

National literatures as Intimate Expression and the Problem of Teaching World Literatures

Kette Thomas

Michigan Technological University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Kette. "National literatures as Intimate Expression and the Problem of Teaching World Literatures." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.6 (2013): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2354>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 418 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 15 Issue 6 (December 2013) Article 2
Kette Thomas,

**National literatures as Intimate Expression and
the Problem of Teaching World Literatures**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/2>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.6 (2013)**
Special Issue ***New Work about World Literatures***
Ed. Graciela Boruszko and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/>>

Abstract: In her article "National Literatures as Intimate Expression and the Problem of Teaching World Literatures" Kette Thomas analyzes the fundamental tension embedded in the discourse on teaching world literatures. Thomas focuses on models which contextualize the problem around the subject of allegiance either to the reader or the author rather than the commonly limited geographical, national, and politically defined complex. Focus on the reader or author is often made at the expense of the "other," but it is the tension and communication between them that offers possibilities for the development of the discipline of comparative literature (against Eurocentrism and the nation approach) and the fields of world literatures and comparative cultural studies.

Kette THOMAS

National literatures as Intimate Expression and the Problem of Teaching World Literatures

During the 2011 ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sparred about the role of world literatures in a comparative literature context. At the heart of their debate, it seems to me that Damrosch sought to protect the reader while Spivak was engaged in protecting the writer and thereby the reader by extension who engages literatures which are or are not part of their national heritage. Educators face the challenge of deciding how to combine the local with the global using the most appropriate methodology in order to provide the best approaches for students who are studying world literatures. I engage in this debate including other theorists' perspectives and my own reflections in order to advance the discussion.

In "What Is Literature For?" Tzvetan Todorov describes his reading "maturity" in detail beginning with those early years before the intervention of formal education: "As far back as I can remember, I see myself surrounded by books. Both of my parents were professional librarians; there were always too many books in our house ... I quickly learned to read and began to devour classic stories in children's versions: *The Arabian nights*, the tales of Grimm and Andersen, *Tom Sawyer*, *Oliver Twist* and *Les Misérables*" (13). Todorov describes a childhood wherein words on a page engulfed his imagination with limited, if any, obstructions. Thus, he says he learned to "love reading," the inevitable consequence of what Spivak seems to propose runs the risk of being "wasteful spending," a term she got from Rabindranath Tagore (472). To be fair, it is not that Spivak has any objection to the kind of education that marked a reader like Todorov: "Wasteful spending" has both positive and negative attributes. In fact, she recalls her experience in a small girls' school in Calcutta, where she and a friend would "sit down and sing Tagore songs or 'Rabindra Sangeet' on every possible occasion" (471). Thus, in her explanation that one might consider reading a text "regionally," Spivak gives a glimpse of what Tagore meant to her and her peers in the intimacy of Kolkata, shared environments, and local contexts.

Spivak's complaint has to do with the fact that Tagore was intimately, but not exclusively joined to her body of literary experience. She had to read Western texts, too. This unfair balance, wherein Todorov's early memories are not occupied with Tagore, but hers are occupied with Andersen and the *Arabian Nights*, lends itself to the conflict with teaching world literatures to a nationalist student body. What, exactly, are we trying to do? What is teaching world literatures supposed to look like? Spivak's concern emphasizes the concept that the imperialist anti-imperialist model is unfair in its production of literature in relation to what and how we teach in the classroom. Internalizing Western literature is a love-hate relationship: "Why should we endlessly quote Goethe?" she asks (472). The postcolonial reader is embattled with Western imaginary spaces and morale — often at the expense of strict meditation and reflection on those bodies of knowledge produced locally while even Damrosch admits he had never heard of Tagore until graduate school — constituting reason enough not to be lax in our treatment on the subject (477). Spivak explains that these problems are not isolated or arbitrary, but the true result of teaching world literatures "badly." Thus, I find that although Spivak agrees with some of Damrosch's positions, what lies at the bottom of her dilemma is a matter of initial intimate engagement and the imagination. Where Damrosch might see the advantages of unknown possibilities, Spivak sees the threat of violence and confusion brought on by a neocolonialism determined by the market and globalization. We already have an example of what can happen, proven in the experiential body of the postcolonial reader who, although studying Western literature, was not formally engaged in "world literature," representing the complex outcome of lazy or mindless exposures to the "world."

How do you respond to that? Spivak's position is the historically "accurate" and generally accepted point of view. But if we position ourselves alongside Spivak is it not fair to say that we run the risk of compromising the experience of reading entirely in a negative way? We cannot underestimate Spivak's concern for as she points out, "the world is in bad shape" (472). Nevertheless, I take issue with Spivak's proposed solution to this problem. Namely, she mentions

the idea that we are positioned to "train the imagination" if we are to "supplement the impulse to world literature" — and this is what makes Damrosch's counter position so important (479). She says this in passing as she closes her stance in the debate, but the phrase struck a chord and I find that this encapsulates Spivak's concerns. In fact, Spivak quotes herself from another text, saying "The bottom line of teaching literature as such is to teach how to read, in the most robust sense. The bottom line of teaching philosophy is to teach how to think, again, in the most robust sense. It is to teach an activism of the imagination and intellect" (470). But this "activism" is not as innocent as it appears. It is one thing to submit facts and contexts which situate the reader whenever they engage with foreign literatures and it is another to approach the problem by thinking we can or should "train" the reader's imagination, even if it is for the worthy cause of moving them away from the harmful effects of imperialist thinking.

Todorov's childhood experiences with books did not lead to some dramatic imperialist drive. He, too, was forced to engage institutionalized reprocessing by way of reading and analyzing texts. Books engaged his imagination in junior high school: "It always gave me a shiver of delight to plunge into the world of the writers — classics or contemporaries, Bulgarian or foreign — whose books I was now reading in complete editions. I could satisfy my curiosity, live adventures, experience fright and happiness" (13). Determined by these experiences to "have something to do with literature" (13) Todorov embarked on a career that would put him around books. But, something went wrong: "Bulgaria was then part of the Communist bloc, and all the humanities disciplines were shaped by the official ideology" (13). Todorov found his beloved books turned into tools which shaped the ideological framework of his day. No longer was he free to imagine himself in Tom Sawyer, he now had to see Tom through the lenses of Marxism-Leninism: "Literature courses were half scholarship and half propaganda" (13). He continued by describing what he was now commissioned to do: "We were required to show how books represented the correct ideology — or otherwise, how they failed to do this" (14). While Spivak's concern for world literatures is a valid one, Damrosch suggests we run the risk of making literature the albatross around the neck of the reader much in the same way communism sought to obliterate Todorov's intimate connection and engagement with books in the 1950s.

Todorov's problem "How could I write about literature without knuckling under to the dominant ideology?" (14) echoes the problem my students seem to face when asked to produce term papers. Like Todorov, initially, my students choose the only path that (lets them) avoid the orthodoxy to concentrate on the study of things which have no ideological value in themselves. Todorov wrote that "everything I wrote escaped the censor, and I ran no risk of violating the ideological taboos of the Party" (14). If, as educators, we cannot locate the balance between the global and the local, let us at least recognize what the reception to our methods may be doing to the ways our students assume they should approach literary texts. There is an underlying anxiety or assumption which exists before we select both the text and the subject of foreign literature. Student term papers appear less creative, less explorative or imaginative. Rather — although a certain amount of conformity may be expected in undergraduate literature courses — world literature classes either boast of exceptionally open and ideologically conscientious students or innocuous rhetoric and form. It would almost seem pointless to teach the class at all, but for the fact that educators must determine the difference between meaningful engagement and students' sidestepping political and ideological minefields. Damrosch's position is critical in the debate with Spivak and his proposition that we "inspire more language learning, more genuine understanding of the world, more difficult engagement" is not as restrictive as what Spivak seems to propose in order to guard against the ravages of imperial anti-imperial, capitalist, and materialist fervor (463).

I now turn to the problem to the writer as a means of segueing into Spivak's concern for the reader by extension and discuss two figures who have been the subject of "imperialist anti-imperialist" critique: Harold Bloom and Walt Whitman. I do this in light of the fact that both Damrosch and Spivak admonished the spread of US-American world literature anthologies (on this, see also Eoyang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/16>>). I can think of no greater advocate of Western canonical literature than Bloom who is accused of shameless bias and perpetuating the impetus to define and honor writers mainly through the examples left behind by

dead WASP males. Nevertheless, he makes some important points about why we read literature. In "How to Read and Why," Bloom suggests that we relearn how to read, never mind how to read world literature. Bloom fuses the directives of Francis Bacon, Samuel Johnson, and Ralph Emerson to develop a formula for reading: "find what comes near to you that can be put to the use of weighing and considering, and that addresses you as though you share the one nature, free of time's tyranny" (22). This is not unlike Damrosch's assertions, but Damrosch also insists that we cannot read without awareness of the complexities of politics and the marketplace. So, left alone, Bloom's assertion might come across as somewhat romantic. In fact, Spivak's notion of wasteful spending might apply here. Nevertheless, Spivak, too, recognizes the intimacy involved in reading and the fact that those who understand reading know literature is not merely a solitary act. The author counts a great deal and the relationship between the two represents a critical component in any critical analysis focused on the impact of the text. In Bloom you get an acknowledgment of those first impulses when engaging the writer has the potential to broaden understanding beyond mere facts about a culture or set of beliefs. The sloppy work of sorting through uninformed, instinctive, emotive reactions is part of the reading process because, of course, it is the writer and not the reader who is speaking. That is, the writer is speaking to the reader about those most intimate aspects of being human. The writer is central to the development of meaning, particularly cultural meaning, and it is, in some ways, what remains at issue for the field of teaching world literature. What are they saying, doing, and making of our imagination? Should we abandon ourselves without reserve or protect ourselves?

When Spivak speaks of Tagore, she says that "in spite of all the grandeur of the poet's trajectory, it is intimacy in our girlish souls, established now into examined lives, which 'mean' Tagore for us and she is suggesting that Tagore could understand her girlish soul better than Goethe (478). Or did Tagore activate her imagination such that she could recognize that she had a soul? This question is what makes for her argument that texts can be "universizable" rather than the omnipotent, overly presumptuous universal. But it is also the source of contention in her postcolonial analysis where the regional Indian worker has to "be able to pass as American or British" (478). In other words, she has to reflect on the imagination and the soul of US-Americans or Brits to the explicit exclusion of what one becomes when the *Gita* or Tagore are part of their making. So let us take up the supposition that the writer is not articulating our feelings, but gives those feelings a shape or form such that it can be recognized as something, perhaps even something sacred. The distinction lies somewhere between the function of a servant and an artist within the collective. Are souls nationalistic? If writers give our feelings shape and form such that they direct how we define our souls, are they directing the soul to something that can only be Indian, British, or US-American (the subject of identity vis-à-vis nations in a globalized context is also an important element in this analysis, although I will not go into it here [on this, among the many works, see, e.g., Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>])?

Bloom posited that "Value, in literature as in life, has much to do with the idiosyncratic, with the excess by which meaning gets started" (23). If we take Bloom at face value, then our treatment of the writers who make up the canon of world literatures as unique cultural expressions cannot produce meaning: it can affirm or acknowledge the meaning uttered by others, merely finding a place on the shelf alongside the local literatures which make up our own bodies of meaning that we already had, but now we can reference as a source. Perhaps this proposition is all we can hope to gain from exposure to the foreign writer's expression and perhaps we can also induce self examination of our own bodies of meaning either reaffirming what we thought we knew or challenging our assumptions about the other. As a motivation, this appears to be an honorable enough sort of exercise, but it never moves forward: it simply establishes place as to where one is located relative to others. With Bloom's view in mind, it appears we have a provocative challenge ahead of us when dealing with world literatures. What sorts of idiosyncrasies can we engage when we haven't even the basic comprehension of a people or place? What universizable forms of our souls can we discover if we fail to or only account for the regional place where the writer produced his/her ideas? Still, for Bloom, these are the subjects of literary art and discourse. Bloom tells readers to reinsert literature back to the sensual obscurities that marked the genre for greatness.

He says, "do not attempt to improve yourself or your neighborhood by what or how you read ... there are no ethics of reading" (24). And yet, for Spivak, this is exactly the function of reading: to "read in the most robust manner" means precisely so that we can improve our imagination and our intellect. We cannot remain increasingly transient without learning to think about the origin and development of our souls: reading is an ethical activity.

With above said in mind, when Bloom proposes that there are no ethics in reading, he suggests a temporary truce. While reading, the reader is able to engage the imagination of the author with total immunity or suspension of judgment. As a reader, Bloom submerges himself in literary intimacies which ground the relationship between the writer and the reader. Whether we are speaking of Tagore or Whitman, Bloom's assertions might be exaggerated if it were not for humanity's long history of reading seminal texts as intimate expressions of the author to the reader, be it gods or human, individual or collective. This is most evident in such nationally recognized and idolized US-American treasures like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Is Walt Whitman a servant or an artist? Is he merely articulating an explicitly US-American soul or is this "universizable?" Whitman's poems are cultural artifacts, certainly, but scholars who study Whitman's texts would shirk at the suggestion that his work should be regarded solely in the closed confines of a US-American collective. To even begin an analysis of Whitman's poetry, Thomas Edward Crowley warns us that Whitman himself admonished anyone who would read his works in bits and pieces: "If there is anything in *Leaves of Grass*- anything that sets it apart as a fact of importance — that thing must be in its totality — its massing ... I am not to be known as a piece of something but as a totality" (4). I do not believe Crowley is referring merely to Whitman's body of work. This is important, but Crowley's book is also about the personal affects of Whitman's poetry "This study of the structure of *Leaves of Grass* is the result of two significant personal experiences: first, that of reading Whitman's poems carefully, but somewhat at random, viewing *Leaves of Grass* as little more than a handy one-volume edition of the collected lyrics of the poet, related, yes, and grouped broadly, according to subject matter, but in no particular significant way; second, that of reading *Leaves of Grass* as a unified work, as something more than a series of lyrics, as a single poetic achievement, lyrical, and yet in its totality not without an epic quality and direction. The second reading was a revelation. 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken'" (3).

Crowley's two modes of applying himself to Whitman's works are ideal: it is the totality of his works and the totality by which our world becomes consumed, enriched, grouped, and formulated through the lenses of one writer. Rather than isolating the mechanical components that contextualize works from other regions, one gets the sense that Whitman's poetry invites the reader to experience the grounds (albeit in the U.S.) where meaning is produced. Crowley describes his reading of Whitman's poetry as having taken on new "magnitude and purport": "many lyrics loved were dearer now [and] a sense of oneness of the whole gave new force and beauty to the component parts" (4). Thus, one cannot help but ponder what the consequences are when Whitman's "Children of Adam" is relegated to formal, material cultural examinations. Is it focused on the US-American family and their paternalistic ideals? Is it ahistorical? Strictly historical? What exclusions are to be found in these expressions? What does Whitman neglect, since he is neither willing nor able to consider different family dynamics, knowledge formations, or socially-determined modes of conduct? How relevant are such paths of inquiry to the task of understanding Whitman? And there is the rub: understanding Whitman, Whitman with the U.S., but not as a US-American cultural servant of articulation. Whitman intends to devour the reader in an experience he describes as a "totality." To treat it as "American" with a persistent awareness that other nations exist which one should not expect to encounter in his poetry, begins the processes of erosion (on the appropriation of "America" when referring to the U.S. see, e.g., McClennen). Great poets, whether we are speaking of Whitman or Tagore, are not negotiable artists.

But again, we cannot underestimate the importance of place, circumstances, and environment. In *The Erotic Whitman*, Vivian Pollak wrote that "Children of Adam" was a response to Whitman's poems named after the blades of grass which grew in the North and Midwest, "Calamus-Leaves." "Calamus" may invoke Whitman's imaginings of the U.S., a faithful vision of the new nation's

strengths. Whitman claims he selected the native-grown word because of its "big and hardy spears," but Pollak adds that Whitman identified this source "with the occult convolutions of his brain, with his spiritualized body's 'rich blood' and seminal 'milky stream,' and with his 'adhesive's' heart's desire" (127). "Children of Adam" was written to admonish the "political parties and 'kept editors' (who failed) to establish an enduring social and political union" (127). This would satisfy a formal cultural context for an introduction to Whitman's works, but to stop there would do injustice to both the author and readers, like Crawley. Whitman also wrote to silence the "undemocratic and possibly morbid connotations of manly love" (*Walt Whitman's* 127). In a single verse, for the nineteenth century, Whitman was provocative if not antagonistic judging by England's cries of "indecency," but he can also invite the reader to engage the erotic creases of a whole body, indeed US-American, but primarily human and primarily universizable.

Returning to Bloom, I consider what some critics hold him guilty of. Metaphorically, what is so unbecoming of a professional, unbiased scholar is simply this: he fell in love. Immediately we have a conflict. First, to speak of love in the profession of literature is amateurish. Second, to think on the subject in the contexts of global literature poses too many problems, especially when Spivak suggests we reduce our conception of the universal to "universizable." In other words, the term love is too subject to linguistic limitations, environmental and social and cultural factors for objective engagements, at least for now. And third, in an era where people are ruled by commercially imposed affect, how can we even understand the term's relevance pertaining to the consumption of literature? Nevertheless, all of these concerns notwithstanding, what we propose about the writer still reflects the general properties of intimate communication. It seems that Whitman's poetry, whatever his intent, was most probably not meant for the unbiased professional scholar who would pick apart his poems for textual analysis and an exposé of nineteenth-century US-American life and culture. Rather, Bloom celebrates Whitman as much for his motivation, his attempt to inspire, as he does the published works.

The theory of the poem involves both the expression of the hottest wildest passion, bravest, sturdiest character, not however illustrated after any of the well known types, the identities of the great bards old or modern. Nor Prometheus is here, nor Agamemnon, nor Aeneas, nor Hamlet, nor Iago, nor Antony, nor any of Dante's scenes or persons, nor ballad of lord or lady, nor Lucretius philosophy, nor any special system of philosophy, nor striking lyric achievement, nor *Childe Harold*, nor any epic tale with beginning, climax, and termination. Yet something of perhaps similar purpose, very definite, compact (and curiously digesting and including all the lists we have just named), very simple even and applying directly to the reader at first hand, is the main result (and purpose) of this book, namely to suggest the substance and form of a large, sane, perfect Human Being or character for an American man and for woman. While other things are in the book, studies, digressions of various sorts, this is undoubtedly its essential purpose and its key, so that in the poem taken as a whole unquestionably appears in the Homeric or Shakespearean character, a person with the free courage of Achilles, the craft of Ulysses, the attributes of even of the Greek deities, Majesty, passion, temper, amateness, Romeo, Lear, Antony, immense self-esteem, but after democratic forms, measureless love, the old eternal elements of first class humanity. Yet worked over, cast in a new mold, and here chanted or anyhow out down and stated with invariable reference to the United States and the occasions of today and the future. (Bloom qtd. in Crawley 9; see also Whitman, *Walt Whitman's* 136-37).

Whitman makes no effort to conceal his desire that US-Americans feel tended to by his poetry. He does not hide his aspiration for his reader or that they may embrace his poems as a source of velocity and inspiration as the readers in a young nation marching on to becoming ideally human. But it is in this last instance that one gets the sense that Whitman's abandon left the doors of experiencing his poetry open to people not fitting the description of US-Americans. His poetry remains a source of open interpretation and engagement, even with the social and cultural context that often accompany assignments to read his works. In this way I support literary canons, insofar as they reflect, much like a lover who has had many partners, the reading of many works in a tradition and selecting the ones which moved the most deeply, illuminated the brightest, and tested the reader's senses the hardest, the ones who transcended their own articulated purpose. This robust reading, as it were, is not to be taken lightly. Spivak's point is bolstered by her assertion that when we teach a foreign text wherein there are students in the class whose origins they share with the author, we run the risk of giving the student too much credit. Why should an East Indian know any more about Tagore than a US-American? She calls this a populist motivation and

denounces it as insulting to the singularity of the author: "We must earn the right to be able to judge what the student brings to class ... thinking of any international student as an authority on globality is like thinking all Americans abroad are experts on Melville" (465). Spivak also addresses the author's singularity by saying that "our concern is not how to situate the peaks of the literary production of the world on a level playing field but to ask what makes literary cases singular. The singular is always unversizable, never the universal. The site of reading is to make the singular visible in its ability" (466). When listening to Spivak one gets the feeling that she is not altogether different from Damrosch, except of course she is protecting Tagore, not Eva. There is some real justification for this if we are to defend against, "relating benevolently to everything, 'knowing about other cultures' in a relativist glow" (466). Writers become increasingly obscured in this debate, but Spivak is pinpointing a quality in the production of world literature that threatens not only the consumption of the literature, but also its contemporary production.

In a scene by J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, two successful novelists, one White South African, the other Nigerian, spar about their work. The Nigerian novelist has just delivered a speech boasting the superior qualities of the African novel over those written by Westerners. The speech, lengthy and gratuitously arrogant, provokes his colleague to assert the following: "The English novel ... is written in the first place by English people for English people. That is what makes it the English novel. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to me to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigner who will read them" (51). This is like saying that "while making love to your wife you're watching the voyeur in the room in order to recognize yourself in the act." Coetzee's remark about the self-consciousness in modern texts echoes Spivak's concerns precisely. She uses the phrase "supplementing world literatures" and suggests we "earn the right to supplement by the most painstaking intimacy" (466). This intimacy does not prioritize the reader, but the writer. There is a difference between the poetry of Whitman and Tagore and those of Chidi A. Okoye or Edwidge Danticat. Should we not discern the difference between the writer who speaks both directly and indirectly to sparring collectives, and those who, though speaking within their cultural origins, seem to make the subject of nations or collectivities disappear? In Tagore's poem "Authorship," the author is seen through a child's eyes: while we have to account for the language or translation problems, we do not need a university degree to realize that the poem is in the voice of a young child and that the poem is also about gender roles in Bengali culture and Western influence, among others. However, Tagore in much of his poetry — and like Whitman he is to be read as a "totality" — does not conceal the external world, but creates for the reader an internal dynamic comprised almost entirely in the imaginary space of a world shared with the reader, produced by the writer. Chidi A. Okoye contrasts this position in the poem "Dada":

The spiritual child of the land,
the gifted child of the clan.
The child's eyes that sees beyond the roots of life.
Playing with your dread and bushy hair is like toying
with fire in a thatched hut.
Dada magic and mysterious child, reverence of all for
the fear of the unknown.
Dada, Dada! child of the soil.
Dada, Dada! Hope of the land.
Your tears fill mothers with fear.
Your joy is their celebration.
Dada you are the gifted child of the present,
the hopeful path to the past and the strength of the
future.
With your hair so weird and wild, that speaks of
Mother Nature. (32)

The poem is a critique and an attempt to reverse the violence done to a particular body by a particular group. It is addressed to two different and specific collectives and it is, consciously, not

for everyone. It was not written to become universalizable only that the beauty of Black hair may be accepted universally.

There are also no shortage of books which seem to suggest that the writer is not nearly as interested in his/her readers' response, but those of a third party looking over his/her shoulders, the voyeur who sits in judgment (the marketplace). Coetzee's remarks draw attention to an underlying function behind contemporary literary production not as a means of intimacy between writer and reader, but between writer and nation, local and global. Coetzee's remarks bear down on the "African" writer insofar as the literary experiences which ought to be shared in intimate confidence with an African audience are misguided and directed to "foreign" audiences. This may be true, but Coetzee is also mistaken if he thinks that great English writers limited themselves to England. Rather, such writers were in search of a single worthy reader, national origins aside, because it was "their" world they constructed, their particular brand of "nation" — a totality. The actual geographical place and the political landscape were merely tools of production. Neither Whitman nor Tagore wrote for a nation: their poems "are" the nation and no other place existed before, around, beneath, or beyond this. As such, great writers can be arrogant. We release them onto the world because they are not so susceptible to social and political handling. They form the world around us, we live in it as they describe or prescribe. Writers are irresponsible, even reckless, intrusive, rude, angry, violent, but also wise, patient, and tender. They steal god's ego to shape us in their own image. In this way, Spivak and Damrosch coincide: both encourage students to be lost and remain lost until they mature enough to understand they have been handed the whole of the universe by someone dressed in the colors of a different flag.

On the subject of Spivak's insinuation that readers are an extension of the writer's influence as literatures across geographical borders make their way into classrooms and study halls, a fine line between observation and engagement, voyeurism and affectionate embrace with the writer is drawn. I find this to be at the crux of Spivak's irritation. Spivak has no objection to the intimacy forged between a foreign reader and Tagore: what she seems to abhor is the "relativistic" pride paraded about by someone who is wholly ignorant of what Tagore meant to her as a child and throughout her intellectual maturity just because they read a few of his poems in conjunction with a barrage of other "world literatures" in a "multiculti" literature class. Damrosch suggests she should wait: the future with the continued advance of globalization seems bleak, especially in light of postcolonial history, but it is not unassailable. We cannot know what our students will do, what they will find objectionable or desirable until we expose them to all the alternatives available now in ways totally unlikely just a half century ago. World literatures open up possibilities which are closed to us if we insist on maintaining current structures of analysis, albeit while adding new languages and traditions to our field of study.

The reader by extension who enrolls in a world literatures course is engaged in a massive undertaking. Teachers, too, are embroiled in a serious problem. Vilashini Cooppan recalls her four year old son asking him whether he knows "the whole ball and world of space and the universe" (10). Cooppan claims that this seems to be the expectation that world literatures classrooms are taught by professors who know the "whole world and universe" and, somehow, students will emerge with some of that knowledge (10). Of course Cooppan writes this comically and we should read it that way, but she also proposes a vision for addressing this contemporarily constructed expectation. Beyond the absurdity of the assertion there is the problem of how to teach world literatures when you do not know the whole universe and even if you did, you cannot teach it in a fourteen-week semester. On a practical level, Cooppan suggests we learn to engage the uncanny, a subject she develops extensively. She suggests that literature is always behind us, with us, and ahead of us (16). World literatures do not have to exist in a vacuum, as we know, but the applications of its use can enlighten us in ways which do not exorcise great writers from the souls of foreign lands. Like Spivak, Cooppan is interested in those universalizable texts which elicit both what we do not recognize along with what we can identify immediately.

Cooppan says that "world literature is a way you learn to think, a mode in which you learn to read, and a collective agreement you make to lose something in translation in order to gain something in transformation" (30). I am careful here not to suggest that Cooppan wants to "train

the imagination." Rather, it seems she wants to train one to think in new modes and tropes which incorporate disparate, sometimes conflicting texts thereby exciting the imagination in new unforeseen ways. I have to be careful not to suggest that this is not what Spivak might also mean when she suggests we train our imaginations, but unlike Damrosch — who suggests this model of learning is best in a consumer driven, capitalist environment — Spivak sees potential misappropriations which compromise the writer and the reader. For Damrosch, the reader can no longer be limited to the grasps of knowledge irreducible by literary scholars of old, but neither can they escape the modes of thought which defined the history behind texts. As Cooppan points out, it is the fusion of ideas that will save the humanities by always looking forward while looking back. By engaging the uncanny in Tagore along with Whitman all the while looking forward at what the two together can produce in an undergraduate student of a globalized world, we discover new regions of the soul. Whitman's world is not dead: it has transformed itself in the reader who, by extension, also read Tagore.

In conclusion, in some ways Spivak and Damrosch are suggesting the same approach: Spivak's defense of the writer is primarily in order to protect the reader who reads deeply and in an informed manner. Damrosch also seeks a similar accountability and both seem to suggest that world literatures should be renamed something like "thematics of the soul" wherein exposure to foreign texts is less a product of wanting to know the universe and more an experiential exercise. In this way readers refocus their reasons for engaging the texts to consider the stakes it has for their intellectual development and imagination. The difference between the two is on the scale of academic imposition. Spivak insists that more structure and balance is necessary to determine which literatures from foreign cultures are best suited to form the imagination and intellect and Damrosch suggests an open-ended model that allows students to engage deeply with a variety of texts leading to unknown results in how it will shape their development. For Damrosch, this does not always mean a condescending or arrogant flair for performing cosmopolitanism and insists that we are not in the business of making souls, but guiding students with genuine interests to further their development. Damrosch asks educators to approach both the text and the reader with humility and Spivak tells us to "stand up and fight" and to demand active participation on the stage where globalization threatens genuine engagements with foreign writers by force feeding, not just language translations (imposters of the original), but marketplace populism.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking, 2003.
- Cooppan, Vilashini. "Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine: The Uncanny Life of World Literature." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004): 10-36.
- Crawley, Thomas Edward. *The Structure of Leaves of Grass*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1971.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!* New York: Vintage, 1996.
- Eoyang, Eugene. "The Persistence of 'Cathay' in World Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.5 (2013): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/16>>.
- Juvan, Marko. "Worlding Literatures between Dialogue and Hegemony." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.5 (2013): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>.
- McClennen, Sophia A. "Inter-American Studies or Imperial American Studies?" *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 3.4 (2005): 393-414.
- Okoye, Chidi A. "Dada." *Songs of Silence: Collection of Poems*. By Chidi A. Okoye. Bloomington: Trafford P, 2012.
- Pollak, Vivian R. *The Erotic Whitman*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, and David Damrosch. "Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch." *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.4 (2011): 455-85.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "Authorship." *The Crescent Moon*. By Rabindranath Tagore. Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004. 58-60.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "What Is Literature For?" *New Literary History* 38.1 (2007): 13-32.
- Whitman, Walt. *Walt Whitman's Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Manuscripts*. Ed. Clifton Joseph Furness. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. John Hollander. New York: Library of America, 2011.

Kette Thomas,
"National Literatures as Intimate Expression and the Problem of Teaching World Literatures" page 10 of 10
CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.6 (2013): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/2>>
Special Issue *New Work about World Literatures*. Ed. Graciela Boruszko and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek

Author's profile: Kette Thomas teaches literature at Michigan Technological University. Her interests in scholarship include questions regarding identity, agency, and language by placing emphasis on religion, myth, and folklore in cultural practices. Thomas's recent publications include She recently published an article in the called, "What We Need Now is a Poet: A Preemptive Argument for Developing Art in Memory of Haiti Earthquake Victims," *International Journal of Arts in Society* (2010) and "Haitian Myth, Zombie, and Modern Identity," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2010). E-mail: <kthomas@mtu.edu>