

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND “OTHERING”: METHODOLOGIES FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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Comparative Literature has remained an elusive discipline of inquiry, as it has been perceived as “a subject of study, a general approach to literature, a series of specific methods of literary history, a return to a medieval way of thought, a methodological credo for the day, an administrative annoyance, a new wrinkle in university organization,” and much more (Weisinger and Joyaux vii). Amidst these infinite possibilities, a comparatist must identify the key responsibilities of the discipline as a field of intellectual inquiry. The difficulty in defining the field, or at least the difficulty in coming to an agreement about the definition, is not essentially a crisis for the discipline. The field can and has accommodated the study of a wide range of literary works from varied geographical, historical, linguistic backgrounds, and engaged with other disciplinary modes of inquiry. Scholars have argued that the search for definition is ultimately a futile exercise for a field that resists categorization of knowledge into discipline-specific fields of inquiry. For example, Haun Saussy has shown that scholarly attempts in defining Comparative Literature “through its objects of knowledge or methods” remain inefficacious, and proposes to understand the discipline “as practice, a way of constructing objects” (340).

Harry Levin, one of the founders of the discipline in the North American context, characterizes it as “an attempt to pool the resources of the variously related literature, to cross the linguistic barriers that confine them within the framework of national histories and provide an area for the consideration of their common features and underlying forces” (22). Levin’s proposed attempt to transcend the boundaries of national histories in the study of literature has been echoed in the works of René Wellek, another founding figure of the American school of Comparative Literature,

who notes that "Comparative' literature has become an established term for any study of literature transcending the limits of one national literature" (167). In the same essay, Wellek argued that it is entirely possible for single literature departments to engage in comparative studies of literature and proposed opening the study of literature beyond the association with a particular language; this approach would have eradicated the practice of dividing the teaching and scholarship of literature according to languages and instead embrace literature as a field of artistic expression and critical studies. An emphasis on the "literary" rather than the national and/or linguistic would have established literature as a unique cognitive entity driven by its own theories and methodologies; such an approach would have destabilized the monopoly of former colonial languages and their cultural empires could be forced to engage with other languages as equals. However, this approach has not been widely appreciated, and thus very few universities have merged their language-specific literature programs in order to create a "Literature" department.

Paul de Man was aware of the challenge of self-identification that haunted the field, and in his 1967 "notebooks," he proposed that "comparative literature is an important auxiliary to the history of ideas, with obvious relevance for international studies" (230). This articulation of an "obvious" relationship between the fields of Comparative Literature and International Studies indicates the importance of locating Comparative Literature within a framework of internationalism and interdisciplinarity. Contemplating the discipline's definition and scope in early 1980s in "Comparative Literature as a Cultural Practice," Mary Louise Pratt welcomes the opportunity for Comparative Literature to work in "cooperation" with International Studies programs. Such endeavours promise to focus on the immediate cultural lives of the readers and students, allowing them to engage in intellectual inquiry about the world they inhabit.

In the late 1980s, Earl Miner observed that "the least studied issue in comparative literature is what is meant by 'comparative' and [...] what are the canons of comparability" (135). In the same essay, Miner elaborated that the "comparative" element in the study of literature allows us to understand how "critical systems" emerge by connecting the world, the poet/author, the poet/author's work, a text (the physical coding), a reader and the reader's perception of the poet/author's work. Rey Chow explains that "comparison in comparative literature is understandably grounded, as the etymology of the word suggests, in the notion of parity—the possibility of peer-like equality and mutuality among those being compared" (291). Thus, "comparison" must begin with the acceptance of an equality amongst narratives, subjectivities, cultures, and texts. In order to uphold this sense of parity, a comparatist must practice *deliberate othering*, a process through which cultures, languages, and literatures are studied as *different* but *equal*. In subsequent sections, this article demonstrates the problems of cultural equivalency in recent Comparative Literature curricula, develops a praxis of *deliberate othering*, and offers pedagogical examples to illustrate how *deliberate othering* can foster respectful relations.

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL EQUIVALENCY

182 In the earliest conceptions of the discipline, comparatists were perceived as polyglots and cosmopolitan scholars who could establish a literary text in relation to its social, historical, and political contexts while simultaneously tracing the relationship between various literary traditions. Often considered a foundational work of the nascent concept of Comparative Literature, Johann Gottfried von Herder's work on the *Volkslieder* project of the 1770s takes an interdisciplinary and multilingual approach to the study of folk songs from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In 1812, Frederick Schlegel outlined the conception of a singular "European Literature" in *Geschichte der europäischen Literatur*; this idea of perceiving literature beyond a national purview would become one of the defining features of the modern discipline of Comparative Literature. Finally, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe introduced the concept of *Weltliteratur* in his 1827 letter to Johann Eckermann, a concept that dominates significant aspects of current scholarship and pedagogy of Comparative Literature. Another influential figure of Comparative Literature in the context of nineteenth-century Europe, Georg Brandes, contended "L'examen comparatiste de la littérature a la double propriété de rapprocher l'étranger de nous de façon que nous puissions y avoir accès et d'éloigner de nous ce qui est nôtre de façon que nous puissions en avoir une vision d'ensemble" (*Samlade Skrifter* IV. 1-2; qtd. in Boyer 140-41).

Though interdisciplinarity was conceived as a foundational component of Comparative Literature in the nineteenth century, the twenty-first-century Comparative Literature curriculum tends to embrace a monolithic study of world literatures in English translation. The ideas of interdisciplinary studies of literature and decentering of the canon has been thriving and well attended in national literature departments in general and English departments in particular in North America since the 1980s. However, while monolingual and national literature departments thrived with the advancement of interdisciplinary approaches offering opportunities to engage with multicultural texts, Comparative Literature as an intellectual discipline has found itself in decreasing demand. Thus, in 1993, Susan Bassnett stated in her book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, "Today, Comparative Literature is in one sense dead" (47). Gayatri Spivak's work in *Death of a Discipline* invites twenty-first century comparatists to initiate a new direction in the discipline with an Area Studies/Ethnic Studies approach instead of a World Literature approach. However, the emergence and growth of World Literature programs in various North American universities indicates that the monolingual approach to sampling literary works from around the globe has become more convenient for, and useful in, post-secondary classrooms.

The urgency for framing literature within the broader corpus of social relations and cognitive processes was pointed out in Charles Bernheimer's "Report" on the state of the discipline in 1993, published in 1995, which notes that "textually pre-

cise readings should take account [...] of the ideological, cultural, and institutional contexts in which their meanings are produced" (43). This emphasis on "contextualization" of textual reading has been further theorized in postcolonial criticism. As the discipline of Comparative Literature has embraced a curriculum that reflects more affinity with World Literature—a field initially conceived as an undergraduate discipline in which students would primarily engage with literature in English translation—criticism has pointed out the loss of the "contextual" in translated works. Rajani Srikanth's study raises ethical questions about collecting "world" literature and exposes the hegemonic nature of pedagogy, promoting a new chapter in cultural imperialism through the publishing industry.

In her seminal work *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Emily Apter shows that World Literature operates within a framework of translatability that does not allow comparatists to engage with the philosophy of untranslatability. Grounded in the theoretical tradition developed by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Samuel Weber, Barbara Johnson, Abdelfattah Kilito, and Édouard Glissant, Apter's work aspires to

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activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature with bearing on approaches to world literatures, literary world systems and literary history, the politics of periodization, the translation of philosophy and theory, the relation between sovereign and linguistic borders at the checkpoint, the bounds of non-secular proscription and cultural sanction, free versus privatized authorial property, the poetics of transnational differences, as well as ethical, cosmological and theological difference, as well as ethical, cosmological and theological dimensions of worldliness. (3-4)

Apter's work on untranslatability draws attention to the longstanding problems of imposing hegemonic infrastructures (theories and methodologies) on the study of languages, cultures, societies, and people who emerge from historical sites of colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist repressions. In the "Introduction" to the *Dictionary of the Untranslatables*, Barbara Cassin explains that "the untranslatable is [...] what one keeps on (not) translating" (xvii) and allows for a multiplicity of meanings of a concept, within a language and in many languages, to be created and considered. As a result, a recognition of the untranslatable allows a heterogeneity of worldviews, imaginations, and new realities through encounters between the text and its interpreter.

In "The Multilingual Local in World Literature," Francesca Orsini states that monolingual approaches to the study of literature can reproduce the existing social biases associated with a particular literary tradition, whereas multilingual analysis presents inherently comparative and non-hierarchical readings of cultures that have been traditionally "othered" by western institutions. Orsini argues that

an approach to literature and space that takes multilingualism within society and literary culture as a structuring and generative principle and holds both local and cosmopolitan perspectives is more likely to produce "modest and accurate [perspectives] [...] of world literature than approaches based only on cosmopolitan perspectives of circulation and

recognition. (346)

Susan Snaider Lanser urges comparatists to embrace and enhance this “insistence on language as the primary site of difference and hence not only the discipline’s central basis for ‘comparison’ but the very good ground of disciplinary legitimacy” (287).

184 Translation remains a crucial tool for any training in Comparative Literature, but the use of translated works in World Literature curricula raises many concerns. In the context of Comparative Literature, translation needs to highlight the power dynamics associated with the objects of knowledge construction and the subjects of knowledge production. While engaging with a translated text, a comparatist must practice intensive caution, to avoid the tendencies of distorting the “other” to understand it. Translation poses the threat of absorbing the “other” within the culture of the target language. Avoiding cultural equivalency is an ethical obligation of a comparatist who is not just translating content but studying “the very moves of language” (Spivak 612) to expose the inequalities and conditions of cultural encounters in a globalized world.

While in its conception Comparative Literature strove to overcome cultural equivalency by emphasizing multilingualism and interdisciplinary, the current state of the discipline in North America in the twenty-first century seems to diffuse othering and induce a process of amalgamation. As an integral part of graduate training in Comparative Literature, students take World Literature courses, which often fail to conceive of the untranslatability of concepts, cultures, and their diverse literatures in their full complexity. For example, the tendency to “survey” the world of literatures and “gather” a few of their representatives for closer inspection in the classrooms of the global north often leads to the choice of texts that fit preexisting ideas about cultures and peoples that have been constructed as “others” to European enlightenment. This tendency also limits which texts and authors become part of the survey, and ignores practices and performances of narrative storytelling that are difficult to expose, while inclusion and selection are controlled and monitored to “fit” within an existing toolbox.

To expand on the problems of cultural equivalencies, I draw on an example from my graduate training that demonstrates how cultural equivalency and essentialism are reproduced in studies of translated texts. The mandatory coursework for our graduate studies included surveys of World Literature, comparative methodology, literary theory, and studies in genres. The survey of World Literature attempted to grasp what Henry Remak considers “the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country” (3). Not surprisingly, the survey course resulted in a “gathering” of texts from varied historical, geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and we read all of these texts in English translation.

As with the content, our classroom also consisted of a representative “gathering” of students from Iran, China, and India, along with Canadian and American students. On a superficial level, this amalgamation of varied backgrounds and contents

did manage to achieve at least a portion of the discipline's commitment; however, it also resulted in a selective and monolithic representation of the "other." For example, we studied Mahasweta Devi's short story "The Breast Giver," in its English translation by Gayatri Spivak, as one of the representative texts from modern India in our survey course. As the only woman of Bengali ethnicity in the classroom and in the program, I found it comforting to see the work of a fellow Bengali woman finding a place in the western classroom; it was a moment of validation of my epistemic world to be included in a western university curriculum. I was asked if I knew the original Bengali title of the story. For a moment, I, along with the text, was welcome within the paradigm of knowledge construction in the field.

The plot of "The Breast Giver" revolves around the protagonist of the story, Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman who finds work as a wet-nurse in an upper-class merchant family when her husband is disabled in an accident caused primarily by the negligence of the Halder family's younger child. Jashoda breastfeeds a series of children at the Halder household, thus turning motherhood into a profession, though she does not receive a wage for her reproductive labour but instead is paid in terms of food, shelter, and clothing. Ultimately, Jashoda develops breast cancer and the new generation of daughters-in-law of the Halder household cannot find any more use for her. Jashoda suffers a pitiful death while "the sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes."

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In our class, we did not explore the function of Jashoda's presence, or Devi's presence for that matter, in the World Literature curriculum. We did not consider Jashoda's intersectionality, which contributed to her pain and suffering, within a narrative of global feminism or third-world feminism or women-of-colour feminism. In the absence of all such discussions, Jashoda's world became a representative example of women's plight in the Indian subcontinent. Without an intricate analysis of the structures of class, caste, and gender relations and the legal and social reforms of pre- and post-independence Bengal, the interpretation of this story not only remains limited but can be dangerously faulty. Despite her caste status, Jashoda is exploited by the women of the Halder family who hold a superior class position but an inferior caste position in relation to her. The story also problematizes the "sisterhood" narrative and highlights the intersectional issues of class-caste-gender hierarchy in the subcontinent. It is equally necessary and important to discuss the role of women intellectuals, such as both Devi and Spivak, in third-world feminist movements to understand why we should read this story in a survey of World Literature. Devoid of this contextual knowledge and analysis, the inclusion of the story in the survey of World Literature served little purpose other than mere token representation.

Earl Miner identified the dangers of cultural equivalence promoted by alienation of the text and misreading of the "other." Miner defines this as a twofold process whereby alienation, "a deliberate introduction of something kindred but unconnected historically with the issue or matter at hand" (139), and misreading, "[a] deliberate procedure, interpreting a complex whole by an important subordinate,

rather than the dominant feature” (140) result in misrepresenting the “other” as a distorted caricature at best. Subsequent discussions with my classmates confirmed my assumptions about the dangerous misconceptions about this “other,” the third-world woman. No affective connections were established between the readers and the characters, and instead the text contributed to a stereotype for and about agency-less “third world women” stuck within oppressive patriarchies.

186 Though it is important to provide exposure to literary works produced from different corners of the world, Comparative Literature needs to do more than merely introduce narratives in English translations while students focus on the plotline and move through a significant stack of literary works without understanding the linguistic and social environments that produce these creative outputs, or critically evaluating the power dynamics of interacting with works from non-English, often non-white locations in settler colonial lands and Eurocentric institutions. Here I draw on Édouard Glissant’s concept of *tout monde*, which calls for a process of multilingual awareness in reading, writing, and scholarship. In *Traite du Tout-monde*, Glissant argues that the possibilities of plurality of imagination and reality are endangered when dominant world languages such as American English or standard French continue to impose themselves and reduce their *others* into comprehensible categories. Glissant does not perceive multilingualism as a quantitative concept, but rather a process whereby a text in one language is always situated within the context of global polyphony. When a foreign text is approached with this awareness of multilingualism, a non-hierarchical relationship is established between the subject and its other. This relation between the subject and the *other* (person, language, text, culture) is determined through a consciousness of difference and equality.

Studies of World Literature, via translations, have a place in Comparative Literature, but such studies cannot replace the multifold process of engaging with literary works through careful considerations of their textuality, transmissibility, and social autonomy in both local and global contexts. The following section demonstrates how a comparatist can practice *deliberate othering* to avoid cultural equivalencies by establishing a relationship between the self and the other, foregrounding their differences, and accepting the other as an equal and alternative way of being and thinking.

DELIBERATE OTHERING AS AN ETHICAL PRACTICE

The place of World Literature in the discipline of Comparative Literature is perhaps described best by Amiya Dev, who points out, “The comparatist has to know that comparative literature is a method of investigation while world literature is a body of valuable literary works” (96). Once we establish Comparative Literature as a method or practice, we must engage in the ethical application of this practice.

Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy of ethics and “otherness,” *deliberate othering* emphasizes a relationship between the subject and its other without consum-

ing the latter within the corpus of the former. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the "other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity" (TI 194). Instead, the "other" is perceived as an alterity that cannot be "reabsorbed into [one's] own identity as a thinker or possessor" (TI 33). Any attempt to categorize or represent the "other" with the subject's preexisting tools of comprehension demonstrates an intention to reduce the "other" into sameness. In "Diachrony and Representation," Levinas describes this attempt to reduce or assimilate the other within the subject as "the egological representation" ("DR" 100-01), which constitutes a form of violence against the other. In contrast to the egological work of representation, Levinas proposes "moral consciousness" to establish a relationship between the subject and its other; in this approach, the subject engages with the other as irreducible and infinite, and thus resists the temptation of distorting the latter.

Like Levinas's "moral consciousness," *deliberate othering* calls for an ethical engagement with the other. The comparatist must be trained to reject the temptations of reducing and distorting the other in order to comprehend or make sense of the other's narrative world with a preexisting toolbox. When a "foreign" literary work is included and appropriated within the World Literature survey as an "example" of *otherness*, the process almost always leads to an absorption of the other. In order to avoid this mistake, the discipline of Comparative Literature must practice premeditated *othering*, where students and scholars engage with the foreign with an emphasis on its *difference*. While the alterity of the other must be recognized throughout the process of comparison, deliberate othering does not necessitate a non-relation. Rather, as Luce Irigaray has argued, the encounter with the other calls for "a participation of the body, of feelings, and of mind" (117), in which the strangeness of the *other* is perceived according to the realms of the material, affective, and epistemic.

However, merely recognizing the foreign as *different* but an *unequal other* creates an ethical problem that has been all too well exposed since Edward Said's *Orientalism*. When "third-world" texts are included within the curricula of the global north, the power hierarchies of cultures and languages are reproduced by appropriating and distorting the former to serve the interests of the latter. In such cases, comparison of texts and cultures leads to the reestablishment of hierarchies. The perception and acceptance of the other as equal is possible when the engagement is established on the foundation of a polyglossia or multiplicity, which Glissant conceptualizes as *tout monde*.

Deliberate othering is a complex praxis that begins with an intentional commitment to engage in an ethical comparison. The basis of such comparison is informed by a sense of parity between languages, cultures, and peoples who are accepted as equals. In this process, the comparatist does not look for cultural equivalencies or for opportunities of absorbing the other. The goal is to establish a relationship between the subject and object of inquiry. Acute awareness of multilingualism, as Glissant

describes it, which allows for attention to opacity and untranslatability are crucial for such comparison. Ultimately, *deliberate othering* establishes the other as an equal and different form of knowledge construction, thus adding to the plurality and heterogeneity of possible realities. Through *deliberate othering*, a comparatist does not merely imagine a moment of *living like the other*, but acknowledges that other ways of being and thinking are real and equally acceptable ways of existence.

REFLECTIONS FROM UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOMS

188 Even if graduate training programs in Comparative Literature reembrace multilingualism and interdisciplinarity, the decrease in hiring in Comparative Literature, which in turn has resulted in many comparatists finding home in English literature departments, other single literature departments, or Area Studies, poses a significant problem. I am interested in evaluating how *deliberate othering* as a praxis of Comparative Literature can be applied in the study of literature in our Anglophone classroom contexts.

I currently teach courses in an English department, and in order to engage my students with non-western narratives from outside the American, Canadian, and British contexts, sometimes I do rely on translated works. In recent first-year classes, I have ventured teaching Paul Bowles's English translation of Mohamed Choukri's collective autobiographical narrative *For Bread Alone* alongside the film *Babel*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and written by Guillermo Arriaga. The pairing helped us identify the material conditions of existence for those living on the fringes of the globalized world and exposed the vulnerability of children who are situated at the interface of the global-neoliberal-upwardly mobile and the peripheries of globalization. We focused heavily on the politics of language and relationships between languages within globally connected societies, which are dominated by the hegemony of the American Anglophone media and entertainment industries.

These texts draw attention to the inequality of asymmetric globalization, the untranslatability of narratives and languages, and the impossibility of studying the foreign and the other using the existing tools and lenses that often were developed under assumptions of the inferiority of the other. At the beginning of the course, we addressed our intentions in engaging with these narratives in a settler colonial setting. Following Franco Moretti's proposal, I relied on the expertise of scholars in the specific geographical area and on existing scholarship on both texts. For assignments, students read and prepared research reports on the historical and social conditions of the cultures and societies about which we read in the literary works under discussion. Despite the Anglophone content, we were able to engage with the silences, omissions, exclusions, and distortions. Throughout the semester we learned to question the power structures that dominate cultural and linguistic encounters. In the end, as a group we asked why we should engage with these narratives when most

of us present on the university campus engage with globalization very differently. My Generation Z students, most of whom grew up, as far as their memory takes them back, in a post-9/11 world, explained that they wanted to know because these stories help them develop a position of critical and *deliberate othering*, a concept we explored throughout the course. From this departure point they engage with cultures, societies, and people who are different from themselves as "normalized equals."

This experience has been significant in my quest for ways to apply my training as a comparatist in an English literature classroom while maintaining my ethical obligations to the discipline and to the world at large. My classrooms are gathering spaces of students who are primarily from Asia and Africa, along with Canadian students from Indigenous, diasporic, and settler backgrounds. As in most other Canadian institutions, my employer's strategic planning encourages internationalization and indigenizing. As a result, my classrooms are often embodiments of the trajectories of human migrations and movements from the imperial to the globalized era. In such contexts, comparative studies of literature offer us opportunities to evaluate our positions and responsibilities towards others whom we read about and try to understand. Through *deliberate othering* we establish strangers as different and equal subjects of knowledge formation.

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CONCLUSION

In his keynote address "Ethics Before Comparison" at the 2019 annual conference of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, David Palumbo-Liu urged comparatists to engage in ethical scholarship and comparison. However, Palumbo-Liu's speech did not offer any tangible guidelines for contemporary comparatists to overcome their own training and tendencies to read the non-western world through a set of tools and prejudices that have been refined within the Anglo-European and settler American institutions. As we can only teach what we know, any attempt to train a new generation of comparatists to respond to this call for ethical engagement and comparison presents a significant practical challenge.

Despite this lack of a guideline for practicing ethical comparison, most scholars and teachers of Comparative Literature would agree that the task of the comparatist needs to be reevaluated to ensure the discipline continues to fulfill its promise of comparison and study of the "other" without reproducing hierarchies. It is important to remember that Comparative Literature, as a discipline of academic and intellectual inquiry, emerged during a climate of imperial nationalism that influenced the nineteenth-century European academy to establish the human sciences as we know them. These epistemic and structural transitions resulted in institutional changes that went on well into the twentieth century and restored a new relationship between the subject and the object of knowledge formation. As we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century, Comparative Literature must reflect on avenues of modi-

fiction and allow itself to extend its corpus beyond Anglo-European societies and cultures in order to remain relevant for the diverse populations of the globalized world.

This article has argued that the discipline of Comparative Literature must recentre its commitment to multilingualism, not a quantitative multilingualism but a philosophical multilingualism, as Édouard Glissant has suggested, and interdisciplinarity to remain an intellectual discipline that fosters plurality and heterogeneity of imagination and existence. This study points out that uncritical acceptance of translation as a tool of connection between cultures and people results in dangerous distortions of peoples, cultures, languages, nations, and ethnicities. Ultimately, it demonstrates how a praxis of *deliberate othering*, which emphasizes both difference and equality, can be used to establish an ethical relationship with the “stranger” through comparative studies of literature. This approach can be applied in undergraduate courses on Anglophone literature by teaching students to read silences, distortions, and omissions as components of untranslatability. Developed from Emmanuel Levinas’s work on otherness and Édouard Glissant’s work on relations, a praxis of *deliberate othering* focuses on how language and literature construct relationships between the Same and the Other while committing to an ethics of equality.

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