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Comparative Global Humanities After Man: Alternatives to the Coloniality of Knowledge

Lisa Lowe

Yale University

Kris Manjapra

Tufts University

Abstract

The core concept of ‘the human’ that anchors so many humanities disciplines – history, literature, art history, philosophy, religion, anthropology, political theory, and others – issues from a very particular modern European definition of Man ‘over-represented’ as the human. The history of modernity and of modern disciplinary knowledge formations are, in this sense, a history of modern European forms monopolizing the definition of the human and placing other variations at a distance from the human. This article is an interdisciplinary research that decenters Man-as-human as the subject/object of inquiry, and proposes a relational analytic that reframes established orthodoxies of area, geography, history and temporality. It also involves new readings of traditional archives, finding alternative repositories and practices of knowledge and collection to radically redistribute our ways of understanding the meaning of the human.

Keywords

global humanities, coloniality of knowledge, empire, colonialism, relational study

By describing our project as ‘comparative global humanities after Man’ we observe that the core concept of ‘the human’ that anchors so many humanities disciplines – history, literature, art history, philosophy, religion, anthropology political theory, and others – issues from a very particular modern European definition of Man that, in Sylvia Wynter’s terms, ‘over-represents itself as the human’ (Wynter, 2003, 2015; Weheliye, 2008; Chuh, 2019). The presumption of Man as the central agent of history, society, and aesthetics effects a historical and ongoing

Corresponding author: Kris Manjapra. Email: kris.manjapra@tufts.edu

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‘coloniality of knowledge’ that accompanies and naturalizes settler colonial and imperial projects in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and across the Pacific (Quijano, 2000). Committed to ‘reading against’ this misequation of Man with ‘the human’, we pose a range of interdisciplinary research questions that take us beyond the singular, unitary Eurocentric ideas around which culture and the humanities have been previously organized.¹ By invoking a different landscape of ‘other humanities’ as the racial, disciplinary, and ontological limit to this canonized version of ‘the human’, we gesture toward the myriad kinds of human life, practice, and society that are not legible within our received definitions and observe that the affirmation of ‘the human’ as universal and exclusive continues to be linked to the forcible forgetting of ‘other humanities’ and other forms of life, culture, world, knowledge, and aesthetics. Race and various forms of social difference, we suggest, are produced by educing a singular ‘human’ from the ‘other humanities’ that are its condition of possibility. The history of modernity and of modern disciplinary knowledge formations are, in this sense, a history of modern European forms monopolizing the definition of the human and placing other variations at a distance from the human.² We consider here ways to revise these former accounts, and to radically redistribute our ways of understanding the meaning of the humanities.

In this essay, we explore concepts, methods, materials, and archives to ask what it means to be human in a global modernity defined by and organized in terms of Man. This effort does not involve a simple return to a former subject, ‘the human’, nor does it merely pluralize its meanings. Rather it requires, we suggest, an interrogation of our received knowledge traditions, and an innovation of practices to conceive the relations and entanglements of incommensurable scales, intelligences, and contexts, as the very conditions for knowledge itself.

Analytic of Relation

A variety of scholars in recent years have elaborated different possibilities for relational comparative study.³ Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein discussed the relations of imperial conquest, Indigenous peoples, and enslaved rebellions in the hemispheric Americas and archipelagic Caribbean as the palimpsest of ‘Americanity’, the cultures of which Edouard Glissant theorized as a poetics of relation (Quijano and Wallerstein, 1992; Glissant, 1997). Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih engage Glissant’s ideas to envision relational comparison as the complexities and entanglements among cultures and communities. Relationality disrupts the presumption of pure, singular cultural origins, and emphasizes internal heterogeneity and differently scaled connection among different traditions, rather than the comparison of uniform abstractions, such as nation, region, or culture (Lionnet, 2008: 1508–9;

Shih, 2013: 84–5). In a similar way, theorists of the ‘archipelagic’ from Antonio Benítez-Rojo to Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Stephens have drawn upon Glissant to consider dynamic cultural relations present in island and oceanic cultures with histories of permeable boundaries arising from trade, migration, and colonial encounter. Roberts and Stephens suggest, for example, that if the scale of studies focuses exclusively on large areas, and if we ignore the ever-changing relations of overlapping, creolized, and interdependent worlds, then we neglect the multilingual assemblage of interconnected cultures – Indigenous, colonial, and migrant – that emerge on islands, shorelines, seas, and archipelagoes (Roberts and Stephens, 2017).

Comparative relation is also a significant approach elaborated in US studies of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson (2011), for example, consider racialization as dynamic mutually constitutive processes that not only generate national and identity-based racial categories of privilege and stigma, but which also always produce gendered and sexualized difference as well. Exemplified by the work of Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Barbara Smith, and the Combahee River Collective, these critiques do not presume homogeneity across racial or national groups. Instead, they offer powerful relational analyses of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized valuation and devaluation of human life. Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues and Alyosha Goldstein employ relational comparison to foreground conventions of knowledge under different forms of colonialism; they situate their intervention in ‘the colonial present’ and ‘contemplate and work toward the ongoing imperative of decolonization’. They observe that colonialisms – overlapping, historical, and contemporary – have established epistemic practices that erase and obscure relations among Indigenous and colonized peoples as they encounter and resist settlement, occupation, extraction and domination. Drawing upon Indigenous critic Jodi Byrd’s work, Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, and Goldstein develop conceptual approaches that disrupt these imposed forms of what they term ‘colonial unknowing’ (Vimalassery et al., 2016; Byrd, 2011: xxv). These collective projects frame a constellation of multiple and interconnected colonial experiences grounded in differential racialization and dispossession.

Like our contribution on comparative global humanities, these scholars of ‘relationality’ are concerned to intervene into the epistemological, ontological, and aesthetic norms that have been practiced in the humanities. We insist on the comparative study of different cultural, historical, and social formations in ways that defy isomorphism, and disclose actually-existing mutual constitutions, intimacies, and entanglements. Our work in this essay draws on an ongoing project shared with colleagues that elaborates relational comparative study as a response to the epistemic challenges and ethical imperatives of the global humanities after Man.⁴

Globalization's *longue durée*

To begin, we first insist that 'globalization' is not exclusively a contemporary process, but rather that worlded encounters, connections, relations, conflicts and exchanges must be understood in the *longue durée* (Lughod, 1989; Venn, 2000, 2009). Secondly, rather than adopting the comparative method that has structured modern humanities and social science fields, we propose an *analytic of relation*, or a mode of study that attends to the contradictory and tensile entanglements that are the condition for different modes of social organization in the longer time of the global. This analytic of relation recognizes the limits of a more established comparativism that presumes analogous, discretely bounded units, yet explores instead the interdependence, relatedness, and coproduction of communities. Thirdly, we do not presume that 'the human' is an isomorphic or transhistorical entity. Rather, 'the human' comprises at once *both* the colonizing project of Man, *and* the manifold variety of heterogeneous and assembled relations – social, cultural, economic, and ecological – that continuously emerge, transform, and remake themselves, in the past and in the ongoing present. This analytic considers relation rather than fixed entities, transformations rather than stability, dissymmetry rather than analogy.

While the late modern period of global contacts and interdependency has initiated new discussions of personhood, culture, ethics, society, and history, we insist that global connections are not new, nor are they exclusively relevant to the contemporary moment. Rather, 'comparative global humanities after Man' names a critique of modern disciplinary knowledges in light of a more extended set of processes that link multiple spaces over the longer course of world history. In the ancient and early modern worlds, there were empires, conquests, slavery, trade and diasporas; several decades of recent scholarship have provided us with an understanding of imperial and trans-regional cultural formations across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Ocean (Pollock, 2006; Ricci, 2011; Ho, 2006; Hämäläinen, 2008; Chang, 2016). British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish overseas colonial expansion, from the 15th century to its heights in the 19th century, occurred, in this sense, in the midst of other interregional and transoceanic formations that predated and, in some cases, also outlasted it (Frank, 1998; Chaudhuri, 1999; Pomeranz, 2000). Looking beyond the exclusive story of 'the rise of the West', we understand how the silver coined in rupees in the Mughal empire may have come from Spanish colonial Potosí and from Tokugawa Japan, or why 17th-century murals by Indigenous artists in Puebla, Mexico, reference contacts with Flanders and China (Gruzinski, 2001). Yet reconceiving the *longue durée* of global modernity also implies the important rethinking of the given regions, areas, or fields of study that have been institutionalized in the modern university – East Asia,

South Asia, the Middle East and Latin America as well as Europe – and it underscores the need to rethink and repurpose these ‘areas’ in terms of genealogies of contact, influence, and exchange, unmooring them from their colonial and Cold War epistemologies. We are especially suspicious of presumptions of homogeneous ethnocultures located in ‘Asia’, the ‘Middle East’, ‘Africa’, etc., which overlook not only histories of many differences between and within apparently homogenous geographies, but reiterate cultural essentialisms, and the politics of knowledge that persistently figures the ‘West’ through Asian, Arab, and African alterity. We consider ‘Europe’ to have emerged at the intersection of contacts and exchanges among different peoples, from Africans, Arabs, and Asians, to Christians, Muslims, Jews and others. An interdisciplinary global humanities highlights, for example, cross-regional Arabic literary cultural exchanges in the Mediterranean world, or the aesthetic, religious, and cultural entanglements arising from Indian Ocean trades connecting South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa. Likewise, ‘Asia’ is more than the study of China and Japan as discrete histories and cultures, and would emphasize instead connections and conflicts within Asia (e.g. with Japanese colonial occupation of Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, Burma, and the Philippines), on the one hand, and the various Asian relationships to the United States, Australia, Europe and Russia, on the other, including Asian emigration and diaspora. In lieu of a concept of ‘Africa’ as bounded or separate, studies of the global Black Diaspora comprise Africa and the Americas, the Black Mediterranean, African itineraries across the Indian Ocean, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latino cultures and societies, and Black Europe.

Scales of More-than-Man

Moreover, thinking beyond units of national territory and culture includes appreciation of different relations of scale: from the hemispheric, to the oceanic, to the archipelagic, to the diasporic, to the bodily – we understand scalar designations not as given ontological structures, but rather as perspectival fictions, epistemologies that express situated knowledges and modes of apprehension. This kind of study not only defamiliarizes the epistemologies inherent in normative scales of study, such as the global or the national, but it explores relations between unlikely and perhaps even asymmetrical and incommensurable scales. Shifting and dynamic relations of scale are in themselves a critique of universalisms, a consideration of multiple perspectives, in order to examine, in historian Engseng Ho’s terms, ‘empire through diasporic eyes’, giving a ‘view from the other boat’ (Ho, 2004). Needless to say, global humanities work must also necessarily include the histories of multiple languages and language arts broadly cast, not merely the imposition of imperial languages; it is interested in both forcible and creative preservations and creolizations of

Indigenous, occupied, or colonized languages in the face of their attempted elimination (Lionnet and Shih, 2005).

Yet the point, of course, is not to simply multiply geographies, languages, or perspectives, nor to practice conventions that reiterate presumptions of top-down cultural determination. It is rather to consider dynamic relations rather than inert singularity, transfiguration rather than immutability, irregularity rather than linear continuity. We cannot assume that global relations are a single process of homogenization, or that they impose standardized unified social and cultural forms; rather they may comprise interactions, negotiations, and contestations among multiple agencies, improvised technologies, and incommensurable knowledge formations across layered jurisdictions and political spheres. Placing in relation different historiographies of slavery, colonialism, and imperial rule, we observe not only variations in the definitions and practices of slavery and emancipation across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but we also note conflicts and interdependencies between and across different practices.

Neither evenly integrating, nor rendering homogenous all parts of the world, global processes have varied in time and location, and have taken place quite differently in unlike parts of the world, providing a rich set of new research materials and new archives for the interdisciplinary humanities. Language, culture, philosophy, visual arts, and representation, as well as ethical concepts, narratives, styles, and forms for understanding, can all be rethought in relation to global contacts, entanglements and connections. Interdisciplinarity, in this sense, is not a facile patching together of multiple disciplines and area studies, but must involve thorough interrogation of the objects and methods of our modern humanities disciplines and area studies themselves. This means rethinking the centrality of Judeo-Christian theocentric descriptions to the study of religion, along with unsettling unitary linear historical narratives of modern industrial nations, and innovating an understanding of cultures beyond a presumption of bounded, discrete analogous units. In addition, it also requires reconceptualizing culture as not centered exclusively on human communities, but decentering 'Man' to broaden our sense of social and environmental ecologies; this might include recent concerns with interspecies interdependence, cyborg assemblages, and the vibrancy of matter (Haraway, 1985, 2003, 2016; Kosek, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Chen, 2012; Tsing, 2015). A relational global humanities approach does not seek to salvage 'the human' as a replacement for Man. Rather, it critically describes the ways that the *more-than-Man* has always already existed. The study of the *more-than-Man* attends to the superabundance of dynamic relations that cannot be contained or delimited by 'the human': that is, the relations between different human histories and worlds, between humans, surrogacies, and technologies, amongst humans, animals, ecologies and environments. Man is a regnant fiction

that not only occludes the multiplicity of worlds, but which also obscures the complex *relations* of histories, scales, geographies, and temporalities. The humanities could be instead a way of thinking, reading, writing, and critically reflecting on the ‘plasticity’ of the human; the human not as fixed form, but as a shifting relation itself (Chow, 2005; Drayton, 2012; Weheliye, 2014; Atanasoski and Vora, 2019; Mbembe, 2016).

A different humanities based in the analytic of relationality invites a total rethinking of discipline and method. Forging alternatives to the coloniality of knowledge, institutionalized in the very methods of the humanities and the history of the university, requires not only an *analytic of relation*, but also a rethinking of the archive, which may involve new readings of traditional archives, or finding alternative repositories and practices of knowledge and collection. We ponder what it means to ‘recover’ historical pasts for which there is no or little documentation or evidence. We investigate the manners in which collective memory practices, apocryphal materials, ephemera, and performance may constitute types of archives. These humanities may expand upon the maroon sites, hideaways, and what Moten and Harney term the ‘undercommons’ of the university, where we can attend to the hard work of understanding the meanings of ‘more-than-Man’ after imperial war, occupation, and capitalist accumulation (Harney and Moten, 2013).



Figure 1. Cocoa plantation in Malaya, 1890s. Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia. 2001/0025368.

Archival Distortions

We turn now to examples that dramatize the sorts of rethinking we are gesturing towards. The photograph in Figure 1, found in the National Archives of Malaysia, depicts a cacao plantation in British Malaya of the 1890s. Typical of a whole genre of plantation photography collected in many imperial archives, ostensibly documenting the rise of industrious ‘planting culture’ around the world, it provides us with an example of comparative relation that we have been evoking in more abstract terms. We may appreciate that plantations were managed landscapes that facilitated measurement and calculation. Colonial capitalists organized plantations according to a regime of visibility (Mirzoeff, 2014): a rectilinear axial system, on which humans, animals, plants, and ecologies could be identified, surveilled, disciplined, moved, and measured.

By the 1840s, British Malaya had become a new frontier for plantation capitalism precisely with the fall of slave economies in the British Caribbean after Emancipation, especially on islands such as Jamaica. With the cultivation of coffee and cacao, initially, followed by rubber, sugarcane, and palm, the plantation form was brought to Malaya. Cacao trees came from both South America and West Africa, out of the crucible of the trans-Atlantic slave economy and the plant cultivars that resulted from it (Beckford, 1972). The Caribbean ‘plantation complex’ metastasized and spread across new Asian frontiers in the very time of slavery’s alleged end. By the 1860s, Malaya was a site of the ‘second slavery’ (Tomich, 2004), as modes of native dispossession, primitive accumulation and incarcerated labor expanded across new geographies, including the American South, Cuba, Brazil, Egypt, India, Australia, and the Pacific, in the wake of the collapse of the ‘first slavery’ during the Haitian Revolution, followed by Abolition in the British empire.

Plantations were places where ‘the whip was as regular as the wind’, as George Lamming once observed (Lamming, 1960) with reference to the particular devastation of the transatlantic trade in enslaved African people, and the ongoing legacies of Black survival and renewal. As plantations ‘traveled’ to new frontiers across the circum-Caribbean and beyond it, we can identify continuities and discontinuities of racialized extraction, social engineering, carceral enclosure, technology, and intellectual property, yet not render the slave plantation in the Americas identical or equivalent to the transfer of its logics and strategies elsewhere. With the coming of the Liberal Age in the 1830s, this historical charge of expanding unfreedom and imperial necropower blasted out across the earth, transforming ecologies, cultures, and economies, and establishing the contours of what would become the Global South (Mbembe, 2003). This Liberal Age, which was conceived by European philosophers such as Tocqueville, Hegel, and Carlyle as the time of Man’s arrival *as* the universal human, was in fact a period of accelerated entanglement of

histories and temporalities, and of intensified interdependencies and contradictions that continuously disrupted the realm of Man.

The photograph illustrates the drive to secure Man against the hazard of this emergent, superabundant global modernity. The camera's gaze seeks to open up all lifeforms in the visual field for accounting. The photograph is, in this sense, a colonial apparatus that registers the anxious desire to master the dynamic *more-than-Man* that is entirely unmasterable. In the foreground, at the focal point, are cacao trees arranged in a rectilinear matrix. Workers are arrayed in quadrants around the trees. The camera's point-of-view asserts *one* history, *one* scale of consciousness, and *one* narrative about the plantation as a site of industry, while simultaneously containing and reducing the multi-sited histories of peoples, rationalities, and ecologies converging in the Malayan scene.

But the calculated organization of the shot is unsettled by the different scales of intelligence that peer back at the camera lens, and by the invisible presences and forces beyond the frame. At the center of the image, cacao trees and the human laborers almost appear to consort in a kind of camouflage. The optic of measurement and calculation *fails*, as branches, leaves, heads, and limbs grow into each other in deranged formation (Hall, 1961). To the left of the image, women and children laborers crowd in the background. The women, some child-in-arm, look directly back into the camera lens, even as the foremen lower their gaze and submit to objectification. Set on the margins, their direct gaze generates a haunting and unpredictable presence in the photo. The women's gaze at the margins of the photograph might be said to cause the whole plantation scene to 'waver', to borrow Avery Gordon's formulation, as it suggests the *more-than-Man* beyond what is subsumed by the photographic eye (Gordon, 1997).

The gendered dimension of the plantation's racial labor regime haunts the image, if we define 'haunting', following Gordon, as that which 'gestures to the unspeakable' or the unspoken (Gordon, 1997: 149). One woman nurses a child, another seems to stand defiantly, cutlass in hand. Under the patriarchal labor regime of the plantation, women are valued for their dexterity and their supposed likeness to machines, reliable and docile. Meanwhile the actual value of their labors is disavowed and left unrecognized, unremunerated, and 'off the books'. Plantation women are scarcely paid and worked to exhaustion (Jayawardan and Kurian, 2015). Subjected to a hierarchy of foremen, women are forced to perform productive and reproductive labor, and supply the necessary care to ensure the daily replenishment of the plantation workforce. The photograph is haunted too, for example, by the material presence of coercive gendered labor recruitment regimes, such as the *kangany*, blackbirding, or the *kheh-tau* systems that led the laborers to the fields and immobilized them there.

Indeed, while the historical plantation was a violent regime of racial capitalism run with the labor of captive and colonized people (Robinson, 1983; Mintz, 1985; Smallwood, 2007; Johnson, 2013), the ‘plantation’ can serve as an analytic that comprises at once the violent social order for brutal extraction, the many kinds of resistance, and the legacies and afterlives engendered by that order (McKittrick, 2013; Weheliye, 2014; Eudell, 2016; Eudell et al., 2016). Plantations, as sites that disclose relationality, are not consigned to the past, but are distributed interstitially throughout the tissues of our present: in informal economies, sweatshops, slums, Indigenous hinterlands, zomias, prisons, extractive landscapes, human trafficking networks, detention sites, refugee camps, occupied homelands, curfewed enclaves, and migrant worker tenements (Sanyal, 2014; Scott, 2009). These discrepant sites sketch out what we might call the ‘new Souths’ of our time. Modes of violence, erasure, and dispossession, developed in and through centuries of colonial force, continue to structure the contemporary world in which we live. We might even imagine our contemporary world as a global plantation archipelago, with a ‘dark and vast sea of human labor’, as W.E.B. Du Bois said, enveloping its shores and preserving traces of bondage, trial and loss in its submarine vaults (Du Bois, 2012: 15). Conceiving the plantation complex as a global curve of dots and distances set within a vast human sea helps us envision what is at stake in the work of relational comparison after Man. ‘Comparative global humanities after Man’ thus exposes the relations amidst the islands, seas, and submarine depths of the human. This mode of study dwells on the enjambment between histories of war, settler colonialism and native dispossession, racial enslavement, bonded mobilities, environmental extraction, fiscal militarism, biopolitical engineering, financialization, and other processes that define the aftermath of Man.

As C.L.R. James observed, the human histories that converge on the plantation always exceed the rational aims of the plantation itself. Evoking the contradictions that produced the conditions for the Haitian revolution, James wrote in *The Black Jacobins* (1938):

The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals, transport them in pens, work them alongside an ass or a horse and beat both with the same stick, stable them and starve them, they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings; with the intelligence and resentments of human beings. (James, 1963 [1938]: 11)

While plantations are spaces of brutal extraction, domination, and dispossession, they are also emerging assemblages of human, plant, animal, and machine intelligence and intimacy. A project in relational comparison would appreciate these dynamic contradictions.

Finally, the photograph of the plantation helps us reflect on the manifold meanings of the human, not primarily by what is exposed for inspection to the eye, but rather by the forms of submarine and occluded relationality that call for a reckoning. Archives haunted by the more-than-Man are the material of our study.

Through relational comparison, the plantation scene is no longer understood as a space of Euclidean calculation, enclosure, and measurability. Rather, it is disclosed as a hyperbolic space, in which the uncontainable and the incalculable are always overwhelming the optical field, making it 'waver'. 'Hyperbolic space' is a way of referring to non-Euclidean geography, or to space organized according to the curved axial system of the hyperbola instead of the axes of straight lines. Hyperbolic spaces are the underlying geometry of the oceanic realm, defined by flows, waves, eddies, and warps. One might say that the plantation is a dominant logic whose drive for mastery in effect skews the Euclidean grid by releasing at the same time the incalculability it cannot master. This incalculability arises from genocides, kidnappings, forced displacements, coercion, commodification, the recombination of life-forms, and the erasures that are the conditions for its possibility. To study these processes, we need other humanities that go beyond the study of archival documentation, to practices that help us reckon with the omitted, the disavowed, the obliterated, and the submarine. Attending to the incalculability that overwhelms the enclosures of Man constitutes the important work of relational comparison facing the humanities today.

Submarine Souths

The project of comparative global humanities after Man necessarily exceeds archival interpretation and scholarship; contemporary artists, writers, and cultural activists sound the incalculable depths of global relations. Shazia Sikander's multi-media installation, *Parallax* (2013; see Figure 2), visualizes such modes of thinking in relation to the hyperbolic space of today's 'new Souths'. Pakistani-British artist Sikander is known for her reworking of the Indo-Persian miniature painting in ways that inscribe the diasporic and the displaced. *Parallax*, a three-channel, single image video installation exhibited in 2013, contemplates the many incommensurable scales of Indian Ocean history that are at play in contemporary times. The term, parallax, comes from maritime astronomy, and refers to the seeming change in location of an object, such as a star or celestial body, depending on the position of one's boat. Parallax is the epistemic effect that occurs with the articulation of multiply situated, interrelated, yet irreducibly discordant, claims to truth.⁵ In the video installation, we witness forms and symbols continually shifting their references, fragmenting and reforming with new meaning. An animation of



Figure 2. Shahzia Sikander; *Parallax*, 2013. Three-channel, single image HD video animation with 5.1 surround sound. 15 minutes, 26 seconds. Music by Du Yun. Installation view, MAXXI Museo nazionale delle Arti del XXI secolo, Rome, Italy, 2016–17. © Shahzia Sikander. Photography: Luis Do Rosario. Courtesy: Fondazione MAXXI and Shahzia Sikander Studio.

watercolor, gouache, and ink drawings accompanied by music by Du Yun, *Parallax* exposes the Arabian peninsula as a haunted geography, in which different worlds overlap and contest with one another. The work explores the continuities and ruptures of Indian Ocean cultural worlds alongside production patterns and political formations imposed by various European imperial occupations, and by the rise of US and postcolonial petro-capitalism across the Arab region.

In drawing upon Persian and Indo-Islamic pasts, *Parallax* rejects the view that the history of European ‘Man’ marks the starting point for global connections, and it points to the ‘other worlds’ that predated and then also endured the rise of Eurocentric globalism. Sikander animates this point through visual experiments with the figurative detail of *Gopi* hair, a stylized canonical shape that she morphs and transforms into zoetic graphic elements that seem to swarm with their own intelligence across the screen. In one scene from *Parallax*, the diasporic swarms of *Gopi* hair converge together, collect into orbs of indiscernible chatter, then disintegrate, and subsequently recompose in new configurations. The animated accumulation of *Gopi* hair creates what Sikander calls a ‘particle system’ (Sikander, 2015). Sikander points to the fluid dynamics of worlded encounters that are characteristic of the Indian Ocean arena.



Figure 3. Shahzia Sikander, *Parallax*, 2013. Three-channel, single image HD video animation with 5.1 surround sound. 15 minutes, 26 seconds. Music by Du Yun. © Shahzia Sikander.

But if the Indian Ocean is a vast domain of worlded encounters and connections that date back centuries, even millennia, Sikander's *Parallax* also depicts the inter-regional forces that overdetermine it as one of the most important 'new Souths' of our time. Arab petro-states in the later 20th century accumulated vast wealth supplying black gold to the world economy. These countries are also major consumers of contracted, coerced, and trafficked human labor from Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. People labor under the terms of the plantation, confronting claims of measurability that hide and deny the incalculable extent of violent exploitation, coercion, and resistance.

In one of the most arresting segments in *Parallax*, we observe a shifting background that alternatively connotes peninsular formations of sea-boards and ports, such as around the Strait of Hormuz, or organic imprints suggesting scarred flesh, or perhaps storms at sea (see Figure 3). In the distance, we notice indistinct swirling objects that begin to move closer and closer into view. They take on, eventually, the likeness of disembodied, commodified, workers' arms that whirl and multiply over the screen. Again, here, in their multiplication, crowding together and swarming, we perceive an intelligence that is not that of Man. Looking again, the forms signify helicopter wings or the unrelenting turning of machine combines.

With a different parallax, we might see the *ambi* design, the diasporic tear-shaped Indo-Islamic pattern that was famously appropriated through the imperial textile trade as 'Paisley'. If the whirling arms might signify the precarious conditions of labor in this peninsular world center of imperial and petrocapiatist domination, they also connote the large, small, and swarming forms of human and ecological resistance and response that are also at play. Recalling James's description of plantation revolt, *Parallax* requires us to contend with the 'invincibility' of contradicting temporalities, meanings, and intentions that burst in like the flood (Tsing, 2005). The experience of parallax names a disposition to knowledge, in which fixing the meaning of a motif, an artifact, an archival object, or a piece of evidence is not the primary aim. Rather, we endeavor to reckon with multiple, discrepant vantage points, and, thus, with the contradictions of parallax that are always attached to archives, and to the many hauntings that call out from the objects we study.



Figure 4. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, 'Sugar', Smith College Museum of Art (2010–11).

The Unthought Known of Colonial Relations

Sikander's work suggests that the material world around us is far from inert, and shapes and motifs palpitate with the intimacies, entanglements, and relations of the historical past. That the present shapes our knowledge about the longer course of world history is conveyed by an installation piece of another contemporary artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, 'Sugar', which thematizes the histories of slavery, colonialism, and forced labor that enabled Matanzas, Cuba, where Campos-Pons was born, to become a leading center for sugar production during the Spanish colonial era (see Figure 4). With the expansion of the plantation system in Cuba in the 18th century, there was an enormous increase in the trade in enslaved Africans. Yet by the early 19th century, as Cuban sugar plantations faced competition from British and French West Indian colonies, as well as exploding sugar demand in Europe, planters sought to increase production through '*la trata amarilla*', importing workers from southern China to Cuba (Mintz, 1985; Helly, 1993; Look Lai, 1993, 1998; Hu-DeHart, 1992; Jung, 2006, Yun, 2008, McKeown, 1999). Initiating a new division of labor in which African slaves worked in the fields cutting the cane, and bonded Chinese laborers worked in the mills grinding, boiling, and crystallizing it, Cuban sugar production surged in the 19th century, with chattel slavery remaining in place until the late 1880s. The distinct histories of European colonialism in Africa and Asia come together in the differentiated exploitation of enslaved

African and bonded Chinese laborers in Cuban sugar production, which gave rise to political, sexual, and intellectual intimacies, including their collaborations during the Cuban struggles for independence in 1895–8 (Scott, 2000; Helly, 1993). Campos-Pons, an Afro-Cuban woman with Chinese ancestry, stacks colored cakes upon vertical spears, evoking the alchemy of sugar and race in the Matanzas industry that profited precisely through the racial hierarchy of colonial plantation labor.

Both sugar and spears appear to grow out of the wooden stools, conjuring the seizure and subjugation of enslaved people, and the profound history of African labor that formed the backbone of Caribbean sugar production. The weapons are bound in place by stools, yet the blades evoke the vigilance of shackled peoples, always prepared to rise up against their brutal enslavement. At the same time, the palette of black, brown, yellow, and white colored cakes suggests a colonial social order that thrived upon the manufacture of racial difference, as well as the convergence that Fernando Ortiz in *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) referred to as ‘peoples from all four quarters of the globe’ laboring in the ‘new world’ to produce sugar for European consumption. Ortiz commented that ‘Sugar was mulatto from the start’ (Ortiz, 1995 [1940]). The wooden stools beneath the spears allude to royal thrones and seats of landed aristocracy, the rulers who possessed, profited, and accumulated the spoils of slavery. They recall C.L.R. James’s observations that it was the 18th-century slave societies in Saint-Domingue that produced the wealth of the French bourgeoisie who demanded the rights of man in the Revolution of 1789 (James, 1963). The rows in which the vertical stakes are arranged further suggest a cane field in which the men and women toiled tethered together with little chance of escape, or a cemetery of makeshift headstones, evoking both the labors and sorrows of workers of color. The installation meditates upon the conversion of human suffering into wealth and seated power, and the intimacies of different captive peoples living together and struggling for freedom.

In an interview about her creation of the installation Campos-Pons explains: ‘It is a very weird experience . . . [like] you are touching something that you don’t know yet’ (Campos-Pons, 2011). We might connect Campos-Pons’s description of ‘touching something that you don’t know yet’ with the uncanny presence of a historical past that may be lost but remains, even if invisible, in material objects themselves. It recalls Toni Morrison’s idea of ‘rememory’ in *Beloved*, in which the past that is not past has a material thingness, ubiquitous even if unseen, as Sethe explains to Denver: ‘If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world’ (Morrison, 1987: 36). The arrangement of spears, cakes, and stools in the installation are like a landscape in which one might, in Sethe’s words, ‘bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else’. Campos-Pons’s piece guides us to touch and feel the presence of the *longue durée* of

colonialism, indenture, and slavery as what psychoanalysis terms ‘the unthought known’, a forgotten convergence we are unable to think, but may be reminded we once knew (Bollas, 1987).

Like an ‘unthought known’, we actually know relatively little about the past constellations of ‘more-than-Man’ – and excavating such connections is like Campos-Pons ‘touching something you don’t know yet’ – because the interests that form national histories, and the state archives that inform them, have profoundly shaped and restricted the kinds of knowledge that we are able to have about these worldly pasts. Rather than pursuing a revisionist history that would aim to correct dominant narratives by making them more comprehensive or inclusive, we might instead reflect upon the possibilities and limits of the historical archive, and explore alternatives in the face of what the archive does not yield. We often refer to collected papers as archives, but the ‘archive’ is also a way to refer to the parameters for knowledge, or how we read, find evidence, and make legible the complex conditions of the past. Yet in the interdisciplinary humanities, we quickly encounter the limits of archives that authorize knowledge about the histories of nations and empires in terms of explicit interests – those of ruling elites, slave owners, and colonial administrators in the settler nation or imperial state – denying Indigenous, enslaved, laboring and colonized people the humanity accorded to free liberal persons. This work is ‘interdisciplinary’ not only in the sense that we work with a variety of materials that each in themselves requires interpretive expertise (in studies of literature, primary historical documents, maps, performance, music, visual and material culture, etc.), but also in the sense that institutionalized disciplinary studies are frequently characterized by an absencing or devaluation of precisely the subjects, communities, and histories that are of interest to our projects. Interdisciplinarity certainly overlaps at times with historians’ or historicist literary critics’ work, whose empirical approach might treat archives as valuable sources of evidence to establish what happened when, where, and to whom. But an interdisciplinary humanities also attends to the limits of the archive – what collections of evidence may privilege or omit, regulate or negate – and it innovates new methods for understanding the past, imagining and speculating, engaging in what Saidiya Hartman has called ‘critical fabulation’ (Hartman, 2008) or David Kazanjian terms ‘scenes of speculation’ (Kazanjian, 2015). However painful the confrontation with denials of Indigenous, enslaved, racialized and colonized humanity, it is also an occasion to query under what conditions, and in relation to what materials, the conditions of ‘other humanities’ might be examined. We can conceptualize this as a conditional temporality of ‘what could have been’, the opening of a space for a different kind of thinking and speculation, with a twofold attention that encompasses at once both the positive objects and methods of

history and social science, and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods (Lowe, 2015).

Uncanny Materiality

The 18th-century desk depicted in Figure 5 is said to have been crafted by *mestizo* artisans in Puebla, Mexico, during the Spanish viceregal period, and is one of a twin set, probably commissioned in the mid-18th century by a member of the Osorio y de Cervantes family in whose possession it remained until the late 19th or early 20th century, when their hacienda was broken up.⁶ The outside of the desk is decorated in a Moorish pattern of inlaid wood and engraved and painted bone, reminiscent of



Figure 5. Desk (Puebla de Los Angeles, Mexico, mid-18th century). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Islamic architecture that developed during the eight centuries of Moorish occupation of southern Spain and ended with the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. Yet the style of writing desk with tall bookcase is fashioned after a traditional Anglo-Dutch style bureau, rather than a Spanish one, with wood embellishments that allude to Dutch ripple moldings and German engraving techniques. When the cabinet is opened, the interior is painted in a striking red and gold *chinoiserie* style, in keeping with an *achinado* tradition in which Latin American artists borrowed and embellished Chinese and Japanese styles of silks, porcelains, and lacquerware that had been imported from Manila to Acapulco during the 250 years of the Manila Galleon trade (Carr, 2015). From the 16th to early 19th century, Asian goods were sold in Mexico City's market in the main *zócalo*, named El Parián after Manila's Parián, the commercial plaza in the Philippine city that was home to Chinese merchants, and whose port docked ships of Muslim traders from India, Africa, and other parts of the world. While *achinado* styles echoed Asian artisanal designs and techniques, they were nonetheless distinctly Latin American, and the piece makes reference to European and Asian aesthetics and the long histories of transhemispheric trades, while forged from Indigenous traditions and materials by *mestizo* laborers in Mexico.

On the red interior of the Puebla desk's two cabinet doors is a painted map, with symbols that have been identified as Nahuatl hieroglyphs or pictographs representing the plantation in Veracruz, more than likely painted later once the piece had been brought from Puebla to Veracruz, the eastern Mexican port from where many goods were transported across the Atlantic on ships bound for Lisbon. Figured in the maps and on the desk drawers are scenes of plantation life that include ranchers and farmhands, among them free Blacks or enslaved men, on the one hand, and mythical warriors, unicorns, elephants, reindeer, birds, and lions, on the other (see Figure 6).

The Puebla desk suggests many things about the comparative global humanities 'after Man', or the process of understanding our present-day relationship to a past that is always 'more-than-Man'. In one object, there are traces of complex transoceanic and transhemispheric itineraries that condense enslaved, *mestizo*, and imported labor, Asian and European influences, and foreign and Indigenous materials, which compels us to rethink static essentialisms of race, place, or nation, as well as unidirectional or bounded, discrete histories. Yet beyond merely expanding or pluralizing archives, peoples, and cultures, and thinking beyond singular or autonomous traditions, the desk figures the possibility of relation, contradiction, connection, and exchange – between, within, and across asymmetries of scale and differences of kind – as a way to conceive various worlds of culture and meaning in relation to one another. Even while a single object may be a repository of processes that link Asia, Africa, and Europe with the Americas, it suggests we



Figure 6. Detail from desk (Puebla de Los Angeles, Mexico, mid-18th century). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

might lose the particularity of each historical and ongoing process if, on the one hand, we render them analogous or equal to one another, or if, on the other, we insist on the exclusive elevation of one history or people, and the erasure of others. In this way, the desk suggests the differentiated yet simultaneous and entangled histories and modalities that converge in many different locations, in the past and continuing into the present. We miss these convergences if we remain invested in tracing a single genealogy, or if we impose equivalences between origins and peoples. The desk suggests the need to be able to think anew about important asymmetries of contact, exchange, and coercion.

Returning for a moment to the contemporary installation piece by María Magdalena Campos-Pons: her art is made in vastly different circumstances than those of the 18th-century desk, yet her contemporary piece suggests some of the ways that global connections and intimacies might reside within material objects, and it intimates how we might read an artifact, like the desk, for the undisclosed histories it holds. In a sense,

Campos-Pons envisions an ‘unthought known’, imagining and rendering familiar something unfathomable, a conjunction that might have or could have been. That is, to ‘read’ the desk, we might consult archival records – e.g. to learn about the Mexican family who commissioned the desk by the artisans in Puebla, or the trades that brought the silks and lacquerware from Manila to Acapulco that inspired the desk’s design, or the enslaved, Indigenous and mestizo workers in Mexico – but in light of Campos-Pons’s installation that ‘invites’ the viewer into the sentient or haptic materiality of sugar, we may ask other questions about the colonial object. For example, what sociality and behaviors are held within the materiality of the desk? Who painted the red and gold interiors of the cabinets? From which animals did they derive the bone, and from which plants came the dyes for the paints? Would the woodworkers who made the desk, or the painters of the interior cabinet, have had a fleeting chance to sit at it? Who had the leisure to sit at the desk, and what did they write as they gazed at the painted maps? Were they curious if the Black workers depicted were enslaved or free? This kind of investigation includes not only the archive of written texts but also embodied memories, or the repertoire of gestures, orality, movement, and song (Taylor, 2003). Where the written archive may often be a means of stabilizing colonial power, embodied affective practices implied by material things may evoke other notions of agency and resistance, particularly with respect to subjects and communities without access to written means of representation.

Contemplating the desk and bookcase, then, one imagines that at different times and in various locations it linked Filipino mariners and Muslim traders, Asian merchants and Mexican artisans, Indigenous geographers and Black farmworkers. As a material object made, embellished, traded, collected and displayed across continents, the desk mediates conditions of production, handling, dwelling, and reception – from various communities of designers, laborers, and artisans, to colonial states, shipping companies, private interests, public museums and more – that frame the possibilities and impossibilities for knowledge. Just as John Berger famously observed that every image embodies a way of seeing, a material thing suggests a way to feel historically, not as the instrumental desire for evidence or for possessive preservation, but as the contemplation of different kinds of embodied meanings, across time and space. The desk speaks to us about itineraries of colonial trade, the sociality of ports, the sweated labor on plantations, and hand-to-hand exchanges in commercial plazas; it is an eloquent palimpsest of different layers of labor, place, and location, conveying other forms of intimacy, mobility, and community. Yet it also asserts the divide between those who sourced the materials, and made, painted, and adorned the desk, and those who were permitted to sit, read, write, and gaze at it, to own and possess it. Moreover, an object like the desk also gives us an allegory

of the always layered and mediated relationship of the present to the past, the upset boundary between a stable present and a corresponding past. Always itself and other than itself, the artifact appears to abbreviate the whole course of history into a finite object, while simultaneously refusing to yield this infinite multiplicity. We are promised a faithful representation of the past, even as its representation obscures the worlds beyond, which we can only scarcely know.

In this essay, we have inquired into the purpose of the humanities within a global modernity whose knowledge practices have been organized in terms of Man. Comparative global humanities after Man suggests a range of critical practices that radically unsettle the subject position and the objects of humanities study, neither returning to 'the human' nor simply multiplying geographies, traditions or perspectives. We employ instead an *analytic of relation* that seeks to reckon with the coloniality of knowledge that divides and regiments the world into areas, objects, properties, and scales of meaning, by observing instead asymmetrical conflicts, entanglements, survivals, and transformations that comprise worlds exceeding the single figure of Man. In making a decisive turn to the 'more-than-Man', we commit to decolonizing the humanities, asking different questions and innovating new practices that unmoor us as subjects and scholars, and put into motion the tasks of asking who we are, what we can know, and to what and whom we are responsible.

Notes

1. The conception of a humanities faculty as a semi-autonomous professional group of scholars divided into disciplines emerged with bourgeois consolidation and the rise of the liberal state in Europe at the end of the 18th century (see Kant, 1798). The 'human sciences', defenders argued, offered interpretation, not explanation (Dilthey, 1883), and practiced the comparative method (Weber).
2. During the critical period of high imperialism in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and across the Pacific, the humanities proved their worth by interpreting the mind of European Man as a singular modern and evolved intelligence (Dussel, 1995).
3. We have benefited especially from the work on 'relationality' in discussions of comparative race and colonialism by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick Ferguson (2011); Shona N. Jackson (2012); Shu-mei Shih (2013); Katherine McKittrick (2015); Iyko Day (2015); Keith P. Feldman (2016); Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein (2016, 2017); Julian Go (2016); Robin D. G. Kelley (2017); Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Byrd, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy (2018); and Natalia Molina, Daniel Martinez HoSang and Ramon Gutiérrez (2019).
4. This work emerges from a collaborative project with colleagues at Tufts University, beginning first as a workshop in Comparative Colonialisms in 2015-16, a Mellon Sawyer Seminar on Comparative Global Humanities in 2016-17, and continuing as the core research focus at the Center for the

Humanities in 2017 19. Key participants in this work are Kamran Rastegar, Amahl Bishara, Adriana Zavala, Sarah Pinto, Alex Blanchette, Heather Curtis, Kendra Field, Orly Clergé, Christina Sharpe, Kareem Khubchandani, Alexandra Chreiteh, Brian Hatcher, Matt Hooley, Natalie Shapero, Cristelle Baskins, Mona El-Khoury, Nidhi Mahajan, Mark Minch, Anna Cruz, Khury Petersen-Smith, Marina Bilbija, Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, Hossein Ayazi, and Sumayya Kassamali. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara was a crucial collaborator until his untimely death in 2015. Visiting scholars, artists, and writers who contributed to the seminar include Stephanie Smallwood, Walter Johnson, K-Sue Park, Kevin Bruyneel, Lisa Yoneyama, Neferti Tadiar, Shaden Tageldin, Mahmood Mamdani, Mira Nair, Françoise Lionnet, Shu-mei Shih, Vincent Brown, Vivek Bald, Elizabeth Dillon, Alexander Weheliye, Demetrius Eudell, Katherine McKittrick, Robin Coste Lewis, Dionne Brand, Debarati Sanyal, Stef Craps, Judith Butler, David Chidester, Alondra Nelson, Emily Martin, Lawrence Cohen, Audra Simpson, Jessica Cattelino, Kalindi Vora, Neda Atanasoski, Ann Laura Stoler, Mel Y. Chen, Jake Kosek, Minkah Makalani, Paget Henry, Zachariah Mampilly, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, and Alyosha Goldstein. We also wish to thank Shahzia Sikander and María Magdalena Campos-Pons for their generosity.

5. Parallax has been taken up by Slavoj Žižek (2006) and Jodi Byrd (2011). We are interested especially in Byrd's elaboration of the perils of interpreting 'parallactic effects' in ways that reduce them to discourses of multiperspectivalism and multiculturalism. Instead, parallactic gaps call for a 'dynamic and relational' reckoning in order to ascertain the differentiated and inter-related modes and functions of subjection within imperialism (Byrd, 2011: 54).
6. Thanks to Dennis Carr, Lynch Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for this account.

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Lisa Lowe is Samuel Knight Professor of American Studies at Yale University. Her work is concerned with the analysis of race, immigration, capitalism, and colonialism. She is the author of *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (1991), *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), and *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), and coeditor of *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (1997).

Kris Manjappa is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Studies in Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora at Tufts University. He is the author of works on global and transnational history, race and colonialism studies, and plantation transformations, including *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (2009) and *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (2014). He is the coeditor of *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones of South Asia* (2010).