



A COMPANION TO  
*COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE*

EDITED BY  
**ALI BEHDAD AND DOMINIC THOMAS**

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A COMPANION TO

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

EDITED BY  
**ALI BEHDAD AND DOMINIC THOMAS**

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Introduction

*Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas*

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” (Wellek, 1963: p. 282). That nearly over fifty years later, the same can be said of the state of a discipline that has grown to over fifty departments and programs worldwide (see <http://www.swan.ac.uk/german/bcla/clusa.htm>) underscores not only the timeliness of this volume, but also the precarious and plural nature of the discipline itself, a discipline which defines itself as an *inter*-disciplinary, *cross*-cultural, and *trans*-national endeavor. Comparative Literature occupies a distinct and unique position in the humanities. 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.

Perhaps more significantly, as Haun Saussy points out, “The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline [i.e. Comparative Literature] are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring and coffee-shop discussion” (Saussy, 2006: p. 3). In recent years, not only has the idea of world literature gained a great deal of currency among national literature departments, but theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches to literature have taken institutional forms. Indeed, as Tobin Siebers had predicted almost two decades ago, “everyone is becoming a comparatist of a kind” (Siebers, 1995: p. 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 ten 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 multi-directional" (Jay, 2001: pp. 42–3). 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 transcolonial and transnational approaches have afforded us more accurate contextualizations of French history and the role of Europe in the larger postcolonial world.

In light of the recent interest in world literature among literary scholars, a brief discussion of the origin of Comparative Literature and its originary vision of a post-national approach to literature is in order. Many scholars of Comparative Literature locate the genesis of the discipline in Goethe's coining of the term *Weltliteratur*. Goethe wrote to Eckhermann 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" (cited in Moretti, 2000: p. 1). According to Goethe, the literary imagination transcends national and linguistic borders, even though he acknowledges that every work of literature is historically situated and aesthetically unique. As Edward Said argues, the early practitioners of Comparative Literature such as Ernest Robert Curtius and Erich Auerbach took their inspiration from intellectuals of pre-imperial 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" (Said, 1993: p. 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; 1965, 1995: p. 21). Comparative Literature, according to these critics, belonged to a par-



ticular politico-cultural movement in the United States that called for the 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” to use Edward Said’s words (2004: p. 95), or to practical demands of the 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 (1965), Greene (1975), Bernheimer (1993), and Saussy (2004), mandated by the bylaws of the American Comparative Literature Association (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 highlights the importance of a broad linguistic competency and a focus on literary problems that transcend national limits, the Greene Report emphasizes the value of crossing disciplinary boundaries and challenges the “elitism” of the earlier report. Similarly, whereas the Bernheimer Report recommends 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” (Bernheimer, 1995: p. 45) the Saussy Report offers a “multivocal report” that elaborates the values of “‘world literature’ and the politics of empire” (Saussy, 2006: p. viii).

As a way of highlighting the dynamic and innovative qualities of the field, this volume uses the metaphor of mobility to organize the selection of articles both by way of remaining faithful to the general project of comparative literature *and* in order 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” help us track historical antecedents while also pointing to new and exciting configurations (digital humanities, diasporic formations, transnational texts) of the comparative landscape. As global cultural, political, and social alignments continue to emerge and transform the parameters of comparative study, such contextualization becomes all the more important. The articles in this volume provide general theoretical models to use in studying literary texts and cultural products comparatively, 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 in an era of globalization, gender and cultural formation across time, East-West cultural encounters, postcolonial and diaspora studies, and other experimental approaches to literature and culture.

The first section, *Roadmaps*, consists of five 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 accordingly elaborating the different modes

of comparative work. Among the issues these introductory and general articles address 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.

The articles in this section also underscore the fact that the project of defining the discipline of Comparative Literature remains highly important, albeit extremely contested. Thus, for example, while Rey Chow in her article defines Comparative Literature as a "Discipline of Tolerance," that is "a loose discourse network sprouting from an incessant proliferation, intermingling, and hybridization of subjects" (p. 24). David Ferris rejects "the logic of *indiscipline* to which Comparative Literature has recurrently turned whenever it evades the question of its own limit," calling instead for "the foregrounding of comparison in Comparative Literature" which remains the fundamental task in the humanities (p. 33). Like Ferris, David Palumbo-Liu addresses the fundamental question of comparative methodology, arguing that Raymond Williams' notion of "congruity" provides a more compelling methodology than the traditional notion of "commensurability." Put otherwise, instead of seeking a common denominator, comparatists, according to him, ought to look for "a structural similarity [understood in terms of the 'historical matrices'] informing literary cases emanating from different cultural spaces" (p. 57). In contrast, Haun Saussy engages not the question of methodology but rather the very distinct subject matter that has traditionally defined the field. Saussy rejects the very foundational equation of Comparative Literature with world literature, arguing that the latter should be treated as a "starting point" rather than a "goal" for the field in order to make "space for comparative projects that have as their objects things and relations that are not part of the world – yet" (p. 63).

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, and in the 1990s when New Historicism and Post-Colonialism came into view as new theoretical interventions, the field of Comparative Literature has been highly influenced, indeed, defined by what has been generally viewed as "theory." As Kenneth Surin points out in the first section of this volume 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" (p. 70). In recent years, 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" (Rorty, 2006: pp. 62, 63). 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 nineteenth-century European historiographic methodology, but it has also

enabled literary scholars to critique logo- and phallogentric biases of humanism in the West. As Stathis Gourgouris points out in his article, “The turn to theory was a fecund period of experimental practices of radical interrogation, subversion of established methods of interpretation, daring cognitive ingenuity, irreverent performativity” (p. 76). 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, for as Rey Chow correctly observes, “one of the strongest justifications for studying the non-West has to do precisely with the fundamental questioning of the limits of Western discourse which is characteristic of deconstruction and poststructuralist theory” (Chow, 1995: p. 112).

In the second section of the volume, *Theoretical Directions*, the essays engage a variety of theoretical approaches, their uses and influence in the work of Comparative Literature scholars, and offer concrete examples of how these theoretical models can be deployed to study literary texts and other cultural products. Thus, for example, Eric Hayot reviews the history of East/West comparison in the field to advance a more self-reflexive theoretical model that is attentive to the fact that the very terms East and West “are themselves the historical functions of a series of comparisons” (p. 88). Similarly, Michael Lucey focuses on the works of two French canonical authors, Colette and Balzac, to argue for a mode of comparison founded on the idea of (historical) circulation, that is a way of “thinking about the production of meaning that happens not just ‘in’ texts, but in the ways texts circulate, the ways they are transmitted and reproduced” (p. 120). These kinds of innovative ways of approaching cultural mediation extend into other domains, and Efraín Kristal’s article demonstrates how the “insistence on paying attention to a dynamic between the purposive activity of the artist and the artistic qualities that ensue is a rich way to think about art whether or not one is committed to psychological considerations” (p. 112). In fact, while Comparative Literature has fostered all kinds of productive encounters, these have not, by any means been exhaustive. This is particularly true when it comes to drama and theater, and Sharon Marcus’ article explores “the scant attention paid to theater by comparative literature in general” (p. 136), the consequences for the field of adhering to an often “restricted definition of literature” (p. 136), and the resulting disconnect between cultural practice and its reception and analysis in the Academy. In the spirit of this volume, Marcus’ article convincingly argues for more inclusive paradigms, because “To encompass more of the cultural field, to grasp it in ways that do not fix its *mobility*, in order to understand better what we study, is the most basic and most persuasive reason to bring together comparative literature and theater” (p. 151, emphasis added).

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; 1995: p. 42). The authors go 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 remarks, 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” (Culler, 1995: p. 117).

The third section of the volume, *Disciplinary Intersections*, offers analyses of the cross- and inter-disciplinary nature of comparative analysis while providing 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. Thus, for example, Gisèle Sapiro explores the fecund relationship between Comparative Literature and historical sociology, considering “the conditions under which ‘entangled history’ can be transposed to the historical sociology of literature” (p. 226), while Zöe Norridge examines the complexity of social suffering and human experience in thinking about the process of “comparing pain,” arguing “that we should be comfortable in paying greater attention to the exceptional rather than always seeking to establish the exemplary, with its concomitant assumption that literature is to be used as evidence of social patterns within the world” (p. 223). In turn, Todd Presner offers a compelling discussion of the transformation of the very notion of literature that has emerged since the cyber revolution and the emergence of digital technologies by way of demonstrating how “electronic literature offers a significant and multivalent possibility for exploring the future of Comparative Literature (p. 195). Similarly, while Jorge Coronado focuses on three specific instances of lettered production in Latin America to elaborate the relationship between literature and visual arts, Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller address the complex ways in which Comparative Literature as a discipline is interpolated by the political economy by focusing on how literary texts materially come to existence.

The final three sections of the volume broaden the implications of Comparative Literature as a postnational discipline by broaching non-Western literary 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 reliance on the nineteenth-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 Edward 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” (Said, 1993: p. 45).

Among the challenges the field has been facing in the past two decades is how to overcome the Eurocentrism that has traditionally defined the field of Comparative Literature. As Gayatri Chakravorty 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” (Spivak, 2003: pp. 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 consider new directions in studying comparative studies. The articles in the final three sections of this volume explore the various 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 (writings in/by Vietnamese authors in Vietnam, France, the United States) and by transnational authors who circulate between different locations (residency in Africa, Europe, and a *third space*) anchoring narratives in multiple topographic sites? And finally, how might the complex history of decolonization and population displacement/movement have inaugurated spaces that cannot be fixed, immigrant narratives that operate in a constitutive context in which *both* centers and peripheries are reconfigured? These final sections of the volume therefore consist of articles that address some of the possibilities of intellectual inquiry for current and future students of Comparative Literature.

In the fourth section, *Linguistic Trajectories*, the contributors address in particular the transformations that have marked Comparative Literature’s relation with the question of language and linguistic competency which is deemed essential to any comparative project. 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 Green 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. Gayatri Chakravorty 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” (Spivak, 2003: p. 9). As the Greene Report had predicted, this new vision of Comparative Literature has made “our comfortable European perspectives parochial” (The Greene Report; 1975: p. 30). New generations of comparatists have begun not only to study literatures of

non-European traditions in the original, but they have also engaged the very hybrid nature of linguistic traditions itself. Naturally, as the articles reveal, the process of categorizing various *centers* and *peripheries* proves to be a complex endeavor.

Cathy Caruth persuasively elaborates the challenges and implications that arise when one brings into dialogue such apparently distinct authors as Dickens and Rushdie, illuminating the very paradoxical ways in which language itself “may survive precisely because it is inherently parted from itself, and because it carries within it the historical marks of an impossible history that is also the history of its own rootless past and future” (p. 251). However, as Simon Gikandi argues, “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” (p. 259). “[T]he task of comparison,” Gikandi 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” (p. 259). Thus, while Gikandi critiques Comparative Literature’s privileging of European philology, Mary Louise Pratt draws attention to comparatists’ overlooking of the multiple ways in which linguistic circulations have been enabled by migration, and therefore asks “What are the linguistic dimensions of this set of planetary realignments people call globalization?” (p. 274). On the one hand, Pratt elaborates the ways in which migrants redistribute linguistic competences; on the other, she discusses “the widening use of translation and lingua francas in the creation of world scenarios” as well as the “heterolingual expressive practices, which ... are made possible by the extroverted potential of language” (p. 286). Ultimately the section entitled *Linguistic Trajectories* reveals how, as Mireille Rosello has shown, “Emphasizing relationality is a way of remembering that comparing involves a theory of the self and of the other, and a theory of the comparable [...] in other words, relationality does not so much mean that we will be crossing borders between area studies but that the borders in question will now be rethought as our assumptions are about more or less naturalized canons and territories” (p. 313).

Such questions prove to be all the more pertinent to the strikingly original angle adopted by Nasrin Rahimieh in her exploration of the manner in which “A reconceptualization of Persian literary history from the vantage point of Comparative Literature can offer a different history of the apparent political, religious, and cultural impasse defining contemporary Iran’s relations to other nations” (p. 296). For if the articles in the fourth section trace the linguistic trajectories that have complicated the task of comparison today, those in the fifth section, *Postcolonial Mobilities*, address the implications of postcolonial interventions for Comparative Literature. Since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978), 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. For, as David Murphy remarks in his article, postcolonialism can be



viewed as inherently a comparative project in that it constitutes “the sort of transnational literary sphere that has long been central to dominant conceptions of comparative literature” (p. 408). And yet, postcolonialism has been crucial to Comparative Literature as a field for several reasons. For not only 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, but it 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. As well, 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, Caryl Phillips, Sembène Ousmane, and Salman Rushdie have not only enlarged the literary canon but also helped transform the very notion of literature itself.

The articles in the *Postcolonial Mobilities* section approach a wide range of topics in the field of postcolonialism in a comparative framework. David Theo Goldberg, for example, focuses on critical analyses of race and racism, arguing that though it is “undeniable that racial configuration and arrangement may speak thickly to local conditions and reference points, it is nevertheless the case that racial conditions pretty much anywhere are shored up and sustained by [...] racial articulations elsewhere” (p. 359). Goldberg posits a “relational” model to account for “how state formations or histories, logics of oppression and exploitations are linked, whether causally or symbolically, ideationally or semantically” (p. 361). Like Goldberg, Françoise Lionnet offers a relational model of comparison, and the focus is provided by the works of Edward Said and Abdelkebir Khatibi. Her analysis provides a transcolonial model of comparison that “takes as its point of departure the commitment they both share to a relational, polyphonic, and contrapuntal – rather than merely binary and oppositional – understanding of identity, culture, and literature” (p. 388). Whereas most postcolonial critics have tended to study the relationship between the center and the periphery, she suggests that a “transcolonial critique of power” must pay equal attention to “the relationships among different margins” by examining the “transversal and rhizomatic networks of minority subjects and intellectual agents together” (p. 393). These contributions draw attention to the vibrancy of postcolonial studies. Deborah Jensen makes the case for the importance of Haiti, and how “This diasporan literature by those whose common descent involves kidnapping, gives us a new point of entry to exploration of the nation, not just as an imagined community beyond face-to-face interaction, but as an imagined community with unimagined participants, who were subject to the lawless silencing of their voices and public existence, but who nevertheless persevered in self-representation” (p. 384); Allison Crumly Deventer and Dominic Thomas discuss the potentialities of a new field of comparative inquiry (Afro-European Studies) that could assist us in accounting for the complicated historical relationship between colonialism, African and European nation-building, immigration history, and diasporic community formation; and Sangeeta Ray outlines the important links

with ecocriticism and environmental studies, suggesting new frameworks (“ecographies”) that can assist us in unpacking contemporary cultural, political, and social phenomena.

The final section of the volume, *Global Connections*, addresses the idea of World Literature, the multiple refractions that such an idea entails, and its relation to the field of Comparative Literature. If anything, this concluding section confirms 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 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” (Damrosch, 2006: p. 43). In the past two 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” (Damrosch, 2003: p. 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 argues (Damrosch, 2003: p. 283).

While critical of the universality of the idea of world literature, Charles Forsdick “explores the relationship of world literature and world languages, reflecting in particular on whether an adherence to monolingualism is an appropriate characteristic of such a purportedly global literary phenomenon” (p. 477). Forsdick is attentive to the diversity of cultural and political contexts in which notions of world literature have been deployed (among the most recent incarnations has been the francocentric concept of a “world literature in French”), and certainly not entirely dismissive of the theoretical implications. Graham Huggan, however, takes a critical stance against world literature, observing that “debates around *World* literature are often simultaneously debates around the future of *Comparative* literature,” and making a contentious argument that “World Literature institutionally supports what it claims ideologically to oppose” in that “it represents the cultural *realpolitik* of globalization masquerading as either a ‘worldly’ cosmopolitanism of reading (Damrosch) or a transnational study of form (Moretti)” (p. 491). In contrast to these assessments of world literature, Brian Edwards adopts a more favorable view by stressing the literary and cultural advantages of circulation, and asking “What happens when texts move into new contexts, taken



up by audiences beyond the imagination of their producers, emerging from radically different social and discursive spaces?" (p. 454). Focusing on a range of Moroccan texts, he demonstrates how the notion of circulation not only allows us to grasp the contingent and unstable nature of their meanings but also to understand the logic of their receptions in different social and discursive contexts, while simultaneously urging students and scholars to reflect additionally on the usages that are made of our critical tools: "If what we mean by 'globalization' implicates an impossibly broad fabric, it is necessary for scholars and students of literature to localize our attentions on particular texts and contexts in order to understand how such a changed or changing episteme works on the imaginary" (p. 463–464).

Either explicitly or implicitly, all contributors to the volume invariably find themselves contending with larger questions that have 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 maintains 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" (p. 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, 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, readers will hopefully find themselves confronted with a range of stimulating insights to the manifold techniques, systems, and models that emphasize the potentiality of comparative study to evolve and suggest ways in which Comparative Literature's tentacular reach can stand to impact twenty-first century disciplinary configurations, while also insisting on the importance of training students so that they can think globally as effective, informed, and responsible citizens.

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Part I

# Roadmaps



# A Discipline of Tolerance

*Rey Chow*

A call for papers for a conference on comparative literature in 2009 names the following as possible topics: comparative literary history; literature and the languages; world literature, translation, and globalization; colonial and post-colonial literatures; deconstruction and its legacies; hermeneutics; gender, sexuality, and eroticism; drama, theater, and performance; the history of the discipline; philosophy and religion; psychoanalysis, trauma, and testimony; visual arts and architecture; technology, media, audio-visual culture; sociology, anthropology, and political economy; history and historiography; geography, geology, and ecology (Figure 1.1). Although seldom discussed by way of Louis Althusser's well-known essay on ideology, a call for papers is, it seems fair to say, a mode of interpellation. What kind of subjection is in play? Since the occasion is a matter of academic practice, the notion of the subject at stake is, arguably, double: it is both a respondent to the call who consents to participation as a comparativist, and the matter at hand, namely, what comparative literature is/does.

The open-ended nature of the list brings to mind another famous moment: Michel Foucault's invocation, at the beginning of *The Order of Things*, of Jorge Luis Borges' Chinese encyclopedia, that fantastic agglomerate of incommensurate things. Foucault's point, we recall, is precisely that the agglomerate defies all probable logic of similarity and comparability in Western thought. For him, Borges' invention functions not only as a representation of an exotic order of things but also as a means to make visible the West's conventional way of organizing knowledge, itself an artificial grid of intelligibility that, because it is taken for granted, tends to remain invisible. With good humor, Foucault finds in the Chinese encyclopedia the intimation of an impending epistemic abyss, in the light of which the hitherto assumed certitude of Western reason crumbles. From this glimpse of the void, Foucault goes on to give an account

# Constellations:

*Of Comparative Literature and the New Humanities*

October 16-18, 2009

Hosted By:

The Department of Comparative Literature  
Emory University, Atlanta GA



**With a Two Day Roundtable Featuring:**

**Geoffrey Bennington, Eduardo Cadava, Cathy Caruth, Peggy Kamuf, Thomas Keenan, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**

What does it mean to practice comparative literature? When we speak of a discipline that is intrinsically interdisciplinary, how do we understand its limits, articulate its purpose, and constitute its objects? These very questions apply to the humanities in general—itself a heterogeneous constellation of disciplines, each representing not only its own knowledge but its own way of asking questions. From what position can this multiplicity of knowledges comprising the humanities ask the increasingly urgent question of its self-definition?

"Constellations" aims to negotiate this critical task of self-definition by bringing the questions of comparative literature and the humanities together. We hope to produce well-informed perspectives on comparative literature within the broader context of the humanities. But we also hope to ask the question of the humanities from *within* the fold of comparative literature itself—not only because it is one of several loci in the humanities where interdisciplinary work is done, but because its emphasis on language has produced strategies for negotiating between opposed, even irreducible forms of thought and knowledge.

This call for papers invites all who have a stake in these questions to report on their projects and participate in the on-going conversation about what comparative literature and the humanities are or should be. Of course, we also welcome the arrival of unexpected guests.

Abstract submissions may pertain to the following:

- Comparative Literary History
- Literature and the Languages
- World Literature, Translation, and Globalization
- Colonial and Post-colonial Literatures
- Deconstruction and its Legacies
- Hermeneutics
- Gender, Sexuality, and Eroticism
- Drama, Theater, and Performance
- The History of the Discipline
- Philosophy and Religion
- Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Testimony
- Visual Arts and Architecture
- Technology, Media, Audio-Visual Culture
- Sociology, Anthropology, and Political Economy
- History and Historiography
- Geography, Geology, and Ecology

**Abstract Submission Deadline:**

**May 15, 2009; 300-500 words**

Email submissions to Armando Mastrogiovanni, [ammastr@emory.edu](mailto:ammastr@emory.edu)

**Figure 1.1** Comparative literature conference call for papers. (Reproduced with permission from the graduate students in the Department of Comparative Literature, Emory University)