

Introduction

MARGARET R. HIGONNET

To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.
—Gloria Anzaldúa

Along with Gloria Anzaldúa, we all dream of living without or beyond *fronteras*.¹ Borderlands, to be sure, may feed growth and exploration or may conceal a mine field. The creative work of linguistic hybridity takes place at these points of encounter; here, too, systems of exclusion may lead to censorship or even death. Choices and comparisons arise at frontiers: their enigma challenges us to examine, resist, and exploit lines of division within ourselves and to test intellectual limits, whatever their source. This volume stands as such a point of engagement, where concepts basic to both comparative literature and feminist theory both intersect and pull apart.

The question of boundaries is a key to what one critic has called “the permanent crisis of comparative literature.” The fertility of the field has depended on asking again and again, “What is to be compared with what, by whom, to what end, and under what conditions?”² A flurry of handbooks in the 1960s and early 1970s charted and chartered comparative literature as a discipline. Their signposts typically pointed to the study of periods, themes, genres, translation, literature and the other arts, and influence (or a bit later, reception theory and intertextuality). Historically imbued studies and institutions continue to operate within these classifications.³ But with increasing insistence today we hear calls to “redraw the boundaries” of national literary studies, or to

¹The epigraph is from Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 195.

²Ulrich Weisstein, “Lasciate Ogni Speranza: Comparative Literature in Search of Lost Definitions,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1989): 99–100.

³In spite of his subtle critique of earlier theoretical models, for Claudio Guillén the “basic issues” remain genres, themes, literary relations, and historiology, in *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

"find theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries."⁴ As early as 1956, René Wellek rejected the "customshouse" model of binary comparison across national boundaries, arguing instead that a truly comparative literary history would describe transnational genres, schools, or periods, placing texts "inside a scheme of universal literature."⁵ Schemes of "universal literature," however varied and expansive, may nonetheless screen particular historical interests. At successive horizons, national, continental, "cultural," and "civilizational" models require different interpretive grids. As many have noted, schemes that single out a language, a continent, or an empire all obscure the complex interweavings of cultural processes by masking the cultural and linguistic hybrids that emerge at their own limits. Indeed, all hermeneutic systems select among horizons of interpretation, in what is inevitably "a political and cultural act."⁶ For this reason, many comparatists today weave together multiple disciplines in a reading practice that may be called *métissage*, a practice which recognizes that representation cuts across the boundaries of juridical, political, anthropological, and artistic discourses.⁷

Precisely the indeterminacy of comparative literature as a discipline has fostered its continuous retheorizing of interpretive models and their consequences. Why that has happened may be better understood by examining the metaphor of the title, *Borderwork*. A border is a complex construct that defines and localizes what it strives to contain or release. It is rarely a smooth seam; an edge may ravel, gape open at interstices, or leak in both directions. Borders mark sites of rupture, connection, transmission, and transformation. Rather than understand them as static lines of demarcation, margins, or impermeable walls, therefore, we might want to examine them as what anthropologists call contact zones. Since the work of cultural transmission in contact zones is im-

⁴Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 1–11; Gloria Anzaldúa, introduction, to *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), xxv.

⁵René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1956), 245. I borrow the term "customshouse" from Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, eds., *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 8.

⁶Debra A. Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), xvii.

⁷See, for example, Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 8; an outline of pairings is provided by Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi, eds., *Interrelations of Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982).

provisational and interactive, the literary critic who examines such processes of transmission can move beyond "one-way questions."⁸

In the late twentieth century, the violent redrawing of political frontiers around the world has complicated the comparativist's ideal of open borders in a "global" republic of letters, an ideal that itself emerged from world conflict. The crisis provoked by renewed nationalisms and by the pursuit of "ethnic purity" coincides with a sustained reconsideration of definitions of geographic and linguistic identity which have regulated the discipline of comparative literature. Differences internal and external to a culture have acquired such value that some propose renaming the field "contrastive literature," as "an antidote to certain homogenizing, westernizing, monistic tendencies of Comparative Literature as an academic discipline."⁹ As the remapping of national frontiers proceeds, so does another kind of borderwork: testing the continued pertinence of concepts that institutionalize much literary scholarship. In all areas of literary study, framing concepts such as genre, national literature, the site of the critic, and literariness have come into question. For the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), the defining disciplinary concepts have come in such doubt that Charles Bernheimer's 1993 "report on standards" questions their very applicability. The Bernheimer report attacks the field for its restrictive Eurocentrism, exclusive focus on high literary discourse, and passive reproduction of the canon; it calls on comparatists to "theorize the nature of the boundaries to be crossed."¹⁰

The border has been a privileged, if hazardous, trope for feminist activity. "Border feminists," to borrow a phrase coined by Sonia Saldivar-Hull in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, have examined processes of marginalization that exclude texts produced by minority groups and devalue "minor" genres or movements.¹¹ Others call for investigation of "border cases," where hierarchic binarisms that govern symbolic economies—such as black versus white or male versus female—become

⁸See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7; and Eugene Eoyang, "Polar Paradigms in Poetics: Chinese and Western Literary Premises," in *Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends: Selected Conference Papers*, ed. Cornelia Moore and Raymond Moody (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 11–21.

⁹Michael Palencia-Roth, "Contrastive Literature," *ACLA Bulletin* 24.2 (1993): 47–60.

¹⁰Charles Bernheimer et al., "A Statement of Purpose: Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century" (draft version). The final version of the report will appear with responses in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* from Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹¹Sonia Saldivar-Hull, "Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics," in *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldivar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 210.

unsettled.¹² The trope can become hazardous when it conveys the claim that work on the margin brings an immunity to critique or a moral superiority; it then turns into an excuse that conceals the privileged status of most academics and the limits of individual vision.

This book works at the meeting points of comparative literature and feminist criticism, testing conceptual boundaries that constrain their practices. What might feminist engagements with comparative literature yield? A family romance or an armed conflict? The idea that feminist theories can renovate not only literary study at large but comparative literature specifically has wide currency. In an essay written for the Modern Language Association, Cary Nelson observed that feminists have shifted attention "from how to interpret literature to how the discipline of literary studies is constituted."¹³ The logic of feminist scholarship, according to Lillian Robinson in a volume on "decolonizing tradition," "necessarily entails rethinking the entire literary tradition" to encompass "excluded classes, races, national groups, sexual minorities, and ideological positions. . . . What this means is a more truly comparative literature."¹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also spoken of "feminism as the movement with the greatest radical potential within literary criticism."¹⁵ Daniel Stempel, in his introduction to *Comparative Literature East and West*, specifically contrasted the traditional focus of comparative literature on areas such as "genre study, historical periods, movements, source and influence studies, myth and themes" to "feminist literary history and criticism, whose transformation of traditional scholarship is visible in every journal."¹⁶ In his ACLA report on standards, Charles Bernheimer suggests that the discipline develop links to feminist studies, "arguably the most influential theoretical approach of the past twenty years."¹⁷ This volume explores those links, but it does not see the connection as simple or without tensions.

Whereas the anthologies that proliferated in the 1970s often suggested that comparative literature was "an entity with its own unmis-

¹²Valerie Smith, "Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 271–87.

¹³Cary Nelson, "Against English: Theory and the Limits of the Discipline," *Profession* 87 (1987): 46–52.

¹⁴Lillian Robinson, "Canon Fathers and Myth Universe," in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century 'British' Literary Canons*, ed. Karen R. Lawrence (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 29.

¹⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 118.

¹⁶Daniel Stempel, introduction, to Moore and Moody, *Comparative Literature East and West*, ix–x.

¹⁷Bernheimer, "Statement of Purpose."

takable *Gestalt*,"¹⁸ feminist critics have conspicuously used the genre of the anthology to break up monolithic concepts of feminism. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, warns, "An all-purpose feminist frame of reference does not exist, nor should it ever come prepackaged."¹⁹ Just as there are many feminisms, so are there many comparatisms—a point made by Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes in their collection, *The Comparative Perspective on Literature*.²⁰ Yet 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.²¹

This volume aims to break up perceptions not only of feminism as a singular theory or cultural politics, but of comparative criticism as an "entity" or discipline. It juxtaposes different voices, to stress not homogeneity but conflicts and discontinuities, and to do so by exploring a range of discourses—female circumcision, rape, slavery, and pedagogy, for example. If some of these voices propose a new relationship between comparative literature and feminist criticism, others engage a debate over the totalizing, psychologizing, and individualizing of literary and cultural difference. Theory figures here not in isolated splendor but as a practice that generates fresh readings. The clustering of essays around four topics—the construction of identity, genre theory, the site of the critic, and institutional engagements—should not obscure the interweaving of many of these topics within the essays.

Under the impetus of postcolonial and post-cold war politics, new theoretical approaches have facilitated and accelerated institutional change. In response to demands for a more "multicultural" curriculum, anthologies of "world literature" are adapting their contents to include texts from beyond Europe, and translations serve a burgeoning interest in "third world" literatures; studies in comparative poetics open new doors of understanding; journals have emerged to address altered conceptions of comparative practice that are more global and more inter-

¹⁸Weisstein, "Lasciate Ogni Speranza," 98. More recent collections such as *The Comparative Perspective on Literature*, edited by Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, reflect the trend to decenter literary study.

¹⁹Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 14.

²⁰Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective on Literature*.

²¹See Margaret Higonnet, "Feminist Criticism and Comparative Literature," in *Littérature générale/littérature comparée*, ed. Paul Chavy and György M. Vajda (Bern: Lang, 1992), 269–75; and Kathleen Komar, "Feminist/Comparatists and the Art of 'Resisting Teaching,'" in *New Visions of Creation: Feminist Innovations in Literary Theory*, ed. María Elena de Valdés and Margaret R. Higonnet (Tokyo: International Comparative Literature Association, 1993), 180–86.

disciplinary.²² As attention shifts to popular culture and oral arts, neglected populations, including women, move to the fore. Subaltern studies have been particularly hospitable to feminist work; postcolonial studies highlight the comparative work to be done within national boundaries.²³ These innovations point to new forms of intertextuality, to "other languages and cultures, other disciplines, other races, or the other sex."²⁴ "Other to whom?" one might nonetheless ask. The liberating model of the critic as traveler, exile, or hobo, while drawing perspicacious and imaginative critics such as Edward Said, Jane Marcus, and Houston Baker, also carries with it a baggage of voyeurism and self-exculpation, on which Susan Sniader Lanser reflects in this volume.

The question of the female subject shapes the first section, which draws on debates that the concept of identity has sparked both in comparative literature and in feminist theory. Although the gap between an individual woman and the state may seem vast, recent work on nationalisms has examined the way that "imagined communities" inscribe and exploit gender. In the domain of comparative Latin American studies, for example, Jean Franco and Doris Sommer have traced the way that successive social meanings of national identity (for example, as pure blood or as a stable hearth) accrue around the female body.²⁵ These meanings are not themselves fixed. In a radical critique of the categories of identity used by many feminists, Judith Butler asks how language constructs the categories of sex. Feminist work in com-

²²Examples include the *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women, 1875-1975*, ed. Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar (New York: Longman, 1989); Mary Ann Caws and Christopher Prendergast, eds., *Harper-Collins World Literature Reader* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1993); Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and journals such as *Synthesis*, which, according to a 1993 flyer, planned to present "neglected" perspectives, interdisciplinary work, and topics such as "feminism, multiculturalism, . . . comparative aesthetics" (flyer).

²³Spivak, of course, has been highly influential here. See also Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Lie of the Land: English Literary Studies in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); Hilary Kilpatrick, "Arab Fiction in English: A Case of Dual Nationality," *New Comparison* 13 (1992): 46-55; and Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Intelligibility and Meaningfulness in Multicultural Literature in English," *PMLA* 102 (1987): 10-19. The question of women's "national" identity is clearly raised by the works in eleven languages (and spanning thirteen centuries) presented in the two volumes of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India* (New York: Feminist Press, 1991).

²⁴Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective on Literature*, 17.

²⁵Jean Franco, "Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third World Intelligentsia," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 508; Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). See also Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

parative literature has reopened earlier understandings of identity as national or linguistic, on the grounds that political identities simultaneously construct and erase the female subject. For feminist critics under the influence of poststructuralism, the borders of "personal" identity have come to be seen as shifting and constructed, not fixed or organic; likewise, social identities are no longer naturalized in nineteenth-century positivist terms as "racial." "Gender trouble" complicates feminist theory: What *is* a "female subject"? To what extent has the psychoanalytic dimension of much feminist study (whether of the female subject or of related genres such as the female bildungsroman) reinforced Eurocentrism? Can a comparative feminist criticism take into account the different interactions of class and race with gender? Such questions, which have come to the foreground in contemporary feminist theory, are cast up for consideration by several contributors to this volume. Françoise Lionnet, for example, asks whether gender relations differ in non-Western societies under the impact of caste and noncapitalist economies. If so, are feminist, gender-conscious approaches appropriate?²⁶

A related plane on which comparative and feminist approaches intersect is that of linguistic identity. Although the idea of a linguistically unified nation-state has special force in Europe, elsewhere the exceptions outnumber examples. Is bilingualism a problem or an asset? Feminist theories of code switching and of double-voiced writing contest older notions of linguistic purity and coherence within national boundaries. Yet much cross-cultural feminist work is subject to the charge that it depends on translations and transplanted cultural concepts. An exemplary exception is Regina Harrison's interdisciplinary study of Quechua women's traditions in the Andes, to which the MLA awarded the Katherine Singer Kovacs prize in 1991.²⁷

Is sex itself a language, a semiotic system, or a sociolect? If one accepts the premise that control of the female body is, in the words of Santi Rozario, "of the utmost importance in maintaining group bound-

²⁶Among the many volumes that raise such questions, particularly suggestive critiques can be found in Castillo, *Talking Back*; Spivak, *Postcolonial Critic*; Anzaldúa, *Making Face*; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

²⁷In her fascinating study of popular culture and oral arts, Regina Harrison juxtaposes anthropology and textual analysis, women's laments and their love amulets: *Signs, Songs, and Memory in the Andes: Translating Quechua Language and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

aries and social hierarchy,"²⁸ does it follow that female sexuality is a text inscribed on the body—as essays in this volume by Françoise Lionnet and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan suggest? Do literary forms and aesthetic norms take shape around the female body as signifier? The inscription of violence as ambivalent preserver/destroyer of “feminine” integrity has triggered meditations both on the fetishization of a woman’s body as text and narrative moment and on its unrepresentability.²⁹

Questions about individual identity have shifted the orientation of historical study as well. In response to earlier assumptions that “national” or “cultural” traditions are coherently determined by dominant groups, a fresh interest in countertraditions and internal cultural contradictions flourishes. Until recently, for example, the discipline of comparative literature occluded the functioning of color lines as well as gender in the cultural construction of identities and literatures. A more sensitive literary history will recognize what Hortense Spillers calls in her afterword to *Conjuring* a “matrix of literary discontinuities.”³⁰ The former blindness to racially defined traditions in literary history is no longer possible for comparatists, as pressure has been brought to bear on the discipline by specialists in African American literature who challenge the defining norms of national literary analysis. Within the framing language of comparatism, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has repeatedly interrogated “black” identity as a professional tool. Thus, in an essay first presented at the MLA, he argued that a “black” text must be cited both within the American tradition and within its particular tradition, defined not by racial biology or a mystical essence called blackness “but by the repetition and revision of shared themes, topics, and tropes, a process that binds the signal texts of the black tradition into a canon. . . . It is no more, or less, essentialist to make this claim the existence of French, English, German, Russian, or American literature. . . . For nationalism has always been the dwarf in the critical, canonical chess machine.”³¹ The impact of such renewed questions about

²⁸Santi Rozario, “Ethno-Religious Communities and Gender Divisions in Bangladesh: Women as Boundary Markers,” in *Intersexions: Gender/Class/Culture/Ethnicity*, ed. Gill Bottomley, Marie de Lepervanche, and Jeannie Martin (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), 14–32.

²⁹See Mieke Bal, *Femmes imaginaires: l’ancien testament au risque d’une narratologie critique* (Paris: Nizet, 1986); and Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, eds., *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

³⁰Hortense J. Spillers, “Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women’s Fiction,” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 251.

³¹Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “On the Rhetoric of Racism in the Profession,” in *Literature, Language, and Politics*, ed. Betty Jean Craige (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 26.

the intersection of national and individual identity is most visible in this volume in essays on diasporic African literatures, a concept that must include Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Creole literatures, as well as indigenous and anglicized forms. When focused on the writings of women, "diaspora" criticism can inaugurate a new practice of feminist comparative literature, represented here by VèVè Clark and Bella Brodzki.³²

The comparative study of texts rests on assumptions about the group identities not only of authors but also of *texts*—their participation in conventions or "norms" characteristic of a culture, period, or genre. Genre theory, to which the second section of this volume is devoted, has undoubtedly been one of the strong suits of comparative literature. 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. According to Lore Metzger's interpretation here of the marginal ballad genre, the taboo subject of the female vampire or lamia sustains the aesthetic transformation of the ballad form by writers such as Goethe and Coleridge. Yet the shadow side of genres, marked by various forms of cultural difference, has often eluded critical attention. The issue of violence centered on a female body as text links the essays on rape and slavery in Part I of this volume with the studies in genre theory of Part II. It can be a problem of form: if dramatic theory depends on a social process of victimization and exclusion, asks Anca Vlasopolos, does that linkage explain our inability to read certain problem texts?

One genre has received particular attention from feminists because its very center is the formation of the subject: the bildungsroman.³³ A prime example of a form first described in terms of a male protagonist as member of a social or artistic elite, this genre has been reconceived in light of the forces that "form," limit, and liberate female protagonists. Marianne Hirsch traces intertwined processes of transformation that affect men as well as women, and reconfigure family structures through

³²See Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and VèVè Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness," in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40–61.

³³See, by Marianne Hirsch, "Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm," in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), 23–48; *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), esp. 91–121; and her essay in this volume.

narrative displacements. She returns to the canonical text of *Jane Eyre* as a comparatist who reassesses feminist assumptions.

More contrastive approaches to genre underscore historical and cultural difference. In her cross-cultural analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *Slave Girl*, Bella Brodzki unfolds ways in which African and African American slave narratives both share common structures and differ, depending on the moment of record, as to the gender of the protagonist, and the special terms of servitude imposed on women in a given society. In my own essay, working within one fairly limited period, when most fiction about World War I was written, I question the canon shaped by literary critics who have assumed a relative homogeneity among writers and their experiences. To dispel that critical fiction I ask why women are not recognized as writers about war. How does masculine authorship become conflated with authenticity, or the "real"? How does the inclusion of women's texts from places as far-flung as Bengal or the Cameroons alter our understanding of war literature and of the complexities of national identity?

Genre and period study have tended to go hand in hand in the past because certain periods seem to favor one form or another, as Georg Lukács noted. In turn, our understanding of a period may reflect a narrow critical stress on one elite literary form and its makers. The task of rethinking the reach of group identities can help us to realign the clusters of common literary structures and to recognize how these inscribe social difference. As Chris Cullens suggests here in her study of eighteenth-century women, certain literary commonalities among a group of writers spring from their group identity within the social order: thus the German and English women whose novels she studies shared adverse material conditions of literary production—obstacles to education and publication—that shape the twists of their plots. If we turn our gaze to these neglected women writers, we can begin to recognize a broad period phenomenon, one that has eluded students of the Romantic period, traditionally understood to be an Olympus inhabited by male poets.

Other, historically defined clusters may be flung across time as well as space and language, suggesting that new literary histories need to be written. In several books and articles Annette Kolodny has broken open traditional concepts of masculine territorial conquest in American literature. She defines "frontier literature" as intrinsically multilingual, polyvocal, intertextual, and multicultural. If a frontier is not a line but a "territory or zone of interpenetration between . . . previously distinct societies," then the hybridized styles, tropes, and structures of frontier

texts will demand a “radically comparativist” and interdisciplinary scholarship.³⁴

The inflection of a genre may depend on class background, color, or other cultural structures. The theme of “passing” can now be recognized not only as a product of racism and homophobia but as constituting a narrative “line” in novels that dramatize attempts to construct a self that defies essentialist and determinist social regulation. Sexual practices can furthermore provide a map to concealed literary traditions: Biddy Martin has argued on behalf of grouping lesbian texts together as expressions of “a desire that transgresses the boundaries imposed by structures of race, class, ethnicity, nationality.”³⁵

Who cuts the border? This question posed by Hortense Spillers in *Comparative American Identities* affects our understanding of genre analysis and literary history, of authors and critics.³⁶ The third section of this volume investigates the position of the critic. It asks how her voice speaks, translates, or ventriloquizes. If we do not speak ourselves but “are spoken” by language and culture, what does it mean to engage in a critical activity of interpretation and explanation? Who speaks for whom? The problem is pervasive (if not intractable): if reading is a form of dialogue with an interlocutor, how can one avoid usurping the voice of the other? Does any act of criticism necessarily constitute “information retrieval”? The implied authenticity that lies behind charges of usurpation presumes that there are proximate others that one *can* represent and speak for. Where should the line of difference fall? Such difficulties thread through this volume, from Françoise Lionnet’s opening response to a dialogue between an Egyptian novelist and a prostitute, through Sabine Gözl’s meticulous examination of Derrida’s criticism as a form of gendered mime, to Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s provocative questions about the politics and proprieties of a feminist approach to Arab women’s texts and Obioma Nnaemeka’s proposals for a multicultural pedagogy.

For a comparatist it is particularly pertinent to acknowledge the multiplicity of sites that a critic occupies—a point that Greta Gaard speaks to eloquently in her suggestive study of bisexual theory as a form of comparatism. One way to think about this multiplicity has been to pos-

³⁴Annette Kolodny, “Letting Go Our Grand Obsessions: Notes toward a New Literary History of the American Frontiers,” *American Literature* 64 (1992): 4, 15.

³⁵Biddy Martin, “Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s),” in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 94.

³⁶Hortense J. Spillers, “Introduction: Who Cuts the Border? Some Readings on ‘America,’” in *Comparative American Identities*, 16.

tulate a divided critical positioning, the critic as the "voice of the shuttle." But is that the voice of the comparatist who commutes between literatures, or of the silenced woman? Obioma Nnaemeka proposes cultural study by juxtaposition in order to defamiliarize one's own most familiar cultural practices. What might be the hazards in turn of a feminist bifocalism or "pluralism"?³⁷

Identity politics bear directly on feminist poetics and criticism. Repudiations of the critical practice of "speaking for others" reflect an awareness that "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says . . . a speaker's location is epistemically salient."³⁸ Much feminist criticism has assumed, in an inversion of age-old misogynist attitudes, that the woman who reads reads resistantly, and differently, from the man who reads.³⁹ This model implies an oedipal struggle between "young" feminists and older (male?) comparatists. Some such contestatory model probably lurks within any revisionist project, whether the stakes are the (re)definition of genres or the evaluation of a critical approach, as in Sarah Goodwin's reflections here on feminism and the "new historicism." For the purpose of responding to indiscriminate attacks, it may be useful to postulate a community of feminist critics, or even to recognize the threat of exile on an island within the seas of academe—a metaphor that Nancy Miller exploits with vivid force and subtlety, imagining herself as Philoctetes' sister.

Yet disagreement seems to have increased about how categories should be drawn, and about how membership in conflicting groups informs critical practice. It is important not to hypostasize the female or the male reader. Here the indeterminate figure of the "polysexual" critic, proposed by Greta Gaard, offers a fresh alternative to rigid positioning. Can a readerly identity be inscribed on a woman's body? Do cultural practices separate or unite women across boundaries of age, class, and legal status? Françoise Lionnet forcefully asks whether one can interpret a text about a practice such as excision without raising issues of moral evaluation and bias. And Obioma Nnaemeka likewise

³⁷See Elizabeth Meese, *Crossing the Double Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

³⁸Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-92): 6-7.

³⁹See Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to America Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); and Patrocínio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 31-62. Susan Noakes examines the cliché from a comparative, thematic perspective in "On the Superficiality of Women," in Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective on Literature*, 339-55.

wrestles with the possibilities of shaping a critical sisterhood across cultural difference.

In this vein, critics such as Spivak have charged their readers to reflect on comparative practice as a form of "information retrieval," or the exploitation of "native informants" as a system of literary colonization that leaves Western theories and "great traditions" (the work of Wordsworth or Woolf) in undisturbed power. Feminist comparatists such as Jean Franco, Debra Castillo, and Rey Chow have likewise noted that Western theory tends to project a non-Western material-political Other on which to operate.⁴⁰ Spivak targets totalizing interpretive acts as forms of critical violation or even rape.

Figuring comparative literature as "rape," although melodramatic, leads to broader questions about study of the Other. Do we demarcate ontological boundaries in order to project outward the negative or repressed side of our discourse? Indeed, the prevalence of rape as a topic of critical theory (to which Rajeswari Sunder Rajan here urges our attention) suggests that the violation of the female body displaces some other, unspoken critical violation. How can one work at the border without absorbing, usurping, or silencing another? Understood in this way, ethnographic or cultural study is always implicitly ethnocentric, freighted with scopophilia, and prone to view the Other as a feminized and subordinate spectacle.⁴¹ The would-be multiculturalist becomes a critical tourist, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas and Susan Sniader Lanser argue, insulated from threat of contamination by theoretical antibiotics.

Institutionalized distinctions between scholarship and teaching, reinforced by the trend toward theoretical abstractions in comparative literature, have led comparative critics to neglect their site in the classroom. Drawing on her experience in teaching introductory courses, Obioma Nnaemeka proposes that teachers resist the one-way, Eurocentric bias of much critical interpretation by employing the critical voice as a shuttle that moves in both directions across the border. Comparative study can thus defamiliarize one's own most familiar cultural practices; to go beyond the implied hierarchies of "one-way" questions and the static rediscovery of cherished preconceptions, the comparatist can place her own culture into the field of analysis.

Comparative classwork stumbles again and again against the poverty—and incompatibility within groups—of our linguistic skills. In addition, as VèVè Clark and other contributors to this volume remind us,

⁴⁰Franco, "Beyond Ethnocentrism"; Castillo, *Talking Back*; Rey Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xvi.

⁴¹See Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity*, 5, 7, 174n.

besides language there are many other historical, economic, and religious tools that a reader must acquire before the complex cultural pattern of a diasporic literature falls into place. The last section of this volume, then, reweaves threads in the web of comparative practice in the academy. How is one to shift position and to change the opening questions when most undergraduate and many graduate courses in comparative literature or in "multicultural" studies continue to present texts either in translation or drawn from postcolonial literatures in European languages?

A common complaint about comparative literature and feminist practice today is that they both remain confined within Western critical norms. As Rey Chow points out in *Women and Chinese Modernity*, however, such a critique runs the risk of displacing ethnic individuals such as herself (born and raised in Hong Kong), whose entry into a culture historically inflected by imperialism is already "Westernized."⁴² A purist "nativism" would require non-Western critics to examine only non-Western topics, thereby reinscribing an idealist opposition between the West and "the rest," or between first and third worlds. Such geographic and political dichotomies impede recognition of the complex interpenetration of cultures and of differences within "national" cultures. This volume does not, therefore, attempt to differentiate first from third world feminist theories. Rather, it works to utilize feminist insights in order to nuance comparative practice and, conversely, to nuance and render more comparative the practice of feminist criticism.

The boundary becomes problematic for feminists working on gender issues, as Diana Fuss notes, "when the central category of difference under consideration blinds us to other modes of difference and implicitly delegitimizes them."⁴³ Borderlines police not only inclusions but exclusions, not only privilege but repression—lines inscribed on the backs of those groups who are marked as different. In *Beloved* Toni Morrison describes the physical inscription of slavery as a tree of scars on Sethe's back. Maxine Hong Kingston's warrior woman Fa Mu Lan carries scar-words of revenge for her people on her back. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga reminds herself that a bridge gets walked over.⁴⁴ The work of the border, the burden, is differentially allocated.

⁴²Ibid., xi.

⁴³Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 116.

⁴⁴Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga (Boston: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), xv.

Comparative literature needs to renew continually the questions it raises about the boundaries of its subject and its practice. Many issues call for fresh approaches. The concept of a civilization remains inflected geographically by continental units, historically by neocolonialism, and aesthetically by an assumed priority of European forms and norms. Can cross-cultural study provide a new justification for "global" literary study? Attempts to expand the curriculum by including "third world" literatures embed a linear theory of political and economic development, as well as the homogenization of the West's Other. Ancient Chinese and Indian literatures, such as a ninth-century anthology of literature by nuns, can scarcely be described as emergent or "third world." Is "global" really different from "universal"? Or must comparative study abandon its totalizing aims and refocus its energies on local practices?

The complex testimonial narrative of Rigoberta Menchú, to which several essays here refer, puts into play many of the issues raised by the border for comparative work. She reminds us that this metaphor records real political costs and gains. In order to reach an audience, Menchú had to cross two linguistic thresholds: first, she had to acquire Spanish in order to communicate with *compañeros* from other villages, and second, she had to speak through an ethnographic mediator, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. She learned Spanish, a language of colonization and exploitation, because by contrast to the twenty-two Guatemalan Indian languages, "Spanish was a language which united us." The linguistic barriers she struggles against furthermore are not neutral facts but signs of economic, educational, and political differences maintained by a structure of institutionalized violence which must be undone.⁴⁵ Just as Spanish can become a medium of joint resistance, so can the Bible, an imported text, offer models of resistance in the stories of Jael and Judith. Menchú cites the song of Judith: "He bragged that he would burn up my borders" (Jth. 16:5). Her ironic appropriation of this text as a tool for revolutionary reflection and resistance underscores the complex exchanges at work in her testimony.

Textually, Menchú works through multiple changes in position. She borrows and usurps from the "master" language and culture the tools she needs to liberate her people; she passes from the oral work of organization to the mediated, written work of international mobilization.

⁴⁵"We have to erase the barriers which exist between ethnic groups, between Indians and ladinos, between men and women, between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and between all the linguistic areas." Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984), 162, 223.

She insists on continuously changing activist roles so that no one alone speaks for others. To foreground lines of difference can make action and change possible. Yet Rigoberta Menchú also warns us that no narrative can exhaust her readers' desires or be fully transparent, free of boundaries: "I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. . . . Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets."⁴⁶

Reading at the crossroads, reading along the borderlines of silence, is the work that confronts both comparative literature and feminist criticism today.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 247.