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Introduction: Comparative Literature beyond Eurocentrism

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Abstract: This introductory essay discusses the Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature and argues that as an effect of the structures of the modern humanities, the study of non-European literatures has been mostly consigned to area studies and not literary studies departments at universities. Therefore, despite the efforts to overcome this condition of the field, including the rise of World Literature since the turn of the 21st century, scholarship has reproduced the status quo to the extent that World Literature also remains a largely Eurocentric project. We argue that revisionist efforts have so far operated within the European theoretical space and referred to a limited number of languages. The essays collected in the present issue address this problem and propose diverse solutions for overcoming the Eurocentrism of the discipline.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, ethnocentrism, modern structures of knowledge, method, colonialism, translation

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Scholars of Comparative Literature may disagree on many things, such as the meaning, function, or practice of the discipline, as well as its methodological application or limits, but there is one issue that is unanimously agreed upon: Comparative Literature, and to some extent its avatar in the present century, World Literature, is still Eurocentric despite the fact that there have been multiple calls and attempts on various fronts to change the discipline and its past paradigms.

In Europe, Comparative Literature started as an academic discipline in the 19th century set up against the danger of nationalism and its corollary, monolingualism. Hugo Meltzl, one of the earliest practitioners and editor of the first journal of Comparative Literature, alerted his readers as early as 1877 to a dangerous tendency in Europe: “every nation today insists on the strictest monoglottism, by considering its own language superior or even destined to rule supreme” (40). As a solution, he famously proposed the concept of *Dekaglottismus*, i.e., ten languages with which a comparatist should ideally be able to work; the languages, however, were all European without exception. The inclusion of non-European languages could be considered, wrote Meltzl, only when “Asian literatures will finally come around to accepting our alphabet” (41).

Despite its noble commitment to transcend narrow-minded nationalism and monolingualism, Comparative Literature was formed through such a vision and set itself disciplinary limits for a

long time. Comparative studies of European literary traditions—at least the dominant ones—were unfettered by significant issues, but outside Europe, as territory or culture, the explanatory limits of models based on European literatures would become visible. In fact, the Eurocentrism of the field has not simply been the result of what practitioners have done so far, something that could be resolved by “new” practitioners; there is something larger at work, in the way the modern secular humanities have been constructed and practiced at academic institutions. Discussing Eurocentrism in social science, Immanuel Wallerstein writes:

Social science has been Eurocentric throughout its institutional history, which means since there have been departments teaching social science within university systems. This is not in the least surprising. Social science is a product of the modern world-system, and Eurocentrism is constitutive of the geoculture of the modern world. (“Eurocentrism” 168)

The history of the modern world is defined through the rise of capitalism from the 16th century to the 19th century when European dominance was established through colonialism, aspiring to absorb all the peoples and nations of the world into its world-system. Eurocentrism is the result of the modern structures of knowledge that emerged during the 18th century (Wallerstein, *World-systems* 1-22): this structure developed certain “sciences,” such as history, social science, political science, and economics, for the study of European cultures. To these sciences capitalism was *the* final mode of human development, in which individual or social relations were understood accordingly. Since the logic of capitalism had not permeated non-European cultures, anthropology, ethnography, and area studies were developed for their study; these cultures were approached in a linear historical chronology which consigned them to the less developed category, inherently and permanently behind Europe, which was the norm against which everything was assessed. Hence, historiography was Eurocentric, assuming that that which had happened in Europe would also inevitably happen elsewhere (Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric* 1-16). This was motivated and boosted by assumptions about the universality of European cultural history, which became a parochial notion: any different historical and cultural development was interpreted as an aberration, because it failed to meet the expectations set by analyses of Eurocentric “sciences” (Wallerstein, *European Universalism* 21-49).

This idea has been deeply entrenched and become a civilizational approach with very specific connotations:

For some, civilization was encompassed in “modernity,” that is, in the advance of technology and the rise of productivity as well as the cultural belief in the existence of historic development and progress. For others, civilization meant the increased autonomy of the “individual” vis-à-vis all other social actors—the family, the community, the state, the religious institutions. (Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism” 173)

Such a civilizational attitude emerged in the 19th century in French colonizers as *la mission civilisatrice*, and in the 1990s through “right to interfere” in political situations in various—almost always non-Western—parts of the world (173).

Following such a historical hierarchical logic, the study of non-European languages and literatures

was (and largely still is) consigned to departments of oriental/area studies in Europe and the US. Thus the languages of “Near-, Middle- and Far-East” are grouped in clusters formed around imagined geographies (Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model* 17-29), through the presumed centrality and mediation of European literary and cultural traditions. Therefore, Comparative Literature, which was rooted in the formation of national cultures, structurally removed non-European languages from purview. In consequence, if and when the study of non-European language and literary traditions was brought to the field, the assumptions of the discipline—formed with reference to European cultures—would be “imposed” on them.

Eurocentrism, therefore, has meant the use of knowledge from European cultural and literary development as the norm against which non-Europeans were/are assessed. In this sense, the purpose of scholarship, particularly comparative practices, has not been the production of “scientific” knowledge, but rather the creation of hierarchies—with reference to normative theories—that build and sustain a hegemonic international order within a structure prescribed by theoretical models (see Rohland et al. 1-16, 173-241). In other words, the humanities in general, and comparative practices, in particular, have been vassals of hegemony.

Efforts to transcend Eurocentrism began in the second half of the 20th century on various fronts: in Latin America, intellectuals strove to establish aesthetic autonomy from European norms with reference to historical differences. At the same time, the work of intellectuals from colonial contexts was informed by political struggles for national independence from European colonization. And placed within the academic institution of an emerging empire, Edward Said’s monumental books, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, displayed how literary studies had served imperial aims. Such theoretical advances led to significant awareness of the wider experiences of individuals and communities in the oppressive colonial international order.

In fact, Eurocentric attitudes are so deeply normalized that their expression does not surprise anyone. The American writer Kurt Vonnegut, for example, told his audience in a talk he delivered in 2004 at The Case College Scholars Program, that he had read some stories by what he called the “primitive” people, stories “gathered by missionaries, and ethnographers, and imperialists of other sorts” and found them “stupid” in comparison with Western narrative norms. He concluded unabashedly: “Look at the wonderful rise and fall of our stories . . . and you know, they deserved to lose” (web). Such triumphalist comments on and dismissal of stories told by aboriginals only disclose his ignorance and arrogance, but they also reveal a systematic bias in the very structural problem of setting up European normality to judge all non-European literatures and cultures.

Fredric Jameson’s much debated essay, “Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism,” is a sample of such analysis. Jameson argues that “Third-World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69; emphasis original). Published a few years after the Iranian revolution of 1979, this paper uses the “nation” as *the* reference for analysis to argue that the “third-world” literature represents the national allegory. But in the Iranian revolution, the transnational idea of *ummah* was key to the formation of the revolutionary discourse, something that Jameson’s analysis could not capture or describe.¹ He also used the modern Chinese writer Lu Xun’s works as “the supreme example of this process of allegorization” (69), but

to relate this kind of social and political “allegory” to a third-world “nationalism” is setting up a dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world, a “very limited and limiting framework” for understanding literatures of the world (Zhang 76).

Such selective construction of a literary tradition is a well-known form of Eurocentrism—Orientalism. In the creation of this body of knowledge in the 19th century, European orientalists learned the languages and deciphered the texts of “oriental” cultures and produced “Western/Oriental, or modern/nonmodern” binaries from which “emerged a long line of famous polarities” (Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism” 175). Significantly, Wallerstein reminds us that such binaries were an effect of comparative acts, e.g. Henry Maine’s “comparison of Hindu and English legal systems” (175). In other words, comparisons were founded on two principles: the normativity of the European mode of existence, and its hierarchal relationship with the othered non-European culture.

In a global system dominated by the institutions of research and education that promote Orientalist knowledge as the reference, such distortions can be, and are, exported as authoritative texts to the contexts they poorly describe. In fact, theories formed as a normative body of knowledge in the humanities sometimes become an essential part of scholarship, without which academic work would not be valued. Writing in 1987, during the heyday of deconstructionism, Olsen critiques “theoretical authoritarianism” in the sense that theory is used not as an auxiliary that can help with understanding a text, but rather as an essential and inevitable way of dealing with texts (203). If such is the force and prestige of theory within the European system, it is obvious that imposing itself on non-European traditions—despite resistances—would be an *expected* form of scholarship. Hence, the persistence of Eurocentrism, a continued effect of which is the constant delay of the development of methodologies that can change the dominant paradigms of Comparative Literature.

Non-European Humanities

The Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature is related to something deeper and structurally formidable: the formation of secular humanities in the modern world. As a matter of fact, this Eurocentrism—or ethnocentrism—is not specific to social science or Comparative Literature because it is observed in other fields, too. In *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, Bryan Van Norden argues that most Western departments of philosophy can be renamed as “Department of Anglo-European philosophy,” because “philosophy faces a serious problem of diversity” (7). He relates the lack of recognition for non-Western philosophies at Western institutions primarily to the history of enlightenment, and to the way racist attitudes have constructed knowledge categories (Park 11-29; Peters 71-76). Many Western philosophers had a narrow-minded understanding of philosophy as specifically Greek and Western, and this prejudice was held by such important figures as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and their postmodern critics like Jacques Derrida.² Van Norden relates this to a structural racism that has shaped modern institutions of education and research:

But there is a moral issue as well: ignoring non-Western philosophy in our research, curriculum, and hiring decisions is deeply racist, and is a practice we cannot endorse in good faith once we recognize this.

[...]

Philosophy as it is practiced professionally in much of the world, and in the United States in particular, is racist in precisely this sense. To omit all of the philosophy of Asia, Africa, India, and the Indigenous Americas from the curriculum and to ignore it in our research is to convey the impression—whether intentionally or not—that it is of less value than the philosophy produced in European culture, or worse, to convey the impression—willingly or not—that no other culture was capable of philosophical thought. These are racist views. (xix-xx)

Van Norden calls for the inclusion of what he terms Less Commonly Taught Philosophies (LCTP) in departments of Philosophy and offers practical solutions to diversify the curriculum: even though relevant expertise exists, the specialists of non-Western philosophies are often relegated to other departments such as area studies, and excluded from philosophy. As he argues, the lack of recognition of other systems of thinking is primarily due to an entrenched normative ideology—in his words “essentialist ethnocentrism”—that, as in the case of philosophy, operates on the basis of a specific definition and the norm.

As the history of Comparative Literature displays, cycles of critique and adjustment have been integral to the development of Comparative Literature (see D’haen’s paper in this issue): discussions about the Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature lead to certain accommodative changes; but the cyclical changes, as they absorb critiques into the system, do not fundamentally resolve the issue. Wallerstein, too, describes how efforts to overcome Eurocentrism have often been counter-productive (“Eurocentrism” 172-173). The reason is that the debate never quite gets out of the Eurocentric framework, and both the theory and practice of Comparative Literature are discussed within the limits of European literatures and in their usual geographical areas of Europe and North America. What we find problematic in the process is that the discussions are ultimately constructed on a limited number of languages that are almost exclusively European.

The transformations of literary studies as a result of post-colonialism, for instance, were critical in exposing the limits of traditional Comparative Literature. However, motivated by a primarily political critique of the dominant colonial cultural traditions, postcolonial criticism “has been, and still is a national or local project,” placed in a dichotomous relationship, i.e. “authenticity and hybridity,” and, more importantly, “it has not come up with particularly convincing ideas and methods for dealing with the literature of the traditional centers of literature, the old colonizers,” nor with any particular methods suitable to the study of texts that are placed outside the colonial networks and circuits (Thomsen 24-25).

On the other hand, post-colonialism as a blanket term mutes the differences between colonial experiences and post-colonial conditions. Contexts that have inherited and use colonial languages and literary genres fare better in a Eurocentric literary system; in other words, the territorial expansion of literary production is characterized by linguistic inertia. This new model of European expansion provides opportunities for literary circulation and recognition in the Eurocentric world, but the illusion of change only delays the study of languages and literary traditions positioned outside the Eurocentric network. As a matter of fact, postcolonial criticism often seems to have further strengthened the centrality of the European canon; the territorial scope of Eurocentrism might have expand to include the colonies, the “Europe and Co.,” but the literary references are often the same.

What are often discussed in Comparative and World Literature, the actual literary works that are

well known in the world, remain the major works of European or Western literature. In 2006, David Damrosch argued that in the age of World Literature, the canon would move into the “hyper-canonical” status and open a new space for new literatures (43-53). After more than 15 years, this remains an elusive ideal instead of a reality. Some have thought of World Literature as a product of academia (Fisk 165-188), but that does not mean it is just a utopian vision and not something comparatists and literary scholars should fight for. Confucius was once ridiculed by one of his contemporaries as the one who “does what he knows cannot be done,” but no one can ignore his influence in the long history of China. Doing “what one knows cannot be done” may very well be an excellent definition of a visionary scholar and intellectual.

World Literature and Eurocentrism

Having entered the present century, World Literature has promoted a more inclusive and cosmopolitan perspective in the last two decades. The beginning of World Literature has often been placed in Goethe’s formulation:

I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. (19)

Goethe was far more open-minded and cosmopolitan than most of his contemporaries in his appreciation of non-European literature, for he formulated his concept of World Literature while reading a Chinese novel and also wrote his *West-östlicher Divan* under the influence of the Persian poet Hafiz. He was, however, a classicist and self-conscious inheritor of the Greek tradition. So he continued to say:

But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the *Nibelungen*; but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; *appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes.* (20; emphasis added)

This narrative is founded upon the idea of World Literature as a systemic “appropriation” of non-European literatures for the development of European literature, which Goethe understood as the continuation of the ancient Greek tradition. Also, Goethe did not coin the term World Literature; the idea could be traced to the work of orientalist who provided him with access to non-European texts (Hassan 255-269).

As we said earlier, Comparative Literature developed in the 19th century, but it did not follow Goethe’s idea of World Literature by decoupling itself from national literatures. Instead, it was Europe-centered and limited to European national literatures; such a paradigm exerts a remarkable influence in the study of World Literature even today, as evidenced in Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* and Franco Moretti’s *Distant Reading*. In the former, the “international” foundation of literary

studies is built on the centrality of the “nation” as a determining condition, followed by the integration of ex-colonies into the European order in literary studies. In the latter, the working model is still the paradigm of Europe as center and the rest of the world as peripheries.³ As Theo D’haen also observes:

However revolutionary or even upsetting their works might otherwise be methodologically, in this particular sense Casanova and Moretti were continuing in the hallowed tradition of world literature studies throughout the late nineteenth and the whole twentieth century. This tradition saw world literature as largely synonymous with European or more generally Western literature, as is also evident from the anthologies used for teaching world literature courses in United States undergraduate curricula until the mid-1990s. (9)

In our world today, however, the old global structural apparatus is being transformed into a much more multipolar and multidimensional one, beyond the colonizer-colonized, and the connectedness of different nations and peoples has become prominent in our lives as well as in our minds. The world is changing, and so must the paradigms of literary studies. Describing the current linguistic distribution in world literature, Aamir Mufti argues:

Iqbal, who is generally regarded as the founder of the Pakistan idea, wrote much of his poetic output in Persian in the first half of the twentieth century, a far cry from the situation today, where writers in Pakistan, to say nothing of the larger reading public, may well have encountered *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in the original or in Urdu translation but are almost entirely unaware of contemporary Iranian literature in Persian. (489)

The current paradigms of Comparative Literature are, therefore, the legacies of what Mufti describes as “tectonic shifts in language, literature, and culture” that occurred as a result of “colonial empires” and the logic of orientalism. This logic has interrupted direct contacts between historically neighboring languages, and has created a structure mediated by languages that determine the conditions for the dissemination of literary works as well as the rules of aesthetic judgement in comparative studies. It is within this structural logic that efforts to overcome Eurocentrism have fallen short of changing the discipline’s paradigms, so much so that despite the transformations of the world and the rise of World Literature, the majority of studied works are still Western.

This is why we argue that the rise of World Literature has not achieved its projected aim of a balanced distribution of literary texts, particularly those from outside the “Europe and Co.” network. A new paradigm of Comparative Literature should revisit the cultural logic of colonial globalization and multiculturalism, and reconsider the fact that non-European languages and communities are by default—and falsely—positioned as “minorities.” In addition, the methodologies of Comparative Literature must be reassessed, accommodating languages and literary histories that have been only juxtaposed and compared indirectly in the landscape of literary studies: not just in terms of the definitions and aims of the field, but also in terms of pedagogical programs, language education, textbooks that are used to train the next generation of comparatists, and the norms of scholarly practice.

Beyond Eurocentrism

The papers collected in this issue address questions about doing Comparative Literature beyond conventional Eurocentrism: How can Comparative Literature be theorized and practiced in a new paradigm that is decentered and dismantles the imagined geographies that have dominated literary studies for too long? How would this change of paradigm influence our readings in ways that can revisit literary historiographies written with the impact of European modernity at their core, to revive the study of classical texts from innovative, and even radical, perspectives? Contributors to this issue discuss ways of engaging in constructive dialogues with the global forces surrounding, and shaping, literary studies in the present century.

Considering Comparative Literature

Three papers engage theoretical debates on Comparative Literature as a conceptual challenge, place the origins of the history of the discipline outside Europe, and discuss how broader cultural, social, and political changes have had an impact on educational programs, leading to the accommodation of emerging perspectives.

Ben Hutchinson examines the fundamental idea of comparison, and argues that the centralization of the discipline around European literatures is the effect of the fact that comparativism “is anything but disinterested: it constructs its critique in the process of comparing—or rather, it inherits it, building on deep foundations of historical, cultural, and geographical prejudgment.” This is a paradox at the core of the discipline: as each scholar is positioned, the act of comparison will inevitably become a description-as-distortion that has, for instance, created Orientalism; in other words, the Eurocentrism of the field is the effect of an imbalance in comparative work. Part of the problem, however, is that even when critics have aspired to change the discipline, the dominant paradigms have been reproduced. Hutchinson differentiates between *a priori* Comparative Literature that is epistemological, and *a posteriori* Comparative Literature that is geopolitical; a global Comparative Literature that can overcome the limits of present paradigms will emerge through a balanced relationship between the two. By way of reading Herder and his criticism of Eurocentrism *avant la lettre*, Hutchinson argues that the geopolitical comparativism ultimately leads to an *a priori* form of comparison.

Displacing the history and origins of the discipline, José Luis Jobim argues that even though the history of Comparative Literature has been written from the European perspective, it makes more sense to talk about the discipline as a scholarly practice that began in the peripheries, specifically because in Europe the focus of comparative practices was the formation of national cultures. Taking the European idea of national culture normatively, such transfer would cast the literatures of societies it came in contact with in terms of a “lack.” This process determined circulation and canonization, and removed the oral cultures of Americas from its scope of attention. The opposite end of this relationship is acclimatization: it expresses the cultural agency of the importing culture that “owns” the imported idea: genres and forms are adapted to new environments, with new significations that rarely—if ever—reiterate the “original” form, thus exposing the limits of European universality. From this perspective, a non-Eurocentric history of Comparative Literature will display the diverse ways literary transfer occurs, how adaptations use the imported form for a different expression, and widen the scope of the literary to include aboriginal languages and literatures.

The problems of the discipline are examined within an institutional setting in the contribution by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas. The discipline has evolved in response to new challenges, as well as social, cultural, and political expectations. Theory, for instance, has been criticized as a project with limited value; however, it was theoretical advances like poststructuralism and analyses of power structures that ultimately led to rigorous critiques of European hegemony. Moving beyond Eurocentrism is, therefore, possible through reading the hegemonic literary and cultural tradition from perspectives that have been traditionally neglected in literary history (echoing what Ben Hutchinson and José Luis Jobim also argue). From this perspective, Comparative Literature is a frame of mind that goes beyond the traditional practices that either demonstrated “the intrinsic connections between cultural or literary objects” or were “committed to disclosing incommensurable differences.” The “inherently heterogeneous” nature of all cultures indicate that comparative acts can place the object of analysis “in relation to, or even against, its own context”; without the external object, Comparative Literature can be decentralized and saved from the ethnocentrism it has been associated with for so long.

New Comparisons

Building further on these theoretical propositions, the question is whether actual literary texts can be studied outside the conventional modes of reading in Comparative Literature? Two papers address this question: one engages traditional Orientalism through contrapuntal reading as a corrective measure, and the other broadens the field through engaging health humanities with universal relevance that does not impose predetermined or normative solutions on objects of analysis.

Revisiting Orientalist translations and interpretations through contrapuntal reading, David Damrosch formulates the complexities of comparative work: a text studied from a specific theoretical perspective might be decontextualized and subjected to ideas rather than studied in a way to reveal itself, or the history and culture it draws upon. What can contain this theoretical distortive quality is “local knowledge” that will keep both “vague universalism and imperialist exoticism” in check. Damrosch proposes a way of “comparing the incomparables” as a practice that will not establish a normative epistemological order that removes non-abiding phenomena, but instead accepts difference as integral to the study. He reviews the 1976 English translation of Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta*, and corrects it by “local knowledge” from the work of the 9th-century scholar Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyaloka* (*Light on Suggestion*). This contrapuntal reading can be the goal of new comparative studies, because *new* aspects of texts that were muted through imposing critical systems on non-European texts will become accessible. A significance of this shift is to bring closer collaboration between Comparative Literature and knowledge that ensued from Orientalist perspectives in traditional area studies, to expand and, where necessary, correct and complement the “distortions” or “simplifications” of the texts in readings.

Another way the scope of Comparative Literature can become global is to put issues of global concern at the center of investigation. Karen Thornber approaches the subject from the perspective of health humanities and defines “global literature” with reference “specifically to texts that grapple with challenges and crises that have global implications or counterparts globally, whether at present, in the past, or likely in the future.” Even though we have recently experienced the yet-to-end Covid pandemic, and the “shadow pandemic” caused by its harmful effects, there are many forms of health issues that endanger and take human lives at a different pace. Thornber examines the connections

between disease and stigma, environmental crises, and gender-based violence in texts from Tanzania, Kenya, Pakistan, and Canada/US. In the texts that are juxtaposed, the stigmatization of a disease, for instance, only hides the sites of potential gender-based violence from scrutiny which, in its turn, threatens the community and its relations. Health humanities has universal relevance and is not affected by the problems of the discipline. Thornber argues that such universal issues that afflict human communities equally will shape the future of a global Comparative Literature.

The Ideal vs. the Real in Comparative Literature

One thing that cannot be neglected is the reality of the field and the ideal it begets, something the present special issue strives toward. Theo D’haen argues that discussions of the Eurocentrism of Comparative Literature are part of a cycle of debate-and-change, because the underrepresentation of non-Western literatures in literary studies had been already recognized by Albert Guérard in 1940, Werner Friedrich in 1960, and René Etiemble in 1975. Moreover, the relative neglect of non-Western literatures does not mean that all European literatures are well-represented; Northern traditions (English, French, and German) are much better studied because in the 19th century these nations had done economically, politically, and militarily better than the South. Going “beyond Eurocentrism,” however, does not mean “cutting out European literature altogether in the ‘new comparative literature,’” but developing methodologies that are more global and less ethnocentric: this can be found in studies of global issues from environmental degradation to medical disasters (see Thornber’s paper in this issue), or in models like the Warwick Research Collective’s proposal that does not use world-literature as a system that exists *in the world* but “precisely that it leaves no part of the world untouched.” Such methods will also transform postcolonial criticism, which has had a politically antagonistic stance, to become one possible reading among available readings.

This examination of the cyclical life of theory and critique is followed by Mads Rosendahl Thomsen’s paper that describes the *reality* of the field. Thomsen argues that the ideal of World Literature is to include as many literary works as possible from other cultures, but the reality is the limited resources of publishers and educators: the latter group, for instance, resists changing the curriculum or adding new works to reading lists. While this is partly related to the material conditions of the formation of literature, it is also part of a larger debate on canonization. The rules of participating in World Literature are diverse and often unpredictable, but a close connection to Western literature, the use of enchantment, displays of violence or its traumatic effects on individuals, and the use of shorter forms have often given works a better chance of circulation in World Literature. In the relationship between the real material conditions that create imbalance in the global literary exchanges, and the ideal of a more nuanced formation of World Literature, the compromise goes through the above four conditions—which become sites of negotiation between literary creativity, circulation, and Comparative Literature.

Comparison and the Untranslatable

Translation and its study has been argued to be an important part of contemporary Comparative Literature by scholars such as Susan Bassnett and Emily Apter. In this issue, two papers address untranslatability, in this particular case critical untranslatability. One major problem, as argued above, is that Orientalism was a systemic application of hegemonic critical concepts to “marginal” literatures,

an untenable critical practice.

Thomas O. Beebee examines untranslatability in comparative criticism, and approaches the question of “beyond Eurocentrism” through a significant proposal. Beebee argues that untranslatability is integral to intercultural or interlingual translation because of two inherent characteristics of language: first, “language is not made of words, but of words that occur within specific contexts,” and second, “language is not static.” The changing contexts of language use and the dynamic nature of language itself create a “semantic drift” which transforms concepts through their history, often rendering an accurate translation nearly impossible. Since untranslatability is a constant, Beebee urges “the need for one or more anthologies or chrestomathies of world literary criticism and theory.” He uses examples from Sanskrit (*rasa*), Japanese (*yūgen*), Greek (*mimesis*), and Chinese to illustrate how such an anthology will depict the wide varieties of critical systems that ground global literary studies, and disrupt the normativity of Eurocentric criticism by illustrating spaces of “lack” in it (echoing José Luis Jobim’s discussion of lack and acclimatization); this critical approach currently tends to use concepts and their translations interchangeably to impose its own history and conceptual discourse on non-Western literary traditions.

Yan Liu, too, studies the untranslatability of critical terms through their cultural origins, and offers solutions about how this can be tackled, aiming to balance the ethnocentrism of Comparative Literature. Yan Liu draws on a fundamental difference between European and Chinese literary criticisms: in the former, the purpose is to provide precise definitions and use them in order to clarify texts. In the Chinese critical system, the critic uses their own understanding of the text in order to trigger particular meanings for the future reader. From this perspective, therefore, Chinese critical terms resist the accurate clarification that is the aspiration of European critical theory. As a consequence, by translating a critical term like *feng* into English, either as “airs” or “wind,” three things happen: first, the translated Chinese term is specified instead of remaining ambiguous, which is against the Chinese critical tradition; second, by specifying the term, the possibility of translating other compound notions using the same character diminishes; third, the potentials for future development of the term, in the hands of other critics, is narrowed. This provides further evidence for Beebee’s argument as well: non-European critical traditions are rooted in historical processes that give meaning to literary criticism and use particular concepts to achieve their envisioned ends. Culturally contextualizing critical terms will be an important step to avoid assessing non-European literary traditions with European critical means.

Cultural History and Literary Historiography

The final two papers of the issue are also about translation, but with a different emphasis: one argues that cultural common ground is wider than we expect, and displays how Chinese political thought—made available through translation—has had an influence in the formation of modern European political theories; the other is a critique of the decline of historiography and advocates the use of translation as an effective first step to balance the field of Comparative Literature.

To tackle Eurocentrism, Martin Powers focuses on the history of translation *from* Chinese *into* European languages, and traces the origins of modern European political philosophy, particularly the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in preceding Chinese classics. Theories of state formation, social justice, effective governance, and the use of “public opinion” in reforming state operations had

existed as theory and practice in the long history of China. These texts, made available to European intellectuals through translation, introduced new concepts that would be instrumental in the modern conceptualization of state and governance in Europe. Given this history, the Eurocentrism of the humanities is partly rooted in the fact that the circulation of ideas from “East” to “West” is expunged from intellectual history, casting European cultures as “pure”: “Like theories of incommensurability,” writes Powers, “the notion of influence is rooted in the idea of distinct cultural essences.” Beyond this ethnocentric idea, “common ground is more common than we imagine, and at times is inescapable.” Even if it is erased from history in favor of ethnocentrism, the role of translation in the world history of ideas cannot be neglected.

Translation is also the subject of the final paper of the issue. Zhang Longxi discusses the challenges of writing a history of World Literature and argues that the decline of historiography is the result of the Western cultural development where “grand narratives” are suspected and questioned. However, subscribing to such a view would only aggravate the Eurocentrism of the field: without rewriting the history of World Literature in new ways to include non-Western literatures, we are left with a partial history which will fall short of the goal of overcoming Eurocentrism. Zhang also reflects on problems raised around “untranslatability”: while blanket domestication—to the extent that translated texts are appropriated—would not be acceptable, keeping literary texts foreign as sanctioned by the idea of untranslatability would only lead to the consolidation of a “racist stereotypical impression” that consigns the translated text “to an exotic Oriental heterotopia,” something that “is nothing but a travesty of translation.” Zhang is aware of the role of English in contemporary scholarship and, returning to the reality of the field by emphasizing the significance of translation, argues that an “imperfect translation” into English would benefit the field much more than “no translation of those important” texts at all. In other words, the history of World Literature will necessarily depend on translation, which can have an impact on the reformation of the field towards a wider appreciation of world literatures.

Global Comparative Literature

The label Eurocentric is “the great fear of contemporary criticism in an age of postcolonial globalization” (Hutchinson 5). This is because Eurocentrism is linked to the history of hegemony, inequality, colonialism, exploitation, and racism. However, semantic shifts do happen and, as Behdad and Dominic argue in this issue, Europe has now come to stand for other values, too, namely religious tolerance, diversity, and multilingualism. Eurocentrism, therefore, is not an inherently negative idea.

The need for a change in Comparative Literature is probably more urgent now than ever before, because the change in the patterns of globalization has meant the increasing popularity of Comparative Literature in continental Asia. As a result, for Comparative Literature to remain a critical discipline with relevance, adjustments are necessary. A new and global Comparative Literature can emerge if the aesthetic, political, and pedagogical foundations of the discipline are also transformed in order to decentralize the field and make it contextually relevant. For instance, it is the aesthetic function of criticism to explore the text. As Helen Vendler argues, interpretation is useful as criticism when it can “reveal some hitherto occluded aspect of the aesthetic power of the art work.” But this is not always possible in comparative literary studies because texts are read from perspectives that are “not

interested in the uniqueness of the work of art, wishing always to conflate it with other works sharing its values” (Vendler 2). If Comparative Literature is to become meaningful as an aesthetic project, therefore, knowledge that has accumulated through the older paradigms in the present knowledge structure—such as, but not limited to, Orientalism or area studies—must be subjected to rigorous examination to be corrected and complemented; this can put the literary text back in the sphere of literature, where it properly belongs, and not in a hierarchical structure that serves cultural hegemony.

A paradigm shift cannot happen without pedagogical perspectives either: teaching the same materials, even with a different emphasis, is not going to be the solution. Researchers and students at universities in continental Asia, for instance, cannot proceed to reproduce the same kind of knowledge. Acknowledging the chronological, epistemological, and aesthetic diversity of literary cultures precedes practicing Comparative Literature outside the “Europe and Co.” network. Likewise, in presently dominant institutions, neglecting to substantially incorporate non-European languages and literatures in curricula will only further the status quo. We argue that students must be initiated into the discipline with a critical awareness of its core problems. New reading lists are needed that will work towards the greater aim of a pedagogical shift in order to develop a Comparative Literature that is, first, cosmopolitan in perspective and, second, suitable to developing literary studies among Asian cultures (again, continental Asia). Such a discipline will obviously be adapted based on contextual needs and questions, and complemented by texts that give a more global character to the curriculum at programs that intend to take a different and new approach to the teaching of Comparative Literature.

The papers in this special issue present theoretical debates about Comparative Literature, critically reveal its history and evolution, discuss actual readings of literary texts through acts of juxtaposition, reflect on the real conditions and the ideal aspirations of the field, and debate untranslatable critical terms as well as the challenges of Eurocentric historiography as effective paths to move towards paradigm shift. These debates will be furthered in the *Routledge Companion to Global Comparative Literature* (2023) through studies of the multiple histories of the discipline that address the question of how Comparative Literature can be imagined and practiced differently in the world today. By juxtaposing diverse views, we hope the outlines of a global Comparative Literature will emerge: after all, research and educational aims are often determined locally, and this special issue is a step towards imagining a more inclusive and truly global discipline.

Notes

1. To be fair to Jameson, he does bracket Iran at the beginning of the paper, but the transnationalism that formed part of the revolution was not visible to him. A similar error was committed by Michel Foucault who celebrated the role of religion as a mobilizing force in the 1979 revolution. Such analyses are the product of the knowledge structures we critique.
2. Kant did have racist views, but he was more complicated than that. In his famous essay, “Perpetual Peace,” he condemns colonialism: “If we compare with this ultimate end the *inhospitable* conduct of the civilised states of our continent, especially the commercial states, the injustice which they display in *visiting* foreign countries and peoples (which in their case is the same as *conquering* them) seems appallingly great. America, the negro countries, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc. were looked upon at the time of their discovery as ownerless territories; for the native inhabitants were counted as nothing. In East India (Hindustan), foreign troops were brought in under the pretext of merely setting up trading posts. This led to oppression of the natives, incitement of the various Indian states to widespread wars, famine, insurrection, treachery and the whole litany of evils which can afflict the human race” (106).
3. This new phase of research is an added issue. Google nGram, for instance, makes a small number of literatures available,

at least publicly, for research purposes which, in this case, includes Chinese. Even though the technologies for the study of other languages, e.g., Persian, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Urdu, and Hindi, among other non-European languages, have made significant improvements, the technologization of research will further widen the gap that has already prioritized European cultural history and literary traditions.

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