

“After the World: New Possibilities for Comparative Literature”

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Roundtable Discussion

“The Future of Comparative Literature”

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(Part I)

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Thank you very much for the very kind introduction. To be honest, I did not expect to speak in any way about the future of comparative literature. Futures are always very difficult to predict. So I probably won't do that. But let me start by thinking about the conference, which has been very inspiring, with many interesting papers. But I was struck out in the last session by Su Yun Kim's introductory remark about how this is the first time that she has presented at a comparative literature conference, and how she normally speaks in conferences that are associated with area studies, such as Asian American or Asian literatures. This was very interesting for me; it speaks to one of the shifts I will talk about. It reminded me of Tobin Siebers who, about twenty years ago, in a very interesting essay called “Sincerely Yours,” which came out in the Bernheimer collection [note: *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*], said, “everyone is becoming a comparatist of a kind.” He made that remark as a way of saying that comparative

literature was, in fact, a dying discipline. But he actually thinks this has meaning: if everyone has become a comparatist, it has actually made comparative literature a high umbrella in some ways. An example of this is the movement we see demonstrated at this conference: globalizing national literature, in Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese literatures, and so on. But we see this movement even in a major literature department such as English literature. Paul Jay in an extremely insightful article several years ago called “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English” drew attention to the tendency in English and other literature departments to organize their curricula around a traditional division of discrete national literatures into ossified literary historical periods, and he called 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.” I think that today comparative fields such as trans-Atlantic studies or global English are gaining tremendous critical momentum in many English departments. That even national literature departments are moving away from their nationalist paradigm toward the globalized model of literary studies suggests that comparative approaches to literature are no longer the exception but the norm in the pattern. But this normalization of comparative approaches has actually not made comparative literature any less relevant. This has certainly been the case in many French departments, for example, that now include in their curriculum the study of cultures and literatures of the francophone world, and these transcolonial and transnational approaches have afforded us a more accurate contextualization of French history and the role of Europe in a larger postcolonial world.

What I got from this conference are certain shifts that I think are really important and telling, shifts or maybe displacements of some sort. The first one is the shift or the displacement of multinational comparison. When I went to graduate school in the eighties, but also beyond that, early on, you *had to* compare—at least in the

program I went to, you could not do comparative literature on a single national literature. You're expected to do more than two, and in fact sometimes three or four. I had to take three exams in three different languages and three different literatures. But now there is a kind of shift or displacement from multinational comparisons to what I would call the comparative approach to national literature, so that students, for example, write about a single national literature but in fact have a comparative framework.

The second shift or displacement, which is related to the first one, is the shift or displacement of high European humanism by what I would call postcolonial comparisons—that is, even the studying of European literatures takes on postcolonial comparison models. With this, I think, comes the question of power or the issue of relationship between knowledge and power. This is not just a phenomenon. When I call it postcolonial comparison, I see that there is a genealogy of it in American academy that goes back to the influence of Foucault, Said, and so on. But one thing we have to attend to, which the last panel brought up, is to *not* fall into a certain discourse of identity and claims of alterity that may not necessarily be there.

The third one is the reinvention of the idea of world literature, moving from Goethe's model. The idea of world literature has continued but has been reinvented in a new way. I think this conference is representative of that, of thinking of other worlds that tend to dominate, and so on.

The fourth shift is what I would call a shift from Theory (with the capital T) to theories. When I was in graduate school, it was Theory with the capital T: there was a curriculum that took us from Plato to Derrida and so on. And now we see a kind of dispersion of theories. There is a persistence of theory, but in a quite non-hegemonic dispersive fashion that includes a broad range of positions and concepts that are happening. But one thing one has to be mindful of is free borrowing, free association (for instance, putting Deleuze and Derrida together). This is problematic because the concepts in these

theories are very specific and distinct, and they don't always go together. So it's important to be attentive and not just be citational in use of theory. At a certain point in American academy people used to write their introduction as a theoretical introduction and then apply that theory in every chapter, to different authors, which I think is an uninteresting way of doing theory. There should be a different form of theoretical work, which is building theory from the text itself rather than, for example, imposing Derrida, Deleuze, or Foucault onto the text.

The final shift that is happening is a shift from comparative literature to comparative studies. There is a proliferation of cultural objects that we can study and consider in our studies of comparative literature as such.

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The main theme of this conference is "After the World." I feel obliged to give an answer to the question, "What will be happening after the world?". I'm thinking of Benjamin Lee Whorf's study of the language of the Hopi, who lived their life day by day—in other words, they had a different notion of time. What I mean is that the question "after the world" depends on what notion of time you have. For me, for example, after the world, another world will live on. After the world, there will be another, and another, and another. And maybe worlds can live on like babies.

About the future of comparative literature, yes, what Ali said is true. When I was a student, I had to study, as well as Japanese as my own language, two foreign languages, which in my case were English and French. It was not easy—the exams. In any case, we were formed in that world. But today is another time. And I think the important thing for comparative literature is an attitude. Ali talked about "comparative frame of mind" yesterday. I think that is the most

important thing. I can tell you my own story in regard to it. I was born in Japan, near Tokyo, which means the center of Japan. So I thought Japan was *one* because they gave us such a vision. But now after many years abroad, I came back to Japan, and I live in the southern island, which is very close to Korea. It takes only one hour flight from my city to Seoul, but to go to Tokyo it takes two hours. So, culturally speaking, there is much similarity in people's life with the Korean people. I go very often to Korea, not just because it's near, but because it's quite an interesting place. So, I began to recognize different cultures in the same country. Later I began to read the Ainu literature of the northern aboriginal people, which is very interesting and quite different from what is called Japanese literature. When I studied abroad, I formed a comparative literature vision that can be useful even now when I look at Japan. Even within the same country, there are different cultures. And I think the important thing is to have respect for each particularity or each culture. Even if globalization pushes us to see everything in the same way, I think it's important to know that globalization cannot do everything. Our nature, as neuroscientists say, needs multiplicity to survive. So, I don't have too much anxiety about the future of comparative literature.

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