

YOU AND ME: RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES IN CANADIAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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The momentum of this commentary comes from Julia M. Wright's recent work **187** "Professionalism, Citizenship, and the Problem of University Governance" as published in MLA's *Profession* and my own interests in decolonizing professions in the university and the university as an historically situated institution.

Amidst our current crises, we are all as professionals, professors, and part of the community of scholars worried about our roles in programs, departments, and disciplines because they are so intimately tied up with feelings of identity, trust, and obligation, or as Mary Douglas writes, "feelings of loyalty and sacredness" (1). Much comes together in these worries. Not to mention, we have spent a long time getting 'here.' And wherever 'here' is for Comparative Literature in Canada, 'here' is less a space than a series of relations. My own relations, of course, run through comparative literature, and wherever it might be, I know to whom I relate through it.

Insofar as Comparative Literature in Canada ostensibly provides a framework for critical and collaborative labour, it is also a crucial space for decolonization and the indigenization of university curricula and modes of research production. Decolonizing curricula and indigenizing research methods do not elide existing paradigms. They, rather, provide comparatists with a necessary adjustment to research practice: that of reframing (Smith 153). And yet, in order to be able to reframe, we must also be able to collaborate. The problem is, the idea of reframing that we may use as professionals in the classroom or as researchers is more effectively put to work administratively to reframe the discipline rather than our thoughts. Rather than reframing our specialized knowledge, we are instead reframed in our labour communicating it—the lifelines of our departments are being subordinated to the administrative and bureaucratic procedures of institutional power. With the budgetary cutting block so well-populated, how do we press home our relevance to today's

globalized, indeed glocalized, world? Seen one way, comparison is a world matter, and it would seem that world matters are 'area' matters. Seen another, comparative organizations become world organizations, and by proxy area organizations. We begin in messy collaboration and end in tidy division. A reliance on area studies can prove detrimental to the radical retooling necessary for critically collaborative work. The epistemological construct of area studies is deeply in bed with the movement and directional flow of transnational (and translational) capital, but we don't want to know this, and we are too worried about the job market (in Canada?) to speak of it, that is, if we even see beyond our place in it. Shades of Said and spectres of Spivak abound.

188 Comparison entails speaking truth to hegemonic power (or at least it should), and comparison should be innovative and always a function of resistance. Comparative Literature in Canada should yield a productive power by virtue of being unafraid. But to remain daring requires a continuous self-examination of what it means to compare and to collaborate, or in other words, to bring down imposed binaries and, if we dare say it, the division between 'areas.' It is opening oneself unto others. But speaking of areas, we need a space—not the place of power, but places to sit, work, teach, and actually exist: a department unfolded. We run the risk of retreating into our area and worshipping the idols of our territory, but comparison by its nature interrogates and opens collaborations between difference, which defers the stable meanings that make such self-concealment possible.

But those are disciplinary matters, or we may say they are styles of knowledge. Or we might better say they are neither—they are administrative matters, matters of professional work. Wright argues that the "gap between bureaucratic operations, in which faculty members safeguard academic standards and processes, and professionalism, in which they are subordinated to an employment structure, is ideological" (n.pag). That is to say, budget allocations ideologically fold programs and purposes as "things" not intimate relations, social enterprises, or radical decolonizations. This is most certainly disciplinary concealment without the collaborative praxis of comparison. Said another way, we may wish to see our social consciousness as comparative and collaborative, finding openings between differences, but our mode of production (Wright's "employment structure") is administratively moved to an area studies model and reflects the neoliberal fiscal operations of the university and its service to political aims and globalization through sometimes instrumental institutes or employment pathways. Our felt sense of being professionals aloof from bureaucrats is crushingly dismissed by Wright when she brings readers back to the reality of social consciousness being determined by material conditions: "The divide between faculty-controlled bureaucratic operations that safeguard educational standards and executive-driven financial operations that safeguard the bottom line keeps getting wider and wider" though there is hope that "Academics can work to bridge bureaucratic and financial operations in defiance of the separation of powers" (n.pag). For Wright, this move from a pre-Enlightenment vision of bureaucracy entails collab-

orative and horizontal relations among the professoriate, and this is a comparative enterprise.

Collaboration involves decolonizing our tendency to privilege. Collaboration leads to innovation. However, practice often runs contrary to this perspective. I would hope we can reconsider not only our ideas but also the professional organization of our work such that it includes comparison's focus on the productive capacities of collaboration: listening not imposing, networking, naming, claiming, remembering, indigenizing, representing, and discovering (Smith 142-162).¹ Importantly, this potentially redirects our gaze beyond a gilded, bronzed, marbled, or corked hallway of literary heroes to recognize one crucial fact: privileging silences. The seventh ambiguity here is vital—we may hope to privilege silences (that is, recuperate the silenced voices of others), but at the same time we are in a process of recognizing that the institutional privilege around us and in our elitist refolding into new administrative operations is also a force for silencing other voices. Privileging silences indeed, and it may silence us as well.

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Hence, collaboration is a useful way to help decolonize the extant models of interpretation in Comparative Literature in Canada. What does collaboration look like? That is up to us to negotiate and renegotiate. We do know that collaboration does not require abandonment, but it does engender *productive* negotiation: that each party listens and gains something from the experience in a horizontal relationship rather than vertical. What does it mean for comparatists to simultaneously accept multiple realities, or is this destabilization only deconstruction? For Shawn Wilson, “this idea can be further explained to say reality is relationships or sets of relationships, thus there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships that make up an indigenous ontology. Therefore reality is not an object but a process of relationships” (Wilson 73). The practice of comparison is itself relational, while the division into discrete areas that allow the production of products/students serviceable to geopolitical relations with these discrete areas is divisional. Do we produce relational ontologies, or do we produce a quasi-Enlightenment form of alienation that eschews relations for the rational instrumentalist operation of the critic on its alienated subject?

The problem here is in many respects Enlightenment.

But even this opens messy relations that cannot be closed into tidy areas. If light is literally the matter, then Prometheus is not the sole trickster figure. Nor is Raven. Nor is Coyote. Nor is Loki. Nor are the tricksters alienating. But to collaborate on their productive uses in storytelling and mythic narratives, and indeed their humanizing potentials, reminds us that the bravery to defy authority occasionally leads to horizontal relations and forms of organization. Dare we even say “relational” or spontaneous orders, rather than how Wright troubles the sense of “professional”? Can Prometheus unbound engender an ontology of relations that opens humanity to the gods? Or with a great deal more modesty, can comparison keep us open to an ontology of relations without being materially contextualized in a bureaucratic orga-

nization of world areas? If it can, would we do so knowing that it meant the lucrative instrumental training that is meant to meet the need for professional geopolitical knowledge that serves capital's transnational migrations through its various 'areas' might be set aside? Do we organize relations or instrumental service? Do we study Cree, Arabic, Mandarin, isiXhosa, or Norwegian to open an ontology of mutually altering relations, or do we do so to find employment in the current energy industries that seek this skill? We must not only teach relations, we must institutionally enact collaboration. You *and* me.

NOTE

1. Please see Smith for a more exhaustive list and explication of these ideas in a decolonizing perspective.

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