

COMPARING LITERATURES IN CANADA: JOSEPH PIVATO AND THE POSTCULTURE OF DISAPPEARANCE

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- 364** *Dal lavôr si cognos il mestri*. From the work we recognize the master, and from the fact that Joseph Pivato not only chose this old Friulan proverb as the epigraph for his contribution to *Comparative Literature for the New Century*, the collection of essays he co-edited with Giulia De Gasperi, but also provided English and Italian (*Dall'opera si conosce il maestro*) translations of it, we are to recognize how much the collection reflects his vision for Comparative Literature in the twenty-first century. Somewhere between a Festschrift and a state-of-the-discipline report, the volume is among a flowering of publications on Comparative Literature by Canadian academics that supports the argument in De Gasperi's introduction on "The State of the Art" that "the discipline of Comparative Literature in Canada is constantly growing and that its research and study topics are expanding in order to analyze and understand our ever-evolving world" (15).¹ How is this spate of activity to be understood? Given the limited number and precarious state of the Canadian institutions that struggle to foster the discipline, it would seem to be overstating the case to present Comparative Literature in Canada as "thriving," while the evidence in the volume also leads one to question in how far Comparative Literature in Canada is "expanding its teaching and research scope to embrace its interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and multilingual approach" (10). Nevertheless, De Gasperi and Pivato's volume provides a welcome opportunity to take stock of where Comparative Literature is at in Canada and to demonstrate the utility of proceeding comparatively, which I do here by situating the volume vis-à-vis the ACLA's most recent (2014-15/2017) state-of-the-discipline report and then by considering whether Comparative Literature in Canada might be experiencing what one might call, in good comparatist tradition, a "culture of disappearance" moment. In drawing on Ackbar Abbas's seminal text about Hong Kong culture in relation to the Handover of 1997, I probe what it is about comparatists that

makes us cultural seismographers, sensitive to how cultural works reveal the shifting grounds beneath us, and what it is about proceeding comparatively that brings into focus the unsettling conjuncture of crisis and futurity.

CECI N'EST PAS UNE FESTSCHRIFT

The areas around which *Comparative Literature for the New Century* is scaffolded are the ones to which Pivato has dedicated his life work: a kernel on Italian-Canadian writing expands into ethnic minority writing, women's writing, and issues of translation and literary theory. One would be forgiven for thinking the volume is a Festschrift for Pivato. Indeed, the effect is so striking that De Gasperi felt the need to add a note at the conclusion of her engagingly personal introduction to explicitly deny the possibility: "This collection of essays is not a Festschrift for Joseph Pivato, though over his long career he has been a mentor to many writers and academics with his research work and publications in ethnic minority writing, Canadian literature and Comparative Literature" (16). Protest as she might, it is not merely that "*Some* of the contributors to this volume make references to his publications" (16; emphasis mine). The contributions, beginning with Linda Hutcheon's astute, gracious preface, are, as Hutcheon notes, "all engaged responses to the important work" that Pivato has done in the field of "comparative ethnic minority and diasporic writing specifically in Canada" (ix). Hutcheon herself confesses that "the Bortolotti crypto-ethnically hidden beneath the marital Hutcheon took both heart and inspiration from Joe's example" (ix).

365

It is not until the final essay by his colleague at Athabasca, Mark A. McCutcheon, that we get an explicit argument against considering the volume a Festschrift, which turns out to be a deconstructive argument against Festschriften per se. Not only does McCutcheon "survey the work of Joseph Pivato in the context of post-colonial theories and critically examine his contributions to Comparative Literature, ethnic minority writing, and university governance" (304); he also reflects on how and why the contribution should be read as an adaptation and critique of the Festschrift tradition. Likening the Festschrift to Hollywood's lifetime achievement award (305), McCutcheon makes clear that because the academy has come to resemble its splashier cousin as far as its business model is concerned, a point underscored by drawing on Len Findlay's masterful take-down of the neoliberalization of the (Canadian) academy in "Rethinking the Humanities," the scholars worthy of respect and honour should be seen as those who, like Pivato, have found productive ways to resist neo-liberal tendencies. Pivato's "old-world scholarly style" (314) has, as McCutcheon's homage notes, consistently been in the service of "an insistent pursuit of providing modern, liberal education, and the advocacy of *this* tradition's ideals of mass enlightenment and social justice against the countervailing grain of postmodern, neo-liberal education, which tends instead to narrow both the university's social mis-

sion—and its pool of eligible students” (315; emphasis in original). Unlike the author of the volume’s first essay, Sneja Gunew, whose seminal 2004 *Haunted Nations* helped to establish grounds for the situated, explicitly “comparative” studies of multiculturalism (*Haunted Nations* 1), and who goes out of her way in her contribution to pause and explain that she uses ‘post’ in her work “in the Lyotardian sense” (“Anonymous” 23), which entails quoting Lyotard in the original and offering her own translation (“Anonymous” 24), McCutcheon can take for granted that by the end of both the volume and his contribution to it readers will all understand what “postmodern, neo-liberal education” entails and will appreciate that while he does not explicitly cite Gunew, his theoretical brace of “haunting tradition” is very much in the same spirit as her work. In how far that spirit is also what motivates Pivato’s work is something I consider next.

366 CECI N’EST PAS UNE STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE REPORT

Just as *Comparative Literature for the New Century* flirts with being a Festschrift, its title challenges readers to understand it as a state-of-the-discipline report of the kind the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA)’s constitution mandates it to produce every decade. If one turns to the most recent of those volumes, however, which first appeared online in 2014-15 (stateofthedisdiscipline.acla.org) and then in 2017 with Routledge in a selection curated by Ursula K. Heise as *The Futures of Comparative Literature*, one sees that the vision of the discipline to emerge in De Gasperi and Pivato’s volume is decidedly more circumscribed than the ACLA’s. The scope of the ACLA project can be gauged from Heise’s description in her introduction to the project, which emphasizes how wide-ranging the ACLA’s understanding of and approach to the discipline has become:

Clearly, a discussion that includes two different media (web and print), over 50 texts, and sixty participants pushes the boundaries of what is normally called a “report.” As it should: neither literary studies in general nor comparative literature in particular can today be described as anything other than a diverse constellation of theoretical and analytical approaches to questions of languages, literatures, and media. (x)

In contrast, the Canadian volume traffics mostly in close literary analysis, and media hardly figures. Only Monique Tschofen’s exquisitely structured “Exile, Media, Capital: *Calendar’s* System of Exchange” reads a non-literary work, namely, “an early [1993] film by one of Canada’s premier directors, Atom Egoyan” (175), while the useful, if admittedly “brief” (6), overview De Gasperi provides in her introduction of the history of Comparative Literature programs in Canada emphasizes that it is indeed “comparative literary study in Canada” (7) that is the volume’s focus, leaving it a mystery why the co-authors decided not to include any mention of Canada in the volume’s title.²

One sees this emphasis on the literary most explicitly in Pivato’s “argumentative”

contribution on “The Languages of Comparative Literature” (41). For Pivato, what matters about the English term *Comparative Literature* is that it is “a short form for the Comparative Study of Literature, the main practice of this discipline” (41). While he acknowledges that this core expands “to include questions of theory, history, psychology, and other media” (41), it is the core that matters to him because it is what has historically been specific to and identity-determining about Comparative Literature: the fact it “has many languages” and insists on language learning as a tool to read literature in the original. It is difficult to imagine a comparatist arguing with Pivato’s contention that language(s) matter(s), or denying the extent of the challenges comparatists all over the world face, which he tellingly enumerates in “The American Case” section of the essay. How could one not regret the global dominance of the United States and the corporatist, STEM-leaning agendas it played a major role in entrenching in the second half of the twentieth century? Reduced funding for the humanities, practical monolingualism in light of the growing hegemony of global English, the negative effects of the culture wars, disputes over identity politics, wide support for President Donald Trump’s administration (47-49)—that these all cast a dark shadow over the contemporary academic conjuncture is indisputable. On the basis of Heise’s volume, however, one can hardly accuse American comparatists of a lack of awareness of these issues. On the contrary, contributions such as Michael Rubenstein’s “Petrocriticism,” Snehal Shingavi’s “Neoliberalism,” Joseph R. Slaughter’s “Counterinsurgency,” Sophia A. McClennan’s “Human Rights,” Mohammad Salama’s “Fundamentalism,” Jonathan E. Abel’s “Big Data,” and Jennifer Wenzel’s “Climate Change” all pull at key threads that have gone into the making of the complex weave in which we find ourselves enmeshed.

367

De Gasperi and Pivato’s volume, on the other hand, seems to take solace, and reveals an abiding faith, in the tradition of the discipline. The final of the four sections in their volume—after “Comparative Arguments,” “Future Directions in Comparative Literature” and “International Comparative Studies”—is “Looking Back at Traditions.” Just as “Comparative Arguments” opens the volume with two programmatic essays, Gunew’s and Pivato’s, the final section contains McCutcheon’s deconstruction of *Festschrifts* and E.D. Blodgett’s “Comparative Literature in Canada: A Case Study.” The latter originally appeared in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de littérature comparée* in September 2013, a few short months after he delivered it at Congress in Victoria to an audience of appreciative CCLA members who had trouble believing their good fortune at being present to hear this giant presence reflect on the course the discipline had taken over the years he had professed it at the University of Alberta (cf. Sywenky 529 and Figure 1). As Monique Tschofen neatly sums up in her lyrical eulogy on the occasion of his passing on 15 November 2018, in this essay he “asked a question about which he thought deeply: ‘What is the teaching of literature for?’” (541), after which he

pondered the great shifts as the discipline foci shifted from philological approaches to New Critical ones, and then became informed by French theory. He described his regret

that the discipline in Canada had later failed to respond swiftly enough to accommodate Cultural Studies. He offered opinions on the hazards and merits of translation. He reflected on how Comparative Literature must wrestle with the history of ideas, asking which ideas might be engaged, in what spirit, and in what way. (541-42)

368

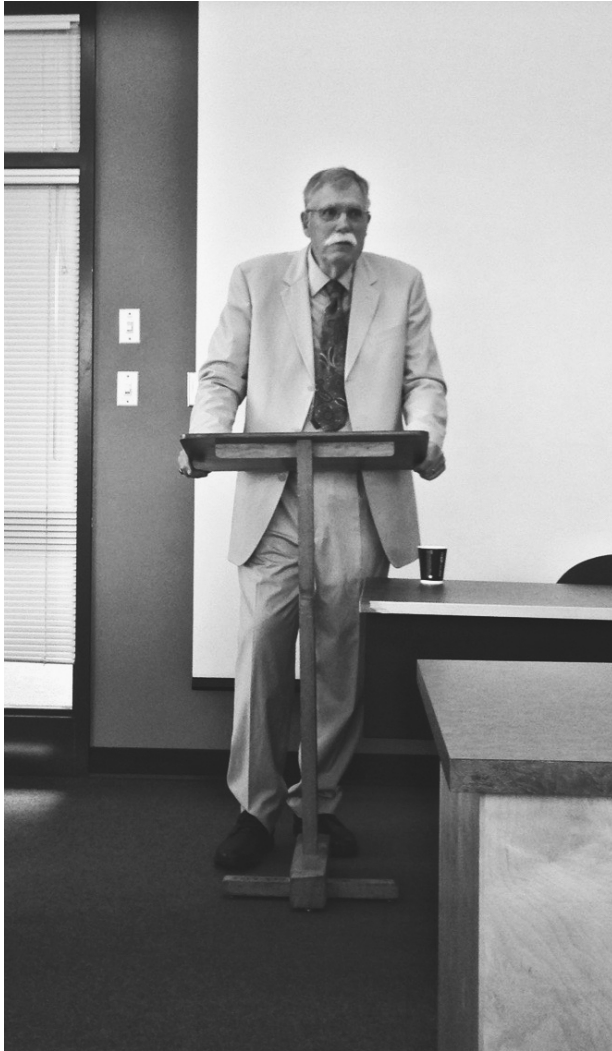


Figure 1. E.D. Blodgett at Congress 2013, University of Victoria.
Photo by Susan Ingram.

De Gasperi and Pivato's volume not so much wrestles with as marks a continuation of this humbly erudite and respectful tradition of studying literature in the original.³

Just as Comparative Literature in *Comparative Literature for the New Century* is the comparative study of literature, so too does it understand theory as explicitly *literary* theory, to be distinguished from practical or interpretive criticism except in the case of poetics, which, in the wake of Aristotle, is, as Pivato dryly notes, of course both in combining the two (53). Despite Hutcheon's valiant effort in her Preface to position the volume as offering a "rich *variety* of theories" (viii; emphasis in original), the only engagement with theoretical material written in the twenty-first century is Gunew's with cosmopolitanism and Hétu's with posthumanism. One sees this time lag most notably in Pivato's claim that "*Current* literary theories proclaim the death of the author (Barthes)" (55; emphasis mine). Barthes, as Hutcheon implicitly acknowledges, was part of "the exciting new 'theory'" that she encountered en route to becoming "the first PhD in the new program in Comparative Literature from the University of Toronto in 1975" and that has, in the intervening forty years, become "if this volume is to be believed [...] almost our lingua franca" (viii). Hutcheon's singular career, in which she has "found herself lured into teaching and writing about every- 369 thing from opera to film adaptations of fiction, from photography to architecture" (ix) decidedly demonstrates "the productivity of this kind of pushing outward of the boundaries of our discipline [...] of its methodological and ideological inclusivity" (viii). Sadly, there is no work in the collection on media such as opera, photography, or architecture, let alone petrocultures or big data, although, in fairness, Pivato does acknowledge work done on the latter two (59-60).

The richness in the volume comes not from varieties of theory, but rather, as Hutcheon notes in concluding her Foreword, from readings of a rich variety of ethnic minority literature. Contributors

use comparative methodological tools to bring together Ukrainian- and Japanese-Canadian writing [Jolene Armstrong's "Peasant Boots, Dancing Boots: Assimilation and Hyphenation in Vera Lysenko's *Yellow Boots* and Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*"], Italian-Australian and Italian-Canadian [Gaetano Rando's "The Power to Narrate: Representing Italian Migrant Working-Class Experiences in Two Steel Cities in Australia and Canada"], Caribbean-Canadian and Caribbean [George Elliott Clarke's gloriously "un-disciplined" (to borrow her *bon mot* for the discipline, vii) "Why Not an 'African-Canadian' Epic? Lessons from Pratt and Walcott, Etc.," which considers M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, Walcott's *Omeros*, Pratt's *Brébeuf*, and Dudek's *Europe*, before offering "with necessary humility and requisite trepidation" excerpts from his own epic-in-progress, "Canticles," "which canvasses—utilizing the info-telegraphic style of Pound's *Cantos*—the image of the 'black' in Occidental civilizations, the transatlantic slave trade, and its discontents, and, in passing, the bloody flux and flow of imperialism and colonialism" (138)], anglo- and francophone African [Ndege Fatou Ba's "Dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone Literature in Africa"] or Canadian [Dominique Hétu's "What a Caring Act: Geographies of Care and the Posthuman in Canadian Dystopian Fiction"], American and Canadian [and Italian in Anna Pia De Luca's "Gunn, Edwards, and di Michele: Nomadic Spaces"], European and Arab-Canadian [F. Elizabeth Dahab's "Like a Dancing Gypsy: A Close Reading of *Cockroach*"]. (ix)

To this list one could also add the complexity of the translational and transcul-

tural writing addressed in Maria Cristina Seccia's "Reading Literature through Translation: The Case of Antonio D'Alfonso into Italian" and Deborah Saidero's "A Many-Tongued Babel: Translingualism in Canadian Multicultural Writing," which looks at the growing number of Canadian writers "who freely include phrases and sentences from their heritage language to introduce a difference cultural perspective into their narratives" (199), such as Rohinton Mistry's use of Gujarati in *Such a Long Journey* (1991), Hiromi Goto's use of Japanese in *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), Antonio d'Alfonso's use of Italian in *Fabrizio's Passion* (1995), and M.G. Vassanji's use of Swahili in *The Magic of Saida* (2012).

370 Pivato's empathy for the careful reading of such literature shines through in his own contribution. Because of his minority background, the pushback of postcolonial approaches against the deliberate unintelligibility of the high theory embraced by North American academics in the 1980s and 1990s understandably continues to resonate with him: "Many of us of minority backgrounds are well aware that our subject positions are discursively constructed, and we want to determine the discourse, since it is the location of resistance. Our position is similar to that of many women writers and Indigenous writers; in the end all we have are our stories" (58). By the end of the second decade of this no longer so new century, what it means to have, or more polemically "own," one's own story has come under increasing pressure as debates on cultural appropriation grow increasingly shrill and each day seem to call forth new headlines.⁴ Pivato, however, remains above the fray, content to remind us that this is by no means a new issue: "In my article 'Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction' [which was published in the 1998 volume *Literary Pluralities*, edited by Christl Verduyn], I discuss appropriation of voice with regard to both ethnic minority communities and Indigenous communities" (59). In not further interrogating this highly symptomatic cultural phenomenon, we see the type of lack of engagement with Cultural Studies that Blodgett regretted. As Minh-Ha T. Pham has sought to raise awareness of in both academic and non-academic publishing venues, while "critiques of cultural appropriation do have their use [...] and] have been an important strategy, in Richard Fung's words, 'to redress historically established inequities by raising questions about who controls and benefits from cultural resources'" ("Fashion's Cultural-Appropriation Debate"), there are also downsides to such engagement:

Acts of cultural appropriation often deepen existing divides between haves and have-nots, who's in and who's out, who has power and who doesn't. Commenting on the appropriation of Native voices by white Canadian novelists, M.T. Kelly has poignantly observed, "Again and again, papers have been written, careers built, tenure granted, royalties issued, and yet the people upon whom this is based are left behind on the reserves with nothing." ("Fashion's Cultural-Appropriation Debate")

Trenchantly summed up, the problem with critiques of cultural appropriation is that "they reaffirm the very thing they intend to oppose: *white Western* domination over and exploitation of culture at the expense of *everyone else*" ("Fashion's Cultural-

Appropriation Debate”; emphasis mine), thus continuing the disputes over identity politics that, as Pivato bemoans, impede the “open development of multiculturalism in literary study in America” (49).

Pivato’s self-understanding is thus very much not that of the privileged “white Western” able-bodied, cisgendered male subject that, were they to meet, Pham would likely take him to be. One can see in the list of works given at the beginning of Section Two, which are considered “good models of Comparative Literature studies, which investigate cultural differences, diasporic writers, and Indigenous authors” (65), that he is clearly on the side of Pham’s “everyone else.” This orientation helps explain what Pivato’s position in Comparative Literature at Athabasca University has meant, and continues to mean, to him. These non-hegemonic components of his academic identity position him as peripheral: to the United States, to the WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) establishment in Toronto, and to English Studies, and it is from this peripheral positionality that he has been able to draw strength and champion the types of (literary) studies he feels matter and should matter to others, whether or not they serve to reinforce the terms of the discourse he is very much against.

371

It is also of interest that this positionality contributes to Pivato’s optimistic perspective on the future of the discipline. He concludes his contribution with a consideration of literary studies and digital technology, in which he acknowledges the changing landscape of academic publishing brought about by online possibilities and predicts that “[f]uture developments in Comparative Literature will benefit from this new technology, which speaks many different languages and reaches many different cultures” (60). Drawing on George Landow’s *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, he notes that this shift involved the abandonment of “conceptual systems founded on ideas of centre, margin, hierarchy, and linearity,” which will be replaced “by ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks.” As he further points out, “This response has profound implications for literature, education and politics” (61), and he goes on to express the hope that “in the future students and scholars in Comparative Literature will become more fully involved in this paradigm shift and use their different languages” (61). To begin approaching these implications and understanding why comparatists are well placed to understand them and able to remain at least somewhat optimistic in the face of great challenges, I turn in conclusion to Ackbar Abbas’s work on Hong Kong.⁵

CECI EST-CE QUE C’EST HONG KONG?

Writing in the buildup to and aftermath of the Handover of Hong Kong back to China in 1997, Abbas, who could be seen as Hong Kong’s Linda Hutcheon, diagnosed Hong Kong culture as a “culture of disappearance.” Comparing Hong Kong to Shanghai, he noted:

For a long time, Hong Kong did not develop the kind of cosmopolitan culture that Shanghai exhibited in the 1920s and 1930s, a cosmopolitanism that emerged from the anomalous space of extraterritoriality. Dependency meant that for most of its history, Hong Kong, culturally speaking, was caught in the double bind of divided loyalties. It was politically ambivalent about both Britain and China; ambivalent about what language, English or Chinese, it should master; and confident only about capital. The one moment when it began to rival the cultural vibrancy of Shanghai in the 1930s was during the 1980s and 1990s, after the Joint Declaration announcing the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997: that is, at precisely the moment when Hong Kong felt most vulnerable and dependent. This was the period when more and more people discovered, invented, and rallied behind what they called “Hong Kong culture.” This Hong Kong culture was a hothouse plant that appeared at the moment when something was disappearing: a case of love at last sight, a culture of disappearance. (“Cosmopolitan De-scriptions” 777)

372

Just as Hong Kong culture came into its own only when it felt most vulnerable, Comparative Literature and other *Bildung*-oriented disciplines in the Humanities, not to mention the Humanities themselves, have been undergoing a similar development but without a clear handover date. As I had occasion to analyze, after returning from a teaching sojourn in Hong Kong in 2004 to profess “modern European culture” in what was then York’s Division of Humanities, Humanities disciplines seemed to be blooming in their embrace of transdisciplinary theoretical tools that enabled them to confront their own dissolution and mortality. In a 2007 Abbas-inspired review of *A New History of German Literature*, for example, I queried

whether the Benjaminian historical understanding of *Bildung* that Wellbery’s volume represents has a better chance of producing pearls than being either seamlessly absorbed into or summarily expelled from the greater borg of the globalized managerial academy than either contemporary Cultural Studies, which the managers despise, or the Kantian aesthetic understanding of *Bildung* that led to high “lit tra cha” taking the disciplinary form it did in the modern Humboldtian university, which the managers admire and envy but also see as a luxury that can be cut in times of fiscal restraint. (50)

In the meantime, these subtle differences do not seem to make as much of a difference as I thought they might, given the general steamrolling to which the Humanities have been subject. The “Division” I was hired into became the “Department” of Humanities as part of the restructuring of 2008-09, in which the Faculty of Arts absorbed the non-profitable Faculty of Atkinson, which specialized in evening adult education, to become the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies. In the interceding decade it has become clear that PS was intended to pressure and weaken LA, something one sees in the closure of many of the Humanities’ small interdisciplinary programs, including European Studies, which was officially shut down in 2018.

That developments in the US have proceeded along similar lines can be seen by considering the metaphors in Haun Saussy’s introduction to the 2006 ACLA state-of-the-discipline report, which opens with the staging of a memorable dialogue that leads one to contemplate the level of irony he intended in titling the report “The

Triumph of Comparative Literature.” Comparative Literature is first declared to have “in a sense, won its battles” and become “the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra” (3). However, Saussy then confronts this metaphor derived from the world of *Bildung* with scenarios from science:

We might be forgiven for wanting to bring home the fruits of our collective intellectual influence. One nightmare scenario about genetically modified crops has poverty-stricken farmers obliged to pay heavily every year for seed stock that is patented by the corporations that did the development; another has modified genes escaping, through pollen, out into nature and altering the makeup of wild and cultivated plants. In our case, it is certainly the second metaphor that applies. (4)

In the meantime, Saussy’s first metaphor has become the more relevant of the two, as the neoliberal academy increasingly replaces its full-time faculty with precarious, poverty-stricken adjuncts and stands idly by while publishing behemoths such as Elsevier and Taylor and Francis demand that libraries buy back the academic production of their increasingly downtrodden faculty.⁶

373

It is in the changes to academic publishing over the past two decades that one most poignantly sees the workings of the culture of disappearance that I have experienced during my tenure at York. In the paper I gave at the 2010 ICLA in Seoul, “Fashion, Decorated Ducks, Comparative Literature: Cosmopolitical Lessons from Hong Kong,” I noted that we were even then being showered with an increasingly overwhelming amount of publications; new academic journals and new series sprout up at every turn, while increasingly vulnerable academics turn to new forms and media of production: they make documentaries, appear on television programs, blog, and do research and teaching via *Facebook*.⁷ That Canada has become an international leader in the open access movement is something that deserves to be better known.⁸ However, given the recent announcement by Stanford University’s Provost that she had not anticipated that the decision to shutter the university’s press “would touch such a deep nerve in the community of our humanities and social sciences colleagues” (Jaschik), one can see not only how out of touch university administrators have grown from the humanities and social sciences, but how much deep restructuring the academic publishing landscape, together with the academy itself, is likely to continue to experience.

Another of Abbas’s contributions is his recognition that the culture of disappearance is not really about culture but rather what he calls “postculture,” by which he understands:

a culture that has developed in a situation where the available models of culture no longer work. In such a situation, culture cannot wait or follow social change in order to represent it; it must *anticipate* the paradoxes of hyphenation. A postculture, therefore, is not postmodernist culture, or post-Marxist culture, or post-Cultural Revolution culture, or even postcolonial culture, insofar as each of these has a set of established themes and an alternative orthodoxy. In a postculture, on the other hand, culture itself is experienced as a field of instabilities. (*Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* 145; *empha-*

sis in original)

These instabilities, in the case of Hong Kong, produced a consciousness of living, as Abbas put it, on a hyphen, a recognition that their situation should be regarded

not as a “third space” that can be located somewhere; not as a neither-nor space that is nowhere; not even as a mixed or in-between space, if by that we understand that the various elements that make it up are separable. Above all, hyphenation refers not to the conjunctures of “East” and “West,” but to the disjunctures of colonialism and globalism. (*Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* 143)

374

Current discussions of cultural appropriation reflect the contested nature of this disjuncture and the fact that, while it has long been a truism for Comparatists and other Humanities scholars that “models of unmediated cultural imperialism will no longer wash” (Sneeringer), a common-sense consensus among the general populace has yet to emerge. On the contrary, the more damage corporate (or petro or turbo or surveillance—insert your favourite modifier) capitalism wreaks, the stronger the forces that defend it become, and the increasing number of countries—not to mention, of course, provinces—in which rightist governments are democratically elected to maintain “business as usual.” As Abbas had a chance to observe while growing up in a rapidly capitalizing Hong Kong, the disjunctures of colonialism and globalism may open up multiple voids, but “the problem [...] remains how we are to negotiate the transnational space that global capital produces” (“Cosmopolitan De-scriptions” 782).

It is here that the matter of optimism emerges as a thoroughly political issue. In a 1997 interview, Geert Lovink asked Ackbar Abbas about “the possibility of a true form of modernity in local Hong Kong politics and aesthetics,” which he suggests Abbas found in Wong Kar-wai’s films “as an alternative to the political kitsch.” Abbas replied:

Yes, I am an optimist in this respect. I do see an alternative and try to bring it out in my own work. This functions within the current situation, which is very closed. In Hong Kong, the options are closing down. We still have the Hong Kong cinema of the eighties, which had really started to become a world cinema. Not because it was trying to deal with world problems—it dealt with local issues, in order to dislocate the local.

This local was not just a provincial thing. The local films from the forties and fifties were different. They were local in the sense of an exclusionary process, and were meant for a particular audience. The new localism contains many paradoxes. If a filmmaker is able to find new images which evoke things that are hard to say, then something can happen. (Lovink)

In a 2018 interview, Abbas again evinced this sentiment and the role of comparatists in maintaining alternatives and outsiders; however, this time he did so in more explicitly Gramscian terms:

Criticism is not so much a labour of love for Abbas as something he has to do, an inextricable part of who he is and how he relates to the world around him, a world he describes as having become “black hole-like” in its cultural complexity.

Now in his seventies, Abbas's brain continues to churn through that black matter with an unquenchable curiosity and a quite few dollops of an intellectual's gloom, propelled along by what he calls the "optimism of the will."

As breakfast comes to an end and the cafe empties of its clientele, Abbas is asked if he ever wishes he could take a break from the cerebral life. He replies, with a smile, that such an option does not exist for him. "No," he says. "It's not a question of adopting thinking as a mode. You don't adopt it, it's part of what you do, it is part of your relationship with the world. This is how you process the world." (Karacs)

While Pivato would likely not respond to a similar questioning by citing Benjamin and Gramsci, his relationship with the world is of a comparative piece, as it is with my own self-understanding as a comparatist. As my students and colleagues can readily corroborate, the comparative mode is the way I process the world, and I try to maintain as much "optimism of the will" as possible.

How to best go about it? Abbas notes that cosmopolitanism has historically "been seen as an ability to acquit oneself, to behave well, under difficult cultural situations by juggling with multiple perspectives—even when these perspectives were forced upon us or adopted in indifference" ("Cosmopolitan De-scriptions" 783). However, even back in 2005 in the wake of my leaving Hong Kong for Toronto, it was no longer enough to simply behave well and be open to otherness, although that was always a good start (cf. Ingram and Reisenleitner). In the face of corporatist and fascist encroachment, what we need to find are ways of living active lives, as Hannah Arendt elaborates this term in *The Human Condition*. That is, it is not enough to do the labour that merely reproduces life in the *oikos*/household, nor the work of *homo faber* that generates material products for the *agora*/marketplace, although that needs doing as well. Rather, we need to be truly active because it is through action that "human beings demonstrate themselves as free, as initiators, when they do something new, unprecedented and improbable" (McAfee 118), such as maintaining the life of the mind in general and of studies of Comparative Literature in Canada in particular. Arendt

holds that true action is pointless unless it is done in the company of others and recorded by others. It is not enough for an action to occur; the story of its occurring needs to be told [... as this] narrative will offer others in the polis a way to think about the political [...] For Arendt, the main task of the narrator is not to invent a story but to recognize "the moment of accomplishment" and to "identify the agent" of the story. (118, 120)

Such action is crucial because it maintains a space of appearance and of history—the *polis*—where "people enter into the public realm [...] and] can begin to leave their mark or legacy" (117).

That is why Ackbar Abbas responded to the question "Can there be a cosmopolitanism for the global age, and what would it be like?" by suggesting:

We might look for an answer in the analysis of the nature of cities today, particularly an analysis of their linkage to the transnational more so than to the national. As the fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto said in Wim Wenders's 1989 film *Notebook on Cities and*

Clothes, “I like all big cities. More than Japanese, I feel I’m from Tokyo [...] Tokyo has no nationality.” (“Cosmopolitan De-scriptions” 785)

Comparatists need to act to preserve spaces to work in and in which to teach not just literary works, but also Wenders’s *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, Abbas’s *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, which has been described as “a philosophy of design that reflected the speed and messiness of life as it was coming to be lived” (Ouroussoff). We need to learn from urban cultures such as Hong Kong and cosmopolitan comparatists such as Abbas, Pivato, and his contributors how to keep reinventing workable forms and structures that enable academic *activity* in the midst of the worst challenges with which global capital can confront us, because it continues to show us that it will do nothing else. We need to recognize how much, in fact, to paraphrase Flaubert, Hong Kong *c’est nous*.

376

NOTES

1. In addition to De Gasperi and Pivato’s volume, at the time of writing at least three collections edited by members of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association’s executive are set to appear: President Jessica Tsui-yan Li’s *The Transcultural Streams of Chinese Canadian Identities* with McGill-Queen’s, Treasurer Paul Morris’s *Le Canada: une culture de métissage / Transcultural Canada* with Laval, and CRCL/RCLC editor Irene Sywenky’s and my *Comparative Literature in Canada: Issues of Scholarship, Pedagogy and Publishing in the Contemporary Conjuncture* with Lexington Books.
2. While I appreciate De Gasperi’s singling out for mention “the Graduate Diploma in Comparative Literature that was launched at York University (Toronto) in 2014” (8), which is housed in the Graduate Program of Humanities and has been coordinated by me since its inception, I must confess to feeling a bit uncomfortable at its being mobilized as evidence of “[t]he promising future for comparative literary study in Canada” (7), as literature is by no means the only type of cultural production students taking the Diploma analyze. What distinguishes the GDCL from the Graduate Diploma in World Literature with which it was launched, which is housed in York’s Graduate Program in English, is not literary analysis but our insistence on multilingual competence and attention to texts in the original.
3. Just how much this orientation owes to Blodgett is demonstrated in George Lang’s tribute, in which Lang distills two key points about Blodgett’s pedagogy: “First, Ted insisted that we read all texts in the original Latin (or German or Italian or Provençal), at least to the point of being able to point out by line number in the Loeb or whatever Latin edition of the passage on which we were commenting” and second, how political Ted’s pedagogy was “without being ‘political’” (532).
4. For a recent contextualization of the debates, see Sarkar and Rabkin.
5. In the interests of self-disclosure, I should note that I had the happy occasion to co-translate Abbas’s seminal text into German.
6. Yamini-Hamedani contrasts Goethe’s “intriguing” flower metaphor in his poem “Ein Gleichnis” (“A Parable”), in which “the plucked bouquet finds its new home not on new soil, but rather in water, creating an interesting link with Goethe’s metaphor of world literature as ocean” (158), with Posnett’s mirror metaphor in *Comparative Literature*. For Posnett, “as mirror literature reflects social life and evolution—the actions, thoughts, and speech of a particular time and space” (160). Abbas and Saussy both update this imagery for the new technological, not to mention anthropocenic realities.

7. Upon returning to that paper, I was struck by how dated it seemed, and how similar a role *Twitter* has come to play in the field of politics.
8. For a good overview of the Canadian contribution, see Reisenleitner.

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