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In Every Issue

State of the Discipline Wanted: New Windows in Comparative Literature

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On March 6, 2014, Cree novelist and playwright Tomson Highway presented the annual Henry Kreisel Memorial Lecture of the Canadian Literature Centre at the University of Alberta. In his brilliant, amusing and provocative talk, entitled "Understanding Each Other: The Essential Importance of Multilingualism through the Prism of Cree, French, and English," Highway reminded the standing room only audience that speaking only one language was like living in a house with only one window. In such a house, you have only one perspective on the world.

As comparative literature scholars, we have always believed in having a lot of windows in our academic houses. In a discipline that perforce requires multiplicity—multiple windows looking out at various periods, themes, genres, languages, intertexts, and intersections with other disciplines—the idea of a house with just one window doesn't sit well. Comparative literature programs across North America require knowledge of more than one language for students in their undergraduate and graduate programs, with "proficiency in a language in addition to English" as the first item on the list of key elements of an undergraduate Comparative Literature degree compiled by Corinne Scheiner on behalf of the American Comparative Literature Association. The most recent ACLA report also speaks to the "concern occasionally raised that undergraduate Comparative Literature had become wholly literature in translation," a concern that can arise in a house with just one window.

Most Comparative Literature programs and departments across North America stress the interdisciplinary and international aspect of their offerings. Taking just a few examples: at the University of Chicago, Comparative Literature is inspired by the "spirit of thinking globally and transhistorically"; the Department of Comparative Literature at Brown University stresses "its conviction that literary research and instruction must be *international* in character"; the Department of Comparative Literature at Penn State claims a "global" range and asserts that "comparative literature is above all about understanding how literary and social forms are shaped by the plural languages and cultural contexts through which they come into being"; and the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto notes that it "enables research that is among the best and most exciting at the University and that, because it crosses languages and national borders, cannot be done in any other venue. Often the research is among the best and most exciting because it exceeds what can be done in a national literature department or a discipline." Graduate students entering Comparative Literature programs in North America are themselves shaped by the plural languages and cultural contexts of their diverse countries of origin.

Yet Haun Saussy points out that in spite of Comparative Literature's claims to welcome works from every imaginable language, time, and tradition, the reality is a bit different. In his March 9, 2014 piece entitled "Comparative Literature: The Next Ten Years," he writes of Sheldon Pollock's plenary speech at the 2010 ACLA conference, in which Pollock pointed out that the great majority of doctoral dissertations written in Comparative Literature and a similar share of the articles published in the main journals of the field deal with English, French, and German literature between 1800 and 1960. Saussy notes that the annual prizes awarded in 2010 just "confirmed the modernist and European center of gravity of the ACLA." Are some of our windows open wider than others?

Are there other windows we have not yet opened? What about windows onto the Indigenous nations around the very universities where we teach Comparative Literature? An exploration of literary and cultural creations from the Indigenous nations close to our universities might allow for different answers to the question, "What is the relationship between our theories and the people we are theorizing about?" (Acoose 369).

In "The Problem of Being 'Indian': One Mixed-Blood's Dilemma," Janice Gould (Koyangk'auwi Maidu) reminds us that "there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land. We should reflect on this over and over, and understand this fact as one fundamental point about the relationship of Indians to academia" (81-82). While Gould speaks of the United States, her point extends to all universities in the Americas. The University of Alberta is on Treaty Six territory, a treaty signed in 1876 between "Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland," and "the Plain and Wood Cree and other Tribes of Indians." Treaty Six covers much of the central sections of Alberta and Saskatchewan and includes some 50 First Nations in Canada. A respectful recognition of our university's presence on Treaty Six territory and of the nation to nation relationships of this land would open new windows for our Comparative Literature program, encouraging our students to consider their own relationships to the land on which they stand. What would it mean for our programs, our students, and our own relationships with the land and with the traditional inhabitants of these lands if Comparative Literature programs throughout North America asked students to take courses in the Indigenous literatures and cultures of the First Nations or tribes on whose lands our universities are built?

At the undergraduate level, our students are often from Canada or the United States. While studying the literatures of other countries beyond Canada or the United States broadens their intellectual horizons, studying the literary productions of Indigenous nations where their university is located allows them to see, as Malea

Powell (Miami-Shawnee) has argued, that "it is because of how America—the ideological state and collective national culture—came into being that there is an 'American' scholarly experience and a specific scholarly discourse about Native Americans at all" (3). Powell's connections between the "un-seeing of Indian peoples, nations and civilizations" in the stories of the American frontier tale are not dissimilar to other connections than students could make between the "un-seeing of Indian peoples, nations and civilizations" in the stories of the creation of Canada (3-4). Opening up windows onto a thoughtful discussion of the creation of America/Canada, of the American/Canadian story through the erasure of Indigenous peoples and nations helps us to problematize various concepts at play in Comparative Literature courses, including nation, race, ethnicity, identity, colonialism, resistance, and imperialism. Issues of land, culture, and community that are key to discussions of Indigenous identity can be windows onto interesting discussions of identities and literatures in other parts of the world as well.

Teaching Indigenous texts within the context of a Comparative Literature course brings on responsibilities to discuss vital issues that distinguish Indigenous peoples from other groups often included in those courses. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Lakota) forcefully affirms for the U. S. context, "Indians, first of all, are not 'ethnics' in American society; rather, they are Indigenous populations with a particular political, cultural, and historical status different from any other population in the United States." Craig Womack (Muscogee Creek-Cherokee) similarly argues that because "literature rises out of land and language and stories, and given that tribal nations have different landscapes, different languages, and different stories from the United States and England (and, importantly, tribal members and their nations are defined, legally, differently from the rest of American citizenry, including America's minorities), those differences must suggest rejection of the approach to teaching Native literature as simply some kind of 'minority extension' of the American canon" (76). Engaging with Indigenous literatures and cultures from the nations around our universities opens windows toward a discussion of what it means to engage ethically with these texts and these issues, as well as what it means to engage in the very discipline of Comparative Literature, a discipline that often asks us, as Saussy reminds us, "to learn not only difficult languages but the rules of a different social order, the conventions and allusions of a different literary tradition, and much else besides."

In graduate Comparative Literature programs that often enroll a significant number of international students, opening and prioritizing new windows onto the Indigenous nations around our universities would give international students a different understanding of Canada or the United States than they receive when studying works only from the dominant culture or (mostly) European cultures. Bringing in multiple Indigenous perspectives affirms the importance of the knowledge and ways of knowing of Indigenous peoples, an affirmation that may resonate in critical ways for students who are not from the dominant culture of the country in which they are pursuing their graduate degree. As our Comparative Literature students themselves grapple with challenges and dilemmas encountered at the intersections of their work and their identities, courses in which Indigenous literatures and perspectives are placed at the centre, rather than the margins, of the discussion, could be vital windows in our Comparative Literature houses.

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Bio

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