theories and methodologies

Net Work: Area Studies, Comparison, and Connectivity

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AREA STUDIES AND WORLD LITERATURE SHARE A SPIRIT OF COMPARISON, DESPITE THEIR DISTINCT HISTORICAL FORMATIONS IN COLD WAR tactics of knowledge for power and the flurry of globalization theory that accompanied the neoliberal 1990s vision of open market as world stage, and notwithstanding recent critical narratives that cleave area studies' particularized zones of specialized, philologically deep knowledge from world literature's globe-spanning yet difference-erasing ambition. That spirit will not speak in these brief remarks, nor can I promise a report, readable or otherwise, *to* one disciplinary field (the comparative) *from* any other field (e.g., area studies). Area studies was always comparative. It emerged alongside a host of comparative methodologies whose slicing spatial divisions (continents, spheres of influences, West/East) and stealth temporal ladders (civilization, modernity, development) later comparatists of the literary-critical persuasion may question but whose gestures we are perhaps condemned to repeat in cutting the globe to new spatiotemporal measures. The task is not to redress historical error in the name of comparison (as if the verbal sense of *discipline* was intended and comparative literature could complete area studies) but rather to re-cognize comparison, which we are always learning how to do, through the remembrance of area studies' ambitions and omissions.

For the Japanese historian Harry Harootunian, area studies' "inaugural impulse for holism and comparison" resulted in the increasing privilege of the spatial over the temporal (24). The primacy of spatial divisions enabled the notorious carving up of territories for knowledge; the fabled denial of coevalness that, in locating different societies in different temporalities, helped "mak[e] them outside to our inside" (33); and the "effac[ing]" of the "obvious fact that the people of the world outside of Euro-America have been forced to live lives *comparatively* by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization or subjection enforced by the specter of imperialism" (26). In the face of such comparative histories, comparison takes on the burden of critical responsibility, first to the fact of uneven development

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and second to keeping the thinking of that fact uneven. The "reunion" of space and time whose necessity Harootunian identifies is thus no mere merging (23). As distinct vectors of analysis, each demanding historical consciousness of its disciplinary deployments, space and time come together in perpetual intersection, or perhaps supplementation or striation, if I may thus signpost the Derridean and Deleuzean theoretical lineages whose differential possibilities for reframing comparison I have elsewhere elaborated and currently try to think in the form of reunion ("Hauntologies" and "World Literature"). Comparison, as deconstruction and posthumanism instruct, is antithetical to completion, filling in, evening out, rendering equivalent. How then to use it to map area studies, recalling the heavy weight attached to this comparative gesture by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her Derridean critique of world literature as "map-making literary criticism" that is incapable of accessing futurity, whether disciplinary, political, or planetary (104)?

The rhizomatic map of smooth surfaces and striated depths hallucinated in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* offers one approach. The rhizomatic map is "reducible neither to the One nor the multiple" and it "has neither beginning nor end" (21, 25). It is "a system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states" (21). Notoriously placeless and often charged with metaphorizing away actual places, persons, cultures, and histories in favor of a neologistic nomadology, the rhizomatic map nonetheless models a mode of comparison for the analysis of place, including the critical regions of multilayered and syncretic cultural, linguistic, and economic formations known as areas. There are many ways for comparison to skin a map, to fleshify it, when flesh is taken as a tactile figure for the affective intensities that can pulse through a map, causing borders and names to evoke, as Benedict Anderson observed with regard to nationalism, the most primal of emotions: love and hate. To see a map with an eye for "the circulation of states," including states of feeling (fantasies, identifications, disidentifications, affects), as well as for nation-states, countries, landmasses, bodies of water, first worlds, third worlds, cores, peripheries, regions, and rims, all interconnected, is to see a map not as a cognate for hegemonic territorializing but as a rhizomatic network, in which elements (spaces, times, modes) do not succeed one another but rather coexist and in which the very categories of comparison are subject to change.

Inflecting *area* with *network* allows us to highlight the principle of circulation, sedimentation, and linkage; distinct objects such as languages, cultures, identities, and aesthetic forms that move rhizomatically; the bedrock comparative category of history newly broken by branching structure; and the peculiar space-time of memory as it entangles with the multiple temporalities of the slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and decolonization that have made areas. In *Poetics of Relation* the Caribbean poet, novelist, and theorist Édouard Glissant brings together these categories of comparison to propose, against the "linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course," something he calls "nonhistory" (66–67). Nonhistory's archipelagic assemblage combines partially registered, slowly sedimented traumatic shocks, displacements, and losses with explosive creations; "multiple converging paths"; transversal, flowing, rhizomatic linkages; and an "aesthetics of the earth" whose stylistic commitment to "rupture and connection" again and again cuts against History's teleological line and ontological heft (151). Nonhistory is not without its weight, nor is it devoid of waiting: densely ephemeral, sedimentary yet alluvial, it is as freighted with the passing of time as the buried bones that are often its metonymic signifier, yet it remains open to alternative ecologies of future being.

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The central nodal unit of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*—the plantation—is a site of memory that cannot be thought in nonnetworked form, for it is both self-contradictory and comparison inducing. An "enclosed place . . . defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden," the plantation was a singular sovereign economy, an "autarky" that nonetheless "from Louisiana to Martinique to Réunion, be[came] capable of kinship" (64). The connective tissue that renders the plantation not only sovereign but also comparable is a link formed by the material "reality of slavery" (despite the many distinctions between the economics, production techniques, and legal codes for slavery and manumission in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean world systems). Other factors also shape the plantation as a comparative category—notably, a common condition of incompletion that constitutes these far-flung epiphenomena of the totalizing power of modernity as "ruins with their uncertain evidence, their extremely fragile monuments, their frequently incomplete, obliterated, or ambiguous archives" (65). Analysis, whether of the plantation arc or of a single locale, requires a comparatively minded surfacing of the past, a skinning of it or feeling with it rather than a filling in or fleshing out in a full realization of what Walter Benjamin dismissed as the historicist's fantasy of recovering "the past as it really was" (391).

Glissant's nonhistory, in its submarine transversality, maps a network imaginary for the postplantation world, even as it fleshes the structural network of sovereign power out with an alternative sense of being—namely, being in relation. Being with is relation's work, the inhabiting of a metamorphic-speculative mode unseconded by a primary origin, unconfined by the symmetries of hierarchy and binarity, and unsettled (disturbed but not yet conquered) by the telos of colonial transformation: earth to territory, human to slave, labor to value. The comparative poetics of relation in this sense preclude any nostalgic gaze back at the past to recapture it, just as they preclude any assimilation of a series of particularities to a singular generality, whether history, being, or commodity.

Once thought in relation, any nodal point, privileged or not, becomes a place from which we can imagine the larger totality of area, region, or world while simultaneously perceiving, as if in some ghostly recessional, the prehistories that constituted both the point and its orbit. This is a kind of memory work, activated by network comparison, that allows distinct spatiotemporal nodes to be simultaneously pinpointed and connected, reverted to and departed from, effectively multiplied and nonlinearly mobilized, in striking contrast to the reterritorialized housing of memory criticized by Pierre Nora. According to Nora, the state's enshrining of prosthetic memory animatronically activated by *lieux de mémoire* such as museums, monuments, cemeteries, archives, and anniversaries embodies memorial consciousness for an age that has abandoned living memory and produces it now only in forms that are "no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living history has receded" (12).

Comparative-memory studies have amplified Nora's elegiac vocabulary and national focus to include *multidirectionality* (Rothberg), *inheritance* (Hirsch), and *palimpsest* (Huyssen). Constituting memory as movement helps us to interrogate the territorializing by which one event horizon becomes the measure for all subsequent ones in a memory equivalent of the centering of the West. The comparative category of mobile memory further allows for a more diverse assemblage of event horizons and area imaginaries. Acts of memorialization travel across this assemblage and hold it together in comparable elements such as monumentalizations, truth commissions, and aesthetic forms. These forms are memory practices in which the shaping logics of distinct times and spaces are congealing and mutating, sedimenting and reassembling.

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Without enshrining, as Mikhail Bakhtin does, the novel's unique capacity to capture the accumulative instant of modernity, the chronotopical analysis of genre can showcase how the logics of time and space inform form, congeal in it, and provide a snapshot of the constitution of era *and* area. The form in question may be literary, but it may equally be disciplinary, as Harootunian notes, or perhaps disciplinarily specific—that is, history's form, culture's form, identity's form, media's form.

I turn now to consider one form of critical density in recent area studies, including Glissant's Atlantic, Caribbean, and Indian Ocean plantation zone; Fernand Braudel's medieval Mediterranean; the "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" Paul Gilroy calls black Atlantic modernity (4); the Pacific Rim littoral of the new global economy; and the twelfth-to-twenty-first-century Indian Ocean world. Oceanic knowledge, Devleena Ghosh and Stephen Muecke argue, is comparative and interdisciplinary: "Like the ocean, it will cross cultures and paradigms" (153). In the context of the Indian Ocean, Françoise Vergès proposes the evocative image of "writing on water," another way to posit the sea not only as history, to paraphrase the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, but also as archive and beyond that as a recognizably rhizomatic map, striated with multiple points of connection and both saturated and skinned with affect. "If we look at the ocean as a cultural space," Vergès writes, "we observe layers on layers of maps of power and resistance, which have created and still create identities, narratives, and territories. . . . Maps of friendship, of love, of family history, of political solidarity, of connections with people we will neither know nor wish to know, reified maps, dreamed maps, maps of memories" (250). In their 2002 anthology *Coolitude* (the term translates the Césairean poetics of negritude to the Indian Ocean history of Indian indenture) the Mauritian poet and critic Khal Torabully and the historian Marina Carter figure the ocean as a connective, connecting spatial category and as a "nodal moment of migration." This moment in turn becomes spatialized, "a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration, when an aesthetics of migration was created" (17). As space turns to moment and then to metamorphic relation (both a connection and the telling that captures it), space, time, and form appear as no longer separate, differently privileged categories (space for area studies, time for the historically minded, form for literary folk) but rather as intersecting, inseparable vectors for comparison, new lines on a methodological map.

The flows of capital, commodities, and cultures across the Indian subcontinent, the southern tip and eastern coast of Africa, and the Arab Gulf for nearly a millennium have generated multiple analytics, including world-history-style accounts of spices, silks, slaves, and other objects of circulation; postcolonial explorations of South-South relations of contact and creolization; political surveys of empire, nationalism, alignment, and cosmopolitanism; and remappings of area space such as those conjured by Thomas Metcalf's *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920*, John Hawley's anthology *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms*, and Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*. Indian Ocean studies' countering of the territorial models that privilege the borders of imperialism and the postcolonial nation and reassert ethnocultural particularisms over creolized contacts is inextricable from the effort to bridge or, better, to bring into conjunctural flow the vast temporal divide between premodern and contemporary histories of globalization. This coming together on the axes of time and space in the service of a deterritorializing intimation of connectedness is perhaps nowhere more lyrically yet concisely present in Indian Ocean world literature than in Amitav Ghosh's 1992

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In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale. The text recounts Ghosh's meticulous reconstruction of the life of an Indian slave, Bomma, mentioned in a twelfth-century letter, known as MS H.6, written by the slave's master, a Jewish Tunisian merchant, while also chronicling Ghosh's own experiences tracking the slave in a rural village in 1970s Egypt as a young Indian doctoral student in anthropology from Cambridge University.

In an Antique Land is as much a story of the reconstruction of history as a virtualization of certain kinds of historical feeling. This is the undercurrent of the text's elegiac tone, in which the lost Islamicate world of Indian Ocean cosmopolitan connectivity is nostalgically evoked at the same time it is overshadowed by the ruinous postcolonial nationalism that pits 1970s India and Egypt against each other, culminating in the screaming match in which Ghosh's narrator and the village imam argue over which of their nations has more guns and tanks and bombs. The violence of territorial thinking is mobilized by the palimpsestic coincidence of spaces and times, even as the imagining of scenes of historical feeling at nodal points causes affect to flow across this area imaginary, thereby skinning its map. The imaginative excess of feeling may be conjectured (as in Ghosh's imagining of Bomma's drunken joy after a pirate raid on Aden) or recalled (as in the imam's and the narrator's rage in the territorial shouting match), but it is always conjunctural, the site of a coming together of distinct moments, places, persons, and affiliations. The paucity of Historical record, trace, fact, and chronology is thus simultaneously conjured and sublated by the text, which delivers nonhistory in its very form.

In an echo of the palimpsestic, networked form of *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh's 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* unveils a history of Indian indenture against the backdrop of eighteenth-century British imperialism, the opium trade, and the cultural-ethnic-linguistic stew of the Indian Ocean world. Serving on board the *Ibis*, a former slave ship turned coolie transport, are a Lascari pirate crew, British colonial officers, and a freed African American sailor passing as white, together ferrying a diverse group of Indian laborers, including a mixed-caste couple; a debt-ridden *zamindari* or landowning aristocrat turned convict who finds community with his cell mate, a Chinese prisoner; a Frenchwoman, raised by a Bengali nurse, who is fleeing a proper Anglo-Indian marriage in disguise as a male sailor; an Indian mimic man turned mystic (female) guru; and a host of others becoming other as they leave the bonds of home behind and forge new ones as *jahaji-bhai* ("ship brethren") on the journey from India to the plantations of Mauritius. The *Kala Pani* or "black waters" beyond which an Indian was thought to lose caste become the aqueous equivalent of the rhizomatic map in this romance of metamorphosis.

Language itself branches out rhizomatically, as the novel crafts a many-tongued, minor English in which Lascari sailor argot, a Hobson-Jobson of imperial Hindustani and Anglo-English, Enlightenment gallicism, and more all have a voice; the novel's glossary is inspired by the *Oxford English Dictionary* but includes a radically subjective list of words understood by the aristocratic convict alone and passed from him to his descendants in an aging record. Taking flux (that network ideal) as its favored literary trope and medium yet suffusing its many dynamic movements with a palpable sense of the traumatic histories and memories of the indenture period and its connected world systems of slavery, empire, and modernizing globalization, *Sea of Poppies* offers a vertically layered and laterally linked vision—a view from within and across—of area histories and memories that persist, are shared in common, and are never fully "washed away" but constantly remade in the larger "alchemy of the open water" (396, 390).

This oceanic form finds another aqueous expression in Ghosh's 2005 novel *The Hungry*

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Tide. The hallmark juxtapositions of official and hidden stories, past and present horizons, small and large scales, nodal points and networked links are visible here in the intercutting of monsoons and tides that violently make and clock historical time in the Sundarban mangroves of East India with lost precolonial, imperial, and postcolonial worlds. Tributaries that "spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating," and tides that cause "every day thousands of acres of forest [to] disappear underwater, only to reemerge hours later" install a metamorphic geography through which alternative forms of memory proliferate. These include the landscape's changing traces, the local oral legends of the forest interwoven into the novelistic narrative, and the sedimentary accumulation that turns the onetime villa of a Scottish imperial officer who came to found a Marxist community into a house where decades later a Calcutta teacher shaken awake by indigenous-rights infractions lives with his wife. It is then used by their nephew, summoned to read the teacher's notes of those bloody days, and finally by an Indian American cetologist whose records of the disappearing Irawaddy dolphins are also absorbed into the novel, as are the several love stories that shape each historical horizon and connect it to the others.

Places in Ghosh's Indian Ocean texts, whether homelands or new lands, imperial zones of sovereignty or diasporic dislocations of belonging and selfhood, resonate with memories and affects, some entailing the imperial nation as a point of attachment or foundation, others invoking ethnic origin, linguistic community, or the body as constituted by gender, sexuality, race, caste. These tactile histories of feeling, captured in the imaginative archive of literary figuration, are also what comparison, with its skinned maps, sliding scales of juxtaposition, and oscillatory movements within and across a series of lines, can bring to the thinking of area studies. So, for example, in contrast to an understanding of diasporic imaginaries as tending to relocate fragments of the lost homeland in a greater whole (home, origin, natality, or nationality), Ghosh's Indian Ocean texts connect these fragments to a hole: a loss that cannot be fully known or repaired, whether in the project of historical recovery and archival retrieval that figures prominently in the literature of the region or in the repositioning of Indian ethnic identity. This repositioning emerges not as originary, singular, or autonomous but rather as riddled and split in a sea of migratory, metamorphic movements, networked within itself and to others.

This is just one example of the many consequences of thinking area through comparison's multilevel field of historical, memorial, textual, and affective styles of being. As products of, and invitations to, area imagining, Ghosh's Indian Ocean texts offer multiple models of geography, temporality, identity, and identification and distinct histories of slavery and indenture, empire and decolonization, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism. No one of these should become the analogical model for another, for all that they rub up against and intersect with one another. Just as a network doesn't need a starting point, it doesn't need a cell-style template that can be reintroduced with the same effect or in the same way, time after time. Network afterlife, that flickering sensibility of being with, reclocks and remaps area again and again, reminding us that a comparatist's work is never done.

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