

Afterword: On Derivative Forms of Eurocentrism

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Abstract: The article builds on the contributions of this special issue in order to point to the racial, linguistic, and epistemic hierarchies embedded in *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. The discussion is situated within the broader genealogy of European humanism and its foundational dichotomy between *humanitas* and *anthropos*. In dialogue with Sylvia Winter, Nishitani Osamu, and Naoki Sakai, Shih emphasizes the journal's reproduction of colonial and racialized distinctions between so-called civilized and primitive cultures. Of particular interest to the author of the "Afterword" is the journal's ambiguous engagement with subaltern cultures of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—Romanian and Romani literature.

Keywords: comparative literature, *Acta Comparationis*, *humanitas* and *anthropos*, subaltern cultures.

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Reading through this special issue's set of essays on the world's first journal dedicated to comparative literature, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877-1888), is a learning experience for all who are concerned about both the discipline specifically and the comparative method in general. These essays tackle the journal's myriad aspects, internal and external to its content: its pronouncements and rationalizations, successes and failures, contradictions and complicities, implicit and explicit biases and hierarchies, emphases and omissions, and, very usefully, its extensive network of scholars and writers. We also learn much about the specificity of its situatedness in the Austro-Hungarian empire, in the hierarchy of languages, literatures, and ethno-races that trace the workings of the empire. The majority of essays are rightfully critical of the journal's practices, correcting the hagiographic account of the journal by scholars such as David Damrosch and Haun Saussy, while understanding the promises, limitations, and prejudices of the journal's aspirations in both its historical context and from our present perspectives. This special issue is a model of how a journal should be studied and a model of collaborative scholarship.

I would like to focus here on the hierarchy of languages, literatures, and ethno-races that the journal manifested, subtly and unsubtly, as analyzed by many of the essays in this special issue, and situate this hierarchy in a larger intellectual context of European humanism. I will do so by placing these three categories under the scrutiny of the *humanitas* and *anthropos* dyad that organized European humanism and gave it its coherence.

Of the scholars who have engaged with this classical dyad, either directly or indirectly, I find Jamaican American scholar Sylvia Wynter's work to be particularly helpful. Wynter offers a genealogical understanding of the invention of what she calls "Man" (i.e. the white European as the paradigmatic human) over the *long durée*, arguing that Renaissance humanism was the time when race became the major signifier of difference and when the global racialized order of knowledge emerged. Renaissance humanism produced Man, the quintessential human, whose Other is the less-than-human, the subhuman, predominantly referring to African slaves and Indigenous peoples. Later, Enlightenment humanism, which coincided with the rise of European colonial expansion, that continued the production and consolidation of Man, whose Other now included all peoples of color around the world.¹ The history of the white European as the exclusive human, *humanitas*, is thus the process of continuous co-production of the Other as the less than human, often likened to monkeys and such or simply lacking civilization, relegated to the domain of *anthropos*. *Humanitas* hence is the province of humanism and humanities, while *anthropos* the

1. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man. Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.



purview of anthropology and ethnology. Two disciplines find their root words here.

Japanese scholar Nishitani Osamu notes that the Latin word *humanitas* came into use by Renaissance intellectuals and has been continuously used since to designate the humans who possess “civilization,” hence the subject of knowledge, while *anthropos* are those without civilization, thus objects of knowledge. Although anthropology as a discipline emerged later in the late nineteenth century, the “motif of its knowledge” reaches back to the sixteenth century, born of Europeans’ travels to the unknown world and their encounters with non-Europeans. The division between *humanitas* and *anthropos* is thus not just about the production of Otherness but also about who are the subjects of knowledge and who are not.² Hence, as Japanese American scholar Naoki Sakai notes, following Nishitani, “Asian theory” is a contradiction in these terms, as Asians and Asia, not being subjects of knowledge, can only provide empirical data and ethnic particularities, not theory. Sakai’s immediate reference is to German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who called Indians, Eskimos, and Chinese “empirical anthropological types,” and excluded “gypsies” from European humanity.³

Contemporary to the work of Husserl, *Acta Comparationis* similarly excluded the Roma from Europeanness, anthropologizing Romani poetry and songs as folklore within the domain of ethnology, not literature. The journal’s main Romani translator, fittingly perhaps, was himself an ethnologist, who invoked racial stereotypes of the Roma (see Manuela Boatcă in this volume). Very much in the vein of the Gypsyism that racialized and exoticized the Roma in the journal’s publication of Romani folksongs, the journal ignored Romani authors of the time (see Luiza Medeleanu in this volume). Similarly, even though Romanian was one of the major languages spoken at the site where the journal was institutionally founded, the journal failed to account for the work of the Transylvanian School that argued for the social, political, and cultural rights of Romanians in the empire, and Romanian literature was similarly relegated to the status of “primitive folklore” (see Mihaela Ursa in this volume). As opposed to “artistic literatures” with high aesthetic value, or, in the language of the Introduction to the journal, the literature that conveyed the “gospel of beautify,” other literatures were to be relegated to the domain of anthropology and ethnology. The editorial board of the journal professed that the journal “... will focus exclusively on *par excellence* literature, the heart and soul of nations—poetry and philosophy, specifically metaphysics, aesthetics, and criticism, as well as, at most, anthropology (ethnology), without which foreign and particularly exotic literatures cannot be fully comprehended.” (“Introduction” to *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, 1877, in this volume)

The journal thus gives credence to the argument that the rise of European idea of comparative literature and world literature here and elsewhere coincided with the rise of anthropology and ethnology that pertain to the study of the “primitive cultures.” This leads us to consider the journal as mainly operating in the “colonial-cum-ethnographic frame” underlined by the practice of “ethnographic salvage” when it came to “primitive” peoples. If you cannot save those people, then save their literature, an instance of which is the work of British scholar Herbert Augustus Strong, who provided “primitive” philological sources to the journal while he was teaching in Australia (see Angus Nicholls in this volume).

Contextualized in the long genealogy of *humanitas* and *anthropos*, then, *Acta Comparationis* is very much informed by this dichotomy in its construction and practice of a hierarchy of languages, literatures, and races. This is where the status of the Hungarian language and literature in the journal becomes interesting. When the journal reduced the originally professed polyglottism to decaglottism, it included only one non-Indo-European language, Hungarian. The other languages of decaglottism are the three “great European languages” of German, French, and English, and those capable of producing “major” literature with “truly world-literary characteristics,” which are Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, and Icelandic. This list led scholars to conclude that the journal practiced “linguistic chauvinism” (see Mircea Minică in this volume) and to frame decaglottism as inherently Eurocentric and asymmetrical (see Alex Goldiș in this volume). While we can understand that Hungarian was one of the privileged languages of the empire, Hungarian literature was by no means as well-known or universally acclaimed as German or French literature at the time. Interestingly, Hungarian constituted about 30% of the journal’s content, second only to German at 50% (see Letiția Guran in this volume). In the 1877 “Introduction,” it is curious that the editors call the journal “our Hungarian journal,” given the journal’s professed universalism and polyglottism. Several authors in the current volume comment on Hugo Meltzl’s concerted effort to publish translations of Hungarian literature into Indo-European languages (Italian, German, and others), aiming to bring it visibility and recognition.

2. Nishitani Osamu, “Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of ‘Human Being,’” translated by Trend Maxey, in *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference*, eds. Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2006), 259–273.

3. Naoki Sakai, “Theory and Asian Humanity: On the Question of *Humanitas* and *Anthropos*,” *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 441–464.

This is where we see the tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism being so contradictorily present in the journal, as was also the case of the journal's conception of nationality. According to the journal, since a given national literature embodies a unique nationality, world, universal, or comparative literature is a conglomeration of literatures as nationalities. The three essays on Romanian literature in this volume proves this point most straightforwardly. The scholars who represented or translated Romanian literature tended to be professed Romanian nationalists, some militant nationalists, as they sought to bring prominence to Romanian literature (see the essays by Cosmin Borza and Márta Zabán and Rareş Moldovan in this volume). The ambiguous operation of nationality, as a set of distinct national characteristics, the appreciation of which also underlies and easily slips into nationalism, fundamentally undermined the journal's desire for a universal literature that transcends literary and political nationalisms.

The editors of the current volume refer to the dynamic of Eastern European Occidentalism at work whereby this Eastern European-based journal expressed a strong desire to be part of the West (the Europe other than Eastern Europe), a desire born of Eastern Europe's marginalized position as the East within Europe (see "Introduction" in this volume). The study of *Acta Comparationis* and its place in the world thus can perhaps be framed in terms of this desire, as the East in the West pining for the status of the West by exercising a derivative form of Eurocentrism, ineluctably replicating the *humanitas* and *anthropos* dyad in its hurry to join the ranks of Man as the subject of knowledge.

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