

**Legitimate Issues:  
Culture and Authority in the Age of “Global Debt”**

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As Jean-Michel Rabaté reminds us in one of his Joyce books, no authority is self-begotten. Unable to authorize itself, it is accredited. It presupposes a credit, in other words—indeed, a credit in, or of, *others'* words, texts, and representations, which, to their own credit, authors like Joyce credit, so much so that their *oeuvres* turn on this fundamental or, as I will specify later, ethical recognition, on this admission and citation of debt. To author books then, hammer out paradigms, “invent” concepts, set up standards, speak “with authority” on whatever subject presuppose going in debt. We come into our own and become part of “us,” of “our” community, through references to others and not before we find our “balance,” a way of owning to what we owe them.<sup>1</sup> I indulge in such over-the-top puns only to stress how deeply embedded in language, and with it in culture, in our humanity is this seldom acknowledged indebtedness; how so much accumulation and recording of debt, so much “bookwork” go into our books; and how, in speaking, reading, and writing, in cultural practice generally, this debit brings into play issues as linguistic as moral and political, an accountability beyond accounting, a debt-derived duty larger than words, figures, and accounts.

In “*Dette mondiale et univers parallèle*” (Global Debt and Parallel Universe), a 1996 *Libération* article, Jean Baudrillard zeroes in—no pun intended here—on a different kind of incommensurable debt. This is the financial sublime of the global age. It is debt that itself

globalizes the world. Increasingly shared one way or the other by the planet's population—although by some of us more than others—it is practically infinite because impossible to pay off while still mounting ad infinitum, “beyond counting,” *au-delà de toute comptabilité*—beyond measuring and representation and without correspondence in reality, in “available capital.” This is why, Baudrillard concludes, it is financially meaningless. Its only value is symbolic because this debt speaks to a “symbolic credit system whereby people, corporations, nations are attached to one another by default.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the symbolic value of globalized and globalizing debt, I would argue, is not immaterial or meaningless. It points to the very meaning of symbolic values in general at the dawn of the new millennium, to the concrete “attachments,” flows, and exchanges underlying them, in brief, to the global formation and reach of a cultural capital that grows as it finances—funds and founds, credits and authorizes—narratives, tropes, stances, trends, and values around the world and across all kinds of boundaries. Non-referential as it may be, unevenly distributed as I think it actually is, global monetary debt nonetheless supplies a fine model for coming to terms with the worldwide circulation of symbolic capital and the swelling, planetary indebtedness derived from it. The latter is hardly a negative category. Nor is its world virtual. Instead, its “credit lines” tie us together in real or quasi-real time and space. In this material landscape, the formation of a cultural interconnectedness becomes more and more visible. Here money provides a translucent allegory of the axiological, and accordingly, here too debt is the other name of all-pervasive influence and the cultural hybridity coming on its heels. Self and other farm their discourse out to one another frenetically, so we all are more indebted to others elsewhere than we have ever been. These others and their locations hold liens on our times and spaces, on what we do and say in them and on the authority we build in there, on *our*

discourse—on what we profess and possess. And vice versa: we ourselves are jump-off points for developments that come to fruition somewhere else.

This applies to individual authors as much as to communities and traditions now more than at any other point in history. In the “compressed” space and time of interweaving world cultures authority is increasingly “on loan,” authenticity and originality intertextual affairs, “individual talent” and “personal tone” often echoes from afar, ventriloquisms. This is not a postmodern paradox. Nor does it pertain solely to an emerging network society whose rationality is fundamentally relational. But it is in this society that relatedness and, stemming from it, mix, “impurity,” the allogeneic have become staples of life worldwide. The cultural credit/debit arena is giving rise to a new, physical and non-physical (at-distance) proximity, to a culturally woven immediacy with my culture and yours intermingling and fostering new assemblages.

It is within this exchange horizon that what I call the outsourcing of identity takes place. To clarify: whatever I am or become comes about under the impact of remote, heterogeneous sources, places, and styles. The familiar is more and more a function of the alien. As a result, the economy of my being is hardly self-sufficient, depending as it does on others for “parts”—myths, fantasies, stories, symbolic structures. Leaving behind a separatedness-based model shaped by the center/margin, “in here”/“out there,” our culture/theirs, and other similar *disjunctions* typical of coloniality, postcoloniality, and an earlier stage of multicultural awareness, this economy is moving toward a *conjunctive* or *relational* model informed by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, and barterings.

Now what I want to argue in what follows is essentially this: in the context of “global debt” thus understood, the law of authority, that which legitimates a notion, a custom, style, or artistic practice *inside* a certain culture and place, must pass new if controversial tests. As I will

reiterate later, this law or laws need not and should not become one for all in this “one world” of ours, as Peter Singer calls it.<sup>3</sup> Neither should this oneness be construed as homogenizing consensus, legally or otherwise. But the particular laws undergirding particular authorities are already under revisiting, re-legitimizing pressures, subject, that is, to the law of the context itself. This relegitimation cannot but take into account the crisis of modernity’s *discrete* world picture, of the inside/outside distinction, and the subsequent opening up and progressive integration of locations, the breaking down of all sorts of borders, walls, and curtains. More to the point, in this context, what used to “go without saying” in a certain location and tradition—especially in those inclined to fancy themselves as pure, monolithic, organic—finds itself put on trial, denaturalized, complicated. Updated by Foucault’s genealogy, an older model of “critique” thus gets a new lease on life under a globalization seized not only as a historical process but also as a *historicist* or critical moment, as a stage where people query the allegedly transcendent, self-evident truth of a whole range of discourses, criteria, and interests, reflections and inflections of specific times and places.

What does this mean? Simply speaking, what it all comes down to is a revaluation of values within the ever-consolidating framework of the network society’s relational dynamic wherein local, seemingly standalone, autonomous units become more apparently that which they have been all along: “attachments,” relations, rumors of otherness, anchors in the not-here. It is obvious, to me at least, that this framework calls for a comparative approach to authority and the law it lays down, for a displacement of authority from its putatively non-ideological yet aggressively policed turf. The problem is, of course, that comparatism itself—to be more specific, Comparative Literature—lost its longstanding privileged position around mid-late 1980s. This happened when the approach and the field in general were needed most. It came as a

surprise too because the comparatists, the network surfers per se, can be expected to feel at home in the post-Cold War era's network society. So before seeing what comparatism can do for us today, let me take stock of the discipline briefly.

To get us started, I turn to Charles Bernheimer's 1995 essay "The Anxieties of Comparison," the introduction to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, because Bernheimer too argued that by virtue of "the breath of their knowledge of literature's construction and function in different cultures," "comparatists are best equipped to undertake" a "renewed articulation of the value of literature which respects both its individual, subjective aspects . . . and its social and political implications and imbrications." "In the age of multiculturalism," he concluded, "the comparatist's anxiety has finally found a field adequate to the questions that generated it."<sup>4</sup> The "field" was in fact a battlefield; the discipline was under siege. No wonder the "Bernheimer report" was more than a non-committal survey. It forefronted a disciplinary and emphatically interdisciplinary agenda, and made no bones about it. Eleven years *après*, in the introduction to the tellingly titled *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Haun Saussy informs us that Comparative Literature

has, in a sense, won its battles. It has never been better received in the American university. The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion. Authors and critics who wrote in "foreign languages" are now taught (it may be said with mock astonishment) in departments of English! The "transnational" dimension of literature and culture is universally recognized even by specialists who not long ago suspected comparatists of dilettantism. "Interdisciplinarity" is a wonder-working keyword in grant applications and college promotional leaflets. "Theory" is no longer a badge of special

identity or a mark of infamy; everyone, more or less, is doing it, more or less. . . . The controversy is over. Comparative literature is not only legitimate: now, as often as not, ours is the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra. Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions."<sup>5</sup>

This is true but not the whole story. The critic himself points out that while the epistemological and methodological battles have been won, the institutional ones have been lost. Granted, we have institutionalized our "conclusions," in that national literature departments (with English leading the pack) and other university units have adopted the comparative tools and frameworks described by Bernheimer and Saussy. At the same time, an alarming number of Comparative Literature programs have been de-institutionalized (downsized or even phased out). This is arguably a logical consequence of intradisciplinary and intradepartmental success that brings about a paradigm shift across disciplines and units and by the same token weakens the paradigm's own disciplinary and departmental position.

Still, the glass strikes me as half full. After all, the critic is right: "What needs propagating is the comparative reflex, the comparative way of thinking, not the departmental name." Further, if "identity" is indeed the "pivot of our triumph—and our wraithlikeness,"<sup>6</sup> then I propose that we entertain a "contrastive" or, a cosmopolitan notion of disciplinary-departmental identity: not necessarily one that involves "selflessness," as Saussy seems to imply,<sup>7</sup> but one in which a comparatist's self and comparative studies' collective, disciplinary selfhood for that matter are articulated no less comparatively, across national, institutional, methodological, and field-related boundaries. For both, in the wider world and in the academy, identity is, more visibly nowadays, what it has always been: itinerant and diasporic, only temporarily or superficially entrenched. Its strength and "profile," what it is and does best may spring from a

certain root (roots, actually, usually more than one) but reach full potential as they uproot themselves and go places. In effect, the meaning of this kind of identity does not inhere in its root but en route. Its true home is away from home. Its natural birth no less than its professional birth or training are dry runs for whatever takes place thereafter in other people's homes, in a Film or English rather than a Comparative Literature department. This is how comparatists build an identity on the go, not in one place but in places successively and simultaneously, and as they do so they "find" themselves by giving up some of our initial selfhood, security, and notions. And this is also how this cosmopolitan identity itself turns into method, how biography and epistemology become one.

What comparatists stand to gain from this personal and institutional loss is, I think, obvious. But so are the pitfalls. Together, the downside and the upside make up the "indiscipline" of the discipline. And this has to do less with Comparative Literature's disciplinary rowdiness within the academy and more with the "politics of comparison," with the field's inherited (Hegelian) treatment of alterity.<sup>8</sup> If comparing comes down to seizing upon a work as part and parcel of a network, as Roland Greene reminds us, then what we need to lay out is a "non-analogical" comparison model, a network setup that does not "discipline" or reduce to the selfsame, to the already-known the particular object that it brings into its fold.<sup>9</sup> Historically, this reduction has been culturocentric, Eurocentric, to be more precise. Invoked by Saussy, Jonathan Culler, and others before them, Comparative Literature's "cosmopolitanism" has seldom broken out of its Western framework, and so empires old and new have appended its cultural ecumenism to their political and economical agendas more often than not.<sup>10</sup> This is one reason critics like Timothy Brennan come down so hard on cosmopolitanism in *Wars of Position*, his second book on the subject.<sup>11</sup> Here is how he defines it:

• *Cosmopolitanism*. Colloquially associated with broad fellow-feeling, world travel, openness to cultural otherness, and so on, cosmopolitanism discursively accompanies globalization as the political ethic of the humanities intellectual. It both describes and endorses (endorses *as* it describes) the creation of a singularity out of newness, a blending and merging of differences becoming one entity. Furthermore, it stipulates a theory of world government and world citizenship in which the term's cultural meaning is carried over to its political one. In that sense, it is distinct from internationalism, which sets out to establish a global network of respect and cooperation based on differences of polity as well as culture. Cosmopolitanism sprouts from an already existing culture of intellectuals and middle-class travelers, researchers, and businessmen. Internationalism, on the other hand—although based no less than cosmopolitanism on the facts of global interpenetration, the homogenization brought about by capitalist mass culture, and the cultural consequences of mass migration—is an ideology of the domestically restricted, the recently relocated, the exiled, and the temporarily weak.<sup>12</sup>

The definition comes right before a similar one on neoliberalism, possibly global studies' most uncritically rehearsed mantra.<sup>13</sup> The vicinity suggests a complicity. In fact, it purports to disqualify as much as the qualifications set forth in the definition itself. I do not doubt some will find the association a matter of course. To me, it seems more like a matter of opinion, a rhetorical move whose success hinges on how you understand the terms at hand. This understanding has serious bearings on comparative studies. If, as I have noted, comparatists (at least some of them) tend to view their in(ter)discipline, what they do and are ultimately, as cosmopolitan, then Brennan's account must rub them the wrong way. As with "neoliberalism," this account is not an "analysis" but, in his own words, a "faith,"<sup>14</sup> that is, doxological grounded



in belief—and throughout *Wars of Position* we see Brennan doing onto others what he claims they have been doing in and to the recent history of theory and cultural politics. As for what he believes cosmopolitanism is and does, this strikes me as highly restrictive and questionable. Not only is cosmopolitanism (and the comparatism underpinning it) much older than globalization and the neoliberalism putatively behind it (never mind that globalization and neoliberalism are, together and separately, not necessarily what the critic makes them out to be); not only are there competing histories and descriptions for all these concepts and practices. But it has been argued, convincingly to my mind, that the kind of critical cosmopolitanism on the rise need not and in a host of relevant contexts clearly does not “endorse” the “merging” of cultural differences into a single cultural and political “entity.” Ironically enough, it was post-World War I “internationalism” and the U.S.S.R. proxies known as the Internationals that attempted just that, and there have been encouraging signs that the burgeoning neo-internationalist, transnational, and non-governmental movements are shaking off that troublesome legacy.

A fairly limiting view of cosmopolitanism makes then people like Brennan contend that the phenomenon furthers the homogenizing agenda of globalization. For one thing, the same view restricts today’s cosmopolitans to privileged business and intellectual elites. For another—and setting aside for now the classist “elite” business—this picture of broad brushstrokes ignores how comparatists have been positioned themselves of late within such elites, that is, precisely “the political ethic of the humanities intellectual” or the “rationale” comparatists have had to work out “to escape [Comparative Literature’s] status as the humanities’ disciplinary remainder.”<sup>15</sup> If it is true, as Brennan himself admits, that “actually the non-Western gesture has been an aspect of comparative literature from” its Goethean start,<sup>16</sup> then what exactly prevents us

from keeping up the good work in this pluricultural, difference-sensitive, non-homogenizing, indeed cosmopolitan tradition of comparative studies?

Kwame Anthony Appiah's answer in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in A World of Strangers*<sup>17</sup> is quite encouraging. While admitting that "there are friends of cosmopolitanism who make [him] nervous," the critic is also

happy to be opposed to cosmopolitanism's noisiest foes. Both Hitler and Stalin . . . launched regular invectives against 'rootless cosmopolitans'; and while, for both, anti-cosmopolitanism was often just a euphemism for anti-Semitism, they were right to see cosmopolitanism as their enemy. For they both required a kind of loyalty to one portion of humanity—a nation, a class—that ruled out loyalty to all of humanity. And the one thought that cosmopolitans share is that no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other. Fortunately, we need take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality. The position worth defending might be called (in both senses) a partial cosmopolitanism.<sup>18</sup>

Eat the cake and have it too? "Partially" at least? Possibly. At any rate, Appiah does some damage to its ideological icing: the nation-state. If Brennan and others hark back uncritically to previous statist forms, Appiah is more inclined to acknowledge the troubling record of this political structure no less than the "unimaginative" role it has often played in terms of reining in identity within the domain of a usually traditional if not conservative and authoritarian oneness: one place, one ethnic group, one genetic pool, one way of doing things, one way of defining, hence authorizing a style or a lifestyle, one and, if not the only, then the hegemonic way of understanding genre or gender, the novel or women novelists or both, and so forth. Romantic

ideologies of nationhood notwithstanding, the “many” have always already been built into—yet systematically shut out of—most national formations I can think of. This is as much as saying that complications come first, are original, and also that there is something inherently cosmopolitan to every nation and community. As Appiah notes, “The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already have a cosmopolitan life.”<sup>19</sup>

While setting the stage for the seemingly implacable, manifestly cosmopolitan “worlding” of the nation in the post-1989 era, this intrinsic, less visible life still needs to be brought out. This is where the global-age comparatists come in, reminding people of forgotten or contested complexities and “connections”<sup>20</sup>—of our humanity, that is. For, if we “star[t] with what is human in humanity,” as Appiah recommends, we run into a web of connections. By the way, this is what postmodern “relativism” means: not a hermeneutic free-for-all, a sort of anything goes, and so it has nothing to do with “relative” in this sense, but in another, which hints that anything subject to representation is related to other representations or, even better, is simply related, a matter of relation, an object wrapped in and constructed by a story in turn already tied into others and so inevitably readable within the framework of this otherness.

Within this framework now, “self-explanatory” discourses do call for explanation, and the first step involves rethinking the object as element of a nexus, part and parcel of something broader. Further, once placed *in relation*, things may no longer seem as they have: great poets’ anti-Semitism starts counting aesthetically and affects canonical status, so much so that it makes people ask what it means to be a “great poet,” no less than how strong was the sway racism, xenophobia, and such held over Romanticism and modernism; or, the “Orient” appears what it has always been for the Western imagination: an exotic landfill where imperial Europe dumps on others features unable or unwilling to recognize in itself; or, this or that national identity at the

dawn of the third millennium is still constructed, we begin to realize, either a-chronically or anachronically, torn between illusions of grandeur and provincial despair over equally imaginary limitations; and within this identity, we finally understand, the previously ignored identity parameters, those responsible for its actual configuration, have been in play and therefore must be taken into account too—issues of gender, sexual choice, race, faith, ideology, and the exclusivist logic behind their socio-cultural, legal, and political encodings. In all likelihood, this critical project will take revisionary processes otherwise under way since the 1960s and amplify them globally. Naturally, to some, this recontextualization of local canons, curricula, axiologies, taxonomies, and debates, which places them in the vaster theaters of larger concerns—the Holocaust, colonialism and postcolonialism, queer studies, minority rights, globalization itself—is no more than the globalization of political correctness. To others, though, this is simply about rethinking the human at a time this operation can be undertaken less and less solely on and within small, cloistered cultural units.

We need to go back to Appiah at this juncture because he makes an important, if debatable, point on the subject: our humanness, he says, is predicated on the notion that “one connection—the one neglected in talk of cultural patrimony—is the connection not *through* identity but *despite* difference.”<sup>21</sup> I would reply that today’s true challenge is accounting for the kind of connectedness that sets itself up not *despite* differences but *through* them. There will always be a “center” of privileged location or cultural viewpoint from which we will be tempted to play down distinctions and contrasts and so potentially enlist in the homogenizing push of corporate globalization. Appiah is certainly not unaware of this “unethical” possibility. The new connectedness and the cultural “togetherness” flowing from it, I stress too, involve abilities and rights—what I can and have a right to do—no less than responsibilities, how I must act while

establishing a relation, while “comparing” and benefiting from it. Like the newly remerged cosmopolitanism and directly following from the structural obligation I have toward the other, this ethics is sometimes a reality and frequently wishful thinking. Still, given the unifying pressure of global processes, cosmopolitanism, when driven by this ethics, provides a counter to uncritical globalization, that is, precisely a critique—an “other” to it. Cosmo-theorists true to their comparative ethics—comparatists living up to the standards of “critical” cosmopolitanism—work out this alternative, this new paradigm of human interaction by supplementing if not supplanting modernity’s rationality with a moral type of relationality, thus setting the stage for a new, ethical sort of self-other interface. Post-Hegelian scripts of this cultural and epistemological drama time and again give us an “allergic” picture, and here—as elsewhere—etymology is our guide (see Gk. *allos* and *-ergeia*, “other” and “activity,” respectively): in relating to an other, in attempting to know and deal with her generally, the Western self has threatened to co-opt, assimilate, reduce her to the same, rationalize her and thus make her fit the self’s preset epistemological mold, theories, patterns, categories, and stereotypes. We are these days in a better position to theorize the world’s cosmopolitan “reading scene,” to come to grips with the global spectacle of self and other repeatedly scrutinizing, “reading” each other worldwide according to an ethical dynamic of “us” and “them,” in and against uniformity-inducing globality.

In this light, I find particularly helpful Levinas’s discussion of the Other’s “face” and, in conjunction with it, the “conversationalist” theory developed in *Totality and Infinity* (incidentally, Appiah never mentions it in his own comments on “conversation”<sup>22</sup>). When applied to cross-cultural encounters, this theory is illuminating for it shows why self and other can relate to one another, be in relation, be with each other in the modality of *relationality*

without *rationalizing*, “colonizing,” and assimilating each other. It is con-versation—not con-version—that is or should be guiding us here. Grounded in this kind of relationality, the new comparatism comes about not despite the other’s “differential” identity, mores, and values but precisely via them and as a way of honoring them. Critics like Appiah tend to suggest that “difference” among human beings has been overrated; if we toned it down, the argument goes, we got along just fine. In *Critique de l’égocentrisme*, Sylviane Agacinski cautions, however, against falling back on such “universalism”: the other is “possible,” she insists (and I agree), not as a “specimen” of general-abstract humanity, a priori defined (known) by “universal traits,” but as “alterity that evades” generalities.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as Žižek tells us in his essay “Love Thy Neighbor? No, Thanks,” the real challenge is to deal with the other as a real body, not as a generic, disembodied entity.<sup>24</sup> Con-versation, turning your face to your interlocutor become possible and work *because* he is different, and the difference, yes, often inheres in bodies. That is why bodies “matter.” Further, even if self and other discover what they have in common, they still have to strike up this conversation, face each other in a dialogue across, not at the expense of, what they are not. To put it otherwise: it is this critique of rationality’s schemes and predictabilities that prevents this kind of cosmopolitanism from being old universalism’s new hat, another unacknowledgedly sectarian extrapolation.

Underpinning this critique is an *ethics of collegiality*. Why is this ethics collegial? But first, what is a colleague? I answer the question elsewhere in greater detail. Here, I turn to etymology again. For this is what “colleague” means, after all: a person you “read with,” from the Latin *con-legere*. Reading, proximity, and intimacy, reading with and reading next to, interacting with, con-versing, close to the other’s face and reading it—all these blend into one another over time. In the network society’s reading matrix, this collegiality is about to become a

defining practice and, to some, an ethos. I would like to offer this collegiality as a blueprint for the new cosmopolitan arrangements and comparative pursuits, a script for what goes on in the global reading matrix—repeated scenes of reading in which self and other take each other in, represent each other, and try to accommodate each other, driven by history if not by their hearts into one another, “colleagues” reading each other, each other’s books and worlds inescapably together. Derived from this reading-induced togetherness, their collegiality implies a duty, a law of reciprocal treatment and mutual acknowledgement or, legitimation: *legere* refers to “reading,” *lectura*, as well as to “law,” *lex*. The fact that I “put together” my identity and worldview (*together*) with an other, with her help, obligates me. That is, connectedness and togetherness cannot be preserved and honored other than through a certain way, principle, or law of being together. This “reads” (“legislates,” stipulates) that self and other cannot go on, cannot keep reading if, as they interface, as read each other’s texts, see each other’s movies, eat each other’s food, and so forth, are not careful not to deface each other, not to dis-figure each other’s faces and figures, rhetorics, and idioms. In surveying, then, the global scene of comparison, we must cast light on a practice of reading and caring: on the one hand, we need to pay attention to how people read with one another, side by side or from different computer terminals, how they read each other, again, in one another’s proximity or from a distance. On the other hand, we must cultivate a cosmopolitan code of behavior; we need to show how some, if not all of us read “with” others morally and epistemologically, not only next to them spatially but also with them in mind even as we read ourselves. As one can see, I am pointing to an ethos, to a prescriptive attitude no less than to a tone, to a style, to a colloquiality that de-formalizes the conversation, making it less pompous and distant, and rendering it instead more idiomatic, more familial, and thus bringing the interlocutor, through interlocution itself, into “my” family, “my” tradition.

As is well known, the latter has been modeled ordinarily after a sort of *Blut-und-Boden*, blood-and-native soil paradigm. By and large static, unified if not monolithic, “organic” and “growing” according to a dubious teleology, this is tradition as “root.” I suspect we are moving away from this model. The analogy routinely used to challenge it is the poststructuralist alternative to “root,” that is, the rhizome as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, recently invoked by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt to describe the logic of globality, and thus *casus belli* in Brennan’s book. Like others, I discern in the rhizome a complex, mobile, and dynamic structure, an intertextuality of traditions and traditional “nodes” calling out to each other, claiming each other, and intermingling—yet without merging. They do so either at a distance longer than ever before—and this is possible due to new communication technologies—or closer to each other than ever, more and more locally, as traditions discover themselves “thicker,” more and more heterogeneous, more indebted to others and their traditions.

As far as I am concerned, not only does this fluid, multi-relational structure of spliced-up, con-versing, racial, ethnic, and cultural stories and histories overall account for what is going in a whole range of present-day texts and discourses across media and traditions—for the post-Berlin Wall cosmopolitan formations and implicitly for the comparative methodology best suited to do them justice. But it also carries on an older, anti-nationalist, anti-tribal, and anti-parochial resistance to “roots” and their often burdensome paradigm. It is also true, though, that the new cosmopolitans do not uproot themselves either, and in this regard Appiah is right to talk about “rooted cosmopolitanism” in his book *The Ethics of Identity*.<sup>25</sup> “Uprooting” is not what the new cosmopolitans necessarily do or have to do geographically, culturally—as they develop a cultural identity—or critically, as they examine it. They teach us, instead, how to rethink the root along rhizomic lines; how to see a multiplicity and heterogeneity, a medley and intertextuality of



traditions instead of one, talking to each other inside and across each other, inside and outside traditional communities, turning to each other with method, curiosity, and empathy while withstanding the pull of a privileged, rationalizing center.

It seems to me that this de-centered conversation reaches beyond Appiah's humanism. Emily Apter's work on the "new comparatism," in particular her latest book, translates quite literally into such a (cautiously) posthumanist move.<sup>26</sup> For, drawing critically from the contiguities and complicities of philological humanism, the humanities, and nationhood as laid out in Peter Sloterdijk's 2000 "Response to Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism,'" Apter suggests in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* that while the rise of Comparative Literature in the West strengthens the position of the Western nations and scholars surveying the comparative panopticon, recent transitions and translations—the worlding of nations and "comp-lit-ization" of their literatures—tends to destabilize this position.<sup>27</sup> We no longer take the discipline's Euro-location for granted. Its fundamentally diasporic indiscipline has become topological too. "Lacking a specific country, or single national identity," "Comp[arative] Lit[erature] necessarily works," she says, "toward a non-nationally defined disciplinary locus, pinning high stakes on successfully negotiating the pitfalls of *Weltliteratur* especially in an increasingly globalized economy governed by transnational exchanges and flows."<sup>28</sup>

Yet how do we actually do this sort of work, I would ask in closing. Two recent answers come to mind. Both have to do with translation. One has been given by Zhang Longxi in his 2005 volume *Allegoresis*.<sup>29</sup> I begin with it because it is somewhat closer to Appiah's insofar as Longxi cautions us that the stress on singularity understood as the "relativist emphasis on difference may serve to legitimize a position of cultural supremacy."<sup>30</sup> He sets out to show that the Chinese commentaries on the Confucian *Book of Poetry* are accessible to the Western mind if

they are read allegorically and, more broadly, that allegorical reading can serve as a translation vehicle and thus bridge the East/West divide. Longxi makes his argument against some Sinologists' claim that allegory "can[not] be translated between Western and Chinese languages."<sup>31</sup> He works hard to build a bridge where others throw up their hands in despair, and therefore his effort is commendable.<sup>32</sup> The other answer has been provided by Apter herself. *The Translation Zone* goes back to Walter Benjamin's 1929 seminal essay, "The Task of the Translator" to move away from translation as "adequate" rendition of an original and toward "a transcoding model in which everything is translatable and in a perpetual state of in-translation."<sup>33</sup> If this is true, then in-translatability always already affects the "original" while making translation possible. The world and its literature, Apter implies, move between these two poles. So "cognition," comparative cognition included, must reckon with a "worldly dialectics" that calls on us to attempt the impossible, to wrestle with the "interlocking singularities" and "incommensurabilities" nested in the seemingly monolingual, linguistically and culturally speaking.<sup>34</sup> To be in the world—especially these days—means already being in the "Zone," in the "translation zone," in transit and "relative," that is, making sense of our(-)selves and others also in relation to others and our other selves while recognizing that such sense-making protocols may not get those others completely right. "The implications of planetary criticism for the future of a comparative poetics," Apter observes, "thus place renewed emphasis on a unidimensional formalism—univocity, singularity, irreducibility, holism, quantum cosmology, the Event—while remaining constant to an earthly politics of translation and nontranslatability."<sup>35</sup>

The new comparatism has no choice but to seek its footing precisely in this shifty, still to be charted terrain of unique, imponderable alterity. Here, a global-scale *Miteinandersein* presents us all both with opportunities and dilemmas. For being with an other, reading, comparing,

translating her and with her involve complex challenges and risks, in response to which the “new comparatists” must call for, and practice, a certain “relational etiquette” or, as I call it, an ethics of collegiality. This ethics plays itself out in what I take to be one of the global age’s defining cultural gestures: turning to the other to see myself better, reading in his text or on his face the blueprint of my identity. Whether they open themselves up from within or are opened up from outside, national cultures, their texts broadly conceived and those behind them are more and more “worlded” and thereby available, acquire a new presence, visibility, and *readability*—are both legible and vulnerable. Other people, their places, books, images, and wisdom offer themselves or are offered to us. But this very offer, the vulnerability embedded in it no less than what we stand to learn about ourselves from it are ethically binding, call upon us to acknowledge “what we owe to each other,” and thus invite us to face up to a profound obligation.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce. Portrait de l’auteur en autre lecteur* (Petit-Roeulx: CISTRE, 1984), 131.

2. Jean Baudrillard, “Global Debt and Parallel Universe,” in *Digital Delirium*, edited and introduced by Arthur & Marilouise Kroker, 38-39 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

3. See Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

4. Charles Bernheimer, “Introduction: The Anxieties of Comparison,” in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 16.

5. Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes," in Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 3.
6. Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers," 5.
7. Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers," 5.
8. David Ferris, "Indiscipline," in Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 94-95.
9. Roland Greene, "Not Works but Networks: Colonial Worlds in Comparative Literature," in Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 212-223.
10. Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers," 16, 28; Culler, "Comparative Literature, at Last," 246.
11. Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA. London, UK: Harvard UP, 1997); *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
12. Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 136-137.
13. Mario Vargas Llosa, "Global Village or Global Pillage?," *Reason*, July 2001, 41-47.
14. Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 137.
15. Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 115.
16. Brennan, *Wars of Position*, 115-116.
17. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
18. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xv-xvii.
19. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 113.
20. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 135.

21. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 134-135.
22. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 85, 146.
23. See Sylviane Agacinski: *Critique de l'égoïsme. L'événement de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).
24. Slavoj Žižek, "Love Thy Neighbor? No, Thanks!," in Christopher Lane, ed., *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, edited by Christopher Lane, 154-175 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
25. Appiah, "Rooted Cosmopolitanism," in *The Ethics of Identity*, 213-272.
26. Emily Apter, *Continental Drift: From National Characters to Virtual Subjects* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) 2006. Apter also has essential contributions both in the Bernheimer and Saussy reports.
27. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 41.
28. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 42.
29. Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
30. Longxi, *Allegoresis*, 17.
31. Longxi, *Allegoresis*, 63.
32. Longxi, *Allegoresis*, 64.
33. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 7.
34. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 243-246.
35. Apter, *The Translation Zone*, 93.

36. T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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