

THE COMPARATIVE IMPETUS: THOUGHTS ON THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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206 A recent classroom session required that I revisit both the 1993 and 2004 reports on the state of Comparative Literature as a discipline. The ensuing discussion among my fellow graduate students, our professor, and myself reaffirmed many of the anxiogenic concerns already raised by the reports: finding a balance between teaching and reading literature in translation vs. originals; the seeming inevitability of the erosion of loci of power and centrality amid the historical realities of multiculturalism and globalization; and the paradigmatic shifts in the institutional, pedagogical and rhetorical focus of the discipline. Having come to the discipline by way of a degree in Political Science and experiences as a high school English teacher in my native Philippines, I must admit that I still sweat a little bit when I get asked, “why CompLit?”. The job outlook is grim if one doesn’t diversify one’s language and skill set, most government funding goes to departments perceived as being more stable such as English or French, and seemingly everyone can do CompLit these days. “To be in CompLit means to live and think in the interstices,” our professor sagely intones.

A comparatist *must* be able to inhabit and navigate the interstices: the gap between linguistic and literary traditions, the fine line between theory and method, the space between historicity and self-fashioning. A comparatist *must* be able to look at cultural artifacts and see them for what they are according to certain criteria of craft, context, and value. Being able to bridge divergent texts and traditions is the bread and butter of every comparatist. Yet I do not think that a comparatist can or should be, as it were, a neutral gatekeeper of aesthetic judgment, as if he or she were blindfolded Lady Justice meting out impartial verdicts. Here I run the risk of being labeled a heretic, but I believe that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to dissociate oneself from ideology in CompLit. History is ideological, as is taste, and when the field is being shaped into an uneven landscape by hegemonic political and intellectual

forces, comparativism itself becomes a charged practice.

Mary Louise Pratt's view of a discipline transformed by the triple processes of globalization, democratization, and decolonization (59), of Comparative Literature as a "hospitable space for the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding, and genuinely global consciousness [in order to] develop these things both as scholarly endeavors and as new forms of cultural citizenship in a globalized world" (62), is a beautiful ideal to which every comparatist should aspire. In a world rapidly becoming more cosmopolitan, advocating for "global citizenship" seems apt and relevant. And yet insofar as achieving a global consciousness that acknowledges and accommodates the multiplicity of perspectives is ideal, there exist persistent socioeconomic, ideological, and even ethnolinguistic power structures that threaten cooperation or even dialogue, even from within the discipline itself.

I have had that "What are you writing on?" conversation with other graduate students and even some professors, and one too many times I have been on the receiving end of polite silence when I tell them that I am trying to investigate the intersection between postcolonialism (too passé) and popular culture (too pedestrian) in the Filipino tradition (too Third World). Never mind either that there is a disproportionate gap as far as institutional support goes in the fields of Asian or postcolonial studies in my experience in Canadian universities, which seem to favour research along post-structural or deconstructionist fields of inquiry. While I welcome and encourage intellectual diversity, I feel especially impelled to entertain such identitarian interests from a comparative point of view, being an Asian immigrant to Canada. This is how I enter the intellectual tradition, and if invoking this historicity in my academic pursuits is a function of ideology, then so be it.

In today's world, it doesn't seem disingenuous to perceive cultures and traditions as subaltern to, in perpetual tension with, and perennially displaced by others. What does it mean to be a comparatist who is also a "global citizen"? Is it to be at once a citizen of one's nation, and also of the rest of the world? Is it to be privy to multiple heritages, traditions, and contexts? In a world where the landscape is constantly being shaped by economic globalization, intellectual and political democratization, and sociocultural decolonization, the question of where one belongs is indeed less compelling than the question of where one is in-between.

That we exist in a multicultural age is a reality, but this multiculturalism also exists within a globalizing context; it is not as if the age of multiculturalism has passed into the age of globalization, and that we are awaiting the next epoch of Comparative Literature (internationalism? postmodernism? post-postcolonialism?). It is all of these things at once, each in dialogue with the others, and Comparative Literature is ever their mediator. In an age when borders, boundaries, and even identities are shifting and becoming more and more porous, we are also called as comparatists to adapt to the changing needs and functions of the comparative landscape. My sense is that Comparative Literature in Canada must take into account not just the external

changes that are dictating scholarship in the field; it must also acknowledge how the discipline is changing at the grassroots level. The influx of international students from states and canons hitherto considered peripheral, the diversity of backgrounds and interests brought by these junior scholars to the table, and the organizational and fiscal structures of each CompLit program are all expedient factors that, to my mind, can and should impact administration, pedagogy, curriculum development, philosophical paradigms, and research in Comparative Literature in the coming years. These instances of multiculturalism, globalization, and internationalism certainly pose a challenge—but also a great opportunity—to established norms of theory, canon, and ideology within the academic circles of CompLit in Canada, and perhaps the whole of North America. The engine of Comparative Literature is moving along, but where it goes from here remains largely dependent on acknowledging the forces that drive it, not least including the ever-increasing diversity that characterizes the backgrounds, orientations, and intellectual pursuits of the scholars who are converging into our discipline.

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WORK CITED

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship." *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 58-65. Print.