

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA: THE DISSOLUTION OF A DEPARTMENT

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188 It is difficult not to feel uneasy about offering insights into what those of us who studied Comparative Literature in Edmonton remember as the glorious days before budget cuts and disciplinary and global shifts led to the dismantling of a once strong Department. I attribute my misgivings mostly to the fact that I am not at this moment situated in the Canadian academy and feel like an intruder. I wonder whether there is any way to escape my deeply embedded Canadian apprehensiveness about anyone from a US institution offering words of wisdom about Canadian university disciplinary structures. In addition to this US versus Canada dilemma, I am also reminded of my current position as a comparatist who has ended up running a Center for Persian Studies and, being a professor of Comparative Literature, seemingly occupying a paradoxical position of reaching for the planetary objective Gayatri Spivak recommends we adopt in lieu of the global or the worldly, while staying within the area studies models which have always given American universities more resources to engage in the study of non-European languages.

Ironically these paradoxes and reservations are the best entrée into remembering what many experienced in Edmonton as the “death of a discipline.” In my own departure and resettlement as a comparatist in a department whose niche is critical theory and provides or used to be a home for the director of the Center for Persian Studies, the Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation, and the Director of the Humanities Research Institute can be discerned the contours of some of the movements that made the Department of Comparative Literature in Edmonton vulnerable to crises, financial and otherwise.

I am not suggesting that as a specialist of modern Persian literature, I was not welcome in the Canadian setting. After all I studied Middle Eastern immigrant and exile writing for my PhD dissertation in a Department with no experts in the area.

The founding fathers at the University of Alberta department were open to all fields of study. How can we forget the late Milan Dimić’s famous mantra “you name it, we compare it.” This openness made it possible for me, despite an initial recommendation that I try entry in a US university with the requisite expertise among the faculty, to do my work and to join Persian Studies indirectly and through Comparative Literature. As a good comparatist, I would not qualify for any university position in Persian because I do not have a PhD in the field. Ironically while I would not be considered qualified to teach Persian language and literature courses, I can apparently direct a Center whose focus is Persian language, literature, history, and culture. I mention this to stress the extent to which the department in Edmonton defied traditional and rigid disciplinary boundaries and criteria. In my own case the willingness went beyond accepting me as a student and extended to eventually bringing me on board as a colleague.

How could such a formidable vision of openness not withstand the forces of change? It would be inaccurate to leave out of this discussion the extent and the depth of the financial crisis that made many an administrator experiment with cost cutting measures such as merging different units. First came the Film Studies group, then Religious Studies, making us into what I used to call the “department of sex, lies, and videotape,” and ultimately almost all the language and literature departments. For a department that had long stood for welcoming the displaced, the refugees, and the transplanted from across the globe and across disciplines, it was difficult to argue for gate keeping. Not that the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta was not used to defending itself and its turf, from its largest and most powerful rival, the English Department. The founding fathers had argued eloquently and repeatedly that the Department stood for languages other than English and the need to study them in the original. This while having to also defend the need to forego the use of original texts in the undergraduate curriculum. For years the argument had held, despite frequent tensions across departmental lines. But with the arrival of global English and postcolonial studies, the Edmonton English Department, like many others in Canada and elsewhere, shifted from the commonwealth to the postcolonial, blurring some of the differences between what was studied in the undergraduate courses in English and Comparative Literature. Equally significant was the fact that while for long Comparative Literature had had something of a monopoly on teaching theory, this too changed and the Department of Comparative Literature became one among many offering a theoretical foundation.

I remember numerous discussions around that time about redrawing the boundaries and mustering a new line of defense against what occasionally seemed like openings to a global vision in many other disciplines. Such moments, particularly when they focused on articulating what theoretical questions and paradigms constituted the proper domain of Comparative Literature, betrayed the chinks in the armor. A department that had long maintained that nothing was beyond its reach was now in the paradoxical position of having to put up fences. As we shuttled from

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a defense of polysystem theory to narratology to find the glue that held us together and, even more importantly, buttressed us against others, we became less and less convincing to ourselves and our interlocutors. This was not a proud chapter in the history of the department. The definitions and counter narratives of who we were did not offer a cohesive vision, nor did they help us, the diverse practitioners housed in the department, find a new community. In our belated attempts to rewrite ourselves into a dynamic and fast changing map of other disciplines, we began to unravel as a distinct department.

I do not mean to minimize the multiplicity of other factors that fueled and hastened the ruptures that culminated in the dissolution of the department. I remember and could relive them all too vividly, but that is not my focus here. What I want to return to are the paradoxes with which I began this piece: that is, being a comparatist and venturing into other terrains such as the dreaded area studies, or in my case Persian Studies. In my current home, Comparative Literature does not see its emphasis on critical theory diminished by serving as a home for a Persianist or an Africanist because it expects us to engage in difficult conversations across disciplinary and theoretical boundaries.

In my view Comparative Literature is at its best when it does not set itself against or in opposition to other disciplines, departments, or units, but rather positions itself in relational terms. This means embodying the alterity at the root of Comparative Literature and making it into a practice of critical debate and dialogue.

In the case of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, which was instrumental in the formation of countless comparatists, adopting this vision would imply taking incursions from other disciplines and departments as opportunities for transforming both the self and the other. The question would then become: how can Comparative Literature interact with and inflect other fields of study? I do see a position of strength in being able to stay within some of the paradoxes that cannot be easily resolved and to make them into a platform for affecting the way other disciplines and or domains of study operate. In my own case, this means approaching the study of Persian literature and culture from a different vantage point and raising questions about the history of formation of Persian Studies and its future in the academy. In this encounter, while the study of Persian language, literature, history and culture come under scrutiny, Comparative Literature opens itself up to alternative histories, emanating from beyond its European origins.

What such a model could have offered Edmonton at its most vulnerable moment could perhaps be best summed up in a revision of the old mantra "you name it, we compare it" to "you name it, we transform it."