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# The Scale of World Literature

Nirvana Tanoukhi

This is his home; he can't be far away.

—Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

## The Problem: Literary Space

**D**ISTANCE HAS LONG BEEN a thorny issue for comparative literature. Whether one tries to explicate a foreign text, map a course of influence, or describe an elusive aesthetic, there is the problem of crossing considerable divides without yielding to the fallacy of decisive leaps. And yet, a condition conducive to methodological malaise found consolation in a fixed literary geography that justified comparison, ingeniously, with the very fact of incommensurability. Impossible distances beg to be crossed *precisely* because they cannot be. And for crossings to be attempted, each book, each author, each device—each canon, nation, or interpretive community—would assume its rightful place. While comparative literature, it was said, would occupy the space-in-between conventional places. And so, by a euphoric celebration of displacement, the comparative method became unquestionably subversive: in practice it exacted “shock value,”<sup>1</sup> institutionally it was a “thorn in the side,”<sup>2</sup> in ideological wars it proffered a “symbolic weapon.”<sup>3</sup> But really, may that not be overstating the case? I want to consider why the comparative method, in the first instance, made a *cartographic* claim to scale. Why dedicate a discipline to the task of charting zones, paths, and crossroads obscured by strict adherence to “national traditions”—when logically, comparison depends for its existence on the entrenchment of nation-based geography?

Comparison's cartographic commitment (and its poetics of distance) is worth examining not only as a logical paradox, but as a possible key to the recent disciplinary revival of the concept “world literature”—which I take to be the latest, most pronounced attempt to diffuse the teleological thrust of “literary history” with a radically synchronic outlook. With this slide from “literary history” to “world literature” the literary discipline makes a belated entry into the globalization debates,<sup>4</sup> a time-honored, social-scientific inquiry into the time and place of uneven development.

But what kind of possibilities does this move open up for comparative literary analysis, and what are the risks involved?<sup>5</sup> Here's my answer: on the one hand, the discussion about literary globalization has already launched us, however slowly or implicitly, on a disciplinary critique of the very concept *scale*, which by necessity moves us away from metaphorical deployments of "space" toward concrete discussions about the materiality of literary *landscapes*. I suggest that the concept *scale*, properly theorized, would enable a more precise formulation of the role of literature, and literary analysis, in the history of the production of space. But, in the meantime, though such a critique seems imminent, "world literature" threatens to become a hardened (albeit enlarged) image of the old literary history, where *geography* evokes a figurative solidity that assumes the guise of materiality. My aim is to hasten the literary critique of *scale* by making cracks in the geography of "world literature." The postcolonial novel—perhaps one of the most geographically constituted objects of literary history—offers an ideal weak spot to get us started.

### Man with a Novel

A most interesting insight about the comparative view of the novel comes in an essay by the cultural philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah, where he describes a particular geographic outlook that makes futile both the writing of the postcolonial novel, and by extension, its cultural critique. Appiah argues that so long as the novel is taken as a representative sample of African culture, Western intellectuals are bound to drown in misconceptions about the popular mentality of the continent. By "popular" he means nonliterate, which is why he proposes African sculpture as an alternate sample object of African cultural history.<sup>6</sup> *Man with a Bicycle*, a Nigerian sculpture, is presented as the epistemological antithesis of the African novel, an object whose cultural ethos eludes Western critics (suggests Appiah) precisely because they insist on approaching it *as a novel* (Fig. 1). Appiah reprimands the sculpture's critics and curators as follows:

I am grateful to James Baldwin for his introduction to the [Nigerian sculpture] *Man with a Bicycle*, a figure who is, as Baldwin so rightly saw, polyglot—speaking Yoruba and English . . . someone whose "clothes do not fit him too well." He and other men and women among whom he mostly lives suggest to me that the place to look for hope is not just to the postcolonial novel, which has struggled to achieve the insights of Ouoologuem and Mudimbe, but to the all-consuming vision of this less-anxious creativity. It matters little whom the work was made *for*; what we should learn from is the imagination that produced it. *Man with a Bicycle* is produced by someone who does not care that the bicycle is the white



Fig. 1. *Man with a Bicycle*, Yoruba, Nigeria, 20th century. Wood, 35 3/4 in. Collection of The Newark Museum, New Jersey, Purchase 1977 Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund. Photo: Jerry Thompson, 1986.

man's invention: it is not there to be Other to the Yoruba self; it is there because someone cared for its solidity; it is there because it will take us further than our feet will take us; it is there because machines are now as African as novelists . . . and as fabricated as the kingdom of Nakem. (PP 357)

One cannot be surprised by Appiah's admiration for *Man with a Bicycle*, a contemporary Nigerian wooden sculpture whose nonchalant protagonist stands firm, it seems, because he is impervious to the anxieties of influence. We understand why he would draw force from such a *man* lacking in hesitation, who grabs a machine simply because it works. In fact, the

*man* seems to be at such ease that we almost wonder whether he takes the bicycle, not simply, but unthinkingly. His apparent comfort in the “solidity” of things resonates for us uncomfortably with the primitivism of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* who can make do precisely because he does not reflect. We are a little surprised by Appiah’s effortless conflation (or confusion) of the maker of the statue with the figure he carves out: the producer, “someone who does not care that the bicycle is the white man’s invention,” and the wooden personage, “someone whose ‘clothes do not fit him too well’” (PP 357). For sculpture to be an improvement on the novel—a “less-anxious” alternative, as Appiah says—the author and his hero must become one, such that the “hope” of the creator passes into the happiness of his creature, showing the “dark vision” of the novel to be gruesome in comparison. We’re meant to see how, as a sculpture, *Man with a Bicycle* conveys in itself the “solidity” of its conception, a man’s matter-of-fact contentment in his clothing, regardless of whether they “fit” or not. As if to say that writing a *novel*—imagine a hypothetical novel called *Man with a Bicycle*—about this man would have been akin to using his clothes to tell his story, which would lead inevitably to a novel *about* his clothes, because their fit, being imperfect after all, would have become a problem (or the story) itself. At best, such a novel could be about the man’s contentment *despite* his clothes, which is already not the same thing. Because surely, in this case, the man would “care” not only about his clothes, but also about the status of the bicycle as “the white man’s invention,” so on and so forth . . .

Is this true, then? That in a sculpture, bicycles (and borrowed clothes) can be mere conveniences, while in a novel a mere bicycle (or ill-fitting clothes) must be a problem? Does the postcolonial writer’s “struggle” with the novelist’s mantle truly brand the hero with an anxious temperament, and by extension, the postcolonial novel with its “dark vision”? For now, instead of asking *whether* this is true, let’s look at Appiah’s own inadvertent explanation for *how* it’s true. What is fundamentally historical about the postcolonial novel, he says, is its foreignness to African soil (a premise that, as we shall see later, echoes comparative wisdom on the subject). For this reason—unlike in the case of sculpture—the novel’s geographic displacement becomes the context by which it can be properly historicized. This is, for him, the generic difference that escapes the interpreters of *Man with a Bicycle*, who mistake a piece of wooden handiwork for a modernist work of “high culture,” burdening it with residues of the kinds of expectations we bring to a novel. And where do we see the critics making the mistake? Well, observes Appiah, when they “contextualized [the sculpture] only by the knowledge that bicycles are new in Africa” (PP 339).

To contextualize an African novel, then, is *not* exactly to historicize. What Appiah captures is the peculiar “contextual” work done by a so-

called “historical” detail, where the bicycle’s novelty serves as the seed from which springs a whole psychic landscape with which the postcolonial novel is identified. One exhibit caption stresses the same detail to “explain” the sculpture as follows: “The influence of the Western world is revealed in the clothes and bicycle of this neo-traditional Yoruba sculpture which probably represents a merchant en route to market” (PP 341). As for Baldwin, he observes that: “His errand might prove to be impossible . . . He is challenging something—or something has challenged him” (PP 339). The critics’ knowledge of the bicycle’s novelty is of course far from random, it is a “fact” chosen to mark a particular location: “new in Africa,” not elsewhere. Since Appiah is far from interested in making a case for the African novel, the extent of his claim is that each genre is decipherable by a hermeneutic—a logic of contextualization—to which it is individually suited. The claim *betrayed* by his line of reasoning is far more interesting: that a wooden bicycle is turned into a sign of novelty by *a way of reading*, which not only pulls together identity and landscape in *Man with a Bicycle* such that they become inextricable—but more impressively, they mystify the man’s journey, turning garb and transport into hurdles along his way. It’s a way of reading that elicits a novel’s “dark vision”: “His errand might prove impossible . . .”—a way of reading that prevents the *Man* from reaching his destination.

Even as Appiah seems to be corroborating a common view of the postcolonial novel as “anxious creativity,” he illuminates the obscure makings of its landscape. By doing so, he has taken us where we wanted: the symbolically historical place that is Africa-of-the-Novel, where each object is potentially a hurdle and distance is the threshold of motion.<sup>7</sup>

### Distance, Scale, Location

We must linger on the nature of distance, in light of places like Africa-of-the-Novel. “The making of place,” says Neil Smith, always “implies the production of scale in so far as places are made different from each other; scale is the criterion of difference not between places so much as between different kinds of places.”<sup>8</sup> Smith is inviting us, here, to enlarge our schoolish association of scale to maps. From the perspective of a human geographer, the fact that the distance between two adjacent neighborhoods of unequal wealth cannot be measured numerically necessitates an understanding of geographic scale as a process—a process that establishes distances dually: by differentiating places *qualitatively* and demarcating boundaries *quantitatively*.<sup>9</sup>

The cartographic sense of scale—of representation through mapping—is only one of three senses of the term that Smith lists in the revised entry for “Scale” in the *Dictionary of Human Geography*:

*Cartographic scale* refers to the level of abstraction at which a map is constructed . . . therefore crucial in determining what is included and excluded in a map and the overall image a map conveys . . . [*Methodological scale*] is largely determined by some compromise between the research problem (what kind of answer is anticipated), the availability of data, and the cost of data-acquisition and processing . . . If these first two definitions refer to the conceptualizations of scale—cartographic and methodological—*geographic scale* is of a different order. “Geographic scale” refers to the dimensions of specific landscapes: geographers might talk of the regional scale, the scale of the watershed, or the global scale, for example. These scales are also of course conceptualized, but the conceptualization of geographical scale here follows specific processes in the physical and human LANDSCAPE rather than conceptual abstractions lain over it . . . Geographical scale is in no sense natural or given. There is nothing inevitable about global, national, or urban scales . . . These are specific to certain historical and geographical locations, they change over time, sometimes rapidly sometimes slowly, and in some cases a scale that operates in one society fails to appear in another.<sup>10</sup>

So, three senses of scale: *cartographic*, *methodological*, *geographic*—each accentuating a particular kind of limitation the geographer will encounter in practice. The first is epistemological and recognizes the limits of looking through a particular frame. The second, empirical, acknowledges the necessity of compromise with preexisting conditions of research. In both cases, scale is, more or less, a matter of choice. But the third, more materialist definition of scale—what Smith properly calls *geographic scale*—sounds more complex and elusive. Though geographic scales are arbitrary, says Smith, they *emerge* (for the geographer) as objectifiable elements in the course of *following* the material processes that shape a landscape. It is this very notion, implied here, of a scale-sensitive procedure—a procedure that “conceptualizes” by following—which, I think, carries significant consequences for the idea, method, and perhaps the ethics of comparison.

Smith takes “space” to be the kind of seemingly simple, abstract category (not unlike “labor”) whose conceptualization, articulation, and manifestation in social life must be examined and understood within a history of intercourse between humans and the physical universe of which they are part. “In the advanced capitalist world today, we all conceive of space as emptiness, as a universal receptacle in which objects exist and events occur, as a frame of reference, a co-ordinate system (along with time) within which all reality exists.”<sup>11</sup> This, Smith explains, is a particular conception of space that resulted from a distinction made by Isaac Newton between *absolute space* and *relative space*: “Absolute space in its own nature, without relation to anything external, remains always similar and unmovable. Relative space is some movable dimension or measure of the absolute spaces; which our senses determine by its position to



bodies.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, we may speak metaphorically of spaces that “connect,” “house,” or “anchor”—but only as a way of gauging the navigability of a situation: “Absolute location is simply a special case of relative location, one in which we abstract from *the social determinants of distance* (83, my italics). Smith gives the medieval city as an example: “In Euclidean terms, the distance from the ground floor to the fourth floor of a city tenement may be equivalent to the height of a tree in the primal forest beyond the city walls. But the same distance between floors of the tenement can also be measured in terms of social rank and class whereas the height of the tree cannot” (78). Though we could, of course, imagine a situation in which the height of the tree itself would “matter” as the center of a social dispute or transaction.

As comparatists, therefore, we must approach “spaces” wherever we find them, as the articulation of distance within a particularly spatialized system of social relations. In a landscape like Africa-of-the-Novel, we must reconstruct the process by which the space of the postcolonial novel becomes differentiated, gaining the contours of a place and the fixity of a cultural location. Only by following the dynamics of a landscape will we be able to unearth “the social determinants of distance.”<sup>13</sup> If we can indeed imagine a literary history that is entangled in the history of the production of space, it is time for comparative literature to develop both a critique of *scale*, which would examine the spatial premises of comparison—and, eventually, a phenomenology of scale, which would help us grasp the actually existing landscapes of literature. Let us begin with the first problem, by turning once again to the postcolonial novel, and the “conceptual abstractions lain over it.”

## A Sensitive Genre

The postcolonial novel, it would seem, lacks the serenity that comes with provincialism. It is a place-sensitive genre that supposedly *intuits* its geographic displacement as the condition of its impossibility. “An anxious creativity,” Appiah says; nor are most critics of the postcolonial novel as generous. “Compromise,” not “creativity,” is the central trope in criticism of the postcolonial (or “peripheral”) novel, according to Franco Moretti.<sup>14</sup> This idea of compromise appears so prevalent in the secondary literature, Moretti goes further, that one would think it “a law” of literary evolution: “Four continents, two hundred years, over twenty independent critical studies, and they all agreed: when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it’s always as a compromise between foreign form and local materials.”<sup>15</sup> And nowhere is the “compromise” more evident, say his sources, than in the narrator’s anxiety. “Which



makes sense,” for Moretti, since “the narrator is the pole of comment, of explanation, of evaluation . . . when foreign ‘formal patterns’ . . . make characters behave in strange ways . . . then of course comment becomes uneasy—garrulous, erratic, rudderless” (65). If indeed a law could be extracted, for him it would look like this: “foreign form, local material—and *local form*. Simplifying somewhat: Foreign *plot*; local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*: and it’s precisely in this third dimension that these novels seem to be most unstable—most uneasy.” Moretti takes compromise to mean something like “refunctionalization,” the concept conceived by Viktor Shklovsky to describe formal adaptation to historical change. However, when he applies it to describe a process of adaptation to *geographic* change (when refunctionalization becomes a process of *domestication*), an interesting tautology arises. “Local form” is initially proclaimed the *synthesis* of “foreign form and local materials.” But when “form” is simplified quickly into “narrative voice,” it emerges a *symptom* of incomplete refunctionalization (of impossible domestication). For Moretti and his informants, as with Appiah, the postcolonial compromise with the novel’s foreignness forecloses the condition in the symptom; the landscape in the detail; the “law” (60) in the “unit of analysis” (61).

But no matter how intriguing this idea of the postcolonial novel’s impossibility, or how poignant this malaise of compromise, it takes an “anxious” genre to illustrate *methodologically* the possibility of the project “world literature.” And to even have a debate, it helps (as I hope to emphasize) that the novel’s comparative potential is a matter of disciplinary consensus. Moretti defends his “law” as a scientific abstraction of a ubiquitous critical repetition, but more importantly he authorizes it explicitly as an *empathetic* reformulation of the testimonies compiled. Even the fiercest critiques of Moretti’s law do not question the *substance* of the secondary literature, nor do they contest his description of the object itself (the postcolonial novel). I take the thesis of “formal compromise,” which has remained remarkably invisible in the otherwise intense debate triggered by Moretti’s essay, to point to a theoretical status quo.

Objections to the law itself have been generally procedural, targeting either Moretti’s disengagement from textual hermeneutics or the law’s limited *cartographic* potential. On the one hand, we have the critics of “distant reading” who are most concerned with the displacement of hermeneutic authority, and perhaps the implication that they may be “mere” specialists to whom “close-reading” would be conveniently outsourced. For this reason, they raise the problem of secondhand information as one of reliability (not *objectivity* for instance). Their quarrel with Moretti is: “How do you know they’re right without *seeing* for yourself?” as opposed to “What can one make of this *kind* of repetition?” Then

there's the second group, who wants to beat Moretti at his own game, claiming that his seemingly ambitious model actually circumscribes the *full* cartographic potential of the comparative enterprise. Appropriately enough, this group offers recommendations on how to hone and refine the proposed model, while implicitly agreeing that the schematization of "literary space" is the greatest and most significant challenge of a "world literature."<sup>16</sup> Important questions are raised about how to balance the representation of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies or differentiate the portability of certain genres over others. But there is little self-reflexivity about the cartographic impulse and the logic that accepts "portability" as a category of comparison. Overall, the principle of "world literature" as a cartographic program that would adjudicate the scope of "foreign interference" resonates both with structuralist theories of "influence" (literary interference, dependence, debt, et cetera)<sup>17</sup> and also with *post*structuralist theories of "reappropriation" (literary resistance, subversion, cannibalization, et cetera).<sup>18</sup> Even Moretti's swift concession to his critics is a victory of sorts, for instituting that question that must remain the center of comparative controversy: "yes, 'measuring' the extent of foreign pressure on a text, or its structural instability, or a narrator's uneasiness, will be complicated, at times even unfeasible. But a diagram of symbolic power is an ambitious goal, and it makes sense that it would be hard to achieve."<sup>19</sup> (Here, we must mention a third ascetic group who reject this imperative of "diagramming" on principle, choosing to abstain altogether from comparative schematizations lest they should fall into the temptations of universalism. But even there, the category "mobility" resurfaces as a theoretical axis in the metaphors of "translatibility" and translation.)<sup>20</sup>

The problem, to my mind, lies not in the nature of measuring. Nor, as Pascale Casanova has famously suggested, in the impossibility of measuring distances established "in the mind": "the structure [of literary relations is] so hard to visualize [because] it's impossible to place it at a distance, as a discrete and objectifiable phenomenon."<sup>21</sup> But rather, in the fact that as literary critics, we often *begin* with strong ideas about what needs to be measured—for me, this is the most compelling justification offered by Moretti for pursuing a new comparative science: that "we are used to asking only those questions for which we already have an answer."<sup>22</sup> But are we posing a new question when we set out to investigate the *extent* of "foreign pressure on a text"; "its structural instability"? It's not that such measuring endeavors are "unfeasible"; what is worse, they appear superfluous because the mystery is already solved: "a narrator's uneasiness." Between Moretti's tragic conception of formal compromise (the postcolonial novel's *yearning* for independence) and Casanova's more conciliatory version (of literature as the willful *realization* of a compromise:

“the majority of compromise solutions achieved within this structure are based on an ‘art of distance’”),<sup>23</sup> we have transformed the comparative concern with xenocentrism into something like Xeno’s paradox, where the riddle of distance produces either the *need* or the *will* to shape compromises with literary laws of motion.

This kind of paradox, of course, increases the novel’s fortune in “comparative” controversy.<sup>24</sup> Let me explain by turning back briefly to *Man with a Bicycle*. I began with Appiah’s insight that the novel’s anxiety derives, at least in part, from a mode of contextualization, which grounds an African hero by circumscribing his mobility. As to what makes the African novel itself *conducive* to this kind of reading, says Appiah, the problem lies with the author. Or more precisely, the African novelist’s obligation to what he calls the “space clearing gesture”: an explicit departure from intellectual predecessors without which an author in the modern Western sense cannot make a claim to distinction.<sup>25</sup> Because *literary* producers *must* assert an authorial status, says Appiah, the African novelist vacillates discontentedly between the national and Western traditions, hoping to claim a sensible parameter of influence. Baldwin, on the other hand, offers a clue which suggests that the novelist’s problem lies elsewhere: “He’s grounded in immediate reality by the bicycle . . .” and then, “He’s apparently a very proud and silent man” (PP 339). Not only must the hero of our hypothetical novel, *Man with A Bicycle*, worry about his clothes and his bicycle. Unlike his wooden counterpart, he is not afforded the stoic stance of a sculpture. The novel seems to demand that the African hero speak, and it’s the force of this imperative that unleashes (in the mind of the novel’s critics) the question of what, if anything, *distinguishes* the utterance of a postcolonial hero—what makes the postcolonial novel amenable to comparison—or better, what opens it to *geographic* explanation. Moretti correctly identifies “voice” as a possible point of political convergence between the comparatist’s moral and empirical ambition, on the one hand, and his informants’ anxieties, on the other. But is the convergence real? What is the sociology of this term “compromise” so often repeated in the secondhand testimonies, and what is its theoretical hold on the comparative imagination?

### New Anxieties

The thesis of cultural compromise is much more than a law of literary history; it is the most powerful and lasting cultural program to originate from the development era and was devised by emergent postcolonial intelligentsia to resolve the contradictions of “transition” in what was then candidly called “the third world.” Partha Chatterjee has provoca-

tively described this agenda as “alternative modernity” to insist on the cognitive and political work expended by Asian and African societies to formulate an *independent* path of progress from colonial patronage to indigenous state-formation.<sup>26</sup> But, in a remarkable development, the synchronic connotation of an “alternative modernity” appealed to analysts of *contemporary* cultural forms who sought a way of describing an increasingly integrated cultural world without recourse to teleological narratives of “modernization.” Adopted as an *analytical framework*, “alternative modernity” has proved immensely fertile, producing a rich descriptive literature that demonstrates the versatility and creativity of “local” forms, *despite* compromises with larger forces of homogenization. But the anachronism that belies this critical gesture is unmistakable. Is it really possible to borrow the cultural slogan of an era of economic optimism to *describe* the uneven world that emerged in its painful aftermath? This spirited body of work must neglect, as Jim Ferguson has observed, that the early postcolonial investment in cultural alterity lost currency when the prospect of economic progress became dim. That in fact, when economic *convergence* was no longer believed to be a historical inevitability, cultural alterity appeared more like the symptom (or even the cause) of permanent economic troubles. The language of alternative modernity thus disguises a real dissonance between an academic thesis that celebrates the periphery’s specificity and a local outlook that experiences “specificity” as a mark of inferiority. Speaking of his colleagues, Ferguson says: “Anthropologists today, working to combat old stereotypes, are eager to say how modern Africa is. Many ordinary Africans might scratch their heads at such a claim.”<sup>27</sup>

What is “accomplished,” he asks, by saying that Africa is “differently” or “alternatively” modern? We could indeed ask this question of Moretti, whose eagerness to proclaim the postcolonial novel the “rule,” not the “exception,” recalls Ferguson’s description of anthropologists. We must consider the possibility that “alternative modernity” is currently a powerful horizon of world-scale literary analysis, and that Moretti’s conjecture on “formal compromise” is neither a coincidence nor an isolated move. The thesis of “formal compromise,” says Moretti, “completely reverse[s] the received historical explanation of [influence]: because if the compromise between the foreign and the local is so ubiquitous, then those independent paths that are usually taken to be the rule of the rise of the novel (the Spanish, the French, and especially the British case)—*well, they’re not the rule at all, they’re the exception*. They come first, yes, but they’re not at all typical. The ‘typical’ rise of the novel is Krasicki, Kemal, Rizal, Maran—not Defoe.”<sup>28</sup> Moretti’s goal of provincializing the European novel appears worthwhile, even to his harshest critics. First of all, he avoids placing novelistic traditions in a chain of influence that defines literary

modernity as literary Westernization. Second, he reveals that the “path” to literary modernity is *normally* alternative and, by extension, that the European novel is in fact a deviation from the norm. None of this could have been done without fulfilling comparative literature’s unflinching commitment to scale, “[Y]ou become a comparatist for a very simple reason: *because you are convinced that your viewpoint is better*. It has greater explanatory power; it’s conceptually more elegant; it avoids that ugly ‘one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness . . .’” (68). In short, by looking at the production of the novel “on a world scale” (66), you are able to reframe (if not redirect) the traffic of influence.<sup>29</sup> But what if Ferguson is right? If, as he suggests, the ethos of development is the historical condition that allowed the two terms “alternative” and “modernity” to be sensibly conjoined, what seems most troubling about the anachronistic redeployment of “alternative modernity” is that it *should* bear some *trace* of the actual decomposition that befell the paradigm of development, and which broke the once reassuring tie between cultural ascendance and economic progress. An immediate question for a program of “world literature” becomes: How indeed does the theoretical framework of alternative modernity manage to do its work without bearing such a trace? When Moretti moves from “description” to “explanation” without raising questions about the very sociology of “compromise,” what exactly did he borrow from a bygone narrative of postcolonial transition that proved surgically extractible?

Here, we must go back to Chatterjee who, in his account of “alternative modernity” as paradigm of postcolonial transition, described more than an agenda that called for adapting foreign forms to local reality. Chatterjee’s description is most vivid and convincing when he reconstructs a complex mode of cognitive mapping that splits social life into an external economic domain and an internal spiritual domain. This zoning of the national consciousness offered a society, for better or worse, a way “to choose its site of autonomy” amidst a project of cultural normalization.<sup>30</sup> And after staking out the spiritual domain as a zone of autonomy, “culture” was again conceived as a *place* where foreign and native elements are allowed to mix by way of careful but creative compromises and negotiations.<sup>31</sup> This intricate mapping of the social terrain allowed the intelligentsia to evoke two contradictory views of culture: looking *outward* from the spiritual domain, culture looked like a defensive space that needed to be protected and differentiated from the sphere of commerce; whereas, looking *inward*, culture looked like a space of experimentation and innovation.<sup>32</sup>

In recent deployments of “alternative modernity,” the cartographic impulse is emulated but economics and culture are taken as antagonistic *agents*, not mutually differentiated *spaces*. Ferguson finds that in anthro-

pology, “the application of a language of alternative modernities to the most impoverished regions of the globe has become a way of *not* talking about the non-serialized, detemporalized political economic statuses of our time—indeed a way of turning away from the question of a radically worsening global inequality and its consequences.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of comparative literature, I believe the picture looks different. It’s not that the “detemporalized economic statuses of our time” are ignored. Instead they are routinely evoked as the “real” material condition to which post-colonial societies respond with defensive acts of cultural creativity. We no longer have the tension produced by the forced separation of economics and culture within a national sphere, instead economic pressure is experienced as an external force of “foreign interference.”<sup>34</sup> As we saw with *Man with a Bicycle*, political statuses have so hardened as an African “reality” that they’ve become the “objective” limit of a work’s interpretation. And the more these statuses’ detemporalization is asserted, the more literary production at the periphery is imagined, in this “context,” as a mode of creativity under duress. In a place like Africa-of-the-Novel, where problems are chronic and solutions short-term, there is no time for literary *projects*, only literary “acts” of survival: generic reappropriation, reversal, refunctionalization, subversion, the list goes on. This helps us better understand Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters* as a particular kind of *place*:

to speak of the center’s literary forms and genres simply as a colonial inheritance imposed on writers within subordinated regions is to overlook the fact that literature itself, as a common value of the entire space, is also an instrument which, if re-appropriated, can enable writers—and especially those with the fewest resources—to attain a type of freedom, recognition and existence within it.

More concretely and directly, these reflections on the immense range of what is possible in literature, even within this overwhelming and inescapable structure of domination, also aim to serve as a symbolic weapon in the struggles of those most deprived of literary resources, confronting obstacles which writers and critics at the centre cannot even imagine.<sup>35</sup>

“An inescapable structure of domination” that “enables [the most unprivileged] writers . . . to attain a type of freedom.” An ingenuous logic, which leaves us with a literary universe whose internal differentiation into zones may be theoretically attributed (according to Casanova) to the uneven distribution of literary capital—but that is differentiated *from a methodological point of view* by a fundamentally unequal capacity among zones for *sustainable* modes of literary production: “large-scale” projects like forms, genres, or “literature itself” *expand* out of “Central” Europe, while “small-scale” endeavors like techniques, styles, or texts *transpire* locally.<sup>36</sup> In such a universe, where “writers within subordinated regions”

are oppressed-and-freed by the task of “writing back,” a *misplaced genre* like the postcolonial novel is the quintessential object of comparison. In theory, the postcolonial novel points us in two directions: either to celebrate the reappropriation of a Western genre on the periphery or lament the perpetual struggle borne of cultural colonialism. The framework of “alternative modernity” allows us to indulge both sentiments in a single interpretive procedure: first, we *describe* the periphery as a “region” of economic struggle; then we *explain* individual novels as local acts of resistance or appropriation.

The brilliance of this formulation is that it reconciles two contradictory horizons of comparison: on the one hand, economic accounts of a single world made of unequal and connected regions; and on the other, cultural accounts of multiple universes that are intelligible in their own right. While the first precludes *in principal* the notion of comparison (as Immanuel Wallerstein would put it, “You do not *compare* ‘parts of a whole’”), it often defines “unequal” peripheral regions comparatively in terms of their relative location to the center.<sup>37</sup> And the second, while it considers location *de facto* a guarantor of specificity (an incomparability inviting comparison), it ignores the dependence implied by this state of separateness: “If separate, then *from* what?” But there’s no need to dwell too much on such contradictions. These two approaches have coexisted peacefully by a tacit division of labor: ecumenical models fulfill the function of describing a lamentably homogenous economic world, while localized models illuminate, through case-by-case analytical care, a multifarious cultural universe. One could say that the economic view has served the congenial role of springboard for culturalist arguments. After all, “alternative,” “critical,” and “other” cultural modernities need to be championed *against* the existing menace of a “singular” economic modernity.<sup>38</sup> In the shadow of a consolidating neoliberal order, the comparative imagination shouldered the responsibility of illuminating “local” spaces of hope. Thinking back to the cognitive map drawn by Chatterjee, we could say that the “comparatist” has not only mastered the cartographic impulse, but also assumed the position of a transcendental witness who can look both inward *and* outward from culture. In this way, comparison can become a spatialized escape route from the teleological claims of a singular modernity. The comparative method can double-up, as it were, as antidote and supplement to periodization. But as a condition, “scale” would have to remain a flat, untheoretical concept—the geographic foil of a cartographic enterprise heralding spaces of its own creation.

Indeed, for a human geographer and theorist of scale like Neil Smith, the conceptual framework of alternative modernity is a particular instance of what he describes as “the metaphorical uses of space that have become



so fashionable in literary and cultural discourse.”<sup>39</sup> In terms that recall Ferguson’s remarks about anthropologists of contemporary Africa, Smith describes a subtle form of ideological complicity that belies the liberal dispensation of spatial metaphors, even (and increasingly, it seems) in the most ethically disposed cultural criticism:

Much social and cultural theory in the last two decades has depended heavily on spatial metaphors. The myriad “decenterings” of modernism and of reputedly modern agents (e.g., the working class), the “displacement” of political economy by cultural discourse, and a host of other “moves” have been facilitated by a very fertile lexicon of spatial metaphors: subject positionality, locality, mapping, grounding, travel, (de/re)centering, theoretical space, ideological space, symbolic space, conceptual space, spaces of signification, territorialization, and so forth. If such metaphors functioned initially in a very positive way to challenge, aerate, and even discard a lot of stodgy thinking, they may now have taken on much more independent existence that discourages as much as it allows fresh political insight . . . Metaphor works in many different ways but it always involves an assertion of otherness . . . Difference is expressed in similarity. Some truth or insight is revealed by asserting that an incompletely understood object, event, or situation is another, where the other is assumed known . . . To the extent that metaphor continually appeals to some other assumed reality as known, *it* systematically disguises the need to investigate the known [at hand]. . . . (63–64)

Smith’s insistence that we “investigate the known” at hand implies an important shift in the ethical horizon of comparison. A metaphorical space like “postcolonial culture,” when conceived as an operative counterforce to the “world-economy,” indeed “disguises the need to investigate” the particular spatial relations that shape the landscapes of the postcolonial novel. It makes it impossible to recognize Africa-of-the-Novel as a differentiated *place* that embodies, in part, the ethical anxieties of the culturally permitting Western critic, national commentators, and the producers of novels. A literary critique of scale would regard Africa-of-the-Novel as a dialectically “motivated” *landscape* (to use a key term of formal analysis) where the so-called laws of motion, progress, and probability unfold according to a logic of spatial differentiation—or better, as an anthropologist would say, in a process of *scale-making*. What better program for a geographically enlarged literary history than to conceptualize the dialectic of lived time and lived space in and around literature—in order to understand the entanglement of literature in the history of the production of space. There can, of course, be no productive conceptualization of literary scale that can be limited to a single genre.<sup>40</sup> And yet, the novel seems to offer a ready opportunity to begin tackling directly the stakes of the “literary globalization” as a historical, theoretical, and ethical conundrum: by returning us to one

of the most time-honored problems of comparative literary history—the problem of historical contextualization—this time, for the purpose of considering the geographic thinking that grounds comparative claims to context-dependency.

Instead, in the “world literature” debate, we witness distanciation, a notion that may well qualify as the commonsense of the discipline, undergo yet another “radical” revival. And the repetition suggests that the comparative imagination is hitting a chronotopic limit. Again we are told what every comparatist already knows: that by enlarging the frame of inquiry beyond the nation-scale, by stepping back, as it were, to revision the literary terrain from afar, one becomes privy to broader connections—clusters, homologies, specificities, exchange, trails of influence. This is a cultural geography that will continue to harden, as I have suggested, to make crossings possible. But also, in the midst of familiar provocations, globalization is presented as an impetus to rethink the “evidence” of literary phenomena and the relationship of the literary object to its milieu. And this is where, to my mind, the simple logic of distance begins to disintegrate.<sup>41</sup> We are at a juncture where we must pursue directly a literary phenomenology of the production of scale, which can begin to elucidate the diverse forms of entanglement between literary history and the history of the production of space—and the function of literary criticism as an intermediary poetics. By doing so, we leave behind what Smith describes as “the metaphorical uses of space.” Unlike schoolchildren for whom scale is the relation between distance on a map and distance in reality, literary comparatists conceptualize scale as the social condition of a landscape’s utility.

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#### NOTES

1 Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005). Apter’s critique of comparative literature begins by examining the cultural and racial biases of the discipline’s founders, most notably Eric Auerbach and Leo Spitzer.

2 Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68. Moretti’s short essay, and the wide response it has solicited from “comparatists” and “specialists” alike is significant, primarily because it allows us to gauge a critical status quo. Responses include, but are not restricted to: Christopher Prendergast, “Negotiating World Literature,” *New Left Review* 8 (March–April 2001): 100–122; Francesca Orsini, “Maps of Indian Writing,” *New Left Review* 13 (January–February 2002): 75–88. Efrain Kristal, “Considering Coldly . . .”: A Response to Franco Moretti,” *New Left Review* 15 (May–June 2002): 61–74; Jonathan Arac, “Anglo-Globalism?” *New Left Review* 16 (July–August 2002): 35–45; Emily Apter, “Global *Translatio*: The ‘Invention’ of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (2003): 253–81; Jale Parla, “The Object of Comparison,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 116–25; Frances Ferguson, “Comparing the

Literatures: Textualism and Globalism," *English Literary History* 71, no. 2 (2004): 323–27; Wai Chee Dimock, "Genre and World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents," *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (2006): 85–101; and Gayatri Spivak's "World Systems and the Creole," *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (2006): 102–112, and her discussion of Moretti's distant reading in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003): 108. The list goes on.

3 Pascale Casanova, "Literature as a World," *New Left Review* 31 (January–February 2005). Casanova's application of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological construct of the "field" to describe a tightly knit international sphere of literary production that emerges in the seventeenth century and which gradually guarantees for literature "relative" autonomy from politics, has received general approval in U.S. and British academic circles, upon publication of an English translation, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), of her French book *Le republique mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999). Terry Eagleton calls the book "a milestone in the history of modern thought" in *New Statesman*, April 11, 2005, and Perry Anderson says "*The World Republic of Letters* . . . is likely to have the same sort of liberating impact at large as Said's *Orientalism*, with which it stands comparison" in "Union Sucrée," *London Review of Books*, September 23, 2004. This has, so far, not been the case. Casanova's work has been more often lauded than engaged or discussed. Less favorable reviews include Christopher Prendergast's "The World Republic of Letters," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Prendergast (Verso: London, 2004), 1–25, and Gayatri Spivak's "cautioning" to Casanova in "World-Systems and the Creole" (see note 2).

4 For a summary of this debate, see the introduction by Prendergast, *Debating World Literature*, vii–xiii.

5 Here I am not only counting those of us who hail from comparative literature; for many outside the "discipline" who espouse a comparative approach, comparison has come to be a horizon of interpretation and research.

6 Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336–57 (hereafter cited in text as PP). Appiah's article makes a strong (and I think correct) argument about the limited relevance of a category like "postmodernism" to most of the postcolonial world, and he offers interesting observations about the "nativist" turn in prominent African writers. In this essay, I derive insight from Appiah's juxtaposition of novel and sculpture.

7 As a structure of narrative motivation, this landscape could not be any tighter; every "object" in it is explosive, a Chekhov's gun.

8 Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale," *Social Text* 33 (1992): 99. Smith's essay has been widely quoted and discussed in relation to "the scale question," which has been the center of renewed discussion among human geographers and beyond the field of geography, most notably in cultural anthropology.

9 For more on the scale debates in geography, and the critique of scale by human geographers, see Eric Sheppard and Robert McMaster, *Scale and Geographic Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

10 Smith, "Scale," in *Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. Ronald J. Johnston et al., 4th ed. (London: Blackwell, 2000): 724–26.

11 Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1984), 68 (hereafter cited in text).

12 Newton quoted in *Uneven Development*, 68. Smith goes further to associate the "progressive abstraction of space from matter" in the history of the concept to the rise and consolidation of capitalism in *Uneven Development*, 69.

13 If we can argue that Edward Said was, in a manner, concerned with the mutual differentiation and intelligibility of the "Occident" and "Orient" as geographic *scales* in the Western imagination, then every instance in which the categories of "Orient" or "Occident"

are pressed into service, what is evoked and enforced is a notion of cultural distance—the impossibility of reconciliation, or indeed, the inevitability of a clash of civilizations. See Said's critique of Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 308–9.

14 Moretti uses “peripheral novel” to denote novelistic production outside central Europe, which includes what is widely referred to as “the postcolonial novel.” I will use the latter term.

15 Moretti, “Conjectures,” 60 (hereafter cited in text).

16 A most coherent and well-articulated project in this direction is that of Shu Mei Shih and Francoise Lionnet, whose goal is to challenge the statuses of “minor” and “major” literature by charting minor-minor and periphery-to-center movements. See *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Lionnet and Shih (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005). Elsewhere, Wai Chee Dimock dismisses Moretti's use of “world-systems analysis,” but takes on the “mapping of ‘literature’ as an analytic object” in “Genre as World System” (see note 2). Spivak notes this discrepancy in Dimock's critique, and gently guards against “unintended consequence[s]” in “World Systems and the Creole,” 110.

17 For example: Fredric Jameson, “On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World,” *Margins* 1 (1993): 11–34; Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (London: Verso, 1992); Itamar Even-Zohar, “The Laws of Literary Interference,” *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990): 53–72.

18 The seminal text here is Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

19 See Moretti's response to his critics in “More Conjectures,” *New Left Review* 20 (March–April 2003): 73–81.

20 See Apter's *Translation Zone*, where she argues that Moretti “ignores the extent to which high theory, with its internationalist circulation, already functioned as a form of distant reading” (43); and Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, whose “utopian” trajectory is remarked upon in a review by Roland Green (*Sub-Stance* 35, no. 1 [2006]:154–59). In contrast, David Damrosch's claim, in *What Is World Literature?*, that “texts become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture,” offers a pragmatic approach to translation, which acknowledges the privileged role of close-reading in the *second language* in the world circulation of literature (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 283.

21 See Casanova's “Literature as a World,” 82.

22 Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 26.

23 Casanova, “Literature as a World,” 89. The notion of “art” here magnifies the element of design on the part of postcolonial authors. Of course, Casanova contends, at the very same time, that such compromises are largely unconscious. All of this again casts the postcolonial writer as peculiarly artful and artless, a particularly “intuitive” or “instinctive” producer.

24 Pheng Cheah, who (among others) has noted the novel's centrality in accounts of cultural transition to “modernity,” remarks in the context of a discussion of Benedict's Anderson's work on Indonesia in the “placing of the novel at the threshold of the epistemic coupure between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ worldviews.” *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999): 8n5.

25 Indeed Appiah's “Man” could not be fit into Casanova's “literary” republic.

26 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).

27 Jim Ferguson, “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development,” in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba et al. (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 174.

28 Moretti, "Conjectures," 60–61 (hereafter cited in text).

29 The point here is not that Moretti's conception of scale is faulty, but more importantly that he, as others in the world literature debate, have thus far deployed the term scale untheoretically (speaking of literature or literary analysis on "the world scale," "the global scale," "the large scale").

30 Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 11.

31 "Language . . . became a *zone* over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world." Chatterjee, *The Nation*, 7 (my italics).

32 These two views of culture proved contradictory, Chatterjee shows, when "modern women" became anxiously perceived as the barometers of compromise. *The Nation*, 135–57.

33 Ferguson, "Decomposing Modernity," 179–80.

34 J. K. Gibson-Graham has offered a critique of a political economy, which increasingly endows "the economy" with the quality of an abstract and unchanging "Real." *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

35 Casanova, "Literature," 90.

36 In this logic, it matters little that some products are more far-reaching than others, because all modes of production are *aesthetically* equal.

37 This has long been Immanuel Wallerstein's position, and is expressed explicitly in relation to the comparative method in "Call for a Debate about the Paradigm," in *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1991): 237–56.

38 Anna Tsing explores the relationship between "modernization" and "globalization" as historiographical tools in her influential essay, "The Global Situation," *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 327–60, where she proposes "scale-making" projects as an object of ethnography.

39 Smith, "Contours," 62 (hereafter cited in text).

40 It has been argued, with validity, that the novel's centrality in discussions of world literature and literary globalization must itself be scrutinized and explained. See note 4.

41 The term scale has recently attracted some specialists of American literature, such as Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, who argue that what appears to be a national American literature can in fact be shown to be transnational; this is finally done by asserting the "multiculturalism" of a presumably homogenous American canon. *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007). Hsuan Hsu also introduces the language of "scale" to the debate among Americanists about regionalism, most recently reactivated by Sara Blair's article, "Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary," *American Literary History* 10, no. 3 (1998): 544–67. Hsu associates scale with the ability of literary texts to negotiate the experience of belonging to geographic spheres of experience that vary in scope, and consequently chooses to examine instances where conventional geographic scales (such as the world, the nation, the home) are named and questioned, or when the word "scale" emerges in the discourse of American writers. Also see Ann Brigham's "Productions of Geographic Scale and Capitalist-Colonialist Enterprise in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 2 (2004): 303–31. Brigham draws widely from Neil Smith's work.