

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND WORLD LITERATURE

LITERATURA COMPARADA E WORLD LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: “Comparative Literature” and “World Literature” are concepts with origins in the same era – the early nineteenth century and the rise of nationalism in Europe. With that emergent nationalism came the intellectual study of national literatures, and thus the need for explicit disciplinary models (like Comparative Literature and World Literature) which transcended national boundaries. For nearly two centuries these concepts had quite separate lives in the English-speaking world, with Comparative Literature elevated to the status of an academic discipline, while World Literature remained something popular and non-intellectual. At the end of the twentieth century, that began to change in the US academic system. This paper examines the interconnected histories of Comparative Literature and World Literature in the US academy since 1960.

KEYWORDS: comparative literature; world literature; literary history; institutional history

RESUMO: “Comparative Literature” and “World Literature” are concepts with origins in the same era – the early nineteenth century and the rise of nationalism in Europe. With that emergent nationalism came the intellectual study of national literatures, and thus the need for explicit disciplinary models (like Comparative Literature and World Literature) which transcended national boundaries. For nearly two centuries these concepts had quite separate lives in the English-speaking world, with Comparative Literature elevated to the status of an academic discipline, while World Literature remained something popular and non-intellectual. At the end of the twentieth century, that began to change in the US academic system. This paper examines the interconnected histories of Comparative Literature and World Literature in the US academy since 1960.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comparative literature; world literature; literary history; institutional history

One of the most frequently-discussed issues among US-based specialists in Comparative Literature so far in the twenty-first century has been the relationship between Comparative Literature and World Literature. Both terms originate in the same general time period: the early nineteenth century – but their histories then diverge for nearly two centuries, in interesting ways.

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The term “World Literature” (*Weltliteratur*) enters into regular circulation with Goethe’s conversation with Johann Eckermann on 31 January 1827, when Goethe famously pronounced: “National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit.”² [“National Literature no longer has much to say; the era of World Literature is here.”]

Goethe’s discussion of *Weltliteratur* emerges in part from his re-reading of a Chinese novel (probably Jean-Pierre Remusat’s 1826 *Iu-kiao-li, ou les deux cousines, roman chinois*, translating a novel by Zhang Yun, likely published during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, 1661-1722). He compares this novel with those of Samuel Richardson, as well as with his own *Hermann and Dorothea*, while also discussing the popular *Chansons* of Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857). In the discussion, he also alludes to the traditional cycle of Serbian poems around the fourteenth-century Battle of Kosovo, the dramas of Calderón, the *Niebelungenlied*, Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, and other works. This eclectic discussion purposefully removes texts from their historical context: in annihilating geographic borders, Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* also fractures chronological borders, as well as the borders between elite, popular, and folk literature. Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* is interested in these texts for what they offer him as a reader and as an author, not in what they might have meant to their original audiences. This instrumentalization of texts from other places and times, deploying them as a mirror to the self rather than of their own times, will be a recurrent theme in the study of world literature.

Perhaps the earliest use of “Comparative Literature” in any language is that in the subtitle of the 1816 edition of the *Leçons francaises de littérature et de morale: cours de littérature comparée*, edited by François-Joseph-Michel Noël and Guislain-François-Marie-Joseph de La Place (the 1804 edition had not carried this subtitle).

This work and its companion *Leçons anglaises, allemandes, italiennes, grecques, latins, latins modernes* (and later volumes by others on Spanish and Dutch literature) each offer excerpts of a given national literature, mostly in the original language, though the German volume offers only translations. Each of these *Leçons* follows somewhat the model of Mme de Staël in seeking to identify in each national literature the characteristics of its people. De Staël identifies, for example, the lassitude, licentiousness, and vengefulness of the Italians; the sincere emotions of the Spanish, sometimes pompous, but never subtle or insipid; a certain Nordic melancholy, more intellectual among the Germans, more detached among the English; the gallantry and stylistic perfection of the French, far removed from the active interests of human life; the Greeks with their agonistic desires for fame, their solemn rituals, their contempt for bodily pain; and the Romans, with their Stoic self-control and calm dignity.³

This label of Comparative Literature, gradually became the name of an academic discipline, beginning especially with the works of Hugo Meltzl (1877)⁴ and Macaulay Posnett (1882).⁵ As has frequently been observed, both Meltzl and Posnett were working on peripheries of the Eurosphere: Meltzl in Budapest; Posnett in Dublin and later in Auckland; the project of comparative literature began on the peripheries, perhaps because residents of provincial and peripheral cultures are forced to think comparatively (at least with respect to dominant cultures), where members of dominant cultures can more easily treat their culture in isolation. It has also been observed that the disciplinary name of “Comparative Literature” emerged in part on analogy with other comparative disciplines of the nineteenth century: comparative anatomy, comparative religion, comparative law, comparative philology, and so on.⁶ The disciplinary name has remained the same to the present day, in part because of institutional inertia, and in

² Goethe et al., *Goethes Gespräche mit J. P. Eckermann*, 175.

³ I discuss this aspect of de Staël in more detail in Beecroft, “Greek, Latin, and the Origins of ‘World Literature.’”

⁴ Meltzl, “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature.”

⁵ Posnett, *Comparative Literature*.

⁶ Saussy, “Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes,” 6–11.

spite of the fact that explicit modes of comparison are today only one of many methodologies employed in Comparative Literature – and in the United States at least, far from a dominant methodology at that. The disciplinary label has remained stable in spite of the somewhat problematic nature of the comparative enterprise, at least as practiced by Mme de Staël and by Messrs. Noel and La Place, where the aim of comparison seems to be to find in the literary works of each nation the qualities of character already presumed to exist there. In our age of deserved skepticism and hostility concerning cultural essentialism, not to mention our ongoing fascination with the trans-national, the global, the regional, surely the notion of “comparing” literatures ought to give us pause. Nor is it entirely clear, I might add, that “comparison” even describes a method unique to our discipline. When, for example, someone writes of the influence of Emile Zola on Henry James, we say that they are doing work in comparative literature; when someone else writes of the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne on Henry James, that work is not comparative. And yet the methods and techniques used in both cases will be essentially identical, with an emphasis on close reading, on identifying close parallels, on biographical and archival work to uncover just what the influenced writer knew of their influencer. The only difference between the Zola/James project and the Hawthorne/James one is that the former project requires reading knowledge of two languages; the latter of only one. The fact that these two projects are understood to exist in different disciplinary contexts is a question of institutional history, not of methodology.

Where “Comparative Literature” became the name for an academic discipline, and gradually acquired the rigor and seriousness appropriate to such a meaning, “World Literature” remained an essentially non-academic conception. A Google Ngram search reveals that world literature has generally been the more common term, especially in the middle part of the twentieth century, between 1920 and 1987, but that “world literature” is most frequently found in the context of works designed for popular education, rather than for scholarly audiences.⁷ Representative of such works might be the *Essentials of World Literature* published in 1952 by Barron’s Educational series, the opening sentence of whose preface is: “This book was written with the express intention of filling the long-felt need for a dependable and comprehensive guide to Continental European Literature.”⁸ Other works of this type recognized that “World Literature” and “Continental European Literature” were not synonyms, and did make a more sincere effort to cover the larger world. See, for example, the preface to *Cassell’s Encyclopedia of World Literature*, in two volumes, published in 1954:

While naturally the bulk of the available space has been allotted to the major literatures – English, French, German, Greek, Indian, Italian, Latin, Russian, Spanish – particular care has been taken to provide fair representation of literatures which are not always dealt with in works of reference: e.g. Armenian, Basque, Breton, Cornish, Eskimo [sic], Ossetic, Polynesian, Tibetan, Yiddish.⁹

The list of “major” literatures here would have seemed familiar to nineteenth-century historians of European literature, though even they might have been startled to discover that the entry on “Arabic literature” was only 4 ½ columns in length (as compared to the 11 columns given to American, that is US, literature). In this era, courses in “World Literature” featured in the catalogs of many US universities, and, as with these popular reference works, course syllabuses and textbooks emphasized European works, sometimes to the absolute exclusion of anything else.

⁷ “Google Ngram Viewer.”

⁸ Hopper and Grebanier, *Essentials of World Literature*, v.

⁹ Steinberg (ed), *Cassell’s Encyclopedia of World Literature*, vii.

This is where matters stood at the foundation of the American Comparative Literature Association in 1960. From its inception the ACLA exhibited a great concern for the importance of reading and teaching literature in the original languages, believing that even at the undergraduate level it was not possible for students to read literature in translation in a Comparative Literature program worthy of its name – indeed, many had their doubts, about the viability of undergraduate programs in Comparative Literature at all, especially in the elite private research universities where the discipline found its first US homes. This emphasis on philological purity, laudable in many ways, of course had the effect of continuing to marginalize non-European languages within the discipline, which tended (just as World Literature did in the same era) to confuse Europe with the world.

A telling barometer of the shifting importance of non-European literatures to the discipline of Comparative Literature in the United States has been the Reports on the State of the Discipline produced by the ACLA roughly every decade since its foundation. The first of these reports, written by Harry Levin, was published in 1965, and it observes:

We need not be too much concerned with the problem of foreign literature in translation, if we distinguish clearly between such courses and courses in Comparative Literature; and, if the latter courses include a substantial proportion of work with the originals, it would be unduly puristic to exclude some reading from more remote languages in translation. A further distinction might conceivably be drawn between Humanities or World Literature or Great Books at the undergraduate level and Comparative Literature as a graduate discipline.¹⁰

Foreign literature in translation is a “problem,” of course, to the extent that it threatens Comparative Literature as an academic discipline: if the ability to read works in multiple original languages is devalued, then Comparative Literature ceases to be a discipline distinct from the general study of literature, and risks (at least in the United States) collapsing into English departments, where masterworks of European and/or World literature can be studied in translation. While this might be tolerable, Levin suggests, in undergraduate coursework for non-specialists, it is entirely inappropriate for graduate study or scholarly work. At the same time, since that linguistic competence is restricted to a handful of languages (especially French and German, but also to lesser degrees Italian, Spanish, and Russian, with at least a passing knowledge of Latin and Greek also assumed), the field in practice concentrated on studying the literatures of those languages closely in the original language, while the study of other literatures was reserved for work in translation, and often for undergraduate teaching rather than for other purposes. The hierarchy of disciplinary knowledge Levin proposes creates in turn, then, a hierarchy of languages and literatures – and also a hierarchy of institutions, for Levin further cautions that “where [Comparative Literature] is not yet represented in a curriculum it should not be introduced without a good deal of institutional heart-searching and a careful scrutiny of the facilities and requirements elsewhere.” Only those institutions with exceptionally capable students and extensive libraries will benefit from the presence of a Comparative Literature department; for the rest, let them offer courses in World Literature in translation.

This hierarchy also has implications for the kinds of methods used. Given the close links between literatures in the major European languages, the Comparative Literature that emerged in the United States in the postwar years placed particular emphasis on literary relations and influence, and was most comfortable integrating other traditions into its orbit when and where

¹⁰ The Levin and Greene reports, and the initial Bernheimer report can be found online: “State of the Discipline Report.”

those traditions directly impinged on Europe – and more where non-European languages learned from or adapted European models, rather than the opposite. While the academic study of non-European languages such as Arabic and Chinese tended to privilege classical texts over modern ones, Comparative Literature found itself without a method for integrating classical texts of the non-Europhone world, and tended therefore to continue to leave such texts (and the methods that might be required to integrate them into the discipline) to one side.

Levin's remarks on "more remote languages" are quoted in each of the two subsequent reports, in interestingly different ways. Thomas Greene's 1975 report acknowledges immediately that the "elitism" which the Levin report had boldly endorsed in 1965, "has been challenged for better or worse by rapid historical change." Greene expresses grave concern about the possibility of declining standards (including the possibility, he darkly suggests, of lecturers in literature-in-translation seminars who have not read in the original language all of the texts they teach). He suggests a variety of methods for retaining high standards of linguistic proficiency in the face of the rapid spread of higher education in general, and Comparative Literature in particular (150 programs in the discipline across the country in 1975; he notes – twice the number ten years before), but also, already in 1975, because of concerns about the shrinkage of foreign-language departments and the difficulties of the academic job market. At the same time, Greene is hopeful about the addition of non-European languages and literatures to the discipline. He expresses reservations about the inadequacy of then-available theoretical tools to address literatures not in close contact with Europe, and asserts that "we cannot begin to absorb the wealth of exotic literatures before firmly possessing our own." At the same time, Greene looks forward to a future when those tools are available:

A new vision of global literature is emerging, embracing all the verbal creativity during the history of our planet, a vision which will soon begin to make our comfortable European perspectives parochial. Few Comparatists, few scholars anywhere, are prepared for the dizzying implications of this widening of horizons, but they cannot be ignored.

Greene's vision of world literature here is, intriguingly, the maximal version, including the entire "verbal creativity" of the planet, not the more restrictive kinds of world literature derived from world-systems theory that have predominated in actual discussion in the US academy in the 21st century.¹¹ Greene stands, then, Janus-like, between the rigorous standards of a Comparative Literature based on five or six European languages; and a millennial future in which verbal creativity in all its forms will be celebrated, but where linguistic competency beyond the familiar languages is not addressed.

The next State of the Discipline Report came in 1993, a decade late; its author, Charles Bernheimer, tells us that a precursor report had been written, but shelved, in 1985.¹² Bernheimer's initial report was then supplemented by a panel at the MLA conference, with papers by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Mary Louise Pratt, and Michael Riffaterre; and then by a published volume, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, which included the Levin, Greene, and Bernheimer Reports; the response essays by Appiah, Pratt, and Riffaterre; and thirteen additional essays in response to the debate generated by the entire project.

This greatly expanded authorship,¹³ together with a name change ("State of the Discipline" became the rubric here, rather than the earlier "Report on Standards"), signaled a change in

¹¹ I expand on this distinction in Beecroft, "World Literature Without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems."

¹² Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ix.

¹³ The earlier reports were both ostensibly written by a committee, but in a single, unified, voice.

approach, away from the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of a Great Man; towards an attempt to reflect a broader range of perspectives. This new openness was also reflected in the way that the Bernheimer report engaged with its predecessors, and particularly with the Levin Report. Bernheimer refers to Levin's language about texts in translation being appropriate primarily in undergraduate teaching, or in the case of more "remote" languages, but now with an open rejection of Levin's self-described "elitism," and a new openness to the study of literature in translation. Translation itself is now to be understood as a paradigm for thinking through cross-cultural understanding and interpretation; and as an invitation to reflect on the scholar's own situatedness, and the challenges of "translating Europe or South America or Africa into a North American cultural reality."¹⁴ Graduate students are to be encouraged (though certainly not required) to "broaden their linguistic horizons to encompass at least one non-European language,"¹⁵ while undergraduates "should be encouraged to study languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, or Swahili."¹⁶

But this encouragement to study non-European languages is not entirely borne out by the volume itself. Only one of the contributors, Rey Chow, had a scholarly interest in non-European languages, and much of Chow's essay is taken up by reminding the volume's readers that the study of non-European languages has its own, Orientalist, history in the US and Europe, and that "multilingualism does not necessarily prevent one from becoming an intellectual bigot," arguing that the study of, for example African-American English, or Asian-American English, could perform much the same work of teaching the comparative method and an understanding of language as power.¹⁷ These cautions remain as timely in 2019 as they were in 1995, and yet (as with Bernheimer's own emphasis on translating other continents into a "North American cultural reality") the focus rapidly shifts from the larger world to the United States – a shift presaged as well by the use of the phrase "Age of Multiculturalism" in the title of the Bernheimer volume. When it comes to the actual study of texts in non-European languages, the Bernheimer report, as much as its predecessors, emphasizes the difficulties and dangers of such studies rather more than the rewards. To paraphrase Saint Augustine, the discipline of Comparative Literature in the United States seemed to say "Give me non-European languages, but not yet." The need to study non-European languages is acknowledged in each report, but always as something of a new discovery, as if recognized for the first time, and with all the uncertainty and caution that comes with first times.

By the time of the next State of the Discipline Report,¹⁸ the process had democratized further. Rather than a single-author Report, followed by sixteen reactions, the 2006 Saussy Report featured essays by twelve scholars, of which the essay by Haun Saussy himself was just one; followed by seven reactions by other scholars. From a report on disciplinary standards, the Association had moved to a much broader collection of observations about what was happening in the discipline of Comparative Literature: intellectually, institutionally, and in relation to the larger social context. Strikingly, the term "World Literature" has become a much more prominent feature of the discussion: an inspiration for the title; the explicit subject of two of the chapters, and an important dimension of several other chapters. The term itself is mentioned 165 times in the Saussy report, vs. 11 times in the Bernheimer. Many of these references, it must be said, are cautious or critical, from Jonathan Culler's concern that "indeed, the danger of world literature is that it will select what is regarded as excellent without regard for the particular standards and ideological factors that might have come into play in the processes of

¹⁴ Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 44.

¹⁵ Bernheimer, 43.

¹⁶ Bernheimer, 46.

¹⁷ Chow, "In the Name of Comparative Literature."

¹⁸ Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*.

selection,”¹⁹ to Katie Trumpener’s warning that world literature will only succeed at opening minds if scholars from different fields learn new ways of talking to each other,²⁰ to Haun Saussy’s own worries about world literature courses taught in translation, which might erode the differences in language and historical moment that Comparative Literature has traditionally prized.²¹

These cautions aside, it is quite clear that by 2006 world literature, and not multiculturalism, is the leading generator of the anxiety for which Comparative Literature in the United States has long prized itself. The discipline now imagined itself less as a vehicle by which the world could be brought to North America, and more as itself part of that world. The reason for this shift can be found in the work of three scholars: two active in the US (one a former ACLA president, and contributor to both the Bernheimer and Saussy volumes), and one in France: David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova. Their work emerged and was received in the context of the “Culture Wars” of the 1990’s US academy (of which the Bernheimer report was one salvo), and, in the skeptical assessment of John Hamilton, seemed designed to address the impasses that report encountered:

World Literature has of late come to the fore as a redeeming, cosmopolitan conception for a discipline perceived as fatally Eurocentric. In contrast to the institutional history of Comparative Literature, which was purportedly concerned with tracing and thus essentializing the cultural roots of national identities, World Literature would be emphatically transnational, introducing an expansion that would allow comparatists to realize their utopian dream of attaining encyclopedic breadth by means of ethically equitable, ecumenical scholarship.²²

“World Literature,” in other words, was the eventual answer to the riddle that multiculturalism posed for Comparative Literature in the US. As late as the Bernheimer report, the discipline gestured towards the incorporation of texts and literatures in non-European languages, while in practice being more successful at articulating theoretical obstacles than at actually, say, learning the languages and “comparing the literatures”²³. The Bernheimer report itself had, in a sense, continued to challenge the incorporation of non-European literatures into the discipline, by proposing an engagement with US multiculturalism and cultural studies as an alternative means to the same end. World literature had the clear advantage of a more cosmopolitan outlook, as Hamilton suggests, and it is probably not surprising that it was world literature, and not multiculturalism, that would become the discipline’s battle-cry, and battleground, in the new millennium. As always, of course, the questions of language learning, and of the value of literature in translation, remained central.

Returning to the texts which proved central to the emergence of World Literature as a major paradigm for Comparative Literature in the United States, David Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* proposed a three-part theory of world literature, designed in many ways to turn

¹⁹ Culler, “Comparative Literature, at Last,” 244.

²⁰ Trumpener, “World Music, World Literature: A Geopolitical View,” 190.

²¹ Saussy, “Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes,” 11.

²² Hamilton, “Ellipses Of World Literature,” 5.

²³ Miller, *Zero Plus One*, 15. “Now that the way out of the crisis in comparative literature had been clearly indicated, Wellek thought, it ought to be just a matter of getting on with it, that is, getting on with ‘comparing the literatures.’ My last phrase is an allusion to a cartoon published around then in the *Harvard Advocate*. The cartoon showed Harry Levin and Renato Poggioli, the patriarchs of Comparative Literature at Harvard, dressed in plumber’s clothes and carrying plumber’s tools, knocking at someone’s house door. ‘We have come to compare the literatures,’ the caption said.” Other sources identify the joke as coming from a dream recounted by Harry Levin himself.

these questions, particularly about the role of reading-in-translation in Comparative Literature, back on those who posed them:²⁴

1. World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.
2. World literature is writing that gains in translation.
3. World literature is not a set canon of texts, but a mode of reading.

Rather like Goethe's discussion of *Weltliteratur*, Damrosch's "elliptical refraction" seeks to balance its two foci: an interest in the national-literature context from which a work is presumed to spring, with a concern for how that work is received in the reader's present – with the ever-present danger, one might add, that without the assistance of specialist knowledge, the ellipse can easily collapse into a circle, whose sole center is the reader and his present-day utility. The concept of writing that gains in translation is a valuable corrective to the too-easy dismissal of translation as a loss of authenticity, by redirecting attention to the new lives works often live in new languages, embracing an enlarged sense of the meaning and value of a text rather than insisting on a presumed original reading as the sole legitimate one. Again, the student of world literature needs to be careful here: works can only gain in translation by being translated, and the inequities in access to translation play an important if not always acknowledged role in the afterlives of particular texts. The claim that world literature is not a canon, but rather a mode of reading, resonated in the context of the Culture Wars, largely in ceasefire mode by 2003 yet still haunting the memories of most of us active in the field at that time, even if there remains plenty of room to disagree about *what* mode of reading World Literature might be. The project of constructing a global canon would always have been complex and contentious, but was even more so in the simultaneous ages of multiculturalism and globalization, where a global canon would be required to reflect not only the dominant traditions of major world cultures, but also subversive and subaltern voices within those traditions, while also paying attention to works by US-based ethnic communities linked to those major world culture. By replacing a fixed canon with a mobile and flexible collection of texts built around the reader's own needs, Damrosch's model deftly escaped many of the politico-cultural tensions of the era.

Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999), had a significant impact in US literary circles only once it was translated into English (*The World Republic of Letters*, Harvard University Press, 2004). Casanova argues for the emergence of a literary field, constituted nationally but seeking to surpass national borders, beginning in 16th-century France with Joachim du Bellay and his contestation of the vernacular literary supremacy of Italian. She argues that national literatures seek to accumulate cultural capital through the development and concentration of literary resources: from dictionaries and grammars for national languages, through canons of literary work and major writers and movements. The goal of these national literatures for Casanova is to achieve global status within the World Republic of Letters, through recognition in major cultural capitals such as Paris. Entry to this World Republic is not easy, and national literatures join only slowly; in particular, Africa and Asia enter into literature only during the period of post-1945 decolonization²⁵.

Casanova's claims generated lively discussion in the US academy from the moment her work was translated. US-based readers were drawn to Casanova's sociologically acute description of the literary field and its workings, and many have found that notion useful. At the same time, other aspects of Casanova's model were perfectly designed to provoke the ire of US critics. Her insistence on the importance of Paris as the locus for the stock exchange of literary value, to and even beyond 1945, naturally irritated readers used to thinking of the Anglosphere's capitals

²⁴ Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 281.

²⁵ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 11.

of New York and London as the twin centers of the literary universe (when such readers do not conflate the Anglosphere with the literary universe altogether). Many aspects of her theory seem designed without reference to English-language examples, and/or display a comparatively weak grasp of the English-language tradition, as when she argues, for example, that the publication of the Book of Common Prayer (1549) and of the King James Bible (1611) may have represented an early use of English as a vernacular language for religious purposes, but that this religious use of the language long delayed the emancipation of English from the literary prestige of Latin by grammarians.²⁶ The moment is a revealing one – if French provides the model for all vernacular languages, “emancipating” itself from a cosmopolitan language like Latin through the establishment of grammars and dictionaries, then consolidating its prestige through a national Academy and through the establishment of a literary canon, then English might seem like it was late to develop as a literary language. But of course the years between the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible encompass, not timid beginnings of vernacular writing, but Elizabethan Age, the period traditionally designated as the Golden Age of English literature, including Shakespeare himself. English, in other words, followed a different path towards literary prestige, a path that becomes invisible or irrelevant when viewed through Casanova’s Parisian lens. Americanists could be dismayed by the literalness with which Casanova seemed to take Hemingway’s claim that “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* ... There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.”²⁷ Relying chiefly on Hemingway’s claim, Casanova equates *Huckleberry Finn* with the birth of the American novel, seeming to neglect well-established and highly canonical US novelists such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville – less canonical, it’s true, in Hemingway’s own time, but with a prestige surely well-enough established by the turn of the twenty-first century. Casanova is of course eager to see Twain as the beginning of the American novel because his use of dialect establishes him as a sort of Herderian folk-writer for her purposes; the more formal and standardized English of a Melville or Hawthorne disqualify either from a foundational role in American literature in her view. Equally dismaying to many in the US academy was Casanova’s claim that Asia and Africa (and, indeed, Latin America) would only begin to enter the World Republic after 1945, and at that, slowly – a remark which may accurately describe the reception of such works in Europe, but which leaves Casanova’s reader struggling to decide what to do with the avowedly literary texts produced outside the borders of her Republic, and especially those produced before its foundation, or in ignorance of its existence. Are such works literary at all for Casanova? The answer is not entirely clear, but Casanova’s World Republic offered US academics a useful instantiation of a series of propositions about literature, many of them uncritically reproduced, explicitly and implicitly, within the critical tradition without having ever been articulated as openly as Casanova did.

The third of the major World Literature interventions in US literary study was Franco Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature,” published in the *New Left Review* in January 2000²⁸ (Moretti has chronological preeminence within the US conversation, but due to the briefer nature of his intervention I discuss it last). Drawing on an extensive reading of scholarship on the history of the novel, Moretti developed a theory of the novel where that form’s migration from its homeland in England and France can be explained as the combination of European form and local content. That is, the form travels from its place of origin, gradually spreading across Europe, across non-European regions speaking European languages, and then the wider world, maintaining key formal features of the classic Anglo-French novel while adding local

²⁶ Casanova, 74.

²⁷ Casanova, 293.

²⁸ Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature.”

characteristics. Moretti presents this conclusion as the product of his “distant reading” of literary histories, mostly those written by scholars based in or trained in the United States. It might be observed that it is not altogether surprising that scholars trained in similar methods might look at similar corpuses of text and derive similar findings, and that this might be as much a function of their scholarly training as of the nature of the evidence itself. Further, critics have detected a certain circularity in Moretti’s argument: if the only things that count as novels are those prose works which assume the form of the Anglo-French novel, then naturally the arrival of that form in other cultures will involve a mix of that form with local content. Jonathan Zwicker has shown, for example, that the majority of prose fiction actually read in late nineteenth-century Japan followed traditional Japanese prose narrative forms, and that the more innovative works using Anglo-French novelistic form were initially rarely read by actual Japanese audiences.²⁹ Moretti’s model, as initially proposed, does not seem to offer a means of understanding how the Anglo-French novelistic form could coexist with local forms.

In the above descriptions I have sketched some of the critiques these three models of World Literature have encountered. There have, of course, been many others. Christopher Prendergast, in a series of articles in the *New Left Review*, and through the essay collection *Debating World Literature*, challenges the models of both Casanova and Moretti, saying:

“that a single, generalizing description misses too much and is destined to do so, if it is offered as the description. What is needed is a proliferation of competing (sic) but also mutually nuancing predicates, description that is thick rather than thin.”³⁰

He argues, rather, for richer and more subtle understandings both of the concept of “literature,” and of the role played by the national, especially in some of Casanova’s key authors such as Kafka and Beckett who, he argues, viewed their relationships to language and nation in ways more complex than those implied by a rigid application of Casanova’s model.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her *Death of a Discipline*, argued that world literature is implicated in discourses of market globalization, and advocated for the death and rebirth of Comparative Literature in a form which takes many lessons from the disciplines of “Area Studies” (East Asian Studies, Latin American Studies, etc.). Area Studies, she says, can offer the kind of knowledge of the Other necessary to understand worldly texts, although these disciplines were founded as a Cold War knowledge project, while Comparative Literature contributes literary method.³¹

Emily Apter, in *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, critiques dominant theories of World Literature as possessing an “entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world’s cultural resources.”³² Borrowing from Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (later co-translated into English by Apter); she argues for the politics of untranslatability; for a focus, that is, on those words and concepts that stick or struggle as they move from one language to another, and for, therefore, a kind of World Literature that values translation without viewing it as an easy or unproblematic task.

Aamir Mufti’s *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* critiques the triumphalist and celebratory tone of world literature as a new version of orientalism, domesticating the radical energies of postcolonial literatures.³³ Through examinations of the Orientalist study of Sanskrit, the decline of the Persianate cosmopolis under imperial rule, and the global anglophone novel, he calls for a revision of world literature that understands that our very understanding of “diversity” is itself Orientalist and colonial in origin.

²⁹ Zwicker, *Practices of the Sentimental Imagination*.

³⁰ Prendergast and Anderson, *Debating World Literature*, 25.

³¹ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*.

³² Apter, *Against World Literature*, 3.

³³ Mufti, *Forget English!*

These critiques, and the many others which space does not permit me to enumerate, share a number of interrelated concerns. Many critics of World Literature accuse the field of overly general theories, which seek to explain too many phenomena using too broad and vague an analysis. Critics often point to the lack of political engagement and critique in world literature studies, in particular contrast with other models, such as postcolonial theory, frequently applied to similar bodies of work. They cite world literature as an instrumentalization of literary study, driven by market forces and pedagogical needs, and by the narcissistic desire to turn all literary texts, whatever their origins, into mirrors to our own selves. They express the concern that world literature, far from engendering a genuinely cosmopolitan outlook on literary production, might simply bring back presentism and Eurocentrism in a new form. These critiques demand serious attention. Yet the challenge remains that existing models of Comparative Literature (those advocated by Levin and by Greene, for example) were designed for a small number of closely-related European languages and literatures, and struggle to “scale up” to deal effectively with a larger variety of literatures from a broader range of places and times. Models, for example, of literary reception and influence, offer only limited and fragmentary means of discussing many non-Western and pre-modern literary texts in a comparative perspective, and yet if those texts are discussed only in the context of highly-specialized local knowledge, then our collective understanding of literature will remain myopically Eurocentric. How, then, can we discuss pre-modern and non-Western texts in a way that is responsible, that respects the contexts from which they emerged, and yet is accessible to non-specialists?

These questions have long interested me personally, as a scholar of ancient Greek and classical Chinese literatures, and I have suggested a possible starting-point for such future work. In my *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, I offer an alternative way of thinking cross-culturally about literature, a method derived in part from ecology. Ecologists characterize different parts of the world in two different ways: as ecozones and as biomes. Ecozones, or “biogeographic realms”³⁴ resemble to some extent the “areas” of area studies, and sometimes even overlap with them in territory. They are large contiguous regions of the planet with a shared evolutionary history, separated by significant barriers such as oceans, great mountain ranges, and large deserts, which have historically impeded the movement of plants and animals. These large regions (corresponding, roughly speaking, to North America, Latin America, Africa, South/Southeast Asia, Northern Eurasia, Australia, the Pacific islands, and Antarctica) are occupied by closely related species which have adapted in some cases to a wide range of habitats.

Biomes, by contrast, are not entirely contiguous geographically, and do not share an evolutionary history. Rather, they are the disparate regions of the world which share similar habitats based on temperature and precipitation patterns, soil types, and so on. These biomes (examples of which would be the tropical rain forest, the desert, the tundra, or the Mediterranean landscape) are found in widely-separate regions of the world, and the species they contain may not be closely related. Because these species have had to respond to similar living conditions, however, they have tended to develop similar features, such as the waxy leaves typical of Mediterranean-style plants, designed to cope with the wetter winters and drier summers of regions such as southern Europe and northern Africa, central Chile, southern California, the Cape Province of South Africa, and parts of southern and western Australia. These plants have evolved separately in separate regions, developing out of existing species in similar directions because they have sought solutions to similar environmental challenges.

In order to approach ecology from a comparative or historical perspective, both the biome and the ecozone need to be taken into account; the distribution of species in a particular location cannot be understood through one of these dimensions alone. But when we think of literature

³⁴ Olson et al., “Terrestrial Ecoregions of the World.”

in a comparative or historical sense, the areas, continents, -spheres, and -phones we think in terms of work largely on the model of the ecozone, looking at the evolution and circulation of literary forms across defined geographic regions with (to one extent or another) shared literary cultures. We think much less frequently about typological comparisons across cultural distance: about how, for example, people in south India and in northwestern Europe began to compose literature in vernacular languages at around the same time (c. 700-800 AD), and in similar reaction to the presence of existing classical languages (respectively, Sanskrit/Prakrit and Latin).³⁵ Similarly, there is room to compare archaic and classical Greece and Warring States-era China in terms of their similar challenges in creating a body of texts which could consolidate a **notional** cultural unity in the face of extreme political fragmentation³⁶. Drawing on these basic observations and some others, I have proposed a series of six ecologies (biomes, in terms of the distinction above) in which literature seems to have circulated somewhere or other in human history.³⁷ I use the language of ecology here partly in the manner of Nicklas Luhmann's notion of "environment" as that which is drawn upon by a system while remaining external to it: in my case, the political, economic, social, religious, technological (etc.) factors that shape the literary world without being governed by it,³⁸ though I do make use of some specific concepts from ecological science, using, for example, the concepts of "genetic drift" and minimum viable populations to think through the challenges faced by small languages.³⁹ My list of ecologies is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive: certainly, there is room to consider additional ecologies for situations which may not entirely fit into the existing six (ranging from ancient Egypt to contemporary Latin America).⁴⁰ Moreover, some of the distinctions I make may seem less essential to others: the absence of a cosmopolitan language in the background is the main distinction between my panchoric and vernacular contexts, for example, and the distinction between the cosmopolitan and the global may be more theoretical than actual. This fuzzy, overlapping, non-sequential and incomplete taxonomy is not intended to reduce all literary experience to its lowest common denominator, but rather to provide the beginnings of a shared language with which it might be possible to speak about world literature in a cross-cultural context.

With those cautions in mind, the six ecologies I have proposed are as follows.

1. The **epichoric**, or purely local, the limit case where texts (probably, though not necessarily, oral in composition) do not circulate beyond their small community of origin. This ecology, a zero-grade version of literary circulation, is included primarily as a conceptual tool rather than as a fully-accurate description of any actual situation, since all known cultures interact in at least some measure with others. Small-scale tribal communities of past and present, whether in the Americas or on the fringes of larger cultural worlds in Eurafasia, provide the closest approximation, though such communities are generally in some kind of productive cultural relation with their neighbors – and where they are not, they are generally in flight from the predations of more sedentary communities, rather than ignorant of their existence.⁴¹ Texts produced in such an environment might be expected to be deeply engaged with place, genealogy, and other questions powerfully tied to the local. Theoretically speaking the epichoric allows us

³⁵ Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*; For the role of Prakrit in the creation of this "literary cosmopolis", see Ollett, *Language of the Snakes*.

³⁶ Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China: Patterns of Literary Circulation*.

³⁷ Beecroft, "World Literature Without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems"; Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*.

³⁸ Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*.

³⁹ Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, 243–48.

⁴⁰ See Sánchez Prado, *Strategic Occidentalism* on Latin American literature as a kind of "world-making" world literature.

⁴¹ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

to account for strictly local readings and experiences of texts, readings which take their local qualities seriously, even if such readings may in fact be second-order (and frequently nostalgic or ironic) reconstructions of an imagined past, viewed from the perspective of a more complex present. The concept has been used extensively in thinking about representations of the local in archaic Greek myth and literature, where it is almost always found in conjunction with a Panhellenic perspective;⁴² the concept could certainly be applied elsewhere. It is very difficult to speak about epichoric texts in a historical context, both because they are frequently quite stable in content and form over long periods of time (or are imagined to be stable, at any rate), but also because the act of reading such texts in a historical frame of reference inevitably removes them from a possible epichoric context.

2. My next ecology, the **panchoric** (a term I generalize from the Greek notion of the Panhellenic), emerges in a limited number of situations around the world: in the Ancient Near East; in Archaic and Classical Greece; in Warring States China; and perhaps in both the India of the Vedas and the Mayan world. The nature of textuality in both of these latter cases, however, makes it harder to apply the model, at least with respect to literature. What unites and typifies these cases is the unusual combination of small-scale polities, almost inevitably frequently at war with one another, together with an emergent sense of a shared culture. This culture, which either develops as a synthesis of more local tradition, or at least imagines itself as a synthesis of the local, establishes and consolidates a written literary language, in a context where no previous written language has been used by locals. The concept of writing may well be borrowed from outside, as it was in Greece, but (also as with Greece) literary influence and circulation from dominant regional cultures was not foregrounded as a feature of the new traditions as they emerged.⁴³ These new traditions often use literary devices such as catalogues, genealogies, and anthologies as a means of representing their *e pluribus unum* sensibility. I have found this notion of the panchoric useful in my comparative study of archaic and classical Greece on the one hand, and of Spring-and-Autumn and Warring-States China on the other,⁴⁴ as a frame for thinking about the composition, circulation, and interpretation of literary texts there. In so doing I have drawn in significant part on the work of my teacher, Gregory Nagy, on the tensions between epichoric and Panhellenic readings within ancient Greek texts.⁴⁵ Other texts in the cultures I have identified as potentially panchoric would seem to lend themselves to a similar analysis, from the survey of Mesopotamian cities in the Sumerian *Temple Hymns* of Enheduanna, to the genealogies of poets in the *Rigveda*, to the mappings of journeys in the pre-Islamic *qasida*. The panchoric is a useful comparative and typological hermeneutic. But its emergence takes place at many different points in time, from the second millennium BC (in the case of Sumerian/Akkadian) to the early centuries AD (in the arguable case of Mayan writing), depending on when particular regions begin to adopt writing and to create larger-scale networks of polities (engaged in trade and/or war). Moreover, the details may be somewhat different from place to place, as in some regions the panchoric seems connected to primary state-formation,⁴⁶ while elsewhere (as in Greece) the panchoric as we know it may be more the consequence of later stages of the re-formation of states after a period of collapse. China, which always claimed to reflect the collapse of a primary unity, but whose early history may better have been represented as the co-existence of a range of polities, each of which became prominent in a different era, is another case again.⁴⁷

⁴² Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*.

⁴³ See e.g. West, *The East Face of Helicon* for a discussion of the literary relations between archaic Greece and the Near East.

⁴⁴ Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China: Patterns of Literary Circulation*.

⁴⁵ Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*; Nagy, *Pindar's Homer*.

⁴⁶ Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State*, 23.

⁴⁷ Chang, "China on the Eve of the Historical Period."

3. **Cosmopolitan** literary cultures are those which imagine themselves as universal, and which are used by rulers and others to represent visions of universal power.⁴⁸ These languages typically begin either as panchoric languages whose range dramatically increases at some point, or as vernaculars alongside actually-existing cosmopolitan languages, which eventually rival or supplant those earlier languages. Cosmopolitan languages are often spread in part through forces such as conquest, trade, and migration, but these forces alone cannot explain the ongoing use of these languages long after their initial impetus has been spent. There are a limited number of languages which could be considered cosmopolitan in this sense: Sumerian and Akkadian, perhaps; Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, classical Chinese.

Often the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture is a question of degree or perception, rather than of absolute paradigm shift. Akkadian and Sumerian, I would argue, move from panchoric to cosmopolitan as they cease to relate to spoken languages, and as their use spreads beyond Mesopotamia to Syria, the Levant, and the Hittite world. Greek becomes cosmopolitan as Macedonian conquests cause it to replace Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of the east, and the status of Greek as a cosmopolitan literary language long outlasts the Hellenistic kingdoms that fostered it, in both Roman and Parthian territories. Latin becomes cosmopolitan alongside the spread of Roman imperial power, and particularly as it becomes the dominant inscriptional and literary language for North Africa, Gaul, and Spain. Notably, these regions possess other written languages at various stages of development, all of which fade away long before the collapse of Roman power, even the process of replacing local languages with Latin was still underway in the late empire. Latin's status as cosmopolitan is, of course, something that continues well into early modern times in Europe, in spite of the absence of any polity or dynasty for whom it is native. Classical Chinese, I argue, shifts towards a more cosmopolitan outlook as we move into the Han, with large-scale conquests of non-ethnic-Han peoples, and the use of texts in the classical form as a means of both administering and legitimating rule in that empire; use of the language beyond territories ruled by the Han, beginning with the Korean states in the 4th century, was also an important turning-point. The classical register of Sanskrit has ties to very ancient forms, but its cosmopolitan status arguably postdates that of its supposed "daughter" language, Prakrit.⁴⁹ Cosmopolitan Sanskrit is certainly elevated by its use by the Gupta empire, but its spread to South India and as far afield as Java and Angkor Wat cannot so easily be explained (and is the critical piece of evidence behind Pollock's notion of the cosmopolitan literary language). Arabic naturally spreads with Islam and with the conquests of Muhammad, but its continued spread, reaching as far as Timbuktu and Java by the 13th century, cannot simply be explained in terms of conquest.⁵⁰ Modern Persian emerges as literary language with Rudaki (c. 941) beginning in Bukhara (in modern Uzbekistan), and spreads across the Muslim world and across South Asia. There is no clearer sign of the cosmopolitan status of Persian than its use as a powerful literary and administrative language for the Mughal Empire (a Turkic dynasty ruling speakers of mostly Indic languages), and indeed its continued use under British rule in India until 1835, and Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous Minute upon Indian Education (a moment frequently discussed in other contexts, but important as well in establishing that European imperialism would no longer resemble more traditional Eurasian cosmopolitan empires of the Early Modern period).⁵¹ Each of these vast literary languages outlasts by

⁴⁸ See Pollock, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology" for the establishment of the term in this sense. For his further development of the idea, see ; Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.

⁴⁹ Ollett, *Language of the Snakes*.

⁵⁰ See Ricci, *Islam Translated* on the Arabic literary cosmopolis in South and Southeast Asia.

⁵¹ For two very different comparative approaches to the comparison of early modern and earlier empires, see the introduction to Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror* and ; Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands*.

centuries, or even millennia, the forces which gave them life, and each spreads over a geographic area well beyond that reached in conquest or colonization.

4. **Vernacular** literary cultures, which by my definition emerge in reaction to cosmopolitan ones, similarly emerge at distinct chronological moments. Vernaculars claim to speak to smaller, more localized, communities than cosmopolitan languages, but need not be territorialized or nationalized; indeed, in medieval Europe and South Asia alike, writers often chose specific vernaculars for reasons of genre rather than based on their own ethnic origin or on their expected national audience. Pollock notes the emergence of Kannada as a vernacular in South India at approximately the same time as Anglo-Saxon emerges (7th/8th century, roughly), and we might note that this is nearly the time in which Japanese emerges as well. But other vernaculars are earlier: beginning, I'd argue, with Ugaritic in the 14th century BC; see also Latin 3c BC; old Irish and Armenian, 5th c AD; and so on. Other vernaculars, particularly those in the Romance and Indic language families (and therefore relatively close to Latin and Sanskrit, respectively) emerge as literary languages early in the second millennium AD, while in Chinese a standardized literary vernacular doesn't emerge till the twentieth century, and in the case of Arabic such a vernacular has yet to emerge (though in both cases there is an extensive historical use of vernacular language elements in classical works, and indeed of specific genres entirely in the vernacular).

It's here that the comparative-historical begins to resemble something like the world-historical, and the biome to resemble the ecozone. There are, to be sure, earlier waves of vernacular literatures in the centuries BC, but beginning in the first millennium AD, alongside the consolidation of cosmopolitan literatures, we begin to see the consistent emergence of vernacular literature and vernacular literary elements and tendencies, nearly everywhere. The interplay between the two, cosmopolitan and vernacular, becomes nearly everywhere a central preoccupation of literary history, and because this is happening simultaneously across at least Eurasia, it becomes possible to use this interplay as the major narrative of a large-scale literary history that has room for other narrative elements (such as the borrowings of prose fiction across large cultural borders through works such as the *Pancatantra* and the *Alexander Romance*).⁵²

5. The **national** literary model emerges out of the vernacular-cosmopolitan system, but with the important distinction that there is now assumed to be a homology between language, people, and nation. In this system, cosmopolitan languages fade in importance, lacking all-important nation-states as backers, and literary language becomes more tightly integrated into a national political system. This ecology merges more rapidly, since its spread has much to do with the spread of European imperialism. In Europe itself I date the national literature to the displacement of Latin and the increased association of the vernacular with the nation-state over the 17th century, though we see its beginnings with the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539, which establishes French, not Latin, as the language of government in France; note, too that this is also the era of du Bellay and Ronsard, important advocates for vernacular literature. This phenomenon spreads beyond the Anglo-French origins of the nation-state as a consequence of the Napoleonic wars, across Europe and the Americas. Already by the early nineteenth century the seeds of a national-literary discourse are being felt in select parts of the non-West: in the Arab world because of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, and in Bengal in South Asia, under direct British rule since the 1750s (one of the first large colonial regions outside the Americas to come under direct European governance, rather than interacting with small European commercial entrepôts). Other parts of the non-Western world began to adopt national-literary models as Western influence grew, until by the early to mid-20th century the model was pretty much universal.

⁵² For a very rough sketch of this latter narrative, see Beecroft, "Rises of the Novel, Ancient and Modern."

6. My **global** ecology is, like the epichoric, a limit-case, a hypothetical future rather than an actually-existing present; a frictionless utopia of literary circulation, in which texts circulated without constraints imposed by local political or other conditions. We clearly do not live in such a world, and the years 2015-2019 have made such a future seem even less probable than before. Nonetheless, literature is reaching beyond the global in all kinds of ways, from literary prizes (the Booker, Cervantes, Camoes) open to all writers in a given language; to works of literature that are “born translated,”⁵³ to the academic phenomenon of world literature itself. My ecologically-oriented typology can certainly inform local literary histories, which can trace for example the negotiations between vernacular and cosmopolitan, or the emergence of the national literature out of the vernacular. But these six ecologies are not themselves a history of world literature, nor can they be used to write one. They are not a history of world literature in that, while I have listed them in what seems to be their historical sequence of emergence in the world, there is no teleology necessarily tying one to the other. No literature has unambiguously experienced all six in this sequence (though a case might be made for Chinese), and some have experienced these ecologies out of my sequence, moving, as Latin for example did, from vernacular to cosmopolitan. They cannot be used to write a global literary history, either, partly for these same reasons, and partly because the typological comparisons that this ecological method opens up are themselves anti-historical. An ecological model for literary circulation allows us to compare, for example, the emergence of vernacular Japanese literature against the background of classical Chinese (in the seventh century AD) with the beginnings of Latin literature in the third century BC.⁵⁴ It could just as well comparatively trace the emergence of national-literature discourse in the nineteenth-century Arab world and Latin America, or the cosmopolitan poetics of, say, Persian and classical Chinese. Even more broadly, I hope, this method gives us the beginnings of a language to talk more generally about the relationships between culture and power in different historical contexts: to explore, for example, why the Roman empire continued to use Greek as an administrative and cultural language throughout its era, while the British empire, after initially retaining the Persian of the Mughals, later required the use of English, or to understand the *république mondiale des lettres* described by Casanova as one literary ecology out of many that have existed. But these ecologies cannot be, on their own, the story of world literature; history and theory, as it turns out, are not the same thing, and an ecological approach illuminates unexpected similarities and provides a language for shared conversation, rather than a linear and teleological narrative for global literary history. While the field of World Literature had been defined in fairly clear terms already by the time of Haun Saussy’s State of the Discipline Report in 2006, the conversations generated by that field have only increased in intensity since then. By the time of the most recent ACLA State of the Discipline Report, World Literature could be identified as one of the three guiding axes of contemporary Comparative Literature as practiced in the US (alongside “theory” and postcolonial studies).⁵⁵ While many of the entries in this report offer potent critiques of the concept and the discussions around it, World Literature is also clearly part of the background to many, if not most of the conversations active in US Comparative Literature scholarship today, at least as an imperative, or a potential scale of analysis. After their very different journeys over the past two centuries, “Comparative Literature” and “World Literature” seem to have reached a more amicable understanding.

⁵³ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*.

⁵⁴ Denecke, *Classical World Literatures*.

⁵⁵ Heise et al., *Futures of Comparative Literature ACLA State of the Discipline Report*.

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