

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THE ADJUNCT

Jonathan A. Allan

*Brandon University*

**220** The opportunity for a junior scholar to reflect on the state of the discipline is a fascinating challenge. It requires that I look towards a future that I hope will, perhaps, be there, even though strategically, I know, that I have to be aware of its eventual demise. During my time at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, Dean Meric Gertler, now President of the University, proposed the closure of the Centre for Comparative Literature. International rebuke soon followed and thanks to the efforts of many, but most especially students, the Centre for Comparative Literature was saved. Tenured faculty continue to teach comfortably in their desired fields of research, but what happens to the un-tenured, those for whom the dream of tenure is akin to tilting at windmills? What happens to those of us who fought to save a Centre for Comparative Literature in this economy, in this job market, which does not and cannot reflect the needs or desires of graduates of that Centre? Today, reflecting on Comparative Literature, as the discipline that granted my doctorate, I am less and less convinced of a disciplinary future. Perhaps, today, I might concede that Dr. Gertler was correct in his assertion that we have been “too successful” and have made ourselves “redundant.” I’m not convinced, however, that is the case, because more often than not, when I converse with colleagues “outside” of Comparative Literature, they largely assume that I “compare” “literatures.” Colleagues in literature assume that comparatists know bits and pieces of the “literatures” that they “compare.” Simply put, we have failed as a discipline to explain ourselves to the academic community at large, and the situation in Canada is particularly dire: we have but a handful of Comparative Literature programs and nearly all are threatened with closure. What then does the future look like for Comparative Literature, if there is a future at all?

I wish I could say that the future looks bright, that hope is on the horizon, but I

cannot. I just do not see it. Comparative Literature as a discipline needs to do what it does well: reflect on itself. Unlike the previous declarations of the viability of the discipline, we need to ask less about how we see ourselves and how those beyond comparative literature see us. Are we, as one journalist once suggested, “academe’s stepchild”? Have we become “redundant”? And how do we make arguments for our viability that are not about our position as victim of austere economies?

Comparative Literature, when I began in the field, was an escape from the tyranny of the rigidity of national literatures (or, at least, that is how I imagined it). At the time, I was busy flirting with theory, national literatures, competing colonialisms, varied gender and sexual expressions across time and space, and it seemed that Comparative Literature was the ideal place for this literary misfit—after all, Comparative Literature allowed its students to ask broad, sweeping questions. This was in 2006, before the so-called economic recession. Today, Comparative Literature is less interested, it seems to me, in the big questions that once motivated it, and more interested in “safe” research that will lead to tenured jobs. All of this, I’d suggest, is nothing more than what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” We graduate students and recent graduates, supervised by tenured faculty who have achieved the dream, are clinging to and “maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant 24). We have clung to the idea that there is a future in the academy and that we will—eventually—find a place.

221

If Comparative Literature is to have a future in which it thrives, it will require that tenured faculty in Comparative Literature do more than commit to their own research agendas; it will require that those faculty fight vociferously for the future of the discipline for their students. In other words, supervising a thesis is not finished when a student defends, but only becomes finished once a student is placed in a gainfully employed position, inside or outside of the academy. We must train students for the economy in which we currently reside, not in an imagined economy that is forthcoming (i.e. it will get better, thanks Dan Savage!) or in an economy that has recovered before (i.e. history repeats itself).

Comparative Literature, it must be said, needs to go back to what it once was, an intellectual powerhouse for the development of rigorous theoretical explorations and novel methodological interventions. If we are likely to fail, we might as well fail spectacularly. What I mean by this is that if we are no longer—as if we ever were—guaranteed employment, why do we insist on “safe” research? We must encourage students to develop an intellectual path that allows for the students to stake claims that are worth staking. And we must train students to be cautious of what Northrop Frye once called “an imaginary stock exchange” (123). If the economic recession has taught us anything, it is that markets are never safe, markets are always a gamble and the same is true of any fad in the academy, whether it be “adaptation studies” as it was when I began my PhD, or “digital humanities,” when I concluded my PhD. What is popular right now will likely not be when one goes on the market for the first time, the second time, the third time, and so on.

Graduate students and early career scholars desperately need academic associations that actively promote the field, not just within the associations, but also beyond. We need a Canadian Comparative Literature Association that fights for the discipline at all levels and that commits to ensuring its most vulnerable members are protected, fought for, and encouraged to continue in the discipline, while still engaging in surrounding and allied disciplines. We need conferences that encourage student participation and make that participation financially possible. The American Comparative Literature Association is, in many ways, a wonderful conference, but it is also an expensive conference, and in times of austerity, interdisciplinary scholars—which is what comparatists are—have to be able to participate actively and with purpose in all of the disciplines to which they profess expertise.

Comparative Literature, today, needs to reset itself and imagine its future cautiously for that future is not guaranteed, especially not in Canada, a country that, one would imagine, would embrace Comparative Literature, a discipline committed to multicultural research that is cognizant not just of “two solitudes” but of the many “solitudes” that separate us.

222

## WORKS CITED

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