### **COL5130H1F**: **COMPARISON AND “THE HUMAN”**

Instructor: Professor Uzoma Esonwanne

Tuesday, 11.00–1.00

Venue: Linda Hutcheon Seminar Room

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**I. Description**: If they do nothing else, recent publications devoted to “comparison” – for example, Anderson, *Specters of Comparison* (1988); Cheah and Culler, *Grounds of Comparison* (2003); Yengoyan, *Modes of Comparison* (2006); Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008); Xie, *Conditions of Comparison* (2011); Felski and Friedman, *Comparison*: *Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013) – suggest that “comparative,” the adjectival bedrock on which Comparative Literature rests, is unstable. Questions about the verb, “to compare,” suggest why this may be so: What is the activity (or are the activities) designated by this verb? Under what conditions does literary scholarship undertake this activity, and to what ends? If “to compare” is to think relationally (Felski and Friedman 2), then in practice comparison is a cognitive activity in which objects that the mind brings into sharp focus nonetheless retain their distinctiveness. What is the status of the comparativist mind in relation to the objects it thinks relationally, and from what vantages could it think them, thus? What might thinking relationally entail when the objects belong to the category of the human? How, in an age saturated by discourses of difference such as “the *English* working class, the *black* Haitian, the *Irish* diaspora,” could we think comparatively without further betraying the “‘*conspiracy for the human race*’” (Buck–Morss 107) to which intellectual dissent has committed itself since the dawn of European modern age? To pose such questions is not, necessarily, to answer them. Rather, it is to engage the instability of comparison as the condition of possibility of the theory and practice of Comparative Literature today.

**II. Texts**

A. Prose narrative (University of Toronto Bookstore)

Isabella Allende, *Island Beneath the Sea*

Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*

Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable*

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*

Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta*  
Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky*

B. Film narrative (Robarts Library)

*Battle of Algiers* (Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo)

C. Readings (Quercus)

Aldridge, A.O. “The Purpose and Perspectives of Comparative Literature.” *Comparative Literature*: *Matter and Method*.

Ed. A.O. Aldridge. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969. Pp. 1–6.

Anderson, Benedict. “The Spectre of Comparisons.” *The Spectre of Comparisons*: *Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the*

*World*. London: Verso, 1988. Pp. 1–2.

Buck–Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. Pp. 10–14,

127–143.

Cheah, Pheng. “Grounds of Comparison.” *Grounds of Comparison*: *Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*. Ed. Pheng

Cheah and Jonathan Culler. New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 1–20.

–––. “Humanity Within the Field of Instrumentality.” *Inhuman Conditions*: *On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*.

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 230–266.

Derrida, Jacques. “‘Who’ or ‘What’ Is Compared? The Concept of Comparative Literature and the Theoretical

Problems of Translation.” Tr. Eric Prenowitz. *Discourse* 30. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2008): 22–53.

Detienne, Marcel. “Foreword: Toward a constructive comparativism: Between historians and anthropologists.”

*Comparing the Incomparable*. Tr. Janet Lloyd. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Étiemble, René. “Comparative Literature Is Humanism.” *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*. Tr. Georges Joyaux and

Herbert Weisinger. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966.

Fromm, Erich. “The Nature of Man.” *Marx’s Concept of Man.* New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1961. Pp. 24–

43.

Glissant, Édouard. “National Literatures.” *Poetics of Relation*. Tr. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan

Press, 1997. Pp. 11–36.

Hutchinson, Ben. “Practices and principles.” *Comparative Literature*: *A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2018. Pp. 15–45.

Levinas, Emmanuel. “Humanism and An–Archy.” *Humanism of the Other*. Tr. Nidra Poller. Urbana: University of

Illinois Press, 2003. Pp. 45–57.

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Press, 1999. Pp. 97–109.

Lloyd, G.E.R. *Polarity and Analogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966. Pp. 169–171, 414–420.

Lyotard, Jean-Froncois. “Can Thought Go on Without a Body?” *The Inhuman*: *Reflections on Time*. Tr. Geoffrey

Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991. Pp. 1–23.

Mbembe, Achille. *Critique of Black Reason*. Tr. Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 1–8, 87–

92.

Melas, Nathalie. “Grounds for Comparison.” *All the Difference in the World*: *Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. Pp. 1–43. Online.

Mignolo. Walter. “On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?” *Comparison*: *Theories, Approaches, Uses*. Ed.

Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. 99–119.

\*Moretti, Franco. “Conjectures on World Literature.” *Distant Reading*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. Pp. 43–

62, 211–35.

Morton, Timothy. “Species.” *Humankind*: *Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. London and New York: Verso, 2017. Pp.

121–136.

Ricoeur, Paul. “‘Person’ and Identifying Reference.” *Oneself as Another*. Tr. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. 27–39.

Rotman, Brian. “Parallel Selves.” *Becoming Beside Ourselves*: *The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Being*. Durham and

London: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. 81–105.

\*Saussy, Haun. “Axes of Comparison.” *Comparison*: *Theories, Approaches, Uses*. Ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford

Friedman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. 64–76.

Slaughter, Joseph R. “Locations of Comparison.” *Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5.2 (April 2018): 209–26

Steiner, George. *What Is Comparative Literature?* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Pp. 8–16.

Toulmin, Stephen. “Languages and Societies as Historical Entities.” *Human Understanding*: *The Collective Use and Evolution*

*of Concepts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. Pp. 340–356.

Wood, James. “Human, All Too Inhuman.” *The New Republic* (July 24, 2000): newrepublic.com/article/61361/

human-inhuman.

Wynter, Sylvia. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its

Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR*: *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003).

Yengoyan, Aram A. “Introduction: On the Issue of Comparison.” *Modes of Comparison*: *Theory and Practice*. Ann

Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Pp. 1–15.

Young, Robert J.C. “The Postcolonial Comparative.” *PMLA* 128.3 (2013): 683–689. Print.

\* Scroll down; Mignolo’s essay follows Saussy’s.

**III. Conduct of the Course**: COL5130H1F is a weekly, two–hour graduate seminar punctuated by a ten–minute intermission. In the first three seminars, we will explore question of “the human” as a “viable and vital category for thinking” (Morton) culture and politics and as an object of comparative study. In the next eight, we extend these initial explorations to selected prose and film narratives (A and B above) that raise urgent questions about the category, status, and significance of “the human” that comparatists are obliged to address. The last seminar will be a workshop on “the human” in Comparative Literature today.

**Seminar** (30%): Presentations (30–40 min. max) begin on Tuesday, October 1. Presenters should provide participants with copies of their abstract (200–250 words max) and ensure that their papers are theoretically–informed and grounded on a *close reading* ofthe narrative or narratives scheduled for the week. Please contact Bao Nguyen in advance if you think that you will need technological assistance Evaluation criteria: (a) Content – proposition advanced, analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary texts, logical organization and development of points, use of examples and illustrations, etc.; and (b) Delivery – eloquence, audibility, composure, ability to engage others in dialogue and to provide prompt and relevant answers to questions, etc. Feedback will be provided by email. Please send me an email listing two narratives, arranged in order of preference, on which you would like to give your seminar, by Tuesday, September 17.

**Participation** (20%): While individual students are responsible for their presentations, the class is collectively responsible for discussions of the narratives and of issues raised in the presentation. Meeting this responsibility means reading the materials assigned in advance, raising and responding to questions about such material, and otherwise generously sharing your thoughts and insights with colleagues.

**Research Essay** (50%; 20–25 pages; due December 31): The aim of this assignment is to encourage students to produce publishable essays. The essay must be a theoretically informed comparative analysis of at least two of the texts explored in this course; students who wish to include a text not studied in the course should obtain permission from the instructor. For this assignment, you have two alternatives: either expand your seminar presentation or, if you prefer, develop your mini–conference paper, into the research essay. Students are expected to formulate their own essay topics, but those who wish to consult the instructor may do so. Premium will be placed on essays that exhibit originality of thought, sophisticated rhetorical skills, clarity of expression (please avoid jargon), and proper (MLA) documentation of sources. Essays should be submitted on the deadline indicated above. Late submissions will be penalized as follows: 25% per day for a maximum of two days (weekends and holidays included), after which an “F” (0%) will be entered for that assignment. All research essays must meet standards of academic writing (rhetoric, grammar, formatting, etc.) expected of graduate research papers at the Centre for Comparative Literature. Please use double–spaced lines and Times New Roman 12 font.

## Calendar

Unit 1: Thinking relationally

September 10: Concept and activity (Anderson, Buck–Morss, Derrida, Lyotard)

September 17: Objects and objectives (Cheah, Fromm, Levinas, Morton, Rotman, Wynter)

September 24: Perspectives, methods, ethics (Detienne, Hutchinson, Levinas [“Proximity”], Lloyd, Mbembe, Melas, Mignolo, Saussy, Slaughter)

Unit 2: Reading comparatively – relational thinking *and* “the human” in prose and pictorial narratives

October 1: Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*

October 8: Allende’s *Island Beneath the Sea*

October 15: Anand’s *Untouchable*

October 22: Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*

October 29: Menchu’s *I, Rigoberta*

**Reading Week: November 4–8**

November 12: Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem*

November 19: Said’s *After the Last Sky*

Unit 4: Reading comparatively – “the conspiracy for the human” in screen narrative

November 26: *Battle of Algiers*

Unit 5: Conclusions

December 3: Workshop: Thinking “the human” in Comparative Literature

**Bibliography**

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Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Apter, Emily. “Said’s Terrestrial Humanism.” *Against World Literature*: *On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London and

New York: Verso, 2013. Pp. 211–227.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd Ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Auerbach, Eric. “Odysseus’ Scar.” *Mimesis*: *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Tr. Willard R. Trask.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. Pp. 3–23.

Cassin, Barbara. Ed. *Dictionary of Untranslatables*: *A Philosophical Lexicon*. Tr. Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert,

Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathaniel Stein, and Michael Syrotinski. Tr. Ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Cohen, Richard A. “Introduction: Humanism and Anti-Humanism—Levinas, Cassirer, and Heidegger.” Emmanuel

Levinas. *Humanism of the Other*. Tr. Nidra Poller. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Pp. vii–xliv.

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Curthoys and Debjani Ganguly. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne Press, 2007.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

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Mbembe, Achille. “Difference and Self–Determination.” *Critique of Black Reason*. Tr. Laurent Dubois. Durham:

Duke University Press, 2017. Pp. 78–102.

Mufti, Aamir. “Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times.” *boundary 2* 31.2 (2004)

Said, Edward W. “The Return to Philology.” *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University

Press, 2003.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Planetarity.” *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. Pp.

71–102.

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Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

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