

criteria," he writes, "govern our foremost activities" such as translation. Weisstein, "Lasciate Ogni Speranza," 103.

18. Deborah Cameron, "Introduction: Why Is Language a Feminist Issue?" in *The Feminist Critique of Language, A Reader*, ed. Deborah Cameron (London: Routledge, 1990), 24.

19. I am indebted here to Eleni Varikas, "Ecrire derrière les jalousies: Le journal intime d'une recluse," unpublished paper.

20. Carolyn Lau, "Nu Shu: An Ancient, Secret, Women's Language," *Belles Lettres* 6 (1990): 32-34.

21. See Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

22. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 82, 194.

## SPACES OF COMPARISON

FRANÇOISE LIONNET

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One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time to the determined inhabitants of space. . . . Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.

—Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

Growing up on a small island, you become intensely aware of the rest of the world. When it is an island in the Indian Ocean whose history is completely contained within that of colonialism, your awareness of that world is the only canvas that you have, the only mirror into which you can look. To make sense of your insularity, you try to understand what this small place represents and how it has figured in the European languages that you speak. You know that your identity is marked by these languages; yet you do not feel circumscribed by them. Your sense of place is relational: you can understand who and where you are only when you begin to see that this place, the island on which you were born, played a role in Europe's construction of its own identity just as much as it helped shape the lives of the islanders.

In Mauritius, two European countries competed in different ways for the privilege of educating and civilizing us: France and England. This allowed for a healthy skepticism vis-à-vis the claims of universality which each culture made in its own way. France had the upper hand culturally, England politically. We learned both French and English perfectly. But the African and Indian bases of our Creole vernacular grounded us in a very different epistemology. Our identities, it seems now, were always "in process" before we knew the word and the concept. We were all "comparatists." Our location at the intersection of several systems of knowledge provided a certain kind of productive discomfort: Mauritius has a two-hundred-year literary history, more daily and weekly newspapers per capita than most countries, and several small publishing houses. But the school curriculum exposed us only to the classics

of English and French literature—Shakespeare and *ancien régime* authors. The education was first-rate, and the schools attempted to make us into those “pious descendants of time” evoked by Foucault, to fold us into teleological History. The outcome, for those of us who loved learning, would normally be departure from the island in search of more learning—the prototypical colonial intellectual odyssey.

During my last years of high school, I moved to the neighboring island of Reunion, still a French *département d’outre-mer* (overseas department), or DOM, fourteen thousand miles away from Paris. There, I accidentally discovered Faulkner in a French *Livre de Poche* edition. It was in Faulkner’s pages that I first began to see a reflection of my own colonial society: no other books that I knew (the year was 1966) evoked its racial, cultural, and gender dynamics and exposed its flaws without apology. Aimé Césaire had published his *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*) in 1939, but it was not available in the DOM, nor was African or Caribbean literature taught in the schools. In the mid-sixties, the closest I came to hearing echoes of my colonial background in literary texts was to pay imaginative visits to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. In the mid-seventies, living in Toronto, I discovered similar echoes in Margaret Laurence’s *Manawaka*. These fictional worlds offered a historical geography that made some sense of my experiences and wove together the legacies of long, shared colonial histories.

Faulkner’s protagonists express themselves in a vernacular that seemed like an echo of our own Creole. The novels of Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Marie-Thérèse Humbert, and Toni Morrison would later give me access to the same kind of *imaginaire*. In 1966, however, the only other writer I knew who had written about heat, about barefoot women such as Lena in *Light in August*, and about the kind of natural world with which I was familiar was Baudelaire. Our very French and newly arrived *professeur de lettres* insisted that we were lucky to be from this part of the world which so inspired Baudelaire’s sensual and exotic poetry, “À une dame créole” or “La belle Dorothée.” This *prof* had clearly come to the Indian Ocean in search of the Baudelairean myth of the tropics. She went on pilgrimages to those parts of both islands where Baudelaire is known to have spent several months in late 1841, waiting for the sailing ship *L’Alcide* that was to take him back to Bordeaux. I appreciated Baudelaire—I loved poetry, and he was after all rather *osé* material for a Catholic high school—but I also knew, as did my classmates, that our *prof* was living a mystified life: the poetry and exoticism of the tropics, as she saw it in Baudelaire, was for us just “literature,” a myth that had

very little to do with the colonial reality of this outpost of the recently crumbled French empire. Besides, we perceived this newly arrived, pale-faced, and somewhat overfed teacher as a *métropolitaine* whose access to sensuality was at best limited—we spent the better part of our weekends on the beach, whereas she seemed never willing to expose herself to ultraviolet rays. It seemed very odd indeed to be introduced to Baudelaire’s poetry by such a teacher. She did teach us to love *Les fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*), but what I remember from those days is a profound sense of disjuncture—between Baudelaire’s poetry and this seemingly asexual teacher on the one hand, between the poetry of exoticism and the politically and economically repressive reality of the DOM on the other. Somehow, the first disjuncture reflected the second, and modern literature became a locus of the historical and geographical paradoxes that were woven into our lives. This experience inaugurated my personal “era of suspicion.”

In my high school *classe de philo*, we read Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes, but also Freud, Marx, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. I remember Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s early texts on America. They reinforced my growing interests in contemporary American literature as “the” literature of our time. I wrote a paper on *Light in August* and existentialism. American literature had become the canvas and the mirror. In it, questions were raised, lives would unfold, and the past was articulated in ways that were not available in the standard historical narratives of colonialism. At least, not yet. Foucault had recently published his *Histoire de la folie* (*Madness and Civilization*), but the question of madness and colonialism was still a marginal one, despite Fanon’s eloquent contributions in *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*). At the university in Aix-en-Provence, I gravitated to courses in philosophy, literature, and American studies. When I obtained an exchange fellowship to Ann Arbor in 1969, I did not hesitate. From the “New World” of the Southern Hemisphere to what has recently been termed the “Extrême-Occident,” the leap now seemed inevitable. Space was beginning to take for me “the form of relations among sites.”

I became another statistic in the brain drain that takes Third World intellectuals to Western research centers. The development in the seventies of Afro-American studies and women’s studies opened intellectual avenues that did not exist at home. I could have gone back, to get involved in some practical political issues that interested me: Mauritius had become independent in 1968. But being female, I had fewer choices than my male relatives, one of whom actually became the leader of an important neo-Marxist political party. I chose literature instead, and after a master’s degree in English, transferred to

comparative literature, where my knowledge of French and German was an asset. I am pretty sure that I was not aware of the existence of the 1965 and the 1975 Reports on Standards, but graduate courses in theory had familiarized me with Wellek and Warren, E. D. Hirsch and Croce. Suddenly I was focused again on the canonical European traditions, and I experienced a renewed sense of disjuncture and discontent. I had also taken courses on Afro-American literature, structuralist poetics, and Russian formalism. Somehow, the sum total of this education did not add up then to the kind of comparative work I wanted to do. I am not black, and no one would recommend that I specialize in Afro-American literature in this country. I could have gone back to France and worked with Americanists such as Michel Fabre or Jean Guiguet. My personal life took me in a different direction.

I lived and taught in Canada for a few years. Quebec literature offered another "site" in which issues of language (English, French, and Jouis) were often raised, echoing the preoccupations of writers from many other colonial contexts. I put Marie-Claire Blais and Claire Martin, Hubert Aquin and Michel Tremblay, along with other Francophone authors from Africa and the Caribbean, on the syllabi of the French classes I was teaching. The most common formal denominator of these texts is the first-person narrative: the genre of autobiography provided a productive way of thinking about issues of identity and subjectivity, race, class, and gender. I came back to the United States in 1980, audited classes at the New School, Columbia, and New York University: Susan Sontag's course on autobiography, Todorov's on the conquest of America, and Michel Beaujour's on Montaigne and self-portraiture. Ross Chambers had moved from Australia to the comparative literature program at the University of Michigan, and his intellectual rigor, generosity, and openness gave me the final nudge.

I wrote my dissertation on autobiography and tried to expand the theoretical boundaries of women's autobiographical practice by privileging the writings of cultural *métis* from a wide chronological and linguistic range. This dissertation quickly became a book, but not without initially raising many eyebrows: "Augustine and Nietzsche? Along with black women writers? Are you serious?" There was no apparent coherence to such a grouping: the individual writers belonged to such disparate traditions, I was told. I am sure that for some it seemed like "an unstructured postmodern hodgepodge," to use a phrase from Appiah's response in this volume. In fact, my book uses poststructuralist theories to make a deconstructive argument, the aim of which was to clear a cultural space where the reconstruction of alternative genealogies might be possible. I tried to derive my interpretive strategies from

the texts themselves. I showed that deconstruction as a practice has accompanied decolonization as a historical event and that several contemporary African American and Francophone women's narratives actually *perform* the kind of cultural critique which some contemporary philosophers later set out to theorize. In 1990, Cornell University Press nominated *Autobiographical Voices* for the ACLA's Wellek Prize. I did not win, nor did I expect to. But it was gratifying.

Had I "arrived"? That is, had I won some points in what José Piedra has called the "game of critical arrival"?<sup>1</sup> Does it matter? Only to the extent that such recognition contributes to opening up a field that has been resistant to both feminisms and noncanonical literatures and has denied agency and creativity to the peoples of "lesser" traditions.

Had I followed a more traditional path to the degree, I am sure I would never have found the tools that allowed me to interrelate a set of literary texts in a way that would be productive, for me, of new insights about writing and culture, shared histories and related geographies. The areas in which I work clearly do not coincide with the field as mapped in both the 1965 and the 1975 Reports on Standards, although both positively emphasize "interdisciplinarity." But interdisciplinarity is not multi- or interculturalism: two sentences in the Levin report are a good index of the misunderstandings and blindspots that have plagued academic debates about pluralism:

Since there has been some talk about an American school of Comparative Literature, we should like to reaffirm our belief in the internationalism of our field . . . It is largely because of America's cultural pluralism, above all its receptivity to Europeans and European ideas, that we have been enabled to develop centers for the study of Comparative Literature since the last war.

Strangely enough, this "American school of Comparative Literature" that advocates "internationalism" and admits having benefited from America's cultural pluralism is totally indifferent to the literature and expressive culture of *this* country. Surely Sartre's discussion of American writers in the chapter "Situation of the Writer in 1947" in his essay *What Is Literature?* qualifies as "European ideas." Yet the displaced European intellectuals who built the profession in the postwar era seemed to equate America's pluralism with the opportunities that come with virgin territory. America had no "history" as understood by the Levin report. On the face of it, American literature could not constitute a proper field of study.

The 1965 report stresses that "for historic reasons which must be respected, certain countries have figured prominently in [the field's] pioneering investigations, as indeed have certain periods and types of relationships." Let us be generous and suppose that this sentence did leave its authors open to the possibility that a reexamination of the history on which claims of cultural superiority are made could call for new kinds of comparative endeavors linking new "spaces of comparison" according to shared experiences based in, say, European colonialism. It seems logical to suggest this much. If we "post/colonials" are "the determined inhabitants of space," then some understanding of the material conditions and appropriative gestures that produce a disciplinary space is required. This understanding is necessarily historical, but it changes the "types of relationships" which would now constitute the field.

I recently had occasion to look into the history of the late-seventeenth-century French *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. It was instructive to discover that women had been the principal target of Boileau's *Satire X* because they questioned the authority of the past and supported the moderns against the claims of those, like Boileau, who upheld the traditions of classicism. Among the moderns: Corneille, Molière, Pascal, La Fontaine, and Charles Perrault. *Plus ça change . . .*

What is surprising, then, as I read the three responses to the 1993 report that Charles Bernheimer has included in this volume, is to find a distant echo of the 1965 formulation in Anthony Appiah's paper:

There is a complex dialectic between subject matters, human interests (themselves shaped deeply by literary and other dimensions of culture), and professional organization which goes into the historical process of the construction of a field of discourse. The old comparative literature responded to more than the taste for languages: it responded to the historical interconnectedness of a field of European texts that came to be central to Europe's high culture. I hope this study can go on in the university alongside the multiple comparisons and the scores of languages in which the study of literature and orature flourish; and the history that Wellek studied can be seen as one instance of that broad set of multilingual cultural histories which we call a civilization.

Of course the study of Europe's high culture will go on. How can it not, given the importance of that *Weltanschauung* to the self-understanding of contemporary peoples? The point, as I see it, is not to replace the old with the new but to make room for those ancient civilizations that had been marginalized and for those subcultures and countercultures that question the authority of the

past (as seventeenth-century literary French women did). These deserve representation in all the senses of the word: not because of academic altruism but because we all contribute, in different ways, to the advancement of knowledge.

The construction of the field à la Levin, Wellek, and Greene left out elements (e.g., contemporary American literatures, women's histories, African literatures) which are an integral part of the "complex dialectic between subject matters, human interests," and cultural production and reception. This is especially true if the arena of reception is the American academy with its diverse population. But it is also increasingly true of Europe. Study of its high culture is enriched by the perspectives and intertextual references of bilingual writers such as Abdelkebir Khatibi in *Amour bilingue* (*Love in Two Languages*) or Assia Djebar in *L'Amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*). Knowledge of nineteenth-century European literature and painting is just as important as familiarity with Arabic to appreciate Djebar's works. And reading Djebar brings the European tradition of Orientalist paintings into renewed focus.

That is why the study of the classics cannot just go on "alongside" that of more recent texts. It is no longer possible (if it ever was) to consider Europe's traditions in isolation, as though the Enlightenment philosophers' elaboration of the sovereign subject did not rest on the simultaneous othering of cannibals and Persians, Africans and Orientals, whether in narrative or in museum displays. I should think that it is precisely the interweavings of traditions, languages, and perspectives which offer the richest avenues for the archeological work that old and new "fields of discourse" offer together. It seems to me that once you understand knowledge as a field of interrelated practices, the fear that something so central as European cultures (whether we like it or not) would no longer be taught in the American academy becomes ludicrous. More important, knowledge thus understood makes it anachronistic to write, as the Greene report does, that "it goes without saying that we cannot begin to absorb the wealth of exotic literatures before firmly possessing our own." No literature should be seen as "exotic" if "our" purpose is to gain a better understanding of the networks of influence and power, lure and seduction, freedom and liberation, not to mention containment and subversion, which link the local to the global, the former colonies to their metropolises, and last but not least, various local manifestations of interrelated cultures. The symbolic understanding of cultural forms in a global framework provides the basis for what Edouard Glissant has called "une poétique de la Relation" (a poetics of relationality): one that takes into account the indige-

nous productions of non-Europeans as well as their respective relationships to the sites of Western modernity. Geographical connections are becoming as important as historical ones, and the current convergence on spatial thinking in many disciplines highlights the search for alternative ways of knowing.

According to a U.N. report, more than 50 percent of the world's population will be urban by the year 2005.<sup>2</sup> Visual and musical urban popular culture is already that of the majority, and we need to take this into account. That is why I do not think that it would be giving up "the idea of distinctive trainings" (Appiah) to include popular culture (however defined) within the purview of comparatists. Shakespeare's plays were "popular culture" in his time, as were the troubadours, François Villon, and Rabelais in theirs: they used the vernacular, not Latin, as their chosen mode of expression. Critical languages developed by semioticians and formalist critics have been useful to the study of myths, folktales, Russian *skaz*, and orature. Specialists of visual culture use them as well. Mineke Schipper's *Beyond the Boundaries: Text and Context in African Literature* shows how formal critical tools can illuminate the intercultural and comparative study of African texts and of the written orality that Russian and African literatures share (albeit from vastly different contexts).

Jocelyne Guilbault's *World Music* talks about the hybridization or *métissage* of Caribbean *zouk*, of its French-Creole lyrics and West African beat. If the old comparative literature could see the relevance of Wagner to the study of Nietzsche, there is no reason why world music cannot belong in the comparative study of Caribbean and African oral and literary cultures. James Baldwin wrote his books while listening to Bessie Smith. Understanding the highly structured elements of what is wrongly called "improvisation" in jazz or blues helps us to see the similarly structured and complex patterns of African American literature.

I do happen to think, along with Michael Riffaterre, that the category "literature" has a valuable specificity. The writers that I read and work on do indeed claim the field as their very own. They value writing as an intransitive activity that cannot always be subsumed under larger political agendas, and they strongly resist the attempt to reduce their efforts to the simple manifestation of cultural determinants. As Glissant's 1993 book *Tout-Monde* suggests, he for one is engaged in an enterprise of invention and liberation aimed at freeing consciousness from false and abstract universals, from tired and sterile hierarchies. Salman Rushdie and the numerous Algerian writers whose lives are threatened because they exercise the right to freely "do literature" assert the same need for creative expression in a medium that is not constrained by

readily identifiable codes. V. Y. Mudimbe's essays and novels similarly expose the contradictions and dislocations that are those of the African intellectual caught between knowledge systems and revolutionary praxis. Hence, I am as uncomfortable as Riffaterre (but for different reasons) with the 1993 report's suggestion that "'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study." I think there is a confusion here between "belles-lettres" and how that category is produced over time, and the activity of writing the kind of texts that escape or transform rigid cultural conventions. Some literary critics may have focused on a disembodied and decontextualized study of the text. Surely this does not mean that *literary* criticism is synonymous with decontextualized readings. Insisting on the literary aspect of an analysis simply asserts an object's status as "literature"—according to an author's intention and publishing opportunities. It does not mean that the critic subscribes to a binary evaluative episteme (high/low; aesthetics/politics).

In our desire to embrace "cultural studies," I would hate to see us reduce the contemporary non-Western writer to a mere epiphenomenon of identity politics and, worse still, privilege Western *mass* culture and the theoretical tools applicable to it as the most interesting site for innovative investigations. The danger here is that under the guise of antiethnocentrism, once again cultural relativism and American liberalism will join in encouraging a "hands off" attitude toward the non-English-speaking world beyond the U.S. borders. There is a risk that more and more students will focus exclusively on U.S. cultures, ignoring in the process the voices of less visible peoples who have much to contribute to our current debates and who often pose questions or offer imaginative solutions directly relevant to the dynamics of multiculturalism in this country. One of the limitations of Anglo-American cultural studies has been this somewhat parochial focus at the expense of broader, international, and multilingual approaches. This is therefore a moment of great opportunity for comparatists, and it behooves us to seize the occasion and to "globalize" and "democratize," as Mary Louise Pratt puts it. The decolonization process has already been under way for quite some time now. But what we seem to fear, as a profession, is the messiness of globalization and the risk of contamination that might result from the democratization of the idea of literature as an intersubjective practice.

I have nothing against television, hypertext, and virtual realities, but access to the necessary resources and technology is not democratic. Where I come from, pen and paper continue to be the cheapest means of self-expression, after music and storytelling. And this is the only means that is not communal and ephemeral. Hence, literature as "pure representation" of im-



pure phenomena will continue to challenge, and fascinate, to open doors and to provide points of entry into the *impensé*, the still necessarily opaque and unspoken dimensions of a chaotic contemporary world in which a multiplicity of histories have left their traces. Writers and artists offer us powerful insights into the processes of negotiation which intercultural contact demands: we would be doing a disservice to our students if we did not encourage them to learn from these global transformations and to contribute to the latter in a theoretically and culturally informed manner.

Of course, this does not mean that there should exist a disciplinary hierarchy between different kinds of comparative studies, depending on the forms of discourses which occupy the "space of comparison": "literature" . . . music, philosophy, history, or law as similar discursive systems" (1993 report), but also medical and scientific constructions of race, health, normalcy, and gender identity. That is why I also agree with Mary Louise Pratt's call for greater inclusiveness, for an expanded definition of the field, and thus even for going beyond the occasionally tentative formulations of the 1993 report. We should encourage students to devise programs of study which correspond to what compels them most, to the landscapes they most desire to understand or to inhabit. And we should teach them that patience is indeed a virtue: sooner or later, the discipline will catch up with you. I know, I've been there.

As Toni Morrison puts it, "All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes."<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1. José Piedra, "The Game of Critical Arrival," *Diacritics* 19 (Spring 1989): 34–61.
2. "The World Urbanization Prospect," Population Division, U.N. Secretariat (Summer 1993).
3. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 91.

## "LITERATURE" IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

MARJORIE PERLOFF

Ask any student in the United States why he or she decided to study comparative, rather than English (or indeed any single national) literature, and that student will tell you that the appeal of comparative literature is its *more than status*. René Wellek said it back in 1956 in *Theory of Literature*: "The great argument for 'comparative' or 'general' literature or just 'literature,' is the obvious falsity of the ideal of a self-enclosed national literature."<sup>1</sup> "Self-enclosed" is the key term here: how, comparatists have always asked, can one study, say, English Romantic poetry without some knowledge of its German precursors—Goethe, Heine, Hölderlin, to mention just the most obvious ones. How study Joyce without any knowledge of Flaubert? Aimé Césaire without a familiarity of French surrealism? And so on.

Then, too, comparative literature has always had a special appeal for those of us who want to work synchronically rather than diachronically. Let me confess that as a specialist in modern and postmodern literature, I have always resented the time (a whole semester!) I spent in graduate school making my way through *Piers Plowman*, when I might have been learning more about Dante or Gérard de Nerval or the amazing Whitmanian poet from Brazil, Joachim de Sousândrade. A synchronic model would have also made it possible for me to do more work in philosophy: for a variety of reasons, a course in Kant and Hegel would have been more personally valuable to me than was the course I had to take in *Beowulf*. And, as it happens, since I work in both literature and the visual arts, I am profoundly grateful that at Oberlin College, where I did my undergraduate work, I took six courses in art history—courses I still draw upon in doing my own brand of "comparative" study.