

Mission Statement Responses

I see this new phase in the history of a well-established scholarly journal as offering a major opportunity. That opportunity needs to be placed in a context. There are three key elements to this context, from the point of view of the American research university and the geographies of the rest of the world. First, globalization has encouraged greater traffic among disciplines, regions, and institutions based primarily on growing access to information, knowledge, and methodology through the Internet and the World Wide Web. Second, and in roughly the same period, the humanities have become increasingly marginalized as a result of the rise of vocational, professional, and skill-based knowledge throughout the world. This has been tied to a deepening crisis of the research university, which has lost any clear sense of its distinctive mission. Third, there is growing tension everywhere between the claims of heritage, identity, and religion and the claims of free expression, opinion, and debate.

Each of these contextual factors, and their joint force, requires renewed attention to what I see as the *critical humanities*. Under this rubric, I assemble the traditional humanities (from linguistics and literature to history and philosophy), the newer brands of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies, and the softer social sciences, especially anthropology. This is the space that I see as the anchor for *CSSAAME*.

Challenges

I see four known challenges requiring continued engagement and fresh ideas. First, the tension between Western theories and local or non-Western archives remains unresolved. Discussions about this particular challenge continue to emerge, most recently in John and Jean Comaroff's book *Theory from the South*. While there has been much effort to disturb the somewhat static earlier geographic underpinnings of this debate—on the grounds that the North within the South has further blurred the problem of the West within the East, both as regards geopolitics and academic knowledge—the effort to build knowledge of and across areas without privileging some as superior guides to method or theory has not had much success. My own view, outlined in my recent book *The Future as Cultural Fact*, stresses that an important basis for progress here must be the effort to enable research to be a better distributed capacity across regions, classes, and disciplines. As far as *CSSAAME* is concerned, I think it would be useful for the journal to monitor, encourage, and publicize efforts anywhere in the world that have the democratization of research as a primary goal.

Second, we need to continue to engage the hoary issue of “text” and “context” that has historically been, *inter alia*, a proxy for the distinction between the humanities and the social sciences. It is clear that

there has been considerable progress on the “text” side of this binary, in linguistic, literary, and philological developments in the era after structuralism held sway. There has been comparatively slight progress in the study of “context.” Apart from a handful of linguists and philosophers, the problem of context remains part of the inert language of the social sciences and the humanities, and it is a ripe subject for a deep investigation based on case materials as well as revisitations of our conceptual languages. What defines a context? How do we handle the problem that all contexts also have their own contexts? Can there be a method for the study of intercontextuality? Are all contexts, such as temporal, spatial, regional, and disciplinary contexts, similar in their structure or form? If not, what does this mean for our scholarly practices?

Third, these considerations, if properly pursued, surely have implications for the study of the relationship between written media and all other media, including visual, electronic, and digital, all of which now play a crucial role in the critical humanities. Regional and areal histories affect the form and force of each of these media and thus of the relationships between them. These relationships cannot be grasped except by the structured investigation of materials from the maximum diversity of regions and of their comparison.

Fourth, none of these desiderata can be addressed except by confronting the dominance of English as a language of scholarship, debate, and publication worldwide. Absent a thoroughgoing effort to tackle problems of translation, dissemination, and linguistic democratization, non-English arguments on all of these issues will remain marginal, and the universe of comparison will be unacceptably narrow.

Priorities

These challenges suggest some priorities for the critical humanities and thus for the mission of *CSSAAME*. First, the rapidly growing field of visual culture studies should have a prominent place in the journal. We have seen remarkable developments in the study of mapping, image studies, and the visual technologies of warfare, borders, identification, and security. Each of these has involved new ways of reading the history of visual technologies and of using these readings to reexamine

fields as diverse as censorship, travel, iconoclasm, and journalism. These developments need to be harnessed to reexamine classical problems of language, translation, and interpretation.

Second, it is time for the critical humanities to cease to consign the study of such topics as hunger, energy, climate, planning, and war to the political and social sciences. Each of these topics raises important questions about epistemology, comparison, history, and archive, which have rarely been taken seriously by the harder human sciences. It is now vital to engage them critically, in the manner, for example, that Timothy Mitchell has addressed the category of the “economy” in the modern Western academy.

Third, insofar as contributions to *CSSAAME* involve regions and sources that are not dominated by English, it will be important to insist that authors be as explicit as possible about their approach to non-English sources, philologies, and archival practices. This should replace the older philological obsession with etymologies and roots with a dynamic understanding of how linguistic traditions influence how traces are formed and how such variably deposited traces can both enable and disable comparative our strategies of interpretation.

Fourth, it would be a major accomplishment if *CSSAAME* encouraged publications in the critical humanities from scholars and critics who now publish mainly in professional journals such as those of law, medicine, science, and business. Among these authors are a significant minority who are alert to problems of language, history, region, and genre, and they could bring into the journal vital new debates in fields such as climate, privacy, genomics, and financial derivatives (to name just a few) that have usually been absent in the pages of such journals as *CSSAAME*.

CSSAAME comes to a new point in its history at a time when there is a general exhaustion with involuted recent debates in the humanities and cultural studies—over postcolonialism, identity politics, deconstruction, the linguistic turn, and of course postmodernism— and when traditional social sciences have increasingly become allies of the neoliberal global market, largely by abdicating any and all deep criticisms of the global economy. There has never been a moment when

the world has been so visibly large and varied and the methods for its study so narrow and parochial. *CSSAAME* can correct this worrisome imbalance.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322345

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The relationship between discipline and region in the field of anthropology has undergone major transformations in the past twenty years. Where once an anthropologist could frame his or her work, both methodologically and theoretically, within a region with assumed spatial and temporal borders, by the mid-1990s such an enterprise was roundly viewed as misguided if not impossible. The groundwork for the destabilization of this relationship was laid by Marxist and feminist approaches beginning in the late 1960s, critiques of representation and the culture concept dating mainly from the 1980s, and the concomitant rise of postcolonial, poststructuralist, and critical theory more generally. For Middle East and South Asian anthropologists in particular, Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1979) was read as a direct challenge to reconsider the political implications of representing a region as a bounded whole. Older views of an anthropology divided into discrete world regions were made further untenable in the geopolitical context of decolonization movements, late and post-Cold War political realignments, and neoliberal capitalist and technological globalization.

Yet still, anthropology as a discipline continues to privilege deep regional experience and expertise. The sine qua non for the discipline is ethnographic fieldwork in one geographic place, and nearly all PhD programs require students to spend one to two years physically rooted in a single city, town, or village. Occasionally students

will conduct fieldwork in an additional location, but nearly always within the same nation-state boundaries. This fieldwork is then translated by all disciplinary measures as "methodological expertise" in a region, even though that region is typically defined as broader than the nation-state where the original fieldwork was conducted. Thus, a fieldworker in Egypt has expertise in the Middle East, an anthropologist working in Zimbabwe has expertise in Africa, and so on. Not only does this framework conflate nation-state with region, but it also assumes that research conducted in one location or community within a nation-state is more broadly representative of that country. Additionally, comprehensive exams or other evaluative structures in graduate training generally carve out an area of "expertise" defined as in-depth knowledge of ethnographic texts based on fieldwork in a specific region that, in the case of the "areas" of this journal, also supersede nation-state boundaries. These means of producing and assessing academic knowledge and expertise in anthropology result in ethnographic monographs that are based on research in one physical place. These are produced (and read) through a series of structures that define them as part of and often representative of a larger region. This privileging of regional expertise has often extended from ethnography to theory, as certain theoretical paradigms have been associated with specific regions within anthropology in ways that may limit the sorts of questions researchers ask and the topics they find important to study.

For the Middle East, this framework is especially problematic given that ethnographic fieldwork is nearly impossible in at least half the countries of the region because of on-site research restrictions. As we have discussed in "Anthropologies of Arab-Majority Societies," major differences in social life across contexts within the region also challenge the notion that ethnography in any one place can represent such a diverse whole. With very few exceptions, it is only when anthropologists begin second or third projects that they may consider doing comparative fieldwork between two nation-state contexts within the same region, as George Marcus has pointed out. Even then, we rarely see such fieldwork being conducted in two different world regions for the same project.

What may appear as a drawback from the perspective of macrocomparativist approaches found in other disciplines is, from the point of view of anthropologists, a distinct advantage. Anthropologists may not pursue comparative work in terms of location of fieldwork, but they would argue that only through ethnography can we get a fine-grained analysis of how transnational processes affect social life and vice versa. Also, if the impulse behind comparison is to see the similarities and differences across regions and assess why they exist, anthropologists typically say that they cannot make these distinctions without careful ethnography of how processes and structures are made manifest in social life. That is to say, ethnography can ascertain aspects of transnationality and comparativity that more macrolevel studies cannot. Fieldwork, in the view of anthropology, is a privileged means for accessing unexpected similarities and differences and remaining alert to the possibility that the comparativist impulse across large swathes of world regions can generalize in problematic ways.

Whatever the pretensions or virtues of this perspective on the relationship of anthropology to region, the fact is that theoretically anthropology has always been deeply committed to understanding human societies across space and time and in that sense is deeply comparativist at its core. In the past twenty years, with the theoretical interventions and global phenomena mentioned earlier, anthropologists of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa have found much synergy by reading each others' work to see how historical and contemporary global processes may be theorized in relationship to daily struggles and subject-making processes. (This synergy emphasizes regional interconnectedness and is thus very different than earlier moments in which, for example, Middle East anthropologists working on tribes may have adopted or tweaked structuralist analyses of tribes developed in Africa). In two prime examples of this new synergy, many Middle East anthropologists have incorporated theories of modernity and postcoloniality derived through scholarship on Africa and South Asia into their work. They have also found very productive theories of neoliberalism developed in Africanist research. In addition, work in all three regions featured in *CSSAAME*'s

title that is related to gender (and feminist theory) and/or religion (especially Islam) has tended toward cross-regional theoretical engagement, perhaps a testament to the longstanding popularity of those topics for both scholars of these regions and in public discourse more generally.

An inherently comparative journal like *CSSAAME* could further encourage these sorts of theoretical cross-fertilizations. For example, research on racialization processes in the Middle East—a significant lacuna in anthropological work there—would benefit from and could find inspiration in critical race theory that has emerged from work focused in Africa and the Black Atlantic. The burgeoning theories of youth and generation coming out of Africanist and South Asianist research could be very useful for Middle East anthropology to think through, particularly with the new geopolitical interest in youth in that region. Analyses that challenge assumptions about sectarianism in the Middle East could benefit from those that challenge similar assumptions about ethnic conflict in Africa. And greater emphasis on intersectionality within feminist theories, often emerging from South Asianist work as well as from work within the US context, might push Middle East anthropologists to connect their analyses of gender to class, race, and sexuality in addition to the common intersection of gender and religion.

In addition to this theoretical synergy, Middle East anthropologists now increasingly engage with forms of multi-sited ethnographic research that involve following transnational circulations, whether population movements or other transnational phenomena that link sites physically, imaginatively, figuratively, and virtually. Most fruitfully thus far, scholars have begun to explore labor migration, for example of workers from South Asia to the Arab Gulf, of Lebanese entrepreneurs to West Africa, and of Arab notables to South and Southeast Asia. *CSSAAME* could encourage this new area of scholarship focused on communities located at the intersections of regions, who maintain multiple kinship, social, and economic ties across them in their daily lives.

Anthropology of these three regions would also benefit from some comparative consideration of a number of transnational phenomena that are becoming the subject of exciting research within

and outside the discipline. Most pressing among these are carbon economies and their effects on societies, mega-cities and new forms of urban life and urbanization, cultural production and consumption, circulation of mass media across regional contexts, corporations and their effects on transnational relationships and local economies, resource management and sustainability especially in relation to water and food, resource privatization and the selling of land to other nations, and natural disasters. While work on Islam has long considered similarities and differences in practices and movements across these regions, such comparative thinking could be extended to work on Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism as well. And at the intersections of scholarship and activism, discussions of contemporary politics in Palestine and Israel could benefit from careful comparison to apartheid in South Africa and partition in South Asia.

In recent years, Middle East anthropologists have embraced collaborative models of research, including projects that link anthropologists with scholars from other disciplines, groups of anthropologists doing research on a single topic in one locale, and collaborations with “native informants.” Yet hardly any of this research is conducted in a deliberately transregional way. *CSSAAME* could facilitate such expansion of scholarly networks and advancement of new research models by actively seeking to publish scholarship produced by these new research collaborations. Such an initiative would add considerably to our knowledge of not only transregional connections but local processes and experiences as well.

Finally, the comparative thrust of *CSSAAME* provides a unique opportunity to consider how disciplinary interests get formed in relationship to regions. We need more meta-analysis of the kinds of questions or research foci that anthropology, and other disciplines, take up in different regions. *CSSAAME* could promote research that assesses (and compares and contrasts) what scholarship in specific regions contributes to particular disciplines and theoretical approaches, as collections such as *Africa and the Disciplines* and our forthcoming *Anthropology's Politics* work to achieve. Such a project would allow scholars to see the strengths and weaknesses of how subfields within disciplines,

and disciplines more generally, are formed in relationship to region. It would also help us continue the projects of decentering Euro-American theoretical models and generating theory from ethnography itself. From the perspective of Middle East anthropology, there is much to be gained from the comparative work that would be generated by new post-area studies approaches that nonetheless take area seriously.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322354

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To reinvent the content, or slip the shackles, of area studies and the disciplines is a worthy goal. I can only say: may the force be with you. You have every prospect of success in getting scholars to send you their best on regions as sources of theory and method, connective and comparative studies of regions and newly explored transregions. The time seems ripe for those kinds of things.

About disciplines, especially disciplinary history, I am not so sure. The gesture to deep history is most welcome. But these days the time depth of the history discipline gets shallower. History is increasingly the history of a past that is decreasing. At the same moment deep history is being constructed by cosmologists, chemists, geologists, and evolutionary biologists. Their knowledge surges ahead, aided by new instrumentation, new techniques, new conceptualizations, new zeal for history.

What seems to hold us back is an increasing belief in the singularity of our times and increas-

ing doubt about the ability of the remoter past to explain our times to ourselves—even in the face of the signal accomplishments of the natural sciences in doing just that. For us, the modern exerts a gravitational field that draws everything in. The modern is our black hole, which, try as we might, we cannot escape. Deep history is exactly what is needed to counteract it.

Is *CSSAAME* likely to stimulate the production of this life-giving tonic? Were I to have written the mission statement it would not contain the phrase *early modern* and would not put a limit on the time depth to which articles may go. And the invitation to consider pieces reaching farther back would not be so tepid. The tendency of the statement as written, I fear, may be to make the black hole stronger by reinscribing the singularity of the modern. Deep history does the opposite. And deep history is a force that knits up the sciences and the social sciences. I say again, may the force be with you.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322363

Congratulations to the new editors, editorial board, and home of this important journal, which has fostered global and trans-regional scholarship for more than thirty years. So many of the issues and themes raised and promoted in the journal remain crucially important in humanities and social science (HSS) scholarship today. For the next decade and beyond they will have to have a prominent place on the agenda, albeit in changing and different ways, as can be expected in any thriving and dynamic field or forum of debate and scholarship.

Despite the existence of this journal and a few others explicitly committed to fostering comparativist methods and transregional studies, the dominant trend in various fields of HSS appears to remain solidly national and single case in focus—the nation-state remains the object of study, or a question is framed in terms of its origins and complexity within a single country, comparisons across regions on the same continent or across continents are the exception, and there is a reliance on one

dominant language (perhaps two) for sources and so on.

There are many reasons for this, among which is the persistence of the area studies model developed in the US academy during the Cold War, for instance, and therefore it shaped teaching, research, and generations of scholars unwilling or unable to take risks and go beyond expertise in a country, a linguistic area, or at most an ill-defined region (defined more by unquestioned convention than rigorous analysis, e.g., the “Middle East”) as a secondary field of concentration. But cross-regional comparativism has not been encouraged as a field for deep, systematic research. We inherited the same approaches in the South; as we all know area studies took off with the decolonization of the South and the imperative to produce knowledge about its constituent parts.

There is then the problem of the cost of such research beyond the research ideology of “one problem, one country.” It is much costlier. In the South, resources are already stretched and HSS are very poorly funded. Our governments in the South have the same educational ideals set by the OECD and similar organizations, and HSS are recognized only if they can prove to be quantitative, or become massively so. Work on texts, on historical questions, or contemporary social processes without obvious relevance to developmental problems, or explicitly quantifiable through the establishment’s methods, do not really feature in national funding schemes for higher education. Thus to imagine a library even in the better resourced institutes in India, for instance, having the range of up-to-date secondary sources to allow a graduate student to construct a project proposal comparing an aspect of labor history between a South Asian and Latin American state is asking for much. This applies for the entire South.

In the mid-1990s Sephis (South-South Programme for Research in the History of Development) emerged precisely to enable researchers in the South with the means and opportunities—training and funding—to work in a comparative fashion focusing on diverse parts of the South. Sephis was modestly funded but put explicitly on the southern research agenda the possibility of thinking and doing research across regions in the South, of working outside the frame of the nation-

state, and taking research traditions and theory in the South outside their national spaces to a Global South community.

This task is necessary and massive and requires organizations and funding far larger than what Sephis had access to. But in its fifteen years it moved young scholars and ideas beyond national frontiers and to areas beyond their and our imagination. The challenges are tremendous (library resources, language training, conservative patronage, inherited research traditions), but with the extension of Internet capacity and web tools there are more ways to address some of these problems. Large bodies of materials from the South, however, need to be put into circulation through web platforms. A range of problems persists that undervalues the HSS produced in the South unless it reaches the northern academies. The challenges remain in finding the will, intellectual curiosity, and capacity to take risks and explore beyond the canon, the established disciplines, and networks embedded in patronage and authority.

The nation-state frame has bred an insularity that is hard to shake off. Prominent publishers come out every few years with new series of “national histories.” This has the effect of promoting such intellectual work as an ideal: If a senior scholar devotes herself or himself to such a task then perhaps it’s both a worthy ideal and potentially lucrative? These histories are useful to have, up to a point. But should these be encouraged? Look at South Africa, for instance, and the surfeit of general histories and now histories of liberation. But I cannot call to mind a single regional history of southern Africa; there are a few collections of essays that pretend to address the region, but they mostly treat the individual states of the region prefaced by an introduction that attempts to integrate the essays. How would a regional, southern African history of apartheid look? All the colonial regimes had apartheid policies, or variations thereof, without the name. Popular struggles and liberation movements with bases outside the country overthrew all of them. So why have there been so few attempts to write the history of the region in an integrated and comparative fashion? There are key turning points that have had integrating powers in the region; for example, the impact of the mining revolutions of the last quarter of the

nineteenth century brought labor from all over the region to the urban centers of South Africa; the Second World War was another turning point; liberation struggles in the early 1960s led to a flow of ideas and support among leaders and guerrillas of these movements; and the apartheid military attacked, threatened, and fostered rebels in all of the states systematically from 1975 onward.

We can raise similar questions for the Nile Valley where the histories of Egypt and Sudan cannot be written separately; the region includes Ethiopia and the Nile basin countries. The Levant, the question of Palestine, and so on all are issues that can productively be studied in comparative and cross-regional ways. There are a few cross-regional studies, but they are the exception to the rule of single-country emphasis. How to compare across these and other spaces? When the Arab Spring was in its early phases in 2011, TV pundits raised comparisons with Eastern Europe in the 1980s. But what about comparisons with other spaces and experiences from southern Africa to the Philippines?

Beyond region and cross-regional comparison there are entire processes that have for centuries spanned large-scale spaces and have in recent years generated exciting new work. We think here of the work done and still in progress on the Indian Ocean and various discrete parts of this vast space. This research has demonstrated the connections between Yemen and Indonesia, which is not an artifact of the past but a living history and reality. The same applies to the East African coast connecting Cape Town to Zanzibar and to Oman and so on. The work on the Indian Ocean shows how communities lived with and on the ocean. Yet the shore, the land, remains crucial in this experience where families and institutions established themselves by building local foundations and maintaining strong ties of religious heritage and other lineage networks to their regions of origin.

Such thinking that deepens analysis historically of a region and between disparate parts of a continent or between continents requires new kinds of training and collaborative work. It also requires linguistic skills to read bodies of literature in more languages other than the dominant ones in a country and region. The question of language leads to another set of issues that the new *CSSAAME* mission statement alludes to with

“philological renewal.” This is a moment in HSS that is indeed witnessing glimmers of a return to philology but not as a style of scholarship that removes the text from its worldliness. The specific details of the European “discovery” of “other” languages and the construction of fields of knowledge from historical linguistics to a broader comparative philology are themselves now fields of study. But areas that were once considered not to have the materials for philological study, such as intellectual production in large parts of Africa, have earned increasingly more attention. African intellectual history was very much a history of writing in the Latin script (English, French, Portuguese) that emerged with the coming of missionary education in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The rest was a problem of the reconstruction of oral tradition. “Mediterranean Africa,” as Hegel had it, was, and in mainstream work continues to be, cast as a world apart from the Sahara and the spaces beyond. We have seen just how connected these regions are today if we consider that the fall of Colonel Qaddafi in August 2011 had a direct impact on Mali by early 2012. This is one division that persists and that continues to require unlearning. It coincides with the misleading division of the continent into two distinct parts—orality in the North and literacy in the sub-Saharan.

But renewed work on the numerous, mainly family, manuscript libraries from Senegal to Ethiopia and northern Mozambique opens up new areas that require philological training at least in Arabic (and local languages in the Arabic script, *ajami*). These manuscripts are not in the standard Arabic script of, say, Damascus manuscripts (i.e., *khatt mashriqi*) but comprise a whole range of Arabic scripts with their own local inflections that have been dismissed as rather strange and at best mediocre Arabic calligraphy derived from *maghribi*, as has been the dominant argument. Yet the density of these materials requires that we look at these scripts as regionally diverse African reworkings of the Arabic script. Studies that can argue with the canon and place these scripts, and at another level, the huge and rich volume of work using these scripts, in context will entail philological skills but also reimagining the archive and the book in Africa. There are parallels and comparisons with

other historical experiences where classical philological methods simply neglected bodies of work and in periods when the idea of an archive was extremely limited.

CSSAAME has done admirable work in the past; it has to continue pushing comparative frontiers and the dominant foundations in theory and method that genuinely open new pathways to think about the world.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322372

Congratulations. Over three decades of sustained labor, *CSSAAME* has tracked breaking scholarship and scanned long-term trends. Its continued existence will fill an important institutional need, but it will also entail—not to be left out—the ugly, rugged work of maintaining a journal. For those who do not know, the work of publishing a journal is relentless and unappreciated. It is, moreover, remarkably badly “theorized,” given the centrality of journals to scholarship and intellectual debate and the key role that editors and reviewers play in shaping how initial thoughts become structured, publishable ideas.

Your statement delights in the arrival of post-disciplinary interstitial university spaces, where research and publication shall take place in a brave new world to come. How can I fully disagree? I have also operated in a few of these spaces. Rockefeller and Luce Foundation grants, the generosity of an impoverished state university, and the largesse of a wealthy private one have kept alive the journal I founded and edit, *positions: asia critique*—but stewarding scholarship hand-to-mouth is a hard role to maintain, year in and year out. The spaces that you celebrate may disappear without warning. I am less celebratory, of course, but then perhaps it is my temperament to understate, to avoid the evil eye.

How does a phoenix journal rise from the ashes of its past? To me, new media are only one possible avenue for rebirth, and one that requires scholars to be already engaged in a struggle to define them. *positions* has welcomed “new media

flows,” a Montreal-based collective that fuses so-called post-area studies with new media critique. Their first issue is in the *positions* hopper now. My point is cautionary. Get together with emergent scholars who already know this struggle firsthand. Collaborate with them. Support their efforts. Change your style.

What sort of submissions should you seek? At *positions*, we stopped soliciting because we found we did not need to solicit. Projects come to us. I would say, issue an initial call and projects will contact you to sell their ideas. Given the chance, they will propose why a topic or debate is timely or, in the case of antifoundationalist efforts, absolutely urgent.

What is the purpose of a journal? I have thought about this question a long time. Walter Benjamin said that the journal is the central element that marks the extant scholarship of the times. It is not that the editor goes around asking for scholarship to be written, so much as the editor must never publish anything they do not believe in, and must scan the environment to find scholars and works that speak to the political moment. Now, of course, Benjamin never published a journal. He had no real idea what sort of labor it requires. However, I take his point. A journal is born with a purpose. The purpose of *positions* was to find out what “post-Cold War” and “after Orientalism” would mean in practice for a Cold War Asian studies that had gone defunct already. In those dramatic days, people fought like animals to establish a thought or politics about the future of the corpse of “Asian studies,” so there was never a question about the journal’s purpose. Purpose and its vigilant editor arose out of a conjuncture. Where is the conjuncture *CSSAAME* finds itself in now?

If you do commission projects, I urge you to use a debate structure. The debates can involve historiography, geography, ideology, periodization, virtually anything. But the point must be a general one and the invited scholars have to come in bands or groups, so that the pure implications arising from the ground of struggle can be shown in bright contrast. These are not the fake debates where truth is alleged to lie in the middle. I am talking about debates where genealogies of scholarship are aired. Where in the current debates over neoliberalism and globalization, for example,

do new Marxisms belong? What must we unearth about that scary and weird period when theoretical Maoism transformed continental philosophy? What schools of scholarship have arisen around the great midcentury traumas? We all know them, but what if we were to meet and debate earnestly the strengths and weaknesses of these coteries, some even attached to independent journals? Why not hold a great meeting of journal advocates to delineate differences in approach, to draw ideological and political inferences?

On the topic of review essays, I have not had luck publishing this genre in our journal, in part because it is a hornet’s nest (who wants to offend anyone these days?), and in part because review essays are a thankless task. I wrote one myself for another journal and I liked it, because I no longer have trepidation and I do have pronounced opinions, overviews to contribute. Get older, established scholars to write review essays. I think we owe it to the fields to be frank and critical.

The best conferences in my experience are those that organize around a set of problems. The “After Orientalism” conference in 1992 set the agenda for *positions*’ first two years. The journal’s recent MLA prize-winning special issue—*War Capital Trauma*—arose out of a conference held at the University of Washington, funded by a Rockefeller Grant in the Humanities for “The Trauma Project.” Younger scholars also like conferences that address practical questions about the overlap of individual careers and political engagement. This would suggest a topic about publication venues and new strains of research. Any conference that brings generations together in comfortable dialogue and company will likely be successful.

One final thought about our fields. What if, in the projects of the journal itself, you intervene to show what a field was or might be, or is currently, in ways that help shape the future? Twenty years ago “queer” was a scary word. Now it is a field, and *positions* publishes queer studies. “Postcolonial” was not a field then either. Neither was “theory” something you could study formally in school. It seems to me that journals like *positions* have helped shape what is acceptable as a field precisely by employing a strong double-blind review process, enabling editors to be aggressive, and walking into

hornet's nests fairly regularly, particularly in the early years of their existence.

Warm collegial thoughts for collaboration in your brave new future.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322381

The relocation of *CSSAAME* to Columbia University certainly offers its editorial board a great opportunity to rethink both the character of regionally specific scholarship and the possibility of creating linkages and conversations between such regions. I am in full agreement with the journal's mission regarding the limits of the postwar area studies model in the United States as well as the dangers posed by the new "scientism" of disciplines like political science and their quest for a universality that transcends place. The journal should indeed provide a forum for thinking critically about inherited models of regional knowledge while at the same time foregrounding new theoretical interventions in rethinking its categories. And Columbia is so well-placed to make such conversations possible that it is even possible to conceive of one of the journal's tasks as being that of engaging its scholars and graduate students, especially in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS), in a set of collective debates on these subjects. I cannot think of another research institution where the task of a journal maps so well onto the interests of its scholars.

It seems to me that one of the implications of the increasingly visible limitations of area studies has to do with the revitalization of the discipline as a framework for study. Of course such disciplines are no longer the methodologically hidebound things they once claimed to be. Instead they appear to provide scholars with forms of inquiry and styles of narration that can inform other disciplines without being welded together into a single super-model of knowledge. The area, in other words, may no longer provide a home for scholars in different disciplines, which must now encounter one another afresh in a wider world of

reference. This means that the journal will inevitably have to deal with the problem of disciplinary as much as regional knowledge. And what better way to deal with these intertwined problems than by thinking historically about region, context, and locality rather than in purely abstract terms about "the historical method" or "ethnography"? The interconnection and displacement of such questions is likely to give these debates a new richness of texture.

Crucial to the mission of the journal should be the possibility of restoring in the arena of knowledge those interregional relations that were cut apart by Euro-American political and economic dominance. Just as important is the task of making entirely new relations possible in the Global South that needn't require mediation through the West. This is of course already beginning to happen in the political and economic spheres, but the production of knowledge from and about these relationships still lags behind. Will new forms of knowledge be produced from these sites and travel abroad? In contrast to this project is another that may be said to be its mirror image, the study of dislocation and mobility in the global arena. Removed from the ideal of neutral and universal knowledge that characterizes the new "scientism," what makes this phenomenon important is the way in which the militant practices of Al-Qaeda, for example, proffer models of knowledge and communication that are global without being geographically defined in any strong sense. They have nothing to do with cartographic expansion, like that of commodities, or even with saturating a field of visibility seen as a flat and empty space.

If the globe is not the sum of its geographical parts, then, of course, the opposition between local and global falls apart, since what is most globalized might well be the most particular of practices or experiences. In other words, regional and local worlds are probably more likely than international organizations or large countries to be the homologues of or interlocutors for global movements. This way of thinking about the regional and the global permits scholars, in addition, to think beyond economies of scale and spatiality in general to redefine the area by aligning it with—rather than against—the globe. And this immedi-

ately makes the model of “scientistic” universality outdated and irrelevant as any kind of challenge to regional knowledge. For the countervailing tendencies to the uniformities of “scientism” are those discontinuities that attach locality to the global in geographically unmediated ways. The opportunity of thinking about regional knowledge outside a cartographic framework is one that should not be forsaken, as it may well provide an entirely novel way of considering the particularity of knowledge. This means that we are now able to question all those accounts of circulation and mobility that take the old-fashioned map as their ground.

If the journal’s editors want to think critically about expansiveness and spatiality, set against the global arena and its regional homologues, then the website and visual materials are crucial. Both works of art and visual studies, as well as scholarly interrogations of them, are able to grasp this dimension of discontinuity better than texts. But the journal should also host the kind of located historical analysis that might counteract the superficial fixation on mobility and circulation, where things, ideas, or persons are seen as metaphors for the movement of capital. But such movements are not capable of questioning region or locality conceptually, only of expanding or contracting their reach. Neither do they allow us to think about global discontinuity, apart from as a limitation, and can only reinstate the traditional cartographic conception of flat space. Is it possible to think about relations among South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in a way that doesn’t fall back into the logic of spatiality and expansiveness? This question, I believe, should pose a productive challenge for the journal’s editors and contributors.

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 DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322390

My reflections are of an entirely practical nature and are based on my experience as editor of an area-based journal, *Central Asian Survey*. I entirely agree with the observation in the mission statement that we are poised at a crucial moment when disciplines and area-based knowledge can enter into more meaningful interaction.

However, in the UK at least, institutional research performance auditing (such as the former Research Assessment Exercise [RAE], now the Research Excellence Framework [REF]) exerts powerful pressure on scholars not only to publish in discipline-based journals but to favor those on a particular league table of supposed excellence in their parent disciplines. As a result, we have had to rethink the ways in which we could make the most effective contribution. In our case we found that unfolding events in the region we cover (such as the various “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, for example) receive shallow and often misleading commentary, and we started to think about how we could combine current “hot” topics with attention to the *longue durée* and solid analytical grounding. Agenda-setting special issues were the means we used to drive this orientation, put together through a combination of conference papers, calls for papers, and sometimes invited contributions—all subject of course to a rigorous peer review process. I think it has worked. Left entirely to the vagaries of regular submissions, we would never have achieved the goals we set ourselves.

The task of *CSSAAME* is even more complex since it has a broader geographical scope than *Central Asian Survey*. But it should not be impossible to identify clusters of issues that can be put in a comparative cross-regional perspective and to draw upon different disciplines. (In our case, for instance, the dialogues between political scientists and anthropologists, in particular political anthropologists, turned out to be fascinating.) In brief, initially at least, a proactive editorial policy that targets specific issues or clusters of issues that have immediate real-world relevance seems desirable. The issue of so-called postauthoritarian transitions will run and run, and so will resource issues and the geopolitics thereof. What is more important than the actual list of concerns at this point is what editorial mechanisms will be mobilized to

create a new platform. In my experience this sort of thing actually takes shape in the doing anyway. Best wishes with this new undertaking.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322399

It is a pleasure as well as an honor to respond to the editors' statement about their plans for *CSSAAME*. As they write, the present is exciting in both its opportunities and perils; area studies' half-empty glass can spur new and important scholarship. I agree that much of the most exciting scholarship of the past decade transcends region—from the brilliant scholarship of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to the ever-expanding literature on diasporas, much of the best work has moved among regions and balanced cosmopolitanism with a grounding in many localities at once. However, it seems to me the defunding of area studies maps onto the perilous state of Western universities, recently compounded by their governments' insistence on austerity. More than a shift in academic emphasis, scholars based in the West face an accumulating set of contradictions: the casualization of the academic labor force, increasing demands on candidates for hiring and promotion, and the difficulty of publication especially for junior scholars. While one might simply conclude that *CSSAAME* could play a productive role in mentoring young scholars as they make their first publications and in consolidating its position as a high-quality venue for them to aspire to, a wider lens suggests additional possibilities for *CSSAAME*'s future.

The editors' call to recast areal focus can be sharpened and clarified by looking at the crisis of area studies with a wider lens. If the crisis of area studies is of a piece with a worldwide crisis of higher education, we might date this less to austerity policies enforced in OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries as a result of the economic crisis of the 2000s than to the debt crisis of the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism. Almost everywhere, universities and researchers have regularly been faced with ever-shrinking budgets and with demands for produc-

tivity gains incompatible with the current model of university education. Area studies was particularly hard hit by such demands. While US government funding and canny Rockefeller grants were crucial in establishing and consolidating their intellectual vigor, area studies has always depended on links between universities in OECD countries and in the "areas" being studied. Scholars circulated among universities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and in Euro-America, to the benefit of all. Dependency theory, the *Dar es Salaam* school of historiography, and subaltern studies are almost random examples of the critical importance of global intellectual exchange. The circulation of scholars became more difficult during the 1980s and 1990s as structural adjustment policies strangled academic life in many countries. "Circulation" became "brain-drain," following cutbacks, which often occurred in rich countries as well.

Within my own field of African studies, one of the most exciting developments of the 2000s was an easing of conditions at many African universities. Speaking impressionistically, it seems to me intellectual ties have greatly strengthened in the past decade. At the same time, more universities are attempting to serve international constituencies, teaching students and sponsoring research about South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and significantly contributing to the transnational and transregional trends the editors cite. Thus, the "explosive growth" the editors foresee in non-Western universities is a promising return to earlier periods of intense exchange. All of this, of course, is simply to say that the political economy of higher education and research will be critical to *CSSAAME*. The past half century of higher education has demonstrated that periods of plenty are followed by dearth. Programs once cut are often difficult to revive. The patterns of funding that undergird today's intellectual excitement will not last forever, and we must be prepared for whatever comes next. But if anything, this can be more an opportunity than a sign of ultimate futility. How can truly global exchanges be sustained given the feast-then-famine quality of our institutional politics?

The greatest hope may lie in another terrible danger, that of the crisis in academic publishing. I would urge the editors to consider the problems

of copyright and of access to journals, which of course is one of the greatest barriers to international scholarship for scholars in poor countries and for people outside the academy. How might it be possible for more people to get access to articles published in *CSSAAME*, and how might scholarly discussion be made more accessible to those without current academic affiliation? Similarly, scholars in many places have difficulty getting access to up-to-date scholarly debates and therefore face difficulties in taking international scholarship into account. Even if the current moment is relatively conducive to journal access for scholars in many locales, we can be quite certain it will not always be.

Additionally, in the United Kingdom at present, the government is considering requiring all research funded by the public research councils to be published in open-access venues. It is not clear yet what ultimate policies will result from this, but the initiative poses grave dangers to academic research in the UK and to journals like *CSSAAME*, which might want to publish UK-funded research. The more optimistic way to think about this, however, is to wonder whether *CSSAAME* and Duke University Press might be able to find a way of making work accessible that did not also destroy the journal's ability to pay for itself. To its very great credit, the press offers radically discounted subscriptions to institutions in poor countries and to students, and of course scholarly norms are increasingly adapting to a world of e-mail and PDF attachments. Perhaps this is a moment to think carefully about how such norms can be systematized and institutionalized.

Clearly, neither *CSSAAME* nor the press can solve the problem of unequal access to scholarly publishing. But I wonder whether the journal might consider going farther in the direction of accessibility in its plans for special projects, commissions, and conferences than the editors describe. Would it be possible for *CSSAAME* to broaden the mandate of a scholarly journal to make itself something of a social network as well? Would it be possible to make the journal's website a message board as well, to maintain a database of the e-mail addresses of published authors, to create a set of suggestions for the ideal *CSSAAME* conference that might include relatively inexpensive

forms of teleconferencing such as Skype, which might enable wider participation and might enable organizers from a wider range of institutions and backgrounds? It seems to me that a relatively small number of innovations at the center might make it possible for the journal to address broader constituencies and to do so without violating the copyrights that enable to press to publish.

To shift gears radically, let me illustrate the suggestions I have made with a problem and an example of great concern to me. At the time of this writing, ongoing violence in northern Nigeria has been somewhat eclipsed in international coverage of West Africa by the civil war in Mali, but the two situations have overlapped in uncomfortable and problematic ways. Outside commentators have often taken both as instances of "Islamist violence," local outbreaks of a more general process radicalizing Muslims and part of an ongoing struggle between Islam and the forces of democracy, modernity, stability. Needless to say, such a view is desperately oversimple and indeed no longer serves any coherent goal, even to the extent Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" paradigm fed a particular neoconservative approach to international relations. Needless to say, the bombings and shootings in Nigeria bear little resemblance to Malian secessionist violence, nor do Tuareg rebel groups and Salafist militias discernably parallel the murky history of Nigeria's Bok'o Haram or volatile intersection between vigilante organization and party politics. The broad spectrum of political violence in West Africa is simultaneously local, regional, and global. Local leaders with deep-rooted constituencies come into conflict over resources, ethnicity, and patronage, and these conflicts have their own long histories. Mali's troubles cannot be understood without a grasp of the intricacies of Tuareg politics, nor is Bok'o Haram comprehensible without a longer-term appreciation of the role Islam has played in Nigeria's regionalized and ethnicized politics. Local political interests come into conflict with local rivals and with opponents from elsewhere in the country. Meanwhile, international networks circulate ideas, weapons, fighters, and religious figures. In such circumstances, it is unproductive to label conflicts "religious" or not. Western tendencies to take these complex pro-

cesses as a kind of religious frenzy do little justice to their deep historical roots and leave little hope for productive engagement.

It would be easy to conclude from this that what one really needs at such junctures is a revived area studies, albeit one perhaps more attentive to the role regional and global forces play in influencing and sustaining local conflict. But there is something more important to be teased out. Because as frustrating as so much Western journalistic coverage and policy analysis is, one cannot discard it entirely: such narratives are themselves a form of local knowledge. Such paradigms influence many profoundly influential actors and thus are necessary to take into account. While many scholars are well situated to debunk particular reductive narratives, the most useful intervention might be one that simultaneously provided accounts of local conflicts and of the various systems of understanding that comprehended them. Narratives of “global jihad” or “Islamism” are more than a paranoid, Orientalist fantasy, in part because they do correspond with universalistic aspirations invoked by groups with international contacts and aspirations. But more than that, the narrative of religious danger describing West African violence channels national and international responses to them into a mode of opposition that can heighten conflict rather than resolving it. Obviously *CSSAAME* cannot somehow create an area studies simultaneously attentive to local complexity, the convoluted epistemic twists of international systems of knowledge, and desirable policy outcomes. Nonetheless, I wonder if a sustained commitment to international dialogue and accessibility would not enable a series of publications that achieve academic rigor while addressing multiple constituencies in a manner that enables the imagination of alternative futures. A careful attention to local particularity and to the analytic potential of grand theory is both precondition for and consequence of sustained conversation between Global South and Global North. More than a forum to engage in both the nomothetic and idiographic, *CSSAAME* might facilitate a series of dialogues that more profoundly engages the multiple constituencies knowledge about the region must necessarily serve.

What would this look like in practice? In the case of northern Nigeria, one might attempt

to bring together a variety of forums—civil society organization and research groups in Nigeria, counterparts in Euro-America, perhaps also online fora such as Naija Net to provide a broad spectrum of commentaries. An international array of scholars exists to help coordinate such a project, from the most senior to the most junior, and with Skype and teleconferencing, the costs of an international conference could be kept to a minimum. If *CSSAAME* were to recruit several such figures to coordinate forum meant to encompass both academic papers and more general commentaries, and to provide them with a set of templates for potential publication, the intellectual payoff could be profound. The result would not only be a series of distinguished publications but a set of discussions around them that might have more profound consequences. My space here is limited, and thus my prescription is necessarily vague and somewhat utopian. Nonetheless, in the end *CSSAAME* will make its greatest contribution through boldness and through taking advantage of the limitations that might otherwise stifle it. The editors’ statement suggests they have precisely the vision that might make such endeavors possible.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322408

CSSAAME’s proposal to rethink the region and the disciplines comes at an apposite moment: while there is an almost ubiquitous acknowledgment of the importance of location, attempts to give substance to this idea face the threat of dissolution of all locations into expansive global narratives. Can regional studies offer a new site of engagement with spatial specificity and connectedness at the same time?

More than four decades ago, Bernard Cohn wrote about there being “as many definitions of regions as there are social science disciplines and problems that social scientists investigate.” He identified four kinds of regions for special attention: historical, linguistic, cultural, and structural. Cohn’s essay was an attempt to complicate the picture by focusing on the problems that arose while working with clear definitions. He questioned in

particular the assumption that regions, once established, are unproblematically comparable.

The critical valence of the region as an analytical category in the postcolonial context has derived mainly from its ability to avoid simplistic paradigms based on the nation or on a unitary understanding of the postcolonial condition. The region has been invoked in order to designate subnational or supranational locations, often implicitly referring to the category of the nation for comparison and contrast. In foregrounding sites of affective habitation that do not correspond to national territories, the region has the ability to challenge the nation's dominance over idioms of belonging. By bringing longer precolonial histories into the discussion, regions have also complicated easy causal explanations in terms of colonial charting and reconfiguration of spaces. However, while the region may appear as a more immediate locus of privileged geographical affect than the nation, it is as deeply linked as the nation to political and administrative arrangements and systems of control. It is useful to recall the region's etymological connections with *regnum*. The common sets of practices, which give identity to a region, develop in a space of rule, regulation, and control and undergo constant negotiation.

In literary studies in India, the category of the region has been invoked most often to speak of the literary cultures of individual languages. The phrase "regional literature" refers in practice to literature written in languages other than English and, to some extent, Hindi. The regional here stands in contrast with the national, indicating its marginal status in relation to the centers privileged by the nation-state. This marks a departure from the relationship of inclusive transcendence in which regions were placed within nationalist discourse, where the true meaning of all regions is seen as emerging from their identification with the nation. However, even when the region stands in an oppositional relationship to the nation, it has often been conceived in precisely nationalist terms as a site of immemorial and authentic belonging, as the really true nationality. Recent scholarship has tried to move away from this conception by focusing on the political processes through which regional identities have emerged as sites of control and exclusion, not only through the work of

colonial and postcolonial governmental technologies but also through various techniques of norm setting within literary institutions and linguistic practices. New scholarship has highlighted the fractured nature of the literary public sphere and its consequences for understanding the formation of linguistic identities.

Literary histories have been a crucial space for narrativizing linguistic regions. The identity of linguistic regions is often secured at the expense of a wide range of language practices, oral and written. The historical and political processes through which literary regions are shaped can be grasped only by going beyond monolingual models of literary history. Multilingual histories of literary cultures may not only throw better light on the literary and language practices of a region but also open regional spaces to new connections beyond the borders of linguistic identities. This has important consequences for our reading of individual literary texts and the history of literary forms. The space occupied by texts are to be considered not in terms of the history of a single-language literature but as constituted by networks of cross-linguistic connections and transactions. The philology for our times needs to acknowledge multiplicities of articulation and access; this is crucial if the concept of the vernacular is to retain its critical edge in cultural historiography.

I see this approach as opening regional studies to the rich dynamic of a new sort of comparative work. What I have in mind is not the comparison of preexisting unities; the work of comparative literature within a nationalist frame has often moved in this direction. The new comparative work, which does not take the self-intelligibility of national literatures for granted, brings into the limelight relationships that cut across languages and national territories.

A striking example of this is Isabel Hofmeyr's work on Indian Ocean print cultures, about which she wrote in *CSSAAME* recently. Multilingualism, complex and fluid relationships with territoriality, and multifarious negotiations with imperial governance, communities, and norms—the Indian Ocean print public sphere has brought all these to the foreground. Even major texts like Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* have become available for a fresh reading through a rich understanding of genres,

reading practices, and addressees. Its meticulous attention to location and circulation, to spaces and processes makes Hofmeyr's work an important example of the new comparative work I have in mind.

Understood in this sense, the region may be seen not as existing self-sufficiently prior to the work of comparison but perhaps as a conceptual and methodological tool that is constituted through comparison. We need to see comparison as a process of opening enclosures to understand them in their contaminated connectedness; it involves a training of the eye on the jostling of differences from which identities are forged and equalities measured and determined. The consequences of such reorientation for conceptual categories, methods, and disciplinary assumptions have not yet been fully understood. The philology of comparative regional studies may learn more from a cultural anthropology of practices than from a stable typology of doctrines or forms. *CSSAAME's* relaunch offers an opportunity to reconsider and interrupt our disciplinary habits. By challenging the stability of proper spatial locations, the category of the region—not as a distinct preexistent object, but as constituted through comparison in its new sense—offers the promise of productive critical interruption.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322417

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Scholarship of the last two decades in cultural theory has created new paradigms in the readings of non-Western cultures. Not only have these theories critiqued the universal discourse of Western humanism, but they have also attributed agency and history to the subaltern human. Who has the authority to speak for non-Western cultures? Can the colonial past be transcended? What are the appropriate epistemological tools to understand the colonial past? These are questions that in the last two decades have been actively debated both in the West and the postcolony. Indeed, the decades radically rethought European epistemology and challenged prevailing universal concepts of European modernity to rework and redefine knowledge.

Nevertheless, theories of postcolonialism and cultural studies that have facilitated these debates have also often looked at the postcolony from a distant Western institutional base and have periodically neglected key components of subaltern identity. What is contentious is that those ideas that articulate the experiences of coloniality have also frequently overshadowed the significance of distinct and variegated narratives of the experiences of coloniality. Therefore, while there is an undeniable acknowledgment of the gains of cultural studies and postcolonial theory, there is also an emergent consensus among non-Western scholars to critically reexamine the textualities and discourses of these theories. More and more of us who work in the non-West are finding out that the claims of these theories cannot be unified under a broad rubric without taking into account diverse colonial histories and dissimilar postcolonial presents. Certainly, the interventions of these theories have given us a critical paradigm with which we can interrogate the hierarchies found in culture. Yet the riches of interiority ultimately call for a new kind of intellectual enterprise to consider the immeasurable archives that have structured disparate experiences, intellectual trajectories, and contrasting social and cultural practices.

For instance, debates in African modernism that in the last two decades emanated from diasporic African artists, curators, and historians successfully challenged traditional notions of modernism by introducing modernism's plurality. Indeed, the hegemonic history of Western art along with

the art market had not accounted for the artistic production of the non-West in its narrative of modernism's history. This authority of Western art history had long complicated the analysis, trading, and exhibition of African art. Exhibitions such as 2002's "Short Century, Liberation and Independence" at PSI Contemporary Art Museum and journals such as *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* nevertheless challenged this canonical ontology of Western art and gave new importance to the creative principles of Africa. In the Western art platforms and institutions, complex aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions continue to dominate discussions of African modernity and modernism, exploring an alternative way to understand their trajectory beyond familiar discourses. Unfortunately, this discourse has also largely ignored the parameters of contemporary and archival accounts of African artists who live in the continent today. Its critical engagement has been confined to African diaspora artists, consequently marginalizing the production of art inside the continent itself.

The works of artists in the continent is characterized by local needs and indigenous cultural forces where the construction of artists' identities is continuously being challenged. For instance, there are many artists who articulate issues such as the tribulations of obtaining visas to the West. If one passes by the US Embassy in Addis Ababa, one is confronted with the notion of absolute Otherness. People are lined up in long queues to supposedly attain their passage to freedom. In question here is not peoples' attempt to flee from Africa's economic dejection that the West is so much responsible for, but the humiliation and harshness that the subject encounters to be granted this authorization. People are treated like animals, faced with harsh interrogation techniques and many times false accusations of forgery and deception. The African subject is constituted, among many other stereotypes, as genocidal and destitute. It is no wonder then that this subject deserves the cruelty bestowed to monsters and animals, not deserving the dignity of a human being. It is this spite of the visa officials that attempts to articulate itself in many artists' works in the context of identities that both produce and are produced by specific environments.

There are also few artists who work on the challenges of neoliberal development paradigms.

For instance, Behailu Bezabih, a prominent Ethiopian artist, works on collages made of old newspapers collected from homes that were destroyed to give way to road constructions, where many people are and continue to be displaced. Although the government provides compensation for these homes, often these compensations are not enough for purchasing other homes in the city, as real estate prices have skyrocketed. The influxes of foreigners who are representatives of hundreds of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are emblems of neoliberalism, have also exacerbated the problem of housing, and many who are displaced are forced to settle for affordable places that are many miles out of the city. One encounters a sense of exile and displacement in one's own country when identity is thus negotiated and renegotiated consistently. Road construction has become a fetish of modernity because of neoliberal models of modernization that favor infrastructure over everyday life. Therefore, artists challenge the contemporary social and political phenomena of Ethiopian subjectivity.

While postcolonial theory and cultural studies have greatly contributed to the debates of African modernism, consequently opening the space for African diaspora modernists to participate in the international art scene, these theories have also discounted African contemporary artists who live in the continent and attempt to articulate the political and social conditions of their contemporary experience.

It is therefore with great pleasure that we African scholars in the continent welcome the relaunching of *CSSAAME* and support its mission, as we urgently need the platform to critically engage our contemporary experiences.

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The editorial statement is most promising and suggests that *CSSAAME* will continue to play a vital role as a forum for publishing rigorous and theoretically informed area studies research. In my view, the journal's principal and most distinctive contribution has been its support for scholarship that transcends the parameters of area studies as it is conventionally understood. Despite several provocative analytic interventions—Freitag and von Oppen's *Translocality* and Bayly and Fawaz's *Modernity and Culture*, for example—and the growing interest in South-South connections, it has been my experience that North American professional organizations like the Middle East Studies Association and the African Studies Association are generally uninterested in interregional work outside a few well-established domains. Although academic publishing is considerably more flexible in this regard, it is nonetheless true that many area studies journals are skeptical of contributions that make interregional comparisons or draw upon theoretical insights derived from other fields. For better or worse, the region remains the dominant analytic category.

The implications of this situation are especially acute in my own field, Northeast African studies. Despite the region's contemporary geopolitical significance and the august history of Semitic studies related to the Horn of Africa, there is currently little institutional support for the field in North America and Europe, and Horn-based scholars face a host of nearly insurmountable obstacles when it comes to obtaining new publications and funding their own research. For these reasons, the specialist literature is rich in empirical detail and theoretical implications, but its audience is small. While there are numerous journals devoted to—and published in—the region, these tend to feature research that is highly compartmentalized within contemporary ethnic and national categories, and there are few other fora for publishing scholarship related to Northeast Africa. As a result, the field is now effectively marginalized from the rest of African studies and entirely divorced from Middle Eastern studies. Once rightly seen as a borderland, the region itself has been occluded by the intellectual and institutional fault lines of area studies.

Nonetheless, some recent work has attempted to remedy this situation by forging links with other literatures and advancing the conceptual apparatus of the field. Four lines of inquiry have been especially fruitful. First, some researchers, including Jonathan Miran and Scott Reese, have endeavored to develop a Braudelian approach to the region by situating the littoral societies of the Horn within the broader historical dynamics of the Red Sea arena, in the process revealing a host of migrant actors, material flows, and institutional networks that have hitherto rarely figured in scholarship. This promising work, some of which has appeared in recent issues of *Northeast African Studies* and *Chroniques Yéménites*, has begun to situate Northeast Africa within Indian Ocean studies. A second and related development has been a growing interest in the region's manifold ties with Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, and the Muslim world more generally, most recently manifest in edited collections (by Donald Crummey, Israel Gershoni, Meir Hatim, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, Kharyssa Rhodes, and Haggai Erlich, among others) and several panels on diasporas, migrations, and imperial strategies at last year's 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Dire Dawa. A third line of inquiry, which Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis has encouraged through a special issue of *Callaloo*, has moved from the study of modernization to the interrogation of modernity as a discursive, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon. Though this work is still very preliminary, it has encouraged the growth of literary and cultural studies in a field largely dominated by philology and the social sciences. Finally, a new military historiography is emerging—in work by scholars such as Gebru Tareke and Richard Reid, for instance—that provocatively considers the political, social, and institutional history of violence.

A journal like *CSSAAME* has the potential to nurture these and other promising developments in Northeast African studies and bring them to a wider audience, especially since it represents a prominent publication venue for specialists who wish to engage scholars in adjacent and allied area studies fields. To this end, I hope the editors will consider (1) inviting Horn-based scholars to join the editorial board, and/or (2) organizing special

issues or roundtables related to Northeast Africa and the Global South.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322435

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Thank you for this welcome opportunity for conversation on the new vision and direction for *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, as announced in the mission statement for the journal's upcoming tenure at Columbia. I am especially engaged by your accent on the humanities and task of philological renewal, as by the journal's commitment to the ongoing disciplinary life of critical and postcolonial theory. Despite the prognostications of demise that have haunted postcolonial theory since its very inception, the field has been powerfully evolute over the past three decades. Since the combative and countercanonical energies of its beginning years it has, in the main, comprised laborious empirical work precisely in the domain of connective history: such that the term *transnationalism* has become by degrees the preferred substitute term for *postcolonialism*. Thanks to the efforts of numerous scholars across the disciplines it is all the harder to justify provincial historical thinking: secularism, cosmopolitanism, political economy, and indeed modernity itself each evince a global canvas. We can no longer entirely circumscribe the conditions of possibility for twentieth-century phenomenology within Europe, or restrict the political reverberations of *mimamsa* to ancient South Asia alone, or ascribe a purely Western genealogy to the longue durée of ethical cynicism-stoicism. It now reasonable to query the pedagogic as well as ideological soundness of certain forms of disciplinary abstraction—wherein, say, a curriculum that deals exclusively with the history of European citizenship is presented as sufficient to the concept of the "citizen," and so on.

To arrive at this critical juncture, however, many of us in the humanities have had to take our cue from the social sciences. Since the 1980s, oppositional English departments have addressed the task of substantiating connective histories through a powerful positivist turn, underwritten by deep suspicion about "pure" literary or aesthetic value. Even those scholars who spoke up in defense of theory in past decades did so by insisting upon the ineluctable materiality or evidentiary worth of impalpable epistemologies, whether philosophical or literary. Though this emphasis was especially invigorating after the stifling era of postwar synchro-

nous literary criticism (in the Anglo-American academy), perhaps the one-way relationship between the humanities and social sciences is ripe for reversal under a new interdisciplinary comparatist dispensation?

Our collective endeavor in postcolonial literary studies has been saturated by the strenuous demands of information gathering: Which subaltern-colonial conscripts were on the ground in the world wars of the previous century? What were literate South Asians actually reading in nineteenth-century colonial libraries? What does a transnational history of malaria look like? This sort of work remains necessary but is no longer sufficient to the world it has brought into view. We are also beholden to the more subtle consciousness that even the most minor histories, or occluded life forms, or localized language games might possess an undisclosed global import; the smallest utterance could be a crucial link in a vast discursive network. Is corroboration the only meaningful academic response to such intimations? Or is there some untapped disciplinary merit to be had in conscientious, indeed, skilled fictionalizing and conjecture?

Literary scholars are, arguably, trained to overinvest details—the textual or evental fragment—with planetary significance. They used to do so in the name of a human condition quite uninformed by the existential materiality of most global populations. A posthumanistic and, indeed, post-positivist comparatism may yet pave the way ahead toward an imaginative and subjunctive historiography: supplementing the question of “what really happened” with the “what might have happened” or the “what ought to have happened” of a more conjectural and provisional connective scholarship. Perhaps the newly reconstituted *CSSAAME* will encourage experimentation in the humanistic social sciences in the course of its efforts to yoke regions and disciplines anew.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322444

With the relaunch of *CSSAAME* the usual questions come up: What is regional comparison, and why focus on South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East? Comparison is at the heart of cultural analysis and needs some reflection. Comparison should not be seen primarily in terms of comparing societies or events, or institutional arrangements across societies, but as a reflection on our conceptual framework as well as on a history of interactions that have constituted our object of study. One can, for instance, say that one wants to study the secular governance of religious diversity in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, but one has to bring to that a critical reflection on the fact that that kind of study often presupposes a certain understanding of religion as well as the centrality and uniformity of secular state formation. Unfortunately, such critical reflection often leads to the argument that societies should be understood in their own terms and cannot be understood in Western terms. Nevertheless, in the case of an English language journal, “their own terms” have to be interpreted and translated in relation to the historical formation of Western social sciences. Moreover, such translation and interpretation are already part of a long history of interactions with the West. So, if one speaks about “religion” or “civil society” and “the state,” one has to confront a larger, mostly imperial history. Today, there is the added factor that this field of comparison has been widely democratized by modern media so that everyone is in a mediated touch with, and has views on, everyone else, mostly in a comparative sense.

Comparison, as I understand it, is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that both underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. So, it is always a double act of reflection.

Religion is a good example of the conceptual complexity here, since it is precisely the emergence and application of this generic term as purportedly describing, but in fact producing, a distinctive social field that shows the value of comparison or, perhaps better, the need for comparative reflection. It shows the central importance of the interactions between Europe and its civilizational Others in understanding the emergence of this social

field. What I am arguing for here is an approach in which the interactions between Europe and the former colonies in Asia and Africa are seen as central to the emergence of modernity in both colonial and European societies.

One can desire to provincialize Europe, but that very desire has to be expressed within the genealogy of European thought. Europe is an example of a region, and examining the difficulties to conceptualize it might be instructive. One might think of Europe as a space of interaction among ideas, people, and goods. Such a concept has to be dynamic, for sure, because it changes all the time. Greece is a reference point for European thought, but not for goods. Its inclusion in the European Union seems obvious at the level of thought, but less obvious as a contemporary economy. And, if it is a reference point for thought, why not include Turkey, the site of an important part of the Greek and Hellenic World? The opposition to the inclusion of Turkey into Europe is partly civilizational, or rather religious, and partly economic. In the discussions on the European constitution the question of civilization loomed large. Christian Democrats have pointed out that Europe was founded on a Christian civilization, while liberals and socialists have pointed at the secular-liberal foundations of Europe. Both arguments were also used against the inclusion of Muslim Turkey as a Member of the EU. The fact that there were already millions of Turks (as well as other Muslims) in Europe seemed to have no bearing on whether Europe was Christian or secular-liberal. The fact that Turkey has a secular state and a secularism that resembles most French *laïcité* also did not impact the discussion of the inclusion of Muslim Turkey. This civilizational debate shows the extent to which Muslims are defined as strangers in Europe. At the same time, one may wonder why Turkey is often not considered to be part of the Middle East.

An even more complex story is that of imperial expansion that has brought Spain to Latin America, Portugal to Brazil, England and France to North America, and ultimately Britain to Asia and Africa, Holland to South Africa and Indonesia, and France to Africa and Southeast Asia, to mention some of the connections. What to think of the spread of Christianity and Islam with their own centers and peripheries that confound re-

gional boundaries that are conceptualized in terms of trading or language? Not to mention the networks of economic connectivity in which Japan, China, and the Asian Tigers become more and more the crucial nodal points for the rest of the world. All this is perhaps evident, but to understand what this means for regional studies requires some thought.

It is not immediately clear that today the connections between South Asia and Africa are more important than those between South Asia and China. In economic terms China is the largest trade partner of India, surpassing the United States. India and China are civilizational states that can be compared at the level of their entire societies, although, at another level, it might be more fruitful to compare Mumbai with Lagos than with Shanghai. In terms of religious connectivity Islam connects South Asia with Africa and the Middle East but obviously also with Indonesia and Malaysia. Korean Christianity is everywhere nowadays as are Korean soap operas and dancing styles. It is very hard in such a world to privilege one set of connectivity as the basis of the choice of regions to compare. So, in the end, it is what one wants to study that determines which regions one focuses on, but it is doubtful that regions can be determined at the outset as the basis of a journal.

Nevertheless, one does need a focus and that focus is mostly based on institutional academic histories. Despite all obvious conceptual difficulties one does have African studies, and South Asian studies, just as there are European studies and American studies. A major determinant seems to be pedagogical, and the boundaries seem to be the product of language and history, political and cultural. One cannot build departments and journals that can deal with an endless variety of languages and histories. The disciplinary conceit of the dominant social sciences (economics, political science, and sociology) is that one can do without language and history and produce universally valid results based on statistically analyzed data sets. More and more, these social sciences want to connect to the natural sciences, focusing on the universality of the mind, of cognition, of bodily functions, with an increasing emphasis on evolution. Cultural anthropology is the one social science that largely escapes this fantasy, only to

be marginalized as endless critique of universal knowledge from the fetishization of the local and specific. The humanities, also increasingly marginalized in the academy, similarly continue their pursuit of the specific. In passing one may ask why it is that at the time that anxieties about cultural difference are rampant in politics worldwide the study of religious and ethnic diversities is more and more forced to comply with forms of auditing that undermine its very existence. I am thinking here, for instance, of the focus on citation indices and the push to marginalize monographs and edited volumes that make it difficult to uphold the specific research and publication traditions in this field of scholarship. The expectation that the developmental trajectory of non-Western universities could be a solution to these problems needs to be examined with a wary eye, as my experience in teaching in India, Thailand, and China has taught me.

In short, one needs journals like *CSSAAME*, but much wisdom is required to steer clear of the restraints of regional comparison. The journal needs to be open to the quirky social and cultural trajectories of Manangis or Sindhis or Ismailis that do not confirm to any neatly drawn regional boundaries. It needs to be open to the expansion of China into the regions that are the focus of the journal. While one can easily see from an institutional perspective the advantages of having the journal based at Columbia University with an all-Columbia advisory board, it is as easy to see the incestuous possibilities of such an arrangement. One way to escape from that is to commission projects to outsiders that lead to special issues exemplifying combinatory possibilities that go beyond those actualized at Columbia. To give an example from my own recent experience, *Encounters*, a journal based and funded at Zayed University (UAE), published an issue I edited on religious networks in which work on China, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Nepal, India, Malaysia, and Palestine was fruitfully brought together. In the end, it might be the capacity to think beyond the region that reinvigorates regional study.

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DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2322453