Introduction

**Autobiographical Prologue**

This book has its origins in a confluence of interests, derived alike from my prior scholarship and from pedagogical imperatives. I began my scholarly career as a student of the literatures of ancient Greece and early China, fascinated by each tradition individually and drawn to the institutional discipline of comparative literature as the only venue (if in some ways a reluctant one) for pursuing such divergent interests. The desire to find something useful to say about these two literatures in conjunction with each other that did not depend on claims of contact, and, in particular, to do so in a way that might speak to comparatists as well as to specialists in each language individually, led me to consider the phenomenon of authorship in both traditions, and particularly how stories about the lives of authors were used in each context to negotiate the transition from a predominantly oral transmission to transmission through writing. As I was studying, and writing about, that process,¹ I became especially interested in a similarity between the early Greek and Chinese contexts that I had not noticed, or paid enough attention to, earlier—in both cases, the historical record shows that literary texts (oral or otherwise), and other cultural artifacts, circulated across political boundaries so that the world of a common Greek (Panhellenic)² or Chinese culture was larger by far than that of any polity then in existence, providing some measure of cultural solidarity to a politically fragmented world.


At the same time, I was involved in teaching a world literature course and in thinking about how to adapt and revise that course to better suit the needs of the undergraduate major of which it formed a part. As my then colleagues and I explored this question, we read together the burgeoning literature on world literature, notably the works of David Damrosch,\(^3\) Franco Moretti,\(^4\) and Pascale Casanova.\(^5\) All three produced what seemed to me very valuable insights into how literature circulates across the large spaces of our contemporary world, but the discussions of Moretti and Casanova both focused almost exclusively on the literature emerging from the modern West and from the non-West's reaction to Western modernity, and it was difficult to use their theories to understand the ways in which texts that were pre-modern or non-Western (or both) were circulated and understood. Damrosch does have a great deal to say about such texts but avowedly and deliberately from the perspective of how the modern West understands and makes use of them. The ideas of all three were provocative and stimulating, but I was left searching for a theoretical model that could make sense of things like the relationship between political fragmentation and cultural unity I had found in early Greece and China and that would be useful for constructing an undergraduate world literature course not taking as its premise the value we, as modern readers, add to the texts we read.

In the context of that reading on world literature, I was also introduced to the work of the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock.\(^6\) Pollock's recent work has focused on two phenomena of interest to me: the sudden appearance, in the early centuries A.D., of literary texts written in Sanskrit in regions from modern Afghanistan to Java, which he believes cannot be explained by the means obvious to moderns, such as conquest, trade, or colonization, but resulted rather from the charismatic prestige of the language itself (a phenomenon he refers to as "the Sanskrit cosmopolis"); and, about a millennium later, the equally sudden emergence of literature written in vernacular languages in South India and in Southeast Asia and, later, in the

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\(^6\) See now especially Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, although that was not available to me when I began this work.
Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of North India (a phenomenon he calls the “vernacular millennium”).

In reading Pollock, as well as Damrosch, Casanova, and Moretti, and in continuing to think about my own work, I began to think that each of us was in fact talking about different instantiations of the same question, which might, most simply, be put as “the interaction of literature with its environment.” The circulation of Homeric epic between city-states in classical Greece; the use of Sanskrit to compose inscriptive poetry in Java and its later replacement with poetry in Javanese; the competition between national literatures for recognition in Paris that Pascale Casanova described in The World Republic of Letters—all of these, it seems to me, are not so much competing models for understanding how literature circulates, but rather different concrete answers, emerging in specific contexts, to the same set of problems about the interactions between literatures and their environments. With a bit of elaboration, I developed a scheme of six patterns for this interaction: the epichoric (or local), panchoric (a generic term I derived from Panhellenic), cosmopolitan, vernacular (drawing both from Pollock), national (where I was inspired to an extent by Casanova), and global.7 In the simplest terms, this book represents the elaboration of that model under the label An Ecology of World Literature, and in the remainder of this introduction I hope to explain this project more fully by means of a series of questions. I begin by discussing an interlocking set of questions (What is a language? What is literature? and What is a literature?) before moving on to consider what I mean by ecology and why I use the term, a discussion that itself divides into several parts. I finish this introduction by revisiting the six ecological patterns I listed earlier, describing them in some detail and setting out thereby the structure for the six chapters of this book.

What Is a Language?

Since literature (whatever we might decide it to be) is certainly made out of language, and since the ability to understand the language in which a text is composed is the single most essential determinant of whether or not one will have access to that text, it is necessary to begin our search for an understanding of what literature is by beginning with the question of what constitutes a language. On an intuitive level, this first question may not

seem to require any very detailed answer; speakers of English, in particular, understand their language as having fairly discrete and unproblematic boundaries. The differences between English and the other Germanic languages, such as Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and German itself, are considerable enough to present little ground for argument—despite what are, to linguists, obvious shared historical origins, each of these other languages is sufficiently different from English as to be mutually incomprehensible, while the fact that the homeland of English is physically separated from those of the other Germanic languages by the English Channel and the North Sea means that there are no dialects intermediate between English and, say, Dutch or Norwegian. There are some questions concerning internal boundaries within the family of English, so that, for example, Scots (and its close relative, Ulster Scots) are frequently seen by their own speakers as distinct languages, rather than as dialects of English, while the creole Englishes of, for example, Jamaica and Nigeria are also sometimes seen as distinct languages. Since these boundary questions have little saliency for English speakers within England or the United States (and thus for the major arbiters of the language and culture), they intrude comparatively little on the minds of most speakers in those regions, leaving English, in the minds of its speakers, a relatively homogeneous language with quite distinct borders with other related languages.

In this as in so many other things, however, English speakers (and especially those not from Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Caribbean, or Africa) may run the risk of assimilating the rest of the world to their own experience and assuming that all languages are as clearly defined as English. This is, however, manifestly not the case. Even within the small family of the Germanic languages, for example, far more complicated questions exist concerning the boundaries of languages. Standard Dutch, for example, differs less in many respects from Standard German than a number of regional dialects of German do from each other, so that an educated Dutchman and German might be able to decipher each other’s languages more readily than speakers of the local dialects of Zurich and of Hanover. At the same time, the question of whether Dutch and Flemish, or Dutch and Afrikaans, constitute different languages is far from unambiguous.

The Romance languages present an even more complex picture. On the

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surface, French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese are each major and distinct languages, spoken by tens or even hundreds of millions, and each possesses a centuries-old literary tradition. Beneath that surface, however, the traditional everyday spoken languages of France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal are part of what linguists would call a “dialect continuum,” a range of dialects shifting imperceptibly from village to village and town to town and more drastically from region to region. Within this continuum it is difficult to draw firm boundaries of mutual intelligibility, and to the extent that they exist such boundaries do not correspond to national boundaries; the spoken dialects of much of northern Italy, for example, have in some respects more in common with certain of the dialects of France than with those of Tuscany and points south. All of these dialects derive to some extent from Latin, though many details of when and how they diverged remain controversial. Likewise, the spoken dialects of the Arab world; of North India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; and of China bear complex familial relationships to each other across large areas, derived in each case from common ancestors (classical Arabic, Sanskrit, and classical Chinese, respectively, or at least from the spoken equivalents to these highly literary and somewhat artificial languages), though as with the Romance languages many of these spoken varieties are today converging on single literary standards, thanks largely to mass education, film, and television. These Arabic, Indic, and Sinitic languages, like the Romance languages of Europe, vary community by community and can be consolidated to some extent in larger regional groupings, but can neither be assimilated into one homogeneous and mutually intelligible spoken language nor even into a small handful of languages divided according to strict, consistent, and unambiguous criteria. The case of many other parts of the world, from the Bantu languages of much of Africa to the languages of New Guinea, is still more complicated, especially where literary standard forms are lacking, and where scholarly efforts in linguistics have not been as extensive.

The question, then, of what constitutes a language is not an easy one to answer. To return to the Romance languages of Western Europe, it is clear enough that the standard forms of French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese constitute languages, each used in writing and in elite oral communication for centuries, and each today defined and maintained through a range of state institutions, from academies of language to public schools. But what of the dialect continuum? Do we (as some nationalists of the nineteenth century would have liked) subsume all the regional dialects within the nation-state of France or Spain or Italy into a single language, forcing the
understanding of these spoken forms as dialects of the national language even where historical linguistics suggests a closer affinity to another national language or a history distinct from that of any national language? Do we (as regionalists in Spain have successfully argued and as their counterparts in France and Italy also argue) decide instead that the dialects of recognized regional levels of government constitute languages in their own right, again assimilating potentially quite divergent local dialects to a uniform standard of Catalan, Occitan, Neapolitan, or Venetian? Do we allow for these regional languages to break down still further into local varieties, proper to specific towns or groups of towns? And do we attempt to draw the boundaries between regional languages based on linguistic grounds (with the realization that linguists themselves dispute these matters) or according to regional or local political borders (recognizing that this might be an artificial imposition on lived linguistic experience)? None of these solutions is entirely satisfactory.

In practice, of course, the tendency until very recently has been to decide, in the words of a hoary cliché in the field, that “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy”; in other words, that the boundaries between languages should match those between nation-states. Dutch, then, is a language where Low German is not, because the Netherlands is a sovereign nation and “Low Germany” is not. Italian is a language because Italy is a nation, but Venetian, Lombard, Neapolitan, and Sicilian are not because Venice, Lombardy, Naples, and Sicily are no longer sovereign states. To some extent (and this trend is increasing, as I discuss in more detail in the final chapter), we should acknowledge the corollary that “a language is a dialect with a regional assembly,” as Catalan, Valencian, Galician, and so on have gained official recognition as languages in Spain (and as, in India, status as an official language tends to go hand-in-hand with the establishment of a new state).

I would like to propose, however, an alternative, if equally simplistic, slogan, “a language is a dialect with a literature,” as potentially a more useful way of thinking about these questions. The question of what exactly literature is is itself rather complicated, and I will return to that question in a later section of this introduction. For the moment, what I wish to emphasize is that the notion of “literariness,” however manifested, necessarily involves a certain level of self-awareness concerning the linguistic form taken by a given text. For a text to be recognized within a given community as “literature,” it usually must conform to some set of conventions regarding diction and syntax and in the process it will help to consecrate those conventions as culturally prestigious and desirable. I return to this process
in Chapter 4, in particular, in my discussion of vernacular languages and literatures, a situation in which these processes are especially prominent, though they operate in other contexts as well. In writing (in Latin) the *De vulgari eloquentia*, for example, Dante was making an explicit and self-conscious argument for the legitimacy of the vernacular vis-à-vis classical Latin; in his vernacular writings, such as the *Commedia Divina*, he (as is well known) helped to establish certain vocabulary and certain grammatical structures as legitimate vehicles for cultural expression; to the extent that he was successful in so doing, his vernacular successors have adhered to the conventions he established (and have established some of their own), gradually building a sense of what is, or is not, acceptable usage in a literary text self-representing as written in "Italian" (even though that name was not used for the language until the early sixteenth century). Likewise, English speakers' understanding of what constitutes good written English has been shaped over the centuries by the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and so on, and lexical innovations and grammatical simplifications alike have gained legitimacy through their use in imaginative literature or in formal nonfiction prose.

Literature, especially of the written kind, is of course not the only means by which the notion of a language can emerge. A particularly significant alternative pattern is the gradual standardization of a lingua franca used by people of different regions to communicate with each other orally; thus, modern Standard Mandarin (which is, as we shall see in later chapters, in large part a self-consciously created language), developed to a great extent out of the so-called *guanhua*, or "official talk" used by government officials from different regions to converse with each other in Beijing, and some have argued (controversially) that Québec grew to speak a form of Standard French earlier than metropolitan France itself, thanks to a *choc des patois*, an interaction between the different regional languages spoken by settlers of New France leading to a standardized form used for mutual convenience.9 It is also true that speakers of a local dialect, even one proper to a specific village, will generally have an intuitive sense of what is "correct" or "normal" usage within that dialect, whether or not there exists a literary or

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verbal-art tradition consecrating that set of forms. Nonetheless, the existence of a body of texts (oral or written) that legitimate certain linguistic forms at the expense of others does a great deal to establish that set of forms as constituting a "language" rather than a "dialect." This can be true, I would argue, independently of the medium in which those texts circulate, whether through oral storytelling and song, through manuscript or print culture, or through television, radio, film, and the internet. This is not to minimize the very real differences among these media, which I discuss to some extent in relevant chapters, but rather to emphasize that all of these media have the capacity to foster a given set of linguistic conventions, promoting the self-awareness among the community of users of that set of conventions to the point where it makes sense to describe those conventions as a language.

In this sense, then, a language is less a group of dialects, demarcated by a more-or-less arbitrary boundary based on criteria of historical development or mutual intelligibility than it is a standardized, refined, and developed collection of usages circulating between, around, or above those dialects. In this context, linguists speak of the difference between Abstand and Ausbau languages; that is, between languages understood as differing greatly enough from their neighbors as to be distinct (as I began by suggesting was the case with English) and languages constituted as such through their more or less self-conscious development as distinct linguistic media through their use in (among other things) literature and education. Since an Ausbau language, almost by definition, does not quite correspond (at least at first) to anybody's native language, some process of education in the language and its norms is essential to its propagation and stability, whether in the form of modern public schooling, the training of educated elites in pre-modern states, or the training in the songs and stories of a traditional small-scale society. Although each of these processes of education is quite different, they share alike a need for standardized texts that can act as exemplars of prestige linguistic usage—for texts, in other words, that could be considered "literary."

**What Is Literature?**

What constitutes the literary is, of course, a fraught question both cross-culturally and, in many cases, within cultures. To the extent that we are unable

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to agree on a definition of “literature” that will operate across cultures, the project of this book will be rendered all but impossible. I identify two interrelated sets of problems surrounding my use of the term “literature,” one of which (the question of what sorts of genres or varieties of texts count as literature) I address in this section; the other (which concerns whether literature extends throughout history or is a process with a clear beginning), I discuss in the section that follows.

Any definition of literature necessarily presents boundary questions. Do only fiction, poetry, and drama count as “literature,” or is there room for nonfictional texts (in prose or verse) as well? Can philosophical, historical, scientific, and technical texts qualify as literary, or do texts need to be self-consciously belles-lettres, and is this distinction equally meaningful in all cultural contexts? What about texts viewed as sacred and/or divinely inspired? In practice, I find this first problem does not present insuperable obstacles to cross-cultural study of literary ecologies for two reasons. In the first place, concerns about the translatability of the concept of literature rest, I would suggest, on two false assumptions: that words for “literature” in major pre-modern literary languages differ incommensurably in meaning, and, still more significantly, that the terms in question have stable and uncontested meanings within their own linguistic contexts. The evidence for both claims is rather weaker than one might think. I discuss the historical evolution of the English term “literature” and that of its equivalent in modern Chinese, wenxue 文學, in further detail in Chapter 5 because the debates about the meaning of both terms are a productive way of thinking about cultural exchange. In essence, however, both “literature” and wenxue evolve over time (the latter, certainly, under the pressure of the former, though not exclusively for that reason), moving, as for example Trevor Ross has argued in the English case, from describing the totality of texts that a well-educated member of the elite might read or choose to read and thus including such things as history, philosophy, and scientific writings, to a more specific emphasis on what we might call “imaginative literature”—the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama, which we associate today with the notion of literature.11 Similar developments took place in Chinese (and in Japanese), where wenxue, which traditionally could (but did not always) include history and philosophy, came during the nineteenth century to

11 Trevor Ross, The Making of the English Literary Canon From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998, 293–301.
align itself as a translation of the European notion of literature. In a related vein, Sheldon Pollock discusses the Sanskrit conception of kāvya, which he glosses as texts that are “workly,” or wirklich, in the Heideggerian sense of being texts where formal questions and traditions of interpretation are indispensable to understanding the meaning of the text. Pollock notes that kāvya in this sense is distinct from śāstra, texts that are expository or scientific in nature, and notes that the European notion of literature or literariness is thus close enough to the traditional meaning of kāvya to allow the interchanging of the terms in speaking about pre-modern South Asian texts.  

Modern Standard Arabic uses the term adab as a gloss for the Western “literature”; as with wenxue in Chinese, scholars of the subject note both that the varieties of texts included in adab differ from those of its Western equivalents (the inclusion of “the repertoire of belles-lettres texts needed for polite conversation”; the exclusion of religious texts), and that usage of the term in pre-modern texts varies and indeed sometimes seems quite close to the modern, Western “literature.”  

Literature, wenxue (and its Japanese cognate, bungaku), adab, and kāvya, then, while not identical, do all share certain important family resemblances, including most importantly something of a tension in their definitions between “imaginative literature” and “the sum of all texts an educated person should know.” As such, it does not seem to me (any more than it does to Pollock) like the differences in meaning among these terms prevents our talking about them in parallel with each other.

The second reason why the differences between these terms (such as they are) do not present an insurmountable obstacle to comparative work is that these differences themselves not only can be a genuine object of comparative study but form an integral part of the study of literary ecology that I undertake in this book. Certainly, each of the cultures that I discuss in any depth in the following pages understands its notion of literature as some kind of marked category of linguistic utterance, distinct from the unmarked use of language as an everyday part of human life. Where to draw this boundary will be of considerable interest to us as this study progresses, especially in the later chapters. In particular, the notion of literariness and its limits is crucial to the chapter on vernacular literatures,

since it is clear that many languages are first standardized or committed to writing for use in administrative documents, religious sermons, dedicatory inscriptions, and the like, in many (though by no means all) of which cases language may be serving an extraliterary purpose. As I show in the vernacular chapter, the use of a language for literary purposes marks a decided shift from these nonliterary uses, making a very different claim on behalf of the language in question—usually, that it is a legitimate alternative to another, more cosmopolitan language, for cultural purposes. The transition from “documentary” to “workly” roles for a given language alters the literary ecology; as such, this transition is a legitimate object of study for literary ecology. Far from impeding the study of literary ecology, questions concerning what counts as literary, and when and how, are central concerns to the field.

**Literature, Orality, Textuality**

There is another problem surrounding the meaning of “literature,” which is the relationship between the medium in which texts are composed (orality or writing) and their status as literature. As a student of the school of oral-traditional poetics nurtured over the generations at Harvard (Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, Gregory Nagy), my training and inclinations urge me to insist that oral texts, be they proverbs or Homeric epic, should be considered as belonging to the category of “literature.” There exist, however, powerful arguments to the contrary, developed explicitly by Sheldon Pollock and relied upon implicitly by Pascale Casanova. While Pollock takes pains to insist that texts produced without writing can constitute “something reasonable people would call literature,” he also insists that the use of writing marks a decisive moment in the history of literature’s becoming. For Pollock, the social, political, and epistemological privileges associated with writing, at least in pre-modern South Asia, confer both on those who write and on the texts they produce a kind of authority not available to the author who speaks his texts; further, he argues, it is writing that produces in texts a self-awareness of their status as literature, as “an artifact to be decoded and as a pretext for deciphering.”14 Finally, he argues, pre-modern theorists of kāvya themselves viewed writing as indispensable to their understanding of the term itself.

In thinking through these phenomena, Pollock coins a term, *literarization*,
which he uses to designate the emergence of a given language into the realm of literature and literariness as understood in a given cultural context (in his case, obviously, the Sanskrit world of pre-modern South or Southeast Asia). Literarization is for Pollock related to, yet distinct from, literization, the process by which a language is committed to writing; for a language to be literarized, it must first be literized, but (as I suggested earlier) literizing does not automatically entail literarizing, which includes other processes, such as the standardization of orthography and diction, the fixing of grammatical rules, the establishment of generic conventions, and the accumulation of literary prestige through the emergence of a literary tradition. By a curious coincidence, noted as such by Pollock, his word “literarization” was, nearly simultaneously, developed also by Pascale Casanova in her 1999 *La republique mondiale des lettres*, speaking of the development of the French language in the seventeenth century:

What is involved, rather, is a unique process of the establishment of theoretical, logical, aesthetical and rhetorical resources, through which would be constructed strictly literary value (a kind of symbolic “surplus value”) – the literariness of the French language, that is, the transformation of the “langue françoysé” into a literary language. This mechanism, which operates simultaneously and inseparably across both the language and the development of literary forms, allows for the language itself to become autonomous, and gradually makes of it a literary and aesthetic raw material. The collective construction of the French language as a literary language is a kind of aestheticisation, that is, of gradual literarisation, which accounts for how French was able to become, somewhat later, the language of literature.  

Elsewhere, Casanova emphasizes the importance (for languages late to the game of literature) of translation into more powerful target-languages as a

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15 Il s’agit plutôt d’un processus unique de constitution de ressources théoriques, logiques, esthétiques, rhétoriques à travers lequel va se fabriquer la valeur proprement littéraire (sorte de « plus-value » symbolique), la littérarité de la langue française, c’est-à-dire la transformation de la « langue françoysé » en langue littéraire. Ce mécanisme, qui s’opère à la fois et inséparablement à travers la langue et l’élaboration de formes littéraires, permet l’autonomisation de la langue elle-même et en fait peu à peu un matériau littéraire et esthétique. La construction collective du français comme langue littéraire est une sorte d’esthétisation, c’est-à-dire de littéralisation progressive, ce qui explique que le français ait pu devenir un peu plus tard la langue de la littérature. (Casanova, *La republique mondiale des lettres*, 95-6.)
mechanism for literarization. This is, in no small part, because her definition of "literature" situates literature's origin with Joachim du Bellay's 1549 *La Deffence, et Illustration de la Langue François*, which acts as what I will later call a "vernacular manifesto" for the use of the French language for literary purposes. For Casanova, this represents the first moment in which a literature is self-consciously developed for a nation, which will be for her the necessary precondition for that national literature's efforts to transcend the nation-state, and to enter (as its founder) the "world republic of letters." Casanova's republic, then, is singular, having been founded in a single place and time, and other literatures (such as those of Asia) can only enter into literature per se with the post-1945 era of decolonization.

I discuss many of the questions this definition raises in the vernacular, national, and global chapters that form the second half of this book but begin that discussion here by noting that Casanova's definition also deliberately excludes from "literature" a great many European texts generally described as such, from the literature of the Greek and Roman traditions, to the religious texts of the Middle Ages, and even Dante, who might seem to many to be an early pioneer of literature even on Casanova's definition. Even in the sense evoked by Pollock, who looks to the emergence of South Asian vernaculars in the eighth century AD, rather than to sixteenth-century France, for the origins of literature per se, Sanskrit epic, and therefore also Homeric epic, among many other things, do not qualify as literature, since their composition may have predated literarization, and certainly predated literarization.

The definitions used by Casanova and by Pollock thus exclude significant quantities of material that I believe need to be considered in a work such as mine, if for no other reason than that the texts excluded from literature by Casanova and Pollock clearly circulate within the literary ecologies they define and exert considerable influence. At the same time, the (different) concepts that Casanova and Pollock identify as literature seem, to me, clearly to represent meaningful ideas very much in need of terminology to describe them, and I would be reluctant to discuss their concepts under other names.

This leaves me with three different working definitions of literature: my

16 Ibid., 192.
17 Ibid., 69–72.
18 Ibid., 24.
19 Ibid., 83.
own (which includes, at least in theory, all self-consciously aesthetic use of language); Pollock's (which requires the use of writing and a series of relationships between author, text, and tradition that writing for him implies); and Casanova's (in which literature must be in a particular kind of relationship to the nation). In many cases (as, for example, with all written texts composed in what I identify as national and global literary ecologies), these definitions coincide. Anything included in either Casanova's definition or Pollock's will be found in mine, and anything found in Casanova's definition will be found in Pollock's. There are, therefore, many situations in which I find it easy to use the term literature without qualification and others in which a reference to Pollock or Casanova is sufficient to illuminate what is meant. There are, however, still other situations (particularly in the first two chapters) in which I discuss texts that I am quite comfortable referring to as "literary" (Homeric epic, for example, with the understanding that oral composition or circulation is no impediment to literariness in the sense I mean) but for which Pollock and/or Casanova would resist the term. My use of the term "literature" (or occasionally "verbal art"), then, subsumes these other definitions of the literary within a broader category, just as I hope to show that the systems of literary circulation described by these authors are themselves examples of a larger range of possible systems.

**What Is a Literature?**

Alongside the question of "what is literature?" lies another, less-discussed question, though one that deserves, I believe, more thought and one that is central to this study: "What is a literature?" In our contemporary world, where, as Pascale Casanova reminds us, we think regularly about literature in national terms, phrases such as "French literature," "English literature," "American literature," "Latin American literature," "Ancient Greek literature," "Postcolonial literature," "African-American literature," and so on are a regular element of how we think about texts and their relationships, and yet we give little thought to the question of whether or not these terms are equivalent or of how to understand the relationships among them. Although we speak more generally about "national literatures" as a label for the set of terms suggested by the above list, it is clear that nation is not always, nor even necessarily that often, the determining criterion for bounding a literature. Does "French literature" include all literature composed in French or only that produced in the Republic of France, or that produced by its citizens? Does "English literature" begin with Beowulf,
though that text is unintelligible to speakers of modern English without specialized training and though it was lost for centuries and thus had no influence over the development of the English literary tradition from the High Middle Ages through the nineteenth century? If English literature does not begin with Beowulf, where does it begin? How do we know when a text written in English in the Thirteen Colonies is a (peripheral and provincial) adjunct to British literature, and when does that text become instead part of American literature? Why do we (those of us in North America, at any rate) frequently talk about “Latin American literature,” as if Latin America had a (single) national tradition, when the texts of writers as diverse as Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Mario Vargas Llosa are often so specifically narrating their nations, not a continental region? Why do we do the same with “Postcolonial literature” in English? Does it make sense to link the English- and French-language literatures of Canada under a single rubric, suggesting a stronger connection between them than either has with its peers in its own language, when questions of literary influence would likely point the other way? What of literatures by non-linguistic minorities, like African-Americans? Does talking about African-American literature as if it were wholly separable from American literature strengthen a sense of solidarity or ghettoize minority voices, hindering them from reaching the mainstream? Are these answers the same both inside and outside the African-American community, and do the answers remain constant over time?  

These questions are each discussed with some regularity within a localized context (and I address some of them myself in this book), but rarely, if ever, are these kinds of questions juxtaposed. This is unfortunate because this question of how we determine what is or is not a literature is extremely important to literary studies not merely because so much of the institutional study of literature (academic departments, subfields, journals, and so on) is built around the notion that the world of verbal art can be subdivided into discrete categories we can call “literatures,” but also because without some such set of divisions the already unmanageably large bodies of material in many literatures would become truly overwhelming. Further, the methodological and ideological quandaries so many of the questions in the above paragraph pose might be rendered more soluble if we were able to begin from

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20 For the argument that African-American literature, as such, is a product of the Jim Crow era, see Kenneth W. Warren, What Was African American Literature?, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
some kind of a priori notion of what a literature is, and, further still, such an a priori definition would provide the basis for a potentially fruitful comparative discussion. A quick review of those questions shows that the answers authors themselves might give will often differ from the answers we would find satisfactory. To give just two examples, the composers and redactors of Beowulf, though some of them may have been motivated by political impulses, were clearly not anticipating the emergence of the modern-day United Kingdom, and were not self-consciously founding a national literature for that nation; likewise, the views of African-American authors as to whether or not they were founding a "national literature" may or may not have influenced their readers' understanding of the role of their work.

It is, rather, in the world of audiences or readers that the notion of a literature really emerges. Literatures, in the sense in which I use the term, are techniques or practices of reading texts, and specifically of linking texts together, through a series of relationships that usually begins with language and/or the polity, but which also include questions of genre and influence, among other criteria. As such, it is important to underline that any given text may be found in more than one literature, as different modes of reading that text may contextualize it very differently. Literatures can emerge in which texts of verbal art circulate only orally, as for example Homeric epic (and the lyric traditions with which epic develops) not only develops a common language in which literature can be composed and consolidates a repertoire of stories suitable for literary representation but also helps to develop a self-conscious sense of "Greeks" as those who listen to, understand, and appreciate Homeric epic. To that extent, my use of the notion of a literature in this book resists the understandings of literature as a whole promulgated by Pollock and by Casanova. That said, because the concept of a literature is so dependent on the practices of audiences and critics, the use of writing (and the production of para-literary texts, such as commentary and criticism) helps to establish larger-scale and more enduring literatures. Readers and audiences construct literatures by making connections among texts, but authors themselves (who are of course a privileged class of readers of literary texts) frequently self-consciously found or develop literatures, with varying degrees of explicitness. In founding a literature, readers and writers are of course interacting with existing literary texts and traditions, and literatures take on meaningful form only when there are texts excluded from them. Excessively local and particular traditions, for example, get excluded from the tradition of "Greek literature," as that emerges, and Latin texts get excluded from the vernacular literature of England. Works
composed in marginal dialects get excluded from the national literatures of Germany or Italy, and texts by colonial administrators get excluded from the national literature of a postcolonial nation. The texts excluded can be excluded either because they are deemed unworthy of the tradition (as with my first and third examples), or because they may be attached to a kind of social, cultural or political prestige that would obscure the literature in question (as in the second and fourth examples). In either case, texts are in competition with one another, and so are literatures.

Why Ecology?

In making this claim, I am of course saying nothing new; that texts and literatures are in competition with one another for the scarce attention of readers is a familiar point. Since economics is devoted to the study of how decisions are made about the allocation of scarce resources, it is no surprise that economic metaphors are frequently used to describe this process. To turn, again, to Pascale Casanova (who I believe is here, as elsewhere, articulating explicitly a series of ideas implicit but unexpressed in a great deal of other thinking and thus worth exploring in some detail):

We can describe the competition in which writers are engaged as a collection of exchanges where the stakes are the specific value that has currency in global literary space, the common good sought and accepted everywhere: that which [Paul Valéry] calls “cultural or civilizational capital” and which is also literary in nature. Valéry believed possible the analysis of one specific value which had currency only in the “great market of human affairs,” measurable according to the customs proper to the cultural world. This value lacks common measure with “the economic economy,” but its recognition is the sure index of a space (never named as such), of an intellectual universe where these specific exchanges take place.21

21 On peut décrire la compétition dans laquelle sont engagés les écrivains comme un ensemble d'échanges dont l'ennu est la valeur spécifique qui a cours dans l'espace littéraire mondial, le bien commun revendiqué et accepté par tous: ce qu'il appelle le « capital Culture ou Civilization » et qui est aussi bien littéraire. Valéry croit possible l'analyse d'une valeur spécifique qui n'aurait cours que dans ce « grand marché des affaires humaines », évaluable selon des normes propres à l'univers culturel, sans commune mesure avec « l'économie économique », mais dont la reconnaissance serait l'indice certain de l'existence d'une espace, jamais nommé comme tel, univers intellectuel où s'organisent des échanges spécifiques. (Casanova, La republique mondiale des lettres, 26–7.)
Tellingly, for both Valéry and Casanova, this literary economy relates to "the economic economy" through relations of analogy rather than through metonymy; literary capital is like financial capital but can in no way be exchanged for it. This use of economics as a controlling metaphor has, of course, many precedents in recent scholarship in the humanities and in critical theory, from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to the use of the economy as a model for understanding the operation of desire, familiar now from countless works of literary-theoretical scholarship. The metaphor clearly has considerable explanatory value and articulates nicely a particular critical notion of modernity as the ever-advancing march of capitalist logic into domains previously thought exempt from its sway. That said, I have chosen in this book to advance instead a different controlling metaphor, that of ecology. It should be noted that these metaphors, economics and ecology, share a great deal, from their etymological derivation from the Greek (oikonomos vs. oikologos), to their shared interest in the invisible processes that regulate and manage scarcity. My choice of ecology here begins with the observation that, where economics tends to simplify our understanding of complex systems in order to make them easier to understand, ecology is more comfortable accepting that the complexity may be inherent to the system. The wisdom and utility of economic theory, in fact, comes from its insight that all of the various inputs into the economic system—land, labor, capital—can be made equivalent to each other through expressing the value of each in terms of money. If gold, land, wheat, factories, machinery, advertising space on Facebook, and my desire to have a four-day workweek can each be assigned a cash value, then it becomes easy to compare the role each of these things might play in the economy as a whole and to make decisions accordingly.

If, however, we are dealing with a system in which the various inputs are not in fact equivalent to each other, or if we wish to keep the significance of those inputs distinct, ecology may provide a more interesting and useful model. Ecologists examine the interactions between the different forms of life that exist in a particular region, as well as the interactions of those living things with their non-living environment. Particularly useful, for my metaphorical purposes, is that ecology understands, accepts, and insists on, the distinct and mutually interactive nature of these various inputs, so that changes in the external environment (more or less rain than usual, habitat destruction) can have complex and shifting impacts on the various species found in a given context.
As the previous sections of this introduction have already suggested, I believe that it is impossible to understand any given literature qua literature solely through an analysis of the texts read through it. Rather, any given literature must, I believe, be understood as being in an ecological relationship to other phenomena—political, economic, sociocultural, religious—as well as to the other languages and literatures with which it is in contact. As an example, if we are to think about, say, Canadian literature in English, and how and why texts come to be read as part of this literature, we must understand that that literature is shaped by numerous forces, both literary and extraliterary. English-Canadian authors read other texts, within and beyond their own tradition, and are influenced by them, and understanding these processes will be crucial to understanding English-Canadian literature. But we must also consider environmental forces operating on that literature—the role that political, cultural, and educational institutions play in creating a demand for a literature to correspond to their own position, the economic forces that dictate the relative marketability of novels with explicitly Canadian themes, the desire of individual Canadians to read books about their nation. We must also consider how readers situate English-Canadian texts vis-à-vis competing English-language literatures coming from the United States and the United Kingdom, and even the extent to which Canadian literatures in English and in French interact with each other, or fail to do so. Likewise, an attempt to understand the literature of early China will require us to investigate not only the texts themselves, but the roles those texts played in the complex political and cultural arena of the time, where regional states’ leaders shared kinship ties and a common ritual culture but competed for hegemony with several states less completely integrated into a common cultural sphere. As I explore in some detail below, I believe that ecology, rather than economics, provides the better model for understanding these complex interactions.

One of the consequences of adopting this ecological metaphor, rather than an economic one, is that we can see more clearly that both texts and literatures thrive in a wide variety of ways, rather than there being the single adaptive strategy that Casanova, for example, finds. For her, the only way a literature can thrive is by building recognition in key centers such as Paris, London, or New York; only with that recognition achieved can authors working in that literature compete for individual recognition in the World

22 I touch on some of these issues in the next three chapters; for a fuller discussion, see the final three chapters of Beecroft, Authorship and Cultural Identity.
Republic of Letters. Literary recognition is of course a scarce resource, and as such gains for one author, text, or literature must be balanced by losses for others. But if we use an ecological lens to understand this process of survival and recognition, we can see that different literatures over time have thrived in different ways. Oral transmission and circulation has allowed for verbal art to thrive for centuries, or even longer, in small-scale societies, and indeed strong associations between such texts and ritual activities may, in a small-scale context, prove a more effective means of survival and recognition than written transmission. Such an orally based strategy, however, would have been less effective in a larger-scale context, such as the world of the Roman or Han empires, where even the recitation of works of literature at the court (a major literary activity in both cultures) was ultimately less successful than the writing of texts and the production of manuscripts. In some contexts, it has made sense for authors to produce texts in so-called cosmopolitan languages, reaching large audiences thinly spread over space and time; at other moments, vernacular languages (which can penetrate a given region more deeply, but whose endurance is endangered more rapidly with increased distance and the passage of time) have seemed the wiser choice. Even national literatures of the modern era can make the choice between gaining recognition in Paris or London (perhaps at the expense of being meaningful to audiences at home) and speaking exclusively to local audiences at the expense of wider recognition. Individual authors, of course, face similar choices, always subject to the constraints imposed by local conditions, both literary and extraliterary (it is easier, for example, for an author writing in Spanish to gain recognition in Paris than for one writing in Korean, since there are more translators able to work from Spanish, more members of the Parisian intellectual elite themselves able to read Spanish, more presses willing to build on the success of past Spanish-language authors, but also more of a perception of affinity between Parisian and Spanish-language cultures). Authors, texts, and literatures, I would argue, respond to the scarcity of recognition not as economic beings but as actors in an ecological context, searching for the niche in which they are most at home.

This book is, therefore, not ecocriticism in the conventional sense,23 and my use of the term "ecology" has more in common with linguistic

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ecology and media ecology, which likewise examine the relationships between their objects of study and their (human) environments, than it does with, say, political ecology, which lies at the intersection of the political world and the natural environment. I do not seek to discuss how literary texts represent or shape the natural environment, although I certainly see such projects as crucial and timely interventions in both our cultural and environmental lives. Further, while environmental constraints can certainly influence what I am calling literary ecology, (as when, say, past climate change has produced civilizational decline, necessarily reshaping the literary landscape in the process) that is not a phenomenon I will dwell on here. I do make use at various points of key ecological concepts, ranging from the discussion of the biome as a model for the comparative study of human cultures immediately below, to my borrowings from population genetics in the final chapter, in my discussion of the role that diversity might play in keeping a literary culture viable. It is my hope that my more abstract uses of ecological concepts and themes in this book augments, rather than detracts from, discussion of ecology per se in literary contexts, just as the use of language like “the economy of desire” in literary-theoretical contexts can awaken an interest in more profound interactions between economics and literature or the use of a phrase like “epistemological violence” can remind us of the ever-present dangers of physical violence (though of course in both these cases, too, there is the danger that the metaphor might instead detract from the real-world questions it indexes).

WHY A BIOMES APPROACH?

Although my appropriation of ecology as a metaphor for the systems of literary circulation I study does not altogether depend on a rigorous adherence to the categories or methods of that scientific discipline, I do find some of its concepts useful in understanding the project represented by this book. In particular, I find useful the distinction made in classifying ecological contexts between biomes and ecozones. In terrestrial ecology, the ecozones are the eight large-scale geographic regions into which the earth's land surface are divided—roughly speaking, North America, South America, northern Eurasia, Sub-Saharan Africa, South/Southeast Asia, Australia, Polynesia, and Antarctica. These large regions, long separated from each other by oceans, deserts, and mountains, have evolved quite distinct genetic, taxonomic, and historical profiles. Overlapping this classification are the series of biomes, a collection of fourteen types of environments, sharing conditions of climate, landscape, and major plant types, including such environments as deserts, tropical rainforests, tundra, boreal forests, Mediterranean climates, and so on. Each ecozone contains samples of a variety of these fourteen biomes, and regions of a particular biome the world over tend to share similar kinds of animal and plant life, which has evolved over time (with the particular genetic heritage of that ecozone) in response to the particular ecological constraints of the biome.

As an example, there are five regions of the world which share what the World Wildlife Federation calls a “Mediterranean” climate and ecology—the Mediterranean basin itself, California, parts of Southern and Western Australia, parts of South Africa, and parts of Chile. Each of these regions can be characterized by warm, dry summers, and cooler but generally mild and rainier winters, though of course there is considerable variation within each region. The long, hot, dry summers characteristic of the Mediterranean biome have led in each case to the prevalence of so-called sclerophyll vegetation—plants with small, dark, waxy leaves designed to conserve moisture. The specific kinds of sclerophyll plants found in each Mediterranean region differ, however, thanks to the very different ecological histories of the larger ecozones in which they are found, ranging from the oaks of Italy to the

eucalyptus of Australia. A biome, then, represents a shared set of challenges and constraints to life in a given region, with distinct and characteristic types of adaptive features found in plants and animals that may not be genetically related to each other. The territory found in a given biome in each ecozone is then subdivided into a number of ecoregions (over 800 terrestrial ecoregions worldwide, according to the standard used by the WWF), each of which differs to some degree from its neighbors as a result of the specific combinations of plant and animal life found there. The temperate deciduous forests of the US East Coast, for example, are divided in this scheme into two parts (with the dividing line just north of Baltimore), with the (traditionally) oak and chestnut forests of the Northeastern Coastal Forests ecoregion giving way to the oak, hickory, and pine forests of the Southeastern Mixed Forests to the south.

I have discussed the classification of ecoregions at some length because I believe this discussion, and particularly the notion of the biome, has considerable relevance for the study and classification of human cultures. The boundaries between cultures represent just as complex a question as that of those between languages (and indeed the two categories often overlap), but broadly speaking most of those who classify cultures have been happy to identify relatively small groups of people situated in space and time as a "culture," reserving terms like "civilization" or "culture region" for larger-scale assemblages of cultures. The construction of these larger cultural areas presents certain unavoidable methodological problems. Like the languages I discussed earlier, cultures often blend gradually one into the other, with the inhabitants of each town or village sharing some customs with their neighbors, and innovating some of their own. As a result, it is difficult enough to draw anything like a strict border around a culture; a region of literary or verbal art circulation would provide one means of doing so, but (as we shall see many times over the course of this book) it is quite possible for a given region to be within the region of circulation for more than one literary tradition.

The difficulties multiply when we seek to aggregate local cultures into larger units, since even if we have managed to define individual cultures, their complex interrelationships and participations in multiple larger-scale networks will make defining the boundaries of the aggregate that much more difficult. One of the most famous efforts to divide the world's cultures (or at least those deemed sufficiently advanced) into "civilizations" is that of the midcentury British historian Arnold Toynbee, who, by the time his project was completed, had identified no fewer than
forty-three civilizations in world history, though not all were present in his model at each stage.\textsuperscript{28}

Numerous localized and empirical objections could be raised to Toynbee’s scheme—why, for example, is the Greek world divided into three distinct civilizations (Cretan, Hellenic, and Byzantine), among the thirteen full-fledged civilizations he retains throughout the history of his own project, while China is represented as a single continuous civilization from the beginning of its history? Why are Chibchan and Araucanian cultures described as distinct satellites of “Peruvian civilization,” while all of Southeast Asia is classified as a single satellite of Indian civilization? How, for that matter, can the category of “arrested civilization” be made to fit such diverse cultural formations as the Ottoman and the Polynesian, the Spartan and the Eskimo? Such concrete queries could, of course, be multiplied almost indefinitely. This is not, I would suggest, because there is something particularly ineffective about the specific scheme Toynbee developed over decades of research nor yet because he failed to develop a sufficiently coherent definition of what a civilization is, even though that is an obvious methodological problem. Rather, I would argue, the concrete problems of Toynbee’s list of civilizations, and its tendency to break down the closer one looks at it, is a necessary consequence of the inherently interlinked and continuous nature of human societies around the inhabited world and the difficulties incumbent on the effort to break up this continuity into discrete spatiotemporal units. A thousand concrete improvements could be suggested to Toynbee’s scheme, but none of these possible improvements would, I contend, be able to address these fundamental methodological impossibilities. At the same time, as a comparatist with an interest in studying literatures (specifically Greek and Chinese) whose relationships are based on something other than contiguity, I admire the early attempt at a global synthesis that someone like Toynbee represents, and I believe strongly that the attempt to think through comparisons on a global scale is more than worth the effort.

Ecology, I argue, provides a useful paradigm here; to begin with, the cultural notion of the “civilization” is analogous in many respects to the

ecozone. Sometimes, ecozones have very coherent boundaries, as when the flora and fauna of the Americas differ from that of Eurasia, or where the Sahara or the Himalayas present so forbidding a barrier to many species as to constitute a fairly impermeable boundary. At other times, as in southern China where the Palearctic and Indo-Malayan ecozones meet, the borders are better understood as zones of transition. This notion, that borders can be zones of transition rather than fixed lines on a map, is itself illuminating for the project of enumerating human civilizations—certainly history has provided many examples of regions better understood as transitional between civilizations, or as participating in multiple civilizations, than as firmly in one or another of them.

But there is, I believe, something much more useful that ecology can contribute to this problem. As I suggested earlier, I think the notion of the biome—a set of typological conditions of climate and terrain found in different locations around the world and generating similar kinds of adaptations in plant and animal species—suggests a possible new approach to the comparative study of the literatures of the world. Rather than make, or in addition to making, the civilization our object of study (or its literary analogue, the region within which texts of a given language circulate), we might find it productive to think in terms of literary biomes as well; that is, in terms of particular patterns of ecological constraints operating on the circulation of literary texts in a variety of different historical contexts. In other words, rather than limit our study to specific systems within which literature circulates (Early Modern Europe, say, or East Asia, or the contemporary Anglosphere), we might want to think about how literature circulates, what sorts of constraints operate on that circulation, and how particular literary communities respond to those constraints. If patterns of temperature and precipitation, relief, the availability of freshwater, and the quality of soil are among the most important determinants of ecological biomes, the most significant determinants of a literary biome might be:

The linguistic situation: How widely spoken and/or read is the language of a particular text? Is that language used by a tiny elite across a wide range of times and places, or is it the general mother tongue of a specific region? What sort of literary history does that language have, and what sorts of linguistic and literary resources (from dictionaries and grammars to genres and venues for recognition) exist? Moreover, how many other languages exist as viable media for literary expression for that author or community,
and what sort of relationship obtains between those languages? Is the decision to compose work in that language a foregone conclusion for a given author or a choice made among two or more options, each, potentially, with different audiences and opportunities?

The political world: In the modern and Western world, but pretty much only there, as I demonstrate throughout this book, there exists a presumption that languages are properties of nation-states and that the entire human world can be (or at least should be) subdivided into nation-states. If this is not the case for the world of a given author or text, then what sort of political context is operative, whether tribal community, city-state, world-empire, or something else? How do the limits of polities correspond to the limits of linguistic circulation? Is one language shared by many polities, or does one polity possess many languages (or both)? Does a particular literary language provide a vehicle for intra-polity cultural relations, and does that language have a privileged relationship to one or more of those polities? How does the state intervene in cultural affairs, and does the state take an interest in the language or languages used for literary production?

Economics: What sort of economic relations link cities and polities to larger networks? What sort of relationship do those networks have to the structure of polities, and is there an economic system of core and periphery in place? To what extent is culture, and specifically literature, seen as an economic act, and to what extent is literature implicated instead in political, religious, and other symbolic networks?

Religion: If religion is a coherent and autonomous sphere of activity in this context (which is not necessarily the case), to what extent does it link the polity and the community to larger networks and/or define the limits of the polity? Is a given language (or languages) privileged within the literary ecology because of its association with sacred texts, and is that language still usable for other purposes? Does religion divide what might otherwise be a unified linguistic and cultural community?

Cultural politics: Is there a strong sense that literature should be an elite activity, a folk art, a mass-produced commodity? If the production of literature is itself a prestige activity in any way, to what extent are there gradations of prestige? Who assigns authors and texts to different levels of prestige and on what basis? Is valued literary production focused on one
location (court, capital city, commercial center) or distributed more widely across a variety of centers? Is literary prestige and/or the evaluation of literary texts associated with particular institutions, such as academies or universities? How stable is this arrangement?

**Technologies of distribution:** Is verbal art produced and consumed orally only, or does writing play a role? Is writing in fact the dominant, or only, means by which prestige texts can be circulated? If both oral and written circulation are found, what are the respective valences of each, and what are the relationships between the two? Are theater, or other performing arts, important to verbal art? Does printing and the mass production of texts play a role, or more recent technologies, from radio and film through television to the internet and beyond? Which of these media are recognized as verbal art, and with what levels of prestige (and how does that prestige compare with economic recognition?)

**Six Literary Ecologies**

This book cannot discuss all of these questions for all possible cultures over time, and of course the many possible answers to these questions could be combined (and, more importantly, have been combined) in a myriad ways. But just as the concept of the ecological biome seeks to generalize and to create a set of comparable circumstances in which species adapt in fairly predictable ways, so, too, I think the circulations of literatures have operated in similar enough ways that a relatively small set of biomes can offer considerable explanatory power. In what follows, and in the rest of the book, I work with a set of six literary ecologies, which I have discussed briefly elsewhere and used in my earlier work. I do not claim to have exhausted the range of possibilities; this set of six ecologies is empirically derived rather than theoretically complete. I also draw here on the understanding, inherent in ecology from its beginnings, that life on earth varies continuously rather than being divided into discrete and stable blocks. In a foundational and still-cited 1935 article, the biologist A. G. Tansley observed that the ecological boundaries we draw are frequently (though not always) “mental isolates,”

29 Beecroft, “World Literature Without a Hyphen.”
that is, intellectual constructions designed to make scientific study possible and not unambiguous features of the natural landscape. Since they deal with human culture rather than the natural environment, my six literary ecologies are a fortiori just such "mental isolates," with all the usefulness and all the problems that such concepts necessarily entail. I would suggest, however, that the fact that my ecologies cut across traditional cultural boundaries and juxtapose unrelated cultures in deliberately artificial ways might be helpful as an antidote to civilization thinking, which all too often forgets that civilizations are always, in the end, mental isolates as well, and that human cultural experience knows no firm or enduring borders.

I am certain that many specialists in many areas will challenge my association of particular cultural contexts with specific ecologies; since I do not see the purpose of this book as being to definitively categorize the world's literary ecologies but rather to provide a basis for further discussion, I do not believe that these concerns ultimately affect the value of this project. Indeed, I will view it as a measure of the success of this project if it invites further discussion and debate whether on the level of disputing the association of a given context with a particular ecology, the reduction of or addition to my list of ecologies, or indeed to disputes on the level of premise about the comparability of different cultural contexts. The goal of this book is to facilitate the comparative study of the interactions between literatures and their environments; to the extent that I have helped to further that discussion (even if it is only to conclude that the project is, in whole or in part, impossible), I will be happy.

EMIC AND ETIC: A SHORT INTERLUDE

At this point, it seems appropriate to dwell for a moment on one possible critique of this project, namely that the ecologies I am discussing are artificial constructions of my own (even if derived in each case from specialist scholarship in a relevant field) and do not reflect concerns indigenous to the cultures I discuss. The nature of this critique can be summed up in the sense that my conceptual framework is etic rather than emic, to borrow the terminology made popular by the linguist Kenneth Pike. In the

Pike-inspired use of the terms, which have considerable currency in the social sciences but which are less common in literary study. “emic” concepts are those indigenous to a particular culture, while “etic” concepts are those introduced to the study of that culture by an outside observer. The terms derive from “phonemics,” the study of the minimal linguistically meaningful units of sound in a language, and “phonetics,” which studies instead the minimal units of sound in all languages, from a physiological and acoustic perspective. As an example, from a phonetic perspective, the sounds represented by the letter “p” in the English words *pit*, *spit* and *tip* are distinct, since the *p* in *pit* is aspirated slightly, while that in *spit* is not, and that in *tip* has no audible release. From a phonemic perspective, however, all three are identical because English speakers perceive them to be a single sound and because there are no cases in which the phonetic distinctions among these three sounds is used by the language to convey meaning (in the way, for example, that the difference between the initial consonants of *pet* and *bet* is productive in meaning for English speakers, since it is the only way to distinguish between these two words with different meanings).

It is true that, in general, the ecologies I describe in this book are etic concepts in this sense, although it should be noted, as I discuss in the relevant chapters, that “epichoric,” “Panhellenic,” and “cosmopolitan” are all emic terms to some extent within the Greek language and that the words “vernacular,” “national,” and “global” are also emic in certain contexts and to varying degrees. None of these terms (with the exception of the last two) are emic in Chinese, for example, or indeed in any of the other cultures I discuss, so I can reasonably be charged with imposing terminology borrowed either from the Ancient Greek context or from modern


34 Throughout, I use “Ancient Greek” and “Classical Chinese” (or occasionally the emic term *wenyan*) as if they are the proper names of specific languages, despite an obvious awareness that each term refers to a disparate collection of regionally, chronologically, and sociolinguistically variant forms, assembled variously in different surviving texts. The systems of literary circulation built around each make use of a assortment of linguistic registers, commented on in the text where appropriate. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same could be said about many of the “languages” I discuss. Similarly, I use the expressions “Archaic/Classical/Hellenistic Greece” and “Early China” at times as if they refer to coherent civilizational entities, in full awareness of the complexity of such a claim.
scholarship on radically distinct cultural contexts, rather than searching for whatever emic terminology in those contexts might identify the phenomena I discuss. Moreover, even within the Ancient Greek context, it can reasonably be argued that I (following the work of Gregory Nagy and others) am not so much using emic terminology as borrowing indigenous words to express etic concepts, since our modern scholarly discussion, say, of epichoric versus Panhellenic modes of reading of ancient Greek texts clearly depends on so many other concepts derived from the modern world and not strictly from an indigenous Greek context.

These concerns are certainly legitimate, and the reader of this book is well advised to bear in mind at any moment that I am imposing an artificially constructed conceptual framework on my unsuspecting source materials. As a scholar trained in the methodologies of (Western) Classics and Early China studies, both of which disciplines (like, I would suggest, all disciplines built around a specific linguistic or cultural object of study) lay considerable emphasis on an emic understanding of the culture under study, I take these concerns very seriously, and, elsewhere in my work, I attempt to (re?)construct parts of the emic frameworks of the cultures I study. It is as a practitioner of a third discipline—comparative literature—that I must come to the defense of the etic, for it is etic concepts that make that discipline possible. By definition, the comparative study of literature in different languages, coming from different cultures, must take place in some sort of critical language, and that language must be etic to at least one of the cultures under study, if it is not etic to both, or all, of them. In fact, those in search of a methodological description of comparative literature or of a ready means of drawing a distinction between that discipline and the study of the so-called national literatures, (an obviously problematic category which I discuss further in Chapter 5), could do much worse than to say that national-literature disciplines and departments study literature from an emic perspective, while comparative literature does so from an etic perspective.

In ascribing to comparative literature an etic perspective, I am not claiming to privilege the etic over the emic, let alone to give legitimacy to the etic alone. Nor do I mean to suggest that an etic perspective is somehow an objective or neutral one; necessarily all critical perspectives, whether etic or emic, are embedded in the cultural and ideological situation of their authors, and all necessarily result in (at best) a distortion of what they study, if not (at worst) the construction of the very object they hope to examine. This is, however, as true of modern scholars adopting an emic methodology
as those using an etic one, since to use the emic as a critical methodology as an outside observer (or even as an "inside" observer speaking to a scholarly, therefore always-already partly "outside," audience) is already to begin the transformation of emic to etic. Moreover, as we have seen in the discussion of the translatability of "literature" as a term, one of the dangers of a scholarly methodology that overemphasizes the emic is that it runs the risk of reifying as meaningful and structuring indigenous concepts or terms whose meanings were or are in fact contested within the culture itself.

Given that both emic and etic frameworks alike can thus represent artificial impositions on the texts that are the objects of our study, there are certain advantages to the use of an etic framework. On one level, I would argue, the use of an etic framework has the advantage of highlighting the very artificiality of the concepts we use to study texts from other times and places. Unless we are extremely careful in our use of emic concepts, we always risk naturalizing our use of those contexts that are usually decided etic disciplinary contexts. The composers of Homeric epic had no notion of being studied by specialists in "Classics"; nor, for that matter, did Melville know that his work would be an object of study for "American Literature" (at least not as that field is now constructed), nor yet Goethe as an object for "German Studies." Even to the extent that authors self-consciously reflect on their position within a literature or a tradition (as Melville and Goethe surely did), their understanding of what that "literature" or "tradition" really is necessarily differs from ours. Valuable as the emic work we all do as "national-literature" specialists is, I believe that at least the occasional glance at an etic perspective can serve as a useful corrective for our natural tendency to equate our use of emic concepts with their use in their original context.

Most importantly, as I have already suggested, such a framework makes possible comparison across cultures and therefore also conversation across disciplines. Even as this book offers a framework through which the comparative study of literary ecologies might proceed, its greater commitment is to the creation of a common ground on which questions of comparison and comparability can be asked. I would be delighted, for example, to hear from Hispanists who object that contemporary Latin American literature is neither "national" nor "global" in my sense, or from Arabists who dispute my claim that Arabic literature remains in some sense "cosmopolitan," or from Egyptologists who might rightly point out that my scheme provides no obvious place for the literature they study. But beyond such terminological disputes, I also welcome debate that challenges my
thesis that these literatures, as objects in their own right, are comparable on ecological grounds, whether by insisting on the *sui generis* nature of some particular literary tradition, by constructing an alternative framework based on concepts emic to a literature or through some other means. Such challenges will not invalidate this project, I contend, but rather demonstrate its worth, which lies very much, I believe, in its establishment of a basis for discussion.

I have elsewhere criticized Franco Moretti’s model of world literature as one itself based on a core-periphery model of economic activity, with scholars of national literatures operating as the extractors of raw material on the periphery, while scholars of world literature perform the value-added labor of synthesis and analysis in the core.\(^{35}\) I am aware that the mission I here propose for my own work risks reinscribing the very division of labor I criticize in Moretti’s model. This is a danger I take seriously, and it is one that I hope to have resisted, at least to some extent, in the writing of this book. Most of all, I believe that I can function best as a theorist of world literature to the extent that I speak as a scholar of specific literatures, which is why where possible I offer examples from the literatures that I study (Greek, Latin, classical Chinese) or at least from modern Chinese or from the modern European languages in which I can read the original, with varying degrees of fluency and sophistication. As such, I also believe strongly that a critique of my approach undertaken from the perspective of any particular language or literature is also, inherently, a theoretical and/or methodological intervention in the field of world literature. This project is also by nature collaborative, at least in the sense that reading books from fellow scholars in other fields, and drawing inspiration from them, can be considered a collaborative project (and I believe it can); one of the most fervent hopes I have for this project is that it will encourage more such reading across disciplines, so that specialists in Old English might find theoretical insights in the work of specialists on early South Asian vernaculars, or scholars of nationalism in the literatures of Eastern Europe or Latin America might find insight in the work of specialists on the national literatures of Canada or of early twentieth-century China. I hope also to provoke other, more rigorous and extensive forms of collaboration, but simply to read each other’s books would be a good start. My greatest hope for this book is that it will begin to provide scholars of different literatures with a common language with which to talk about a shared set of issues; the

richness of the discussions that could happen in that language are the greatest reward I can imagine.

Herewith, I introduce the six ecologies that form the core of this book. Each is the subject of its own chapter, which conveniently allows this concluding section of my introduction to serve as a summary of the book’s chapters. I offer here a brief outline of each ecology, together with a mention of some of the key tropes found in texts that participate in that ecology, and which facilitate readings informed by that ecology. Since each of these ecologies are, in Benedict Anderson’s happy phrase, “imagined communities,” there is always a dimension of constructedness, or of the unthought, about each ecology, and I attempt to sketch these, too, here. More details, obviously, follow in each chapter. These ecologies are presented in the order in which I can identify their historical emergence, although I stress that my model is not an evolutionary one. I do not see any sense of historical inevitability to this list of ecologies, any more than deserts necessarily evolve into rain forests, and where appropriate in the text I note cases where a particular language or ecological context evolves against the order below (as when, for example, Latin moves from being a vernacular language to being a cosmopolitan one).

1. **Epichoric**, or local, literary ecologies are the limit case of literary circulation, where verbal art (frequently, though not necessarily, oral) may be transmitted over long periods of time but does not leave the small-scale local community (be it a Greek *polis*, a Chinese city-state of the Warring States era, or a tribal community among the aboriginal populations of the Americas and the Pacific). Epichoric readings of texts frequently emphasize the emplacement of those texts—the ways in which those texts both embody and construct a sense of place for the community in question, marking boundaries and imbuing mountains, rivers, trees, and other natural and artificial features with meaning. Since we as modern Westerners do not live in such a society, we by definition cannot read epichoric texts purely from “inside” their cultures, and so any text that may have begun as “local” must circulate in some other form for us to have access to it. As a limit case, the ideal epichoric culture would have no contact with any other culture, but since we know of no culture so isolated, epichoric readings of texts necessarily involve some kind of “forgetting” of broader cultural connections.

2. **Panchoric** ecologies are those that form in regions with small-scale polities but where literary and other cultural artifacts circulate more
broadly through a space that is self-aware of itself as some kind of cultural unity and that define themselves by the exclusion of other polities that do not share that culture. The paradigmatic example of this ecology is the Panhellenic culture of archaic and classical Greece (and my coinage, “panchoric,” is a generalization of the more familiar Panhellenic), though I have attempted to show, here and elsewhere, that the Chinese world of the same era is comparably constituted, and there are a limited number of other possible cases around the world. Key tropes of the panchoric ecology are catalogues, anthologies, and genealogies—devices that bring into the structure of the text itself an understanding of literature and culture as the sum of a series of epichoric parts. Frequently, however, the elements of these catalogues, anthologies, and genealogies seem to have been constructed artificially to present the appearance of a “sum of parts.” Panchoric cultures, in other words, are frequently more unified than they pretend to be and represent themselves as assemblages of traditions precisely in order to eliminate the space for whatever might be more genuinely local.

3. **Cosmopolitan** ecologies are found wherever a single literary language is used over a large territorial range and through a long period of time. Such languages frequently emerge as the result of a great world-empire (those of Alexander the Great, of the Guptas in India, the Han in China, or the Islamic Caliphate, for example), but the languages and literary cultures they spawn (almost necessarily written) long outlast those more transient political formations. Cosmopolitan literatures, especially those which evolved out of panchoric or vernacular languages (as many did), frequently indulge in the trope of universalizing imagery or themes from that earlier tradition, reworking what was once a more local tradition so that it can better serve a larger world. Cosmopolitan literatures, almost by definition, represent themselves as universal, and yet their very reach often brings them in touch with rival cosmopolitanisms. They also tend to represent themselves as universally accessible, with recognition within the tradition open to almost anyone who can learn the (often difficult and somewhat artificial) language, and yet cosmopolitan ecologies frequently conceal considerable inequalities of circulation, with cultural peripheries marginalized by the core.

4. **Vernacular** ecologies emerge (as Pollock describes) out of cosmopolitan ones when sufficient cultural resources accumulate behind some version of a locally spoken language to allow for its use for literary purposes. Vernaculars are often developed in the context of new political formations,
though their uses frequently spread beyond the borders of those polities, and their emergence is frequently accompanied either by translations of canonical works from cosmopolitan languages or by texts I call "vernacular manifestoes." Since many vernaculars emerge out of a dialect continuum (as, for example, Italian, French, and Spanish all do), they are often themselves somewhat abstract languages, generalized from a point on that continuum, rather than simply reflecting the speech habits of any one community (though they may represent themselves as so doing). Vernacular literatures exist in competition with one or more cosmopolitan languages (since they emerged in the context of one), as well as with each other.

5. The national literary ecology emerges out of the vernacular literary ecology of Europe, together with the emergence of nationalism per se, gaining considerable momentum in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and independence movements of the settler colonies in the Americas and continuing to grow throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This ecology spreads gradually around the world, as a direct consequence of European imperial expansion during this period, and corresponds very much with the ecological situation of literature as described by Moretti and Casanova, among others. Just as this period marks the first era in human history in which it is believed that the entire inhabited world should be under the rule of a single kind of polity (the nation-state), so too does this mark the first time a single literary ecology spreads worldwide (as opposed to cosmopolitan ecologies, which think of themselves as universal but spread instead only over a particular region). A key trope of the national literature is that of literary history, which emerges in Europe at this time and seeks to establish a progressive narrative for national literary history, beginning with rustic or folk foundational texts, and progressively shedding cosmopolitan elements, now represented as old-fashioned. Another trope of the ecology is that of the "Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns," a period, in other words, when the cosmopolitan language is supplanted completely, so that national literatures compete with each other just as nation-states do, freed (at least in principle) from non-national actors. Since the notion of the nation-state rests on the claim (only loosely connected with reality) that each nation speaks a single language, and is represented by a single polity, the national-literature ecology does the same. The national-literature ecology thus tends to forget works whose origins belie this congruence between nation and language, as well as works written in the cosmopolitan language after the
emergence of the vernacular and works that do not suit the narrative of national history.

6. **Global** literary ecology, my sixth and final category, represents another limit case—the literary circulation that truly knows no borders. As major languages (most obviously, of course, English) escape the bonds of the nation-state, and texts begin to circulate more rapidly around the planet, we may be moving in the direction of just such a borderless world (though linguistic competency will always create barriers of its own). The fantasy of a world without borders conceals within itself another fantasy, namely that borderlessness might create equal access to the literary world for all, regardless of political status or the position of one's native language within the global linguistic ecology. I identify as a key trope of this emergent ecology something that I call the “plot of globalization,” the use of multi-strand narration to convey on a formal level our interconnected and polycentric world.