
Comparative Mobilities

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Abstract: This essay explores recent incursions into comparative modalities and highlights how global comparative literature better reflects the ways in which borders and mobility have become defining elements of the 21st century. However, the humanities remain under attack. Recent openings towards decolonizing the curriculum and strengthening synergies between various social justice approaches may prove fruitful in coordinating defenses. Today, economic and historical circumstances are such that it has become increasingly hard to think of literary traditions in monolithic terms since globalization has dramatically transformed the circulation of literary works. In our understanding, a comparatist is not necessarily invested either in demonstrating the intrinsic connections between cultural or literary objects as traditional practitioners of comparative literature have been, or committed to disclosing incommensurable differences, as postcolonial comparatists have been. Instead, the comparative frame of mind is defined by the fundamental insight that any cultural product or production is inherently heterogeneous and hence requires no external object of comparison. Put otherwise, a comparative frame of mind does not require the co-presence of two or more cultural or literary archives in practicing comparative literature, for any single object can be read in relation to, or even against, its own context. Likewise, languages are not, and should not be considered monolithic entities. Rather, they are historical containers, mobile vessels that transport perpetually evolving references and symbols across borders, the portals and vectors that allow for multi-dimensional cultural and linguistic expression. We therefore argue that the persistent privileging of multi-lingual fluency as the *raison d'être* of comparative literature needs to be relinquished, and that instead one needs to embrace the idea that one can be a comparatist within a single language. In other words, we argue that comparison is as relevant within diverse national traditions as it is between them.

Keywords: global comparative literature, globalization, decolonizing, mobilities, multilingualism

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I

In “The Crisis of Comparative Literature,” the distinguished scholar of comparative literature René Wellek wrote: “The most serious sign of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology” (282). That over 50 years later, the same can be said of the state of a discipline that has grown to dozens of departments and programs worldwide underscores the precarious and plural nature of the discipline itself, a discipline which defines itself as an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and transnational endeavor. Comparative literature occupies a distinct and unique position in the humanities largely because of its capaciousness as a dynamic and inclusive field. Despite the small size of most departments and programs, the discipline typically plays a central role as a clearing-house of ideas not simply for other literary departments on university campuses but across the humanities and humanistic social sciences. Indeed, with student interest in the traditional national literatures rapidly declining as evidenced by a shrinking number of majors, the field of comparative literature is quickly emerging as the natural site around which to organize modern language and literary studies. That the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) regularly draws upwards of 1200 international participants who come from a wide range of literary and disciplinary backgrounds further testifies to the field’s continued vitality.

In light of comparative literature’s global expansion, the history of how language and literature departments were organized around a single nation-state remains of great interest to us. Indeed, a recent initiative at our home institution (the University of California, Los Angeles—UCLA) is paradigmatic of some of these transitions. Under institutional pressure to “amalgamate” various departments of “European” languages (decades after an area studies model had prevailed, paving the way for the establishing of a Department of Asian Languages and Cultures and another of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures), the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies was created. As a February 8, 2021, *Los Angeles Times* article wrote: “Bucking national trends that have closed down many European language programs, UCLA is doubling down on its commitment to European studies by redefining it with a 2021 twist. Germanic, French, Italian, and Scandinavian languages are being merged into a single department with a transcultural bent. Perspectives from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central and South America—areas touched by Europe’s colonial legacies—will be injected into a new way of studying foreign language” (Wannabee web). This new department was grounded in the belief that transcultural and transnational approaches to literature, culture, and society better reflect the ways in which borders and mobility have become defining elements of 21st century globalized existence. Resurgent and often disquieting nationalisms represent challenges to these new configurations, but our multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and pluri-linguistic training affords us unique perspectives on these complex questions. While the curriculum is primarily anchored in Europe, the department has foregrounded the idea of the “trans,” allowing for an emphasis on shared European roots while also complicating the very idea of “Europe,” effectively underscoring the “transcultural” and global qualities of this space. Needless to say, “Europe” today also includes such disparate places as the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, French Guiana, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Mayotte, etc. In the past, there has been considerable “pushback” against the term “Europe,” yet more recently “Europe” has lost some of its negative meanings (colonial,

imperial, oppressive, exploitative), and is increasingly understood as a transcultural and transnational framework that corresponds to a geopolitical space that is rapidly emerging as a center of gravity for thinking about human rights, diversity, and religious tolerance. That some of the most popular and distinguished writers in France and other European countries come from their former colonies speaks to the new transnationalism of literary traditions in Europe that have become both multipolar and multidimensional. A writer and scholar like Alain Mabanckou, for example, is a French citizen born in the Republic of Congo, lives and teaches in the United States, and depicts in his creative work the experiences of Africans, African immigrants in France, and African-Americans in which he problematizes notions of race, nation, and the binary of colonizer/colonized.

Perhaps more significantly, as Haun Saussy points out, “The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring and coffee-shop discussion” (“Exquisite” 3). In recent years, not only has the idea of world literature gained a great deal of currency among national literature departments, but also theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches to literature have taken institutional forms. Indeed, as the late Tobin Siebers had predicted almost two decades ago, “everyone is becoming a comparatist of a kind” (196), though contrary to his prediction, far from a dying discipline, comparative literature is alive and well today. Consider the field of English literature, arguably one of the strongest and most traditional fields in the humanities. Almost 20 years ago, Paul Jay, in an extremely insightful article titled “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” drew attention to the problematic tendency in English and other literature departments to organize their curricula around a “traditional division of discrete national literatures into ossified literary-historical periods,” calling instead for the globalization of literary studies by which he meant an approach that gives “primary attention to the historical role literature has had in global systems of cultural exchange and recognize(s) that this exchange has always been multidirectional” (42-43). Today, comparative fields such as Transatlantic Studies and Global English are gaining tremendous critical momentum in many English departments. That even national literature departments are moving away from a nationalist paradigm towards a globalized model of literary studies suggest that comparative approaches to literature are no longer the exception but the norm in the academy. This has certainly been the case in many French departments that now include in their curriculum the study of the cultures and literatures of the Francophone world, and these trans-colonial and transnational approaches have afforded us more accurate contextualization of French history and the role of Europe in the larger postcolonial world.

That national literature departments have taken a global or transcultural approach to literary studies also speaks to the changes in the literary world itself. Indeed, 2021 will forever be remembered as the year when, as literary critic Bhakti Shringarpure has written, “African authors took the literary world by storm” (web), most notably the Nobel Prize (Abdulrazak Gurnah), Booker Prize (Damon Galgut), Neustadt International Prize for Literature (Boris Boubacar Diop), Pen Pinter Prize (Tsitsi Dangarembga), Man International Booker Prize (David Diop), Prix Goncourt (Mohamed Mbougar Sarr), and Prémio Camões (Paulina Chiziane). Critics like Debjani Ganguly have further argued that a new novelistic form has emerged, the “world novel” that “opens up many worlds that variously converse with, interrogate, interrupt, and even enter the forgotten histories of the world made in the image of contemporary global capital” (83). Such a literary form is not merely reflective of the empirical reality of globalization, but a visually inflected mode of representation that, as a response to

the dominance of visibility in contemporary culture, aims to destabilize the mediated representations of war and humanitarian suffering in our contemporary world.

II

The early years of the new millennium were witness to a burgeoning interest in world literature among comparative literary scholars, one that was inextricably linked to an originary vision of a postnational approach to literature. Many scholars of comparative literature locate the genesis of the discipline in Goethe's coining of the term *Weltliteratur*. Goethe wrote to Eckermann in 1827 that "Nowadays, national literature doesn't mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent" (qtd. in Moretti 54). According to Goethe, the literary imagination transcends national and linguistic borders, even though he acknowledged that every work of literature is historically situated and aesthetically unique. As Edward Said argued, the early practitioners of comparative literature such as Ernest Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach took their inspiration from intellectuals of preimperial Germany such as Goethe and Herder who considered nationalism to be transitory, while recognizing the global dimensions of modernity. For early comparatists, "the idea of comparative literature not only expressed universality and the kind of understanding gained by philologists about language families, but also symbolized the crisis-free serenity of an almost ideal realm" (*Culture* 45). Other critics, however, have pointed to the specific emergence of comparative literature as a product of the Cold War. As the Levin Report on Professional Standards of 1965 acknowledges, "The recent proliferation of Comparative Literature, in colleges and universities throughout the country, could hardly have materialized without the support of the National Defense Education Act," which was passed in 1958 in response to the Soviet Union's early success in the space race and the need for foreign language instruction to counter the threat of communism ("The Levin Report" 21). Comparative literature, according to these critics, belonged to a particular politico-cultural movement in the United States that called for teaching of foreign languages and literature to help the younger generation of Americans understand and engage more effectively with the cultural and political challenges of the Cold War era.

Whether one may attribute the emergence of the discipline to "Goethe's grandly utopian vision" in Said's words (*Humanism* 95), or to the practical demands of Cold War politics, all scholars of comparative literature concur with the idea that it is a dynamic and plural field of study, perpetually transforming its theoretical assumptions, critical methodologies, and objects of study. Even a cursory glance at the reports on professional standards and the state of the discipline by Levin, Greene, Bernheimer, and Saussy, mandated by the bylaws of the ACLA, demonstrates the ability and the commitment of students and scholars of comparative literature to launch new scholarly projects by way of transforming the intellectual mission of the discipline. Thus, for example, while the Levin Report highlighted the importance of a broad linguistic competency and a focus on literary problems that would transcend national limits, the Greene Report emphasized the value of crossing disciplinary boundaries and challenged the "elitism" of the earlier report. Similarly, whereas the Bernheimer Report recommended that Comparative Literature departments "actively recruit faculty from non-European literature departments and from allied disciplines" while "broadening the cultural scope of comparative literature offerings" ("The Bernheimer Report" 45), the Saussy Report offered a

“multivocal report” that elaborated the values of “‘world literature’ and the politics of empire” (*Comparative* viii).

As a way of highlighting the dynamic and innovative qualities of the field, we endeavored in *A Companion to Comparative Literature* to implement the metaphor of mobility as a way to better organize the selection of articles, in order to remain faithful to the general project of comparative literature and to address the historically situated nature of the methodologies and theoretical assumptions. Thus, in order to circumscribe the project, categories that include “roadmaps,” “directions,” “intersections,” “trajectories,” “mobilities,” and “connections” proved helpful in tracking historical antecedents while also pointing to new and exciting configurations (digital humanities, diasporic formations, transnational texts) of the comparative landscape. Examples would include a range of structures that support all kinds of cultural studies across various literary, historical, and media forms. Likewise, new “experimental humanities,” including configurations like “Environmental Humanities,” “Health and Medical Humanities,” and “Urban Humanities” continue to foster an engaged and relevant 21st century humanities. The scholars who work in these emergent fields are compelled to take a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, given that issues such as the environment or the city are by definition global phenomena that must be addressed by taking into consideration contexts beyond the Global North. Comparativists like Elizabeth DeLoughrey, to cite an example, have argued that the Anthropocene and empire are mutually constitutive, as the artistic and literary works of poets like Kamau Brathwaite and Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and artists like Tony Capellán demonstrate. DeLoughrey also argues that to tackle the existential threat of climate change, one must take into consideration the perspective of activists and artists of the Global South and their multi-scalar views of the crisis (1-32).

As global cultural, political, and social alignments continue to emerge and transform the parameters of comparative study, such contextualization becomes all the more important. Comparative literature, and especially global comparative literature, offers theoretical models we can use in studying literary texts and cultural products, as well as specific examples of comparative analyses, including the relationship between translation and transnationalism, literary theory and emerging media, the future of national literatures, gender and cultural formation across time, East-West and North-South cultural encounters, postcolonial and diaspora studies, and other innovative approaches to literature and culture. In our volume, we offered readers articles and position papers by scholars who have been actively engaged in the process of defining the methodologies and theoretical assumptions of the field, and elaborating the different modes of comparative work. Among the issues these introductory and general articles addressed are the intellectual promise and critical values of comparative literature as a discipline; the function of literary criticism today; the ways in which historical conditions determine and effect what constitutes the notion of literariness; the relation between form and content, aesthetics and politics, theory and literature. Together, articles highlighted the multiple ways in which the project of defining the discipline of comparative literature remains highly important, albeit extremely contested.

III

At least since the rise of structuralism in the 1970s, through the 1980s when deconstruction,

feminism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis became dominant theoretical paradigms in the study of literary texts in the US, and in the 1990s when new historicism and postcolonialism came into view as new theoretical interventions, the field of comparative literature has been highly influenced, indeed, defined by what has been generally called “theory.” As Kenneth Surin pointed out in his genealogy of the field, the emergence of critical and cultural theory inaugurated a fundamental shift in the discipline “from a traditional kind of ‘comp lit’ towards a more intellectually ramified ‘comparitism’ involving a diverse range of theoretical paradigms” (70). At the same time, however, some scholars have called into question the centrality of critical theory to the field. The late Richard Rorty, for example, argued that “literary theory” is not a “dialectical necessity” for the field and that its dominance among Comparative Literature scholars was merely a “historical accident” which “has gradually become old hat” (63-64). However, what such wholesale rejections of theory overlook is the fact that the discipline’s theoretical orientation has been extremely useful in that it has not only problematized 19th-century European historiographic methodology, but it has also enabled literary scholars to critique logo- and phallogocentric biases of humanism in the West. Furthermore, such theoretical paradigms as deconstruction and poststructuralism have also played a pivotal role in the introduction of non-Western literary traditions in Comparative Literature departments. Indeed, without deconstruction and poststructuralism, the kind of work that postcolonial critics engaged in would have not been possible. Said, for example, relied on Foucault’s elaboration of the relation between power and knowledge to launch his critique of Orientalism, just as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha drew on the theoretical insights of Derrida and Lacan to elaborate their discussions of subalternity and colonial ambivalence, respectively. Several essays in our volume, therefore, engaged a variety of theoretical approaches, their uses and influence in the work of comparative literature scholars, and concrete examples of how these theoretical models can be deployed to study literary texts and other cultural products, while also pointing to the ways in which these innovative approaches to cultural mediation extend into other domains. In fact, while comparative literature has fostered all kinds of productive encounters, these have not by any means been exhaustive and certain blind spots are to be found, particularly when it comes to drama and theater, yielding the resulting disconnection between cultural practice and its reception and analysis in the Academy.

One of the crucial contributions of “high theory” to the field of comparative literature has been the introduction of other modes of discourse to literary scholarship. The group of scholars who worked on the Bernheimer Report in 1993 wrote: “Literary phenomena are no longer the exclusive focus of our discipline. Rather, literary texts are now being approached as one discursive practice among many others in a complex, shifting, and often contradictory field of cultural production” (“The Bernheimer Report” 42). The authors went on to point out that students of comparative literature tend to work between disciplines, but also often study literature in relation to other modes of discourse. As Jonathan Culler remarked, comparative literature scholars recognize the fact that

their analytical skills can shed light on the structures and functioning of the wide range of discursive practices that form individuals and cultures; and their contributions to the study of philosophical, psychoanalytic, political, medical, and other discourses, not to mention conduct books, film, and popular culture, have been so valuable that no one could wish to restrict literature faculties to the study of literature alone. (117)

The cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of comparative analysis provides concrete examples of how the study of literature can be enriched by the consideration of anthropological, historical, linguistic, new media, political, psychoanalytical, race, and sociological discourses. These factors, among others, also broaden the implications of comparative literature as a post-national discipline by broaching non-Western literary and cultural traditions.

While comparative literature as a field of study serves as a beacon for interdisciplinary inquiry, this success has engendered new challenges. Comparative literature historically has been structured as a discipline around a tension between two forces that seem to work in opposite directions: on the one hand, a concern with overcoming the barriers of national culture and literature and the reliance on the 19th-century notion of world literature as a concert of the world's literary traditions and, on the other, a concerted effort to consolidate the idea of Europe in literary and cultural terms, to be distinguished formally, and once and for all, from all other societies and their literary and cultural creativity. At the same time that the discipline has provided openings to a consideration of a multiplicity of literary cultures, it has also participated in the solidification of a world literary system in which the collective cultures of "the West" have functioned as the center, the interpreter, and the point of reference for all others. As Said cogently observed, "To speak of comparative literature therefore was to speak of the interaction of world literatures with one another, but the field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures as its center and top" (*Culture* 45).

Among the challenges the field has been facing in the past four decades is how to overcome the Eurocentrism that has traditionally defined the field of comparative literature. As Spivak points out, the fact that "Comparative Literature was founded on inter-European hospitality" has prevented it from engaging "the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media" (8, 9). Given recent shifts in the focus of literary and cultural studies away from an exclusive concentration on European literatures, as well as the fact that many students (both graduate and undergraduate) now commonly engage in comparative studies that cross chronological, cultural, disciplinary, linguistic, and national boundaries, it is intellectually necessary to underscore the new directions in studying comparative studies. These considerations remain of utmost pertinence, as do many of the key questions we asked pertaining to the complex ways in which comparative approaches have been forced to broaden the context under investigation in order to account for factors at play beyond a traditional framework in which two forces were juxtaposed. How, for example, do we engage in a comparative analysis of works produced at/in global diasporic sites (e.g., writings in/by Vietnamese authors in Vietnam, France, the United States) and by transnational authors who circulate between different locations (e.g., residency in Africa, Europe, and a third space) anchoring narratives in multiple topographic sites? In 2011, we pondered the degree to which the complex history of decolonization and population displacement/movement had inaugurated spaces that cannot be fixed, and how immigrant narratives operated in a constitutive context in which both centers and peripheries are reconfigured. Today, the imperative to "decolonize" the discipline is of paramount importance; arguably though, the success of this goal will be premised on our willingness to understand how the field emerged and has been transformed over a longer history—a topic we will address in the concluding section of this essay. As Massimo Montanari has argued,

Roots inhabit the past. On the time line, if we want to recount the birth, growth, and

development of anything, they are at the beginning, and they expand in space to take nourishment from every reachable source [...] At the other end of the time line are identities, which, instead, inhabit the present—a mobile present, always intent on projecting itself into the future all the while becoming itself the past. [...] Losing sight of the vitality of identities means denying oneself a truly historical outlook on them and the roots from which they spring, or their “origins.” It means thinking of them as immutable with respect to the future, devoting one-self not to keeping them alive—with the opportune adaptations—but to freezing them, codifying them, confining them to museums. It means thinking of them as immutable with respect to the past—a past that thus becomes pure legend and a colossal mystification. (14-15)

For this reason, comparative literature’s relation with the question of language and linguistic competency remains of key importance. Among the most significant issues in the context of language has been the field’s traditional focus on European languages and literatures. As early as the Greene Report of 1975, scholars of comparative literature have been cognizant of the fact that the field has not traditionally engaged non-European languages. In recent years, however, a new vision of comparative literature as a planetary project has emerged, a vision that calls into question the centrality of European languages and literary traditions in the field. Spivak, for example, has admonished students of comparative literature to “take the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant” (9). Similarly, in *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*, Aamir Mufti has observed that the facile claims of some comparativists about the egalitarian nature of global literature belie the fact that English continues its dominance as the literary language as well as a cultural network of international reach. Nevertheless, as the Greene Report had predicted, the new vision of comparative literature has made “our comfortable European perspectives parochial” (30). New generations of comparatists have begun to study not only literatures of non-European traditions in the original, but also the hybrid nature of these very linguistic traditions. Naturally, the process of categorizing various centers and peripheries proves to be a complex and challenging endeavor. As Simon Gikandi has argued, “so long as European literatures and languages remain at the center of the project of comparison, gestures of expansion, those that seek to embrace other cultures and national languages, will always remain feeble” (256). “[T]he task of comparison,” he further suggests, “must start by exploring how the reigning ideologies of translation are, or can be, dislodged, questioned or revised when scholars seriously engage with the historicity of texts produced in the non-European languages” (259). Indeed, in light of the fact that linguistic trajectories have complicated the task of comparison today, the implications of postcolonial interventions for comparative literature cannot be ignored.

Since the publication of Said’s seminal book, *Orientalism*, the field of comparative literature has been marked by a shift in the interest of its practitioners from textuality to historicity, from the aesthetic to the political, and from individual receptions to collective responses to literary texts. That Said himself was first and foremost a comparatist speaks to the affinity between the fields of comparative literature and postcolonialism. And yet, postcolonialism has been crucial to comparative literature as a field for several reasons. Above all, postcolonial theory brought the issue of colonialism to the forefront of literary studies in the West by critically displaying the ideological underpinnings of scientific and aesthetic representations of “otherness” in European thought throughout modern

history. Moreover, postcolonial theory also enabled a mode of critical inquiry that is attentive to the complex ways in which knowledge, and more specifically nineteenth century European literature, was implicated in relations of power. Finally, the field of postcolonialism reconfigured the literary canon by focusing on the works of many Anglophone and Francophone authors, among others. Today, the works of postcolonial authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Aimé Césaire, Assia Djebar, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Jamaica Kincaid, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Caryl Phillips, Sembène Ousmane, and Salman Rushdie, to name only some “canonical” writers, have not only enriched bibliodiversity but also helped transform the very notion of literature itself. With these questions in mind, the issue of race becomes incontrovertible. David Theo Goldberg, for example, has shown how it has become “undeniable that racial configuration and arrangement may speak thickly to local conditions and reference points, [but] it is nevertheless the case that racial conditions pretty much anywhere are shored up and sustained by [...] racial articulations elsewhere” (359). The range of issues, their complexity, and by association relevance to contemporary cultural, political, and social questions, draw attention to the vibrancy of postcolonial studies, and to new and emerging potentialities such as Afro-European Studies, one that accounts for the complicated historical relationship between colonialism, African and European nation-building, immigration history, and diasporic community formation.

In the final section of *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, aptly titled “Global Connections,” our project built a bridge to the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Global Comparative Literature*. We addressed the idea of world literature, the multiple refractions that such an idea entails, and its relation to the field of comparative literature, more particularly. If anything, we were able to confirm the vitality of comparative literature, pointing to the mobility of concepts and terms and to the historical journey that has taken us from *Weltliteratur* to World Literature. As David Damrosch has remarked, “No shift in modern comparative study has been greater than the accelerating attention to literatures beyond masterworks by the great men of the European great powers” (“World Literature” 43). In the past three decades, students of comparative literature have had to reckon not only with the proliferation of literary works by exile, diaspora, and immigrant writers in Western metropolitan centers, but also with non-Western literary traditions, all of which have problematized, if not fully displaced, traditional European literary canons. Scholars of comparative literature have also turned their attention to world literature as a framework with which to explore new modes of literary circulation, production, reception, and interpretation. One of the most crucial features of world literature, Damrosch argues, originates in the complex ways in which “works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts” (*What* 24). Put otherwise, to the extent to which various works of literature become world literature through their receptions in foreign cultures, the processes of circulation and reception become as crucial to understanding literary texts as their actual contents. In this way, “World literature is thus always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture,” as Damrosch points out (283).

A Companion to Comparative Literature invariably contended with larger questions that had to do with curricular focus and orientation, in other words with the ethical, political, and social implications and consequences of the various proposed approaches to scholarly and pedagogic activity and the

resulting learning outcomes. As Emily Apter maintained in her article,

In addition to foregrounding the political stakes that accompany the classification of peoples within heritage traditions (a major concern in *Orientalism*), Said places the study of legal statutes governing citizenship and land entitlement within humanism's purview. Equally important, he urges the critic to remake humanism in the guise of ethical militance; thereby, disrobing the congeniality of a liberal tradition that loves the world but ignores the earthly violence of distributive injustice. (450)

In coming to grips with these important issues, humanistic inquiry remains all the more crucial to the process of addressing relationality, of accounting for the new ways in which knowledge production occurs and information is accessed, disseminated, analyzed, and processed. Indeed, colleges and universities have made adaptability, circulation, diversity, internationalization, and mobility, in terms of demographics, curriculum, and study abroad opportunities, integral to their mission. Thus, in the end, scholars of comparative literature will emphasize the potential of comparison to suggest ways in which the field can impact 21st century disciplinary configurations, while also insisting on the importance of training students so that they can think globally as effective, informed, and responsible citizens.

Having said this, the humanities remain under attack, and within this conflict, linguistic and literary study have very much emerged as the proverbial "wretched" of the higher education landscape. Recent openings towards decolonizing the curriculum, strengthening synergies between various social justice approaches (#MeToo, BLM, environment, and so on) may prove fruitful in coordinating defenses. And, to the extent that "Comparative Literature has always been concerned with *alterité*," as Milan Dimić insisted, departments of Comparative Literature have a crucial role to play in working against both linguistic and cultural conformism as well as racial and sexual forms of oppression (8).

IV

In *All the Difference in the World*, Natalie Melas observes that scholars of comparative literature have consistently responded to the crisis of their disciplinary identity with a will to expansion, echoing the concern raised by the Greene Report of 1975 that critically noted that comparative literature in many colleges and universities "seems to be purveyed in the style of a smorgasbord at bargain rates" ("The Greene Report" 31). Such a "limitless serial extension," she observes, leaves unexamined and obscures the very "meaning of the verb 'to compare'" (Melas 2). By way of conclusion, we wish to respond to Melas's provocation through a reflective reconsideration of the very notion of comparison as the disciplinary *raison d'être* of comparative literature. To be sure, we generally agree with Saussy that comparative literature cannot be identified either through its objects of study or its methods of inquiry ("Comparative" 340). Moreover, as an interdisciplinary enterprise, comparative literature cannot necessarily be considered a "discipline" that incorporates a specific form of knowledge (such as literary or linguistic knowledge), a range of expertise (such as theory or historicism), or a set of skills (such as close reading or textual analysis). Nevertheless, we do agree with Melas that it is important for us as comparatists to seriously engage with the notion of comparison as a defining term

of our scholarly practices. To elaborate our notion of comparison, a brief detour through how the term has been historically understood is in order.

The adjective “comparative” in comparative literature points to the intellectual origins of the field in the 19th century and its affiliation with comparative philology and the “comparative method” as a means of studying the development of languages and of tracing their historical origins and relationships. Like comparative philology, comparative literature, at least in its French formation in the 19th century, arose from of a positivist will to comprehend the origins, sources, and influences of literary production in different nations. Comparison in this instance implied the consideration of more than one literary tradition and a systematic approach to locating the historical development of literary forms. Such a model of comparison, as Saussy points out, entailed a “tree-shaped” discipline “organizing historical and typological diversity into a common historical narrative with many parallel branches” (“Comparative” 337). As discussed above, developed in era of European colonial hegemony, this model of comparison assumed the primacy, if not supremacy, of French and European literary traditions and entailed an evolutionary model of literary production. As Jan Ziolkowski points out, for 19th-century comparativists such as Philarète Euphémon Chasles, “comparative literature contained a presumption that comparing would involve . . . French literature as either the source or destination of the comparison” (20). The practice of comparison aimed at once to establish a universal poetics and to map the historical origins of all literary traditions, with Europe always positioned at the center. Likewise, in his 1886 *Comparative Literature*, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, one of the earliest practitioners of comparative literature in the English-speaking world, defined the “internal and external aspects of literary growth” as “the objects of comparative inquiry” (85). Claiming that “the comparison of literatures belonging to different social states” would allow the practitioners of the comparative literature to treat “literature as capable of scientific explanation,” Posnett advocated an evolutionary model of the discipline that involved “the gradual expansion of social form, from clan to city, from city to nation, [and] from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity, as the proper order of our studies in comparative literature” (86).

The positivist and universalizing model of comparative literature was also embraced by early proponents of the discipline in the United States. As Melas elaborates, Charles Mills Gayley in his 1903 essay, “What is Comparative Literature?” used the notion of comparison in literary studies to mean “first a scientific approach that is at once systematic and historical, and second a global scope for the study of literature” (Melas 13). Like his European precursors, Gayley and other comparativists such as E. R. Curtius applied the comparative method to discover the common characteristics and qualities of all literary forms and productions. The comparative method enabled these scholars to fashion an evolutionary model for the study of literature that “allowed all the differences in *kind* to be measurable as differences of *degree* in development and growth,” as Melas explains (emphasis in original, 15). After what Wellek called the “revolt against Positivism,” ushered by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, the Russian Formalists, and New Critics, the evolutionary comparative method was displaced with a formalist and Eurocentric notion of comparison after the World War II. Wellek, for example, who admonished comparativists to “stop being all things to all men” and to embrace once again “the old task of understanding, explaining, and transmitting literature,” defined the aim of comparison as identifying the “proper interplay between a study of national literatures, their common tendencies, [and] the totality of the Western tradition” (“Comparative” 334, 330).

With the rise of multiculturalism and postcolonial theory in the 1980s, the formalist and Eurocentric model of comparison was deconstructed, leading to a more historical and politicized form of comparison. In *Culture and Imperialism*, for example, Said drew attention for the first time to the ways in which the development of comparative literature coincided with, and was imbricated in, “the emergence of imperial geography” (50). Observing the ideological nature of comparison as a method, not to mention the hierarchical structure of comparative literature as a discipline, Said called for a politically oppositional mode of secular comparison through which “we begin to reread [the cultural archive] not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (emphasis in original, 51). In the contrapuntal model of comparison, Said remarked, “it becomes incumbent upon you also to reinterpret the canon in the light of texts whose place there has been insufficiently linked to, insufficiently weighted toward the expansion of Europe” (60). Following Said, Melas has built on his contrapuntal model of comparison to develop what she calls “postcolonial comparison,” which “involves a particular form of incommensurability: space offers a ground of comparison, but no given basis of equivalence” (xii). Melas’s critical aim is to bring a set of diverse literary and theoretical traditions “into relation over a ground of comparison that is in common but not unified” (43).

Melas’s focus on the idea of comparison speaks to the fact that the issue of methodology remains insufficiently elaborated among scholars of comparative literature. There is also a tendency to claim that students of comparative literature often do not actually, in practice, *compare* texts, opting instead for a more restricted focus on a specific cultural or literary tradition. However, this assessment may be potentially misleading and needs to be further qualified because of emerging factors impacting this age-old question of what it means to be a comparatist. Today, economic and historical circumstances are such that it has become increasingly hard to think of literary traditions in monolithic terms. Globalization has dramatically transformed the circulation of literary works specifically, but cultural productions more generally. Authors write simultaneously for target audiences in ever-mutating language spheres, to the extent that many readers are less conscious of the national identity of the authors or filmmakers (Arabic, English, French, Gikūyū, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, etc.), but also for global (and often quantitatively larger) audiences *in translation*, and according to a range of sociological factors (Sapiro, *Traduire*; “Translation” 320-346). It should come as no surprise that the Booker Prize expanded its eligibility criteria in 2014 to include authors writing in English anywhere in the world: “We are abandoning the constraints of geography and national boundaries,” said Jonathan Taylor, chair of the Booker Prize Foundation (“Global Expansion for Booker Prize” web), and notably in 2022, the “francophone” writer, Mabanckou, was named to the jury. Once again, the context of African literature and the inclusion of a Francophone writer in the Booker Prize jury are indicative of some of these changes that can be attributed to globalization. Mabanckou, for example, has argued that “Africa is no longer only in Africa. Africans are dispersed all over the planet and have created other Africas” (62). Similarly, photographer and writer Taiye Selasi has explained how “Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many. [...] The Afropolitan must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural—with subtle tensions in between” (web).

In light of these transformations, our notion of comparative literature as a practice of engaging and realizing ideas through what we call “a comparative frame of mind” differs from the model Melas and earlier practitioners of the field have suggested. Above all, our notion of comparison designates an analytics as opposed to an operation performed on comparable or incommensurable objects. In our understanding, a comparatist is not necessarily invested either in demonstrating the intrinsic connections between cultural or literary objects as traditional practitioners of Comparative Literature have been, or committed to disclosing incommensurable differences, as postcolonial comparatists have been. Instead, the comparative frame of mind is defined by the fundamental insight that any cultural product or production is inherently heterogeneous and hence requires no external object of comparison. Put otherwise, a comparative frame of mind does not require the co-presence of two or more cultural or literary archives in practicing comparative literature, for any single object can be read in relation to, or even against, its own context. Relatedly, a comparative frame of mind also takes seriously the arbitrariness of the divisions drawn among cultural productions, and may even make the problematization of genre categories the object of analysis itself.

Relatedly, languages are not, and should not be considered monolithic entities either. They are, indeed, historical containers, mobile vessels that transport perpetually evolving references and symbols across borders. Reading or speaking any language therefore necessarily triggers a process of comparison, and the precondition for access and understanding is a willingness to engage with that language in concerted archeological and forensic ways. The persistent privileging of multi-lingual fluency as the *raison d'être* of comparative literature needs to be relinquished, and instead one needs to embrace the idea that one can be a comparatist within a single language. This means acknowledging that languages are the portals and vectors that allow for multi-dimensional cultural and linguistic expression. These measures will provide students with a comparative frame of mind and the accompanying requisite cultural fluency which is often overlooked by the persistent focus on multi-lingual competency as a non-negotiable skill for comparatists. Comparison is as relevant within diverse national traditions as it is between them, and whereas cultural projects may be conceptualized in local settings, the fundamental goal is to reach contexts beyond the narrow and limited confines of the national.

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