

To Compare Otherwise: Immanence, Totality, and the Crisis of Capital

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Dialectical thought is therefore profoundly comparative in its very structure, even in its consideration of individual, isolated types of objects.¹

In the case of the *world market*, the connection of the *individual with all*, but at the same time also the *independence of this connection from the individual*, have developed to such a high level that the formation of the world market already at the same time contains the conditions for going beyond it.) *Comparison* in place of real communality and generality.²

Few today would disagree that the field of comparative literary studies expanded and reinvented itself thanks to the intense globalization of the last two decades. As one of its most celebrated critics puts it, comparative literary studies can be "ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of world capitalism."³ Yet, ideological critique aside, no one has asked the epistemological question of what it means for comparison, as a specific application of an intellectual approach or method, to work *like* capital. And if there indeed exists a link between intellectual comparisons and the value-form of capital, is it possible to compare otherwise, which is to say, to mobilize comparison for a critique of global capital?

Comparison, to ventriloquize what Frederic Jameson says of capital, is "a totalizing or systemic concept: no one has ever met or seen the thing itself."⁴ Like capital, comparison is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. I focus on comparative literature — and not other forms of comparative study such as comparative history, comparative politics, or comparative philosophy — because it is my trained discipline. The more compelling reason, however, is that comparative literature's reflexive and methodological attention to the units of comparison, that is, the relation, distance, and scale between texts and the world — between the objects of comparison and other social processes — mobilizes the same kind of dialectical thinking with which

Marx analyzes the immense wealth of societies starting from the form of appearance of value in a commodity's relation with another commodity. On the level of form, the comparative relation corresponds to the exchange relation as a social relation premised on equivalence as well as contradiction. As to whether the different aspects or forms of appearances of labor, which make any two commodities comparable in Marx's theory of value is also that which drives intellectual comparisons, we will have to look no further than the *comparability* — let us, when we can, abandon the vague term “relation” — between cultural and literary comparisons and the economic world of comparisons. When this comparability proves itself to be viable up to a certain limit, that is also when intellectual comparisons come into its own as critique.

The kind of comparison I have in mind is thus an immanent one, which, in Moishe Postone's formulation, evaluates its own conceptual position in relation to and not outside of its object, and ground the possibility of its existence in its social, and in this case, disciplinary context.⁵ Disagreements between comparative literature and world literature scholars over the conceptualization of totality, whether the latter takes the name of the world, globe, planetarity, *mondialization*, or *Tout-monde*, to give but a few examples, reveal false distinctions insofar as they rely on comparative thought as itself the constitution of a self-organizing and self-referential totality.

I take as my first case study Ursula K. Heise's recent article “Globality, Difference and the International Turn in Ecocriticism,” where she identifies in broad strokes two comparative approaches, namely the noncentric or deconstructive and the systemic, which both center on the problem of the world and global capital as a totalizing structure but with opposing views on what to do with totality's “other,” that is, difference. For comparatists who develop “overarching models and methods” in order to explain global systems, networks, and cultural economies — Heise includes works such as Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism; Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, and Franco Moretti's contributions to world literature; and John Guillory and James English's studies of cultural economy — cultural difference, while important, is secondary to their accounting and explanation of the structural coherence of such systems.⁶ On the other hand, comparatists who focus on socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, linguistic, or national difference tend to analyze global capital in terms of how it exploits and intensifies difference.⁷ Theorists in this group range from postcolonial luminaries such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Walter D. Mignolo, to cultural theorists as varied as Paul Gilroy, Timothy Brennan, Simon Gikandi, Xiaomei Chen, Sibylle Fischer, Ramón Saldívar, David Palumbo-Liu, and Bruce Robbins.⁸ Without being an exhaustive account of the state of the field, Heise's categorization, however schematic, serves to show how differing emphasis on globality or difference on the level of content corresponds to the form or method of presentation of the theoretical work itself. Hence, whereas Casanova's world republic of letters is a “complex but well-defined network,” Spivak's planetarity “remains frustratingly but deliberately vague, since the construction of a planetary whole beyond the inequalities

of colonialism, in her argument, is a task yet to be accomplished.”⁹

Yet, it is never as if an either/or choice marks existing debates on totality and difference: poststructuralism’s concern with difference operates as a Derridean supplement — as both accretion and substitution — to the comparative discipline’s engagement with totality. At the same time, Nicholas Brown reminds us that totality — far from eliminating all contingency and complexity as an erroneous association with totalitarianism might imply — is the “precondition” for understanding difference.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the divide continues to sharpen. Eric Hayot, in *On Literary Worlds*, introduces the categories of “generic” and “material” totality to account for the opposition between world-systems theorists and the disciplinary discourse of comparative literature, which “aims for a frame for the act of comparison and the problem of human literary history that is as expansive and non-Eurocentric as possible.”¹¹ Their oscillation between a “generic” and “material” totality is reflected in the definition of the word “world” itself as both an “ontological reference” to self-enclosed wholes and a “material reference” to the largest possible.¹²

The problem with the framing of these debates is that it overlooks how the possibility of a relation between totality or globality and its individual units, and that between materiality and the non-material, are inherently comparative. In a recent essay, Natalie Melas, who wants to have, to pun, the best of both worlds, argues for totality or structured wholes as a material condition and structuring reality without the grand, systematizing methods of comparison popular in the nineteenth century, which the recent computational turn inspired by Franco Moretti’s quantitative and collaborative scholarship in the Stanford Literary Lab risks reproducing.¹³ Following Glissant’s *Tout-monde*, Melas’ notion of the “merely comparative” is first and foremost “relationality as such... the condition of existing in the midst of the co-presence of all the cultures in the *Tout-monde*”¹⁴ Whereas European colonialism determines the standard of evaluation within “a totality of discrete cultures occupying distinct and knowable territorial units” effected by a knowing subject’s distinct, voluntary act of comparison, decolonization puts in its place a comparative condition or a mode of being both “symbolic” and “unconscious/unknown,” which disrupts the power dynamics of the subject-object.¹⁵ The *tout-monde*, or relationality as such is less a determinant as it is the “merely” necessary condition, the “relativization inherent in the conditions of possibility for narrating the story of the world from any place in the world.”¹⁶

After making such a distinction between the colonial and decolonizing comparative without denying that even the latter conditions human experience, albeit in “relative” and aporetic fashion, Melas ends her reflections by bringing in another discrete level or modality of comparison. Drawing from Pheng Cheah’s recent essay, the author shows that her evocation of the “merely comparative” has to adhere to larger comparative structures and processes that create the material conditions of the capacity for ethical comparison in the first place.¹⁷

Because the biopolitical ethos of late capitalist globalization, based as it is on the quantification of life, is intrinsically inclusive, recent intellectual comparative projects, according to Cheah, cannot be presumed to resist it and can indeed be construed as complementary epiphenomena, easily accommodated into its infrastructure.¹⁸

Glissant's critique of the colonial standard of evaluating the totality of cultures and territorial units is certainly a precursor (or accompaniment, depending on how one reads the "post") to what Cheah calls the "postindustrial comparison machine."¹⁹ Yet, how and with what certainty does one assign "intellectual comparative projects" — or anything intellectual, since Cheah also includes here literature — to the level of epiphenomena in the first place?²⁰ What exists, indeed, what is the relation or comparative condition between the material, infrastructural comparison machine and "recent intellectual comparative projects" as wide-ranging as Melas' "merely comparative" without method or mastery and the resurgence of comparative methods such as the computational turn inspired by Moretti's quantitative and collaborative scholarship?²¹ Where does one side's conception of totality begin and another's end?

It should be of little surprise that we find ourselves on the scarred battlegrounds of cultural critique that is the notorious question of the relationship between the base and superstructure, this time reframed as that between the materialist-comparative base and the cultural-epiphenomenal-comparative superstructure. Not only do both levels operate comparatively on their own terms; the similarity and difference between them indicate a comparative relation to the second power, a comparison about comparing itself.²² The more notorious a concept like base-superstructure is, the more telling it is, Jameson claims, that demands for its decent burial comes from the family members themselves, as evident in recurring critiques in the Marxist tradition.²³ Engels' "reciprocal interaction," Raymond Williams' mobilization of Gramsci's hegemony, Althusser's "overdetermination", just to name a few, have tried to find a substitute to the base-superstructure relationship rather than do away with it altogether.²⁴ The history of these intellectual attempts show that it is high time to understand base-superstructure less as a "theory in its own right, but rather the name for a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad hoc invention."²⁵ I have tried to show that debates over the units of comparison, which determine how one conceives of totality, are never innocent but in fact intervene directly in their comparative relation. To be sure, there will always be weak solutions that range from the valorizing of an inevitable, causal law of economic determinism or a mystical autonomy of the cultural. Regardless, "[i]t is when one has decided in advance that the relationship to be thus established is no longer an interesting or important question that we may speak, using one of Adorno's cautionary fragment in *Minima Moralia*, of throwing the baby out with the bathwater."²⁶

At this point, I am reminded of Edward Said's observation in *Orientalism* more

than thirty years ago that North American Marxist literary studies have successfully avoided the task of “bridging the gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship” is, for good or for bad, still resonant today.²⁷ Perhaps a reason for such avoidance has less to do with the base-superstructure relationship but the nature of the base and superstructure in the first place. The “base,” Williams claims, has too often been regarded abstractly and unvaryingly as some site of economic production consisting of the real social existence of men. Marx’s emphasis of the base, however, in terms of the *process* and not a static state of productive activities, which constitute the foundation of all other activities, is neither static nor uniform but deeply contradictory in its structural relationship with other social activities.²⁸

Cultural materialism therefore complicates Cheah’s schema of the materialist-comparative base and the cultural-epiphenomenal-comparative superstructure by revisiting the entire definition of “productive” forces or work. The example Williams gives is that of the pianist, who unlike the piano maker and the man who distributes the piano is not a productive worker in the Marxist analysis of capitalist commodity production, and hence has no place in the metaphorical notion of the base.²⁹ Yet, considered from Marx’s more complex notion of productive forces whereby “the most important thing a worker ever produces is himself, himself in the fact of that kind of labor, or the broader historical emphasis of men producing themselves, themselves and their history,” it is possible to reinvigorate the whole question of the “base” with its figurative implication of a fixed spatial relationship as quite literally, “basic,” that is, in a broader sense of the primary production of society itself.³⁰ Correspondingly, the term superstructure defines a dynamic range of cultural practices rather than a “reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content” to be dismissed as merely secondary.³¹

Whereas Cheah offers little in terms of a dynamic reconceptualization of the base-superstructure relationship other than an insistence on the imbrication of epiphenomenal comparisons in infrastructural comparisons, Williams would likely insist that such imbrication changes the units of comparison and their interrelationships. In his words, “[a] society is not fully available for analysis until each of its practices is included,”³² and I maintain that intellectual work and cultural theory, which attempt such analysis also be seen as one of its practices. It bears to repeat that the notion of social totality in the Marxist tradition from Jameson’s project on the unconscious representation or allegorical investments of totality to Brown’s argument for postcolonial literature’s utopianism in representing the unrepresentable totality, is an incomplete one necessary to the historicization of the role of culture under global capital.³³ A critique of how intellectual comparison also conditions the “economic” comparative “base” must thus presuppose the very incompleteness of the concept of the world or social totality because an expanded definition of labor as productive forces demands so. Turning now to Marx, the kind of comparison he

conducts does not isolate the economic from cultural or ethical worlds but negotiates between related and yet competing visions of social totality.

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“A culturalism that disavows the economic in its global operations cannot get a grip on the concomitant production of violence.”³⁴

Whether it is discussing accumulation, contradiction, social relation, historical development, or conflict, Marx’s analysis of capital carries out some of the principle activities of comparison. The first few pages of the first volume of *Capital* address the discipline’s fundamental and at the same time enigmatic task: namely, how to abstract from two things a corresponding value or unit of analysis that can then be interpreted in varying contexts. A preliminary response by way of Marx’s inquiry into the exchange relation is intriguing to say the least: comparison must be able to represent two commodities in a “third thing, which is in itself neither the one nor the other”; a “common something” that cannot be a “geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property” of the two things compared.³⁵

The value-form, or the form of appearance of value is the common factor represented in the exchange relation, but value is not what makes two things comparable. In the language of *Capital*, values are the “crystals” of “congealed quantities of homogenous human labor.”³⁶ Commodity exchange is the exchange of equivalents — as values — but what drives their comparability is their “phantom-like objectivity” as products of labor. In *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx challenges the notion that “commodities could be directly compared with one another as products of social labor” when they are “only comparable as the things they are ... [as] the direct products of isolated independent individual kinds of labor,” that is, as private, concrete labor in its different, specific forms.³⁷ Yet, comparison through exchange results in the universal alienation or abstraction of individual kinds of labor as social labor, not because the process of exchange bestows a “social form on hitherto private labor but that it brings out the social character which is already latent, albeit bringing it out in a fetishized form, as a ‘social relation between things.’”³⁸ The two-fold nature of labor embodied in commodities — social/abstract labor and private/concrete labor — must neither be seen as concepts for different kinds of labor nor different stages of labor but concepts for different aspects of labor.³⁹

It is these different aspects or forms of appearances of labor, its “social character,” which make any two commodities comparable. Comparison, because it *begins* from the premise that commodities are “the direct products of isolated independent individual kinds of labor” and *arrives* at the abstraction of individual kinds of labor as social labor, grasps the movement of value embodied in a commodity as a social relation. Comparison does not alter things but changes the way they appear to us: “since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their

labor, the specific social characteristics of their private labor appear only within this exchange.”⁴⁰

While commodity exchange is an exchange of equivalents, it is premised on contradictions at different stages of its development. When a commodity represented as relative value meets another that serves as equivalent, the two “mutually condition” while at the same time exclude each other as “opposed extremes.”⁴¹ Comparability through exchange consistently produces value as an *internal* opposition, as both use-value and exchange-value within a single commodity; yet such an opposition is only manifest when it is in a value-relation or an exchange relation with *another* commodity.⁴² The external opposition between two commodities whereby one counts directly as use-value and another as exchange-value is in fact a representation of an internal opposition, which — and this is the paradox — does not exist in the first place if the commodity is looked at in isolation.⁴³ In other words, an individual commodity’s inherent incomparability with itself is both the basis and consequence of its comparison with something else, which promises equivalence-as-opposition.

By giving the Hegelian logic of the identity of identity and difference its concrete and social character through exchange, Marx’s proverbial inversion of Hegel’s dialectical thinking of totality emphasizes exchangeability less as an individual, *ad hoc* process but a larger, unspoken rule governing the “immense collection of commodities” that “make up the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails.”⁴⁴ Exchangeability does not hinge on a single, isolated act that reduces commodities to a common element of equitability since, as Diane Elson explains, Marx is not arguing from a formal, ahistorical concept of exchange but from a precise *social* relation, namely, capitalist commodity exchange.⁴⁵ That two commodities as different as corn and iron can be reduced to a “third thing” or “common something” is not a result of one individual act of exchange but a *general exchangeability* of every commodity with every other commodity. This is why the exchange relation does not rely on use-value, the physical or natural property of commodities but on exchange values for “other commodities in the most diverse proportions.”⁴⁶ A commodity, by definition, is interchangeable with other commodities even if it has not actually exchanged with any of them.

Hence, we hardly have to wait for Cheah’s demarcation of the biopolitical ethos of late-capitalist globalization to see that because of the exchange relation at the heart of the capitalist value-form, larger, more general comparative structures and processes condition all intellectual comparisons. This does not mean that subjective acts are non-existent. After all, it would be ridiculous, Marx reminds us, to imagine that commodities, without their guardians, can go to the market and perform exchanges.⁴⁷ “But insofar as the exchange-values appear to be ‘given’ to each commodity owner it is a general social process which takes place ‘behind the backs’ of the commodity owners.”⁴⁸ Like the comparative relation between individual and systemic units of comparison that I have been tracing in Heise, Hayot, Melas, and Cheah, the exchange

relation is first and foremost an immanent one, which reflects on comparison as a dialectical process. It critiques its own comparative process just as it assumes the work of comparison between two commodities in particular historical and global contexts. Herein lies their key formal correspondence: if intellectual comparisons take place under the conditions of capitalist comparison, the latter is no mere backdrop but is itself subject to mediating between subjective and general levels of exchangeability.

Exchangeability and therefore comparability are crucial presuppositions of Marx's historical-materialist investigation into production not only as a particular production but a "certain social body, a social subject,"⁴⁹ or in Williams' words the "primary production of society itself, and of men themselves, the material production and reproduction of real life."⁵⁰ Little surprise that Jameson attributes to "[e]xchange value, then, the emergence of some third, abstract term" between what would otherwise be two incomparable objects, "the primordial form by which identity emerges in human history."⁵¹ More than simply a representation of the value-form, the equivalence of commodities is an "objective expression of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity."⁵² Marx's theory of value thus has for its object, according to Elson, the "indeterminateness" of labor in its various stages of production and distribution, labor, that is, as "the living, form-giving fire... the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time."⁵³ And such indeterminateness fuels the incomplete totality of social relations.

For this reason, Elson's contribution towards a broader re-definition of political economy reading is significant beyond its refutation of the labor theory of value.⁵⁴ Whereas an "arithmomorphic model" of economy like that employed by proponents of the labor theory of value treats phenomena of the material world like "symbols of arithmetic and formal logic, separate and self-bounded,"⁵⁵ Marx prioritizes "the law of their variation... their transition from one form into another, from one series of connections into a different one."⁵⁶

Precisely because of such a view toward the ebb and flow of economic life, a historical-materialist view of comparison acknowledges its own concepts as one-sided abstractions of concrete realities. As "the simplest economic category," exchange value "presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole."⁵⁷ Such a living whole belongs to:

the life processes of definite individuals... not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, *produce materially*, and hence as they work under definite material limits, pre-suppositions and conditions independent of their will.⁵⁸

Marx's investigation into the forms of labor expressed in value does not simply begin with comparability-through-exchange. The finished product of analysis, which constructs the totality of social relations in terms of how men produce materially, further compares "totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts" with "the real subject [that] retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before."⁵⁹ Hence it is not a matter of simply pointing out that intellectual (what Cheah calls ethical) comparisons practiced by comparative literary studies can never escape the material conditions of infrastructural comparability, but rather, that comparison as such necessarily entails this gap between the world as it appears to us and the world itself.⁶⁰

If social totality cannot be grasped in thought but only through practical action, holding *Capital* as exemplary for comparative studies, it is legitimate to ask whether Marx's analysis of capitalist exchange adequately critiques it. For he is really working backwards from the finished world of comparisons that is the wealth of societies as an immense collection of commodities to individual commodities and their value-form in order to reach the ground of comparison itself. As Marx puts it, "reflection begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready at hand."⁶¹ In tracking comparability in the form of commodity exchange, to what extent does Marx compare *like* capital?

The question can be alternately posed in terms of theory and practice: does a theory of comparison also compare? The recent surge in self-reflexive or disciplinary debates around comparison and comparative literature and cultural studies (both Heise's and Melas' articles appear under *PMLA*'s "theories and methodologies" section) appears to distinguish between theories of comparison and more orthodox works of comparative criticism that "do" the work of comparing one set of cultural objects with another, whether such objects under comparison are organized around national, thematic, temporal, or other criterion. This division, like any division or label, is artificial and problematic since any work of comparative criticism necessarily includes a methodological reflection.⁶² That comparative-literary theories remain attractive despite or perhaps because of its lack of a concrete "methodology" has much to do, Ming Xie argues, with the nature of theories in general. "Comparing is to comparison as theorizing is to theory. Something in the comparing, as in theorizing, differs from the result of its own operation — that is, a comparison or a theory."⁶³ It is safe to agree with Xie that "something" in the practice of comparative literature contributes to our thinking of theory even as there continues to be a paradoxical relationship between the two: "it is the limit of theory that comparativity cannot be grounded theoretically; yet, comparativity lets us see theory as intrinsically comparative."⁶⁴

Xie's insight into theory's "intrinsic" comparativity turns out to be rather compatible with Melas' appeal to the "merely" comparative even though one forceful adjective seems to cancel out the other measured adverb. Is this another variation on the artificial schism between so-called systemic and non-centric approaches

in comparative literature and cultural studies? Is the “ultimate” comparison that which examines totality “as it appears in the head, as a totality of thought” alongside the totality or “world” that “retains its autonomous existence outside the head”?⁶⁵ If Marx’s theory of value contests an “arithmomorphic model” of economy, his comparative method no longer simply marks an approach or disciplinary field but an understanding of related but competing notions of social totality in which literature, culture, politics, and economics intersect. This is why efforts to read Marx “textually” by literary critics, one of its most famous instances being Gayatri Spivak’s 1985 essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” which defines textuality as a “structural description [which] indicates the work of differentiation (both plus and minus) that opens up identity-as-adequation” can be buttressed by the thinker’s own words: not to repeat the “mistake of the political economist who bases his explanations on some imaginary primordial condition.”⁶⁶

The question of whether a theory of comparison also compares hopefully sharpens another edge in the dialectics of comparison, which confounds the very need to distinguish between one’s object of analysis and analytical category. To return to Marx, it only *appears* that he is working from the finished product of capitalist comparison because the presentation of one’s work has to differ from the process of one’s inquiry. This difference is so commonsensical that it goes without saying, but Marx spills much celebrated ink on the subject in the postface to the second edition.

Inquiry has to appropriate the materials in detail, to analyze their different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back into the ideas, then it might appear as if we have before us an a priori construction.⁶⁷

Substitute comparison for inquiry, and the presentation of its findings, namely, the “inner connection” of “different forms of development” of value-formation *appears* as a mere reflection of capitalist comparison. Marx’s goal at the beginning of *Capital* to investigate capitalist wealth or the “immense accumulation of commodities” starting from the single unit of a commodity unravels the particularities of comparison under capital at the same time as it critiques it.⁶⁸ The more rigorous a “practice” of comparison is, the more theoretical it appears as it reflects the “life of the subject-matter.”

Jameson’s persuasion that a “genuinely dialectical criticism must always include a commentary on its own intellectual instruments as part of its own working structure” does more than encourage self-criticism or reflexivity.⁶⁹ It judges Marx the comparatist vis-à-vis the larger comparative structures and processes, which form at once the material conditions as well as object of his intellectual work. Can the

thinking of the relation between the comparative superstructure and comparative base — comparison to the second power — constitute the indeterminateness of labor as the primary production of society itself?

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“... the very term superstructure already carries its own opposite within itself as an implied comparison, and through its own construction sets the problem of the relationship to the socio-economic base or infrastructure as the precondition for its completeness as a thought.”⁷⁰

We have almost come full circle to find that the question of the comparability between intellectual comparison and commodity exchange is also that which will, hopefully, allow us to mobilize comparison for a critique of global capital. To do so, “we have to trace the development of the expression of value contained in the value-relation of commodities from its simplest, almost imperceptible outline to the dazzling money-form,” although our eventual aim is not to solve the “mystery of money” but that of comparison.⁷¹ Because the analysis of the development of values in the price or money-form of commodities becomes increasingly problematic and tenuous, and prone to disintegration from its own internal contradictions, the point of capital’s limits — its possibility of crises — marks also the end to comparability between intellectual comparison and the capitalist value-form, and at the same time the beginning of comparison’s possible respite from global capital. This argument in the spirit of its ethical injunctive is not new, typifying to a certain degree Spivak’s vision of comparative literature as the “irony of globalization,” Melas’ focus through postcolonial literature on forms of incommensurability, and Emily Apter’s proposal of untranslatability to battle world literature’s endorsement of cultural equivalence.⁷² I depart from these approaches in my critique of capitalist totality from inside and not outside the value-form as well as an insistence on a comparative solution to what is essentially a comparative problem.

Earlier, I demonstrated how it is the two-fold nature of labor embodied in commodities that make any two commodities comparable. The process by which only one aspect of labor, abstract labor gets objectified as the value of a commodity happens through further development of the exchange process resulting in the “visible incarnation” of an universal equivalent, which eventually becomes the measure of all things while itself being outside of comparability. This process begins with the expression of abstract labor in a thing, which is materially different from the commodity being evaluated, and yet common to that particular commodity and all other commodities.⁷³ Such a commodity — say, a coat — serves as a “bearer of value,” or equivalent form to, say, the linen whose value is reflected as the relative form.⁷⁴ (The equivalent form represents a “supra-natural property,” that of a purely social and exchangeable value, while the relative form relies on the commodity’s

natural properties, that is, its use-value.⁷⁵ The distinction in these two value-forms constitutes the basic unit of comparison, which, as previously discussed, can only arise from “the joint contribution of the whole world of commodities.”⁷⁶ It is crucial to recognize that while this infinite process of direct exchangeability makes the equivalent form the material embodiment of all other commodities, the same process is also premised upon its isolation until the equivalent form is “excluded from the ranks of all other commodities, as being their equivalent.”⁷⁷ When such exclusion becomes final, what we have is money as the embodiment of abstract labor and only then does “the uniform relative form of value of the world of commodities attain objective fixedness and general social validity.”⁷⁸

On the one hand, Marx makes no exception for the universal equivalent as a measure of value to be comparable to other forms of value assumed by any commodity; on the other hand, because money also performs the function of the standard of price, it needs to have uniquely specific material qualities, such as being capable of purely quantitative differentiation, of being readily divisible and reassembled.⁷⁹ Money, which does not render commodities commensurable, nonetheless embodies in its two-fold nature at the end of a series that shape the prices of commodities, the *form* of commensurability as incommensurable. Hence although price, “being the exponent of the magnitude of a commodity’s value, is the exponent of its exchange-ratio with money, it does not follow that the exponent of this exchange-ratio is necessarily the exponent of the magnitude of the commodity’s value.”⁸⁰ The possibility of this incongruity between price and the magnitude of value is requisite for the price-form in order for the latter to serve “adequate[ly] for a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities.”⁸¹

The force behind this incongruity, that is, the relative autonomy of money from the circulation of commodities — proceeds to a “certain critical point [where] their unity violently makes itself felt by producing — a crisis.”⁸² Marx’s theory of capital’s limits against which value production becomes precarious is internally consistent to its object because antithesis — “immanent in the commodity between use-value and value, between private labor which must simultaneously manifest itself as directly social labor, and a particular concrete kind of labor which simultaneously counts as merely abstract universal labor” — can only be immanently grasped in its own terms.⁸³ After all, “[t]he further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move.”⁸⁴

It may appear that this brief exposition of the development of the money-form has taken us far from the question of the relation between the comparative superstructure and comparative base, unless the real intention is to eventually show that incongruity and thus the possibility of non-identity and crisis are immanent in it. It is far trickier to ascertain the link between the two levels outside of their formal affinity their respective objects of comparison differ in their relation to

capitalist rationalizations. To be sure, the production of certain cultural objects such as original artworks are not subject to the average socially necessary labor time constitutive of commodity value, and therefore cannot be, argues David Brech, “really subsumed” by capital. Yet, depending on what gets compared, commercially reproducible cultural objects, for example, novels and films do not entirely escape the law of value.⁸⁵ In Sarah Brouillette’s assessment, “artworks are not ‘non-economic’ so much as defined fundamentally by their unusual relation to the economic sphere.”⁸⁶ Basing her observations on Marx’s remarks on Milton and Raphael, she goes on to explain that art and culture are precisely “not the singular achievements of given expressive individual consciousness... but rather the products of practices that are materially, concretely, importantly distinct from capitalist norms.”⁸⁷ In other words, the distinction between the objects of intellectual comparisons and the commodity under capitalist exchange art must be seen as a material distinction.

It is in the realm of comparison as an academic practice rather than that the general area of artistic production, however, that we see an even more direct redefinition of conceptual thought to its social, material basis. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, studying how principles of thought crucial to Greek philosophy as well as modern natural science originate in and develop in tandem with the exchange abstraction as a particular mode of social interrelationship, refers to this process as “real abstraction.” As Anselm Jappe observes:

The faculty of abstract thinking, *of seizing what is common to several objects without being visible in any of them*, is not a given, a prius, as the idealistic conception of thought has always claimed, but is the result of the existence of real abstractions in the production and reproduction of human life.⁸⁸

Comparison — “seizing what is common to several objects without being visible in any of them” — is as elemental in abstract thinking as it is in the concrete historical conditions of material existence. Like capitalist exchange, intellectual comparisons abstract and objectify; premised upon equivalences and contradictions alike, comparative literature’s concerns with the dialectics between totality and difference mirrors capitalist exchange as a subjective act amidst a more general, social process.

It goes without saying that none of the literature scholars mentioned in the first section of this essay analyze commodities of the linen-and-coat variety produced by wage laborers, yet this does not mean that their academic labor has nothing to do with a broader understanding of economic activity that is, in Jappe’s words, “the production and reproduction of human life.” Adapting Marx’s theory of subsumption for academic labor, Krystian Szadkowski argues that formal and real subsumption are shifting, simultaneous processes rather than sequential ones, and adds to these recognized forms of subsumption two overlooked categories: hybrid and ideal subsumption.⁸⁹ Hybrid subsumption explains the ways that financial and commercial

capital control higher education, and ideal subsumption projects a “framework of capitalist production (i.e. its language, logic, technologies) onto higher education” insofar as the latter (at least non-profit making institutions) has not yet conformed to the mode of capitalist production.⁹⁰ Precisely because academic labor is not directly productive labor, and yet idealized as productive by encroaching “profit-seeking technologies of control,” its “schizophrenic” existence promotes and intensifies the exploitation of precarious, adjunct labor.⁹¹

“Theory” today encompasses a wide range of practices, but the general tools of its trade such as “ideological critique, history from below, deconstruction of norms, institutional analysis, race-class-gender inquiry, not to mention classical self-reflection,” Vincent B. Leitch writes, “all mandate investigation of current professional regimes.”⁹² Hence it seems both natural and conscientiously necessary that English and Cultural Studies professors like Cary Nelson, Michael Bérubé, and Marc Bousquet count amongst one of the most trenchant theorists of the higher education industry. Marxism is of course the likely ally here; I am proposing that comparative theory, or theories of comparison, be brought into this fold. For a start, viewing works of comparison produced by university researchers in light of academic labor closes the gap between intellectual comparisons and the totality of capitalist production. I am less interested in the exceptionality (or intersectionality) of objects of literature and culture with the commodity form as I am in emphasizing comparability as a social relation, one with the *effect* of abstracting social labor from products of isolated, independent kinds of labor. Just as the equivalence of commodities is an “objective expression of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity,” comparison exceeds the reified category of intellectualism or ethics when it more fundamentally describes the conceptualization as well as the concrete reality of the totality of social processes in which what is known as the economic, political, or ideological and cultural relate to one another.⁹³

Yet, ultimately, the comparability of intellectual comparison with the capitalist value-form can only go so far: no universal equivalent as that which develops in the dialectical progression of the value-form as the money-form exists for intellectual comparisons. Only a sigh of relief can accompany this truncated relation because either literary comparison isolates one object as the embodiment of all other objects, a supreme standard against which all literatures and cultures could be evaluated, say the “Western” canon or civilization, with the relative autonomy of the circulation of this universal equivalent from all other things resulting in the system’s crisis, or, to move to a higher register, the larger comparative “base” or “infrastructure” so unequivocally determines and structures the comparative “superstructure” until, as its universal equivalent, their unity similarly produces a crisis. The end to comparability thus goes hand in hand with the possibility of crisis in the comparative process.

While the exchange relation has shown in so many ways to be profoundly comparative, it is neither feasible nor favorable for the similarity to proceed to the

point where literary or cultural comparisons could, like the value-form, precipitate in a form of universal equivalent. Far from suggesting with this proposition that men's consciousness is no longer determined by social relations, perhaps it is the very relation between consciousness and social relations that needs to be rethought — from the basis of an order or modality of comparability other than economic exchange. We could learn a few things from Marx's famous use of chemical metaphors in *Capital* where he analyzes the peculiar objectification or materialization of a certain aspect of socially necessary labor-time, that is, the aspect of abstract labor: commodities are merely "congealed quantities of homogenous human labor" and "crystals of this social substance."⁹⁴ As Elson explains, socially necessary labor-time does not determine value in "the logical or mathematical sense of an independent variable determining a dependent variable" but "in the sense that the quantity of a chemical substance in its fluid form determines the magnitude of its crystalline or jellied form."⁹⁵ The emphasis is rather on determination as a dynamic, two-way process that signals both continuity and discontinuity.

Once again, the principles of immanent critique, which does not have a "logical form independent of the object being investigated, when that object is the context of the argument itself" proves invaluable.⁹⁶ Any attempt to find similarities and differences between the worlds of economic exchange and intellectual comparison must reflexively grasp the relation between the two spheres as a comparative problem. (Economic and intellectual spheres are neither perfect nor absolute terms; we have found that they also stand problematically for "base" and "superstructure," "material" and "ethical," and "practice" and "theory".)

To compare otherwise has thus been a shorthand for comparing immanently. I conclude by way of a "practical" solution: if capitalism is the ultimate comparative machine, there is no better place for comparative literature scholars to work through the relation between their own work and the capitalist logic of equivalence and exchange than from the representation of this dialectical relation in literary, cultural, and theoretical texts. The epigraph of this essay excerpted from Marx punctuates my own preliminary effort: comparison, made possible by the world market to connect *and* disconnect the individual maps at the same time the place of "real communality and generality."⁹⁷

Notes

1. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 45.
2. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1973) 161.
3. David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.4 (2011) 456. It was Marx and Engels who in their "Manifesto for the Communist Party" first observed the "cosmopolitan character" given to production and consumption by the bourgeoisie, and the rise of world literature from national and local literatures. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 476-77.
4. Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 354. In his *Distant Reading*, Franco Moretti provides an alternative version to Jameson and Damrosch's observation with an emphasis on uneven development. "...like capitalism, *Weltliteratur* is itself one and unequal, and its various components — the world's many national and local literatures — are often thwarted in their development by their position within the system as a whole" (127). See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2015).
5. Qtd. in Neil Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint," *Mediations* 24.2 (2009) 50.
6. Ursula K. Heise, "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 637.
7. Heise, "Globality" 637.
8. "Globality" 637.
9. "Globality" 637.
10. Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 9. Brown's dialectical grasp of totality as the "Hegelian identity of identity and difference," as that which gives us access to the radical incompleteness of what appears spontaneously as solid and whole", makes sense not only for the comparative nature of his project on British modernism and African literature, but also for his thinking of the rift between capital and literature. "Complete, self-evident things (say, a commodity, a democracy, a novel) are in fact incomplete and always derive their being from something else (the production cycle, the world economy, the concept and institution of literature)" (10).
11. Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 33.
12. Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* 39.
13. While comparison reigned as a method during Ernest Renan's time as "the great instrument of criticism" through the early twentieth century as a positivist and synthetic program, its popularity waned during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. During this time, comparison-as-method gave way to "scope, or transversal extension in geographic and disciplinary space" in order to mitigate the effects of Eurocentrism, elitism, sexism, racism, nationalism, etc.
14. Natalie Melas, "Merely Comparative," *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 652.
15. Melas, "Merely Comparative" 654.
16. "Merely Comparative" 654. On the vexed question of historical determinism in Plekhanov, Jameson

suggests that it is perhaps “more a question of a feeling than of a concept... the emotion characteristic of historical understanding as such.” Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 360.

17. In “The Material World of Comparison,” Cheah contrasts the subjective techniques of comparison in Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel to Adam Smith’s analysis of comparison as the operational basis of any healthy political economy (537). Taking Smith’s view of political economy as a backdrop for the emergence of Foucault’s notion of biopower, Cheah defines material processes in terms of technologies directed at the whole population, state power aimed at the maximization of resources, and the precise cultivation of the populations’ overall physical needs as well as intellectual capabilities (536). The essay, in a way, rehearses the opposition between the idealist predication of the subject on consciousness and the materialist predication on labor-power that concerns Spivak in her essay “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value.” Yet, Cheah is curiously silent with regards to Marx’s contribution not just to this dialectics but also to the development of the value-form in being both the analysis and critique of capital’s limit. See Pheng Cheah, “The Material World of Comparison,” *New Literary History* 40.3 (2009) 523-545. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” *Diacritics* 15.4 (1985) 73-93.
18. “Merely Comparative” 658.
19. Qtd. in “Merely Comparative” 658.
20. Cheah defines material processes in biopolitical terms, consisting of technologies aimed at the population, state-controlled processes that increase material well-being, and the overall “milieu” for developing the material-bodily and intellectual needs of both individuals and the general population (536). Cheah is quite content to limit the material, in short, to what “conditions, influences, and shapes any intellectual consciousness,” and in so doing begs the question of the nature of such conditioning and influencing.
21. A possible response implied in Cheah’s essay, since the question above is mine and not his, is the notion of aesthetic-cognitive mapping in novels like Pramoedya’s *Buru Quartet*, José Rizal’s *Noli me tangere* and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, which examines how the mechanisms and technologies of infrastructural comparison work in specific locations and their negative, coercive effects” (Cheah 543). Cognitive mapping serves well as a “spatial analogue” to Althusser’s positive definition of ideology in terms of “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence,” between individual phenomenological perception and the larger reality of “class relations” on a “global” or “multinational” scale by conscious and unconscious representation (Cheah 542). Yet once determined as an aesthetics — since literature, to recall, is always part of the “postindustrial comparison machine” — cognitive mapping only further begs the question of the relation between cultural and literary comparisons and the totality of material or infrastructural comparability in Cheah’s, and by extension, Melas’ essays.
22. See also Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010) 32 where he argues that the dialectic appears whenever there is a thinking of incommensurability in whatever forms. I take the phrase comparison as thought to the second power from his comment on the dialectical method in *Marxism and Form* 45.
23. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990) 45.
24. Jameson, *Late Marxism* 45.
25. *Late Marxism* 46.
26. *Late Marxism* 47.

27. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House Books, 1979) 13.
28. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 2005) 33-34.
29. Williams, *Culture and Materialism* 35.
30. *Culture and Materialism* 35.
31. *Culture and Materialism* 34.
32. *Culture and Materialism* 44.
33. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI Pub., 1996). There, Jameson further defines totality in terms of the social or collective: "For it is ultimately always of the social totality itself that it is a question in representation" (4). Since it is impossible to represent social totality, the cognitive or allegorical investment in such a representation will mostly be an unconscious one (9). Any act of comparison as such, do not simply reproduce the various groups or collectives under representation. To be clear, comparisons bring to light an allegorical, non-literal representation of what is in fact impossible to represent completely. For an ambitious overview of the concept of totality in Marxism, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality the Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," *Diacritics* 15.4 (1985) 85.
35. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 127.
36. Marx, *Capital* 128.
37. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, trans., S.W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow; London: Progress ; Lawrence & Wishart, 1981) 85.
38. Diane Elson, "The Value Theory of Labor," *Value: The Representation of Labor in Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015) 146-47.
39. See Elson, "The Value Theory of Labor" 145. While there are overlaps in meaning, abstract does not mean the same as social, or concrete the same as private. It is just that capitalism tends to cancel out the distinctions such that the concrete aspect of labor is privatized, and the social aspect of labor is abstracted.
40. *Capital* 128.
41. *Capital* 139-40.
42. *Capital* 152.
43. *Capital* 152-153.
44. *Capital* 125.
45. *Capital* 152.
46. *Capital* 127.
47. *Capital* 178.
48. "The Value Theory of Labor" 156.
49. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* 86.
50. *Culture and Materialism* 35.
51. *Marxism and Form* 75.
52. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964) 147.
53. *Grundrisse* 361.
54. For an overview of the republication of *Value: The Representation of Labor in Capital* in which Elson's essay

is published, see Joshua Clover, "Value in the Expanded Field," *Mediations* 29.2 (2016) 161-67. I am grateful for the second anonymous reader who pointed me to Clover's review.

55. "The Value Theory of Labor" 131.
56. Qtd. in "The Value Theory of Labor" 140.
57. *Grundrisse* 101.
58. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy"* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2004) 46-47, emphasis added.
59. *Grundrisse* 101.
60. Cheah, "The Material World of Comparison" 543.
61. *Capital* 168.
62. A search in the MLA Bibliography for monographs published under the subject "Comparative Literature" from 2000 to 2014 generates 44 results, while that for monographs with "Comparative Approach[s]" in the same time period produces 33 titles with 22 overlaps. Even while taking into consideration the non-exhaustive and non-systemic nature of these searches, it is possible to induce that Comparative Literature criticism encompasses comparative approaches, while the latter does not need to include the former; the clearest example being Ming Xie's *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry*, which appears in the second search but not the first. There are of course notable exceptions. Emily Apter's *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* is clearly theoretically focused but is not categorized under "Comparative Approach." See Ming Xie, *Conditions of Comparison: Reflections on Comparative Intercultural Inquiry* (London: Continuum, 2011) and Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
63. Ming Xie, "What Does the Comparative do for Theory?" *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) 676.
64. Xie, "What Does the Comparative do for Theory?" 677.
65. *Grundrisse* 101.
66. See "Scattered Speculations" 81; Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin 1992) 323.
67. *Capital* 102.
68. *Capital* 125. See also Neil Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint," *Mediations* 24.2 (2009) 48-65 where he revisits this old question of immanent critique in *Capital* and touches on a similar point on the separation of "theory" and "text" as a "fallacy of application."
69. *Marxism and Form* 336.
70. *Marxism and Form* 4.
71. *Capital* 139.
72. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).
73. *Capital* 142.
74. *Capital* 142-43.
75. *Capital* 149.
76. *Capital* 159.
77. *Capital* 160-62.
78. *Capital* 160-62.

79. *Capital* 184.
80. *Capital* 196.
81. *Capital* 196.
82. *Capital* 209.
83. *Capital* 209.
84. *Capital* 198.
85. Sarah Brouillette, "On Art and 'Real Subsumption,'" *Mediations* 29.2 (2016) 170.
86. Brouillette, "On Art and 'Real Subsumption'" 171.
87. "On Art and 'Real Subsumption'" 173.
88. Anselm Jappe, "Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction': A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?," *Historical Materialism* 21.1 (2013) 4.
89. Karen Gregory and Winn Joss, "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor," *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 28 (2016) 4.
90. Gregory and Joss, "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor" 4.
91. "Marx, Engels and the Critique of Academic Labor" 4-5.
92. Vincent Leitch, "Work Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 31.2 (2005) 291.
93. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* 147.
94. *Capital* 128.
95. "The Value Theory of Labor" 133.
96. Qtd. in Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint" 51.
97. *Grundrisse* 163.