

Editor's note: These pieces are invited responses to Joseph Slaughter's "Locations of Comparison," published in Volume 5, Issue 2.

Comparison Re-Justified

Jeanne-Marie Jackson

In his 2017 presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association, Joseph Slaughter works via Harry Levin to raise the important question of what it means to “do justice” with and in the discipline of comparative literature. “After all,” he writes, “even if we recoil at Levin’s insistence that the North Atlantic . . . is the proper geography for American Comparative Literature, his idea that 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 systemic injustice—of anti-immigrant anti-intellectualism in the U.S. and Europe.” This concern resonates with my own sense of the field and its practitioners; I am lucky to have been trained at a time when comparison’s Eurocentric past was a well-acknowledged problem. I know virtually no comparatist who does not see “doing justice” to expressive traditions beyond those from which they hail as somehow wrought up in their work, extending back for many of us to the suspension of self that immersive language training demands. Agreement at this level of generality is easy enough. It is at the level of particular project design and methodology that things get murkier, and where scholars who believe themselves to be working toward the same goal draw their battle lines. Slaughter ends his address accordingly, by reformulating the question of justice in a slightly more granular way: “[W]e 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” (29).

So what *are* the “practices” that Slaughter refers to here, and how do they help or hinder an overarching goal of the discipline’s geographical de-hierarchization? Though he frames the question of justice within a self-evident continuum between our positions beyond the academy and our practices within it, the situation is still more complicated than this shared social urgency would suggest. The relation of one’s political to one’s intellectual commitments is often oblique, entailing an agile and nearly constant toggling among different levels of focus. Justice on an institutional level and justice on an intellectual one are complementary but not necessarily convergent aims. Slaughter’s address but gestures toward this fact, thereby offering an opportunity to more fully flesh out the difficulty of moving from one plane to the other.

Jeanne-Marie Jackson is an assistant professor of world Anglophone literature at Johns Hopkins University. Her first book is *South African Literature’s Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation* (Bloomsbury 2015). She is currently completing *The African Novel of Ideas: Intellection in the Age of Global Writing* for Princeton University Press. (Email: jjacks98@jhu.edu)

In offering up an example of injustice from the field, he raises the crucial and often overlooked issue of citation, whereby Franco Moretti relegates the foundational African literary scholars Emmanuel Obiechina and Abiola Irele to an ill-contextualized footnote. Practically speaking, Slaughter's recommendation for doing justice here is pretty straightforward: Western comparatists need to historicize or "locate" the regionally in-depth scholarly work of which they make sometimes hasty use. Paradigmatically speaking, though, his example invokes a persistent problem confronting the postcolonial field that is harder to solve: there remains an unspoken prestige gap in the discipline at large between "big questions" work and its regional tributaries. Anyone working mainly within the broad terrain of global south literature knows the score here. We can count on one hand the names of regional postcolonial experts whose work is acknowledged by English department generalists.

In taking up Slaughter's invitation to consider comparative literature as a forum for justice, though, I want to focus here on some restrictive tendencies *within* the postcolonial-cum-global south literary field rather than on its place in the discipline at large. In particular, I will suggest some ways in which the notion of literary "justice" might become a form of inadvertent injustice in its own right, provincializing "global" traditions by enforcing too literal or direct a relation between the world of action and the world of literary thought. Knowing full well the limitations of anecdotal evidence, I nonetheless take my cue here from a formative moment in my own graduate training as a comparatist. Sitting in a postcolonial survey seminar one day led by the Pakistani scholar Sara Suleri—a formidable writer in her own right, most notably of the memoir *Meatless Days*—someone raised the specter of V.S. Naipaul. I don't recall the context, but I do recall the knowing and dismissive tone: our class was on the right side of things, and Naipaul, clearly, the wrong one. Almost certainly, I went along with it. Suleri, however, held back. She reflected for a moment, before slowly reciting a line from Naipaul's 1979 novel *A Bend in the River*: "We were simple men with civilizations but without other homes." The care brought to bear on that moment, which Suleri could so easily have used to build a cheaper kind of classroom rapport, contrasted sharply enough with the haste of students' judgments that I found myself pulled up short. "I am not ready to dismiss someone who writes a sentence like that," she continued, before the discussion veered back to the less-incendiary text at hand.

My point here is not simply to praise a pedagogical affect from which I continue to find inspiration, but to indicate how doing justice demands different temperaments at different times, and in different forums. Not a year passes that I don't hear someone make a snide remark about Naipaul's being purged from our classroom and whatever now passes for the postcolonial canon. And yet not two years passes when I don't think of Suleri's hesitation here and assign a Naipaul novel (more often than not, *The Mimic Men*) as a means of getting students to reckon with the disparity between his jagged political posturing and the well-wrought sublimity of his prose. My choice to continue teaching someone like Naipaul (in whom I have no deep personal investment), contrasted with many of my colleagues' choice not to, bespeaks virtually nothing of our real-life political commitments: in most cases, our causes are the same. What this difference in pedagogical approach does signal, I think, is a discrepancy between whether we see doing justice *to* literature as consonant with doing justice *through* it. It is not, frankly, a matter of how we vote, or to what end we organize, or

even of what university reforms we might favor. It is a philosophical question about one's comfort with conflating intellectual and institutional mobilization, in this case as concerns textual objects from parts of the world often prized more than others for their "use value." One vision of justice supposes that removing V.S. Naipaul from students' purview is politically progressive, a small step in ridding the world of misogyny and racial condescension. An opposing vision of justice holds that a "difficult" figure like Naipaul is essential to conveying the fullest possible range of responses—moral, political, and aesthetic—to the experience of decolonization. In practical terms, of course, this conflict is largely moot because individual professors will teach what they want to and no consensus is needed. Theoretically, though, it is an impasse that stands as an important corrective to what seems like an increasingly pervasive and reductive view that "justice" here is at issue on only one side.

Because Slaughter focuses on an Africanist scholarly archive, and because that is also my own main area of expertise, the rest of this piece will address some ways in which this conflict as to what doing justice to or through literature means plays out in the Western-located study of African writing. Specifically, I want to take up what I see as the unjustly enforced social utility of African writing precisely in advancing what seem like justice-seeking methodologies. The incongruity as I have presented it thus far is also especially relevant to this ACLA-related forum, echoing as it does some longstanding tensions between comparative and "world" literature approaches to so-called global texts. Much as the aforementioned example of Naipaul hits on an underlying question of whether doing literary justice can diverge from its immediate social corollary, there is often a crucial difference in how comparatists, as opposed to world literature scholars with a redemptive interest in the global south, imagine their methodological aims. I realize that this distinction has grown stickier as comparative literature departments have closed around the country, and the line between who is and is not a "comparatist" has grown difficult to trace. Broadly speaking, though, I mean the distinction to invoke a mode of analysis, on the one hand, that takes for granted the existence of discrete literary traditions and locales in order to perform an overcoming of the boundaries between them; and on the other, a literary analysis that emphasizes the ultimate singularity and co-complicities of the world system. It is a question of interpretive scale and contextual responsibility more than a question of what any one of us takes to be the state of reality "as such."

"Comparative literature has always thought about difference," Haun Saussy writes in his Introduction to the volume *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, but inequality remains foreign to its usual vocabulary.¹ In a further move toward pitting global economic disparity against comparative literature's worldly self-conception, Saussy continues, "The more cosmopolitan our reach, the more evident the problem." Not unsurprisingly, comparative literature has come under fire elsewhere for seeming to efface intrinsic geopolitical inequalities in the name of maintaining the sorts of "differences" that can then be laterally compared. Writing in *The Global South* during its first year of publication in 2007, for example, Alfred J. López argues that

1 Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 28.

“The rise of postcolonial studies and related projects has begun to expose [the problem of “foreignized” subaltern texts] in comparative literature, as the latter has only in the past decade started playing a belated game of inclusive multicultural ‘catchup’ in an area in which it has effectively been trumped.”² Lopez thus believes that “The global South signals the death of a certain kind of comparative literature, because it would undermine the originary exclusion upon which the discipline is founded.”³

The stakes, I believe, are yet again more complex than this. Whereas many comparatists respond to global economic divisions by advocating for more inclusive comparative methodologies, the trend among Marxist-influenced world literature scholars is to see this move as politically flaccid. Consider the following two statements, the first by Shu-mei Shih in a recent *PMLA* essay on “World Studies and Relational Comparison,” and the second from the Warwick Research Collective’s 2015 book *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. “The work of the comparatist thereby partially evens out the terrain of literature across the world,” Shih writes, “thus [breaking up] the center-periphery model of world systems theory.”⁴ And still more pithily, “A true anti-Eurocentrism should scatter all centers rather than replace one center with another.”⁵ In contrast, the authors of the Warwick Research Collective (WRC) book begin from the assumption that literary studies should reflect rather than seek to transcend global economic dynamics. While they, too, seek departure from a diffusionist model of modernity in favor of a varied but all-encompassing capitalist system, the WRC focuses on “the *literary* registration and encoding of modernity as a social logic.”⁶ In other words, they are interested in what literature of roughly the past 200 years—and especially that from formerly colonized parts of the Anglophone world—reveals about the material conditions of its production. The world after all *is* made up of centers and peripheries, and Shih’s utopic egalitarianism won’t make that any less the case.

Following on interventions by Fredric Jameson and Harry Harootunian, among others, which dismiss postcolonial theories of “alternative modernities” as similarly denialist, the WRC position at first glance seems unassailable in its logic. If the “unprecedentedness” of the “modern capitalist ‘world-system’ . . . consists precisely in the fact that it is a *world-system* that is also, uniquely and for the first time, a *world system*”⁷—that is, if capitalism is the system that determines *all* systems—well then it follows that all literature somehow registers its dominance. An argument of this scale, though, is doomed to say the same thing over and over: literature shows us only what we already know, the totalizing thrust of which heads off alternative frameworks at the pass. Harry Harootunian perhaps unwittingly acknowledges as much in his likeminded essay “Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem,” asserting that, “If . . . the instance of unevenness

2 Alfred J. López. “Introduction: Comparative Literature and the Return of the Global Repressed,” *The Global South* 1.1 (2007): 2.

3 *Ibid.*, 5.

4 Shu-mei Shih, “World Studies and Relational Comparison,” *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 436.

5 *Ibid.*, 435.

6 Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 15.

7 *Ibid.*, 8.

invariably accompanies the historical spread of capitalism everywhere, it must still continue to occupy a commanding 'space of experience' because it constitutes one of its principal conditions of preproduction."⁸ For him, this suggests that a world-systems approach to literature must restore emphasis on temporality over what he sees as the faulty postcolonial preference for space because capitalism manifests in time as an endlessly replaying process rather than a stagnant, achieved, and overturnable state.

The upshot of Harootunian's argument is that a global comparison grounded in discrete geographical identifications "either dramatizes the location of difference or situates place boundedness as an asylum for political and cultural resistance to globalization,"⁹ wedding an appearance of resistance to a Western-originating capitalist modernity by "centering" non-Western locales to a perpetual definition of the rest of the world vis-à-vis the West. The argument's turns are many, but its final shape looks something like this: comparison gravitates toward space (i.e., comparing one country or region with another) because it provides a bounded entity for the comparatist to work with. In downplaying time and thus the simultaneous dynamisms of capitalist entrenchment, it "[denies] a relationship of coequality to precisely those societies targeted for study."¹⁰ Comparison, in short, has often served as an insidious force for instantiating hierarchy even as it claims to dispel it. The reason for this is that in Harootunian's estimation, "the inevitable impulse to compare" has historically been fused with "a strategy to classify and categorize according to criteria based upon geopolitical privilege."¹¹ His point also relates to a persistent complaint of global scholars working in the comparative domain, which is that "the non-West may be a source of exotic cultural production but cannot be a site of theory."¹² In other words, "global literatures" are fetishized as content, never fully enfranchised as method.

Although Harootunian's critique of comparison vis-à-vis a world-systems approach is more conceptually dense than the WRC's, the fact remains that both miss the justice claim intrinsic to Shih's deceptively simple point, which maintains that comparative literature should provide an alternative set of possibilities to those afforded (or more aptly, not) by the economic divisions of the world. It is a bracketing of the literary arena that is deliberate, not delusional. This is not to suggest that literature does *not* register the macroeconomic conditions in which it is produced, but that it also does a good many other things in surplus of this. If African and other literatures of the global south are relegated primarily to a role of being *vessels for* rather than *objects of* some kind of justice, then literary practitioners of all stripes and shades may as well throw up their hands in defeat. As Peter Brooks worried more than a decade ago in relation to comparative literature's institutional fate (a prognosis that has hardly grown rosier), a literary analysis that stakes itself to economic truths risks replacing "the study of literature with

8 Harry Harootunian, "Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem," *Boundary 2* 32.2 (2005): 51.

9 *Ibid.*, 39.

10 *Ibid.*, 32.

11 *Ibid.*, 30.

12 Revathi Krishnaswamy, "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization," *Comparative Literature* 62.4 (2010): 400.

amateur social history, amateur sociology, and personal ideology.”¹³ If doing justice to literature and doing justice through it are in fact the same thing, then this disciplinary dilution is scarcely a problem; other fields will pick up the slack where they haven’t already triumphed by more or less any metric. If we are to insist that they are subtly *different* aims, however—and this is my own view—then we should still heed Brooks’s warning: subsuming literary study into a more generic demand for social mobilization amputates the adjacent space in which a concept like “justice” can percolate. To quote briefly from Paul Ricoeur’s *The Just* as he elaborates an aesthetic philosophy drawn from Kant and Hannah Arendt, justice is a multilayered project that entails careful distinction between action and reflection. “[W]e need to underscore the primacy of the retrospective view of the *spectator* over the prospective view of the *actors* of history,” he summarizes. “In this way we rediscover the opposition . . . between the discernment of the one and the creativity of the other.”¹⁴

I’d like to conclude with a final, brief example of this delicate trade-off between the virtues traditionally associated with comparison (regional expertise, multilingual close reading, openness to and reflection on “otherness,” etc.) and those more recently claimed by the world-systems approach (namely an attunement to economic hegemony). In a recent essay published by the online journal *Blind Field* called “On the African Literary Hustle,” the Canadian scholar Sarah Brouillette indicts what she refers to as the “NGOization of African literature.”¹⁵ “The field of contemporary Anglophone African literature relies instead on private donors, mainly but not exclusively American,” she writes, “supporting a transnational coterie of editors, writers, prize judges, event organizers, and workshop instructors. The literary works that arise from this milieu of course tend to be targeted at British and American markets.” This is a common enough position in the more popular byways of the African literary arena (Twitter and Facebook threads, along with frequent thought-pieces on a few signal blogs), and Brouillette is surely aiming to critique a Western-centric economic power structure rather than to denigrate African letters. Her introductory claims, nonetheless, operate at a level of generalization that tells the reader little about the most meaningful dimensions of how literary production works. What information does the identifier “transnational” really provide here about the position of the many and sundry literary organizations operating in African communities, let alone about the kinds of work they prize or publish? Although “coterie” implies some sort of malignant uniformity (presumably, the uniformity of financial association with “the West”), the situation on the ground is highly variegated. Do relatively small-scale Alliance Française or Goethe-Institut locales—many of which operate differently within even their own umbrella organizations—fall into the same category as a multimillion-dollar contract from a “Big 5” global publisher? How do we categorize a scholar born in Nigeria who teaches for years there before accepting a post in the United States, and then signing on as a judge for an African literary prize?

13 Peter Brooks, “Must We Apologize?” in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Multiculturalism* ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 100.

14 Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 104.

15 Sarah Brouillette. “On the African Literary Hustle,” *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*. August 14, 2017. <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2017/08/14/on-the-african-literary-hustle/>.

After a brief overview of the literary publishing situation in Zimbabwe over the past two decades or so (which notably leaves out organizations such as Bulawayo-based amaBooks or *Munyori Literary Journal*), we come to the essay's main claim: "Literary writing is a category tied inexorably to the fate of dynamic, absorptive, 'healthy' capitalism." Because it is clear by this point that healthy capitalism is a contradiction in terms (capitalism is only a cure for its own disease), there is also no doubt as to how the remainder of the essay is to be read. Literary writing is a symptom of the world-systemic rot it does little or nothing to alleviate, instead begging for handouts from the coterie to whom we've already been breezily introduced. The case study Brouillette chooses to focus on is Kenya's storied and influential Kwani Trust, associated most famously with the writer Binyavanga Wainaina but, in fact, a nursery for a good many other home-grown talents and texts including Billy Kahora's *The True Story of David Munyakei* and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*. Brouillette mentions neither of these figures, nor *Kwani's* long history of community workshops and book distribution, instead focusing mainly on its ties to the Ford Foundation and the wealthy Wylie Agency. The more significant point, however, in the context of doing justice to literary texts is that these financial relationships are meant self-evidently to bolster a far more problematic and contestable hermeneutic conclusion, namely that "the writing that emerges from this scene is Western-facing, targeted primarily at British and American markets." Because there are no readings in the piece aside from an introductory theme-setting exercise using NoViolet Bulawayo's popular novel *We Need New Names*, one is left wondering on what evidence this claim is based. It is certainly not true of either Kahora or Makumbi's books, but the reader can only conclude that this is beside the point. The unfair consolidation of global capital determines all things, and so all things must lead back to the unfair consolidation of global capital.

From this closed circuit, I now work back around to the open-endedness of Slaughter's original question. At what point do we consider that justice has been done to the objects we study? One answer is that justice is never done, that the world is growing more unjust by the day, and that it is our job to reveal this to our students through the works we teach at every possible turn. If the murmurs of assent at a panel I attended where someone suggested teaching students to write a "how-to" manual for revolution are any indication, the field is tacking strongly in this direction. When I think back to the postcolonial scholars, works, and literary encounters that have stuck with me, though—from Suleri's softspoken citation, to Abiola Irele's contrarian lecture "In Praise of Alienation," to Kwame Appiah's measured dissection of culture in *In My Father's House*—another, more restrained option comes into view. To do justice to the literary texts and aspirations that have not historically been the recipients of what now seem like passé critical movements in close-reading and "great traditions," we should strive to instill in our students a sense of resistance to easy certainties that can flourish alongside resistances of a more immediate sort. Doing justice in this context entails a willingness to let texts chart journeys for which we don't yet have maps. It is a pact to occasionally bracket our studied alertness to the world's many ills and tune into the possibilities that exist, against the odds, in surfeit of them.