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Editors' Introduction

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Comparative literature scholars usually learn sometime during their training that the origins of and impetus for their discipline lie in the Europe of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the apogee of the sovereign national state. During this period, classical literatures were gradually replaced as the basis for literary study by works written in the vernacular, which the academy eventually christened as “national literatures.” The recovery of an international perspective through the discovery of literary universals, shared themes, or other forms of political and linguistic boundary-crossing, came to be seen as comparative literature’s *raison d’être*, a vital supplement to the national and linguistic partitioning of what once had been shared tradition.

However, the second half of the twentieth century brought profound historical changes which, although by no means eclipsing the national state as the major political actor on the world stage today, have allowed perspectives to emerge that question the uniformity and cohesion of national literary canons. Many nation-states created through the historical processes of colonialism and imperialism have subsequently either split apart, collapsed, or continue to exist in name only, while failing to provide an “imagined community” for their citizens as a whole. At the same time, the multilingualism of relatively successful nation-states such as Canada, India, or Switzerland renders the idea of a “national literature” for those countries an interesting problem for comparatists to contemplate and analyze. To be added to these phenomena are those related to the movement of peoples—migration, exile, diaspora—which have affected many of the most important living writers of world literature, for whom national identity bears little relationship to literary *habitus*. (For a more detailed account of these developments, see Azade Seyhan’s introduction to her article in this collection.)

The essays comprising this special issue show that comparatists have been working with such issues for some time. By publishing them under the rubric of Intra-National Comparisons, we hope to give more visibility

to this alternative paradigm. The essays range widely in geography and language. We start at home, with the literary production of two Hispanic communities living in the United States. Distinguished Chicano Studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones enters the complicated territory of how to engage humor in the ethnic studies context—a constellation of fields often derided as both humorless and frivolous by detractors. Through his survey of the flexibility of humor in Chicano cultural and literary projects, Gutiérrez-Jones argues for a more nuanced and strategic exercise of reading practices. Lori Ween’s meditation on Cuban-American culture through her analysis of conflicting claims about the “authenticity” of the popular novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, opens onto a politically charged issue, and one that, while not unique to the Cuban-American community, has a special resonance within it. Her reading of Garcia’s well-known novel, moreover, contributes to current debates about cultural and linguistic translation, taken in the broadest sense of the term and applicable to many other essays in this special issue.

In the former colonial nations of Britain and France, the presence of large groups of immigrants from South Asia and North Africa has changed the relationship between so-called “mainstream” and “minor” cultural formations. Vinay Swamy’s paper examines forms and theories of ethnic and sexual disidentifications, using the example of Hanif Kureishi’s film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, to discuss the survival tactics used by minority subjects in their fight against the logic of national stereotypes. Azade Seyhan’s reflection on the necessity of language in the face of grief and trauma leads her to compare the lyrical autobiographical works of the Algerian writer, Assia Djebar, and the exiled Turkish poet, Nazim Himet. She argues against what has been termed “the impossibility of representation” and “the unspeakability of trauma” in the case of others’ extreme suffering, and concludes with the suggestion that words may indeed be the most ethical form of witnessing.

Lacking the colonial background of England or France, the literatures of central Europe present a different problematic. The mitosis of Czechoslovakia into separate Czech and Slovak states raises the interesting question: what exactly *was* Czechoslovakian literature? Charles Sabatos finds through his reading of Pavel Vilikovský’s novel, *Ever Green is . . .*, that Czech literature was an act of perpetual translation between Czech and Slovak languages, cultures, and identities. In contrast to Czechoslovakia, Germany has become one nation instead of two, problematizing the former division between two national literatures—East German vs. West German—enshrined in German Departments during the Cold War. In place of the in-

ternational East-West dichotomy, scholarly attention has increasingly been drawn to the fact that German literature of the last three decades has become more and more multicultural. The emergence both of Turkish authors out of that minority population, and also of a new generation of Jewish authors who write in German, has greatly reduced the effectiveness of traditional national paradigms. Theories and methods informed by comparative literary studies are more adequate, especially those that focus on cultural transfer and exchange, as is amply demonstrated in the essays of Monika Shafi (on the Turkish-German authors Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Zafer Şenocak) and Christina Guenther (on the German-Jewish author Barbara Honigmann).

Finally, the essay by Shaden Tageldin takes us to the borders of Europe with its non-Western Others. Tageldin develops a poetics of postcolonial migration, focusing on the exchanges, reversals, and borrowings that underlie a specific form of nostalgia that she describes as a “being longing.” Comparing the differences within the identities of a Beurette (Sakinna Boukhedenna) and a Kashmiri (Agha Shahid Ali) writer, she details the aching and subtle moves of migrant subjectivity under the spell of an “impossible nostalgia” that arises out of the attempt to link an old “home” that is no longer home to a new “home” that never feels quite like home.

“Impossible nostalgia” may perhaps also characterize scholars’ attempts to construct national literary canons as representative, unified wholes. As these essays demonstrate, comparative literature has a role to play in the overcoming of such nostalgia.

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