MEETING GROUND:
CONSIDERING THE PLACE, VALUE AND
CHOICE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Jacqueline Sloan Morgan
University of Adelaide

The specialty of comparative literature provides an inter-disciplinary meeting place for critical approaches to literature. It offers an ‘open venue’ for considerations of literature and culture from developing and alternative perspectives and provides the opportunity to reveal cultural knowledge previously imbedded within subjugated histories or lost through a narrow vision. Research in comparative literature engages with texts in a complex and multifaceted way. It is the encouragement of this interdisciplinary and multifaceted approach that attracted me to the field of comparative literature, particularly for my doctoral work. My research in the field of women’s settlement literature in Canada and Australia engages with works in related fields such as colonial/post-colonial studies and feminist scholarship and examines concepts of gender, national identity, national mythology, relations with nature, and the intersection of these themes. Comparative literature offers an effective meeting-ground for analysis of primary and secondary sources considering these materials. In this article I will describe and reflect on my choice for using a comparative framework for textual analysis and discuss the placement of comparative literature within the larger and related areas of national history telling and identity development, specifically regarding the British settlement histories of Canada and Australia.

Provisionally titled Wild Hearth: Negotiating ‘Womanhood’ on the Frontiers of Australia and Canada, my in-progress doctoral thesis is a comparative analysis of Canadian and Australian women’s settlement writing. The paper examines key Anglo texts, both published novels and private memoirs, written between the mid-eighteenth and early twentieth centuries by middle-class women. Utilising a comparative framework to analyse both popular and obscure texts, the thesis considers settlement writing within a triangulated (British, Canadian, Australian) context. The comparative method allows for the identification of similarities and divergences in...
representations of women’s experiences across continents as the two colonial nations moved towards independence. The similar backgrounds of Australia and Canada as British settler nations (the scope of my thesis is limited to Anglo texts, noting the strong Francophone history in Canada and complex multi-cultural histories in both countries) yet their distinct geographical and social circumstances lend themselves naturally towards a comparative study. This methodology, like many of its comparative counterparts, allows me to consider and re-consider key themes in settlement histories and ask questions such as: Within a comparative framework, what patterns and divergences emerge about the gendered representation of emergent settler national identities? How did life and nation look to middle-class women on the settler frontier? What kinds of responses does their writing reveal about the settlement experience and how is that represented as being shaped by geographical location, landscape, social isolation, inherited social mores and expectations?

In answering these questions I consider how the early development of national identity in Canada and Australia was formed in response to shifting settler circumstances and imperial influences. In these two British settler nations the negotiation of influences between the Old and New Worlds resulted in the sharing, enacting and adoption of gender roles across boundaries for men and women. In each settler nation a national culture evolved that was “quite distinct from that of the Old World from which they had sprung,” yet shared “a distinct and developing sense of their own nationality” (Eddy and Schreuder 1). Undertaking a comparative study of representations of life on the frontiers through literature provides an in-depth understanding of key themes and cultural negotiations prevalent to women across nations.

In considering the methodological framework for my doctoral thesis, comparative literature engaging more broadly with transnational historical studies invited “the potential of transnational approaches to develop new understandings of the past by highlighting historical processes and relationships that transcend nation states and that connect apparently separate worlds” (Curthoys and Lake 5). Despite facing harsh environmental and distinct political circumstances British colonists “co-constructed a particular transimperial discourse of colonialism” (Lester, “British Settler Discourse” 25) in which physical movements and conceptual ideas were linked (Lester, “Colonial Settlers” 39). These international connections, and central to my work—key themes in negotiating concepts of ‘womanhood’ in the settlements across nations, are highlighted through undertaking analysis in a comparative context.

Since the 1970s scholars and historians have revisited concepts of national identity. Colonial and postcolonial scholars in particular have identified the inadequacy of traditional historiography as drowning the vexed histories of non-dominant social groups under the “glaring partiality and incompleteness of the official archives” (Paisley 1). Postcolonial scholarship has challenged the ways in which traditional history telling has provided a limited account of the experiences and cultural histories of nations (Haggis 5), and it has encouraged the re-examination of national histories through a lens of wider inclusivity. My work, considering representations of
history/settler women’s experiences through writing, engages with the claim that a symbiotic relationship exists between history writing and the nation; it is within this space that ‘national identity’ is consolidated (Ballantyne 23). My motivation for considering women’s literature is, in part, that reconsiderations or altered perspectives of history challenge perceived ‘knowledge’ which in turn creates zones of national identity-discomfort. If we see, as Duncan Bell does, the notion of ‘national memory’ as a "totaling mnemonic that forms the basis of the nationalist narrative: the alleged unified, coherent memory shared amongst all of the people concerning their national past” (Bell 74), we begin to understand the importance of reconsidering ‘representations’ of history as a ‘national mythscape’; a place that “can be conceived of as the discursive realm, constituted by and through temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly” (Bell 75). Analyzing these ‘myths’, through literature, as a comparative scholar creates the opportunity for in-depth consideration of specific texts while encouraging discoveries of contrasts and similarities that transcend the nations. It is a valuable framework that allows both the acquisition of new knowledges through close textual study and also encourages a re-evaluation of ‘traditional’ scholarship by examining literature within new contextual frameworks.

Comparative literature provides a place where ideas meet. It draws on the writings from different sources about related experiences. As such, it is a place from which to conduct research that challenges the limited scope of ‘traditional’ historiography. The benefits of comparative study, apparent in the established corpus of the field, demonstrate that work conducted using this methodology reveals new discoveries of shared and divergent aspects of literature and culture. The identification of interconnectivity in areas such as national identity, race, gender ideology and history through comparative studies are highly valuable in the increasingly interconnected modern world and particularly in Canada where international, indigenous and imperial influences play a key role in the historic and continuing negotiations of national concepts and themes. Academia, and specifically the fields of literature and cultural studies are and will continue to be enriched by comparative studies undertaken by scholars willing to put the miles into traversing disciplines and nations in search of new connections.

**Works Cited**


Bell, Duncan S.A. “Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity.”


