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The History of Comparison Matters

Ali Behdad

"Comparisons," Joseph Slaughter remarks, "are made at particular historical moments under particular historical conditions, with particular historical motivations under particular historical constraints from particular locations."[1] To ignore the particular historical locations of comparison, he maintains, risks "sedimenting those occlusions and forgetting rich histories of comparison that should matter to us as scholars of comparative literature."[2] In his American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) presidential address, Slaughter draws attention to the ways scholars of comparative literature have avoided the historicity and the location of comparison, thus overlooking and misconstruing the contributions of African and other non-Western scholars to literary studies. This tendency, he insightfully observes, persists to this day, as demonstrated by the new scholarship on "world literature," a relatively recent area of critical inquiry that has quickly come to be regarded as emblematizing the very essence of the field of comparative literature itself. Taking as a representative case in point Franco Moretti's mode of "distant reading," one in which the critic relies on previous scholarship to generalize what he calls the "*law of literary evolution*,"[3] Slaughter highlights this approach's blindness to "the political contingencies and historical locations of comparison."[4] Citing a footnote in Moretti's article to the works of African scholars Emmanuel Obiechina, Abiola Irele, and Ato Quayson, on whose scholarship Moretti relies to advance the claim that the evolution of the novel in the non-Western world depends on "a comparison between a western formal influence (usually French and English) and local materials,"[5] Slaughter contends that Moretti's "distant reading" exemplifies "how the dominant literary critical institutions still treat [non-Western] scholars . . . as informants rather than theorists."[6] Today, scholars in comparative literature may be more willing to acknowledge and engage literary productions from the Western periphery, but Western scholars continue to read this literature against "the grid of intelligibility

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1 Joseph R. Slaughter, "Locations of Comparison," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5.2 (2018): 209–26.
2 Slaughter, "Locations of Comparison," 27.
3 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 58.
4 Slaughter, "Locations of Comparison," 15.
5 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58.
6 Slaughter, "Locations of Comparison," 20.

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. . . of literature as understood in Europe," as Rey Chow has observed.[7] In light of such contentions concerning the treatment of African and non-Western literature by comparative literature scholars, one might reasonably wonder whether comparison, as it is defined and practiced in the Euro-American academy, is capable of doing justice to the literatures of Western periphery. Is a non-exclusionary mode of comparative analysis even possible today?

To be sure, comparative literature scholars in Euro-American academy have attempted to counter, or at least curb, the discipline's Eurocentricity by expanding the range of texts considered worthy of comparison. As Jan Ziolkowski observes, "In each past episode of anxiety about its own viability, comparative literature has responded by enlarging its purview and self-definition."[8] As early as 1963, René Étiemble, in his *Comparison n'est pas raison: La Crise de la literature compare*, advocated the study of Oriental literatures in Arabic, Chinese, and Bengali as an antidote to a perceived crisis of the field, a recommendation whose wisdom René Wellek acknowledged, even if he doubted its sufficiency "to change the direction of comparative literature." Still, Wellek conceded, "In principle he is surely right in asking for a comparative poetics, for a genuinely universal study of world literature."[9] A decade later, Thomas Greene and the members of a 1975 Comparative Literature Association committee that prepared a "Report on Standards" responded to cries of disciplinary crisis by recognizing, albeit ambivalently, that "[a] new vision of *global* literature is emerging, embracing all the verbal creativity during the history of our planet, a vision which will soon begin to make our comfortable European perspectives parochial."[10] Several years later, as the rise of multiculturalism and cultural studies posed even more urgently articulated threats to the disciplinary consciousness of comparativists, the ACLA leadership responded by calling for a massive expansion of "the discipline's goals and methods," proclaiming:

> The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and post- contact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulations; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, and genres that term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study.[11]

7 Rey Chow, "The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective," *ELH* 71.2 (2004): 294.

8 Jan M. Ziolkowski, "The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not," *The Global South* 1.2 (2007): 24.

9 René Wellek, "Comparative Literature Today," *Comparative Literature* 17.4 (1965): 335.

10 "The Greene Report, 1975," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 30 (emphasis in original).

11 "The Bernheimer Report, 1993," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 41–42.

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In the contemporary period, the practice of redress by incorporation continues to predominate. David Damrosch, for example, suggests that "[c]omparative literature can thrive in the coming years . . . only through a renewed engagement with national traditions and with global contexts" and by "embrac[ing] translation far more actively than it did during the past century."[12] Even more grandly, Gayatri Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* attempts to resurrect the field by appeal to a "planetary" consciousness that "supplements" comparative literature with area studies.[13] This "new comparative literature," she hopes, "will touch the older minorities: African, Asian, Hispanic. It will take in its *sweep* the new postcoloniality of the post-Soviet sector and the special place of Islam in today's breaking world."[14] What such a "limitless serial extension" obscures however, as Natalie Melas astutely observes, is the very "meaning of the verb to 'compare' as a practice or an act."[15] That is, rising calls for more exclusive forms of comparison risk preempting the work of rigorous engagement with the idea of comparison as a method, and with the political and ideological assumptions in which it is grounded. This is especially problematic if, as I would suggest, the comparative method itself is the critical factor enabling the discipline's persistent Eurocentricity and its inability to treat non-Western literary traditions as equal to their European counterparts.

The adjective *comparative* in the term *comparative literature* points to the intellectual origins of the field in the nineteenth century and its affiliations with comparative philology and the "comparative method" as a means of studying the development of languages and of tracing historical origins and relationships. Like comparative philology, comparative literature, at least in its nineteenth-century French formation, arose from a distinctly positivist approach to comprehend the origins of and influences on literary production in different nations. Comparison in this context implied the imperative to consider more than one literary tradition and to take a systematic approach to locating the historical development of discrete literary forms. Such a model of comparison, as Haun Saussy points out, entailed a "tree-shaped" discipline "organizing historical and typological diversity into a common historical narrative with many parallel branches."[16] Developed in the era of European colonial hegemony, this approach suggests a proto-evolutionary model of literary production that assumed the primacy, if not explicitly the superiority, of French and European literary traditions. For nineteenth-century comparativists such as Philaréte Euphémon Chasles, "Comparative literature contained a presumption that comparing would involve, . . . French literature as either the source or destination of the comparison," as Ziolkowski points out.[17] The practice of comparison aimed at once to establish a universal poetics by way of mapping the historical origins of all literary traditions—but with Europe unquestioningly positioned as the standard bearer. Likewise, in his 1886 *Comparative Literature*, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, one of the

12 David Damrosch, "Comparative Literature?" *PMLA* 118.2 (March 2003): 327, 328.
13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.
14 Ibid., 84 (emphasis added).
15 Natalie Melas, All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.
16 Haun Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" *PMLA*, 118.2 (March 2003), 337.
17 Ziolkowski, "The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not," 20.

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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."[18] Declaring that "the comparison of literatures belonging to different social states" would allow the practitioners of comparative literature to treat "literature as capable of scientific explanation," Posnett advocated an evolutionary model of the discipline in which "the gradual expansion of social form, from clan to city, from city to nation, from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity, is the proper order of our studies in comparative literature."[19] In this way, literary comparison echoed the racist theories of ethnologists and anthropologists who also deployed the comparative method to map Europe's relation with its others in terms of a linear narrative of progress and "by means of temporal devices [that] implied affirmation of difference as *distance*," as Johannes Fabian has demonstrated.[20] Such a positivist and universalizing approach to 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."[21] Like his European precursors, Gayley and other comparativists, including 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.[22]

After what Wellek called the "revolt against Positivism," ushered in by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, the Russian formalists, and the New Critics, the evolutionary comparative method was displaced after World War II by a formalist but equally Eurocentric notion of comparison. Wellek himself admonished comparativists to "stop being all things to all men" and to embrace once again "the old task of understanding, explaining, and transmitting literature," defining the goal of comparison as identifying the "proper interplay between a study of national literatures, their common tendencies, [and] the totality of the Western tradition."[23] For Wellek and other New Critics, European literary traditions remained the sole focus of comparative literature, and they explored the structural and formal aspects of literary texts largely without consideration of historical and sociopolitical issues. The various reports on professional standards of the American Literature Association provide ample evidence of the domination of a Eurocentric and formalistic mode of comparison in the United States well beyond the era of New Criticism. For example, though the 1965 Levin report correctly identified the establishment of the field of comparative literature in the United States in the National Defense Education Act, which provided material

18 Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1886), 85.
19 Ibid., 86.
20 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 16.
21 Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*, 13.
22 Ibid., 15.
23 Wellek, "Comparative Literature Today," 334, 330.

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support for foreign language instruction and for the systematic introduction of programs and courses in great books to help a younger generation of Americans understand and engage more effectively with international cross-currents in the postwar years, the report nonetheless advocated a non-historical, Eurocentric approach to comparison by proclaiming that only universities with strong European language departments and large libraries were suited to pursue comparative literature. The Levin report defined comparative literature as the study of literary phenomena from the perspective of more than one European national literature (primarily English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish), with the critical aim of understanding fundamental unities. As Edward Said observed, "The field was epistemologically organized as a sort of hierarchy, with Europe and its Latin Christian literatures at its center and top."[24] It is not an accident that founding texts in the field, including Erich Auerbach's 1942 *Mimesis*, Austin Warren and René Wellek's 1949 *Theory of Literature*, and Leo Spitzer's work on stylistics, all focused on European literary traditions to posit a universalist view of literature understood without reference to the socio-historical forces in which literary works are inscribed. While attributing the successful proliferation of comparative literature departments in the 1950s to American exceptionalism, stating that "it is largely because of America's cultural pluralism, above all, its receptivity to Europeans and European ideas, that we have been enabled to develop centers for the study of Comparative Literature since the last war,"[25] the Levin report remained oblivious to the significance of the historical and political contexts of its own time, including the civil rights movement, not to mention the literary contributions of minority writers in the United States. In this way, comparative literature was not merely Eurocentric, but also apolitical. Indeed, as Said pointedly remarked, "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."[26]

By the mid-1970s, a Eurocentric, ahistorical, and apolitical approach to literary to comparison was consolidated. The 1975 Greene report is a revealing example of historical disavowal, at once advocating for a cosmopolitan understanding of comparative literature while simultaneously repressing questions concerning the necessary conditions of possibility. The report replaced Levin's notion of "new internationalism" with a "cosmopolitanism vantage point." Despite this gesture, the report quickly abandoned Levin's self-reflexivity about comparative literature's disciplinary origins and instead engaged in acts of formalistic entrenchment by unabashedly rejecting the idea of translation, while reducing the project of comparativism to literary studies by dismissing interdisciplinary works that "involve a relaxing of discipline" and by discouraging the "study of literature at the global level" given a supposed dearth of "concepts and tools that will permit us" to engage in "the study of those literatures further-flung from Europe and the Americas."[27]

24 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 45.
25 "The Levin Report, 1965," 25.
26 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 45.
27 "The Greene Report, 1975," 36.

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The Greene report registers as particularly reactionary when read in the context of the ways the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and antiwar protests had radically politicized university campuses throughout the United States. In the wake of these shifts, the report advocated a formalist and Eurocentric approach to literature following a symbolic but ultimately hollow recognition of non-Western literary traditions and other interdisciplinary fields such as American and medieval studies. More broadly, comparative literature's Eurocentrism and formalism at the time point to its problematic inscription within a logic of Cold War politics that rendered it politically conservative despite an apparent identification with cosmopolitanism. Indeed, as Said remarked, a "complacent ethnocentrism and covert Cold Warriorism" began to take root in comparative literature.[28] It should come as no surprise, then, that the report concluded by recommending the constitution of "a permanent Evaluation Committee" to monitor every comparative literature program in the country for evidence of "the danger of diluted excellence" (36).

The Greene report marked a turning point in the field of comparative literature while pointing to missed opportunities to institute a more worldly understanding of the comparative method. On the one hand, the report's Eurocentricity speaks to the failure of comparative literature to embrace ethnic and postcolonial literary traditions, a failure that the study of these flourishing literary traditions was to be outsourced to American studies and English departments. On the other hand, despite the report's passing references to the value of interdisciplinarity, it resorts to a provincial formalism based on an Orientalist tradition of philology that precludes the possibility of studying literature in relation to other modes of discourse. By the 1980s, when English departments began to integrate US ethnic and postcolonial literatures in their curricula, comparative literature departments, in contrast, embraced "high theory" as their new disciplinary focus and as a badge of distinction. Although, as Kenneth Surin has pointed out, the introduction of critical theory—structuralism in the late 1970s, and deconstruction, post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism in the 1980s and 1990s—enabled a productive shift "from a traditional kind of 'comp lit' toward a more intellectually ramified 'comparitism' involving a diverse range of theoretical paradigms," the embrace of "high theory" contributed to the marginalization of non-European literary and philosophical traditions, while preempting historical approaches to literary studies in comparative literature departments. On the one hand, privileging the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jacobson, and Roland Barthes over more political approaches such as Marxism or critical theory enabled a synchronic worldview that rendered diachronic or political interpretation nearly unthinkable.

Here, it bears remarking that New Historicism as a mode of textual analysis was invented in the English departments in the late 1980s, and Said is to the point in describing the kind of theoretical projects pursued by scholars of comparative literature at the time as "quietistic," "uninterested in political questions," and "[t]he life of society, or the life of society that bears centrally upon texts and literature," a field marked by a "renunciation of everything but the literary work and its problems."[29]

28 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 47.
29 Edward W. Said, "Interview," *Diacritics* 6.3 (1976): 35.

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The dominance of high theory at the time, which was rooted in the post-Enlightenment philosophical traditions in Europe, further marginalized non-European forms of knowledge, especially what V. Y. Mudimbe called "African Gnosis."[30] Although in the 1990s, some scholars of comparative literature began to deconstruct formalist and Eurocentric models of comparison, these approaches hardly freed the field from its biases. Even Said, who insightfully demonstrated how the development of comparative literature coincided with and was imbricated in "the emergence of imperial geography," did not go as far in his contrapuntal method as to urge a displacement of the Western high-humanist literary tradition; instead, he merely advocated a reinterpretation of "the canon in the light of texts whose place there has been insufficiently linked to, insufficiently weighted toward the expansion of Europe."[31] That more recent scholars such as Melas, who have followed in Said's footsteps to fashion a "postcolonial comparison," have similarly called only for bringing non-European literary traditions "into relation [with their European counterparts] over a ground of comparison that is in common but not unified"[32] speaks to the profound challenges facing what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o called "the quest for relevance," that is, a "liberating perspective" that would allow non-European literary traditions to form the bases of comparison and not an afterthought.[33]

I have offered this brief history of literary comparison in response to the important questions Slaughter raises in his presidential address, namely: "Does it matter who compares?" and "Does it matter where we are com(par)ing from?"[34] By underscoring the historical conditions that have enabled the dominance of Eurocentric and formalist approaches to literature, I contend that if we continue to use the comparative method without fully attending to the cultural and ideological assumptions that undergird it, literatures from the Western periphery will continue to remain in an essential sense marginal in comparative literature—even as these texts come to be incorporated into the field. The meaning of comparison is not primarily a question of geographic scope, nor must the act of comparison necessarily be conceived in identitarian terms. Instead, the idea of location itself must be understood in the context of the development of comparative methodology in the West as a hierarchal and hierarchizing mode of textual analysis that has placed non-Western literary productions in a subordinate position in relation to their European counterparts. The issue I underscore here, then, is not that comparative literature in the Euro-American academy lacks a global disposition; in fact, comparative literature as a field has shown a marked willingness, especially recently, to incorporate literature from the world at large. Rather, the problem is the enduring power of a parochial understanding of the comparative method itself in the study of literature. The comparative method, as I have suggested, rests on a developmental assumption in which non-European traditions represent earlier stages in a progressive narrative of literary production. That

30 V. Y. Mudimbe, "African Gnosis Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge: An Introduction," *African Studies Review* 28.2/3 (1985): 149–233.
31 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 50, 60.
32 Ibid., 43.
33 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 1981), 87
34 Slaughter, "Locations of Comparison," 3

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such an influential comparativist as Moretti could unabashedly use "other people's comparison without due regard for their historicity," a practice that Slaughter correctly observes has "become rather common practice today,"[35] is an emblematic manifestation of a comparative approach that assumes the Western literary tradition as both a privileged reference point and as representing the most advanced stage of literary production.

The hegemony of a Eurocentric concept of the comparative method is reflected not only in scholarship, but also in the hiring and curricular practices common in comparative literature departments throughout the academy. Although European national literatures typically are covered by multiple faculty members each of whom specializes in a different historical period or genre, entire literary traditions from the continents of Africa or Asia often are covered by a single faculty member. In many cases, staffing decisions reinforce the presumption that a single faculty member is sufficient to train students in the literary productions of the entire non-Western world, as suggested by recent job ads for positions in fields such as "global Anglophone literature," "transnational literature," and "world literature." At the same time, the tokenized inclusion of African or Asian faculty in comparative literature departments is perhaps the reason some scholars continue to be treated as "informants" rather than theorists, an assumption reflected in the fact that although comparative literature departments often offer numerous, specialized courses in European literatures treating different genres and historical periods, course offerings on African or Asian literatures generally are at best meager and at worst nonexistent. The introductory series in comparative literature at the institution where I teach, for example, includes three courses on European literary traditions spanning from antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the modern period, but only one course devoted to the "great books from the world at large." For this reason, it is predictable that the inclusion of non-Western literatures in comparative literature curricula will not prove capable of generating and sustaining serious engagement with politico-historical specificities, let alone provincializing the high Western humanist tradition at the level of either syllabus or scholarship. Indeed, so long as the prevailing understanding of the comparative method maintains intellectual and institutional hegemony, non-European literatures will remain in peripheral locations in comparative literature departments in the Euro-American academy.

35 Ibid., 15.

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