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Introduction: Spectres, Spectrums and Spectrality: New Directions in World and Comparative Literature

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The 2024 US election saw a severe polarization of voters, embodied in the attempted assassination of Donald Trump at an election rally in Pennsylvania on 13th July, as well as Joe Biden's departure from the race following criticism of his capabilities to run. His replacement, Kamala Harris, was the target of intensified right-wing attacks, especially concerning her position as the country's first black female presidential candidate.ⁱ

In July and August 2024, the UK witnessed some of the worst unrest since 2011,ⁱⁱ as far right, anti-migration riots spread across the country. The riots included attacks on hotels housing migrants, the setting alight of buildings and racialized attacks on people of colour across the country. In response, counter demonstrations by anti-racism groups were observed on a national level).ⁱⁱⁱ

Between 2021 and 2024, almost thirty Republican-controlled US states passed laws restricting gender-affirming care for minors. Many of these laws prohibit trans-affirming healthcare such as puberty blockers, surgery, and hormone treatments for young people, with one State Governor going as far as to call such care 'child abuse'.^{iv}

Consider the above. Three instances, all from recent contemporary history, representing what might be called a generalized crisis of polarization, as democracies appear to crumble, social protest movements arise, and human rights are denied. Examples including the election

of Donald Trump in 2016 and again in 2024, the 2016 Brexit vote, multiple rulings and legislations taken against LGBTQ+ rights and the global rise of far-right politics, have highlighted an increasing tendency toward the extreme within political discourse and action.

And yet, recent years have also witnessed an explosion of calls for the reclaiming of rights-based movements and spaces by the ‘people’, or the 99%.^v As early as 2011, the Occupy Movement looked to express the voice of and fight for the interests of the 99%, opposing the increasing economic polarization of the 1% as a result of neoliberal marketization, looking instead to promote socioeconomic and political democracy against socio-economic division. In another vein, recent environmental movements have aimed to highlight the interconnectedness of the human body with that of the land and natural environment. Movements including Just Stop Oil, the Standing Rock protests and Latin American feminist collective protests around “body-territory” have attempted to contrast a previous dualism, which views the human as apart from nature. In so doing, they have sought to shed light on the spectrum on which we might understand the violence of the climate crisis, experienced by and through multiple interconnected bodies. This reclaiming has thus been dominated by an emphasis on shared, collective action, attempting to draw links across spectrums of identity, as a direct contrary to the splintering of civil and social life in the age of neoliberalism. ‘When those involved with the struggle for social justice occult the streets and use our voices’, notes David Palumbo-Liu, ‘we can imagine *belonging with others* – those who are also protesting in streets across the globe. In this sense, we are in the same place, and we are filling it with the same voice’.^{vi}

In many ways, then, this current moment of clash between an increasingly polarized political, economic and social world, and a rise in movements looking to recast that polarization, might be understood in terms of a spectre of histories of violence returning to haunt the present and even predict the future. Protests such as Occupy recall the global

implementation of a neoliberal economic agenda of the 1970s and 80s, whilst contemporary climate movements look to highlight the historical development of the climate crisis which, critics are at pains to note, has been impacting much of the world population for a much broader expanse of time than hegemonic Euro-American public and media discourse might otherwise acknowledge.^{vii} Similarly, racially charged protest movements of the last decade, stretching across political spectrums, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and even the July/August 2024 far-right anti-immigration riots in the UK, both look toward historic violence in their development. For BLM, the instigation of racialized violence at the very heart of the US nation state, through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, can and must be understood in terms of systemic racism manifesting in the racialized police violence of today.^{viii} In the UK, meanwhile, critics have noted that the anti-immigration riots of August 2024 are the product of a long build-up of anti-immigration rhetoric in the country through 14 years of Conservative rule, followed by an aggressive Centrist labour policy emphasising anti-immigration under Keir Starmer.^{ix} Furthermore, the Mayor of London noted at the time that the events triggered a reminder for him and members of his community of the violence endured by people of colour in the UK during the 1970s and 80s.^x As such, the spectres of history can equally be mobilized to empower disenfranchised communities. For instance, the tenacity and bravery of those involved in the 1969 Stonewall uprising is regularly evoked by younger and subsequent generations of LGBTQ+ activists, who emphasize the importance of ‘upholding a collective history’ and looking to the past to empower them in their fight against present, and future, threats to the rights and dignity of their communities.^{xi}

So how might we bring together this sense of a splintering or polarization of contemporary social, economic and political life, with a consideration of the “spectre” of the past which might be looming on the present? In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida notes, ‘The specter *appears* to present itself during the visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present,

itself, in flesh and blood. The non-presence of the specter demands that one take its time and its history into consideration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity'.^{xii} The “spectre”, then, might be understood in terms not only of the past returning to haunt the present, but also as a demand, both socially and academically charged, that we recognize at this moment of juncture, the violence of the past to which we must now answer.

The urgency of privileging relationalities over dichotomies, then, becomes ever more evident as days go by. Amid manifold crises, we find ourselves in need of thinking “spectrally”, considering our world and future not through binarisms – but rather on a heterogenous, sliding scale or spectrum. Diverse thinking within scholarship is in fact one of Comparative and World Literature’s merits, to which this half issue speaks and expands upon. From considering the interrelated and/or distinct nature of various literary traditions and the politics and (im)possibilities of literary translation, to studies in the (im)materiality of new forms of literature and the prevalence and significance of intertextuality, diverse studies in Comparative Literature grapple with multiple questions taking myriad directions. While 2023 marked two decades since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provocatively declared the death of Comparative Literature,^{xiii} the discipline undoubtedly lives on, perhaps enacting its very own afterlife or spectral existence. In its ghostly, yet ironically *present* state, the boundaries of Comparative Literature are being pushed from all directions.

In this half issue, we thus draw upon understandings of spectres, spectrums, and spectrality as a means with which to widen avenues of critical inquiry and consider more balanced and multifaceted understandings of the world through literature, poetry and film. This thematic focus allows us to challenge binary thinking and to embrace ambiguity and liminality, in order to consider narratives that resist fixed and rigid interpretations. By approaching literature through this spectral lens, we can critique and reflect on the ways in which complex identities can be represented in new ways. Engaging with spectres of the past that haunt these

texts, through manifestations of cultural traumas and political conflicts, yet focusing on the opportunities in thinking spectrally within Comparative Literature, thus enables this half issue to broaden the gaze of critical inquiry, allowing for more nuanced and inclusive understandings of our place in the world.

One of the crucial affordances of Comparative and World Literature is its ability to intersect with wider fields of scholarship. In this half issue alone, studies engage with spectrality through a variety of broader lenses, including Queer Studies, Gender Studies, Migrant Studies, Trauma Studies, Ecocriticism and Posthumanism. It is perhaps of little surprise that these fields are foregrounded in a study of spectrality in Comparative and World Literature, as spectres and spectrums are endlessly connected with attempts to move amidst – or away from – marginalisation. For instance, pushing and, at times, deconstructing boundaries is characteristic of Queer Studies, whose key texts explore the spectral both explicitly and covertly. As Kathryn Stockton maintains, the child – or childhood itself – is ghostly; a period of life whose spectre haunts us in adulthood.^{xiv} For *queer* children especially, emphasis is placed on their ‘bizarre attachments, fluid identities and puzzling contours’,^{xv} particularly in hindsight. Thus, temporality is pivotal to queer life: ghosts of the past, present and future materialize and dis/integrate in strange and intriguing ways. Moreover, Petra Dierkes-Thrun notes that Comparative Literature and Queer Studies share multiple ‘concepts around which their disciplines revolve: “the nation,” “the body,” “literature,” “community,” “truth,” “history,” “space,” “time,”’ and more.^{xvi} Thus, Queer Studies has much to offer Comparative and World Literature, as our authors’ interventions demonstrate. Emma Wood mobilizes the concept of the ghost through her discussion of non-conforming lesbians in queer spaces, while Evie Lewis considers queerness in relation to temporality and community, examining (literary) bonds enacted between queers of the past and present. In this way, the authors in this issue

expand both Queer and Comparative Literary Studies to explicate the spectral elements implicit in their fields' foundational theories.

If we embrace the malleable ontology that spectral thinking offers, we must also, and simultaneously, embrace Posthumanism and Ecocriticism. In these fields, the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman 'become permeable, with human distinctiveness dissolving, fracturing and connecting to those nonhuman entities who might be considered the most remote of all others'.^{xvii} Amid multiple debates around what constitutes Ecocriticism, Camilo Gomides defines the field as one 'that analyzes and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations'.^{xviii} As such, ecocritical scholarship is interdisciplinary, and interrogates the relationships between nature, humanity and culture. Likewise, studies in Posthumanism work to problematize dichotomies between human and non-human and animated or non-animated, among others. Since the Renaissance period, being human has meant being distinct from beast,^{xix} or, more recently, from objects, cyborgs and technological formations.^{xx} Yet, being human has *also* meant 'to subscribe to a specific code of humanity',^{xxi} one that segregates and categorizes, establishing intra-human divisions just as it establishes other ontological dichotomies. As Rosi Braidotti notes, '[c]lass, race, gender and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness [each] function as significant markers in framing and policing access to normal humanity'.^{xxii} Comparative Literature scholarship has already adopted Ecocritical and Posthuman Studies,^{xxiii} and in this half issue, the authors build upon and intervene in disciplines that consider the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Evie Lewis explores how *The Thirty Names of Night*'s transgender protagonist imagines himself as existing outside of the confines of so-called humanity, as he 'finds relief through imagining himself as a bird who takes flight from such norms'. Similarly, placing her focus on the process of ageing and disability in relation to the natural environment, Rin MacRitchie's

work foregrounds an ecocritical perspective on death and dying that prompts us to consider the ‘spectral futures’ that the (post)modern world asks us to ignore.

Indeed, although spanning diverse considerations including corporeality, ageing, cultural identity, trauma, gender, sexuality and queerness, each of our authors explore and interrogate the various spectres that haunt and preoccupy the texts that they engage with. Papers also complicate binaries in multiplicitous yet related ways, with dichotomies such as the speakable/unspeakable, visible/invisible, knowable/unknowable, material/immaterial, human/nonhuman and animate/inanimate placed beneath the microscope. Some focus on the disturbing insufficiencies of language, particularly when it is mobilized to describe individual or collective experience(s). Traumatic spectres haunt – or are set to haunt – the protagonists of our texts, just as they haunt the fields with which our authors engage. Such haunting, uncertainty and spectrality makes space for productive and diverse interventions in the manifold disciplines with which this half issue engages, with studies of literary fiction, autobiography, biomythography, poetry and film coming together to re-examine the world in which we have lived, do live, and will live. Such examinations are necessary in an academic context which increasingly demands inter- and multi-disciplinary work, and a broader sociocultural context which necessitates new modes of thinking and acting in order to survive. The articles included in this half issue thus reflect the demand and need of early career researchers within Comparative Literature to rise to this challenge, in order to forge new, bold ways of thinking within scholarship and within society.

In her piece, Rin MacRitchie sustains and propels forward contemporary conversations about the body in her study of Mia Hansen-Løve’s 2022 film, *Un beau matin* (One Fine Morning). At the intersection of ecological and death studies, this article highlights the incompatibility of the ageing body with urban living, particularly in our contemporary moment of rapid technological advances. In assessing the spectral experience of illness and ageing in

our progressively hostile, contemporary societies, MacRitchie argues that societal structures hold the power to ‘make ghosts of anyone experiencing old age or illness in contemporary urbanism’, ultimately urging her reader to look towards their ‘own spectral futures’ in the human, and increasingly non-human, world. The making of ghosts is also a key motif in Emma Wood’s intervention, although her ghosts take a markedly different form. Through an examination of the work of Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Wood unearths the ghosts of the 1950s North American working-class lesbian bar, those invisible ghosts, or ‘sister outsiders’ who once frequented these spaces yet remained largely unseen because they did not fit into conventional, contemporaneous framings of lesbianism on account of their appearance, behaviours, and perhaps most often, their race. Wood argues that for these invisible, ghostly sister outsiders, the lesbian bar is at once ‘the only place to gather’ yet also a space wherein they feel ‘out of place’, ultimately making this space ‘a temporary, complex place of reprieve and kinship’. Our final contribution, by Evie Lewis, further develops such considerations of temporal queerness through her analysis of Zeyn Joukhadar’s novel *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020). Lewis argues that in unveiling a spectral ‘archive of resistance’, including familial diaries, journals and sketchbooks from the first half of the 20th century, the novel’s protagonist queers the migratory history of New York City, shining a much-needed light on the neglected, or rather hidden, history of the queer diaspora of the past, and thus empowering this community in the present, who continue to face the spectres of violence perpetrated by the state on their bodies and lives.

These contributions are thus intricately intertwined, building upon and rubbing up against each other as they examine diverse literary representations of the very real spectres that have haunted our past, that define our present, and that in many ways foreshadow our future. As such, there is a tangible intellectual urgency to this study; across the genres examined, the theories employed, and the themes explored, all of these articles speak to our immediate socio-

political context, offering an innovative framework through which to interrogate the various spectres that we are facing in this turbulent moment of the 21st century.

NOTES

- ⁱ Joseph O. Jewell, 'Ring-Wing Attacks on Kamala Harris Are Part of a Century-Old Playbook', *Chicago Sun Times* (2024) <<https://chicago.suntimes.com/other-views/2024/08/22/right-wing-attacks-kamala-harris-racial-middle-class-divisions-donald-trump-jd-vance-joseph-jewell>> [accessed 23 August 2024].
- ⁱⁱ David Batty and Syal Rajeev, 'UK Riots: How Does the Violence Compare with Unrest in August 2011?', *Guardian* (2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/07/uk-riots-how-does-the-violence-compare-with-unrest-in-august-2011>> [accessed 24 August 2024].
- ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel De Simone, 'Riots Show How the UK's Far Right Has Changed', *BBC News* (2024) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c74lwnxxxzjo>> [accessed 23 August 2024].
- ^{iv} Lindsey Dawson, Jennifer Kates and Marybeth Musumeci, 'Youth Access to Gender Affirming Care: The Federal and State Policy Landscape', *KFF* (2022) <<https://www.kff.org/other/issue-brief/youth-access-to-gender-affirming-care-the-federal-and-state-policy-landscape/#:~:text=Texas..the%20specified%20gender%20affirming%20services.>> [accessed 14 January 2025].
- ^v Sarah Van Gelder, *This Changes everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011); Jamie Matthews, 'Populism, Inequality and Representation: Negotiating "the 99%" with Occupy London', *The Sociological Review*, 67.5 (2019), 1018-33.
- ^{vi} David Palumbo-Lui, *Speaking out of Place: Getting Our Political Voices Back* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), p.2.
- ^{vii} Sasha Lilley and Jason W. Moore, 'Jason W. Moore: The Socio-Ecological Crises of Capitalism', in *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*, edited by Sasha Lilley (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), pp. 136-52 (p. 136).
- ^{viii} Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Women's Press, 1994); Michelle Alexander, 'America, This Is Your Chance', *New York Times* (2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/opinion/george-floyd-protests-race.html>> [accessed 23 August 2024].
- ^{ix} Alberto Toscano, 'UK Riots Have Their Roots in a History of Hate', *In These Times* (2024) <<https://inthesetimes.com/article/uk-immigration-race-riot-far-right-white-nationalist>> [accessed 23 August 2024].
- ^x Sadiq Khan, 'Sadiq Khan on the riots: "Like a lot of people of my generation, I felt triggered"', *Guardian* (2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/aug/08/sadiq-khan-on-the-riots-like-a-lot-of-people-of-my-generation-i-felt-triggered>> [accessed 23 August 2024].
- ^{xi} Wilder Davies, 'Stonewall-Era Activists and Queer Millennials Discuss the State of the LGBTQ Community, Then and Now', *Time* (2019) <<https://time.com/5617238/lgbtq-community-after-stonewall/>> [accessed 20 January 2025].
- ^{xii} Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 126.
- ^{xiii} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- ^{xiv} Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Charlotte: Duke University Press, 2009).
- ^{xv} Emily Colucci, 'Hide and Go Seek: Finding Enigmatic Queer Childhood in Catalina Schliebener's "Growing Sideways"', *Filthy Dreams* (2017) <<https://filthydreams.org/2017/01/19/hide-and-go-seek-finding-enigmatic-queer-childhood-in-catalina-schliebeners-growing-sideways/>> [accessed 24 August 2024].
- ^{xvi} Petra Dierkes-Thrun, 'Comparisons Worth Making: Queer Studies and Comparative Literature', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 19.2 (2013), 264-6 (p. 264).
- ^{xvii} Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Object, Cyborg* (London: Routledge, 2015), p.2.
- ^{xviii} Camilo Gomides, 'Putting a New Definition of Ecocriticism to the Test: The Case of "The Burning Season", a Film (Mal)Adaptation', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 13.1 (2006), 13-23 (p. 16).
- ^{xix} Manuela Rossini, 'Bodies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 153-69.

^{xx} Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*.

^{xxi} Rossini, 'Bodies', p. 155.

^{xxii} Rosi Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36.6 (2019), 31-61 (p. 53).

^{xxiii} Kate Soper, 'The Humanism in Posthumanism', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 9.3 (2012), 365-78; Jessica Maufort, 'Multiple Convergences: Ecocriticism and Comparative Literary Studies', *Literary Research*, 35 (2019), 101-25.