

Literature, Geography, Translation

Literature, Geography, Translation:
Studies in World Writing

Edited by

Cecilia Alvstad, Stefan Helgesson
and David Watson

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PART I:

CONCEPTUALISING WORLD LITERATURE

CHAPTER ONE

COSMOPOLITAN PROTOCOLS,
MULTICULTURAL ENDS?
WORLD LITERATURE AS A PROGRAMME
OF STUDY

PAULO LEMOS HORTA

Attempts to reconfigure comparative literature to encompass more of the globe beyond the discipline's traditional strength in European languages and literatures are attaining new levels of research interest, pedagogical currency, and institutional support in the North American academy. Among several new initiatives one notes the summer institute for world literature conceived by David Damrosch at Harvard, Princeton's certificate in translation and intercultural communication, and the four-year undergraduate programme in world literature at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver (the site of the ACLA annual meeting in 2011 on the theme of world literature / comparative literature). The passage from world literature as a distinctive research approach to an institutionalised programme begs the question of whether there is a disconnect between the call for a world literature and the tools available for its study. An increasingly global history, Stefan Helgesson (2009) notes, has overtaken a discipline of literary study that remains beholden to national or Eurocentric conceptions of literature. Susan Bassnett (2009) concurs that the turn to world literature in the academy has occurred before its establishment as a discipline. In his plenary address at the ACLA in New Orleans in 2010, Sheldon Pollock (2010), professor of Sanskrit at Columbia University, observes that for all the talk of world literature, comparative literature remains overwhelmingly European in terms of research in its leading programmes and journals and the languages required for its study at the undergraduate and graduate level. Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, and Pascale Casanova are concerned with this

tendency toward hypercanonicity in the circulation of texts as works of world literature given the disproportionate influence of London, Paris, Frankfurt, and New York as markets and arbiters of taste. Recent work has sought to question the assumption of European or American models of world literature as natural or paradigmatic, asking what world literature might look like (as an approach, a theory, a programme) from the vantage point of India or Iran.¹

From the vantage point of new programmes in world literature that seek to engage diversity via curricular innovation, it is timely to revisit reports on the state of comparative literature that see the paradigm of globalism replacing that of multiculturalism (Bernheimer 1995, Saussy 2006). Were the authors of these reports correct to identify multiculturalism and world literature as competing models for greater inclusiveness in the academy? If so, what sort of attention to diversity will world literature represent programmatically and pedagogically? Charles Bernheimer's 1993 report presented the discipline at a crossroads, faced with the choice of comparative literature or multiculturalism as alternative models for curricular inclusiveness and cross-cultural inquiry. Should the field remain an elite enterprise distinguished by the reading and teaching of foreign language works in the original and their deep contextualisation? Or should it more democratically aim at multiculturalism understood by Bernheimer in terms of identity politics and the freedom to read decontextualised works in translation? Bernheimer's "oversimplified dilemma" is useful as it anticipates the fundamental questions that would be asked of research and teaching initiatives in world literature: do these initiatives adhere to the original language protocol of comparative literature, or do they rather signal a multicultural rethinking and expansion of the domain of English? The Bernheimer report further anticipated subsequent scholarship that would suggest that comparative literature might be undone by the widespread adoption of its goal of making literary inquiry more global and cross-cultural, which multiculturalism as a project would seem to promise to deliver in a more accessible and popular manner.

How would the terms of debate from the postwar American context that shaped the goals and standards of comparative literature as a discipline translate elsewhere? Bernheimer stresses the defining experience of World War II, both for European exiles and refugees and returning American soldiers, in shaping the ideals and standards of postwar comparative literature in the United States. The discipline's lofty goal in this view entailed nothing less than the cultivation of a cosmopolitan class, equipped with the linguistic and cultural expertise to deal with international questions and concerns. Historically, comparative

literature's original language protocol was necessarily elitist both in the sense that it could only be pursued at elite research institutions possessing excellent language and literature programmes and in the sense that it signalled more exacting standards than adjacent programmes at those same institutions (Bernheimer 1995, 21–27; 28–38). The elitism of this protocol is reinforced in the recommendations of Bernheimer's 1993 report, which couple the requisite of an "unusual" and "exceptional" expertise in foreign languages and cultures with the new imperative of mastering a non-Western language, criteria only likely to be met, in the view of one class-conscious critic, by the "children of the elite classes" in global metropolises who "find their way to privileged institutions of higher education" (Chow 1995, 110).

In an American context, the impetus for multiculturalism as an alternative model for cross-cultural inquiry was a function of the enfranchisement struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Within the academy, the idealistic goal of multiculturalism is the symbolic presence of content representing different constituencies defined in terms of the politics of identity, authenticity, and recognition. The language protocol of multiculturalism is more democratic in that the comparative work it envisions can be pursued with reference to a single linguistic or national tradition. Rey Chow states this case positively in her response to the Bernheimer report:

Instead of asking our students to learn Arabic or Chinese [...] what about asking them to study black English, English as used by writers in British India, or English as used by present-day Latin American and Asian American authors? (1995, 114)

She questions the cosmopolitan ethics of multilingualism as an ideal, since non-Western languages and cultures are already taught in the academy under the guise of area studies programmes in which (in her view) knowledge can be placed at the service of instrumental concerns in the manner described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Chow's is a dissenting voice within the context of the comparatists contributing and responding to the 1993 report. For these scholars, multiculturalism (defined in terms of cultural essentialism and identity politics) represented the forfeiting of the discipline's cosmopolitan standards and ideals. Within the framework of what Tobin Siebers terms the "cola wars" between comparative literature and multiculturalism, partisans liken the former brand to cosmopolitan fashion houses like Armani and the latter to a knock-off brand. In Siebers' own analogy of rival diet plans, one option requires exercise and the other promises a magic pill: "most people try the second method because it is

easier" (1995, 197). Siebers ventured that comparative literature could not compete with multiculturalism because the latter had found "a marketing strategy that makes it available to more people" (196).

However, the most seminal articulation of the concept of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition", calls for much more rigorous work in the labour of cross-cultural inquiry than the user-friendly version of multiculturalism denounced by scholars of comparative literature.² For Taylor, multiculturalism cannot be merely the symbolic presence of different representative vantage points in the classroom, in the form of de-contextualised and hence translatable content. Taylor (1994, 69) shares with comparatists like Bernheimer a cosmopolitan concern with disentangling deep from superficial modes of cross-cultural inquiry (he terms the latter multiculturalism on demand). Concerned with the project of fashioning multicultural citizens, Taylor brings to his critique of on-demand multiculturalism an attention to its constraining effects on citizenship and access to and participation in public culture. In his view, to praise the familiar in an unfamiliar culture is to be at once homogenising and patronising, for a favourable judgment with reference to familiar default standards of the products of a culture "not intensely studied" constitutes a case of praising the other "for being like us" (71). Such a "feigned" favourable judgment "given to placate its perceived beneficiary" is an act of "breathtaking condescension" and of exclusion, because "to be an object of such an act of respect demeans" (70). For Taylor the cause of citizenship in a multicultural society would be ill served by a multiculturalism defined in terms of the symbolic presence of voices representative of different constituencies, without the benefit of deep cultural or linguistic knowledge.

Taylor ventures that nothing less than what Hans Gadamer termed a "fusion of horizons" is needed:

We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. (1994, 67)

Taylor sets a rigorous threshold for the investigation of possible new cross-cultural canons and contexts in the academy. Consideration of the value of a foreign cultural artefact must be "demonstrated in the actual study of the culture", a study that may necessitate the transformation of familiar standards of aesthetic and cultural value (67). From the vantage point of comparative literature, it is difficult to see how the intense and transformative study of another culture Taylor calls for could be

accomplished in the absence of the foreign language acquisition and deep cultural contextualisation associated with the discipline historically. Indeed, a recent paper that seeks to tease out the implications of Taylor's use of Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" suggests that his account of multiculturalism implies the imperative of foreign language study (Leitch 2008). While Gadamer had in mind the task of evaluating concepts and values from a different historical period within the same culture, within the broader context of Taylor's oeuvre the engagement with a different culture points to the significance of language study.

The privileging of world literature as *the* portal programme in literature at Simon Fraser University/Surrey represented a programmatic response to the brand wars between cosmopolitan and multicultural modes of cross-cultural studies, and between the deep and on-demand variants of multiculturalism. Within Greater Vancouver, which has a higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York or Los Angeles, Surrey is a particularly diverse suburb, since two-thirds of the population is comprised of first or second-generation immigrants (one in four are from South Asia and one in six from China or East Asia). What choices were made between the different models and brands of cross-cultural inquiry available? The programme in world literature represented an attempt to approximate the historical protocols of comparative literature given institutional constraints. The administration approved a world literature programme that called for all majors (including those already bilingual or multilingual) to acquire a new language and promised resources for foreign language instruction (notably in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian). While a revision of the language requirement was made necessary due to budgetary cuts to language instruction, in the absence of a formal requirement 80 per cent of current majors and minors pursue foreign-language study and a significant number partake of a year of study abroad. The challenge for the programme is to seek disciplinary protocols and assignments that might do justice to linguistic and cultural specificity in teaching world literature in English translation. If the institutional landscape prevented the adoption of the protocol of requiring reading texts in the original languages, the demographics – with almost half of entering students proficient in a second, often non-Western language – are favourable to this programmatic quest to experiment with new disciplinary protocols and assignments.

The new programme in world literature proposed cross-cultural inquiry as an animating principle to engage the East/West, North/South cross-cultural makeup and curiosity of the population. The challenge was to design a programme that fit not only the diversity of the students but also

their cross-cultural experiences and yearning: students in metropolitan Vancouver are already leading cross-cultural lives and exposed to different cultural norms, practices, and products on a daily basis. The objective was to produce students who conceived of learning about other cultures and languages as a continual and lifelong process, whether they were to continue in academia or not. In designing the curriculum, my goal was to approximate the protocols of comparative literature to the extent possible in translation – to keep alive the sense of the original text and its cultural and historical context while being attentive to shifts in meaning in its reception in foreign contexts. An early influence on my thinking in this respect was the work of Roberto Schwarz on the fertile mismatch between European form and ideas in the work of Machado de Assis and the context of nineteenth-century Brazil (Schwarz 1992), and in graduate school I would gravitate to theorists of world literature interested in how works and genres travel across cultures such as Franco Moretti and David Damrosch (who themselves built upon the work of Schwarz and Eduardo Coutinho). David Damrosch's definition of world literature as the movement of literature across time and space proved particularly useful in curricular design, for his work on world literature served the needs of a programme that sought to place cosmopolitan ideals at the service of a multiculturalism of substance rather than surface. Damrosch had given systematic consideration to how cross-cultural questions and contexts could be explored in an undergraduate programme in world literature in translation. I shared his concern with rigorously teaching cross-culturally and, if need be, in translation, and his preoccupation with resisting the hyper-canonisation of world literature via the inclusion of "minor" literatures (2009, 194).

Yet can the communitarian ends of multiculturalism be reconciled with the cross-cultural imperative of cosmopolitanism? How to reconcile the claims of diversity and inclusivity towards "minor" traditions such as the Portuguese, relegated to the status of minor literature by international literary markets, and the rigour of cosmopolitan protocols that call for the acquisition of new, non-heritage languages? It was a formative experience when first teaching a course at the university level (Introductory Portuguese at the University of Toronto) that first persuaded me of the need for a world literature portal programme as a bridge between the protocols of comparative literature and those of departments of national language and literature – but where should the accent lie? I was disconcerted to find that on the day José Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize, my ethnically Portuguese students expressed a mixture of confusion, anger, and disbelief, for they had internalised the sense that the Portuguese

language had not produced a worthy canon of texts to be studied. Arguably the fault lay with an official government policy of multiculturalism that stressed through its grants and practices folklore at the expense of high culture, dispensing funds for folkloric dances but not for the translation from languages such as Czech or Portuguese into French or English.³ This formative pedagogical experience persuaded me that an ideal undergraduate programme in literature should open students to the possibility that works of value were possible not only within English but across a variety of cultures. The lesson for me was ambiguous: Did we need better multiculturalism, or less of it? Should ethnically Portuguese students in Toronto be encouraged to study “their own” language and culture over others? Taylor’s articulation of multiculturalism accentuates at once the communitarian claims of belonging and the necessity of understanding between cultures (also defined in a communitarian manner). At once he affirms the communitarian claims of culture, and the presumption that other cultures may have contributed something valuable as an act of faith worthy of possible and rigorous verification.

Ultimately, while the privileging of cross-cultural curiosity as the programme in world literature’s animating principle dovetailed in some respects with Charles Taylor’s argument for a high threshold for meaningful cross-cultural inquiry and dialogue and a “fusion of horizons”, it nonetheless was intended also as a departure from multiculturalism understood in Taylor’s underlying sense of the politics of recognition of communal identities. Taylor positively articulates the communitarian claims of a politics of identity, authenticity, and recognition. For some of Taylor’s critics from the vantage point of the rival principle of cosmopolitanism, notably Anthony Appiah, the politics of recognition Taylor advocates risked compelling a script of identity and behaviour for minority communities (1994, 163). Indeed, my survey of former students in Toronto and Vancouver suggested that students did not want to be grouped on the basis of their cultural heritage or ethnicity. Students complained that in previous contexts (in high-school classrooms and student clubs) they had felt pressure to speak on behalf of ethnic communities and to behave in a prescribed “authentic” manner (precisely Appiah’s cosmopolitan objection to prescriptive modes of multiculturalism). A student complained of being excluded from a student club allegedly about culture on the basis of her ethnicity; another complained of being asked to “play the Hindu” in classrooms and on multicultural cable television, where he hosted shows on Bollywood and Hinduism; a third complained of having to choose between multiple affiliations in a city where the rate of intermarriage is 8.9 per cent. Tellingly, a current world

literature major of Korean descent would explain her decision to learn Japanese “because I love the country and animated works, and because a lot of my annoying relatives hate Japanese culture and people and I would like to be subtly rebellious towards them” (pers. comm.). The last quote best explains the complexity and potential of Vancouver, hardly a utopia of perfect intercultural harmony yet a place of cross-cultural exchange and curiosity nonetheless. In this particular context a conscious decision was made to privilege introductory courses in particular that cut across national and linguistic traditions, though in other institutional frameworks (particularly those with programmes of excellence in national languages and literatures) geographical and national rubrics would make more sense.

If all formulations of world literature are perspectival, it follows that the programmatic answers to the dilemma between cosmopolitan and multicultural protocols for cross-cultural inquiry will be contextual. An ideal programme in world literature might build upon the established protocols of comparative literature and national literature to encompass more of the world than the discipline’s traditional strengths in European languages and literatures. Such a programme might serve as a bridge between (and perhaps also a portal programme feeding into) existing strengths in English, foreign languages and literatures, comparative literature, translation, and area and cultural studies. In ideal scenarios, it would serve the cosmopolitan aims of comparative literature and (as Rey Chow cautions) avoid an instrumental approach to other areas and cultures of the globe. In North America it is possible that this model of a world literature that builds upon proven excellence in foreign language and literature study is only viable at a few elite research universities, as implied and sometimes made explicit in the reports by Levin, Greene, and Bernheimer. Indeed, at his keynote address for the ACLA annual meeting in 2010, Sheldon Pollock prefaced his complaint about the relative neglect of non-Western languages in comparative literature by delimiting the field of comparative literature to the twenty-one programmes that operate at what he termed the top twenty-five research universities in the United States. Yet arguably the statistics he cited about the discipline’s continued Eurocentric disciplinary concerns (85–90 per cent if measured by research interests and publications in the leading journals in the field) only reinforce the need to consider how comparative literature is being expanded to take on more of the globe beyond the twenty-one programmes he singles out.⁴

In the context of public research and comprehensive universities in Canada, the Eurocentrism of literary and cultural study that Pollock bemoans is even more conspicuous at campuses that more closely

resemble (at least in enrolment in courses outside the humanities) the extraordinary diversity of the urban populations they serve (Toronto like Vancouver has a higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York or Los Angeles). In such contexts (and with less resources at their disposal) programmes in comparative and world literature may not always take the same shape as the best programmes in the United States, yet given the remarkable diversity and cross-cultural curiosity of students (who evidently seek exposure to more than just the official languages and “heritage” cultures) the need to find ways to provide instruction in foreign language and cultures is no less urgent. A comprehensive university such as Simon Fraser University will not have the same types of programmatic compromises available between the original language and translation protocols of study as Cornell, Columbia, or indeed the University of Toronto.⁵ At the moment of the programme’s inception, the solution imagined was for students to take advantage of programmes of excellence in language study available across town at the University of British Columbia and further via a sufficient network of exchange and partner programmes with dozens of universities across several continents.⁶ The risk for a world literature programme at a comprehensive school such as Simon Fraser University would be to go it alone and allow cross-cultural inquiry to amount to no more than an uncritical multiculturalism of representative but decontextualised texts. The potential benefit of the programme is to build upon and channel in the direction of disciplinary rigour precisely the cross-cultural curiosity that distinguishes the everyday life of the city. Faced with the disciplinary crossroads between a soft multiculturalism or a deeper version akin to the “fusion of horizons” advocated by Taylor, or between multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, the greatest institutional asset is the desire of the students themselves (from the programme’s inception) to aim for the most rigorous forms of the multicultural and cosmopolitan protocols available to them.

This example drawn from a Canadian context demonstrates that cosmopolitan ideals and protocols need not be forsaken in curricular and pedagogical projects aimed at engaging diversity. Taylor’s seminal essay on multiculturalism, indeed, sets a high threshold for the required fusion of horizons that might make possible a meaningful cross-cultural inquiry, dialogue, and citizenship. Perhaps the key lesson that might be generalised from this experience for other contexts is the need to find workable, contextually determined compromises between competing cosmopolitan and multicultural ideals and original-language and translation protocols in the study of world literature. In the United States and Canada, as elsewhere, the greatest risk would be to allow disciplinary turf wars to

scuttle programmatic experiments and advances in the quest for rigour in the study of world literature. For those who believe cosmopolitan protocols can be placed in the service of engaging diversity, whether or not this can be reconciled under the multiculturalism of substance called for by Taylor, the answer to Chow's question of whether to become literate in Arabic or "Black English" would be to do so in both, in whatever programmatic form local institutional contexts dictate. The tensions between cosmopolitan and multicultural protocols can be productively harnessed with regard to the requisite of engaging diversity.

It is vital to heed the caution recently posed by Susan Bassnett (2009) in a keynote address at a conference at Uppsala University, in which she regretted the fight of translation studies to establish itself as a distinct discipline (rather than an approach) vis-à-vis the study of texts:

There has been a great deal of debate since translation studies first emerged as a field of study back in the 1970s as to whether it constitutes a distinctive discipline in its own right. Over the years, I have contributed to the debate, at one stage suggesting, with André Lefevere, that translation studies should be redefined as an overarching discipline into which comparative literature should be accommodated. Today, I find such debates tedious and outmoded; both translation studies and comparative literature are not disciplines – both are methods of approaching the study of texts. In all areas of literary transfer, there is interconnectedness, and it is this that we should be investigating. (Bassnett 2009, published in this volume)

David Damrosch's claims on behalf of world literature as a distinct comparative *approach* that could be adopted within national, foreign, or comparative literature study, rather than as a new disciplinary protocol incompatible with the standards of national or comparative literature, appear particularly productive in this regard. From this vantage point the brand of world literature matters less than specific initiatives: for instance, for English departments to require further foreign language proficiency and study, departments of Spanish more Portuguese or Arabic, and programmes in comparative literature a non-Western language. Bassnett's warning serves as a reminder to departments devoted to language and literature that even as they feel themselves to be locked in a zero-sum struggle over diminishing resources, they would do well to collaborate and champion initiatives that demonstrate the value of foreign language and literature study within the university at large (that is, one should advocate bridge programmes in world literature not instead of Czech or Slavic studies, but to reinforce the need for these units). The success of new initiatives in world literature in attracting better and more diverse students

can contribute to this case that needs to be made in a continuous and collaborative manner.

Notes

¹ For instance, the seminar on world literature convened by David Damrosch at the ACLA in New Orleans, 2010.

² Evidently, in the United States, as in Canada, not all variants of identity politics and multiculturalism amount to the type of superficial and essentialist discourse of representation and authenticity criticised by Bernheimer. For instance, Satya Mohanty ventures that precisely because our values are culturally contingent, the best and most objective form of inquiry into them needs to be comparative and cross-cultural (2001, 803–33).

³ The government preference is for ethnic writers to pen new works in Canada's official languages rather than translate, edit, or disseminate works from other linguistic traditions.

⁴ If for no other reason than to gauge how undergraduates elsewhere might be better prepared to deal with non-Western languages and contexts if and when they do gain admission to the best graduate programmes in the field.

⁵ For instance, in the absence of Asian Studies (and of instruction in Chinese or Japanese beyond introductory courses), Simon Fraser University boasts a small programme in Asia-Canada, privileging the Asian-Canadian experience as a filter for Asia. "The goal of the Asia-Canada programme is to introduce students to the rich and complex relations between Asian countries and Canada", the programme website stresses, adding that "[f]or Canadians of Asian heritage, the programme provides means to develop a fuller understanding of their own complex cultural contexts". See <http://www.sfu.ca/AsiaCanada/ascdept.htm>.

⁶ This network currently includes institutions such as Monash University, Humboldt University, and Charles University in addition to the offer of exchange from programmes such as INALCO-Paris.

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