

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE ON EXPLORING UNCHARTED LITERARY TERRITORY TERRAIN IN GRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECTS

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When working in the field of comparative literature, from time to time a researcher will encounter this conundrum: *what to compare?* While devilishly simple in appearance, this question has nonetheless confounded many scholars, at least for a short while. Since the birth of comparative literature, which is often considered to have happened in Europe during the early nineteenth century (Bassnett 14), literary theorists have struggled with this very question. They have provided different answers over the years that fitted their particular personal view of the world, their native culture, and the purpose of literature.

Today, with the advent of concomitant disciplines such as cultural studies and translation studies, the options for comparisons have never been so numerous. Unfortunately, there is still a tendency among some comparative literature scholars to underestimate the potential of certain comparative projects. For graduate students, this can mean being encouraged in choosing a project with obvious comparative potential over their more challenging initial idea.

Take my own master's thesis for example. My idea was to compare selected right-wing oriented, anti-communist texts from the USA during the 1960s to left-wing oriented, radical nationalist texts written in Quebec during the same period. I was studying these works for parallels and differences in the discourses used to talk about invasion and occupation. In the American texts, I wanted to study the imagined possibility of a Soviet invasion which spurred the creation of a number of speculative texts. In Quebec texts, I was interested in the concept of the "Anglo-Saxon" occupation as envisioned by radical sovereigntist writers. At first glance, nothing suggested

any links between these two kinds of texts—they came from two different contexts, genres, and political stances in addition to having different purposes in their own society.

But is it not the role of present and future comparative scholars to go beyond the beaten path and find links and similarities where there seems to be none? I believe so, and therefore I threw myself into the colossal task of trying to find a common ground between the various works of my selected corpus. I was motivated and inspired to do so by the works of Marc Angenot:

...mon premier travail à consisté à repérer ou extrapoler des « répertoires » thématiques où vont puiser tous les écrivains (sic) et à faire ressortir les tendances générales, les avatars locaux de formes et de thèmes fondamentaux, la rumeur d'une « basse continue » derrière les variations d'une série de « motifs », la permanence de la doxa dans la surprise des paradoxes, l'éternel retour de certains paradigmes, présuppositions et constantes dans les désaccords apparents et les individuations....

The only difference between my research project and something easier is that I had to dig slightly deeper to find this common ground. I could not refer to already existing comparative essays that bridged the two contexts—I had to read theories from both contexts and establish the parallels myself. While doing so, I discovered the most thrilling aspect of delving into undiscovered literary territory: the joy of applying an old theory created in one context to a completely different context and discovering that it fits almost seamlessly as if it had been made for comparative analysis in the first place.

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The most prominent example of this phenomenon in my own thesis is a concept called the “paranoid style.” It was developed by American historian Richard Hofstadter to explain the rhetoric of anti-communist crusaders like Senator Joseph McCarthy:

In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac. Although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious (sic), overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. (4)

It was easy for me to see how this style applied to the virulent, fire-and-brimstone ranting of Cold War anti-communists. However, I was surprised by how well this description also fit the style of works written by radical sovereigntists of the 1960s. While the situation of Quebeckers at this period was not utopic, it is hard to read books like *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*, *Prochain Épisode* or *Éthel et le terroriste* and not see an undercurrent of paranoia and conspiracy fantasies. Especially in hindsight, it is hard to see how comparing the situation of Quebeckers to that of Black Americans or Arab Algerians could be anything but slightly mad hyperbole. This

was no more rational a thought than thinking that the USA was the theater of a secret Soviet invasion.

This is just one of the similarities I have unearthed in my research so far, and it is a discovery I would never have made if I had opted for an easier subject instead of trying to go my own way and use old tools to open up new paths. After all, to my admittedly young eyes, the very purpose of comparative literature is precisely to open up brand new avenues of literary analysis by looking at genres, texts, concepts and cultures in interaction with each other rather than in isolation. To find these new avenues, these new veins of meaning, we have to explore every nook and cranny that we can discern. Not all of these explorations will be fruitful, and one would be naive to think otherwise. No matter what you do, some attempts at comparisons will fail. Remember that no one learns from avoiding something entirely, while failure is among the best teachers. So, to my fellow students and future researchers in comparative literature, I say this: take the road less travelled. It could make all the difference.

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