

## SPECIAL ISSUE

# WORLD LITERATURE AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE MINOR

## INTRODUCTION\*

Núria Codina Solà

*University of Leuven*

5

## MAPS OF WORLD LITERATURE

Since its emergence in the 1990s as a field of research in its own right, world literature has typically been studied through maps. Cartography, Francesca Orsini points out, “seems more generally to be the first technology to which literary scholars reach out when they seek to spatialize literature” (349), especially in the case of those texts that span different countries and are characterized by global circulation. Mapping has been used as a metaphor to locate the power relations between major and minor literatures in the world literary system or as a visual tool to trace the unidirectional movements from the centres of production in Western Europe, which determine the literary norm, to the literary periphery, which is typically located on the linguistic margins of Europe or outside the Western world and is characterized by aesthetic derivation and institutional dependence. In his influential book *What Is World Literature?* (2003), David Damrosch describes world literature as “maps in motion,” a phrase that he borrows from Vinay Dharwadkar to illustrate the “shifting relations both of literary history and cultural power” (24). While Damrosch proposes a dynamic approach to world literature, based on how a work circulates and is read beyond its point of origin at a given time, the use of the map as a metaphor is significant, since it presupposes an overarching portrayal of space that reflects Western “ideas about representation and reality emphasizing an ‘all seeing’ perspective, a fixed scale, and mathematical

projection from sphere to developable surface” (Pearce 17). Even though Damrosch is aware of the specific US-American perspective from which he writes (28), “[t]his account has so far implied that the early post-millennial career of world literature occurred largely in and around Anglophone, North-American academic contexts” (Helgesson and Vermeulen 7), with the result that the Anglophone has often been equated with the world (cf. Gunaratne). Dominant theories of world literature often overlook those literary texts whose trajectories and relationships take place on a non-Western, regional level or on the margins of the literary market. In his later essay “Where Is World Literature?” (2012), Damrosch offers a more critical discussion of the possibilities of cartographic representation: “To achieve a full understanding of where world literature is,” he argues, “we also need to see where it *isn’t*, and why” (219; emphasis in original), pointing to the blind spots on world literary maps and the importance of local levels of circulation that often remain unseen.

- When critiquing the broad patterns employed to describe the spatial scope of literary works, Damrosch challenges Franco Moretti’s method of distant reading, which turns to maps, graphs, and evolutionary trees to offer a systematic view of the world literary system—a form of mapping that, according to Damrosch, needs to be complemented with close readings of regional dynamics and individual works in order to “see both the forest and the trees, both the wave and the drops of water, both what is and what could be” (“Where” 220). Indeed, in his sociological approach to literary history inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory, Moretti sees world literature as a “system that is simultaneously *one*, and *unequal*: with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality” (55-56; emphasis in original). This form of mapping assumes rigid and readymade boundaries between the different national literatures and parts of the world, which can be cast in fixed roles and positions. Using a necessarily limited and biased sample of data, a limitation that Moretti acknowledges when he writes that “[r]eading ‘more’ is always a good thing, but not the solution” (55), distant reading is reminiscent of traditional mapping procedures in which the ordering of spatial knowledge aims at making the world’s geographical complexity and mutability manageable: “Through statistical and graphic generalization, the features of the map are categorized into the hierarchies of quantitative and qualitative data; division of features into points, lines, and areas; and assignment of categories to symbolization through size, arrangement, and texture” (Pearce 18). Moretti’s focus on empirical maps, along with cartography’s view of maps as neutral documents, have been objects of fierce debate in the disciplines of world literature and human geography, respectively, leading to counter-movements such as “critical world literature studies” (Helgesson and Vermeulen 2) and, in geography, to subdisciplines such as critical cartography or counter-mapping, as I will explain below.

While drawing on a similar hierarchical model, albeit using textual and sociological analyses rather than quantitative and digital tools, Pascale Casanova understands the world republic of letters as a global space of struggle and competition for interna-

tional prestige that “opposes large literary spaces to small ones” (181). The symbolic location of the different national literatures vis-à-vis Paris, the centre of consecration where writers enter the circuits of world literature, can be measured through the Greenwich meridian, an imaginary line “in terms of which it becomes possible to draw an aesthetic map of the world, the position of each national space being determined by its temporal distance from the center” (351). Despite acknowledging that it constitutes a “*fictive* line” that is “arbitrarily chosen” (88; emphasis in original), Casanova takes the Greenwich meridian at face value, both as a geographical category and as an aesthetic construction, arguing that it “contributes to the *real* organization of the world and makes possible the measure of distances and the location of positions on the surface of the earth” (88; emphasis in original). Casanova needs such divisions to make sense of the otherwise multiple, chaotic, and shifting positions of literary texts—a yearning for convention and order that makes her account blind to its inherent Francocentric perspective, as Christopher Prendergast famously disputed in his essay “The World Republic of Letters,” and which demonstrates that maps are always results of how mapmakers perceive the world.

7

## COUNTER-MAPPINGS

World literature’s tendency to represent the world literary space, and in particular the relationship between the major and the minor (or the centre and the periphery), through maps projects an illusion of scientific rigour and spatial objectivity that has been at the core of cartography as a discipline and representational practice until the late 1980s. If mapping was typically perceived as producing a “geography of modernity, universality, detachment and placelessness” that enabled the control and exploitation of other territories (Pearce 18), in the last decades maps have begun to be understood as historical constructions and political activities that “*make* reality as much as they represent it” (Crampton and Krygier 15; emphasis in original). Aware of the links between geographical knowledge production and power relations, cartography has become more open to narrative, nonrepresentational, and artistic practices that offer new ways of expressing place (cf. Caquard; Crampton and Krygier; Pearce). While cartographers and geographers have moved away from rigid empiricism and are alert “to the geo-political and economic underpinnings of map-making” (Orsini 349), world literature is overwhelmingly characterized by an “aerial picture of global flows and circulation” that obfuscates forms of literary agency and hinders inclusivity (Orsini 351). To put it more bluntly, one could make the analogy that world literature studies has tended to represent the world following the Mercator projection, which is centered on the prime meridian and makes areas that are further away from the equator, such as Europe or North America, appear disproportionately large, while shrinking the equatorial zones (Africa, South America, for instance) and reducing them to the periphery of the Global North. Alternative representations, such as

the Gall-Peters projection or upside-down maps, are able to render more accurately the countries' relative sizes and draw attention to the power dynamics in mapping practices, even though it is worth noting that these cartographic approaches, as is similarly the case with postcolonial studies or critical world studies, are often the result of Eurocentric knowledge production and potentially overshadow other maps that emerge in less privileged locations.

As a way out of the dominant forms of mapping in the literary field, key critical contributions in world literature have developed more accurate approaches that take the minor seriously instead of treating it as a mere derivative product of the literary centre. Redrawing the maps of world literature and encompassing other "significant geographies" beyond the Anglophone, Francesca Orsini's Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies (MULOSIGE) project foregrounds various modes of circulation and understandings of the literary (including oral performances) that challenge the hierarchies between major or so-called cosmopolitan languages and minor literatures. Where the MULOSIGE project examines the multilingual literary productions in North India, the Maghreb, and the Horn of Africa, the Swedish research program "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Dynamics in World Literature," led by Stefan Helgesson, focuses on the dynamics of cosmopolitan and vernacular exchanges in a European linguistic context and demonstrates that literary value is shaped through the exchange between the local and the global. If Orsini's and Helgesson's works redefine the contours of world literature without necessarily relying on the technology of the map, Diana Roig-Sanz's project "Social Networks of the Past: Mapping Hispanic and Lusophone Literary Modernity, 1898-1959" uses digital tools to fill the Ibero-American knowledge gap in world literature and reveal the impact of Hispanic and Lusophone networks on global circulation and translation flows.

This special issue joins this burgeoning self-critical turn in the discipline and engages with the institutionalization of minor texts in world literature, demonstrating that minority is a provisional identity produced through mapping practices that include academic discourses, translation choices, reading modes, and publishing strategies. Instead of offering counter-mappings with a specific geographical focus, as Orsini's, Helgesson's, or Roig-Sanz's projects commendably do, or taking maps as objective representations of the world literary system, as is the case with dominant accounts in the field, this volume asks rather by whom, how, and where world literature cartographies are made, and how we can rewrite the legend and learn to reread the map. Drawing on critical cartography and human geography's emphasis on narrative mappings and embodied trajectories, the special issue examines what strategies writers and other institutional agents use to inscribe minor literatures in the material acts of mapping, translating, and publishing. The goal is to situate world literature's traditional mapping of minor literatures in the periphery of the literary field within "a specific set of power-knowledge claims" (Crampton and Krygier 12). Rather than seeing them as immobile scholarly or textual realities, the focus on production highlights the process of making instead of the stable identity of the product.

The contributions in the collection lay bare the mechanisms and gatekeepers that regulate the circulation of literary works and, without underestimating the force of the market, also show how minor literatures *actively* mobilize the institutions of more dominant systems to achieve international visibility and gain literary value, a form of *institutional agency* that does not always come without contradictions. As a result, authors, texts, languages, or genres that were traditionally relegated to the margins of the national and world literary canon become part of what Sarah Brouillette calls the “global literary marketplace,” as the contributions by Sandra Folie, Remo Verdictt, Leticia Ibanez, Claudine Le Blanc, and Tristan Mauffrey emphasize by engaging with processes of commodification and becoming major.

These examples of minor institutional agency challenge the seemingly unidirectional relationship between the minor and the major in world literary maps from a networked perspective (Cooppan). In contrast to traditional maps, which draw mostly on lines and one-way flows, networks redefine the literary geography of world literature “as a crossroads of flows and lateral connections, of connectivities and disjunctures, of coming close and zooming out; in short, as a disciplinary topography in motion” (Cooppan 195). Except for the critical projects mentioned above (Orsini, Helgesson, Roig-Sanz, among others) and Françoise Lionnet’s and Shu-mei Shi’s book *Minor Transnationalisms* (2005), networks have been curiously absent in prevalent conceptions of world literature. If world literature has mostly drawn on lines and hierarchical forms to uncover power relations on static maps, networks replace this cartographic gaze with multi-layered representations of space. Through multiple nodal points, networks create a tension between places that are “both relatively centered and relatively de-centered” (Pearce 21). Such a dynamic approach to world literature enables to move away from notions of the minor as an entity that is either passively being acted upon or which refuses global circulation through isolation or linguistic and cultural resistance. Following the image of the network as a form that aborts binaries and opens up multiple and simultaneous trajectories of domination and institutional agency, the special issue seeks to recalibrate the relationship between the major and the minor and, in doing so, to change the way literary studies see the world.

## ROADMAP OF THE VOLUME

In order to capture the shifting positions occupied by the minor, the special issue brings world literature to bear on related disciplines such as the sociology of literature, translation, gender, and memory studies. The essays foregrounds the linguistic, geographical, aesthetic, gendered, temporal, and racial dimensions of minority and show how refugee writers, ancient literatures and oral texts, postcolonial chick lit novels, Flemish and Swedish as instances of small European literatures, South American Indigenous multilingual writers, or authors belonging to ethnic and

sexual minorities constantly oscillate between marginality and (partial) recognition.

Theo D'haen's "Flemish Literature and World Literature" looks at the situation of Belgian literature, Flemish in particular, in relation to Dutch literature, its "senior counterpart," and in a world literary context. While Dutch-speaking literature, together with other minor (European) literatures, constitutes a notorious absence in world literature anthologies, its international circulation through translation has risen in recent decades. Despite the historically weak position of Dutch-speaking texts, especially Flemish literature, in translation (at least when it comes to canonical works), this turning point draws a different map of the minor, highlighting the active role of government agencies promoting the international visibility of small literatures. D'haen's article shows the impact of institutions such as academia, publishing houses, and other agents in the making of world literature, questioning static notions of the minor that take it as a given.

- 10 If D'haen's article expresses the precarious yet also complex position of small languages in a world literary context, Sandra Folie's "Acting Like a White Woman: Cynthia Jele's Black South African Chick Lit Novel *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word* (2010) as *New Weltliteratur*" applies this multilayered understanding of the minor to chick lit, which qualifies as world literature in terms of its major international circulation but which, in practice, is often considered a minor genre due to its lack of reputation and less canonical status. This ambivalent identity is even stronger in African chick lit, which weaves the local linguistic and cultural postcolonial realities into the genre's major conventions. These disjunctures are particularly visible in Cynthia Jele's *Happiness Is a Four-Letter Word*. On the one hand, Jele's debut novel instantiates the impact of white Western normativity on literary forms and gender roles; but, on the other, it makes use of Sotho, Zulu, and Afrikaans to critically reveal the legacies of European colonialism and racism in South Africa. Folie's essay displays the contradictions that go hand in hand with the multifarious meanings of the minor and demonstrates the necessity for more accurate maps that go beyond world literature's strict distinctions between centre and periphery.

Paul Tenngart's contribution "From Major to Minor: Swedish Working-Class Fiction in the UK and the US" ties in with Theo D'haen's focus on small European languages and with Sandra Folie's attention to the dynamics of genre in a world literary context as it looks at the transformations of Swedish working-class fiction in English translation. Despite the established position of the genre within the national literary context during the 1930s and 1940s, Tenngart shows how the strategies employed by the Anglophone translators lead to different kinds of minorization, which he classifies as distributional, thematic, and peritextual. These effects are linked to the status of the publishing houses and the restricted reach of the texts, the translators' simplifying choices when conveying Sweden's linguistic and cultural diversity for a foreign audience, and the use of peritextual devices such as maps, footnotes, or prefaces that make the setting appear foreign, distant, and almost exotic to the English reader. The multiple positions of the minor, depending on the context and scale of analysis that

is being used, also become clear in the majorization effect that Tenngart detects when the originals are read in political terms and become embedded in international movements such as feminism. Similarly to Theo D'haen's piece, translation emerges here as a key factor in tracing out the genealogy of minor literatures from a sociological perspective, together with academia and literary criticism, the two other institutions that the preceding contributions link to the social construction of the minor.

Remo Verdickt's "Double Consciousness Squared: James Baldwin and the Minorities of World Literature" showcases a shifting dynamic between the major and the minor in global circulation that is comparable to the transformations of Swedish working-class fiction that Tenngart describes, albeit in the reverse. By analyzing Didier Eribon's and Alain Mabankou's acts of affiliation with James Baldwin, Verdickt argues that these two French-speaking writers mobilize Baldwin's different minor statuses to construct their public identity in the world literary field, an identification that enhances Baldwin's circulation and therefore leads to a process of majorization. Curiously, it is neither Baldwin's ethnic nor sexual identity that both French-speaking writers invoke, but rather less known facets of his identity, such as his class-belonging and creative independence, a multiplicity that takes Baldwin's double consciousness into new directions. In doing so, the article highlights the necessity of expanding the narrow conceptions of minority that structure Baldwin's recent (and sometimes rather unidimensional) consecration as a representative of queerness and black identity in today's literary culture.

11

The interplay between the major and the minor and the role of translation in redefining the position of literary texts is also visible in Melisa Stocco's essay "A Journey into Mapuche Memory: Self-Translation and Postmemory as a Strategy of World Literature in Liliana Ancalao's *Rokiñ* (2020)." Stocco describes the aesthetic and political implications that lie behind Liliana Ancalao's decision to self-translate her poetry from Spanish into Mapudungun, the Mapuche nations' language and the language of Ancalao's ancestors. As an act of postmemorial resistance, self-translation highlights the active role of (multilingual) writers belonging to the centres and languages of power in shaping the circulation and valorization of minority languages. This strategy, however, is radically distinct to that of minor literatures seeking to enter the world literary map through translation into major languages, as Stocco warns. Rather than accommodating cosmopolitan readers of Western languages, Ancalao's practice consists in moving the audience *toward* the absent and the unknown, putting on the map of world literature vernacular productions that too often remain uncharted.

While Ancalao's creative practice is firmly grounded in resistance against majorization, Leticia Ibanez's essay "L'entrée sur la scène internationale d'un écrivain tamoul : édition, traduction et réception des œuvres de Shobasakthi" explores the consecration of Antonyhasan Jesuthasan, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee writer also known as Shobasakthi, and his active role in bringing the fate of refugees and the human rights abuses committed during the Sri Lankan civil war to the world literary conversation.

Ibanez underscores the importance of international recognition for Shobasakthi's political and aesthetic project, which invites circulation and translation through the use of postmodern and intertextual references. The article is careful not to readily equate this strategy with uncritical assimilation or domestication. Ibanez problematizes the biographical interpretations that emerge in the international reception of Shobasakthi's work, particularly at the beginning, but which in turn endow the author with the necessary authority to give voice to the struggles of refugees and other minorities worldwide.

- Engaging more explicitly with the process of becoming major through Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of minor literature, Claudine Le Blanc's "Entre majorations ambiguës et minorations créatrices : la traduction des épopées orales d'Afrique et d'Asie en langues occidentales" discusses the ambivalent aspects that go hand in hand with the international circulation of African and Asian oral epics since the nineteenth century. Le Blanc shows how translations and adaptations of oral texts into European languages are often subject to linguistic decontextualization and linked to colonial and religious projects with obvious ideological implications. At the same time, the essay asks under which conditions it would be possible to create what Deleuze and Guattari call a "becoming-minor" (27), consisting in an alternative translation method that reflects the conditions of enunciation in which oral epics emerged and recognizes the performative aspects and social uses of oral tales. Rather than opposing majorization and minorization as two distinct strategies, however, Le Blanc emphasizes the unavoidable ambivalent relation between both poles, a dynamic that questions cartography's and world literature's illusion of scientific rigour and all-encompassing objectivity.

Along similar lines, Tristan Mauffrey's article "Lire les littératures anciennes (grecque et chinoise) comme des littératures mineures" uses Deleuze and Guattari as a theoretical framework to draw attention to the problematic aspects of the anthologization of ancient literatures, which is based on a written and canonical understanding of literature. Their status as foundational texts obfuscates the sometimes arbitrary, contingent, and political processes that have led to their codification. Like Le Blanc, Mauffrey suggests a mode of reading that aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming minor. It consists in a less teleological approach to literary history that highlights the connectivity between different literary cultures and the textualization processes surrounding the exegesis of ancient texts. This networked perspective, which questions cultural singularity and stresses the social construction of literary works, corresponds with the special issue's ambition of deconstructing notions of minority.

In sum, the contributions to this special issue bring to the fore the active role and collective responsibility of writers, translators, academics, and other agents in reshaping the position of literary texts in the literary field. This emphasis on institutional agency complements the analysis of minor literature's aesthetic agency in the special issue *Pluralizing the Minor: Figures, Genres, Practices*, co-edited with Pieter

Vermeulen, which, together with the present volume, emerged from the international conference “World Literature and the Minor: Figuration, Circulation, Translation” held at the University of Leuven on 5-7 May 2021. With their double focus on socio-logical and aesthetic aspects, both publications hope to contribute to the insufficiently theorized notion of the minor in world literature studies.

## NOTE

\* This publication has received funding from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO). Grant number: 12T5120N.

## WORKS CITED

- Brouillette, Sarah. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Caquard, Sébastien. “Cartography I: Mapping Narrative Cartography.” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2013, pp. 135-44.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M.B. DeBevoise, Harvard UP, 2004.
- Codina Solà, Núria, and Pieter Vermeulen. “Introduction: The Aesthetic Agency of Minor Literature.” Special Issue, *Pluralizing the Minor: Figures, Genres, Practices. Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (forthcoming).
- Cooppan, Vilashini. “World Literature between History and Theory.” *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, Routledge, 2012, pp. 194-203.
- Crampton, Jeremy W., and John Krygier. “An Introduction to Critical Cartography.” *ACME, An International e-Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006, pp. 11-33.
- Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.
- . “Where Is World Literature?” *Studying Transcultural Literary History*, edited by Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, De Gruyter, 2006, pp. 211-220.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan, U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Gunaratne, Anjuli I. “The Rise of Global Anglophone.” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2023, pp. 563-578.
- Helgesson, Stefan, and Pieter Vermeulen. “Introduction: World Literature in the Making.” *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, edited

- by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-20.
- Lionnet, Françoise, and Shu-mei Shi. *Minor Transnationalism*. Duke UP, 2005.
- Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, pp. 54-67.
- Orsini, Francesca. "The Multilingual Local in World Literature." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2015, pp. 345-374.
- Pearce, Margaret Wickens. "Framing the Days: Place and Narrative in Cartography." *Cartography and Geographic Information Science*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008, pp. 17-32.
- Prendergast, Christopher. "The World Republic of Letters." *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast, Verso, 2004, pp. 1-25.