

THE NUANCES OF COMPARING OR JUSTIFYING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE PROGRAMS

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The University of Victoria hosted a few months ago a Congress focused on Hispanic and Latino Studies in Canada, and, while some of my graduate student fellows and I were dining and commenting on the works presented during the opening day, a discussion pertaining to Comparative Literature arose. Someone articulated the following, all-too-familiar question: What justifies a Comparative Literature Program these days? The question definitely hit close to home, as I view myself as a wannabe comparatist. But the director of one of the BA programs offered at UVic was quick to respond, before I could muster my ideas and express an appropriate response. She claimed that the combined BA in English and French provided comparatist students with the rigors and training necessary to succeed in any professional and/or academic career.¹ She went further to say that this rigorous training they received could not be provided by specific national literature departments such as German or Spanish alone. Taking on a more somber tone, though, she also explained to us the difficulties associated with keeping a comparative-oriented program running and immune to the many attacks her program has been under (and all comparative literature programs the world over, might I add): budget cuts, English departments' imperialist tactics, convincing potential students of the virtues of learning several languages and literary traditions (not an easy task for sure), and more specifically, the paradigm shift (of UVic and possibly other departments and universities² across the board) from aesthetic-based literary criticism to a more culture-based criticism, that is, Cultural Studies taking over the subject, themes and methods traditionally linked to a Comparative Literature program.

Indeed, the new sub-fields that sprang up at my host school purported to cross spatial as well as disciplinary borders (Multiculturalism Studies, Post-Colonial Studies and World Literature).

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But we should note that these 'studies' do not necessarily demand any nation-specific knowledge, languages, or any specificity as to the socio-historical contexts in which these texts originated. And this is exactly what sums up my experience not only as a graduate student in a Hispanic Studies program, but also as an aspiring comparatist. Well into my first year in the PhD program, I realized I wanted to compare literatures within Canada (Chilean and Chinese-Canadian) but I found professors who were unprepared to deal with literary criticism from a comparative standpoint. I decided to take matters into my own hands and started taking (up to the present) courses in the English Department that might afford me the rigorous training and skills required of a true comparatist (versus Cultural Studies Comparatist): mastering 3 or 4 languages, being knowledgeable of 3 literary traditions, courses in national literatures and contemporary and pre-contemporary literary criticism in Canada, among other equally desirable abilities and dispositions that I presently find myself developing. My greatest challenge came when I first attempted to read a mostly English text which contained big portions of Chinese poetry and prose. I didn't want to read a translation (Why would I?!), but my Mandarin was definitely not (and still is not) up to the task of comprehending Chinese in all its subtleties and nuances. As a proud close-reader myself, I felt I couldn't afford to overlook important details in the text, so I asked for help to a fellow graduate student with fully bilingual Mandarin-English skills. What followed (and still does) was an intense and always rewarding interaction in which we asked, corrected, suggested, taught, yelled at, assisted and pushed each other.

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Of course, a comparative literature purist would want me to learn Mandarin, but does it follow that I should learn 10 different languages, just in case I would like to compare African writers with South American writers of the late 20th century? Not quite. What I am implying, and certainly what the director of the combined BA at UVic was implying, is that a closer and fruitful collaboration is required if we are to save the Comparative Literature programs. The truth is that Cultural Studies have come to stay and we need to show some flexibility. Choices have to be made. In my opinion, a hybrid program, integrating the study of literary traditions and texts read in the original with training in literary theory and in at least one other related discipline, will best serve the future comparatists of the twenty-first century. There is no need to change the name, nature or scope of Comparative Literature but only facilitate agreements between literature departments, allowing students to oscillate between one department and another as they see fit. The Comparative Literature departments offer the skills and knowledge that other departments alone could not offer on their own; for this reason, the relevance of Comparative Literature programs in Canada is clearly justified. Unfortunately for me, the journey towards becoming a true comparatist in a non-comparative program has been characterized by constant obstacles of varied nature: intellectual, academic and administrative. However, talking constantly with comparative-friendly professors, taking immersion language courses, collaborating with other peers in translating written works, studying abroad

and attending Comparative Literature conferences in Canada and the U.S. have strengthened my hope that I can take this project to the finish line.

Oh, yes. Another answer given to the question *What justifies a Comparative Literature Program these days?* was this one, offered by a graduate student from the Comparative Literature program at the University of Toronto (give or take a few words): “In this world we live in today, the humanism of Comparative Literature cannot be more timely; it provides us with a moral standpoint from which to learn and do research.” Indeed, a comparative approach allows us to avoid the dangers of dogmas and many “isms”.

NOTES

1. The Combined Major in English and French (Canadian Literature) is not a double major in English and French, but a single BA degree program composed of selected courses from each department.
2. My host university (UBC-Vancouver) is definitely included among those schools shifting towards a Cultural Studies focus rather than staying focused on national literatures/traditions.