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Literature and Comparative Studies:
Theories, Paradigms, Models

*Literatura e Estudos Comparatistas:
Teorias, Paradigmas, Modelos*



Ângela Fernandes
Donata Meneghelli
Jan Baetens
(Eds.)

Front Matter | Ficha Técnica

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Literature and Comparative Studies:
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Contents | Índice

Foreword | Introdução

ÂNGELA FERNANDES, DONATA MENEGHELLI, JAN BAETENS Comparative Literature Today: Notes from the Field	4–9
--	-----

Articles | Artigos

JAN BAETENS, DONATA MENEGHELLI The Vitality of Comparative Literature	10–24
--	-------

EWA A. ŁUKASZYK Comparative Literature and the Quest for Global Literary Theory: Exploring a West African Margin	25–44
--	-------

ELENA CORDERO HOYO, LAURA LÓPEZ CASADO Relaciones simbióticas: hacia un comparatismo ibérico feminista	45–63
---	-------

BERNARDO DINIZ FERREIRA “Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d’autres ?”: Attention and Lists in Comparative Literature	64–82
--	-------

VANESSA MONTESI Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Brown’s Assembly and Varvello’s “Brexit Blues”	83–99
--	-------

DOMINGO SÁNCHEZ-MESA, NIEVES ROSENDO Comparatismo intermedial y posthumanismo: transmedialización del mito del cibernauta	100–121
---	---------

Interviews | Entrevistas

QUESTIONNAIRE ON LITERATURE AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES	122–151
---	---------

Answers by: Federico Bertoni, Helena C. Buescu, Astrid Erll, Matthieu Letourneux,
Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser, Marcelo Topuzian, Johannes Türk

Reviews | Recensões

NICOLA GIANSIRACUSA Holst Katsma, <i>Morfologia del romanzo</i> , 2024	152–157
---	---------

MARTINA ALTALEF, TELMA CARVALHO Rosario Hubert, <i>Disoriented Disciplines</i> , 2023	158–164
--	---------

JAN BAETENS Florent Coste, <i>L’ordinaire de la littérature</i> , 2024	165–169
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Comparative Literature Today: Notes from the Field

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THE COVER IMAGE of this sixth issue of *Compendium: Journal of Comparative Studies* invites the reader (or the beholder) to recall the pre-digital world, when epistolary correspondence relied on physical mailboxes and letters were made of paper and ink. In 2024, this world co-exists with e-mails and all sorts of digital correspondence, and living with these two kinds of communication is certainly an added benefit. Along with using both, one may compare the media and the procedures, analyse the texts exchanged and elaborate on contents and contexts, and all this contributes to a more solid and nuanced knowledge of epistolary practices. This kind of acknowledgement of the fruitful potentialities of accepting and studying our fast-changing world is what guides us in this issue of *Compendium*, dedicated to the reflection on the current position, the shifting practices and the conflicting views about the field of Comparative Studies within the Humanities in the early twenty-first century. Paying special attention to the historical place of Literature as the creative field that first witnessed the development and consolidation of comparative approaches, this issue proposes the discussion of contemporary perspectives on Comparative Literature and Comparative Studies, delving on what may seem both the vulnerabilities and the opportunities of the discipline, as well as its conundrums.

When considering the contemporary panorama of research, teaching and knowledge dissemination developed under the label ‘comparative studies’, one finds such a multiplicity of theories, paradigms, models and objects of study that any common denominator(s) might seem impossible to grasp. In addition, and somehow contradictorily, the broad diversity of this panorama is tainted by the recurrence of some aspects, such as the predominant attention to contemporary works and issues, with scarce historical reflection, and the use of English as the almost only language of reading, study and communication. Following recent scholarship on these topics (e.g. the short list of references offered below), we have selected a relevant number of articles and book reviews all focusing on the changing relations between Literature and Comparative Studies, in terms of theories, paradigms and models.

Moreover, we have asked seven scholars from different backgrounds to answer a short questionnaire dealing with their personal engagement with the field of Comparative Literature, their position regarding some key issues and their view on the near future. The diversity and discrepancy of their answers show the multiform vigour of the discipline, and in this sense the Interviews clearly resonate the main topics dealt with in all the items composing this issue. When entitling this foreword “Notes from the Field”, we would like to stress the ambiguity of “field” as both an area of research (i.e., Comparative Literature, Comparative Studies) and a place where things are being done, or the study is being conducted, as in “field work”. Indeed, all contributors to this no. 6 of *Compendium* are active agents of comparative practices in their everyday teaching and researching.

The three reviews included in this issue comment on books published in 2024, dealing with cutting-edge issues (the novel, narrative forms and human cognition; the relation between Eastern and Western cultures; the place of literary theory nowadays), and written in various languages (English, French, Italian). We wanted to have a substantial part of the issue devoted to reviews of recent books because

reviewing is an essential part of academic life, as more and more top-rated journals have now well understood, and certainly in the case of Literature and Comparative Studies, the review is an ideal format to freely discuss new and emerging insights in an in-depth way that the mention of these books in traditional articles does not allow. Additionally, this is an excellent way of having beginning scholars to start participating in the ongoing conversation, together with seniors, while the confrontation of young and more confirmed reviewers gives a good insight into the diversity of sensibilities gathering in the field.

The six articles published here propose different lines of discussion, all signaling relevant and timely topics of contemporary comparatism, including: the importance of multilingualism and of historical and material approaches to literature; geographical revisions and cultural power relations; feminist perspectives; reading procedures and hermeneutics; migration and border exchanges, and cyborg culture.

In the first article, entitled “The Vitality of Comparative Studies”, Jan Baetens and Donata Meneghelli discuss the main aspects of Comparative Literature as a discipline (multilingualism, history and textuality) and argue for the need to have them combined in relevant research in contemporary Humanities. The interdisciplinary and institutional dimensions of the field are also addressed, as the authors contend that a more open stance should be favoured, namely through the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders in the new dynamics of comparative research. Some viable and promising paths for the future of Comparative Studies are then critically exemplified when analysing the novel *14 juillet*, by Éric Vuillard, and the essay *The Chapter*, by Nicholas Dames.

In “Comparative Literature and the Quest for Global Literary Theory: Exploring a West African Margin”, Ewa A. Łukaszyk takes as her starting point the openness of Comparative Literature to supersede its innate Eurocentrism, sketching new ways of establishing a dialogue between debates on World Literature, and pointing to questions that are still underdiscussed in this more recent framework. The author suggests new theoretical and methodological openings, without reducing discussions on global literature to the colonial versus postcolonial dilemma. Theoretically speaking, Łukaszyk emphasizes the lasting impact of certain Western concepts such as genre (and the dominant position of both the novel and the lyric) and literariness (with its narrow take on orality) in World Literature, while also highlighting the limited historical scope of some postcolonial thinking. Instead of simply overthrowing these biases, the article insists on the value of finding new forms of multiplicity by linking traditional Comparative and World Literature questions to insights from hidden precolonial traditions. The author focuses on a political, linguistic and cultural context, that of Guinea-Bissau, often considered as a totally peripheral country with apparently “no literature”. A different, more patrimonial and collective way of defining literature, as a form of language that a community wants to share and considers worth maintaining, helps challenge this perception, which the article then discusses both in the field of poetry and that of the novel, disclosing original attempts to link local production with universal concerns.

Elena Cordero Hoyo and Laura López Casado, the authors of the third article, “Relaciones simbióticas: hacia un comparatismo ibérico feminista” [Symbiotic Relationships: Towards a Feminist Iberian Comparatism], address a key issue of

contemporary Comparative Studies, the relationship between disciplines, in this case the field of Gender Studies and Feminism on the one hand, and Iberian Studies on the other hand. Considering that both disciplines (although the term of discipline may be too narrow to completely cover the wide range of questions and sensibilities disclosed and explored in this kind of research) can only benefit from their dialogue and interaction, the authors make a plea for the integration of feminist activism in Iberian Studies, a field currently under construction and trying to supersede nationalist and colonialist biases inherited from traditional Spanish or Portuguese philologies. Moreover, Cordero Hoyo and López Casado claim for the use of the powerful comparative perspectives and orientations of Iberian Studies in the necessary repositioning of Feminist and Gender Studies in an age of queer, lgbtq+ and postcolonial criticism.

The essay by Bernardo Ferreira, entitled “Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d’autres?": Attention and Lists in Comparative Literature”, tackles a crucial issue in Comparative Literature and indeed in any study of literature: that of selection, of the choice of texts and authors, at the heart of operations such as the formation of canons, the construction of anthologies and syllabi. As tools to face this crucial issue, Ferreira proposes two related concepts, attention and list, explaining how the list may be seen as a product of certain forms of attention. Thanks to its potential arbitrariness and de-hierarchising power, the list is described as a means to rethink attention itself and to problematize the very act of selection well beyond the staple debates on the canon that have inflamed Comparative Literature in the last decades.

In her article “Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Brown’s *Assembly* and Varvello’s ‘Brexit Blues’”, Vanessa Montesi highlights the value of literature today by arguing that literary works can contribute to interdisciplinary geopolitical debates and to social and political theory, while at the same time the tools of Comparative Literature as a discipline can become instruments of political and geographical analysis. To show such interplay in action, Montesi elaborates on the notion of “scale-bending literature”, stressing the capacity of literary texts to “reveal the reverberation of political discourse on the level of the body and the household”. The author argues for the value of literary works as powerful compositions capable of sliding between the private and the public, the individual and the social, the singularity of experience and the wider socio-historical landscape, also thanks to stylistic and narrative devices such as metaphor, repetition, or juxtaposition, that create patterns within the linearity of the unfolding story.

The sixth essay, “Comparatismo intermedial y posthumanismo: transmedialización del mito del cibernético” [Intermedial Comparatism and Posthumanism: Transmedialization of the Cyborg Myth], by Domingo Sánchez-Mesa and Nieves Rosendo, offers an overview of the use of the cyborg as a myth which has been conceptually productive in both Intermedia Studies and Posthumanism. The authors contend that Comparative Literature, as a discipline of frontiers, provides the most adequate frame for developing in-depth study on the multiple issues raised by all new entities existing on the border between the organic and the artificial. As Sánchez-Mesa and Rosendo persuasively show, the growing field of Cyborg Studies, as a relevant research line in Comparative Studies, allows for renewed attention

towards the relationship between culture and technology, as well as towards the crucial relevance of the medium in contemporary literary and artistic processes.

The idea to edit this issue of *Compendium: Journal of Comparative Studies* arose from the pedagogical and research experience the editors shared as members of the Directive Board of PhD-COMP, an international PhD programme on Comparative Studies in force at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon between 2015 and 2024, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). If we take into account the diversity of the research projects developed by our PhD students, the intensity of the debates on theoretical and methodological issues we have conducted over the years, and (*et pour cause*) the contributions to this issue, we may conclude on a positive note: the systematic reflection on the relation between Literature and Comparative Studies does lead to renewed perspectives of knowledge-building in the Humanities, strikingly open to key issues in contemporary life.

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The Vitality of Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT:

This essay deals with both the crisis of Comparative Literature and the aspects that should be considered in a renewed version of the discipline. In recent years, Comparative Literature has been struggling with newer disciplines, like Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, World Literature, each of them with their new research interests and methodologies. But Comparative Literature has also been quite successful in the integration of these new topics, questions and insights, even if it sometimes did so by abandoning elements that should remain at the core of its business, like multilingualism, a strong historical perspective, and a persistent focus on textual objects and close reading. This article addresses the importance of these three elements, illustrating them with, first, a literary example (Éric Vuillard's novel *14 juillet*) and, second, a literary-historical example that might serve as a possible model of what Comparative Literature may stand for in the coming years (Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter*).

RESUMO:

Este ensaio aborda simultaneamente a crise da Literatura Comparada e os aspectos a ter em consideração numa versão renovada da disciplina. Nos últimos anos, a Literatura Comparada tem sido confrontada por disciplinas mais recentes, como Estudos Culturais, Estudos de Género, Estudos Pós-Coloniais, ou Literatura-Mundo, cada uma com os seus novos interesses de investigação e a sua metodologia. No entanto, a Literatura Comparada tem sido também muito bem-sucedida na integração desses novos tópicos, questões e olhares, embora o faça, por vezes, abandonando elementos que deveriam permanecer no centro da sua actividade, como o multilinguismo, uma perspectiva histórica forte e uma incidência persistente em objetos textuais e no *close reading*. Este artigo examina a importância desses três elementos, ilustrando-os, primeiramente, com um exemplo literário (o romance *14 juillet*, de Éric Vuillard) e, em segundo lugar, com um exemplo literário-histórico que pode servir como possível modelo do que a Literatura Comparada poderá representar e defender nos próximos anos (Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter*).

KEYWORDS:

multilingualism; close reading; history; Éric Vuillard; Nicholas Dames

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

multilinguismo; *close reading*; história; Éric Vuillard; Nicholas Dames

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IN SOME WESTERN universities (and exemplarily at the University of Lisbon), the field of Comparative Literature has developed into the broader field of “comparative studies”, and this evolution is of course far from being anecdotal. It can be seen as one more symptom of the problematic status of the field. As we all know, comparative literature is a discipline that is under strong institutional pressure: declining student numbers, erosion of new research initiatives, even closing down of programs (in Flanders, for instance, all Comparative Literature programs have been “dissolved” into Literary Theory and Cultural Studies programs). For some, the discipline can only survive when morphing into other approaches, with new theoretical and methodological tools and horizons, like, for instance, literary theory, cultural studies or, more recently, intermediality¹. The very existence of a research line in “comparative studies” is undoubtedly a variation on the same theme: since we no longer do Comparative Literature as it used to be, we can only try to continue or resume it in a different way.

In the observations that follow, we would like to make a contribution to this debate, not by proposing another radical move away from Comparative Literature, but, more modestly, by sketching some possible perspectives on how to do Comparative Literature today, and why not tomorrow, while trying to maintain what makes the discipline a vital part of literary studies. We will do so in three steps, each of them representing a specific angle on the field: first as a discipline, second as an interdiscipline, third as an institution.

1. Discipline

As a discipline, Comparative Literature is not only in crisis. Even its very future seems to be in danger. However, Comparative Literature relies upon a certain number of defining features that are not always creatively appropriated or repurposed by the newer disciplines and which deserve to be vehemently defended. Three aspects are key in this regard: multilingualism, history, and textuality.

Multilingualism

Comparative Literature is by definition multilingual and it presupposes an in-depth knowledge of the three dimensions of the languages one is using (linguistics, literature, culture). Everybody pays lip-service to this basic principle, yet in practice the only language that is being used when doing for instance World Literature (for some a new branch of Comparative Literature; for others, it is one that has been taking its place) is English. Such multilingual dimension is so crucial to the definition of the discipline that in 2003 Gayatri Spivak published a thought-provoking book titled *Death of a Discipline*, where she reversed the usual power

¹ On the notion of intermediality, see Rippl (2015) and Bruhn, López-Varela Azcárate and Vieira (2023).

relationships between the main western languages and the so-called “minor” languages (especially non-Western, that often are anything but “minor”, spoken as they are by millions of people²) and argued that without an active safeguard of the multiplicity of languages – and traditions – within the academia, the discipline of Comparative Literature was bound to die³. There is of course nothing wrong with English per se, certainly not when one realizes that English is a language with many usages, but its exclusive use involves a dramatic impoverishment, certainly at a time of “diversity” and claims in favor of “decolonizing”. It is also unfair to nonnative speakers less familiar with the language and the cultural context (everybody is supposed to be knowledgeable in English/American language, literature and civilization, while Anglo-Saxon scholars are perfectly allowed to remain monolingual and monocultural). Comparative Literature can be a bulwark against this form of cultural neo-colonialism.

History

Comparative Literature is also radically open to history, which has become even more problematic in many current approaches and studies of literature and culture. Here as well, we all pay lip-service to the Jamesonian invitation to “always historicize” (Jameson 1981: 9). In practice, however, literary and cultural studies are acutely suffering from presentism and in serious danger of being narrowed down to the non-history of the *hic et nunc*. More and more students only seem interested in (and know) contemporary literature, film or culture in general, and everything non contemporary – if tackled at all – becomes the object of hyper-specialized and hyper-confined fields of study. Historical amnesia has become a reality, just like the growing lack of interest in all things other than what happens here and now. Comparative Literature can be an inspiring example of what literary and cultural studies can discover and achieve with the help of a historical lens. The subdiscipline of book history, longtime separated from the broader field of Comparative Literature and cultural studies but dramatically reinvented by scholars such as Roger Darnton and Roger Chartier⁴, who both dismantle the opposition between writing, making (printing, publishing, selling etc.), and reading of books, is a wonderful proof of the added value of a strong historical and cultural perspective in comparative literary studies, which also clears new ground for both the analysis and the actual use of books in literature in the digital age⁵.

² On a more technical approach of the notion of minor language, as both a literary and a political subversion of some major language within itself, see Deleuze and Guattari (1975).

³ Spivak’s book is, of course, more complex than our short resume might suggest; in fact, she welcomed the death of “traditional” comparative literature and advocated one of the many re-births of the discipline, a new comparative literature, closely linked to postcolonial and area studies.

⁴ See, for instance, Darnton (1982) and Chartier (2004). In current scholarship, the notion of “book” has been opened to other types of host medium as well, such as magazines and newspapers; see the notion of *mediapoetics* as coined by Thérenty (2008).

⁵ For a good introduction to the “book” as a material and cultural object, in paper or not, see Borsuk (2018).

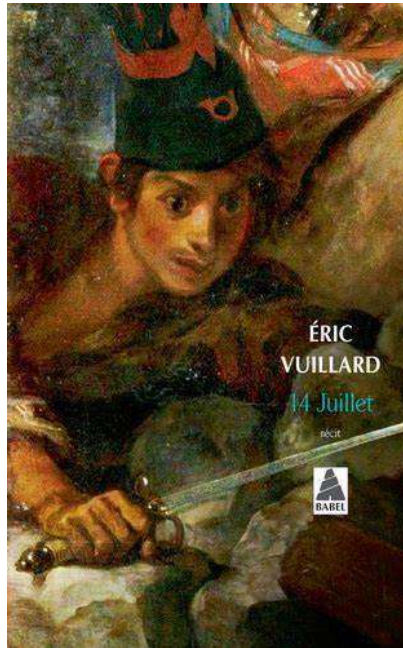
Textuality

Finally, Comparative Literature remained strongly corpus-oriented. It may have been derided for being insufficiently theoretical, for good or bad reasons, as it is the case even with Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, that while being considered one of the founding references of the discipline, has often been accused of presenting a poor theoretical framework, e.g. lacking a strong definition of realism, of literary history, of literary form and style, just because it is – so wonderfully and proudly, one might add – focused on a close reading of the corpus. This focus has its drawbacks, of course: is there a specific “methodology” in Comparative Literature that we can practice, teach, and transmit? However, one should stress the absolute necessity, in any approach or method whatsoever, of maintaining the tradition of close-reading actual texts as texts, and not simply as a reservoir of short examples meant to illustrate theoretical insights or hypotheses. Comparative Literature is solidly related with stylistics and thus well situated to display the benefits of corpus-oriented analysis, and also the need of disclosing new corpuses, to shape new objects of study⁶. Even strongly theoretically oriented scholars such as Marjorie Perloff ceaselessly return to close reading, not just as an exercise or an application of some general toolkit, but as a crucial hermeneutical and historical tool⁷.

All three of these aspects, which Comparative Literature unites and practices daily, should not be lost, not just out of nostalgia, but because they prove capable of offering insights which monolingual, presentist and overtheorized approaches will probably never produce. A first example of how to do Comparative Literature in this perspective could be given by a recent novel by Éric Vuillard, *14 Juillet* (2016), a fictional rewriting of the first days and hours of the French Revolution:

⁶ For this, see below the third section, on Institution.

⁷ See, for instance, the wonderful collection of close readings of “difficult” poems in Perloff (2021).



Although written in French, this book can usefully be compared to similar texts in other languages, one may think for instance of Tacitus's description of the "Four Emperors Year" (69 AD) in his *Histories* (Tacitus 2009). There exist of course countless examples of the literary description of revolutionary days and events, but given the importance of Roman history (and the concept of "virtue") for the self-representation of those who have overthrown the *Ancien Régime* in 1789, it makes sense to choose Tacitus as a point of reference, ideologically as well as stylistically.

Vuillard's novel can also be compared with the different ways in which French literature as well as historiography (the two genres tend to overlap here) have addressed this key turning point: Michelet of course (how could one read a text on the French Revolution without taking into account this author and his *Histoire de la Révolution française*, published between 1847 and 1853 and still widely read?), but also quite different voices such as, among many others, Tocqueville (not only the author of the famous book on American democracy but the moderated social and cultural historian of the emergence of democracy in France [see Tocqueville 1985]), or Furet (an historian very critical of the ideological reuse and heritage of the Revolution [see Furet 1978]). Here too this can be done from a historical as well as a literary perspective, which will enable readers to ask questions on the role of fiction and imagination in the writing of history.

Finally, and this may already be a way to anticipate the second point, on interdisciplinarity, one can also approach the novel by close-reading it, within the discipline and across disciplines. An interesting aspect here is the possible tension between the "popular" (Vuillard's take on the historical event is clearly left-wing) and the "sophisticated" (despite its interest in the language of the "people", the style of the book, a powerful mix of colloquial expressions and a firework of rhetorical figures, is light-years away from what we associate with "popular literature"). This tension between form and content, to put it very naively, is something that may remind readers of the ethical debates on the use of stylistic and rhetorical devices in the representation of historical tragedies such as the World War Two concentration

camp, where the artistic tools are not easily compatible with the documentary ethos. Long before Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and its tabooing of all things fictional, various authors had already criticized the hypocrite aestheticization of this subject as an insult to the victims⁸.

2. Interdiscipline

Today, interdisciplinarity is not an option, but an institutional constraint (and more on institutions in section 3). Yet interdisciplinarity is a hard thing to do – and perhaps as hard to find as a good man. All disciplines are the result of three specific dimensions: a theory, a method, and a corpus. And the same applies to interdisciplinarity: without their convergence, interdisciplinarity is not “complete” but “partial” (could we say “weak”?); if only one or two of the three basic components is concerned by the shift from discipline to interdisciplinarity, something may be missing. Examples of such partial interdisciplinarity abound, such as the use of literary tools to analyze nonverbal objects (is one really doing interdisciplinarity when applying narratology to cinema?) or the use of statistical analysis to analyze literary texts (is this big data approach really interdisciplinarity?⁹).

One should ask two sets of questions here.

One: when doing interdisciplinary research, do we really need the proper competence and expertise in more than one field or not? In practice, that is perhaps putting the stakes too high. And what about the respective status of the disciplines that are combined: are all disciplines truly equal? It seems for instance possible to do “law and literature” studies as a law scholar with no special training in literature (and the results can be occasionally convincing), while the opposite seems a little weird (and would not be taken seriously by law scholars). Literary studies, including Comparative Literature, seem to have a very weak position in this regard. More generally speaking, the issue of power relationships between disciplines is too often overlooked in the average conversation about interdisciplinarity, even if the consequences can be radical: why maintain a discipline like Comparative Literature if anybody can discuss literary texts without any form of disciplinary training in literature?

Two: is there actually something wrong with weak or partial interdisciplinarity? After all, many disciplines have been working with “auxiliary sciences”, which represent the old school of interdisciplinarity, before interdisciplinarity became an institutional concern. It is perfectly possible that there exist specific tools which allow for this kind of weak interdisciplinarity in a satisfying way (think of the so-called “travelling theory” or “travelling concepts”, as popularized by respectively Edward Said, 1983, and Mieke Bal, 2002). Perhaps we need to revise our false and unrealistic ideas on interdisciplinarity and make room for more *tactic*

⁸ See the polemic around *Kapo*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, and the famous article by Jacques Rivette, “De l’abjection”, in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1961.

⁹ Given the actuality of this topic, it may be useful to mention the recent polemic statements and critical survey of this question: see Bode (2023).

than *strategic* forms of interdisciplinarity, to use the terminology as coined by Michel de Certeau (1984)? Such a change might be helpful to Comparative Literature and save it from deceiving or disappointing attempts to certain types of interdisciplinarity (yes, we can be interdisciplinary in literary studies without relying on statistical analysis). Many investigations that are labelled “comparative studies” may fail the test of “hard”, that is “complete”, interdisciplinarity and nevertheless produce useful insights, while an inconsiderate application of “hard” interdisciplinarity may be in danger of producing only an appearance of knowledge, the interdisciplinary equivalent of namedropping within a discipline¹⁰.

3. Institution

Comparative Literature is an academic discipline (outside academia, nobody cares?). This situation has many consequences, for an academic discipline is not only the interweaving of a theory, a method, and a corpus, but also the combination of the three pillars of any form of academic practice: teaching, research, and public service.

At first sight, teaching and research are not a problem, while public service (“what is it good for”?) definitely is. For Comparative Literature, it is not easy to “valorize” its outcomes, and it is well known that valorization is increasingly important in funding of research and thus, in the long run, of a discipline: without external funding, any center or research program can be closed at any moment; this is for instance what is happening this very year, 2024, with the well-known FIGURA center at UQAM-Montreal. Yet valorization is far from impossible in Comparative Literature. It is, however, necessary to link it as closely as possible to teaching and research (which is a truism), but also to a broader reflection on the issues of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

As a Discipline: it seems necessary for Comparative Literature to disclose new objects of study as well as new ways of working with them. It is important to stress here the intimate dialectic relation that always grows between objects and methodologies or ways of inquiry. A methodology is not an aseptic set of tools that can be “applied” to any object whatsoever. The corpus shapes our methods and vice versa. Comparative Literature, with its “weak” theoretical dimension, its corpus-oriented tradition is perhaps one of the best fields for measuring (and practicing) the interdependence between corpuses and methods.

As an Interdiscipline: Comparative Literature needs new tactic alliances with other disciplines, not just for opportunistic reasons, but to develop these new objects and new methodologies. This need is also related to the dramatic changes that have impacted the literary field and the very notion (and pragmatic definition) of literature in the last decades: changes that often project themselves backward, so to

¹⁰ See Da (2019) for a critical discussion of the limits of big data analysis in literary studies, and the response in Bode (2023). To these critical voices, it may make sense to add the skeptical voice of Fish (1999), who challenges the blurring of boundaries between literary studies and political action, a flaw he considers typical of certain forms of cultural studies, which in certain academic departments have taken the place of comparative literature.

speak, and push us to see even old objects in a new light. Here as well, examples are not rare. The notion of “archive” (an object as well as an approach) has recently been developed in the field of Comparative Literature with the help of disciplines such as:

- archival studies, not from a theoretical point of view alone, but also bottom up, with new questions on how to build, for instance, the archive of something that does no longer exist, such as the photonovel and film photonovel;
- curation studies, with a strong focus on the development of new methods to exhibit archives;
- book history, already mentioned above, with a special emphasis on the relationships between texts and the material changes of their host medium;
- law studies, foregrounding fundamental questions concerning ownership of texts and archives;
- creative writing, a discipline that promotes the invention of new techniques of interacting (appropriating, rewriting) with archives;
- art history, which may propose innovative perspectives on the very role of images in archives;
- documentation sciences, a key player in the elaboration of new forms of metadata description;
- and why not... literary studies?¹¹

Last but not least, putting together an object as well as a practice (the archive) and a discipline (Comparative Literature) may also be the starting point of developing teamwork, which is also imperative in today’s teaching, research, and outreach, within and outside the academia (e.g. crowdsourcing, collective intelligence, participative culture). It can be seen as part of the necessary transformation from “hard” interdisciplinarity into what some call transdisciplinarity, a discipline often defined, among other things, by the inclusion of nonacademic stakeholders, whose needs and demands are taken into account at the moment of defining practice-oriented research programs involving a broad range of disciplinary insights.¹²

4. An example which is also a model

A book like no other, a book for all of us

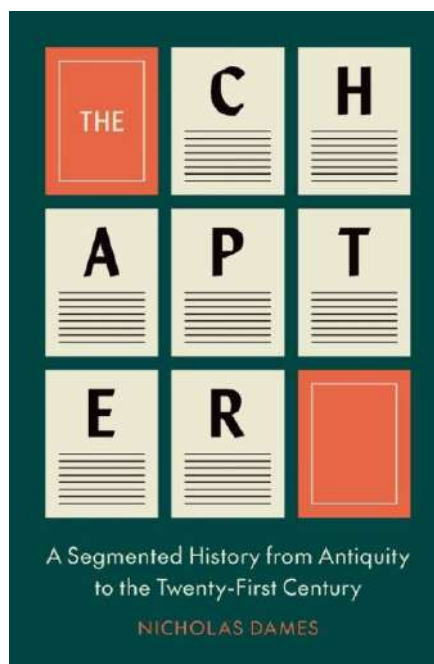
Comparative Literature is a double-faced Janus. Concrete texts, objects, people, networks, institutions are one thing. Methodological and theoretical reflection, another. The impossibility of separating these two aspects was already

¹¹ See for example the “Littératures modes d’emploi” network: [Littératures mode d’emploi \(litteraturesmodesdemploi.org\)](http://litteraturesmodesdemploi.org)

¹² See for instance the Swiss td-Network: [Network for Transdisciplinary Research | td-net \(transdisciplinarity.ch\)](http://transdisciplinarity.ch)

clear in our short discussion of how to read the novel by Éric Vuillard. A new and more scholarly example will drive this point further home.

The Chapter: A Segmented History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century by Stanford professor Nicholas Dames (2023) offers an impressive overview of a compositional device that is so ubiquitous and naturalized that it has become nearly invisible. Apart from its own merits, Dames's book is also important for the field of Comparative Literature in general. Not only because it demonstrates the vitality of a type of research that more fashionable ways of reading such as postcolonial studies, queer studies, or digital humanities, tend to ignore, but also because it brings together a certain number of theoretical and methodological tenets and insights that may prove capable of putting Comparative Literature once again at the center of literary studies – and literary studies at the center of humanities.



In this book, the author defends a strong thesis. He claims indeed that it is not possible to define the notion of chapter in a single way or provide a unified definition, while he also argues that this openness – that of the object as well as of the scholarly take on it – should not prevent us from elaborating a general history and interpretation of the question under scrutiny.

On the one hand, Nicholas Dames prefers to offer an interpretive matrix rather than a fixed characterization, thus providing a multifarious set of properties that take the form of creative tensions. Here is an example: chapters play a role in fictional as well as nonfictional texts, but their respective functions (narrative and sequence- or time-oriented in the case of fiction, nonnarrative and information-oriented in the case of nonfiction) cannot be studied separately (in fiction as well, chapters can be determined by the concern for the easy access to information, while in nonfiction issues of sequential arrangement may be no less important). Besides, the chapter itself cannot be considered a transhistorical phenomenon: chapters have not always existed (think of the impact of the shift from roll to codex) and today they

may be on the verge of disappearing (in digital publication, we are returning to a kind of roll publication and the consequences on capitulation have immediately become visible), while the status of the chapter has varied widely over time. Dames also emphasizes the need to distinguish between function and meaning as well as the need to acknowledge the dissemination of the chapter function to a wide range of “strategic textual places” such as, for instance, a prefatory abstract of the table of contents; the question: “where is the chapter?” is far from a silly one. As the author himself rather poetically explains in the first of his “ten premises”:

The chapter is stylistically distinct; it is not fully explicable to units in other media or to psychological models. It is only loosely like a musical phrase, a dramatic scene, or what cognitive scientists call “even perception,” however tempting the analogy becomes. It is its own practice, peculiar and peculiarly useful. (Dames 2023: 17-18)

On the other hand, Dames equally stresses the possibility of using some of these tensions, mainly the ones that lie between “dividing” (the continuous text) and “gathering” (the elements that are part of the same chapter) as key components of a more encompassing approach that insists on the relationship between chapter and Time, with a capital T: for Dames, the chapter both reveals and shapes the history of ideas on Time in Western literature.

In the field of Comparative Literature today, *The Chapter* can be compared to Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1948). Obviously, it would be absurd to argue that Dames’s book will achieve the same classic status and universal prestige of Auerbach’s study. However, the methodological principles of both works are very similar: first, the decision to examine Western literature as a whole, i.e., as a body of works in different languages whose history stretches over more than two millennia; second, the choice to study Western literature via a selection of privileged creations, i.e., the “canon”, whose methodological and theoretical advantages are now being rediscovered by a new generation of “post cultural wars” scholars¹³; and, third, the performative power of a general question that helps organize the whole field (the question of the growth of realism in the case of Auerbach; the relationship between techniques of capitulation and the conceptualization and organization of time in the case of Dames).

A typical CompLit study

It is of course a pleasure to notice that the major Comparative Literature features as presented in the beginning of this essay appear to be fully integrated in the work by Nicholas Dames: the triple concern for history, multilingualism, and text-oriented criticism.

Let us start with history. The author of *The Chapter* is not afraid of covering the (almost) complete history of Western writing, superseding the obnoxious

¹³ For a meticulous scientific demonstration of the advantages of using canonical rather than noncanonical sources in literary studies focusing on writing and style, see for instance Philippe (2021).

specialization – think of the infamous French divide between “centuries” – that hampers the blossoming of Comparative Literature research, as if a broad historical view were a synonym of superficiality and incompatible with an-depth analysis. Granted, Nicholas Dames is not a “specialist” of all the periods that he treats, but there is no shame in confessing one’s debts to other colleagues, as the author honestly does in this book. Moreover, Nicholas Dames has the courage to tackle periods and works that are not necessarily very “hot” in today’s academic approaches. Leaving his comfort zone, that of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century British novel, the author courageously enters seemingly esoteric legal and religious texts of less studied periods, which he manages to disclose as essential milestones in a historical process most modern readers refuse to even consider. Finally, and this is also not very trendy today when historical change is primarily seen as a chain of mutually exclusive paradigms (each “turn” is supposed to get rid of the errors of the previous one), Nicholas Dames lays bare the profound continuity of Western literature and culture. Things permanently change, the author agrees, but these changes are not arbitrary, and they always build upon each other. On the one hand, literary changes are connected with culture and society at large. On the other hand, they are transformations rather than substitutions of already existing structures, before being themselves transformed into something (once again relatively) new. Raymond Williams’s “structures of feeling”,¹⁴ with their dynamic interplay between residual, dominant and emerging affective attitudes toward cultural phenomena, are a vital intellectual framework in this regard, which *The Chapter* smartly instrumentalizes.

And let’s continue with multilingualism. Here as well, Nicholas Dames is simultaneously modest and ambitious. He actively reads and quotes material in various languages (generally the major European ones: English French, German, Italian, Spanish, and of course also Latin; the only exception being the Hungarian examples, read in English translation), but refrains from making universalizing claims going beyond the well acknowledged limits of the Western canon. At the same time, this multilingualism is not only used in a synchronic perspective (as people are conventionally doing in Comparative Literature), but also diachronically, a much more stimulating and innovative practice which ties in with Nicholas Dames’s conviction on historical continuity. Not all periods are analyzed with the help of examples from more than one linguistic tradition – a methodical a priori or utopia that would have exceeded the limits of a single-authored study. Instead, the global take on Western literature and history as “unity in diversity” allows the book to shift from one language to another when moving from one period to another (by the way, this is also a very elegant manner to put aside any nationalist temptation). As Dames puts it:

My examples are drawn from Western languages and locales only, already just a portion of the chapter’s wild global proliferation, and is also literary scholar’s book, oriented toward the highly self-conscious presence of chapters in novels. (...) But the route this book sketches is not just a matter of disciplinary training or eccentric preferences. Certain inarguably pivotal examples loom large, among them the Bible itself, in its long history toward becoming one major paradigm

¹⁴ As theorized, among other places, in Williams’s bibliography, in *The Long Revolution* (1961).

for a chaptered text. At other examples I have chosen examples because archival evidence permits us to glimpse chapters in the presence of formation (...). Whether my landmarks were chosen for their cross-cultural influence or the fact that they bear useful traces of their construction, the goal has been to extract from these stopping places a list of stylistic and local traits of the chapter that endured over long stretches of time and find their way into very different historical occasions. (Dames 2023, 8-9)

Last but not least, Nicholas Dames's analyses are thoroughly text-oriented, with a systematic reliance on close reading. Throughout the whole book, the author patiently explores his general hypotheses, as triggered by his initial matrix, by testing them on specific examples – and vice versa, for full priority is given to the texts. Theoretically speaking, *The Chapter* is so modest that it may seem “weak” to contemporary readers, who tend to sketch one single theoretical perspective which is then applied to the reading of four examples (as the current norm of heavily streamlined academic books is prescribing, one of the many implicit rules that powerfully rationalize the output of most university presses). In practice the more hermeneutical attitude of the author, who goes back and forth between text and theory, is an extremely strong and rewarding one, which both enlarges the theoretical framing and respects the stubborn complexity of the corpus.

A wonderful example of this approach is given in the opening chapter of the book, the one before the historical inquiry as such, where Nicholas Dames merges the two sides of his work. First, his elaboration of the theoretical and methodological matrix is a way of mapping those possible tensions that might structure our thinking on the chapter, such as the already mentioned pseudo-dichotomies of narrative versus informational or dividing versus gathering, etc. He then continues with a superb close reading of an apparently unremarkable chapter of an equally seemingly ordinary story by Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women* (1952). The analysis is brilliant, as well written as the text it analyzes, proclaiming from the start of Nicholas Dames's book which kind of interaction between theory and practice one may be expecting: a permanent back and forth between general hypothesis and close reading, but also a strong concern to underscore the social as well as existential impact of the chapter, which for Dames is one of the privileged ways of shaping time (and why not also Time with a capital T). As the author resumes his reading of postmodern fiction:

In all of these examples (...) the self-conscious adaptation of an earlier model of novelistic chaptering bears a wry, detached relation to the meliorist optimism that had previously inflected the chapter's shape: that making of stages on life's way which promised a partial cancellation of the past, a space to assess and settle, and an equally partial new beginning, often enough in fact a new dawn. Adapted to a different kind of modernity (...) chaptering became more of a temporary bulwark against sharper dislocations, something defensive and not wholly satisfying, minor transitions to guard against both desired and feared major ones. (Dames 2023, 283).

Theory's voice will be all-pervading but nevertheless modest and always at the service of a better understanding of the text. Particularly illuminating and symptomatic in this regard is the use of non-close-reading methods, some of them

qualitative (genetic studies), some of them quantitative (Moretti-like distant reading calculations of length, frequency, word count and the like). In all these cases, however, the use of these methods is highly limited and exclusively related to what close reading has already touched upon or what it is still struggling with. The sober and (perhaps therefore) convincing results of genetic and quantitative input prove that it is possible to close the gap between quantitative and qualitative approaches.

This essay started with a very simple question: does Comparative Literature have a future? We hope the various examples are a good and optimistic answer to what is often seen more as a frightening issue than as a vigorous challenge. As we have stressed, the most workable solution is not to rebuild the discipline from the ground, but to rethink some of its major characteristics, increasingly overlooked by other literary and cultural approaches, such as the importance of historical reflection, multilingualism and the need to return to the texts and the works themselves, and to start reading them oneself, rather than relying on second-hand and frequently biased descriptions that avoid both literature and comparison.

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Comparative Literature and the Quest for Global Literary Theory: Exploring a West African Margin

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ABSTRACT:

This article reflects on the intellectual aspirations and current challenges faced by the discipline of Comparative Literature. The challenge identified comes from the global margins and the necessity of integrating the plurality of non-colonial legacies in the syncretic vision of global literary studies. The case study presented in the article, the literature of Guinea-Bissau, is considered not in the usual inter-literary context of Lusophone universe, but in its regional, West African cultural history, rich in tribal legacies and Islamic influences. The regional focus permits to emphasize the plurality of local languages, legacies of oral literature associated with them, as well as non-European literacy. The focus proposed permits us to see the literature of Guinea-Bissau not as an emergent phenomenon, but as a conclusion of long-lasting cultural processes reaching, with the postcolonial writing, their stage of exhaustion rather than auroral moments.

RESUMO:

Este artigo reflecte sobre o destino intelectual e os desafios que a disciplina da Literatura Comparada enfrenta na actualidade. O desafio identificado advém das regiões marginalizadas do mundo e da necessidade de integrar a pluralidade de legados não-coloniais na visão sincrética dos estudos literários globais. O estudo de caso apresentado no artigo, a literatura da Guiné-Bissau, é considerado não no contexto interliterário habitual do universo lusófono, mas na sua história cultural regional, a da África Ocidental rica em legados tribais e influência islâmica. Este enfoque regional permite delinear a pluralidade das línguas locais, os legados da literatura oral a elas associada, bem como a tradição da escrita não-europeia. O enfoque proposto permite também ver a literatura da Guiné-Bissau não como um fenómeno emergente, mas como a conclusão de um processo cultural duradouro que atinge, na escrita pós-colonial, a sua fase de exaustão e não um momento inicial.

KEYWORDS:

literature of Guinea-Bissau; non-colonial legacies; oral literature; emergent literacy; translatability

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

literatura da Guiné-Bissau; legados não-coloniais; literatura oral; escrita emergente; tradutibilidade

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Introduction

FOR MANY DECADES of its history as a discipline, Comparative Literature has been living on expanding its geography. The initial challenge, as David Damrosch recalled in *What Is World Literature?*, was formulated by Goethe, arguably in crucial interaction with Johann Peter Eckermann, a visitor to the old poet's residence in January 1827. Eckermann also informs us about the conversations that Goethe had with Jean-Jacques Ampère, who in his lifetime was a promising author of essays on Comparative Literature and later on, already after Goethe's death, would publish an original approach to literature through travel. Ampère's highly idiosyncratic book *La Grèce, Rome et Dante* (1848), written during a trip to the East and proposing to read classical works through the lens of the landscape that had inspired them, epitomises, in an almost literal sense, the move out of Europe, the will of crossing geographic borders that constitutes the deepest root of Comparative Literature as an intellectual project. Goethe dreamed of *Weltliteratur* as a combined divan (i.e. a poetic anthology) of East and West. And indeed, from the end of the eighteenth century on, a new discipline, Oriental studies, eagerly explored great literatures that were put almost on an equal footing with classical Greek and Roman literature. Not only the emergent comparative study of the world's literatures but also Romanticism as a wider cultural movement was born from the reinvention of philology, which switched from Greek and Latin to Romance and Germanic studies, Arabic and Persian literature. As the colonial era progressed, further Middle Eastern and Indian legacies became the new frontier. Such texts as the Vedas began to be studied, and libraries of clay tablets containing not only the well-known story of the flood but also of Gilgamesh's descent into hell were discovered and deciphered – those remote origins of Comparative Literature were still vital and highly exciting for Damrosch in the first years of the new millennium (2003).

This is why, although Eurocentrism appears as a sort of original sin of Comparative Literature, and the discipline would be bitterly criticized for it, it may equally be argued that its essential project had always consisted of struggling against its own Eurocentricity. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, leading comparatists such as George Steiner pushed the boundaries of discourse and expertise focused on Western Europe to include new literary geographies, be them for instance Russian literature in his famous book *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959). The influential postcolonial school gained its momentum from the same initial aspiration of enlarging horizons. The global turn of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, apparently triggered by the vehement criticism of the Eurocentric understanding of Comparative Literature in Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), may rather be seen as the discipline's fulfilment. However, a new lease of criticism may be formulated. Formed in the postcolonial school, Comparative Literature opened its new, global chapter, investing in the creation of an adjacent field, World Literature studies. Nonetheless, the very concept of the "world" has been criticized by Pheng Cheah (2016) as yet another capitalist and colonial construct. The focus on "ultramajor" literatures, fostered by such scholars as Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch (2022), is still referred to this normalized con-

cept of the “world” in which the questions of scale, circulation, and the ultraminor writers’ reliance on translation (or their resistance to it) remain relevant.

Comparative Literature diverging from its Eurocentric inscription and contributing to the vaster horizon of World Literature studies has a lot to do to refine its specific methodologies – such as forms of genre theory that might better reflect the diversity of literature around the world – that have lagged behind the general reflection in literary studies throughout the postcolonial era. The awareness of these shortcomings fosters new approaches growing out of the specific, specialised fields; their findings require integration in the complex domain of Comparative Literature. The work on non-European genres that occupy prominent positions in variously defined supranational and regional literary perspectives is at the cutting edge of the discipline. An illustration of this is Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych’s reflection on qasida and its performative definition as “a ‘ritual’ of allegiance, a bond of mutual recognition and obligation” legitimizing a patron’s rule (2022, 13) rather than a given pattern of lyrical composition with its defining set of formal constraints. Her book is an example of how the specific contribution of an Arabist working on the formal experimentation put into practice by the eleventh-century Syrian poet al-Ma’arrī opens a passageway into a wider, comparative appreciation that remains to be done. Departing from its local beginnings in Arab literature, qasida became one of the most widespread literary genres of the Afro-Eurasian Old World, yet its development remained almost entirely in the margin of the colonial-postcolonial process of the formation of World Literature. This pre-Islamic genre crossed countries and centuries to resonate in the Fulani poetry of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, contributing to the West African literary conundrum that I propose to revisit in this essay.

Two decades ago, Gayatri Spivak could only formulate a general interrogation about the existence of such West African peoples as the Fulani and their place – if any – in “major” literatures created elsewhere. She does mention the West African peoples in *The Death of a Discipline* (2003, 16-18); the topic comes to the fore as she comments on Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon*, where a West African subaltern gives a list of identities that a French-speaking upper class woman from Guadeloupe knows not: Mandingo, Fulani, Toucouleur, Serer, Woloff, Toma, Guerze, Fang, Fon, Bété, Ewe, Dagbani, Yoruba, Mina, Ibo. The characters in Condé’s novel cannot come to any conclusions; one of them does not understand what the other means. Neither do the majority of Spivak’s American readers. Apparently, West African peoples must be represented because they are unable to speak for themselves. Or we lack interest, patience, and specialised skills to digest the specificity of their poetry.

There is a whole universe of literature that stems from non-colonial cultural histories. It speaks minor languages, follows genre constraints and the rules of literariness that seem unattractive to the dominant global public. No wonder that, for its obscurity, difficulty, and lack of apparent appeal, it remains marginal in the current academic practice outside the narrow groups of specialists. Yet this invisible part of humanity’s literature, like the underwater part of an iceberg, is also the source of a powerful temptation. This is what motivates me to muse on the dimen-

sions of literariness in West Africa and try to situate them in a Portuguese-related context, that of Guinea-Bissau.

This article explores the point of intersection between the quest for a constantly enlarged understanding of literary phenomena, initially formulated in the context of the dominant, essentially West European culture, and the challenge coming from global margins with their wider-than-colonial legacies. As a case study, I will focus on the literature of a small country in West Africa, Guinea-Bissau. It is usually treated as part of the postcolonial Lusophone world, isolated, by an accident of colonial history, from the predominantly French- and English-speaking regional context. The choice of this tiny country is paradoxical, because – among its multiple social, economic, and political problems – it could also be seen as a literary backwater (even if referred to its presumed postcolonial interliterary area, that of Lusophone literatures) since the literature of other, equally tiny countries, be it Cape Verde or São Tomé, seems richer and more attractive. For a long time, this corner of the Lusophone world was considered a “country without a literature”, “an empty space”, according to the formulation of Manuel Ferreira (1975, 319), as it occupied only a marginal place in early manuals and anthologies of Lusophone literary history¹.

Coming late to the decolonial literary school centred in its Lisbon headquarter at the Casa dos Estudantes do Império [House of the Students from the Empire], Guinea-Bissau participated only in a diminutive degree in the poetic flourishing of the final decades of the Portuguese colonial empire. Later on, it remained in the margin of the boom of postcolonial novel that introduced such former Portuguese colonies as Angola and Mozambique into the limelight of global literary visibility. The first postcolonial Guinean novels appeared in the late 1990s and never formed a consistent line of literary production. The internal fissure of Guinean literature, hesitating between Portuguese as a literary language and the quest for an idiosyncratic Creole (Kriol) expression, contributed to the positioning of the country in the margin of World Literature. As a working hypothesis, I would claim that this appearance of marginality and scarcity is a refraction of the predominance of non-European genres in the country’s poetic expression. Accentuating linguistic plurality, I will make patent why I prefer to use cautious expressions, such as “Portuguese-related” or “(post-)Lusophone”, rather than the admitted scholarly designations such as “Lusophone literature” in the description of the literary expression in Guinea-Bissau. On the other hand, the Guinean example will serve me to exemplify the range of problems related to non-European legacies and their correct apprehension in global literary studies.

Paradoxically, it is due to its multidimensional marginality that Guinea-Bissau may be treated as a testing field of literary theories for a Comparative Literature that nurtures the aspiration of reflecting the full extent of global diversity. I dare say that global definitions of literature must be formulated precisely in such

¹ Even in recent years, the place of the literature of Guinea-Bissau in the general landscape of Lusophone writing has been marginal. As an example, one may cite its scarce presence in the anthology *Literatura-Mundo Comparada, Perspectivas em Português – Mundos em Português*, edited by Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Inocência Mata (2018).

places, representative of the complexity of non-Eurocentric world. In many ways, Guinea-Bissau embodies the ultimate periphery, in stark contrast to any definition of a global centre. Throughout the colonial era, this small territory was a Portuguese enclave embedded on the side of a giant entity called French West Africa. Yet also in the indigenous world, it was a “last frontier”: the westernmost and northernmost part of the territories occupied by the Mandingo (Mandinka) and the Fulani. Throughout a complex history that included equal parts European colonization and non-colonial processes such as inter-ethnic conflicts and holy wars, this rugged, difficult-to-control coast was a Zomia – an anarchic refuge for displaced individuals and groups. Guinea-Bissau may be seen as a synecdoche of the contorted world of tiny tribes, former jihadists, and the descendants of refugees settled at the end of the world. Being such a complex cultural reality, Guinea-Bissau allows for a deeper insight into what literature may be, into its most idiosyncratic forms. In a radical way, the exploration of the West African margin offers an adventure into the farthest frontiers of literariness that permits to relive the thrill of the scholars delving into the distant past and excavating the Sumerian clay libraries, so persuasively narrated by David Damrosch in *What Is World Literature?* (2003).

1. The quest for sufficiently ample definition of literariness

Broadly, Western literatures share a relatively coherent system of genres issued from the classical, Aristotelian definition. This system of distinctions into the lyrical, the epic, and the dramatic remained for over two millennia the basis of the European, then Western perception of literature. Comparative Literature as a meta-domain of reflection on the post-classic literature is rooted in this relative clarity in defining its object of studies. However, the exploration of the global margins requires constant extension and reshaping of those Eurocentric definitions.

Certainly, Comparative Literature strives for new paradigms, but it is also haunted by a sense of old-fashioned continuity, looking back to the heroic era of colonial scholars who for the first time noticed the existence of non-European literature. The same instinct of intellectual nostalgia makes me look back to structuralist literary studies which formulated some seminal questions about the nature of literary phenomena. Nowadays, this essential structuralist interrogation on literariness, considered as outdated by the postmodern schools of reading, may be seen under a new light, helping to address the multitude of sources. In a global world, one must constantly remember the rule of multiplicity, the fundamental mode of coexistence of everything with everything. The comfort of moving within a single, be it post-classic, post-structural or post-modern literary theory – which could be naively accepted as a universal mono-theory – is no more.

Arguably, Comparative Literature has already accepted the awareness of the multiple, culture-specific theories of literature of non-European origin or “world literary knowledges” according to the designation proposed by Revathi Krishnaswamy (2010, 408). If we moved to North Africa around the tenth century AD, we could participate, already at such an early date, in a number of lively theoretical and literary debates concerning the question what literature truly is: whether it

is more of a *ṣan* – a craft that can be learned, or whether the decisive factor is *ṭab* – the innate talent. Echoes of such a debate have been carried throughout history by the traditional Muslim system of knowledge transmission. They were present in the mental universe of West African Sufi brotherhoods looking for a theory befitting their attempts at mystical poetry. Apparently, when we come to Guinea-Bissau, such concepts as *ṭab* and *ṣan* are expected to appear sooner than the classic essay by T.S. Eliot. Yet both sources may appear, because *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919) was once a standard reading assigned to students at Portuguese universities, and therefore a number of Guineans may be well acquainted with it. Throughout the early postcolonial decades, Portugal took up the mission of forming the elites of the new independent countries², financing scholarships, also in the domain of literary studies. Be that as it may, this example illustrates a general truth: what defines the specificity of the global era and its literature is the merging and interaction of concepts, patterns, and inspirations. *Ṣan*, *ṭab*, and T.S. Eliot may often be part of the horizon of literary awareness of an individual formed both by non-colonial legacies and postcolonial opportunities.

The eclecticism of received legacies seems to be the challenge of our times. Therefore, nothing is old-fashioned or archaic in global literary studies – not only because theoretical fashion is supposed to be questioned as a Eurocentric category but also because the basic determinant is the long duration. The depth of time perspectives that global literary theory must integrate contrasts with the shallow chronology of postcolonial approaches in which pre-colonial cultural roots were often treated as something entirely obliterated by symbolic violence and therefore absent. Postcolonial literary awareness operated on scales reduced to decades, generations, at best one or two centuries of colonial history; it failed to take into account broader, longer-lasting traditions marginalized by the colonial supremacies. The current challenge is to foster the awareness of multiple non-Western concepts of literature and merge it with the legacy of Eurocentric literary theory.

An aspect of literature, often overlooked by structuralists, is emphasized by T.S. Eliot (1972): literature is characterized by transmission and duration; it may be seen as the capitalization of symbolic value – a concept I refer to as its patrimonial nature. Literature serves as a repository of symbolic value, encompassing what humanity deems worth preserving across time. This transmission occurs in various ways. Literary works may be conveyed through writing or non-literate, technical media such as radio. An improvised poem can be memorized and performed repeatedly or become a mobile phone video shared on a streaming platform. Even in resource-limited contexts like contemporary Guinea-Bissau, where editing houses, libraries – often even pencils and school notebooks – are scarce, the patrimonial essence of literature persists, demonstrating its adaptability and endurance.

The structuralist legacy frames literature as a message distinguished by its form, with multiple layers of meaning. It has a metalinguistic dimension, creatively engaging with the rules of language, and a metatextual dimension, interacting with the genetic and textual conventions rooted in tradition. Furthermore, litera-

² This collaboration was established by an agreement signed by Portugal and Guinea-Bissau on 11th July, 1975 (Acordo Geral de Cooperação e Amizade).

ture often exhibits a metacultural dimension, enabling a critical interplay of entire traditions and cultural identities coexisting – just like in my shorthand “*san*’, *tab*’ and T.S. Eliot” – in an individual and collective awareness. Thus, a literary message functions as both a metatext – a “theory about other messages” – and a meta-tradition – a “theory about tradition(s)”. These mechanisms remain active even in societies that lack an abstract, generic concept of “literature”. At its core, literary awareness stems from an intuition about a message’s significance, sparking a desire to remember it, pass it on, and connect it to a broader tradition.

Also, the performative definition of literature, which emphasizes that it is created with purpose by someone, offers valuable insight. Literature functions as a social ritual, carried out by “agents” who meet specific criteria for their role. In Mandingo communities, well explored by colonial ethnologists, griots form a strictly defined, trans-generational group where the literary role is inherited from father to son. However, the category of literary “agents” can be much broader. Guinean *cantigas di ditu*, playful poetic compositions, are spontaneously improvised by women in daily interactions (Augel 2007). Yet even here, the category of “agents” is clearly defined: women, not men, perform these pieces. This delineation of form and function reserved for a specific category of people helps establish the boundary between literature and non-literature. Literary messages operate within a social framework where their purpose and audience are understood. In the life of a *tabanka*, a traditional Guinean village, such an occasion is a *djumbai* – a communal gathering –, creates an expected setting for literary expression distinct from everyday conversation (Queiroz 2011, 149-153). Within such contexts, shared cultural competencies enable the group to recognize and value literary messages, fostering specific expectations and preferences that distinguish them from other forms of communication.

During a Guinean *djumbai*, the texts will be performed over and over again, we will hear stories passed down from generation to generation, but there will be an element of fake or genuine surprise as a reaction to the form of a riddle, codified but open to innovation. In other words, literature is repetition and predictability combined with innovation. It encompasses the horizon of audience’s expectations and the element of surprise. In all this, the element of agon, i.e. the struggle for primacy and the will to show off the individual’s ability to capitalize on pre-existing literary material, remains constantly present. This echoes T.S. Eliot’s concept of the balance between individual talent and connection to tradition. Literature, being associated with what is deemed valuable and significant, elevates the skilled individual within his or her social context, celebrating their ability to innovate while remaining rooted in tradition.

What deserves to be stressed is the fact that literature holds social value regardless of a community’s stage of material development. While it may seem like a luxury for the wealthy and privileged, literature is, in fact, deeply embedded in human societies worldwide. Alongside this ubiquity is a shared tendency to make value judgments, leading to enduring debates about what constitutes “better” or “real” literature versus what is considered an unworthy imitation.

2. Divergent oralities and literacies

The Eurocentric view associates the term “literature” with writing. The term “orature” is a secondary derivation associated, often abusively, with Africa. This perspective overlooks the continent’s long history of diverse writing systems, such as the Libyco-Berber abjad from the first millennium BC, as well as Arabic, Ge’ez, and others. In West Africa, literacy has a dual history: colonial and non-colonial. Literacy existed in the region before European contact, though Islamicate writing developed significantly during what might also be considered the colonial era. The eighteenth century, in particular, was a pivotal period of spiritual revival, exemplified by the rise of Sufi brotherhoods such as the Tijaniyya, the most distinctive tariqa of West Africa (Wright 2020).

Literature in Guinea-Bissau reflects the complex interplay of historical processes and conditions. While the country, as a former Portuguese colony, is often automatically classified as part of the Lusophone world, it is important to note that in 1975, following Portugal’s withdrawal, only a small percentage of the population – around 10% – had any proficiency in Portuguese (Guterres et al. 1986). By the late 1990s, when political agreements formalized the PALOP group (African countries that recognize Portuguese as their official language), Lusophony in Guinea-Bissau remained more aspirational than real. Paradoxically, Portuguese language proficiency has steadily grown among the Guinean population over the postcolonial decades. Yet simultaneously, Kriol has experienced even more rapid development, expanding from use by about half the population in the early postcolonial period to over 90% in the first decade of the new millennium (Instituto Nacional de Estatística de Guiné-Bissau 2009, 36). Be that as it may, behind the fiction of Lusophony still lies what the colonial explorer Landerset Simões once called “the black tower of Babel” (1935). Although the country has less than two million inhabitants, there are about 30 ethnic groups and virtually each of them has its own tongue, mainly from the Niger-Congo language family. Guinea-Bissau has a weak Muslim majority: about 47% of the inhabitants profess Islam, about 30% – the so-called animism, i.e. various native African cults, and less than 20% – Christianity. The Islamized Fula and Mandingo communities coexist with the predominantly animist Balanta group, while Christianity is relatively widespread among the Pepels, who had the closest contact with the Portuguese during the colonial period. The rest of the mosaic consists of small, often endangered ethnic and linguistic groups: Mandjacos, Bijagós, Soninques, Nalu, etc. It is worth stressing, however, that these ethnic groups do not fit within the postcolonial borders of the country but are part of wider regional reality of West Africa. An ethnic group such as the Fula inhabits the entire Sahel belt stretching latitudinally to the gates of Sudan and encompassing a total population that exceeds 20 million (Kahera 2011).

The great historical reservoir of Islam in West Africa is Mali and the inner Niger Delta; it forms also the main reservoir of literacy encompassing the written tradition in Arabic and African languages written in Arabic script, with large intellectual centres and libraries of Timbuktu and Djenne. On the other hand, the world of griots extends further south, connecting with the cultural traditions of countries

such as Ivory Coast. As already mentioned, during the colonial period the then so-called Portuguese Guinea was a tiny enclave at the gate of the gigantic entity that was the colonial A.O.F., or French West Africa. This is from where some decolonial impulses and inspirations flowed in the 1950s and 1960s, and hence, for example, in the 1960s, some theatrical attempts in French, as well as a marginal tradition of Francophone poetry episodically appeared under the influence of the development of Francophone West African literature. This is the result of transcolonial exchange, i.e., mutual inspirations between cultures dominated by different colonial empires operating in the same region.

It is thus justified to argue that a plurality of parallel literary histories went on in Guinea-Bissau. Many of them were rooted in areas more or less distant from the country's present-day borders. One of the hypotheses is to treat the ethnic diversity of Guinea-Bissau as the result of mechanisms resumed under the term "Zomia", proposed by the Dutch historian Willem van Schendel (2002). The emergence of amorphous, anarchic social structures might have been the result of a long-term process of pushing subsequent ethnic groups to swamps and islands near the coast under the pressure of stronger, more aggressive organisms forming in the interior of the continent, such as the Kaabunké state (Lopes 1997). These migrations of weaker ethnic groups lasted until the nineteenth century.

The Portuguese exploited the pressures exerted by aggressive inland groups during their expansion into Guinea. Their first contact came in the fifteenth century during explorations of the African coast and the search for a route to India. However, it was only later that they established slave emporia like Cacheu and Ziguinchor. In the early seventeenth century, they settled on the island of Bolama, which became their operational centre. Yet the Portuguese were not the first colonizers. It is more accurate to talk about the multiplicity of parallel histories and, consequently, the multiplicity of lines of tradition and sets of cultural competences transmitted through them. Before the Portuguese, the Mandingo from the Mali Empire initiated the first wave of Islamization between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries (although it should be remembered that Islamization is a gradual, multi-stage process continuing to this day). The second wave was brought by the Fula. Only the third wave, largely coinciding with the expansion of the Fula, were the Portuguese – this is how we can outline a history of the conquerors, the sequence of waves of expansion. Equally important is the history of the conquered – the populations subjugated or displaced by these expansions. The mosaic of ethnic groups includes communities that resisted assimilation into dominant identities linked to expanding monotheistic religions, Christianity or Islam, and preserved unique cultural traditions outside these monotheistic frameworks.

In the realm of literature, Guinea-Bissau exhibits an ever-expanding complexity, much like a fractal. Intersecting influences continuously complicate the landscape, with more and more branches diverging in various directions. Similar to a mathematical fractal, the scales vary: some branches grow finer over time, while others gain power, only to be overlaid with finer details at their edges. In this way, Guinea-Bissau can be seen as a microcosm of small, proliferating literatures, each expanding and evolving in its own unique direction. An overview of this complex dynamics requires a degree of simplification to identify different layers of tradition.

The first one, as it was already mentioned, is the world of the Mandingo griots, i.e., a category of performers known in Guinea-Bissau as *djidius* (griot is a French name given by colonial ethnologists). In this universe, we encounter the figure of an adjutant poet, inextricably linked with a specific leader. This bard is the embodiment of memory and its guarantor: with his person, with his face, he vouches for the reliability of the message. The biological continuity of the griot line from father to son is a guarantee of the continuity of history. Hence, griots written down in the twentieth century claimed to be direct, biological descendants of figures from a past as distant as the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. Interestingly, all this happens in an Islamicate context, in which writing, associated with religious scriptures, is not unknown. But *djidius* believe that the embodied oral tradition they represent is something better, more reliable than the written text. For them, written knowledge is dead. The books are silent and do not guarantee the truth brought by their personified testimony, their personal act of bearing witness.³

The Fula are more closely linked with writing, particularly through their historical chronicles, which were occasionally studied during the colonial period (Moreira 1948). These chronicles, referred to as *alfarrábios* by the Portuguese, were often written with locally made ink on marabou paper – a type of paper produced in Africa using traditional Muslim recipes –, in Arabic or in Fula using Arabic script. They narrate the history of individual groups, schools, and genealogies of scholars. Fulani literature is also rich in religious poetry and mystical writings, which are especially prominent in regions where Sufism and Sufi brotherhoods have a strong presence. Mystical Islam stands as a significant source of literary tradition, entirely distinct from any European pattern.

Adding another paragraph in this short description requires further simplification. An artificial category of “animists” can be used as an *ad hoc* sketch to group tribal cultures and identities pushed to the margins by the spread of monotheistic religions. This category mainly includes forms of creativity and communication rooted in orality. Even in absence of any abstract concept of genre, literature’s key feature – codified constraints – can still be identified. For instance, proverbs, riddles, and narratives explaining observed phenomena all fit within a broad definition of literariness. In the twenty-first century, we can speak of both orature and literature, as many oral texts have been transcribed and even reproduced in print. The first to do so was the Portuguese priest Marcelino Marques Barros (1900). In the postcolonial period, further collections and publications appeared (e.g. Gomes and Cavacas 1997). This tradition not only persists but also branches out fractally. The written oral tradition begins to evolve, producing new texts that are both re-oralized – read from books and retold – and serve as inspiration for fresh writing based on oral heritage.

It is worth emphasizing once again the key phenomenon of two-way interaction between orality and writing, already mentioned in the case of griots who knew

³ This aspect can be persuasively illustrated by an opinion contrasting the value of embodied witnessing and mere bookish writing, voiced in the margin of the French transcript of the Mandingo epic of Sundjata: “Quelle piètre connaissance que la connaissance qui est figée dans les livres muets” [What poor knowledge is the knowledge that is frozen in silent books] (Niane 1960, 78-79).

writing but valued oral testimony more highly. Written oral tradition and oralized written literature are far more common than the solitary, silent reading of texts, which is the basic form of literary engagement in Western tradition. In Guinea-Bissau, poetry sketched on a piece of paper may rather be brought to a *djumbai* or read on local radio. It is important to note that a large portion of the population is still illiterate – while three-quarters of men can write, in many regions roughly half of women remain illiterate⁴. Additionally, financial limitations prevent the widespread purchase of books. This is why, in Guinea-Bissau, the radio becomes a vital medium for transmitting and preserving literature. Also, this is where we might uncover some of the missing elements of the multilingual landscape, such as poetry written in Balanta. While literature in this language has not been printed, it is known that Felix Sigá wrote manuscripts containing Balanta poems along with texts in Portuguese and French. These poems were reportedly read on local radio (Bessa 2011, 170-171). This example highlights the challenges of researching Guinean literature.

Relativising the importance of the country's Lusophony, it is important to notice that the development of Kriol in Guinea-Bissau is deeply tied to the decolonial process and the country's quest for a national identity. During the struggle for independence and the formation of the postcolonial state, Kriol was envisioned as a supra-tribal language that could serve as a unifying force, positioned as an alternative to Portuguese. It was intended to represent *Guinendadi* – the Guinean identity – distinct from the existing ethnic identities, transcending them and fostering a sense of national unity. The evolution of Kriol literature thus reflects the broader dynamics of postcolonial nation-building, where language plays a pivotal role in asserting new cultural and political identities. The best-known examples of poetry in Kriol include the works associated with the group "Meninos da Hora de Pidjiguiti" and the poetry sung by the group "Cobiana Djazz". However, the international visibility of the latter may be attributed to a single researcher, the Brazilian scholar Moema Parente Augel, who paid due attention to its transformative importance, published it and analysed it (1997). Most likely, "Cobiana Djazz" case should be treated as an illustration of a broader category of omitted or lost phenomena: in the chaos of colonial wars and the material difficulties of the first postcolonial decades, texts and recordings produced by other artists did not survive.

On the other hand, the "Meninos da Hora de Pidjiguiti" poetic collective is deeply tied to the decolonial struggle in Guinea-Bissau, particularly the massacre of dockworkers at Pidjiguiti wharf in 1959, which marked the beginning of the unrest that utterly led to a full-scale colonial war. This event became a foundational moment for the group, which adopted Kriol as a literary language to express their decolonial aspirations. This shift to Kriol included the creation of written and printed poetry, as exemplified by Odete Semedo's volume *Entre o ser e o amar* (1996). A key feature of this literary movement is the phenomenon of diglossia,

⁴ According to the 2022 data included in *The Global Economy*, the literacy rate in Guinea-Bissau is as low as 53.90%. In younger generations (age group 15-24), the male literacy rate is 75.28%, while the female rate is 62.55%. In older age groups this gender disparity is likely to be greater. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/guinea-bissau/Literacy_rate/ (accessed: 17/12/2024).

where Kriol and Portuguese exist in a constant state of interaction, with texts often self-translated between the two languages by their authors. This reflects the tension between the colonial language and the indigenous, decolonial speech, highlighting a cultural and linguistic negotiation essential to postcolonial identity. The desire to establish a literary tradition around Kriol was not only a linguistic move but a political one – intended to crystallize the emerging identity of the young nation and state. This intention is most evident in works like the decolonial anthology *Mantehas para quem luta!* (Regalla et al. 1977), whose title – marked by an exclamation point – evokes the revolutionary, ideologically charged spirit of the time. The anthology exemplifies how literature served as a tool for nation-building, attempting to forge a collective identity and a sense of solidarity in the postcolonial context through the power of poetry. Also, the theatre in Kriol has an important tradition due to the activity of Carlos Vaz and his Teatro Popular Guineense. However, novels in Kriol seem to be absent, at least in print form, though it is possible that a manuscript may yet emerge, awaiting the right local publishing initiative.

3. Finding a book for the global reader

In Guinea-Bissau, poetry comes to the fore, overshadowing the novel, which remains secondary in importance. However, in the broader context of World Literature, the novel holds a central and highly visible place. Within the postcolonial framework of Lusophony, the arrival of a Guinean novel was eagerly anticipated, as it represented a possibility for a text that could be read, translated, and marketed beyond the borders of Guinea-Bissau. This expectation of the novel aligns with the criteria of global literature as outlined by David Damrosch, who argues that for a text to be part of World Literature, it must enter global circulation and become part of a functional network of texts. This global circulation allows literature to transcend its local origins and engage with distant, diverse contexts: only then it may serve as “a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (Damrosch 2003, 281). In the case of Guinea-Bissau, the emergence of the novel as a major literary genre was not merely about the creation of new stories but also about connecting the nation to a global literary discourse. Through the novel, the country’s literary voice might be heard internationally.

Historically, the emergence of the novel in Guinea-Bissau can be traced back to colonial times. Its early precursor was Fausto Duarte, a writer born in Cape Verde who worked as a colonial administrator in Portuguese Guinea. Duarte’s literary aspirations were shaped by a desire to follow in the footsteps of figures like René Maran, a dark-skinned writer from Martinique who served as an official in the structures of French Equatorial Africa. Duarte’s biography (Bull 1985) offers a poignant illustration of the contradictions inherent in Salazar’s colonial regime. As a *branco da terra* (a term referring to Creole-born individuals), Duarte occupied a complex, ambivalent position within the colonial hierarchy. Officially considered “white” by the empire, he was still distanced from the full privileges associated with race, and his identity was in tension between the roles of colonizer and colonized. This liminal status may have made literary work seem like a path to elevate

his social and cultural standing, and through his engagement with metropolitan literary traditions, he may have hoped to achieve a higher status – reflecting the phenomenon of colonial mimicry. Duarte’s attempt to craft a literary career within this system not only highlights the cultural contradictions of colonialism but also the ways in which literature was used by colonized individuals to navigate and sometimes challenge the colonial structures that oppressed them.

Fausto Duarte’s work as a colonial administrator, coupled with his frequent field trips throughout Guinea, provided him with a deep understanding of the ethnic complexity of the region. This knowledge informed his literary work, which drew heavily on the traditions of Portuguese naturalism and regionalism. His novel *Auá* (i. e. *Eve* in Fula), which depicted the intricate social and cultural fabric of Guinea, won the first prize in the colonial literature competition held in Lisbon in 1934. This recognition was a significant achievement within the Portuguese context, akin to the success of René Maran’s *Batouala*, which won the Goncourt Prize in France in 1921.

Despite Fausto Duarte’s alignment with the colonial system, *Auá* subtly conveys an African perspective. The novel’s protagonist, Malam, is not depicted as a typical colonial subaltern but rather as an independent and resourceful young Fula man capable of making his own decisions. His tragedy does not stem from being a victim of colonial rule, but rather from intra-African conflicts and personal choices. Malam’s troubles begin when he offers hospitality to a wandering marabout, a Muslim missionary from the north. The marabout takes advantage of Malam’s generosity, raping his wife Auá, who becomes pregnant with a child whose lighter skin betrays the marabout’s crime. Although such affairs were usually tolerated in the Fulani community, Malam’s response is shaped by his exposure to Portuguese cultural norms, particularly the concept of male honour. This foreign influence compels him to seek revenge, a stark contrast to traditional Fulani approaches. He decides to kill the perpetrator of the rape. It is worth mentioning that the issue of honour crimes was widely discussed in the nineteenth-century Portuguese naturalistic literature, such as the novels by Camilo Castelo Branco, who may have had some influence on Duarte’s plot choices. Be that as it may, Malam’s friend and former rival accuses him of having learned jealousy over a woman from the Portuguese. It is to him that Malam hands over Auá and the child fathered by the marabout. With a pained soul, he sets off north to Dakar, perhaps to complete the Fulani model of education in the circle of Sufism.

The beginnings of colonial literature in Guinea-Bissau were modest, and the novelistic tradition remained largely dormant for many decades, with a gap until the late 1990s, when notable works like Abdulai Silá’s *Mistida* trilogy and Filinto de Barros’s *Kikia Matcho* emerged. Despite these contributions, poetry has remained the core of Guinean literature, maintaining its central role in the cultural landscape. This focus on poetry, a form of expression that does not penetrate easily into the mainstream of global circulation, contributed to the misconception concerning Guinea-Bissau as a literary “empty space”. Such an opinion is widespread among scholars and editors looking for literary works that would fit into the broader framework of World Literature, circulating in translation and engaging with global literary criticism. For a long time, Guinea-Bissau seemed indeed to be such a

void in the realm of Lusophone African literature, especially when compared to other Portuguese-speaking African countries like Angola and Mozambique. These nations produced bestselling authors such as José Eduardo Agualusa, Mia Couto, and Ondjaki, whose works were translated into multiple languages and enjoyed recognition on the global literary scene. Guinea-Bissau's literary output apparently lacked a similar presence in the global literary market.

In reality, however, Guinea-Bissau, like many emerging literary cultures, seeks to leverage World Literature as a means of gaining visibility and influence on the global stage. The global literary market provides an avenue for writers from countries with less-established literary traditions to overcome the constraints they face within their local contexts, such as limited publishing infrastructure, low literacy rates, and economic challenges. By entering this broader literary network, they can reach wider audiences and secure a place within the evolving literary dialogue. Many Guinean writers aim to tap into this circulation. Abdulai Silá's success with *A Última Tragedia* (part of the *Mistida* trilogy) exemplifies the path to international recognition for Guinean writers. His novel, which was published in French just one year after its original edition, made a significant impact despite the book being released by a relatively obscure publisher. This achievement was further reinforced by its translations into English (2017) and German (2021), making Silá one of the few Guinean writers to successfully navigate the complexities of the global literary market. Silá's success underscores a crucial strategy for emerging literatures seeking global recognition: the balance between local concerns and universal themes. By weaving together distinctly local issues – such as the political and cultural struggles of Guinea-Bissau – with broader, more universal literary elements, Silá crafted a narrative that resonates with both local and international audiences.

Abdulai Silá's *As Orações de Mansata* is a prime example of how local issues and global intertextuality can be successfully interwoven to create a piece of literature that resonates on multiple levels. The play draws from the rich tradition of decolonial Guinean theatre, rooted in the larger movement of transcolonial theatre across West Africa. This tradition often explores the political and social struggles, and Silá's work is no exception, as it touches upon the Guinean tragedy of power and corruption. On the other hand, it puts this local problem in the framework of intertextuality that is legible to a global audience, namely, it refers to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, providing an opportunity for an inspiring analysis of multiple triads: instead of three witches there are three wives, three seers, but also three *talibés* – female scholars from the circle of Muslim knowledge –, and three *katan-deras* – “witches” responsible for ritual offerings in the Pepel culture. The fact that *As Orações de Mansata* occupies a prominent place in international scholarship – perhaps even more so than the rest of Guinea-Bissau's literary output – speaks to the power of Silá's method. By combining local political and cultural issues with universal literary themes and structures, Silá creates a work that transcends its immediate context.

A much more local in its intention – but in a sense also quite Shakespearean – Guinean novel, *Kikia Matcho*, by Filinto de Barros (1997), did not gain similar recognition. The owl in the title, which is – quite importantly – a male and not a

female of its species, embodies, according to animistic beliefs, the returning spirit of the deceased. The plot starts with a funeral and mourning, presenting, at the same time, the inability to let go of what has inevitably grown old and died. The novel's subtitle, *o desalento do combatente* ("the exhaustion of the combatant"), captures a deep sense of disillusionment that permeates the postcolonial experience in Guinea-Bissau. Central to this theme is an exploration of masculinity (*machundadi*) embedded in the patriarchal structure of Guinean society. During the decolonial struggle, men had a clear purpose: to fight the Portuguese, a struggle that gave their lives direction and meaning. However, in the aftermath of decolonization, the existence of the former heroes lost its obvious meaning. The only glimmer of hope in the dilapidated country is emigration to Portugal, where those who were once considered traitors – like the ex-commando Djaló – are now being rewarded, receiving Portuguese military pensions. The idea of victory, once so clearly defined, now feels hollow and meaningless. Also, the search for alternatives proves to be fruitless, as illustrated by the case of Baifaz. His crash-course in engineering, made in the Soviet Union, did not provide him with sound skills, and therefore the transformative power to change his personal circumstances or contribute meaningfully to the country's development. This failure to adapt to modernity drives him back to older, animistic beliefs, which in the narrative are presented negatively. These beliefs, centred around destructive magic and envy of other people's prosperity or success, are seen as a retreat into a past that offers no solutions to the pressing challenges. Filinto de Barros' rather gloomy novel can be interpreted as a sign of overcoming not only colonialism, but also the postcolonial system of references. *Kikia Matcho* depicts the state of mental postcoloniality, derived not only from the oppression suffered but also from the vicissitudes of the fight against the colonizer, which shaped the characters of the "combatants". These individuals, once driven by the clear and noble goal of fighting for independence, now find themselves adrift.

It is no accident that this transcolonial quest for a way out of the dysfunctional mentality takes on a gendered form. At the heart of this struggle is the male identity, which is portrayed as being particularly fractured and lost in the aftermath of the independence struggle. The women in *Kikia Matcho*, though also living in a harsh, postcolonial reality, seem to find ways to adapt. Their resilience, born of necessity, allows them to carve out a place for themselves in the world – often by shouldering the burdens of survival and raising families on their own. Men, on the other hand, particularly the former combatants, are shown to be increasingly marginalized and disempowered. They lack the tools to navigate the new reality, unable to find meaningful roles in society. Their victory in the decolonial struggle now seems meaningless, leaving them in a state of frustration and hopelessness. This male crisis of identity is at the heart of *Kikia Matcho*. The Guinean man yearns for a mobilizing project – an "Afrotopia," a vision of a better future for the continent that could reinvigorate their sense of purpose. But such a vision is elusive, and the novel emphasizes the non-obviousness of transcolonial solutions. Instead, it describes a state of suspension, a limbo in which these men find themselves stuck, unable to move forward. This unresolved tension echoes the broader impasse of the end of the historical cycle: colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial realities seem to entrap individuals in a never-ending loop of dissatisfaction and struggle. The spirit

of the dead returns, embodied in a male owl, as if an African version of Minerva's owl that flies out at dusk, yet brings not the ancestral wisdom from the afterlife but a reminder of the lost potential and unfulfilled promises of the past.

Conclusion

Tiny, poor, politically unstable, and largely excluded from global commercial flows (except for drug smuggling), Guinea-Bissau seems to occupy the margins of all margins, a periphery of peripheries. Yet, in my exploration of the new frontiers of Comparative Literature, Guinea-Bissau stands out as a privileged location – not in spite of, but precisely because of these very characteristics. It serves as an important literary laboratory where the less visible aspects of global literature are brought to light: multilingualism beneath dominant postcolonial languages, and the interweaving of traditions, often present as deeply transformed, barely legible, but highly valued and carefully transmitted echoes of various timelines.

The two-way dynamic of tradition-building is evident in Guinea-Bissau, where traditions constantly merge and differentiate in a fractal pattern. In these divergent forms, literature is a continuous testimony to crisis, doubt, ambiguity, and the absence of definitive solutions. This specific nihilism is neither a postmodern legacy nor the result of colonial violence, but a raw, original expression of humanity's fundamental aporia – the uncertainty of human fate and the human tragedy of not knowing what to do with life. As Domínguez, Saussy, and Villanueva note, “if literature is a use of language that testifies to humans' creativity, its creation is intimately linked to the aim of overcoming our mortality” (2015: xviii). In the unrestrained bricolage of language in literature, the curse of our undetermined freedom – humanity's ability to do anything with its life, yet its essential inability to truly do anything to solve the problem of death – is mirrored and exposed. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the first Guinean novels, often seen in postcolonial terms as foundational texts, actually appear as conclusions, points of arrival. Rather than pioneering, they are reflective of the twilight of postcoloniality, while simultaneously affirming the vitality of the non-colonial pasts that continue to resonate through literature.

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Relaciones simbióticas: hacia un comparatismo ibérico feminista

Symbiotic Relationships:
Towards a Feminist Iberian Comparatism

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RESUMEN:

El objetivo de este artículo es subrayar los beneficios mutuos que la unión entre el comparatismo ibérico y el feminismo podrían generar en los estudios en los que se aplicasen dentro del área de las humanidades. La hipótesis de la que partimos es que la suya es una pareja bien avenida, a pesar de la presencia marginal del feminismo en los programas y guías docentes universitarias en España y Portugal. Para defender su compatibilidad, nos centramos en los puntos de contacto, como el hecho

de ser intrínsecamente transdisciplinarios, transfronterizos, intermediales y haber atendido a semejantes desafíos como su propia heterogeneidad y las críticas recibidas desde el poscolonialismo. De esta forma, exploramos cómo los estudios comparados ibéricos podrían beneficiarse del momento de auge del feminismo como movimiento social para ganar atractivo y relevancia académica, mientras que el feminismo tendría una base sólida en la que apoyarse con el fin de lograr la legitimación académica – que no su domesticación. Consideramos esta simbiosis no sólo deseable como necesaria con el objetivo de hacer frente al descrédito de las instituciones y frenar la ola política reaccionaria que está imponiéndose a nivel europeo.

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this article is to highlight the mutual benefits that the union between Iberian comparatism and feminism could generate in the studies in which they are applied within the area of the Humanities. The hypothesis from which we start is that they are a well-matched couple, despite the marginal presence of feminism in university syllabi and teaching guides in Spain and Portugal. In order to defend their compatibility, we focus on their multiple similarities, such as the fact that they are intrinsically trans-disciplinary, trans-border, inter-medial and have dealt with such challenges as their own heterogeneity and the criticisms received from post-colonialism. In this way, we explore how Iberian comparative studies could benefit from the rise of feminism as a social movement to gain academic appeal and relevance, while feminism would have a solid base to build on as a way to achieve academic legitimization – that is different from domestication. We consider this symbiosis not only desirable but necessary in to address the current discrediting of institutions and to stem the reactionary political tide that is rising at the European level.

PALABRAS-CLAVE:

feminismo; península ibérica; humanidades; movimientos sociales; poscolonialismo

KEYWORDS:

feminism; Iberian Peninsula; Humanities; social movements; postcolonialism

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1. Introducción

A PESAR DE QUE EL FEMINISMO ha sido uno de los movimientos políticos globales más importantes de los siglos XX y XXI, sacudiendo la base de nuestras sociedades occidentales y afectando a todas las áreas de estudio y las estructuras de poder en política, arte, deporte, economía, etc., es una palabra que aún produce cierta reticencia en determinadas áreas del ámbito académico, al menos en España y Portugal. Fariña Busto y Suárez Briones, en su artículo “Feminist, gender and LGBTQ studies in the Iberian Peninsula”, exploran las razones por detrás de la resistencia de usar las aportaciones feministas como entramado teórico y las nuevas categorías de análisis que “no solo han promovido una conciencia crítica acerca de la necesidad de igualdad como también han introducido perspectivas y variantes importantes en todas las esferas de conocimiento” (2016, 579)¹. Las autoras se interrogan acerca del motivo por el cual las publicaciones feministas han sido consideradas durante mucho tiempo como accesorias y se han segregado de sus campos de estudio, en vez de ser consideradas como herramientas metodológicas y teóricas dentro de las disciplinas de origen para las que estaban siendo utilizadas. Es decir, por ejemplo, el estudio de las mujeres directoras de cine ha ocupado un espacio separado de las monografías de grandes directores del cine adoptando una posición marginal y parcial dentro de un ámbito cinematográfico considerado “neutro”².

En ese sentido, en este artículo vamos a referirnos específicamente a los estudios comparados ibéricos – entendiéndolo como tales aquellos que analizan las relaciones entre objetos y fenómenos literarios, culturales y artísticos que no pueden ser debidamente abarcados desde una dimensión nacional dentro del polisistema de la península ibérica y sus regiones insulares asociadas (Pérez Isasi 2013, 11) – ya que estos se han mostrado reticentes a incorporar la perspectiva feminista, en parte, por su origen en la academia estadounidense y su lenta adaptación al contexto socio-cultural de las regiones ibéricas³. Además, ha habido un debate – que ha acabado convirtiéndose en una tendencia – de que, para que una investigación fuese feminista, debía tener como objeto de estudio a la mujer como autora o como objeto de representación, como si el estudio de autores masculinos, de clásicos culturales o de temas aparentemente “universales” estuviese exenta de ser afectada por el patriarcado (Fusco 2006, 4-5). Por ese motivo, mientras que el comparatismo en literatura se ha centrado primordialmente en el análisis discursivo/textual – con métodos como el *close reading* o el *distant reading*, – y se le ha acusado, en ocasiones injustamente, de antihistoricista (Griffiths 2017, 482), los estudios feministas han adoptado una perspectiva principalmente social, así como metodologías que han considerado de manera evidente el contexto histórico.

¹ Todas las traducciones del inglés son nuestras. Cita original: “have not only promoted a critical consciousness about the need for equality, but also introduced important perspectives and variants in all spheres of knowledge”.

² Remitimos aquí al conocido texto “Cine con tetas” en el que la directora Iciar Bollaín ironiza sobre esta cuestión (Bollaín 2003).

³ La reticencia de los estudios comparados en adoptar los marcos teóricos feministas exportados principalmente de la academia estadounidense no ha sido exclusiva de los países ibéricos, sino que es extensible a otros países europeos del sur como Italia (Fusco 2006).

Sin embargo, la literatura comparada ha evolucionado hacia los actuales estudios comparados, abriéndose a otros objetos de estudio y cruzándose con otros campos de investigación como los estudios de área o los estudios culturales (Bernheimer 1995; Spivak 2003). Además, este cambio ha permitido que el área de conocimiento, proveniente de las humanidades, dialogue con las ciencias sociales⁴. Por su parte, la ineludible llegada del feminismo no ha estado exenta de tensiones y resistencias que han derivado, como mostraremos, en la situación actual de los estudios ibéricos. Estos, al relacionarse con otras áreas de estudio se alejan del riesgo de ser una mera continuidad o “reencarnación” del hispanismo más problemático en términos de dominación de un idioma, una cultura y una epistemología sobre las demás (Casas 2019, 25).

Nos encontramos, por tanto, en un momento crítico en el que los estudios ibéricos y el feminismo o bien se instauran como una unión natural, por derecho propio, o bien se marginan como un campo particular, en el mejor de los casos, o en un vínculo artificial, en el peor. No hay que olvidar que el feminismo ha argumentado frecuentemente que su incursión en la academia no se trata de un objeto de estudio sino de una mirada, una lente violeta con la que “mirar el mundo”⁵. A su vez requiere de unas prácticas académicas libres de opresión, lo que suele desembocar en conflictos dentro de ámbitos académicos jerarquizados en los que existen tradiciones patriarcales y de dominación que son incompatibles con una ética feminista (Ahmed 2017, 203-217). Por ello, el feminismo no se centra en temáticas o metodologías determinadas, sino que es una perspectiva crítica trans-disciplinaria, una visión o una idea sobre cómo los conceptos académicos y los métodos de investigación necesitan modificarse y aplicarse para contribuir a la consecución de la igualdad de género en la sociedad. O, como Joan Scott (1986) lo definió, es una categoría de análisis histórico útil que puede ser considerada por otras disciplinas y campos de conocimiento.

Fariña Busto y Suárez Briones reclaman que hay una necesidad de incorporar masivamente las cuestiones de género en nuestras universidades. Esto significa “movilizar, desplazar, reorganizar el conocimiento” (2016, 583)⁶. Por ello, esto requiere repensar algunas de las bases de las disciplinas o campos de estudio más institucionalizados. Sin embargo, como sabemos “los estudios de género no implican necesariamente una investigación feminista” (2016, 581)⁷. La práctica feminista es necesariamente una práctica consciente, comprometida y activa, por lo que la implementación de programas feministas dentro de los grados universitarios es esencial para

⁴ Acotar las humanidades y las ciencias sociales con límites precisos puede ser una tarea complicada ya que hay disciplinas que comparten marcos teóricos y metodologías comunes. Sin embargo, para este artículo nos ceñiremos a la distinción y división que realiza la ANECA (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación de España) donde ubica la historia, filosofía, arte, filología y lingüística en la rama de conocimiento de arte y humanidades, y el derecho, ciencias económicas, ciencias empresariales, ciencias de la educación, ciencias del comportamiento y las ciencias sociales en la rama de las ciencias sociales y jurídicas.

⁵ La metáfora de usar “gafas violetas” para mirar el mundo para referirse al despertar de una conciencia feminista que nos permite analizar e interpretar todo aquello que nos circunda poniendo el foco en las desigualdades derivadas de las categorías binarias de sexo-género se ha utilizado popularmente desde inicios de siglo después de que la autora Gemma Lienas lo utilizase en su libro juvenil *El diario violeta de Carlota* (2001).

⁶ Cita original: “mobilizing, displacing, reorganizing knowledge”.

⁷ Cita original: “gender studies do not necessarily imply feminist research”.

impulsar la igualdad de género y disminuir la injusticia a nivel social. Sin embargo, esta perspectiva será más eficiente aplicada de una manera interdisciplinaria a todas las áreas de estudio que de una manera segregada en un curso o asignatura aparte. De lo contrario, se seguirá interpretando lo “universal y neutral” dentro de parámetros tradicionalmente patriarcales mientras que lo denominado como “femenino” será considerado como una minoría “Otra”, un complemento a los estudios literarios, fílmicos o artísticos con mayúsculas, un añadido violeta para señalar y celebrar los días 8 de marzo sin mayor repercusión y sin verdadero poder disruptivo. Sara Ahmed lo explica, apuntando la falta de diversidad en el espacio académico, utilizando la metáfora del muro en la que describe las citas como ladrillos académicos: “cuando estas prácticas se convierten en hábitos, los ladrillos forman muros” (Ahmed 2017, 204). Ahmed señala el racismo y sexismo en la práctica citacional, no solo entendida como aquellas personas nombradas en textos escritos – o estudiadas en los programas de las asignaturas universitarias podríamos añadir – también incluye a las personas que son invitadas o que hablan en actos circunscritos en el ámbito académico.

Por tanto, siendo un movimiento interdisciplinario, internacional e interseccional (pero también indisciplinado, en el sentido de que critica las jerarquías del conocimiento y algunas de las prácticas institucionales ampliamente instauradas en la academia), el objetivo de este artículo es apuntar las sinergias y dificultades que actualmente se presentan en la integración de una perspectiva feminista a los estudios ibéricos.

2. El feminismo en el contexto comparatista ibérico

El feminismo entró en la academia en los años setenta en los países anglosajones, pero no fue hasta alrededor de los años noventa cuando se realizaron la mayor parte de las investigaciones, lo cual desencadenó en el estudio de cómo el feminismo podría impactar en disciplinas tradicionales como, por ejemplo, los estudios literarios. Gayatri Spivak llegó a denominar el feminismo en 1990 como el movimiento con el mayor potencial radical dentro de la crítica literaria (Spivak 1990, 118)⁸ y, en 1994, se publicó el primer libro que valoraba el impacto que la crítica feminista podía aportar a los estudios literarios, *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, editado por Margaret R. Higonet. Asimismo, es destacable el trabajo realizado por Robyn Warhol desde 1989 al aplicar las teorías feministas (y recientemente teorías queer también) al ámbito de la narratología⁹.

En la Península, las investigaciones feministas comenzaron a desarrollarse en la década de los ochenta tanto en Portugal (Santos, Lopes, Vieira y Ferreira 2022, 1), como en el Estado español (pudiendo tomar de referencia en este territorio la inauguración del Instituto de la Mujer en 1983). Fueron apareciendo centros, seminarios y grupos que produjeron una tímida institucionalización de las investigaciones feministas en las universidades públicas a través de másteres, y centros y grupos

⁸ Cita original: “feminism as the movement with the greatest radical potential within literary criticism”.

⁹ El libro *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* editado junto a Susan S. Lanser en 2015 se considera una publicación fundamental en el campo de estudios.

de estudio aislados, sobre todo en el ámbito de las ciencias sociales¹⁰. Un hito significativo en la evolución de estos estudios en la Península fue la creación del primer programa de doctorado en género en 1994 en la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras en la Universidad de Oviedo, impulsado por dos filólogas y dos historiadoras (Quintanal 2024). En Portugal, un año después, se inauguró el primer máster sobre Estudios de las Mujeres en la Universidade Aberta (Santos, Lopes, Vieira y Ferreira 2022b). No obstante, durante estas cuatro décadas, los estudios feministas se han mantenido como un campo de conocimiento anecdótico o, a lo sumo, complementario en los programas y guías docentes¹¹.

Sin embargo, y más allá de lo que sucede en las universidades, el feminismo ha despertado recientemente de manera intensa en las sociedades ibéricas, concienciando sobre la necesidad de revisar y atender a la dominación patriarcal sistémica que se perpetúa con brutales actos de violencia o mediante actos más sutiles conocidos como “micromachismos” en todas las esferas de la vida social¹². Salir a las calles y reclamar la igualdad entre géneros ha producido importantes cambios en áreas extremadamente masculinistas y patriarcales y esferas desde las que se mantiene y potencia simbólicamente la división de sexos y la construcción genérica de manera muy clara. Las marchas masivas dentro de las manifestaciones del 8M, que incluyeron huelgas históricas como la celebrada en el Estado español en el 2018 o la celebrada en Portugal en 2019; los movimientos dentro del fútbol como la ola que surgió contra los abusos sexuales después de que la selección española de fútbol femenino denunciase la agresión a la futbolista Jenni Hermoso por parte del expresidente de la Real Federación de Fútbol española durante la celebración de la Copa Mundial

¹⁰ En la actualidad parece ser una tendencia que continúa. En Portugal, existen tres programas de doctorado y cuatro másteres. De todos los artículos, libros, capítulos de libros, tesis y actas de congresos producidos en estos marcos formativos, el área disciplinar del primer autor o autora es mayoritariamente en sociología (42%). En el caso de los trabajos dentro de los estudios literarios y lingüísticos (8%), historia (7%) y filosofía (7%) vemos como la suma de su producción baja a casi la mitad con respecto al anterior (Santos, Lopes, Vieira y Ferreira 2022, 5). En el Estado español los datos no difieren mucho de lo que sucede en Portugal. En la búsqueda en la página web de la ANECA (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación de España), en su buscador de formación se puede rastrear a través de las palabras clave “feminismo”, “mujeres” y “género” un total de cuarenta titulaciones entre másteres y programas de doctorado. La ANECA coloca en la rama de artes y humanidades once de ellos (27,5%) pero, atendiendo a los resultados, muchas de estas titulaciones contienen en su nombre palabras como “ciudadanía”, “agentes de igualdad” o “políticas de igualdad” lo que puede indicar que los campos de estudio son en realidad áreas como la sociología o el trabajo social. Si fuese este el caso, el porcentaje de programas del área de las artes y humanidades bajaría considerablemente (a un 7-8%). En la rama de ciencias de la salud nos encontramos tres titulaciones (7,5%) y en la de ciencias sociales y jurídicas, veintitrés (57,5%). Por último, quedarían tres entradas que este organismo coloca en ramas genéricas de doctorado. En cualquier caso, a pesar de los posibles errores y sin ánimo de ser exhaustivas, se observa que la mayoría de los estudios no se ubican en el área de las humanidades, lo que puede denotar el desinterés o la poca imbricación que el feminismo ha suscitado en disciplinas en las que las metodologías y marcos teóricos comparatistas son fundamentales.

¹¹ Consideramos fundamental notar que, a pesar de que puedan solaparse en múltiples casos, las autoras distinguimos entre estudios de género, estudios de la mujer y estudios feministas y que, en este artículo, nos referimos a estos últimos ya que entendemos que implican una mayor imbricación con el movimiento social y el activismo fuera de la academia.

¹² Se denomina “micromachismo” a los comportamientos “invisibles” de violencia que se generan en los espacios cotidianos y que sirven para mantener y perpetuar la dominación masculina en nuestras sociedades. Sobre el origen del término, ver Bonino Méndez 1998. La Real Academia Española lo define como “forma de machismo que se manifiesta en pequeños actos, gestos o expresiones habitualmente inconscientes” pero las autoras discrepan sobre la “inconsciencia” de dichos actos.

Femenina de Fútbol de Australia y Nueva Zelanda, propagando internacionalmente el hashtag #SeAcabó; las denuncias de los abusos sexuales cometidos por políticos, intelectuales o académicos españoles y portugueses que continuamente salen a la luz, tras el lema #MeToo o #Cuéntalo; o la creación de grupos de activistas por todo el territorio ibérico que han producido festivales, escuelas de pensamiento y grupos de trabajo, son claros ejemplos de ello.

A pesar del desbordante auge del feminismo en la sociedad que, como hemos mencionado, se ha convertido en la actualidad en una de las fuerzas y revoluciones más significativas en el conjunto de regiones ibéricas, esta perspectiva ha permeado tímidamente en los estudios comparatistas ibéricos y, solo a partir del cambio de milenio, se comenzó a investigar áreas anteriormente ocultas, así como a crear espacios y momentos de encuentro en congresos, cursos y publicaciones. Algunas contribuciones como *Perspetivas críticas sobre os estudos ibéricos* (Martínez Tejero y Pérez Isasi 2019) o *Women in Iberian Filmic Culture. A Feminist Approach to the Cinemas of Portugal and Spain* (Cordero-Hoyo y Soto-Vázquez 2020) o el coloquio *Ibéricas. Mulheres e mediação cultural no espaço peninsular* (Lisboa, noviembre 2022) se han producido vinculados al Centro de Estudios Comparatistas de la Facultad de Letras de la Universidad de Lisboa. También son destacables la colaboración desde 2012 entre la Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia y la Universidade de Lisboa en la publicación académica *Revista de escritoras ibéricas*, así como la edición de los volúmenes colectivos *A New History of Iberian Feminisms* (Bermúdez y Johnson 2018) o *New Approaches to Women Intellectuals of Early Twentieth-Century Iberia: Translation, Mediation, Collaboration* (Harkema y Scaramella, en prensa)¹³.

Lo que casi todas las obras referenciadas tienen en común es su reflexión en torno al potencial efecto que el cambio de paradigma metodológico y teórico, desde una visión feminista, podría producir en los estudios comparados ibéricos. También es destacable la influencia de la academia anglófona en los marcos interpretativos, el idioma y las editoriales de publicación. Nos encontramos, por tanto, ante la apertura de un nuevo enfoque, lo que significa que, en este camino, aún se están sentando las bases de qué es y qué significa aplicar los feminismos en el comparatismo ibérico, preguntándonos incluso si en este momento se dan las circunstancias que permitan y aseguren la perspectiva y la práctica feminista en esta área de conocimiento y en esta región, específicamente. Por ello, en los próximos apartados profundizaremos sobre las sinergias y las posibles fricciones que pueden emerger.

3. Sinergias entre el comparatismo y el feminismo

Ampliando lo arriba expuesto, algunas de las razones que encontramos para argumentar que fomentar el entrelazamiento del comparatismo ibérico y el feminismo puede dar como resultado una unión productiva son algunas similitudes que ambas áreas comparten. En primer lugar, no es posible unificar ni homogeneizar ninguna

¹³ Para una lista más exhaustiva de publicaciones relativas a los estudios ibéricos en la que se permite buscar por palabras clave, remitimos a la base de datos IStReS: <https://istres.letras.ulisboa.pt> (Gimeno Ugalde y Pérez Isasi 2017).

de las dos perspectivas. Existen múltiples comparatismos y entendimientos de la ibericidad de la misma manera que hay una pluralidad de feminismos y, a pesar de que dificulta la práctica y plantea desafíos y encendidos debates dentro de los propios campos de estudio, esta realidad los convierte en ámbitos mucho más autoconscientes sobre sus propios principios y métodos (Higonnet 1994, 5). Es decir, la heterogeneidad supone un obstáculo, pero aporta una enorme riqueza, al mismo tiempo.

En segundo lugar, el comparatismo ibérico y el feminismo trabajan y se construyen a partir del espacio liminar de la frontera (ver Cabo Aseguinolaza et al. 2010). Ambos abrazan el pluralismo y la interdisciplinariedad, por lo que el binarismo y los opuestos han sido enemigos comunes. Por esa razón, la traducción y la cooperación entre personas, comunidades, culturas y lenguajes dentro de un espectro variado y variable se ha visto en ambos campos como un objetivo a perseguir y una inevitabilidad fructífera. En el artículo *Feminismos y traducción: apuntes conceptuales y metodológicos para una traductología feminista transnacional*, de Olga Castro y María Laura Spoturno, se plantea que la traducción invita a pensar en ese espacio intermedio, “el cual, al estar siempre signado por diversas fronteras, obliga a la desnaturalización de las categorías patriarcales y a la construcción de nuevos sentidos” (2020, 23). Las autoras defienden que “la expansión epistemológica ha propiciado un giro en los estudios de traducción que está también relacionada con una mayor complejización de las categorías de análisis” (2020, 22).

Es decir, los estudios comparados abordan un enfoque transnacional yendo más allá de los estados – aunque sin conseguir escapar de su “alargada sombra”, siempre presente en los sistemas universitarios (Casas 2019, 33) – con realidades plurinacionales como la ibérica, algo que comparte el feminismo transnacional en el que estamos inmersas. En el artículo de Castro y Spoturno, se afirma que ese abordaje transnacional (aplicado en su caso a la traducción) es el que “permite articular y explicar los factores lingüísticos-discursivos, socio-culturales, geo/gltopolíticos e interseccionales” (2020, 27) que atraviesan, indiscutiblemente también en nuestro caso, la metodología y estudios ibéricos. A pesar de que los avances en los derechos de las mujeres se hayan conquistado en numerosas ocasiones a nivel estatal, es justamente esa dimensión que rompe con lo nacional lo que más puede aportar el comparatismo al feminismo académico ya que, de facto, los movimientos sociales feministas se han caracterizado por no limitarse a los territorios intrafronterizos ni respetar ningún tipo de delimitación nacional dentro de sus aprendizajes, lecturas, demandas o reivindicaciones. Como resultado, una metodología comparada y transnacional puede ser la herramienta más útil del feminismo para articular hipótesis y buscar resultados y conclusiones fuera de los límites conceptuales y teóricos marcados por las disciplinas establecidas según parámetros patriarcales (sirvan como ejemplo de comparatismo aplicado al ámbito ibérico las tesis doctorales de Cordero Hoyo 2022 o López Casado 2023).

Esta complejización también es visible en los estudios comparatistas ya que, en tercer lugar, el hecho de que estén abiertos a la intermedialidad en el sentido de que, desde hace tiempo, ya no se limitan a los estudios literarios, sino que han incluido entre sus áreas de estudio una diversidad de medios, objetos de estudio y

formatos, incorporando incluso elementos de la cultura popular¹⁴. Como ejemplo de esta apertura se puede observar los dos volúmenes de *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*. El primero, publicado en 2010 (Cabo Aseguinolaza et al. 2010), está totalmente dedicado al estudio de las literaturas, los idiomas y la oralidad, mientras que el segundo, publicado seis años después (Domínguez et al. 2016), contiene también estudios sobre otros medios audiovisuales como el cine, la televisión, el cómic o la radio. La “contaminación medial”, motivada parcialmente por el impacto de los estudios culturales, ha impulsado a los estudios comparados a alejarse de discursos androcéntricos y acercarse a metodologías feministas y LGBTQ (presentes en el citado segundo volumen en el artículo de Fariña Busto y Suárez Briones 2016).

Sin embargo, del mismo modo que oponer dos objetos de estudio, dos idiomas, dos territorios o dos culturas no es necesariamente comparatista, la aproximación feminista tampoco es simplemente estudiar a la “mujer” o las relaciones sociales construidas a partir de la diferencia sexo-genérica. Como se ha argumentado anteriormente, la perspectiva feminista no es solo una metodología, un marco conceptual o epistemológico, sino que incluye la forma de relacionarse con los objetos y sujetos de estudio, con los colegas e incluso con la forma de divulgación de los resultados (Martínez Samper 2023). Por ello, la pregunta que se plantea desde una parte del activismo es si la ética feminista es compatible con la universidad actual que empuja a producir de manera constante para competir en un entorno laboral precario, creando un circuito cerrado con exceso de textos y escasez de tiempo para la reflexión y la crítica (VV.AA. 2024). Mientras que, en el pasado, la universidad estaba aquejada de exclusión de ciertos sujetos y del monopolio de los discursos epistémicos y científicos, en la actualidad su endogamia viene derivada de las lógicas neoliberales de producción que se traducen a nivel institucional en rankings, índices de impacto y sistemas corruptos de citación¹⁵ y, a nivel personal, en competitividad, ansiedad y (auto-)explotación. El feminismo académico pasaría, por tanto, por romper con esas lógicas de dominación capitalistas y patriarcales e incorporar la práctica de los cuidados también a la práctica académica cotidiana en cualquier campo de estudios.

Si aceptamos que toda práctica académica es ideológica ya que el propio uso del lenguaje en su creación y transmisión de significado es aquello que genera el mundo que habitamos, –actualmente sumido en una cruenta guerra por el relato– entonces el posicionamiento abiertamente feminista sería un acto de desvelamiento del punto de partida discursivo. La autora brasileña Djamila Ribeiro (2017) afirma que todo

¹⁴ A pesar de que tiene muchos significados y definiciones, la intermedialidad puede ser vista como un desvío de un predecesor más establecido en las humanidades denominado estudios interartes. Sin embargo, mientras el último ha sido (y aún es) principalmente centrado en el estudio de los textos y la relación de la literatura con otras artes, la intermedialidad ha extendido el ámbito de interés y ha prestado atención también al contexto de producción, a la relación de los diferentes medios o nuevos fenómenos como la transmediabilidad (Rippl 2015; Bruhn, López-Varela Azcárate y Paiva Vieira 2024).

¹⁵ Sirva como ejemplo el reciente caso del rector de la Universidad de Salamanca, Juan Manuel Corchado, investigado por el Comité Español de Ética de la Investigación por haber impulsado una “fábrica de publicaciones y citas” para destacar como uno de los científicos más relevantes del panorama español (Martín-Martín y Delgado López-Cózar 2024, 55). Asimismo, el reconocimiento de las limitaciones de las métricas cuantitativas ha derivado en la modificación de los criterios de evaluación de la actividad investigadora en diciembre de 2023 por parte de la ANECA que añadirá métodos cualitativos para valorar las contribuciones de los solicitantes.

sujeto tiene un lugar de enunciación y es ahí donde nos encontramos, buscando cuál es el lugar de enunciación de los estudios comparados ibéricos que incluyan una perspectiva feminista. Es decir, el rechazar la existencia de una posición “neutral” en lo político, cultural o epistemológico nos conmina a comprometernos con nuestro activismo de manera abierta y clara que evidencie cuál es ese “lugar de enunciación”. Es importante encontrar esas coordenadas desde donde realizar la práctica académica, como se ha apuntado, pero también poder revelar cuales son. Esto, en ningún caso, podría significar la vulneración de unas metodologías científicas rigurosas y éticas.

En este aspecto, no ya el comparatismo sino el comparatismo ibérico por su atención a las cuestiones identitarias basadas en lo nacional, cultural y lingüístico y sus tensiones, se presenta como un lugar fecundo para incorporar también cuestiones identitarias referentes al sexo-género – a riesgo de que ese otro comparatismo, que permanece impermeable a los cambios, deje de ser relevante y, hasta pertinente, a nivel social. Son los estudios comparados, por tanto, más dialógicos y más sensibles a la existencia y las tiranteces derivadas de las jerarquías de poder –sean estas lingüísticas, culturales, nacionales, imperiales– dentro de la academia que otros campos de las humanidades y esto las convierte en un posible aliado de los feminismos. Por otro lado, como hemos expuesto, ambos ámbitos de estudio han recibido críticas similares desde el campo de los estudios poscoloniales sobre su ceguera ante las desigualdades raciales y los contextos históricos coloniales. Por ese motivo, ha sido necesario extremar la atención para mejorar y evitar continuar reproduciendo una visión parcial, blanca y eurocéntrica. Como señala Higonnet, “una queja común sobre la literatura comparada y la práctica feminista hoy es que ambos permanecen confinados dentro de las normas críticas de Occidente” (1994, 14)¹⁶. No obstante, tras años de resistencias, se ha realizado un trabajo imprescindible de adaptación para escuchar y superar sus limitaciones en ese sentido.

Incluso en el ámbito de las metodologías de análisis formal y textual, las contribuciones feministas al estudio de la representación y los efectos culturales que producen no pueden pasarse por alto:

Las exploraciones feministas de la construcción del sujeto individual femenino han cambiado dramáticamente los estudios sobre géneros [i.e, géneros literarios, o artísticos] siguiendo la forma en la que el género del protagonista dicta las reglas del juego. (Higonnet 1994, 9)¹⁷

El feminismo, en su encuentro con la teoría y crítica literaria (y posteriormente en otros medios expresivos como el cine), ha reproducido algunos de los debates esenciales del movimiento asociados a la pregunta de qué o quién es mujer, ¿se nace o se hace? Así, esta cuestión central se ha trasladado a la discusión sobre la existencia de una escritura o una mirada femenina que, de existir, habría que determinar si es natural o adquirida. Este es uno de los debates que ha atravesado al pensamiento feminista desde sus inicios (Beauvoir 2005; Butler 1990; Wittig 2006), pero más allá

¹⁶ Cita original: “a common complaint about comparative literature and feminist practice today is that they both remain confined within Western critical norms”.

¹⁷ Cita original: “Feminist explorations of the construction of the individual female subject have dramatically shifted genre study by tracing the way the gender of the protagonist dictates the rules of the game”.

del mismo y su evolución, parece pertinente y necesario seguir estudiando la autoría desde un punto de vista feminista¹⁸.

Por supuesto, la relación entre los estudios comparados y el feminismo no está exenta de contradicciones y fricciones. Mientras la literatura comparada está en un estado permanente de crisis (Spivak 2003; Hayes, Higgonnet, Spurlin 2009, 2), el feminismo está viviendo un momento álgido y, en los últimos años, ha ido creciendo en impacto social y cultural. De esta forma, el comparatismo puede aprovechar las lecciones ofrecidas por los estudios feministas: un cuestionamiento del sistema de producción cultural que también ha sido abordado por los estudios de las disidencias sexo-genéricas o los estudios poscoloniales. Tampoco se puede obviar que los estudios comparatistas pueden incorporar el feminismo para actualizarse y prestar atención a aspectos que atraen la atención y el interés del alumnado y de los fondos de financiación públicos y privados. Asimismo, los estudios feministas también pueden aprender de las metodologías comparatistas su foco en la búsqueda de los puntos en común, las especificidades de los casos de estudio y la tercera narrativa que emana al comparar dos realidades y enriquecer el discurso y las conclusiones. Además, el feminismo todavía necesita conseguir el reconocimiento completo e incondicional dentro de la academia como una escuela legítima / institucionalizada de pensamiento o como una perspectiva transversal a todas las ramas de conocimiento, lo que puede conseguirse dentro del área de humanidades, mediante su unión con los estudios comparatistas. Lo que también es conveniente concretamente para los estudios (culturales) ibéricos, tal y como señaló Sebastiaan Faber cuando apuntaba que la inclusión de las ciencias sociales y otras disciplinas de las humanidades revitalizarían esta área de estudio y le ofrecerían prestigio internacional (Faber 2008, 8).

4. El comparatismo feminista ibérico será descolonial o no será

Spivak anunciaba la muerte de la disciplina de la literatura comparada y proclamaba que había que ir más allá de la lusofonía, francofonía, teutofonía, anglofonía, etc (2003, 19-20), realizando, por tanto, una crítica imperialista a esta área de estudio. Esta afirmación, realizada hace más de 20 años en torno a la literatura comparada, resuena de alguna forma en los estudios comparados hoy en día. Específicamente deja preguntas aún sin responder en nuestro campo de estudio particular, y entre ellas, ¿se puede utilizar el comparatismo ibérico dentro de nuestras fronteras asumiendo la crítica descolonial? ¿Tiene actualmente el comparatismo ibérico académico la posibilidad de asumir la perspectiva y la práctica feminista incorporando las cuestiones éticas, materiales y políticas que eso implica?

Tal vez, en primer lugar, hay que escuchar a las teóricas feministas iberoamericanas como María Lugones (2003, 2008), Yuderkis Espinosa Miñoso (2022), María Galindo (2013) o Djamila Ribeiro (2017), entre otras muchas, que han apuntado, la construcción de sus propias identidades feministas más allá de lo ibérico. En ese

¹⁸ Podemos destacar en este ámbito el trabajo del grupo de investigación *Cos i Textualitats: autories i subjectivitats en construcció* de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona.

señalamiento, se ponen en evidencia las construcciones hegemónicas exportadas desde la Península en los ámbitos hispanohablantes y lusófonos. Es decir, estas autoras han reivindicado una existencia previa a las prácticas coloniales ibéricas, al mismo tiempo que las denuncian como agresiones directas a sus identidades, culturas, lenguajes y a sus cosmovisiones. Las autoras mencionadas, entre otras, evidencian la “colonialidad del género” en palabras de Lugones que, por un lado, apunta “al alcance de los cambios en la estructura social que fueron impuestos por los procesos constitutivos del capitalismo eurocentrado colonial / moderno” y después “la consideración del género como imposición colonial (...) cuestionando el uso del concepto ‘género’ como parte de la organización social” de las sociedades precolombinas (2008, 92-93). Estas cuestiones, aunque pueden parecer alejadas del asunto que nos concierne en este artículo, son críticas que tienen que resonar en el espacio ibérico. Entender cuáles son las identidades, culturas, lenguajes y cosmovisiones impuestas desde la academia occidental, identificar si ese tipo de relaciones jerárquicas define a sus miembros, investigar cómo han operado todas esas lógicas dentro de la Península o, incluso, analizar cómo las nuevas estructuras de poder han reconfigurado las relaciones intra y extra peninsulares, son líneas de investigación que habrá que recorrer desde diferentes áreas de estudio y que parece necesario incorporar desde una perspectiva feminista en los estudios comparados ibéricos.

Por otro lado, pero no menos importante que lo anterior, una cuestión que sobrevuela siempre que se plantean unos estudios comparados es entender cuál es el prisma común que les une y qué hace productiva esa comparación. En este sentido, Arturo Casas nos conmina a reflexionar sobre la “propia razón de ser de los estudios ibéricos: su admisibilidad, legitimidad, oportunidad y aplicabilidad” (2019, 25) sin dar nada por supuesto ni ignorar “las lógicas no siempre explícitas, de procedencia administrativo-académica, acuciadas por la necesidad del amparo que proporcionaría una red extensa y sólida de investigadores y docentes, o incitada por la obsolescencia de modelos académicos y metodológicos supuestamente superados” (2019, 26).

La respuesta más obvia en los estudios ibéricos es hablar del territorio, del *continuum* histórico y del imaginario cultural común, pero mirando más de cerca y teniendo en cuenta que una perspectiva feminista ibérica no es lo mismo que la narrativa del feminismo ibérico, podemos fijarnos en cómo se ha construido esta última a lo largo del tiempo para entender el peligro de la historia única (Adichie 2018), también dentro del feminismo. A pesar de que el concepto de feminismo ibérico no está profusamente trabajado, sí que ha habido aportaciones interesantes, tanto por lo que ponen de manifiesto como por las ausencias. Nos podemos remontar al libro *El feminismo ibérico* (Capmany 1970) como la primera aportación rastreada bajo este nombre y en donde no se incluía ni una sola palabra sobre el feminismo portugués. Mucho más recientemente, otra aportación capital para esta área, y ya mencionada en este artículo, ha sido *A New History of Iberian Feminisms*. Destaca en su título esa necesidad de volver a reconstruir la historia, a pesar de su escaso desarrollo. Y comienza así:

A New History of Iberian Feminisms es un relato de la actividad feminista y los escritos en todas las zonas de la península ibérica: las provincias vascas, las zonas de habla castellana, Cataluña, Galicia y Portugal (...). Hasta la fecha, el

pensamiento y los activismos feministas en la península ibérica han sido contados en narrativas que no tienen en cuenta los diversos entornos lingüísticos, políticos y culturales en los que se han desarrollado el pensamiento y las actividades feministas. Los análisis de la escritura feminista de las áreas geopolíticas ibéricas se entrelazan en una narrativa cohesiva que considera la interacción entre los diversos feminismos territoriales. En consonancia con las formulaciones recientes de los Estudios Ibéricos, este volumen entiende la península ibérica como una configuración cultural y literaria multilingüe en su complejidad. (Bermúdez y Johnson 2018, 3)¹⁹

Este volumen, a pesar de que reconoce que hay un compendio de realidades culturales diferentes en la Península, se basa específicamente en las diferencias lingüísticas para desentrañar las relaciones que se ejecutan en este territorio. Sin embargo, en los últimos años, se han levantado voces que señalan, una vez más, narrativas silenciadas. Han surgido discursos desde áreas donde no se esperaban o no se querían oír, y, utilizando un prisma descolonial, se han manifestado discursos feministas desde territorios como las Islas Canarias o Andalucía (Pérez Flores 2021, Gallego 2020). Y esto también es pertinente para el comparatismo. Es decir, el comparatismo ibérico, al aplicar una perspectiva feminista, debe entender que ésta va evolucionando a lo largo de los años. Así lo explica Pastora Filigrana desde su posición de gitana y andaluza: “[l]os ejes de opresión, consistente en ser mujer y pobre, se agudizan cuando los acompañan cuestiones étnicas o territoriales periféricas, como es el caso de habitar Andalucía” (*apud* Santos Gil 2019). Podemos hablar, por tanto, de que, igual que la perspectiva poscolonial ha afectado a todos estos nuevos feminismos, el feminismo también está afectando a los territorios ibéricos.

Larisa Pérez explicaba en una entrevista que le hicieron sobre el feminismo descolonial canario que hay una serie de cuestionamientos que hace la teoría descolonial y que hacen los feminismos, que son muy afines. Ambos han desafiado categorías que estaban muy arraigadas en la historia moderna. Así, pone de ejemplo la separación de lo público y lo privado, la separación de lo racional y lo sentimental, de lo científico y lo mágico. Estos dos campos, los estudios feministas y los estudios poscoloniales, a pesar de las fricciones y tensiones que se han suscitado el uno al otro (el primero por mantener lógicas occidentales y colonialistas, y los segundos por no desafiar ciertos pensamientos patriarcales) han encontrado áreas convergentes desde donde se nombran los feminismos indígenas, los feminismos negros y otros feminismos descoloniales: “hay una especie de convergencia en cuestionar un canon, que es un canon epistemológico, un canon que impone una cosmovisión del mundo que feministas y sujetos, digamos poscoloniales, están cuestionando juntos” (Pikara Magazine 2019).

¹⁹ Cita original: “A New History of Iberian Feminisms is an account of feminist activity and writing in all areas of the Iberian Peninsula – the Basque Provinces, the Castilian-Speaking areas, Catalonia, Galicia, and Portugal – (...). To date feminist thinking and activism in the Iberian Peninsula have been chronicled in narratives that do not take into account the diverse linguistic, political, and cultural milieux in which feminist thought and activity developed there. Analyses of feminist writing from the Iberian geopolitical areas are woven together in a cohesive narrative that considers the interaction between the several territorial feminisms. In consonance with the recent formulations of Iberian Studies, this volume understands the Iberian Peninsula as a multilingual cultural and literary configuration in its complexity”.

Precisamente la revisión de ese canon ha sido uno de los desafíos a los que se ha enfrentado la literatura comparada. Incluir todas esas lecturas y medios que habían sido obviados, esas perspectivas marginalizadas, desechadas y que cuestionaban la misma idea del canon, ha sido apuntado desde los años noventa en la academia americana (Bernheimer 1995, 44), gracias al encuentro con estas otras áreas de estudio. Lo cual ha generado más o menos resistencias desde entonces, evidenciando como elementos disruptores de la disciplina esos encuentros con el feminismo, los estudios poscoloniales o todas esas “literaturas menores”. Estas últimas fueron definidas por Deleuze y Guatari como aquellas literaturas que son escritas por una minoría, pero no entendidas como aquellas que tienen un lenguaje minoritario, sino dentro de un “lenguaje mayor”, como ellos lo denominan, donde todo es político en ellas y representan una enunciación colectiva (Deleuze y Guatari 1978, 28-44). Los filósofos franceses ponen de ejemplo la escritura en alemán de los judíos en Praga. En la Península podemos pensar bajo este término literaturas tan diferentes como las escritas por la comunidad gitana, la afrodescendiente, la comunidad LGTBIQ+ o incluso las mujeres.

En consecuencia, la perspectiva feminista actual puede retroalimentarse también de las críticas de las lecturas comparadas, como se anunciaba al inicio. El artículo “Compared to What? Global Feminism, Comparatism and the Master’s Tools”, de Susan Sniader Lancer (1994), nos advertía que el comparatismo podía suscitar cierta jerarquía sistémica, al igual que lo hace el feminismo occidental. La crítica que recogíamos al inicio de este apartado, propuesta por Spivak, que señalaba que había que ir más allá de determinados límites lingüísticos en el comparatismo, crítica que nacía desde una mirada feminista y poscolonial, puede tener diferentes lecturas e interpretaciones dentro del iberismo. Una propuesta, como la que está surgiendo desde perspectivas feministas y poscoloniales dentro del territorio ibérico, entendiendo las identidades y las claves culturales desde otros lugares, puede ser recogida por los estudios comparados. Por otro lado, los estudios comparados pueden ser aplicados también para comprender mejor la diversidad que brota dentro de las fronteras. A su vez, acudiendo a un modelo fractal, esto también nos puede llevar a pensar en la Península en clave de territorios periféricos dentro de Europa²⁰, refiriéndonos en mayor medida a cuestiones económicas o de infraestructura y no propiamente geográficas. Podemos tomar de referencia algunos aspectos de las industrias cinematográficas de estos dos países o las literarias en lenguas co-oficiales. Por ello, es fundamental determinar si la lectura que se hace de los distintos elementos ibéricos es en clave europea, trasatlántica, mediterránea, etcétera. Esta mirada compleja contribuye a no simplificar en estos momentos en los que los discursos polarizados circulan libremente.

²⁰ Para entender esa posición marginal dentro del continente, podemos referirnos al término peyorativo con el que se designaba a España y Portugal, entre otros países del sur de Europa, al inicio del milenio: PIGS (cerdos) que era el acrónimo resultante de juntar las iniciales de Portugal, Italia, Grecia y España (en inglés Spain) (Pozzi 2010).

5. Por tanto, comparatismo, estudios ibéricos y feminismo: ¿una óptima triangulación?

En conclusión, consideramos que la incorporación de una perspectiva y una práctica feminista al comparatismo ibérico dentro del ámbito de las humanidades no solo tiene sentido, dadas las múltiples sinergias que presentan ambos estudios dado su carácter plural y heterogéneo, transnacional y fronterizo, e intermedial, sino que, además, puede ser académicamente productivo. Los estudios comparados ibéricos tienen la oportunidad de subirse a una de las revoluciones más importantes que ha tenido la Península en este siglo XXI, siendo permeados por una realidad social, que es también una realidad transnacional. La perspectiva feminista, aunque no solo por ella, está permitiendo que ciertos territorios ibéricos puedan nombrarse, comenzando a ser nuevas piezas activas que tener en cuenta en estos estudios y que pueden aprovechar del comparatismo la posibilidad de dar explicación a realidades complejas. Apunta Casas la posibilidad de que

el comparatismo académico más tradicional –en buena medida hegemónico todavía, aquel en cuya epistemología no se integraron las vertientes políticas, identitarias e ideológicas aparentemente consustanciales al caso ibéricos, y por tanto tampoco sus conflictividades cruzadas– quizás haya dicho todo lo que estaba capacitado para decir. (Casas 2019, 30-31)

Lo que tememos es que las tendencias reaccionarias y de extrema derecha que están avanzando y gobernando regiones europeas en los últimos años puedan conseguir que en algunas instituciones académicas ibéricas exista una resistencia a redefinirse, poniendo en duda la fructífera unión entre feminismo y comparatismo. Este viraje conservador llevaría a continuar tratando como debate abierto lo que ya se defendió hace treinta años y se podría aplicar frases escritas en 1994 por Higgonet:

algunas instituciones comparatistas van a la zaga de la gama de innovadoras prácticas individuales; las revistas especializadas a menudo refuerzan un limitado canon eurocéntrico de escritores y críticos, al igual que lo hacen muchas listas de lecturas de los departamentos²¹ (1994, 5).

Cada vez que un estudiante de grado, máster o doctorado en cualquier institución ibérica tenga que defender la pertinencia de un marco teórico feminista o de género como una categoría útil de análisis, la academia demostrará su incapacidad para acompañar las demandas sociales contemporáneas y la inevitabilidad del interés de los y las jóvenes por ellas.

Para acabar, consideramos fundamental subrayar la importancia de los estudios comparatistas ibéricos y en la península ibérica, en un contexto en el que la capacidad de leer, analizar y comprender profundamente textos es cada vez menor. Asimismo, para que la academia ibérica continúe siendo un espacio relevante y a la

²¹ Cita original: “some comparative institutions lag behind the innovative range of individual practices; dedicated journals often reinforce a narrow Eurocentric canon of writers and critics, as do many departmental reading lists”.

cabeza de nuestras sociedades en cuestiones como la igualdad, la justicia social y la defensa de los valores democráticos, las universidades deberían incorporar el feminismo como uno de los movimientos que más han movilizadado a sus sociedades en los dos últimos siglos. De esta forma, favorecerá la conexión con la ciudadanía que, con una desconfianza creciente en las instituciones, parece distanciarse de la ciencia para abrazar las pseudociencias; y del comparatismo y los espacios intermedios y relacionales para abrazar la polarización.

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“Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d’autres?”: Attention and Lists in Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT:

Taking a short quotation from *Le Mariage de Figaro* by Beaumarchais as motto, this article reflects on important issues of comparative literature, namely, questions of inclusion and exclusion in the delimitation of the discipline’s boundaries. In the context of recent discussions on the shifting role and modes of attention in contemporary society (and following Bernard Stiegler), it argues that the issue can be seen in broad terms as a matter of attention and its techniques, and that comparative literature can be understood as both the practical and theoretical study of attention. Finally, it briefly considers the pivotal role of listmaking within the material productions of comparative literature (canons, syllabi, anthologies) as manifestations of this attentional identity.

RESUMO:

A partir de uma curta citação de *Le Mariage de Figaro*, de Beaumarchais, tomada como lema, o presente artigo desenvolve uma reflexão sobre questões importantes da literatura comparada, nomeadamente, questões de inclusão e exclusão na delimitação das fronteiras da disciplina. No âmbito de discussões recentes acerca do papel e modos de atenção na sociedade contemporânea, propõe-se que o problema pode ser entendido, em termos gerais, como uma questão de atenção e suas técnicas, e que a literatura comparada pode ser assim tida como o estudo prático e teórico da atenção. Por fim, considera-se brevemente o papel central da lista nas produções materiais da literatura comparada (cânones, *syllabi*, antologias) enquanto manifestações desta identidade atencional.

KEYWORDS:

canon; anthology; crisis; catalogue; boundary

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

cânone; antologia; crise; catálogo; fronteira

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1. Why these things and not others?

IN THE FIFTH ACT of Beaumarchais' *Le Mariage de Figaro*, the play's namesake launches himself into a lengthy monologue; pondering on the seemingly random and chaotic nature of human recollection and thought, he asks the world a difficult set of questions: "Ô bizarre suite d'événements ! Comment cela m'est-il arrivé ? Pourquoi ces choses et non pas d'autres ? Qui les a fixées sur ma tête?" (258).¹

Why these things and not others? The question is decidedly vast and general. Yet, I believe it to encapsulate particularly well the common thread uniting the crises and ruptures with which the field of comparative literature has contended over the past century. "Why these things and not others" is, in other words, a good starting point to think about such issues in a general way and across their distinctions. By analysing this shared, central, question, I do not mean to disregard them in their particularities, but only to attempt to hone in on something important about comparative literature as a discipline. In this article, departing from the problem of "why these things and not others", I will consider the nature of the question in the context of two concepts which are at the heart of its (our) practices: attention and listmaking.

Let us dissect Figaro's question briefly; it includes two different questions. "Why these things" makes one ponder on a justification for a particular grouping or assemblage with a high degree of autonomy: "these" things, and they alone, should be sufficient to explain why these and not others are now presented before us. "Why not others" adds a twist, by gesturing at things outside the assemblage, prompting us to make comparisons, detecting differences and similarities which disturb the very nature of the rubric "things". The troubling moment arrives when "those other things" (i.e. not "these things") are intuited to be similar enough to have warranted inclusion into "these things" after all. The question always requires two distinct answers – if answered honestly.

Starting from the second answer, and taking two notable examples, writers such as Gayatri Spivak or René Wellek illustrate well the "why not others" side of the question. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak (2003) aims to "[expand] the scope of Comparative Literature" into its "*proper*" form, that is, the bringing together of comparative literature and area studies "in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global South but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when the maps were made" (13-15). Wellek's case, in his own words in a 1959 essay, similarly points to "those" things, asking:

why should, say, the influence of Walter Scott in France be considered "comparative" literature while a study of the historical novel during the Romantic age be "general" literature? Why should we distinguish between a study of the influence of Byron on Heine and the study of Byronism in Germany? The attempt to *narrow* "comparative literature" to a study of the "foreign trade" of literatures is surely unfortunate. (162-163)

¹ "Oh strange sequence of events! How did this happen to me? Why these things and not others? Who fixated them in my mind?" This and all other translations by the author.

Such questions have always paved the way for (and kept the vitality of) comparative literature as a discipline, by addressing things erroneously outside its scope. Accordingly, leaving things out entails lack of “propriety” and risks “narrowness”. Yet, such expansions also presume a risk (whether real or imaginary) of the dilution of what was already there, so that concern over the thinning of the discipline’s identity becomes another recurring critical theme.

Accordingly, some have indeed argued for narrowness; Harold Bloom’s *Western Canon* (1994) is a famous case of an answer strictly according to the first half of the question, one which “seek[s] to isolate the qualities that made these authors canonical” (1). Claiming to have no interest in “mimic[king] cultural wars”, Bloom limits his preface and explanation of “the organisation of this book” to elaborating on his “choice of these twenty-six writers from among the many hundreds in what once was considered to be the Western Canon” (1). Bloom’s disregard for “those” things can be taken as poor or thoughtless – it is not my goal to dwell into its many critiques but to underline the nature of the issue as a double-bind: just as readers of Bloom are urged to remember that one can never fully justify the anthological effort on the first half of Figaro’s musing, so should any future collectors take notice of the necessity to put a limit to one’s effort somewhere where the exercise can be finished; at that point, offering some justification for “these things” might become more urgent than arguing for further “others”.

In both cases, justifications and theorisations serve the need to make choices (which can certainly be draped in political or ethical considerations seeking to masquerade them as non-choices). But all such arguments state the basic assumption that one must now forego something in order to address something else, a truism close in spirit to Richard Rorty’s general evaluation of the “so called ‘crises’” of comparative literature: in his words, they “move the apparently peripheral to the center and the apparently central to outer darkness” (66). When the time comes to draw a new canon, a new syllabus, a new anthology, the issue remains the same: overabundance and the tension, as William Marx described it, “entre le choix et la totalité”:

Est-il possible par exemple de concilier la tentation anthologique, d’une part, qui incite à étudier et à célébrer ce qu’il y a de plus beau et de plus remarquable dans la littérature, avec la mission épistémique, d’autre part, laquelle consiste à décrire le réel de la façon la plus précise et la plus complète (...)? (Marx, 2020)²

It is not surprising, but perhaps only inevitable, that for an extensive and careful scholarly project such as the Portuguese three-volume anthology *Literatura-Mundo Comparada, Perspectivas em Português*, Helena Buescu chances upon a formulation as close to Figaro’s as one could get, while underlining its inevitability:

Thus, the question of selection (*inclusion* vs. *exclusion*) is inevitable in this context, and arises not only to those responsible for the gesture and result of the anthology, but also to those who read or peruse it. The question “why this text and not another?” is often formulated in a much more direct way: “how is it

² “Is it possible, for example, to reconcile the anthological temptation, on one hand, which encourages studying and celebrating the most beautiful and remarkable aspects of literature, with the epistemic mission, on the other hand, which consists of describing reality in the most precise and complete way (...)?”

possible to not include...?" Such questions are, as mentioned before, inevitable, with answers that are anything but obvious. (Buescu 2013, 77)³

And what happens with certain books or certain authors will tend to happen with truly destabilising objects, in a logical sequence which I do not believe to be so different in nature as to require a complete reworking of the basic assumptions of a discipline in “eternal crisis”: “other” texts paved the way for “other” methodologies, alien formats and media, etc. The answer, in any case, always redounds to a “why not ...”, rejoined by further enlargement of previous horizons.

The remainder of this article is not dedicated to the delineation of a concrete answer to this issue – if there is any. Instead, I will be foregrounding two concepts which I believe are crucial in addressing it in the first place and, thus, in understanding comparative literature/comparative studies as a possibility: the notion of *attention* and the practice of *listing*. Both are intimately connected with the constraints of choice, inclusion *versus* exclusion, and totality; attention and lists act as *filters* to the Real. While the first is eminently theoretical, philosophical, or concerning psycho- or neurological phenomena, the second suggests the concreteness of technique, technology, and the materialisation of thought, as well as being ubiquitous in the academic production which substantiates theories like those described above: anthologies, canons, and syllabi, precisely. In the past two decades, both of these terms have undergone enough scrutiny to question such a sharp divide: can we not speak of techniques of attention? Are its ties to contemporary technological objects which seek to manipulate and engender it not evident? Regarding lists, enough theory has been produced since Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists* to elevate it above “mere” output: the requirements of making lists, as we now well know, come with their own philosophical and epistemological baggage.

2. Attention

It seems trivial to note that “why these things and not others” is a question of attention, which could be rephrased as “why pay attention to these things and not pay attention to others”. Any proposal seeking to understand the preconditions for privileging certain objects of study over others must grapple, at some point, with the idea of attention. Saussy (2006) suggests it directly, when he proposes comparative literature as the study of the quality of “literariness”, claiming that this object of study “has a lot to do with focusing, giving disproportionate attention to small things” (32). But what selection does not? The word disproportionate strikes us as unnecessary: attention seems to be all about disproportionality – whether warranted or not.

Once agreed that posing the issue of “why these things and not others” relates directly to the idea of attention, understanding what attention is (or at least agreeing

³ Original text: “A questão da selecção (incluir vs. excluir) é pois neste contexto inevitável, e coloca-se não apenas a quem é responsável pelo gesto e pelo resultado da antologia, mas também a quem a lê ou percorre. A pergunta ‘porquê este texto e não outro?’ é muitas vezes formulada de modo mais directo: ‘como é que é possível não incluir...?’. São perguntas como disse inevitáveis, com respostas que são tudo menos óbvias”.

on one meaning) should be our first task, since answering the “why” requires us to think about the origins of attention, the means to capture and form it. As suggested above, we easily find echoes of the matter of choice and totality, or choice and dilution, in inquiries concerning attention itself:

The language of “information overload” starts to feel relevant, and the language of “attention” becomes a way of expressing concern about filtering the flows. In this context, “attention” functions as a tool for managing the excess; to be attentive is to be able to hold on to what needs to be held, and to achieve this under conditions in which it feels increasingly difficult to do exactly this. (Burnett and Smith 2023, 9)

The deployment of attention as a filter against the impression of overabundance feels commonsensical: we understand it when we ask someone to pay attention to us amongst other distractions, or when we perceive the ability to pay attention itself as being under threat, for example, by social media. Were we inclined to be tendentious, we might draw parallels between this basic description and what we have vaguely portrayed as the permanent crisis of comparative literature: perhaps “increasingly difficult” conditions, which in Burnett and Smith refer to drastic developments in media consumption, map onto that sense of increasing disciplinary dilution, caused by a perceived “overflow” or “excess” of potential objects of study, potential connections, potential comparisons. It seems more interesting to me, however, to agree that some form of “filtering” permeates both attention techniques in general and the concrete disciplinary methods and *praxis* of comparative literature, as when, again, Saussy describes “world literature and translation [as] *filtering techniques*” (14). The theory of comparative literature would then task itself “with expressing concern about filtering” as well as with the development of appropriate filtering tools. Comparative literature becomes the study of attention itself, as a direct reflection on its techniques and dilemmas and as meta-reflexive analysis of its own production.

Most approaches to the idea of attention-as-filter assume that attention can undergo redirection if one so chooses – that attention is subject to will. Katherine Hayles’ distinction between “deep” and “hyper” attention is one popular example of this view, accurately portraying a commonsensical and contemporary-minded approach to the subject. Her oft-quoted 2007 article describes the current ongoing transition – a generational shift – from deep to hyper attention: hyper attention is characterised by a rapid switching between different tasks, multiple information streams, high-level of stimulation, and a low-tolerance for boredom. Deep attention, on the other hand, is described as the ability to concentrate on a single object for a long period of time. It is also, in Hayles’ words, associated with the Humanities: the example given is the reading of a Dickens novel – giving attention to one thing for a long duration. The two modes of hyper and deep attention not only contrast but are in permanent tension. According to Hayles, if the passage from deep to hyper attention constitutes a generational shift, then new tools must be developed to accommodate this shift as synthesis, rather than fully rejecting the latter.

Hayles’ pedagogy-minded proposal has two problems if we wish to use it as a model to understand attention in comparative academic practices. It describes something which we might characterise as *active* attention, particularly where it concerns

the kind of attention which the Humanities supposedly prefer: “deep”, committed, deliberate.

Firstly, we might ask ourselves whether comparative literature is well served by an *active* model of attention at all, which measures “depth” through an isolated focus on one single thing, for a long period of time. It seems to me that proposals in the style of William Marx’s (which I take as representative of a generous and wide understanding of the discipline) point in a different direction, according to which the answer to “why these things and not others” demands us to become more prudent, modest, and doubtful – passive, even, rather than active. In this light, Marx first quotes from Paul Valéry, who once explained “que l’objet de ce cours n’est pas d’enseigner, mais d’éveiller (...) non pas de résoudre des problèmes, mais d’en énoncer”, to conclude that comparative literature is “une démarche interrogative” (2020).⁴ Here, the one thing to which attention must be directed for a long period of time becomes too elusive to assuage any concern.

Secondly, all the critics who argue for more openness, for a wider understanding of comparativism and its possible objects of study, might occasionally sound too urgent. But fear of dilution should not stop us from seeing such calls also as generous and, in this sense, one should be wary of being led towards any criticism of such calls which would cast them as “hyper”, dispersing through too-many avenues, deficient or worse, to paraphrase Hayles, not characteristic of the Humanities. This is an old critique of comparative literature, which time has proved ill-advised – one of its main beneficial offers to the Humanities can perhaps be stated as the sincere belief in the possibility of depth in/through multiplicity.

A more productive understanding of attention can be found in Bernard Stiegler’s work. Stiegler agrees with Hayles on the urgency of a generational shift in how attention is being manipulated by media development – if anything, Stiegler emphasises the perversion of such developments. However, mindful of the etymological connection between “attention” and the French “*attendre*”, Stiegler describes a different process, grounded on Husserlian phenomenology, in which attention is not something that one *does*, but rather “the flow of consciousness” (2010, 18). It is an interplay of *primary retentions*, which belong “to the present of perception” (Stiegler 2014, 34) and *secondary retentions*, in which memory and imagination take an active role:

In the flux of what appears to your consciousness, you make selections which are personal retentions; these selections are made through *the filters of secondary retentions* which are held in your memory and which constitute your experience. (52)

Secondary retentions are the filter of the continuum of experience, selecting and constituting experiences from the primary retentions, the “present of perception”. The projection of “protentions” – anticipation – resulting from the accumulation of primary and secondary retentions is what constitutes attention.

For Stiegler, attention is not concerned with sustained dedication, but rather the cultivation of a perpetual state of open readiness, a “waiting for” which, “even if

⁴ “the goal of this course is not to teach, but to awaken (...) not to solve problems, but to enunciate them. [...] an interrogative approach”.

it forgets it is doing so”, attends to “the infinity of the object whose mirror image is projected back as infinite being” (2010, 96). His favoured image for this mode of attention is the weaving of a web or fabric, formed by the flux of primary and secondary retentions, and protensions upon which we delineate motifs and designs. Answering directly to Hayles, Stiegler argues that the depth of attention has nothing to do with duration, but rather with the length of the connections activated in this matrix. (80)

If there is any value to be found in the proposition that comparative literature might wish to dedicate itself to a mode of perpetual doubting and interrogation, a projection of its real object into a permanent “elsewhere” (as Marx put it, “la lecture (...) *par-delà* la littérature”)⁵, and, indeed, the promotion and cultivation of this state as a necessary element within the Humanities in general, then it must gently, but firmly, propose an answer to Figaro’s question by recasting attention in a manner closer to Stiegler’s proposal. In the final section of the article, I want to give shape to this theoretical argument, namely, to point to a mode of discourse which comparative literature privileges, and which is often at the outset of “why these and not others” accusations: the list. I argue that attention as understood by Stiegler can manifest itself via practices of listmaking, and that nurturing and understanding such techniques should be one of the main aims of those seeking to nourish the vitality of comparative literature.

3. Listmaking

A general observation on the relationship between lists and attention (besides the fact that both act like filters) feels commonsensical: listmaking during a meeting, for example, can be a form of paying attention to relevant information. In such cases, the list supports an active mode of attention to things outside the list itself: we pay attention to the meeting, not to the list. However, lists can also promote unique acts of attention, capable of engendering objects particular to listmaking. Two such views are here worthy of consideration.

In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost claims that “lists of objects without explanation can do the philosophical work of drawing our attention toward them [objects] with greater attentiveness” (45). Bogost claims that lists (especially lists of *things*) call our attention to the fact that any *one* thing is composed of many things. Moreover, juxtaposing items without connecting them in hierarchical or chronological relations, democratizes them into a sort of “flat ontology” (17). Not only would the list show the world’s inherent complexity, but also that each item deserves a similar hierarchical status. The list, Bogost suggests, holds a levelling power, capable of de-hierarchising a tendentiously ordered world by redirecting attention to its listed constituents.

In another approach, Jan Alber emphasises the formal nature of this effect, observing that solely by virtue of their unusual construction (among which is the same “disconnectedness” mentioned by Bogost), lists “draw attention to themselves as linguistic constructs” (355). Subscribing to a tradition which prizes the fact that

⁵ “reading (...) beyond literature”.

lists are “produites par des opérations essentiellement graphiques”, and that a list, as such, “ne contient pas que des mots ou des items assimilables à des mots”⁶ (Sève 2010, 23 and 17), for Alber the list becomes a method of disconnecting referent from reference, of drawing our attention to the artificiality of language.

The ensuing difference between Bogost and Alber is markedly stark: things *versus* words, referent or reference. Nevertheless, both agree that the list *itself* draws attention and promotes a particularly distinct mode of engaging with its contents. The list changes how we look at what is listed. One might hold that the linguistic artificiality of the list reveals certain qualities about its object; one might also agree that certain objects require a distinct mode of linguistic expression for their accurate representation – sides of the same coin, one might (rightly) rejoin. What happens, then, when the thing being listed is Literature?

These aspects of the technique of listing would alone carry interesting consequences regarding our discipline as the task of manipulating attentions, often by recourse to list formats. A third observation on listing brings it even closer to the discipline, albeit at a more immediate and superficial level: lists and comparative literature have a privileged relationship, mainly due to the tendency to substantiate the former’s theory into list forms such as canons, syllabi, or anthologies. Such fortuitous propinquity arises, in my view, from several qualities of lists themselves, of which the most decisive might just be the sheer simplicity of the gesture of adding something to a list – so simple as to be almost gratuitous, even if the consequences might be tremendous. In a field whose critical discourse has had as a main concern the possibility of switching between the peripheral and the central, outside and side, this simplicity is both prone to complexity and yet highly desirable. Any technique which could simplify the theoretical struggles of inclusion would be welcomed with open arms.

Hugo Meltzl’s 1877 “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature” showcases all such processes particularly well, by the surprising inclusion of the Hungarian language (and others) in the otherwise stable list of “major” languages for which comparative literature should care (45). Regardless of the particularities of his personal education and upbringing which justify this inclusion, the title page of the journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* – of which he was a founder – still holds power to surprise, when we look at the ten different translations, all together with the non-Indo-European Hungarian, in red uppercase, no less. It states the argument clearly, which needs no theoretical elaboration in prefaces or introductions, but is instead written into the very structure and technique of the list itself: the inclusion (or removal, for that matter) of another translation can be done simply by *doing* it, graphically, in the cover. In any list, the question “why these things and not others” is difficult to answer because it is so easy to pose.

⁶ “produced by operations essentially graphical”; “does not contain but words or items akin to words”.



Figure 1: Detail from the title page of the 1886 edition of Meltzl’s journal. The languages are, in order, Latin, German, French, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, English, Russian, Swedish, Dutch, Icelandic, and, finally, Hungarian.

Meltzl’s “democratic” project of inclusion must rely on both halves of the attentional particularities of lists mentioned above. In an *operational* sense, it relies on that linguistic arbitrariness, which opens the door for the play of juxtaposition and combinations which, without the straightjacket of chronology, hierarchy, or causality, allows for open circulation between inside and outside. *Politically*, however, the “elevation” of Hungarian into the list of “major” languages takes place due to the ontological-flattening effect described by Bogost. In a sort of academic *sprezzatura*, it is an almost duplicitous double-gesture which, once again, makes dramatic statements with seemingly “simple” operations. One might pause and demand the missing justification, but we all understand the hidden agreement by which once two texts or two authors are entered into the same list, they tend to acquire a similar stature.

Such gestures and techniques comprise a crucial distinction between lists and, for example, narrative forms. Adding to an existing narrative requires a high effort of articulation, justification, framing, or contextualisation within the existing text – it is difficult to transplant elements at-will. Without such efforts we must accept that the new element will be seen as a digression, an *add-on*. Adding to a list requires none of this: we lack in lists “those subordinating relations—chronological, logical, or causal—which usually do much of the work in narrational or overtly rhetorical presentation of data” (Sammons 2010, 15). In a field which premised itself on the questioning of borders, the shifting orthodoxies of inclusion and exclusion, the deceptively simple form of the list substantiates what was a complicated theoretical argument, not by virtue of explanation but demonstration – hypotyposis. And the kind of discipline we are left with is naturally prone to anxiety: “il y a dans l’idée que rien au monde n’est assez unique pour ne pas pouvoir entrer dans une liste, quelque chose d’exaltant et de terrifiant à la fois”⁷ (Perec 1985). Saussy, arguing against an understanding of comparative literature as “a field composed of examples”, agrees,

⁷ “there is in the notion that nothing in the world is unique enough to not enter some list, something both exciting and terrifying”.

cautioning that “enumeration is a slender form of interpretation”, since “with a horizon of universality, one has never finished enumerating” (12-14).

The list also produces a second form of anxiety: without those more familiar subordinating relations, it may induce an eerie impression, by which its items seem to crop up independently from one another, either all at once or, if following an order, seemingly arbitrarily. Indeed, even though the notion of list is close to the notion of sequence, lists are rarely used sequentially – this has been the case for most of their history. Marc Van De Mierop, scholar of the philosophy of listing in Babylonia, compares the Mesopotamian catalogues with modern dictionaries, writing that “someone reading [them] cover to cover would end up looking as foolish as the Autodidact in Sartre’s *La nausée*, working his way through the books in his town library alphabetically, author by author” (35). Helena Buescu’s use of the term “perusal” is indeed fortunate: from the *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* to Heaney and Hughes’ *The Rattle Bag* (1982), the function of an anthology concerns perusal or momentaneous reference more often than it does linear and sequential reading.

Accordingly, the caution against anxiety found in the preface to *The Norton Anthology* is not related to enumeration, inclusion, addition, etc., but rather to that disquieting effect of “everything-at-once” which presents no easy way in or out: “opening the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* for the first time, a reader may feel as overwhelmed by its selection of authors and works (from ‘as many different languages as there are’) as Evliya was by the cathedral library” (Simon 2012, xv). The spatial, architectural, metaphor is fortuitous, pointing to a different way of thinking about lists, not as techniques of accumulation, but of containment and framing.

Attending to etymology, one of the meanings of “list” – older than contemporary general usage – refers not to the written content of the list, the words as they are inscribed, and is instead synonym of “border” or “strip”. It referred to the edge of the material support upon which a list would *eventually* be inscribed. “From here”, Liam Cole Young notes, “come the ‘lists’ of battle” (23). We find it in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, for instance: “The very bottom and the sole of hope, / The very list, the very utmost bound / Of all our fortunes” (255).⁸

To think of the list as a border for its items, the fashioning of a list primarily as the fashioning of this border, entails our thinking of the process of making a new list not as a process of *in*-scription but of *circum*-scription. One is reminded of Stanley Fish’s famous classroom exercise, in which a new literary object, a list-poem, appears out of thin air, not because its content was written down for this purpose, but because its *author* “drew a frame around the assignment” (Fish 1980, 323). Valentina Izmirlieva’s definition of list in such terms is here worth considering:

[the list] circumscribes a group of lexical units (...) and displays them in a fixed, syntactic sequence. The most visible effect of this arrangement is that the list (mis)represents a set of lexical elements as equivalent terms. It provides a site for the cohabitation of words and in that capacity alone predicates a kinship upon the words’ referents. Stubbornly ignoring everything that makes its members

⁸ See also Goody (1978, 80), for further elaboration on the graphical nature of lists and the etymological connection with the notion of border.

different, a list is fixed upon the one thing that makes them alike, even if that is only their presence in the list, “the simple crime of contingency”. (Izmirlieva 2008, 54)

Again, the list, thus, can state powerful arguments which remain discretely buried within the infrastructure of the text. At the same time, it serves as a justification for the whole of comparative literature as a discipline in its most intricate paradoxical nature – these things were put together because in some way they are alike; and they are alike because they were put together.

One wonders if this is why the “geographical” might be one of the sincerest forms of early (and everlasting) anthological and comparative efforts and discussions – the meaning of space or border is evident in such cases, as are the thought-provoking consequences of delineating them. The crude terms of physical borders shake the foundations of strict group identity, when circumscription reveals unprobed (even uncomfortable) depths in our lists. Ernst Robert Curtius, in 1948, was prescient in noting that, even if their own “crisis” called for renewed soul-searching, geographically neat concepts such as “Europe [were] dismantled into ‘geographical fragments’”. “Europe”, he noted, “is merely a name” (6) – which is to say, a rubric, with its “physical” borders just as porous as its conceptual ones.

In a more recent geographical anthology, the borders of places like “the Mediterranean” crumble before imagination and expectation: in *Les Poètes de la Méditerranée*, Eglal Errera writes that “pour ces vingt-quatre pays, dont tous possèdent une façade, aussi étroite soit-elle, sur la *mare nostrum*, cette anthologie donnera à lire et à entendre dix-sept langues telles qu’on les écrit ou qu’on les parle aujourd’hui”⁹ (2013, 18). Of course, unmissable inclusions like Portugal, Macedonia, and Serbia do not have a Mediterranean coastline (even a narrow one) in the strictest geographical sense; and few would be convinced of the inclusion of English poetry via Gibraltar or Akrotiri and Dhekelia. But circumscription *preceded* inscription. The anthology, simply by virtue of “providing a site for the cohabitation” of texts, *misrepresents* them as similar enough under the rubric to warrant both entry into the list in the first place and, more importantly, the ensuing exercise of comparison. Comparison becomes a question of providing for the vitality of this new site of cohabitation: a task of *curation*, in this case, of a particular imagination of Mediterranean literary identity, already projected before prefaces were elaborated to dispel confusions. It is this *ethos* which is contained in pronouncements such as Saussy’s, that “the current ‘space of comparison,’ rather than requiring that different works or traditions be deliberately wired up to communicate, sees them as always already connected; the question is just how” (31). Meltzl too was aware of this principle: what David Damrosch underlines as one of the earliest instances of the ecological metaphor used to describe the ethics of comparative literature (6) – comparing endangered species to endangered literatures – is proposed by Meltzl precisely as the drawing of a border (“elaborate and strict laws” (46) – in ecological terms, a sort of natural park for literature to thrive in.

⁹ “For these twenty-four countries, all of which have a coastline, however narrow, on the *mare nostrum*, this anthology will offer the opportunity to read and hear seventeen languages as they are written or spoken today”.

Echoes of the listmaker being a steward of cohabitation can be found, for instance, in Buescu's description of anthologies as “gesture[s] of creating ‘good neighbours’, through an associative process which is never completed and thus always recommences” (75), or in the way by which Emily Apter articulates a fundamental precedence of “neighboring” prior to comparison (Apter 2009, 414), drawing heavily from Kenneth Reinhard's essay, which itself merits extensive quoting:

Lacan's “Kant avec Sade” institutes a comparative literature otherwise than comparison, insofar as the essay pursues a mode of reading logically and ethically prior to similitude, a reading in which texts are not so much grouped into “families” defined by similarity and difference, as into “neighborhoods” determined by *accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter*. “Kant avec Sade” articulates a principle and practice of comparative literature in which the juncture of texts or discourses is predicated not only on historical congruencies, structural isomorphisms, or dialectical contradictions, but also on the critical act through which one text takes the place of, or “neighbors” on, the other. (Reinhard 1995, 785-6)

To think about the making of anthologies, syllabi, canons in the manner of listing-as-circumscribing, is to accept that, to a certain degree, all selection is arbitrary, that large gestures of circumscription can quickly appear mysterious. As an example, and wary of the strength of the hypotypotical list-argument, Hilda Schiff's *Holocaust Poetry* pre-emptively addresses a hypothetical reader's anxious rejection of her circumscription, asking in the introduction, whether “to leave out the account of the other side of the coin of this kingdom of malevolence, namely the terrible suffering of some of those who directly or indirectly brought about the Holocaust?” (xix) The question is merely rhetorical. Unlike the Mediterranean example above, which places idealised culture above geographical logic, Schiff draws another border: closer to strict isomorphism, it cannot but include all those who, in this space and time, have somehow suffered enough to warrant the status of victims – regardless of perpetrator. The business of comparative literature scholars is then to become stewards of new and privileged places of comparison, places which only circumscription-before-inscription makes possible, and to ensure that their vitality allows for cohabitation, and thus comparison.

Why, then, these things and not others? In the first place, to preserve the kind of attention which results from such gestures as circumscription; to refrain from *attending to* as deliberate selection and indulge, instead, in passive attention as *waiting for* such “accidental contiguit[ies]” to reveal hidden truths by themselves. Indeed, one must agree to pass on a certain degree of autonomy from the circumscriber to the anthology. As Jonardan Ganeri – another scholar of attention – suggests, “empathy, one's awareness of another in their otherness, is an attentional state” (4), to which Smith would add that “all instances [of attention], whether involving other persons or “mere” objects, partake somewhat of the phenomenological character of the second-person encounter” (2022). We see this impulse in the preface to the aforementioned *The Rattle Bag*, penned by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes:

This anthology amassed itself like a cairn. (...) We hope that our decision to impose an arbitrary alphabetical order allows the contents to discover themselves

as we ourselves gradually discovered them—each poem full of its singular appeal, transmitting its own signals, taking its chances in a big, voluble world. (19)

Anthologies can appear to amass *themselves*; their order was consciously chosen, and yet it is always arbitrary. This recognition of the anthology as an autonomous *other*, in which the comparatist's circumscription never crosses the boundaries of stewardship, is what allows them and any future reader to attune themselves to the complex and ever-shifting web of signals, which Stiegler would call the fabric of attention. In the end, “why these things and not others” is still a question of attention. But to think attention as the maintenance of this fabric's vitality releases the question from an inexorable anxiety caused by overabundance or wrongful selection, by showing how both it and the discipline can give centre stage to the accidental, to the strange admixture of personal and universal, of similarity and difference, that the ever-increasing fabric of comparative literature promotes. Buescu compares it to a library – no one is expected to read or know a library fully, but tending to it is the Humanities scholar's principal task.

4. Final Remarks on Two Issues

Two issues often result from this perspective: de-historicisation and de-authoralisation.

This notion of listing as the act of circumscribing, in which items have the impression of appearing all at once, free to mingle and float into accidental contiguities or fortuitous neighbouring, has one advantage, namely, of further dispelling the genealogical tree as the model for comparative literature's analytical framework, since it leaves no space for conceiving of a “trunk” equivalent to that elusive *tertium comparationis* which grounds comparison on the articulation of common ancestries. Without subordinating relations, genealogical models must be abandoned. However, even without necessarily having a comparative literature grounded on tracing historical patterns of distance and closeness, there is still a history to be studied that is more than the history of comparative literature. I will quote extensively from Marx's speech, which proposes a historiographical model particular to a discipline of lists and listing:

L'histoire littéraire s'édifie ainsi sur des listes restreintes, et le plus souvent arbitraires, d'œuvres et d'auteurs, dont les carences et les béances donnent le vertige, canons multiples selon les domaines, variables selon les milieux, les classes sociales et les époques, et d'usages non moins divers. (...) Si la littérature comparée peut avoir une utilité, elle est justement de proposer une critique générale des canons et des corpus sur lesquels se fondent nos connaissances littéraires (...) afin de mettre en évidence les strates multiples et disparates dont se compose le corpus nommé littérature. (2020)¹⁰

¹⁰ “Literary history is thus built on restricted, and most often arbitrary, lists of works and authors, whose deficiencies and gaps are dizzying, multiple canons according to fields, variable according to environments, social classes, and epochs, and of equally diverse uses. (...) If comparative literature can have a utility, it is precisely to offer a general critique of the canons and corpora on which our literary knowledge is based (...) in order to highlight the multiple and disparate layers that make up the corpus called literature”.

The study of comparative literature concerns a specific mode of attending to the world of texts and its variety, and it substantiates it by adopting the discursive mode of the list, while actively reflecting on its inner workings, by studying said lists while seeking to continuously remake them. For this reason, it *must* ground this meta-reflexive practice on the wisdom and study of listing as a historically situated activity – the history described by Marx is an intrinsic part of this reflection. And the tradition of listing is long (perhaps older than other forms of writing, perhaps older than writing itself, as explained by Denise Schmandt-Besserat 1996); like any tradition, its practice requires a modicum of ancestor-reverence.

What I call de-authorialisation concerns an extreme view on what is meant by the notion that an anthology assembles “itself”. This is a common effect of lists and their interpretations, owing to the ways by which list forms tend to articulate distinct modes of actancy and focalisation (further distinguishing them from narrative). Thus, Sève defines the list as “un texte dont l’auteur ou le producteur s’est retiré”. “La liste, une fois « lancée » dans une certaine direction”, he adds “tend à se prolonger toute seule” (38, 88).¹¹ Very often, listmakers benefit from this impression that lists are authorless: one thinks of law, statistics, economics, as loci where lists enjoy a privileged impression of objectivity – one can also think of lists like Meltzl’s, whose theoretical arguments are often hidden under a seemingly simple and autonomous operationality. But every list is made by *someone*, and even if most anthologies are prefaced by apologetic and ambivalent admissions of authorship (“this is only our own perspective”, “a different selection would have been possible”, etc.) some – particularly if veering on the side of trying to underline a certain indisputable character to inclusions or their “canonicity” – do not. Schiff’s Holocaust anthology, again, offers an illustration of this intellectual ablution, in commonly found terms: “while representative, this volume nevertheless has had to be selective rather than comprehensive if for no other reason than lack of space” (xv).

It is, in fact, the other way around: circumscription is already a fundamentally *spatial* technique, even if that space is only abstract or diagrammatical. Lack of space does not “choose” by itself; it provides the opportunity for the comparatist to engage in their *raison-d’être*: choice. What does comprehensiveness mean? The end of the discipline – with infinite space, no anthology, or anthologist, would be necessary. Attention is precious, and its manipulation should invite personal responsibility, even when (or especially when) such manipulation is supported by mysterious values such as beauty, intuition, etc. – in other words, the personal preference of the anthologist. This way of speaking – that lists “carry on” by themselves – is only that: a way of speaking, which in truth means that while its author must relinquish *authority*, but not *authorship*, they just do not yet know who will take on the task of stewardship. This is the key understanding of comparative literature as a discipline of attention: what is always at stake is the continued weaving of a communal web of attention, in which privileged forms, such as the list, allow for endlessly surprising reverberations, never predicted (but necessarily welcomed) by their authors.

¹¹ “The list could be defined thusly: a text from which the author or producer have excused themselves”. “The list, once ‘thrown’ in some direction (...) tends to grow all by itself”.

There must be a balance between the autonomy granted to objects of attention, without which that web of meanings is not free to show itself to its attendants, and the obvious fact that any selection is historically and personally situated. A nourishing paradox at the centre of our work: consciousness of de-historicisation and de-authorialisation as *pharmakoi* (Derrida, 1972) to the discipline, renders history and authorship unavoidable sites of reflection. Henri Deluy – in the introduction to the poetry anthology from the *Biennale Internationale des Poètes* in Val-de-Marne – summarizes the issue well enough. On the question of whether his book is an anthology or not, he arrives at a wisely tautological answer:

C'est bien une anthologie, la preuve cette ouverture, car toute anthologie commande sa justification : il n'existe aucune anthologie sans présentation (tout moins depuis plusieurs siècles : depuis que les anthologistes ont pris conscience du genre et que leur activité est mise en cause...)

C'est bien une anthologie puisqu'il y a un anthologiste. Qui fait des anthologies ? (...) [L]e portrait de l'anthologiste reste à faire. Il existe des approches ; par exemple celle-ci, de Karel Teige (...) : *L'anthologiste est pour un quart pervers, pour un autre quart un petit chef, pour un troisième quart un raté, pour le dernier quart un idiot*.¹² (10)

In all its arbitrariness, reflection on said arbitrariness, and reflection on the crises ensuing from it, one gets the impression (as it is often remarked) that comparative literature is only circularly concerned with itself. In the same way, it often seems that canons, syllabi, and anthologies, say less about their contents than about their authors – they, as Deluy intuits, merely self-justify. This kind of arbitrariness should never be confused with “cosmic randomness”: circumscriptions of a part of literature are not randomly selected segments of an ideal “universal” literature. Instead, these objects interest us and are worthy of discussion because in their arbitrariness lie all those apologies, hand-wringing, tendentiousness, and prejudice in which the comparatist lives, and in which we discover something about how we engage with literature and, therefore, literature itself.¹³

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¹² “It is indeed an anthology, as evidenced by this introduction, since every anthology demands justification: there is no anthology without a preface (at least not for several centuries, since anthologists have become aware of the genre and their activity has been called into question...). / It is indeed an anthology because there is an anthologist. Who makes anthologies? (...) However, the portrait of the anthologist has yet to be painted. There are some approaches; for example, this one from Karel Teige (...): *The anthologist is one-quarter pervert, one-quarter petty tyrant, one-quarter failure, and one-quarter idiot*”.

¹³ Soon enough, Deluy's second observation will prompt an urgent reflection: is ‘accident’ valuable enough to consider that “who makes anthologies?” can have as answer a non-human (artificial intelligence, for example)? Is personal and inscrutable preference similar indistinguishable from an outsider's perspective? Will this real death of the author provide for vital places of comparison? Will we have any proper interest in anthologies made by no one?

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Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Natasha Brown's *Assembly* and Marco Varvello's "Brexit Blues"

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ABSTRACT:

This article argues that Comparative Studies adequately show how literature can serve as an original resource for animating interdisciplinary geopolitical debates, contributing in important ways to other disciplines (in this case, social and political theory) and the theories used to analyse them. It does so by focusing on the comparative analysis of two works of fiction that deal with the intimate repercussions of the UK's hostile environment rhetoric and policies on transnational couples, showing how they challenge and complicate Bridget Anderson's concept of "community of value" (2013) and add significant elements to Sara Ahmed's theory of *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014). Through a comparative approach to the discussion on how deportability impinges upon intimacy and romantic relationships, I consider Marco Varvello's short-story "Brexit Blues" (2018) and Natasha Brown's novel *Assembly* (2021) as "scale-bending" (Smith 2004) literary projects that highlight the scalar slide between household and nation to reveal the intertwinings of migration and reproductive politics in today's "climatic context of anti-blackness" (Gedalof 2022) and immigration eugenics (D'Aoust 2022).

RESUMO:

Este artigo defende que os Estudos Comparatistas demonstram adequadamente como a literatura pode servir como um recurso original para animar debates geopolíticos interdisciplinares, contribuindo de maneira importante para outras disciplinas (neste caso, a teoria social e política) e para as teorias de análise aí usadas. Focando-se na análise comparativa de duas obras de ficção que lidam com as repercussões íntimas da retórica e das políticas de ambiente hostil do Reino Unido sobre casais transnacionais, o artigo mostra como as obras desafiam e complexificam o conceito de “comunidade de valor” de Bridget Anderson (2013) e adicionam elementos significativos à teoria exposta em *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, de Sara Ahmed (2014). Desenvolvendo uma abordagem comparativa da discussão sobre como o risco de deportação afecta a intimidade e os relacionamentos românticos, argumenta-se que o conto “Brexit Blues” (2018), de Marco Varvello, e o romance *Assembly* (2021), de Natasha Brown, são projetos literários de “desdobramento de escala” (Smith 2004) que enfatizam o deslizamento escalar entre família e nação para revelar os entrelaçamentos da migração e da política reprodutiva no atual “contexto climático de anti-negritude” (Gedalof 2022) e da eugenia da imigração (D’Aoust 2022).

KEYWORDS:

border bodies; intimate geopolitics; Brexit literature; black British literature; scale

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

corpos fronteiriços; geopolítica da intimidade; literatura do Brexit; literatura negra britânica; escala

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Introduction

THIS PAPER ARGUES that literature can serve as original resource for interdisciplinary geopolitical debates and theory, demonstrating the meaningful import that literature and its comparative study can represent for other disciplines and neighbouring theories. If theories can be defined as “strumenti ottici che ci permettono di vedere nei testi qualcosa che altrimenti non vedremmo mai” [“optical tools allowing us to see what we would not otherwise see in texts”, my translation] (Bertoni 2018, 40), can the reverse be said as well, and can works of literature not only be seen as illuminating each other when read comparatively, but also as illuminating and complicating the social, geographical, and political theory used to understand them? In this paper, I argue that the comparative reading of Marco Varvello’s short story “Brexit Blues” (2019) and Natasha Brown’s novel *Assembly* (2021) cannily register the changing emotional and reproductive geographies of post-Brexit London, while also complicating Bridget Anderson’s concept of “community of value” (2013) and adding important nuances to Sara Ahmed’s theory of *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014).

Published only two years after the Brexit referendum by the London-based Italian correspondent of the main Italian news channel, Rai 1, *Brexit Blues* gives the title to a collection of seven stories exploring various ways of coming across the UK border and bordering practices from the diverse points of view of an ex-minister, a pregnant teenager, an unscrupulous businessman, a man who exploits the NHS (National Health Service), and several transnational couples. The short stories are connected to each other by the first-person narration of the narrator’s own experiences and feelings as he asks himself whether the result of the Brexit vote means that he is a “cittadino nei documenti ma pur sempre straniero” [“citizen on paper but nevertheless a foreigner”, my translation] (2008, 15). The last story of the book, “Brexit Blues”, charts the spiralling trajectory of emotions and events following the Italian protagonist’s receipt of a letter from the Home Office that rejects his application for settled status and warns him to prepare for deportation. While it soon transpires that the letter was sent by mistake, the anxieties and worries about what a failed application would mean for his life and relationship with an English woman re-open “past history of contact” (Ahmed 2014, 165), leading the protagonist, Giovanni John Onorato, towards a series of actions which, in a self-fulfilled prophecy, culminate with his own deportation.

If the stories contained in *Brexit Blues* can be read as an attempt to understand the geopolitical situation that lead such an unexpected scenario to become reality and the author’s own feelings about it, Brown’s novel reads as an experiment in relaying the complicated endeavour of simply existing as a Black British woman¹ in the aggressive climate created by the Hostile Environment rhetoric that culminated in the Brexit vote. Narrated through a series of short vignettes that acutely witness and dissect the hypocrisies, violence, and racism of contemporary British and

¹ Here I am using the capitalised Black British in reference to Stuart Hall’s definition of it as a political identity and a term capacious enough to accommodate “the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain” (1996, 27).

corporate culture, Natasha Brown's 100-pages novella *Assembly* (2021) depicts moments in the life of its Black British female protagonist, an unnamed investment banker, recently promoted and diagnosed with cancer, about to get engaged with the white son of an influent conservative politician.

The choice of these two literary works is not fortuitous. Both books can be seen as a reaction to what has come to be known as the "Hostile Environment", a governmental attitude expressed by influential politician Theresa May in 2012, when she was Home Secretary, and since then translated into a series of increasingly restrictive migration policies and bills, as well as into a general rancorous disposition towards migrants from politicians across party lines². If, starting from its very title, *Brexit Blues* is explicitly a reflection on the impacts of Brexit on European citizens living in the UK, in *Assembly*, whose protagonist and author are British, the outcomes of Brexit and the environment of hostility that characterised the referendum are more subtly evoked through conversations, TV appearances, and references to the Windrush scandal as the last straw of a longer and unending history of "organised, systematic brutality that their [white British] soft and sagging children can scarcely stomach – won't even acknowledge" (Brown 2021, 75).

Furthermore, both narrations make explicit references to the bureaucratization of rights and the importance of papers, forms, and passports in determining who will be accepted and who will be cast aside³. Both reference the pressure to assimilate: in "Brexit Blues", the protagonist welcomes it by changing his name Giovanni into the more British sounding John, while in *Assembly* it becomes a central knot, given the problematic collapsing of English with White, identified by Alessio as one of the main issues at stake in the Brexit vote (2020). Both works use cancer as a metaphor and metonymy, and observe how migration policy, intervening into the private sphere of the protagonists, becomes reproductive politics. Lastly, both protagonists feel the need to distance themselves from the British poor and working class in a way that simultaneously illustrates and complicates Anderson's concept of "community of value" (2013) and Ahmed's political analysis of the feelings of anger, disgust, fear, and shame (2014). What differs, besides the obvious fact that one protagonist is a white male European and the other is a Black British woman, is their reactions to the hostile environment they wade through, the orientation and intensity of their movements. Giovanni John Onorato's disorientation manifests itself in frantic and directionless movements and unbridled monologues, whereas within the whole 100 pages of *Assembly*, the only voices we hear are those of the other characters; if the protagonist ever answers, the narrator does not give us access to her replies, and it is through silence and immobility that she formulates her most poignant attack at the end of the novel.

Following the abovementioned belief in the capacity of fiction to complicate and contribute to social, political, and geographical theory, in this paper I will examine

² This can be seen in the Labour's 2024 manifesto on migration, which reiterates the Tory party's commitment to reduce net migration and purports to set up a new return and enforcement unit.

³ References to changing passports are a recurrent theme in *Brexit* and the *State of the Nation* subgenre according to Alessio (2020), preceding and echoing populist media's appeal for passports to "be returned to their traditional blue covers as a 'symbol of British independence'" (Earle 2016) in the lead up to the Brexit referendum.

how Anderson's and Ahmed's theories complement each other in delineating not only why the migrant and the poor are pitted and pit themselves against each other, but also the emotional process through which this happens and how disgust concurs with shame. I then demonstrate how the lens offered by the superimposition of Anderson's and Ahmed's theories allow us to analyse these two works comparatively, and what their combined reading tells us about the theory used to read them. I conclude with a consideration on how Irene Gedalof's statement that "all migration politics is reproductive politics" (2022, 540) applies to these works of fiction and propose that, alongside being examples of, respectively, BrexLit and Black British Literature, "Brexit Blues" and *Assembly* can be figured as "scale-bending" (Smith 2004) literary projects: works that, by formally highlighting the scalar slide between the household and the nation, work to "challenge and undermine existing arrangements which tie particular social activities to certain scales" (MacKinnon 2010, 25), showing the at once "politicised and politicising dimensions of the reproductive" (England et al. 2019, 10).

1. The community of value: reading Anderson through Varvello and Brown

In *Us and Them* (2013), Bridget Anderson posits the community of value – where value is to be understood in both its moral and economic meanings – as one of the ways in which the state claims legitimacy and distributes rights and duties. Offering an overview of the history of the vagrant in Great Britain from the middle age onwards, as well as its shifting representations and management by state authorities, she demonstrates how this disruptive figure came to be the chrysalis for how the migrant and the poor are represented and dealt with. Allowing a seamless move between the local and the national, the community of value is defined from the outside by the non-citizen, whose contemporary embodiments are gendered as the (male) illegal migrant and the (female) victim of human trafficking, and from the inside by the (male) failed citizen and the (female) benefit scrounger, who, in failing "to live up to liberal ideals" (2013, 6) takes the shape of the criminal, and who, like the non-citizen, must be excluded from the community of value. Somewhere between the good citizen and the non or failed citizen are the tolerated citizens, themselves not an integral part of the community of value but lingering at its thresholds, and whose "fragility of hold" (6) and potential to slip out of it permeate the politics of citizenship, pushing them to become "the guardian(s) of good citizenship" (6) and disassociate themselves from any additional factor of exclusion. Anderson's brilliant examination of the state's attempt to immobilise the poor as a way to initially extract cheap labour and then reduce the claims to public funds highlights how images of the poor and the migrant came to be folded onto each other so they became two sides of the same coin – a conflation that compels them to counteract this movement by setting themselves apart from and against each other, as seen in the white working-class appeals to their rights as native and in the legal migrants' accentuation of their irreprehensible work ethic.

As removal enters the lexicon of migration in addition to that of criminality, deportability, not only as in the act of deportation itself, but as a constant possibility

and a state of anxiety worsening “the quality of life of migrants, their perceived universe of constraint and opportunities” (Anderson 2013, 126), further pushes them to seek acceptance within the community of value. This impulse can be clearly seen in the short story “Brexit Blues”, by Marco Varvello. Its introduction painstakingly sets out the professional profile of its protagonist, detailing his economic success and sketching him as the prototypical hard-working, tax-paying liberal subject who “never asked for benefits” (Varvello 2018, 219) and whose life is dominated by his career to the point that even his partner is one of his colleagues. Giovanni John’s disillusion with the UK after Brexit and his consequent anger can be seen as a reaction to the realisation that, no matter how hard he tries and believes to be part of the community of value, his position as a European migrant marks him out as a tolerated citizen. As such, he is always susceptible to being deported, as clearly spelled out in the letter he receives from the Home Office.

Despite its protagonist being British, a similar anxiety pervades Natasha Brown’s *Assembly*. This is visible in the passage where the protagonist swaps the maroon-coloured EU passport with a new one, which she receives with a sigh of relief and disbelief attributed to “the readiness of this government and enterprising home secretary to destroy papers, our records and proof” (Brown 2021, 54). Referencing what came to be known as the Windrush scandal, where British subjects of Caribbean descent were detained and deported or threatened with deportation after the Home Office destroyed their landing cards and refused to issue their documents, Brown’s one-hundred pages complicate Anderson’s conceptualization of the community of value as made up of the good citizen, the non-citizen and the failed citizen as well as its porosity. The British-born, economically and socially successful protagonist of her book is unable to move to and claim her place among the community of value despite her determined effort to “transcend”. Unlike Giovanni John Onorato, changing her name, getting rid of an accent, or obtaining the right papers will not suffice for admittance. Nowhere is this clearer than in the passage that sees her listening to the rant of a European male colleague distressed over Brexit and who likens his status to hers, exclaiming “We felt unwelcome. It’s like if they said to you: Go back to Africa. Imagine if they told you: no-no, you are not a real Brit, go back to Africa” (Brown 2021, 5). This man’s and Giovanni’s surprise at the sudden hostility of a community they believed to be part of throws into stark relief the temporality of their position within Anderson’s triad and their capacity to slip in and out of it. The same capacity is also possessed by the British poor and embodied in Brown’s colleague Lou, a working-class banker who is promoted alongside her in the same bid for diversity and who, the narrator tells us:

will make it [...] He’ll upsize, then upsize again, soon enough. Get the kids on waiting lists for the right schools. Schmooze up with the right people, get that next promotion, the ski invite, start buying better suits. He’ll evolve. Until he slips in, indistinguishable. His children will grow up knowing only this. Believing it’s free. (Brown 2021, 78)

The reference to reproduction here is not marginal. If Anderson’s triad *good citizen, failed citizen and non-citizen* offers no distinctive space or possibility of movement for Brown’s protagonist, this is because in the wake of slavery and the contemporary

“climatic context of anti-blackness” in the UK (Gedalof 2022, 548), the black body is always already deprived of a status, inheriting non-being from the mother, as skilfully reminded by Spillers’ refrain “partus sequitur ventrem”⁴. Referencing slavery and the academic theory produced in its wake in the context of Britain might appear to gloss over historical differences between the U.S., where slavery was present for four hundred years, and Britain, where people of African descent lived as free subjects from as early as 300 A.D. and even participated as sailors to the voyages of discovery in Elizabethan times. Whilst not recognising this difference might serve selectively blind views of British history as only recently multicultural, it must be recognised that “British postcolonial history remains pivotal, and the policies and cultural shifts impacting [Black British] authors mostly emerge in the 20th century” (Wyatt and George 2020, 7). However different the cultural heritage, there exists “similarities in how Black women in the U.S. and Britain experience racism, irrespective of whether they have previous knowledge of or exposure to ancestors who were previously enslaved” (Norwood 2022, 7). Moreover, Wyatt and George demonstrate that contemporary Black writers from both sides of the Atlantic have produced networks of citations and drawn on one another to “develop literary techniques enabling them to produce ‘racial literacy’ in their readers” (2020: 7) – something that can be identified as a major aim in Brown’s *Assembly*, with its careful and detailed account of episodes of microaggression and its mobilisation of focalisation to highlight the affective dimension of systemic and institutional racism. Deportability, Brown reminds, is not only a feature of the migrant and the poor, but also and always affects the Black British body: indeed,

What is citizenship when you’ve watched screaming GO HOME vans crawl your street? When you’ve heard the banging, unexpected, always, at the door? When British, reduced to papers, is swept aside and trodden over? (Brown 2020, 54).

Unlike Giovanni and Lou, and despite her citizenship and capital, Brown’s character is stuck in the uncomfortable status of tolerated citizen, which she will pass on to her offsprings. The misogynistic and racist micro-aggressions that dot the pages of the book are a constant reminder of her position, from which the only move possible is towards what people openly associate with her skin⁵– foreign or failed. While being cognizant of the racism underpinning the community of value and its exclusion of the immigrant and the poor, Anderson’s theory risks erasing the experience of Black British citizens, whose shape does not fit comfortably in either of those categories and who experience less intergenerational social mobility. At the same time, her concept of deportability allows to comprehend the lives of British-born UK citizens of Black descent and the sense of “fragility of hold” that ceaselessly pervades their and their imagined offspring’s realm of perceived possibility. It is thus not surprising that the central metaphor and metonymy of the novel, a breast cancer, is attacking the protagonist’s reproductive system.

⁴ Gedalof translates this as “the child follows the belly” (2022, 547).

⁵ Take for example the description of a white British labourer looking at her cross the garden and saying “Pretty lady, you think it’s fair? You stroll in the sunshine while I work, eh? What a world” (2021, 74).

As mentioned above, cancer is a common metaphor that connects the two books. For Giovanni it represents the feelings of anxiety “devouring the sense of well-being that had welcomed him home” (2018, 205) and spreading into unforeseen and unwelcome events. In *Assembly*, it becomes receptacle and representamen of different meanings, orientations and emotions in a way that exemplifies Ahmed’s argument that emotions and meaning can “move sideways, through sticky associations between signs, figures, objects, as well as forward and backward” (2014, 43). Stickiness and affective capital are central to Ahmed’s theory of emotions and their political valence, but they also help us understand *how* the association between migrant and poor comes into being and accrues value, thus complementing Anderson’s careful explanation of the *why* of it.

2. Sticky histories of contact and border bodies

If Anderson carefully explains the long historical process that brought together the images of the poor and migrant, and why this was needed and encouraged by state authorities, Ahmed’s book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) can provide answers to why this association became so strong and how it accumulated value over time. In it, Ahmed sets about to explore how “emotions work to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies” (2014, 1). She formulates a theory of emotion that, far from residing in objects and subjects, come into being as the result of contact between subjects, objects, and signs. As temporal proximity and repetition enable emotions and signs to move from one object to another, they carry with them past histories of contact and accumulate affective capital which makes them stickier, reinforcing their associations and binding signs to bodies in ways that “block new meanings” (2014, 92). Stickiness can then be defined as a “transference of affect” enabled by the concealing of the repeated association between words and the past history of contact between bodies they conjure: a sticky sign is the one that evokes “other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association” (91-92). The stickiness and accrual of affect described by Ahmed is clearly portrayed in relation to the word deportation in Varvello’s short story. More than the (mistaken) rejection of his application per se, it is the history evoked by the words “be ready for deportation”, put on paper by the Home Office, that disturbs him:

Deported? Had it been any other word, get ready to leave the country, go away, pack your bags, say bye to your loved ones and hop on a plane...take a ferry from Dover and cross the Channel. [...] Any other word would have made him think that it was an error. A bureaucratic, administrative mistake. [...] But the letter said deported. Expelled. Just like during the war” (205, my translation).

These words become a refrain, opening up the history of the Italians who were detained and deported from the UK in the 1940s, of concentration camps and the intolerance that marked the pre-World War II years, and the more personal history of migration running through his family, the sentiment of being forever a guest felt by his father while admitted in Germany as a *gastarbeiter*, a guest worker. Just like the word deportation cannot be untangled from its historical association with a Europe

of growing divisions, intolerance, and fascism, a history that Giovanni John Onorato is afraid will repeat itself, the words “GO HOME” painted on vans in 2013 as part of May’s politics of Hostile Environment are indelibly associated to the racist slogans chanted by far-right organisations active in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the National Front. This association does not go unnoticed by Brown’s protagonist, and it is linked by temporal proximity to the Windrush scandal. Indeed, the passage on the vans is preceded, just a few pages earlier, by a paragraph detailing how after recruiting British subjects, Enoch Powell (and a series of successive governments, both Tory and Labour) drew up new migration laws that revoked people’s rights. By juxtaposing these scenes, Brown uncovers the sticky history of contact of the expression “Go Home”, once infamously used against British citizens of imperial descent to imply that they would never be considered “at home” in the UK.

Sticky signs and objects, tells us Ahmed, not only block new meanings, but can function to bind subjects together. Disgust is a particularly sticky emotion that “can move between objects through the recognition of likeness” (2014, 88). If we return to Anderson’s description of the good citizen, the poor and the migrant, and superimpose it to Ahmed’s claim that contemporary representations of borders assimilate them to skin – “soft, weak, porous, and easily shaped, or ever easily bruised by the proximity of others” (2014, 2) – we can understand how it is that the abject becomes a common property of the poor and the migrant’s body and how it is that disgust easily shifts to shame. According to Kristeva, the abject is not only what threatens us from the outside – what threatens to perforate the surface of the (individual and collective) skin – but also what threatens to move from the inside out – “as the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean’ self, but scraped on and transparent, gave way before the dejection of its content” (Kristeva 1982, 53). What is placed at the border of the body and what is placed at the border of the nation becomes an object of disgust, while disgust engenders border bodies as something that can be expelled from the community of value at any given moment.

The forced proximity that links the poor and the migrant as objects of disgust (border bodies) allows signs to slide across each other and get stuck. This explains Giovanni’s sudden unease about his heavily accented English as well as the way *Assembly*’s protagonist becomes the ultimate receptacle for a host of diverse associations made by other people, who respectively attribute to her the characteristics of foreigner, working-class, sexual object, progressive left-wing protester, criminal, poor. But disgust can also move in the opposite direction, causing subjects to pull away from their objects of disgust “with an intensity that can be undoing” (Ahmed 2014, 84). Disgust expels the badness and sticks it to the body of others, as does Giovanni when he, unironically and as a form of revenge, describes the twentieth century English working class as “cannon fodder sent to die for the homeland” and “scrounger” (2018, 219-220) before starting a fight. So does *Assembly*’s protagonist, whose merciless gaze hovers not only on the working-class poor, but also on her colleagues, her partner and his family members, turning them into objects to distance and dissect. Returning the studying glare that has been imposed on her throughout her whole life, she strips them of their social and cultural subjectivity and turns

them into bare flesh and tendons whose mechanics of eating can be described as if observed through a magnifying glass:

I watch her swallow. Then sip tea. Bite again, chew. Swallow. [...] The mother, oblivious to this sudden slowing of our time, bites once more. Her jaw grinds rhythmically, bulging and elongating: tendons, emerging taut, flicker up past her ear and into grey wisps of hair. By her temple, a bone or cartilage or some other hard aspect of her bobs and strains against the stretched-white skin. The entire side of her face is engaged in this elaborate mechanical action, until, climatically, the soft-hung skin of her neck contracts familiar and the ground-down-mushed-up toast, saliva and butter, worked into a paste, squeezes down: is forced through the pulsing oesophagus, is swallowed. (Brown 2021, 71)

The difference between the two protagonists, however, is in the latter's inability to fully eject the disgust and move away from the sticky grounds of tolerated citizen. Indeed, when the self is only accessible through the gaze of others, as Du Bois and Fanon acutely described in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2008) and *Black Face, White Mask* (1986), disgust doubles back and turns into shame, producing a subject whose "movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself" (Ahmed 2014, 104). This is evident in the narrator's "ever-present threat of the same impulse. To protect this place from me" (Brown 2021, 85) and adds a new layer to Ahmed's analysis of the cultural politics of disgust. Not only "what gets unstuck can always get re-stuck and can even engender new and more adhesive forms of sticking" (100), but the stickiness of the associations and the histories of contact they at once conceal and manifest can make some bodies stickier than others. This is powerfully articulated by Brown in the multi-layered metaphor/metonymy of cancer, where she allows meaning and affect to slide and stick to signs and objects, the breast cancer coming to stand for multiple and contradictory things.

3. The self has nowhere to turn: immobility/silence as refusal and weapon

Just like Varvello, initially Brown uses the metaphor of a tumour to describe the atmosphere of hostility and what Rob Nixon called "slow violence": "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2013, 2)⁶. By juxtaposing a passage where the main character is the victim of an act of racism, a passage on the white family's wealth, and a passage where the protagonist is told by the doctor that the untreated tumour could metastasise and "spread through the blood to other organs, growing uncontrollably, overwhelming the body" (Brown 2021, 77), not only does the narrator provide a tangible image for the workings of slow violence, but she also links that violence with the practices and institutions that tacitly sustain it and whose power comes from a still open, although unspoken, history of colonization and aggression. The tumour, however, takes on

⁶ While Nixon's definition of slow violence was developed in relation to environmental damage, his concept has since been applied to various forms of structural violence, including austerity and the weaponization of a hostile environment against refugees and asylum seekers (Mayblin 2020; Benwell et al. 2023).

additional meanings as a particularly sticky object of disgust, a “new malignant part of me” (46). As a disruption to her career, it comes to stand for the exhaustion she feels at the prospect of the interminable ascent of the socio-economic ladder, the type of thinking that “leads to undoing. Or else, not doing, which is the slower, more painful approach to coming undone” (51). It is the feeling of resignation she needs to expel to move on, and at the same time the unspoken but all too real disgust impressed on her body (as a border body) by the surrounding cultural climate of racism that stops her in her tracks, demanding that her inconvenient body be “dissect(ed), poison(ed), destroy(ed)” (46) into a shape that fits the colonial canon. In epitomising the contingency of her acceptance within the community of value, the tumour also becomes a metonym for her whole body, her womanhood, her blackness, herself; hence her refusal to treat it is not an act of surrender, but of survival. In a searing passage towards the end of the book, we watch Brown’s black heroine watching her white colleague Lou watching the filmed black body of Philando Castile being killed by a white police officer while reaching for his ID card. A description of the burrito her colleague is eating while doing that is followed by her memory of a visit to the doctor. In these few lines, the cancer oscillates between being the slow violence that is killing her, and her own body as seen through the white gaze as having a “malignant intent”:

I recall Lou, eating lunch at his desk while Philando Castile’s death played out between paragraphs on his screen [...] The doctor said I did not understand, that I did not know the pain of it; of cancer left untreated. [...] Pain, I repeat. Malignant intent. Assimilation – radiation, rays. Flesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalising eyes. Video and burrito, finished. Lou’s sticky hand cupped the mouse and clicked away. (2021, 83)

Excising the tumour equals excising her body; but if the body is what she needs to leave behind in order to assimilate, then to assimilate means to die. Survival for the Black body is only possible through escape from the “cannibalising eyes” (81) of whiteness. In leaving the cancer untreated, the protagonist mobilises immobility as the ultimate refusal to a system in which sustenance she has been complicit, but in which, she has come to understand, she will never be fully accepted. The relentless effort of moving forward and up, epitomised by the repetitions of the words “move on”, “transcend”, “keep moving”, only translates into the stillness of not sliding backwards and down for Brown’s heroine. This is because the community of value, brilliantly exemplified by the white and wealthy guests at her partners’ family gathering, needs the “the sharp, black outline” (69) of border bodies to define them from the outside.

Looking, staring, observing, examining, scrutinizing – the eye as a tool of knowledge and surveillance is a recurring motive in the book. The seemingly random assemblage of its paragraphs becomes a conscious choreography of the gaze caught between looking at itself, looking at others, and looking away. Sara Collins, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, rightfully points out its connection with Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness as “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 2008, 8). However, Brown does more than showing that – by omitting the protagonist’s answers, her name and physical description,

she constructs a “fugitive narrator” who turns the silence and immobility imposed on a “Black body sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 1986, 109) into her own weapons. Paula von Gleich describes fugitivity as a “constant struggle against the Black border” characterizing the lives of Black individuals in the unresolved and enduring history of enslavement (2017, 204). Fugitivity is nothing but a form of agency expressed by those “who cannot and do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned” (Campt 2012, 87). In Brown’s novel, the narrator’s decision to omit any description of herself that would place the readers in the position of being able to identify her - either by naming or by physically or psychologically describing her, or making them imagine her voice - can be seen as a refusal to remain in her assigned narratorial place and an escape for the “cannibalising eyes” of the reader, who is therefore equated to the white onlooker. While Giovanni reacts to the perceived hostility with an excess of unbridled movement and speech – perhaps a luxury he can afford as a white male character – Brown’s heroine is mostly still and silent. Immobilised by the persistent demand to keep moving as well as by the everyday micro-aggressions she painstakingly details, she turns that silence and immobility into a crushing response at the end of the story, when her white, upper class, loving boyfriend proposes to her as they lay on the grass of his family estate:

I should meet his kiss. Then we’ll clumber up, brush off, and walk back down to the house holding hands. Guests will be here soon, it’s almost time. [...] His lips tremble with the strain of pursing; confident in the assumed yes, and yet, uncertain. Suddenly, so uncertain. (Brown 2021, 100)

In her description of hatred, Ahmed demonstrates that “some bodies move precisely by sealing others as objects of hate” (2014, 60). Immobilised by the everyday micro-aggressions and a hostile environment for the large part of the book, Brown’s character ultimately immobilises her partner – and the reader – in the uncertainty of an unanswered question, as his whiteness becomes inextricable from the unresolved history of white hatred and racial abuse he is, at least and perhaps unwillingly, implicated in.

4. Who gets to belong, with whom, and under what circumstances? Scalar politics and reproductive politics

The fact that both stories end with the couples splitting up is something that has not received much attention by literary reviewers and scholars, who have preferred to focus on the protagonists’ own feelings and the socio-political issues related to racism, intersectionality and the hostile immigration rhetoric that surrounded the Brexit vote (Alessio 2022; Pittel 2021). However, I argue that this is a major point of both narratives and one that sets them out as examples of scale-bending literature, which I define as literary works that reveal the reverberation of political discourse on the level of the body and the household, but also help us reflect on the effects that couples’ and families’ choices can have on the make-up of the nation, thus undoing

the material and discursive practices that “fix” certain dimensions of life on a particular scale and highlighting the intersection of migration and reproduction.

To understand how this works, the concept of scalar politics developed by Danny MacKinnon will be useful. In an article titled “Reconstructing scale: Towards a New Scalar Politics,” MacKinnon attempts a synthesis between political-economic approaches to scale, concerned with its construction as material entity, and post-structural approaches that privilege its discursive formation and the performativity of scalar practices. Scales, such as the regional, the local, or the global are not pre-given entities, but the “physical, social, and conceptual product of social and natural events and processes” (Smith 2004, 196) reflecting the “material expression of evolving power relations” (MacKinnon 2010, 22). In partitioning experience into different, hierarchized realms that once established are expressed and perceived as natural, scalar discourses can be used by powerful social actors to disempower subaltern groups by confining them to the lower scales, like the neighbourhood or the household, while they command ‘higher’ scales such as the global and national. Moreover, by producing scale and presenting it as a material given, they can hide the scalar aspects and repercussion of particular political projects (MacKinnon 2010).

The concept of scalar politics is fundamental to understand Gedalof’s claim that “all migration politics is reproductive politics” (540), as it allows us to pay attention to the repercussions that laws explicitly designed to affect the scale of the nation (like migration control) have on the scale of the household (who gets to reproduce with whom?) and the reverse: how individual choices, such as with whom to form a family, can produce and reconfigure reproductive geographies and affect the nation. This is a critical issue in both Brown and Varvellos’ stories, as both works repeatedly highlight scale as materially and discursively produced through formal tools such as repetition, temporal proximity, metaphor, and metonymy.

Indeed, the “turning away from others” engendered on a national level by the mobilization of hatred on the part of politicians (Ahmed 2014, 51), becomes a turning away from each other on the level of the couple. For Giovanni, this is lived as a betrayal, as he associates the feeling of rejection caused by the British decision to leave Europe to his partner’s increasing distance from him, as articulated in the sentence “si era persuaso che l’amore fosse reciproco” [“he had persuaded himself that love was reciprocal,” my translation], which he applies to both the UK and Lauren. The border suddenly surfacing between the collective bodies of the British and European communities raises the question of where one’s allegiances lie, leading him to ask his partner if she would “deport herself” should he be sent away, and to perceive her lack of response as an admission of disloyalty. For *Assembly*’s character instead, the delineation of borders and the distancing that comes with it does not have the same element of surprise but is lived as a collection of moments and events where the political slides on the personal, revealing the mosaic-like quality of scalar relations (Brenner 2001). This is expressed at its best on page 42, as a vignette describing Theresa May’s resignation speech ending with the words “the country I love” – a love that, following Ahmed’s analysis of love and hate, produces the nation as a concrete effect of how “some bodies move towards and away from other bodies” (2014, 133) – is followed by one where her boyfriend declares his love for her and she reflects on its performativity, “the saying of it, and then the acting it out” (2014, 42). Distancing,

in Brown's novel, is the inevitable outcome of getting close⁷: the move towards, which in the phenomenology of disgust precedes the move away from, forces the heroine to look at and see how the unresolved history of colonialism is still living in the present of the social and power relations quietly but strongly defended by her partner's family and by white society's refusal to acknowledge and address them. What is unresolved on the socio-political level cannot be solved on the individual one, as the two dimension of existence do not belong to different scales but are co-produced and affect each other. Both works then show how the politics of deportability and illegality, and the emotions mobilised on a national level (hatred, fear, anger, disgust) slide to the individual sphere and intrude on intimacy as they re-open unsolved histories of harmful contact and produce tense geographies and bodies.

The concept of scale also allows us to answer Gedalof's question: "how does living in the wake of empire and slavery continue to intervene in the ways in which reproduction is differentially put into play when migration policy/politics confronts the lives of Black Britons?" (2022, 574). According to Neil Brenner's theory of scalar structuration, scalar politics allows elements of a scalar fix (scales that become apparently fixed through the interaction of major institutional forms such as capitalism and nation state) of one period to be carried forward and constrain the evolution of future scalar configurations. Elements of the scale of property that characterised imperial configurations of slave subjects and patriarchal configurations of women are carried forward and into the scale of reproduction and romantic love, reproducing hetero-patriarchal and racist reproductive ideas within current marriage migration politics/policies that defines who gets to belong, with whom, and on what terms⁸.

It is not by accident that the powerful metaphor/metonymy of the tumour, mobilised by Brown to simultaneously signify the climate of racist hostility surrounding her character, her exhaustion, her body as what needs to be expelled, and her refusal to succumb to whiteness, is attacking nothing less than her breast, organs linked to reproduction and to the passing on of life and nourishment. When the nation is invested in keeping the Other at a distance, both the other from within and the one from without can be barred from the reproductive sphere on account of their inability to reproduce sameness, while also being excluded from the "normative familial reproductive sphere because their individual kinship ties are devalued if not completely negated" (Gedalof 2022, 522). In light of this, the protagonist's tumour in *Assembly* can be also read as a metaphor for what D'Aoust calls "immigration eugenics" (2022, 271): the increasingly spectacularised interference of the state with matters of reproduction through marriage migration legislation which "obstruct(s) and facilitate(s) the admission of parents and future parents", delineating what types of marriage and citizens are considered legitimate while also showing "what the state would do to citizens – and to which citizens – if it could dictate who among the

⁷ On page 39 she describes the train she has taken to her partner's family house as "tearing us together".

⁸ The implicitly hetero-patriarchal and racist figuration of the foreign spouse as property becomes apparent in the UK spouse visa requirement for a Minimum Income Requirement set so high that, as of November 2024, only 40% of the UK population could "afford" to sponsor their partner, in the prohibitive cost of resettling totalling £12,500, as well as in the implicit assumption that the foreign partner will not be able to participate in public life, work and pay taxes (thereby the request that the UK sponsor maintain them both and pays NHS taxes upfront, as well as the exclusion of the foreign spouse from all forms of social assistance) (Jorgensen 2024).

citizenry could marry and bear children” (2022, 271). Far from this being an unfortunate side-effect, the constant linking of the intimate and national scales in both Varvello and Brown suggests that the government’s interference in family life is an intrinsic aspect of hostile environment politics and policies, pointing towards the central place of reproduction in “the life-maximising and life-negating dimensions of bio-power” (England et al 2010, 13). By approaching the geopolitical “from the starting point of those who experience its embodied repercussion” (Smith 2020, 15), literature emerges as a rich field of enquiry for feminist and reproductive geographers.

Conclusion

This paper started with the assertion that literature and Comparative Literature can provide important insights and reflections to the social, geographical, and political theories used to analyse its objects of study. I have argued that a comparative reading of Varvello’s short story “Brexit Blues” (2018) and Brown’s *Assembly* (2021) exemplifies Bridget Anderson’s conceptualization of the “community of value” and its tripartition into good citizen, non-citizen, and failed citizen as partially blind to the experience of Black British citizens, for whom movement into and out of this configuration is precluded. At the same time, I have demonstrated the applicability of her concept of deportability to their lives, despite their British nationality. Sara Ahmed’s theory of the cultural politics of emotions can help us understand the mechanisms that bound the image of the poor and that of the migrant together so strongly, and how disgust works to produce border bodies as/and tolerated citizens.

Again, reading the works by Varvello and Brown comparatively contributes with significant elements to Ahmed’s theory, stressing, for example, the fact that some bodies are stickier than others, and how emotions work not only to orient bodies towards and against other bodies, but also to disorient them. Anger and shame can be seen as producing difficulties in orientation that leads to stillness and/or misdirection. This becomes clear in Brown’s multi-layered metaphor/metonymy of the tumour as simultaneously symbolising her characters’ surrounding environment, her exhaustion, her own body and the denied reproductive rights in the context of Britain’s contemporary “immigration eugenics” (D’Aoust, 2022). This analysis led me to define these works as scale bending literary projects that, by highlighting the scalar slide between the household and the nation, work to “challenge and undermine existing arrangements which tie particular social activities to certain scales” (MacKinnon 2010, 25) and reveal how the “a-geographical realm of the body, the home, and intimate relationships are key sites at which discursive and material relations of geopolitical power are continuously reproduced and challenged” (Massaro and Williams 2013, 574).

Literature carries the potential to be scale-bending because of its simultaneous embrace of the characters’ intimate lives and the wider socio-historical and political landscape that allows it to account for “the embodied experience of people whose lives have been rendered territorial” (Smith 2020, 9). In addition, literary devices such as repetition, metaphors, metonymies, and juxtaposition help emphasise the scalar slide from the intimate to the political and vice-versa. It is exactly through its

formal structure, as well as its material and spatio-temporal affordances, that the literary form can powerfully articulate complex and contradictory experiences of the world, contributing to our understanding of it, while the tools of Comparative Literature can become instruments of political and geographical analysis, as they simultaneously borrow from and enrich neighbouring theories.

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Comparatismo intermedial y posthumanismo: transmedialización del mito del cibernético

Intermedial Comparatism and Posthumanism:
Transmedialization of the Cyborg Myth

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RESUMEN:

En este trabajo se explora la pertinencia de la figura y modelo de identidad del cibernético para el Comparatismo Intermedial. Se ofrece un panorama de problemas asociados susceptibles de análisis, junto a un corpus transmedial de textos culturales relacionados con la ciencia ficción y el *cyberpunk* seleccionados por su relevancia canónica en cada medio considerado. La Literatura Comparada siempre ha sido una disciplina de fronteras, abordando fenómenos literarios que trascienden las literaturas y

lenguas nacionales, basándose en la movilidad de temas, textos, géneros, formas y autores. Posteriormente, ha atendido a las intersecciones de lo literario con otros discursos culturales, especialmente las artes visuales. En la transición del siglo XX al XXI, ya en la denominada cultura postdigital, se ha consolidado el Comparatismo Intermedial, una versión de la Literatura Comparada que desplaza la centralidad de las categorías de lengua y texto hacia la de medio, considerando la intermedialidad, la remediación y la transmedialidad como conceptos y prácticas culturales centrales. En 2024, primer año post explosión de la IA generativa en el sistema de medios y la cultura postdigital global, se reactiva el potencial de un mito que se convierte en categoría teórica central para estudiar las relaciones entre cultura (literatura) y tecnología: el cibernético, un ser en la frontera entre lo orgánico y lo artificial.

ABSTRACT:

This article explores the relevance of the figure and identity model of the cyborg for Intermedial Comparatism. An overview of associated problems amenable to analysis is offered, together with a transmedial corpus of cultural texts related to science fiction and cyberpunk, selected for their canonical value in each medium under consideration. Comparative Literature has always been a discipline of frontiers, addressing literary phenomena that transcend national literatures and languages, based on the mobility of themes, texts, genres, forms and authors. Subsequently, it has attended to the intersections of the literary with other cultural discourses, especially the visual arts. In the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, already in the so-called post-digital culture, Intermedial Comparatism has been consolidated as a version of Comparative Literature that shifts the centrality of the categories of language and text towards that of medium, considering intermediality, remediation and transmediality as central cultural concepts and practices. In 2024, the first year after the explosion of generative AI in the media system and global postdigital culture, the potential of a myth that becomes a central theoretical category for studying the relationship between culture (literature) and technology is reactivated: the cyborg, a being on the border between the organic and the artificial.

PALABRAS-CLAVE:

intermedialidad; literatura comparada; postdigital; inteligencia artificial generativa; transmedialidad; *cyberpunk*

KEYWORDS:

intermediality; comparative literature; postdigital; generative artificial intelligence; transmediality; *cyberpunk*

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Introducción

EL AÑO 2023 SERÁ RECORDADO, entre otras cosas, por la *caída del meteorito* de una tecnología llamada a protagonizar la cuarta gran revolución cultural tras las derivadas de la imprenta, la máquina de vapor e Internet. Hablamos de la Inteligencia Artificial Generativa (IAGen)¹, un conjunto de tecnologías que para nosotros suponen uno de los últimos capítulos del proceso de ciborguización humano, cuya teorización y análisis en sus manifestaciones intermediales y transmediales nos ocuparán en las siguientes páginas. La bibliografía y especulación científica y teórica sobre esta tecnología se remonta ni más ni menos que a Alan Turing (1950) pero lo que ha cambiado las reglas del juego ha sido la salida comercial disfrazada de acceso abierto al Chat GPT de OpenAI.

Uno de los grandes retos para la Literatura Comparada y los estudios en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales cualitativas – para los que la cuestión de la autoría y la creatividad siguen siendo problemas capitales – es cómo encontrar un equilibrio entre las posibilidades o ventajas que proporciona a los creadores la IAGen y, entre otras cuestiones, el compromiso con los derechos de autor de esos creadores desde un concepto de creatividad auténticamente *ciborguesco*, fruto de la colaboración o integración orgánica del factor humano y el tecnológico más allá de la simple automatización de esa creatividad.

Sin necesidad de caer entre los adoradores del advenimiento de la “singularidad” tecnológica, término popularizado por Raymond Kurzweil en 2005 para indicar el momento en que la llamada “inteligencia general” se consolide como inteligencia suprahumana, lo cierto es que la velocidad en el desarrollo y evolución de las tecnologías de IA generativa es exponencial y no lineal. *The Exponential Age* es precisamente el título de un libro de Azeem Azhar (2021) en el que se describe y pone en discusión la vertiginosa transformación a la que esa evolución tecnológica está sometiendo a la sociedad, la política y el mundo de los negocios. La brecha “exponencial” entre las grandes corporaciones tecnológicas y la sociedad representada por instituciones y gobiernos es cada vez más grande y evidente, empujada por una dinámica en la que las primeras continúan entrenando y alimentando sus modelos de IA e inundando el mercado con aplicaciones cada vez más especializadas mientras los segundos son incapaces de regular eficazmente las posibles consecuencias de esa velocidad exponencial².

En uno de los mejores libros recientes sobre la IA generativa desde las Humanidades, Pablo Sanguinetti afirma que “La inteligencia artificial seguirá incompleta mientras no se la recubra de un diseño narrativo y estético que le dé sentido y la inserte en nuestra cultura” (2023, 17). No a otra cosa apuntaba Lance Weiler, director del Digital Storytelling Lab de Columbia University, cuando su equipo diseñó e

¹ Entre las fechas clave de la IAGen se encuentran 2014, cuando se introdujeron las redes generativas adversarias (GANs), o el lanzamiento el 30 de noviembre de 2022 de Chat GPT de OpenAI para un público limitado. Pero es el 23 de febrero de 2023 cuando el acceso a Chat GPT se vuelve público y masivo.

² La Ley Europea de la IA (mayo 2024) tendrá una implantación progresiva que demorará hasta 2025 la aplicación de ley de transparencia para las compañías que producen esta tecnología, obligadas a partir de entonces a dejar patente si un texto, imagen, película son el resultado de generación sintética a partir de IA.

implementó *Frankenstein IA*, un modelo capaz de visitar o adaptar el clásico de Mary Shelley en su segundo centenario, para demostrar que la IA puede y debe salir del discurso apocalíptico y terrorífico de la ciencia ficción para poner a prueba su potencial para asistir a los humanos en la comprensión de su propia humanidad (Weiler y Sánchez-Mesa 2019). Se trataría, en el fondo, de incidir en la evolución de esta tecnología desde los intereses de la cultura artística y humanística, enlazando con el concepto de *postdigital*, con el que Rui Torres apunta a la forma en que las tecnologías digitales motivan diálogos que van más allá de la interactividad mediada por la pantalla, dando lugar a formas mixtas entre lo digital, lo cultural y lo biológico. Semejante combinación de lo real y lo virtual ha desencadenado formas de creación artística y literaria que se caracterizan por la mediación y la hibridación (Torres 2022, 47) a las que puede y debe estar atenta la modalidad de comparatismo que describimos a continuación.

A través del comparatismo intermedial, la figura del cibernético se revela no solo como un símbolo de las intersecciones entre literatura, tecnología y cultura, sino también como un modelo teórico capaz de explorar los límites de la identidad en un mundo cada vez más marcado por lo digital y lo artificial. En este sentido, el cibernético no solo encarna la tensión entre lo orgánico y lo tecnológico, sino que también desafía las categorías tradicionales de lo humano, un concepto transmedia que se extiende desde la literatura hasta el cine, el cómic y los videojuegos. El cibernético además invita a una reflexión más profunda sobre el papel de la IA y de las tecnologías generativas en la creación cultural y en la redefinición de la autoría y la creatividad, todos ellos temas de los que trataremos en este artículo.

1. La Literatura Comparada como Comparatismo intermedial: nuevas encrucijadas entre culturas y tecnologías

Con más de 200 años de historia, la Literatura Comparada es una disciplina cuya evolución reciente resulta muy sintomática del devenir de las Humanidades de base literaria que han sabido responder a la complejidad que está caracterizando el primer cuarto del siglo XXI. En trabajos anteriores (Baetens y Sánchez-Mesa 2015 y 2017) hemos subrayado cómo tras el llamado *giro lingüístico* de los años 70 y el *giro pictórico* de los 90, la segunda década del XXI se caracterizaría por un *giro transmedial* (Baetens y Sánchez-Mesa 2019, Rosendo 2022) en los estudios teóricos y comparados. Este giro será incomprensible sin un desplazamiento del concepto del lenguaje o lengua, a su vez entendido más allá de su componente verbal en el sentido de su dimensión intermedial o figural (Bal 2021), hacia el concepto de *medio*. Siguiendo el desplazamiento de Joshua Meyrowitz desde una teoría de los media (*media theory*) hacia una teoría del medio (*medium theory*), Jan Baetens propone entender el medio en tanto *cultura* o conjunto de prácticas sociales que van más allá de un canal material de comunicación, poniendo el énfasis además en la agencia potencial de las cualidades materiales del *host medium* [medio anfitrión] en la generación de sentidos dentro de la dinámica propia de la remediación (2020, 81).

Dicho movimiento (que no *sustitución*) desde de la noción semiótica de *texto* se prolonga hacia otras categorías y problemas tales como los de la remediación, la

adaptación, la serialización o la demediación, conceptos todos ellos centrales para los estudios de la intermedialidad, espacio de la Literatura Comparada que consideramos heredero de los *Interart Studies* (Fisher-Lichte 2016) o los *Word & Image Studies*³. Esta *oscilación* hacia el paradigma transmedial solo puede comprenderse cabalmente no solo dentro de las dinámicas industriales de la cultura popular de masas en transición al modelo de las grandes plataformas digitales y de los medios interactivos (Ryan 2016), sino también a partir de la condición híbrida o intermedial de todo medio en tanto condición de posibilidad de la transmedialidad misma (Mitchell 2005, Sánchez-Mesa y Baetens 2017).

La transmedialidad, que hemos propuesto estudiar como *procesos de transmedialización* (Rosendo y Sánchez-Mesa 2019), es entendida en este marco tanto en un sentido amplio o *tradicional*, por el que se produce una transposición entre medios de temas, mitos, géneros, formas o personajes así como hibridación de sistemas formales y modos de representación o simulación y referencialidad múltiples entre textos correspondientes a distintos medios (Rajewsky 2005); como en un sentido restringido o radical, denominado *transmedia storytelling* [narrativa transmedial] por Henry Jenkins (2006), cuando se produce la distribución de un relato o mundo transmedial entre varios medios con un grado de participación relevante por parte de la audiencia. Al ocuparse de estos fenómenos, la Literatura Comparada experimenta una exploración cada vez más intensa y fructífera de los *límites* de las culturas literarias, enriqueciendo tanto el legado del último formalismo ruso y su funcionalismo dinámico (a su vez heredado y proyectado por los estudios de la cultura y de la traducción de la teoría de los polisistemas) como de la particular poética de la novela de Mijaíl Bajtín, cuyo concepto de carnavalización literaria y heteroglosia narrativa (1963, 1965, 1975), sumados al concepto de discurso y del signo ideológico de Valentín Voloshinov (1929), marcaban también el camino de un estudio de lo literario en las fronteras de la cultura y sus complejas manifestaciones inter y transmediales.

El contexto en que se produce esta movilidad de la disciplina lleva al comparatismo de raíces literarias a incorporar a sus líneas tradicionales de investigación nuevos objetos y fenómenos relacionados con los *nuevos viejos medios* (videojuegos, redes sociales, apps, IA generativa, etc.)⁴ con el *macro* o *metamedio* de Internet como espacio integrador del nuevo paisaje mediático. De este modo la función del comparatismo, tanto en cuanto rama de los estudios literarios y culturales como en cuanto teoría del discurso, respondería más a una actitud o perspectiva ante la comunicación y los textos culturales que a una definición estrecha y estricta de su objeto de estudio, como señaló Claudio Guillén (2005) en la misma línea de Harry Levin (1966).

En 2024, año 1 post explosión de la IA generativa en el sistema de medios y la cultura postdigital global, la perspectiva comparatista, cuya denominación nosotros condesamos como *comparatismo intermedial* está desarrollando un conjunto de

³ La IAWIS - *International Association of Word and Image Studies* fue creada en 1987 (www.iawis.org).

⁴ Adoptamos esta expresión, no exenta de cierta ironía, para marcar la necesidad de dar ya por plenamente integrados en el sistema de medios aquellos que dieron pie a la configuración de los *New Media Studies*, a partir de la generalización de Internet a principios de siglo XXI (narrativas digitales y transmediales en sentido radical, blogs, videojuegos, literatura electrónica, redes sociales y plataformas digitales en toda su variedad, etc.) así como para indicar que desde este horizonte se *recuperan* posibilidades innovadoras de los *viejos medios* en sus reacciones dentro de las dinámicas de *repurposing* o *remediación*.

conceptos y herramientas teórico-críticas que le están llevando más allá de las disciplinas hermanas con las que evolucionó: las Filologías nacionales, la Crítica literaria, la Estética e incluso la Teoría de la literatura.

Nos encontramos, por tanto, en el umbral de un nuevo capítulo de la evolución de la *literatura aumentada* (Sánchez-Mesa 2011), una coyuntura en la que el comparatismo nos ayuda a comprender de qué modo lo literario se expande o comprime, prolongando la negociación de sus fronteras al tiempo que avanza una de las transformaciones culturales y sociales, a nivel mundial, más radicales de la historia moderna y contemporánea, cuyos perfiles y características apenas estamos empezando a comprender en esta segunda década del siglo XXI.

Sin pretender reducir el comparatismo internacional a las directrices de la literatura comparada anglosajona, nos interesa revisar cómo en la llamada de artículos para el *State of the Discipline Report* [Informe sobre el estado de la disciplina] de la tercera década del siglo XXI de la *ACLA – American Comparative Literature Association* [Asociación Americana de Literatura Comparada] (2024)⁵ sus responsables marcan seis grandes áreas o dimensiones de investigación asociadas a la disciplina. Aunque aún no tenemos el resultado de la selección de este último proceso abierto de revisión de la disciplina, sí que es relevante una breve reflexión sobre dichas dimensiones o *áreas-marco* conceptuales: (1) Lenguajes, fundamentos, traducción; (2) Teorías, paradigmas, métodos, palabras-clave; (3) Mundos, regiones, minorías, geopolítica; (4) Historias, temporalidades, periodización; (5) Poder, justicia, ética; y finalmente (6) Instituciones, pedagogía, empleo. En el informe anterior de la *ACLA* (2014-15) las categorías de la llamada fueron parcialmente distintas: (1) Paradigmas; (2) Ideas para la Década (*Big Data*), (3) Hechos y Cifras, (4) Futuros, (5) Prácticas. La etiqueta que nos interesa, prácticamente una subdisciplina o campo de estudio dentro de los Estudios Culturales, los llamados *Cyborg Studies*, se encuentra completamente ausente de los trabajos incluidos en el informe 2014-15. La atención por el *cibernético*, en cuanto tema y objeto, sí aparece de forma casi constante en los encuentros anuales de la *ACLA* desde, al menos, el año 1995, en el que, con el título *Literature and Science* [Literatura y Ciencia] acogió un seminario titulado *Cyborgs and Cyberpunk*. A partir de este momento la presencia del *cibernético* es casi constante en sus congresos anuales (2003, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020). En 2024 se le ha dedicado un seminario titulado *Cyborgs in Posthuman Worlds* [Cibernéticos en mundos posthumanos].⁶

Los *Cyborg Studies* se han ocupado de una amplia gama de temas en los últimos diez años, en los que las publicaciones científicas interesadas por el concepto y la metáfora del *cibernético* se han incrementado con respecto a la década anterior.⁷ Dentro del ámbito internacional, en inglés, encontramos numerosas revisiones de Donna Haraway (1983), pero los grandes temas de tecnología, cultura, identidad y corporalidad se entrecruzan en una serie de áreas comunes dentro de las artes y las

⁵ Vid. <https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/>

⁶ Vid. <https://www.acla.org/program-guide#/seminars/all/42753>

⁷ Las conclusiones siguientes se han obtenido tras diversas búsquedas en las bases de WoS y Scopus limitadas a los últimos diez años, tanto en el ámbito anglosajón como luso-hispano. En el caso español, se ha consultado asimismo la base de datos de Dialnet, y en todos los casos se ha empleado asimismo el motor de búsqueda de Google Scholar.

humanidades. Una posible nómina de estos grandes temas o problemas podría ser: 1) el cuerpo, la identidad y la subjetividad; 2) el género y la sexualidad; 3) la ecocrítica y el ecoposthumanismo; 4) la representación del cibernético en la cultura popular y el arte y el consiguiente análisis de narrativas y de discursos que influyen en la percepción social sobre la tecnología y el cuerpo e identidad humanas; 5) la desigualdad tecnológica y cómo esta afecta a la sociedad; 6) el control del cuerpo, la privacidad y la autonomía corporal por parte de corporaciones y estados, y al tiempo cómo el uso de tecnologías cibernéticas puede resistir el control y el poder; y por último, 7) desde una perspectiva filosófica, los dilemas éticos que presuponen la alteración tecnológica del ser humano, y las implicaciones filosóficas que el cibernético propone al cuestionar lo específico humano.

El cibernético se cruza, además, por su naturaleza híbrida, con otros temas, disciplinas y objetos de estudio, desde la descolonización al afrofuturismo, los *Queer Studies* y el feminismo dentro de los *Black Studies*. Como metáfora y al tiempo realidad de naturaleza transversal, se estudia asimismo en ciencias sociales, ciencias de la salud, *computer sciences*, medicina, psicología, economía o empresa. Por supuesto, lo posthumano (Hayles 1999) se relaciona directamente con lo ciborguesco (cf. Koskimaa 2014, 121-124).

En el caso español, se ha desarrollado especialmente el ciberfeminismo, con autoras como Remedios Zafra (2005, 2013), Meri Torras (2005, 2012) o Teresa López-Pellisa (2017, 2018), que también han colaborado en obras colectivas (Zafra Alcaraz y López Pellisa, 2019). También se ha explorado su dimensión filosófica o sociológica en trabajos como los de Fernando Broncano (2009), o de Igor Sádaba (2009) entre otras publicaciones más numerosas que atienden al cibernético como tema en las representaciones audiovisuales que a su vez toman al cibernético de los clásicos literarios de la ciencia ficción.

Si atendemos al tema o mito de la figura del cibernético (como modelo de identidad también) y lo consideramos desde la perspectiva del estudio intermedial y transmedial que reivindicamos dentro de nuestra versión, también “ampliada”, de la Literatura Comparada, podemos concluir esta sección planteando cuáles serían las áreas de investigación para el Comparatismo intermedial en este espacio emergente de la estética postdigital:

- 1) El modelo de identidad del cibernético, las teorías sobre lo ciborguesco y el proceso de ciborguización, con un foco especial en la perspectiva de género o teoría feminista con nuevos desarrollos como el xenofeminismo, el ecofeminismo y el debate entre las filosofías del posthumanismo y el transhumanismo.
- 2) Las representaciones de la identidad cibernética desde una perspectiva intermedial en literatura, cine, series, videojuegos, espectáculos, performances o la industria musical.
- 3) La literatura digital como conjunto de géneros de creación ciborguesca.
- 4) Las expansiones y adaptaciones transmediales de mundos ciborguescos.
- 5) Las cuestiones del impacto de la IA generativa y su estética particular que afectan especialmente a la indagación comparatista: autoría y creatividad cibernética, derechos y ética; intermedialidad y transmedialidad en el desarrollo y evolución de las aplicaciones de IAGen.

Como puede verse, las dos primeras áreas se corresponden con el campo descrito de los *Cyborg Studies*, mientras que las otras tres (la *e-literature*, la transmedialidad y adaptaciones y, por último, la IA generativa) constituyen espacios de investigación teórica y crítica que van más allá de aquella subdisciplina, planteando una serie de objetos de estudio y posibilidades de indagación comparatista enormemente atractivos y relevantes en el horizonte postdigital ya descrito y en plena metamorfosis.

2. Organismo cibernético: del origen del concepto a la tipología del cibernético

El término *cyborg* apareció en el ámbito científico en los años 60, vinculado con la exploración espacial. Fue introducido por los matemáticos Manfred E. Clynes y Nathan Kline (1960), quienes en el contexto de la NASA propusieron un híbrido humano-máquina capaz de operar en el espacio. Se trataba de un nuevo tipo de *astronauta* que, como los replicantes de la novela, de Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), y de la icónica película *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982), fuera capaz de soportar las condiciones extremas de la exploración espacial. Así, *cyborg* en cuanto a *cybernetic organism* es el término “for the exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously” [para el complejo organizativo ampliado exógenamente que funciona como un sistema homeostático integrado inconscientemente] (Clynes and Kline 1960, 27). Por tanto, en su inicio el término se refería a un organismo vivo con sus capacidades restauradas o aumentadas a través de la tecnología. Con el tiempo esta concepción se fue ampliando, como insistiremos más adelante. Desde este primer momento el término saltó a la ficción, proliferando en el género de la *ciencia ficción* con múltiples versiones y representaciones de esta figura, que ya contaba con antecedentes relacionados con la vida artificial, como los autómatas y los robots desde, al menos, el siglo XIX. Sobre la enorme nómina de cibernéticos en este género, ofrecemos una pequeña panorámica más adelante.

Es evidente que existen diversos tipos de cibernéticos más allá de la ficción. Artistas como Neil Harbisson han convertido su indagación artística en una exploración de su propia identidad.⁸ Encontramos cibernéticos también en el campo de la “restauración” de funciones biológicas o incluso de miembros del cuerpo humano, los llamados *cyborgs protésicos*: desde los implantes cocleares en personas sin audición o las bombas de insulina para personas diabéticas a las prótesis de alta funcionalidad como las empleadas por diversos atletas.⁹

En el territorio del Arte, el concepto de lo cibernético tiene eco en posiciones que resultan estética y políticamente divergentes, como las que representan figuras de

⁸ Artista y activista cibernético, cofundador de la Cyborg Foundation, Harbisson nació aquejado de acromatismo, se implantó un chip osteointegrado que le permite traducir las vibraciones de los colores en tonos. Fue el primer ciudadano reconocido como cibernético por un gobierno (el británico), en 2004. Cf. <https://www.cyborgarts.com/neil-harbisson>

⁹ Como son los casos del corredor sudafricano Oscar Pistorius, que llegó a pasar la primera ronda de 200 metros en los Juegos Olímpicos de Londres (2012), o de las atletas españolas Desirée Vila, con una pierna protésica, paralímpica en pruebas de velocidad y salto de longitud (Tokyo 2021) y la esquiadora Audrey Pascual, subcampeona del mundo de esquí adaptado.

la performance teatral tales como el australiano Stelarc, quien concibe al cuerpo no como un lugar de inscripción social, psíquica o del deseo sino como una “arquitectura evolutiva o materia escultórica” disponible para su “rediseño”¹⁰; frente al español Marcel.li Antúnez¹¹ (miembro fundador de La Fura dels Baus), capaz de ironizar desde la dimensión “grotesca” del cibernético poniendo en escena una política participativa del cuerpo ya en obras como *Epizoo* (1994) o *Afasia* (1999) (Sánchez-Mesa 2003).

El cibernético ha sido un objeto de estudio y reflexión tanto en las Ciencias Médicas o la Biomecánica como en los ámbitos de la Filosofía, las Ciencias Sociales o las Humanidades. Para la Literatura Comparada no solo se convierte en un tema, asociado a una tipología de personaje, sino en acicate de especulación teórica y crítica en las fronteras entre medios, artes y modos de discurso. Su existencia nos hace preguntarnos no solamente cuáles son los límites del ser humano cuando éste puede modificarse a sí mismo con extensiones tecnológicas sino, más allá, en qué consiste precisamente lo específicamente humano. Es una figura que arrastra consigo toda una esfera de preguntas y cuestionamientos que atañen a las relaciones entre cultura (literatura) y tecnología, una línea de indagación propia de la *literatura aumentada* (Sánchez-Mesa 2011) y de la confluencia entre Literatura Comparada y los *Media Studies*.

Pero más allá de la realidad técnico-científica de la existencia de humanos “reparados” gracias a la tecnología, desde un punto de vista teórico debemos partir de una definición del concepto de cibernético desde la que poder proyectar nuestros análisis comparados. Esa definición, particularmente interesante para nuestro modelo de comparatismo intermedial, atento a las fronteras entre lo ficcional y lo no ficcional, nos vino dada por Donna Haraway, una filósofa norteamericana que puede considerarse como la *madre* de los *Cyborg Studies*. Haraway, en su célebre *Manifiesto para cibernéticos*, define al cibernético como “un organismo cibernético, un híbrido de máquina y organismo, una criatura de realidad social y también de ficción” (Haraway 1995, 1). En la siguiente sección desgranamos los motivos por los que esta definición resulta tan trascendental en el desarrollo de este campo y por qué la seguimos considerando funcionalmente válida en lo esencial.

Chris H. Gray, discípulo de Haraway, amplía el concepto de cibernético, señalando que hay cibernéticos no humanos, entre los animales o los vegetales, pero que siempre el factor humano está detrás de este *proceso de ciberneticización*. La pregunta que nos lanza es ilustrativa del alcance de este concepto: “No se preocupe por si usted es un cibernético o no. Pregúntese qué tipo de cibernético es” (2011, 88). En el manual *The Cyborg Handbook*, los tres tipos de cibernético que se distinguían en la entrada “Cyborgology” son los siguientes (Gray, Mentor y Figueroa 1995, 1-14):

1. *Simple controllers* [controladores sencillos]: cibernéticos formados por el uso de interfaces informáticos y digitales. Derivados de la comunicación mediada por el ordenador o algún tipo de inyección en el cuerpo, como vacunas o similares.

¹⁰ Vid. Conferencia de Stelarc “Zombies, Cyborgs and Chimeras” (Curtin University, 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqtiM1hK6IU> ; web personal <http://stelarc.org/projects.php>

¹¹ Vid. <https://www.marceliantunez.com/>

2. *Bio-tech integrators* [integradores biotecnológicos]: implican la protesificación del cuerpo mediante la integración de elementos articulados o mejoras fisiológicas.

3. *Genetic cyborgs* [cibernéticos genéticos]: el máximo grado de cibernización. Híbridos formados mediante ingeniería genética o transferencia de facultades humanas, como la conciencia o la memoria, a depósitos inorgánicos tales como chips, placas de silicio, etc.

En nuestro mundo, podemos encontrar, al igual que en la ficción, numerosos ejemplos de personas que gracias a sus prótesis ven sus capacidades restauradas, como los implantes cocleares, las bombas de insulina, los marcapasos, prótesis diversas todas ellas que podrían entrar en el tipo de *bio-tech integrators*. Desde el momento en que empleamos tecnologías como las digitales o, yendo más allá de Gray, empleamos la tecnología de la escritura para recordar, registrar y comunicarnos, somos cibernéticos del tipo 1, una visión más cercana a Haraway y al posthumanismo. El tercer tipo de cibernético es todavía una ficción y se encuentra más cercano a las ideas del transhumanismo, que veremos a continuación.

3. El mito del cibernético y sus ampliaciones: el posthumanismo

Volvamos ahora a Donna Haraway para entender mejor por qué el cibernético es una figura relevante para el comparatismo intermedial en la frontera entre la ficción y la no ficción. En su argumentación, el cibernético es un *mito* (una ficción) relevante para la teoría crítica feminista, para un feminismo *posthumanista* para el que se convierte en una metáfora política. Haraway utiliza esa metáfora para hablar de la condición de la mujer como sujeto de la explotación capitalista patriarcal capaz de imaginar irónicamente un estado de cosas no determinado por las condiciones de poder generadas en y a partir del género sexual. El cibernético funcionaría así como una “criatura de realidad social vivida” y, al mismo tiempo, como una ficción. Y es que la mujer, que en realidad *no existe* en singular, es un conjunto de construcciones igualmente culturales basadas en dicotomías metafísicamente establecidas donde la tecnología y el saber aparejado a ella parecen no coincidir con el polo de la “naturaleza” con la que se la relaciona tradicionalmente. En el discurso de Haraway, el mito, empleado como concepto, y las herramientas tecnológicas en tanto instrumentos científicos, se constituyen mutuamente y en contestación a una biopolítica que se considera agotada. Dicho mito se convierte en un lugar de resistencia contra lo que ella denomina “la informática de la dominación” –aparato al que más adelante nosotros podríamos llamar *dataísmo*– de modo que “[l]as tecnologías de las comunicaciones y las biotecnologías son las herramientas decisivas para darles nuevas utilidades a nuestros cuerpos” (Haraway 1995, 19).

En cualquier caso, la gran provocación o reto que nos plantea Haraway es la de asumir nuestra responsabilidad en el proceso de cibernización, es decir, de la evolución de nuestra propia especie. Para comprender qué implica este reto basta con que nos planteemos, desde nuestra perspectiva presente, ¿cuál es nuestra agencia en el desarrollo de la IA generativa? ¿Estamos condenados a ser meros *usuarios* de estas tecnologías o podemos entrar en procesos de diálogo y agencia efectiva con los

desarrolladores de la IA? Esta era también la gran pregunta detrás del proyecto ya citado *Frankenstein AI*, de Lance Weiler, quien ya en 2016-17 nos provocaba para convertirnos en *arquitectos del futuro*, siguiendo a Buckminster Fuller, y comprender que podemos ser activos, estar comprometidos y formar parte de las soluciones necesarias para ese futuro (Weiler y Sánchez-Mesa 2019, 42).

El potencial político de la figura del cibernético queda patente en pasajes del *Manifesto* como el siguiente:

Los cyborgs no son irreverentes, no recuerdan el cosmos, desconfían del holismo, pero necesitan conectar: parecen tener un sentido natural de la asociación en frentes para la acción política, aunque sin partidos de vanguardia. Su problema principal, por supuesto, es que son los hijos ilegítimos del militarismo y del capitalismo patriarcal, por no mencionar el socialismo de estado. Pero los bastardos son a menudo infieles a sus orígenes. Sus padres, después de todo, no son esenciales. (Haraway 1995, 4)

Como vemos, el concepto de cibernético, siguiendo el principio metodológico de los *conceptos viajeros* de Mieke Bal (2009), se va ampliando hasta acercarse a un modelo de identidad que, en nuestra opinión, sería central en las sociedades que hemos venido relacionado con la cibercultura (Sánchez-Mesa 2004) o, en términos filosóficos más recientes, del posthumanismo crítico (Hayles 1999, Braidotti 2013). Pero, ¿qué quiere decir el término *posthumano*? Según la teórica Katherine Hayles, no por casualidad una autoridad importante en la consolidación de los estudios contemporáneos sobre literatura electrónica:

Lo posthumano no implica de verdad el fin de la humanidad. Más bien, indica el fin de una cierta concepción de lo humano [...] Lo que es letal no es lo posthumano como tal sino su unión en la visión liberal humanista del sujeto. Posicionado en el interior de la dialéctica entre modelo y casualidad, arraigado en la actualidad material más que en la información inmaterial, lo posthumano se presenta como un nuevo recurso, una posibilidad para reconsiderar la relación articulada entre humanos y máquinas inteligentes (Hayles 1999, 375).

El posthumanismo, una teoría filosófica y crítica heredera de diversas corrientes posmodernistas, cuestiona la noción de una identidad humana única e inmutable y la centralidad del ser humano en el mundo natural. Los diversos avances tecnológicos, la globalización y los cambios culturales han modificado la visión tradicional de lo humano que es heredera del pensamiento cartesiano y de la Ilustración. Hayles propone una reconfiguración de lo que significa ser humano en un contexto en el que nos relacionamos cada vez más con la tecnología. Así, el posthumanismo se refiere a un cambio en la comprensión de los límites entre el cuerpo biológico y las tecnologías digitales. Las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación moldean nuestras percepciones y, por tanto nuestras identidades, y han cambiado asimismo la relación que existía entre humano y máquina. En resumen, ser posthumano implica que nuestra identidad no es una mera cuestión individual o biológica, sino que se entiende como nuestra relación con los sistemas de información, datos y tecnología.

Desde el posthumanismo, la identidad humana ya no es concebida como algo estático, sino relacional, que se construye y transforma en su interacción con otros seres, formas de vida y tecnologías. El ser humano ya no es el centro del mundo y su

identidad no es inmutable. Hayles señala que las barreras de nuestra identidad no se encuentran fijadas en nuestro ser biológico, en nuestro cuerpo, ya que se rompen en nuestra relación con lo tecnológico. Como posthumanos evolucionamos al mismo tiempo que la tecnología, que nos permite así expandir nuestra existencia.

Así, *posthumano* no significa un reemplazo del ser humano por las máquinas, o la tecnología, sino una condición en la que la distinción entre lo humano y lo tecnológico se difumina cada vez más. Se trata de un estado por el que las características tradicionales asociadas a la humanidad son redefinidas por la influencia de la tecnología y otros factores culturales y sociales. Ahora bien, en este contexto existe otra corriente filosófica que también parte de la relación entre el ser humano y la tecnología y cómo esta relación cambia nuestra percepción de lo humano, el denominado *transhumanismo*.

El transhumanismo es una corriente filosófica que busca *mejorar* y trascender al ser humano a través de la tecnología, la biotecnología y cualquier otro medio a nuestro alcance. Lo humano, entendido como una limitación y un punto de partida evolutivo, debe quedar atrás. De límites poco claros, esta corriente se fue conformando a mediados del siglo pasado. Según Nick Bostrom (2005), es a Julian Huxley, biólogo y eugenista, hermano del escritor Aldous Huxley, a quien le debemos el término *transhumanismo*. Julian Huxley escribió en 1927 *Religion Without Revelation*, donde en un momento determinado reflexionó sobre la especie humana y la posibilidad, la *voluntad* que ésta debía de mostrar en trascenderse a sí misma (Bostrom 2005, 6). Pero es el filósofo Max More quien en 1990 desarrolla este concepto, llevándolo a una *voluntad* de superar lo humano, de forma que el transhumanismo encuentra en el progreso tecnológico su mayor foco de interés. Una vez superado el primer estado de lo humano, el nuevo *posthumano* (no confundamos aquí este término con el *posthumanismo* y su idea de lo posthumano, aunque Bostrom emplee aquí este sustantivo), no debe imponerse ningún límite en su evolución, buscando incluso la inmortalidad, ni en su forma de transformar el mundo (Bostrom 2005, 15).

En 1998 se creó la *World Transhumanist Association* (ahora *Humanity +*¹²), de la mano de Nick Bostrom y David Pearce. En la actualidad, entre las diversas personalidades del transhumanismo, se encuentran el citado Bostrom, Ray Kurzweil, director de ingeniería de Google, que entiende el cuerpo humano como un soporte que funciona con distintos programas, y que por lo tanto puede reprogramarse para alargar la vida; Max Moore, defensor de la criopreservación que tiene una compañía en la que ofrece sus servicios para preservar cerebros y cuerpos con la esperanza de un futuro restaurador; o el conocido futurólogo y experto en robótica Hans Moravec, que ha especulado con la posibilidad de *descargar* la conciencia humana en una placa de silicio. A esta corriente pertenece el arte ciborguesco ya mencionado del performer Stelarc.

En este punto es importante subrayar la diferencia entre posthumanismo y transhumanismo. El concepto de lo *transhumano* se corresponde con un movimiento que aboga por las posibilidades evolutivas biológicas y tecnológicas a partir sobre todo de la idea del *aumento humano* (nanotecnología, medicina protésica, prolongación de la vida, criogenia o el mítico “volcado” de un cerebro o conciencia en un

¹² Vid. <https://www.humanityplus.org/>

ordenador) y desde la confianza absoluta en la ciencia y la tecnología. El movimiento *posthumanista*, sin embargo, evita colocar a la técnica en el centro absoluto y se plantea la necesidad de “repensar” lo humano desde una conciencia aguda del impacto de la acción histórica humana sobre el planeta, es decir, desde la era geológica del llamado Antropoceno. En palabras de Francesca Ferrando:

El posthumanismo llama nuestra atención sobre nuestra pertenencia como especie humana a un ecosistema que, si se daña, afecta también a la condición humana [...] El posthumanismo constituye un punto de vista crítico y deconstructivo a partir de un reconocimiento del pasado, a la vez que propone una productiva y abarcadora perspectiva que sustenta alternativas para el presente y los futuros (Ferrando 2013, 30).

La crítica fundamental que se le hace al transhumanismo es que no repara en las implicaciones éticas, sociales, políticas, económicas y medioambientales de estas mejoras, en la igualdad social en el acceso a las mismas, a su impacto en el resto de los seres vivos y el planeta. Haraway critica este individualismo excesivo que ignora estas implicaciones y que la visión excesivamente utópica del transhumanismo ignore las necesidades actuales (Gane 2005). El posthumanismo, sin embargo, se basa en la diversidad y la interconexión del mundo donde humanos, máquinas, animales y entornos naturales están interconectados. Haraway tampoco apoya el binarismo humano/máquina (mejora biotecnológica) presente en el transhumanismo porque, como hemos dicho, cuestiona precisamente esta frontera.

Relacionado con lo anterior, es interesante mencionar otra propuesta surgida del posthumanismo feminista, el *xenofeminismo*, lanzado por otro manifiesto, en este caso el del Colectivo Laboria Kubonics (2015). En su defensa de un racionalismo feminista, el manifiesto aboga por una vinculación de la innovación tecnocientífica con un pensamiento crítico y colectivo donde mujeres, identidades queer y *disidentes de género* alcancen un protagonismo hasta ahora inédito.

4. Los cibernéticos en la ficción

A continuación, vamos a trazar una suerte de mapa o cartografía provisional de un paisaje poblado por una selección de textos culturales, pertenecientes a medios muy diversos, susceptibles de integrar un corpus donde poner a prueba la batería de conceptos teóricos y críticos descritos anteriormente. No es nuestro propósito aquí desarrollar un análisis de caso sino trazar dicho paisaje o canon básico de obras de la cultura cibernética, para futuros estudios en la frontera entre comparatismo intermedial y *Cyborg Studies*.

De manera espontánea los consumidores de la cultura postdigital relacionan la idea y el término *cibernético* con criaturas de la imaginación literaria, cinematográfica o del mundo de los videojuegos¹³. Recordemos por un momento los relatos del escritor norteamericano Philip K. Dick, “The Minority Report” (1956), “We can remember for

¹³ Al acercarnos al terreno de la ficción otra distinción aquí es necesaria para diferenciar el *cibernético* (ser híbrido entre lo orgánico-biológico y lo tecnológico-artificial) respecto de los *robots*, completamente artificiales, incluso cuando adoptan la figura humana (androides, ginoides).

you wholesale” (1966) o su novela *Sueñan los andróides con ovejas eléctricas* (1968), las tres objeto de exitosas adaptaciones a la gran pantalla dirigidas por Steven Spielberg, Paul Verhoeven y Ridley Scott, respectivamente.

La última novela citada es el origen a su vez de un *universo transmedia* que se va expandiendo a partir del film *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), continuando por el juego para PC del mismo título (Westwood 1997) y la secuela dirigida por Dennis Villeneuve, *Blade Runner 2049*, a la que acompañan una serie de cuatro *animés* que recorren el tiempo de la diégesis transcurrido entre 2019 y 2046. Los personajes que pueblan este universo, en sus sucesivas expansiones, encarnan y dramatizan las grandes preguntas que sobrevuelan en el género del *cyberpunk*, del cual la novela de Dick fue uno de sus precedentes más influyentes: *¿Qué es lo que diferencia a los humanos de las máquinas?, ¿el libre albedrío?, ¿la capacidad de empatizar con los otros?, ¿la capacidad de soñar o tener memorias y experiencias propias? ¿simplemente nacer o reproducirse?* El relato de las aventuras del *blade runner* Rick Deckard y de los replicantes Nexus 6 en un Los Ángeles distópico tenía una complejidad temática (el poder de las corporaciones tecnológicas; ecologismo; tecnopredicadores; realidades alternativas; tecnologías de vigilancia; reflexiones estéticas, etc.) que es muy superior a la adaptación de Scott, un neo-noir futurista que, no obstante, acuñó las bases de buena parte del cine *cyberpunk* posterior.

El movimiento literario del *cyberpunk*¹⁴ acaba cristalizando en las novelas de William Gibson siendo *Neuromante* (1984) la primera en la que se encuentra la palabra *ciberspacio*, un mundo virtual paralelo al físico, denominado *la Matriz* y operado por miles de programadores donde ya no rigen las leyes de los estados sino las grandes corporaciones. Ese mundo bizarro es experimentado de forma alucinatoria (drogas psicofísicas) en los asaltos de *hackers* y *vaqueros informáticos* en pugna y alianzas con mafias y tribus de personajes que usan la biotecnología para construir nuevas identidades corporales. En su prólogo a la muy influyente antología de relatos *cyberpunk*, *Mirrorshades* (1986), Bruce Sterling ensayaba una definición del género aludiendo a la influencia de la ciencia ficción de los 60 y de la literatura de la *New Wave* de Brian Aldiss y sobre todo James G. Ballard, citando también a H. G. Wells, Philip K. Dick, el *beatnik* Alfred Bester y, en especial, a Thomas Pynchon (1986, x). Sterling insiste allí en dos notas que nos llaman la atención, el interés y cuidado por el “estilo”, que causaba reticencias en la “ciencia ficción dura”, apegada a lo científico y tecnológico, y por “la idea”, que le vinculaba a la tradición clásica de la ciencia ficción. Y afirmaba que el término clave para entender este movimiento es el de *integración* entre tecnología y contracultura de los 80 (1986, xii).

Además de las otras dos novelas de William Gibson que conforman, con *Neuromante*, la llamada “trilogía del *Sprawl*”, *Conde Cero* (1986) y *Mona Lisa acelerada* (1988), o de sus célebres relatos *Johnny Mnemonic* (1981) y *Quemando Cromo* (1986) recogidos en la antología de este mismo título, otros títulos han destacado; los otros autores principales del movimiento son Neal Stephenson con *Snow Crash* (1992), *Diamond Age* (1996) o *Criptonomicon* (1999), y Bruce Sterling con la mencionada antología, fundamental en la diseminación del género, *Mirrorshades* (1986), o con novelas como *Cismatrix* (2005).

¹⁴ Para una genealogía y cartografía del movimiento véase Dani Cavallaro (2004).

La presencia de la identidad cibernética en la estética *cyberpunk* no se limita, según la misma lógica intermedial y transmedia que preside nuestro método, al medio literario, y así podemos encontrar un desarrollo muy amplio de estos universos de ficción y este tipo de personajes en el mundo del cómic, o del manga, con sus correspondientes adaptaciones al cine de animación o anime en el caso japonés. Tal es el caso de *Ghost in the Shell*, manga de Shirow Masamune (1989-90), adaptado a *anime* por Mamoru Oshii (1995) con una segunda parte *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence* (2005). Las aventuras de la mayor Kusanagi, una policía cuyo cuerpo ha sido reconstruido casi por completo, y sus compañeros de la sección 9, se convierten en una investigación casi filosófica sobre la propia humanidad en su progresiva hibridación con la tecnología, al tiempo que persiguen a criminales como el llamado Puppet Master, una IA escapada del control del gobierno que hackea a humanos y cibernéticos en busca de su liberación definitiva. El mundo de *Ghost in the Shell* se ha expandido transmedialmente con dos series de televisión, *GitS Stand Alone Complex* (2 temporadas) y *Ghost in the Shell SAC_2045_Guerra Sostenible*, así con el largometraje (live action) *Ghost in the Shell: el alma de la máquina*, dirigido por Rupert Sanders (2017), más varios OVAs y cuatro videojuegos. Otros conocidos títulos del anime con personajes cibernéticos ocupan lugares míticos en la cibercultura desde films como *Akira*, de Katsuhiro Otomo (1988), hasta *Alita: Battle Angel*, de Robert Rodríguez (2019), como también sucede en el ámbito de las series, como son los casos de *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, de Hideaki Anno (2015-2016) o *Cowboy Bebop*, de Shinichiro Watanabe (1998-1999).

En el sistema cinematográfico, sin olvidar la galería de cibernéticos que pueblan las más grandes franquicias transmedia del momento, como *Star Wars* (Disney) o *The Avengers* (Marvel), entre una amplia filmografía de temática cibernética podemos destacar por su complejidad intermedial y heteroglosa, títulos como la trilogía (ya tetralogía) *The Matrix*, de Lana y Lilly Wachowski (1999-2021), *I Robot*, de Alex Proyas (2004), la inquietante *Ex Machina*, de Alex Garland (2014), o *Her*, de Spike Jonze (2013). Por lo que respecta al espacio de las series de televisión deben citarse también *Altered Carbon*, de Laeta Kalogridis (2018), o *Severance* (Apple TV 2022). En el ámbito del cine español destaca el film *Eva*, de Quique Maíllo (2013).

Por último, dentro de la esfera del medio cibertextual que ocupa el centro del sistema industrial de la cultura postdigital, esto es, los videojuegos, son especialmente relevantes para el tipo de indagación que se propone aquí títulos tales como: *Deus Ex* (Eidos, 2002) y sus secuelas; *Detroit Be Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020). Existen cibernéticos ya míticos en el universo de los videojuegos, como los *spartans* de Halo (Bungie, 343 Ind.) y en especial el personaje Master Chief, los Bigdaddy de Bioshock (2K Boston) o el cibernético Rayden, de la franquicia de Metal Gear (Konami, Kojima).

5. Conclusiones con un punto de fuga sobre Literatura Comparada e IA Generativa

Comenzábamos estas páginas asumiendo nuestra revisión del estado de los estudios de Literatura Comparada desde una perspectiva *postdigital*, un horizonte que

implica la problematización de esa sensación de *novedad continua*, muy propia de la lógica del régimen temporal de aceleración social y alienación vital contemporáneas (Rosa 2016). Frente a ello, regresando a la reflexión (eco)crítica de Rui Torres conviene subrayar que:

A literatura pós-digital (categoria provisória, como todas as categorias o são) não se serve dos média apenas porque eles são novos ou novidade. Pelo contrário, contesta precisamente essas diferenças, promovendo misturas entre processos e métodos daquilo que caracteriza o novo e o velho, o analógico e o digital (Torres 2022, 48).

La oposición entre lo digital y lo no digital, entre lo natural y orgánico, por un lado, y lo artificial o tecnológico por el otro, ya no se establece en términos no solo absolutos sino siquiera binarios. El bucle de retroalimentación entre ambas esferas se hace cada vez más patente, con consecuencias también cada vez más palpables en *la crisis de realidad* o de percepción de las fronteras entre lo ficcional y lo no ficcional. En este contexto, la figura del cibernético representa un tema con una rica extensión simbólica y un conjunto de problemas que abordar desde el comparatismo intermedial tal y como discutíamos al inicio de este artículo. Su naturaleza híbrida, que transgrede las fronteras entre lo humano y lo tecnológico, encarna y ejemplifica las dinámicas intermediales y transmediales que identificamos también en la Literatura Comparada del siglo XXI. Este modelo de identidad, influido y moldeado por múltiples medios, ofrece un espacio de convergencia donde se manifiestan las tensiones entre tecnología, cultura y prácticas sociales. Al poner en diálogo los *Cyborg Studies* con el comparatismo intermedial, se propone una visión que abarca tanto el cuerpo físico del cibernético como sus representaciones simbólicas, una articulación que refleja el desplazamiento teórico desde una teoría de los medios hacia una teoría del medio, donde el cibernético adquiere agencia como “cultura” y no solo como “tema”.

De este modo, la Literatura Comparada y, en concreto, el comparatismo intermedial puede y debe aproximarse a las grandes preguntas que está planteando esta especie de *fase avanzada* de la estética digital y, más allá del debate sobre la creatividad de la IA Generativa, someter a un análisis comparado las posibles diferencias en los efectos de la progresiva síntesis masiva de objetos o textos culturales, dependiendo de los medios que son objeto de remediación por las redes neuronales artificiales y sus modelos de aprendizaje. Si todos los medios son medios mixtos y sus componentes semióticos se combinan e hibridan de distinto modo dependiendo de sus condiciones materiales específicas de producción, circulación y recepción, ¿hay diferencias cualitativas dependiendo de cada medio sintetizado en los resultados de la creación con IAGen a partir del impacto del carácter fragmentario y disgregador de su modo operativo?¹⁵

Si, como afirma Lev Manovich (2024), lo que distingue a la estética de la IAGen es su carácter predictivo, fruto de su naturaleza probabilística y estadística, ¿de qué modos están evolucionando, en función de la diferencia intermedial, sus limitaciones

¹⁵ William JT Mitchell (1995) hablaba del principio de “separate and recombine” para aludir al procedimiento creativo propio de los medios digitales que la IAGen conserva en sus potentes algoritmos de síntesis de millones de datos.

artísticas actuales en la combinación de lo único, particular e inesperado junto y dentro de los patrones generalizables de las formas artísticas asociadas a los géneros y estilos? Si el concepto de instrucción (*prompt*) es la clave de la creatividad cibernética con IAGen, ¿cómo varía o afecta a cada sector de la industria cultural o a las artes digitales el desplazamiento desde los conceptos de “forma” y “contenido” hacia los de “tema” y “estilo” (Manovich y Arielli 2024, 25)? o ¿cómo determina la “traducción mediática” de las tecnologías de IAGen (de texto a imagen, texto a sonido, imagen fija a imagen en movimiento, etc.) las posibilidades creativas de este “nuevo” modo estético?

La figura del cibernético, por tanto, no solo es un tema relevante dentro de la Literatura Comparada; es también un símbolo del enfoque comparatista intermedial, puesto que invita a analizar nuevas prácticas culturales y tecnológicas como la IA generativa desde un modelo transmediado y posthumano. De esta manera, el cibernético deviene en un objeto de estudio que no solo refleja, sino que también amplía las herramientas críticas y teóricas del comparatismo intermedial.

Estas son tan solo algunas de las preguntas que se vislumbran como específicas del comparatismo intermedial en el horizonte postdigital de la creación con IAGen. Y ello sin dejar fuera de foco otras más generales que conciernen a la estética y la política de las tecnologías de grandes bases de datos y generación automatizada de nuevos textos culturales, teniendo en cuenta críticas y llamadas de atención normativas como las de Frank Pasquale (2024) y sus nuevas leyes de la robótica, o las de Rui Torres y Eugenio Tisselli (2020), por un lado, y Kate Crawford (2021) por otro, y sus respectivas críticas al impacto antiecológico de la IA. Estos autores nos alertan sobre cuestiones tan básicas como la necesidad de limitar y legislar el marco de desarrollo de estas tecnologías de modo que, entre otras cosas, la IAGen evolucione como apoyo y complemento a la acción humana en régimen de *colaboración* y no de *sustitución* (Pasquale 2024, 28) y, por otro lado, la materialidad física de las tecnologías, consideradas por Torres y Tisselli al modo del *pharmakon* platónico (remedio y droga), que las enormes instalaciones informáticas capaces de gestionar y movilizar los trillones de datos que estas tecnologías son capaces de procesar no aumenten el ya de por sí acelerado impacto de las industrias de hardware sobre el medio ambiente (Crawford 2021). En este contexto, el lugar de la literatura digital, en su dependencia consustancial de la tecnología, sería la de una periferia irónica (Torres y Tisselli 2020).

En definitiva, regresando finalmente a nuestra revisión del modelo de identidad del cibernético podemos concluir afirmando que esta figura (de ficción y realidad social) se puede convertir en un modo de “renombrar” lo humano en la cibercultura entendida desde una perspectiva posthumanista. El filósofo Fernando Broncano llama a los cibernéticos “seres de frontera” (2009, 15), dotados de una identidad móvil, en continua metamorfosis, *melancólicos* por su “desacoplamiento con la realidad” (25). De este modo los cibernéticos se convierten en figuras centrales de una teoría para fundamentar un pensamiento filosófico no basado en dicotomías metafísicas que opongan *lo natural* a *lo artificial*, *lo humano* a *lo tecnológico*. Esto es especialmente relevante en un momento en que discursos neoconservadores rechazan la hibridación entre humanos y tecnología, en particular todo lo que tiene que ver con la

intervención científica y médica en cuestiones de reproducción, pero también de *hibridación posthumana*, desde posiciones morales ultraconservadoras.

Al fin y al cabo, si estamos de acuerdo con lo planteado en *Membrana*, novela de Jorge Carrión (2021) –uno de los escritores españoles más incisivos en el potencial imaginativo de la ciencia ficción en tanto *realismo especulativo*–, los cibernéticos y el proceso de ciborguización serán lo que identificarán la evolución próxima de la especie humana, en relación conflictiva con sucesivas generaciones cada vez más perfeccionadas de IAs; estas Inteligencias Artificiales son precisamente las voces narradoras de la citada *Membrana*, una novela que ha protagonizado una de las expansiones transmediales de origen literario más interesantes en el ámbito español¹⁶.

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¹⁶ La novela *Membrana* (2021) ocupa el centro de un mundo transmedial conectado con: el *falso diario-ensayo Lo viral* (2020); el podcast *Solaris* (Pódium Podcast, 3 temporadas, 2020-2021); la exposición del Centro José Guerrero de Granada, *Todas los museos son novelas de ciencia ficción* (dic. 2021-feb. 2022); el *pseudo* catálogo-novela del mismo título (2022); y, recientemente, tanto el podcast *Gemelos Digitales* (Pódium 2024) como el montaje *Todas las novelas son museos de ciencia ficción* (parte de la exposición *Ficciones Generativas*, Santiago de Chile 2024).

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Questionnaire on Literature and Comparative Studies

with

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1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

As a scholar and teacher, my approach to Comparative Literature was not straight, but mediated by a bordering discipline, Literary Theory, my field of research since my MA at the University of Bologna and then during my PhD at the University of Bergamo. For me and other scholars of my generation, the role models at the time (the late 1990s) were Mario Lavagetto – professor of Literary Theory in Bologna – and Remo Ceserani. The latter, professor of Comparative Literature in Pisa and then in Bologna, was also a tireless mediator between the often backward Italian academic environment and the ideas or debates coming from abroad, especially from the United States. As a matter of fact, the pivot of my research and teaching activity is still Literary Theory, that I practice far from any dogmatism or methodological orthodoxy: flexibility, open-mindedness and thoughtful eclecticism are the skills required by the cultural and epistemic horizon in which we move. And despite the crisis of Theory as an academic discipline, I think one cannot do Comparative Literature without a sharp theoretical awareness. It would be like doing thematic criticism, for example, without having the slightest idea (or without even asking) what a theme is. So, along this line, without theory one would inevitably regress to empirical, impressionistic research habits, which easily turns into the “know-it-all” (in Italy we call this science “tuttologia”, i.e., speaking of anything without really knowing it).

From this point of view, the cultural and institutional history of the discipline is very instructive, especially in its contradictions. To a large extent, modern Comparative Literature has taken shape in individual critical practice, as some great scholars have taught (or rather shown) through their concrete example – Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, in Italy Giacomo Debenedetti. In the Italian critical tradition, after the interdict pronounced by Benedetto Croce, who condemned the comparative literary studies prevalent in his time, the history of the discipline has been particularly faltering and tortuous, characterized by an ambiguous system of relations with the national literature. Before taking institutional root in the universities, Comparative Literature developed mainly through the individual work of scholars coming from other fields such as Italian Studies, French Studies, Roman Philology, Aesthetics and so on (Mario Lavagetto, Remo Ceserani, Francesco Orlando, Franco Brioschi, Mario Domenichelli, Piero Boitani, etc.), scholars who then became *de facto* comparatists. At the same time, these scholars taught us to approach the literary tradition with a flexible yet rigorous method, to conceive a strong idea of literature as a system, and to compare different topics and objects within a firm theoretical framework and by sharp analytical tools. The lesson I have learnt from them is to consider Comparative Literature not as a mechanical comparison between authors or texts from different national traditions (this is the classic pattern of some old Italian jokes: there is an Italian, a Frenchman and an

Englishman on a plane that crashes...), but rather as an approach, a point of view, a heuristic stance that enables a distinctive, broader and more penetrating perspective on the phenomena that we study. It is in this spirit that, in more recent years, I have followed and (prudently) taken up the new trends in Comparative Literature in Italy and around the world.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

This is an old and challenging question, already tackled by Erich Auerbach in *The Philology of World Literature*. To a certain extent, it is one of the core problems of Comparative Literature in itself: how can we handle the relationship between the part and the whole, the analysis and the synthesis, or “entre lo uno y lo diverso”, in Claudio Guillén’s terms? Is there a point of convergence between the panoramic gaze of the comparatist, who crosses borders and traditions, and that of the philologist, who meticulously investigates individual texts in increasingly specialised sectorial research?

In this respect, my point of view is quite radical: I do not think it is possible to study texts and literary traditions whose language we ignore, for the language issue, as you say, implies also historical frameworks and cultural backgrounds. To miss out on this richness, in exchange for wide thematic or intertextual overviews, is a game I am not keen on. That is why I observe with a certain diffidence some international debates about World Literature. Obviously, not all authors and artworks are the same and you can accept nuances and exceptions depending on their textual status, linguistic and stylistic features, ways of production and circulation through different media, including translation policies. Likewise, not all approaches are alike and some kinds of research (e.g., content-related, or broadly cultural, not to mention the quantitative tools of digital humanities) may rely on translations, if not completely disregard the text as such. But for my part, since I believe in the specific quality of literary language and I have often faced writers with strong, even idiosyncratic stylistic personalities (Gustave Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Vladimir Nabokov – at least the English writing Nabokov...), I cannot imagine my work without a direct access to the original text – or at least without the possibility to check on it. (I also tend to be radical as a teacher: when a student comes to me enthusiastically proposing a study about, let’s say, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, the first question I ask is: do you know Russian?).

As we know, some translations can be better than the original works, but I sincerely do not believe in creative misunderstandings arising from reading, interpretive or translating mistakes – at least not in a general and abstract way. It means that I will refrain from rambling in Turkish, Armenian or Japanese literature. That will be for another life.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

My research interests have shaped me as a modernist scholar. A large amount of my studies focuses on the Western literary tradition (written mainly in the languages I know) between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, especially in the field of the novel. Usually, when I go back to previous centuries, I try only to recover a cultural filiation or the historical path of a theme in relation to the topics I am studying (for instance, working on Stendhal's elaboration of romance, I have recalled his medieval imagery and retraced the evolution of the *topos* of the "eaten heart" starting from courtly literature). But also concerning pre-modern literatures, my stance is very similar to the one I take towards the language issue: I believe in a specific skill that cannot be improvised. For my part, I have always preferred to study modernity because I am convinced that any investigation of cultural history, even remote from us, should start from the great questions of our time. This does not mean collapsing the distinction between past and present, but rather preserving the past's otherness with respect to our historical positioning, which should always be thematised even when we claim to adopt a neutral and "scientific" method. One of my points of reference on these issues is a page from *The Historian's Craft* by Marc Bloch, where he writes that "misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present". Then he tells an anecdote: "I had gone with Henri Pirenne to Stockholm; we had scarcely arrived, when he said to me: «What shall we go to see first? It seems that there is a new city hall here. Let's start there». Then, as if to ward of my surprise, he added: «If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life»".¹

That being said, it is true that the prevailing interest in modern or strictly contemporary literature can become a problem, especially when one loses the sense of historical evolution and fails in the essential work of historicization. Undoubtedly, one of the present and future challenges posed to comparatists is to broaden their point of view not only horizontally, on the geographical and transnational axis, but also vertically, in a medium- and long-term perspective. As always, their task will be to reconnect distant fields, finding a meeting point between scholars of modernity and those of more traditional disciplines.

¹ Marc Bloch. 1992. *The Historian's Craft*. Transl. Peter Putnam. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 36.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

As Gayatri Spivak points out in *Death of a Discipline*, the task of Comparative Literature is to cross borders, but to cross borders can be a very serious problem. We must always keep this in mind, even when we cherish the irenic utopia of a World Literature in which all literatures and cultures can talk to each other, while the ecumenic comparatist acts as a cultural mediator or a peacekeeper. Power relations are always unbalanced and asymmetrical, as shown by linguistic hegemonies, translation policies and dynamics of texts circulation on a global market (see Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*). That being said, I think that the broadening of the corpus beyond the Western canon is nothing but a good thing, even if we cannot forget the problems of linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge that I mentioned earlier. Likewise, I think that between Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Subaltern Studies, etc., a virtuous alliance can be established, as so many instances demonstrate. But this alliance will really take place as long as we move away from the pernicious antithesis between content description and formal analysis, as if one could disregard the form in which any cultural element is expressed, or as if, on the other hand, any literary work could be reduced to the surface of style, without any thematic or ideological concern. So, to answer the question: no, I do not think one can practice Comparative Literature without close reading and without asking aesthetic questions. As I said before, the great challenge is to find the balance point between analysis and synthesis, and maybe simply to adjust the scale.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I must confess that I cannot find a really outstanding model in the current panorama of methods and critical theories. There certainly are some research fields that I consider helpful for my theoretical toolkit – Fictional Worlds Theory, Visual and Inter-medial Studies, some issues in Postclassical Narratology – but nothing I can rely on as a stable foundation or framework. On the other hand, over the last few decades I have observed with some suspicion a phenomenon fostered by current epistemological scepticism and weak theoretical paradigms: I mean the proliferation of methods, schools or merely critical labels that rapidly turn into veritable brands. Nowadays, once a month, some new “Studies” crop up and yet another epoch-making “turn” is patented, with the usual sequel of projects, conferences, “seminal” essays, and possibly some academic positions to be funded. Sometimes it seems really hard to distinguish serious proposals from academic marketing, just to increase your credit in the intellectual research market. I often recall the warnings of Remo Ceserani, when

he used to talk about “the supermarket of critical methods”, a postmodern metaphor to convey that methods have lost their heuristic power and “have become tools or utilities, routines to be indifferently performed, distinguished only by the label, or the patented griffe”.²

In my opinion, the first thing we should do for the future of our studies is to seriously master the methods and theoretical paradigms we have at our disposal, the new and the old ones. Sometimes we rush to throw into the critical dustbin the movements we consider classic or even out of fashion, from Structuralism to Semiotics, from Hermeneutics to Reader Response Criticism. One of the updating procedures we should periodically carry out is to reconsider certain authors, books or theoretical models and honestly take stock of the situation, to screen the still useful issues from those that are irrevocably outdated. At the same time, we should historicise not only literary artworks or phenomena, but the critical models themselves, tracing them back to their cultural, ideological and political frameworks. That is the only way to resist the sirens of the new critical trends and keep us away from the supermarket of methods, looking for the latest commodity or trendy product. We should also remember that literary theory and criticism are (or should be) intelligently ancillary disciplines, meant to clarify the texts and to provide us a better understanding of the literary tradition. It is therefore legitimate, as a tactical resource, to adapt our paradigms and methods to the specific object we are investigating, which takes priority over research labels and academic affiliations. If we work this way, we will not become unsuspecting consumers but serious, curious and open-minded scholars, endowed with the strategic eclecticism we learned from our masters.

² Remo Ceserani. 1999. *Guida allo studio della letteratura*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, p. XIX.

Helena C. Buescu

Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at the University of Lisbon, Portugal

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

For personal reasons, I have always lived in the immersive context of Comparative Literature, well before considering an academic career and, especially, a PhD. When this time came, and having taught for a number of years French Literature, Classical and Romantic/Realist, and written an MA dissertation on Mme de La Fayette, I quickly understood that I would much rather prefer to continue my research in an area that would never foreclose my interests in terms of national literatures, approaches, authors, and individual works. Consequently, I began doing some research and found out that the area closer to my interests would be Comparative Literature. However, this was an area that did not exist previously in Portuguese universities, and which therefore was not officially recognized as a PhD area of study. With the support of my supervisor, Maria Alzira Seixo, and the whole Department of Romance Literatures at the University of Lisbon, I began my research on landscape description in three different national literatures, hoping that by the time I had to hand in my thesis the administrative process would be complete. So it happened, even though only a couple of months before I finished my PhD thesis.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

I agree that “the language issue” is indeed a problem, or shall I say a challenge. One must be aware of the limits and even dangers when using translations, because unfortunately not all translations have the same level of proficiency. But it can be done, with a special attention to the cultural background (and research!) of the works one is dealing with. The main question, to my view, is to understand that one cannot approach a work from a different language and historical culture in a supposed naïve way, as though everything would be self-explanatory. Research and contextual reading are always necessary, but in this case they become of paramount importance.

I would also point out two different and to my view decisive questions that must inform a critical self-awareness of the comparative scholar as such. First and perhaps foremost, the philological understanding has to be a central part of the work we do. Unfortunately, in the last decades philology has in most cases been discontinued from university curricula, at least as a subject matter. It is not unusual, therefore, to see the main part of university training as discarding the discipline of

philology but, even worse, as discarding (and therefore making it invisible) the cognizance and the knowledge that comes from understanding just *how different* is a work that comes from a different culture and language.

The second question is that Comparative Literature (and other disciplines as well, but in Comparative Literature this becomes more perceptible) needs a convergent effort coming from other disciplines to address these problems: I would underline hermeneutics, of course, but also history, which allow one to build a knowledge of the different as different, therefore building (and not cancelling) the dialogue between that which is already known by us, and that which is new. So, philology, hermeneutics, and history are, to my view, the pillars of a true and informed comparatist position.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I see this with regret. And I think they are both a sad consequence of neglecting the disciplines I just mentioned, especially philology and history, which offer the interested scholar the means of frequenting the difference not only between spatially removed languages and cultures, but also different historical times. Reading a text from medieval literature, written in a language that we come to recognize as also our own, brings with itself the awareness that there is much separating us from the Middle Ages, and therefore that we have to approach the said text as offering us a quality of separation that we must recognise and embrace, in order to promote the hermeneutical understanding. I value contemporary case studies, but I am also very much aware of how much what we term “contemporary” is permeated by the non-contemporary. This is for me the true richness of our culture, giving rise to cultural and literary fruitfulness, for only by frequenting the “old” may we appreciate the “new”, which is built on what has (apparently) passed.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Short answer: no. Close reading and asking aesthetic questions are two main features of Comparative Literature and, to my view, also of all literary disciplines. Comparative Literature cannot be adequately densified if the subject who reads (the *tertium quid*, to put it in comparative terms) is banished from the reading and is not challenged by each and every text. My view is that Comparative Literature must be unflinchingly centred on the text. Otherwise, it becomes a false discipline, in which

description has replaced any reflective argument. Besides, there is no Comparative Literature without critical awareness of how our historical and theoretical position, as well as our encyclopaedia, always inform the way we read and interpret different texts. We are lucky, moreover, to work on a field such as the humanities, where new knowledge gains by being superimposed to the previous one, and becomes a decisive tool to highlight and transform it.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

My view is that we are in a critical and dynamic moment, which is certainly reconfiguring the field. Of recent trends, there are some which are, I think, on their way out: for instance, post-colonialism and world literature are close to having exhausted their capacity of innovation and challenging, and it is not difficult to see that what is now being written under these headings is more and more distant from an ability to promote exciting and productive new approaches. Instead, there is a tendency in these fields to just repeat and adapt what has already been said, without further ado. There are other fields that offer a possibility of renewal, and in which I think future work may offer exciting perspectives. One of these is, to my view, ecocriticism, which has not exhausted all its possibilities. I would like to add that it does seem that a renewal of philologically informed approaches is on its way, and, if so, I am sure this will bring about a deeply interesting repositioning of what it means to be doing Comparative Literature today.

Astrid Erll

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1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I had a comparative research question before I became aware of comparative literature as a field. In my doctoral dissertation (*Gedächtnisromane*, 2003), I wanted to compare German and English prose texts of the 1920s that addressed the experience of the First World War. This was in the late 1990s. I duly searched for books on “how to compare” – unsuccessfully though. I suppose that this problem persists for young comparativists to this day.

However, Rita Felski’s and Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013) became an important landmark for more systematic questions about the logics, ethics, politics, and transnational dimensions of comparison. These concerns in fact resonate with the field in which my dissertation found its home: memory studies. In British and German war writing of the *interbellum*, national frameworks of memory (as in Maurice Halbwachs’s “cadres sociaux de la mémoire”) are clearly palpable. But beyond this, other frameworks such as social class, gender, and political orientation shape literary war memories. And of course, there are transnational dynamics, the “travel” (Erll 2011) of memories: Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1929), for example, became a narrative template for Helen Zenna Smith’s [Evadne Price] *Not so Quiet ... Stepdaughters of War* (1930), and enabled her outraged articulation of the female experience of the First World War (see also Erll 2025).

Some years later, I wrote my *habilitation* about memories of colonialism in Indian and British media cultures (see Erll 2009), I realized that comparing memories within “national containers” (as I had by and large done in *Gedächtnisromane*) did not do justice to the entangled histories of colonizer and colonized, where historical experiences and archives are shared (while often contested), and forms of representation travel. Creating “containers for comparison” runs the risk of masking transcultural traffic. Most modern histories are therefore better studied in their “connective” rather than in a “comparative” logic, to use Marianne Hirsch’ and Nancy K. Miller’s (2011) distinction. This insight lies at the basis both of relational approaches to comparative literature (Goldberg 2011) and of what emerged in the 2010s as “transcultural memory studies” (Erll 2011; Erll 2023).

But as I realized in my subsequent project on the mnemohistory of the *Odyssey* (Erll 2018), tracing connections across vast stretches of time poses a challenge for relational approaches. Literary mnemohistory does not happen on what Genette calls “the sunny side of hypertextuality” (Genette 1997, 9). Instead of explicit linkages, we find potentialities and resonances. Exact points of connection remain difficult to pin down. Classical reception studies offers important insights for comparatists working on “frail connections” (Greenwood 2010, on ancient Greek and

modern Caribbean literature) or “striking literary similarities” (Haubold 2013, on Mesopotamian and archaic Greek literature).

The question of comparison has returned with full force to the field of memory studies in recent debates about Holocaust-comparisons. What are the epistemological and ethical dimensions of comparing the Holocaust with transatlantic slavery, or of understanding the war in Gaza as a Holocaust? Some of the most nuanced and engaged interventions into the debates about “comparing comparisons” have been made by comparatist Michael Rothberg (2020), whose concept of “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg 2009) offers a fundamentally new take on comparisons in memory culture. Memory studies’ concerns, however, are not so much about comparison as an academic practice than as a phenomenon of public discourse. People compare histories of violence all the time, both in the form of oversimplistic equations that will lead to unproductive “victim competitions” and in ways that help engender productive “differentiated solidarity” (Rothberg 2011). The “agency of the aesthetic” (Rigney 2021) cannot be overrated in this context. Literature and the arts can explore original and nuanced comparisons between different histories of victimization and their effects through time. The novels by Caryl Phillips, for example, with their thinking-together of histories of slavery, racism, and the Holocaust, are an important form of “comparative (memory) literature”.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

I am rather agnostic here. I think that close readings will require language as well as cultural competence and that “creative misunderstanding” in studies revolving around a handful of novels would be difficult to justify. But for digital “distant readings” of large corpora, in particular, we need to draw on translations (see Moretti 2013). In the ideal case, both modes of doing comparative literature are brought together in meaningful ways (critical: Moretti 2022).

Another question are AI translations, which will rapidly pose more and more challenges to the field of comparative literature in the years to come, including questions of authorship – challenges that even the important [*The 2023 Manifesto on Literary Translation*](#) by PEN America could not yet foresee.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I think that current interest is not so much on contemporary literature *per se*, but on the contemporary *relevance* of literature. My students and doctoral candidates at Goethe University Frankfurt tend to be interested in older literatures, if and insofar these are “actualized” today – rewritten, adapted, remediated, and controversially debated. In this way, Homer enjoys great currency in my department of Anglophone literatures. Students engage in “reading backwards” (Erll 2024) through the popular novels by Pat Barker, Madeline Miller, and Margret Atwood (or even through TikTok content) – and these are their entry points to consider the English history of translating Homer, the poetry of H.D., James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Why should the opening of the Western literary canon imply that we abandon questions of aesthetics? There are myriad Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic etc. works that are highly aesthetic (if based on different aesthetics) and require careful close readings. Opening the canon is a political act. But it should not narrow down our focus to political questions only.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I work at the intersections of comparative literature (and media culture) and memory studies. From this vantage point, I would like to see literary history conceptualized in fresh ways that make it attractive (again) for emerging scholars. One way could be to think more deeply through “reading backwards” as a way of moving through literary history, which accentuates the transnational and transtemporal travels and relationalities of literary works: literary history as mnemohistory.

On a different note, I think there is much more to be said about the neurobiological and cognitive dimensions of (memory) literature. I would like to see closer collaboration between literary historians and cognitive psychologists. Andrew Elfenbein’s *The Gist of Reading* (2017) is an impressive case in point, and the work, for example, by Lovro Škopljanač (e.g. Antonini et al. 2024) brings a fascinating empirical dimension to the understanding of readers, reading, and the memory processes involved.

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Matthieu Letourneux

Professor of French Literature at Paris Nanterre University, France

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

The university curriculum for literary studies in France generally includes courses in Comparative Literature from the *Licence* (BA) level upwards. In my Master's degree, I chose to specialize in Comparative Literature and prepare two dissertations in this field (on the art of the short story by Marcel Schwob and Robert Louis Stevenson in the first year, then on the adventure novel in the second year). I followed this up with a doctoral thesis in Comparative Literature on the adventure novel. My thesis supervisor was Pierre Brunel, who had established mythocriticism in French comparative studies, and who played a major role in my training and enabled me to take part in many works in this field. Subsequently, however, it was more the methodologies of cultural studies, cultural history and literary theory (narratology and fiction theory) that influenced me. In comparative literary studies, it was transmedia research that contributed to my thinking, namely the work by researchers at the crossroads of comparative literature and media studies. Today, my teaching position is not in comparative literature, but my work largely focuses on comparative corpora (with an emphasis on European and American exchanges), encompassing both literary and media fields (film, comics, press, radio, material objects...).

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

To be honest, the detailed study of translation practices is not central to my research. Indeed, I work on large corpora and, being interested in the international (and trans-media) circulation of stereotypes, architextual models or fictional characters and universes, I rather consider translation practices in a global perspective. For me, translation issues are clues to cultural practices: what circulates *en masse*? How does the translation of popular fiction adapt to the architextual, media, commercial and cultural ecosystems of the host country? Do the logics of language translation and of intersemiotic translation intersect? What do major translation movements tell us about cultural exchanges between countries? These kinds of serial translation phenomena are what interests me the most in this perspective.

One striking example is the importation of American dime novels into Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century by the German publisher Eichler. He bought entire series of dime novels (Buffalo Bill, Nick Carter) and decided to distribute them throughout Europe. Very quickly, his publications were imitated by

German series, which were in turn translated and distributed in Europe, and local imitations flourished in every country. A process of negotiation was thus put in place, on a national and European scale, with the American model, involving publishers, translators, authors and distributors, and making the issue of translation one of the key moments in a global cultural process. Studying translation choices (in reality, very free adaptations) highlights one of the levels of this negotiation, which is also apparent in formats, imitations, media discourse and so on.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

I believe that studying contemporary productions is an excellent way to escape the stifling weight of the canon and classic works in literary studies. Comparative literature must embrace not only the contemporary but also a whole range of aesthetic textual productions neglected by literary studies: mass literature, press and magazines, songs, fanzines, amateur internet productions... In this field, exchanges are far more numerous and intense than in legitimized literature, making it an excellent area for analysis in comparative literature. This is true in both the contemporary era and literary history.

This is particularly striking in the field of research dedicated to the production of media culture, which has changed so much since the 1980s, and which increasingly involves thinking on a global scale. Bestsellers, their adaptations, and new forms of writing (both professional and amateur) on the internet and social networks all need to be seen in the context of the international circulation of works, series, genres and conventions. Such a perspective implies considering the confrontation between cultures and languages, as well as the effects of domination and resistance. Such perspectives require us to reinvent some of our tools of literary analysis, by decentring the cultural questioning (since the canon then finds itself at the margins of the questioning). And from this decentring, it is possible to historicise contemporary phenomena, and to rethink literary history entirely on the basis of this new cultural paradigm.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

It seems to me that aesthetic inquiry lies at the heart of literary concerns. However, it must be understood as an inquiry based on a broad definition of aesthetics, focusing on the emotional and rhetorical effects sought by the text's creators, or induced by the texts themselves, or even by the contexts (cultural, media, commercial) of

production, distribution, and consumption. From this perspective, aesthetic inquiry can encompass objects of very different natures, far removed from the canon (such as, once again, the press, popular literature, media culture, advertising...). It may indeed engage methods of analysis closer to distant reading. Yet such objects and perspectives also lend themselves to close reading – though a close reading that seeks less to highlight the uniqueness of the work than to understand how it is shaped by a range of similar productions, which aligns with a comparative approach *par excellence* that perceives literature as a cultural phenomenon.

In reality, the apprehension of large corpora, including from a broad cultural perspective, in no way precludes aesthetic questioning or close reading methods. Firstly, because most of the productions of media culture involve an aesthetic relationship (in the sense understood by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, i.e., to put it briefly, a relationship involving the evaluation of a depragmatised pleasure), and because this relationship is based precisely on conventions, stereotypes or identifiable narrative structures which can be perceived at the global level of the series of texts. Secondly, because this global perspective is better understood when we compare it with the concrete appropriation practices of authors, who always singularise at the margins (and thus contribute, on their own scale, to modifying forms, tastes and what they reveal to us about social discourse).

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Once again, the studies that intersect comparative literature with media studies, cultural studies, or cultural history seem to me the most compelling. They also appear to address an important challenge for our disciplines. The need for literary studies to break away from a narrow conception of literature and open up to a culturally oriented inquiry (and thus to a broader definition of literature) seems to meet both a disciplinary and a social requirement: definitions of literature and culture are undergoing profound change, and literary disciplines, which claim to make the relationship with literature and culture their object of study, cannot ignore this transformation. This shift impacts our contemporary questioning, but also, retrospectively, our way of examining our history.

The methods of comparative literature can be seen as a formidable tool for engaging in global cultural questioning. The global turn taken by history (and its variants – connected history, decentred history) and by part of sociology benefits from being enriched by methods of text analysis, at the same time as they feed into the reflections of comparative literature. They have the advantage of reintroducing questions of cultural power relations, and thus of understanding the international circulation of works, genres and forms in terms of domination and marginalisation – in this respect, the arrival of cultural studies methods in French research, applied here to the relationship between cultures, is revolutionising the questions being asked. This is true not only in the case of postcolonial studies, but also in the way contemporary culture is thought of, including in Europe, in terms of power relations played out on an international scale.

Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser

Professor of Comparative Literature at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I studied at the Department of General and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philology, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, North Macedonia. It was in the period 1982-1986. Later I finished MA and PhD studies in Comparative Literature and my whole academic career was in the frame of this discipline. I still work as a senior researcher in the Department for Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature at the Institute of Macedonian Literature at the same university.

The most influential and relevant authors during my education were: Mikhail Bakhtin, Hugo Dyserinck, Claude Pichois and Andre M. Rousseau, Earl Miner, Iv Shevrel, Dyonis Djurishin, Claudio Guillén, Antun Ocvirk, Frank Wolman, Zoran Konstantinovic, Aleksandar Flaker, Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Armando Gnisci and many others, and of course, my professors Milan Gjurcinov and Vlada Uroshevic. After many years the books by Totosy de Zepetnek, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti also gained the attention of my colleagues. In the last few decades, I can summarize that we have passed several levels of the methodological approaches in comparative studies: firstly, there was the classical research of the reception, influences and parallels; afterwards the interest was concentrated on the inherent literariness of the works and that was the period of structuralist and post-structuralist dominance. After that, came the era of different types of cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, etc. The classical form of imagology was renewed into the identity and/or intercultural studies. Also very popular to this day are the areas of traductology and intermediality. Research on the connections of modern cultural phenomena with the ancient mythological and folklore heritage, as well as the archetypal approach, are still of great interest.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

I really like Susan Bassnett’s understanding that comparative literature is nothing more than following the noble work of literary translators who create world literature. The phenomena of translation as intercultural re-creation lighten the tension between globalization and different cultural identities. At first sight, literature seems to separate peoples and nations because it relies upon a specific linguistic

medium. On the contrary, it has the deepest supra-national value, that rests somewhere between translations, somewhere among or deep inside cultures and languages, in the sphere of the essential human categories. According to various literary theoreticians the *raison d'être* of literature is perhaps to reach this untranslatable component. The translators struggle to reach the (almost) untranslatable components of any national literature and to transfer them to another linguistic culture. It seems a paradox, but that way literature becomes an instrument for overcoming the Babylonian curse and enriching the common heritage.

Of course, on the practical level, it is undeniable that the scholars “doing Comparative Literature” must have at least double optic – that means that they have to know thoroughly at least one more language and national culture than their own. Transculturality is so common in the contemporary world so that it becomes a regular characteristic of the humanities. Misunderstanding could be a challenge, because it broadens creativity, and if we consider the translated literary work as a new artwork, then it gains new qualities in the process of being adopted in another linguistic and national culture. According to Itamar Even-Zohar the translated works are a very important part of the literary poly-system, and they have special functions for the variety and complexity of the target culture.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

It seems to me that not only in academia, but especially in primary and secondary schools, the programmes of teaching and studying classic works should be changed and made more attractive for younger generations (maybe through film adaptations, cartoons or other specialized educational publications, etc.). It is normal that some kinds of discourses and some themes will not stand the new trends, since the literary field is changing constantly. Contemporary literature is more provocative for Comparative Literature scholars than many well-known canonical stories and poems. I do not think this is wrong.

On the other hand, in contemporary case studies the basic parameter should be the aesthetic quality of the text, not just its freshness or convenience for drawing critical conclusions in the spirit of certain theories. Something that bothers me is the fact that some theoretical approaches force a very narrow circle of works and there are a lot of theoretical studies written and inspired by only three or four novels, for example. The literary system is dynamic, so the process of canonization of literary works is constant: through this process the most influential contemporary books become classics. I always look towards the future with great expectations regarding young authors. But, of course, in order to have the capacity to make a significant step towards new poetics, themes and forms, young authors must have a solid knowledge of classical literature. So, the conclusion is that there should be a balance between classic and contemporary work in Comparative Literature education.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

I think that aesthetic questions remain crucial for literary studies, and in that context in Comparative Literature, too. Literature can be analyzed in many ways, but the most important thing is to be observed as literature, as a special type of artistic creation. Broadening the Western canon gives the chance to recognize the identity differences, but this makes sense only if it is done on aesthetic premises. The political and ideological issues are provocative for Comparative Literary scholars but only in combination with proper literary and aesthetic analyses. The traditional Western canon can be revised only by transnational curriculum consisting of literary works of high quality, which means of an aesthetic value. Comparative Literature does not promote a proportional and mathematically inclusive canon in which authors and works will be considered only as representatives of their national cultures and languages. Although there is a certain stigmatization of literature written in languages which are not widely spoken and there is evident dominance of English written works, the transnational corpus must be formed on an axiological base. And this is possible only when using the method of close reading of the chosen texts. This is not just a hermeneutic analysis or perception of the style and structure, but it is a specific reader's response, in great part connected with the feeling of content and enjoyment. So, the old-fashioned model of reading in literary studies with interest and enjoyment cannot be abandoned. The opposite model of distant reading, proposed by Franco Moretti for the comprehension of the concept of World Literature, is provocative for literary history, but for the real academic engagement with literature the two models must be combined.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

I have tried to summarize my cultural and Comparative Literature interests over the past ten years. Then I discovered the book *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* by the German theorist Doris Bachmann-Medick (2016 in English, and in German in 2006), in which seven significant turns are analyzed in a rather systematic way for the studies of culture, namely: interpretive turn, performative turn, reflexive turn, postcolonial turn, translation turn, spatial turn, iconic turn. In addition, the religious, neurological, and digital revolutions are also indicated as current types of "turns". I found myself dealing more or less with several humanistic turns in my own research. First of all, and perhaps most consistently, with the problems of the spatial turn, to which I have dedicated several papers and academic actions (debates, conferences), but soon after I was carried away by the

problem of the ethical, affective, translation, digital and other so-called twists and turns. So, I am asking myself whether and to what extent these important interdisciplinary cultural orientations are reflected in Comparative Literature and to what extent they model and transform it.

From the time of the emergence of these cultural upheavals, Comparative Literature definitively breaks with positivist literary analysis and turns into an in-depth, contextual and, by its very essence, complex study of literary phenomena, so that the concepts of comparative literary studies and comparative cultural studies are more or less identical. In other words, I think that the classic discipline of Comparative Literature turns into Comparative Cultural Studies. In this frame, I see great potential in inter-art research, in the connection of popular culture research with mythology, archetypal and other folk-studies, geo-criticism, new media, etc. Lately, the most provocative topics are: eco-criticism, AI, post-humanism, etc. Why? Because the old-fashioned humanistic disciplines are evidently in crisis and give way to interdisciplinary approaches.

Marcelo Topuzian

Professor of Spanish Literature at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

Si bien estaba ya obviamente anoticiado de la existencia de la disciplina durante mis estudios de grado (en la Universidad de Buenos Aires en los años 90), entre ellos solo encontré cursos de literaturas extranjeras (francesa, inglesa, alemana, norteamericana, etc.) y distribuidas por períodos (medieval, del siglo XIX, del siglo XX) que no tomaban el comparatismo como centro de su agenda de manera explícita, aunque lo practicaban, más o menos “salvajemente” según los casos. Esto cambió muchísimo en los años siguientes, creo que por demanda de los propios estudiantes, aunque los nombres de las materias hayan seguido siendo los mismos. Hoy ya existe incluso un curso de Teoría de la Literatura Comparada en el grado de la misma carrera.

Realmente terminé de familiarizarme con la Literatura Comparada mucho después de doctorarme, y ya a cargo de un curso de Literatura Española Moderna y Contemporánea en la misma universidad, dada la necesidad de encontrar formas de incorporar de manera razonada, entre sus contenidos, textos de las literaturas catalana, gallega y vasca. Por esto mismo, fueron cruciales en mi acercamiento a la disciplina libros y autores vinculados con los estudios comparados de las literaturas en la península ibérica o los estudios ibéricos, como Joan Ramon Resina, Santiago Pérez Isasi, Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Joseba Gabilondo, César Domínguez, Arturo Casas (fueron especialmente importantes en este sentido los dos volúmenes de *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, de la editorial John Benjamins; también el volumen 9 de la *Historia de la literatura española* de Editorial Crítica dirigida por José-Carlos Mainer, a cargo de Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza). A ellos habría que sumar la obra de teóricos españoles del comparatismo como Claudio Guillén y Darío Villanueva, por supuesto. Luego, dada mi formación y especialización previa en teoría literaria, me llamaron especialmente la atención las zonas de la literatura comparada que buscaban, en razón de sus objetivos, provocar cambios de orden teórico-metodológico en la práctica usual de los estudios literarios. Entonces les presté atención a las reflexiones de la primera década de este siglo sobre literatura mundial. En el marco de lo que veía en ese momento como un giro historicista generalizado de la investigación en literatura, me interesaba la posibilidad de pensar nuevas formas de historia literaria global o transnacional. Por eso leí con mucho interés en ese momento las obras de Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova y David Damrosch, y luego las de Alexander Beecroft, Eric Hayot y Mariano Siskind.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be

addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

Dado lo peculiarmente ibérico de mi acercamiento a la literatura comparada, el problema que se presenta especialmente en los cursos que dicto es el del acceso de los y las estudiantes argentinos a textos en catalán, gallego o vasco. En este caso, dado que la carrera de grado en la Universidad de Buenos Aires no otorga formación en estas lenguas, se vuelve obligatorio proporcionarles traducciones al castellano, aunque también ponemos a su disposición las versiones originales, para quienes deseen cotejarlas o hacer el esfuerzo de enfrentar su lectura directa, o simplemente para que los y las estudiantes sean más materialmente conscientes de que están leyendo un texto traducido y lo tengan en cuenta en sus lecturas. El equipo de cátedra y de investigación del que formo parte cuenta con especialistas que manejan, por lo menos, el catalán y el gallego, y gracias a eso se vuelve posible encarar proyectos colectivos de investigación que puedan adoptar un perfil comparatista. Sigo pensando que no hay manera de que el trabajo de crítica e investigación se lleve a cabo sin un manejo docto y lo más inmerso posible en ella de la lengua original de los objetos de estudio, incluso (o especialmente) cuando lo que se estudia es la traducción. En esto, entonces, creo que hay una obvia diferencia entre lo que ocurre en la enseñanza de grado, por un lado, y en el posgrado y la investigación, por otro.

En cuanto al trasfondo cultural, su conocimiento cabal es siempre un desiderátum, un ideal, incluso para los habitantes nativos de un espacio literario determinado (sobre todo cuando toca hablar del pasado); todo lo que se pueda hacer para documentarse al respecto parece poco. Pero no creo que haya un diferencial “metafísico” – respecto de este tema – entre el investigador extranjero y el nativo.

El “malentendido creativo” no es más que una forma lúdica, y quizás no la más feliz, de explicar en qué consisten los aportes al conocimiento de la literatura de una perspectiva comparatista. Es muy esperable, si no imprescindible, que un cambio en la perspectiva de estudio de los textos, que se sirva de ellos en la conformación de objetos de investigación de una escala mayor a la local o nacional, dispare o visibilice valencias de sentido inadvertidas o apenas embrionarias bajo la mirada de lectores a los que es ajena esa intención comparatista, sean o no críticos o académicos. Las lecturas no pueden incluirlo todo, y por eso también es esperable que dejen de lado aspectos que, desde un enfoque más local, pueden parecer indisociables, indispensables o necesarios.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

Tiendo a pensar que esto es consecuencia de la importancia otorgada al trasfondo cultural a que se refería la pregunta anterior. Parece una extraña consecuencia del giro historicista de los estudios literarios de las pasadas décadas, con su énfasis correlativo en las cuestiones contextuales más inmediatas a la producción, pero

también a la recepción de los textos, que los investigadores más jóvenes se sientan más cómodos con textos con cuyos contextos se sienten más íntimamente familiarizados, es decir, con la actualidad. No quiero caer en el lugar común acerca de la “decadencia de las Humanidades” que cifra esta deriva en el rechazo del esfuerzo de erudición que conlleva la reconstrucción cabal de un contexto histórico, sobre todo si es lejano en el tiempo o en el espacio. Se trata, más bien, de cómo los investigadores intentan compatibilizar en su propia producción los requisitos de validación promovidos por la disciplina, que pueden ser, si no estrictamente contradictorios entre sí, sí a menudo demasiado exigentes si se los confronta a estudios que no se inscriben en la literatura comparada. No estoy, por lo tanto, seguro de que estemos ante los efectos dentro de la disciplina de un “presentismo” como característica o índice ideológicos de nuestro tiempo.

Correlativa, en cierta forma, de lo anterior, es la exigencia, en las investigaciones doctorales, de estados de la cuestión cada vez más eruditos, que en el caso de los clásicos pueden alcanzar un volumen realmente inmanejable, por más esforzado que sea el doctorando. Paradójicamente también, ha crecido una visión desacralizante de los clásicos, que los sacó de la ilusión o apariencia de accesibilidad inmediata basada en su conformación eminentemente filológica (es decir, centrada en su carácter de monumentos lingüísticos dentro de una lengua nacional), y por lo tanto los historizó y contextualizó, enfatizando las distancias que nos separan de ellos, y así los volvió casi inaccesibles para la investigación, dada la dificultad que hoy exige salvar esas distancias.

Algunos investigadores que ostentan el grado máximo alcanzable en la erudición acerca de un clásico y su contexto histórico deploran la pérdida de interés sobre sus objetos, que a veces puede conllevar la desaparición del puesto que ocupan tras su jubilación y con ello la desaparición de todo un campo de estudio de la institución en que se desempeñan, y, al mismo tiempo, castigan o ridiculizan acercamientos a los mismos objetos que juzgan superficiales, resultado de lo que para ellos es simple “moda teórica” o militancia académica. Habría que poder mantener actitudes un poco más balanceadas.

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

Esta pregunta ni se puede empezar responder en cuatrocientas palabras, que es el límite fijado por la encuesta. Mi respuesta más inmediata y espontánea es que sí, la disciplina de la literatura comparada es suficientemente elástica como para que se pueda practicar de maneras ostensiblemente diferentes y hasta contradictorias. Esto puede dar pasto a las seculares acusaciones de inconsecuencia teórico-metodológica, pero creo que sirve también para evidenciar cuán sostenido a lo largo del tiempo es el impulso comparatista: quizás la literatura comparada sea, ante todo, una fuerza,

una compulsión por no dejar intactos objetos de estudio que, de otro modo, parecen acabados en sí mismos. Por supuesto, esa fuerza también se institucionaliza y reinstitucionaliza periódicamente, afianza y discute sus protocolos y operaciones de lectura, se realiza en obra crítica e historiográfica palpable. En síntesis, sí, la literatura comparada se puede practicar sin hacer lectura atenta y sin plantear cuestiones de orden estético.

Sin embargo, lo que más me interesa es impugnar la exclusión que parece suponer la pregunta: la lectura atenta o cercana y las preguntas estéticas no son incompatibles con cuestiones de orden ideológico o político. Es más, el privilegio de uno u otro de estos planos o niveles de análisis ni siquiera implica el desprecio de los demás. Es cierto que los y las estudiantes o jóvenes doctorandos probablemente lleguen mejor equipados de antemano para la discusión política o ideológica (al menos, así es seguro en la Universidad de Buenos Aires, donde trabajo), por lo cual es comprensible que nuestra tarea formativa fundamental sea familiarizarlos lo más posible con los recursos de la lectura atenta y los problemas suscitados por el propósito y la percepción artísticos de los materiales con que trabajan. Pero el arte y la literatura son incapaces de no suscitar cuestiones ideológicas y políticas, leídos de cerca o de lejos. La política es combate sin garantías, a menudo en canchas inclinadas, y el arte y la literatura intervienen en él de maneras no muy estentóreas, más bien sutiles e indirectas, cuando no hay ya o todavía lugar en el discurso político *tout court* para las reivindicaciones que realizan.

Un último señalamiento, igualmente simplificador por falta de espacio, concierne al tipo de política invocada por el estudio de objetos distantes del canon literario occidental tradicional. La imposición sobre ellos de agendas políticas prefijadas, gestadas a menudo a partir de necesidades muy locales, pero “universalizadas” a fuerza de poderío académico, editorial e institucional, se ha venido volviendo crecientemente odiosa para los investigadores que no provenimos de, ni trabajamos en, los centros hegemónicos de formación académica, en Estados Unidos o en Europa.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Considerándome, en tanto especialista en literatura española, un fan y al mismo tiempo un *outsider* del comparatismo, es decir, haciendo la salvedad de que no me siento para nada sancionado institucionalmente para hablar como comparatista, debo decir que lo que me parece más interesante durante los últimos veinte años es cómo problemas, conceptos, prácticas y métodos que podían considerarse propios o inspirados por la literatura comparada se convirtieron en rasgos de la investigación literaria o cultural en general, sin mayor aclaración. Este es el mayor logro reciente de la disciplina: volver crecientemente improcedente el tratamiento no trasnacional, o cerrado a la traducción y a las relaciones interculturales, de cualquier asunto literario clásico. El romanticismo, el modernismo, las vanguardias, la novela, etc., etc. ya no se pueden pensar como objetos de estudio en sí teóricamente aislables de sus acaeceres concretos por todo el mundo. Y esto se puede leer con interés incluso en el trabajo de investigadores que no son comparatistas literarios “nacidos y criados”. Por

esto me seducen e interesan especialmente las obras críticas e historiográficas que se animan a abandonar la compulsión a lo monográfico propiciada por la hiperespecialización de la investigación académica de la literatura y la cultura, y se atreven, con buena dosis de valentía, pero también con un esfuerzo enorme, a la larga duración y a la máxima extensión geográfica alcanzable. Pienso, por ejemplo, en el *tour de force* de Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel y sus tres enormes volúmenes sobre las vanguardias artísticas, que ni siquiera tienen la literatura en su centro – al contrario –, pero son un modelo en cuanto a la visión de conjunto y comparada que hoy me parece nuevamente cada vez más necesaria en el ámbito de unos estudios literarios que se quieran históricamente relevantes.

Dicho esto, me interesa particularmente como esto vuelve sobre la teoría literaria. Es decir, me interesa considerar cómo la necesidad de repensar comparativa y globalmente la historia de la literatura y del arte exige perentoriamente, sin abandonar el trabajo minucioso con fuentes y datos de investigación empírica, la elaboración de nuevas categorías y conceptos que sirvan a ese objetivo y al mismo tiempo deconstruyan, implícita o explícitamente, los andamiajes teóricos eurocéntricos (en realidad generalmente francocéntricos, o germano-anglo-francocéntricos) que, surgidos muchas veces de los mismos agentes que la historia literaria decía estar estudiando y analizando críticamente, les dieron a los objetos de investigación los sesgos tan característicos de la literatura comparada de la segunda posguerra. Por eso, aunque ya tienen unos años, me siguen pareciendo interesantes los intentos de teorización generalista y a la vez desplazada de autores como Eric Hayot y Alexander Beecroft, que para mí siguen en esto la línea abierta por comparatistas no centrales como Antonio Cândido o Ángel Rama.

Johannes Türk

Professor of Germanic Studies and Comparative Literature at Indiana University – Bloomington, USA

1. How did you come across Comparative Literature? Did you find the discipline during your academic studies or after your PhD? Which authors and/or books became most relevant in your approach to the field?

I was in my second year as a student of medicine at the Freie Universität Berlin when I realized that I was more interested in the humanities and changed to comparative literature and philosophy. In the traditional modern university, philosophy was the field at the head of the faculty that included the philologies. Unlike law, medicine, and theology, this faculty promised what one could call a general humanist education. And literature and the arts, more recently joined by film, seemed in a historical perspective the major medium in which human experience had found its expression. Asking fundamental questions about human experience, its history, and concepts to grasp them on a general level therefore seemed to find its natural objects in literature, the arts, and philosophy. I had a close relationship with literature and had learned two modern languages, English and French, fluently at school, but also through exchange programs during high school. I loved reading, theatre, and art. Even if I was not aware of this background, I think it informed my choice. In Berlin, friends told me that comparative literature at the Freie Universität offered a curriculum that would correspond to a more ambitious and theoretically informed approach to literature that also cut across several national literatures. The Institut für Allgemeine and Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft [Institute of General and Comparative Literature] in Berlin was founded by Peter Szondi.

The profile of the field was then still developed along the two axis its name indicates: on the one hand, the “general” side in which semiology, anthropology, aesthetics are studied, on the other hand the “comparative” side, which means the study of several national literatures as well as of different art forms. The Institute was one of the most interesting intellectual places I have come to know. It was the first to invite Derrida to teach in Germany in the 60s and attracted the most interesting students. During the first phase of my studies, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Gérard Genette, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Starobinski, Jean-Luc Nancy, Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, and Ernst Cassirer were the most important authors I encountered. Later they were joined by some contemporary scholars such as Joseph Vogl, and during a stay at Yale, Shoshana Felman and Peter Brooks. On the side of literature, it was Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, Baudelaire, Kafka, Valéry, later also Georges Perec. In the aftermath of the second world war, the Franco-German cultural exchange was important and shaped in many ways the interests at the Institute of Comparative Literature.

2. One of the thresholds of “doing Comparative Literature” is of course the language issue: translations are helpful, but not always perfect. Yet another problem is that of the cultural background of the translated texts, which in many cases a scholar may ignore or misread. How can this problem be addressed? And can one imagine that in certain cases it is less a problem than a challenge, considering examples of “creative misunderstanding”?

Octavio Paz opens an essay on translation with the anecdote about someone who prays using a translated text, if I remember well a translation from Sanskrit. Once he receives a translation that is more correct in the academic sense, the gods, who always used to appear to him as a result of the words from a mistranslation, no longer appear. Some texts that German Romantics published as translations from Sanskrit were translations from the English translation. The English translations might have included misunderstanding or have been based on an insufficient knowledge of the cultural context. These are some examples that illustrate that a translation is not a pure medium in which a self-identical content is rendered; rather, it transposes an original that itself might be constituted of content that has been transposed from other cultures and languages. It therefore seems important to think of an original as no more than a direction of provenance. The idea of origin is the projection of a pure beginning that can help orient our search for a better understanding. We might need it as a regulative idea in order to have a standard we can use to reject wrong meanings that would contradict the meaning of a text, that is too remote or even outright abusive. In his introduction to David Heller-Roazen’s lecture “Reading Chances” in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Department of Comparative Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, on October 24, 2024, my friend Eyal Peretz has described comparative literature as a discipline that resembles piracy because it crosses different forms of knowledge, contexts and languages.

On a pragmatic level, it is therefore important to always be aware of the degree of competence one has and why it is necessary in some cases and in others it is not. And it is vital to include a reflection of the limits of one’s knowledge as an essential part of our work. I can for example teach a text whose original was written in Russian, a language I do not speak, and consult experts that do know the language and also reflect on the limits of my access to the text if it relies on linguistic factors. At the same time, I think that national languages as historic origin of texts have too much prominence, a prominence that is due to the institutional fact that the philologies were the foundational disciplines of the study of literature. The form of a text can often relate to influences from a different literature or from a remote historical period and that influence is as important as an origin of the text as the specific language in which it was written. Texts are inherently anachronistic heterogeneities.

3. How do you see the pervasive interest in contemporary authors and artworks in scholarship now produced in Comparative Literature? What are for you the advantages or disadvantages of foregrounding contemporary case studies, sometimes at the expense of more classic works?

Foregrounding contemporary case studies entails a high risk. Until a few decades ago, most scholars were very hesitant to take that risk, primarily because historical distance seemed to guarantee a more objective viewpoint. To find and sufficiently capture a context and to assign it to a given artefact is more difficult and prone to error in relation to contemporary artworks. Hindsight also was the precondition for a more stable assessment of the importance and the relative status of a work of art. In addition, periodization was problematic and incomplete because seemingly different works could represent two different styles, but they would also, viewed from a different angle, show similarities that would lead a later generation to see them as two facets of the same movement or style. In German literature, Kleist, for example, would have represented something radically new for many contemporaries. But his work only became recognized as that of a major writer almost a hundred years later, and the question how he can be positioned in the Romantic period puzzles scholars until today. We can therefore say that the humanities were operating in an epimethean sense.

Today, what becomes more important is the promethean, that is forward-looking dimension of contemporary art and literature. Literary scholars increasingly see artists and writers as their equals, which is to say engaged in thinking and understanding through their own medium rather than as providing objects in need of explanation and conceptual illumination. Only a few twentieth-century thinkers have engaged more extensively with contemporary arts, among them Barthes, Foucault, and Deleuze. They were interested in Modern artists who had theoretical aspirations, worked in proximity to aesthetic theory and saw their works as a contribution to art theory as much as to art as a historic process. That is why the book on Bacon (*Francis Bacon – Logique de la sensation*) or the reflections on the work of art in *Différence et Répétition*, both by Deleuze, still seem relevant.

What, then, has changed to allow for the investment in contemporary art? What seems clear is that there is a looser relationship to both history and theoretical rigor. History, while in flow, has become vague so that the investment and time seem no longer necessary. A concept with a fine intuition, promising to capture what is original in a style, is enough to be published. Theory has become regional. If the present and its production has also broken loose from the binding force of precursors, or if that always seemed the case and there was merely more patience to wait until phenomena inserted themselves into the flow of historical forms is unclear. Or has historical distance itself turned out to be a mere surface effect that withdraws objects from their intelligibility, quarantines them so to speak until a later point?

4. Comparative Literature has promoted the broadening of the corpus under scrutiny way beyond the traditional Western literary canon and this has brought new (usually political and ideological) issues concerning the criteria used to analyse the texts, authors, or practices. Can one practice Comparative Literature without close reading and/or without asking aesthetic questions?

The broadening of the corpus is only one part of a wider phenomenon. David Damrosch has shown through analyses of publications recorded in the MLA Bibliography that on the one hand, there is an explosion of the canon, that is, there are publications on a large number of authors that were little known. On the other hand, the number of authors that form part of the canon shrinks. Instead of 16 Romantic writers, on whom several articles are published every year, only 8 are left. There is a smaller and less varied kernel with a large number of satellites around it. The domain of shared intelligibility is smaller; the discursive dimension in which debate, argumentation, refutation and articulated difference is possible became narrower. And it is now surrounded by works whose rationale can only be shared on a political basis in a wider sense. But they cannot become objects of pluralistic debate. There is just a small denominator in a wide field of differences without an internal measure.

Canonicity enabled discourse and pluralism but at the expense of the exclusion of a large amount of works. Once it disappears, that is, explodes and does not evolve merely by shifts and slow inclusions of additional texts, consensus and dissensus seem to lose their meaning. For many of these works, close reading or a debate on aesthetic features is precluded. One can either be convinced of their value through an argument external to these works, or one can follow the invitation to explore the singular works. Out of this scenario grows an opportunity for comparative literature if we think of it as “piracy”: it can search for new forms of intelligibility, transversal lines that connect seemingly disparate material. It can also try to rigorously understand the situation and develop a conceptual response to it. Or it can revert to observing, as Franco Moretti has, the relationship between canonic and non-canonic literature on a quantitative level. In my view, however, the link to the experiential reality, to lived life, the invitation of artworks to speak to us and accompany us through an adventure, is essential for our engagement with literature.

5. Which are the main features (theories, paradigms, models) of the field you consider more productive today and in the near future, and why?

Looking at the contemporary world, I see a disarticulation. The field of comparative literature falls apart into many spheres that no longer communicate and that no longer try to show in an encompassing manner how their claims relate to the field as a whole and to its past. At conferences, we have on the one hand groups such as the proponents of deconstruction or discourse analysis that cling to their heritage and present work that rehearses terminologies that Derrida or Paul de Man in one case, Michel Foucault or Friedrich Kittler on the other hand coined. And we have postcolonial studies, that tries to turn a fundamental critique into a series of approaches but is at risk of losing transformative power by suggesting to discredit a large amount of works, approaches and analytic tools on the basis of their complicity in a system of global dominance and exploitation. They bring important and not fully perceived historical dimensions to our attention, but often they do not explain why, beyond condemnation, this should be relevant or interesting and what it implies for what other forms of criticism read. More recently, the Anthropocene in environmental studies or concepts of the posthuman have tried to translate the vast impact of

the thematic constellation they make visible into importance in the field. All of these are important new movements, but their innovation is primarily thematic.

At the same time, Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a central challenge as well as a historically transformative reality. It produces and models texts and images as well as their interpretation and invades domains of life and politics. Because AI produces knowledge and perceptions, it is not just a tool: the more people use it, the more does it create historical feedback loops. In a decade or so, our way of perceiving the world will largely be shaped by content originating in AI. Already now, algorithms are programmed that make ChatGPT more “ethical”, debates have emerged about how “woke” AI is. Simultaneously these ethical standards are, as Roberto Simanowski claims, part of a western ethical and political world and cement a colonial dominance on the level of technology. In addition, AI algorithms work on the basis of probability, which will erode quality and innovation. Simanowski has done interesting work on these aspects. Comparative Literature has a lot to contribute here because languages in their relation to being are at the core of this field. The relationship between the human and technology needs to be examined again in this new context. In addition, I would say that Sylvia Wynter’s work is an important legacy still to be explored, as she suggests that we as humans find ourselves in stories capable of re-foundation of the human.

These are some scattered points. One possible way forward would be to rehabilitate the “general” in General and Comparative Literature: to systematically account for language and arts in their relation to the historic moment, and to find a rigorous conceptual field in which to rearticulate the relationship between different texts, artworks, forms of knowledge, languages, and human experience.

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**Katsma, Holst. 2024. *Morfologia del romanzo*.
Edited and translated by Tiziano De Marino,
afterword by Franco Moretti.
Milano: notttempo.**

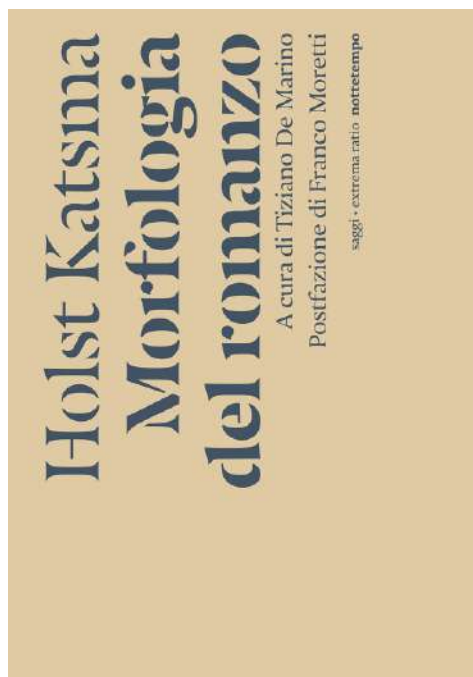
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HOLST KATSMAS WORK, published in the excellent Italian translation by Tiziano De Marino and with an afterword by Franco Moretti, adds a brilliant chapter to the development of distant reading. Translated from Katsma's PhD dissertation, *Morphology of the Novel*, the title immediately recalls Vladimir Propp's analysis of the fairytale. However, Katsma quickly clarifies that he takes morphology in the literal sense: his book studies the visible, spatial form of the novel's page, as it evolved in England between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. This period of highly increased production led to introduce new organisational signs, what he calls "notazioni extralinguistiche" (2024, 42).¹ Katsma thus focuses on numbered chapters, paragraphs with indentations, quotation marks and indented dashes: he aims to show their takeover in the period under investigation, their effect on the novel's language and, most importantly, their imaginative benefits. His main proposition is that the new forms acted not upon a social but a cognitive necessity, "trasformando la nostra capacità di immaginare le voci e lo scorrere del tempo; andando a plasmare, di volta in volta, le nostre stesse teorie su avvenimenti, pensieri e persone" (45).²

While Katsma got his MA and PhD at Harvard, his first apprenticeship was at Stanford, where he participated in the quantitative analyses of the Literary Lab. His BA thesis, which developed a way to determine the "loudness" of novelistic dialogue, was adapted into the Lab's seventh pamphlet (Katsma 2014). In fact, the phenomenal character of imagined sound and dialogue remains one of the main objects of study of *Morfologia*, this time investigated not through grammar, but through non-linguistic spatial organisation.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, Katsma shows the evolution of different types of chapter appearing since the eighteenth century, charting a path from the undivided novel to the eventual hegemony of the untitled chapter around 1800. His quantitative analysis, involving hundreds of English novels, is clearly and elegantly visualised in a diagram. Katsma then moves to paragraphs, showing a parallel proliferation through various close-reading comparisons: first between chapters with similar themes in Edward Kimber's *Joe Thompson* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, then from two larger pools of bestsellers published either around 1750 or 1850.

The second part starts from a quantitative analysis of the "notazioni vocali" (142),³ mainly quotation marks, once again charted in their numerous variations until the predominance of the modern format. Katsma then embarks on an inquiry on their effects upon the readers' acoustic imagination. He proposes that such new notations fundamentally enhanced the vivacity of the dialogues, reshaping the novel's oral foundations. He backs up his theory by showing the dependence of older samples on oral models of reported speech, through an ingenious close reading of

¹ "[E]xtralinguistic notations" (Katsma 2021, 5). Since, as mentioned, the book was translated into Italian directly from Katsma's doctoral thesis, I am providing the English original. I thank the author for sharing it with me. An abstract is available at <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37370198>.

² "[C]hanging our ability to imagine voices and the passing of time; shaping, in turn, our very theories about events, thoughts, and persons" (Katsma 2021, 6).

³ "[V]ocal notations" (Katsma 2021, 68).

seventeenth-century novels and trial transcripts of witness testimonies (reported word for word since 1730, thanks to stenography: 183, n.39). The new notations are then related to an increase in the complexity of the quotatives (i.e., he said, she said, and the like), of which Katsma underlines the emotional and moral value. They are also posed as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the rise of free indirect style.

Summarising the previous findings, the third part proposes five theses on the novel as a genre, arguing, among other things, that extralinguistic notations can offer a surer standing for a genre typology than linguistic elements, and that they allow one to consider the Western novel as a translinguistic structure able to influence literature on a world scale, *independently* from language. After comparing his work to Reviel Netz's investigation of formal elements in Greek mathematics, Katsma concludes with a reaffirmation of the epistemic value of spatial form.

On the whole, Katsma's research is solid and decisive, and the data he collects is presented with great clarity. A few charts and fewer parameters suffice to show the spatial renewal of the English novel in the course of a century and a half of increased productivity. It is a path of initially wide experimentation with the new forms, leading to a formal stability that continues today. Once established in their historical development, these elements reveal their importance for the novel as a genre. Quantitative data provides the grounds for a comparative close reading of a few selected texts, based chiefly on Bakhtin's and, as a close second, Moretti's theories of the novel.

Such pairing of the two methods provides a possible answer to Moretti's recent claim against a real collaboration of hermeneutics and quantification. The latter, Moretti proposes, is bound to strict formal analysis and thus aims at revealing a closed network of relations, an atlas of literature; the former, instead, looks at form as a force acting on history, an object to be reworked and transformed during an interpretation that must ultimately cross the textual boundaries and reach the world (Moretti 2022, 17-38). The conceptual difference between hermeneutics and quantification makes for two parallel tracks with but fleeting crossings. However, Katsma directly relates spatial form and mental structuring, in search for categories that, although developing historically, reflect a more profound, a-historical character of human cognition. This deeper connection between the two methodologies, independently from the actual results, shows a promising path for future research.

Equally promising is Katsma's definition of the novel in its relations with other genres. This includes the already discussed pairing of novelistic vocal notations and trial transcripts in the second part. In another moment, at the end of the first part, he looks at chapters in epistolary novels with the help of samples from letter-writing manuals. This comparative approach highlights how the spatial forms under scrutiny seem to pertain more strictly to the novel, while allowing Katsma to show how the novel distinguished itself from other genres through their introduction. Indeed, he is not the first to adopt a similar (inter)genre analysis – he mentions some cases (2024, 286-92) – yet his personal mix of distant and close reading, along with his Bakhtin-inspired take on genres as epistemic modes, makes this work rather productive.

Given the complexity and extent of its ramifications, Katsma's study of literary imagination presents important strengths as well as a few weaknesses. Katsma focuses on the effect of the notations on the writers' and (especially) the readers' minds: novels are chiefly considered as producers of cognitive experiences. This somewhat phenomenological approach leads him to manipulate texts like laboratory samples, to help readers appreciate the particular mental effects textual materials generate. For instance, he argues that paragraphs, once applied extensively, engender a new rhythm that lengthens the chapters and produces a proprioceptive variation in tune with narrative emotions. In a very ingenious move, he drives his point home by proposing a passage from *David Copperfield*, first deprived of paragraphs, then in its original form (92-95).

At times, however, the focus on emotions and their ethical evaluation limits the picture. For example, Katsma is convincing in saying that quotatives became more complex only after the introduction of new vocal notations, thus making novelistic conversation more psychologically nuanced. Yet, he prioritises the moral upshot of such quotatives, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's ethical reflections on the novel. This seems too selective a consequence, and leads him to some subjective overstatements about the genre, like that “[p]rima del XIX secolo, i romanzieri non offrono particolari contributi alla filosofia morale (tantomeno gli scrittori di altri generi)” (220).⁴

Moreover, and notably, in the second part Katsma directly opposes visual and auditory imagery, arguing against the role of the former. He sees reading as “un’attività che non è principalmente visiva ma si radica invece in un immaginario proprioacustico e acustico delle parole” (164).⁵ Mental vision and sound seem incompatible: according to the author, even the complexified quotatives, oftentimes delineating facial expressions or gestures, reflect “un mondo celato alla vista e che scoraggia chiunque tenti di farsene un’immagine” (209).⁶ His ideas are explicitly aligned with the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, William Empson and I.A. Richards, that is of a specific strand of philosophers and critics arguing against visual imagery. Yet, Katsma almost completely overlooks the opposite side of the debate, whether older and purely aesthetic (e.g., Romantic theories) or contemporary and more empirically oriented, like the multifaceted area of cognitive literary studies. He only briefly approaches Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book*, yet passes over it proposing that the novel's evolution seems to point towards a greater ease for human beings to imagine sounds (160-61, n. 14) – a statement which would require a larger sample of analysis, both chronologically and geographically. In light of recent empirical research pointing towards the multisensory nature of mental imagery – one cannot fail to name G. Gabrielle Starr (2013) – it could be easily put that, rather than opposing the visuality of narrative experience, an increased ability to imagine oral conversations could enhance it.

⁴ “Novelists before the nineteenth century are not making these particular contributions to moral philosophy (nor are writers in other genres)” (Katsma 2021, 119).

⁵ “[A]n activity that is not primarily visual but is [instead] rooted in the proprioceptive and acoustic imagining of words” (Katsma 2021, 83).

⁶ “[A] world that can never be visualized and a world that discourages visualization” (Katsma 2021, 112).

This takes nothing away from the constructive part of Katsma's theory of novelistic auditory imagery, which is innovative and much needed in a field oftentimes too focused on visuality. Rather, future research could improve it by delving deeper into the possible synergy of vision, proprioception and voice. This is but one of the many questions sparked by Katsma's work, joining others such as: what are the origins of chapters and paragraphs, and what part do they play? Are there relations and mutual influences between the new notations and contemporarily arising market practices, such as instalment publishing? And if spatial notations are translinguistic, how do they fit into writing systems different from the horizontal, left-to-right Roman alphabet? On this note, Katsma works, inevitably, with the data available to him (that is, English novels in a limited period), yet also provides fruitful comparisons with similar research in other areas, such as Vivienne Mylne's on French and English punctuation (Katsma 2024, 153-57), or Oleg Sobchuk's on the Russian novel (275-76). Given what stands to be gained, more work is needed, for a longer time span and a larger area. The recent book by Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter* (2023), is already a very promising step forward in this sense.

To conclude, Katsma's work constitutes a valuable addition for everyone working on English or comparative literature, literary imagination, or book materiality. His assertive arguments resound – no more appropriate word – in his reader's mind with many challenges. They sometimes reach for the stars, yet are all based on the data collected by the author. One could either propose a different interpretation or, as he often suggests, integrate the evidence with new data. Yet, and this is the sign of a great work, one could not afford to simply ignore Katsma's findings and move along. In this sense, Katsma's tentative joining of close and distant reading points at a positive way for humanists to build on each other's work.

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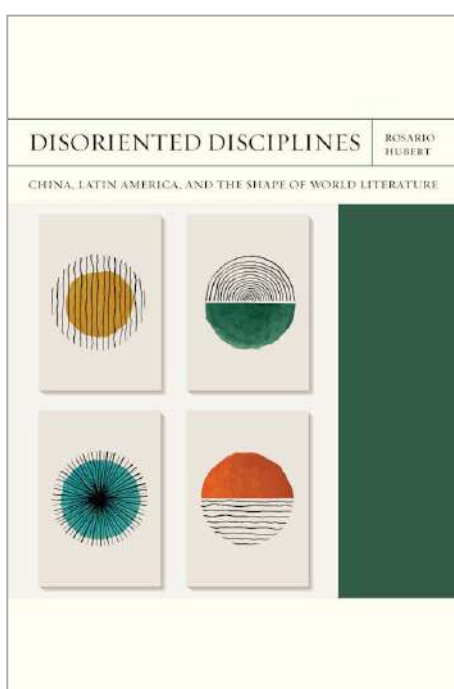
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DISORIENTED DISCIPLINES: China, Latin America, and the Shape of World Literature (2023), by Rosario Hubert, explores the transnational, diasporic and global dimensions of cultural manifestations of China in Latin America, undertaking a demanding task: by embracing the undisciplined essence of Comparative Literature, instead of containing it, the author analyses not only canonical literary works, but also genres that are normally considered complementary or paratextual, such as travel narratives, book reviews, and memoirs, as well as non-textual objects and other cultural practices. These artifacts, Hubert argues, constitute the vital spaces of critical intervention when examining the discourse about China in Latin America, especially due to the absence of a specialized epistemological framework for oriental studies in the region. *Disoriented Disciplines* demonstrates how, in Latin America, sinology has been developed by writers, editors, translators, artists, intellectuals and diplomats – not by scholars – amidst trade routes, commercial navigation, human trafficking and global circuits of cultural diplomacy and political militancy. This book, however, not only provides an in-depth investigation of the representation, mediation and circulation of Chinese culture in Latin America, but also proposes a distinctive methodology that deeply concerns those dedicated to World Literature and Comparative Studies, suggesting new modes of reading, and new perspectives to map the world.

Rosario Hubert is currently Associate Professor at Trinity College (Connecticut, USA), where, since 2014, she teaches and conducts academic research in the areas of Spanish and Portuguese Languages, World Literature and Translation. Native speaker of Spanish and fluent in an array of languages, Hubert specializes in the cultural intersections of China and Latin America. *Disoriented Disciplines* was conceived as a long-term project that involved personal passions, academic interests and professional requirements, and earned the support of several scholarly institutions: Harvard University, Trinity College, the Northwestern University Press, the American Comparative Literature Association, the National Library of Argentina – a network that reflects the complexity of academic work in the international spheres of contemporary Comparative Studies.

Hubert's book intertwines enriching reflections by an international set of scholars who work in the USA and a selection of the most relevant works by the Argentinian literary critics of the past decades – from Ricardo Piglia and Sylvia Molloy to Graciela Montaldo and Gonzalo Aguilar. The fecund theoretical framework of this research includes approaches to World Literature by David Damrosch, Emily Apter and Franco Moretti; the theory of Orientalism, by Edward Said; and questionings about the Western gaze within the Humanities by Zhang Longxi. Additionally, concepts such as 'infrastructures', developed by anthropologist Brian Larking to better understand the materialities through which people, objects and ideas move across the globe; the idea of 'anarchaeologies', suggested by Erin Graff-Zivin to rethink the possibilities of literary criticism and academic interdisciplinarity; or Beatriz Sarlo's notion of 'orillas' [margins] to define peripheral cultural positions, are productively recuperated and put into dialogue. Although the perspectives of Chinese theorists and critics are not incorporated in the main theoretical framework of the book,

several mentions are made to critical pieces when needed, such as the notion of ‘utopian ruins’ and the proposal of a memorial museum of varied artifacts by Jie Li.

In tune with the project’s aim of proving that the Latin American writings of China cross the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and methods, combining literary studies, philology, linguistics, translation studies, ethnography, history, international relations, and more, Hubert forms an open-ended, expansive *corpus*. When studying works by – among others – Rubén Darío, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Haroldo de Campos, and Severo Sarduy, the author reads the unexpected and unexplored within the modern canon: China, its diplomacy, its representations and depictions, the imbrications of its politics, aesthetics and critical thinking. The *corpus* also includes a series of unorthodox materialities that imbricate textual and non-textual objects. Thus, *Disoriented Disciplines* creates and studies an articulation of *a priori* dissimilar elements, connects diverse historical moments, refers to different manifestations of the Chinese culture, and observes multiple periods in Latin American cultural history – from Spanish American *modernismo* to Brazilian *concretismo* to Third World socialist realism and beyond. Hubert presents the existing writings of China in Latin America and sews, by means of a chronological organization, a thematically, ideologically and formally non-homogeneous *corpus*.

After a strong introduction in which Hubert states that Latin American comparative criticism is fundamentally about indiscipline and translatability, underlining the historical lack of specialized frameworks for sinology in the region, the book presents five main chapters, sequenced chronologically from the nineteenth century to the present. Each chapter concentrates on one specific form of expression related to China in Latin America: the “coolie” trade documents and the *crónicas modernistas* [modernist short stories] concerning Chinese migration and *chinoiseries*; Borges’ writings on China and his fictional sinology; the trajectories and initiatives of several cultural agents; the artists and poets inspired by the imagery of the Chinese script, especially as presented in classical poetry; and the materialization of the Cultural Revolution aftermath in recent films, memoirs and novels.

The title of the first chapter, “Trade, Tourism and Traffic – The Labor Routes of *Modernismo*”, reveals the literary and cultural criss-cross Hubert seeks. Building upon the influence that *chinoiserie* had on the *crónicas modernistas*, the author delves into specific texts that relate to the movements of Chinese immigrants and the human traffic routes between China and the Americas, namely *crónicas* by José Martí, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, and José Juan Tablada. Shedding light on the dispersed depictions of the labourers that were transported across the seas from China to Peru, Cuba and México, a series that the author names as “coolie passage archive” (54), translation is seen as an act of moving bodies. Through the analysis, the willingness to debate issues concerning labour migrations in South America also becomes evident in the *modernistas’* prose, even though the debate was not taken as a political stance, but as a literary one.

Chapter 2, “Sinology on the Edge”, historicizes sinology and examines the fictional epistemology of China created within Jorge Luis Borges’ narratives that portray Chinese characters, the figures of Western sinologists and travellers, and (apocryphal) Chinese textual objects. It is argued that these are not representations of China, its culture or its people, but rather humanistic reflections on China as an

object of fascination and study. According to Hubert, Borges states, through fiction, that the Western conception of China is an artifice, a philological product, a forever mistaken attempt to contain and translate a forever distant culture. Sinology is thus put “on the edge” (67), while discussing the very nature of (Western) Humanities, the global circulation of cultural products, literary translation, and World Literature. By the end of the chapter, the author lists Borges’ readings of Chinese literature and critically comments on the writer’s hermeneutical positions. Translation is here examined as a form of creative writing.

Chapter 3, entitled “The Twisted Networks of Cultural Diplomacy – Global Maoism in Print”, takes the reader further into the middle of the twentieth century, shifting to the trajectories of cultural agents that “gravitated between the networks of Maoist diplomacy and the booming Spanish book industry in Latin America” (21). Seemingly a vague type of object to focus on, it actually shows the importance that serendipitous moments or figures can have in the cultural field. Episodes, such as the two-hour unexpected meeting between poet Ai Qing and several Argentinian writers during an aircraft repair in Buenos Aires in 1954, give way to three case studies of intellectual projects in Argentina that took advantage from the PRC agenda to disseminate Chinese culture and Maoist diplomacy in order to put forward their own cultural initiatives.

The visual aspect is the common thread of the artifacts studied in chapter 4, “The Surface of the Ideograph – Visual Poetry and the Chinese Script”. In this section, Hubert takes into consideration how the Chinese classic poem served as a catalyst due to its visual value, rather than its literary content. Putting to good use her Chinese language skills, the author looks at the artistic works of José Juan Tablada, Haroldo de Campos and Severo Sarduy to unveil how the Chinese script influenced and inspired Spanish and Portuguese publications in Latin America. Here, translation echoes a complex act of transcreation and mediation and defies even further the notion of translation beyond the linguistic.

Finally, chapter 5, “Moving Memories – The Affective Archive of the Cultural Revolution”, concentrates on the archival memory, its subjective, affective and intimate dimensions, and studies documentaries, memoirs and novels produced by the sons and daughters of Latin American militants and intellectuals who lived in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Raised in China, the children of those prominent Maoists were both educated as locals and treated as foreigners. The narratives of this second generation are read as post-memories that illuminate childhood and youth perspectives, underline the bodily inscriptions of the Revolution, problematize the figures of political exiles, and open discussions on possible contemporary relations between politics and the arts. Translation here is conceived as an act of affective, sensorial and mnemonic transference.

Without a confining conclusion, the book ends with an afterword entitled “Imposture”, where Hubert reiterates the peculiarity of this archive and links the main analysis to a brief yet compelling reflection on contemporary Latin American writings on China. This section acknowledges those artifacts that did not find a way into the structure of the book, with special mention to *Los Impostores* (2002) by Santiago Gamboa, a novel that contains many of the intersections found in this study. Portraying itself as the scholarly reverse of Gamboa’s book, Hubert’s work enriches the

vast *disoriented, undisciplined* Latin American tradition of productively blending essay and fiction, literature and criticism. Additionally, fifteen images in black and white illustrate, throughout the book, several aspects of the proposal, highlighting the materiality of the cultural objects privileged by this study. In the Appendix, the table “Spanish translations of Chinese literary works published in Buenos Aires, 1942–81” (245–50) maps the vast – and yet very little read – number of literary works specifically translated and edited in one of the main editorial backgrounds in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world. Finally, the detailed Index, gathering a wide variety of worldly terms, from acupuncture and Aztecs to *Weltliteratur* and Zhuangzi, attests to the expansiveness of this academic undertaking.

One of the strong points of the book is certainly its methodological and conceptual proposal. Hubert deliberately explores and reads together spaces of expression that normally do not get to be part of a grander scheme of representation. *Disoriented Disciplines* is a fresh outlook among Comparative Studies that successfully blends together not only unexpected objects of study, but also several areas of knowledge and geographies. In parallel, embracing the definitions of “disorientation” and “indiscipline” as positive features in the academic research *praxis*, encouraging its inherent instability and dispersion for a productive analysis, the book proposes an innovative perspective that gives coherence to the whole project. This is also a deliberate attempt to call out the meanings and purposes of the Humanities, as Hubert herself explains: “I seek to stress the speculative nature of the humanities, overlooked in an academic context that steadily forces humanistic disciplines to adapt to the protocols of science” (22).

A few critical observations throughout the book become noteworthy regarding the decentralization of the Humanities, and particularly the predominance of perspectives from the Global North within Comparative Studies. The author defends a revisitation of dominant standpoints, such as the general use of Orientalism to conceptualize the vast and diverse cultural products of the Global South. Subtly, the use of ‘American’ as a demonym that refers to one specific country, and not a complex multi-regional amalgamation, is contested, since *Disoriented Disciplines* insists on specifying ‘US American’ when referring to what comes from the United States. Furthermore, Hubert’s examination projects a plural mapping of the world, not only by focusing on unexplored relations between China and Latin America, but also by avoiding a Eurocentric analysis, and by including a Transpacific Studies approach. She explicitly claims that nations and regions are deeply unstable geographical constructs.

The stance on the broadness of translation is another positive note throughout this reading. The author’s background in Translation Studies and her knowledge of the Chinese language seem to enrich her conceptions of translation as a cultural practice grounded in several forms of displacement. For Hubert, translation is more than a textual operation: it “involves an act of displacement of the human, visual and haptic qualities of a literary artifact when it crosses cultural boundaries” (196). Moreover, translation here becomes the name for several phenomena: an exercise of creative writing and comparative reading, an act of media transfer, the displacement of humans through different modes of migration, the transplantation of sinology, the artistic appropriation of ideograms, the political emulations of Maoism, and the

affective transference of experiences of the exiled. This search for expansiveness is an “easier said than done” task that the author eventually develops chapter by chapter. The vast and precise knowledge of the author about both Latin America and China, concerning not only the official languages and cultures of each region, but also their histories and material traditions, paired with an extensive gathering of investigative results, contributes to the value of this work.

In addition to her specific, innovative and enriching analysis, Hubert includes a few noticeable reflections on conducting research and writing, particularly within World Literature, as well as self-referential comments on the material conditions of working in the academic spheres of Comparative Studies, and the intertwined actions and responsibilities of those who study, read, teach, and write. Becoming a mother and procrastinating are named as experiences that affect the bodily and intellectual practices of a contemporary woman scholar. These brief reflections on academic work and maternity, and the plasticity of the creative process related to writing and publishing are remarkable: included in the introduction and in the afterword, these notes serve as comments about the academic *praxis* as labour.

A challenging commitment as this one would be deemed to have its fragilities – although in this case we understand its shortcomings as inherent to the project’s conceptual and methodological ambition. The amount of information can be overwhelming in some sections of the book, particularly to those who are not familiar with Latin American literary history, and this can create a sense of ephemeral analysis on occasion. Also, the choice of *corpora* that is moderately read in close can seem ambivalent at times, although it is that very ambivalence that gives way to a heterogeneous and original selection. Finally, regarding editorial decisions that affect the reading process, it must be highlighted that big excerpts of most-needed, and very welcomed, translations are included in the main textual body, which sometimes results in an uncomfortable reading leap for those proficient in both Spanish/Portuguese and English.

By discussing the meaning of being a specialist in a foreign culture, *Disoriented Disciplines* is ultimately more about Latin America, its cultural and intellectual positions and manifestations, than about China or Chinese culture, and the book reveals practices of World Literature theoretical possibilities among spaces of critical intervention in Spanish and Portuguese. The originality of the topic studied by Hubert enables the exploration of alternatives to decentralize the Humanities, integrates the analysis of contemporary artifacts with reflections on Modernism and the historical formation of a worldly cultural *panorama*, and suggests innovative modes of *corpus* formation that overcome the binary conception of canonical/non-canonical, textual/non-textual, literary/non-literary works. In conclusion, the book is a recommended read, particularly for those concerned with the central questions that permeate the debates in Comparative Studies today, such as the inherent tensions of working on the edges of interdisciplinarity and the relationship between literature and other cultural practices.

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Coste, Florent. 2024.
L'ordinaire de la littérature. Que peut (encore)
la théorie littéraire ? Paris: La Fabrique.

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LES JOURS DE GLOIRE de la théorie littéraire sont loin derrière nous. Depuis bien des années, elle recule au profit de la lecture (et la lecture dite critique est de plus en plus appelée à devenir celle, subjective, intuitive, athéorique, du « bon sens », quand elle ne se confond pas avec le discours journalistique ou publicitaire) et des recherches historiques (le retour de l'histoire du livre comme discipline académique s'accompagne d'un intérêt plus général pour l'archive, le patrimoine, le collectionnisme et, dans un registre un peu différent, la rencontre entre écriture et beaux-arts, dans les publications comme au musée). La tentation est donc forte, aujourd'hui, de renoncer une fois pour toutes à la théorie littéraire, dont la disparition pourrait même passer presque inaperçue (de tous les genres littéraires, la théorie est celle qui se vend le moins bien en librairie).

Tel constat est le point de départ du livre important de Florent Coste, mais les conclusions qu'il en tire sont diamétralement opposées à l'acceptation de cette désertion. Tout en analysant les raisons qui ont causé le déclin de la théorie littéraire, l'auteur explique la nécessité absolue de la théorie littéraire, non dans le but de sauver une approche institutionnalisée (mais pour combien de temps encore ?) dont il admet les défauts, mais afin d'œuvrer pour une relance de la théorie sur de toutes nouvelles bases. Pour Florent Coste, la théorie « traditionnelle », celle issue du structuralisme comme celle inspirée des mille et une formes du poststructuralisme, s'est en effet coupée du réel. Elle a perdu tout contact non seulement avec le travail des auteurs et l'expérience des lecteurs, mais aussi avec le contexte plus large qui fait exister la littérature comme les modalités de transmission du texte, les clivages économiques, sociaux et politiques de la société où se produit la littérature ou, de manière plus problématique encore, l'état de la langue dans lequel, et souvent contre lequel, s'effectue le travail de l'écriture. La théorie littéraire, qui se veut comme toute théorie conventionnelle une théorie du général, non du particulier, s'est écartée de la complexité et des contradictions de l'expérience vécue, souvent douloureusement subie, et en ce sens il n'y a pas de raison pour en assurer la survie, qui ne peut être qu'une forme de maintenance purement institutionnelle, garantie par un enseignement à fuir autant et dès que possible.

Le constat n'est pas neuf et Florent Coste ne peut que l'entériner. Mais au lieu d'en conclure qu'il est temps de tourner la page, il milite en faveur de la théorie, plus nécessaire que jamais selon lui. Comme le proclame la quatrième de couverture : « À cet égard, renouer avec la théorie littéraire est un acte de résistance ». Ce programme suppose toutefois une redéfinition radicale des formes et enjeux de la théorie, renversement qui ne peut se faire en restant à l'intérieur de la théorie littéraire telle qu'on la connaît aujourd'hui. Il importe de repenser non seulement la notion de texte, mais aussi celles d'auteur, de lecteur, des divers aspects de l'institution littéraire et pour finir aussi celle de la langue, qu'il ne suffit plus de considérer comme un simple outil. Tant le texte proprement dit que les autres aspects et agents de la chose littéraire souffrent en effet d'une profonde aliénation, que Florent Coste analyse, mais pas exclusivement, à la lumière des travaux de Marx et de Bourdieu (il est important de souligner aussi les références au pragmatisme de Dewey, puis aux

apports des études culturelles). À l'époque du néolibéralisme triomphant, nos idées courantes sur la littérature aussi bien que les théories qui se font l'écho de ces lieux communs—promeuvent une conception individuelle et marchande de la création comme création de valeur (sociale, culturelle, symbolique, mais aussi purement économique), à la fois cause et effet d'une mise entre parenthèses radicale des conditions de possibilité matérielles et collectives de la littérature. Il en résulte plusieurs types de fétichisme littéraire : celui de l'objet (on attribue des valeurs magiques à des textes sans s'interroger sur le caractère relatif d'une telle valeur, qui reste toujours fonction de critères n'ayant rien d'universel) mais aussi celui de l'auteur (qui continue à être vu comme un agent individuel et solitaire, même après l'effondrement du mythe du « génie inspiré ») ou encore celui des gardiens du temple (ces instances de discrimination à la fois jalouxés et idolâtrés). En se faisant le double d'une telle décontextualisation, la théorie est devenue un fétiche à son tour, fétiche de fétiche, objet lui aussi doté de fonctions magiques, jugé capable d'expliquer « la » littérature mais dont les effets pratiques sont peu mis au défi (même si on n'y croit plus qu'à moitié, voire plus du tout, on continue à faire de la théorie pour trouver une place sur le marché de l'emploi académique, pour le dire un peu cyniquement).

La théorie littéraire qu'avance Florent Coste est tout autre. Pour lui, la théorie doit cesser d'être une sorte de théorie pour la théorie, elle doit au contraire se mettre au service de la littérature se faisant (qui n'est plus, du moins dans certaines de ses formes, un pur divertissement ou une nouvelle variation sur l'art pour l'art). Non pour dire la « vérité » de la chose littéraire, mais pour l'aider à jouer le rôle qui doit être le sien. Dit autrement : pour mettre fin à l'aliénation du texte et de la littérature en général et par là précipiter la transformation de la littérature en action sociale et politique.

Florent Coste esquisse ainsi un nouveau futur pour la théorie littéraire, appelée désormais à intervenir dans la littérature en train de se faire, c'est-à-dire en train de se sortir du statut fétichiste et déconnecté qui demeure encore sa règle. Pour l'auteur, la théorie littéraire doit critiquer sa valeur d'échange et redécouvrir sa valeur d'usage : à la théorie littéraire comme outil de distinction et tremplin carriériste doit succéder une théorie littéraire qui accompagne et approfondit les formes littéraires qui, non contentes de rejeter le statu quo, s'efforcent aussi d'élaborer de vraies alternatives, artistiques en mêmes temps que sociales. Cette intervention peut prendre des formes très différentes, mais leurs ambitions primordiales doivent être l'explication, non des textes mais de leurs enjeux sociaux et politiques (par exemple en s'interrogeant sur le refus de reconnaître certaines formes d'écriture comme littéraires), et l'exploration, non de nouvelles formes de théorie, mais des alternatives sociales et politiques dont la littérature contemporaine, non celle d'aujourd'hui mais celle qui cherche à dépasser l'aliénation d'un discours séparé des réalités sociales, se veut le laboratoire (soulignons ici que cette exploration de nouvelles formes de littérature ne se confond pas avec l'insistance sur le caractère référentiel ou documentaire : pour Florent Coste, ce « retour du réel » n'inquiète pas réellement la séparation de la littérature et de ses conditions de possibilité, qui dépassent largement le seul texte).

Ce livre vise donc à mettre au jour les tensions sociales, politiques, matérielles, juridiques et technologiques de la littérature qu'ignorent ou refoulent les idées

communes sur l'écriture et la lecture, mais aussi sur la publication et la transmission des textes, afin de montrer, exemples à l'appui, que la littérature est capable d'opérer de véritables changements, à la fois dans le domaine littéraire proprement dit (l'auteur par exemple n'est plus l'individu dont on déclare la mort ou le statut purement institutionnel, mais une instance collective et participative) et dans les domaines plus larges mais indissolublement liés, de la société et de la langue, elle aussi aliénée par la force des clichés et théâtre de nombreuses luttes de distinction et d'hégémonie (tel type de discours tentant de se faire accepter comme « norme » et d'exclure tous les autres comme secondaires, inférieurs, marginaux, voire inacceptables).

L'argumentation solide de Florent Coste s'appuie sur de nombreux exemples, souvent empruntés à la production de maisons d'édition comme Questions théoriques (Christophe Hanna ou Franck Leibovici), La Fabrique (Nathalie Quintane), Al Dante (Jean-Marie Gleize, également auteur du Seuil) ou P.O.L (aujourd'hui rachetée par Gallimard, qui n'est pas forcément le partenaire idéal pour le projet politique et intellectuel de ce livre), avec une attention particulière pour la manière dont ces auteurs pensent leur travail comme intervention directe dans le tissu social dont la littérature fait partie. Malgré l'intérêt de ces travaux, c'est là une réduction du champ considérable, dont l'impact éventuel sur le reste de la production littéraire et la vie de la littérature en général est toutefois peu discuté en ces pages. Certes, Florent Coste donne bien des pistes pour nous aider à « reconnecter » textes et société, dans l'optique militante qui est la sienne, mais au-delà des auteurs et autrices qui prêchent peut-être les convertis, la mise en œuvre de ce programme reste très générale. Il demeure en effet un écart considérable entre les pratiques encore relativement marginales données en exemple et la grande masse des textes circulant sur le marché du livre. Comment savoir ou assurer que les pratiques transformationnelles de tel ou telle auteur ou autrice, qui restent encore très minoritaires, *débordent* sur les rapports avec d'autres textes, davantage lus dans des perspectives plus traditionnelles tels que divertissement, consolation, admiration ou encore développement personnel, dont Florent Coste souligne qu'elles méritent d'être prises au sérieux, dans la mesure où elles témoignent sans exception du désir d'établir les liens entre lecture et expérience vécue ? De la même façon, comment évaluer l'impact autre que superficiel ou anecdotique des différentes manières dont la littérature contemporaine cherche à façonner un nouveau public ? Il ne serait pas difficile d'instruire un dossier critique à l'égard de ces nouvelles institutions que sont la résidence, la performance, la lecture publique ou l'atelier d'écriture, notamment. Florent Coste note très justement le glissement du statut allographique (infiniment reproductible) du texte au statut autographique (idéalement unique et impossible à reprendre ou à copier) de l'acte littéraire, mais il reste assez timide au moment d'en discuter la possible fétichisation.

Il faut donc espérer que d'autres études prolongent rapidement le livre de Florent Coste pour aborder deux questions un peu négligées dans *L'ordinaire de la littérature*, à savoir l'enseignement et le patrimoine. Ces deux points sont évidemment inséparables. C'est par le biais de l'enseignement que beaucoup de nouveaux lecteurs se mettent à explorer le domaine de la littérature, qui ne peut se réduire à la seule explication du contemporain. En dépit des multiples efforts pour

permettre à des publics variés d'entrer en contact avec les textes cités en exemple par Florent Coste, la voie royale de l'entrée en littérature reste quand même l'école. Or on ne voit pas (encore) très bien comment « traduire » la démarche militante de ce livre en termes didactiques ou, si l'on préfère, comment appliquer les leçons du travail d'auteurs comme Hanna ou Leibovici aux livres mis au programme : après avoir lu Florent Coste, on a envie de s'y mettre, sans pour autant disposer de tous les outils pour le faire. Il en va de même des nombreux classiques, car une bonne partie des textes qui continuent à circuler sont des œuvres plus ou moins canonisées (et nous savons que tout canon est une forme de fétiche) : faut-il les laisser de côté au profit des créations qui essaient de sortir du cercle vicieux de la valeur et du fétiche, ou les soumettre à une critique sévère, quitte à les priver de certaines de leurs caractéristiques, comme par exemple l'invite à s'y perdre pour le seul plaisir ? De nouvelles formes de lecture, moins fétichistes si on veut, demandent un effort de contextualisation qu'on imagine vraiment énorme et qui ne semble pas à la portée de tous les lecteurs. Comme l'exprime justement la dernière phrase du livre : « Il reste donc encore du pain sur la planche. »

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