

The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination

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Volume 9 Issue 1 (March 2007) Article 13**Sophia A. McClennen,****"The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/13>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007)**Thematic Issue Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror****Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/>>

Abstract: In her paper "The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination" Sophia A. McClennen argues that understanding the relationship between culture and human rights depends on humanist perspectives attentive to the relationship between storytelling and identity, mass culture and ideology, text and audience, critical thinking and engaged citizenship. After briefly considering how the divide between the humanities and human rights advocates developed and how it might best be overcome, she suggests that comparative cultural studies grounded in an ethical commitment to study the relationship between culture and society offers an indispensable perspective on the ties between culture and identity integral to any effort to promote global respect for human rights. Calling attention to the tyrannies of comparison that facilitate contemporary ideologies of absolutism, imperialism, and neoliberalism, she suggests that an ethical process of comparison requires translation, recognition, *and* imagination. Each of these comparative processes depends on a vision of the self and its other that is meaningfully relational, intertwined in conflict and tension as well as in collaboration and mutual representation.

Sophia A. McCLENNEN

The Humanities, Human Rights, and the Comparative Imagination

Imagine, if you will, the following scenario: a Danish newspaper publishes satirical cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, setting off protests, riots, and heated debates about the tensions between "freedom of expression" and respect for cultural difference (see "Muhammad Cartoon Row"). Those who defend the cartoons claim that they were meant to spark debate and reflection. What is wrong in that, they ask? Those who criticize them argue, in contrast, that the cartoons were degrading depictions of a community that already feels embattled both in Europe and globally and that the cartoons demonstrate profound disrespect for Islamic law that prohibits images of the Prophet. It is obvious, they assert, that these cartoons were not meant to spark debate, but rather that they were meant to rekindle stereotypes and possibly even provoke the type of violence that ensued, thereby sanctioning views that depict a fundamental divide between Islam and "the West." Critics draw parallels between these cartoons and anti-Semitic ones published in publications such as *Der Stürmer* prior to the rise of Hitler. Defenders of the cartoons describe the Danish journalists as champions of free thought. Days later, a second round of photographs of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib is released, sparking further violence (see "Abu Ghraib"). This time, however, it is generally agreed that the photos are atrocious. What is not agreed upon, however, is who is responsible for the images and for the acts they portray. Some suggest that the photos are representative of a profound disdain for fellow human beings, that the photos are indicative of the need for universal protections on human rights. Others suggest that the photos are simply the product of a few "bad eggs" in the US military and they deny that there has been a systematic dehumanization of Iraqi prisoners. A few weeks later David Irving, a famous Holocaust denier who has published several books on the matter, is sent to jail in Austria (see "David Irving"). His defenders rail that his imprisonment is a blow to free speech and to Irving's right to be skeptical of official history. Those pleased by the verdict claim that his imprisonment demonstrates that the need to remember the persecution of the Jews during the Holocaust outweighs the need for freedom of expression. Many intellectuals, including the scholar who Irving sued for libel, express dismay at the outcome of the trial. They fear that it will simply give Irving more attention and they argue that the means to challenging offensive ideas should not be imprisonment, but rather reasoned debate.

One central thread runs throughout these events: the idea that cultural representation -- books, cartoons, photos, etc. -- is a battleground through which communities define themselves and their relationship to others. Cultural representations are equally the means by which we depict common humanity and the means by which we divide ourselves. Peace and war, compassion and hate, solidarity and factionalism all depend on cultural products. And it is via our relationship to these cultural forms, to their representative media and their institutions of communication, to their embedded political assumptions and their deceptive distractions, to their visions of apocalypse and their promises of hope, that we measure our ability to critically engage with the world in which we live. When we fail to see the connections between the events described above, we lose our ability to take seriously the power that cultural forms have in shaping the narrative structures and the ideological maps that influence public and private views of global politics and social relations. Failing to link these events, then, heralds a failure to think of cultural representations as a process, as the beginning of a dialogue, and as an opportunity to encourage critical knowledge and ethical engagement.

In each of the cases described above social responses to cultural representation led to violent material consequences. This means that it is necessary to not only recognize the ways that these events are linked, but also to imagine how to translate our critical responses to them into social actions that reject the logic of violence, radical othering, and war. What if an international taskforce were created to examine the intersections between these events? What if the goal of the taskforce were to promote

a global initiative dedicated to fostering a human rights platform on the relationship between cultural representation and world peace? Who would be on the taskforce? There would need to be participation by experts in cultural policy and human rights activism together with writers and artists. Perhaps members would come from the United Nations or Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Maybe there would be an ex-US president or an Irish musician or a Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner. But the crucial question I ask you to consider is whether such a taskforce would logically include you -- a scholar of the humanities skilled in cultural studies. And, I wonder, if you were invited, would you go, or would you dismiss the whole project as stemming from an oppressive enlightenment notion of common humanity? Would you balk at the idea of spending time sitting in a room with policy wonks, diplomats, and politicians whose understanding of culture was woefully unsophisticated? And, would they listen to theories of interpellated subjects, fragmented identities, and performativity? Or would they simply shake their heads at the "fuzzy thinking" of the humanities and tune you out? The seeming absurdity or implausibility at the mere suggestion of such collaboration indicates the extent to which these worlds have become drastically divided. What does it mean if we can not even imagine taking part in such a project? Despite repeated calls in recent humanities scholarship for public intellectuals there has been relatively little progress made in taking our research out of the academy. Certainly there are notable exceptions to this divide, evidenced, in particular, by the voices of some of the present volume's contributors such as Ariel Dorfman, Henry A. Giroux, Alicia Partnoy, and Howard Zinn (see McClennen and Morello <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/1>>). The fact is, however, that these voices are the exception that proves the rule. The question remains: How did we get to this impasse and how can we move through it?

It is ironic that so much humanities research is dedicated to understanding the intersections between voice and silence, knowledge and power, narration and identity, and yet so little work has been done to find ways to build lines of communication between the humanities and the human rights community of activists, lawyers, politicians, and policy specialists. Anne Cubilié notes that "the gap between critical theorists and practitioners and grassroots political organizers ... seems as wide as ever, if not wider" (xi). Research on trauma, on the ties between state violence and cultural representation, on language and oppression, on torture and truth, on diaspora and identity forms a major, if not central, core of humanist work, but those insights seem to rarely inform public debates on human rights policy. Domna Stanton explains that the separation of human rights discourse and the humanities, despite their overlapping interests and shared intellectual traditions, has led academic work on human rights to be dominated by departments of international relations, public policy, political science, and the law. In a call for heightened collaboration between the humanities and human rights she writes: "Humanists can meaningfully bring our modes of analysis and interpretation to bear on human rights discourse and in turn our teaching and research can become richer, more nuanced and more relevant by engaging with the ethical and philosophical imperatives of human rights" (*Newsletter* 3).

As the examples I describe in opening this essay show, however, the consequences of this divide go beyond a loss of sophistication in humanist analysis and in human rights discourse. There is much more at stake. This essay argues that understanding the intersections between cultural forms, social politics, and human rights depends on humanist perspectives attentive to the relationship between storytelling and identity, mass culture and ideology, text and audience, critical thinking and engaged citizenship. And it depends on understanding the work of the humanities as more than the passive analysis of texts, but rather as a form of socially relevant critical engagement. Those of us who specialize in the study of the politics of representational practices are acutely aware of the ways that cultural forms can lead equally to genocide and to peace. And yet, we have become sidelined from the core of these struggles, relegated to the margins. In the following section I briefly consider how this divide developed and how it might best be overcome. I ultimately claim that comparative cultural studies grounded in an ethical commitment to study the relationship between cultural representation, media politics, and society offers an indispensable perspective on the ties between cultural practice

and identity formation integral to any effort to promote global respect for human rights. If cultural products constitute both the means through which the other is projected and the means through which a sense of common humanity is constructed, then they must be studied via a comparative method that understands these ways of representing humanity relationally, contrapuntally, and contextually. Furthermore, I argue that an ethically grounded comparative cultural studies can understand cultural difference as a historical construct rather than an essential, ontological category. The critical methods of comparative cultural studies allow for attention to the particular within a larger global framework.

Before outlining the contours of an ethically driven comparative cultural studies, let us consider why humanists would probably not be invited to participate on an imaginary taskforce on cultural representation, social politics, and human rights. The divide between the humanities and human rights policy has a long history but there are two key intellectual moments that have played a pivotal role: the enlightenment and the postmodern turn. The enlightenment leads to a couple of crucial developments that continue to influence the critical work of the humanities. First, the enlightenment signals both the birth of the modern university and the divorce between philosophy and science signaled by the split between deductive and empirical methods of inquiry (Wallerstein 2). This breakdown would lead to what C.P. Snow later called the "two cultures" --the sciences and the humanities. Immanuel Wallerstein adds that the "division of knowledge of the two cultures came to mean as well creating a high barrier between the search for the true and the search for the good and the beautiful" (3). When science became the sole source of knowledge about truth, the practical ties between humanities research and society were severed. Even today the legacy of this separation continues to plague the humanities, despite the calls for interdisciplinarity associated with cultural studies. The consequence of this rift is that there persists in the public mind, and even among some humanist scholars, a sense that humanist work should be apolitical, separated from the mundane, irrelevant. The best art, from this view, is art that is eternally and universally beautiful. Consequently art that engages with human rights would be tarnished by its political motives and would not be worthy of study, meaning that those scholars who work on political art work on lesser art.

These prejudices continue to hinder a view of the humanities as a mode of inquiry with social relevance. It is still commonly presumed that a poem that protests a war has lesser aesthetic value than a poem that laments the loss of love. Despite the work of poets like Sam Hamill and Michael McIrvin, who each have essays included in this volume, to deflate these prejudices against politically engaged poetry, David Ball in an exchange about the role of poetry in understanding the Abu Ghraib torture photos, recently claimed that poets who "try to express horror at the practice [of torture] run the risk of writing bad poems" (6) (Hamill <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/6>> ; McIrvin <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/14>>). So, not only are the arts not expected to have social relevance, when they attempt to critically engage with the world, they are presumed to be aesthetically compromised.

A further legacy of the enlightenment that continues to affect the relationship between human rights discourse and the humanities is the divergence between how these two fields understand subjectivity. The enlightenment concepts of universal humanity, the knowable subject, and objective reason --notions that most humanists have come to distrust-- form, to a certain extent, the ideological basis for much human rights advocacy. At the heart of this conflict is what might be characterized as the tension between the universal and the particular. This debate took on considerable force after the postmodern turn. Postmodern theory, in particular anti-foundational poststructural theory, heralded a profound skepticism of all structures of knowledge, especially those that attempted to explain identity in general categories such as gender, nationality, race, or ethnicity. Such skepticism led to an apparently insurmountable division of opinion between humanists and human rights advocates. On the one hand, the postmodernists argued that notions of universal human rights depended on oppressive, ideologically loaded ways of understanding identity and they pointed to the fact that human rights dis-

course used western models of subjectivity that did not recognize the diversity of cultural life. The postmodernists centered on two key problems with enlightenment subjectivity: First, despite the idea of universal humanity, all of the nations that advocated enlightenment values abused these terms and disregarded the core concepts of the enlightenment, speaking, for instance, one day about equal rights while buying slaves the next. Second, the notion of enlightenment subjectivity failed to account for cultural diversity. Concepts like "family," "woman," and "nation," from the postmodern view, were flawed ways of understanding existence and any discourse that promoted the use of such terms was invariably hegemonic. On the other hand, human rights advocates, while sensitive to the problems attendant with the ontological categories critiqued by postmodern theory, have been unwilling to abandon the need to struggle for human rights on a global scale. For them, concepts like "woman" or "child" or "ethnic minority" may be flawed but they consider some form of grouping terminology necessary in order to craft policies that can protect communities in danger of human rights violations. They acknowledge sticky points, to be sure, like whether marriage should be consensual or whether the cultural practice of arranged marriages should be protected. These instances, though, from the human rights point of view, must be understood in conjunction with other more clear-cut cases such as those that call for unequivocal protection of women from slavery and other forms of violence.

Postmodern theory's attention to the hegemony of master narratives that attempt to explain all features of identity has been an important source of insight into questions of universal human rights, especially in those cases that call for more attention to diversity and cultural relativity. The postmodern assertion that all cultural flows and all identity markers circulate within spheres of political power adds further force to human rights arguments about the need to defend cultural diversity; it also helps explain the ways that cultural forms are able to both subvert and protect human rights. Postmodernism's interest in the ways that cultural representation shapes social relations and maintains regimes of power draws crucial attention to the ideological aspect of human rights issues. Where apolitical postmodern theory, as it has been institutionalized in the U.S. academy, has failed to contribute to human rights discourse, though, is in its wariness, if not outright distrust, of any ethical stances or critical groundings. Masao Miyoshi notes that U.S. scholars influenced by postmodern theory exhibit "an undeniable common proclivity ... to fundamentally reject such totalizing concepts as humanity, civilization, history, and justice, and such subttotalities as a region, a nation, a locality, or even any smallest group" (41). The main pitfall to this line of thinking, ironically, is its dependence on a binary. Such theory assumes that there are two ways of understanding the world: one is monolithic, universal, and totalizing, and the other is fragmented, diverse, and particular. One is bad and the other is, if not good, then at least better. Such theories suggest that the answer to normalizing, oppressive, hegemonic notions of universal humanity is fragmentation, deconstruction, and attention to the particular. Not only do these theories fail to grasp the real historical development of human rights struggles, they also create a dangerous dichotomy that holds that instability of meaning is less oppressive than fixed meaning. Consequently, the practical realities of engaging in the struggle for human rights have led, to a certain extent, to a divide between humanists and human rights advocates, since skeptical postmodern theory is fundamentally incompatible with a commitment to social change.

There are a number of reasons why this rift must be overcome. First of all, it depends on false perceptions by both human rights advocates and humanists about each other's work, which I hope explains the general characterizations of the Enlightenment and postmodernism that I painted above. The human rights activists think that humanists have no practical knowledge that would help them and the humanists falsely assume that human rights discourse continues to rest on enlightenment ethics, when, in fact, those ethics have undergone a number of conceptual transformations. As long ago as 1979, Karel Vasak suggested the generational theory of human rights. The first generation originated in the enlightenment and protects civil and political rights. The second, which developed after the Russian Revolution, focuses on equality and protects social, economic, and cultural rights. The third, which followed independence movements in Africa, promotes solidarity and protects collec-

tive rights. More recently, the fourth generation reflects indigenous movements and protects, among other things, language rights. Vasak's ideas have been critiqued and modified, exemplifying a long debate over how to define the details of human rights (for more on this history see Joseph Slaughter's essay in this collection <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/19>>). The reality is that from the early process of drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the late 1940s to today there has been an ongoing and vigorous debate about how to define human rights, about whether such a project is itself hegemonic, and about how to protect cultural diversity while also protecting human life. It is worth noting that the Anthropological Association refused to support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when it was first drafted, because they did not agree with its universalizing conception of human culture. The point, then, is that the human rights community has reflected consistently on the critical assumptions that support their project.

Regarding the misconceptions about humanities work, it would be fair to say that since the 1960s and 1970s there has been an ongoing and dedicated effort within the humanities to understand cultural processes in the service of a political project dedicated to social change. What came to be known as the "cultural turn" in humanities scholarship represented a newfound interest in cultural representation as a motor for mass consciousness and identity formation, which moved beyond anthropological understandings of culture as customs, as well as bourgeois characterizations of culture as the elite arts of the privileged classes. The cultural turn marked not only a change in the definition of culture, but also a shift in intellectual appreciation of its political impact and social value. Michael Denning explains that "with the discovery that culture was everywhere, the study and critique of culture became an increasingly central part of political and intellectual life" (2). Culture came to be known as the means by which states and markets acquired and maintained power. Culture was perceived as both a form of mass distraction and also a form of social control, leading to work by Michel Foucault on culture as surveillance, and to Guy Debord's theories on culture and spectacle. These projects understood culture as a dynamic complex of symbolic forms, societal contexts, and representational meanings that are intimately tied to relations of power. (For more on this point see Henry Giroux's essay in this collection.) Culture no longer referred exclusively to the production of meaning, texts, institutional forms, and ideologies but became also the central site for the production of, and struggle over, power. This means that, despite the pitfalls and shortcomings of certain features of deconstruction and poststructuralism when practiced as nihilistic high theory, there is a massive body of humanities research that directly addresses many of the issues at the core of human rights advocacy, and uses elements of deconstruction and poststructuralism in the interest of producing socially relevant research. Cultural studies related research on trauma and memory (Laub and Felman), on human rights and narration (Schaeffer and Smith; Slaughter), on testimonial and prison narratives (Gugelberger; Harlow), and on identity and authoritarianism (Bauman; Giroux) represent only a sampling of examples of humanist work that should inform human rights advocacy.

Thus, the impasse between the humanities and human rights is a complex matter. On the one hand, many of the premises that have driven the impasse between the two fields are outdated or incorrect. The fields have often paralleled each other in the types of questions they have asked about the objects of their work, about how best to define methods, and about how to engage with the implicit power dynamics that stem from working to help others. On the other hand, however, there are fundamental disjunctions that persist between these fields. First is the problem of representation, which may be overly problematized by the humanities and undertheorized by human rights discourse, with each suffering from these extremes. As Stanton explains in the introduction to a special section of *PMLA: Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* that debates the relationship between the humanities and human rights: "The humanities' deconstruction of the nation-state as a disciplinary regime (Foucault, *Discipline*) and an imagined community (Anderson) is at odds with human rights' fixation on the nation-state as the source of both violations and protections" (1520). She goes on to highlight other discrepancies: the way the humanities understand abusive power as fragmented

and multivalent versus the assumption of a fixed authoritarian source in human rights discourse, the fundamentally distinct ways the fields understand subjectivity; and the difference between the empirical work of human rights advocates and the unverifiable nature of most humanities research (1520). It seems likely that divisions such as these will persist and it is possible that such points of tension could lead to very productive dialogue between both fields. Indeed, the question is whether these divisions will amount to insurmountable differences, or whether they can form the basis for critical engagement.

Critical engagement between these two fields depends, I believe, on displacing the construction of the subject and the ontological categories associated with it, such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, and so on-- , as the pivotal concepts that structure the work of both humanists and human rights advocates. Clearly subjectivity is a central notion to human rights. My suggestion is not to abandon concern for the subject, but rather to displace and defer our focus on the self and its formation, in order to substitute the object/subject of human rights with attention to developing an ethically just comparative method. Both human rights discourse and humanist work on human rights circle around metaphysical and ontological questions of being at the service of ethical agendas, and the fields have tended to disagree ontologically and ethically. What would happen, though, if we focused our attention on the comparative ways of thinking that frame our projects? Reflecting on the possibilities of comparison necessarily leads to consideration of subjectivity and to the ethical motives behind comparison. Moreover, it is only by means of comparison that there can be any sense of rights and their violations. The problem of representation, then, is a problem of comparison. Rather than focus on *what* is being compared, I suggest that we focus on *how* and *why* we engage in comparison.

It would be fair to say that Immanuel Kant is the specter that haunts much of the division between human rights discourse and the humanities. Hilary Putnam points out that the Categorical Imperative may be little more than a variation on the Golden Rule, but its foundational premise that "ethics is *universal*," appearing as it did at a crucial historical moment, provided a foundational link between universalism and what would later be called "human rights" (25; emphasis in the original). Kant's great achievement is that "insofar as ethics is concerned with the alleviation of suffering, it is concerned with the alleviation of *everyone's* suffering" (original emphasis; 25). As mentioned above in my necessarily skeletal portrayal of the enlightenment, criticism of Kant's notion of universal ethics tends to take two forms. One is a critique of its hypocrisy, where the criticism centers on the contradictions of universalist theory and divisive practice. Such critique does not necessarily call for an abandonment of enlightenment ideals so much as an acknowledgement of the way that the very people who tend to espouse those ideals are often directly responsible for violating them. Another line of critique, which may or may not come in tandem with the other, addresses the foundational metaphysics of enlightenment thinking. Here the target is not the hypocrisy of enlightenment thought, but instead, the danger of constructing a worldview that depends on sameness, universality, and absolute, abstract truth.

There were many philosophical responses to Kant's universal ethical model that offered alternative ways of searching for social justice and ethical codes, but the particularist counter to Kant's universalism is best represented in the work Emmanuel Levinas. Working coincidentally with the postmodern turn, Levinas's theories continue to influence much humanist work on human rights and ethics as evidenced by his theory's prominent role in Judith Butler's response to the tragedy of 9/11/2001, *Precarious Life*. Whereas Kant constructs an ethics of sameness and universalism, Levinas offers the ethics of the other, of difference, and of the particular. Butler also finds his work especially useful because of its insistence on ethics as a matter of representation. Levinas's association of the other with "the face," where the face is always incommensurably linked to that which it imperfectly represents, allows Butler to consider the representational features of ethics: "No understanding of the relationship between the image and humanization can take place without a consideration of the conditions and meanings of identification and disidentification" (145).

The Categorical Imperative and its radical alternative in Levinas's face offer oppositional ethical philosophies that revolve around ontology and anti-ontology. Their ideas have shaped and continue to shape, the work of humanists and those of human rights workers alike in significant ways. Without suggesting that we abandon critical engagement of these ideas, I nevertheless want to take a different tack in what follows, and approach the ethics of sameness-versus-difference from the angle of comparison. The ethical quandaries of the present moment relate in direct ways to the promises and pitfalls of comparative thinking. Parallel to the tropes of ethical philosophy, the field of comparative literature is haunted by the universalist "world literature" paradigm of Goethe and its particularist corrective of Spivak's "irreducible hybridity" (Spivak, *Death 9*; in fairness, I should note that "irreducible hybridity" is only one of various features of Spivak's comparative project). The problem with these oppositions, apart from their inherently dualistic binary trap, is that they omit the third element of hierarchy that complicates the sameness/difference debate. Hierarchy is the third critical framework that influences social perceptions of ethics as much as it offers a comparative template. Hierarchy is the value laden critical framework that demands both comparison and judgment in order to operate. For instance, hierarchical thinking allows nations to espouse enlightenment ideals while simultaneously committing imperial violence. Imperialist hierarchical epistemologies allowed comparatists in the nineteenth century, for instance, to speak about "world literature," when they actually meant European literature.

The messy problem is that these comparative frameworks all continue to coexist. From C.L. Wrenn's statement in 1967 that the "only proper object of study for comparatists ... is 'European languages medieval or modern'" (Bassnett 20) to Henry Gifford's comment in 1969 that "whole continents are becoming articulate -- South America yesterday, Africa today" (78), comparative literature has a long history of dismissing the culture of the "peripheries" as unfit to be counted as part of the world. Even in today's academic climate of comparative literature, where the organizing principle for research and curricular formation is often difference and diversity, it is noteworthy that certain social groups and their cultures are targeted for study, while others are not. One could simply say that it is not possible to study all cultures and that this requires departments and faculty to make difficult decisions. But such difficult decisions, I contend, reveal embedded valorizations, which are, perhaps, all the more insidious because they are couched in relativism. It seems to me that this history of using hierarchical thinking to undermine universalism and also to provide a clandestine structure to relativism is common to both traditional comparative literature and to human rights discourse.

I want to move away now from this somewhat abstract discussion to suggest that the ethical dilemmas that we face in the present moment amount to a failure of the comparative imagination, a failure that equally affects humanists and human rights advocates. The first failure has been the lack of attention to the way that three dangerous, distinct, yet enmeshed, comparative practices buttress contemporary human rights violations. The second failure has been our inability to offer successfully alternative comparative imaginaries. At the simplest level, comparative thinking is the cornerstone for any critical engagement with the world, since it is via comparison that we make critical assessments and imagine change. The current environment of militarization, hyper-individualism, and excessive patriotism yields comparisons based on exceptionalism, impunity, marketability, and hegemony. Djelal Kadir has recently diagnosed these problems vis-à-vis the field of comparative literature: "As part of its engagement with the world, Comparative Literature must engage and actively negotiate its own strategies in their diversity and dialectical paradoxes, lest it leave itself vulnerable to the charge of side-stepping the intricacies of specificity and of the particular through strategies of 'distant reading' (Moretti), or succumbing to the anodyne wishfulness of neoliberalism and the purported 'free' market circulation of literary culture (Damrosch, 'world literature'), or replicating the hegemonic discourse of the metropole in its translocation to a Southern Hemisphere and in the idealized utopia of 'interplanetary' (Spivak)" ("Tlon" 137). It goes without saying that the failures that I identify are qualified by numerous successes, but I think that any quick survey of the present condition supports

my claim that these are "dark times" for human rights, as well as for social and scholarly human rights advocacy (for more on this, see Arendt; Bauman *Liquid Life*; Giroux *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism* and *Stormy Weather*; Kadir "Tlon"). As Kadir notes in his recent contribution to the ACLA's state of the discipline of comparative literature, rather than describe our work as "comparative literature in an age of globalization," we should be aware that we are working in an "age of terrorism" ("Terrorism").

Understanding the current form of our "dark times" requires attention to how three dangerous ideologies of comparison (or its critical lack) have intersected and intertwined to shape the current horror of human rights. These break down into comparisons of universality, hierarchy, and difference, but they are coded specifically with right-wing politics and converted into absolutism, imperialism, and neoliberalism. Universality, or the rhetoric of sameness, effectively eliminates comparison of any nature. The same is the same. But discourses of power have never deployed the rhetoric of sameness without also introducing its insidious twin of hierarchy. As Butler points out: "It is ... an ongoing task of human rights to reconceive the human when it finds that its putative universality does not have universal reach ... It is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human to the extent that a 'Western' civilization defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human" (91). Butler calls for analyzing the comparative failures of the rhetoric of universality when these are coupled with the rhetoric of Western civilization. In fact, the rhetoric of universality has been virtually dependent on hierarchical comparisons.

What we must acknowledge is that the violation of human rights by nations that espouse enlightenment ideals has a long history, one that persistently withstands its inherent and seemingly obvious contradictions. One reason for this persistence is that it is no easy task to disentangle the connection between universalism and hierarchy in a way that productively allows for public engagement with these concepts. Often the critique of universal rights appears to be a critique of shared humanity, when really it is a critique of how the rhetoric of universality serves hierarchical, exceptionalist, and divisive master narratives of humanity. Thus, we can not overemphasize the fact that the reigning hierarchical ideologies of civilization and religious superiority provide false universalisms, because they always assume that only a particular group is entitled to be universal. Add to that the nationalist exceptionalism of US hyper-patriotism that claims that all should be free, but that only the US power elite can determine who and what is free, and we can begin to recognize the dangerous ways that universalism and hierarchy intertwine to undermine the possibilities of ethically progressive comparative thinking. For instance, in President Bush's 9/11 address to the nation he began the rhetoric of the war on terror by claiming that the United States would "go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world" (<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>>). The logic seems clear: the United States defines freedom and "all" that is good and just. Bush's vision of universalist absolutism depends on dogmatic patriotism, civic obedience, and an imperialist worldview that discounts the humanity of most of the globe.

The other side of the contemporary rhetoric of civilization, however, is that of irreducible difference. These are the people beyond compare: incomparably other, easily destroyed, disposed of, and forgotten. Again these ethical failures depend on devious comparative practice. Endless difference negates the possibility of politically ethical comparison just as surely as does the rhetoric of universality and the caste system of hierarchy. As Giroux explains, this logic of difference must be read in today's context within the ideology and practice of neoliberalism, where human beings operate as nothing more than consumers and products. The hyper-privatization of social life under neoliberalism has foreclosed the possibility of translating between the private and the public: "Democracy begins to fail and political life becomes impoverished when society can no longer translate private problems into social issues" (*Spectacle* 1). Giroux makes an appeal for what he calls "acts of translation," where critical thinking draws meaningful and politically relevant links between individuals and their social context; he argues, moreover, that such practices are threatened by neoliberal ideologies. If universalism and

imperialism had to contend with the "face" of the other under modernism, neoliberalism creates categories of the human, which, in their loss of humanity as a social relation, become redundant and disposable (Bauman, *Postmodernity*; Giroux, *Stormy*). The retreat of the notion of the common good, of civic commitment, and of democratic responsibility that has resulted from the corporatization of practically all forms of life means that the public good is now measured in terms of private consumption and production (for more on this, see Giroux, *Terror*). Diagnosing the dangerous result of transferring civil rights into neoliberal economics, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff note that: "Everywhere there is evidence of an uneasy fusion of enfranchisement and exclusion; of xenophobia at the prospect of world citizenship without the old protectionisms of nationhood; of the effort to realize modern utopias by decidedly postmodern means. Gone is any official speak of egalitarian futures, work for all, or the paternal government envisioned by the various freedom movements. These ideals have given way to a spirit of deregulation, with its taunting mix of emancipation and limitation" (299). Whereas "freedom" used to refer, under modernism, to the individual, now it refers to the market. Any reference to the common good is quickly denounced as a threat to the "freedom" of business. The language of community is now the language of big business. Even those few social programs that remain functioning in the United States are described in market terms. In one extremely disturbing example of this shift, we no longer immunize children against disease; state-sponsored immunization is now described as "an investment in human capital" (Nunberg 126).

In the age of neoliberalism, the Other, the stranger, the disposable, and those with bare life, who have historically constituted that which lack, yet haunt, comparative potential, have entered a new stability of otherness. This stability of otherness has been ratified, in part, by the uncanny parallel between the left's and the right's characterization of difference and the bizarre convergence of certain operative features of postmodern theory with that of neoliberalism. Zygmunt Bauman notes that the left and the right today agree on a celebration of difference: "postmodern times are marked by an almost universal agreement that difference is not merely unavoidable, but good, precious and in need of protection and cultivation" (*Postmodernity* 31). As Giroux points out in his analysis of the biopolitics evident after Hurricane Katrina, the category of the disposable other has morphed under neoliberalism to constitute a visible, yet easily expendable, segment of society (*Stormy*). The crucial difference is that under modernity the stranger was to be assimilated or destroyed in a violent comparative operation that could not countenance difference. Today, as Bauman points out, the stranger is "here to stay" (*Postmodernity* 30). It is with this logic that the U.S. government can create wholly new categories of exceptional humanity, such as enemy combatants (for more on this point, see Jonathan Marks <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/vol9/iss1/11>>). Again the logic of difference depends on the logic of hierarchy. The only reason the US public idly watched as the government created the category of enemy combatants and then tortured them was because they believed themselves to belong to a superior category of humanity.

Each of these tyrannies of comparison has had devastating consequences for our ability to productively grapple with the current social crisis. Neoliberalism's market fundamentalism yields a subject incapable of imagining individual or social agency and unconcerned with the disposable, bare life of enemy combatants, tortured prisoners, hurricane victims, and their kin (Giroux *Terror* xxii; *Stormy*; *Spectacle*). Neoliberalism allows for comparison, but we are left with comparison of products, of commodities, of markets, and of exchange rates. When comparison shopping becomes the model for social relations any possibility of critical engagement with social conditions ends. The strangers created by neoliberalism's market mentalities must contend with the incomparable, homogenous group identities of religious fundamentalism, social militarization, and the permanent state of war, none of which admit any possibility for the translation of experience. The only constant comparison of human life that publicly circulates replicates the hierarchies of imperialism, justifies social inequity, and reiterates the discourse of civilization versus barbarism. Within this context the universal/particular debate depends

on the premise of the incomparability of human life and imperialist hierarchies rely on a strictly hegemonic comparative scheme.

As Giroux explains, when all forms of action and critical consciousness are reduced to the private, "acts of translation" that allow connecting oneself in relation to others are rendered unthinkable (*Spectacle* 5). "Acts of translation" are requisite for democracy and also for social justice, but these have been gravely threatened by the hyper-individualism and market fundamentalism that characterize neoliberalism (*Spectacle* 1-16). Giroux is calling for a comparative project (even if he does not name it as such). What he suggests is that the inability to create webs of connection that intertwine lives and link the private and the public results in a "collective failure of vision, imagination, ethical responsibility, and direction" (*Spectacle* 5). Thus, the first task before us is to call attention to the tyrannies of comparison that currently reign, and the unjust ethics that accompany them. As Kadir points out: "Comparison is inevitably ethical: any course must be accompanied by the realization and forthright admission that Comparative Literature is in and of this world and, as such, it is an eminently political endeavor, and, as with all political tasks, this too must be guided by a supple but steady sense of ethics" ("Tlon" 127). Kadir here speaks specifically of the task facing scholars of comparative literature, but I would contend that the challenge of comparison -- of understanding how it both supports power structures and provides ways of imagining alternatives -- applies to a much broader constituency.

Acknowledging the inherently ethical and political act of comparison, and diagnosing and critiquing the dangerous tyrannies of comparison that structure the dominant ideologies of humanity and their rights is only the beginning. The next task before those of us who engage with comparative critical methods is to begin to formulate alternatives to the paradigms of sameness, difference, and hierarchy. Each of these paradigms, as explained above, are ultimately dependent on determining the ontological quality of that which is to be compared, and each of these paradigms limits socially just ways of thinking about others. I suggest, in contrast, that we move to emphasize that an ethical process of comparison requires *translation*, *recognition*, and *imagination*. Here I am using these terms as a way to bridge the literary and the social. I take translation, recognition, and imagination as terms that relate to texts, to reading practices, and to mental images; at the same time that I want to call attention to the way that these concepts refer to critical practices that move beyond the isolated contemplation of a text and into the realm of context, politics, and social action. Each of these comparative processes depends on a vision of the self and its other that is meaningfully relational, intertwined in conflict and tension as well as in collaboration and mutual representation.

These processes necessarily intersect and overlap, providing critical counterpoints to each other, and refusing any clear trajectory from one to the next. Translation, a concept that implies both movement and the rendering of one thing into another, provides a fluid, yet grounded, critical framework for thinking about human rights and their representation. Translation is the critical process that links an object and its other, that allows for the transference of the private into the public, of the personal into the political, of the local into the global, of that which happens in a torture chamber to that which happens to all of us. Translation is a form of action and intervention that requires both reflection and social engagement. Translation is an especially useful concept for sidestepping the ontological binary of sameness versus difference, because it implies both, because translation presumes an imperfect correlation. Consequently, rather than worrying about whether human rights need to be grounded in universality or difference, we might recognize that the "acts of translation" that link human beings imply a dialectic between sameness and difference (Giroux, *Stormy* 5). Moreover, an ethics of translation attends to the problem of language, understood here both literally and metaphorically. Because translation suggests a correlation that is always flawed and always lacking at the same time that it speaks to a will to connect, to transmit, and to reflect, it provides a comparative method that openly admits its limits, yet is not paralyzed by them.

Translation has long been a source of concern for comparatists, since the official party line of pol-
yglot comparative literature has tended to suggest that a translation of a text can never equal its orig-
inal. Recent translation theory, though, has reversed this view to claim that, even though translation
may always be a "poor" simulacra of the original, the translated text, when it openly acknowledges its
distance from the original, creates circuits of connection that would have otherwise been impossible.
These connections, though, require that "acts of translation" are accompanied by "close reading," a
practice that depends on being able to read across a variety of cultural contexts. Spivak notes in her
essay "Close Reading" that the process of translating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights re-
vealed a number of places in the document that made no sense in other contexts. "The question of
translation," she explains, "is a question of power" (1609). Translation, then, is not some naïve, ideal
process that allows us all to share the same culture and understand one another in a happy global vil-
lage. Or worse, I do not suggest translation as an accomplice to imperial epistemologies that would
render all culture into the unified tongue of "western civilization." Rather, I suggest that we seriously
engage with the process of translation as a contrapuntal comparative practice that provides a neces-
sary critical framework for thinking about social relationships whether between individuals, communi-
ties, cultures, or the texts they produce. What is more, I suggest that we link our thoughts about
translation as a literary practice to a much broader critical agenda, since it is the translation from
thought into action that is at the heart of any ethical practice.

Translation requires a dialectic between recognition and imagination. Recognition, in its insistence
on considerate attention of an other and its assumption that the other can be identified, depends on
appreciation of context, history, and shared experience. Emphasizing recognition as a central feature
of ethical comparison allows me to draw on Hegel's theory of recognition as prior to subjectivity and
as dependent on community. Nancy Fraser explains that for Hegel "recognition designates an ideal
reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees the other as an equal and as separate from it"
(10). For Fraser an ethical theory that is premised on recognition allows a way out of the difference
debate caused by identity politics and foregrounds intersubjectivity over subjectivity. Bauman furthers
this point by claiming that recognition is premised on universality of humanity, on the idea that we are
all part of the conversation: "Universality of citizenship is the preliminary condition of all meaningful
'politics of recognition'. And, let me add, universality of humanity is the horizon by which all politics of
recognition, to be meaningful, needs to orient itself. Universality of humanity does not stand in oppo-
sition to the pluralism of the forms of human life; but the test of a truly universal humanity is its abil-
ity to accommodate pluralism and make pluralism serve the cause of humanity – to enable and en-
courage 'ongoing discussion about the shared conception of the good'" (*Community* 140). Recognition,
then, is a highly complex process by which communities negotiate spaces of difference within a shared
vision of commonality. Bauman explains that the process of recognition depends on knowing where to
draw the line on difference, when to refuse to condone degrees of difference that destroy any sense of
community and that create ghettos instead (141). He explains that "recognition of cultural variety is
the beginning, not the end, of the matter; it is but a starting point for a long and perhaps tortuous,
but in the end beneficial, *political process*" (136; emphasis in the original). And I would add that it is
a political process that depends on both comparative modes of thinking and on finding a common lan-
guage of social commitment. At the center of recognition, then, is a comparative practice of
intersubjective communal connection that relies on context and history for meaning and depends on
dialogue and interactive voices in order to function. Acts of recognition provide crucial tools of "close
reading" necessary for socially progressive translation.

If recognition depends on an appreciation of the past as well as an appreciation of the differ-
ent, then imagination offers the hope of the future, of that which may not yet be present to the sens-
es, but is nonetheless possible. Imagination, with its utopian potential, is what allows recognition
across time and space. It is what motivates the urge to translate. In keeping with Giroux, however, I
am not calling for a naïve form of utopic imagination, but rather an "educated hope" that acknowledg-

es the extraordinary obstacles to social justice before us and stubbornly refuses to give up (see *Terror*). All of these interrelated processes -- translation, recognition, and imagination -- depend on critical attention to the cultural forms that provide the media through which we render comparison. And as Kadir points out, ethical comparison must always be understood as an act of negotiation; not as a form of idealistic consensus building, but rather as a restive space "beyond dialogue or mere conversation ... where there is something at stake beyond mutual understanding" ("Tlon" 134). Spivak, too, calls for recognizing the relationship between comparative thinking, ethical engagement, and the imagination: "If a responsible comparativism can be of the remotest possible use in the training of the imagination, it must approach culturally diversified ethical systems diachronically, through the history of multicultural empires, without foregone conclusions" (*Death* 12-13). The point is that the comparative imagination depends on a dialectic between knowing and hoping, between particular experience and collective interpretation, between "acts of translation," "close reading," and mutual recognition, between dialogue and dissent. As Hegel has taught us, dialectical relationships between master and slave, between torturer and victim, between the self and its other are always relationships of degree that are permanently in process even though they are often perceived as absolute reified divisions. Attention to how those purportedly oppositional relationships are formed and perpetuated begins the process of critically undermining the ontological categories that threaten our ability to engage politically and ethically with the current human catastrophe generated by the war on terror.

Now I would like to briefly outline how an ethically driven comparative cultural studies based on translation, recognition, and imagination offers both a way to bridge the disconnect between the humanities and human rights activism, as well as a critical method capable of offering important insight into the ways that cultural representations and their political power affect the struggle for global human rights. As Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek has explained, comparative cultural studies grew out of an urgent need to rethink the critical tendencies that had dominated the field of comparative literature, not the least of which included Western-oriented hierarchical thinking and the marginalization of humanist scholarship from public discourse (see "From Comparative Literature"). There are a number of ways that the methods and theoretical underpinnings of comparative cultural studies, as they have been outlined by Tötösy, help to bridge the humanities and human rights activism. First, it is dedicated to making humanities research socially relevant, and to overcoming the institutional and public marginalization of the humanities. Second, its commitment to crossing boundaries -- be they disciplinary, cultural, discursive, or ontological -- while simultaneously appreciating local and particular difference, allows for a comparative, contextual, and dialectical method that moves beyond the binary of the universal versus the particular. As a general rule, comparative methods, especially when they are conscious of ideologically driven value systems, attend to both similarity and difference in ways that can be useful for advancing a common vision of human rights while simultaneously protecting socially valuable forms of diversity. For instance, comparatists know that there are universal human themes -- such as love, conflict, hope, fear -- and we know that these themes are always grounded in context. When we compare cultural forms that emerge in moments of war, for instance, we register the shared and distinct ways cultures respond to social trauma. Comparative analyses of testimonials like that of Rigoberta Menchú with slave narratives like that of Frederick Douglass expose how the written word has been used as a vehicle for social struggle across distinct cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. These forms of comparison also allow us to appreciate the different ways that Menchú and Douglass presented their individual and group identities to readers -- readers whom they hoped would decide to support their struggles after finishing their books.

While it is true that the traditional discipline of comparative literature largely served to reinforce western value systems and social hierarchies, comparative cultural studies reverses this trend by actively addressing the ways that certain cultural forms have been accorded "emotional and intellectual primacy" (Tötösy de Zepetnek 259). Comparative methods serve to break down binaries such as the particular versus the universal or the self versus the other, or the nation-state versus the globe, by

revealing the dialectical intersections between these categories. Because comparative cultural studies moves away from the western "world literature" model, the method calls for critically examining how cultural products shape identity without resting on ontological claims. In this way it is able to revise the universal subject implied by Kant's Categorical Imperative with a comparative imagination. The comparative imagination is an ethics grounded in understanding identity-- and the cultural forms that construct and deconstruct it --contextually, historically, relationally, and dialectically.

In addition to bringing humanities research into greater relevant dialogue with human rights, an ethically driven comparative cultural studies brings an indispensable understanding of how narration and representation play a fundamental role in defining identity. Recognizing how these modes of communication obtain social force in historical, cross-cultural context provides key insight into the ways that communities understand their relationship to others. In an excellent example of the type of comparative project I am describing, Kay Schaeffer and Sidonie Smith have studied the relationship between narration, human rights activism, and a politics of recognition:

For readers who identify with collective movements, whether they are active participants or not, narratives coming out of a shared experience offer new avenues for activism and self-understanding, new models of remembering. Such narratives can enable access to and potential recognition of the incommensurable differences between the teller's experience and that of the reader, making possible circuits of connection across differences, and circuits of difference across connection. Although always compromised, stories offer readers new ways of gaining knowledge about peoples across the globe, calling into existence new cultural forms, new modes of circulation, and new forms of civic engagement. (Schaeffer and Smith 27)

International declarations, covenants, initiatives, and commissions dedicated to protecting human rights will hold no persuasive power over the public if they do not recognize that culture and the narratives that sustain it are an essential force in shaping visions of shared humanity, and in threatening them. It goes without saying, then, that a comparative method based on translation, recognition, and imagination could help build bridges between humanists and human rights activists. It also seems clear that we need greater attention to the role that media play in providing the language of human rights. Butler explains how the work of humanists is essential to the human rights project. Simply put, she argues that there can be no human rights without media: "If a condition of possibility of a human rights claim is a language or medium in which the claim becomes articulable, it follows that media are crucial to communicating the existence of suffering disenfranchisement, violence, inequality, to name a few. This does not mean that suffering is only media. It means, rather, that without media, no suffering can be known" (Butler, "Afterword" 1660). Not only do we need narratives and other media to create a shared understanding of human rights (for more on this see Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions"), but we also need these communicative modes in order to engage in mourning, resistance, and retribution.

In an example of the fraught relationship between media and human rights claims, Ariel Dorfman's poem "Traducción simultánea" ("Simultaneous Translation"), from *In Case of Fire in a Foreign Land*, draws an analogy between the poet and the translator, linking the work of writers to those of human rights workers:

I'm not so different from the interpreters
in their glass booths
at endless international conferences
translating what the peasant from Talca
tells about torture
repeating in English that they put him on a cot
...
finding the exact equivalent for rape by dogs. (3)

No soy tan diferente de los intérpretes
detrás de sus ventanas de vidrios
en las interminables conferencias de lo internacional

traduciendo lo que el campesino de Talca
recuenta sobre las torturas
repitiendo en inglés que lo pusieron sobre el catre
...
encontrando el equivalente exacto para violación por perros. (2)

Here the connection between artistic representation and human rights activism stems from the fact that both discourses seek a way to connect a word with something else. While the interpreter links the words of two different languages, the poet links the word to experience. Each has a difficult task of translation. The poem does not celebrate the process, and Dorfman pushes the reader to consider how pain and suffering can be mediated into words and across languages. What Dorfman wants to emphasize is the inevitable loss of feeling entailed by such translation. And yet, despite this representative gap, "something" is communicated as revealed when the poem uses the first person to refer to the poet for the first time:

in spite of my river of interpretations and turns of phrase
something is communicated
a part of the howl
a thicket of blood
some impossible tears
the human race has heard something
and is moved. (3)

a pesar de mi río de interpretaciones y giros lingüísticos
algo se comunica
una porción del aullido
un matorral de sangre
unas lágrimas imposibles
la humanidad algo ha escuchado
y se emociona. (2).

Dorfman makes the dilemma clear. Once you recognize that translation is flawed, you have two choices: You either let those voices lie silent, unrepresented, forgotten, or you begin the difficult task of working through the crisis, of using your imagination and your critical recognition of other cultures, other peoples, and other texts to create a translation, a language that can build a connection, a shared history, a mutual awareness, and a collective desire to shape political practice. To find that language we need to become good at comparison, and by "good" I mean ethically and skillfully, and we need to expand our understanding of what it means to be a comparatist. Training to think comparatively should include the traditional menu of courses in other languages, cultures, and histories, but it should also incorporate the study of ethics, politics, and critical theory. When we study other cultures without thinking about the ethics of comparison, we run the risk of replicating the tyrannies of comparison that currently fuel the war on terror, that decide which deaths are to be mourned, which acts of violence are to be punished, and which stories are to be remembered.

Our questions need to consider the relations of representation and how these relations affect the possibilities of political intervention. How is the human constructed during an age of terror? When does representation of suffering move from meaningful document to glorified spectacle? When does free expression turn into hate speech? What is the difference between dissent and terrorism? What makes books dangerous? What makes them liberating? How can a story lead to mass murder? How can a photo lead to peace? How does culture agitate and domesticate? The questions are endless. In a world that increasingly calls on us to retreat from political activism by succumbing to market mentalities, individualism, and tyrannical comparisons, we need to retheorize and repoliticize the work of the humanities and resist the trend to ghettoize and corporatize the critical work of the liberal arts. The comparative imagination plays an essential role not only in considerations of political power and repre-

sentational practices, but also in the very ways that we understand agency, democracy, civic responsibility, and human rights.

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