

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE PROGRAM



GRADUATE STUDENT 2025 ESSAY PRESENTATIONS



Monday, May 19, 3:30 pm
Wednesday, May 21, 3:30 pm
Dartmouth Hall 105

Monday, May 19, 3:30
Dartmouth Hall 105

Welcome: Prof. Klaus Mladek
Keynote Address: Marija Nikolić

Panel 1: Subjects of Modernity

Moderator: İnci Çetin

Umer Al Dulaimi

The Epistemological Violence of the Nahḍah: Hadīth ‘Īsā bin Hishām and the Specter of Inḥitāt

Reuben Slade

When Reading for the Plot Goes Wrong: “The Death and the Compass: (“La muerte y la brújula”) by J.L. Borges (1942) and “The Sunglasses Society” (“眼镜会”) By Sun Liaohong 孙了红 (1921)

Anh Do

Tôi and *Moi*: The Ambivalence of the Self in Lưu Trọng Lư and Proust

Questions & Answers
Break

Panel 2: Media, Mediation, and Scene/Aesthetic Forms

Moderator: Crista Fiala

Yingyi Wang

Theatricality of the Ephemeral: Media of Surplus and Spectatorship in Southern Liang (南梁, 502-557) Palace-style Poetry and Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness* (1989)

Jackie Béla Szepessy

Excess, Melodrama, and Recessive Action in *Madame Bovary* (1857 & 1949)

Questions & Answers

Wednesday, May 21, 3:30
Dartmouth Hall 105

Welcome: Prof. Klaus Mladek
Keynote Address: Umer Al Dulaimi

Panel 1 : Relationships with Belonging(s)

Moderator: Jackie Béla Szepessy

Crista Fiala

“Untraditional Intimacies:” *Re-Pairing* American Narratives of Racialization and Settler Colonialism in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and Gerald Vizenor’s *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003)

Marija Nikolić

Out of the Suitcase and Into the Bag: Rethinking Metaphors of Refugeehood in Yugoslav War Memoirs

Questions & Answers
Break

Panel 2: En(countering) Space: Materialities, Imaginaries, and Interventions

Moderator: Anh Do

Anne McGrath

Beware the Wandering Woman: Depictions of Female Spatial Transgression in Athenian Public Dramas of the 5th and 4th Centuries BCE

Dana Akhmerova

Ritual as Resistance: Orality, Identity, and Soviet Kazakh Childhood in Sayin Muratbekov’s *The Smell of Wormwood*

İnci Çetin

Between Word and World: Textual Spaces in Sephardic Literature

Questions & Answers

Dinner Reception: Writing Center 101: Leslie Center for the Humanities

Dana Akhmerova

Ritual as Resistance: Orality, Identity, and Soviet Kazakh Childhood in Sayin Muratbekov's *The Smell of Wormwood*

This presentation examines *The Smell of Wormwood* (1961), a short novel by Soviet Kazakh author Sayin Muratbekov, set in a Kazakh village during World War II. The story follows Ayan, a 9-year-old orphan with a physical disability, who copes with trauma and isolation by becoming a storyteller for the village children. The analysis focuses on how Kazakh folklore—especially storytelling and initiation rituals—shapes the characters, plot, and central conflict of the novel. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's theories of ritual, I demonstrate how Ayan's storytelling functions as a form of social initiation for the children. Ayan's tales create an informal ritual space in which the children undergo symbolic transformation, reaching back to their nomadic cultural past that Soviet colonialism sought to erase. Although *The Smell of Wormwood* passed Soviet censorship and was widely taught in Kazakh schools as ideologically sound literature for children, I argue that it is, in fact, a decolonial work. Through its use of oral tradition, the novel performs cultural resistance within the boundaries of Soviet literary norms.

Advisors:

Victoria Somoff Associate Professor East European, Eurasian and Russian Studies

Stuart Finkel Associate Professor East European, Eurasian and Russian Studies

Umer Al Dulaimi

The Epistemological Violence of the Nahḍah: Hadīth ‘Īsā bin Hishām and the Specter of Inḥiṭāt

This thesis locates the reemergence of inḥiṭāt (decline) as an internal symptom and enduring residue of modernity, rather than its antithesis—a recursive structure within the epistemological grammar of the Nahḍah that exposes the limits, contradictions, and disavowed failures of reformist discourse. In doing so, I turn to Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s Hadīth ‘Īsā bin Hishām and read how inḥiṭāt is positioned as a phenomena that reflects what I call the paradox of reform, instead of a static historical condition; I read moments where the text captures the contradictions, breakdowns, and unintended consequences of the Nahḍah. Al-Muwayliḥī problematizes the linear narrative of decay and progress that structured much of Nahḍah thought, but rather than simply lamenting the failures of Ottoman institutions, the text suggests that inḥiṭāt and disruption are not antithetical to modernity but are constitutive of it. Ultimately, Hadīth ‘Īsā bin Hishām does not offer a singular resolution but instead exposes the Nahḍah as an ongoing and contested process, one that is marked by laḥzāt wa‘y in which the ideal of renewal is revealed to be unstable, incomplete, and perhaps even doomed.

Advisor:

Tarek El Ariss James Wright Professor Chair, Middle Eastern Studies

İnci Çetin

Between Word and World: Textual Spaces in Sephardic Literature

Geographically, linguistically and even temporally, Sephardic literature resists being situated. As a multilingual and multirooted body of writing, it poses a special challenge to current disciplinary models for reading and organizing literature. Comparative practices of studying world literatures and national literatures tend to take for granted the coupling of geopolitical locations and languages. Constructed through and within language, the textual spaces of Myriam Moscona's *Tela de sevoya* (2012) and Mario Levi's *Istanbul Was a Fairytale* (1999) act as exploration sites for Judeo-Spanish's linguistic status: silently visible or loudly invisible. This dynamic highlights a disciplinary challenge: that reading for Judeo-Spanish, and recognizing its presence, is possible only through an attunement to the changing scales between the word and the world. In this paper I argue that Moscona and Levi create textual spaces uniquely designed to mirror the spatial, temporal and linguistic dimensions of Sephardic imagination. These are textual spaces that neither conform to the nation state's borders even though they write from it, nor to nationalist temporalities as they continue a narrative thread that reaches back to 15th-century Spain.

Advisors:

Eman Morsi Assistant Professor, Comparative Literature Program

Txetxu Aguado Professor, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

Anh Hoang Van Do

Tôi and Moi: The Ambivalence of the Self in Lưu Trọng Lư and Proust

Much scholarship has discussed the prevalence of the first-person pronoun *tôi* ('I') in the New Poetry movement in 1930s Vietnam during the French colonization and the nature of the individual agency that accompanies the word. Yet, despite bearing visible marks of the Cartesian self, the Vietnamese subjectivity portrayed in Lưu Trọng Lư's poetry resists essentialist categorization, engendering what Bhabha calls mimicry. But what does the colonial subject mimic? This essay looks closely at arguably the most canonical French author that precedes the rise of the New Poetry movement in Vietnam, Marcel Proust, whose *Recherche* reveals the elusive ideal of the self even within the French subject. Tracing the oscillation between metaphor and metonymy in both Proust's prose and Lưu's poetry as deconstructed by Paul de Man, the essay drifts from textual literariness to ontological questions on subjectivity. It further examines the intricacies of the colonial subject who dwells in the space of ambivalence along the axis of metonymy of presence.

Advisors:

David LaGuardia Professor, Department of French and Italian

Edward G. Miller Associate Professor, Department of History
Department of Asian Societies, Cultures and Languages

Crista Diane Fiala

“Untraditional Intimacies:” *Re-Pairing* American Narratives of Racialization and Settler Colonialism in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and Gerald Vizenor’s *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003)

Recent scholarship on contemporary American literature has asked how representations of cross-racial relationships can “re-pair” the blotted-out stories and experiences of minoritized individuals in the United States. My project seeks to incorporate and expand upon the current theorization of these representations to develop a macroscopic framework around literary relationships that confront the oppressive systems embedded in the American nation-building process. Drawing upon the work of scholars like Lisa Lowe, I define the concept of “untraditional intimacies” as relationships between people who share similarly lived experiences due to having been directly affected by racialization and settler colonialism in the United States. These intimacies often extend across race, across colonial borders, and/or beyond heteronormativity as “untraditional,” interrupting hegemonic representations of ideal relationships.

I apply this concept to Gerald Vizenor’s *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003) and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) to analyze how the untraditional intimacies in these novels-in-verse confront and interrupt the ongoing processes of racialization and settler colonialism across the contemporary United States. As Vuong’s text is situated in New England and Vizenor’s text is situated in a Japan representative of the American West, this project engages in a “reverse American expansion.” Vuong’s work takes us back to a region where American colonization began centuries earlier, “unsettling” how most scholarship on contemporary American Literature about settler colonialism and racialization prioritizes studying literature focused on the spatial American West.

Advisors:

Matt Hooley Assistant Professor, Native American and Indigenous Studies

Melanie B. Taylor Professor, English & Creative Writing and
Native American and Indigenous Studies

Anne McGrath

Beware the Wandering Woman: Depictions of Female Spatial Transgression in Athenian Public Dramas of the 5th and 4th Centuries BCE

This presentation explores how ancient Greek literature and culture construct autonomous, mobile women as threats to the ideological and spatial order of the *polis*. Referencing mythological precedents and closely reading Classical texts, I propose the category of “excepted women” to address the threads of female transgression woven throughout this extensive literary corpus. Focusing on figures who transgress imposed spatial boundaries, I examine how such women are positioned as disruptors of gendered norms and civic stability, thus reflecting deep cultural anxieties about female agency and movement into spaces coded as masculine. The presentation engages theoretical frameworks from Althusser and Butler to analyze how these women are figured in particular texts; operating with the dual levels of interpellation inherent to a state-sponsored, publicly-staged drama, the 5th century plays *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus) and *Ecclesiazusae* (Aristophanes) are examined closely and seen to clearly depict the female rearticulation of ideological norms through spatial transgression. In this analysis, the excepted woman becomes a figure through which Greek culture negotiates the limits of gendered space and power—she is always seen to have the potential to unsettle or exceed these boundaries. In tracing the movement of the excepted woman, this presentation illuminates the cultural and conceptual mechanisms by which femininity was policed, performed, and persistently imagined as a site of instability in ancient Greece.

Advisors:

Roberta L. Stewart Professor, Classics Department

Margaretha T. Kramer Senior Lecture, Classics Department

Marija Nikolić

Out of the Suitcase and Into the Bag: Rethinking Metaphors of Refugeehood in Yugoslav War Memoirs

The suitcase has become a staple trope in a variety of migration narratives since the early twentieth century. Travel, immigration, and displacement have all been packed into this same metaphor, which risks collapsing these distinct experiences. Moreover, while some refugees do bring suitcases with them, others pack their belongings in a variety of containers, and many are entirely “suitcase-less.” Looking beyond the suitcase, the goal of this presentation is to examine alternative representations of luggage in refugees’ stories. In doing so, I focus on two recent diaspora memoirs recounting experiences of the breakup of Yugoslavia, Sofija Stefanović’s *Miss Ex Yugoslavia* (2018) and Snežana Žabić’s *Broken Records* (2016). The former a story of immigration and the latter of refugeehood, both memoirs concentrate on material objects, as well as the containers in which those objects are transported. Instead of defaulting to the suitcase metaphor, Stefanović and Žabić depict refugees as carrying a different kind of bag, one that is truly representative of the experience of refugeehood. Throughout this presentation, I will explore the differences between the suitcase and the “refugee bag,” examining the history of the two containers, their materiality, and the belongings carried within them.

Advisors:

Lada Kolomiyets Visiting Professor, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine

Yuliya Komska Associate Professor, Department of German Studies

Reuben Walker Century Slade

When Reading for the Plot Goes Wrong: “The Death and the Compass” (“La muerte y la brújula”) by J.L. Borges (1942) and “The Sunglasses Society” (“眼镜会”) By Sun Liaohong 孙了红 (1921)

Detective fiction was once considered the pulpy, mass-consumed genre of a newly literate class with unrefined taste and an unquenchable desire for temporary withdrawal from the chaotically modernizing urban centers of the early 20th century. It has since transcended national boundaries to become a fully potentiated sect of world literature. As it traveled the world, local additions that imitated a recognizable form were imbued with distinct locality— detective fiction became both global and local, undertaking the universal questions of morality, law, order, and modernity in juxtaposition with the domestic circumstances that complicated them. This presentation places two detective stories in comparison, “The Death and the Compass” (“La muerte y la brújula”) by J.L. Borges (1942) and “The Sunglasses Society” (“眼镜会”) By Sun Liaohong 孙了红 (1921), analyzing where they conform to and transgress generic conventions. Drawing similarities between both the short stories themselves and the socio political climates of Argentina and China in which they were written, each story is understood as a commentary on how the teleologically oriented epistemological order of detective fiction unfolds in a local context. This presentation argues that by showing a fundamental failure of the inductive reasoning traditionally championed in detective fiction, these works present the dangers of applying an a priori reasoning detached from reality to the multifaceted cultural anxieties of countries with burgeoning senses of national identity.

Advisors:

Antonio Gomez Associate Professor, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Comparative Literature Program

Miya Xie Associate Professor of Chinese and Comparative East Asian Literature, Department of Asian Societies, Cultures and Languages

Jackie Béla Szepessy

Excess, Melodrama, and Recessive Action in *Madame Bovary* (1857 & 1949)

Scholars often pose melodrama as a category of critical mediation between genre and form, or as an expressive ‘mode of excess’ uniquely capable of addressing the lifeworld of social institutions and crisis under historical capitalism. Theories of recessive action developed by Lauren Berlant and Anne-Lise François propose an alternate genealogy attending to underperformative or inexpressive styles alongside caricatural expressivities of nineteenth-century bourgeois tragedy’s melodramatic mode. To thread out Berlant and François’ experimental archive of a reticent aesthetics, this presentation considers different instances of excess from *Madame Bovary*—Flaubert’s 1857 novel and Vincente Minelli’s 1949 film adaptation—in relation to the historical aesthetics of melodrama and minimal realization. Two potential modes of recessive action, mediocrity and the open secret, become melodramatic exemplars for Minelli’s filmic scan of Flaubert’s novel. And in the novel, figural pattern of litotes and hyperbole in scenes of negotiation, as well as musical allegories of articulation, punctuation, identification and lyric voice, suspend *Bovary*’s relations of surface and convention between melodramatic form and content within latent non-identities of affirmative reticence. Gestures of subtractive revelation can show up otherwise: moments of Flaubert’s style indirect libre, positioned in line with reticent or recessive aesthetics of ‘suspended relational clarity,’ develop readings of melodrama as a diffuse formal mode whereby the text calls for re-tuned apprehension of a scene’s viscera.

Advisors:

Robert St. Clair Associate Professor, Department of French and Italian

Rebecca Biron Director of the Leslie Center for the Humanities
Professor, Spanish and Portuguese, Joint Title in Comparative Literature

Yingyi Wang

Theatricality of the Ephemeral: Media of Surplus and Spectatorship in Southern Liang (南梁, 502-557) Palace-style Poetry and Hou Hsiao-hsien's A City of Sadness (1989)

This project focuses on the mediation of spectatorship experience by “ephemeral media” in Southern Liang (南梁, 502-557) palace-style poetry and Hou Hsiao-hsien's film *A City of Sadness* (1989). Drawing from Alexander Galloway's “the interface effects” in new media studies, this project examines how “ephemeral media,” as non-transparent interfaces, reshape the optic-centric view of spectatorship in visual theories. Using “ephemeral media” as an analytical framework for dust, candlelight, shadows, silence, and writing in the poems and the film, I define spectatorship as a spatial and temporal experience. Transplanting Xiaofei Tian's notion of the “surplus” in her discussion of Southern Liang palace-style poetry against the use of literature in classical Chinese literary thought and Ling Hon Lam's historicization of theatricality as arising from the interfacial position between the spectator and theatre into my context of media and spectatorship, I pinpoint the theatricality of these ephemeral media in their “surplus” position between the spectator and the mediated world and in their ethereal yet lingering existence in time. I argue that their theatricality challenges the optic-centrism in spectatorship and enriches it by bringing in intersensory and intermedial interactions in the theatricality-spectatorship ensemble. As such, this project looks into the interstices between a comprehensive perception and the fleeting transparency of media and points out the frictions that these media of surplus create in the coherent and closed world of shadows, reflections, and representations - the world on stage/screen.

Advisors:

Dennis Washburn Professor, Comparative Literature, Asian Studies, Cultures and Languages, Department of Film Studies

Yiren Zheng Post-Doctoral Fellow, Society of Fellows, Department of Asian Studies, Cultures, and Languages

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Special thank you to the advisors!