

# COMPARISON

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THEORIES, APPROACHES, USES

EDITED BY RITA FELSHI AND SUSAN STANFORD FRIEDMAN

# CONTENTS

Introduction, by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman 1

**PART I. THE STAKES OF COMPARISON**

1 Why Compare?, by R. Radhakrishnan 15

2 Why Not Compare?, by Susan Stanford Friedman 34

3 Crossroads, Distant Killing, and Translation: On the Ethics and Politics of Comparison, by Zhang Longxi 46

4 Axes of Comparison, by Haun Saussy 64

**PART II. COMPARISON IN THE WORLD: USES AND ABUSES**

5 Comparison as Relation, by Shu-mei Shih 79

6 On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?, by Walter D. Mignolo 99

7 Transnationalizing Comparison: The Uses and Abuses of Cross-Cultural Analogy, by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat 120

8 Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique, by Ania Loomba 147

9 The Material World of Comparison, by Pheng Cheah 168

10 Chomsky's Golden Rule: Comparison and Cosmopolitanism, by Bruce Robbins 191

11 Endings and Beginnings: Reimagining the Tasks and Spaces of Comparison, by Mary N. Layoun 210

12 Comparison Literature, by Rebecca L. Walkowitz 235

**PART III. COMPARISON IN THE DISCIPLINES**

13 Rethinking Comparativism, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 253

14 The Uses of Incommensurability in Anthropology, by Richard Handler 271

15 Anthropology, Migration, and Comparative Consciousness, by Caroline B. Brettell 292

16 A Meditation on Comparison in Historical Scholarship, by Linda Gordon 315

Notes on Contributors 337  
Index 341

© 2013 The Johns Hopkins University Press  
All rights reserved. Published 2013  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press  
2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363  
www.press.jhu.edu

ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0912-2 (paperback : alk. paper)  
ISBN-10: 1-4214-0912-7 (paperback : alk. paper)  
ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0949-8 (electronic)  
ISBN-10: 1-4214-0949-6 (electronic)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012948563

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Chapter 2 adapted from *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 753-62.  
Chapters 1, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 appeared in  
*New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2009).

*Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.*

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## Comparison as Relation

Shu-mei Shih

COMPARISON, AS THE ACT OF COMPARING SIMILARITIES and differences, has led to two ethical conundrums. First, it led to anxieties toward the grounds of comparison, because when we put two texts or entities side by side, we tend to privilege one over the other. The grounds are never level. A presumed or latent standard operates in any such act of comparison, and it is the more powerful entity that implicitly serves as the standard. Second, the most likely conclusion to these comparisons is further pronouncement of differences and incommensurabilities between the entities, precisely due to an ethical concern over the latent operation of the presumed, usually Eurocentric, standard. Comparing two entities at their intimate juxtaposition therefore paradoxically produces further distances between them.

This essay is a modest proposal for a new theory of comparison that I call relational comparison. It argues for comparison as relation, or doing comparative literature as relational studies. Comparison as relation means setting into motion historical relationalities between entities brought together for comparison, and bringing into relation terms that have traditionally been pushed apart from each other due to certain interests, such as the European exceptionalism that undergirds Eurocentrism. The excavation of these relationalities is what I consider to be the ethical practice of comparison, where the workings of power are not concealed but necessarily revealed. Power, after all, is a form of relation.

To set up the relational framework, I first draw insights from the integrative world history detailed by such scholars as Janet L. Abu-Lughod, John M. Hobson, and André Gunder Frank to consider the potentiality of a world historical study of literature as they do global economy, and to offer a new, and I think more viable, conception of world literature. I synthesize these findings with the theory of Relation developed by Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant as a way to link geocultural and socioeconomic history—the history of worldwide interconnectedness—not only to literature but also to poetics. Literature is part and parcel to the world, and poetics is as much about understanding the text as understanding the world. Glissant's notion of poetics as a certain logic of the world and a theory of literature offers us a creative way to think

about the relation between the text and the world in several ways. As a being in the world, the text is not only organic to the world but also enters into relations; its worldliness is its thrownness. Usefully, we can consider the question of scale in literary studies from the world to the text, from the grand geographical scale of the world to the admittedly small physical scale of an individual text. The relational method informed by world history, I contend, allows for the scaling back and forth between the world and the text as well as along the intermediary scales, moving toward a more integrated conception of comparative literature and world literature, where the issue is not inclusiveness or qualification (which text deserves to be studied or designated as "world literature" and which does not) but excavating and activating the historically specific set of relationalities across time and space. These relationalities can be as much about form as content; hence the importance of poetics.

Relational studies of literature in integrated world historical contexts can occur along various axes and pivots, from different perspectives, around different thematics, and in different scales. For example, we can consider the specific decolonial pivot of world history in the global 1960s to analyze literary texts that cross-fertilized each other, or we can consider the axis of women's movements around the world to analyze women's literature in these different places not as discreet entities but in relation. The potential topics are as numerous as the infinite web of world relations within which the text is caught.

In this essay, the specific pivot traces what I call the "plantation arc," stretching from the Caribbean to the American South and to Southeast Asia. From the Caribbean, we follow Glissant's theory of Relation, a theory that is consonant with the widespread tendency to think on a global scale in the late twentieth century (as in chaos theory, which he appropriates, and theories of globalization) and organic to the location from which he theorizes, the Caribbean archipelago or the West Indies. From there, we follow Glissant's reading of the plantation novels of William Faulkner, set in the American South and populated by white and mixed-blood planters harboring dark secrets, a reading which enacts the scaling of the theory of Relation from the worldwide to the textual. From this American South, we move to the British East Indies—the Borneo rain forest of British and Japanese colonizers, Chinese settlers and coolies, Sarawak communists and indigenous Dayaks—in the work of Taiwan-based Sinophone Malaysian author Chang Kuei-hsing. We then loop back to the Caribbean of Patricia Powell, the Jamaica of postabolition blacks, white coolie traders, Chinese coolies, and shopkeepers. The purpose here is twofold: first, to illustrate how doing relational studies with a keen world historical sense demands that world literature take its worldliness more seriously than thought possible; and second, to show

how relational comparison opens up a new arena, perhaps even a new life, for comparative literature.

### Integrative World History and World Literature

The two main theses for integrative world historians, simply put, are that the world as we know it has been integrated economically and otherwise for much longer than the modern world system theory proposes, and that the so-called "rise of the West" owed much to the more advanced East. To consider the macrohistory of the world is to learn the interconnectedness of the world since at least around the sixth century, and what this means is that the ideology of "East is East and West is West" is as fictive as it is false.

Historical sociologist J. L. Abu-Lughod identifies in her important book *Before European Hegemony* (1991) the existence of a polycentric world system in the thirteenth century, much before the European-led world system of the sixteenth century, as has been proposed in Immanuel Wallerstein's popular world systems theory. By the eleventh, twelfth, and especially the thirteenth century, the world had become more integrated than ever before. The "increased economic integration and cultural efflorescence" of the thirteenth century can be witnessed in such accomplishments as Sung celadonware, Persian turquoise-glazed bowls, Egyptian furniture with complex inlays of silver and gold, grand cathedrals in Europe, great Hindu temples in south India, as well as developments in technology and social innovations such as navigation and statecraft, all of which happened alongside an international trade system that stretched from northwestern Europe to China.<sup>1</sup> This international trade system was in turn organized around three major circuits of the Far East, the Middle East, and Western Europe, covering most of the world, with the exception of the continental Americas and Australia.

Disputing Abu-Lughod's claim that the thirteenth-century world system then declined when the European-led world system arose, André Gunder Frank's explicitly anti-Eurocentric *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) pays special attention to the structural relations, interconnectedness, and simultaneity in world events and processes during what he calls "the Asian Age," which he dates from 1400 to 1800. Even though he actually locates in his other works the existence of something similar to Wallerstein's world system back by five thousand years, not five hundred years, his main point in this book is to show how Europe "climbed up on the back of Asia, then stood on Asian shoulders," which also asserts the view, contrary to Abu-Lughod's, that Asia did not decline but maintained its economic dominance until 1800.<sup>2</sup> Frank analyzes trade routes, the

capillary operation of money, and the interconnectedness of a global economy, making an argument after Joseph Fletcher for a "horizontally integrative history." This is how Fletcher defined integrative history as a method:

Integrative history is the search for and description and explanation of such interrelated historical phenomenon. Its methodology is conceptually simple, if not easy to put into practice: first one searches for historical parallels (roughly contemporaneous similar developments in the world's various societies) and then one determines whether they are causally interrelated.<sup>3</sup>

Here what we have is a proposal to study macrohistory in a horizontal fashion across different geographical regions in terms of structures, simultaneities, and interrelations, as opposed to predominant studies of vertical continuities of national histories. The integrative method is deceptively simple, but it is also the method that historians (not to mention literary scholars) have more than successfully avoided throughout the modern period. This avoidance is telling. To analogize alongside Frank's critique of Eurocentric history, separating the West from the East in literary studies was probably as foundational to the construction of European literary exceptionalism as it was for Eurocentric historical studies. We can now perhaps begin to see the conceit of not only the displacement of horizontal studies (the East is too hard to know), but also the conversion of horizontal to vertical studies (the East is the past of the West) prevalent in literary studies. Fletcher's method begins with finding parallel patterns, and this is but one of the methods one can use to do relational studies, but it can be highly productive for literary studies. When we do modernist studies, for instance, we can no longer turn a blind eye to all those modernisms that occurred in non-Western countries, nor can we see each of these modernisms as autonomous or discreet. Apparent parallels are not historical accidents.

Synthesizing many of the views of Abu-Lughod, Frank, and other like-minded world historians, J. M. Hobson's *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004) offers specific analyses of the "resource portfolios" (technologies, institutions, and ideas) that the East had to offer to the West to make possible the rise of the "Oriental West," because globalization was first of all Eastern (Far Eastern and Islamic Middle Eastern) or Oriental. What this means is that the world since the sixth century has been a "single global cobweb,"<sup>4</sup> where advancements in the production of iron and steel (not to mention the production of crops, crafts, and arts), the breakthroughs in astronomy and mathematics, and the creation of a whole series of capitalist institutions in the Islamic Middle East—as well as the technological advancements such as printing, gunpowder,

navigational sciences (compass and the building of ships)—enlightened ideas of rationality, and agricultural and other technological know-how from the Far East (especially China) made the world a much more interconnected place. It was with the construction of the white racist self-identity, the burgeoning of European social sciences, and the rise of imperial ambitions that the ideas of European exceptionalism and the autonomous "rise of the West" were invented. Methodologically, Hobson does not necessarily offer anything more than Frank does, but substantiates Frank's more theoretical and general claims in greater detail.

Integrative world history, as far as I can see, began as both a reaction against nationalist historiography (where the object of study is one nation and its vertical history of continuity) as well as traditional comparative history (where the two objects of study—two nations—largely run parallel while differences and similarities are calibrated). The new focus is instead, as one historian notes, on "the complex, global network of power-inflected relations that enmesh our world."<sup>5</sup> To be sure, not all parts of the network are equally affecting or evenly affected by the global system, but all parts of the network are constitutive of the system itself, and there is no hiding from an interconnectedness that is thoroughly infiltrated by the operations of power. This means that histories of empire, conquest, slavery, and colonialism cannot in any way be disavowed when one does integrative world history; after all, as noted earlier, power is a form of relation.

Herein lies perhaps the greatest distinction between integrative world history and the theories of world literature offered by literary comparatists in recent years. Franco Moretti's map of world literature, though inclusive of much of the world, is Eurocentric to the extent that he holds up what is essentially an exceptionalist argument about the life story of the novel as rising in the West and traveling to the East.<sup>6</sup> Pascale Casanova's model considers colonial history only to reaffirm Paris as the center of the world republic of letters.<sup>7</sup> David Damrosch's model would grant world literature status only to those texts that have "circulated beyond their culture of origin" through such modes of circulation as translation, publication, and reading.<sup>8</sup> What this implies is that the study of world literature is partly about identifying which texts were translated into and read in which languages. Considering that the United States has the lowest percentage of translated books compared to almost all of the other countries in the world, American scholars should be accordingly least qualified to theorize the system of world literature. More importantly, texts travel over terrain that is by no means even, and the circulation model effectively cuts off from consideration the literatures of many small nations and minor languages that are nonetheless also touched by world historical processes. Wouldn't it make better sense to consider a

model of world literature similar to that of integrative world history that sees, instead of discreet national literatures, all literatures as participating in a network of power-inflected relations, with the task of the world literature scholar to excavate and analyze these relations through deep attention to the texts in question in the context of world history? These relations can manifest themselves on formal, generic, and other levels, so the new model will require close readings of the texts (as opposed to Moretti's "distant reading") and will require sensitivity to world history, scaling both the textual and the global without losing sight of either of the scales. To put it differently, form and formation are intimately connected, as are content and history, even in texts that most assiduously flaunt artistic autonomy. The argument for the autonomy of the text is itself a historical formation.

### From the West Indies, Relation

While the integrative world historians have given us concrete historical and economic evidence as to the interconnectedness of the world since the sixth century, Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant has theorized Relation as both a way of describing and understanding the globalized world of "infinite interaction of cultures," and as an act (Relation as "an intransitive verb") that changes all the elements that come into relation with each other.<sup>9</sup> Relation is therefore as much a phenomenological description of the world as a movement or a process. As a description, it is akin to the perception of the dynamics of the world in chaos theory; as a movement, it is best exemplified in the worldwide and ceaseless process of creolization. Together, they constitute a poetics. Relation is a network and shaped by history, however chaotic and unpredictable this network may be. It is not "devoid of norms, but these [norms] neither constitute a goal nor govern a method,"<sup>10</sup> just as in the science of chaos, which shows that indeterminacy can be an analyzable fact and accidents can be measurable.<sup>11</sup> Relation therefore allows us to consider the world both in its unity and totality as well as in its infinite diversity. Like the ecological interdependence of all lands on earth, all peoples and cultures are interdependent when seen from the viewpoint of Relation. Cultures cannot be reduced to prime elements, such as prime numbers in mathematics, but are always open and changing through their contacts with other cultures. Hence Relation is movement. In this way, it is not just a description of the past world where Relation did its work, but also constantly changing present where Relation is doing its work, but also the unforeseeable future where Relation will continue to do its work in transforming cultures, peoples, and languages.

To do the work of Relation as an exercise in poetics—that is, Relation as a method—is to relate here and elsewhere and to explore the inexhaustible and unpredictable entanglements and confluence among cultures and histories. As the world has been and will always be enmeshed in the unceasing processes of creolization, so should our method be attentive to these processes rather than providing static descriptions of closure and completion. As a method, this also departs dramatically from even the non-Eurocentric methods of comparative literature, where the juxtaposition of different cultural texts has caused some to worry about cultural relativism.<sup>12</sup> Relation work is in fact the opposite of relativism, because relativism is premised on reductive understanding of cultures and assumes essentialism of cultures,<sup>13</sup> as if each culture has a discreet boundary that another culture cannot cross. The West Indies is as exemplary as the place from which to theorize as any other place, as the point is not to elevate the specific to the universal but to deconstruct the universal altogether by way of interrelations among places and cultures. One can start in any place. And it is in this specific sense that Glissant's evocation of Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite's famous line "the unity is submarine"—both as an epigraph for his magnum opus, *Poetics of Relation*, and as something unique to the Caribbean in *Caribbean Discourse*—should be understood. It refers to the "subterranean convergence" of the histories of the islands in the Caribbean specifically,<sup>14</sup> but it really also refers to the worldwide confluence of cultures.

In Françoise Lionnet's discussion of the archipelagic dimension of Caribbean thought, she evokes the Southeast Asian nations' declaration of their archipelagosity in the Bandung Conference of 1955, but these two areas are seldom discussed together.<sup>15</sup> The fact is that the West Indies and the East Indies are similar geographic formations, and they also share similar colonial histories. These commonalities alone should prompt comparative archipelago studies.<sup>16</sup> Etymologically, "archipelago" refers to the water between islands, not the islands themselves: "pelagos" is "sea," as in Middle English "arch-sea,"<sup>17</sup> similar to the meaning in Greek and Italian. Viewing from the perspective of the sea, I infer, allows us to see the world as an archipelago, where different land masses (whether the so-called continents or the so-called islands) are all islands; though of varying sizes, they are also all interconnected by the sea. This would be the relational way of looking at the world as a sea of islands, big or small, concretized by integrative world historians' mapping of maritime trade routes that crisscrossed the world. We may say that the archipelago is unique to the West Indies, from where Glissant theorizes, and to the East Indies, where the same European colonizers landed, but it is also a way to comprehend the interconnectedness of the world: the world as an archipelago. After all, "the unity is submarine." Here the geographical

the Indian Ocean, around Cape Town, and over the Atlantic to the Americas; the other route from Southeast Asia through the Suez Canal to cross the Atlantic from the Mediterranean. These were the routes of the coolie ships in the nineteenth century, along with the route that takes off directly from southeastern China to the Americas over the Pacific.<sup>21</sup> Viewed in terms of integrative world history, this nineteenth-century circuit exceeds the Far Eastern economic circuit that Abu-Lughod identifies for the thirteenth century, as the Far Eastern circuit at the time extended from the Indian Ocean in the west only to the South China Sea in the east, and it did not cross the Pacific to the Americas, nor did it cross the other way through the Atlantic to the Americas. In fact, the coolie ships were often nothing more than repurposed slave ships, and they traversed both the Pacific and the Atlantic to reach the Caribbean islands from China and Southeast Asia. Jamaican writer Patricia Powell aptly and empathetically calls this the "middle passage" of the Chinese coolies.<sup>22</sup>

To trace this arc from the West Indies to the East Indies, a brief loop through the American South helps us actuate the arc in specific literary works, and to consider the possibility of a poetics born of literary relations in the context of world historical relations. We can see this in Glissant's deeply attentive reading of the novels of William Faulkner set in the American South. Not only did Glissant repeatedly refer to Faulkner as an important example for his poetics of Relation in his book *Poetics of Relation* (1991), but he also wrote an entire book devoted to Faulkner, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, five years later. In a sense, we can see *Faulkner, Mississippi* as Glissant's scaling of Relation from the global level to the textual level, from the logic of the world to the logic of the text, and his extension of the theory of Relation from the Caribbean to elsewhere from archipelagic perspectives. Not only are there structural similarities between the two plantation systems in the Caribbean and the American South, Glissant proposes that the American South is actually an "incalculable border" of the Caribbean.<sup>23</sup>

The basis of Glissant's reading of Faulkner's work rests with the question of race and consequences of slavery. In contrast to Faulkner's public position on the question of race where Faulkner was usually racist and at best paternalistic, including in his public conversations with W. E. B. Du Bois,<sup>24</sup> Glissant reads Faulkner's novels as having exposed the torrid undercurrent of sin and perversion among the planters and other southern whites, all tinged with deep racial anxieties; that is, he reads Faulkner's novels as taking the opposite stance from the author's own on the race question. In Faulkner's novels, the southern whites actually live "such bootless daring, such useless majesty, such tragic, miserable, and small-minded lives" with "so much violence, theft, rape, insanity, infirmity,

scale can be shrunk or expanded in our thinking, but the important point is how one begins specifically (from the West Indies), not to arrive at the universal, but to arrive at interconnections. This is what I mean by doing relational studies, which does not resuscitate old universalisms or construct new universalisms, but works from the specific to arrive at interrelations in history.

How might this theory of Relation (and, related to it, the world as archipelago) be scaled back to the textual level for the literary comparatist? Glissant notes, in one of his many lyrical moments, what the poetics of Relation promises: "The probability: that you come to the bottom of all confluences to mark more strongly your inspirations."<sup>18</sup> It is surely impossible to reach "the bottom of all confluences," and I doubt there is such a place, however abstract that place may be, but it may be the place where we can work toward, from whichever small or large land mass in the arch-sea.

### The Plantation Arc

The history about what I call the plantation arc is fairly straightforward; it considers the West Indies, the American South, and the East Indies in the same conjuncture and thereby traces a related but different itinerary from that of a plantation system organized around slavery. Glissant himself notes that the plantation system "spread, following the same structural principles, throughout the southern United States, the Caribbean islands, the Caribbean coast of Latin America, and the northeastern portion of Brazil."<sup>19</sup> In the postslavery context, however, the plantation system also spread throughout the East Indies, where the European colonizers experimented with, mimicked, and transplanted their practices from and to the Americas with varying successes. They experimented, for instance, with tobacco, sugar, and coffee in the East Indies as in the Caribbean, then shifted to rubber and other products such as tapioca and pepper when those crops that had succeeded in the Caribbean could not acclimate to Southeast Asia. Planters across the Americas and Southeast Asia imported indentured laborers—especially coolies from China and India—as labor to the plantation system at the end of slavery. Some of the so-called Chinese coolies brought to the Caribbean were themselves transported across the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic—not from China, but from Southeast Asia, as the European colonizers had brought them there earlier.<sup>20</sup>

This arc from Southeast Asia to the Americas constitutes a portion of the postslavery plantation circuit, a circuit of interconnected histories of European colonialism. One route takes off from Southeast Asia through

misfortune<sup>75</sup> that their legitimacy is most fundamentally challenged. A cloud of ambiguity and a mountain of secrets haunt their existence. They all seem to be somehow damned.

This damnation is manifested in the perversion of the descent line, or the irreparable collapse of relationships of filiation. In novel after novel, the descent line between fathers and their children (especially sons) is irrevocably broken, the family members are torn asunder, and some have monstrous births, awkward deaths, and other unexpected misfortunes. And then there are stories that actually include episodes of lynching, as well as those set in the Caribbean. Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* has a white father but must face the threat of lynching. The white planter, Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom!* marries a woman who passes as white in Haiti, and does not discover that she is of mixed blood until their son is born. Race appears again and again as the "unsurpassable point of reference,"<sup>76</sup> thrusting the idea of a white genealogy under threat. All this is due to the original sin: the violence committed by whites on Indians and blacks. The presupposition of Faulkner's narration, Glissant concludes, is therefore the "illegitimate foundation of the South,"<sup>77</sup> about which whites are solely responsible.

Faulkner's South is in this way linked with the Caribbean and Latin America by "the damnation and miscegenation born of the rape of slavery."<sup>78</sup> Contrary to his public stance on the race question, Faulkner obliquely writes into his narratives the history of settler colonialism and slavery and compels us to consider it as an ethical demand, that is, as Glissant puts it, "the recognition of the other as a moral obligation" and "an aesthetic constituent."<sup>79</sup> In other words, responsibility to the other is constitutive of a poetics where descent is impure, linearity is lost, and entanglements are supreme, leading to a "post-identitarian poetics"<sup>80</sup> that is also the poetics of Relation, both in terms of history and in terms of literature-qua-literature. Secrets are revealed in a painstakingly slow manner; hence the narrative tempo moves hauntingly and hauntingly along countless deferrals. Character psychologies are as confused as the intensely wrought and baroque prose, with words going around in circles, "listing, accumulating, repeating" (194), constituting his particular modernist style that has influenced writers all across the Americas and has reached the East Indies.

### To the East Indies, Creolization

The legacy of the plantation system at the edge of the Borneo rain forest in Chang Kuei-hsing's Sinophone novel *Monkey Cup* (Houtbeij, 2000), as in Faulkner's South, is the irreparable damage done to the line of descent

due to an original sin, which Chang calls "one hundred years of filth."<sup>81</sup> Here the planters and settlers acquire land and property illegitimately, exploit the trafficked laborers (Chinese coolies) and indigenous people (Dayaks), commit rape and pillage, and encroach upon the oldest rain forest in the world, earning an original condemnation on the succeeding generations of descendants. The planters, or rather their executors, are the Chinese settlers who acquire their derivative power from the British colonizers and essentially function as what I call "middleman settler colonizers,"<sup>82</sup> constituting the middle layer in a colonial system structured by race and class in a hierarchy in descending order: white European colonizers, Chinese middlemen settler colonizers, Chinese coolies, and indigenous Dayaks. As there is no English translation of this Sinophone novel, I offer a summary of the plot first below.

Told in a mix of temporalities traversing a span of about one hundred years, the narrative of *Monkey Cup* begins, in chronological terms, in the year 1882,<sup>83</sup> when a Chinese foreman boldly recommends himself as the substitute planter for a coffee plantation after the British founder in 1860 was killed, a murder that turned out to be staged to look like it was done by the Dayaks, by none other than the ambitious foreman himself. This foreman-turned-planter is Great-grandfather and patriarch of the Chinese Malaysian Yu family. The British governor-general is impressed by this man's silent and able demeanor, with a body that is as tall as the British, "without [such physical deficiencies as] foul smell from the body and the mouth, heat rashes, athlete's feet, tuberculosis, and papaverine-deprived shiftless eyes." They are especially impressed by his multilingualism:

He spoke ten languages: Malay, Indonesian, and Dayak pickled with rice wine, spices, and red pepper; Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien filled with the fishy flavors of tree barks, grass roots, and mud; English and Dutch mixed with the flavors of cigar, alcohol, and lead.<sup>84</sup>

In economical prose, Chang imbues the languages listed with specific, racialized characteristics associated with the people who speak them as mother tongues in colonial taxonomy: the foods they eat (for the native races), the settlers' ability to endure hardship (for Chinese Malaysians who speak a variety of Sinitic languages), and colonial products and articles of consumption (for the European colonizers). His multilingualism is first of all the crucial skill needed for his middleman colonizer position, but it points also to an incredible mix of cultures on the ground, as this mixture does not merely affect the relationship between Great-grandfather and others but seeps integrally into the interaction among the Yu family members. If multilingualism initially served as a strategy of domination and control, it gradually also becomes a condition of existence for the Chinese Malaysian descendants.



With his multilingualism and cunning, the scheming Great-grandfather, to lease the plantation, secretly presents the British governor-general with a dozen bricks of gold stolen from the gold mine in western Kalimantan where he had been a coolie. Once he gets the plantation, he adds tea, pepper, rubber, and opium poppy to the existing crops of coffee and tobacco and builds a lumber factory. As soon as he accumulates enough wealth, he buys out the plantation from the British colonial government and starts running a gambling den, an opium den, and a prostitution house on the land.<sup>35</sup> In the next ten years, he uses all possible means of deceit and cruelty to acquire a second plantation on the lower reaches of the Baram River, then buys weapons from the British military to protect his plantations against "barbarous natives, poisonous snakes, and fierce beasts."<sup>36</sup> The gambling and opium dens are there to snare the eight hundred or so coolies he employs into addiction, so that they will be entrapped in their work and the plantations will never lack an exploitable labor force. When their debts exceed what they can possibly earn, they would then be forced to sell their daughters as prostitutes to pay off their debts, thus completing a cycle of debt, entrapment, and ruin for the coolies, ensuring the perpetual prosperity of the plantations. Great-grandfather personally imprisons and rapes the women to be forced into prostitution before sending them to his prostitution house, shoots anyone who enters his plantations without permission, and drives away the Dayaks in close-quarter combat, including one battle that results in the deaths of over 130 Dayak men and thirty Chinese coolies. His relationship with the Dayak women predictably mimics the "sex safaris" or "sex peditions" favored by the British, American, and Australian tourists who take them into the rain forest.<sup>37</sup>

Had there been no Japanese invasion and occupation of Borneo during the years between 1941 and 1945, Great-grandfather's plantations might have been handed down to Grandfather, to Father, and then to our protagonist with the English name Teddy Yu. While the Japanese rape and pillage not only the Dayaks but also the Chinese Malaysians, murder all infants in the hospitals in the most gruesome manner (cutting off the penises of the male infants and piercing the vaginas of the female infants), and extract lumber from the rain forest with abandon, Great-grandfather continues to expand his plantations by selling out his compatriots, neighbors, and even his own relatives to the Japanese. The neighbors whose house and land Great-grandfather covets are gruesomely murdered by the Japanese upon his cooked-up charge that they supported anti-Japanese resistance.

But the Japanese could not possibly allow the existence of such a powerful planter, and they eventually force Great-grandfather to dissolve his plantations. At this point, all his past sins begin to catch up with him

and his family. The violence he initiated produces a cycle of violence from which there is no escape; the life of ruin he instituted through gambling, opium smoking, and prostituting also catches up with him and his descendants: they die gruesome deaths, all described in Chang's unyieldingly graphic prose. Great-grandfather and Grandfather die of decapitation by the Dayaks who live in the rain forest. Grandmother, bitten by poisonous scorpions released onto the property by the family's enemies on her wedding night, was maimed in one leg and is later killed by the nameless, gigantic beast that Grandfather keeps to protect the remaining gold bricks; her body is pierced by its horn from the back of her anus to the front of her breasts. Father abandons the family and disappears into the rain forest to join in the communist anti-Japanese resistance, his pregnant lover later brutally raped and murdered by the Japanese—betrayed by none other than Grandfather—her unborn fetus and her entrails disemboweled and exposed in broad daylight. Teddy, advised to escape to Taiwan to avoid the curse on the family, ends up committing an unspeakably shameful act of pedophilia there and is forced to return to Borneo. Narrowly escaping a plot on his life thanks to the ingenious plans of a Dayak woman, Teddy eventually plans to marry her, which brings a semblance of truce at least between the Chinese Malaysians and the Dayaks after the departure of the Japanese. If Great-grandfather, the Kurtz-like figure in the heart of darkness that is the Borneo rain forest, can be compared to Faulkner's Sutpen, Teddy confronts his illegitimacy as well as the original sin of his family by mixing with the indigenous people through marriage. As an avid reader of both Conrad and Faulkner, this is Chang's answer to Kurtz's and Great-grandfather's colonial mentality and to Sutpen's inability to confront the reality of mixedness, all through the "vertigo of a word," as Glissant would put it.<sup>38</sup>

In the meantime, nature gradually engulfs the plantations with force and vitality, returning them to their original state. Indigeneity takes over in the vertigo of words, listing, whirling, repeating:

At dusk, Teddy climbed up to the top of the kampung house with a wooden ladder and scanned the surrounding area while standing on zinc metal plates still hot from the heat of the sun. He saw short trees joggling in the wild family land, brushes sinking and surfacing, the river water undulating, grey dust rolling, fallen leaves, rotten grass, and dusty sand brimming, evening cloud stirring, monsoon wind malodorous, centipede-colored moon cracked like a tortoise shell into the shape of waves, a torrent of view-blocking stream in the wild weaved by locusts and preying mantises, there in the monkey farm emerging a series of small outbursts of commotion, chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs withdrawing, eagles flying high and low, their tongues and claws shimmering, vultures with rumbling stomachs bubbling their heads, while several Jackson-style guns are aimed at the silk floss tree.<sup>39</sup>

Caribbean islands. As contracted (but essentially indentured) laborers, the Chinese coolies were often treated as de facto slaves, governed by inhuman laws and regulations and imprisoned in their plantations to the extent that a former chief justice of British Guiana published a report entitled *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana* in 1871. The book detailed deception at the point of contract, arbitrary wage delays and deductions, physical abuse, extortion, and imprisonment in jails.<sup>41</sup> As in the East Indies, however, once arrived, they managed to survive the indentured labor contract and gradually emerged "as a 'classic middleman minority,' a small ethnic group carving out a niche in the shopkeeping sector."<sup>42</sup>

By the late 1930s, Jamaica had the second-largest Chinese community in the Caribbean, second only to Cuba. It is to this Jamaica that the young, female protagonist arrives from China in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, which fictionalizes the history of Chinese coolies and shopkeepers in postabolition Jamaica. Escaping from an arranged marriage, the protagonist cross-dresses as a man and steals away on a ship bound for the Americas, not knowing that it is a ship carrying a load of coolies chained under deck. Discovered by the coolie trader, she is raped by him but kept safe from all the other men on board. The coolie trader, who turns out to be an ex-slave trader using an erstwhile slave ship as a coolie ship, keeps her as a mistress and sets her up as a shopkeeper in Jamaica, where she has to masquerade as a man to avoid being devoured by men black, white, or yellow in the postabolition Jamaica of rampant unemployment, labor unrest, and economic depression. When she bears the coolie trader a child, he sets up for her a fake marriage with a white woman who also harbors a secret identity. The Chinese woman's masquerade as Mr. Lowe is the ultimate enigma of the novel, just as her sexuality is to herself, both secrets gradually revealed in a skillful process of unfolding as the readers get more and more glimpses into her past. In the meantime, the racial tension among the Chinese shopkeepers and the continuously dispossessed blacks erupt into the looting and burning of Chinese shops, a fate that Mr. Lowe's shop could not escape, even though she/he as the shopkeeper has painstakingly made efforts to get along with the black community:

Yes, he'd come to catch his hand, to make something of his life. But he was no poor-show-great. He didn't see himself better than them. Above them. But now they had burned [the shop] down. Flat. Flat. He was there only on sufferance. Himself and the other five thousand Chinese on the island. He realized now how the Negro people must have secretly despised him for being there . . . And the whites didn't give one blast if the others burned it down. So long as their houses were untouched. Their daughters. Their wives and the plantation equipment.<sup>43</sup>

Here, one gets a sense of Chang's protean imagination and baroque prose, which infuses the 317-page novel without a moment of respite, just as the wild nature gradually and inevitably swallows up the plantations. This entire passage is in fact only a portion of one long sentence in the original Sinophone text, where the full stop is not reached until about ten lines later. The majority of the action that happens in the narrative present is that of Grandfather and Teddy, armed with guns and Malay daggers, fending off the invasion of thousands of giant lizards that attack humans and domestic animals and threaten to take over the house. As they fight the losing battle against the numberless giant lizards, we readers struggle through the suffocating density, ornateness, and violence of Chang's prose, as if under a nameless spell. Chang willfully invents new words and creates new combinations of words and phrases intricately wrought together like the dense rain forest, creolizing the various languages on the ground, like the various plants and animals populating the rain forest all leaving their distinct imprints on the land and the people. This prose disregards the boundaries between time past and present, between exterior and interior realities, between the rain forest and the non-rain forest, between the animal and the human, altogether producing a world that is perhaps more bizarre and more suffocating than Faulkner's South.

The dynamics of the Chinese plantations in Borneo may be historically specific to Borneo, but the plantation system leaves similar legacies as those in Faulkner's South, having been cursed with an original damnation that would carry through generations. As mentioned above, in Chang's Borneo, there seems to be a possibility for redemption, a solution that Faulkner's white southerners refused to take: a willing mixing with the native Dayaks and a surrender to the rain forest.<sup>40</sup> In Chang's novel, it is through affinity and kinship with the Dayaks that our locally born, fourth-generation protagonist is able to arrive at some sort of reconciliation. The rain forest may be the heart of darkness, the tourist mecca, the site of sex safaris for others, but it is also where the logic of the plantation system can be reversed through the process of mixing, leading to unpredictable, unexpected, but diverse and rich possibilities for something new. This is Glissant's world of creolization.

### From the West Indies, Reciprocity

Before Chinese coolies were brought to the East Indies, they were brought over to the Caribbean as early as 1806 in the earliest experiment with coolie labor during the time of slavery, but the most concentrated period was between 1852 and 1866, after the abolition took place in various

Besides being a livelihood, the shop was also a sanctuary and the embodiment of hope for the Chinese coolies:

The shop had been for . . . the Chinese who had escaped the sugar estates with broken backs from working twenty hours a day for close to nothing. They came with hands twisted and chewed from water pumps, scarred by deep grooves left over from cane leaves that cut like knives. They came with spit bubbling with blood, asthmatic and tubercular chests from the dust. They came without flesh, with holes in the skin, half starved from inferior food, lashed and mutilated by overseers under the muscle of plantation owners. The shop was there so if they wanted they could come and apprentice with him, till they'd pay off their contracts and with a small loan open up a little shop, selling half flash of rum, a stick of cigarette, big gill of coconut oil, two inches of tobacco, quarter pound of rice, repaying monthly and with interest.<sup>44</sup>

Soon, we learn more of how the coolie trade operates: the abduction of the Chinese forced into becoming coolies, sold like pigs by crimps, drugged and tortured, chained to iron railings below decks on slave ships with only one third surviving the passage on average, sold in the "man markets" while stripped naked upon arrival, and emblazoned with the initials of plantations on their skins by the planters who bought them. Powell's narrative voice is imbued with empathy toward the Chinese coolies and shopkeepers in Jamaica, calling their passage from China, as mentioned above, their own "middle passage." Instead of accusing the Chinese as the middlemen who helped the European colonizers further oppress the blacks, Powell depicts them as having been equally abused by the whites, explicitly making historical connections between slavery and coolie trade. We find out later that black neighbors and customers did not burn down Mr. Lowe's shop.

In the end, Mr. Lowe's secrets are revealed: she is a woman and a lesbian. The secret of Mr. Lowe's white wife is also revealed; she is a fair-skinned mulatto passing as white, and is now living on the lam. In order to conceal her racial identity, she murdered her first (white) husband who discovered their newborn child's dark skin. If placed in Faulkner's novel, she would have been Sutpen's mulatto wife, to whom Powell is possibly making a specific reference. Through all the secrets, Mr. Lowe's half-white, half-yellow daughter grows up and marries a black man who is a labor activist, gives birth to children who are mixtures of all three races, and Mr. Lowe can no longer speak either of the two Sinitic languages, Hakka and Cantonese, without lapsing into "island speech." Unbeknownst to her, creolization has already taken place. Her "West Indianisation"<sup>45</sup> is inevitable, just as creolization is irrevocable.

The history of Manhattan, Jamaica, is as enmeshed in the history of slavery as Faulkner's South, and as enmeshed in the history of Chinese

coolies as Chang's Borneo. Here, however, it is not the perspectives of the white or Chinese planters that are captured, but the perspectives of coolies, shopkeepers, mulattos, ex-slaves, and labor activists that are all woven into a deeply moving tale spun by a black Jamaican writer. From a shared and interconnected fate so empathetically depicted—the slavery and coolie trade—emerges an ethics of reciprocity, which the process of creolization makes possible and will further disseminate. The opposite of competitive victimology that seeks and competes for confirmation by the colonizers and powers that be, the ethics of reciprocity practices a kind of minor transnationalism that extends horizontally.<sup>46</sup> After all, Powell seems to be telling us, we all live in Relation or, in the language of the integrative world historians, in an interconnected world inflected by power relations. Amid these power relations, she actively chooses an ethics of reciprocity among the oppressed, rather than a competition for recognition by the powers that be.

From the West Indies to the East Indies and back, the constellation of literary works along the postslavery plantation arc examined in this essay traverses seemingly discreet but in fact interconnected geographical places, peoples, languages, and cultures. The interconnectedness of the world in turn compels us to consider world literature and comparative literature not in terms of juxtapositions but in terms of a network of horizontal and vertical relations, which comparatists have so far consistently ignored due to various vested interests. If Patricia Powell's choice to establish a reciprocal affinity between the histories of slavery and the coolie trade appears to be unique and even counterintuitive, it is because there are certain interests being served by the suppression of this affinity. Coolie trade as a continuation of slavery in a different form and with variation deepens the original sin that Glissant pointed out for Faulkner's American South, now equally implicating the European colonizers in the West Indies and the East Indies. Even as it points to reciprocities and affinities, Relation foregrounds the complex operations of power. Hence the coolies and ex-slaves may find affinity in Powell's Jamaica, but the coolies-turned-settlers in the Borneo rain forest are as capable of oppressing the indigenous peoples as the British colonizers. Relational comparison confronts power as it is, without apology.

With this model of relational comparison, I also hope to build on Glissant's notion of Relation as a verb to suggest that relational comparison is an act, that it takes work, and that it can be further broken down to a specific set of action items, depending on the particular objects that enter into a given relation. These action items would have to include archival and other research work on the texts in question to understand their relationalities in historical contexts, especially the suppressed relationalities that uphold the status quo. The action items would also

Indies/West Indies: Comparative Archipelagos," *Anthropological Forum* 16, no. 3 (November 2006): 219–27. But, again, their method is a juxtapositional comparison of similarities and differences, or the application of Caribbean theory to Southeast Asia, not a relational method.

- 17 Murray et al., "East Indies/West Indies," 222.
- 18 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 45.
- 19 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 63.
- 20 See Walton Look Lai's *The Chinese in the West Indies, 1806–1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston, Jamaica: Univ. of the West Indies Press, 1998) for a documented account of the importation of Chinese coolies from China and Southeast Asia.
- 21 For a visual map of these routes, see Arnold J. Meagher's *The Coolie Trade: The Traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America, 1847–1874* (Lexington, KY: Xlibris, 2008), 151.
- 22 Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (New York: Harcourt, 1998), 75. See my analysis of Powell's novel below.
- 23 Quoted in J. Michael Dash, "Martinique/Mississippi: Édouard Glissant and Relational Insularity," in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 95.
- 24 Édouard Glissant, *Faultlines, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 104.
- 25 Glissant, *Faultlines*, 23, 30.
- 26 Glissant, *Faultlines*, 59.
- 27 Glissant, *Faultlines*, 139.
- 28 Glissant, *Faultlines*, 88.
- 29 Phrases used to describe the work of Victor Segalen in Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 29.
- 30 Dash, "Martinique/Mississippi," 104.
- 31 Chang Kuei-hsing, *Monkey Cup* (Houbei) (Taipei: Linking Books, 2000), 35. All translations from the Sinitic texts in this essay are my own.
- 32 See my "Theory, Asia, and the Sinophone," *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 465–84.
- 33 Incidentally, 1882 is the year the first of the Chinese Exclusion Acts was passed in the United States.
- 34 Both quotations are from Chang, *Monkey Cup*, 179.
- 35 It is interesting to note that these three types of businesses were the "three voices" of San Francisco Chinatown as seen by outsiders at the turn of the nineteenth century, which Marlon Hom notes was typical of frontier towns in general. See Marlon Hom, "An Introduction to Cantonese Vernacular Rhymes from San Francisco Chinatown," in *Songs of Gold Mountain* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 3–70.
- 36 Hom, "An Introduction," 181. Note how the natives are placed on the same list with snakes and beasts, as is typical of settler colonial mentality.
- 37 "Sex safaris" and "sex peditions" originally in English in Hom, "An Introduction," 244.
- 38 This is Glissant describing Faulkner's prose style in *Faultlines*, 105.
- 39 Glissant, *Faultlines*, 262.
- 40 Brian Bernards therefore rightly argues that the logic of the plantation and the logic of the rain forest in *Monkey Cup* are diametrically opposed. See his "Plantation and Forest: Chang Kuei-hsing and a South Seas Discourse of Coloniality and Nature," in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013).
- 41 Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 1–20.
- 42 Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, xiii.
- 43 Powell, *The Pagoda*, 13.
- 44 Powell, *The Pagoda*, 15.
- 45 Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 19.

include close readings of both the content and form of the texts, not only to understand their interconnectedness but also to experience the singularity of each text. The stylistic affinity and thematic parallel in Chang's *Monkey Cup* with that of Faulkner's southern novels is then no longer about the canonical metropolitan writer's influence on a practically unknown writer in the West, but about interconnectedness along the postslavery plantation arc in world history where each literary text's singularity stands out. Chang's work may be as deserving of the Nobel Prize, but relational comparison is not so much interested in metropolitan consecration as in fundamentally short-circuiting those technologies of recognition that tautologically reconfirm the center.<sup>47</sup> Relational comparison is not a center-periphery model, as the texts form a network of relations from wherever the texts are written, read, and circulated. In its singularity as text and interconnectedness in history, we may say, lie a literary work's literariness and worldliness.

## NOTES

- 1 Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 4.
- 2 André Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 5.
- 3 Frank, *ReOrient*, 226.
- 4 John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2004), 22.
- 5 Itcol Seigel, "Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn," *Journal of American Studies* 41 (Winter 2005): 78.
- 6 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 54–68. Since publication of this essay, Moretti's new editing efforts present a more diffusive model. See *The Novel*, vol. I of *History, Geography and Culture* (London: Verso, 2007) and *The Novel*, vol. II of *Forms and Themes* (London: Verso, 2007).
- 7 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).
- 8 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 4.
- 9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Poétique de la Relation, 1990), trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997), 173, 32.
- 10 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 94.
- 11 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 137.
- 12 Jonathan Culler, worrying that relativism haunts comparative projects, would rather hold onto his sense of judgment by asserting that Western and non-Western texts are "less comparable" than those between Western texts. See his "Comparability," *World Literature Today* 69, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 268–70.
- 13 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 135.
- 14 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Le Discours Antillais, 1981), trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1989), 66.
- 15 "Continents and Archipelagos: From *E Pluribus Unum* to Creolized Solidarities," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1508–9.
- 16 David A. B. Murray, Tom Boellstorff, and Kathryn Robinson suggested this in "East

46 See "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally," in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 1-23.

47 See my "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119, no. 1 (January 2004): 16-30.

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