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Comparatims

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COMPARATISMS

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Not literature but literatures; not works but networks.

(Roland Greene)

In her contribution to the 2004 American Comparative Literature Association report on the state of the discipline of comparative literature, Linda Hutcheon introduces an interesting metaphor for understanding current conditions in the field:

[...] perhaps the moment is ripe for looking for [...] positive terms of self definition for our discipline, paradoxically flourishing yet feeling beleaguered. I would like to suggest [...] [an] image [...] modest, but [...] apt: the humble but infinitely useful device without which few of us would travel these days to any other continent: the electrical converter. Like this compact, enabling device, comparative literature makes energy (in its case, intellectual energy) usable in different places and in different contexts. This intellectual energy is contrarian, even counter-disciplinary as well as meta-disciplinary [...] And, if I may continue the electrical metaphor, another way to think about comparative literature's usable but not totally consumable energy—whether alternating or direct—is as power. (Hutcheon, 2006: 228–9)

Taking into consideration the 1994 American Comparative Literature Association decennial report's investigation of the impact of cultural studies, multiculturalism, and postcolonial studies on established notions of comparative literature, Hutcheon's analysis seeks to move the discipline beyond its traditional uncertainty in the face of its seemingly endless expansiveness and its lack of a clear-cut object, into a new understanding of its possibilities in the 21st century—which she also hopes will not entail burning bridges with its Eurocentric past, or what David Ferris has termed its 'Eur-iquity' (Ferris, 2006: 81). Through her inventive metaphor, however, Hutcheon introduces not only a new way of understanding the field, but also a new and innovative way of thinking about its larger cultural significance. What does it mean to consider comparative literature as it may be imbricated in notions of power? Does this 'power' refer to the significance of older conceptions of the discipline, in which it was held to an unbending roster of standards—'a knowledge of three literatures in their original language and a level of theoretical sophistication appropriate to the conceptual nature of a field no longer confined to national restrictions' (82)? Or might this 'power' mean something

else, something heretofore unexplored and unarticulated, surging below the critical surface, fully accessible—to follow Hutcheon's metaphor—only to those who have the right attachment, or critical method, to bring it to light?

Certainly, when considered in relation to comparative literature, the power of which Hutcheon writes must be a discursive one, and, like language, capable of molding itself to whatever is called for in each situation in which it finds itself. The mutability of linguistic signification in this context gives rise to a notion of 'comparatisms'—not one comparative literature, but many comparative literatures that, in their multiplicity, serve to reflect the hidden power to signify and to affect cultural understanding as identified in Hutcheon's imaginative metaphor. This unrecognized reality of multiplicity speaks directly to some of the most important concerns about the state of the field expressed in the 2004 ACLA report, as well as the three decennial reports which came before it.¹

The 2004 report answers the most pressing questions put forward by all of the ACLA reports regarding the identity of the field, through its own acknowledgement of the bankruptcy of singularity in conceptions of comparative literature. When comparative literature is imagined as one thing and one thing only to which it must refer, it becomes impossible to discern what 'institutional position it will be called upon to play as the university registers distinct shifts in what constitutes the meaning of foreignness as well as how it provides an educational experience' (Ferris: 82). Yet while practitioners of comparative literature seek to define, enumerate, codify and describe its 'new' form(s), comparative literature, through its corollary of comparative *practice*, is already exercising an unprecedented 'power', having 'won its battles', and now having found itself, through such practices, the 'daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion' (Saussy, 2006: 3).

Thinking about the field from this perspective provides a natural transition from which to consider its significance with regard to the new American studies. Inter-American, or hemispheric studies, as a comparative practice, necessarily represents one instance of the transformation of comparative literature, to which Hutcheon's notion of power can refer. Here, the age-old comparatist problem of language moves from simply a discussion of standards (whether or not a given text is to be read in the language in which it was originally written) to a discussion of how such standards may be derived in a more complicated world containing a veritable proliferation of languages, unequally valued—and, once (or if) such standards are determined, how exactly to implement them. In order to responsibly undertake the comparative literary study of all peoples and cultures of the Americas, it becomes immediately evident that language cannot be anything other than a crucial issue. It follows, therefore, that its discursive power to create, explain, interpret and/or produce cultural reality or realities must also be an inevitable consideration. Along with this realization, then, comes a host of questions, currently under-explored: which languages might best rep-

¹ See the 'Levin Report, 1965', the 'Greene Report, 1975', and the 'Bernheimer Report, 1993' in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, pp. 21–48.



resent the literatures and cultures of the Americas? Should the emphasis be on languages such as French, Spanish, Dutch or Portuguese, or should proficiency in one or more 'native' languages also be sought? What sign of 'power' is given when a relevant language is included or excluded from consideration? What message might choosing English as a lingua franca send to non-English speakers? Which languages might best represent the goals and realities of hemispheric studies? What are the 'official' languages of the Americas, and how should these be determined? Where does/should/can the issue of translation fit in here? What kinds of implications with regard to potential audience do such linguistic choices entail? And, finally, how can issues of language be addressed within a comparative practice without losing the contours of comparative literature as a discipline, while on the one hand steering clear of the intellectual structures of the national literary department, and, on the other, embracing the sheer multiplicity of cultural and linguistic difference within the Western Hemisphere?

These are only a few of the problems surrounding the meaning of language in a comparative and hemispheric context. Between the lines, however, they represent a complicated tangle of cultural implications which can only be fully unraveled within new forms of comparative literature—comparatisms—unafraid to engage older models of comparative practice while simultaneously grasping their nascent, multiple, and wide-ranging discursive power. And it is only within these new and various comparatisms (like Inter-American studies) that what Hutcheon calls the 'intellectual energy' of the comparative approach finds its truest and most powerful expression, transformed into its deepest social effect—as the revelation of a boundless, democratic and inextricably intertwined cultural possibility only beginning to be unearthed and explored.

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