

## Worlding CompLit: Diffractive Reading with Barad, Glissant and Nancy

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*The world theorizes as well as experiments with itself. Figuring, reconfiguring.*  
Karen Barad, *On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am*.<sup>1</sup>

In current debates about the future of Comparative Literature, the term 'World Literature' has seen a remarkable revival.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the responses given to the challenges that the field undeniably faces, as literatures from other than European contexts become more and more visible and important for study. With a post-World-War-II heritage that rested upon a limited number of European literary traditions and languages and that quite self-evidently equated those languages with nations as they were established in Europe in the nineteenth century, Comparative Literature finds its basic framework of analysis contested. The immense wealth of languages and literary traditions – perhaps first put on the radar of US and European debates of Comparative Literature by such 'specific' areas of study as postcolonial or transnational literary studies – is of fundamental relevance to the field as it struggles to adjust to the evidences and challenges of a 'world-wide' poetic production and creative intra-action.<sup>3</sup> In the past decade, the proposals for reorienting the field in response to this have been manifold, among them the mentioned renaissance of a Goethian view of literatures beyond national confines as World Literature. Other propositions have been to acknowledge the death of Comparative Literature as we know it and stress planetarity as its viable future, securing linguistic proficiency through cooperation with Area Studies (Spivak); or its transformation toward a 'new comparative literature' which takes global *translatio* and untranslatability as its crucial angle of analysis, a position recently pronounced explicitly *against* an understanding of World Literature that too easily presumes translatability and overlooks the intimate binds of literature to the languages in which it comes (Apter).<sup>4</sup>

In this article, my aim is not to unravel these different trajectories – an impossible task in such limited space, and already underway in the ramified debates themselves. What I would like to do instead is to focus on the specific *methodological* problem that arises for the logic and practice of 'comparison' in light of a 'world-wide' poetic intra-action, and consider especially the practice of *reading* in this regard. Unquestionably, it is a profound methodological challenge that Comparative Literature faces: How are we to 'compare' texts from culturally, linguistically or historically disparate milieus that draw on diverse mythological, aesthetic, poetological or genre-related registers, when (a predominantly nationally framed) kinship used to be the basis of 'comparison'? And, no less important, how are 'we' involved in these practices? It seems indeed crucial that the field responds to the changing topologies of literatures in a globalizing, postcolonial world. When the traditional framework of national literatures and the unquestioned congruence of nation and language are destabilized – for instance, as Apter has shown, by 'Frenches' and literatures in French burgeoning for centuries well outside hexagon France<sup>5</sup> – the implicit criterion of the 'classical' mode of comparison is no longer sufficient: a comparison of literatures from different languages framed as national and entertaining a (more or less distant) kinship relation. Likewise, to continue the distinction between European literatures (accommodated within Comparative Literature departments) and non-European literatures (studied in

'Postcolonial Studies' or as 'transnational literatures') would not only perpetuate colonially established geopolitical boundaries, but it also tends to over-politicize the poetics at work in texts studied as postcolonial, etc.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore not surprising that such a division is increasingly abandoned and curricula of Comparative Literature departments strive to incorporate African, Asian, Native American and other literatures, more and more requiring scholarly expertise in these specific literatures or, alternatively, in what is called World Literature.

While it is an indispensable step to diversify the languages and literatures that are studied, this does, however, not automatically re-envision practices of comparison or attune them to the linguistic plurality and diversity of 'world-wide' literary production. On this one point I would agree with Moretti: 'no one has ever found a method by just reading *more* texts' [my emphasis].<sup>7</sup> The mere inclusion of diverse traditions and languages does not satisfactorily address the methodological issue at stake. Yet, the substitution of 'comparative' with 'world' – suggested in different ways by, among others, Moretti and Damrosch, as a zooming out to distant reading and graphic abstractions of formal transformations (Moretti), or the circulation of texts across the globe (Damrosch) – equally leaves a fundamental methodological problem unresolved: On what basis and how do we *read* 'comparatively'?

While Moretti's suggestion of distant reading and (carto)graphic abstraction leaves close, linguistically and rhetorically trained engagements with texts behind altogether for the literary-historical study of the morphing of genres, Damrosch's argument remains concerned with the reception of individual texts.<sup>8</sup> Damrosch notes that today, in times experienced as different from Auerbach's and Wellek's 1940s (the time of the field's post World-War-II gestation), when even 'within a single region a range of disparate literatures can seem too daunting to tackle',<sup>9</sup> shifting Comparative Literature toward World Literature responds to this unprecedented wealth of literary texts from different traditions. It does so by making the criterion of study – and one of the qualifiers of literature's world-ness – the active presence of a literary text 'within a literary system beyond that of its original culture'.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, World Literature studies the circulation of literary works: How do they travel 'out into a broader world beyond [their] linguistic and cultural point[s] of origin',<sup>11</sup> moving across the globe in waves of reception that expand and retract across different cultures? From that perspective, World Literature is understood as describing the 'elliptical *refraction* of *national literatures*' [my emphasis].<sup>12</sup> Damrosch draws here metaphorically on refraction, a term from optics denoting the bending of a wave when it enters a medium, to describe the process of works 'being received *into* the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition', a process that is intensified the farther 'a work travels [...] from home'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the circulation of texts for Damrosch continues on the basis of national literatures, and its study builds on conceptions of home and world, host and traveller, foreign and national cultures that understand 'world' as the geographic expanse of a globe containing all localities (or 'cultures') and existing prior to travel. This is precisely what allows one (text) to travel *beyond* or *into* a culture and to be refracted or bent into new directions as a result of this. If actively received, that is refracted, texts that circulate beyond local traditions according to Damrosch become part of a 'broader' world.<sup>14</sup>

However, as much as Moretti's conjectures, Damrosch's vision of World Literature leaves the term 'world' itself (the crucial term that is to replace or define 'comparative') unexamined beyond the idea of it as a static, geographic expanse. As Apter points out, this is

not a rare exception, but a lacuna that characterizes much of the debate, where only very 'few interventions question what a world might be'.<sup>15</sup> In view of the question 'How are we to *compare* texts from disparate cultural and linguistic milieus?', this shift to *world* literature without investigating the term itself, or the ideas of cultural contact, refraction and travel coming with it, is of little help. It leaves the crucial methodological question of reading untouched, *precisely*, it seems, because it fails to examine the term at stake: 'world'. Both the historico-sociological cartography (Moretti) and the study of circulation as reception or refraction (Damrosch) rest on the assumption of world as a spatial given, whose complete stretch is made visible and simultaneously exhausted by globalization. Operating on the basis of separate national, regional, cultural traditions *beyond* resp. *into* which one can travel, it leaves unscrutinized the effects that such 'world-wideness' has on cultures (or nations, or languages). Fearing to lack a 'deep knowledge of more than a very few cultures'<sup>16</sup> (an anxiety one can only be sympathetic to), we thus forego the chance to re-calibrate 'comparison' under conditions of increased entanglements on a planetary scope. Yet, if 'world-wideness' implies intensified intra-action and a perpetually differentiating 'world' – 'world' as continuously in the making – one crucial methodological dimension for a future Comparative Literature to examine is precisely reading under these conditions. Not only, because reading is one of the key practices when it comes to literature, but also because texts depend upon the intra-action with readers in order to 'be'.<sup>17</sup> In the intra-active practice of reading, not only texts are made to matter, but 'world' is also in the making.

In what follows, I would like to take up Apter's warning that what is left unexamined in debates on the futures of Comparative Literature so far is mostly what 'world' could mean, and see if – when considering the implications of 'world' from a different angle, namely (with Karen Barad and Édouard Glissant) as intra-active relationality – we might be able to re-imagine and attune our practices of reading to contemporary conditions, otherwise than distant and abstracting. Central to my argument is the notion of diffraction – understood in its quantum physics modality as outlined by Barad. Diffraction, as Barad holds, is not only a certain behaviour of matter, but also a method of reading, 'of reading insights through one another', 'an apparatus of investigation'.<sup>18</sup> For the practices of comparative reading it might change the footing on which texts meet each other: no longer as objects of national (or regional) descent, viewed as pre-existing their encounters in a comparison, but as 'relata' whose qualities and effects are specified only by way of relating, specifying the 'apparatus' (the texts, the reading and the reader) at the same time. Importantly, however, any diffractive reading involves inevitably the affirmation of a diffracting world, and thereby also has to tackle what 'world' would imply from within such a practice. If taken in its quantum implications, diffraction means that the epistemology it entails cannot be separated from the ontology it expresses, because '[p]ractices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because "we" are *of* the world.'<sup>19</sup> Diffraction – precisely in its double implication of a method of reading and a physical phenomenon that evidences a specific constitution of the world – might permit re-examining 'comparison' today.

My suggestion here is, of course, not that we should simply import the vocabulary of quantum physics to renew Comparative Literature, or 'apply' physics to texts. This would disregard the distinctive materialities and historically different practices of both fields. What I would like to do is to *think with* Barad – hooked onto Glissant's poetics of relation and Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *comparution* – to see what the consequences of Barad's onto-

epistemological perspective might be for the practice of comparative reading. As mere lexicon, imported from elsewhere, diffraction can do nothing to or for Comparative Literature – but as a tool to re-examine what we mean by reading literature comparatively, it might prove useful; *under the condition*, however, that we acknowledge the implications of our practices for a 'world' understood as 'differential becoming' and abandon the 'separation of epistemology from ontology [...as] a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse'.<sup>20</sup> On those grounds, our practices of 'comparative' reading might be taking new turns.

### **Diffraction as Worlding**

I would like to start seemingly far off with the profound conceptual shifts from seventeenth century Newtonian physics to twentieth century ideas of a quantum universe. As Barad explains, quantum theory – especially the quantum physics-philosophy of Niels Bohr<sup>21</sup> – poses 'a radical challenge not only to Newtonian physics but also to Cartesian epistemology and its representationalist triadic structure of words, knowers, and things'.<sup>22</sup> The crucial difference that a quantum understanding of the universe makes both to Newton's mechanic conception of the universe and a (related) Cartesian epistemology, is that the quantum model of the atom rejects Democritean atomistic (meta)physics, which both Newton and Descartes took for granted. Democritus famously coined the term 'atom' for the world's indivisible smallest building-blocks and, as Barad argues, invited Western philosophy and physics to see "'things" as ontologically basic entities'.<sup>23</sup> From here, it was only logical to also assume 'inherently determinate boundaries or properties' of things and an 'inherent distinction between subject and object, and knower and known'.<sup>24</sup> With the advancement of quantum physics since Planck, these distinctions have been increasingly questioned. That matter acts in *queerer* ways than Democritus imagined was the famous result of Bohr's double slit (thought-)experiment: the behaviour of matter, here of photons, depends on how it is observed. Whereas Western meta/physics generally saw matter mechanically as inert, stable and fixed, forming separate things that enter into relations *across* their boundaries, Bohr's diffraction apparatus suggested matter as 'dynamic', entangled with meaning. Light can behave as wave or particle, depending on the measurement '*the nature of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the apparatus*' [original emphasis].<sup>25</sup> Beyond the insights into this queer nature of matter and the intricacies of quantum physics, this has the crucial implication – which Barad distils from Bohr – that ontology and epistemology cannot be separated, an insight that in turn has profound effects on our conception of 'world'. The entanglement of matter and meaning, of the fact that 'things' in their being are entangled with the measurements they participate in, means that the world is not 'out there' to be grasped by a subject separated from it, but that the world in each 'phenomenon' is a congealing of a continuous *spacetime mattering*.<sup>26</sup> Importantly for my argument here, Barad explains this neologism as having an intimate link to what the world is:

The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which 'part' of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another 'part' of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized

does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself. The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which 'mattering' itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities.<sup>27</sup>

Understanding 'world' not as a static given, but stressing its differential relational emergence means that beings (bodies, texts, cultures, nations) are considered in 'their differential becoming, [as] particular material (re-)configurations of the world with shifting boundaries and properties that stabilize and destabilize'.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, quantum thought thus neither denies boundaries, nor does it endorse a mesh of undifferentiated sameness because everything is related. What it does urge us to do is, according to Barad, shift our focus to the intra-active emergence of beings in 'specific intra-actions [...] in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency'.<sup>29</sup> It is this focus on the differential emergence of entities in intra-action that greatly challenges our habits of thought, used to conceiving of bodies (or texts or cultures) as separate, individual (atomistic) entities *in* the world. It challenges these habits of thought, because a world that is 'intra-activity in its differential mattering'<sup>30</sup> is not travelled *across* by independent bodies. Rather, it is *diffracting* (congealing and intra-acting) in the 'ongoing differentiating patterns of worlding',<sup>31</sup> together with (and as) these bodies.

It is in this sense, that I have entitled the article '*Worlding* CompLit': to indicate the emergence of differential patterns in which also practices such as comparative readings participate, and to suggest the need to reflect on this when employing 'world' in the field's current debates.<sup>32</sup> If we return to the problem I started with, we might say that literary works not so much originate in one culture and *refract* in another, but that we can consider the *diffractive* processes whereby they thicken in the differentiating patterns of reading and writing to which they are submitted, and in which they always/already participate. It is not impossible to take diffraction beyond immediate quantum physics and to argue its import for other (such as literary or cultural) realms. The implications of matter that Barad unravels with Bohr also challenge our habitual separation between the realms of culture and matter, or culture and nature, as for instance Kirby has argued in *Quantum Anthropologies*: if we think through the 'quantum implications of what we do in the humanities' we can come to appreciate the fact that 'our corporeal realities and their productive iterations *are* material reinventions' [original emphasis].<sup>33</sup> This matters to our understanding of cultures and for our practices in Comparative Literature, as I would like to show in what follows by drawing on the works of Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant and the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Their works signal an understanding of culture and 'world' more attuned to the 'quantum implications' Kirby mentions, and it is no coincidence, it seems to me, that both use the term 'diffraction' at crucial moments in their work on cultural creolization (Glissant) and 'world' (Nancy). The resonances between the works of Barad, Glissant and Nancy are striking in that respect. Starting from their uses of diffraction, in a last part we can then ask how this might also reconfigure our practices of reading.

### **Creolization Diffracts**

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant notes that '[c]reolization diffracts'.<sup>34</sup> Throughout his work, Glissant mainly unravels the first term of this brief statement (creolization), a crucial element of his poetics of relation, and leaves the latter (diffraction) largely unexamined. However, when examining creolization, we realize that diffraction is one of its crucial qualifiers, and

Glissant's understanding of it resonates strongly with Barad's. For Glissant, creolization articulates two situations at the same time. It names, on the one hand, the process of encounters and relation among various cultures, languages and traditions that took (and continue to take) place in a historically specific and localized manner in the Caribbean; a confluence of forced diasporic de- and reterritorializations resulting mainly from deportations during the transatlantic slave trade, the uprooting of African languages and traditions, and the emergence of Creole culture and language, a creation of newness that Glissant stresses as irrepressible despite brutalized and uprooted plantation life. On the other hand, creolization for Glissant articulates a condition of the world at large at the turn of the twenty-first century. Due to centuries of (again most often forced) displacements, violence and migration in the backwash of colonial projects, and intensified entanglements of all kinds across the globe in the past decades, he sees our contemporary time as marked by a 'massive and *diffracted* confluence of cultures' [my emphasis],<sup>35</sup> analogous to what occurred in the historically specific context of the Caribbean. Glissant calls this condition of confluence-encounter-becoming (epitomized by the Caribbean, yet active everywhere) nothing else but *Relation*. While the 'Caribbean [...] may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly, one of the explosive regions where it seems to be gathering strength',<sup>36</sup> it is also the constitutive condition of the world at large, and increasingly apparent as such. In *Philosophie de la Relation* Glissant specifies Relation as 'the realized abundance of all the differences of/in the world, without being able to exclude a single one' [original emphasis].<sup>37</sup> Relation is the expression of 'the world's poetic force (its energy)' and 'what the world makes and expresses of itself'.<sup>38</sup> We can here recall Barad's point that the world *is* iterative intra-activity, due to which '[t]he world theorizes as well as experiments with itself'.<sup>39</sup> Glissant spells out the crucial point of this in regard to creolization, namely that if we speak of the realized abundance of all the differences of/in the world, we depart from differences as separated entities, pre-existing their 'mere' meeting in an encounter, which the traditional images of cultural 'blending' and even 'hybridity' imply.<sup>40</sup> Glissant insists that creolization is otherwise than *métissage*, translatable into English as (pejoratively connoted) 'cross-breeding' or 'blending', and traditionally describing 'the meeting and synthesis of two differences'. Unlike *métissage*, creolization expresses the very condition of Relation, 'a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and errantry [...] a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable'.<sup>41</sup>

In this vein, *Poetics of Relation* dedicates an entire chapter to errantry (*errance*), as an element of on-going, endless, diffracting creolization. Glissant clearly distinguishes errantry's specific mode of moving in a differentiating-and-congealing manner with-and-through many others from such movements as 'voyage' – a journey starting from a determinable place and returning to it, bent on home-coming (Odysseus) – or 'arrowlike nomadism'<sup>42</sup> – set on discovery, conquest or territorial expansion (Robinson or Columbus). After centuries of a 'thinking of territory and self' and a 'thinking of voyage and other' (both associated with these two modes of movement), for Glissant the world has reached a density of relationality that asks us to move toward a 'thinking of errantry *and* totality' [my emphasis].<sup>43</sup> The task is to articulate and think through the world's relationality as it 'emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, *at the same time*, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us' [my emphasis].<sup>44</sup> Thus, what he proposes – in philosophical and poetic texts alike, most explicitly in *Poetics of Relation* (1997 [1990]), *Tout-Monde* (1995), *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997), *Une*

*Nouvelle Région du Monde* (2006) and *Philosophie de la Relation* (2009) – is to shift our thinking from classical notions of cultural heritage and property, rooted identity and binary relations of self/other as entities preceding their encounter (still active, for instance, in the mentioned conceptions of World Literature) to Relation as errantry and diffraction, with a world understood as a *totalité-monde*,<sup>45</sup> a totality that is always already relational and whose differences or entities co-appear as they differentiate, and are thus by definition never devoid of power.

As we saw above, one of the aims of Glissant's stress on 'errantry and totality' is to think the emergence of 'new forms of identity' – resulting from, rather than preceding relationality. We can hear the resonances of such an endeavour with Barad's consideration of processes of 'congealing of agency [...] a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity',<sup>46</sup> the emergence of differences in encounters (or 'relation-identities' for Glissant) as effects of 'agential separability',<sup>47</sup> and material entanglements. If we read Glissant with Barad, we realize that it is essential to notice that for Glissant creolization *diffracts*: it is in light of the implications of diffraction highlighted by Barad that we can see the real difference which Glissant's poetics of relation introduces over the more conventional ideas of cultural mixing and travel. It is evident that his poetics of relation is not naively ignorant of power relations or that Relation would entail false harmony or neglect violence; it insists on the persistent impact of past pain, especially the terrors of the Slave Trade to the Americas, and it is deeply concerned with persistent postcolonial violence and inequalities. However, creolization as a diffractive process equally insists on the continuous fabrication of new patterns. While Glissant underscores that '[w]ithin the ship's space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations [and...t]his confrontation still reverberates to this day', he equally underscores that, indispensably at the same time:

[w]ithin the space apart that it [the plantation] comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance.<sup>48</sup>

With Barad, we could phrase this as a mattering diffraction pattern: the creolization of the (Caribbean and by now wider) world, even in such stifling environments as plantation culture, is never 'an erasure of memory, [nor] a restoration of a present past', but the memory archived (in Derrida's sense) as 'sedimented enfoldings of interative intra-activity [...] written into the fabric of the world' – into the 'enfolded materialisation',<sup>49</sup> that the world is – constitutively relational and constituted by/constitutive of (gradations of) violence, also always instantiating power relations that we need to be mindful of.

By drawing out the resonances of Barad's quantum notion of diffraction in Glissant (by diffracting Glissant through Barad), we are, at the same time, also able to see the relevance of Barad's conceptions of mattering and world(ing) to discussions of culture and literature. Where Glissant anchors his poetics of relation and its 'thought of errantry and totality' (a totality he insists is not totalitarian or totalized, but diffracted) in centuries of world-wide relationality, Barad draws on quantum physics to understand world as differential mattering. Importantly, they both allow us to understand 'world' as relational becoming of every 'thing', rather than as global geographic stretch *across* which or *in* which things happen, and to re-examine what we mean by 'world' – an important dimension on Comparative Literature's

current radar. The transformed/transforming and increasingly visible relational entanglements on a planetary scale need to be taken into account and to methodologically take effect in the practices of reading that Comparative Literature engages in, but which we circumvent if we merely transpose old national models of comparison onto a 'world-wide' scale.

### **Toward a Diffractive Praxis of Comparative Literature**

In view of these consequential transformations to understanding 'world' that Glissant and Barad propose, I would like to return, in a last step, to the question I started with ('how to read comparatively') and outline programmatically what a *diffractive* practice of reading in Comparative Literature might entail. If we see 'world' as intra-active, diffracting creolization, it is clear that our practices of reading also have to transform. Reading then no longer occurs at a reflexive distance from a given world, but is one form of intra-action with/in it. It is *radically* performative and to see comparative reading as drawing out similarities or differences in two or more texts becomes too static. In the little space left here, I can only sketch in broad strokes what a methodological adjustment might imply; and I would like to do so by interlacing a third thread announced earlier: Nancy's thought on *mondialisation* as 'world-forming' and the foundational co-appearance (*comparution*) of world, as he developed it especially in *The Sense of the World* (1997 [1993]), *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007 [2002]), but also in his work on community and commonality, especially in *Being Singular Plural* (2000 [1996]) and earlier with Jean-Christophe Bailly in *La Comparution* (1991).

Although Nancy's analysis of 'world' resonates on many levels with what we have already seen in Barad and Glissant, at first sight, if we look for instance at *The Sense of the World*, Nancy seems to say the exact opposite, namely that '[t]here is no longer any world'. However, he quickly makes clear that what is gone is certainly not the world as such, but only a certain sense of it: the sense of the world as arranged by God, operating according to the stabilities of a Newtonian universe. What is eclipsed at the cusp of the twenty-first century is 'a *mundus*, a *cosmos*' in the sense of a 'composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation',<sup>50</sup> derived from transcendental anchoring points outside of this material existential space. Although Nancy's wider project shows the withdrawal of universal or transcendental 'certainties' as a historically long process, this has accelerated in recent decades with the world becoming 'global'. One aspect of 'world-wideness' is that the 'partition between exterior and interior, that is, this distinction between different "worlds" that seemed to us to configure the *world*' has been subverted and conflated into one.<sup>51</sup> In striking closeness to Glissant, Nancy sees *errance* as the movement adequate to such an immanent, planetary mode. Exploiting the Greek etymology of *planet* (in Greek, *astēr planētēs* are wandering stars orbiting around fixed stars or suns), Nancy shows that, as such, the planetary is always already errant in a radical sense:

[T]he entire world will have become *planetary*: wandering from one end to the other. But the word wandering [*errance*] is still too narrow, for it presupposes a rectitude with respect to which one can then measure the deviation or the divagation of what wanders. But the planetary, the planetary disaster, is something other than a wandering [...]. Neither simply wandering about nor in error, the universe drifts along by its own momentum [*l'univers court sur son erre*]. That is all.<sup>52</sup>



Where Glissant sees Relation as 'what the world makes and expresses of itself', and Barad thinks a world that 'theorizes as well as experiments with itself', here the universe 'drifts along by its own momentum'. Also for Nancy, therefore, the ontology itself has changed. This universe is a non-totalizable totality, moved/moving by its momentum of differentiation.<sup>53</sup> The task put forward at this juncture then – echoing also in the debates in Comparative Literature – is to visualize, think and practice such a sense of the world. It is to find ways to express the dynamics of a whole that is not completed or given, and yet – very importantly – not lacking anything. Nancy explicitly notes that '[n]othing is lacking in the world: the world is the totality, and the totality completes itself as the open, as the nontotalization of the open'.<sup>54</sup> It is – to once more speak with Glissant – a '(non-totalitarian) totality [...] the diffracted changing totality'.<sup>55</sup> Referencing a crucial difference in understanding 'world' as such a totality – constituted by differentiating, relationally diffracting singularities that compose the singular plurality of the material spacing that the world is – to the Baroque Leibnizian idea of monads, Nancy stresses that at this juncture today, we have to do with 'a *diffractio in principio*, and not merely between monads, but within each monad, and within the monad of monads that is the world: the pars-totalitarian, nontotalizable totality' [my emphasis].<sup>56</sup>

And yet, despite all these transformations and philosophical analyses, what so far appears in the place of the former (imaginary) certainties is globalization, that is the 'exponential growth of the globality (dare we say *glomicity*) of the market'.<sup>57</sup> The world-wide world appears as 'agglomeration [...] with the sense of accumulation'<sup>58</sup> of products, capital, people, information, leaving us with a globe, or rather, a *glomus*: the fungus- or tumor-like agglomerating growth. What has yet to be understood and practiced – as a means of car(ry)ing the world into new directions under these conditions – is *mondialisation* as world-forming (*faire-monde*) and this *precisely* because there is no longer any given *mundus*. In his basic analysis of our contemporary conditions, Nancy thus resonates on various levels with Glissant's and Barad's conceptions of 'world'. He insists that in order to avoid falling back on worn-out models of *mundus*, we have to think Being as 'being-with', stressing relation and *errance* as crucial modes of planetary existence. Under the condition that planetary drifting is all there is, 'with' is 'the essential trait of Being and [...] its proper plural singular coessence'. And here, Nancy introduces the co-appearance (*comparution*) of all that relates so that "'with" is at once both more and less than "relation" or "bond", especially if such relation or bond presupposes the preexistence of the terms upon which it relies; the "with" is the exact contemporary of its terms; it is, in fact, their contemporaneity'.<sup>59</sup> It is in light of the world's having gone planetary – the 'problem' that also the field of Comparative Literature faces – that Nancy stresses the urgency to move from *globus/glomus* to 'world' as the co-appearance of all relating 'parts' demanding a continuous *faire-monde*. Understanding 'world' as co-appearing – with Glissant's poetics of relation as creolizing, Barad's quantum thought of diffraction as diffractive mattering, and Nancy's thought of *mondialisation* – also implies, whether we like it or not, altering our practices of knowing, doing and reading: diffracted worlds cannot be separated from the diffractions that knowledge in/of them maps and effects.

It is the third vector – the 'world' as always/already co-appearing, in its manifold, yet specific 'material-discursive intra-actions'<sup>60</sup> – that we can make fruitful most directly, it seems to me, for re-calibrating comparative readings. For these purposes, and by way of closing, I want to

build on the near homophony between the French terms *comparaison* (comparison) and *comparution* (co-appearance) that Nancy brings to the table. If we are dealing with 'world' as ongoing co-appearance of all 'parts', a diffraction in principle, our practices of reading *comparatively* – that is reading different texts together, which is the specific practice of Comparative Literature – change: from a comparison of separate entities to a reading with and through each other, thereby making co-appear all 'relata' involved. To speak of 'comparative values of cultures', Glissant reminds us, means 'maintaining that cultural values are stable and acknowledged as such' – while reading them with-and-through each other (Glissant calls this: reading them 'in common') 'in a planetary perspective, inflects the nature and the "projection" of every specific culture contemplated'.<sup>61</sup> Thus, any reading, we would have to say (be these readings of cultures, texts, others, situations) is *radically* performative. If we consider reading specifically in the context of Comparative Literature, this means that it neither reflects on a pre-existing alliance between texts, nor 'finds' comparable links between them. It is by *comparatively* reading them that any pattern gets produced in the first place, *and* all of the 'relata' are inflected – the reading *is* their co-appearance. While we seem to know the first part (that readings are productive) since Barthes' declaration of the birth of the reader, we also seem to not have taken in its full impact, since conceptions and practices of reading continue to operate mainly, as we saw, in the reflective mode as if detached from the object of study. For example, building on Damrosch's discussion of World Literature, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen calls for reading 'in constellation' in order to *find* the patterns of travelling texts (and genres) in a globalized world. He sees 'the *innovative* dimension of constellations' as lying in 'their capacity for finding similarities in works [...] in defining a series of properties that can help to find relations to other works'.<sup>62</sup> This continues to presuppose the world as out there, texts as circulating in them, and readings as reflecting on this, as if from a distance. The underlying conventional understanding of realism as description of a given world is inadequate, as Glissant himself notes, when world is an 'interpellate[d] totality'<sup>63</sup> and not a completed givenness. 'We no longer *describe* landscapes, we speak and breath them.'<sup>64</sup> Readings are, in the strongest sense, performative of 'world' – albeit in their localized, specified, errant span of it. And if this is the case, it matters profoundly *how* we read and *which* patterns get generated.<sup>65</sup> As Nancy notes, 'it comes down to us to arrange the lights in [...] such a way that their clarities, instead of annulling each other, *diffract* and multiply each other into other *constellations*, other gatherings of sense' [my emphases]. It means affirming such arranging radically as '[p]raxis',<sup>66</sup> as practices of intra-active encounters (of readers with texts with texts with readers) resonating with as solid and careful a (linguistic, cultural, historical) acquaintance of each other as possible.

Like for Rosendahl Thomsen, the question is indeed one of constellations, yet crucially these are not to be found, but to be produced by way of diffractive readings (which are neither 'fabrication' nor 'illusory invention'). And precisely since readings are, in the strongest sense, performative of 'world' in its diffractive senses articulated in Glissant, Barad and Nancy, it matters which constellations *comparative* readings create. It is crucial to expand the curricula within Comparative Literature, as a necessary step, in order to diffract otherwise than in the past centuries, in order to speak new landscapes to inhabit. But diffract we still must, that is affirm the practices we engage in as *reading*, productive of diffraction patterns and new constellations that matter – for example envisioning *how* precisely we are 'world-forming', and *how* literary (and other) differences emerge, beyond the readability of their sameness, detectable via their reception 'in another culture'. It is in this sense that Badiou's reading of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* with one of Labîd Ben Rabi'a's pre-Islamic *mu'allāqa* – texts

separated by centuries, sharing no apparent kinship – is significant: it demonstrates the production of a pattern, in this specific case involving several articulations of a question ('relation of master, place, truth')<sup>67</sup> that gains precision by interlacing these texts with this reader. We could also say that Badiou's constellation is *diffractive* in that it produces an encounter specifying an issue that matters to the 'relata' involved (texts and readers), and does not merely map socio-historical lines of reception that seem to have happened before they were mapped. Badiou has his own philosophical agenda and, understandably, renounces any interest in Comparative Literature and in revising its methods. It is up to the practices of the field itself to rethink and rearticulate these. Many more threads, beyond the three I have worked with here, would have to enter into the picture, but decidedly, I suggest here, in view of *how to read* rather than in view of tracing travels as if occurring across a stable and static globe. Our question 'how to compare' would then amount to something like: *How to read diffractively* in a *diffracting world* which gets articulated *in/through the countless specifications* that readings are, embarked on in view of the problems of 'worlding' 'we' articulate in the course of this very process? It would mean to take the fullest possible account of the praxis we are engaged in. Less interested in drawing out the differences *between* texts (or their sameness), a comparative-diffractive reading would be aware of itself as an effect of *this* specific apparatus (this reader with proficiencies and limits, embedded in these historical, linguistic, political struggles) and of the diffraction patterns that result from the productive passing through one another of two or more elements (the texts, the readers, their linguistic sensitivities, their cultural repertoires). Such readings *produce* constellations that share no ancestry in the conventional historical, linguistic or cultural sense, and might offer methodological food for thought for today's Comparative Literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karen Barad, 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 23:3 (2012), pp.206-223 (p.207).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), pp.54-68; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Michel LeBris, Jean Rouaud, eds, *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Following Karen Barad, I use the term 'intra-action' here, since *interaction* suggests 'the prior existence of independent entities/relata', while '*intra-action* [...] marks an important shift, reopening and refiguring foundational notions of classical ontology such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, discourse, responsibility, and accountability'. ('Natures Queer Performativity', *Kvinder, Køn og forskning/Women, Gender and Research*, 1-2 (2012), pp.25-53 (p.32).

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Emily Apter, 'Theorizing Francophonie', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42:4 (2005), pp.297-311.

<sup>6</sup> See Réda Bensmaïa, 'Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories?', *Research in African Literatures*, 30:3 (1999), pp.151-163.

<sup>7</sup> Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', p.55.

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<sup>8</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London/New York: Verso, 2005), also his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London/New York: Verso, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.285.

<sup>10</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.4.

<sup>11</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.6.

<sup>12</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.281; for a discussion of the wave metaphor, see also Jacob Edmond's paper in this issue.

<sup>13</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.283.

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of 'cultures' as pre-existing entities, see Leslie Adelson, 'Against Between: A Manifesto', in *Unpacking Europe*, eds Iftikhar Dadi, Salah Hassan, Ken Lum et al. (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2002), pp.244-255.

<sup>15</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*, p.178.

<sup>16</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, p.285.

<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Jacques Derrida's work, Derek Attridge has for instance forcefully argued that texts are not 'objects' but events qua reading, see his *The Singularity of Literature*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.71 and 73.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28:3 (2003), pp.801-831 (p.829). Barad therefore speaks of 'onto-epistemology' (p.829).

<sup>20</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.829.

<sup>21</sup> Bohr won the Nobel Prize for his quantum model of the atom in 1922, crucially setting off the development of quantum theory. On Bohr's (for Barad crucial) difference to Heisenberg's quantum theory, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, pp.97-131.

<sup>22</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.813.

<sup>23</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.813.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.813.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p.106.

<sup>26</sup> Barad calls 'spacetime mattering' an 'imploded phrase' that is to signal that 'space, time, and matter are not simply "there"; rather, they are constituted (and iteratively reconstituted) through the intra-active performances of the world' ('Natures Queer Performativity', p.49, p.51).

<sup>27</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.817.

<sup>28</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.818.

<sup>29</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.817.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p.817.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come', *Derrida Today*, 3:2 (2010), pp.240-268 (p.265).

<sup>32</sup> Thus, 'worlding' here differs from e.g. Marie Louise Pratt's use of it as 'the emergence of a transnational reading public [...] made up of people all over the world' and the consequence that 'authors can write for this transnational literary public' ('Comparative Literature and the Global Languagescapes', in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, eds Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), pp.273-295, p.285).

<sup>33</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies. Life at Large* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2011), p.xi. With reference to Barad, Kirby explains that although quantum behaviour 'in the macroscopic world of human affairs [...] is] not readily discernible they are nevertheless operative and have sometimes been observed' (p.4).

<sup>34</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.34.

<sup>35</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.153.

<sup>36</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.33.

<sup>37</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation. Poésie en Étendue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), p.42 (all translations are mine).

<sup>38</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.159-160.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Barad, 'On Touching', p.207.

<sup>40</sup> See Leslie Adelson, 'Against Between'.

<sup>41</sup> All preceding Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.34. To view Relation as celebrating global harmony or neglecting strife, power and violence overlooks Glissant's profound concern for historicity, post/colonial injustice and exploitation. The opening to *Poetics of Relation* makes such concerns evident (see also Apter, *Against World Literature*, pp.184-186).

<sup>42</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.12.

<sup>43</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.18.

<sup>44</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> Glissant works with three interlaced images of the world: *totalité-monde*, *échos-monde* and *chaos-monde*, of which *totalité-monde* is most relevant here, see *Poetics of Relation*, pp.91-102.

<sup>46</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p.151.

<sup>47</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p.140.

<sup>48</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.5 and p.71 resp.

<sup>49</sup> All preceding Karen Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements', p.261.

<sup>50</sup> All preceding Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.4.

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p.6. Nancy stresses the duration of this eclipse in *Dis-enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) and *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p.43. 'Planetary disaster' refers to Nancy's diagnosis of an augmenting *disastrous* gloomicity of the planet, and to the *dis-aster* (echoing Blanchot) as end to any sidereal order of the cosmos.

<sup>53</sup> In order to envision the non-totalized totality, Nancy makes reference to quantum philosophy. He states the need to reread Democritus' 'fall of the atoms [...]': as the distance, contact, assembling, separation, tangency, interval and interference of the singular, diffracted *there is*' (*Sense of the World*, p.58), to rethink the differentiations of the world according to such a 'discreteness that one could call a *quantum* discreteness borrowing from physics the discreteness of material *quanta*, [which] makes up the world as such, the "finite" world liable to sense' (p.62). Although Nancy does not fully develop the idea of a rephrased atomism, the series of attributes listed above 'dynamises' the notion of atom. Atomism becomes aligned with a dynamic understanding of matter so that "'atomism" (whether well or poorly named) represents what one would have to call the [...] originary spacing qua materiality' (p.57). He

specifies that in this regard matter is not 'above all an immanent density that is absolutely closed on itself [...but] the very difference through which *something* is possible, as *thing* and as *some*' (p.57). Without wanting to deny the differences in perspective, the echoes between Nancy's and Barad's (see 'On Touching', p.210) concerns are striking and would require further exploration in more depth than is possible here.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p.152.

<sup>55</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, p.102.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p.154-155.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Creation of the World*, p.37.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Creation of the World*, p.33.

<sup>59</sup> Both Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.34-35.

<sup>60</sup> Karen Barad, 'Natures Queer Performativity', p.32.

<sup>61</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.161-162.

<sup>62</sup> Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature. International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp.140-141.

<sup>63</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, p.102; on interpellation, see also van der Tuin in this issue.

<sup>64</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, p.72.

<sup>65</sup> See also Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity' for the inseparability of 'reader' and 'read' (resp. 'observer' and 'observed', p.815), where she proposes a 'specifically posthumanist notion of performativity' (p.808) echoing Nancy's *comparution*.

<sup>66</sup> Both Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sense of the World*, p.45.

<sup>67</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.46; see also Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone*, p.87.