

How We Compare: Introduction

JACOB BLAKESLEY, ADHIRA MANGALAGIRI,
ROSA MUCIGNAT AND ELISA SEGNINI

This special issue marks the inauguration of our editorship of *Comparative Critical Studies* (CCS), the house journal of the British Comparative Literature Association (BCLA). We are a motley group of four—with diverse but intersecting areas of expertise, at differing stages of our careers, and with varied degrees of (un)preparedness for the vicissitudes of journal editing!—but we share in common an intellectual interest in and practical commitment to Comparative Literature. In this special issue, which happily coincides with CCS’s twentieth year of publication, we begin our editorship by taking stock of how Comparative Literature has grown in the pages of this journal over the past decades, of where the discipline currently stands, and of those paths it may pursue in the coming years. In so doing, we hope to at once honour the immense work of editors past in building CCS into the UK’s foremost journal for comparative literary research, as well as to introduce ourselves to the journal’s readership through a snapshot of each of our particular investments in the field. The articles gathered here aim not for comprehensiveness or representativeness; indeed, we reckoned early on in the process of curating this issue with the futility of those rubrics given the wonderfully shape-shifting and necessarily plural character of our discipline. Instead, this issue offers provocations on what Comparative Literature looks like—and on what it *can* or *should* look like—in both theory and practice. We invite our readers to join in this conversation on ‘how we compare’, a conversation to which we invite consensus and dissension of all kinds, and one we hope to further nurture in CCS’s pages during our term as editors.

We take as our point of departure the CCS special issue edited by Robert Weninger in 2006, at the beginning of his long tenure as the journal’s editor, entitled *Comparative Literature at a Crossroads?* Our present issue figures as a companion of sorts to that earlier special issue,

and we invite readers to peruse its insightful contents alongside the articles collected here.¹ Together, these two special issues join in the impulse towards self-analysis Comparative Literature thrives in, and as such, the issues contribute to the robust body of publications dedicated to meta-disciplinary reflection, the American Comparative Literature Association's periodical 'state of the discipline' reports among them. The 2006 *CCS* issue features meditations on Comparative Literature's present 'in the twenty-first century' (Susan Bassnett and Lucia Boldrini), on future directions (Elinor Shaffer's 'World Literature Tomorrow' and Jonathan Culler's 'Whither Comparative Literature') and on its survival 'in a world become Tlön' (Djelal Kadir). The issue also reports on the status of Comparative Literature in different national and cultural contexts, with dispatches from the UK, the Low Countries, France, the Arab World and China. Published at the height of the resurgence of 'world literature' in Comparative Literature worldwide, the 2006 issue offers a useful vantage point from which to assess the discipline's transformations over the past two decades. A look back at the issue also brings into focus the shifting contours of the intellectual grounds we now inhabit in the early years of the 2020s.

Contrary to what we may now think back on as Comparative Literature's enthusiastic embrace of world literature in the early 2000s, the 2006 issue makes no qualms about its ambivalence, tempering the eagerness some of its contributors express toward Comparative Literature's turn to the world. In the first half of this introduction, we track the 2006 issue's expressions of this ambivalence in two directions: first, the pressure world literature exerted on European literary studies in the UK and more widely in the continent, and second, the anxieties world literature evoked of Comparative Literature's seeming co-optation by globalization and its unequal market logics. We then reflect on how the articles in this present issue address and extend some of those earlier concerns, and draw out further points of intersection between our contributors that illuminate Comparative Literature's current moment.

EUROCENTRISM V. WORLD LITERATURE

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, world literature found articulation as an antidote to Eurocentrism, a corrective to Comparative Literature's roots in and inheritance of European intellectual traditions. The 2006 *CCS* issue registers the uncomfortable confrontation between European literary studies and this altered disciplinary tenor, one in which a

European focus no longer seemed as welcome. What strikes the reader in 2023 is the confidence in the European project expressed in several of the 2006 articles, and indeed, in the very structure of that issue: the articles are grouped under the sections ‘European Perspectives’ and ‘Views From Afar’, a division based more on the geographical location of contributors than on the subject matter. As a result, David Damrosch’s exploration of the pioneering efforts of the Transylvanian comparatist Hugo Meltzl and the Irish scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett appear in the second section, alongside articles by fellow US-based academics Jonathan Culler and Djelal Kadir, as well as reports on Comparative Literature in the Arab world and China written by Ferial J. Ghazoul, and Dan Shen and Xiaoyi Zhou respectively. The structure of the issue suggests that despite the oft-cited nineteenth-century European origins of ‘world literature’, in the early twenty-first century, it may well have seemed like world literature was ‘returning’ to Europe as though ‘from afar’, through a call for Comparative Literature to look toward the ‘world’ issued most vocally by US-based academics, wherein the ‘world’ seemed to stand largely as shorthand for the ‘non-West’ (or, at least, ‘non-European’). Weninger’s introduction to the issue grants a glimpse into how this call may have then landed in British Comparative Literature as at once an exciting opportunity and, at the same time, as generating uncertainty regarding the future of European literary studies in the UK. Weninger senses in the European contributors to the issue ‘the need to programmatically distance themselves from the colonialist legacy with which they find themselves unfairly associated when we speak, for example, of the “restrictive Eurocentricism” of yore’.² Warning against a Comparative Literature that ‘sacrifices the regional for the global’, the issue collects ‘European Perspectives’ (and, one could say, even centres these perspectives) in order to ‘remind ourselves not to see and use [the term Eurocentrism] as an exclusively pejorative term, inhibiting, if not prohibiting, legitimate contemporary Eurocentric criticism’.³

Such recuperative investment in Europe’s continued relevance and cultural distinctiveness—coupled with the sense expressed in several of the articles of a uniquely European approach to Comparative Literature—might appear jarring today, not only in view of ongoing calls to decolonize Western epistemologies, but also in the face of (yet another) existential crisis of the European idea, battered by Brexit and Euroscepticism and severely tested by the European Union’s (EU) response to the migrant crisis and the war in Ukraine. But the articles in the 2006 issue speak to a different moment when, at the start of the

new millennium, hopes were high that the supranational institutions of the EU would facilitate the rise of more democratic, fair, and inclusive forms of political and cultural life on the continent. Although the failed ratification of the European Constitution in 2005 had exposed significant rifts among member states and resistance to deeper integration among voters in some countries, the enlargement of the union in 2004 and its expansion into Central and Eastern Europe had generally been welcomed with optimism and even a degree of euphoria as a symbolic moment marking finally the end of Cold War divisions between East and West. Thus, Boldrini identifies 'the new shape of a post-colonial Europe no longer formally divided between East and West by an iron curtain' as a growth area for the discipline and one that requires 'a comparative literary re-thinking of what is European at the beginning of the twenty-first century'.⁴

To what extent has Comparative Literature since taken on this challenge, and with what results? Boldrini herself has championed the internationalization of the discipline both through her research and as an academic leader in her institution, Goldsmiths, University of London (where Comparative Literature has recently been under threat of cuts and redundancies), and in the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), of which she currently serves as president. The ICLA's sponsored book series 'Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages' (CHLEL) was launched in 1967 but its activities intensified in the early 2000s, with the publication of landmark volumes on the Caribbean, East-Central Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Nordic region.⁵ This approach to regional mapping, which adopts historiographical and area studies models, has been successful in carving out spaces for large-scale comparative inquiry that intersect but do not coincide with the nation state. In another significant shift, the CHLEL bylaws were revised in 2006 to include non-European languages in the series' remit, albeit 'in conjunction with European languages' and only 'if such inclusion is deemed essential for the scientific integrity of the project'.⁶ This cautiously worded opening has gone some way toward acknowledging the historical incongruity of considering European languages in isolation, and recently-published volumes make an effort to illuminate interactions between Western and non-Western traditions in the context of transnational currents or modes such as realism and orality.⁷ Indeed, the example of CHLEL illustrates how regional or macro-regional paradigms have been swept aside by the re-emerging interest in concepts of world literature: the imperative has

become not so much to rethink Europe and its constituent parts, but to reexamine the relation between Europe and the rest of the world.

This shift is also evident in recent narratives of European culture such as Walter Cohen's sweeping history of European literature and Shane Weller's 'critical history' of the idea of Europe. Cohen is invested in showing how, since antiquity, 'European literature' was shaped by Afro-Eurasian literary networks that pre-date the birth of Europe itself.⁸ Similarly, Weller takes a long view from antiquity to the present day but highlights instead how the European idea has always been predicated on superiority and on the exclusion of 'its perceived others, almost without exception conceived negatively'.⁹ Although differently inflected, both accounts can be seen as responding to the new knowledge and heightened awareness generated by postcolonial and decolonial discourses about Europe's colonial past and its continuing legacy. Such studies—along with the plethora of evidence (including in this issue) attesting to the continued study of European literary cultures in Comparative Literature circles—indicate that fears in the early 2000s that world literature would sound the death knell of European literary studies did not bear out, and to the contrary, the latter has only emerged enriched through efforts to decentralize canonical voices and to interrogate previously repressed colonial legacies.

WORLD LITERATURE = COMPARATIVE LITERATURE +
GLOBALIZATION?

The potential for Comparative Literature to shed its Eurocentric garb seemed to come at the cost of the discipline's subscription to the logics of globalization. To be sure, 'the age of globalization' (to quote from the title of the ACLA's 2006 report) bestowed conceptual affordances of its own despite its homogenizing pull. While Boldrini warned in the 2006 *CCS* issue that 'a "world literature" [...] read in English translation' would come to dominate the Anglosphere at the expense of 'the comparative literature that relies on multilingual enterprise',¹⁰ to Weninger, the impact of a 'globalised community culture' appeared on balance a positive one. The hegemony of English is a price worth paying, he argued, for the greater inclusivity of Comparative Literature's textual universe and its 'expansion' to 'authors from non-white and non-Western backgrounds'.¹¹ In addition, a range of newly-visible cultural configurations, readily theorized in the language of postmodernism, proved particularly conducive to comparison: hybridity,

cultural flows, translation in all its facets, multilingualism, and so on. In her contribution, Bassnett, current president of the BCLA, was confident that global information flows and theories of cultural capital and its transmission could give rise to 'a productive comparative method'.¹² A version of world literature understood along these lines, as globalized literary studies, has indeed since flourished. This is the paradigm that animates the desire to place literatures of specific countries, authors or genres under the label of 'world literature', as in the 'Literatures as World Literatures' series edited by Thomas O. Beebee for Bloomsbury. The 27 volumes published so far in the series range widely in scope and focus from the literature of small European nations (Bulgaria, Denmark, Romania) to those of entire continents and regions (Africa and the Pacific), and from broadly defined areas (philosophy, feminism) to individual authors (Samuel Beckett, Elena Ferrante), inviting us to understand each 'as world literature'.

It is interesting to note that, while the contributions to the 2006 *CCS* issue from Europe, China, and the Arab world tend to be more optimistic or at least pragmatic about Comparative Literature's prospects and dismiss talk of the discipline's 'crisis' and 'death', three of the four North American scholars express deep anxiety at the 'state of the discipline' caught in the throes of globalization. Linda Hutcheon concluded that Comparative Literature is irredeemably 'complicit' with 'the totalizing and homogenizing impulses' of colonialism and globalization.¹³ Jonathan Culler was troubled by the question, touched upon by several others in the issue, of the methodological challenges thrown up by the combination of geographical expansion and a more capacious definition of literature: 'the result of both moves, going global and going cultural, is a discipline of such overwhelming scope that it no longer sounds like an academic field at all: the study of discourses and cultural productions of all sorts throughout the entire world'.¹⁴ The consequence of this, he anticipated, would be not only a lowering of standards and the demise of close reading in the original languages—a fact that, although universally deplored, seems to have affected pedagogy more so than scholarly research. More striking is Culler's suspicion that, as comparatists develop new and better strategies to read their ever-expanding, worldly corpus, 'the more sophisticated one's understanding of discourse, the harder it is to compare western and non-western texts'.¹⁵ What threatens the discipline is not totalizing attempts but increasing specialization and fragmentation, which emphasize difference and encourage scepticism about the value and legitimacy of comparison: 'comparatists' fear that their comparisons

will impose implicit norms and standards may give rise to a vacuousness that is [...] difficult to combat'.¹⁶

How, then, could Comparative Literature at once oppose 'the totalizing and homogenizing impulses' perpetuated by forces of globalization, and guard against the 'vacuousness' of abandoning cross-cultural inquiry altogether? This thorny question energized a strain of debates in the early 2000s led by those who identified in world literature's emphasis on circulation and acculturation the danger of reinstating the very national and imperial hierarchies it purported to challenge. Thus, Gayatri Spivak expressed doubts about Franco Moretti's 'totalizing patterns' and his appeal to Marx, reminding us of Tom Nairn's warning that 'the world market, world industries and world literature predicted with such exultation in *The Communist Manifesto* all conducted, in fact, to the world of nationalism'.¹⁷ Emily Apter's notion of 'untranslatability' took the contestation of world literature's neo-imperialist cartographies a step further. She advocated for a 'translational humanities whose fault lines traverse the cultural subdivisions of nations or "foreign" languages while coalescing around hubs of singularity'.¹⁸ To counter the overpowering currents of global circulation, influence, and equivalence, Apter called for attention to the 'chasms' among cultures, and even for a consideration of the benefits of religious bans on translation 'directed at safeguarding the sacred in language'.¹⁹ Thus, the idea of an essential singularity ensconced in the language of a community, which was central to Romantic ideas of the nation, seemed in a sense to make its way back into demands for a case-sensitive and site-specific Comparative Literature.

In a similar vein, Francesca Orsini has recently argued that the static models of cultural hegemony centred on Europe which underpin Moretti's and Pascale Casanova's accounts of world literature obscure and distort the life of local literary cultures by reducing them to the status of 'periphery'. She also questions more dynamic interpretations of the global circulation of literature, such as Damrosch's, for their tacit implication that 'what does *not* circulate, or is not translated, is not part of world literature', an assumption that seems to assign some deficiency to, say, a work that 'does *not* circulate even after it gets translated'.²⁰ Orsini's approach echoes Spivak's in the call for comparative methodologies that eschew expansive, unicentric models of the world and that are attuned to the literary specificity of the local and the 'idiomaticity of nonhegemonic languages'.²¹ Such orientations toward specificity have helpfully served to rein in world

literature's ever-expansive drive, but not without their own pitfalls. As Kadir noted in his vividly-argued contribution to the 2006 issue, ominously entitled 'Comparative Literature in a World Become Tlön', Comparative Literature must extricate itself from what he terms the 'spectral paradox', in fact a 'second-position racism', that threatens to revert 'to the reification and the essentializing that a would-be post-comparatist discourse intended to allay in its affirmation of difference as material and historical specificity'.²² The same slippage occurs when discourses of multiculturalism contest homogenizing narratives of national identity as performative and 'imagined', but are ready to assume the existence of minority and marginal subjects who are not themselves narrative constructions, thereby undermining the foundations of their own 'deconstructionist' project and rendering comparison impossible or irrelevant.²³ Even Orsini's framework of 'significant geographies', while comparative in spirit, deliberately refrains from conceptualizing a unitary phenomenon with common characteristics, and instead studies the differentiated historical formation of particular constellations of languages in contact in various regions (case studies include North India, the Maghreb, and the Horn of Africa).²⁴ 'Multilingual locals', 'hubs of singularities', 'idiomaticity': could it be that Culler's premonition from 2006 has been proven true? In the effort to capture local realities that resist the homogenizing view of world literary maps, does the space of comparison grow smaller, and emptier too?

FROM GLOBALIZATION'S RUINS

Looking back upon the early years of the twenty-first century from our present-day perspective, the impasse between the registers of the universal and the particular seems itself a figment of the 'age of globalization', a designation that perhaps no longer accurately describes our current times. Calls for an approach to comparison no longer premised upon 'a world steeped in the cross-border affordances of globalization' have intensified in recent years.²⁵ A planetary lens has enabled some to move 'beyond the global as a homogenizing conception of the world-as-one and past an anthropocentric perspective constricted by a focus on human culture and its attendant scales alone'.²⁶ Others have embraced the term 'post-global' as registering the growing dissolution and 'manifest exhaustion' of 'the optimistic paradigm of globalism', a process of disillusionment that arguably reached a crescendo in the early 2020s.²⁷ While the shared experiences of our current moment will

surely come fully into view only in retrospect, a growing consensus seems to be forming around the sense that as the norm dominant since at least 1989—driven by ‘the profits of neoliberal globalization and its chimeral horizons of unbounded openness’—disintegrates, Comparative Literature’s ‘disciplinary tenor and tools of the past no longer seem adequate’.²⁸ What, then, rises from the ruins of globalization?

Some of the contributors to this issue suggest that Comparative Literature’s path out of the impasse (between the universal and the particular, a dynamic variously articulated in terms of homogenized/singular, translation/untranslatability, commensurability/incommensurability and so on) that has fuelled much of world literature scholarship thus far may not lie in choosing one side over the other, but in exposing and drawing into question those intellectual preconditions that set the stage for the impasse in the first place. In other words, this special issue does not provide definitive answers to the questions Comparative Literature grappled with at the turn of the millennium, but suggests instead that the very conditions that gave rise to those earlier questions may now have shifted, and as a result, their terms and stakes require rearticulation. Andrea Bachner, for instance, unsettles the ethics of global inclusion around which many world literature projects tend to rally by exposing inclusivity’s proclivity toward predation. In a manner that is counterintuitive to the world literary ethos, Bachner considers a practice of comparison that does not shy away from, but rather confronts the violence of comparison’s predatory structures. Doing so involves a reassessment of the ethics of comparison, a rethinking of our investments in what we have grown used to identifying as ‘good’ or ‘safe’ comparison under the rubrics of world literature. Thomas O. Beebee offers a remarkably tangible vision of how Comparative Literature can finally break out of its ‘attitude of relative complacency in the face of drastic changes to the overall media ecology’ by calling for a Comparative Literature that cultivates multimodal literacies on both its critical and pedagogical fronts. Adhira Mangalagiri’s article too calls for a renewed consideration of Comparative Literature’s investment in ‘literature’, but articulates it differently vis-à-vis expansionistic models of world literature. In academic climates that seek to rebrand Comparative Literature as a one-stop disciplinary home of ‘maximum coverage’, Mangalagiri suggests that rather than expanding its objects of study to ‘everything beyond literature’, the discipline may stand in better stead were it to turn more concertedly toward the literary-textual.

Shifting Comparative Literature beyond ‘the age of globalization’ also demands a reevaluation of the scales of comparison. As Nirvana Tanoukhi has discussed, world literature projects often pivot on a scalar paradox, wherein, on one hand, the connective drive of globalization seems to collapse distance by making the far away object seem closer, more imminently accessible and therefore knowable, but on the other hand, the study of ‘world literature’ requires a gesture of ‘distanciation’, a ‘stepping back, as it were, to revision the literary terrain from afar’.²⁹ This opposing movement—the turn toward methods of distanciation (Moretti’s ‘distant reading’ among them) in order to reckon with the experience of distance’s disintegration—characterises for Tanoukhi comparison’s scalar dance under conditions of globalization. Our current issue suggests shifting conceptualizations of scale, those that crystallize not so much under conditions of globalized connectivity but more when such connectivity cannot be taken for granted, or when connection bespeaks inequity and violence under the guise of even-footing. Karen Thornber’s article urges a reconceptualization of ‘the global’ away from optimistic frames of connectivity and closeness toward a confrontation with ‘global challenges and crises’: ‘matters of global significance’ that transcend national borders but that often conversely function to erode the sense of the far away seeming closer. By exhorting Comparative Literature to ‘go more global’, Thornber suggests that comparative literary study of global problems may make possible the ‘healing’ of those fissures and paradoxes obscured by globalization’s illusions of oneness. Even in the study of literature’s circulations, a ‘step back to re-vision the literary terrain from afar’ may no longer prove adequate, as Gisèle Sapiro’s contribution suggests. Sapiro calls for a sociological approach to the study of literary circulation and transfer in which comparison takes place on three interlinked scales, each exposing differently activated relations of power: ‘the macro level’ of an unequal transnational field, ‘the meso level’ of the nation and ‘the micro level’ of collectives and individuals. A conceptual shuttling between all of these scales enables comparison to properly address the uneven relations of power that structure each.

Questions of scale prove consequential for how we understand and study translation, a central concern for several of the articles in this issue. In fact, the recurrence of translation as a theoretical and practical concern for our contributors suggests that interlingual and philological work still thrive in Comparative Literature, despite earlier concerns that world literature’s overreliance on translated texts would mire the discipline in

methodological monolingualism. Positioned at the intersection between considerations of translation and of scale, Jacob Blakesley's article tracks the translation of just a few words – the title of Dante's *Commedia* – into dozens of languages. The enlarged linguistic scale of Blakesley's analysis makes possible an understanding of translation not as a question of determining equivalence, but rather, as one of grappling creatively with untranslatability, for the religious ideas of an eternal Hell, a provisional Purgatorial realm and an eternal Paradise at the heart of Dante's text point to some of the most fundamental and often vigorously asserted differences between cultures. At the other end of the spatio-linguistic scalar spectrum, Rosa Mucignat's article focuses on one minor language: Friulian. Mucignat argues that bringing a focus on translation to bear on conceptual questions of scale can enable a transnational reading of site-specific literary practice, thereby engendering the kind of multiscale Sapiro calls for, and breaking through world literature's impasse discussed earlier, between the macroscopic and the particular. Contrary to the assumption that the translatability of a text bespeaks its comparability, Elisa Segini studies an instance of the opposite, when a text's inherent comparability in fact prevents its translation. Segini's article exposes the role of censorship in reifying national borders and erecting barriers to transnational dialogues in ideological contexts where comparison's capacity to exceed the national scale becomes problematic. The equivocal, unpredictable effects of comparison in such cases becomes visible not through published translations but rather in the face of aborted and denied translative endeavors.

The contributors to this issue also share an interest in opening new directions that Comparative Literature appears ripe to pursue at its present juncture, given the institutional pressures the discipline currently confronts. At a time of mounting calls to decolonize our discipline and its curricula, Anna Bernard warns against treating 'decolonization' as merely another 'buzzword' for co-optation by university administrators seeking to meet superficial diversity and inclusion targets. Drawing a contrast between 'worlding' and the 'more radical and purposeful comparative praxis' decolonization requires, Bernard suggests that decolonizing Comparative Literature involves a rigorous reconceptualization of 'the relationship of our teaching and research to contemporary liberation movements and the history and theory of anticolonial struggle'. Beebee's and Mangalagiri's articles mentioned above also join in this conversation on the possible routes Comparative Literature may pursue under conditions of institutional precarity.

Together, the articles collected in this issue celebrate the extraordinary resourcefulness of a discipline that, precisely because it can never stake once and for all the limits of its domain, has become the locus where issues of method in the humanities are articulated and sometimes solved. While this issue does not seek to consolidate our multifarious, flexible comparative approaches into a defined set of methods, it does present a sustained discussion of how we compare, with the aim of uncovering the points of convergence that undergird our comparative practices and of inviting further conversation on our disciplinary coherence and ethos. The following section offers summaries of each of the articles as they appear organized in this issue, but we encourage reading out of order, for the articles speak to one another in ways the structure of a journal issue inevitably fails to capture.

HOW WE COMPARE

The issue opens with three articles that position comparison within our contemporary moment, and seek to better align comparison with the urgent imperatives of our present-day political and cultural landscapes. In ‘Decolonizing Comparative Literature’, Bernard invites comparatists to approach disciplinary decolonization by ‘first going back to the literature and theory of anticolonial liberation struggles’. Bernard conceptualises this body of writings as ‘literatures of resistance’, an archive that offers ‘an alternative genealogy of world literature [...] that] arises from the global struggle against capitalist imperialism’. Delving into this archive, the article focuses on the interventions that two novelists – Ghassan Kanafani and Alex La Guma – made in the pages of the militant, trilingual periodical *Lotus*. Bernard discusses the political and cultural contexts in which the writers worked (as exiles from Palestine and South Africa respectively), and examines their *Lotus* writings with an eye to correspondences and differences in formal aspects (notably the aesthetics of ‘socialist’ realism) and transnational politics (with Kanafani’s contribution remaining closer to the particular situation of Palestine and La Guma’s more invested in internationalism). Taking its cue from the ‘openly partisan’ literary practice of *Lotus*, the article calls for comparatists to turn intentionally toward literatures of resistance in order to challenge ‘contemporary bureaucratic efforts to distance decolonization from the history of anticolonial struggle, and [to] refute the neoliberal consensus that literature and literary criticism are remote from the real concerns of people’s lives’.

Beebee's 'Comparative Media Literacies' urges Comparative Literature to reckon with 'an expanded media landscape' that includes screen, sonic, and digital cultures. Beebee calls to 'reboot' our discipline as Comparative Media Literacies, a new programme that accounts for literature's current position as a 'residual medium', meaning that 'whatever features we may ascribe to literature reach broader audiences through other media'. A focus on media literacies furthers a capacious understanding of both 'literature' and 'reading' in order to inculcate the ability to 'read' literature's manifestations in a range of cultural media. The article offers several examples of how language arts can 'hack into' other media forms or other media can become 'literary', including an intersemiotic translation of Goethe's poetry by Clive Scott and Monica Youn's volume of poems *Ignatz*, an ekphrasis of George Herriman's graphic narrative *Krazy Kat*. Intermedial comparisons, Beebee argues, offer powerful pedagogical tools by decentring literature as the privileged medium for comparison; for example, students can be encouraged to examine the narrative offered by videogames, or to develop literary compositions inspired by gaming experiences. Comparative media literacies, therefore, builds upon Comparative Literature's existing strengths in comparison and polyglotism in order to align the discipline more closely with the 'digital mind'.

In 'Comparison and Gender Injustice in Worlds of Pandemics', Thornber urges comparatists to study through the lens of literature the pressing concerns and crises of our collective life. Redefining 'global literature' away from the notion of 'literatures from around the globe', Thornber proposes attention to 'texts that grapple with challenges and crises that have global implications or counterparts globally, whether at present, in the past, or likely in the future'. Studying the relationship between literature and global pandemics can 'enable comparative literature scholarship to connect more meaningfully and explicitly with life on the ground' and can 'give us a much better sense of challenges and crises that impact individuals and communities globally'. Thornber demonstrates this potential through a discussion of three novels that speak to pandemics of gender injustice—He Jiahong's *Hanging Devils*, Oh Jung-hee's *The Bird* and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*—and shows how comparative reading enables 'deeper insights into varied dynamics of gender inequities/gender based-violence that are closely interrelated but infrequently discussed together'. Thornber's intent is ultimately 'ameliorative': she argues that taking up global crises

addressed in literary form can contribute to ‘facilitating healing and enabling wellbeing in worlds of pandemics’.

The next three articles probe the ‘darker’ sides of comparison, the violence, inequities, and blockages latent within this intellectual practice. As Bachner writes in ‘Predator Comparison’, ‘we must confront some darker visions of comparison head-on’. Rather than cultivate an ethics of inclusion, which, under the logics of globalization, functions more so to ‘devour’ cultural diversity, Bachner conjures a violent scenario of predation as a point of departure from which to renew comparison’s ethics, namely, cannibalism, as conceptualized by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. Bachner shows how the figure of friendship, usually considered ‘good comparison’ because it is imagined as ‘devoid of violence’, is in fact ‘potentially burdened with symbolic and epistemological violence once it becomes a figure of sociality in general’. Cannibalism, on the other hand, is violence (and therefore falls under what we consider to be ‘bad comparison’), but ‘its theoretical use pretends otherwise, since it adumbrates a potentially less self-centered attitude that opens itself up to the other’. As comparison is inherently a predatory enterprise, Bachner contends, we may as well take a hint from Amerindian anthropophagy and the ‘transmutation of perspectives’ it affords, and experiment with ‘embracing rather than trying to ward off the violence of comparison’ so as to better articulate its imperfect ethics.

In contrast to Bachner’s epistemological take on comparison, Sapiro’s article, ‘Structural Comparison, Transfers and Unequal Power Relations: Field Theory as a Conceptual and Methodological Tool’, proposes ‘structural comparison’ as an approach that foregrounds empirical, sociological attention to unequal power relations. Sapiro writes: ‘a structural comparative approach requires one to first analyse the position of the literary field in the field of power; second, to reconstruct the space of possibilities [...] in which a collective or individual strategy takes place [...]; and third to define the position that the [...] author occupies in the field.’ The article develops its methodological framework for structural comparison by combining Bourdieu’s field theory with world literature’s theories of circulation. Sapiro then extends this framework to the market of literary translations, examining how both market forces and institutional structures heighten inequities between languages in the global scene of translation. Moving from the ‘macro’ level of international power relations to the ‘meso’ register of national book industries, the article goes on to identify ‘structural homologies’ between different

national publishing fields through a focus on publishers, prizes, and literary festivals. The article concludes on the 'micro' level of comparing authors' writing strategies given the particular power relations they inhabit.

While Sapiro's article zooms inward from the macro to the micro, Mucignat proposes to begin from the 'minor' in what she terms 'minor comparativism'. The article, 'Pasolini and Minor Comparativism: Transnationalising Dialect Poetry', takes up the impasse between 'the macroscopic perspectives of world literature' on one hand, and 'incommensurability and untranslatability' on the other. Breaking through the stalemate, Mucignat suggests ways to read 'the local and the minor transnationally', methods that 'insist on linguistic and historical rigour but remain open to hermeneutical border-crossing'. Mucignat delineates a framework for 'minor comparativism' through the Italian writer and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini. For Pasolini, who chose to adopt his mother's dialect, Friulian, 'engagement with dialects and folk culture was a constant and constantly evolving source of inspiration, and deeply shaped both his poetic work and his politics'. His turn to dialect enabled a range of interventions, including unsettling the assumed hierarchy between the oral and the written and 'advancing transnational solidarity among oppressed minorities'. Drawing from Pasolini's literary practice, Mucignat demonstrates an approach to comparison that resists claims of 'self-contained particularity and mutual incomparability of localised experiences' and, at the same time, rejects 'impersonal models of global circulation' in attending to the transnational.

Extending Mucignat's interest in translation practice, the issue then turns to the relationship between questions of translatability and those of comparability. Jacob Blakesley's article sheds light on the global translation history of Dante's *Commedia* by studying how translators worldwide have translated the title and canticle titles of this work. In 'Comparing Translations of Dante's *Commedia*', Blakesley surveys dozens of languages to examine the translational challenges Dante's *Commedia* posed over centuries, challenges that have in fact driven the text to be continually (re)translated. Interweaving both linguistic considerations and those of religious culture, Blakesley shows how the strategies translators have used vary enormously, from borrowing and using cognates to adopting entirely new concepts against expectations of equivalence. When translating the titles of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, non-Western translators, for example, frequently use native concepts which have nothing to do with eternal afterlives. Furthermore,

the very title of the work, *Commedia*, poses a translation issue: how Dante understood this concept, Blakesley contends, is far removed from how the term *Commedia* became generally understood by modern readers both in Italian as well as in foreign languages. Through the case of *Commedia*, Blakesley demonstrates how ‘macroanalysis’, or comparing ‘on a wide scale’, illuminates the many valences the text gains that remain imperceptible when viewed up close.

While Blakesley’s article showcases the many possibilities translation opens up, Segnini focuses on what can be learned from the untranslated in relation to issues of censorship and comparability. In ‘Comparability and Translatability in the making of Historical Narratives: Alba de Céspedes’ Comparative Method,’ Segnini studies the aborted Spanish translation of communist French-language poetry by the Italian writer Alba de Céspedes. Drawing on a 1959 article on the Cuban Revolution and a collection of poems written in French about the Parisian 1968 insurrections by de Céspedes, Segnini explores the ‘vertical’ (tranhistorical) and ‘horizontal’ (transnational) comparisons that underpin de Céspedes’ poems and the circulation of this militant writing in translation. Challenging the established association between comparability and translatability, the author demonstrates that the comparisons underpinning the poems at once determined the desired target audiences for translation (Italy and Cuba) and yet prevented translation from taking place. In fact, the association between the French 1968 and the Cuban Revolution developed by de Céspedes, while apparently aligned with revolutionary ideologies, clashed with contemporary Cuban politics. In other words, the comparison was unidirectional, that is, valid from the Western perspective only, and thus prevented de Céspedes from inserting her work into the Cuban literary system.

The issue concludes with Mangalagiri’s ‘Comp Lit’s Other Half: In Defense of Literature, with Lao She’. The article makes a case for the discipline’s continued emphasis on literature, narrowly conceived as the literary-textual expression of languages, despite the conditions of literature’s marginal position in our present mediascape. In order to refocus Comparative Literature’s often distracted eye upon literature, Mangalagiri recalls literature’s historical relationship with ‘criticism’, a specific formulation of ‘reading’ that arose from scholarly efforts a century ago to make space for literature’s study within the university classroom. The article traces the translational movement of ‘criticism’ from Anglo-American academia into the Chinese university classroom

through the pedagogical and creative practice of the eminent Chinese writer Lao She. Drawing upon Lao She's conviction in the critical capacity of literature, Mangalagiri argues that returning to 'criticism', as Lao She articulates it in his lectures and fiction, can help build a justification for the continued importance of teaching the reading of literature today. An insistence on literature, Mangalagiri suggests, can resist institutional drives to align university classrooms with market-driven demands, as well as 'to a mediascape that rewards brevity, immediacy and instant gratification'. As such, Mangalagiri's article subtends several lines of thought also explored elsewhere in the issue – ideas of resistance (Bernard, Mucignat and Segnini), explorations of translation's circulatory capacity (Sapiro and Blakesley), questions of Comparative Literature's ethical commitments (Bachner and Thornber), and debates on both the 'world' (Mucignat) and the 'literature' (Beebee) of world literature.

As a whole, this issue revels in the duality of its title, 'How We Compare', intentionally phrased to evoke an ambiguity between the normative and the expositional. We hope this spirit finds resonance in our readers' own practices of comparison.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank former *CCS* editor Richard Hibbitt for encouraging us to put together this special issue, and for his continued guidance on all matters of editorship. We also thank Jacob McGuinn for his expert editorial assistance with this issue.

NOTES

- 1 Robert Weninger, ed., 'How We Compare', special issue of *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), <<https://www.eupublishing.com/toc/ccs/3/1-2>> [accessed 23 July 2023]. The issue is freely available online (via the given link) for a limited period of time in 2023–2024.
- 2 Robert Weninger, 'Comparative Literature at a Crossroads? An Introduction', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), xi–xix (p. xvii).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Lucia Boldrini, 'Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A View from Europe and the UK', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), 13–23 (pp. 15, 22).
- 5 The CHLEL series is published by Amsterdam-based press John Benjamins. A. James Arnold et al., eds., *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, 3 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994–2001); Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History*

- of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, 4 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004–2010); César Domínguez, et al., eds., *A Comparative History of Literature in the Iberian Peninsula*, 2 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010–2016), Steven P. Sondrup, Mark B. Sandberg, Thomas A. DuBois and Dan Ringgaard, eds., *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017).
- 6 ‘By-Laws of the Coordinating Committee for the Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages’, 14 June 2006, <<https://medialibrary.uantwerpen.be/oldcontent/container31427/files/CHLEL%20By-Laws%202006.pdf>> [accessed 23 July 2023].
- 7 Dirk Götsche, et al., eds., *Landscapes of Realism*, 2 vols (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2021–2022); Daniel F. Chamberlain and J. Edward Chamberlin, eds., *Or Words to That Effect: Orality and the Writing of Literary History* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2016).
- 8 Water Cohen, *A History of European Literature: The West and the World from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 9 Shane Weller, *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 6.
- 10 Boldrini, p. 15.
- 11 Weninger, ‘Comparative Literature at a Crossroads?’, p. xv.
- 12 Susan Bassnett, ‘Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), 3–11 (p. 7).
- 13 Linda Hutcheon, ‘Afterword: Compl(ic)it’, *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1–2 (2006), 159–162 (p. 159).
- 14 Jonathan Culler, ‘Wither Comparative Literature?’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), 85–97 (p. 87).
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 17 Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 108, n.1.
- 18 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 31.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 20 Francesca Orsini, ‘The Multilingual Local in World Literature’, *Comparative Literature*, 67.4 (2015), 345–374 (p. 349).
- 21 Spivak, p. 10.
- 22 Djelal Kadir, ‘Comparative Literature in a World Become Tlön’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1–2 (2006), 125–138 (p. 130).
- 23 See Elías José Palti’s reading of Homi Bhabha’s deconstructionist-multicultural approach in ‘The Nation as a Problem: Historians and the “National Question”’, *History and Theory*, 3 (2001), 324–346.
- 24 Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora and Francesca Orsini, ‘Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a Ground-up and Located Approach to World Literature’, *Modern Languages Open*, 1 (2018): 19, 1–8.
- 25 Adhira Mangalagiri, *States of Disconnect: The China-India Literary Relation in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 7.
- 26 Alexis Radisoglou and Christoph Schaub, ‘Figuring the Planet: Post-Global Perspectives on German Literature’, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 97.2 (2022), 125–133 (p. 126).

- 27 Gesine Müller and Benjamin Loy, eds., *Post-Global Aesthetics: 21st Century Latin American Literatures and Cultures* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), pp. 2–3.
- 28 Mangalagiri, p. 7.
- 29 Nirvana Tanoukhi, ‘The Scale of World Literature’, *New Literary History*, 39.3 (2008), 599–617 (p. 614). Also on world literature’s scale, Ben Etherington has argued that ‘the question of the scale of world literature pivots on whether one regards the term as having as *ideal* or *empirical* referent’. Ben Etherington, ‘Scales, Systems, and Meridians’, in *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 52–68 (p. 53).