

Review Article about U.S. Comparative Literature Journals Published in 2013

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**Miaomiao Wang,**

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.3 (2014)***  
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## Review Article about U.S. Comparative Literature Journals Published in 2013

In the article at hand I review selected comparative literature journals published in the U.S. in 2013: *Comparative Literature* (University of Oregon), *Comparative Literature Studies* (The Pennsylvania University Press), *symplokē: a journal for the intermingling of literary, cultural and theoretical scholarship* (University of Nebraska Press), *World Literature Today* (University of Oklahoma Press), and *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>> (Purdue University Press). All journals reviewed are indexed, among others, in the Thomson Reuters Arts and Humanities Citation Index.

*Comparative Literature* (University of Oregon) 2013. This journal is the official journal of the American Comparative Literature Association. The journal publishes on intersections of national literatures, global literary trends, theoretical and critical approaches, and revised versions of articles which received a prize by the Association. Among other fields of study, in 2013 the journal published 35 articles in the fields of aesthetics, secularism, narratology, globalization, multilingual literature, literary theory, cultural politics, hermeneutics, literary adaptation. In the following I discuss selected studies of interest to me. Maya Barzilai's "Reading Camera *Lucida* in Gaza: Ronit Matalon's Photographic Travels" is about the work of Roland Barthes to discuss how his theory has been used and how his theoretical framework is translated into Hebrew. Barzilai interrelates Barthes's theoretical reflections with his analyses of specific photographs and his personal, memoir-like ruminations on his mother's death. Despite, or perhaps because of, its generic indeterminacy and intriguing combination of the personal and the analytical, the book has been widely discussed. While Barthes's distinction between *stadium* and *punctum* of the photograph continues to excite debate among art historians, philosophers, and scholars who take up other aspects of Barthes's work. Further, in "Not a Question but a Wound: Adorno, Barthes, and Aesthetic Reflection" Lucy O'Meara analyzes Adorno's and Barthes's theoretical work.

In the guest-edited issue *Reading Secularism: Religion, Literature, Aesthetics* I find of particular interest Tomoko Masuzawa's "The Bible as Literature? Note on a Litigious Ferment of the Concept." Masuzawa argues that the Bible "offers no religious instruction but merely exemplifies a cultural achievement of certain peoples — may be regarded as one of the vital internal organs of the secular republican body politic that 'knows no religion.' It is a component in the administrative machinery that lets a religion — even an oversized religion, since there is no denying that the Bible is the great book of somebody's religion, if not exactly 'ours' — live peaceably within a nation that aspires to remain perfectly and unanimously indifferent to religion, a nation that gives no preference to any one religion over another, or any religion over absence of religion" (323). In other words, what is relevant is the understanding of the Bible as a secular text when considered within literary theory. Further, other religious texts like the Quran or sacred texts of Buddhism can be understood similarly and Allison Schachter's "Orientalism, Secularism, and the Crisis of Hebrew Modernism: Reading Leah Goldberg's *Avedot*" is a good example of how Hebrew texts can be located in wide cultural context: "A secular Hebrew culture arose in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, preceded by centuries of belletristic writing in Hebrew, first in Spain, then in Italy and Northern Europe, and initiated by Jewish intellectuals who embraced the Enlightenment ideas circulating in Germany at the time" (347).

In the thematic issue entitled *Cultural Politics* authors discuss matters of diversity and set up relations between historical events and literary writings. For example, in "Perpetrators and Victims: Third-Generation Perspectives on the Second World War in Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* and Erwin Mortier's *Marcel*" Jan Lensen explores the politics of narration: "Narratives from the victim's perspective, for instance, strive for public recognition of the moral significance of their experience of trauma, while those of former perpetrators/collaborators tend to be marked by an inability or refusal to admit involvement and a concomitant sense of guilt. Eyewitness reports are, moreover, often marked by the use of stereotypical and clichéd phrases that, as Sebald explains, 'cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend.' These narrative post-traumatic syndromes are often passed on to the next generation as well. While the children of war survivors did not directly, or at least not consciously, experience the war, they are indirectly affected through their parents' narratives or, conversely, their parents' refusal or failure to construct such narratives" (451). Thus Lensen's argumentation is that there is a relationship between victims and narratives and that this constitutes cultural

politics found in texts written by the third-generation descendants of Holocaust victims. Another interesting article on politics and writing is Glyn Salton-Cox's "Literary Praxis Beyond the Melodramas of Commitment: Edward Upward, Soviet Aesthetics, and Leftist Self-fashioning." Salton Cox writes that scholars less openly hostile to Upward often deplore his supposed "choice" of "politics over literature" and who describe Upward as "a gifted man who traded his gift for the security of a cause. Upward's legacy has thus typically been seen as an exemplary illustration of George Orwell's injunction that 'a writer does well to keep out of politics' or, at the very least, that questions of literary form and value must be kept separate from political engagement. Exhibit A for this cautionary tale is Upward's infamous 1937 essay 'Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature,' which has been dubbed 'the most stupid single piece of Marxist critics never written' for its apparent insistence 'that the way to become a good writer is to become a Marxist'" (409). Lenson's and Salton-Cox's studies represent examples of how ideology and writing explain matters of cultural politics.

In 65.1 we find *Original Languages: An ACLA Forum* where the politics of comparative literature are discussed. For example, Christopher Bush's article "Original Languages?" is based on the current interest in the concept of world literatures, the issue of translation, and hermeneutics whereby he writes that "the valorization of original language-only work has been challenged by otherwise divergent critical impulses. 'Theory' has questioned longstanding conceptions of originality and the explanatory value of origins, re-imagining translations as *supplements* whose authority, scholarly interest, and ontological status need not be inferior to that of their source. At the same time, the geographic and linguistic expansion of comparative literature has put increasingly great pragmatic pressures on the value of doing scholarly work, much less teaching, only in the 'original languages.' The discipline's increasing reliance on translation has been perceived as threatening *both* the traditional scholarly value of close reading *and* the very concern for cultural difference that is one of the motors of 'world literature.' This can all lead to some strange cultural-political bedfellows" (2). Similarly, the problem of not knowing foreign languages and its politics is the focus in Wail S. Hassan's "Which Languages"?:

The multilingual multiculturalist and the world literature approaches point in different directions, the one insisting that the world is represented within the nation, the other that the nation exists within the world. Shell and Sollors focus on immigrants in a polyglot country, while Dimock, who begins with the scene of the burning Iraqi National Library in the wake of the U.S. invasion in 2003, emphasizes U.S. imperialism. Multilingual multiculturalism requires the learning of languages other than English, while the world literature model by and large takes for granted the intermediary role of translation. The one operates within one nation, the other within one language. Both reject the nationalist conception of US-American studies and to a certain extent comparativize the field, yet each in its own way stops short of the multilingual internationalism that has always defined comparative literature. (6)

Of interest to me in particular is what Eleanor Kaufman discusses with regard to French-language philosophy and who argues that in French-language philosophy there is the contention that philosophy and literature do not have much in common. This result of Kaufmann's argumentation is that what is performed in comparative literature is not something French-language philosophy does. Kaufmann's discussion points to a curious disjuncture in French-language scholarship where comparative literature has been and remains prominent: so why the disjuncture in French between philosophy and comparative literature? In addition to articles in the Forum devoted to the American Comparative Literature Association there are several articles dealing with currently "hot topics" such as ecocriticism.

*Comparative Literature Studies* (The Pennsylvania State University Press) 2013. The journal publishes criticism and book reviews. Volume 50 contains 85 articles including articles on the environment and literature, world literature, literary history and theory, canon studies, and philosophy. Similar to all comparative literature journals published in the U.S., contributors are from a number of countries, although contributors to volume 50 of *Comparative Literature Studies* are mostly scholars working in the U.S. Issue 50.1 of the journal is devoted to ecocriticism, a currently much discussed matter not only in the U.S., but elsewhere. Articles in this thematic issue are mostly on matters of the environment in literary texts ranging from such in Arguedas's, Beckett's, Cervantes's, Tolstoy's, Mamakaev's and Gosh's novels and North American Indigenous literature. Issue 50.2 contains regular articles and two thematic clusters: a "political" or "ideological" issue arguing for the study of modern literature world wide and forum on the work J. Hillis Miller. Issue 50.3 contains regular articles and a thematic cluster devoted to the work of Césaire and 50.4, a regular issue, is smaller with five articles. A special feature of *Comparative Literature Studies* is the publication of book reviews — a notoriously difficult

undertaking because of the lack of scholars willing to write book reviews — and volume 50 contains altogether 45 book reviews covering a wide area of new scholarship published in the discipline of comparative literature and related fields.

*symplokē: a journal for the intermingling of literary, cultural and theoretical scholarship* (University of Nebraska Press) 2013. Similar to *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* whose publication started in 1999, *symplokē* is a "newer" U.S. journal of comparative literature. Its issues are always thematic and published twice yearly (that is, the journal is not a quarterly). The 2013 volume is entitled *Critical Climate* with regular articles and a thematic cluster in the field of ecocriticism with 17 articles and the introduction to the volume underlines the relevance and importance of the field:

Climate change has a huge footprint — and not just on the planet. It touches nearly every academic discipline, including many in the humanities. This multidisciplinary reach has the ability to not only alter conversations within areas of research, but also to encourage dialogue among them. It is in our best interest to encourage considerations of climate change across disciplines so as to draw as many voices and perspectives into the conversation as possible. For some, this seems wrong-headed. They aim to localize discussion of climate change to scientific calculations of greenhouse gases and average surface temperatures. These individuals tend to believe that discussions of climate change are more the province of science than the humanities or critical theory. Readers of *symplokē* will appreciate the value of moving beyond basic greenhouse physics to a consideration of the political, aesthetic, ethical, and economic impact of climate change. And it is here that discussions within the humanities can interweave with discussions in the sciences — and hold the potential to radically transform both areas. Climate change asks of critical and cultural theorists nothing more or less than a re-evaluation of our work, and challenges us to rethink how we use the critical tools we have at hand. It calls for us to ask how critical concepts like power, ideology, mediation, capital, colonialism, gender, oppression, society, and construction help to understand the challenges presented by climate change. In addition, it asks whether the current crisis wrought by anthropogenic climate change defies or affirms the assumptions that underpin cultural critical theory, and to what extent. Can we respond through established critical modes, such as those signaled by deconstruction, post-structuralism, genre theory, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and science studies, or those practiced under the rubrics of Agamben, Badiou, Butler, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Latour, and Žižek? Or does climate change demand a new kind of theory? While the impact of critical theory on the examination of climate change is yet to be determined, what can be determined is that merging the critical and the scientific may be our only hope to deal with the unprecedented challenges we face. Focus editor Adeline Johns-Putra from the University of Surrey has done a fantastic job in this issue assembling an international group of contributors to critically explore the discursive shape and texture of what we call climate change. These contributions collectively demonstrate the continued value of intermingling critical theory, literary analysis and cultural studies not merely as ends in themselves — but rather as a means of addressing the complex problems currently facing academe, society, and our planet. This provides hope not only for the future of the planet, but also for the future of the humanities — and journals such as this one rooted in them. (Di Leo 5)

The volume also includes two interviews and two book review articles. As I mention previously, ecocriticism is a prominent topic today and *symplokē's* 2013 volume attests to this with outstanding scholarship. In 2013 the journal published 42 articles by authors who are mostly from the U.S.

*World Literature Today* (University of Oklahoma Press) 2013. This journal is one of the oldest U.S. comparative literature journals. Similar to *symplokē*, *World Literature Today* is not a quarterly, but is published monthly and its 2013 volume was published in November of the year, volume 87. The theme of the 2013 volume is working-class writing with articles on such writing in several languages and cultures and including poems by 16 US-American poets. One of the articles is of special interest to me, namely Andrew Piper's discussion of e-books and reading today. Piper argues that "Most debates about the future of reading have turned around the question of whether or not to go electronic. Books good, Internet bad. Internet free, books bulky. But that debate is over. We *have* gone electronic, whether we like it or not. What we have not done is take advantage of this shift. We've moved backward, not forward in terms of reading" (29). While Piper recognizes the immanent relevance and importance of the digital, he argues for the relevance, still, of the printed book and thus underlines the contemporary situation of not one (print) versus the other (digital), but the parallel nature of our reading culture and practices.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>> (Purdue University Press) 2013. A humanities and social sciences quarterly, the journal is published by Purdue University Press online in open access and thus the only journal among the ones reviewed here that is available at no cost to anyone with internet access. The issues of volume 15 (2013) include two regular issues (one of them with a thematic cluster), two thematic issues, and three special issues. In volume 15 there are 128 articles whose topics range from gender studies, image studies, aesthetics, literary theory, narratology, media studies, cultural studies, ecocriticism, and world literature (note:

one of *CLCWeb's* forthcoming issues is a thematic issue entitled *New Work in Ecocriticism* 16.4 [2014]. Different from other journals, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* does not publish reviews of single books, but review articles of minimum two thematically linked books. Articles published in 2013 are by contributors from Australia, Europe, Canada, the U.S., Asia, and Africa. To me the most interesting articles are in the three special issues 15.5, 15.6, and 15.7 in which a wide range of matters about the current renaissance of the concept and practice of world literature(s) is discussed:

Since the turn of the twenty-first century globalization, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism with its "culture wars," as well as the so-called global war on terror and the crisis of the neo-liberal world economic order have rediscovered the original Goethean and Marxian notions of world literature stressing its complex dynamics, fluidity, antagonism of power, and asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital. From the point of view of the current world wide renaissance of Goethean ideas of transcultural traffic, the circulation of literary goods, and the transnational networking of literary producers, mediators, publishers, readership, and scholars and critics it might seem surprising to find the beginnings of pluralist and de-centered notions of world literature in the above mentioned Occidentocentric and value-laden paradigm of world literature as the canon of "great books." (Juvan <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2333>>).

Another interesting collection of articles is the 15.2 thematic issue *Asian Cultures and Globalization* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/>> because "it is of import that the majority of the contributors are scholars working in Asia or are originally from countries in Asia who make use of their own cultures' scholarship, a matter of relevance with regard to the impact of Western scholarship where in publications the overwhelming framework of references remains — as a rule — Western" (Wang and Guo <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2231>>). Further, while in US-American scholarship there are many publications on African American literature, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* publishes scholarship that is less frequent in US-American scholarship, namely research on Black African literatures and 15.1 includes a thematic cluster entitled *Black African Literatures and Cultures* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss1/>> with articles on a range of topics such as gender studies, Achebe's work, racism and literature, semiotics, education, etc., and the articles are by scholars from African countries proper.

In conclusion, this review of the 2013 publications in *Comparative Literature*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *symplokē: a journal for the intermingling of literary, cultural and theoretical scholarship*, *World Literature Today*, and *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, suggests that US-American journals remain important with regard to the study of literature in general and the discipline of comparative literature in particular and that the current criticism that comparative literature has moved too much away from the study of the literary text proper is misguided. Indeed, as the articles in the journals reveal, the study of the literary text proper is performed in outstanding scholarship while at the same time the texts' context is explored, for example in the journals' many articles about ecocriticism, world literature, the "politics of literature," etc. Further, in my reading of said journals, they do not favor particular or specific approaches and thus they present a balanced view of the current landscape of both general humanities scholarship and comparative literature. Last but not least, the journals reviewed here — although to various degrees — publish new knowledge by scholars working across the globe.

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