

An Introduction to Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture

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**Benton Jay Komins,**

**"An Introduction to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture*"**

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.3 (2003)**

**Thematic Issue *Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture***

**Edited by Benton Jay Komins**

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## Benton Jay Komins

### An Introduction to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture*

Many contemporary analyses of popular culture strive to demystify objects and performances in the context of hegemonic culture. Scholars and critics ask us to question the importance of the popular within ideology, especially the ways in which popular culture impacts our own subject positions. But what happens when we expand the scope of this critical discussion comparatively, across a broad range of cultural, historical, ideological, and linguistic contexts? The authors of the five essays in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* demonstrate that there are indeed benefits to comparative critical analysis of popular artifacts and performances. From the brutality of a Belgian *fin-de-siecle* puppet show to the submerged queer subtexts and iconography of *Wonder Woman* comic books, this volume highlights the eclectic and creative meanings that become associated with popular cultural expressions in disparate contexts.

In "Symbolism, Popular Drama, and Politics and Art in Belgium, 1886-1910"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/2/>>, Joan Gross discusses the ways in which the violence of Belgian colonialism in the Congo came to manifest itself in the popular cultural realm -- in a play by Louis Leloup, a text by Maurice Maeterlinck, and a speech by Lile Vandervelde. Expanding Michael Taussig's argument, Gross suggests that these authors exploit the symbols and traditional narrative of *The Massacre of the Innocents* in response to the contemporaneous colonial terror in Africa. In a lighter vein, Charlotte Headrick's essay examines the ways in which the flavors of New Orleans punctuate Lillian Hellman's *oeuvre*. In "New Orleans and Its Influence on the Work of Lillian Hellman" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/3/>>, Headrick argues that both Hellman's life and her work were shaped by her early years in New Orleans. Noting the importance of Creole cuisine in the city, Headrick discusses Hellman's many references to foods that are unique to New Orleans. We are given insight into this author's fascination with New Orleans cuisine, according to Headrick, with her last published work, a cookbook filled with spicy Creole dishes. In the third paper, "Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/4/>>, Dana Heller examines the holy fool figure that surfaces in American literature and popular culture. Heller contends that the holy fool has been a central figure in the national myth of the United States. She locates this holy fool figure, or divine idiot, across a wide range of genres and historical moments, discussing exemplary works that include the texts of Jack Kerouac and Flannery O'Connor, and the popular films *Forrest Gump* and *The Green Mile*. Next, in "Heidegger, the Erotics of Ontology, and the Mass-Market Romance"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/5/>>, Deborah Lutz focuses on the image of the dangerous lover in pulp romances. She argues that the much-exploited figure of this lover might be conceived of as an allegory of Heideggerian theory. Especially important in Lutz's analysis is the "immanence of love" which links romance to philosophy. Finally, in the last paper in the volume, Brian Mitchell Peters details in "Qu(e)rying Comic Book Culture and Representations of Sexuality in *Wonder Woman*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/6/>>, the queer aspects embedded in the namesake comic book hero. Peters discusses the ways in which the *Wonder Woman* comic changes over time, revealing "a consistent duo of queer subtexts -- gay masquerade and lesbian *jouissance*." Peters notes that this continually repeated duo not only elicits queer responses -- it also bows to pervasive cultural homophobia. The collection concludes with a "Selected Bibliography of Work in Cultural Studies and US-American Popular Culture" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss3/7/>>, compiled by Marta Guirao and Benton Jay Komins.

I hope that the scholarship in this issue will provoke new connections and insights in the study of popular culture in a comparative context and I trust that the material of *Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture* will prove useful to the widest possible range of readers as facilitated by the availabilities of new media, in my opinion the most advantageous and obvious mode of publishing

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scholarship in the humanities available to us today. I would like to thank the editor of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Steven Totosz de Zepetnek, for his support of this project, the advisory board of the journal for their interest in the thematic issue, and editorial assistant Marta Guirao for her outstanding work with *Comparative Cultural Studies and Popular Culture*.

Editor's Profile: With a Ph.D. in comparative literature from Harvard University and after teaching at universities in the U.S. and abroad, Benton Jay Komins is studying law at Tulane University 2003-. His main areas of interest are nineteenth- and twentieth-century American, French, and German literature and culture, popular culture, theories of pedagogy, the visual arts, and theories of subjectivity. Komins is the author of a number of articles in the field of comparative literature and cultural studies, included in such journals as *Comparative Literature Studies*, *The Comparatist*, *Pretexts*, *College Literature*, *Profession*, *Pedagogy*, *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, and *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. Komins is now completing a book with David G. Nicholls, to be published by Smithsonian Books and entitled *Transatlantic Threshold: History, Race, and African Memorial Spaces*. Komins serves on the editorial board of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. E-mail: <[bjkomins@law.tulane.edu](mailto:bjkomins@law.tulane.edu)>.