

## Environmental Comparative Literature

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On the occasion of the inaugural lecture as visiting professor of European comparative literature at Oxford University on October 11th, 1994, George Steiner stated that '[c]omparative literature [...] is immersed in, delights in, the prodigal diversity of natural languages. Comparative literature listens and reads after Babel'.<sup>1</sup> Steiner had used this resonant phrase nineteen years before in his book *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, in which comparative literature seemingly played no role at all. This book, Steiner stated, maps 'a new field, a new space for argument' by 'bring[ing] into interactive focus, the diverse areas of rhetoric, of literary history and criticism, of linguistics, and of linguistic philosophy'.<sup>2</sup> Though unacknowledged for around two decades, *After Babel* became a modern classic, a major contribution to the field of translation studies around the time when it was argued from within comparative literature that translation studies should be looked upon, in Susan Bassnett's words, 'as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area'.<sup>3</sup>

Advocates of comparative literature's co-optation by translation studies have adopted a less antagonistic view lately. Bijay Kumar Das, for example, claims that 'Translation Studies as a discipline promotes the cause of Comparative Literature in our time'.<sup>4</sup> Though an important aspect of my discussion, I do not aim at offering here a new chart of the conflictive boundaries between comparative literature and translation studies. Note, however, that the disconnection of both disciplines in Steiner's 1975 argument may ultimately be only apparent, insofar as he would be applying the term *translation* to two different realms. On the one hand, as a practical tool, translation is excluded from comparative literature, for it is at odds with the professional ethos. '[T]he obvious necessity, wherever practicable, of reading texts in the original, have ebbed', Steiner says in a melancholic mood. And he goes on, 'In too many universities and colleges, comparative literature is conducted today, if at all, entirely via translation'.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, in the broad sense examined in *After Babel*, whereby 'translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning', one needs to conclude that the act of

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, 'What Is Comparative Literature?', *Comparative Criticism: An Annual Journal*, 18 (1996: *Spaces: Cities, Gardens and Wildernesses*), 157-171 (p. 164).

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (1975; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. ix (Preface to the Second Edition).

<sup>3</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Bijay Kumar Das, *A Handbook of Translation Studies* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008), p. 124. It is in 1997, with the occasion of the Preface to the third edition of *After Babel*, that Steiner sees how a collaboration between translation studies and comparative literature is finally taking place: 'the implication of the translator's "exact art" in every aspect of comparative literary and cultural studies, [...] is] the object of study and teaching' (p. [vii]).

<sup>5</sup> Steiner, 'What Is Comparative Literature', pp. 162-163.

translation is part and parcel of comparative literature, for ‘every act of reception of significant form, in language, in art, in music, is comparative’.<sup>6</sup>

Within the broad sense elaborated in *After Babel*, the tension between translation studies and comparative literature is, however, far from being resolved. On the contrary, one may hypothesize that, whereas translation studies can even do in a monolingual context, for ‘[t]ranslation between different languages is a particular application of a configuration and model fundamental to human speech even where it is monoglot’, comparative literature cannot. This is due to the discipline’s aim at focusing on ‘the eventuality and defeats of translation’, defeats which are understood as ‘the conditions, the strategies, the limits of reciprocal understanding and misunderstanding as between languages’.<sup>7</sup>

Comparative literature needs to deal, therefore, with two dangers—an increasing reading in translation within the context of “‘core-courses” on Western civilization [...] in the Anglo-American tongue’, in contrast to the Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur*, in which ‘the study and practice of translation is only a part’, and language death.<sup>8</sup> Steiner discusses this latter danger—language death—in both his Prefaces to the second and third edition of *After Babel*. The following statement is exemplary of his position regarding this issue.

Each human language maps the world differently. There is life-giving compensation in the extreme grammatical complication of those languages (for example, among Australian Aboriginals or in the Kalahari) whose speakers dwell in material and social contexts of deprivation and barrenness. Each tongue—and there are no ‘small’ or lesser languages—construes a set of possible worlds and geographies of remembrance. [...] When a language dies, a possible world dies with it. There is here no survival of the fittest. [...] Inherent in *After Babel* is the accelerating disappearance of languages across our earth, the detergent sovereignty of so-called major languages whose dynamic efficacy springs from the planetary spread of mass-marketing, technocracy, and the media.<sup>9</sup>

Written in 1991, such statement is anticipatory of an ‘endangerment sensibility’ which has been materializing in the form of, first, the field of ecolinguistics since the 1970s (note Steiner’s claim that ‘the accelerating disappearance of languages across our earth’ is ‘inherent’ in his 1975 book), and second, and ‘closer’ to literary studies, the field of biocultural diversity, whose academic inception dates back to 1996, when a group of researchers and activists gathered in Berkeley for a small working conference titled ‘Endangered Languages, Endangered Knowledge, Endangered Environments’.<sup>10</sup> It is in this aspect of anticipation that *After Babel* should be regarded as *theory*, not in

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<sup>6</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. xii and ‘What Is Comparative Literature’, p. 157, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. xii and ‘What Is Comparative Literature’, pp. 165 & 164, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner, ‘What Is Comparative Literature’, pp. 163 & 160.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. xiv (Preface to the Second Edition).

<sup>10</sup> For the concept of ‘endangerment sensibility’, see Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias, ‘Introduction: The Endangerment Sensibility’, in *Endangerment, Biodiversity and Culture*, ed. by Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-38. University textbooks on ecolinguistics agree on the foundational role of the 1970 talk by American linguist Einar Haugen ‘The Ecology of Language’, which was published in 1972 and reprinted in 2001 in *The Ecolinguistics Reader* edited by Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler. For the publication based on the Berkeley conference, see Luisa Maffi (ed.), *On Biocultural Diversity: Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

the ‘spurious’ sense disliked by Steiner himself, but in one of the senses advocated by Jonathan Culler, namely, ‘[a] characteristic of thinking that becomes theory is that it offers striking “moves” that people can use in thinking about other topics’.<sup>11</sup> Note in this regard that Chapter 2 ‘Language and Gnosis’ of *After Babel* has been included in the section ‘The Roots of Ecolinguistics’ of Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler’s *The Ecolinguistics Reader* because ‘Steiner tries to apply the Darwinian “scheme of gradual evolution and ramification, of adaptive variation and selective survival” to the riddle of the diversification of languages’.<sup>12</sup>

The discussion of language diversity and language death by Steiner has offered a ‘striking move’ to ecolinguistics, but none, to my knowledge, to either the field of biocultural diversity or comparative literature. In the latter case, one might foresee that the best place for this fertilisation to take place is at the encounter of comparative literature and ecocriticism. In the seminal discussion of comparative ecocriticism by the noted ecocritic Ursula K. Heise, such cross-fertilisation is seen as the result of the ‘increasingly global nature of environmental crises’ and its crucial contribution being ‘the study of the Anthropocene [...] not just [as] the analysis of how humans’ ecological impact has sedimented in language and literature, but also to point out the conceptual mechanisms that underlie any assembly of global humanness and of species agency’.<sup>13</sup> Whether the analysis of human’s ecological impact includes language extinction, as well as its consequences for literature, is a matter for speculation. In Heise’s most recent contribution to the debate, which may be considered the coming of age of comparative ecocriticism/environmental humanities due to its inclusion in the second ACLA decennial report of the twenty first century, such direction does not form part of the three challenges addressed, namely, ‘the challenge of nonfiction, the tensions between the concept of the Anthropocene and posthumanist theories, and the challenge of the nonhuman’.<sup>14</sup>

This essay aims at charting an encounter between the emerging field of biocultural diversity and comparative literature. When the focus of such encounter is on literature, the result is what I propose to call *environmental comparative literature*. The idea at the core of this subfield is *urgency*, which in the past gave rise to a field such as *urgent anthropology*. Like urgent anthropology, environmental comparative literature takes as its point of departure today’s pressing environmental challenges—specifically the challenge of language extinction, which operates at a much faster pace today than ever before. If comparative literature, as posited by Steiner, ‘delights in [...] the prodigal diversity of natural languages’, which future awaits the discipline in a context of language death progressing at the rate of about one language in three months

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<sup>11</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, p. xvi (Preface to the Second Edition); Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (1997; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler, ‘Introduction’, in *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology and Environment*, ed. by Alwin Fill and Peter Mühlhäusler (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

<sup>13</sup> Ursula K. Heise, ‘Comparative Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene’, *Komparatistik: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (2014), 19-33 (pp. 25 & 29-30, respectively).

<sup>14</sup> Ursula K. Heise, ‘Comparative Literature and the Environmental Humanities’, in *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, ed. by Ursula K. Heise et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 293-301 (p. 295).

according to the data of the Endangered Languages Catalogue? But, unlike urgent anthropology, whose foundational understanding of urgency was seriously flawed with Cold War anxieties, environmental comparative literature needs to deal with the fact that neither documenting nor collecting texts in endangered and extinct languages can be its exclusive primary aim.<sup>15</sup> Documentation and collection have long been under way, and yet this does not secure a place for texts in endangered and extinct languages in comparative literature's purview. This leads to the thorny issue of whether the criteria that define language endangerment (for which there is no consensus among specialists) apply to literature endangerment. Furthermore, whom should comparatists study texts in endangered and extinct languages for? And, in which ways should environmental comparative literature be an extension of individual research? May environmental comparative literature be a vehicle for sustainability activism?

I do not claim to have definitive answers for these questions. Neither is it possible to address them here in all their complexity. My aims are much more modest. First, I will discuss some of the issues environmental comparative literature should be concerned about and provide a provisional definition for this subfield. Second, some of the tenets and main tendencies of comparative literature will be reread against an environment-oriented background. Finally, what kind of participation environmental comparative literature may have in ongoing conversations about sustainability will be examined. If I am correct in the speculation about the need of a new subfield called *environmental comparative literature*, the results here presented should be considered tentative and subject to much future examination.

## **1. What is environmental comparative literature? Towards a working definition**

According to the authoritative definition by John N. Wendel of a term he himself does not use—*ecolinguistics*—but which ‘has turned out to be the best word to comprise all approaches to language and ecology’, ecolinguistics is ‘[t]he ecological approach to language [that] considers the complex web of relationships that exist between the environment, languages, and their speakers’.<sup>16</sup> To this definition, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and David Harmon add that in it *environment* should be understood ‘as not only the social (including linguistic) but also the physical environment’.<sup>17</sup>

Our world has a human population of around 8 billion and 7,099 known living languages.<sup>18</sup> The top 11 languages in terms of number of mother tongue speakers are Mandarin Chinese (16%), English (8%), Spanish (5%), Arabic (4%), Hindi, Portuguese,

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<sup>15</sup> For a study of urgent anthropology within the context of the Cold War, see Adrianna Halina Link, ‘Salvaging a Record for Humankind: Urgent Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, 1964-1984’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Alwin F. Fill, ‘Introduction’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*, ed. by Alwin F. Fill and Hermine Penz (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-7 (p. 2); John N. Wendel, ‘Notes on the Ecology of Language’, *Bunkyo Gakuin University Academic Journal* 5 (2005): 51-76 (p. 51).

<sup>17</sup> Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and David Harmon, ‘Biological Diversity and Language Diversity. Parallels and Differences’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*, ed. by Alwin F. Fill and Hermine Penz (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 11-25 (p. 11).

<sup>18</sup> *Current World Population* <[www.worldometers.info/world-population/](http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/)> [accessed 3 January 2023]; *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* <[www.ethnologue.com/](http://www.ethnologue.com/)> [accessed 3 January 2023].

Bengali and Russian (all 3%), Japanese, French and German (all around 2%). Even if these 11 languages represent only 0.10-0.15% of the world's languages, they take half the pie: they account for some 51% of the speakers.<sup>19</sup> Most languages are in fact spoken by fairly few people; 85% of languages have fewer than 100,000 speakers.<sup>20</sup> Despite the problems of identifying and quantifying languages, researchers have concluded in terms of linguistic diversity that Asia accounts for 32.4% of the world's languages, Africa for 30.2%, the Pacific for 18.5%, the Americas for 15%, and Europe and the Middle East together for 4%.<sup>21</sup> Linguistic diversity is, therefore, an equation that takes into consideration the number of languages and of native speakers in a specific geographical unit. If countries are the chosen geographical unit, then the two most diverse countries are Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, with over 500 languages each, followed by Nigeria, India, Cameroon, Australia, Mexico, Zaire, and Brazil, with over 200 languages each.<sup>22</sup> There are, however, other criteria that need to be taken into consideration, such as phylogenetic diversity, which considers 'the number of different language families or branches of families in relation to some unit, e.g., country or region'.<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, if all of Europe's languages, which are structurally quite similar, vanished, about 3% of world's languages would be lost. The same percentage in the case of Papua New Guinea or South America 'would be far more significant, because the divergence between languages there runs much deeper'.<sup>24</sup>

While linguistic equilibrium (the number of languages dying equalling the number of new languages) endured for most of human history, specialists have detected that global linguistic diversity is decreasing rapidly.<sup>25</sup> In 1992, Hans-Jürgen Sasse, who established the model for the process of language death, stated that '[i]n the last five hundred years about half the known languages of the world have disappeared'.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, Michael Krauss predicted that 50% of world's languages will become extinct during the twenty first century, an *optimistic* prognosis also used by UNESCO.<sup>27</sup> The process of language death is unevenly distributed across the world, with the Americas with 61% of languages at risk, Asia with 38%, Europe with 35%, the Pacific with 34%, and Africa with 17%.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For all these language data, I draw from Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, *Linguistic Genocide in Education: Or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Romaine, 'Language Endangerment and Language Death: The Future of Language Diversity', in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*, ed. by Alwin F. Fill and Hermine Penz (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 40-55 (p. 45).

<sup>24</sup> Nettle and Romaine, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Romaine, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Hans-Jürgen Sasse, 'Theory of Language Death', in *Language Death: Factual and Theoretical Explorations with Special Reference to East Africa*, ed. by Matthias Brenzinger (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 7-30 (p. 7).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Krauss, 'The World's Languages in Crisis', *Language*, 68.1 (1992), 4-10 (p. 6); Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Romaine, p. 54. See *The Endangered Languages Project* <[www.endangeredlanguages.com/](http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/)> [accessed 3 January 2023].

Language endangerment and death, resulting in a decreasing linguistic diversity, is a major preoccupation for ecolinguistics. The recent move from the concept of *linguistic diversity* to the concept of *biocultural diversity* is relevant, for it captures correlations with the environment. I will mention here two of these correlations.

First, there seems to be a geographical correlation between areas of high biological and linguistic diversity. This correlation first attracted attention beyond the limits of academia thanks to the article published by biologist and conservationist William J. Sutherland in *Nature* in 2003.<sup>29</sup> Sutherland claimed that areas with high language diversity also have high bird and mammal diversity and all three show similar relationships to area, latitude, area of forest and, for languages and birds, maximum altitude. And he concluded that languages are more threatened than birds or mammals. One of the reasons for the lively interest aroused by this statement is the immediate bitter response by science writer and independent researcher David Berreby in *The New York Times*.<sup>30</sup> Berreby did not address Sutherland's data correlations, but rather the analogy between 'endangered languages' and 'endangered species'. For Berreby it is a misleading metaphor, because '[t]he difference between a living creature with blood in its vein and a general notion should be obvious: your auburn-haired neighbor, nicknamed Red, has rights. The concept of "red" does not'. From this Berreby concluded that '[i]t is no surprise that linguists and activists promote maintaining spoken languages. Just as the Poultry and Egg Council wants us to eat eggs, linguists want languages to study'. In contradistinction, Berreby claimed that 'the human race has all the languages it needs, and deserves'.

Though the reasons for a correlation as the one described by Sutherland are not fully understood yet, one should not overlook, as Shaylih Muehlmann reminds us, the 'nascent stage that research on this topic is at'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, other researchers have identified similar correlations. The second one I want to mention here is the cross-referencing of the Index of Linguistic Diversity (ILD) and the Living Planet Index (LPI), from which Jonathan Loh and David Harmon have concluded that both indexes have fallen about 30% between 1970 and 2009, with a most rapid decline of species in the Afrotropics (about 40%) and a most rapid decline of languages in the Nearctic and Neotropical realms (both about 75%).<sup>32</sup> Such correlation provides interesting research problems for Berreby's ironic question: 'How, really, are the panda and Ubykh equivalent?'

These and other correlations point to a 'nature-culture nexus', which has been named 'biocultural diversity'.<sup>33</sup> In her authoritative history of the concept, Luisa Maffi

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<sup>29</sup> William J. Sutherland, 'Parallel Extinction Risk and Global Distribution of Languages and Species', *Nature*, 423 (15 May 2003), 276-279.

<sup>30</sup> David Berreby, 'Fading Species and Dying Tongues: When the Two Part Ways', *The New York Times*, 27 May 2003 <[www.nytimes.com/2003/05/27/science/essay-fading-species-and-dying-tongues-when-the-two-part-ways.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/27/science/essay-fading-species-and-dying-tongues-when-the-two-part-ways.html)> [accessed 3 January 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Shaylih Muehlmann, "'Languages Die like Rivers": Entangled Endangerments in the Colorado Delta', in *Endangerment, Biodiversity and Culture*, ed. by Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41-61 (p. 48).

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Loh and David Harmon, *Biocultural Diversity: Threatened Species, Endangered Languages* (Zeist: WWF Netherlands, 2014), pp. 42-43.

<sup>33</sup> Loh and Harmon, *Biocultural Diversity*, p. 2.

traces echoes back to Charles Darwin on the biological side and to Edward Sapir, Benjamin L. Whorf, and Alfred L. Kroeber on the anthropological/linguistic side (note that the first three names feature prominently in Steiner's *After Babel*). According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, biocultural diversity is 'the variety of life in each of its manifestations—biological, cultural, and linguistic—all of which interact with the planet's abiotic diversity to form a complex adaptive system that supports life on Earth'.<sup>34</sup>

Drawing on the concept of 'biodiversity', which originated in the mid-1980s, the field of biocultural diversity has emerged since around 1995 upon the results of the abovementioned Berkeley conference. What I want to stress here is the incorporation of the cultural manifestation next to the biological and linguistic ones. Whereas linguistic diversity is the variety of languages spoken in the world and biodiversity is the variety of living organisms in the whole biosphere, cultural diversity has been defined as 'the variety of human cultures, that is, the variety of worldviews, lifeways, knowledge and value systems, practices and forms of expression displayed by different human societies'.<sup>35</sup> Since scholars working in biocultural diversity acknowledge that both 'species' and 'languages' are fuzzy categories, scholars in the humanities may wonder which kind of items are included under cultural diversity. There does not seem to be a straightforward answer to this question, except for the items included in a key tool for measuring diversity—an index similar to the ILD and the LPI.

According to the UNESCO World Report on cultural diversity, the key vectors of cultural diversity are languages, education, communication and cultural contents, and creativity and the marketplace.<sup>36</sup> The difficulties for quantifying such vectors may explain why they have not been extrapolated to an index. To my knowledge, the first and only existing such index, but for the whole concept of biocultural diversity (IBCD), is the one due to Loh and Harmon, which was presented as a discussion paper at the 2004 International Congress on Ethnobiology and published one year later.<sup>37</sup> Loh and Harmon have elaborated an IBCD in which equal weight is given to biological and cultural diversity (BD and CD). In the case of BD, equal weight is given to animal species diversity and plant species diversity. In the case of CD, equal weight is given to linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity. Data on languages are drawn from the fourteenth edition of the *Ethnologue*, while data on religions and ethnic groups are drawn from the second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*.<sup>38</sup>

Loh and Harmon rely on the number of languages, religions and ethnic groups as proxies for cultural diversity, with the future analysis of trends depending only on 'more and better data [...] particularly on the numbers of individuals in each language group,

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<sup>34</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Luisa Maffi, 'Biocultural Diversity: The True Web of Life', in *An Introduction to Biocultural Diversity*, ed. by Luisa Maffi and Ortixia Dilts (n.p.: Terralingua, 2014), pp. 6-16 (p. 8).

<sup>36</sup> United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, *UNESCO World Report: Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (Paris: UNESCO, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Loh and David Harmon, 'A Global Index of Biocultural Diversity', *Ecological Indicators*, 5 (2005), 231-241.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara F. Grimes (ed.), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 14th edn (Dallas: SIL, 2000); David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

religion, [and] ethnic group'.<sup>39</sup> But these three factors may appear highly unsatisfactory for scholars in the humanities, especially for those in the field of literary studies inasmuch as literature seems called to play a key role as a manifestation of the phenomena the IBCD aims to measure, namely, 'the variety of human cultures', 'the variety of worldviews, lifeways, knowledge and value systems, practices and forms of expression displayed by different human societies'. After all, doesn't literature voice all this variety?

Among literary disciplines, comparative literature is the best suited to address these issues, for they constitute its core areas of research according to the discipline's still valid definition, namely, comparative literature is 'the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression'.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, the comparative approach to literature, the arts, and other spheres of human expression worldwide was correlated to human ecosystems in the first university textbook of the discipline. 'We [...] adopt [...] the gradual expansion of social life, from clan to city, from city to nation, from both of these to cosmopolitan humanity', claimed Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett in 1886, 'as the proper order of our studies in comparative literature'.<sup>41</sup> While comparative literature focuses on the comparison of one literature with both other literature and other spheres of human expression in connection to the human environment, *environmental* comparative literature is a subfield in which such comparison is carried out in connection to the physical environment. My definition of this subfield reads as follow: Environmental comparative literature is an overarching term that arises as a conceptual category above tensions between comparative literature, ecolinguistics, ecocriticism, geocriticism, cultural geography, ecology of culture, spatial humanities, environmental history, and environmental humanities. It is an inclusive subfield of study for diverse comparative perspectives on literature-environment interaction which focuses on issues related to biocultural diversity. It promotes various types of engagement with environmental-literary problems as well.

## **2. Comparative literature against an environment-oriented background**

I will explore some topics relevant to the future development of environmental comparative literature. Neither the number of topics nor their discussion is meant to be exhaustive. The aim is to pinpoint the areas I envision as central to this subfield as emerging from mostly contradictions within comparative literature when contrasted to environmental-oriented issues.

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<sup>39</sup> Loh and Harmon, 'A Global Index', p. 236.

<sup>40</sup> Henry H. H. Remak, 'Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function', in *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, ed. by Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1961), pp. 3-57 (p. 3).

<sup>41</sup> Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1886), p. 86. For a recent attempt at classifying literary ecosystems, see Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 2015).



- Comparative literature was born in nineteenth-century Europe, with Goethe and Madame de Staël deemed its first practitioners. The discipline built a professional ethos around the reading in the original, as insistently reminded still in twentieth-century textbooks: ‘Le comparatiste doit [...] lire plusieurs langues’.<sup>42</sup> And yet Europe is the less linguistically diverse region in the world, in terms of the number of both languages (225 languages, 3% of the world’s languages) and language families (6 families).<sup>43</sup>
- The disciplinary foundation of comparative literature upon comparison as an explanatory method is greatly indebted to practices in natural sciences, most importantly comparative anatomy. While comparative anatomy laid the foundation for work on evolution, similar paths in comparative literature were abandoned due to the inherent problems of biological metaphors as applied to languages and literatures (determinism, racism, neo-colonialism, etc.). Correlations between the geographic distribution of species and languages show, however, that biological and linguistic diversity are fundamentally evolutionary.<sup>44</sup>
- Europe has 35% of languages at risk, and yet none of the literatures in these languages features prominently in comparative literature’s research and teaching.
- Since the last third of the twentieth century the interliterary axis of comparative literature has experienced a significant expansion by interventions from postcolonial studies, East/West studies and world literature studies. None of these interventions, however, has gone beyond literatures in languages other than the top 11 in terms of number of mother tongue speakers, which, as mentioned before, represent only 0.10-0.15% of the world’s languages.
- Of the languages to disappear during the twenty-first century, most would be Indigenous languages, ‘with the exception of a very few that are strong numerically (e.g., Quechua, Aymara, Bodo) and/or have official status (e.g., some Saami languages)’.<sup>45</sup> Neither comparative literature nor world literature studies have included literatures in Indigenous languages in their purview in a systematic way so far. Indigenous languages are spoken in regions which are being exploited by neoliberal globalisation. This leads to not accept Steiner’s claim that there are no small or lesser languages at face value.<sup>46</sup>
- In literature on language diversity and language endangerment, an adjective, which I have purposefully omitted until now, is systematically placed next to

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<sup>42</sup> Marius-François Guyard, *La Littérature comparée*, 6th ed (1951; Paris: PUF, 1978), p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas, p. 32; Romaine, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas and Harmon, p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> The so-called “Steiner case” upon George Steiner’s declaration on Galician language is telling in this regard. See Juan Cruz, ‘Yo intento fracasar mejor’, Interview with George Steiner, *El País* 24 August 2008, <[https://elpais.com/diario/2008/08/24/eps/1219559211\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2008/08/24/eps/1219559211_850215.html)> [accessed 3 January 2023], and EFE, ‘Steiner pide disculpas por sus declaraciones sobre el gallego’, *La Voz de Galicia* 19 September 2008, <<https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/galicia/2008/09/19/steiner-pide-disculpas-declaraciones-sobre-gallego/00031221814893896507744.htm#>> [accessed 3 January 2023].

‘language’, namely, *oral*. Thus, it is claimed that “‘world’s languages” refers to oral languages only’.<sup>47</sup> Having or not a script is a relatively unimportant factor in terms of language diversity, which has nothing to do with degrees of more or less sophistication and deficiency. Literary studies is, however, script-centric, so much so that oral works, such as *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, have been introduced in the canon of world masterpieces as if they had originated in a written environment. This has resulted, as pointed by Caroline Levine, in that ‘world literature in the context of orature appears as a striking slender portion of the world’s creative verbal expression’.<sup>48</sup> A move by comparative literature to embrace the ‘great unwritten’ is, therefore, imperative in order to address the rich variety of human literary expression across the world.<sup>49</sup>

- As literary works—either oral or written—circulate in translation as well, both the overlaps and frictions between the source and the target linguistic systems need to be taken into account. According to the data provided by the Index Translationum, the list of top 6 source languages and top 7 target languages is congruent with the list of top 11 languages in terms of number of mother tongue speakers.<sup>50</sup>
- In contrast to the number of living languages as a proxy for linguistic diversity, ‘literary diversity’ is a category in need of theoretical construction beyond goodwill statements such as ‘[c]omparative literature, criticism and media deals with comparative practices as a restitution of unity as well as a way of preserving literary diversity’.<sup>51</sup>
- Ecolinguistics links language extinction to two processes, the death of the entire population of speakers and the shift to a different language, which results in forgetting the mother tongue within a few generations. The death of literature (in the singular) is a popular topic in literary studies, especially in connection to the forces of the post-industrial world and the technological revolution resulting in the transformation from a print to an electronic culture.<sup>52</sup> In the plural, I am

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<sup>47</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Caroline Levine, ‘The Great Unwritten: World Literature and the Effacement of Orality’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 74.2 (2013), 217-237 (p. 220).

<sup>49</sup> A project that goes in this direction is the *World Oral Literature Project* <[www.oralliterature.org/](http://www.oralliterature.org/)>; see also the UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity <[ich.unesco.org/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-00103](http://ich.unesco.org/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-00103)> [accessed 3 January 2023]. The position of literature, either oral or written, regarding the divide tangible/intangible cultural heritage needs to be addressed in depth.

<sup>50</sup> *Index Translationum*, ‘Top 50 Original Language’ <[www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=3&nTyp=min&topN=50](http://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=3&nTyp=min&topN=50)> and ‘Top 50 Target Language’ <[www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=4&nTyp=min&topN=50](http://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?crit1L=4&nTyp=min&topN=50)> [accessed 3 January 2023].

<sup>51</sup> Lisa Block de Behar, ‘Preface’, in *Comparative Literature: Sharing Knowledges for Preserving Cultural Diversity*, ed. by Lisa Bock de Behar et al. (Oxford: Eolss – UNESCO, 2009), pp. xvi-xix (p. xvii).

<sup>52</sup> Popular books on this topic are Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) and Richard B. Schwartz, *After the Death of Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1997). Interestingly, in 1993 Bassnett proclaimed the death of comparative literature in her book *Comparative Literature*, followed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

aware of only two studies. In 1911 José Cervaens y Rodriguez coined the term *litteraturas mortas* (dead literatures) to make reference to those literatures which have broken away from the general development of *Weltliteratur*, namely, Basque, Catalan, Galician, and Italian literature.<sup>53</sup> More recently, Johanna Domokos has listed the following factors as resulting in ‘endangered literatures’: languages in assimilation processes; cultures without their language education; writers unable to publish their books, poems, and stories; literary organizations forbidden from meeting; social media communities chilled by government infiltration; and rising incidents of blackmail and extortion of literary agents.<sup>54</sup>

- Though Domokos’ list certainly deserves full attention, only the first two factors may result in a drastic situation similar to the one of endangered and extinct languages. And yet the linguistic and the literary realms do not strictly follow parallel tracks in this regard, for, whereas a language may become extinct after the death of its last speaker, a literature may go on living through reading by a ‘passive reader’ and translation. In fact, extensive literary records in dead languages are kept and constitute the core area of world literature through categories such as ‘masterpieces’ and ‘classics’.
- In 2002 and 2003 UNESCO asked an international group of linguists to develop a framework for determining the vitality of a language in order to assist in policy development, identification of needs and appropriate safeguarding measures. The result was the paper ‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’, in which nine criteria of endangerment have been established.<sup>55</sup> There does not exist a similar framework for the level of endangerment of other cultural manifestations, except for Catherine Grant’s application to music.<sup>56</sup> Such application bears witness to the need to go beyond the categories of languages, religions and ethnic groups as exclusive proxies for biocultural diversity. Furthermore, many of Grant’s arguments are instrumental for the development of an environmental comparative literature due to both similarities between music and literature and the fact that music itself is an object of research for comparative literature. Grant claims, for instance, that ‘the importance of change in assessing the vitality of music genres have led to [... her] significantly modifying certain factors of the original language framework’. Furthermore, she advocates the need to ‘challenge the assumption that situations of endangerment must deteriorate inexorably’, and hence ‘any framework to assess music vitality should also be developed from the perspective of revitalization as well as endangerment, to

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<sup>53</sup> José Cervaens y Rodriguez, *Litteraturas mortas (Breves estudos sobre as litteraturas gallega, euskara, italiana e catalã)* (Porto: Livraria Portuense, 1911).

<sup>54</sup> Johanna Domokos, “‘Endangerment’ in the Literary Field’ (unpublished paper, 14th Finno-Ugric Writers’ Congress, Tartu, 24-25 August 2017).

<sup>55</sup> UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, ‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’ (Unpublished paper, UNESCO, 2003) <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183699>> [accessed 3 January 2023].

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Grant, *Music Endangerment: How Language Maintenance Can Help* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

ensure it is equipped to deal with the sometimes atypical circumstances presented by emergent genres'.<sup>57</sup>

### 3. Environmental comparative literature and sustainability

Born in the less linguistically diverse area of the planet and largely focused on the comparison of literatures in a negligible number of living languages (English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish), the history of comparative literature has been punctuated by geopolitical concerns and military confrontations. Steiner reminds us that the discipline's 'immediate backdrop is that of Franco-German tensions, particularly in Alsatia and the Rhineland, between the end of the Franco-Prussian war and the outbreak of the First World War', to which Jan M. Ziolkowski adds the discipline's consolidation after WWII and 'the most vigorous growth in numbers of departments and programs [...] in the United States during the Vietnam War'.<sup>58</sup> Whether comparative literature has been successful in promoting international harmony, mutual understanding and pacifism is a matter for contention. At any rate, the number of languages invited to such harmony is rather restricted.

In an age when the humanities are under serious pressure in terms of visibility in the public sphere and community engagement, environmental comparative literature may appear as a new attempt at justifying the humanities' worth. Undeniably, there is some truth to such claim. But my position is also indebted to the tenet whereby the humanities 'not only *study* culture but are also *part* of culture'.<sup>59</sup> From this perspective, there is something distinctly paradoxical about a discipline that claims to comparatively study literatures *in* the world and yet is limited to literatures in 0.08% of the world's languages. Furthermore, the traditional view of humanities as a disciplinary subset that concentrates exclusively on culture and 'the human' needs to be challenged under the light of the biocultural axiom, according to which 'effectively preserving biodiversity requires protecting cultural diversity, and vice versa' as a 'condition for humankind's survival'.<sup>60</sup> So, in the end, comparatists should want to investigate literatures in as many languages as possible, but for very different reasons from the ones envisioned by Berreby.

There is, therefore, a philosophical and ethical side to environmental comparative literature, which may be beneficial for comparative literature's longstanding commitment with pacifism. If the ultimate research object for comparative literature is world literature, the increasingly destructive force of language endangerment and extinction may result in what Erich Auerbach anticipated as 'a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary

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<sup>57</sup> Grant, pp. 108 & 109, respectively.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner, 'What Is Comparative Literature?', p. 161; Jan M. Ziolkowski, 'Incomparable: The Destiny of Comparative Literature, Globalization or Not', *The Global South*, 1.2 (2007: *Globalization and the Future of Comparative Literature*), 16-44 (p. 18).

<sup>59</sup> Jürgen Mittelstrass, 'Humanities under Pressure', *Humanities*, 4 (2015): 80-86 (p. 81).

<sup>60</sup> Vidal and Dias, pp. 10 and 9, respectively.

language. And herewith the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed', to which, ironically, comparative literature has been contributing.<sup>61</sup>

Environmental comparative literature emerges then within a regime of 'endangerment sensibility', the 'particularly acute perception that some organisms and things are "under threat" and, hence, a 'purposeful responsiveness' is needed.<sup>62</sup> In this regime, environmental comparative literature is confronted with numerous challenges, from an easy extrapolation from language endangerment to literary endangerment and an obsession with inventorying and ranking, to an urge for preservation, a nostalgic drive, abuse of biological metaphors, and deprivation of agency, to name a few. In short, there exists the danger of reifying languages and literatures as objects to be preserved when languages and literatures are in fact processes of social and environmental interaction that define particular human communities. Environmental comparative literature goes far beyond being merely a branch of literary studies and becomes a way of looking at a world in which both nature and culture have evolved in similar ways and are threatened by similar dangers. At least a quarter of the world's languages are threatened with extinction, compared with at least 21% of mammals, 13% of birds, 15% of reptiles, and 30% of amphibians. About 6% of languages have been reported as recently extinct, compared to about 1% of vertebrate species.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Erich Auerbach, 'Philology and *Weltliteratur*', trans. by Maire Said and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review*, 13.1 (1969): 1-17 (p. 3).

<sup>62</sup> Vidal and Dias, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Loh and Harmon, *Biocultural Diversity*, p. 34.