

Compared to What? Global Feminism, Comparatism, and the Master's Tools

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And rain is the very thing that you, just now, do not want, for you are thinking of the hard and cold and dark and long days you spent working in North America (or, worse, Europe), earning some money so that you could stay in this place (Antigua) where the sun always shines and where the climate is deliciously hot and dry . . . and since you are on your holiday, since you are a tourist, the thought of what it might be like for someone who had to live day in, day out in a place that suffers constantly from drought . . . must never cross your mind.

And you leave, and from afar you watch as we do to ourselves the very things you used to do to us. And you might feel that there was more to you than that, you might feel that you had understood the meaning of the Age of Enlightenment (though, as far as I can see, it has done you very little good); you loved knowledge, and wherever you went you made sure to build a school, a library (yes, and in both of these places you distorted or erased my history and glorified your own).

As for what we were like before we met you, I no longer care. No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway, no documentation of complex civilisations, is any comfort to me. Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you.

—Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

A few years ago at the lake where I spend my summers, I read Jamaica Kincaid's brilliantly disturbing book *A Small Place*,¹ a pain-filled and searing indictment of racist colonialism and its perpetuation both in postcolonial corruption and in the tourism that brings 10 million people to the Caribbean each year. Since this book began unsettling me, it has attached itself to questions, texts, and topoi that are in various

¹Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).

ways comparative, an appropriate consequence since *A Small Place* is "comparative literature" in the most literal sense: a literary work that makes (cultural) comparisons. Although the cover blurbs engage *A Small Place* in a predominantly male canonical intertext (as "Swiftian," as a "jeremiad," as resembling the "Ancient Mariner"), I compare it to writings in which women criticize national and imperial policies: Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), the novels of Christa Wolf (1968–89), Audre Lorde's essay on the invasion of Grenada (1984), *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). I have wondered about the differences in tone and stance between *A Small Place* and Kincaid's fiction,² about the ways in which readers—black and white, male and female, U.S. and Antigua—have responded to this book, about the different implications conveyed by its publisher's classification (black studies), and by the Library of Congress catalogue (Antigua—Description and travel). *A Small Place* has helped to redirect my thinking about eighteenth-century women writers, to attend to the traces of colonialism in "domestic" fictions such as Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres de Mistriss Henley* (1784) and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762), to explore the ways in which Francçoise de Graffigny's Peruvian princess (1747) reverses the tropes of empire when she names the Europeans "savages" and "barbarians" and the tropes of fiction when she refuses to marry the heroic Frenchman who has befriended her. My research on eighteenth-century women critics has turned toward the relationship between social values and theories of literature as I ask, for example, whether the dismaying conjunction of feminism and racism in Clara Reeve's *Plans of Education* (1792) has any relevance to her conception of the novel in *The Progress of Romance* (1785).

A Small Place has also led me to questions of personal and professional urgency that are less directly textual. I have reexamined real and imagined travel plans. I have asked myself whether there might be resemblances between tourists and comparatists: both "cosmopolitans" who pride ourselves on transcending narrow and parochial interests, who dwell mentally in one or two (usually Western) countries, summer metaphorically in a third, and visit other places for brief interludes. And I continue to struggle with the implications of *A Small Place* for

²Kincaid has published three books of fiction: the short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983); *Annie John* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1985); and *Lucy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1990). Both the narrative voices and the political criticisms are far more muted and indirect in these texts than in *A Small Place*. It may not be incidental that all of these fictional works appeared serially in the *New Yorker*, which did not publish *A Small Place*.

my own position as a professional woman privileged to write this essay on a screened porch in the Maine woods ten feet from a lake that overlooks the White Mountains, one of the welcomed but sometimes resented "summer people" in an economically pressed rural community, asking myself what I must not dwell on to be here and what I can return to this small place for the peace and renewal it gives more generously to me than to its own hardworking citizens, few of whom have long summer vacations and houses ten feet from the lake.

These questions that *A Small Place* has raised for me are comparative questions, but they are not by and large the questions with which comparative literature has taught me to concern myself, nor is *A Small Place* the kind of text I have been trained to "compare." I have been a feminist for as long as I have been a comparatist, but my work as a feminist has not had much *formal* assistance from comparative literature as such. For although there has been feminist comparative practice for as long as there have been feminist critics, and although influential feminist theorists from Kate Millett to Gayatri Spivak were trained as comparatists, comparative literature as a self-conscious and self-articulating discipline has remained relatively untouched by feminist scholarship. Even so current a collection as Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes's *Comparative Perspective on Literature* (1988), which includes three manifestly feminist essays among its twenty-one pieces, does not integrate feminism into its theorizing of the discipline. For what I hope to demonstrate are related reasons, although "East-West" studies have become more common and "third world" literatures are "emerging" into Western syllabi, comparative literature as practiced in the West (and sometimes in the "East") remains, as Koelb and Noakes rightly remark of their own collection, "skewed heavily toward Europe and indeed toward the canonical writers of a few particularly well studied European languages."³ In comparing white men to white men from white men's vantage points, comparative literature as it is normatively practiced has attached itself in powerfully stubborn ways to what Audre Lorde has called "the master's tools."⁴

Although it is comparative literature and not feminist studies on which this essay concentrates, I acknowledge that feminist criticism has tended to be as insufficiently comparatist as comparative literature has been insufficiently feminist. Whereas Western comparatism has sometimes engaged in feminist practice without significantly disturbing the theoretical foundations of the discipline, academic Western feminism

³Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes, eds., *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 4.

⁴Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

has, conversely, theorized itself as comparative (that is, as concerned with women across or beyond national and cultural boundaries) without engaging significantly in comparative practices. Feminist criticism has tended to claim as universal what is particular (for example, using "nineteenth-century women" to describe white educated women of England and the United States) or has (increasingly) "included" other literatures without knowing the languages and cultures in which these works originate. This means that neither feminist nor comparatist studies, as generally practiced in U.S. universities, is sufficiently comparative despite each field's commitment virtually by definition to difference as a primary concern. When I criticize both of these fields, I include my own scholarship, which reflects the Eurocentrism of my training and against which I am now struggling, like many others of my generation, to reeducate myself. I have been especially conscious of these limitations in completing my "comparative" study of women writers and narrative voice, which remains restrictively Western even though it "includes" African American literature.

It is not my purpose here to discuss why feminism has been inadequately comparative aside from noting that many U.S. feminist critics are not trained in either "foreign" languages or comparative inquiry (which I distinguish from the inclusion of difference). Rather, it is my intention in this essay to look at comparatism through the lens of (global) feminism in order to ask why comparative literature, which has so often been proudly open and avant-garde, has lagged behind related disciplines in its institutional response to feminist scholarship. I then suggest some premises for transforming the discipline that rely for theoretical support on "borderworks" such as *A Small Place* which are concerned with questions of globalism and nationalism, gender and race, literature and culture, difference and dominance. I hope through this project to make clear why I think comparatism and feminism are necessary not only for each other's institutional and intellectual health but for each one's integrity as a discipline and indeed for the still urgent mission Virginia Woolf framed in the 1930s: how we can "enter the professions and yet remain civilized human beings," human beings who "will teach the young to hate war."⁵

That this volume is the first to raise feminist questions about comparative literature long after other fields have been challenged and reformed already suggests the "small place" feminism has occupied in theorizing the discipline.⁶ The lack of pressure feminism has exerted on

⁵Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938), 75, 22.

⁶The institutional history of comparative literature in the United States has been manifestly male-dominated. Whereas by my informal count women constitute between 40 and 50 percent of the membership of the American Comparative Literature Association,

comparative literature may in part reflect the discipline's laissez-faire tendencies. The postwar expansion of comparative literature to embrace virtually any study of literature beyond national boundaries has allowed a latitude of practice that may have forestalled a reconceptualization of the discipline. And because the field is vast and its scholars are often dispersed among many departments, comparatists tend to be genial about one another's work without necessarily seeing that work as having implications for their own. But such nonchalance could not fully explain why a computer search of the MLA bibliography for the entire 1980s, a decade when feminist criticism permeated literary scholarship, turned up among scores of entries in the category "Comparative Literature—Professional Topics," only one brief essay focused explicitly on feminism and comparative literature.⁷ Certainly it would not explain the virulent response that the feminist comparatist Evelyn Torton Beck received at a 1974 American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) session when she spoke about gender issues in translation practices. It seems, rather, that comparative literature as it has traditionally been conceived may be incompatible with a global feminist project, that certain thoughts must not cross our consciousness, as they must not cross the Antiguan tourist's consciousness.

I want to press against this disciplinary repression with a large, provocative statement after the fashion of Kincaid: with an intensity that might be related to our institutional vulnerability, comparative literature has been resistant to global feminism because of its intersecting commitments to aestheticism and canonicity, tradition as longevity, theory as Continental philosophy, literature as intertext, and language as the Ur-ground of comparison—all of which reinforce a disciplinary ideology of transcendence and unity. As a result, comparatism has most often been a discourse of sameness even when it purports to be a discourse of difference.

The commitments of which I am speaking are abundantly documented in the comparative theory that built the discipline in Western Europe and the United States. Despite a certain interest in "folk" traditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, comparative literature has been preoccupied primarily with identifying, studying, and promoting the world's "great" literature. Its sense of authority is reflected, for example, in its traditional undergraduate mission to trans-

only three women have numbered among the twelve presidents serving the association since 1960, and only one woman served before 1989.

⁷Amy Vladeck Heinrich, " 'Startling Resonances': Some Comparative Feminist Issues," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Anna Balakian et al. (New York: Garland, 1985), 608–13.

mit "the major literary works of the western heritage,"⁸ sometimes "enriched" by a few classical "Eastern" texts. These great works are to be viewed, as René Wellek put it, as "monuments" and not "documents,"⁹ a position whose troubling underside is implied by Kincaid's observation that colonists build monuments to themselves among the colonized. These literary icons are protected from such disturbing deconstructions because they are read less in a context than in an intertext, since literature is understood to be produced by international literary movements according to universal literary "laws." The predominance of "influence" studies in comparative literature reflects this intertextual commitment most literally by presuming that works are what they are because of the (world) literature that has preceded them. "Minor" works are usually studied in relation to "major" ones—as *A Small Place* is validated by comparison to the "Ancient Mariner"—or in support of a universal textuality. Linguistic and political differences become "artificial . . . barriers" that have "confined the study of literature."¹⁰

Such an environment easily defines out of greatness writings by women of all races—and men of some—that fail to satisfy white male norms or that lack visible comparative connections with traditional texts. Comparative literature's canons have "included" women primarily by selecting individual works (*The Tale of Genji*, *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Emma*) that conform to its aesthetic values and that can be studied without one's having to confront the kinds of questions feminists would ask. Although there has of course been some opening of the comparative canon, signs of anxiety and retrenchment remain. The 1989 ACLA report on undergraduate comparative literature professes (in negative syntax) to "welcome non-Western, women's literature and non-canonical literature" but insists that comparative literature must still ensure "some significant areas of expertise," thereby nullifying both the significance of these fields and the possibility that they are sites of expertise. In pleading that we "not forget also to introduce students to the canonical works upon which are based the prevailing sense of western culture," ACLA's curricular project would ensure that this "prevailing sense" not be challenged by a critique of Western culture such

⁸Robert J. Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline: A Statement of Principles, Praxis, Standards* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978), 24.

⁹René Wellek, "The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature," in *Comparatists at Work: Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., and Richard B. Vowles (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell, 1968), 13.

¹⁰David Malone, introduction to Werner Friedrich, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature and Other Addresses*, ed. William J. De Sua (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), ix–xv.

as *A Small Place*—which would surely also be dismissed as a document, not a monument.¹¹

Nor would *A Small Place* be considered “theory” in comparative literature’s usual terms. In discussing the engagement with theory that marks the discipline, Koelb and Noakes include only men among the theorists whom comparatists might study alongside the “canonical writers of Western literature”: “Marx, Freud, Lacan, Luhmann, Nietzsche, Wölfflin, Adorno, Derrida, Heidegger, Abraham and Torok, Louis Sullivan, and so on.”¹² Although surely Kristeva or Irigaray could have been mentioned, this list is disturbingly accurate: comparative literature does still understand “theory” in a Eurocentric and masculinist sense. “Great” theory is defined much like “great” literature: as cosmopolitan, Continental, verbally dense, concerned with what are taken to be “large” and “universal” questions rather than “narrow” or “provincial” ones.¹³

Consonant with its commitment to “great” literature and theory is comparative literature’s commitment to long-lived texts, a position in interesting tension with its sense of itself as intellectually avant-garde. The privileging of the traditional has created, for example, what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “selective multinationalism,”¹⁴ by which comparative literature attends to classical Indian works such as the *Mahabharata* but not to the (more politically charged) writings of the colonial and postcolonial periods.¹⁵ This commitment to “traditional” literatures does not, however, override the Eurocentrism of comparatist studies, or courses in the history of criticism would routinely include Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, the classic text of Sanskrit aesthetics, alongside Aristotle’s *Poetics*. For comparatists the ultimate source of “Western tradition” remains ancient Greece, which at around the same time Goethe first called for a *Weltliteratur* was being reinvented as an Aryan culture against the evidence that its science, art, and philosophy result from “cultural mixtures” created by the Egyptians and Phoenicians who colonized Greece.¹⁶

¹¹American Comparative Literature Association, “Undergraduate Committee Report,” *ACLA Newsletter* 20.2 (Spring–Summer 1989): 39–40.

¹²Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective*, 6.

¹³It seems to me a particularly “comparatist” behavior that the warnings I received from some of my graduate professors about pursuing feminist scholarship argued that such a choice would mean “narrowing” myself.

¹⁴Mary Louise Pratt, “Comparative Literature as a Cultural Practice,” in *Profession 86* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1986), 33.

¹⁵This is indeed the position Dinesh d’Souza takes in *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

¹⁶See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, 2 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 1991), 1:2.

Obviously the predilection for "old" works and long-literate cultures implicitly devalues women's writings and "emergent" literatures.¹⁷ Robert Clements, for example, wrote in the late 1970s that although "Black African literature is of course the most visibly lacking component" in comparative literature, this absence is justified "since Africa has contributed fewer literary works that satisfy" the "dual criteria" of "international acclaim and enduring values" so tautologically constructed by comparative literature. On similar grounds "massive areas, like Indonesia with a population of 100 million, would be minimally represented," though as a comparatist good sport Clements allowed "*aficionados* of African or Polynesian literatures . . . of course [to] feature them in theses written for their degrees."¹⁸ Obviously the world's geographic and literary "small places" haven't a chance against such practices by which only what is already deemed important to white men is worthy to be compared.¹⁹

One reason Clements and other comparatists have given for excluding African or Polynesian literatures is a linguistic one: Africans write in many languages, most of which are not known or taught in Western universities. This argument is easy enough to dismantle both by refusing comparative literature's Eurocentric linguistic hierarchies and by recalling the large body of African literature written in European languages. But it evokes a further reason why comparative literature remains resistant to both the global and the feminist: its insistence on language as the primary site of difference and hence not only the discipline's central basis for "comparison" but the very ground of its disciplinary legitimacy. It is not just that the overwhelmingly dominant languages of comparative literature study—indeed sometimes the only ones that fulfill graduate language requirements—are those of Western Europe or even a restrictive group of these, so that the field's language base is actually rather narrow and most comparatists can enjoy the comfort of having at least one "foreign" language in common. Equally problematic is the fact that the privileging of standard-language difference as the criterion for comparative study risks confusing linguistic knowledge with cultural knowledge and overlooks both cultural differences that are not visibly linguistic and linguistic differences that are

¹⁷Thirty or forty years ago even U.S. literature was commonly considered too new a tradition to be fertile ground for comparatists.

¹⁸Clements, *Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline*, 31–32. Clements does not mention women or feminism in his book.

¹⁹Even "small" European literatures are so treated. See Frank J. Warnke, "The Comparatist's Canon: Some Observations," in Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective*, 48–56.

not phonological. Reinhold Grimm has argued, for example, that in the Nazi period one could point to at least four "German literatures" without including the literatures of non-German countries such as Austria, and surely we would all agree with Walter Cohen that "in no two countries is English the same language."²⁰ If we go further, we confront ramifications still more charged: the linguistic imperialism by which Janet Frame's New Zealand English is (mis)translated into American by her publishers; the multilingualism of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose eight languages range from Standard English to Standard Spanish to Tex-Mex; Jamaica Kincaid's anger that "the only language I have in which to speak of this crime [of enslavement] is the language of the criminal who committed the crime," which "can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view."²¹ Feminist criticism has also raised questions about "women's language" and about the particularly dialogic forms that nonhegemonic writers may adopt to open up or circumvent conventional androcentric languages. In light of these challenges, comparative literature's notions of language have been, like its canon, only narrowly comparative.

It seems plausible to me that one reason why so many of these values have persisted in comparative literature even though similar positions have been dismantled in related disciplines is that institutionally ours remains a beleaguered field, routinely having to justify its existence and its disciplinary integrity. We may feel especially defensive now that theory, once comparative literature's bailiwick, is taught routinely in so many departments of national (and particularly English) literature along with an expanding global curriculum in which works in translation are increasingly routine. It seems to me that challenges to comparative literature often take the form of threats to the field's "virility" not unlike those directed at women's studies: both are deemed deficient in definitive boundaries and methodology, lacking in "rigor" and "precision," professionally impractical. Comparative literature has tended to resist these charges with a manly counterelitism that asserts its superiority to national literary studies on the grounds of a rigorous insistence on the "mastery" of foreign languages and literatures, an engagement with complex Continental theories, a concern with the world's great "monuments," and what Werner Friedrich calls "hard,

²⁰Reinhold Grimm, "Identity and Difference: On Comparative Studies within a Single Language," in *Profession* 86, 28–29; Walter Cohen, "The Concept of World Literature," in *Comparative Literature East and West: Traditions and Trends*, ed. Cornelia N. Moore and Raymond A. Moody (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 6.

²¹See, respectively, Janet Frame, "Departures and Returns," in *Writers in East-West Encounter: New Cultural Bearings*, ed. Guy Amirthanayagam (London: Macmillan, 1982), 91–92; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 55; and Kincaid, *Small Place*, 31–32.

scholarly principles." A critical aspect of this self-legitimation has been a sometimes vehement dissociation of comparative literature from "general" or "world" literature, which is implied to be an "easy introductory" study of translated works.²²

But I think there is another, more honorable explanation for the tenacity of the values of universality and transcendence, one that has to do with the political agenda already reflected in early formulations such as those of Goethe and Arnold and especially vigorous when comparative literature was burgeoning earlier in this century. I propose that comparative literature's deep investment in the study of sameness is not only an intellectual agenda but an ideological one, and not only a casualty of cultural solipsism but the unwitting legacy of an urgent need to preserve human dignity and artistic achievement against the real threats of fascism and world war. The investment in sameness is easy to document through decades of apparent dissonance: whether comparative literature has been defined as the study of literature across national boundaries or the study of literature without regard to such boundaries,²³ it has been committed not only intellectually but politically to the notion that literature and aesthetic culture are universal: comparative literature entails "a consciousness of the unity of all literary creation and experience"; "an overall view of literature . . . as inclusive and comprehensive," a focus on "problems that transcend linguistic and national boundaries"; it seeks the "common ground of interest beneath the superficial tangle of differences."²⁴ François Jost put it most unequivocally in the early 1970s, just when feminist and ethnic studies were emerging in national departments of literature: "The entire globe shares identical literary interests and pursues similar literary goals."²⁵

This notion of literature as transcending cultures has an agenda that some comparatists have made explicitly ideological: it is a means for realizing "[our] common humanity"; a way "to consolidate the spiritual unity in our half of the world,"²⁶ a kind of literary United Nations bent on proving the adage that "it's a small world after all." It is therefore

²²Friedrich, *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 8.

²³These positions yield, respectively, what Suzan Bassnett has rightly described as the two different major comparatist projects: the two-text or two-author study that compares, contrasts, or traces influence (literature across national boundaries) and the more general "free-ranging genre study, 'spirit of the age' study, or literary tone study" of the second and more recent type of comparative literature (literature without regard to national boundaries). See Suzan Bassnett, "Comparative Literature and Methodology," *Degrés*, nos. 46-47 (Fall 1986): 1-13.

²⁴François Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), 29; Malone, introduction to Friedrich, *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, xii.

²⁵Jost, *Introduction to Comparative Literature*, 30.

²⁶Friedrich, *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 22.

appropriate that comparative literature's major tasks as they have traditionally been codified—to study influences and analogies; movements and trends; genres and forms; motifs, types, and themes—encourage us to overlook difference in favor of sameness or to show the essential similarities beneath surface differences, as A. Owen Aldridge does, for example, in treating Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro* as a "Japanese Werther."²⁷ Such a project is made immeasurably easier by the persistent white male-centeredness of comparative literature's tools and texts: we are able to define literature, culture, and even "the world" in terms sufficiently narrow to prove our own claims, while sustaining an illusion of breadth by reaching out, like open-minded tourists, to the "finds" among lesser ("folk" and female) cultures and absorbing them into the established museums of literature.

I have said that there were historically progressive reasons why comparative literature developed this universalizing ideology. Comparatism grew up in an era of imperialist nationalism which some comparatists hoped to combat by affirming a transnational spirit in the human sciences. This agenda must have seemed especially pressing in the years when comparative literature was developing in Europe and the United States, since these were years in which the very countries collaborating most fully in the comparative project, France and Germany, were bitter enemies. "Rising above" national boundaries and partisan identities was surely a crucial strategy of resistance, a way to preserve not simply personal and collegial relations, or even the project of comparative literary scholarship, but "culture" itself. It is sadly ironic that this resistance to nationalism ended up constructing an androcentric Continentalism that became its own exclusivity. A sign of the double-talk engendered by such a project may be found in a chilling if well-intentioned passage from Werner Friedrich's 1964 essay "The Challenge of Comparative Literature." Having proclaimed comparatism to be a "political creed" dedicated to "abjuring all forms of racism"; having lauded the spectrum of European national identities represented among comparatists teaching in the United States (though without mentioning Jews, although several of the men he names are Jewish, and omitting women entirely); having identified the "same inspiring wealth" among "the literary figures of America"; and having unequivocally supported the movement for black civil rights and condemned the violence at Little Rock and Birmingham, Friedrich asks his listeners to consider, "happily and perhaps a bit proudly, that the voice

²⁷ A. Owen Aldridge, "The Japanese Werther of the Twentieth Century," in Koelb and Noakes, *Comparative Perspective*, 75–92.

of the Black Man was heard for the first time in history not in Africa, not on the shores of the Congo, but on the shores of the Mississippi—and that it was in ever upward-struggling America that the former slaves . . . were first given a chance to give expression to their hopes and their anguish, to the despair and the vision of a race that is justly aspiring to a respected place on earth."²⁸ I need not point out the truths of African and American history that are violated in this Eurocentric paean to America for "allowing" black culture to enter its comparative melting pot—as if there had not been centuries of culture in Africa, and as if slavery were now a precondition for literary upward mobility.²⁹

Such fictions suggest that comparative literature has embraced "difference" only when it has not visibly entailed dominance, dependence when it has been a matter of indebtedness and not of political power, so that, like Kincaid's tourists, we "needn't let that slightly funny feeling [we] have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease" and ruin not simply our holiday but our livelihood.³⁰ That comparative literature has preferred not to recognize that "in every cross-cultural encounter there is a dominance, a submission, a merging, or a resistance"³¹ might explain its particular resistance to feminism, which sees dominance in difference and for which power relations constitute a theoretical core. *A Small Place* is the kind of text that forces issues of power, though comparative analogies with Coleridge, the Bible, or even Swift might temper the book's contemporary urgency. With its direct interrogation of "you," such a book also asks us to acknowledge, as comparatists rarely do, our own cultural differences—hence our relations of dominance, submission, merging, and resistance—with the cultures we "compare." Since the refusal to confront these imbalances of power is, of course, the privilege of the dominant and of those who align themselves with the dominant, the perspective of the "other" (the woman, the person of color, the colonized—the "borderworker") becomes critical for a fully "comparative" view. In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf distinguishes the England of "educated men" ("so kind to you") from her own, women's England ("so harsh to us") and explains that this is why,

²⁸Friedrich, *Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 48–50.

²⁹Here indeed is the particularly "American" version of comparative literature, which, as Guy Amirthanayagam says, differs from its British counterpart in seeking actively "to draw from as many cultures as possible in order to build a unique cultural base" but produces from this only a "medley of superficial borrowings" that legitimate a "universalizing tendency" (*Writers in East-West Encounter*, 5).

³⁰Kincaid, *Small Place*, 10.

³¹Frame, "Departures and Returns," 91.

"though we look at the same things, we see them differently."³² This kind of comparative consciousness counters the disciplinary tradition I have been describing in which comparatists look at different things but see them as the same.

I have dwelled at some length on dissonances between feminism and comparatism in order to begin suggesting both a shape and a rationale for a globally conscious feminist comparative literature. Since I began with a polemical statement about comparative literature as it has traditionally been conceptualized, let me move now toward an equally polemical but positive statement about the kind of comparative literature that seems to me most valuable for addressing contemporary concerns such as those *A Small Place* raised for me. Such a comparatism would understand texts as documents whether or not they are monuments and would expand its notions of both "literature" and "theory" to include an international, multiracial, and sexually inclusive spectrum of verbal practices. It would need to redefine nation, culture, and language in broader and more complicated terms, would value difference at least as much as sameness by exploring works in what I will call a comparative specificity, and, in order to resist reinscribing dominance, would locate both its practices and its practitioners within their own cultural space. Such a comparative literature might, I suggest, realize the visions of earlier comparatists from Goethe to Wellek in ways and on grounds they did not imagine, just as the U.S. Constitution makes possible, as Bernice Reagon points out, the freedoms of people whom the "founding fathers" themselves suppressed or enslaved.³³

First and most obviously, a feminist comparative literature would need to understand literature as document as well as monument, which also means exploring from an international perspective the processes by which certain documents get transformed into monuments and others do not. Such a project would demand an interrogation of comparative literature's tenacious privileging not simply of *an* aesthetic but of *the* aesthetic, an interrogation that feminist criticism initiated in the 1970s and that Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Pierre Bourdieu have theorized in ways that might speak fruitfully to traditionally trained comparatists.³⁴

³²Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 5.

³³Bernice Reagon, lecture delivered at Georgetown University, 1986. I do not mean to suggest, nor did Reagon, that these various "fathers" shared a wish for inclusiveness. Indeed, Goethe's conception of *Weltliteratur* ends up subsuming "other" literatures into the literature of the Fatherland.

³⁴See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). For critiques of the Kantian aesthetic that underpins comparative liter-

Equally urgent, given the ways in which comparative literature now conceives itself as the locus of "theory," is the need for a revised and expanded notion of that term which embraces not only different theorists and different politics but different *discourses*, including those of people whose primary commitments are not academic but activist and for whom "theory" is manifestly not only about ways to think and read but about ways to live. Such an opening of the theoretical canon would have two crucial results. On the one hand, it would challenge some sacred Eurocentric theoretical premises. It is clear, for example, that for feminists, for colonized peoples, and for other silenced groups, conceptions of language, truth, and reality often differ from those held by the avant-garde West. When Mary Prince says the "foreign people" who "say slaves are happy" have "put a cloak about the truth," her discourse requires some belief in a recoverable "truth."³⁵ Similarly, as post-colonialist narratologists such as Mineke Schipper have made clear, "realism" carries different meanings and imperatives for emerging communities, and the preference for realist fiction that has been associated with various liberation movements cannot be dismissed as retrograde.³⁶ Likewise, William Walsh contrasts the European distrust of language to the Indian view "that immediate experience and its expression in language are not two wholly different things."³⁷ A genuinely comparative encounter between such different theoretical positions asks those of us trained in "the master's tools" not to dismiss these dissenting voices as "naive" or "untheoretical." Such an encounter may be possible, however, only when comparative literature is willing to read as theory writings that lie outside its canon of philosophy. To the extent that such a canon represents the thought patterns of a ruling-class minority, we must also entertain the possibility that it reinforces the hegemony of the groups that created it, even when the individual theorist (like the individual comparatist) remains "detached" from matters explicitly political.

On the other hand, different theories and theories in different discourses may also intersect fruitfully. I have found significant similarities (along with equally important differences) between some radical theory by women of color and some poststructuralist theory by whites. I am

ature, see especially Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 64–72, and Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 486–500.

³⁵Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. Moira Ferguson (London: Pandora, 1987), 83.

³⁶Mineke Schipper, *Beyond the Boundaries: African Literature and Literary Theory* (London: Allison & Busby, 1989).

³⁷William Walsh, "The Meeting of Language and Literature and the Indian Example," in Amirthanayagam, *Writers in East-West Encounter*, 108.

struck, for example, by resonances between Audre Lorde's conception of the relation between poetry and theory in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" and Julia Kristeva's conception of the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic in *Revolution in Poetic Language*.³⁸ But Kristeva's is the writing that has counted as theory; as bell hooks notes, current academic practice admits black women to the creative canon but not to the theoretical one, possibly because black women's theories often raise urgent political issues unbuffered by a generalizing academic terminology.³⁹ If Terry Eagleton is right to say that training in literary studies is training in the ability to manipulate a certain discourse, and that academics are "allowed" to say anything we wish in this discourse because certain things simply cannot be said in it,⁴⁰ then the encounter of theories that I am proposing is possible only if we engage a difference in discourse and not simply a difference in "view." Since comparative literature has been avant-garde in taking up (and producing) "theory," it would be appropriate for us now to take a similar role of leadership in expanding the range of our theoretical competence.

Encounters with antimonumental theories and texts will help—or require—us to redefine nation, culture, and language in new terms. Woolf's contrasts between "male" and "female" England and Kincaid's among Antiguan classes and races make clear the need not to rely on assumptions about national or cultural unity but to confront as subjects of comparison differences within nations and cultures—the differences of race, sex, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, region, and class that in fact get repressed when nations and cultures define themselves.⁴¹ We can also study the comparative intersection of various differences, as Selma James does when she looks through Sir Thomas Bertram's role as a(n Antiguan) slaveholder at his governance of Mansfield Park. In this process James shows the value of gender difference to cultural study: "The effect of dismissing as unimportant what Jane Austen says women of the slaveholding class had to bear at the hands of the master is to dismiss the attack on the slaveholder that comes from within his family."⁴²

³⁸Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

³⁹See bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

⁴⁰Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 203.

⁴¹On this question, see Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), esp. Ernst Renan's historic "What Is a Nation," 8–22. For innovative comparative work on sexual identity, see Andrew Parker et al., eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴²Selma James, *The Ladies and the Mammies: Jane Austen and Jean Rhys* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1983), 41.

Such studies suggest the need for a revision of both the concept and the place of language in comparative literature. We might begin by recognizing that languages embed relations of dominance, as Françoise de Graffigny already understood in 1747 when she accused the French of "according merit to other countries to the extent that their manners imitate our own and their language resembles our idiom."⁴³ We might then want to "compare" intralingual differences such as dialect and register, or different literatures (Afro-Caribbean and African American, or African American and Jewish American) within "the same" language group. We must also make the crucial distinctions between language and culture that allow comparison, for example, of anglophone African and Indian women writers, or anglophone and Tamil Indian writers, or Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and Annie's "favorite" novel, *Jane Eyre*. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), an Iowan asks the narrator to "come up with a prettier name"—"something in Indian"—for the golf course he imagines building on the family farm. The narrator comments: "I want to say to Darrel, 'You mean in Hindi, not Indian, there's no such thing as Indian,' but . . . he comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are."⁴⁴ This passage suggests the importance of distinguishing cultural from linguistic training and creating a comparative literature that embraces both. This does not mean abandoning "foreign language" requirements; on the contrary, at this moment when linguistic imperialism is rising and the study of languages remains in decline, one valuable task the discipline could undertake is to enable students to learn under-studied languages, languages that are primarily oral, and languages of newly literate cultures so that such writings can become part of a fully global literature. This project, in turn, will create a future community of scholars whose linguistic base is immeasurably broader than that of my generation of comparatists.

Such a linguistic reformation would facilitate a deconstruction of the political and cultural hierarchies which, in its efforts at transcendence, comparative literature has tended to reproduce. We would be avoiding what John Dorsey calls a "cultural wealth-of-nations outlook,"⁴⁵ the position whereby the "best" literatures, or those most worth studying, are those with the most exports. (Feminist criticism, my own work by

⁴³Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une péruvienne* (1747), in *Lettres portugaises, Lettres d'une péruvienne et autres romans d'amour par lettres*, ed. Bernard Bray and Isabelle Landy-Houillon (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 249.

⁴⁴Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 10–11.

⁴⁵John T. Dorsey, "National and Comparative Literature in Japan," in Moore and Moody, *Comparative Literature East and West*, 184.

no means excepted, has already reproduced such dominance in its overconcentration on British, French, and U.S. works.) This means resisting a superpower comparatism by which smaller literatures (including literatures by women) are overlooked by or swallowed up in larger ones. In fact, one fertile field for comparative study is precisely the relationship between the production (and reception) of literature and various forms of global power—political, linguistic, economic, cultural. Comparative literature could help to rebalance the cultural map by studying the literal and metaphoric “small places” we have traditionally overlooked. If we value linguistic difference and richness, then let us follow Albert Wendt’s call to explore the literatures of Oceania, with its 1,200 indigenous languages in addition to English, French, Hindi, Spanish, and various forms of pidgin, which give this region, Wendt argues, a potential to be the most creative in the world.⁴⁶ Let us explore complex relations between gender and colonialism which Edna Manlapaz queries, for example, when she explains that it was the overthrow of Spanish imperialism in the Philippines by its American counterpart that gave Philippine women the equivocal gift of a university education to write literature in a foreign tongue within a British-American intertext.⁴⁷ And let us acknowledge that much of the globe—including Europe—is becoming what Ulf Hannerz calls “creolized,” so that even to speak of individual nations or continents, or “East” and “West,” is becoming culturally inaccurate.⁴⁸

A new comparative practice might also entail redefining or replacing those traditional modes for organizing literary study which have encouraged homogeneity. Joan Kelly’s now classic argument that women did not have a Renaissance reminds us that most literary periodizations suit only the productions of European men.⁴⁹ Kincaid writes that “to the people in a small place, the division of Time into the Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist.”⁵⁰ Women have likewise written about gendered differences in understandings of time.⁵¹ It may become

⁴⁶Albert Wendt, “Toward a New Oceania,” in Amirthanayagam, *Writers in East-West Encounter*, 212.

⁴⁷See Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, “Our Mothers, Our Selves: A Literary Genealogy of Filipino Women Poets Writing in English, 1905–1950,” *Philippine Studies* 39 (1991): 321–36.

⁴⁸See Ulf Hannerz, “The World in Creolisation,” *Africa* 57.4 (1987): 546–57. Hannerz’s view is to my mind rather too sanguine and does not sufficiently allow for relations of dominance. Of course “East” and “West” have always been Eurocentric inaccuracies on a planet that is spherical.

⁴⁹See Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵⁰Kincaid, *Small Place*, 54.

⁵¹See, for example, Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminisms and Utopianism in the*

more fruitful to supplement the notion of chronological period by identifying movements or impulses that occur at different times in different places but have similar consequences, so that, for example, one might identify moments in which there seems to be an insertion of anticolonialism or feminism into a culture's discourses. Genre theory would likewise need deconstruction, given the ways in which marginalized literatures have either been omitted from genre studies or have themselves rejected conventional generic forms. And "influence" would surely have to be redefined to account for the nonsalutary as well as the benevolent: the influence of England on Antigua, the related influence of *Jane Eyre* or *The Tempest* on Caribbean writers, the subtler influences of hegemonies (male, white, European) that "outsider" writers have both accommodated and resisted in complex ways. Obviously, notions of "tradition" would have to be revised as we interrogate the restrictive and selective uses to which the concept has been put and the values and agendas served by the legitimation that the word provides.

All these practices imply a conception of the comparative that is grounded in the assumption of difference as a premise at least equal to the assumption of similarity. Such a position opens infinitely more complicated ways to understand textual relations as racial, sexual, regional, or colonial and to recognize that a considerable share of the world's literature is "borderwork." Those of us trained as traditional comparatists would have to resist our easy reach for the similar. Now that I have learned, for example, that Kincaid acknowledges Alain Robbe-Grillet to be a major influence,⁵² I would have to temper my wish to turn her uses of the you-as-protagonist into a simple replication of *nouveau roman* strategies.

The key to such a revised practice seems to me to lie in the idea of what I call a *comparative specificity*, which would embrace both difference and similarity but would never simply dissolve a text, idea, writer, group, or movement into a safe and homogeneous whole. Angelika Bammer's study of feminism and utopianism in the 1970s models such specificity by understanding feminism as a multinational movement of nationally situated politics.⁵³ What happens when such understanding

1970s (London: Routledge, 1991); Frieda Johles Forman, ed., *Taking Our Time: Feminist Perspectives on Temporality* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989); and, of course, Julia Kristeva's widely anthologized "Women's Time," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 187–213.

⁵²Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid," *Callaloo* 12.2 (Spring 1989): 396–411.

⁵³See Bammer, *Partial Visions*.

is absent is dramatically illustrated in Kelly Cherry's review of *A Small Place*, which lambastes Kincaid's book precisely for its specificity:

It is not that the author is wrong to be so furious but that she truncates the reader's sympathy for her emotion by denying . . . that there are other sources of rage, rage as deep as hers.

. . . Every one of us is an island, "a small place" harboring the humiliations and despairs of a history of abuse, racial or sexual, political or economic, personal or professional.⁵⁴

When Cherry turns Kincaid's "small place" into a metaphor, she erases the particular pain of slavery and colonialist racism beneath a fiction of universal and presumably equal suffering. Isabelle de Charrière's *Lettres écrites de Lausanne* (1785) enacts a similar universalizing gesture when Cécile finds herself pitying a "poor Negro" sold into slavery and now dying alone in Geneva, but then "corrects" herself by commenting that it doesn't really matter whether one is a slave or a king since both will die: "The King of France will be like this slave one day."⁵⁵ I am suggesting that comparative literature at this historical moment needs to allow the slave a specificity that is dissolved in this analogy with the King of France as in the metaphorizing of Antigua as an island of generic pain. The slave narrator Mary Prince reveals the danger of such idealist slippages when she talks of Christianity's messages to slaves that "the truth will make me free" when in fact it was not "the truth" but white colonizers who had that power.⁵⁶

Finally, a global feminist comparative literature would have to acknowledge that comparatists are individuals constituted in culture—in nation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, sexuality. To "compare" would mean neither a denial of these specificities nor an imprisonment within them, but a dialectical engagement of what Adrienne Rich calls a "politics of location" with what Virginia Woolf calls a "freedom from unreal loyalties" which together would allow one—paradoxically and probably always only partially—to stand "outside" the very culture in which one also locates oneself and one's work. We would first need to accept Rich's recognition that "as a woman [comparatist] I have a country; as a woman [comparatist] I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government [or by

⁵⁴Kelly Cherry, review of *A Small Place* in *American Book Review* 11 (September–October 1989): 19.

⁵⁵Isabelle de Charrière, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1980), 187.

⁵⁶Prince, *History of Mary Prince*, 83.

styling myself a 'world citizen']."⁵⁷ Although comparatists may not live in our culture of origin, none of us is a culture-free globe dweller, and most are white, European, and middle-class in ethnic origin, training, or outlook. We have proceeded as if these identities, and the differences both among ourselves and between ourselves and the cultures we are studying, did not exist. Comparative literature has, in effect, echoed Virginia Woolf's claim that "as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" without recognizing as Woolf did the need first to divest oneself of one's "unreal loyalties," the seductions that stem from "pride of nationality . . . religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride" in order to see from a critical comparative vantage point.⁵⁸

Indeed, Woolf's strategy for achieving this balance between location and distance was precisely through comparative studies; she asked her woman reader to "compar[e] French historians with English; German with French; the testimony of the ruled—the Indians or the Irish, say—with the claims made by their rulers," and then if there remained "some 'patriotic' emotion, some ingrained belief in the intellectual superiority of her own country over other countries," to "compare English painting with French painting; English music with German music; English literature with Greek literature, for translations abound. When all these comparisons have been faithfully made by the use of reason, the outsider will find herself in possession of very good reasons for her indifference."⁵⁹ Woolf's suggestion that women and other outsiders might have a particular critical perspective on their "own" culture seems to me amply supported by the revision I have been engaging here, which was made possible by the thinking of women such as Woolf and Rich, Lorde and Kincaid, Mukherjee and Grafiny, who refuse to engage in "unreal loyalties" yet who locate their own comparative practices within the framework of their sex, race, sexuality, and nationality instead of pretending to proceed, as the 1979 ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) defined the comparative project, from "an international point of view."

I conclude with the utopian suggestion that this kind of specific and located cross-cultural comparative practice might help to fulfill the desires of the earlier comparatists for a just and harmonious world, goals

⁵⁷Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 212.

⁵⁸Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 109, 80.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 108.

that I believe can be achieved not by denying relations of power and difference but only by confronting and dismantling them. Comparative literature's future may well lie in those texts it has ignored and marginalized and in a new generation of scholars from around the world who will take the discipline, as *A Small Place* has taken me, into the places of discomfort that are so often the places of growth.