

Peer Review

Review of: "Towards a Definition of Small Literatures"

Svend Erik Larsen¹

1. Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, Denmark

I wish the authors good luck with the ICLA project on small literatures within the larger series on the history of literatures in the European languages. I think the reflections are sound, open, and detailed, given the basic conception(s) of literature with which, however, I do not quite agree. The overall European perspective is necessary, though – given the ICLA framework – although the argument is inscribed in discussions on various dimensions of world literature studies, a necessary and commendable argumentative strategy.

Before a few notes on my reservations regarding the conceptualization(s), just a few minor ideas for references which the three authors (and editors of the ICLA volume) will probably already be aware of: the Bloomsbury series on Literatures as World Literature; Francois Lionnet/Shu-mei Shih: *Minor Transnationalism*; Rebecca Walkowitz: *Born Translated*; Gunilla Lindberg-Wada: *Studying Transcultural Literary History*; the recent volume of *European Review* 33, vol. 3 discussing/criticizing the recent (very traditional) 4 vols *Literature: A World History* from Wiley; Casanova has an interesting article on the inequality within the ‘translation system’ from 2002 (Sorry, I have forgotten the concrete source); I would also like to note that the reference to the post-imperial situation in Eastern Europe after the Habsburg and the Russian empire forgets to mention the Osman Empire that dissolved there at the same time. Maybe, Clifford Geertz’s notion of ‘thick description’ instead of ‘definition’ would be useful, that is, defining a phenomenon by using a description that situates it in a historical context. The attempt to define small literatures seems to be an example of exactly Geertz’s approach (to anthropological phenomena).

My disagreement on the conceptual level covers three main issues:

1) There is a tone of lament in the whole argument: the lack of global visibility of the so-called small literatures due to power structures in various contexts beyond the control of the poor small literatures.

Would the quality and the local significance of small literatures be improved by having a greater global visibility? I doubt it. Brandes remarked in his article on world literature that literatures written for the global market would have no value whatsoever without a local anchoring. I agree.

2) What I find essential is: the constitutive capacity of literature regardless of quantitative measures like big or small of transcending borders – cultural, geographical, linguistic – in two directions. One is outward from the place/language of writing/origin into greater visibility; the other is inward, that is, bringing inspiration, themes, topics, aesthetic strategies, forms from the larger world into the local world. The article only focuses on the first aspect. This two-way traffic is not related to big and small, which nobody can do much about, but to activities carried out by people and thus something within the power of people to change. I would like to see a volume on the power of local literatures, big or small [the term ‘exiguous’ is for me close to an abomination] (in the Chitnis volume the article refers to, I argue for the notion ‘under-represented’).

3) There is a tendency to see different literatures within the same local territory as separate units (minor, migrant, ethnic, etc.) whereas the fact is that it is produced in a multicultural environment where they blend, simply because many writers are bi- or multilingual. Hence, the transborder function of literature defines the literary landscape also within local areas which are called small. The article mentions in passing ‘contact cultures’; I would rather use Pratt’s term ‘contact zones’ more consistently.

I think the argument within the conceptual framework of the article is consistent and also fit to support the composition of the planned volume. My focus would just be somewhat different.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.