

Comparative Literature

Annual Magazine
2025





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Cover: Hill Auditorium Ann Arbor

Photo by Scott Soderberg, Michigan Photography, 2024

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Notes From the Chair

This is now the fourth time that I have started drafting this note, more than a full year after I started my three-year term as chair. Months after I started Adam Acevedo Magee stepped into a new, crucial role working with Julie Burnett in student services as we grow our undergraduate program. (Please see “*Comp Lit 141; Great Performances at Michigan*” that is pictured on our cover.) Later in Fall 2024 Sándor Mátyás Fazakas joined as our events and communications coordinator. Matyi was handed a version of the 2024 magazine that you see before you now, and has worked on that along with organizing events you will soon read about – from Absinthe readings to our unique twist on the graduation ceremony. We kept adding and adding more content and finally decided to combine 2024 and 2025, along with a new experiment reaching out to alumni. (Please see the resulting article, “*In Retrospect; How Comparative Literature Opened the World for Two Alumni*”) We are planning to organize more zoom events with alumni in the future and hope those of you in that category will consider taking part!

When I began as chair, I was already looking ahead to how we might build on our strengths, and it is heartening to see that momentum in action when so much has changed in the college, and in the world at large. Each time, I considered afresh the apocryphal Chinese curse, “*May you live in exciting times!*” that my friends who work in Chinese assure me is not a literal translation. I like it as a curse for its wry sense of humor. It has been exciting indeed!

The current moment compels me to think ahead to what we want our department to be in five years. How will we best serve our community – students, staff and faculty alike – so that they find the support they need to do their very best work? While we have seen many institutions face unprecedented challenges recently, I have been heartened by the many people in our community who have stepped up to meet this moment with creativity and determination.

The collaborative projects on translation and multilingual digital humanities that I had been working

on with students and colleagues before becoming chair have helped guide the many exciting developments in my first year: we finalized our proposal for a new undergraduate major in Translation and reinvented our long-standing major to become Comparative Literature, Arts and Media. (See "*The all New Comp Lit Translation major; A Discussion with Professor Yopie Prins*" and "*A New Era of Comparison; University of Michigan's Comparative Literature major Becomes Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media*") These achievements represent years of thoughtful planning and collaboration, building on strengths we have been developing both individually and across units.

Our new Translation major responds to growing student interest and career demand while leveraging our department's unique position at the intersection of languages, cultures, and media. The translation initiative at U-M is known for its ability to combine theory and practice, and this major will provide students with both critical frameworks and hands-on experience. Similarly, our newly-revised Comparative Literature, Arts and Media major reflects the evolving landscape of our field, incorporating digital humanities, visual culture, and media studies alongside our traditional strengths in literary analysis.

Both majors build on our commitment to multilingual practice – work that has become increasingly central to our mission. One of the best examples of this commitment was our ability to host scholar Rita Kothari from Ashoka University in India through the Center for South Asian Studies in Fall 2024. I had proposed teaching a mini-course for both graduate and undergraduate students on her recent book, "*Uneasy Translations*", guiding students to engage directly with her approach as both translator and translation studies scholar. What surprised me most was the range of students it attracted from across the university, many of whom had felt they needed to hide their facility with multiple languages. Our discussions prompted one student to write defiantly, "*I consider my languages a*

superpower!" Another wrote movingly about her Chinese-speaking father's journey learning English and then Arabic, telling me that the celebration of multilingualism made her feel at home in the department.

This multilingual practice extends throughout our work. My colleagues, Will Stroebel and Artemis Leontis, have long worked against divisive narratives in the intersecting traditions of Modern Greek, Turkish and Armenian, finding inventive ways to help students navigate complex cultural and political histories. Similar approaches emerge in South Asian language programs, where faculty address the politicization of scripts and identities while fostering critical awareness among students from multilingual backgrounds.

I knew before taking this role that our undergraduate offerings could only grow through significant collaboration with stakeholders across departments, and I remain excited about the potential I see for growth in the coming years. We understand that this is a particularly challenging time in higher education as we contemplate budget constraints and see the departure and retirement of core faculty. Yet I remain hopeful that by focusing our efforts on building synergies across the college, we can continue to grow more responsive to the needs of all our students – particularly those from multilingual backgrounds who bring such richness to our community.

The launch of these two majors represents not just curricular innovation, but our department's commitment to the hard and important work of comparative literature in the 21st century. In a world that often emphasizes division, our field offers tools for understanding across difference – linguistic, cultural, and artistic. These new programs will prepare students to be thoughtful global citizens and effective communicators in an increasingly interconnected world.



Comp Lit 141 Great Performances

Professor Catherine Brown

Comp Lit 141 fulfills the First Year Writing Requirement in a very fun way.

Students attend five local live performances sponsored by the University Musical Society, the Ann Arbor Symphony, and the School of Music, Theater and Dance and write about them with peer support and the expert guidance of CompLit Graduate Student Instructors and lecturers.

Hill Auditorium is a beautiful venue known nationally for the liveliness of its acoustics. We tour the auditorium and backstage before the first scheduled performance.

Most importantly, they experience the perfection of the acoustics directly. Since the default audio environment for most of them is amplification, being in a space designed for unamplified sound is a discovery for many of them.

It's great to see that discovery on their faces.

Professor Catherine Brown

Photos by Scott Soderberg, Michigan Photography, 2024



Courses Comp Lit

Courses Comp Lit

In Fall 2025 the University of Michigan's Department of Comparative Literature announced its new Undergraduate major in Translation—the first of its kind in the state and one of the first across the country.

To showcase what makes the Translation major distinctive and why it matters now, we revisited a recent conversation between Professor Yopie Prins, Faculty Translation Studies Advisor, and Sándor Mátyás Fazakas, Events and Communication Coordinator.



The All New Comp Lit Translation Major

A Long Road, Rooted in Passion

Matyi: Looking back, can you share a bit about the history and evolution of translation studies within Comparative Literature?

Yopie: Translation has always been in our department's DNA. It stretches back to the 1960s with Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop (who both earned a PhD at U Michigan and became internationally acclaimed poets and translators) and the 1970s when Joseph Brodsky arrived as poet-in-residence. He collaborated with Comparative Literature faculty to influence our program's commitment to translation as both a creative act and scholarly pursuit. Over the decades, translation surfaced at pivotal moments to redefine what Comparative Literature could be.

Another turning point was in 2012, when our department coordinated the LSA Translation Theme Semester and hosted campus-wide events. Professor Christi Merrill and I taught a course entitled "*22 Ways to Think About Translation*." The energy from undergraduates was palpable, and that led to the creation of a new Minor in Translation Studies,

which grew quickly. The success of the minor (and, later, the Graduate Certificate in Critical Translation Studies) showed us that there was demand for something more comprehensive. In 2021-2023, the department received a \$225,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation to organize a Sawyer Seminar Series on "*Sites of Translation in the Multilingual Midwest*", and from there Comp Lit faculty created a public humanities initiative entitled translatingmichigan.org.

Matyi: What were the building blocks from there to the new major?

Yopie: With a Whitaker grant from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) we got support to survey translation programs across the country and lead workshops on developing a proposal for our new Translation major. The journey took nearly two years of review through the department, the LSA Curriculum Committee and Executive Committee, the Provost's office, the Board of Regents, and MASU, the Michigan Association of State Universities. Creating a major was a community effort!

A Major for the 21st Century

Matyi: How is the Translation major different from the Minor in Translation Studies?

Yopie: The minor introduces students to the study of translation in a flexible, exploratory way. In contrast, the major is more robust—it requires advanced work in at least one language, core studies in both the theory and practice of translation, and sustained engagement with real-world projects. Students learn about translation in various professional settings (literary, legal, medical, business, etc) and have the opportunity to work on hands-on projects with professional translators and community partners. It's precisely this applied focus that sets the major apart.

In addition, we've created a new "*Translation in Practice*" course and a capstone translation seminar (COMPLIT 497), where majors and minors come together, share projects, and build lasting community.

Embracing Michigan's Multilingual Reality

Matyi: You talk a lot about translation as both a global and local challenge.

Yopie: Exactly. As a public university, Michigan is committed to teaching languages in order to meet the challenges of living in an increasingly globalized world. And Michigan is remarkably multilingual. We are surrounded by diverse language communities that are shaped by diverse histories and practices of translation. We also have international students who come to our university with a wide range of languages. The Translation major encourages students to build on their language skills, to see that translation is happening all around them, and to learn how to translate across cultural differences. Every community, every industry—law, medicine, education—needs individuals who can bridge those divides.

Charting New Ground - In the Field and Beyond -

Matyi: How has faculty and peer feedback shaped the translation major?

Yopie: The response has been enthusiastic. Our students were clamoring to declare the major before it even launched! We are starting to work with colleagues at Iowa, UMass Amherst, and Rutgers to share best practices and articulate goals for undergraduate programs nationwide. The major is a signal that Comparative Literature is keeping pace with change—offering not only a literary or theoretical pathway, but a deeply applied, outward-facing one.

Preparation for a Changing World

Matyi: What professional doors does this major open?

Yopie: We hope the Translation major will prepare students to pursue more specialized training to work in publishing, international law, health care, NGOs, education, and other professional settings. But more fundamentally, they'll have learned to think critically about technology—especially AI and machine translation tools—and about the critical perspectives and experiences that human translators provide in today's world. Today's graduates will coordinate complex projects across cultures, negotiate meaning between people, and explain the value of nuance. That's a lifelong asset.

Matyi: What should students considering the major, minor, or graduate certificate know?

Yopie: The Translation Studies Minor offers an introduction; the Translation major offers sustained engagement and advanced skill; the Graduate Certificate in Critical Translation Studies enables students to integrate critical and comparative perspectives on translation into their graduate training. All three focus on building community, reflective practice, and hands-on experience.

Translating the Future

Yopie: Being an engaged global citizen means learning to communicate across languages, cultures, and differences. Translation studies helps students do that—respecting not just what can be bridged, but also the gaps that remain. In an age of AI, those who understand context, nuance, and the limits of technology are invaluable.

Matyi: And perhaps, most of all, they're building the communities they want to live in.

“To be engaged global citizens, you have to learn to communicate across differences—cultural, linguistic, political,”
Professor Yopie Prins



We are excited to announce revisions to our undergraduate program, transforming the longstanding major into Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media. The newly-revised major that went into effect in Fall 2025 situates us firmly at the forefront of emerging changes within the field. According to the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), the discipline of Comparative Literature “promotes the study of intercultural relations that cross national boundaries, multicultural relations within a particular society, and the interactions between literature and other forms of human activity, including the arts, the sciences, philosophy, and cultural artifacts of all kinds.” Our department is a home for students

A New Era of Comparison: Comparative Literature Major Becomes Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media

and scholars who study, write, and think about and across languages, media, cultures, discourses, and disciplines. Now literature is recognized as just one aspect of the more capacious Humanities category of “arts and media,” whose flexibility invites unexpected comparisons and critical reflection. The new name is intended to describe more accurately the work students complete and be more recognizable to undergraduates, while also positioning the revised major as an equal partner to the department's recently approved Translation major. We are especially

A New Era of Comparison: Comparative Literature Major Becomes Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media ~ continuation ~

grateful for the hard work of then-Director of Undergraduate Studies Catherine Brown and Student Services Coordinator Julie Burnett, who sought out and integrated feedback, scrutinized rules, drafted and revised proposals that were approved by that year's undergraduate committee, the department, the college's curriculum committee, the provost's office, the board of regents, and then the Michigan Association of State Universities.

We reduced the minimum credit requirement to make the major more welcoming to transfer students and more accessible for the majority of students who pursue multiple fields of study. In the last decade, approximately three-quarters of our Comparative Literature graduates completed at least one additional major. The new total also achieves parity with the new Translation major and aligns closely with the credit requirements of other Humanities majors at U-M. (You can be sure that Catherine and Julie triple checked!)

Most significantly, we replaced the previous requirement for 12 credits of advanced second-language coursework with a new, flexible 12-credit "focus" requirement which allows students to spend time studying an advanced language (as before) or focus instead on a medium (such as film, digital arts, music), disciplinary approach, or a combination of any three. This ensures that students receive more rigorous training in the methods of the discipline within the department itself, providing a strong methodological foundation for their comparative work.

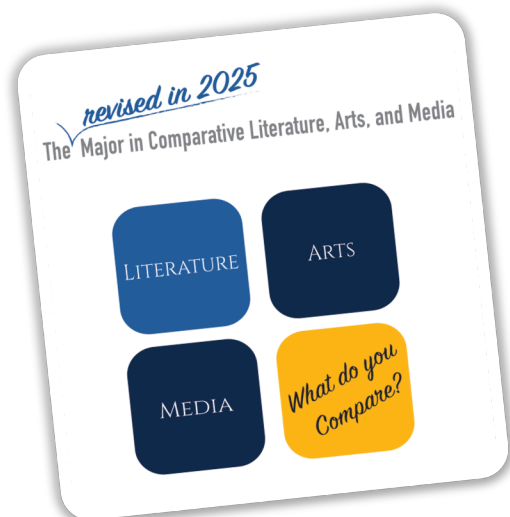
We were especially interested in welcoming students interested in doing work in less-commonly-taught languages (LCTLs.) Programs in which languages such as Ojibwe, Persian, Tamil or Yoruba are taught often cannot

offer enough upper-level courses taught entirely in the target language to satisfy the old requirement. The old major thus tacitly promoted a Eurocentrism that the department has moved away from. The new focus allows students to count relevant courses taught in English, provided they work with an instructor to incorporate as much work in the language as possible. The changes are

designed to meet the needs of transfer and interdisciplinary students as well.

The revised Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media major aims to retain the field's commitment to advanced language and culture study while significantly broadening the scope of what constitutes comparative expertise, welcoming a more diverse range of student interests and backgrounds.

Its success has already been evident in our students: within the first term of its launch, our Comparative Literature, Arts, and Media majors make up a third of our total Comparative Literature program. Before the new major became open to declarations, as it was being advertised, students under the previous major reached out to our advisors with interest in re-declaring, citing increased flexibility and freedom to pursue interests beyond literature, such as film studies and digital media. With the parallel success of the new major in Translation, our undergraduate program continues to thrive at now thirty majors, a 100% increase from the previous Fall.



City of Champions:

Where Sports, History, and Detroit Collide. COMPLIT 313

Professor Silke-Maria Weineck

Sometimes “history” can sound like “nap time” in disguise. But what if you could swap your pillow for a Pistons jersey, and your history book for a Joe Louis knockout reel? Enter COMPLIT 313 / SM 361: City of Champions: Detroit Sports Culture in Context—a course so action-packed, you might need to stretch before class.

Why Take a Course About Detroit and Sports?

Picture this: Detroit isn’t just home to Motown, cars, and the occasional snowstorm epic enough to make international news. It’s also the ultimate “city of champions.” But we’re not just talking about statues outside Comerica Park or epic tales of the Lions’ heroic (and occasionally tragic) pursuits.

In this course, Detroit sports become your supercharged, stadium-sized lens for understanding race relations, urban development, media scandals, and the ties that bind communities. You’ll learn why Joe Louis and Hank Greenberg were more than just all-stars—they were symbols of hope, pride, and resilience. And yes, you’ll finally understand why Detroit has bid so many times for the Olympics—if at first you don’t succeed, try, try, and try again.

What Will You Actually Do in This Class?

Marvel at how the city’s teams—Tigers, Pistons, Red Wings (originally Red Hawks!), and Lions—played within shuffling distance of each other, turning whole neighborhoods into sports temples.

Connect the dots between Detroit’s immigrant stories, the Great Migration, and the factory floors of Ford—where “assembly line” meant both car parts and, sometimes, the latest gossip on last night’s game.

Debate juicy cases like “Malice at the Palace,”

the NBA brawl the media won’t let die, and dig into what that says about American narratives on race and violence.

Watch as economic and literary minds join forces—think “Moneyball” meets “The Great Gatsby”.

What Sets City of Champions Apart?

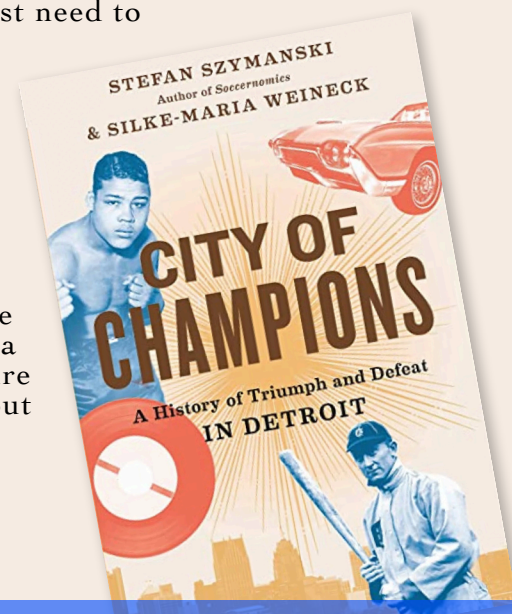
No matter your major—history buff, future GM of the Lions, or someone who loves arguing whether baseball or hockey is better—the course has no pre-reqs. Show up curious, leave a little wiser (and likely with serious opinions on Joe Louis’s left hook).

Plus, the cool part: the class offers a double feature each week. One session is dedicated to a riveting lecture, and the other is discussion-based—where you’ll get to debate, disagree, and team up for final projects ranging from podcasts to city-planning proposals.

Who Should Sign Up?

Any undergraduate student who wants a fresh way to see Detroit, and the power of sports—not just as games, but as part of the fabric of urban and American life. If you’ve ever cheered for a home team, wondered why cities rise and fall, or just need to fulfill a humanities or sports management requirement with style, this is your class.

Come for the sports, stay for the stories, and leave a champion of culture and cool facts about Detroit.



10 Years of

ABSINTHE
WORLD LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

bring it to the Department of Comparative Literature, reimagining the journal as both a showcase and incubator for new approaches to translating world literatures.

Edited by graduate students in Comparative Literature, *Absinthe* underwent significant change—moving to the university's MPublishing platform, offering issues in both print and open-access online. This digital shift offered broader reach while standardizing production, creating a more sustainable and ultimately more influential journal.

How a Graduate Student-Run Translation Journal Became a U-M Tradition

Every year in December, the Department of Comparative Literature hosts a reading to celebrate a new issue of *Absinthe: World Literature in Translation*. As the latest issue is shared with faculty, students, translators, and the wider community, *Absinthe* continues its role as both a showcase and incubator for new approaches to translation.

This year, we are also celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Absinthe* under U-M stewardship—a decade of student imagination, collaborative vision, and transformation.

From Detroit Roots to Michigan Legacy

The origins of *Absinthe* trace back to Detroit, where it focused on Eastern European studies. When the editor contacted Michigan about taking over the publication of the journal, Professor Silke-Maria Weineck saw the magazine's potential and helped

Inside the Editorial Process

What distinguishes *Absinthe* is its structure: the journal is entirely student-run, with graduate students in Comparative Literature serving as editorial leads. Students who have worked as managing editors become eligible to propose a special topic for an issue—a capstone experience, often focused on a theme or language that means a lot to them personally.

Each volume typically takes a year to develop, with most intensive editorial work occurring over the summer. Themes reflect the intellectual passions of each year's team: recent examples have included *Absinthe 29: Translating Jewish Multilingualism* (edited by Marina Mayorski and Maya Barzilai in 2023) and *Absinthe 30: Brazil with an S* (edited by

Julia Irion Martins in 2024), and the upcoming issue *Absinthe 31:*

The Islamicate in Translation (edited by Razieh Araghi and Jaideep Pandey in 2025).

Participation is open: while the editorial board is composed of



Comparative Literature graduate students, contributors—both translators and authors—can hail from anywhere in the world. Editors solicit work, guide contributors through the revision process, and collaborate closely with MPublishing on final production.

This immersive model offers graduate students valuable professional experience. It's a publication on their record, and provides editing experience and contact with other translators. For students applying to pursue graduate studies in Comparative Literature, the opportunity is a major draw to Michigan.

Community, Collaboration, and Impact

Absinthe is more than a magazine; it's an engine for community-building. The journal regularly collaborates with other U-M centers and departments, drawing co-sponsorship for themed issues. For example, the Brazil issue was co-sponsored by the Department of Romance Languages and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, while the volume on Jewish multilingualism benefited from support from the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies.

The next issue on “*Translating the Islamicate*” will be co-sponsored by the Michigan Humanities Council, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Center for Armenian Studies, the Global Islamic Studies Center, and the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures. These collaborations enrich the content and expand the journal's reach.

Open-access availability has also broadened *Absinthe's* audience: what began as a campus tradition now reaches readers, translators, and scholars beyond Ann Arbor. Meanwhile, the annual launch readings remain a high point—gatherings that spark dialogue, celebrate new work, and bring together a vibrant, multilingual community.

CC Barrick, Production
Lena Grimm, Lead Copyeditor
Arianna Alsari, Assistant Copyeditor
Jillia Iron Martins, Guest Editor
Yorlie Prins, Editor-in-Chief, Translation Studies Advisor
Christi Merrill, Publisher, Chair of Comparative Literature UoM



The Next Decade

With the tenth anniversary issue in sight, *Absinthe* stands as both a testament to and a laboratory for the evolving art of translation. The vision and persistence of key figures—Professor Weineck, the early student editors, and subsequent editorial teams—have brought *Absinthe* to this moment.

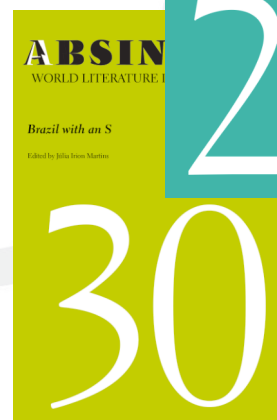
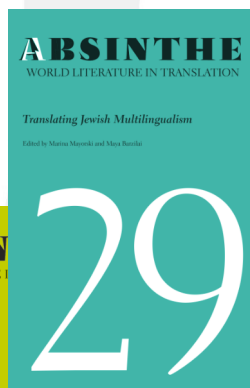
Each year, new editorial teams propose fresh themes and develop new ways to bring world literature to Michigan and beyond. Whether exploring linguistic border zones in Cyprus and Switzerland or delving into protest poetry, *Absinthe* adapts and innovates.

Above all, the journal's greatest accomplishment may be the community it fosters. It's about bringing the project into the community and drawing in people who care about language, literature, and translation. For any student, translator, or reader interested in global literature's future, *Absinthe* offers an open invitation—and an enduring home.

Explore *Absinthe* online at:
myumi.ch/y1xXw



And watch for the next launch event each December!



CLIFF Turns 30:

Three Decades of Connection at U-M's Comparative Literature Forum

From Idea to Call for Papers (and a Dash of Chaos)

Selecting the theme turned out to be the easy part. *"The longer thing was writing the call for papers, which we had a huge amount of fun with,"*

Caroline remembers, describing hours spent ping-ponging sentences and metaphors, then obsessively nitpicking their words. For them, the challenge was to find language open enough to attract proposals from unexpected places—and specific enough to spark conversations across differences.

That invitation travelled far and wide, blasted to a *"giant, horrible email list"* (as Caroline affectionately called it) reaching hundreds of departments, programs,

Based on a Interview by Sándor Mátyás Fazakas with Caroline Sullivan and Benjamin Woodworth (Ben).

When Caroline and Ben started tossing around ideas for The Comparative Literature Intra-Student Faculty Forum (CLIFF) 2024 theme, it took them, in their words, *"maybe less than five minutes"* The resulting title—*Rupture Relation Constellation*—carried echoes of their research interests (science for Caroline, technology for Ben, literature for both) and sent ripples well beyond the humanities.

and friends of the department across the country. Soon, abstracts began to flood in from disciplines spanning philosophy, data science, anthropology, literary studies, and even the occasional computer scientist.

Then the real work started. *"It honestly felt a lot like musical chairs,"* Caroline laughs. Applications were printed, sorted, and reshuffled on a table to form seven panels, each mixing disciplines and universities. *"We were trying to facilitate conversations amongst people who wouldn't be speaking to each other otherwise. Oh, look—a data scientist! Let's put them with the literature folks. Ooh, a philosopher—bring them in, too."*

A Conference Built on Conversation (and Excel)

With around 35 paper proposals and just over 20 slots, choices had to be made. Caroline and Ben independently rated each abstract yes, no, or *"meh"*—then hashed out any disagreements together, ultimately selecting the most promising and cross-pollinating ideas.

But this wasn't just about putting heads in a room; it was about creating dialogues. *"It was really cool seeing the full spectrum,"* Caroline recalls. Some talks stayed close to the practical, analyzing intersections of science and tech. Others pushed the boundaries, exploring literary



metaphors or artistic interpretations. *“The audience could see that these aren’t separate disciplines at all—they’re on a continuum.”*

CLIFF’s freedom, they emphasize, comes from being nearly entirely graduate student-run, with faculty and staff stepping in only for the business admin and budget advice. That autonomy means the experience is electrifying... and kind of terrifying. *“You’re writing a budget for an event that you don’t even know how many people are going to come to, or who’s going to show up from out of town. You chase down funding, coordinate catering, and hope people answer emails. There’s so much you can’t know until you’re in it.”*

The CLIFF Community—Onstage and Off

Ask Caroline and Ben about the best part, and they light up talking about the moments after the panels. *“Taking presenters out for drinks, swapping stories about organizing, building that network,”* Ben says. *“It’s like—these are our alter egos from other universities.”* That camaraderie, born from gathering people around a shared set of questions, makes all the heavy logistics work worth it.

Caroline also highlights the mix of participants and audience. *“We had PhDs, some master’s students from techier fields, and I encouraged my undergrads to come too. As a former STEM student, I want people who don’t really know what the humanities is to walk away thinking, ‘Whoa, this is actually cool!’”*

Looking Back, and Leaping Forward: CLIFF at 30

In February 2025, CLIFF celebrates its 30th anniversary by coming full circle. The upcoming theme? The very idea of comparative literature—how it’s changed, where it’s going, and what the conference itself means after three decades. The plan is to welcome former organizers back to reflect, dig into their own research interests, and chart the future together with new faces.

Leadership for this landmark year passes to Arakel Minassian and Sanjana Ramanathan

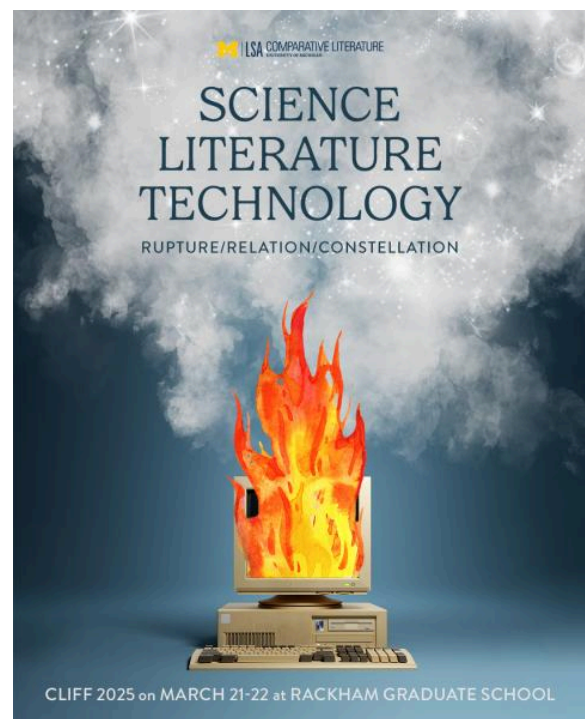
who, along with a soon-to-be-finalized committee, will send out the next call for papers by November, with proposals due in December. As ever, CLIFF remains free and open to all—graduate students, faculty, undergrads, and “anyone who finds themselves reflected in the constellation of ideas.”

Caroline and Ben are the first to admit the exhaustion (they both recall “*collapsing*” when it was all over), but even more, they talk about the exhilaration. In their words, you send the call out, unsure who’ll answer, then realize you’ve summoned a vibrant community. That’s how CLIFF has kept things fresh—and why its thirtieth birthday promises to be more complex, interdisciplinary, and joyful than ever.

Ready to join the next constellation? CLIFF’s call for papers happened this fall; stay tuned for details.

Want to get involved or know more? Contact the organizers at:
cliff.complit@umich.edu.

CLIFF: free, open, unpredictable, and 100% grad-student-run since 1995.



In Retrospect:

How Comparative Literature Opened the World for Two Alumni

In early September, Professor Christi Merrill, Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, sat down for an interview via Zoom with two LSA alumni, Sidonie Schneider (Syd) from the New York area and Pier Franco Donovan from Italy.

Syd still remembers sitting at Jorge Luis Borges's feet. It was the 1969-70 school year, her freshman year at the Residential College, and a professor had brought the legendary Argentine writer to campus—not for a formal lecture, but for coffee in the RC lounge.

"We literally sat at his feet and just soaked in his pearls of wisdom," Syd recalls, more than half a century later. For the past 50 years, I've been able to say to people: *"you see this hand? It shook the hand of Jorge Luis Borges."* The next day, she and other students piled into a car—probably without seatbelts, definitely overcrowded—and drove to Michigan State because they needed more Borges.

That kind of intimacy with great literature and its creators defines what Comparative Literature has meant to its students across generations. For Syd and fellow alumnus Pier Franco, who graduated in 1987, the major

became something unexpected: not just an academic credential, but a way of seeing the world.

An Accidental Major

Neither arrived at Comparative Literature through careful planning. Franco started at Michigan wanting to study computer science in the early 1980s, but found himself facing 300 students competing for access to five or six computers. Discouraged, he flipped through course catalogs until he landed on a page describing Comparative Literature.

"The description said it left you open to almost any career in the world," Franco remembers. *"I have to say, it's probably the best decision I ever made in my life. It gave me the foundations to tackle the life that, unexpectedly, takes you wherever it wants you to go."*

Syd's path was similarly serendipitous. She thought she'd major in astronomy, but every semester the courses filled before she reached the front of the registration line. Psychology didn't work out either—the teaching

assistant was "rude and brusque and had BO," But the Comparative Literature courses at the RC captivated her with their professors and their approach to examining literature across cultures. She eventually double-majored in Spanish and Comparative Literature.

Lives Shaped by Translation

Both alumni found their careers orbiting around language and translation, though neither expected it. After graduation, Franco returned to Italy and met an English poet living in difficult conditions on the Tuscan hills—a former student of Ezra Pound, forgotten at 80 years old. Franco wrote to Italian TV talk shows until one responded, eventually helping the poet find publishers and rebuild his life.

"That's when I started my translation career," Franco says. He went on to work as personal assistant to Mario Luzi, one of Italy's most prominent poets, before a friend suggested he try interpretation at an event. *"I found out I had this natural ability of being very fast and very quick in adapting one world to another to make things more relatable."*

For 25 years, Franco has worked as a professional interpreter in Italy, adapting between languages and cultures in real time. He's worked with figures like pollster Frank Luntz and has interpreted for major international events. *"Comp Lit gave me, really, the foundations on which I built my whole career,"* he reflects. *"It opened me up to the world, to the worldwide perspective."*

Syd spent 53 years teaching—starting as a junior at the RC when they needed someone to lead the Spanish recitation sections. Her Comparative Literature background proved essential when she moved into teaching English as a Second Language. *"One program just supported the other,"* she notes. *"In ESL, you have to have something to read about, so that's where my comparative literature skills came into play."*

Memorable Moments, Lasting Lessons

For both alumni, specific professors and experiences remain vivid decades later. Syd describes studying Russian literature with Professor Vitiello in a class of just four students. *"Every single class meeting, it was my responsibility as one of the four students—I had to carry 25% of the conversation. There was a lot of pressure on each of us to be present."*

She recalls an all-night reading of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* at a professor's home, with food and places to put your feet up, the group discussing as they went from first verse to final verse. There was the professor *"shaped like an owl"* with long black hair streaked with white who made vampires and werewolves come alive in a course on fantastic literature.

Franco remembers Professor Olkin, his mentor in Italian literature courses. *"She had worked, she had been very good friends with one of the greatest Italian writers of the past century, Italo Calvino,"* he says. *"I was able to study Italian literature like I would have never been able to do here in Italy."*

His final paper examined a traditional theatrical representation from a small Tuscan village marking the end of winter—a curious hybrid of fable and legend. Using the University of Michigan library's newly networked system, he found a rare book about the tradition that wasn't even available in Italy. *"When I went back there in person, they took me in as a sort of hero who had found these books that in Italy nobody was able to find."*



Pier Franco Donovan

"I told her, look, I chose by chance, but it's probably the best decision in my life," Franco says. "If I try to explain it to you, though, you won't understand it until 10 or 15 years in the future."

Department Chair Christi Merrill, who herself studied in the RC in the 1980s, recognizes this challenge. *"One of the things I've seen our graduates realize is how much we help them*

Professor Christi Merrill



The Human Element

What makes Comparative Literature distinctive, both alumni emphasize, is how it teaches you to navigate difference while recognizing shared humanity. As Franco's 18-year-old daughter prepares for college, she asks the practical questions today's students ask: *"What major will give me this income? What career path makes financial sense?"*

figure out what's going to make them happy in life," she notes. The new translation major, she explains, emphasizes both the technical skills and the critical thinking that AI cannot replicate—understanding context, nuance, cultural difference.

Franco agrees emphatically. *"No matter how much you depend on AI to translate, you still need the interpretive, critical mind at work—someone who understands the context and all the nuances of the target audience as well as the original text."*

Advice for the Next Generation

Asked what advice they'd give current students, both alumni return to themes of openness and trust.

"Be open. Enjoy yourself," Franco urges. "Don't see it as a course, as credits that you have to earn. You have to have fun. You have to dare. Dare to look past what you immediately see in front of you, because there's a whole world behind that."



Sidonie Schneider (Syd)

He pauses, then adds: *"There are more differences among us than similarities in a certain way, and Comp Lit can help you deal with that in a constructive and good way for the future of the planet."*

Syd frames it slightly differently: *"As many differences as there are, Comp Lit helps you to see the humanity and the commonalities. It makes sense that Comp Lit is part of a degree in humanities, because it's a very human pursuit."*

Her advice, though, is directed at faculty: *"Make it as memorable and as exciting as I remember it half a century later for the students, and they will be engaged. They will want to give it their all and work hard. I saw that [the faculty] were putting so much into it that I wanted to meet them at least halfway."*

The Flow You Find

Franco has a phrase for what Comparative Literature offers: *"Find your flow."* Not going with the flow—that's passive, following where others lead. Finding your flow means discovering what makes you curious, what draws you in, what feels right even when you can't articulate why.

"Too many people are not aware of the world they live in," he reflects. "Comp Lit can help you become aware of the world you live in. Our world is not just America, Italy, Romania—there's Russia, there's all sorts of cultures, Africa, Asia. Comp Lit can help you deal with that."

That small stream you find as an undergraduate—reading Russian literature in a four-person seminar; shaking hands with Borges; discovering rare books about an obscure Italian tradition—might seem insignificant at first. But follow it with curiosity and daring, and it becomes a great river.

Syd retired 75 days ago after 53 years of teaching. Franco continues interpreting across continents. Both credit a major they stumbled into by accident, trusting something they couldn't fully explain at the time. Sometimes, they insist, the best decisions are the ones you only understand in retrospect—when you look back and see how everything connected, how that early curiosity opened doors you never knew existed.

As Franco told his daughter:

"You have to take the leap of faith. But decades later, you realize it wasn't faith at all. It was finding your flow."

Ellen McClure

PhD, 1997



Professor McClure is a member of the French and Francophone Studies Department and the History Department in the University of Illinois Chicago, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. She is an interdisciplinary thinker whose scholarly work and teaching interests lie at the intersection of literature, history, religious studies, and political thought. In addition to her numerous articles and essays, she is the author of *The Logic of Idolatry in Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (D.S. Brewer, 2020), and *Sunspots and the Sun King: Sovereignty and Mediation in Seventeenth-Century France* (U. Illinois Press, 2006). She is also the co-editor of *Teaching French Neoclassical Tragedy* (MLA, 2021)

Professor McClure's administrative experience includes serving as Director of the Mellon-funded Engaged Humanities Initiative, Head of the French and

Francophone Studies Department, Coordinator of the Religious Studies Program, and Associate Director of the School of Literatures, Cultural Studies, and Linguistics. As part of her considerable service to LAS and the broader university, Professor McClure has served on the Faculty Senate and the Executive Committee for the Institute for the Humanities, has been an Honors College Faculty Fellow for over two decades and she is the new director of the UIC Institute for the Humanities!

If you would like to be in a future spotlight, please let us know!



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The Translation major introduces students to the importance of translation and interpreting in various disciplinary and professional settings (literary, social, political, legal, technological, medical, scientific, business, digital, etc.) Students use language skills to explore translation as both a process and a product, and lay the groundwork for careers related to translation.



Comparative Literature is an interdisciplinary field of study of diverse literatures and other arts across media and the borders of language, geography, and time. The major in Comparative Literature Arts and Media allows students to explore and compare their chosen subjects over various cultures, periods, genres, media, and disciplines in a rigorous yet individually flexible course of study.



The minor in Translation Studies encourages students to explore translation from multiple perspectives as a movement between languages, media, disciplines, and cultures. Students have the opportunity to develop their language skills and learn about diverse histories and practices of translation. Students take a flexible sequence of courses selected from various departments and complete a self-designed capstone project.



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