

The Circulation of Iranian Texts around the World: The Appearance of a Transnational Iranian Publishing Industry?

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WHEN ONE THINKS OF TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE, IMAGES OF BIG GLOBAL publishers and global authors in the English language come to mind. However, in the age of publishing conglomerates and electronic commerce does all literature circulate without frontiers? What does the study of non-Western literatures tell us about the transnational circulation of books? What about the particular case of countries such as China or Iran where there is heavy censorship as well as strong external and internal constraints to the circulation of cultural products? In this paper, I study what happens to the transnational circulation of products that do not originate from the major centres of cultural production, and consider how transnational links work on a minor scale on the margins of, although not outside, the traditional circuits. I also analyse what transnational theories can help us uncover about Iranian literary production. Although it is a dynamic field composed of texts in Persian and in the other languages used by writers of Iranian origin in the diaspora, I focus here on literary texts originating from the Iranian nation and in the Persian language.

An understanding of transnationalism as ‘sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders—businesses, non-government-organisations, and individuals sharing the same interests (by way of criteria such as religious beliefs, common cultural and geographic origins)’

(Vertovec) is particularly helpful with respect to the Iranian literary case. Indeed, dominant transnational theory goes beyond the idea of the power struggle with a centre that does not exist, and Iran was never formally colonised by one of the Western powers. Pascale Casanova has shown how Paris gives legitimacy to minor texts and languages, especially for modernist writers (Casanova). One can see a continuation of the analysis of this dominant position of literary capitals of the former empires in postcolonial scholarship. For many countries of Africa, the literary centre is still only Paris or London. On the contrary, Iran does not have a unique postcolonial centre to refer to and its literary production occurs on the periphery and across multiple centres where the diaspora is located: this makes for an interesting comparison to notions of cultural exchange based on Immanuel Wallerstein's ideas, which are concerned with the relationship between the centre and peripheries. This article also insists on systems of relationships and networks, essential to the study of the circulation of texts across borders, as these are far from being unilateral and straightforward exchanges.

In this article, I argue that the Iranian literary field is a case of 'minor transnationalism' (Lionnet and Shi), when considering levels of production, distribution and reception. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi in their seminal study of minor transnationalism have argued against the binaries of North/South and dominant/resisting categories: 'This cultural transversalism includes minor cultural articulations in productive relationship with the major (in all its possible shapes, forms and kinds), as well as minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether' (Lionnet and Shi 8). Similar to the phrase 'soft power', which is not to be considered negative, 'minor transnationalism' is not a deficient form of transnationalism. Rather, I want to insist on its empowering qualities, as it means more flexibility to work around constraints, and less dependence on a relationship to a major centre of power. As such, the minor transnationalism of the current Iranian literary field remaps the relationships between readers within Iran, Iranian readers living in the diaspora and non-Iranian readers reading Persian literature in translation.

I study here two well-known publishers who have one foot in Iran and one in Europe as case studies. In recent decades, the Iranian literary market has been constrained by several factors; by both internal censorship and international sanctions, as well as other structural factors that will be discussed in this paper. As a result, the circulation of its products is complicated and publishers have had to use various strategies to make books available to and readable by large audiences. This has included publishing abroad and digitally, as well as increasing the numbers of translations. The Iranian example will be used to reflect on non-Western types of literary transnationalism, minor in that it deals with a heavily constrained context. Iran is a significant country, although not exceptional by any means, for this study for two reasons. Firstly, Iran possesses a rich culture at the

crossroads of civilisations, which means that the transnational circulation of its cultural products is nothing new, albeit it has evolved throughout the centuries. Secondly, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the war with Iraq (1980-1988) have constrained local cultural production without extinguishing it. As a consequence, Iranian culture has become decentralised, its diaspora developing in several locations, which significantly complicates our understanding of the circulation of peripheral literature today. Iran is an interesting case study that illuminates larger trends about the transnational circulation of products that do not originate from the major centres of literary and cultural power and work around strict constraints.

In addition to international sanctions and censorship, one of these constraints is the crucial role played by the informal book economy. Iran has both a black and a grey book markets, that play an important part in its system. Books circulate online in PDF format, they are shared between families and friends, excerpts get reprinted without reference. Ramon Lobato, who studied shadow economies of cinema says: 'Distributors, formal and informal, determine which films win and lose in this game of cultural consumption. In the process, they shape public culture by circulating or withholding texts which have the potential to become part of shared imaginaries, discourses and dreams' (Lobato). Mahsa Salamati has studied exactly these Iranian shadow economies of cinema and shown how its informal components are at the center of the market, not at the margins or underground (Salamati). The informality of Iran's book circulation has not been studied yet, and it certainly happens on a smaller scale compared to cinema, but it is important to remember that the publishers I study work within this system and are aware that they are competing as well as working with a grey and black book markets.

This article will undertake a comparative study of two Iranian publishers as examples of producers of literary texts, to understand more broadly the different forms of the transnational circulation of texts happening in the Iranian literary field. They have been selected because they each represent well-defined categories: independent diaspora publishing, reformist-oriented, versus publishing that is independent but in line with the Iranian government. They will be analysed together within a transnational framework, with the aim of understanding aspects of the contemporary Iranian literary world and, more broadly, non-Western contemporary literary practices. Their juxtaposition is particularly fruitful because they use different strategies to reach Iranian and non-Iranian audiences globally and also because they are at the opposite ends of the political spectrum.¹

¹ This paper is based on interviews I conducted with both publishers: in Tehran in 2014 and in 2017 with Candle & Fog's director as well as by email since 2014, and by phone since 2015 and in Paris in 2016 with Naakojaa's director. I thank them both, as well as the translator Sara Phillips, for their time.

Firstly, I will look at the publisher Naakojaa ('Placeless' in Persian), a French publishing house that works in collaboration with an active bookstore based in Paris called Utopiran (a play on words between Utopia and Iran). Naakojaa is oriented towards digital publications across three languages (Persian, English and French) and reaches Iranian audiences globally as well as non-Iranian readers through an active programme of translation (Nanquette forthcoming). Secondly, I will look at Candle & Fog (Shamh va Meh), based in Tehran and London, whose strategy is to publish contemporary Iranian popular novels and best-sellers in English and to sell books through Amazon. Due to international sanctions, Iranian publishers are not permitted to use Amazon or other global e-commerce companies, but Candle & Fog is able to bypass the sanctions because it is also a British-based publisher with a UK headquarters. On the basis of these two cases, this article will interrogate the circulation of contemporary Iranian literary texts and their translations along national and transnational lines, and demonstrate that translations and online strategies are crucial to bringing Iranian literature onto the global scene.

Naakojaa promotes new local and transnational intertwining of texts and cultural practices for and by the Iranian diaspora, and enables Iranians in the diaspora to remain connected to Iran in a way which was impossible before, although it is very much constrained by the gap existing between Iranians within Iran and the Iranian diaspora, in addition to international sanctions and censorship. Candle & Fog's position is largely contingent on internal constraints and chance encounters, as is often the case with small publishing companies worldwide. It is also more concerned with targeting non-Iranian readers through translation. These two publishers, both recent additions to the Iranian literary field, have proven that e-publishing and movement across frontiers, both geographically and linguistically, is essential to the opening of a literature long isolated. However, the field is still fragile and needs to be strengthened by local engagement.

Context of the Iranian literary field

The contemporary Iranian literary field is complex because it is located in several spaces, Iran of course, but also in the many countries to which Iranian intellectuals and writers have migrated in the last 30 years. A mass migration of Iranians started in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution, and continued during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. It has taken some time, but more than 35 years after the Revolution, distinct Iranian literary fields can now be found in Northern America, Western Europe and, increasingly, in Australia and Malaysia. These fields cannot be isolated from the Iranian homeland. The two publishers studied here belong to the diasporic space in varying degrees.

Immediately after the Revolution, most Iranians abroad wrote in Persian, publishing in often short-lived journals and magazines, or publishing books through small publishers based in European cities. As regards publishers, one can mention Gardoon in Berlin and Baran in Sweden. Khavaran, in Paris, has closed down in 2015 and Ketab Corp. in Los Angeles in 2017. A Persian journal that started in France in 1991 *Arash: a Persian Monthly of Culture and Social Affairs*, was one of the longest to publish, and stopped in 2014 (Qelichkhani). Small presses and journals have struggled to survive in the new book economy, less reliant on paper, and sectors like publishing in Persian have been particularly hit and are being replaced by other ventures, like the two publishers studied here. But even in their most successful days, print runs of these publishers in the diaspora reached an average of 500 but were not widely circulated. Notably, the publications could not be exported to Iran due to the severing of ties between Iran and its diaspora, both on the physical and financial levels. Those who had left at the onset of the Revolution and in the context of war could generally not go back to Iran. There are exceptions, for example, Reza Ghassemi's *Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* (1991) (Ghassemi; Qassemi), originally published in Persian, which has been translated into French and English. It received positive reviews from the Iranian press and was generally well received in Iran, winning the Hooshang Golshiri Prize for best first novel in 2002. Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* (Dumas), originally written in English and translated into Persian, is another exception. Dumas is based in the US.

As a rule, however, works published abroad do not make it to Iran and do not have a strong Iranian readership. This is due to censorship issues, as well as to a disconnection between Iranian readers and diaspora writers. This disconnection has been called the 'diaspora effect' (Giacobino et al.). Niki Akhavan similarly notes that 'physical location remains an issue in determination of loyalty' (Akhavan). There is a profound mistrust of writers in the diaspora by Iranian readers within Iran. This disconnection is not specific to the Iranian diaspora, but it is especially strong in a country where the experience of migration on a large-scale is relatively recent and which is still navigating its links with those who have left the homeland.

More recently, and increasingly since 2001, when Western publishers began to take a greater interest in Muslim narratives, Iranian writers abroad have published directly in European languages. For example, the graphic novel, *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, written in French (Satrapi), or *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (Nafisi), written in English. This has profoundly changed the way Iranian literature defines itself, as for many it is no longer tied to the Persian language.

In addition to this move to writing in European languages, in the last ten years there has also been a change in the Iranian publishing landscape within Iran. This

is partly due to broader changes occurring in the cultural field, with more focus on transnational exchange from the Iranian side. For a long time, it was the diaspora that wanted to exchange work with Iranians in Iran. Increasingly, the transnational desire is also coming from within Iran. One example is the governmental Saadi Foundation, the equivalent of the Alliance Française, set up in Iran in 2012 to promote Persian language and culture abroad. Candle & Fog has collaborated with them on a bilingual book. Iranian publishers within Iran and abroad are taking part in this opening up of Iranian culture and encouraging it. In the following sections, I look at two main publishers who are working in this direction.

The Publisher Naakojaa

Naakojaa is a French publishing house founded by Tinouche Nazmjou in 2012 (Nanquette, Personal interview, 2015). Nazmjou also runs a bookstore, the Librairie Utopiran, in the 18th arrondissement in Paris. Because censorship increased during the second presidency of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2009-2013), Nazmjou left Iran once again for France in 2009, deciding to start his own publishing house in Paris. He had extensive experience working at Ney publisher in Tehran, but had spent his teenage years in France, where he also studied, and therefore had the necessary connections (Nanquette forthcoming). Naakojaa's aim is to publish works by writers based in Iran (80 percent, according to Nazmjou) and abroad. It receives around one hundred manuscripts in Persian a month from Iranians around the world, usually sent by email, and it publishes 3 or 4 works each month (Nanquette, Personal interview, 2016). It has a large catalogue, with hundreds of books published since 2012, insisting on books that would be difficult to publish in Iran. While some of its books especially in poetry have had only 50 copies printed, others have up to 2000 copies, like the memoirs of the famous singer Mohsen Namjoo (2016). Naakojaa respects the Universal Copyright Convention, contrary to many publishers based in Iran who are not bound by it because Iran is not a signatory to the Berne Convention. Because Iran does not observe international copyright laws, texts readily circulate in PDF format online and there is a wide informal circulation of books, which would be crucial to study. Naakojaa offers an alternative to the numerous poor scans that circulate illegally, and also offers a variety of formats and platforms from which to buy the books.

Unlike the earlier generation of Iranian publishers based abroad, Nazmjou decided to focus on digital distribution as a way of reaching Iranians globally, especially those within Iran. The company tries its best to keep all transactions secure and the identities of buyers protected, so that purchasing books censored by the regime does not lead to problems for readers within Iran. In addition to its purchasing platform, Naakojaa also maintains a website where articles, notes,

discussions, videos and the collected works of most of its authors can be accessed, and it thus acts as a cultural platform. It also presents books published by other publishers in Iran, thereby offering a broad view of the Iranian literary scene. Utopiran, Naakojaa's bookstore, carries printed Persian books and books in French about Iran, as well as organising cultural events linked to Iran on Sundays in Paris, including readings of texts and presentations by authors, or book club discussions in Persian and in French (Nanquette forthcoming).

Why is Naakojaa successful in its transnational efforts whereas other Persian publishers abroad have struggled for decades?

Naakojaa's success is based on two elements: the bridging of the local and virtual spaces, and its politics. Unlike the previous generation of Iranian publishers abroad, who often belonged to leftist and Marxist parties, Naakojaa is not as visibly attached to a political party. It is less reliant on politics than other Iranian publishers abroad, although it is an activist publisher with an explicit policy of publishing books that have been censored or banned in Iran, or those that authors think will probably be banned. For example, a special section of its catalogue is called 'Safar be digar-e soo' (Travel to the Other Side), designated explicitly for these books. In this section, it is possible to find a translation of the graphic novel, *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, published by Naakojaa, which is about female homosexuality and has been banned in Iran. However, contrary to publishers such as the Paris-based Khavaran, which closed in 2015, its activism extends beyond ties to any one party opposed to the Islamic regime and has more to do with the opposition to literary censorship (Nanquette forthcoming). Because of its back and forth with Iran, it is also still rooted in the Iranian political landscape. When he goes back to Iran, the director is accountable to the Islamic government and can be brought before the courts. Benedict Anderson rightfully notes that accountability and responsibility in the homeland are the keys to a politics that is not disembodied and does not transform into 'long-distance ethno-nationalism' (Anderson 12). I believe this is crucial in understanding how this publisher has kept its ties to Iran and Iranian readers.

Secondly, Naakojaa is the only Iranian publisher that has such a wide-ranging approach, encompassing the roles of publisher/bookstore/online cultural platform, and catering to Iranians across the world. The case of Naakojaa demonstrates how electronic media can be used to create bridges between the Iranian diaspora and Iran. In the last decade, there has been a shift in the production and circulation of Iranian literary texts from print to digital format. With this shift, local practices and diasporic spaces, such as those of the diaspora-based earlier generation of publishers, have now been replaced by a diasporic space that is partly virtual. However, it is only partly virtual, and the success of this virtual realm is due to Naakojaa's also working in a local physical space, as a

bookstore hosting readings. In other words, bridging the gap between Iranians by offering a virtual communication space only works so well because there is a local space which can be relied upon, allowing physical exchange when it is needed.

Indeed, the effect of digital spaces should not be overstated. Important studies about the Iranian digital space, whether about the website *Iranian.com* (Alexanian) or weblogs (Akhavan), ask us to think more carefully about the nature and role of Iranian digital space 'as a kind of virtual community' (Alexanian). They insist that we should remember that articulations of identity online have 'consequences in the offline world' (Alexanian). The virtual and the local are linked; the virtual does not replace the local: it is closely intertwined with it (Nanquette forthcoming). Naakojaa is an example of this intertwining, which succeeds to a certain extent in reaching readers in the diaspora and in Iran due to its ongoing interaction with the country. This circulation and transnational endeavour ensures the ties are not cut, which is something that Iranian readers do not forgive, as has been discussed above in relation to the 'diaspora effect' and 'long-distance ethno-nationalism'. As such, it is the perfect example of what Arjun Appadurai has called 'translocality'. As there is a 'growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity and collective social movement' and a 'steady erosion of the relationship, principally due to the force and form of electronic mediation, between spatial and virtual neighbourhoods', new 'translocalities' have emerged (Appadurai) that bridge virtual, local and transnational spaces.

Iranian intellectuals have been published outside Iran since the 1908 Iranian constitutional revolution, and Iranian literary production in exile is nothing new. What is new, is the local and transnational intertwining of these texts and cultural practices for and by the Iranian diaspora, and the extent to which it enables Iranians in the diaspora to remain connected to Iran in a way which was impossible before. The second publisher is a different example of this connection.

The Publisher Candle & Fog

The publisher Candle & Fog was registered in 2001 in Iran and in 2003 in the UK (Nanquette, Personal interview, May 2014). It is a small publishing house, having only published around seventy books since then, mainly in English, primarily literature, along with a few academic books. The founder and manager of Candle & Fog, Afshin Shahneh-Tabar, explained that the idea of registering Candle & Fog in the UK came from the lack of international interest in Persian literature, particularly fiction and novels. The decision was also made as a result of Iran not being a signatory to the Berne Convention. As such, Candle & Fog's main aim is to present Iranian books, translated into English and other languages--mainly French and German--at international book fairs: it insists on being part of the global community of publishers and on selling rights at these fairs. It also insists

on using platforms such as Amazon for sales, whereas a publisher based only in Iran could not do so because of international sanctions. Candle & Fog is not the first Iran-based publisher which publishes translations in European languages; however, it is innovative in being the first to include best-sellers and popular literary texts and in having a heterogeneous catalogue without much of the ideological books that usual Iran-based publishers exporting abroad have. It also has a policy that is markedly different from purely state-funded institutions. Many government institutions and projects have insisted on translation into European languages; however, these are often books about Islam or books that closely follow the line of the regime. For example, the government literary agent POL supports the translations of books about the Shia form of Islam and about Iranian traditions, as well as children books, which are less polemical (Jafari Aghdam).

Candle & Fog takes a different approach. Publishing best-sellers alongside canonical texts is not a traditional editorial policy in Iran, where books are very much segmented by genres and along an ideological spectrum. Candle & Fog's list of publications is heterogeneous, including highbrow texts such as Nima Youshij's poems (Talebi and Rasouli) and a biography of Mohammad (Beygi), as well as lowbrow texts such as *Silk and Roses*, a story of an Italian family with some erotic content (Mahshid). Their best-selling books in English, *Robin Hood of the Desert* by Masoud Behnoud and *The Water Urn* by Houshang Moradi Kermani, sold more than 3000 copies (Behnoud; Moradi Kermani).

I would like to take a closer look at one of their publications, *Kimya Khatun*, by Saideh Ghods, which is about the life of Kimya, the stepdaughter of the classical Persian poet Rumi (Ghods and Phillips), to unpack how the book travelled through this publisher, its translator and to readers. Rumi is a poet which is close to the heart of most Iranians and his life story and his encounter with Shams are known by everyone. Kimya is married to Rumi's Sufism teacher and friend, Shams, 40 years her elder, and ultimately dies at his hands. In Persian, the book has sold more than 80,000 copies, which is a huge success compared to the standard 2,000 or 3,000 copies; it has been reprinted twenty-five times. It received the 2005 Etesami Literary Prize and was nominated for other awards. *Kimya Khatun's* reception was polarising: it was criticised by Rumi scholars for historical errors, as well as vilified because of what was seen to be a feminist discourse. It deals with an erudite topic but in a sentimental form. The book cover of the English version reinforces this trajectory, with the drawing of a broken heart and in its centre a miniature painting of a woman. *Kimya Khatun* was translated by Sara Phillips, who was commissioned by Candle & Fog, with the help of the literary agency Gazelle (Nanquette. Personal interview, July 2014). It is one of the first contemporary Iranian best-sellers to have been translated into English. Despite this, it did not attract much attention among English speakers. If we put aside possible issues with the translation itself, Candle & Fog has limited marketing means and mainly

sold it on Amazon. It was not able to secure reviews in European newspapers. Afshin Shahneh Tabar told this author that it sold 1,500 copies, which is relatively low for European standards of publication but standard in the Iranian context. This book is an example of the many constraints an Iranian publisher has to deal with. It was able to go around international sanctions and market it through a major e-commerce website but it works with a small pool of translators and it has rare connections to the major literary centres, so is not able to organise large publicity.

Politically, Candle & Fog navigates the troubled waters governed by the Iranian regime. Afshin Shahneh-Tabar emphasised the lack of support from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to private publishers, and was critical of its non-alignment with global trends and conventions. Although it is not a governmental publisher, Candle & Fog is Iran-based and works with government institutions, such as the Saadi Foundation mentioned above, which promotes Persian language globally. One of the Saadi Foundation's books, *Komreh (The Water Urn)* (Moradi Kermani), was a co-publication with Candle & fog (03/05/2015).² It also follows government guidelines. For example, it cancelled its program for the 2015 Frankfurt Book Fair due to the decision of the Iranian Minister of Culture to boycott the fair as a result of the presence of Salman Rushdie.

In terms of scale, Candle & Fog cannot be compared to Naakojaa, because it has been less prolific and does not have the same scope. While it is more flexible than a purely Iranian publisher, thanks to its UK base, it is still constrained by the laws of Iran. It is even more accountable for its politics than Naakojaa because it has to work on a daily basis with institutions within Iran. It is also constrained by the lack of international exchange, which makes it difficult to be transnational on a broad scale, although things are slowly starting to change.

The Minor Transnationalism of the Iranian Literary Field

Translations and online strategies are crucial to bringing Iranian literature onto the global scene. These two publishers, recent additions to the Iranian literary field, prove that e-publishing and moving across geographical and linguistic borders are essential to the opening of a literature long isolated. However, I want to insist on the fact that this study challenges a number of preconceptions concerning transnational and local literature. The first is that in the Iranian case, they are intertwined, and that successful cases of transnationalism only arise when they are closely intertwined. The second is that publishing best-sellers in

² *Khomreh* is a popular children's story in Iran, first published by Sahab publisher in Iran in 1989. In 1992, it was translated into German and then into four other languages. Nine movies have been made on the basis of this story.

English and distributing them through Amazon is *not* a guarantee of success. Naakojaa's strategy, which uses more French than English has been more successful in bridging the gap between Iranians within and outside of Iran, while Candle & Fog has been working more on bridging the gap between Iran and Western audiences, with perhaps less success due to the constraints it works with. The third is how important it is to maintain the links between Iran and its diaspora and to increase the circulation of literary resources, including literary translators, who have to navigate between countries. It is crucial for publishers to have a large pool of translators who can go back and forth and stay abreast of the literary fields and of the evolution of the language in both countries. Digital publishing can help reinforce these contacts and ensure the liveliness of literary production, but it cannot do this on its own. Naakojaa is one of the only cases of a publisher in the Iranian diaspora that has actively sought transnational exchanges and succeeded relatively well in achieving this in the few years it has existed.

The study of these two publishers and the minor form of transnationalism they represent also shows that there are plenty of disjunctures in transnational cultural exchange. The stories of the routes that cultural products take are not always determined by a well-defined law of networks, but by chance encounters between those who happen to be there at the right moment. This element of chance is evident in stories of migration itself, as we can see in the narratives of asylum seekers who rely on people they encounter at various points in their journey. Shahram Khosravi describes these stories of border crossing in an engaging way (Khosravi), while Fariba Adelkhah describes the specific case of Iranian transnational trade and exchange and their entanglement with family (Adelkhah). The case of literary products is analogous, as their circulation relies on individuals and their networks. Within the context of constraint, whether physical, linguistic or political, a publisher such as Naakojaa has found a way to create more space and greater opportunity: more people belong to its network, they come from more varied backgrounds, and it has been able to navigate productively between the Iranian diaspora, particularly France, and Iran. Candle & Fog, in contrast, must abide by the laws and constraints of the Islamic regime, meaning that it is less flexible concerning whom it can interact with and what it can do.

I do not believe the 'minor transnationalism' of the Iranian literary field should be understood negatively. The positive aspect of minor transnationalism as underlined here is that it does not reiterate the scheme associated with many postcolonial countries, where the exchange occurs primarily between the former colonised country and the former coloniser, and where the relations of power are difficult to overcome. It is not about dominant/resisting categories. As Iran was never formally colonised, it does not have a unique postcolonial centre to refer to. Its literary production occurs across multiple centres, here admittedly including the traditional centres of Paris and London, but its transnationalism in the minor

mode makes for an interesting comparison to traditional postcolonial cultural exchanges. Strong constraints are added to the exchanges, so that relationships with the major go in several and complex directions.

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