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Núria Codina Solà & Pieter Vermeulen

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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETIC AGENCY OF MINOR LITERATURE

Núria Codina Solà  and Pieter Vermeulen 

Translation Studies and Literary Studies, University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

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Aesthetics
agency
genre
Franz Kafka
minor literature
world literature
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This introductory essay traces a genealogy of the notion of the minor in critical theories of the past four decades to then articulate the notion's aesthetic dimension. Foregrounding that dimension, we argue, offers a powerful analytical tool for fostering a dialogue between world literature and postcolonial studies. Through a critical survey of the important work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, Pascale Casanova, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, as well as David Damrosch and Bergur Rønne Moberg, we contend that these theoretical formulations of the minor have rarely lived up to their methodological promise to articulate creativity, change, and solidarity in ways that are in the final instance not determined by vertical opposition to the major or by an overly restrictive account of aesthetic agency. Going back to the work of Kafka that is so central to Casanova's and to Deleuze and Guattari's account of the minor, we retrieve the figure of Odradek and propose to read it as instantiating a self-reflexive aesthetic intervention that configures its own relation to political constraints. This insistence on

aesthetic agency, we submit, challenges and complements both Deleuze and Guattari's groundbreaking philosophical and political account of the minor and world literature's focus on circulation and postcolonial studies' emphasis on sociohistorical contexts. The introductory essay concludes by presenting the six essays that make up the special issue, and emphasizes the ways in which these essays' attention to the formal and imaginative devices of the minor pluralize the notion by articulating not only minor literatures and languages, but also literary figures (children, women, sisters, queer men), genres (short story cycles, flash fiction, buried laments), and literary practices (indirect translation, diasporic publication, rewriting, adaptation) in ways that capitalize on the aesthetic agency of the minor.

Aesthetics versus politics: the minor in postcolonial and world literature studies

The study of cultural and linguistic minorities has figured prominently on research agendas for almost half a century. In literary studies, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1975 publication of *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure* triggered the academic interest for texts by ethnic minorities that are not contained in nation-state borders and often fall outside of the canon. Their intervention broke new ground in weaning the notion of minor literature from the expressions of minority groups in small languages and making visible the literary and political values of recalcitrant modes of minoritarian expression in major languages. This critical focus expanded beyond the European context with the consolidation of postcolonial and (later) world literature studies as new fields of research. Deleuze and Guattari's work, as well as the subsequent concern for other kinds of minorities it sparked, can be read in the context of the social and political debates that were raging in France and Europe in the mid-twentieth century: the aftermath of colonialism, the arrival of migrants as a result of economic strategies in post-World War Europe, and the contestation of the nation-state in the context of social movements such as May '68. The study of minorities (like the work of French theorists such as Deleuze) also found a welcome home in US academia, where these concerns resonated with a growing attention to ethnicity and identity. Since then, minorities have become an unavoidable and consistently contentious issue on political agendas. Minorities have been given symbolic – yet not necessarily effective – recognition on an international level, as evidenced by the non-binding Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1992, the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, or the 1994 European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Minorities have become not only a political but also a cultural concern. In the cultural field, new digital platforms such as *Words Without Borders* “cultivate global awareness by expanding access to international writing” and centring “writers in indigenous, endangered, and other world languages that are too often marginalized” (*Words Without Borders* 2022). Along similar lines, independent publishing outlets such as the Nigeria-based Cassava Republic Press, which aims to bring emerging African writers to an international audience, contribute to the circulation of so-called “peripheral” voices from former colonized areas to European metropolises and to what Pascale Casanova famously called “world literary space” (2004, 3), simultaneously exploiting and challenging the periphery’s traditional symbolic and material dependence on Western centres of production and circulation. On a national level, consecratory initiatives such as the Adelbert-von-Chamisso Award in Germany or the Restless Books Immigrant Writing Prize in the US promote the work of writers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such celebrations of cultural diversity, however, unavoidably go hand in hand with forms of othering and have at times been surrounded by fierce controversy, as the debates leading to the discontinuation of the Chamisso Prize in 2017 demonstrate. While new political and social challenges, such as the so-called refugee crisis, the Ukraine war, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other less-reported humanitarian crises in the Global South, continue to reconfigure the boundaries of the world (and of the world literature that pertains to it), political and cultural developments in the last decades make it increasingly less self-evident to profess the political potential of literature written by minorities as it has become embedded in critical discourses in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari. Rather than a contestation of the stability of major cultural formations, the minor has become an integral part of today’s globalized political, social, and cultural landscape, to the extent that it is often celebrated, commodified, and circulated “as a token of cultural value” (Huggan 2001, ix). Such commodification inevitably entails a measure of neutralization and disenfranchisement that makes it necessary to revisit the notion of the minor and reevaluate its aesthetic potential in today’s literary culture. This special issue takes up that challenge.

Although the notion of the minor has undeniably been a productive element in the theoretical toolkit of literary and cultural studies since the 1980s, its analytical promises, we contend, have repeatedly been hampered by residual hierarchies and lingering constraints that this special issue sets out to complicate and overcome. In retrospect, we can see that some of these constraints are already apparent in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*, a remarkably influential book that still generates debate today, as visible in the critical engagements in the essays gathered here. Outlining what they call a “Kafka politics that is neither imaginary nor

symbolic”, Deleuze and Guattari are primarily intervening in the study of Kafka as they go against previous “psychoanalytic” or “Oedipal” interpretations of Kafka’s work that tend to privilege biographical and allegorical aspects over cultural and ideological ones (1986, 7–9). Even though their philosophical (rather than strictly philological) reading of Kafka ends up serving more as a “springboard for their own lexicon than an analysis of Kafka *qua* Kafka” (Young, Genosko, and Watson 2013, 170), the third chapter of the essay, entitled “What Is Minor Literature?”, has become a touchstone in literary criticism, often read in isolation from the rest of the essay (which adheres more closely to their overall philosophical project). In this famous chapter, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the notion of minor literature (*littérature mineure*) and link it to Kafka’s status as a Jewish author writing in German and living in Prague. Minor literature, therefore, “doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (1986, 16). Due to its displaced linguistic nature, minor literature “is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” – a condition that they crucially describe as a series of constraints rather than as a site of potentiality and agency, as literature for “the Jews of Prague” is

something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise. The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature ... The impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a “paper language” or an artificial language; this is all the more true for the Jews who are simultaneously a part of this minority and excluded from it ... (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 116)

Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on the determinism of collective linguistic fate amounts to an implicit curtailment of aesthetic agency, which is compounded by their focus on the political function of minor literature – a necessary one in the context of national and colonial oppression of minorities that marked the climate in which they published their work. In such circumstances, minor literatures bind the individual to society and produce “an active solidarity” within the community, and in that way they establish “the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” and constitute a powerful oppositional force that pushes against the majority (17–18).

These connections between literary expression, community, and politics, along with the essay’s at that time particularly innovative and sophisticated understanding of multilingualism, have proven extraordinarily productive

for literary and cultural analysis, but they have, this special issue argues, insufficiently accounted for the agency of the aesthetic, as this, we hasten to repeat, was not Deleuze and Guattari's main ambition. In the constraining conditions under which minoritized literary formations take shape, sustained attention to the minor's formal, imaginative, world-building, and expressive devices has the potential to articulate literature, language, community, and the world in innovative ways that offer valuable alternatives to the social uses of literature that Deleuze and Guattari map out. As early as 1984, two years before the first English translation of *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*, Louis A. Renza criticizes what he sees as Deleuze and Guattari's all too static account of the relation between the minor and the major, arguing that "such deterritorialized literature requires the preexistence of a major literature or language it can deconstruct ... so as to expose minor literature's heretofore underground political 'intensity'" (1984, 34). While it must be noted that this very act of deconstruction undermines a strict binarism between the major and the minor, since it entails both an affirmation of the minor's engrained presence in the major (Kafka as a canonized author writing in German) and a simultaneous deactivation of the major's territorializing effect (Kafka's literary engagement with liminal realities), it is true that the relational identity between both categories precludes the existence of the minor as an independent creative force in its own right. Instead, Renza invokes a different critical perspective that "allows for the reconsideration of 'minor literature' as a signifier of literary value within a changeable canon" (xxix), a measure of aesthetic force that this special issue seeks to restore, yet without abandoning the political dimension of writing, particularly in various contexts of domination (imperialism, nationalism, racism, genocide).

To be fair, Deleuze and Guattari identify certain aesthetic traits, such as "polylingualism" (1986, 26), which they link to Kafka's work and to deterritorialized literatures more generally, but their theory proceeds from a disjunction between content and form that sabotages the very integrity of the aesthetic, a term which, following Elleke Boehmer, we understand as the "concern with the form and structure of a work of art over its raw content, or with form as a critical part of its content" (2010, 17). In this special issue, recognizing literature's aesthetic agency, then, means reading form and content together as mutually constitutive (but not therefore harmonious) moments in the operation of texts. For Deleuze and Guattari, only major literatures have such agency, while in minor literature expression "precedes contents" or carries them away through "lines of escape or transformations" (1986, 85). Because of the minor's compelled collective dimension, form and figurative language are no longer denotative or conditioned by the subject of enunciation but are, similarly to a rhizome, "asignifying" (85). This "disjunction between content and expression" comes at the expense of individual

expression (20), both in political and literary terms, since minor literatures are characterized by the “scarcity of talent” and absence of masters (17).

This downplaying of aesthetic value is a persistent trait in most postcolonial and world literary reformulations of minor literature, which understand this concept as encompassing texts by linguistic minorities and literary traditions that remain underrepresented due to their relations of political, aesthetic, or economic subordination to other major (typically European) literatures. This is the case in David Lloyd’s *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987), which leverages Deleuze and Guattari’s insight in the potential of minoritarian writing in major languages as it offers a postcolonial reading of James Clarence Mangan’s work (and Irish literature of the early nineteenth century in general) as minor literature written in English (instead of Gaelic). Lloyd singles out specific minor modes of writing that are decidedly political, for they disclose “the political structure of the canon” and the existence of a dominant (Irish) nationalist and (British) imperialist aesthetic culture that finds itself “negated by a new literature” (1987, 5). Although Lloyd seems to reconcile the aesthetic with the political by defining minor literature in an oppositional relationship to the canon and the state from which it has been excluded, his account is grounded in a binary logic that ends up limiting the aesthetic agency of minor literature. If major literatures are “directed toward the production of an autonomous ethical identity for the subject” and are “self-contained and original” (19), minor literatures are defined through “modes of writing that are non-original and anaclitic even in their parodic mimicry of the major work” (23). Even if minor literature would eventually supersede itself and cancel the whole idea of canonicity, until such revolutionary conditions are reached, it remains stuck in a reactive mode of resistance that prevents it from generating an aesthetics of its own that is not marked by its “negatively critical attitude” (25).

Going beyond the Irish context and embracing other postcolonial literatures characterized by a “similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture” (1), Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd’s volume *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* places the emphasis on the relations between different minor literatures to “examine the nature and content of their common marginalization and to develop strategies for their reempowerment” (1990, 2). Although the volume seeks “to celebrate the positive achievements and potential of minority discourse” (5) and establish solidarities between different forms of political struggle, JanMohamed and Lloyd’s conception of minority discourse is, in the final analysis, dependent on “damage – damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture” (4). The authors are aware of the dangers of homogenizing “the enormous differences among various minority cultures” (10), but ultimately see in the shared experience

of domination the main cause for minor literary production, a generalization that calls into question aesthetic singularity: “Coerced into a negative, generic subject-position, the oppressed individual responds by transforming that position into a positive, collective one” (10). By yoking the transformative potential of minor expression to (the negation of) oppression, this account, we submit, misrecognizes the full range of the aesthetic agency – a range that includes the power to determine its own relation to oppression as one that is other than negation.

In his critical comment on JanMohamed and Lloyd’s work, Ali Behdad remarks on “the problematic tendency to lump together a broad range of aesthetic and cultural practices under the rubric of ‘minority’ that, as a ‘product of damage’, connotes automatic resistance to ‘pathos of hegemony’” (2005, 224). Mobilizing Boehmer’s words in “A Postcolonial Aesthetic”, we could say that JanMohamed and Lloyd’s account of the minor, like that of Deleuze and Guattari, entails “a definition drawn not from the *work* but the *world*”, which “first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form” (Boehmer 2010, 176). Without wanting to fully invert this dynamic by suggesting an entirely depoliticized account of the minor that aestheticizes inequality and cultural deprivation, this special issue aims to recalibrate the relationship between the aesthetic and the political in a more balanced way, arguing that the “work” and the “world” in minor literature are contiguous but not synonymous. We draw attention to manifestations of aesthetic agency in minor literature that emerge not necessarily *because of*, but *despite* political subordination, not as a *reaction to* major literature, but as a result of the text’s own goals and concerns. It is precisely because minor literature shows how aesthetic agency develops in such hostile conditions that the juncture of the aesthetic and the minor deserves to be brought into focus more sharply.

While postcolonial literary studies, the field Lloyd and JanMohamed operate in, is typically concerned with the historical, social, material, and political conditions in which literature is produced and has remained reluctant to embrace aesthetic matters (Bahri 2003; Boehmer 2010; Crowley and Hiddleston 2011), uses of the notion of the minor in the field of world literature share a similar resistance to the literariness of the minor – a reluctance that is surprising given world literature’s concern with the transnational circulation of form. Pascale Casanova’s field-defining *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) is a case in point. Casanova opens up the notion of the minor to those small literatures (“*les petites littératures*”) that are situated at the periphery of the world literary system and have not yet acquired value in the capital of world literature (Paris), with which they do not necessarily entertain relations of colonial or historical domination, since for Casanova the literary realm is relatively autonomous from the political domain. The unequal structure of the world literary system “opposes large literary spaces to small

ones and often places writers from small countries in situations that are both tragic and unbearable” (2004, 181). In a chapter entitled “Les petites littératures”, Casanova identifies two different strategies adopted by peripheral writers in their struggle for visibility: “On the one hand there is *assimilation*, or integration within a dominant literary space through a dilution or erasing of original differences; on the other, *differentiation*, which is to say assertion of difference, typically on the basis of a claim to national identity” (179). Both options preclude the possibility of literary emancipation: while assimilation goes hand in hand with the reproduction of literary norms imported from the centre, differentiation does not necessarily entail aesthetic agency either, since the literary work remains subordinated to the political project of the nation-state.

As a reaction to Casanova’s strict distinction between the major and the minor, which also permeates Franco Moretti’s (2000) account of world literature as organized by an opposition between a creative core and a derivative (semi)periphery, more recent accounts suggest a more horizontal approach to the relations between literatures in a global framework, based on gliding scales rather than fixed categories of identity (Bachner 2017). Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s 2005 volume *Minor Transnationalism* examines “the relationships among different margins”, avoiding a framing of the minor that situates it “within and against the major in a binary and vertical relationship” (2). While Lionnet and Shih’s work is located in the field of transnational studies, it shares with world literature a comparative (yet commendably less (Euro)centric) approach to minor cultural formations across national borders. Still, their project of “cultural transversalism” (8) privileges “*theory, history, performance, spatiality, culture, and discipline*” as main modes of engagement with the minor (12) – again, at the expense of aesthetic endeavours. Along similar lines, Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch’s notion of ultraminor literatures underscores “the fluid relations between a whole family of concepts: ultraminor, minor, and major”, showing how the status of a certain literature or work may shift depending on the “political circumstances and social relations, the growth and decline in use of a language, and changing conditions of literary production and circulation” (2017, 134). Although the concept of the ultraminor breaks the relations of assimilation and opposition that dominate previous accounts of the minor in world literature, it fails to centre aesthetic agency. As Moberg and Damrosch write, “the ultraminor size entails structural handicaps and a systemic lack of capacity and resources connected both to space and to time” (134), a material and political subordination that restricts its activities to “all kind of survival strategies” (135). Instead of compensating for this marginality through a focus on aesthetic agency, the ultraminor is explored in “spatial and linguistic as well as socio-historic contexts” (135), providing a relational, yet perhaps more contextually accurate theory of

minor literature than Deleuze and Guattari (Corngold 1994), but missing the opportunity to calibrate the relation between text and context in new and more balanced ways.

This special issue places literary texts' aesthetic agency at the heart of its reconsideration of the minor. In this issue, the reach of minor literatures is not restricted to linguistic and cultural formations that are defined by their relation of domination, but to a range of creative and critical instances of a nondominant, alternative poetics. In these instances, a position at the margins of society or literary culture does not determine the forms and political functions of that engagement, nor does it exclude the use of more canonical or even mainstream aesthetic devices. Taking seriously literature's capacity to configure its own relation to its significant others – literary and linguistic canons and traditions, political constellations, intersecting communities and solidarities – the minor emerges as a site of literary innovation and creativity instead of derivation and reactive opposition. Foregrounding minor literature's self-reflexive formal and world-building operations, our more aesthetically attuned approach traces how the minor, through its worldly entanglements, combines poetics and politics. By attending to the ways literary texts articulate minor or overlooked figures (children, women, sisters, queer men), minor or less circulated genres (short story cycles, flash fiction, buried laments, hybridized auto/biographies), and minor or undervalued literary practices (indirect translation, diasporic publication, rewriting, adaptation), we “pluralize” the operations of the minor that extant theories, we argue, constrain by tying these operations too exclusively to contexts of subordination or to compelled modes of collective enunciation. We do not argue that such contexts of domination and affiliation are irrelevant or that minor literature is exclusively defined through aesthetic difference; as Saidiya Hartman notes, agency is not something we can simply “endow” minor actors with, “as some sort of gift dispensed by historians and critics to the dispossessed” (2022, 91). Rather, we take seriously minor literature's potential to position itself in different contexts on terms that are (at least) partly its own.

Toward minor aesthetic agency: Odradek's plural minorities

We can do worse than return to the oeuvre of Kafka to encounter a minor figure that indicates a more promising politics and aesthetics. Kafka's short story “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” is not covered in Casanova's and Deleuze and Guattari's readings of Kafka's minority; the latter mention it in passing but famously base their reading of Kafka on an early diary excerpt from 25 December 1911. While this text, similarly to the diary excerpt,

1 For the German original, see Kafka (2022, 74–8). Our English translations are based on Nicholas Brown’s translation printed in Schwarz (2012, 3–4).

occupies a rather marginal position within Kafka’s oeuvre, a more aesthetically attuned version of the minor can be retrieved from it. Written sometime between 1914 and 1917 and first published in the 1919 collection *Ein Landarzt*, Kafka’s short story evokes an enigmatic creature called Odradek, which looks like a flat, star-shaped spool (*wie eine flache sternartige Zwirrspule*) from which a small crossbar (*ein kleines Querstäbchen*), itself crossed by a further crossbar, emerges.¹ The creature (first referred to as “it”, later as “he”) seems defunct (*zerbrochen*) and meaningless (*sinnlos*), but even that is not certain. Indeed, its very (non)humanity is unclear: Odradek speaks, it laughs, it allows itself to be spoken to like a child, but at other times it remains as mute as the wood it seems to consist of (*wie das Holz, das er zu sein scheint*). As Odradek is not even fully alive, the story worries that it might also be somehow unable to die and might even survive the eponymous family man who narrates the story. This prospect fills the narrator with sorrow (*die Vorstellung, daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte, ist mir eine fast schmerzliche*), and it is on this sorrowful note that the story ends.

So far so minor. Coming in at five short paragraphs and a mere 492 words, “Die Sorge des Hausvaters”, along with the other “small stories” (*kleine Erzählungen*) in the collection *Ein Landarzt*, is a minor text in a trivial sense; restricting itself to the domestic sphere, a fairly flat and straightforward mode of intradiegetic narration, and the tentative evocation of a diminutive figure, its world-building also seems minor by design. At the same time, this diminutive figure is decidedly a deterritorialized one – a feature which brings it in the orbit of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of minor literature (1986, 16): Odradek hangs around in the attic, on the stairway, in the hallways, on the ground floor, and often disappears for months.

What is it, then, that Odradek can add to Deleuze and Guattari’s account of the minor? Two elements come to mind. First, Deleuze and Guattari’s central contention that minor literature is “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16) is disarmed by the story’s opening reflection on the uncertain etymology of the word *odradek*, an etymology that undecidedly traces the term to Slavic sources or to a kind of German only influenced by the Slavic (*vom Slawischen ... nur beeinflusst*); even more problematically, neither trajectory leads to a plausible meaning for the word – a word that then only awkwardly applies to the reality it names. The seeming arbitrariness of the linguistic constitution of the story’s minor creature, then, offers an alternative to the language politics that Deleuze and Guattari want to find in Kafka (a politics focused on Prague German, not Slavic languages like Czech); Odradek is a more promiscuously multi- or translingual entity than those on which Deleuze and Guattari base their reading. Even though they conceive the “German language in Czechoslovakia ... as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish” (1986, 20), the point of origin is clear; the minor, for them, remains contained *within* the German major language

instead of fully dismantling a linguistic point of origin, as Odradek does. Second, there is the story's narrative perspective, which is that of a bourgeois family father registering his dismay and disorientation in the face of the creature (and, importantly, immediately and arrogantly overruling the linguistic confusion on which the story opens [Schwarz 2012, 5]); this narrator, we may surmise, would strike Deleuze and Guattari as pointing to an all too "individual concern (familial, marital, and so on)" with "the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background" (1986, 17) – which for them is the province of major literature, not of minor literatures marked by "the collective assemblage of enunciation" (18). "Die Sorge des Hausvaters", then, brings in a mode of understated individual self-reflexivity that is politically and formally salient in ways that extant accounts of the minor have not given full credit.

"Die Sorge des Hausvaters" and its figuration of Odradek point to a number of features that inform the account of the minor that this special issue puts forward. Capitalizing on Claudia Castañeda's extended understanding of figuration as a practice that is simultaneously semiotic and material and that names how "a concept or entity is given particular form – how it is figured – in ways that speak to the making of worlds" (2002, 3), we argue that Kafka's figuration of Odradek constitutes the minor as at the same time a particular poetics, a characteristic mode of reflection, a determinate politics, and a distinctive mode of agency. It shows that, once we consider the minor beyond the context of its subordination to the major – whether the major is instantiated through dominant literatures, major languages, or oppressive social forces – it emerges as a site of literary and critical creativity rather than as fatally derivative and deprived. Odradek points to the distinctive agency of the aesthetic in recalibrating social and political imaginaries. In this way, the minor becomes a resource for postcolonial and world literature scholarship as those fields participate in what Deepika Bahri refers to as "a reanimation of the aesthetic dimension as a crucial category in the assessment of the social content of ... literature" (2003, 6).

By filtering its figuration of Odradek through the narrative perspective of the bourgeois family man, "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" challenges the default association between aesthetic agency and bourgeois subjectivity that characterizes major literatures in their opposition to the minor (Lloyd 1987, 19–20). In his virtuoso reading of the story (which he calls "a minor masterpiece" [2012, 5]), Roberto Schwarz traces the story's gradual deconstruction of the binary hierarchy encoded in its narrative set-up: if the narrator initially solicits and enjoys "the anonymous, indisputable and happy consensus of men of good judgment" that affords him a sense of "superiority" over the creature (5), the latter's carefree mobility and irresponsibility come to figure a mode of "gratuitous existence" (7); the story embodies "the impossible of the bourgeois order" (7) – not just its negative flipside, but

the occasion for an alternative mode of vitality, a different form of life. When the creature laughs a laugh only a creature without lungs would produce (*nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann*), the formulation, Schwarz notes, is unintelligible without reference to the narrator's (and readers') own bodies, and in that way cancels the abstractness and distance the narrator has worked so hard to maintain. Odradek dismantles societal hierarchies and restores an embodied, material reality of struggle and political potential. For Schwarz, Odradek stands for the possibility of political agency.

Existing readings of Odradek have already amply affirmed its agency, yet in ways that tend to emphasize its vertical relation to the narrator and the human world. In Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, one of a series of materialist and ecological interpretations of this figure, Odradek is a key instance of the agentive capacities of the nonhuman; it is "ontologically multiple", an "impersonal form of vitality" (2010, 7–8). This resonates with the minimal way in which Odradek features in Deleuze and Guattari, where the creature is mentioned twice as an example of how objects in Kafka are not allegories or symbols but "machinic indexes" (1986, 47) – indications of the self-dismantling drift of "abstract machines" and assemblages (87). For both new materialists and Deleuze and Guattari, Odradek's agency is a very minimal one that pertains to the capacity to affect the outside world (in the story, the capacity to irritate and worry the narrator) but that is bereft of all autonomy, deliberation, or reflexivity. Schwarz's insistence on Odradek's (and the story's) political agency goes a decisive step beyond that.

But perhaps not far enough. Because how do we move from this recognition of political agency to the affirmation of aesthetic agency? In an important addition to Schwarz's reading, Nick Brown underlines Odradek's status as purposeless but in its own way complete (*zwar sinnlos, aber in seiner Art abgeschlossen*), as having a purposive form (*irgendeine zweckmäßige Form*) – as, fundamentally, an aesthetic object: marked by an intentional form, without an external purpose; immanently determined, and therefore operating autonomously in a world that everywhere imposes heteronomy (2019, 178–9). For Brown, this illustrates that in our world, lives unconstrained by the compulsions of state and capital only exist "in the unemphatic form of the work of art" (180). Odradek then not only exemplifies a minor form of agency in a world that is alien, and perhaps even hostile, to it, but it also emblemizes art's capacity to exemplify such agency – a capacity that it then lends to Kafka's deliberately slight text itself. In Kafka's Odradek story, we see politics, aesthetics, agency, and self-reflexivity enter into a constellation that neither Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical account nor world literature's focus on circulation or postcolonial studies' emphasis on sociohistorical context fully capture.

It is a commonplace to challenge the overreach of Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of Kafka (Corngold 1994; Edmunds 2010) – an interpretation that departs from a fairly casual diary note from 1911 to capture the whole of Kafka's oeuvre and to use it as a launching pad for a grandiose theory of whole strands of literature it qualifies as “minor” (Tuckerova 2017) – without always acknowledging their politically nuanced conception of the minor as a double, relational entity within and beyond the major. Pascale Casanova has criticized the dehistoricization and overinterpretation that drive Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical distortion of Kafka (1997, 233–4). Too eager to affirm a revolutionary politics, they arguably remain blind to what Casanova sees as the crucial doubleness of Kafka's project: at once participating in the world of politics (for Casanova, this essentially means a negotiation of nationalism) and in the relatively autonomous realm of literature; Kafka's work, she submits, is never directly political – his position-taking is always transfigured, sublimated, and mediated in literary ways (247) – a point she also makes in *La République mondiale des lettres*, where Kafka plays an important supporting role, in particular in the chapters on “Les petites littératures” and on “La tragédie des ‘hommes traduits’.” Casanova's Kafka is committed to the aesthetic agency of literature and to the unpredictable and variable articulations of the political and the literary – features that recommend his work for the aesthetically attuned notion of the minor that this special issue pursues. And while Casanova's monograph *Kafka en colère* (2011) commends Kafka's tactic of eroding “the major” from within, his penchant for “undermining from within accepted social facts, a *doxa*, a collective belief” – a tactic that often adopts the strategy of “questioning ... one of the principles on which the edifice of Western literary narration rests – the function of the narrator” (2015, 207), “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” arguably goes further in destabilizing social distinctions than Casanova (and Deleuze and Guattari) allow. Such a questioning of bourgeois morality through a deconstruction of narrative authority and a mobilization of unreliability, as we have seen, is precisely what the story performs. But, we argue, it does so in a way that even destabilizes the binaries that Casanova wants to keep intact – those between dominant and minor, literary and non-literary, centre and periphery – positioning the minor as an independent, agential force.

Odradek's deconstruction of narrative authority is not straightforward; indeed, it is not even reliably unreliable. The family man and narrator (unmarked in the first four paragraphs, only appearing in the first person in the final one) is neither a supposedly objective voice unwittingly compromising its own objectivity (by turning to the first person, it *wittingly* surrenders its objectivity), nor a first-person narrator blind to its own limitations (the shift indicates an insight in these limitations, not blindness). The story, in other words, is not a clear condemnation of the family man nor a

celebration of the creature; in that way, it dismantles accounts of the minor as a form of disempowerment or a celebration of resistance. The story is, in Eric Santner’s analysis, “itself the story of something that can’t be domesticated, can’t be economized, by the ‘father of the house’, the master of the *oikos*” (2022, 119). Crucially, this uncontrollable excess implicates Kafka’s own understanding of his literary project – his reluctance to embrace the literary at the expense of the political; for Santner, the story encodes “the dilemma of a writerly existence, an existence lived in passionate detachment from other social bonds and one apparently incompatible with being a *Hausvater*, the head of a household or *oikos*” (120). The story, in other words, is about the pluralities and contradictions of Kafka’s own writing, rather than about the identification with a collective voice that is often seen as a hallmark of minor literature.

The notion of the minor at the centre of this issue identifies a form of aesthetic and political agency that is not captured in a hierarchical, dependent relation to a dominant culture; it ascribes a certain sovereignty to the aesthetic in deciding its own connections and commitments and in highlighting the literary mediation of the political through formal devices such as genre and figure and through certain uncelebrated literary practices. These connections and commitments take place in multifarious contexts that are no longer unequivocally marked by oppression or resistance. Such contexts matter. For instance, Rebecca Braun has argued that an update of Kafka’s minority is far from obvious given that what was Kafka’s “major” (the German language) no longer looks so major today: if, a century ago, German “was still credibly a major language within a Eurocentric cultural world”, today, it has been minoritized in relation to the Anglophone world (2015, 88). And “if the whole tone of German literature is minor, then a minor tone struck within it ... is not going to be heard further afield” (88). A twenty-first-century Kafka would not necessarily write in German. Braun’s remarks are a salutary reminder that aesthetic agency always operates in particular contexts – contexts marked by unevenness and violence, to be sure, but contexts to which minor literature connects in less predictable ways than customary accounts of the minor maintain.

Trajectories of agency

The six contributions to this special issue exemplify the aesthetically attuned notion of the minor we put forward by tracing how a generically, linguistically, and geographically diverse range of texts mobilize different formal qualities of the minor to engage political and social contexts. While some case studies inhabit postcolonial terrain as they traffic between Pakistan

and Britain (Orsini) or the Caribbean and South Africa (Nunziata), the geographical reach of the issue is not restricted to the aftermaths of colonization as other case studies shuttle between ancient Greece, the US, and the Netherlands (Neeser Hever) or “Yiddishland” and Catalunya (Gabbay). Part of the unevenness of these terrains pertains to linguistic power differences as writers negotiate and resist the domination of global Anglophone from within (Orsini, Nunziata, Codina Solà, Farrant) or affirm the paradoxical vitality of vernacular languages – even if the translation between Yiddish and Ladino is so vulnerable as to constitute an “*ultranano* phenomenon” (Gabbay). Negotiating domination instead of being determined by it: this is one key dimension of the aesthetically attuned update of the minor we propose.

Language and territory are not the only modes of minority the essays in this issue discuss. Three modalities of aesthetic innovation and worldly engagement stand out: genres, figures, and practices. If we understand genre, with Gérard Genette, as the intersection between a particular mode of enunciation and particular thematic elements (1992, 61–2), or, with Tzvetan Todorov, as a historically realized “codification of discursive properties” (1976, 162), it is apparent that genre becomes a key dimension for literary creativity: genres like the tragedy (Neeser Hever) and the novel (Codina Solà) have come to index institutionalized and codified (and decidedly “major”) values, while they are flexible enough to open up imaginative transformations that afford creativity and agency for minor experimentation. If world literature studies and postcolonial studies often focus on the genre of the novel by default, the minor genres discussed in this special issue include flash fiction, crypto-allegory (both Farrant), auto/biography (the mode is defined by Nunziata), the lament (Gabbay), the short story cycle (Codina Solà), the fable (Orsini), and the monologue (Neeser Hever).

Acknowledging the aesthetic agency of minor literature not only means reading their negotiation of different (often major) genres as deliberate strategies, but also considering their thematic and formal choices as self-reflexively contributing to their aesthetic interventions. Just as Kafka’s figuration – again, a process we understand as simultaneously semiotic and material, as extending textual strategies to worldly intervention – of Odradek self-reflexively stands for the textual agency of Kafka’s short story (an agency to which the figure contributes), the six essays in this issue explore minor figures that do not necessarily stand for the collective subjectivity suggested by Deleuze and Guattari or the hierarchical position vis-à-vis the major put forward by world literature accounts, but perform singular functions within the texts: Lydia Davis’s women, J. M. Coetzee’s children, Coetzee’s and Jamaica Kincaid’s queer men, Antigone’s sister, Aamer Hussein’s metamorphosed humans/animals, Chika Unigwe’s Nigerian migrants, and Itzhak Katzenelson’s lyrical voice that gives collective witness to the genocide in the

concentration camp of Vittel even while it simultaneously addresses the divine in an intimate and subjective way. A final minor strategy concerns the ways the literary texts under discussion position themselves in relation to the realities of contemporary publishing through aesthetic practices – realities that make the domination of global English something to be negotiated rather than denied or fully opposed. The essays identify different strategies for such interventions: the customarily disparaged practice of indirect translation (Orsini), the confusing realities of diasporic (re)publication (Codina Solà), the generic revision and performance of classic tragedy (Neeser Hever), the precarious practice of “ultraminor translation” (Gabbay), the self-reflexive use of voice to confront the inequalities of global literary address (Nunziata), or the sense of linguistic mediation and inverted publication history through which the unquestioned dominance of English is disturbed (Farrant). Genres, figures, and practices: all three dimensions contribute to a pluralized notion of the minor.

Francesca Orsini’s “Against Minoritization: Five Strategies for World Literature” opens this special issue by clamouring for the urgency of different self-consciously minor practices for countering what she identifies as the key feature of the contemporary world literary field: the domination of global Anglophone that causes “the virtual minoritization of all non-Anglophone literatures” – including previously proudly non-peripheral ones like German and French. This state of affairs calls for action by different agents in the literary field, very much including critics, teachers, and academics. Orsini outlines five strategies, most of which she finds exemplified in the multilingual work of the English and Urdu writer Aamer Hussein, which refuses to surrender to the grasp of English even as his works insist on irritating it from within by working in traces and references to other languages, texts, and traditions that resist facile translation and neutralization in the Anglo-sphere. Odradek-like, Hussein’s references, figures, and parables challenge asymmetrical power relations between languages and literatures in world literary space, but they do so quietly and almost unobtrusively – one could say, almost in a minor key.

This key might yet be too major for the practice of ultraminor translation that Cynthia Gabbay showcases in her essay on “Exponential Minor Literatures: A Yiddish Poem of the Shoah in Judeo-Spanish Translation”. The ultraminor here operates in the shadow of destruction, as Gabbay throws light on the recent translation of a Yiddish lament written and buried during the Holocaust in the Vittel internment camp and now rendered in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). Touching on the mathematics of epistemicide, the traces of the absolutely major (the divine) in Jewish poetry, and the status of the almost desperate project of ultraminor translation between two almost post-humous languages (Yiddish and Ladino), Gabbay’s essay radicalizes the

minor to an infinitesimally small kernel of hope that joins Orsini in intuiting a realm of literary resilience beyond the minor/major binary.

The essays by Cécile Neeser Hever and Núria Codina Solà situate the agency of minor aesthetics in minor literature's negotiation of genre. Neeser Hever compares two recent rewritings of Sophocles' *Antigone* that shift attention to Ismene, the protagonist's sister who, to the extent that she is noticed at all, exemplifies secondariness and hollowness. Neeser Hever unearths two strategies in contemporary literature's revision of this figure: one that simply reverses the hierarchy between the sisters and the values they embody but leaves the tragic reality of hierarchy intact, and one (both more promising and more challenging) that imagines Ismene's dependence, secondariness, and non-sovereignty as constituting a distinctive mode of being minor (without aspiring to "become-major", as Deleuze and Guattari have it) – a resolutely non-major and non-tragic mode of vulnerability that instantiates an ethics of care. In "Minority, Collectivity, and the Short Story Cycle: Identity and Difference in Chika Unigwe's *Better Never than Late*", Núria Codina draws on the affordances of the genre of the short story cycle to highlight the political and aesthetic pluralities in minor literature. By showing how the structure of the short story cycle creates a sense of community that allows for partial identification with the major and also foregrounds the gender and class disparities within minorities, the essay echoes Deleuze and Guattari's relational understanding of the minor and challenges the tendency to conceive of minorities as homogeneous, self-enclosed communities that require the individual's total assimilation with the collective. With its fragmented-yet-unified form, the short story cycle articulates a politics of minor literature capable of bringing together identity and difference, singularity and collectivity in more plural and complicated ways than literary and cultural theory has assumed.

The final two contributions explicitly connect the minor's creative use of genre with practices of figuration. Marc Farrant's comparative analysis of two celebrated Anglophone writers, J. M. Coetzee and Lydia Davis, situates the minor in the figuration of the woman (in Davis's collection *Can't & Won't*) and the child (in Coetzee's *Jesus* trilogy) as examples of ambivalent identities that escape a politics of radical difference, while also questioning the liberal universalism that characterizes discourses of world literature. The "agonistic political sensibility" that Farrant links to the philosophical project of Jacques Rancière is achieved not only through figuration but also through genre. Similarly to Kafka's "small stories" (a key influence on both these authors), Davis's flash fictions and Coetzee's crypto-allegories exemplify a minor aesthetics through fragmentariness, self-reflexivity, geographic dislocation, and the use of a neutral narrative voice.

The imbrication of figuration and genre is also a central element in Daniele Nunziata's essay on J. M. Coetzee's and Jamaica Kincaid's representations of

male queer subjectivities in the hybridized genre of the auto/biography (a blurring of autobiography and third-person biography). Although the texts' explorations of marginalized identities unveil lived experiences of unspeakability and secrecy in contexts of racial inequality and homophobic social codes, they unavoidably entail their own form of silencing that brings to the fore the complexity of giving voice to those who cannot express themselves or are not represented in the text. The minor's oscillation between resistance and complicity, between unveiling and suppression, is a salutary reminder of the necessity of linking politics and poetics and of the unavoidable constraints on aesthetic agency, especially in contexts of domination.

By foregrounding the significance of figures, genres, and practices in the articulation of political concerns, the six essays in the collection pluralize extant accounts of the minor in postcolonial and world literature studies and allow them to interface with theoretical debates in the fields of translation, gender theory, theatre studies, philosophy, and Jewish studies. This disciplinary opening points to the relevance of minor literary production in other areas of the humanities that are typically less concerned with aesthetic matters, while extending an invitation to place the study of textual production, circulation, and publication beyond the centre/periphery or major/minor distinctions that continue to organize so much of literary studies. These are only some of the contexts in which a pluralized notion of the minor can serve as a catalyst for interdisciplinary reflection in a world where binaries never fail to fall short.

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ORCID

Núria Codina Solà  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4909-9059>
Pieter Vermeulen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1992-1646>

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