# Comparative Practices in Britain's Long Eighteenth Century
## An Introduction

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## 1. Introduction: COVID-19 and the Study of Comparison

Comparing is one the most fundamental intellectual operations.[1] The ability to relate different objects, for example in terms of similarity and difference, is an essential part of human cognitive architecture. It is part of "the way we think" (Fauconnier/Turner 2002), and, as a result, it seems unavoidable to engage in comparative acts "when trying to cope with our everyday experience" (Eggers 2019: 33). But while the mental ability to compare may be an anthropological constant across times and cultures, the specific forms, functions, and contents of comparative acts can change in many ways. This has been painfully illustrated by the global events of the past year during which most of this book was composed. The COVID-19 pandemic (still going strong while we are writing this introduction) has served as a powerful reminder of both the omnipresence and the historical situatedness of comparative practices. It has shown, on the one hand, that we continue to live in "an age of comparison" (Nietzsche (1996 [1871] 24), i.e., in a time in which contemporary (Western) science and culture are marked by an extraordinary profusion of comparisons; and, on the other hand, that comparisons as a social practice have a historical and political dimension.

1 This book has been prepared within the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 1288 "Practices of Comparing. Changing and Ordering the World", Bielefeld University, Germany, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). We want to thank all contributors to this volume for their articles as well as their patience and dedication during our collaboration. We would also like to thank the SFB1288 and the Library of Bielefeld University for their support in publishing the volume.

Since the outbreak of what has become the worst pandemic in more than a century, SARS-CoV-2 has killed millions of people and severely disrupted economic and social life in countries around the globe.[2] The sudden appearance of the virus and the economic repercussions and social isolation that have affected many people as a result of the political measures attempting to contain the disease, have made it almost impossible, even for those who have not become infected themselves, to compare life during the pandemic with life before the appearance of COVID-19. In fact, there have been few times in history, as Epple (2020) suggest, in which so many people from all social strata, "the sick and the healthy, the old and the young", have been so excessively exposed to and have so intensely engaged in comparative practices as during this pandemic (25).[3]

Beyond the realm of individual, personal reflections not only scientists have embraced comparative methods in their study of the virus, for instance by comparing the effects of the disease on members from different age groups. Different types of comparison have also taken prominent positions in public discourse. Government institutions and news agencies, for example, have embraced the practice of publishing continuous live updates on the comparative numbers of COVID-19 related infections, deaths, vaccinations, (etc.); scientifically false comparisons with other (respiratory) diseases such as influenza have become a mainstay of coronavirus-sceptical discourse; and endless comparisons between political and administrative responses to the crisis in different countries, federal states, cities, and districts have fuelled heated political debates and talk show panel discussions.[4]

The political and often ideological agendas driving many comparisons in those contexts show that comparing is never an entirely neutral operation and

2 The WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard listed 4.049.372 deaths on the day we wrote this passage. ‹https://covid19.who.int› (14 July 2021).

3 "Vergleichen hat eine lange Geschichte. Aber kaum je haben sich Gesunde und Kranke, Alte und Junge mit der ubiquitären Alltagspraxis und ihren Wirkungen so intensiv beschäftigt. Wir bekommen das Verfahren *in actu* vorgeführt. Wir sind Augenzeug*innen, wie mithilfe von Vergleichen Orientierung gesucht, gefunden und begründet wird" (Epple 2020: 24).

4 For a more detailed discussion of different types of comparison related to COVID-19 in public discourse, see once more Epple (2020), who distinguishes between three major types of comparing: scientific comparisons, political-antiscientific comparisons, and conspiration-theory comparisons ("der *medizinische Typus*, der *politisch-antiscientistische Typus* und der *Typus der Verschwörungstheorien*") (24).

"always a matter of judging and choosing" (Spivak 2009: 609). Together with the crucial role of different (social) media in their dissemination to wider audiences those examples illustrate why academic investigations in this field are well advised to go beyond addressing the logical and cognitive architecture of comparing. They suggest that a better understanding of the form and function of comparisons, especially those that have consolidated into specific discursive practices, requires us to study their specific historical, technological, and ideological contexts and the agendas underlying their performance. Comparisons may be traceable in extant sources as far back classical antiquity,[5] but their specific forms and the cultural practices into which they are embedded are subject to historical change. However, while the existence of such change in general seems uncontroversial, sustained academic research into the specifics of the history of comparing is still in its infancy. Comparisons have been studied with regard to their epistemological value and methodological usage in various disciplines.[6] But as Steinmetz has recently pointed out, there is "no reasonably coherent research tradition that deals with *comparisons as practices and concepts* that have a history of their own" (2019b: 4). All in all,

> surprisingly little research has been done on the changing relationship between the comparers and the objects or persons compared, and on the different motives for and social effects of comparisons, on the variable criteria and commensurability assumptions applied, and on when and why the craze for subjecting almost everything and everyone to comparative rankings or ratings has started. (4)

While there may be no "coherent research tradition" at this point, the past years have witnessed interdisciplinary research into the history and theory of comparing becoming "something of an emerging field" in academic research (Rohland/Kramer 2021: 2).[7]

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5 See, for example, Schulz (2020).

6 Steinmetz (2014) provides a helpful survey of debates about comparisons and comparative methodology in sociology, history, anthropology, and political science. On comparative approaches in (comparative) literature, cultural studies, and the sciences, see also the contributions in Zima (2000), Felski/Stanford Friedman (2013), and Eggers (2011).

7 See, for example, the volumes by Rohland et al. (2021); Epple/Erhart/Grave (2020); Saussy (2019); Gagné et al. (2019); Deville/Guggenheim/Hrdličková (2016), Felski/Stanford Friedman (2013), and Mauz/von Sass (2011).

Our volume is situated in the context of this emerging field. It aims to make a contribution to the larger project of studying the history of comparative practices, on the one hand, and the impact of comparative practices on the course of history, on the other.[8] Focussing on Britain's Long Eighteenth Century from the perspective of Literary and Cultural Studies, we are specifically interested in the role comparisons play in the literature, language, and culture of this period, which constitutes a crucial phase in the formation of the British Empire, the development of scientific practices, and various landmark changes in British Society and culture. Moreover, the eighteenth century is arguably of particular relevance for the study of comparing as it seems to mark in several ways the beginning of Nietzsche's "age of comparison". Thus, the period is ideally suited to investigate the connection between the development of what has been called (Western) modernity and crucial changes in the frequency, role, and function of comparisons across various discursive fields. We will attempt to outline this connection in the following, by turning to the example of one of the most famous literary texts from the period.

## 2. *Robinson Crusoe*, Comparative Practices and the Emergence of Western Modernity

> I now began to consider seriously my Condition, and the Circumstance I was reduc'd to, and I drew up the State of my Affairs in Writing […]; and as my Reason began now to master my Despondency, I began to comfort my self as well as I could, and to set the good against the Evil, that I might have something to distinguish my Case from worse […].
> *Robinson Crusoe, 1994 [1719]: 49*

When Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is stranded on an uninhabited island, comparison turns into a strategy for survival. Threatened to become overwhelmed by despair, he decides to "master [his] Despondency" by turning to reason. In a much-quoted passage, which has been mostly discussed with regard to the issue of Crusoe as an embodiment of the *homo oeconomicus*,[9] he attempts to evaluate his situation as objectively as possible and draws up a balance sheet on which he lists "very impartially, like Debtor and Creditor"

8 For an outline of this general research project, see Epple/Erhart (2015b & 2020).

9 See, for example Volkmann (2003: 554-555).

the negative and positive aspects of his life as a castaway in two opposing columns (49). This comparison of "the Comforts I enjoy'd, against the Miseries I suffer'd" has the intended effect (ibid.).

Having finished the task, he concludes that "[u]pon the whole, here was an undoubted Testimony" that no matter how miserable the circumstances, there is always "something *Positive* to be thankful for" (50). In the following years of his enforced isolation, this rather simple truism helps Crusoe to find solace in scripture and turns into a social philosophy that makes it easier for him to endure his fate.

> It put me upon reflecting, How little repining there would be among Mankind, at any Condition of Life, if People would rather compare their Condition with those that were worse, in order to be thankful, than be always comparing them with those which are better, to assist their Murmurings and Complainings. (121)

For Crusoe, as the passage illustrates, comparing has the potential to serve as a (mental) strategy for dealing with adverse circumstances. Over the course of the novel the character engages in various acts of comparing with different functions.[10] Yet, it is the deliberate and strategic way in which he draws on comparisons as a cognitive, moral, and practical resource that connects many of those individual acts. Beyond engaging in comparative reflections serving "to comfort [his] Mind with Hopes" (95), he also uses comparison, for instance, as a tool for empirical assessment. Having been thrown into a state of utmost confusion, anxiety, and agitation after encountering the famous footprint in the sand, for example, Crusoe decides to "go down to the Shore again, and […] to measure the Mark with my own Foot" in order to test empirically by comparison whether he might have made the footprint himself (115).

The examples of the balance sheet and the footprint are of interest in this introduction because they reflect a particular usage of comparisons as conceptual and practical tools for problem-solving which not only permeates Defoe's novel, but which arguably mirrors the larger historical development of an increasing reliance on comparative practices in philosophical, scientific, and other types of discourse in the eighteenth century. Over the past decades, various scholars have suggested an intrinsic connection between the emergence of what has been called 'Western modernity' and the increasing prominence

10 See also the discussion of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in Nadine Böhm-Schnitker's contribution to this volume.

and frequency of comparative practices that can be observed in a wide range of fields from the mid-seventeenth century onwards.[11] Following up the work of Michel Foucault (1966), who was among the first to point to the key role of comparative thinking in the development of Western thought, Michael Eggers (2019), for example, argues that a new "comparative *episteme* […] asserted itself in scientific and intellectual thoughts between the Enlightenment and the Romantic period" (45). In this process, comparison joins and eventually supersedes analogy as a key "style of reasoning" (see Crombie 1994: 83-85) over the course of this period. Structurally inherent to a wide range of instruments of knowledge creation such as taxonomy, measurement, and classification, it emerges and becomes established as "one of the elementary and defining scientific methods of modernity", and, in this context, as one of the most significant methods for defining "an argument or a subject matter as scientific" (Eggers 2019: 44, 45).

But comparative thinking not only marks the development of the (natural) sciences and scientific thinking in general. Niklas Luhmann, for example, points to "the sudden appearance of an extensive and intense interest in comparisons" in the eighteenth century with regard to conceptions and questions of culture (1999: 38; my translation).[12] "Few students of eighteenth-century thought", Richter confirms this general development for the field of the humanities, "would deny the importance of comparison in that period's political and social theory, anthropology, philosophical and legal history, literature, philosophy, theology, and studies of religion" (2000: 385). Furthermore, in a different research context interested in the long-term historical development of *social* comparisons between individuals, Steinmetz (2019c) observes a nascent change in the dominant modes and forms of comparative practices over the course of the eighteenth century. In a study devoted to "the long transitional period from a society regulated by rank and inherited status to one based primarily on competition", he identifies three basic prevalent ways in which people distinguish themselves from others between 1600-1900: "above/below" comparisons, "better/worse" comparisons and "simply different" comparisons (Steinmetz 2019b: 13; 2019c: 81-82, *passim*). While all three basic types co-occur throughout and beyond the timeframe of his study, he

11 See Epple/Erhart (2015b: 14 & 2020: 25-26).

12 "Das plötzliche Auftreten eines intensiven und extensiven Vergleichsinteresses" (Luhmann 1999: 38).

suggests that up to the eighteenth century traditional, hierarchical 'above/below comparisons' relating to questions of social rank occupy centre stage. Only from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards the other two basic forms "come to the fore" (104): 'better/worse comparisons' as a type of social comparing related to a culture increasingly marked by ideas of (economic) competition, on the one hand; and 'simply different' comparisons that function as "assertions of being 'simply different'" (81) in a social context increasingly based on notions of individualism and ideas of "free and self-determining individuals" (82), on the other hand.

Beyond strategies of comparing in social discourse and its function as a theoretical instrument "in the sciences as well as in the humanities" (Eggers 2019: 45), scholars have pointed to a third field in which comparative practices appear to have played a prominent and formative role: The encounter with different cultures and foreign powers around the globe.

> [Comparisons] were crucial for coming to terms with new, sometimes challenging, or even confusing and irritating encounters with formerly little or unknown regions, cultures, geographies, people, plants, and animals—both within and outside of Europe. With comparisons, scholars, adventurers, military experts, explorers, and travelers helped—willingly or not—to naturalize or hide hierarchies by introducing allegedly neutral norms and standards for evaluations. Through comparison, they ordered the world. (Epple/Erhart 2020: 25-26)

Again, in the case of Britain, the eighteenth century constitutes a pivotal phase in the history of such encounters in the context of the development of the British Empire. While Britain's economic expansion from the late sixteenth century onwards had laid the foundation, it was not until the late seventeenth century that "an identifiable political community existed to which the term 'empire' could be fittingly applied", and not before the mid-eighteenth century that Britain emerged as one of the dominant global players in terms of political and military power (Armitage 2000: 7; see Colley 2003).

Moreover, attempts at 'ordering' and 'understanding' the world during this period were seldom 'innocent'.[13] The Western creation of knowledge about

13 The political nature of comparing and its specific relevance to the history of (post)colonialism and imperialism has been an object of intense debate in the fields of postcolonialism and comparative literary studies where it has led to a discussion of the foundational principles of comparative criticism. See, for example, Stanford Friedman

cultural and racial others in this period, as postcolonial scholars have pointed out, rather needs to be conceived as an intrinsic part of the imperialist project of "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over" the non-European world (Said 2003 [1978]: 3). As such, comparative practices in the context of intercultural encounters and conflicts, not only "ordered" the world, but they were also instrumental in changing it (Epple/Erhart 2020: 26). Western science – all ideals of objectivity notwithstanding – was deeply implicated in this process (Loomba 2015: 75-81). Ideologically tainted scientific constructions of racial, cultural, and national differences legitimised imperial conquest and informed colonial policies while economic endeavours based on colonial science "brutally altered the ecological and natural landscape of colonised societies" (76). Moreover, the relationship between European science and colonialism/imperialism was reciprocal. At the same time that science changed the colonial world, "the growth of modern Western knowledge systems and the histories of most 'disciplines' can be seen to be embedded within and shaped by colonial discourses" (78). As a result, it is not surprising that scholars have proposed the idea that intercultural encounters, conflicts, and entanglements, on the one hand, and the European evolution of a comparative methodology in science and scholarship, on the other, are causally related within the context of the emergence of modernity (Epple/Erhart 2020: 25).

Like with Western culture and literature in general, the historical development of the sciences and its comparisons in eighteenth-century Britain thus cannot be viewed in isolation from the country's overseas expansion and the effects of this expansion on British society, economy, and culture. "[T]he growth of the English economy and power", as Kaul emphasizes, "were coterminus with, and dependent upon, the expansion of trade and colonies overseas, with the result that any analysis of national culture and literature in this period must be located in an international, or more precisely, a colonial frame" (2009: 23). The question to precisely what extent comparative practices in literature, language, and culture contributed to and/or reflected the formation of this frame, in how far the comparisons found at work in (literary) works such as *Robinson Crusoe* can be integrated into or at least related to a history of comparative practices and the emergence of Western modernity are part of an ongoing research effort to which this volume hopes to contribute.

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(2012), Spivak (2009), Radhakrishnan (2009), Melas (2007), Harootunian (2005), Chow (2004), Stoler (2001), and Cheah (1999).

## 3. From the Analysis of Comparison to the Study of Comparative Practices

The 'long' eighteenth century, as the short survey above suggests, marks an important stage in the emergence of the British empire and the development of Britain towards a modern society, in general. During this period, moral standards, habits, fashions, as well as scientific-, cultural-, and imperialist practices evolved that shaped the daily lives of individuals of all classes and their interaction in Britain, as well as the expansion of the British Empire and the structures of the modern consumerist culture we still inhabit. This volume inquires into the roles that comparisons and the (discursive) practices into which they are embedded played in these developments. As we have shown, it thus participates in a wider scholarly effort to rethink and investigate the relevance of comparative practices in our understanding of (modern) history and culture that has gained increasing momentum in the humanities over the past years.

Not primarily interested in methodological discussions of the function of comparisons as a scientific tool, this approach proceeds from an understanding of comparing as the performance of a comparative act in which "different items (*relata* [or *comparata*]) are compared in relation to one respect (*tertium comparationis*)" (von Sass 2020: 89). The comparison itself thus constitutes a logical or structural operation putting into perspective (at least) two entities with respect to a particular *tertium comparationis*.[14] The act of comparing, on the other hand, is an operation that takes place in a specific situation, often with a specific underlying purpose. It is, in other words, an activity framed and influenced by its particular situative, ideological, and historical setting. By shifting the focus of attention in this way from the structure or method of comparison to the phenomenon of comparing, "the actors and agencies that perform the comparisons and connect them with their purposes and possible outcomes" come into view (Epple/Erhart 2020: 17). As a result of this conceptual change, individual acts can and need to be situated within larger discursive patterns and historical contexts.

> As a practice—according to the insights of practice theory – comparing has to be reconsidered not as an individual singular action performed randomly

14 For a more detailed account, see also Grave (2015: 135-139) and Epple/Erhart (2020: 15-16).

> and spontaneously across space and time […], but as part of a framework of comparative practices that have been established through repetition and routines, cultural habits, and historical patterns. As such practices, comparative acts in history are no longer contingent and arbitrary, but are clustered and organized along collective cultural schemes and models according to different framings of actors, groups, classes, nations, or other historical conditions and circumstances. (17-18)

The advantage of this approach, as Grave (2019: 55) points out, is that it is neither exclusively focussed on the acting individual and its intentions, nor on the structures into which comparative acts are embedded. The analysis of comparisons as practices rather occupies a middle ground between both approaches. It enables us to turn our attention "to a diverse bundle of factors", including "the practices, habits and routines, the corporeal executions and implicit orderings of knowledge, the material properties of the involved object, as well as the processes of representation" (56).

Adopting this approach inspired by the Practice Turn in the social sciences,[15] allows us to conceive of social practices of comparing as being entrenched in networks of circulation of bodies, artefacts, discourses and ideas. Within this conceptual framework, the contributions to this volume not only attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the history of comparing; they also aim to make a genuinely valuable contribution to the study of eighteenth-century British literature, language, and culture by investigating how comparative practices ordered and changed different aspects of British society and culture.

## 4. The Volume and Its Contributions

As we have seen, one of the key concerns of this volume lies in the question in how far comparisons not only prove fundamental in the epistemological foundation of modernity (Foucault; Luhmann), but to what extent they fulfil a central function in social life and the processes of intercultural encounter. In this context, the volume takes one of its starting points in the assumption that human beings tend to look towards their fellow beings in the negotiation of adequate and desirable behaviour and attitudes, and the sanctioning

15 See, for example, Schatzki (1996); Schatzki/Cetina/Savigny (2001); Reckwitz (2003).

of inadequate and undesirable ones. Similarly, comparisons between self and other play a central role in the discursive formation of national and cultural identities. In other words, comparative practices are deeply ingrained in manifold aspects of social life and their discursive negotiations. Moreover, we believe that fictional and non-fictional texts, images, and artefacts contributed to the formation and dissemination of cultural practices of comparing in the eighteenth century, either by explicitly presenting comparisons of actions and persons, or by offering more or less implicit invitations to compare how people act, think, and feel. Hence, this volume is dedicated to exploring the scope of comparative practices in the fields of language, literature, and culture.

Our volume opens with **Julia Wiedemann**'s chapter on "The Creation of the English Nation: Alfred the Great as Role Model". She explores the foundational function of comparative practices for the construction of an English, or, respectively, British national identity by analyzing both literary and political functionalizations of Alfred the Great as well as "the formation of the Alfredian myth" (29). With her cultural analysis of national identity, she not only clarifies what 'Britain' means in the long eighteenth century, for instance after such historical landmarks as the Act of Union in 1707; she also lays the foundations for many of the consecutive chapters, for example by investigating the function of Britain's Anglo-Saxon history and its discursive connection to ideologies of racialized whiteness and inherent notions of freedom or liberty, or by highlighting Daniel Defoe's contributions to this discourse as a central pamphleteer, journalist and novelist.

In "The Circulating Library, the Novel, and Implicit Practices of Comparing in 18th-Century England: Assembling 'Middle-Class' Literariness", **Ralf Schneider** analyzes the social function of circulating libraries with a view to their setting the scene for a great array of social comparisons, those of class in particular. In addition, he offers a crucial methodological reflection on the interaction between texts and contexts and combines Actor-Network-Theory with a focus on comparative practices. In his cultural analysis, he is particularly interested in performances of politeness and forms of social as well as cultural distinction. He does not as yet investigate the content or narrative strategies of particular novels but argues that the emergence of the genre is closely tied to these material, social and cultural performances in the public sphere. Ultimately, he claims "that access to the novel through the circulating library involved comparative practices of performance of class identity for the emerging middle stratum of society, and that these performances possessed a crucial comparative aspect" (50).

In the following joint contribution, "Comparing Conduct: English Novels of the Long Eighteenth Century and the Formation of Ideals of Social Behaviour", **Marcus Hartner** and **Ralf Schneider** continue to explore literary negotiations of comparative practices *in* the novel. Addressing the role practices of social comparing play in eighteenth-century fiction, they provide a survey of central novels from the period ranging from Daniel Defoe to Maria Edgeworth. In doing so, they introduce a heuristic distinction between direct and indirect comparisons with a clear emphasis on the dominance of indirect comparisons in the novel genre. This chapter thus adds a decidedly literary, or more precisely, narrative analysis of comparative practices and fills a research lacuna, as "the various ways in which comparisons are deliberately enacted in literary works of all genres, i.e., the question in how far comparative practices play a constitutive role in literary texts themselves, remains profoundly understudied" (77). By studying the social and moral comparisons on the level of characters, their analysis confirms the central social function of the eighteenth-century novel and its comparative practices as a potential means of (moral) orientation for the emerging middle classes regarding questions of behaviour and conduct.

In the following contribution, "The Complexity of Narrative Comparisons in Wollstonecraft's *Maria; Or, The Wrongs of Woman* and Lennox's *The Female Quixote*", **Anne Lappert** takes the heuristic distinction between direct and indirect comparisons introduced by Marcus Hartner and Ralf Schneider further and introduces "three basic types, namely imagery comparisons, narrative comparisons and intertextual comparisons" (106) in eighteenth-century women's writing. Interpreting the novels by Wollstonecraft and Lennox, Lappert investigates the complex overlaps of these different kinds of comparative practices and shows that only their combined analysis reveals the feminist arguments put forward in the respective novels.

The chapter by **Monika Class**, "'tis by Comparison we can Judge and Chuse [sic!]": Incomparable Oroonoko", is equally interested in women's writing. It analyzes Aphra Behn's 1688 novella *Oroonoko*, thus exploring a central text at the onset of the long eighteenth century. Taking her cue from established allegorical readings of Oroonoko as a stand-in for different Stuart monarchs, Class employs Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological concepts of emplotment and configuration to highlight moments of incomparability that render Oroonoko exceptional and make him transcend such Eurocentric analogies. Class highlights the affective singularity of the character and thus

illustrates how the interconnection between incomparability and affect may serve as a critique of slavery in the novella.

In "Articulating Differences: Practices of Comparing in British Travel Writing of the Long Eighteenth Century", **Nadine Böhm-Schnitker** takes her cue from Class' investigation of *Oroonoko*'s relevance for the development of the novel and analyzes the relationship between 'self' and 'other' in Behn's novella as well as in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. She explores the function of comparative practices for the construction and authorization of authorship that is fundamentally associated with the newly racialized marker of skin colour as a central signifier of social hierarchies in narratives of interethnic colonial encounters. She argues "that the literary 'individual' emerges defined by a close articulation of economic/capitalist, political/colonial and social discourses that shapes and determines the viability of subjects in the long eighteenth century" and understands comparative practices as "the means by which this subject gains its contours" (150-151).

**Caroline Koegler** equally concentrates on self-other relations from a postcolonial vantage point in her chapter "Oceans of Non-Relation: Affect and Narcissistic Imperialism in Sea Poetry by James Thomson, Charlotte Brontë, and Hannah More". Like Nadine Böhm-Schnitker, she is interested in options of the viability and particularly the grievability of subjects modulated by skin colour and social status; like Monika Class, she emphasizes the role of affect in comparisons as well as the function of incomparability. For instance, she reads Thomson's poem "Rule, Britannia!" as a case of imperial narcissism that is characterized by the "necessity of perpetually re-inscribing incomparable superiority (also: beauty) and comparative liberty (Britons "never will be" 'like slaves')" (184); imperial narcissism thus presents a condition that bolsters ideologies of empire by way of dehumanizing others. Similar to Anne Lappert, Koegler also emphasizes how important it is to pay attention to "who compares and to what effects/affects" (199) and critiques the functionalizations of comparisons for ideologies of empire.

Our volume ends with a linguistic reflection on the scope of English that slowly develops into a global *lingua franca* over the course of the eighteenth century and thus ties in with the previous postcolonial analyses. In "Practices of Comparing in Eighteenth-Century Grammars of English", **Göran Wolf** explores the impact of comparative practices on prescriptive eighteenth-century grammars. In a similar fashion to novels, they negotiate and establish social norms and values. Complementing Ralf Schneider's argument about the performance of politeness in the public space of circulating libraries, Wolf shows

that 'propriety' serves as a central value transported by a particular usage of language. Since propriety presents a social rather than a linguistic value, Wolf can illustrate the complex overlaps between cultural and linguistic analyses. Closing the frame opened up by Julia Wiedemann with her focus on national identity, Wolf concludes "that the progress of English went hand in hand with neglectful behaviour towards the neighbouring languages foreshadowing the nationalism that was to take root in England and elsewhere in the following century" (216).

In sum, the collected essays in this volume shed light on the manifold but interconnected forms and functions of comparative practices in language, literature, and culture. As a salient feature of eighteenth-century modernity, they prove crucial for constructions of national identity (British/English) and for the performativity of social conduct in the public sphere. Such performativity also codifies and delimits the scope of viable behaviours coded by gender, race, class and many other categories of difference, which is equally negotiated in the literature and culture of the period. The novel, the dominant genre of the long eighteenth century, is fundamentally structured by comparative practices that not only calibrate the interaction between characters and thus unfold corresponding subject effects; they also calibrate the interrelation between characters and the spaces they inhabit. As fundamental patterns of language, literature, and culture in the long eighteenth century, comparative practices deserve further and continued scrutiny, because they are performative practices with a clear impact on the scope of 'the human' as well as the understanding of 'the human' in/against their environments, and thus with central concerns of our 'modernity'.

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