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State of the Discipline Comparative Literature and Transdisciplinarity

Paul Jay

As the field of comparative literary studies continues to be transformed by the diversity and complexity of the literatures it studies and the critical theories it draws from, it is useful to consider its long history, which is nothing if not a history of perpetual change and transformation. According to Harvard comparatist Jan M. Ziolkowski, the term comparative literature first appeared as a French expression, *littérature comparée*, in 1816 (20). It was later adopted by other Romance language scholars (its first usage in English was by Matthew Arnold, who used the plural form, in 1848 [20]). By the 1890s, the comparative study of literature had been institutionalized in a variety of European and American universities and was well on its way to playing a central role in literary studies. Indeed, by 1907 our first history of comparative literary studies, Frederio Lolicé's *A Short History of Comparative Literature from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, had already been written. From its beginning, of course, the whole enterprise, although full of possibilities, was also fraught with problems. For Ziolkowski, there was the problem of "comparative" literature's Eurocentrism, but also "the possibility of plain old sloppiness" (22). Indeed, we can observe sloppiness in the very term "comparative literature," because there is of course no such thing. The phrase "comparative literature" suggests a *kind* of literature, but there is no literature that is in itself comparative. Comparative literature was, from the beginning, about the comparative *study* of literature, or literatures, to be more precise.

This issue of what Ziolkowski calls sloppiness emerged almost immediately, and around a familiar topic of debate: should the comparative study of literature be thematic or historical? This question, Ziolkowski points out, was raised early on by Benedetto Croce. Croce argued in 1903 that we need a "comparative history of literature," and that comparison based on literary themes and concepts was a waste of time. He called it "arid" (qtd. in Ziolkowski 22). Croce wanted an empirical history of comparative literature, not loose thematic talk.

Croce's concern with rigor was recurrent, but it surfaced with particular force in the 1960s. Rene Wellek, for example, worried that comparative literature had been unable "to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (qtd. in Ziolkowski 23). It is not as if Wellek didn't contribute to the very problem he identified, for he defined comparative literary studies as "the study of all literature from an international perspective, with a consciousness of the unity of all creation and experience" (qtd. in Ziolkowski 25). It is difficult to imagine either a rigorous subject or methodology here. Indeed, Wellek's definition brings to our attention two very familiar — and interconnected — problems with comparative literature as it was practiced between the 1890s and the late 1960s: its tendency to conflate European literatures with "all literatures," and its flattening out of the diversity of human experience, of the differences that distinguish cultures from one another and make suspect the whole idea of the unity of "all creation and experience."

One of the problems with comparative literature's Eurocentric orientation, of course, was its tendency to trace and periodize literary history through the framework of an overly insulated European history. As Peter Hulme has put it, "the most resistant categories of Eurocentrism are those which are so deeply embedded that we have come to think of them simply as parts of a natural geohistorical landscape; and probably none of these categories has a deader hand than that of historical periodization" (42). The postcolonial Shakespearian, Ania Loomba, discusses this problem in "Periodization, Race, and Global Contact." She's interested in early modern plays about the East (like *Othello*) that stage cross-cultural contact, conversion, and exchange, and she calls attention to how

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traditional approaches to historicism and periodization are poorly fitted for the kind of work this involves. Even in the wake of Foucault and the New Historicism, she complains, we are still working with what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a “first in Europe, then elsewhere” approach to history. (601). As a corrective, she points to recent scholarship on “connected histories,” scholarship that challenges what she calls the “temporal logic of Eurocentric historiography” (604). I don’t have the space here to trace her discussion of this work in much detail, but she stresses how it is beginning to demonstrate that, according to Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the “early history of the modern world” is both “global and conjunctural,” not “a history in which Europe alone first produces and then exports modernity to the world at large” but one in which the history of modernity, and hence of literary production, has to be traced in terms of multiple, intersecting lines of development and complexity (qtd. in Loomba 604). Loomba insists that none of the plays she is interested in can be understood solely “in relation to emergent discourses of English nationalism” (596). For this reason, she warns against “internalist [historical] accounts” that simply assumed the rest of the world followed “its own internal rhythms” until it “was incorporated into the imperial world” of the West (598).

In calling for a comparatist practice that incorporates the work of multicultural, postcolonial, and globalization theory, critics like Ziolkowski, Hulme, and Loomba in effect want to move comparative literature beyond comparatism by paying attention to complex, networked, and fluid forms of mobility and exchange. This new orientation begins to be reflected in the 2006 ACLA report entitled *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization* (edited by Haun Saussy). While the collection reflects real concern about the unwieldiness of comparative literary studies (Dejal Kadir insists, for example, that world literature is both too big a category *and* threatens to become a “master construct” [Saussy, ix], while David Ferris worries it is a “discipline that is not a discipline” [79] a project of comparison with little in the way of boundaries), we can identify in the collection a loose consensus regarding the importance of exploring a range of topics such as the politics of empire, gender, diaspora, mobility, globalization, and social justice.¹ In place of the impossible breadth implied by the study of “world literature,” or the outdated humanist universalism Wellek advocated, we are left with a focus on strategic local interventions that feature transnational complexity. Such an approach is reflected in Françoise Lionnet’s call for a “transversal comparative approach” (105), one that focuses on tracking multiple, intersecting lines and cultural flows determined by complex transnational forces. Similarly, Roland Greene insists that the point is to study “not works but networks” (212). Lionnet and Greene, like Loomba, Hulme and Ziolkowski, it seems to me, call attention to how, as comparatists, we now track processes, networks, and fluid formations: the cultural effects of mobility, and the mobility of cultural effects.

While comparative literary studies have been both comparatist and interdisciplinary, this new constellation of interests suggests that comparative literary studies need to become *transdisciplinary*, embracing an intellectual mode of inquiry that seeks to get beyond binary coordinates — and both comparison and interdisciplinarity can often be too binary. Consider the dictionary definitions of “compare” and of the suffix “trans-.” To compare is to note the similarity or dissimilarity between things, to emphasize resemblances and points of digression between two objects that seem similar. It involves drawing analogies between two things in order to explain them both. And it often involves locating a similar nature or quality beneath surface differences (even if this is often a slippery slope to the reductive ideal of a universalized consciousness like the one Wellek referenced). Comparatism is a mode of analysis that can be valuable but that also threatens to reduce differences to sameness. The word, of course, has its origins in the Latin word *comparativus*, from *comparare*, which meant to pair or match. The “trans-” in transnational, on the other hand, has its origins in the Latin word for across, beyond. It originated as a verb, to cross. It is worth noting, as well, that “transgress” has its roots in the verb form of “trans-,” *transgredi*, to step across — and, *transgressio*, which means going over or transgressing the law.

It is the transdisciplinary nature of the new comparatist work I’ve been discussing that marks its difference from the older comparatist model, precisely because transdisciplinarity requires a *transgressing* of the laws of that older model. Simple comparison can too often lock us into binary analyses, but transnational and transdisciplinary studies, concerned more with flows, networks, intersecting lines, and, most importantly, the spaces between those lines, requires a transdisciplinary approach. What does that entail? Transdisciplinarity started out in the sciences (see the quantum physicist Basarab Nicolescu’s *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* [2001]) but has migrated into the social sciences and humanities. According to Nicolescu, transdisciplinarity “concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline” (44). It specifically involves thinking beyond the binaries of comparison or interdisciplinarity, and is more interested in forms of practice that transcend disciplines altogether and explore the middle ground between them. According to the critic Katie King, author of *Networked Reenactments: Stories Transdisciplinary Knowledges Tell* (2011), “interdisciplinary revolves around academic disciplines, while transdisciplinary works across knowledge worlds both inside and outside academies” (personal communication). In her view, most interdisciplinary work still takes place within disciplines (one example she cites is digital humanities when it’s housed inside English departments); whereas, transdisciplinary work is plugged into knowledge communities outside as well as

inside the academy, with a recognition that issues like validity, argument and rigor are usually made through membership in a whole network of knowledge worlds and associations.²

Work in transdisciplinarity has also spawned a new kind of transversal *politics*. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London, “transversal politics has been developed as an alternative to the assimilationist ‘universalistic’ politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand.” The first approach is perceived as too ethnocentric and exclusionary, and the second as too often “essentialist, reifying boundaries between groups,” homogenizing the individual in the interests of the collective (94). A transversal politics, on the other hand, wants to recognize and respect how the world is seen differently from different positions — and from the point of view of the excluded middle *between* those differences. It sees knowledge based on one position as partial knowledge — not necessarily invalid, but partial. According to Yuval-Davis, “notions of difference should encompass” but not replace “notions of equality” (95). They should also embody a high degree of complexity. For her,

transversal politics is based on a conceptual — and political — differentiation between positioning, identity and values. People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or category can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (e.g. class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle, etc). At the same time, people with similar positioning and/or identity can have very different social and political values. (95)

She stresses the importance of a “multiplexity” of positioning and warns against, in her view, a key problem with “both identity politics and — probably even more importantly — with multiculturalis[m],” which is that critics “too often” make a fetish of “the ‘authentic voice’” of the communities they write about (Jane Gallop, in an essay on the ethics of reading, calls this the danger of creating “positive stereotypes” [15]) (95). In short, transversal politics aims to avoid the twin traps of what Yuval-Davis calls “over universalism” and “over relativism” (98).

Over universalism was of course a key problem with the initial Eurocentric orientation of comparative literary studies, while, in Yuval-Davis’s view, the late twentieth-century theoretical counterbalancing of universalism with difference threatens to overcompensate on the relativist side. A transdisciplinary comparatism, which works in the spaces between disciplines and explores the spaces between locations, identities and nations, has the potential to avoid reductivity on either end. What it doesn’t seem to provide is coherence. But, of course, coherence often operates as the ultimate form of reductivity. Contemporary theory, from deconstruction, the new historicism and critical race theory to postcolonial, Diasporic and queer studies, focuses on complexity to a degree that seems to threaten the ideal of coherence. But it may be that coherence is part of the problem, that coherence is actually a negative product of disciplinarity, and that what we really need is more complexity — ways to focus on forms of mobility that are inherently messy, intersecting networks that overlap in ways that are rhizomorphic and defy neat untangling and productively resist coherence.

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Bio

Paul Jay is Professor English and a Fellow at the Center for Interdisciplinary Thinking at Loyola University Chicago. His critical essays and interviews have appeared in *PMLA*, *Callaloo*, *In These Times*, *American Literary History*, and *Inside Higher Ed*. His most recent book, published in 2010, is *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. His new book, *The Humanities ">Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies*, is forthcoming later this year from Palgrave-Macmillan.

1. Others cite the rise of "global English" studies as a threat to the integrity of a language-specific comparative literature practice. In this scenario, of course, the English department links up with globalization theory to hijack for itself the entire comparatist field, forming a kind of All English New Transnationalism. Indeed, Ziolkowski sees this as a key problem: "how to expand the field in the face of globalization that threatens to reduce comparison to a multiplicity of texts in English and English translation" (24).

2. For her full discussion of these concepts, see King 2012.

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