theories and methodologies

Why Not Compare?

SUSAN STANFORD FRIEDMAN

WHY NOT COMPARE? IT'S A JANUS-FACED QUESTION, A DOUBLE ENTENDRE, ITS DUAL MEANINGS DEPENDING ON EMPHASIS.[1] ON THE ONE hand, what are all the reasons why we should *not* compare? But, on the other hand, why *shouldn't* we compare, and what are the costs if we do not? Embedded in these questions are more fundamental ones ranging from the epistemological to the methodological. What do we mean by comparison, what effects do our comparisons have, and how do we actually do comparison? By "we" here, I address those involved in intellectual work who face choices on whether or not to engage in comparison; I do not, in this essay, address those who study how and why individuals or human societies compare and with what consequences.[2]

These questions of the what, why, and how of comparison are seldom addressed by those who compare, even in disciplines like comparative literature and anthropology, founded on the principle of comparison and often engaged in self-reflexive assessments.[3] The nature and methods of comparison are typically assumed as givens, left largely uninterrogated as comparison is simply performed (or not) across the disciplines and interdisciplines. Discussions of comparison, when they occur at all, typically focus on its politics, most often to attack comparison but occasionally to defend it. There are significant exceptions, including essays in the special issue of *New Literary History* on comparison that Rita Felski and I coedited (2009).[4] And yet comparison is an ever-expanding necessity in many fields, including literary studies, where the intensification of globalization has encouraged comparative analysis of literature and culture on a transnational, indeed planetary, scale.

Epistemology and Politics

The reasons *not* to compare are legion, centering on ways in which comparison presumes a normative standard of measure by which the other is known and often judged. In describing one thing in terms

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of another, comparison assumes knowledge of the one to which the other is compared. The known then operates as measure of the unknown, standing in an unequal relation to it. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, "[C]omparison assumes a level playing field and the field is never level. . . . It is, in other words, never a question of compare and contrast, but rather a matter of judging and choosing" ("Rethinking" 609). Similarly, R. Radhakrishnan recalls "a comparative evaluation I was used to hearing as a boy growing up in India":

> Telugu, a rich and euphonious language spoken in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, was often referred to, in an honorific vein, as "the Italian of the East." Both Italian and Telegu were obviously considered "sweet and musical" languages, and it is on the basis of that linguistic sweetness (which is the tenor of the comparison) that the languages were being identified in terms of each other. And yet this comparison is not without its own hierarchical assumptions. Why not call Italian "the Telugu of the West"? In whose image is the comparison being initiated and who indeed is being honored by the comparison? Why is Telugu being named and regionalized as Eastern/Oriental while Italian remains unlocated and universal as the standard bearer of linguistic euphony or sweetness?

In making Italian the basis for knowing Telugu, the comparison replicates a system of dominance on a global scale. "The point," Radhakrishnan continues, "is that in a world structured in dominance, comparisons are initiated in the name of those values, standards, and criteria that are dominant. Once the comparison is articulated and validated, the values that underwrote the comparison receive instant axiomatization as universal values. . . . Let me reiterate that behind the will to comparison lies the will to judge and evaluate" (*Theory* 74). The "grounds of comparison," argues Pheng Cheah, have been "undeniably Eurocentric" and "teleological" ("Grounds" 2). In political terms, comparison on a global landscape runs the risk of ethnocentrism, the presumption of one culture's frame of reference as universal and known, the other's as different, unknown, and thus inferior.[5]

As yet another reason *not* to compare, the inequity written into global comparisons reproduces an epistemological instrumentalism built into metaphoric thought as a form of analogy. In the terms I. A. Richards established, a metaphor uses an image or figure (the *vehicle*) to explain something else (the *tenor*). "Petals on a wet, black bough" is the vehicle through which Ezra Pound describes the "apparition of these faces in the crowd" in "In a Station of the Metro." What drives the comparison—the metaphoric equivalency—is the need to understand the tenor (apparition of these faces in the crowd), not the vehicle (petals on a wet, black bough). The image exists to serve the concept, which remains primary. Of course, many poets work deeply against this privileging of the tenor to entangle the two parts of the comparison in a reverberating echo chamber, as H.D. does in "Oread": "Whirl up, sea— / Whirl your pointed pines, / . . . / Cover us with your pools of fir." Even Pound's tenor contains its own metaphor: the "apparition" is a ghostly vehicle that describes "these faces." In much poetic language, the vehicle steals the show, however much it appears to serve the tenor. Nonetheless, the fundamental instrumentalism of metaphor raises questions about the ethics of comparison. In a world structured in dominance, why should one thing exist to explain another instead of being seen as a thing in itself?

Although metaphor always embeds comparison, not all comparison is metaphoric. In analytic as opposed to analogical terms, comparison identifies similarities and differences, commensurability and incommensurability, areas of overlap and of discontinuity. In so doing, comparison decontextualizes: that is, it dehistoricizes and deterritorializes; it removes what are being compared from their local

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and geohistorical specificity. Consequently, one reason *not* to compare is the potential violence such removals can accomplish, the damage they can do to the requirements of a richly textured understanding of any phenomenon in its particularity. For example, Mary Daly's comparison in *Gyn/Ecology* of foot-binding in China and genital cutting in Africa as instances of universal patriarchy left her open to charges of such decontextualization (134–78). With her emphasis on similarity, Daly wrenched each so far out of its context that the meanings of both appeared inadequate; the nature, history, function, and even politics of foot-binding and genital cutting were distorted or at least inadequately understood in the comparison. Given her position outside the cultures she described, Daly could hardly avoid the self-other dilemma of comparison that Radhakrishnan articulates ("Why Compare?" 461). Comparative analysis of similarities and differences goes against the grain of the "thick description" required for the kind of "local knowledge" Clifford Geertz advocates in *Local Knowledge*.

And now to reverse the question: shift the emphasis in "Why not compare?" and the question embeds an insistence on comparison.[6] "Why *not* compare?" implies that there is an imperative to compare. We compare because we must. We compare because it is one way in which we think or know. We compare because if we do not there are consequences worse than the political, decontextualizing problems of comparison. What are the ethics of not comparing? To refuse comparison is also a political act, one that can potentially reinstate the existing hierarchies by not challenging them.

There is, in the first place, the cognitive imperative to compare. Comparison is one of the ways in which the brain thinks and knows, essential to analogical and analytic thought processes.[7] This is not to say that comparison is a fixed cognitive universal; as a complex and flexible organ, the brain shapes and is shaped by all kinds of environments. But some form of comparison, however culturally specific, is a central mode of cognition. Comparison is at the heart of all analogy (*x* is like *y*), which means that all forms of figural thought—from metaphor to metonym, symbol, and allegory—embed implicit or explicit comparisons. And figural thought—as distinct from other modes of thought, like narrative—is a vital component not only of literature but also of everyday life and language itself. Additionally, comparison as the capacity to see, first, sameness in difference, then difference in sameness is one of the key modes of analytic or conceptual thought. You can't compare apples and oranges, the adage goes. But, in fact, you can: apples and oranges share the properties of fruit. As fruit, they are the same; as types of fruit, they differ. The concept of fruitness depends on a comparison of what apples and oranges have and do not have in common. As Radhakrishnan argues, comparison performs the conceptual operation of the Venn diagram, visualizing similarities and differences in terms of circles that partially overlap (*Theory* 75).

Second, there is the social or cultural imperative to compare. Whether individual or collective, identity requires comparison, an interplay of sameness and difference. Social comparison, according to psychologists, is a major building block of human behavior and experience (Suls and Wheeler). The self-other relation that constitutes individual and collective identities enfolds comparison at its core. At the level of the individual, I am myself because I am not the same as the other, even though we are both human; at the level of the collective, we are different from others, even though our groups are both human. The identity of a group also depends on its members' being seen as the same as the others in it and different from those outside it—a fundamentally comparative perception. As Cheah writes, "[I]magining the nation is essentially a comparative process in which the nation is

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always haunted by something that is at one and the same time both spatially other or exterior to it but also similar to it" ("Grounds" 10). The colonized, conversely, are haunted by engagements with the colonizer, Rey Chow argues in her discussion of comparative literary studies. Outside the national frame, comparison is also essential to notions like the *umma*, the worldwide community of Muslims. Whether regarded from inside or outside the group, members of the *umma* are the "same" in their identification with their religion but "different" in their races, genders, ethnicities, classes, national origins, sects, degrees of observance, and so forth. Identity requires sameness in difference, difference in sameness—in a word, comparison.[8]

A final imperative to compare lies in the myriad epistemological and political consequences of not comparing. For all the problems of comparison, in the end it is worse not to compare than to compare. Cognitively speaking, the possibility of conceptual thought that comparison fosters moves knowledge beyond pure particularity and thereby enables theory. By "theory" I mean the cognitive capacity to conceptualize, generalize, and see patterns of similarity as part of a broadly systematic form of thinking (Friedman, "Theory"). Theory in this sense requires comparison. Without the concept of fruit, we would be limited to an infinite regress of items, of things; knowledge would be confined to the purely particular and individual. Fruitness includes similarities and differences in an arbitrarily constructed category that is part of a larger theory of biological classification based on identification of patterns. An example closer to literary studies is Vladimir Propp's narrative theory, based on his empirical collection of Russian folktales. Comparing hundreds of tales, he established a typology of thirty-one functions, patterns (similarities) that took particular forms (differences) in actual tales but that were striking enough to allow for the development of a narrative theory. If the danger of comparing is the potential erasure of the particular and nonnormative, the danger of not comparing involves the suppression of the general and the theoretical. Comparison's attention to the particular and the theoretical negotiates between the potential parochialism of the purely local and false universalism of the purely global.[9]

Politically speaking, the refusal to compare can potentially turn into a romance of the local, a retreat into the particular and identity-based, a resistance to the cosmopolitan. The political problem that comparison can reaffirm the universalism of the dominant as the implied standard of measure is real. But there are also political consequences of restricting the inquiry to one cultural group, one nation, or one region of the world. As Radhakrishnan writes, "[T]here can be no serious multicultural experience or multicultural perception of value without a responsible theory of comparison" (*Theory* 75). Comparison across cultures defamiliarizes what one takes as natural in any given culture. This is, of course, a familiar experience of travel: to learn about one's own society, go to another—a double learning that involves comparison. To learn through comparison that others see things differently is to recognize the constructedness of one's own frame of reference. Such defamiliarization of home through engagement with the other is often the cornerstone of transcultural political analysis. In other words, one effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as not universal. Scholars who develop narrative theory out of a purely Western literary archive—without global comparisons of different narrative traditions—are caught, politically speaking, in a hermeneutic circle that confirms Western narrative forms as dominant, universal.[10] A more inclusive comparison of narratives from different sites on the globe can dismantle the false universalism of Western forms.

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The decontextualization that comparison relies on as it moves beyond the particular and local also involves a recontextualization that is potentially illuminating. A literary text, for example, has many potential contexts, not just linguistic, national, temporal, or generic. The refusal to compare texts from different places, times, or cultures privileges one kind of context (temporal-spatial) and renders other contexts invisible. The anthropologist Aram A. Yengoyan describes comparison as a form of carrying over from one context to another: "The rise of comparative histories—of gender relations and colonialism, slavery, migration and immigration, and more recently transnationalism—all emerge from a single case or context from which issues are carried into other contexts. Through comparison, the initial assumptions from the original case can be questioned and rethought . . ." ("On the Issue" 11).

The comparative study of women writers from different historical periods, national cultures, and world regions is a form of carrying over from one context to another. This recontextualization opens up insight into how gender functions across time and space—in/commensurably, as both similar and different. Take, for example, how a comparison of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–01) reframes current debates about "old" versus "new" cosmopolitanism—the old as elite, as cosmopolitanism from above, the new as subaltern, from below. The cosmopolitanism of both texts, I have argued, posits a link among war, the nation-state's violence against its own citizens, and the circumscription of women's lives in the name of protection. Similar in what I have called their gender-based "cosmopolitanism-from-the-side," *Three Guineas* and *Persepolis* also differ as products of incommensurable locations: imperial London and the once semicolonial, now defiantly anti-Western Iran ("Cosmopolitanism"). The comparison I made has been challenged as illegitimate because it "left out important contexts," particularly "Woolf's cosmopolitanism as the product of a certain European or English moment."[11] Here in spades is the argument against comparison based on decontextualization. I suggest instead that this comparative recontextualization of Woolf and Satrapi renders visible ways in which women's writing about the nation-state and their second-class citizenship within it leads to less polarized theories of cosmopolitanism. Transhistorical, transcultural comparison, in other words, enables the production of a cosmopolitan feminist theory based on an expanded archive of women's writing.

Methodology: Comparative Practice

Comparison is rudimentary for human cognition, identity, and culture. But *how* is comparison done? How should it be done? How can it be done to minimize its negative aspects? There is, as Yengoyan writes, no "single all encompassing method" ("On the Issue" 8), and I would encourage more reflection on the plurality of methods and the pros and cons of each. The ABCs of comparative method taught in school are a standard pedagogical exercise of "compare and contrast" based on similarities and differences, stressing that the similarities must be significant enough to warrant comparison in the first place. This kind of comparison can produce mind-numbingly dull college papers. The method is essentially static, not sufficiently dialogic. It obscures the contradictory core of all comparison, the tension between commensurability and incommensurability (Culler; Melas, *All* 32–43 and "Versions"; Handler). In yoking together things that are simultaneously alike and unlike, comparison sets in motion a dynamic, irresolvable paradox. On the one hand, comparison compels recognition of commensurability—likeness; but, on the other hand, comparison acknowledges incommensurability—difference. Oranges

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cannot be reduced to apples no matter how much we consider their fruitness. Conversely, the fruitness of apples and oranges depends on a cognitive abstraction wherein similarity resides. Aligned with particularity, local knowledge assumes the incommensurability of apples and oranges. Aligned with abstraction, comparative knowledge identifies what is commensurate in apples and oranges. Comparison contains a contradictory pull between the particular and the abstract, between identification of parallels and insistence on contrasts. Comparison puts incommensurability and commensurability into a dynamic interplay reflected in the slash that separates and connects: in/commensurability.

Methodologically speaking, the dynamism of in/commensurability can itself be the focus of comparison, as much as the specifics of what is being compared. Comparative methodology in this sense performs a kind of translation of one thing into another through the act of comparison. Translation—from the purely linguistic to the broadly cultural—incorporates a comparative logic of in/commensurability: the languages or cultures undergoing translation are both similar and different.[12] The gap between original and translation is increasingly the subject of analysis, one that brings into visibility what the languages or cultures share and don't share. Moreover, the comparison doubles back to highlight aspects of each that might have gone undetected without the attempt at translation.

The dialogic pull of in/commensurability invites a comparative methodology that is juxtapositional, contrapuntal, and reciprocal, thus opening the possibility for a progressive politics of comparison. A juxtapositional model of comparison sets things being compared side by side, not overlapping them as in a Venn diagram, not setting up one as the standard of measure for the other, not using one as an instrument to serve the other. Juxtaposition can potentially avoid the categorical violence of comparison within the framework of dominance. The distinctiveness of each is maintained, while the dialogue of voices that ensues brings commonalities into focus.

A rhetoric of juxtapositional comparison has appeared sporadically in some discussions of comparison. Haun Saussy rejects what he calls an outmoded "tree-shaped comparatism" based on an evolutionary model (literature as trunk with branches) in favor of one based on "reading as collision," what he calls the "and" model of linked texts ("Comparative Literature?" 336–39). The "new comparativism," Spivak writes, is "comparativism as equivalence" ("Rethinking" 613). Djelal Kadir reads for sites of "contrapuntal juxtaposition," especially for loci of the peripheralized and displaced, "where comparison is an implacable necessity" ("Comparative Literature Hinternational" 246). Kenneth Reinhard advocates a comparative "reading in which texts are not so much grouped into 'families' defined by similarity and difference, as into 'neighborhoods' determined by accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter" (785).

To move beyond the rhetoric of juxtapositional comparison, I propose three modes of juxtapositional comparison, each with its own distinctive focus on dynamic in/commensurability: collision, defamiliarization, and collage. I do so aware that all methods of comparison can fail. The danger of juxtapositional comparison is the license it might provide to juxtapose willy-nilly, for the sake of conjunction without assurance of productive comparison. (Sometimes, juxtaposition is just juxtaposition, not comparison.) Collision is the juxtapositional methodology that Mary Layoun envisions in "Endings and Beginnings" when she calls for comparison based on "relational literacy" and "recognition of difference." Returning to the Greek concept of comparison as *synkrisis* (from *krino* 'to distinguish, discern,' *syn* 'with, among'), Layoun posits comparison as a "listening to, speaking with, and inhabiting

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diverse communities and a diverse world." Comparison is the "great jostling of differences," anchored in the "massive movements and dislocations of peoples in the modern period, the radical juxtaposition—in metropolitan cities or in colonial centers, for example—of different peoples and ideas and things that were hitherto not colliding with one another in quite the same close fashion" (584–85). Her collisional comparative methodology, then, sets in play different voices coming out of distinctive geohistorical and asymmetical contexts. Comparison's utopian potential emerges out of a commitment "to the effort to cohabit with, listen to, and consider alternate stories of those who are different" (602).

"Reciprocal defamiliarization" is a juxtapositional methodology that Radhakrishnan advocates in *Theory in an Uneven World*, a Derridean mode that displaces the self-other binary and emphasizes unknowability (82). Radhakrishnan suggests that each element in a comparison be taken out of its own larger system of meaning, that it open itself to other influences and frameworks in a hybridizing comparative process in which each transforms the other reciprocally. In comparing the sitar of Ravi Shankar and the violin of Yehudi Menuhin, he asks that "the sitar and violin" become "audible to each other as they problematize themselves both in relationship to each other and in acknowledgement of the transcendent authority of aurality as such. The dialogue between the two musical horizons is not an egocentric palaver, but a mode of surrender to the radical unknowability of aurality as such" (87). This reciprocal defamiliarization unravels the self-other opposition that reproduces systems of epistemological dominance. Politically speaking, a defamiliarizing comparison can enhance reciprocal understanding and coexistence.

Collage as a juxtapositional comparative methodology borrows from early-twentieth-century modernist poetics, especially dadaism but also paratactic modernist poetics. It maintains the particularity of each, refuses hierarchy and instrumentalism, and fosters identification of new generalities based on what texts share. I have called this comparative method "cultural parataxis" or "cultural collage," by which I mean the radical juxtaposition of texts from different geohistorical and cultural locations ("Paranoia" and "Modernism"). Put side by side, each in its own distinctive context, but read together for their in/commensurability, texts in collage produce new insights about each, as well as new theoretical frameworks. Collaging Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), for example, radically disrupts the contexts in which their experimental long poems are typically read—francophone, Caribbean, pan-African negritude, surrealist; Korean, Asian American, postmodernist. Juxtaposition allows for some of the particularities of these conventional contexts, but it also brings into focus a form of diasporic modernism that seeks not to wipe out the past ("make it new") but to revisit it, reclaim it, re-vision it as the basis of new beginnings based on painful psychologies of decolonization.[13] Comparison through cultural collage enables the production of new theories.

In suggesting modes of juxtaposition as strategies for comparison that potentially avoid the problems of epistemological hierarchy, instrumentalism, and stasis, I do not want to foreclose other forms of comparative practice. The identification of similarities and differences will no doubt always have a place in comparative studies, although I would urge greater focus on the dynamic relation between them. Some comparative methods are likely to emphasize commonalities; some, differences.[14] Tracing the intertextual evolutions and revolutions of ideas, themes, and motifs continues to be a comparative methodology in literary studies. Newer concepts of "traveling theory" (Said), "traveling cultures" (Clifford),

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"friction" (Tsing), and "teleopoiesis" (Spivak, *Death*) fundamentally involve comparison, as one idea or practice transplants or indigenizes into another location, as one text is written anew or cut or pasted into another text. They have been serving as comparative frameworks for literary and cultural studies on a globalized landscape of encounter.

Conclusion

Radhakrishnan asks, "Why indeed compare, if all that comparison does is to reiterate the economy of a world structured in dominance? Why compare, unless the performance of comparison transforms the world and the many actors who have volunteered to participate in the project? Why compare, if, after the comparison, each actor goes back to her corner to pursue business as usual?" ("Why Compare?" 470). These are, of course, rhetorical questions, which set in opposition dystopian and utopian forms of comparison. Somewhat differently, I ask, why *not* compare? Comparison is an inevitable mode of human cognition. We need, for certain, strategies of comparison that resist the politics of domination and otherness. We need as well greater reflexivity about the epistemology and practice of comparison. We should aim, in my view, for modes of comparison that work with the contradictions inherent in comparison, that expand the voices put in play, that creatively open up dialogue and new frameworks for reading and acting in the world. I have suggested that various juxtapositional methods of comparison in literary and cultural studies work with comparison's in/commensurability in powerfully suggestive ways consistent with efforts to move past centrisms and instrumentalisms of all kinds.

To refuse comparison in toto is to stick your head in the sand.

Notes

1. My title riffs on R. Radhakrishnan's "Why Compare?" That essay and "The Politics of Comparison" in his *Theory in an Uneven World* represent, in my view, the most cogent examinations of comparison as a mode, politics, and practice of knowing.

2. For discussions of comparison as a significant historical phenomenon, see, e.g., Harootunian and Park; Melas, *All* and "Versions"; Loomba; Stam and Shohat; Shih; Robbins; Handler; Walkowitz.

3. For comparative literature's self-reflexivity, see Apter; Balakian; Bernheimer; Culler; Damrosch; Isstaif; Kadir, *Comparative Literature* and *Globalization*; Koelb and Noakes; Mohan; Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" and *Comparative Literature*; Spivak, *Death* and "Rethinking"; "Theories."

4. In addition to Radhakrishnan, "Politics," and the *New Literary History* issue, significant exceptions include Borofsky; Chow; Culler; Culler and Cheah; Gentner, Holyoak, and Kokinov; Harootunian and Park; Isstaif; Kadir, *Comparative Literature* and *Globalization*; Melas, *All* and "Versions"; Nader; Saussy, "Comparative Literature?" and *Comparative Literature*; Stoler; Suls and Wheeler; "Theories"; Yengoyan, *Modes*.

5. For attacks on comparison as an imperial project allied with European modernity, see Harootunian; Osborne; Chow; Shih; Melas, *All* and "Versions." Shih and Melas (*All*) see comparison as an agent of both colonization and decolonization. For defenses of comparison in anthropology, see Borofsky; Brettell; Nader; Stoler; Yengoyan, *Modes* and "On the Issue."

6. In American spoken English, the difference of emphasis in the two forms of "Why not compare?" is tonal: the *not* in the first is flat; the *not* in the second has a rising tone.

7. For comparison in cognitive psychology, see Gentner, Holyoak, and Kokinov. For Kant's views on comparison in human cognition, see Cheah, "Material World"; Osborne.

8. Arguments that regard comparison as the product of a post-1500 Western modernity (e.g., Harootunian; Chow; Layoun; Shih) ignore how the mobility and intercultural contact that characterize millennia of human history have always engendered comparison.

9. Mary Louise Pratt suggests that comparison be not just "horizontal" (A to B) but also "vertical"—e.g., global to local (63–64).

10. See Friedman, "Towards a Transnational Turn," for extended discussion.

11. Letter to me rejecting the essay from the editorial board of a prominent journal. Versions of the essay have been delivered as lectures, keynote addresses, and conference talks eight times from 2007 to 2010.

12. Apter sees translation ("everything is translatable"; "nothing is translatable") as the basis for a new

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comparatism (esp. xi–xii, 3–11). Mohan argues that India's multilingualism compels Indian literary studies to be comparative (viii).

13. For extended discussion, see Friedman, "Modernism."

14. Comparative literature's original emphasis on commonality and its increasing stress on difference are discussed in Balakian; Bernheimer.

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