

SPECIAL ISSUE

COMPARATISM NOW!

INTRODUCTION: COMPARATIVE STUDIES IN A PRECARIOUS PRESENT

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This special issue of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CRCL/RCLC)* bears the pain and scars of COVID-19, having been repeatedly postponed during the first and second waves of the pandemic. During this time, many others had initiated efforts to turn the pandemic into an object of research in the humanities, with prominent journals devoting their own special issues to aspects of the crisis (Erni and Striphas; Ironstone and Bird; Nunes and Ozog). The articles in *Comparatism Now!* were also edited and revised at the height of the lockdowns, and while all but one makes an explicit reference to it (Lourdes Arciniega's "Archiving the Future"), the immediate pressures of the time, on both scholarly research and teaching, became a significant factor in completing this project. Having said that, despite the constraints of publishing in unique circumstances, it may be important to acknowledge that many of these pressures are hardly new. The pandemic has built on existing convulsive changes that were identified even decades prior, for example, as Bill Readings wrote in his groundbreaking work *The University in Ruins* in 1997. The true impact of COVID-19 is still unknown to us as the crisis continues in different forms. Yet the specific "pivoting" that it has required of academic labourers coincides with a much more deliberate *destabilization*—and technological *acceleration*—that is currently at play in all university disciplines. This larger and much older pattern of change hasn't proven to be an existential risk to fields in the humanities, as many have warned in the past. But it does affect the spe-

cific production of knowledge that we as humanities scholars can lay claim to.

In fact, this concern was part of the initial motivation for assembling this special issue. In 2019, the Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée/Canadian Comparative Literature Association (ACLC/CCLA) gathered at the University of British Columbia to determine how comparative literary scholars have been forced to “pivot” amid the overlapping circles of knowledge that have emerged in recent years. These include the epochal changes in encyclopedic knowledge transfer that have now, almost definitively, pushed aside the study of literature from the central role it once occupied (Rajan). Before and beyond the pandemic, conditions inside the university have inspired many successful and unsuccessful attempts at totalization, rationality, governmentality, and systems logic. Where, then, does literary study fit in these current formations? Consistent with the annual theme of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences/Fédération des Sciences Humaines in 2019, “Circles of Conversation,” we explored the circle as an important metaphor of power as demonstrated by the existence of academic boundaries, centres and peripheries, exclusions, and forms of inequality. While acknowledging Tilotama Rajan’s forewarning about the onset of the coming hegemony of academic “culturalism,” we recognize something in literary study that remains critically attuned to these changes, a kind of listening ear on the present that may indeed signal the potential for a critique of those hegemonies. Some may even argue that literary study is urgently needed in times of destabilization, such as the one we are experiencing now. Comparative Literature, then, which is part of literary study, belongs to a collective effort of responding to the larger crisis by navigating its own internal crisis; and, as an inevitable result of this process, of staking a claim for its continued existence.

The demand of *Comparatism Now!* aligns with Susan Ingram and Irene Sywenky’s 2019 edited collection *Comparative Literature in Canada: Contemporary Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Publishing in Review*, which speaks to the urgent need for reappraising the discipline with a focus on the Canadian context. We also align with David Palumbo-Liu in “Ethics Before Comparison,” his keynote address at the fiftieth-anniversary meeting of the ACLC/CCLA at UBC in 2019. In his presentation, Palumbo-Liu urged Canadian comparatists to remember that while our scholarship is founded upon critical evaluation and judgement, an important part of this effort is paying respect to the material challenges involved in “ethical reckoning,” which, as he says, often takes “the shape of a question: ‘what am I doing?’ ‘Why am I doing it this way?’” With this framework in mind, Palumbo-Liu interrogates the ethical demands of comparative literature in the present era of academic knowledge production, insisting that we recentre questions regarding the “ethics of speaking of, or to, or with others”, and that we do so not only in our conversations about works of literature, but also in relation to the explicit contributions we make to Comparative Literature as a discipline of research and teaching that necessarily includes others. For Palumbo-Liu, the ethical dimension of engaging with literature on these multiple scales encompasses Gayatri Spivak’s insistence that “the eruption of the ethical

presupposes the epistemological”; in other words, we need ethics *before* comparison so that we can adequately reckon with the impact and potential of comparing as a theoretical practice for the time to come.

Many of the insights in Palumbo-Liu’s 2019 keynote speech speak to the preoccupations of the meeting held one year prior. In 2018 at the University of Regina, under the Congress’s theme of “gathering diversities,” Canadian comparatists met to discuss the circulation of “diversity” as a mark of research excellence. At this meeting, we acknowledged that this very general, and sometimes problematic, commitment to diversity has been under threat from a broad reevaluation of knowledge across academic communities, but also from the demand, often voiced by those on the outside, to legitimize our existence as viable or, at least, fundable. Diversity in academic research has been framed as both the enemy and the antidote, sometimes directed to related, but also to unrelated, matters. In the process, it has become a term that is increasingly subject to contradictory impulses and vested interests. At the same time, “diversity” occupies an important symbolic function that speaks to the necessity of continuing to build solid foundations for equity in our institutions and practices. In recent years, this necessity has been expressed particularly strongly in the context of Congress and the membership of the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA). Perhaps collective assumptions about “diversity” as an end-in-itself should be at the forefront of our rethinking of what we do as scholars and researchers in the post-COVID era. Should “diversity” continue to serve as a foundation for our work in Comparative Literature, and if so, what are the differences yielded by positioning this foundation as a goal, expectation, platitude, or survival mechanism? Are there instances in the current conjuncture where diversity and uniformity co-exist? And, therefore, to what extent can diversity be refashioned as an important methodological insight, cornerstone of critical pedagogy, or model for engagement and participation in the wider world?

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The articles selected for *Comparatism Now!* address these questions in their own fashion. The first section of the special issue, “Comparative Literature in Theory and Practice,” directly addresses many of the issues that inspired the editorial process as discussed above. Each contributor in this section demonstrates the self-critical process that is required in forcefully articulating an active role for comparative literary study. They each make a strong case for the field’s ability to demand having a seat at the table when it comes to debating contemporary issues, and they each thereby prove Complit’s internal ability to rigorously evaluate its own practices. Laurence Sylvain’s “*De trans- à theoria: résistance et cécité du savoir littéraire*” develops these commitments by providing a meditation on the relations between theory, literature and cultural studies. While Tilottama Rajan’s work on the literary encyclopedia became the basis for a productive misreading that situated the demand for Comparative Literature during the editorial process of the special issue, Sylvain engages her own productive misreading of the text to focus on the overinvestment in themes of “decline” regarding literary-theoretical practices. In so doing, Sylvain

identifies examples where “transcendence” may serve to inform articulations of literary study in the future.

In “Diversity, Inclusion, and ‘Othering’: Methodologies for Comparative Literature,” Sabujkoli Bandopadhyay continues Sylvain’s discussion of the presumed “crisis” of literary studies, but she takes the subject in a different direction that addresses the cultural and associative legacies of Comparative Literature with its anchor in national and linguistic categories. As part of this effort, Bandopadhyay acknowledges how these categories are yoked in specific ideas of authorship, creativity, translation, and Euro-Western bias. Bandopadhyay explores the pedagogies of Comparative Literature to argue that comparatism ought to be framed as a method of investigation as opposed to a material support for the practices of canonization and gatekeeping. She argues that engaging with literature from a comparative perspective must guard against the temptations of cultural equivalencies that mitigate alterity through a sanctioned practice of invariant misreading that reinforces the cultural legacies of a Eurocentric discipline. Adjacent to this offering, Pedram Lalbakhsh and Pouria Torkamaneh’s “World Literature, Coloniality, and Translation: Toward the Coexistence of Diversity and Unity” focuses on the construction of “World Literature” and the problems of coloniality, orientalism, and literary othering as they connect to issues of translation into Persian.

The second section of the issue, “Performativity, Contemporaneity, and Media,” addresses a need to rethink the boundaries of “literature” in comparative studies. The articles included in this section follow in the spirit of the ACLC/CCLA Working Group on Comparative Materialities: Media, Literature, Theory/Matériaités comparatives: Médias, littérature et théorie. Inaugurated in 2020, this group has engaged in projects designed for rethinking literature as a technology of inscription, and to consider the theoretical implications of framing literature “as” media. Following traditions in Media and Cultural Studies that build on the strengths of critical approaches to literature (Hall; Kittler), the group has sought to collectively grapple with the literariness of print as contiguous with the changing media conditions of the present, thus challenging the idea of literature as a vanguard from the past that stands opposed to these changes. By diversifying the concept of literature for Comparative Literature, the theoretical practice of literary study eventually boils down to a method for engaging a broader array of texts, whether it be film, digital and networked cultures, or visual cultures. To quote the working group, the study of literature allows us “to engage with mediations as networks of relationships that are historically embedded in literary conventions and techniques.”

Louis-Thomas Leguerrier and Jeanne Mathieu-Lessard build on the work being undertaken by the Comparative Materialities/Matériaités comparatives Working Group. In “Du cri punk dans le western de banlieue: Une étude de « Turn Those Clapping Hands into Angry Balled Fists »,” Leguerrier and Mathieu-Lessard identify shifts in the cultural capital of punk as it oscillates from subversion to integration through the twentieth century and beyond. Focusing on lyrics authored by the musi-

cal group *Against Me!*, Leguerrier and Mathieu-Lessard examine the expressions of an emerging “punk-western” subgenre, which signals a convergence between the punk tradition, now depleted of its outsider quality, and the mythic figure of the cowboy who has been unheroically displaced from the hinterlands and moved into the suburbs. In her article, Kaby Wing-Sze Kung further explores how genres and story formats from the past are reprinted in contemporary media. She frames the film *Crazy Rich Asians* as a revitalization of the Cinderella narrative as delivered through a “postfeminist,” or third-wave feminist lens, in which women “have the agency to choose and the ability to indicate their choices” (Kung 221, this volume). With an approach that parallels the one taken by Leguerrier and Mathieu-Lessard, Kung’s work engages in adopting literary approaches to the comparative study of popular media.

In “History and Memory,” the third and final section of this issue, the selected articles follow in a tradition of memory scholarship that explores how collective memory practices tend to appear in (and “as”) works of literature, including specific techniques by which to examine the role played by memorialization, a sense of place, the significance of objects, and fragments of experience (Synenko, “Geospatial Memory”). In “‘This is Your Fourth Shore’: Historical Amnesia and the Return of the Colonial Past in Antonio Tabucchi’s *Piazza d’Italia*,” Sophie Desroches focuses on Tabucchi’s novel through the significance of memorial sites that are present in the story, highlighting the specific devices that the author employs to develop a counterhistory of Italian colonialism through the so-called “colonial repressed,” making specific references to Italy’s role in Ethiopia. Desroches further identifies how fiction writing can be repurposed as a form of historiographical engagement, something that Han Fei also develops in her article “La (re)construction de mémoire dans les écritures migrantes: Étude comparative de *Ru* et *Le champ dans la mer*.” By exploring common associations of migrancy with displacement, drift, and exile, Fei develops a theory of the literary construction of memory as it appears in a single work of migrant literature. She highlights how spatiotemporal relations in the novel allow the author to depart from concrete history, and to enter a psychic space where fictional characters express themselves through abstraction, interruption, and the cycle of traumatic time. Fei makes a strong case for the restaging of testimony through works of fiction and the persistence of the fragment, and the “flashes” (Benjamin 255) of memory that remains unabsorbed by those who experience it.

Lily Li’s article takes the broader theme of memory practices in another direction, as her exploration focuses on how personal and public memory can be entwined in literary screen-based narratives. In her discussion of Lou Ye’s *Summer Palace*, Li details the “abuses of forgetting” (Ricoeur 501) regarding the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989, underlining how this very public and national trauma has been woven into the private lives of a young couple. Though Li’s work critically examines the testimonial quality of Yu Hong’s diary entries and their significance in the film’s narrative, highlighting the notion of diary-as-archive, she goes one step further

in her analysis of the cinematic features that contribute to the story, including the images of Tiananmen Square as a backdrop for both a personal love story that is defined by sex and passion, and the broader sense of collective nostalgia and grief that is invested in that site's tarnished past. Similarly, Lourdes Arciniega looks to the ethical dimensions of shared trauma and a sense of communities in crisis. Featuring the post-pandemic world of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, Arciniega directs her attention to the importance of objects lost and found during a pandemic, defining an artifactual memory that persistently operates through the construction of literary imaginations.

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