

SHAKE UP, NOT SHAKE-DOWN: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AS A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DISCIPLINE

Sheena Wilson

University of Alberta, Campus Saint-Jean

226 “Let’s Shake up the Social Sciences,” writes Yale professor Nicholas A. Christakis in the Gray Matter column for *The New York Times*, in July 2013. Christakis is calling for greater interdisciplinarity in social sciences research, in order to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. He argues that while the natural sciences have transformed over the last twenty-five years, introducing whole “new fields of inquiry, as well as university departments and majors...the social sciences have stagnated.” This is not only “boring”, he goes on to say, “but also counterproductive, constraining engagement with the scientific cutting edge and stifling the creation of new and useful knowledge.” According to Christakis, this stagnation “helps explain why the social sciences don’t enjoy the same prestige as the natural sciences.” But does it? Christakis’s arguments, or ones that are very similar, have been repeatedly leveled at the arts and humanities, despite the fact that his challenge for greater innovation across the disciplines defines the work of many Comparative Literature scholars.

Scholarship that addresses 21st-century problems is being conducted by comparatists in a variety of subject areas. As co-director of the Petrocultures Research Group, I am best situated to comment on the way that my comparatist colleagues from around the world are addressing new research problems related to oil, energy and culture: colleagues such as (listed alphabetically) Peter Hitchcock at CUNY, Stephanie Lemenager at USCB, Graeme MacDonald at Warwick University, Imre Szeman at the University of Alberta, Jennifer Wenzel at the University of Michigan, and myself, are only a few names in a continually expanding intellectual community.

As comparatists, we bring valuable perspectives to and insights into 21st-century problems about how societies have been organized around specific forms of energy, namely oil. We also question discourses that falsely naturalize current conditions as the unavoidable end result of oil: after all, oil is only one resource in a complex social,

economic and political matrix.

My own research examines the discourses circulating around oil as they intersect with gender, race, human rights and other related issues. I'm also interested in how these discussions are now orienting around ecology, often in ways that perpetuate existing inequities, as opposed to fulfilling the claims of cultural innovation commonly linked with new energies.

Collectively, comparatists dare to imagine other ways of mobilizing and organizing societies. Engaging with scholars and scholarship from across the disciplines, including the natural sciences, we also work in concert with public intellectuals, activists, artists and other communities. This type of investigation into the most pressing issues of our time is what Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote have termed "sustainable humanities", and what Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman call "energy humanities."

Given that comparatists are successfully addressing the challenges of the 21st century, Comparative Literature should be flourishing in Canada. Its relevance in Canadian academia at this particular juncture would seem to be undeniable, when SSHRC currently supports "research that bridges more than one discipline or that requires the skills of several disciplines." Comparative Literature requires, as it always has, robustly interdisciplinary academic engagement that exceeds national borders and linguistic boundaries. As a discipline, it has historically been recognized for producing theoretically grounded multilingual and cosmopolitan scholars addressing interdisciplinary queries. Think, for example, of the overarching contributions made by Northrop Frye, and the ongoing work of comparatists in the international sphere, such as Gayatri Spivak, David Damrosch, and Frederic Jameson (to name just a few). In fact, the ultimate SSHRC goal, where possible, is to encourage collaborations between SSHRC scholars and "researchers in fields other than the social sciences and humanities, such as the natural sciences and engineering" (SSHRC)—something many of us are actively pursuing.

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But, let's face it: while the research excellence of many comparatists speaks for the value and relevance of the discipline, the state of its programs and administrative units in most Canadian universities is precarious at best, obliterated at worst. Over the past 25 years, financial *shake-downs* in Canadian academia—periods of administrative appraisal resulting in bureaucratic reorganizations for the proclaimed purposes of greater fiscal efficacy—have put Comparative Literature programs under scrutiny. The justifications for this are complex and in some cases institutionally specific.

One might even argue that in a post-9/11 political climate the very linguistic and transcultural skills of Comparatists that should be in high demand make us hard to position on a political map. Comparative Literature, as a discipline composed of multilingual cosmopolitan professors and students, has seemed at times misaligned with national and international mandates that promote ideologies captured by political one-liners such as *you are either with us or against us*.

Whatever the reasons, these administrative reorganizations disperse comparatists

in Canada into departments across the disciplines. This is both an *atout*—evidence of our (inter)disciplinary agility—and our Achilles heel, because in some ways it renders us less visible and less powerful. If we are camouflaged from view, providing support and mentorship to younger scholars is a challenge. Likewise we are largely unable to recognize, reward and celebrate comparatist scholars and scholarship. Despite our collective omnipresence, we risk becoming invisible, which in turn impacts the cultural capital—not to mention the market value—of a degree in Comparative Literature.

Ours is not a problem of relevance, as I've already argued, but of public perception and marketability. The long-term goal should be to increase the visibility of the discipline, and to make more publicly accessible the comparative scholarship that is crucial to solving the most pressing problems of the 21st century. But do not despair: we are well equipped for the challenge. Comparatists are already widely recognized for producing high-quality cutting-edge scholarship.

228 Perhaps it is our self-identification as literary—something that is not necessarily true of our work—that generates one of our problems. Certainly, many of us study cultural forms beyond literature. However, our Cultural Studies cousins have already claimed the more concise designation that can be used to encompass literature, film, media, and the visual arts as they interact with political, economic and social discourses. And, perhaps for this very simple reason (among other more complex issues, of course, not the least of which has been institutional politics) there has been a parallel synchronicity between the reduction in Comparative Literature programming and the rise of Cultural Studies monikers in departmental programs and course design across the country.

No doubt, one potential avenue for Comparative Literature's future success lies in collaborating on equal footing with our natural allies in Cultural Studies associations and programs, along with our colleagues in disciplines further afield on the academic spectrum. And there are a plethora of other creative potential solutions to reinvigorating Comparative Literature; which several of my colleagues would argue should also include conscientiously preparing our graduates to enter positions both within and outside the academy, since we currently graduate more PhDs than there are academic positions—but that is a topic for another article.

If Comparative Literature is to be sustained and reinvented according to the current demands of Canadian academia, then the generations of scholars now studying and working need to form stronger community ties. We will thrive in greater numbers if faculty members with a background in Comparative Literature ensure that every tenure-track job posting invites Comparative Literature grads to apply. Almost all of us comparatists housed in other disciplinary departments currently wear more than one hat. Therefore, to be effective we'll need to work collaboratively.

Innovative leaders will need to emerge to take Comparative Literature into new directions, much as strong leadership in other areas has lead to a rise in the prestige and influence of those disciplines. Furthermore, students should be encouraged

to pursue their cross-disciplinary projects not despite but because of the ways this disrupts disciplinary boundaries. It is important to encourage interdisciplinarity as a positive avenue for breaking down the disciplinary barriers (often resulting from very real fears about resources and budgetary lines) in ways that transform traditional divisions and motivate change at the larger institutional level.

As comparatists, we must move beyond a survivalist position, continually defending the discipline, to become leaders in greater numbers in Canadian academia, setting the agenda for scholarship nationally and internationally. It is up to us to invent the future of the discipline and, as Christakis suggests, to *shake things up*. But beyond that, we must also engage in the larger project of making that work visible: of rendering explicit, to the public, the value and expertise that only arts, humanities and social science researchers can contribute, as we collectively encounter the most critical problems of the 21st century.

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