

Locations of Comparison

Joseph R. Slaughter

What difference does it make who compares? From what location? What kinds of comparison are possible, inevitable, even necessary at particular historical moments? What are the extra-literary conditions of literary comparison? How and when does literature qualify for comparison? Revisiting Harry Levin's seminal essay, "Comparing the Literature" (1968), this paper—originally presented as the presidential address at the 2017 American Comparative Literature Association conference—considers the historical conditions and locational contingencies that motivate acts of literary comparison. Looking at how specific comparisons of African literature to European literature have been mobilized at different times and locations, I argue that comparative literature's de facto immigration policies (its [in]hospitality to other worlds of literature) may be read in the histories of comparisons that have been done before—comparisons once regarded as improper, impertinent, or insurgent that are now commonly practiced to give old Eurocentric fields new life, new prestige, and new authority.

Keywords: comparative literature, world literature, African literature, global modernisms, comparative strategic essentialisms, politics of comparison, immigrant literature, identity politics, immigration policy, internationalism

The aim of the Association is the support and strengthening of Comparative Literature studies in American Colleges and universities and throughout the Western hemisphere.
 —Articles of Incorporation of the American Comparative Literature Association, Inc.

Almost fifty years ago, in April 1968, Harry Levin gave the presidential address to the third meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association at Indiana University. I do not have the attendance figures for that early meeting, but knowing the numbers from the mid-1990s, I suspect that the conference could not have counted more than a hundred or so attendees. Today, here in Utrecht, Netherlands, we have fifteen to twenty times as many participants as the conference in Bloomington in 1968; that dramatic increase both greatly expands the compass of comparative literature and raises numerous institutional challenges for the association (which is still run largely on the volunteer labor

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of faculty) and for the local host committees who organize much of the conference on the ground—all of those colleagues deserve our thanks.¹

I begin with Harry Levin's presidential address not simply to make a comparison in size between our association now and then. Levin himself commented somewhat sarcastically on the success of the ACLA in 1968, and implicitly on what he saw as a weakening of its focus and intellectual integrity: "I am not even sure that we should be congratulating ourselves on the growth of the American Comparative Literature Association," he said; "After all, we are not the Rotary International" (16). In my years on the board of the ACLA, I have sometimes wondered what its founding members might think of the organization today: Would they recognize it? Would they recognize us? Would they think it has become something other than an American comparative literature association? Having recently had occasion to consult the original articles of incorporation for the ACLA from 1963, I thought it worth reproducing the list of names of those founding members—all men, all ethnically northern European, and many of them first or second generation immigrants to the United States, a fact that Levin underscores as a distinction of the association and that I want to revisit in terms of locations of comparison: Chandler B. Beall, Horst Frenz, Werner P. Friederich, Northrop Frye, Victor Lange, Harry Levin, Warren Ramsey, Maurice Valency.

Some of you know Levin's address; it was immediately published under the odd-sounding title "Comparing the Literature" in the *Yearbook of Comparative Literature* (published at Indiana University) and subsequently included in his book, *Grounds for Comparison* (1972).² Levin's lecture offers a short account of his own disciplinary formation, a broad history of the association and institutionalization of the field, and a rundown of the major professorial placements at elite institutions that he counted among the most consequential for the study of comparative literature in the United States. In its historical scope, the 1968 presidential address reads more like the later descriptive state-of-the-discipline reports produced decennially by the ACLA than like the highly prescriptive *Report on Professional Standards* that Levin had authored for the association in 1965.³ Following that report, Levin's address heralds the dawning of what Claudio Guillén would later call comparative literature's "American hour":⁴ the coming-of-age of *American* comparative literature, where "American" modifies "comparative literature," designating the location of comparison rather than the location of the association. Levin ends his address with an appeal to his fellow comparatists in the United States that explains his title and urges them to get on with their good business: "We spend too much of our energy talking . . . about comparative literature, and not enough of it comparing the literature."⁵ His final benedictory words

1 A shorter version of this paper was given as the presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting in July 2017.

2 Harry Levin, "Comparing the Literature," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 17 (1968): 5–16.

3 Harry Levin, ed. *Report on Professional Standards* (American Comparative Literature Association, 1965).

4 Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 60.

5 Levin, "Comparing the Literature," 16.

are a punchy sending forth, most suitable for the location of my address tonight, this church setting in the Nicolaïkerk in Utrecht: “Now proceed,” he exhorted the congregation: “compare the literature.”⁶

The generalized exhortation to stop talking and start comparing the literature might raise more questions for us today than it did for Levin and his audience. Which literatures are we to compare? Or, to which literature does the definite article “the” in “comparing the literature” point? And who is this “we” who will do *the* comparing of *the* literature? Does it matter who compares? Does it matter where we are comparing from?

For Levin, such questions (unasked, though answered nonetheless) mattered, but they likely sounded more rhetorical than we might hear them now, and the answers were certainly more normative (prescriptive and parochial) than most of us would give today. Still, in the course of his address, Levin proceeds to lay out what he saw as the proper focus of comparative literature in the United States, adopting (surprisingly enough) a Rotarian attitude of ethical responsibility toward *the* literature in need of comparison: “Let us make sure that we do justice to those parts of the world of letters which definitely lie within our range.”⁷ The parts of the literary world within our range, as Levin saw it, are ultimately delimited as “occidental” or “European comparative literature,” where “European” designates the originating location of the literature that he asks his American comparative literature associates to compare.⁸ The reasons for Levin’s answer are more interesting than they first appear, however, and they bear some relevance for our own present historical circumstances. After all, even if we recoil at Levin’s insistence that the North Atlantic (certainly not the South Atlantic, where the majority of my own work focuses) is the proper geography for American comparative literature, his idea that doing comparative literature amounts to some form of “doing justice” to peoples, languages, and regions of the world is certainly attractive in our current appalling moment of rabid intolerance and systemic injustice—of anti-immigrant anti-intellectualism in the United States and Europe.

For Levin, the answer to the question (Which literatures do (or should) we compare?) is bound up with the question of who is doing (or should be doing) the comparing. And although he exhorts his audience to compare the literature, the primary comparison that he makes in his speech is between what he regards as an exhausted French historiographical tradition of comparative literature (overly focused on biographical criticism) and a newly mature “American school” driven in large part by immigrants (sometimes refugees) from Europe—by personal biography, that is. American comparative literature’s “leading lights,” those European “expatriates,” were “propelled hitherward—to our eternal benefit—by the great political dispersion of the nineteen-thirties.”⁹ Levin refers to this dispersion as “the transatlantic reversal that has Americanized so brilliant a group of European intellectuals.”¹⁰ By “Americanized,” he presumably means some combination of the effects of American social history that he lists later: “Its colonial past, its continental isolation, [and] its continuous series of

6 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 16.

7 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 12.

8 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 12.

9 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 7–8.

10 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 7.

emigrations,” which he says “have conditioned it to look outward, eastward toward Europe.”¹¹ Of course, Levin’s suggestion that continuous immigration to America will continue to be mostly European already misses much of what was going on in the world in the 1960s, and specifically what America itself was doing in the world at the time in exercising soft and hard power, extending both its global cultural reach and its bombing range.

In comparing and contrasting French and American traditions of comparative literature, Levin exposes (without comment) a suggestive contradiction; while the French school was, in his account, too fixated on authorial biography, the American school (with its apparent fixation on European literatures) was shaped precisely by the personal biographies of those scholars doing the comparing. In other words, the defining feature of an American comparative literature tradition was not academic interest in the biographies of authors, but libidinal investment in the biographies of comparatists. Thus, alongside the European expatriates comparing the literature were what Levin refers to (unfortunately in today’s terms) as “indigenous” scholars from the United States, American *men* of letters (and I emphasize men) whose personal biographies put them in intimate contact with European peoples, languages, and literatures: “[i]f the circumstances of education gave you some exposure to life abroad, if you had a naturalized parent or, better still, a spouse with a constant recollection of other worlds,” he says, “then pure luck had set you on the path and pointed out the destination” of comparative literature.¹²

If identitarian thoughts or personal memories of “other worlds” steered the individual toward comparative literature, in Levin’s conception of the field, American comparative literature seemed to have little cause to be interested in worlds other than the old one. In a 2007 essay subtitled “The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not,” however, Jan Ziolkowski gives an alternative account of the same late-1960s moment in the making of American comparative literature from the vantage point of forty years of hindsight. “A deeply European stamp remained upon comparative literature until the Vietnam War Era,” he writes, when “[g]overnment funding and draft avoidance played a role in enrollments,” as did “a desire to attain international understanding through the comparative study of literatures”; as the United States bombed Southeast Asia, “the study of comparative literature exploded.”¹³ In announcing the “coming-of-age of a movement,” the 1965 Levin Report similarly attributed “[t]he recent proliferation of Comparative Literature, in colleges and universities throughout the country” to war and to “the support of the National Defense Education Act.”¹⁴ The 1958 NDEA was one of the U.S. government’s responses to the Soviet launch of Sputnik and the perceived educational emergency created by relying too heavily (especially in mathematics) on the technical knowledge of immigrants and refugees from Europe. Among other things, the act provided federal funding for the study and teaching of modern foreign languages as well as the establishment of Title VI area studies institutes in order to strengthen national security

11 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 9.

12 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 6.

13 Jan M. Ziolkowski, “Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not,” *The Global South* 1.2 (2007): 16–44, esp. 27.

14 Levin, *Report on Professional Standards*, 1.

and expand the range of American influence abroad. If comparative literature in the United States benefitted from the space race, the academic and political scramble for actionable knowledge about other parts of the world also had implications for the discipline that were not always welcomed. Indeed, the fact that the study of the classical languages of Latin and Greek was not supported by NDEA funds as part of the national interest may help to explain some of Levin's reluctance to congratulate the ACLA on its sudden growth. In retrospect, we may read Levin's address as a preemptive and protectionist response to what he saw as a looming sea change in comparative literature, but we might also see in the picture he painted of the ACLA as a congress of European immigrants an identity project (albeit a relatively narrow one): an American comparative literature promulgated by exiles and pursued by heritage learners.¹⁵

I want to make explicit something that is probably perfectly clear. Logically, from Levin's account, it was recent immigrants and refugees to the United States (and those with intimate personal ties to them) who were doing the comparing—comparing *the* literature from places left behind or visited in Europe. For Levin, the coming-of-age of American comparative literature was precipitated by the coming to America of European comparatists. A great deal could be said about this configuration of comparative literature as a field of immigrants in relation to current reactionary anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe and the United States, as well as the White House's repeated efforts to impose a discriminatory "travel ban" that limits immigration from predominantly Muslim nations and closes the door to refugees, defaulting on our international obligations to receive them. Some of those things would not flatter the ACLA. I can only gesture in that direction today because I want to make a somewhat broader point about locations of comparison that will have, I think, fairly obvious implications for considering what it means to "do justice" to immigrants and refugees—and to the parts of the world from which they may come—by doing comparative literature today.

There is, then, a certain irony in the fact that the ACLA is, for the very first time, meeting in Europe in July 2017, when the geographical range covered by the titles of so many seminars and papers in the conference program, and by the annual prizes that I have the honor of presenting immediately after this address, so clearly show that, as a society of scholars, our collective answers to Levin's questions differ markedly from his in 1968—that collectively we are interested in so much more than just European literature. In fact, the 2017 Wellek prize for the best book in comparative literature is shared by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, which studies the stories of some of the immigrants and the immigrant literature that Levin located beyond the range of our interest and responsibility in 1968. American comparative literature (or comparative literature in the United States)

15 The anticipated globalization of American comparative literature—sometimes dreaded, sometimes touted—would come (if it has come) much later than Levin might have feared; indeed, despite the promotional multicultural rhetoric of the 1990s, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's estimation in her Wellek Library Lectures in 2000, "The general model in Comparative Literature seemed still . . . to be Europe and the extracurricular Orient." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 6.

continues to look outward, but it no longer looks merely eastward toward Europe, along the North Atlantic axis of the ACLA's beginnings. We should not, however, conclude from our current global disposition that comparative literature has simply been, therefore, hospitable to newcomers, to other immigrants and other immigrant literatures—if by that phrase we mean literatures once excluded from but now permitted entry (even if restricted) into the world of comparative literature. Levin himself imagined the limits of comparative literature at the scale of a world that looks something like ours. He declared, for example, that “There are so many nations in the world whose literature is still to be compared. Our discipline will not have completely realized its potentialities or objectives until its network has embraced them all.”¹⁶

I want to make what might at first seem like a surprising comparison because Levin's nationalist division of the world in 1968 has an almost uncanny resemblance to the internationalist objectives of many anticolonial and radical revolutionary thinkers from the colonial and postcolonial third world who viewed post-World War II internationalism as the horizon of decolonization. Frantz Fanon, for example, argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961 that “culture is the expression of national consciousness” and “[n]ational consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.”¹⁷ For Fanon, national consciousness was the cultural route to political internationalism; for Levin, by contrast, the relationship between nationalism and internationalism was framed as an antagonism, where the former is a pitfall of the latter: “Our objective is not a national school but an international perspective,” he insisted, despite his clear investment in asserting the difference and distinction of American comparative literature.¹⁸ If, after World War II, “the constitution of comparative literature was linked explicitly with that of the United Nations,”¹⁹ the assembly of the United Nations itself was conditioned on the nominally equal political sovereignty of states and their putatively comparable national cultures. That is, the nation-statist framework of the international order was largely inescapable for both postcolonial politicians and comparative literature scholars seeking to distance themselves from the “national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness” that were already supposed to have dissolved away with “national and local literatures” in the nineteenth century, in the face of an emerging “world market” and “world literature,” as Marx and Engels forecast in a passage from *The Communist Manifesto* that has become a standard epigraph for world literature today.²⁰

We might now challenge the rigid national lines of the Westphalian (some would say Utrechtian)²¹ international imaginary accepted by both Levin and Fanon, especially as many of us pursue vectors of comparison that do not fetishize the nation

16 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 11.

17 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 247.

18 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 8–9.

19 Ziolkowski, “Incomparable,” 26.

20 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (New York: Verso, 1998), 39.

21 Unlike the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which has been retroactively enshrined as the foundation of modern internationalism, the Peace of Utrecht (1713) stabilized both the balance of power in Europe and the nation-state as the organic administrative form of political (and, later, cultural) difference. See Endre Sashalmi, “The Novelty of the Utrecht Peace Settlement (1713),” *Central European Papers* 3.2 (2015): 20–33.

(or language) as the primary mark of difference. However, the internationalist terms of the world political order in the 1960s determined—even overdetermined—the shape of comparative literature, as well as the grounds of comparison in the United States, Europe, and other locations where scholars were comparing the literature. And, indeed, the idea (or gravitational pull) of “national literature,” which comparative literature has both historically depended upon and intended to transcend, is itself a manifestation of the Eurocentric assumptions of the discipline in the mid-twentieth century: that literatures (and languages), like financial currencies, necessarily came in national units. I will return at the end of this talk to discuss the important differences between Levinian and Fanonian views of internationalism (that is, the comparative locations that inflect their perspectives), but for now I want to emphasize that the state and stakes of political internationalism in the Cold War era of decolonization had implications for the politics of comparison everywhere.

Although Levin entertains the thought that there is a whole world of literature out there to compare, that idea was mostly speculative in his presidential address. Indeed, despite its expansive hypothetical view of a *world* comparative literature, Levin’s address is finally a defense of the “necessarily circumscribed” “domain of the occidental comparatist,” which he says is “*incomparably* rich” (my emphasis).²² In other words, for Levin, nothing compares to European literature—that is to say, to American comparative literature—which also means, of course, that everything must be compared to it.

I want to be clear that I cite Levin’s address not to disparage the blatant Eurocentricism of his vision of American comparative literature, nor to praise how far we have come since then. Both responses would be simplistic—ungenerous on the one hand, and disingenuous on the other. I am interested, instead, in how Levin’s account of who is doing the comparing of *the* literature in 1968 might resonate with the conditions of comparison at other times and in other places, and might help us to grasp something about the location (or locations) of comparison. If American comparative literature today has become more postcolonial or more global or more worldly in its outlook, it is not because the field threw open its doors to other immigrants. Rather, it has responded to historical forces analogous to those that brought Levin’s favored comparatists to form the ACLA in the first place. Indeed, there are important historical similarities between comparative literature in our current era of neoliberal globalization and American comparative literature in 1968.

In their gross outlines, the propellants of the great dispersion *to* Europe (and, to a lesser extent, *to* the United States) of the past decade remain the same as those of “the great political dispersion of the 1930s,” and those of the 1960s and 1980s: war, violence, imperial and economic exploitation, (postcolonial) political malpractice, broad social inequalities, and deliberate uneven development and deprivation. Much of the force behind the violence of the more recent dispersions, it should be noted, is exerted by the same America that, in Levin’s account, was the eternal beneficiary of the immigration of the 1930s. That same America sometimes welcomes, sometimes bans, refugees and immigrants seeking to escape the ranging violence that the United States itself has sponsored, enacted, or exacerbated in other parts of the world. Comparative

22 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 12.

literature, of course, has a similar (although not exactly parallel) history of hospitality and inhospitality toward minority and immigrant literatures—and toward other people doing the comparing from other locations. And, in its more opportunistic modes, comparative literature also has a history of exploiting other literatures as well as other people's comparisons elsewhere for its American institutional purposes.

What difference does it make who compares? From what location or global position? In *All the Difference in the World*, Natalie Melas insightfully argues that “[t]he comparative method is not ultimately directed toward the objects under comparison.”²³ As such, comparison often has much less to do with the particular texts being compared (comparing the literature in order to “generalize about organic [literary] processes,” as Levin says)²⁴ than with securing legitimacy, authority, and prestige—often, though not always, for the particular literary institution that proposes to compare the literature. Comparative practices almost always serve to justify an enterprise—the enterprise of comparison itself (at times), but, more often than not, some other enterprise entirely. From this perspective, Levin's exhortation to compare the literature would have to be understood as an appeal to do something other than compare the literature—to secure something else, some historical benefit at the location of comparison: the emergent position of the United States in the old world of comparative literature, for example.

Comparisons are made at particular historical moments under particular historical conditions, with particular historical motivations under particular historical constraints from particular locations; in short, comparisons are historical. In the second half of this essay, I will consider some historical examples of comparisons that have been repeatedly done by people from different locations in order to illustrate the difference location can make, even for comparisons that otherwise seem the same. I will argue that the history of the hospitality (or inhospitality) of comparative literature generally (and of American comparative literature specifically) is partly written in the histories of particular comparisons that have been done before—comparisons that were done from locations outside the historical, geographic, and institutional range of American comparative literature as Levin understood it. I suggest that the history of comparative literature's own immigration policies could be read in these (largely unwritten) histories of comparisons once regarded as improper, impertinent, or insurgent that are now among the ordinary practices—the common comparative maneuvers or gestures of comparative inclusion—deployed to give old fields new life, new prestige, and new authority.²⁵

23 Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 24.

24 Levin, “Comparing the Literature,” 12.

25 As I discuss later in this essay, I am thinking in particular of the institutionalization of world literature, global modernisms, and transnational american studies, which have all recently “discovered,” even as their predecessors once dismissed, comparisons already made by nonprivileged (generally minor or minority) commentators in the world of letters who compared literature from marginalized places to the literature from Europe. Those comparisons were often rejected or ignored by the stewards of the literature to which they compared, but they are now being repeated and remade from the heights of institutional privilege by scholars in current positions of stewardship in order to claim new relevance for their own fields. The scramble for other people's comparisons today repeats in many ways the attitudes of “the displaced European intellectuals who built the profession” of American comparative literature and

The examples of comparisons done before that I will discuss are virtually contemporaneous with Levin's address to the ACLA in 1968, and they will, I hope, allow us to see differently the questions (and answers) about who compares what literature, to what ends, and what does it matter. My choice of examples is motivated, of course. But it is motivated not just by my own areas of expertise—training in African literatures, in this case; my examples come to me from a footnote in Franco Moretti's provocative piece "Conjectures on World Literature"²⁶ and from Levin's own inhospitable choice of example of non-European literature from what he calls "an unconnected sphere of comparison."²⁷ "What shall it profit our students to gain Swahili and have no Latin?"²⁸ Levin asked, echoing the King James translation of the New Testament verse (Mark 8:36): "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The form of Levin's rhetorical question may seem to grant Swahili the space of the "whole world," but it reserves for Latin a sacred function as the language of man's soul. Moreover, it implies that an American comparative literature that would pretend to be a world literature would have lost its way.

From Moretti, the footnote is one of many in "Conjectures on World Literature" that compares other people's comparisons. Moretti's mode of "distant reading" never compares the literature, but instead collects and compares other people's comparative literature scholarship in order to generalize about organic generic processes, the "*law of literary evolution*" as it pertains to the globalization of the modern novel.²⁹ His hypothesis, as you recall, following a more modest claim by Fredric Jameson, is that the dispersion of the novel genre takes place everywhere as "a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials."³⁰ "This first idea expanded into a little cluster of laws," he writes, but "it was still just an idea; a conjecture that had to be tested, possibly on a large scale, and so I decided to follow the wave of diffusion of the modern novel (roughly: 1750 to 1950) in the pages of literary history."³¹ What follows is his impressive list of comparatist-informants:

Gasperetti and Goscolo on late eighteenth-century Eastern Europe; Toschi and Martí-López on early nineteenth-century Southern Europe; Franco and Sommer on mid-century Latin America; Frieden on the Yiddish novels of the 1860s; Moosa, Said and Allen on the Arabic novels of the 1870s; Evin and Parla on the Turkish novels of the same years; Anderson on the Filipino *Noli Me Tangere*, of 1887; Zhao and Wang on turn-of-the-century Qing fiction; Obiechina, Irele and Quayson on West African novels between the 1920s and the 1950s (plus of course Karatani, Miyoshi, Mukherjee, Evan-Zohar and Schwarz).³²

who, as Françoise Lionnet notes, largely ignored the literature of their American location, filled with the enthusiasm of a settler colonist who disregards the history of the space they now occupy, imagining only "the opportunities that come with virgin territory." Françoise Lionnet, "Spaces of Comparison," *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 165–74, esp. 169.

26 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

27 Levin, "Comparing the Literature," 11.

28 Levin, "Comparing the Literature," 12.

29 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58.

30 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58.

31 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 59.

32 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 59–60.

Comparing the comparisons of these scholars, Moretti concludes: “Four continents, two hundred years, over twenty independent critical studies, and they all agreed: when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s *always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials” (his emphasis).³³

I should say that I am examining Moretti’s essay not to single him (or it) out for special criticism; I could cite numerous examples of recent comparative literature scholarship that accept other people’s critical judgments, without looking too closely into the matter for the sake of a hyperbolic thesis. Indeed, it seems that using other people’s comparisons without due regard for their historicity has become rather common practice today—part of the necessary costs, Moretti’s argument suggests, of doing world literature business through “‘second-hand’ criticism”³⁴ and “distant reading.”³⁵ (With characteristic bravado, Moretti sacrifices “the text” to his system, declaring that “we must accept losing something”;³⁶ it is important to recognize, however, that the texts which Moretti is willing to let disappear, as I document following, tend to be the most recent arrivals to the world republic of letters—literature by people historically marginalized by the dominant institutions of comparative literature.) That said, I am focusing on Moretti’s essay primarily because, for an ACLA audience, it probably offers the most compact and canonical text for framing the problem of using other people’s comparisons while ignoring the political contingencies and historical locations of comparison.

I will restrict my focus to the African sources in footnote 17, although my argument can be further demonstrated by examining other footnotes and other scholars whose comparisons are sourced for Moretti’s project. To substantiate his hypothesis that the African novel, like all non-Western novels, emerged as a compromise between foreign form and local content, Moretti cites three *now*-well-recognized authorities on the subject (the “now” is important, because, at the time they first made their comparisons, all three African critics were budding scholars): Emmanuel Obiechina, Abiola Irele, and Ato Quayson. Here is the relevant footnote number 17 in full; the comparing of the literature has already taken place elsewhere:

“One essential factor shaping West African novels by indigenous writers was the fact that they appeared after the novels on Africa written by non-Africans . . . the foreign novels embody elements which indigenous writers had to react against when they set out to write.” (Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, Cambridge 1975, p. 17.) “The first Dahomean novel, *Doguiçimi* . . . is interesting as an experiment in recasting the oral literature of Africa within the form of a French novel.” (Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, Bloomington 1990, p. 147.) “It was the rationality of realism that seemed adequate to the task of forging a national identity at the juncture of global realities . . . the rationalism of realism dispersed in texts as varied as newspapers, Onitsha market literature, and in the earliest

33 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 60.

34 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 61 fn.18.

35 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 57.

36 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 57.

titles of the African Writers Series that dominated the discourses of the period.” (Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, Bloomington 1997, p. 162.)³⁷

I will discuss, in much shorter order than the work of these legendary African scholars deserves, both Abiola Irele and Emmanuel Obiechina, whose acts of comparison date from about the time of Levin’s address, despite the years cited in Moretti’s footnotes, which tend to give the dates of second or later editions of the books he consulted. (Indeed, the risks of taking someone else’s word at face value become clearer when we dive deeper into Moretti’s footnotes to discover that so many of his cited sources made their strategic comparisons between peripheral and canonical European literatures in the 1960s and 1970s, although his notes often say otherwise.) I will skip Ato Quayson, mostly because his book lies outside the 1960s to 1970s timeframe that I am discussing, but also because his book does something fundamentally different from what Moretti’s footnote suggests. Quayson is interested in problematizing the “bizarre” analytical categories used to separate what is “authentically” African from what is not; thus, he investigates the “strategic transformations” Nigerian writers made to “indigenous” literary traditions and cultural resources.³⁸

Both Emmanuel Obiechina and Abiola Irele do indeed appear to justify Moretti’s main point (although I must also note that they are rarely talking about African literature between the 1920s and 1950s, as the footnote asserts, because most of the novels they discuss were published after 1952, when Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* first appeared). For his part, Obiechina confirms that “foreign novels embody elements which indigenous writers had to react against,” but he does so in a section of his 1975 book that discusses the domination of African themes and settings by European novelists. In fact, the passage that Moretti cites is explicitly about African resistance to European literary and formal domination. (Interestingly, Obiechina makes this claim in order to justify his own comparative literature project and his inclusion of novels *about* Africa that were written by Europeans in his dissertation on African literature at Oxford University in the early 1970s; in other words, he compares European literature to African literature, rather than the other way around, for all the difference that makes.) Irele is cited to say that “The first Dahomean novel, *Doguicimi* . . . is interesting as an experiment in recasting the oral literature of Africa within the form of a French novel.”³⁹ As far as I can tell, however, Irele never calls *Doguicimi* “the first Dahomean novel,” which appears to be a marketing epithet that attached to the novel’s title on the cover of its English translation in 1990. Instead, Irele claims that Paul Hazoumé’s *Doguicimi* is “the most notable work in prose to come out of francophone Africa before the war.”⁴⁰ More pertinently, the missing text apparently marked by Moretti’s ellipsis further asserts that “to some extent,” the “ethnological novel” experimented with “traditional chronicles and legends as regards the narrative form.”⁴¹

37 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 61 fn.17.

38 Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2–3.

39 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 61.

40 Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 147.

41 Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, 147.

In other words, Irele, like Quayson, was interested in the strategic transformation of traditional narrative forms and the dynamic interplay between foreign *and* local form, and between local *and* foreign materials, if such ethnological distinctions of cultural ownership can be made so absolutely. More importantly, perhaps, this particular essay (“French African Narrative Prose and the Colonial Experience”) from Irele’s book was first published not in 1990 (as the footnote lists), but in 1969, as the Introduction to *Lectures Africaines*, which the source notes at the beginning of Irele’s later book very clearly acknowledge.

In 1969, Irele’s essay was responding to a very different historical and academic institutional moment for African literature than the one implied by Moretti’s citation of the 1990 date for the Indiana University Press publication of his book, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, which was itself a reprint of Heinemann’s 1981 edition. If it had been made in the 1990s, Irele’s implicit comparison of an early Francophone novel to French literature would have belonged to the heyday of post-colonialism and the mounting arguments for decentering European literature. In the late 1960s, however, the position and condition of African literature, in its own right and in relation to the institutions of European and comparative literature, were entirely different. If, as Rey Chow has written, comparison is an “unfinalizable event because its meanings have to be repeatedly negotiated,”⁴² this particular comparison made at the height of third worldism at the end of the 1960s changes meaning dramatically when it is projected forward into the world of comparative literature in the 1990s, and then taken as simple literary fact (even “law”) at the dawn of the twenty-first century. There is, I am insisting, a world of difference between an African (or Africanist) comparing African literature to European literature in the 1960s, in the era of political and cultural decolonization, from a relatively marginal location, on the one hand, and an American comparative literature scholar making that same comparison (or relying on the 1960s’ comparison) in order to resuscitate and substantiate a diffusionist theory of the novel for the sake of world literature in the era of neoliberal globalization, on the other—even if the two scholars appear to be saying the same thing. Each comparison is directed to other ends; that is, each comparison is doing something other than (just) comparing the literature.

The difference could be measured differently, in terms of institutional influence and power. For if it were a matter of merely comparing the literature—and one man’s or one woman’s comparison were as good as any other, regardless of location—then I would note that it is easy to find statements in both Irele’s and Obiechina’s scholarship that anticipates and better confirms Moretti’s thesis far more powerfully than the passages he cites. For instance, in the same book, Obiechina writes:

The West African novel necessarily derived from Western models and is, up to the present, written in English. But it has been so adapted to local life and culture that it has acquired a personality of its own . . . , which reflects local settings, local themes and local impulses.⁴³

42 Rey Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” *ELH* 71.2 (2004): 289–311, esp. 298.

43 Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 36.

Not only does Obiechina here confirm the foreign form/local materials thesis of Moretti's conjecture; he formulates (*avant la lettre*) almost exactly Jameson's "model" of the synthesis of foreign form and local content that Moretti adopted as his rule for understanding the globalization of the novel. That we might discuss this formulation as Jameson's "law of literary evolution," or as Moretti's model, rather than as Obiechina's (or any number of other scholars from the global south), speaks tellingly about how the dominant literary critical institutions still tend to treat critics and "cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system"⁴⁴ as informants rather than theorists. This politics of comparison shows, to repurpose Moretti's description of what comparative morphology teaches us about literary form, the ways in which "symbolic power varies from place to place."⁴⁵

If the comparisons by Moretti and Obiechina appear the same, I would argue that the situational differences between the two tell us more about the uneven conditions, and relative cultural capital, of comparative literature at their respective locations of comparison (from the positions of a now "major" and a then "minor" scholar) than they do about the objective history of the novel and its global travels. Where Obiechina finds innovation and necessity—"The West African novel *necessarily* derived from Western models" (my emphasis)⁴⁶—Moretti sees compromise and subordination. Where Obiechina finds politics and history, Moretti finds aesthetics and morphology. It is very much worth asking after the "necessity" that Obiechina emphasizes, not only because it underscores the institutional precarity of the literature and the contingency of the comparison, but also because the necessity he identifies is the generalizable historical condition of postcolonial and other minor (or immigrant) literatures in relation both to comparative literature as Levin defended it and to world literature as Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and others have described it. Levin's comparative literature, like contemporary world literature, is a global positioning system that not only assigns (or consigns) authors, critics, and literatures to relative positions of geocultural (and, I submit, therefore also geopolitical) importance; it also reinforces the institutional power to determine who may indulge in other people's comparisons (or, for that matter, the study of national or minor literatures) and who must compare.

Obiechina's comparative claim that "African novels necessarily derived from Western models" was itself necessary. Such claims reflect the condition and history of comparison from the periphery (the reparative comparison of African or other non-European and immigrant literatures to European literature) precisely because invidious comparisons were part of the historical operation and condition of colonialism—just as they remain part of the history of immigration and state immigration policies today. Indeed, in the traditional model of comparative literature that Rey Chow characterizes as "Europe and Its Others," other literatures of the world are welcomed into comparative literature insofar as they may be "synthesized with the European tradition"—that is, read against "the grid of intelligibility . . . of literature as understood in Europe."⁴⁷ This act of hospitality (or salvage comparison) depends upon and

44 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58.

45 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 66.

46 Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, 36.

47 Chow, "The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective," 294.

“instigates not only comparison but a politics of comparison.”⁴⁸ And that politics of comparison persists into the era of decolonization when, as Chow says (after Partha Chatterjee), “a third-world nation cannot be/become itself without being derivative of that epistemological frame against which it is struggling; and yet, try as it may, it cannot free itself of that frame.”⁴⁹ Thus, the necessity of comparison (the imperative to compare) is also part of the history and practice of literary decolonization, when a “wretched” national literature might be validated in comparison to a paradigmatic European national literature. This is certainly true in the early days of postcolonial independence when, to paraphrase Fanon, it was necessary to be national (by comparison) in order to be international.⁵⁰

Comparisons are historical: so what kinds of comparison are possible, inevitable, or necessary at particular historical moments? Who compares *the* literature, under what extra-literary conditions? And how and when does literature qualify for comparison?

Each of the scholars cited in “Conjectures on World Literature” is doing something else when they compare their non-European novels to European texts in the 1960s and 1970s—something other than just talking about objective similarities and differences between two literatures and traditions. I imagine that this “something else” is apparent to many of you. But let me situate Obiechina’s and Irele’s comparisons in terms of the state of the fields of postcolonial African literary studies and comparative literature in the era of their first publications, more or less around the time of Levin’s address to the ACLA, because their location of comparison bears some resemblance to the situation he described of European immigrants in American comparative literature, who also needed to compare the literature.

In the 1960s, a primary concern of postcolonial African writers and educators, as well as of Africanist literary scholars in American and European universities, was the acquisition of modest cultural capital, the institutional legitimacy of the term *African literature*, the prestige of the objects designated by it, and the viability of publishing and teaching them at home and abroad. After the Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere College in Uganda in 1962, which became bogged down immediately in definitional disputes about who counts as an African author and what counts as African literature, the South African novelist and critic Ezekiel Mphahlele reported on two subsequent conferences convened in 1963 to consider the conditions of possibility for studying African literatures in African universities.⁵¹ A conference in

48 Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” 294.

49 Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” 304.

50 I offer just one example of the immigration barriers raised by the embedded assumption that a literature must be national in order to be both international and comparable. In a provocative essay from 1975—titled “Are There Any National Literatures in Sub-Saharan Black Africa Yet?”—Bernth Lindfors observed that while “artificially created ethnic conglomerations . . . became independent African nation-states recognized and seated at the U.N.,” “[j]udged by any of the standard criteria for measuring the ‘nationality’ of a literature . . . modern African literatures fall far short of qualifying for full-scale literary independence.” Bernth Lindfors, “Are There Any National Literatures in Sub-Saharan Black Africa Yet?” *English in Africa* 2.2 (1975): 1–9, esp. 1–2. The implication, from the perspective of Levin’s model of comparative literature, would be that there may be nothing to compare coming out of Africa until there are African national literatures.

51 Ezekiel Mphahlele, “African Literature and Universities: A Report on Two Conferences to Discuss African Literature and the University Curriculum,” *Transition* 10 (September 1963): 16–18.

Senegal examined the challenges of incorporating African literatures into the curricula of the continent's French-language universities; a conference in Sierra Leone did the same for English-language universities.

Writing for the African journal *Transition*, Mphahlele records that the Sierra Leone conferees had a "frank discussion of the practical problems involved in the integration of Africa's literature, beginning with the assumption that if it is in English then it must be taught in the department of English."⁵² The Francophone writers and professors convened in Dakar came to a different conclusion: "It was felt that African literature should be studied under a chair of comparative literature or African studies. . . . place[d] . . . outside French literature."⁵³ There is much to be said from comparing the differences in conclusions between those two conferences: English turns out to be a language, French a culture, for example. I cannot go in that direction tonight, but I do want to note that each conference's conclusion depended on a comparison of disparaged literature to prestigious literature. Accordingly, the reports concluded that the study of English-language African literature might be legitimized by joining an English-language tradition that included other literatures of the (former) empire—not on par with the national literature of the colonial metropolis but in relation to it and other new national literatures. Francophone African literatures might be introduced through a department of comparative literature, where they could be read in relation to, but not as a part of, French national literature; they would be given an independent identity on par with the national literature from the colonial metropolis.⁵⁴ What is striking is that both conferences felt the need to turn African literature into something suitable for comparison in order to attempt to validate the study of African literature—even in Africa! In other words, for African literature to make its way in the world (into what we too easily call world literature), it had to locate itself within the European "grid of reference";⁵⁵ it had to become literature by comparison.

To return to the American context, similar efforts to make a place for African literature were underway in the United States in the mid-1960s. Almost a full decade before the founding of the African Literature Association in Austin, Texas, in 1975, the African Studies Association (an area studies formation established in 1957) convened a special committee, chaired by UCLA professor John Povey, in order "to consider the scholarly significance" of African literature, "[t]he professional justification of the field," and "[t]he place of this study in American Universities."⁵⁶ In 1966, Povey's committee sought to give African literary studies "authority and orthodoxy"; "all new subjects," Povey warned, are "regarded with some suspicion as a dilution of accepted scholarly standards. . . . In the case of African literature this feeling is complicated by the traditional conservatism of language and literature departments

52 Mphahlele, "African Literature and Universities," 17.

53 Mphahlele, "African Literature and Universities," 16.

54 There is an interesting paradox to note here: the suggestion to separate Francophone literatures from French literature proposes the opposite position from some postcolonial political leaders who chose to have their countries remain part of France; likewise, the proposal to read and teach Anglophone literatures as part of the family of English literature(s) seems contrary to the political solution of Anglophone African countries that demanded full independence from Great Britain.

55 Chow, "The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective," 294.

56 John F. Povey, "African Literature and American Universities," *African Studies Bulletin* 9.2 (1966): 13–19, esp. 14–15.

which are not beyond expressing disbelief in the existence of an African literature.”⁵⁷ Among the strategies for “demonstrat[ing] that African literature is as worthy of investigation as any other area of study,”⁵⁸ Povey argued, was to pursue “comparative studies”: “comparative literature might suggest a comfortable home for this African topic if tradition does not hold such departments to largely European comparatives.”⁵⁹ Thus, African literature (as a field of study and a body of writing) could be validated, the argument went, by making comparisons between it and European literature—that is, *the* literature. Further, he noted, unraveling the foreign form/local materials dynamic, that because “much of the writing [necessarily] leans heavily upon the literary traditions of the European language which it utilizes,” “much that is specifically African may be made intelligible to the American literature student by analogy with his own culture.”⁶⁰ In fact, Povey hoped that comparative literature studies might eventually do away altogether with the foreign/local bind, the “either/or stands in our attitude toward African literature” that force us to argue “that it is all European in structure or that it is totally African in concept.”⁶¹

The historical preconditions of modern African literature and the politics of (post)colonial comparison mean that it is “easy to find an echo of, say, Ezra Pound in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo”⁶² or resonances of the novels of Daniel Defoe and the Grub Street pamphleteers in Onitsha Market literature (popular Nigerian literature),⁶³ or “the influence of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins on [John Pepper] Clark, or that of Claudel on Senghor,”⁶⁴ or the themes and language of *Othello* and *Heart of Darkness* in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*⁶⁵—all comparisons that were being made by African and Africanist scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. These were field-forming, national-literature-creating comparisons—maybe even strategic comparative essentialisms; they have all been done before, even as they are being done now (as if for the first time), by salvage comparatists from other locations, for other purposes, in their own efforts to give authority and orthodoxy to fields such as global

57 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 15.

58 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 19.

59 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 17. A similar sentiment is articulated in the inaugural editorial statement for the *African Studies Bulletin*, the first official publication of the African Studies Association, which was dedicated primarily to collecting and disseminating bibliographic information about social science research work on Africa. In the first issue in 1958, Melville J. Herskovits, president of the ASA, laid out his hopes that the new journal might facilitate “the comparative studies that are essential if we are to make analyses that have the depth needed to give adequate discernment” and “to achieve world-wide adjustment.” Melville J. Herskovits, “Editorial,” *African Studies Bulletin* 1.1 (1958): 1–2.

60 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 14, 16.

61 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 18.

62 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 14.

63 Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, 13.

64 Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, 14.

65 Barbara Harlow, “Othello’s Season of Migration,” *Edebiyat* 4.2 (1979): 157–75. For an example of a recent claim to have recovered Salih’s novel for an expanding modernist studies by making old comparisons anew, see Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13.3 (2006): 425–43. Friedman notes Harlow’s rejection of her appropriative comparison (431), but the impressive list of prior scholarship on the topic that might trouble her modernist claim (which Harlow apparently provided to Friedman) is elided in the text of her essay, buried in footnote 39.

modernisms, world literature, and transnational American studies, often without regard for (or even recognition of) the historicity of such (necessary) comparisons, the relative precarity of those who first made them, the inertia of comparative literature, and the considerable barriers against introducing to world literature “a new world of literature.”⁶⁶

I have given no more than a rough sketch of the historical location from which Obiechina, Irele, and others were making comparisons between African and European literatures in the 1960s and 1970s—when they were battling entrenched prejudices against non-European literatures, like those that suffused the American Comparative Literature Association. Given the cultural and other politics of the time, Obiechina and Irele were involved not in some disinterested study of the purely formal qualities of art; they needed to establish the legitimacy (the authority and orthodoxy) of the literary objects they studied in order to make their work legible in the dominant terms of comparative literature and to demonstrate, precisely, that such texts were legitimate objects of literary study and proper candidates for formal admission into the world of letters that Levin prized. As much as they may have compared in order to validate their own cultural formations and scholarly enterprises, they also compared for the sake of their disregarded literatures and the political futures of their newly independent nations. Chow notes that “the pursuit of comparative literature in non-Western countries is not entirely distinguishable from national literature studies,”⁶⁷ and I submit that “Now proceed: compare the literature” could have been the political mandate that concluded the African Studies Association Report in 1966, and, more broadly, could have served as an anticolonial activist slogan as part of a literary strategy for cultural and political decolonization.

Historically, the comparison of peripheral literatures to the hegemonic comparative literature of Europe seems to be part of the price of admission into the world republic of letters. The history of the hospitality, or inhospitality, of comparative literature, as I have said, is at least partially written in the histories of these sorts of comparisons that have been done (and forgotten) before—or, more precisely, in the still mostly unwritten histories that compare such comparisons and their locations across time. Such histories are not always easy to recover or to tell; comparison may be “inevitable,” as Chow argues, but it is also “unfinalizable,” in perpetual need of renegotiation, in part because “the partialities, erasures, and disappearances [of prior comparisons] have been inscribed over time into such materials’ seemingly positivistic existences.”⁶⁸ And yet, if we ignore the location of comparison, we not only risk further sedimenting those occlusions and forgetting rich histories of comparison that should matter to us as scholars of comparative literature—histories of the necessary efforts of other people necessarily comparing the literature. We also risk losing a sense of the essential historicity of comparison—that is, the contingency, and sometimes risky (political) business, of comparing the literature.

Let me close by returning to Levin’s location of comparison. I would argue that there is a certain postcolonial quality (or nationalist anxiety) to Levin’s argument in

66 Povey, “African Literature and American Universities,” 19.

67 Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” 302.

68 Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” 298.

1968, and if we should not lose sight of the contingencies of comparison in the case of African literature, we should also want to remember the location of comparison that made the Eurocentricism of American comparative literature seem necessary to Levin in his time and place. Indeed, the aim of Levin's own comparison of American comparative literature to French comparative literature was not all that different from the African comparisons I have discussed. Given his emphasis on the place of expatriated Europeans in American comparative literature, Levin's address suggests that the founding of the ACLA—and the practice of comparing *the* literature—served to validate the biographical experiences, cultural formations, and comparative perspectives of a particular (if relatively small) historical assembly of immigrant intellectuals from Europe. Likewise, if Obiechina, Irele, and others compared literature in an effort to secure, at least in part, the validity and independence of African literature, then the nationalist inflections of Levin's exhortation to compare *the* literature might also be read as an appeal to secure the authority, orthodoxy, and independence of American comparative literature from its European predecessor. In other words, American comparative literature had to be comparative literature by comparison.

There are, of course, major differences between Levin's comparison and Irele's and Obiechina's. As far as I know, no one was denying the existence of European literature or challenging the legitimacy of including it within the purview of comparative literature; and Levin's was not a proposal for decolonizing the American mind. While the African scholars were comparing for the expansive purposes of amplification and inclusion, Levin's appeal for comparing the literature operated in the defensive mode of fortification and exclusion, guarding the eurocentrism of the association as a way to legitimate the new global hegemon of American comparative literature. If that counted as "doing justice" to a part of the world of letters (at the expense of most of the world of literature), we might want to ask whether the practices undertaken under the aegis of American comparative literature today are doing justice, in our current period of great political dispersions, to the regions of the world definitely within our range now.