

Comparative Literature  
Fall 2023

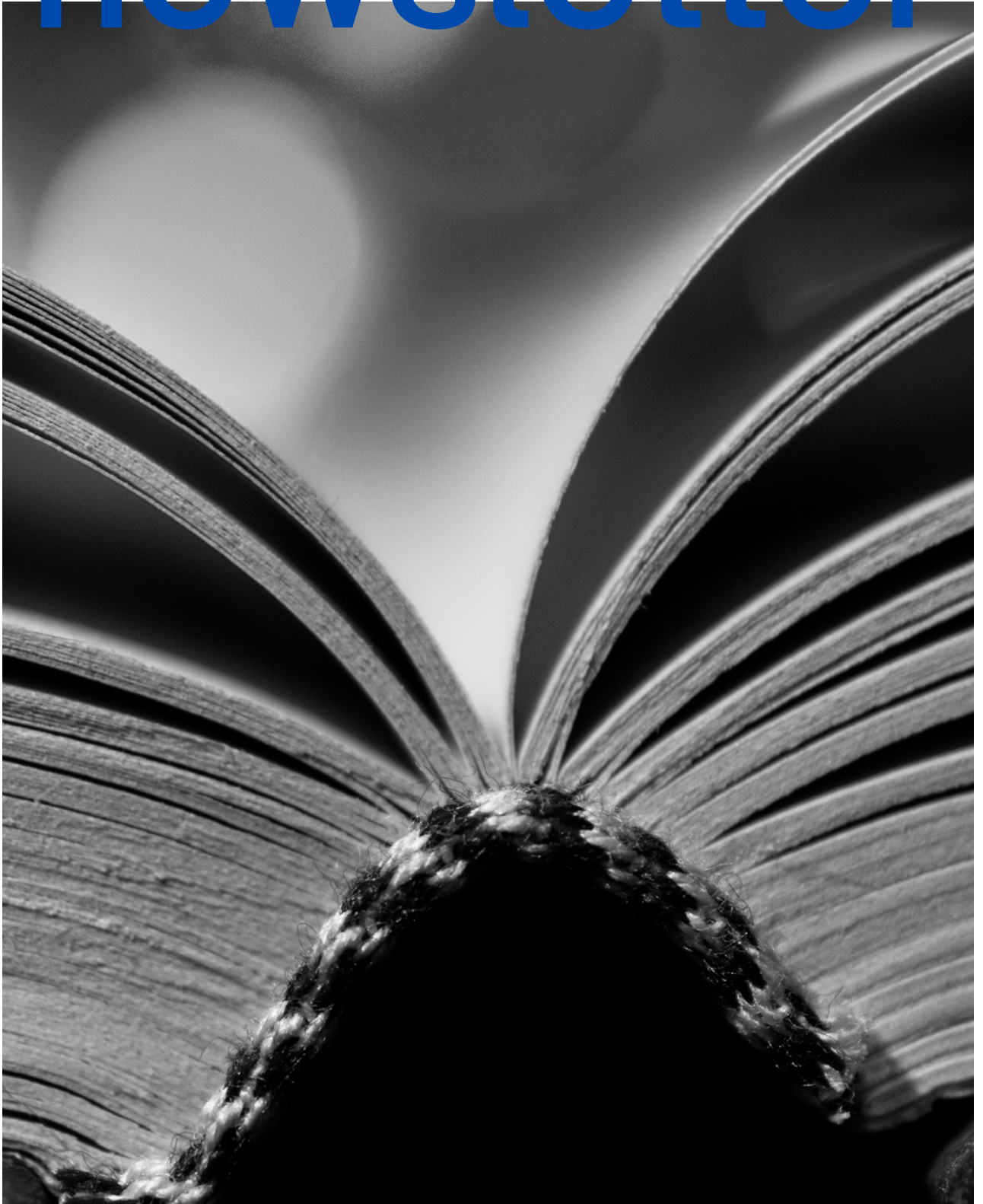


# newsletter

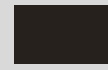
2023-2024

Annual Newsletter

Vol 1



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# Letter from the Chair

## Christopher Hill

Welcome, all, to the first edition of the Department of Comparative Literature's annual newsletter. The 2022-23 academic year was one of transition and change for the department. I succeeded Yopie Prins as Chair in July 2022, after years of dedicated leadership by Yopie and Silke Weineck. The department went through an external review in the fall—a ritual that takes place every 10 years—and received an enthusiastic report from our committee of visitors from Comparative Literature programs at four peer institutions. We launched new courses and began planning new ventures such as a major in Translation Studies. We rededicated ourselves to our mission of studying and teaching languages, literatures, cultures, and global humanities from comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Our department occupies a special niche at the University of Michigan. Languages, regions, and disciplines cross here. As one of the oldest centers for the study of comparative literature in the country—founded as a doctoral program in 1937—we are home to outstanding scholarship and teaching in many of the field's traditional areas: modern reception of the ancient classics, poetry and poetics, philosophy and literary theory, and the history of the book, to name only a few. In contrast to Comparative Literature's traditional focus on Europe, however, in 2023 we have graduate students and faculty working in more than 35 ancient and modern languages from every continent save Antarctica, including classical Chinese, modern Arabic, and Navajo. New areas of strength in courses and research include the circulation of works of literature, film, art, and philosophy on a global scale; translation as a practice and a way of seeing the world; race and racism in a historical and cross-cultural perspective; and post-humanist approaches to problems such as climate change.



In September Renée Ragin Randall, who joined the department as an LSA Collegiate Fellow in 2020, started on the tenure track as an Assistant Professor. Renée is a scholar of world literary circulation and trauma studies, with a focus on the Lebanese civil wars. Niloofar Sarlati, who also started as an LSA Collegiate Fellow, began full-time teaching on the tenure track. Niloofar writes and teaches on literary production in and between Persian, English, Arabic, and French. In April we hired Aaron Coleman, a poet, translator, and scholar of Afrodiasporic poetics for a joint position with the English department. Currently the department's Postdoctoral Fellow in Critical Translation Studies, Aaron will become an Assistant Professor in Fall 2024.

In 2022-23 the department continued its tradition of excellence in teaching with new and notable courses. We launched a new course on literary adaptation as part of our curriculum on world literature and translation, and a multidisciplinary course on Detroit sports culture called *City of Champions*. Our other outstanding courses included a seminar on the global experience of blackness offered jointly with the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies, a course on race and human rights offered with





Yopie Prins, Christopher Hill

Philosophy, and the popular first-year course *Great Performances at Michigan*, in which students watch, listen to, and write about a set of plays and concerts that changes every season.

The year was blessed with awards and recognition for Comparative Literature's students and faculty. Doctoral student Elisabeth Fertig received the graduate school's prestigious Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award. In its nomination of Lis the Undergraduate Committee drew special attention to an innovative course on podcasting. Among the faculty, Silke Weineck received a coveted Michigan Humanities Award and Frieda Ekotto became President of the Modern Language Association, the profession's most prestigious organization. You can see [a full list of kudos](#) during the year by scanning the QR code at the bottom of the page.

In the year ahead I am excited we will begin work on a new major in Translation Studies that will respond to intense undergraduate interest in translation as a skill for our current era. A team of faculty and staff is designing the major in cooperation with foreign language departments and LSA's Language Resource Center. We expect to launch the new major in Fall 2025 alongside our major in Comparative Literature. The department's monthly Comparative Literature

Colloquium will begin in October with a celebration of recent faculty publications. Our literary journal, *Absinthe: World Literature in Translation*, edited by the department's graduate students, will release a new issue on multilingual Jewish literature in December. (The December 2022 issue, on Arab and Arabophone narratives of migration, featured both frequently translated writers and others making their English-language debut.) CLIFF, our annual graduate-student organized conference, returned in person in March after several years online; a team of graduate students is hard at work on this year's conference. It promises to be a lively year, intellectually and socially.

With new junior faculty joining our ranks, innovative new courses, and promising new directions in research, we are uniquely poised to use the tools and perspective of our field to respond to the challenges of the moment. What draws us together as a department is the pursuit of critical and creative connections within and across disciplines and languages; a commitment to encounters with others in and through language; and an openness to the mutual transformation that results. These are values much needed in the world today.

I hope that you will keep in touch this year. Visit our web site often for all of our latest news.





# *Rights and Races*

**Daniel Herwitz**

**Frederick G. L. Huetwell Professor**



The motivation for this course—a course cross-listed between Comparative Literature and Philosophy—has two sources. First, while racial politics are central to American universities, they tend to focus exclusively on the United States and its brutal legacies of slavery. This is of course necessary, and to the good, but also yet another example of US settler exceptionalism, which implicitly believes things in the US are so different from elsewhere that little comparison is necessary. Such an ideology precludes the study of how race arises out of global contexts, with European ideas and practices prompting American and vice versa. The long history through which the concept of race was brought into being is a world-wide one, with European colonialism playing the lion's share, and to understand how race came into being one must focus broadly on the history of Europe, and not simply train one's lens on America.

Second, the pressing challenges of racial politics in America today prove overwhelming, but are best understood without this long and global history of race as part of the equation.

So this course explores the long history through which the concept of race is articulated, which means the history of European racism. And it must do this while at

the same time studying the origin of the modern notion of rights, beginning with John Locke and the idea of natural rights (to life and liberty). These two stories dovetail, since the ideal of rights proposed as indelible, equal and universal is announced just as, thanks to colonialism and the rise of the modern European nation State, the world is divided into colonizer and native, citizen and subject. This story will emphasize various concepts of race as they play out in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.

Slavery and genocide are the two greatest degradations of colonial rule. Slavery is a way of dehumanizing a people while keeping them alive as a mere labor force. Slavery brings a people to the brink of disappearing as persons and is therefore close to genocide. Nationalist driven racism finds its final and ugly conclusion in genocide, first in South West Africa (1904-8) as a response to native resistance. Thereafter in the Armenian and Nazi atrocities. The enormity of these crimes in turn lead to the birth of new moral concepts those of genocide and of crimes against humanity adequate to their horror, and to a new world order of international law and humanitarianism. This at the end of the Second World War (1945). The course then turns to this new world order, in various of its aspects.

First, the expansion of the kind and character of human rights, including group rights and substantive rights such as the rights to health, work, housing, customary practice, linguistic sustainability and the like. Using the democratic transition in the South Africa of the 1990s as our example we explore these adventures in dignity. Here the distinction between race and ethnicity comes to the fore, as the South African Constitution is explicitly non-racial but contains special rights for groups understood linguistically and ethnically.

Second, a fundamentally new form of justice which is confessional and forgiving rather than retributive. We explore restorative justice, relying on the example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## notes from the classroom

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Since both of these events are largely attempts to repair the history of racism, they are studied under that aspect.

Third, the response to genocide. Here we turn to Canada and Australia and their attempts to breed out the Aboriginal from the indigenous person through the forced extraction of indigenous children and their reeducation as European menials.

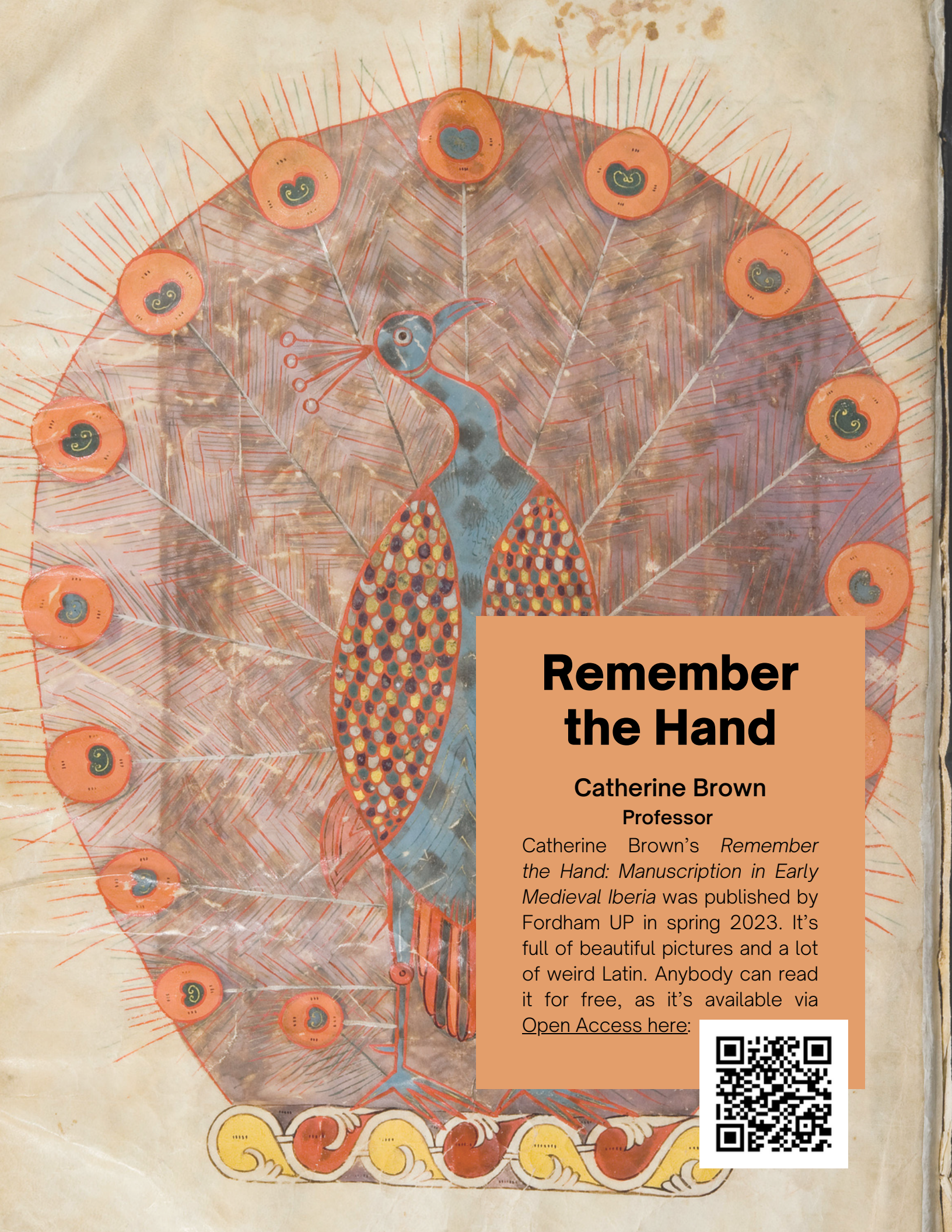
Fourth, the issue of global humanitarian organizations, most centrally the United Nations and the World Court, and the problem of humanitarian intervention. Here the example will be the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

We read selections from the great Afro-American philosopher and cultural critic W.E.B. DuBois, seeking to understand what it is like to inhabit a black skin in America (and elsewhere), through the lens of his idea of the "double consciousness" of African Americans, an idea innovatively adopted from the writings of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

Only at the end of the course, after the long and tumultuous history of racism is grasped, do we turn to the philosopher's question: Is there a viable concept of race today? Or are groups earlier targeted as races better understood ethnically. Or through some creative combination of both these concepts.

In accord with the terrain of this course and its basic questions, we rely a broad swath of writings, from philosophical debates to history, cultural criticism, journalism, and literature. And this is the third motivation for the course. That to grasp how race comes into being one must widen the scope of readings to things that go far beyond any single discipline.





# Remember the Hand

Catherine Brown  
Professor

Catherine Brown's *Remember the Hand: Manuscript in Early Medieval Iberia* was published by Fordham UP in spring 2023. It's full of beautiful pictures and a lot of weird Latin. Anybody can read it for free, as it's available via [Open Access here](#):





## faculty book

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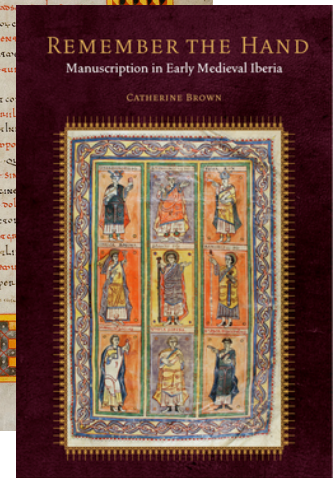
At 6 AM on Friday, April 11 of the year 945 CE, a scribe named Florentius finished the book he had been copying for several years. He dipped his pen into black ink began to write on what would be the book's last page. "If you want to know," he wrote, "I will explain to you in detail how heavy is the burden of writing. It twists the back. It breaks the ribs. It cramps the belly. It makes the kidneys ache and fills the whole body with every kind of annoyance."

I first came across this text twenty years ago. Somebody's scholarly article quoted it in the original Latin, untranslated. I can't remember where I was when I read it. I remember being frustrated that the author hadn't translated it. Once I struggled through it with my creaky Latin, I remember how I felt: called on and called out. Florentius was looking right at me, it seemed: "You, Reader: Turn the pages slowly," he wrote, "and keep your fingers far away from the letters".

I wanted to know more about Florentius and about his work. I wanted to follow his instructions and read his book, but felt unequipped. I knew next to nothing about tenth-century Iberia. My Latin was rusty. Scariest of all: I really only knew how to read printed books.

But I answered Florentius's "Hey you!" anyway. His book was brought to my table at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and when I turned to the page where he'd written those words, I was, well, blown away. It was *beautiful*. The page was framed in an elaborate border of interlace. The text was neatly written in lines of alternating black and red ink. What I'd thought of as a complaint was in fact a carefully planned work of art.

I was hooked. I started digging around and found that there were lots of Latin manuscripts from tenth-century northern Iberia whose makers, like Florentius, named themselves and explicitly wrote their own labor into the books that they made. But in order to go any further, and read their books as they had written them, I needed training.



Their handwriting seemed all spikes and tangles; I had to learn how to read it. Their Latin was hard; I had to get mine up to speed. Many of them were painters and graphic designers as well as scribes; I'd need to learn to think like an art historian as well as a literary scholar. Plus, there was a whole body of scholarship to learn from.

That's why the book took fifteen years to write. It was hard going. I did my best not to get anything terribly wrong. In moments of imposter terror, I comfort myself with the thought that, ultimately, curiosity and open-hearted enthusiasm matter just as much (if not more!) than expertise. *Remember the Hand* is an amateur undertaking in the most intimate sense of the word: a labor of love. I hope the story of its gestation encourages you to be an amateur, too. As Zen master Shunryu Suzuki wrote, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." Valuing love as much as expertise blew open my imagination.

# Translating the Multilingual Midwest

Yopie Prins

Irene Butter Collegiate Professor

“Hamtramck Harmony” was the title of a multilingual poetry reading held in April 2023 in Hamtramck, Michigan. Celebrating the cultural diversity of this two-square-mile city inside Detroit, the event featured music and the work of poets in many languages: Arabic, Bangla, Dutch, English, Hmong, Macedonian, Ndebele, Polish, Shona, and Ukrainian. It was also a celebration of “Sites of Translation in the Multilingual Midwest,” a three-year series funded by the Mellon Foundation and coordinated by the Department of Comparative Literature.

In 2020, a team of Comp Lit faculty was awarded a grant of \$225,000 for a Mellon Sawyer Seminar, to explore diverse histories and cultures of translation in multilingual communities across the Midwest. The team included Maya Barzilai (Professor of Modern Hebrew, Jewish Culture and Comparative Literature), Kristin Dickinson (Associate Professor of German Studies and Faculty Affiliate in Comparative Literature), Christi Merrill (Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures and Comparative Literature), Benjamin Paloff (Professor of Slavic Languages and Comparative Literature), Silke-Maria Weineck (Professor of German and Comparative Literature), and myself, Yopie Prins (Professor of English and Comparative Literature).

With additional funding from LSA, the grant also supported two postdoctoral fellows in critical translation studies (Marlon James Sales for 2019-21, and Aaron Coleman for 2021-24), and research assistantships for PhD students in Comparative Literature (Marina Mayorski and Júlia Irion Martins for Winter 2021, Elisabeth Fertig for Fall 2021, Graham Liddell for Winter 2022, and Berkay Uluç for Fall 2022).

Building on the unique resources of U-M as a public university that is (still!) committed to teaching a wide range of languages, our team worked together with colleagues in departments and schools across campus, as well as graduate and undergraduate students and community members. Our goal has been to promote collaborative research and public outreach, highlighting the global and local networks of translation that surround us.



Poet Dhena Begum, photographed by Silke-Maria Weineck, during multilingual poetry reading at Book Suey in Hamtramck.

The Sawyer Seminar series was launched in the midst of the pandemic, with an event organized by Maya Barzilai in conjunction with a theme year on “Translating Jewish Culture” at the U-M Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. She led virtual workshops with Yiddish scholars to explore “Jewish Multilingualism in the Midwest: Yiddish Translations of Urban Experience.” Audiences zoomed in from near and far (including the Yiddish Book Center) to learn about the midwestern archives of Yiddish writers, and to hear a memorable performance about the life and times of Ezra Korman, Yiddish poet from Detroit.

Participants around the globe also zoomed in for the next event in March 2021, when Marlon James Sales hosted an international symposium on “Translation and Memory: Hispanofilipino Literature and the Archive in the US Midwest.” In addition he collaborated with

Sites of Translation in the Multilingual Midwest

Mellon Sawyer Seminar





U-M librarians to create a virtual exhibit, “The Literary Worlds of the Spanish Philippines.” His research for this project led to an article, “Translation, Repatriation, and the Diasporic Archive: The Migrancy of Documentary Heritage,” forthcoming in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Migration*.

By fall 2021, we were able to host more hybrid events around the U-M campus. Kristin Dickinson organized a symposium, entitled “Visualizing Translation: Homeland and Heimat in Detroit and Dortmund,” around a photojournalism exhibit that she curated at the Ann Arbor Public Library. Depicting immigrant communities in American and German industrial urban zones, the photos were exhibited at other public libraries in Michigan, and several are now featured in a public art installation on Vernor Avenue in southwest Detroit.

I supported activities around the theme of “Translation for the Community,” such as the Translate-a-Thon coordinated in September 2021 by the Language Resource Center at LSA. This annual event brings together volunteers from the university and the community to work together on translation projects for the public good. I also collaborated with Kristin Dickinson to launch [translatingmichigan.org](http://translatingmichigan.org), a public-facing website that houses a growing collection of life stories by multilingual Michigan residents, and serves as a portal for archival and artistic projects that highlight histories of migration across the state.

The next three coordinators for our Sawyer Seminar series focused on various translation networks. In March 2022 Benjamin Paloff led a symposium, “Building Bridges Over Walls: Midwestern Translation Networks for Eastern European Literatures.” The event featured visiting scholars on translating Eastern European writers, a panel on Ann Arbor’s conspicuous role as a hub for publishing such translations, and an exhibit of archival and print materials.

Meanwhile Christi Merrill organized workshops throughout 2022 on “Building Translation Networks in the Midwest with HathiTrust.” She explored the challenges posed by the HathiTrust Digital Library for reading and translating texts in non-roman writing systems (such as Arabic, Armenian, Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Ladino, Panjabi, Persian, Russian, and Urdu). To encourage students to get involved in the challenge, she created an educational game called, “Tower of Babel: HathiTrust Edition.” She writes in further detail about this project in her forthcoming PMLA article, “Collaborations at the University of Michigan: Decolonizing Translation Studies.”

To explore Afrodiasporic translation networks at regional, national, and international scales, Aaron Coleman led a panel discussion in February 2023 entitled “Blackness in Translation.” The panel also shed light on the Afrodiasporic dimensions of Midwestern poets like Langston Hughes and Robert Hayden, while envisioning new modes of Afrodiasporic community through digital and archival innovation.

Silke-Maria Weineck brought the series to a festive conclusion with her vision of a multilingual reading in Hamtramck as our final event, beautifully coordinated and photographed by herself, and generously hosted at Book Suey Bookstore. Our team is grateful to all contributors and collaborators, including many dedicated student research assistants and the fabulous staff in the Department of Comparative Literature, for their help over the past three years!

For more information about our 2021-23 Mellon Sawyer Seminar, including a complete list of events and participants as well as photos, news, and video recordings of public presentations, visit <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/translatemidwest>.



Mural in southwest Detroit, photographed by Theon Delgado Sr., included in photography exhibit curated by Kristin Dickinson on “Visualizing Translation.”



# Absinthe 28

## Graham Liddell PhD, Comparative Literature 2023

It was a privilege to serve as guest editor for an issue of *Absinthe: World Literature in Translation* in my final year of the PhD program in Comparative Literature. I had worked as a managing editor on three previous issues. In that role, I attended planning meetings, helped to keep Absinthe’s website and social media up to date, and assisted with proofreading and copy editing. When it came time for me to propose an issue of my own, I chose to draw from the subject matter that was the focus of my dissertation: contemporary migration, especially from the Arab world. But while my dissertation focused specifically on unauthorized migration to Europe over the past decade, and mainly treated prose and interview material, this issue of *Absinthe*, I decided, would include poetry and have a slightly broader scope, illustrating other kinds of migration experiences, such as diaspora life in the US, internal displacement, and “South-South” migration journeys. It would also feature two slightly older works — one written in the late 1950s and another in the ‘90s.



I started the process of producing the issue by reaching out to connections I had made throughout my time as a graduate student at Michigan. I asked professors Anton Shamma and Khaled Mattawa (who are both renowned translators in their own right) for recommended works to translate and translators to contact. Also, having planned and orchestrated a symposium on translation in the Arab-American context as a part of the Mellon-Sawyer Seminar series “Sites of Translation in the Multilingual Midwest,” I was now in contact with two individuals active in the world of Arabic-English literary translation: Dunya Mikhail and Nancy Roberts. Shamma and Mikhail made fruitful recommendations for pieces to translate for *Absinthe 28*, while Mattawa and Roberts offered their own translations to be featured. After securing commitments for contributions from these well established literary translators, I made a few “cold calls” to others who I hoped would get involved. Almost everyone I contacted seemed excited to be a part of the project. I was particularly thrilled that both Moroccan author Rachid Niny and a translator I greatly respect, Marilyn Booth, agreed to contribute works. Meanwhile, I also recruited translators from among my fellow graduate students who study Arabic at Michigan. An exhilarating process of collaboration ensued.

I had expected that finding contributors and obtaining permission from rights holders would be the most difficult part of the project, but in fact, something a lot more seemingly basic proved to be the biggest challenge: the inclusion of Arabic text in the issue. From the beginning, I knew I wanted to present the poetry in a side-by-side English-Arabic format. Among other things, this would allow us to feature some poems that had been initially written in English, but were later translated to Arabic (see for example the wonderful self-translated work of Palestinian American poet Sara Abou Rashed, who recently finished her MFA at Michigan). The problem is that a lot of publishing software is still not optimized for right-to-left scripts like Arabic. This made for a lengthy

email exchange with the folks at MPublishing, who graciously tolerated my incessant feedback on the many formatting errors that arose (and those that I missed until the last minute). We finally managed to get things more or less right, although flipping through the pages now, there are still a few minor issues I wish we could resolve! As the cliché goes, a writing project is never finished; it is simply due.

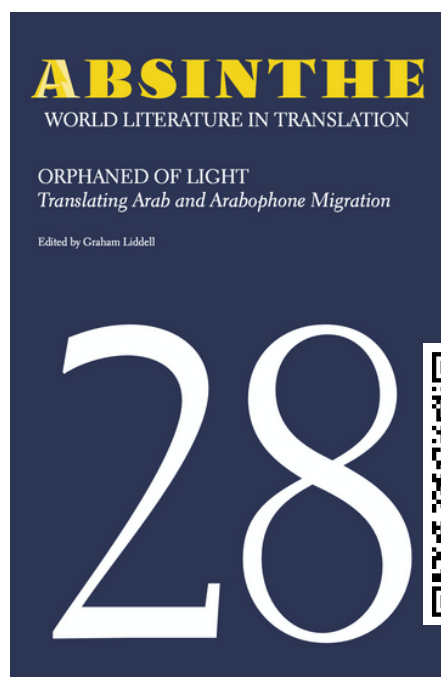
As for the biggest successes of the project, one was having the opportunity to collaborate with Abou Rashed, who, in addition to contributing her own work and helping me to check the accuracy of the issue's translations, also gave a powerful performance of her bilingual poetry at the launch of the issue at the 2022 Comp Lit Winter reception. Another success was working with an outstanding team of fellow Comp Lit PhD students who served as managing editors: Amanda Kubic, Júlia Irion Martins, and Marina Mayorski. They were a pleasure to work with, and were especially helpful in keeping me on track regarding the production schedule. They also provided valuable feedback on my introduction. Additionally, I was excited that a few months after the publication of *Absinthe* 28, I was interviewed about it for a wonderful journal of Arabic literature in English translation, ArabLit Quarterly. And finally, the biggest bonus of all: it was through my search for Arabic-English translators among UM's grad students that I was first introduced to my wife-to-be, Julia Schwartz, who contributed her own excellent (of course, I am biased!) short-story translation to the issue.

## Absinthe diaries

As my time as a Comp Lit PhD student comes to a close, I can say with confidence that literary translation work, including my work with *Absinthe*, was the most satisfying of all my work at Michigan, especially from the perspective of creative output. I appreciated the opportunity to take on some public-facing work, while at the same time getting a glimpse of the world of publishing. I would recommend getting involved with *Absinthe* to anyone interested in literary translation.



Read the interview here



Order your copy here:



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# Why Compare?

Assistant Professors William Stroebel and Niloofar Sarlati talk about what Comparative Literature means to them.

**NS:** I got into Comparative Literature before knowing that the field existed. In retrospect, I can see how I was moving toward the field, but at the time I had no idea. I did my undergrad in statistics back home in Tehran at a public university, during the time that the student movement was very strong, and the political atmosphere was really charged. I got attracted and attached to things within the university but outside the classroom, the margins of the classroom, if you will. I got involved in activism and journalism first and then in reading and thinking more about political science, sociology, philosophy, and literature. All these fields in my head at that time were connected because they spoke to what I was going through with the social and political challenges that were raised. By the end of my undergrad, I was pretty sure that I wanted to do something in the humanities. I started attending some underground classes led by activists and translators mostly on critical theory. I used such classes to build my training in the humanities and eventually applied for an MA in Cultural Studies at Leeds, UK, a discipline I realized brought together many of the topics that I was interested in. I then applied for my PhD in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at Minnesota.

**WS:** My path was similar. I started doing comparative literature before I knew what to call it. After my first degree I worked in Thessaloniki, Greece, just a short drive from Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Working and studying in the shadow of these different languages and cultures that were pushed out of the city in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's collapse and the rise of modern borders, my journey to Comparative Literature started by thinking hard about the partitions that created the edges between Europe and the so-called Middle East, and how this border-think has seeped into educational structures and area studies. And 13 years later, when I'm finally pushing my book over the finish line, I'm still exploring those same questions of border-making and border-think and how we can get communities talking to each other again across partition. So, you know, for me an important aspect of Comparative Literature is the public-humanities idea of outreach and dialog.



**NS:** Right, I was thinking as you were talking that for me comparative literature started in those community-based learning spaces. But unlike you, unfortunately I feel I've given up on that dream of making comparative literature speak to public humanities, not because these problems are not public but because of the academic structure and the kinds of books that we publish. That's one of the things that I keep thinking about as soon as I think about comparative literature as an academic field versus comparative literature in the way that you and I both have experienced it before having a name for it.

**WS:** But we can still think of the book as just a part of a larger, what's the word, media campaign, one part of a larger story you want to tell and this part is telling it to an academic audience, but you can also go on a book tour, you can do a podcast, you can organize translation workshops with public audiences. The book is one part of an outreach program, and each component is addressing different audiences. The book is kind of like a multimedial stepping stone towards different ways of telling the story to different people. Does that make sense?

**NS:** I agree. And I don't feel that I'm stuck with this project that is turning into a book, not at all. I'm enjoying that part too. I just feel that at some point I had to decide between the kind of public learning, teaching, and engagement that I experienced, which drove me to comparative literature, and a more structured academic path that will lead to the book. And I agree with you, there are moments of joy in both of those paths.

**WS:** Oh yeah, for sure. The academic puzzling, right, the joy of playing this game is part of why we have these esoteric conversations with our colleagues.



## faculty conversation

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**NS:** Exactly, the game. Precisely. Then there are moments in the game that you seek to engage different audiences. But those are momentarily engagements, I think. Like even if you incorporate them into your academic year, they still make up a small portion of that, which is different from what I thought of comparative literature when I started it.

**WS:** Let's talk about the discipline. In the 1990s, Comparatists were talking about how we need to move away from Eurocentrism, to open up languages, but another important trend I think, is provincializing the national language—so, not just moving towards other national traditions beyond the West, but also unpacking the concept of a national tradition itself as a multiplicity of languages.

**NS:** Absolutely. I'm also thinking about another question that is now raised on Eurocentrism: it's great that the languages are getting less Eurocentric—but what about the thought and theories that are not necessarily European? And I think that's such a challenge because, for so many years, the discipline has been thinking through European theories.

**WS:** What are some of the potential pathways forward that you see? Historicizing theory in its time and place?

**NS:** Historicizing it, for sure. But I don't think if you historicize theory it means that you won't be able to use concepts outside of their historical context. Historicizing European theory while you historicize other modes of thinking might make a more balanced conversation possible. To use theoretical concepts and tools not only from one direction to the other.

**WS:** For me, the history of the book has been useful because it's a method, not a theory. It's a toolbox to physically engage with the objects of our study. It had its own kind of Eurocentric beginnings, but over the early 2000s people were pushing beyond Western book history and developing a set of tools more attuned to a broader plurality of textual communities. And so book history for me was, I think, a much more robust way to address this problem of theory precisely because it allowed me to see things on the ground level, at a kind of granular scale. Because when you think about it etymologically, what does "theory" mean? It means "seeing," and if theory is not there to help us see the thing that's right in front of us, why are we using it?

**NS:** Right, exactly. That's actually a very helpful way to think about it because, in fact, if "critical theory," let's say, continental philosophy, gives you the theory, it's also

giving you a very particular way of seeing that becomes very hard to undo, to unsee, and to see in a different way, to theorize in a different way. That I think is what's at stake, not necessarily banning or abolishing critical theory. What needs to be done is just making possible different ways of seeing and theorizing.

**WS:** What are your plans for next year?

**NS:** I'm excited about teaching two new courses in the fall.

**WS:** Oh, tell me about them!

**NS:** One is on debt. It's a mini-course and I'm very excited about it. I've been thinking about debt, its relationship to gift, gift-giving, and commodity exchange. So it's a good opportunity for me to focus on it and teach it. And hopefully it's such a relatable topic because of the financial system that we're living in right now. The other course is on representations and uses of the figure of the child in literature and cinema during turbulent times like revolutions, migration and war.

**WS:** I know your book project is also about economy and debt. I'd love to talk more about it.

**NS:** Yeah, everything in my book has to do with the margins of economy like gift giving. I'm looking at gift giving and its very blurred border with bribery and how economic modernization is dividing the two, bribing from gift giving, in colonialism and colonial contexts. I think my book is about economy, but not as we often think about it.

**WS:** The management of the household.

**NS:** Exactly, which becomes the management of the countries and the empires, right, and colonial projects, because managing what counts as bribery and what doesn't, at the end comes to be such a central issue in East India Company, for example. So it's very central but it seems that it's on the outskirts of what is economic. It all has to do with legal discourse, right? That, be it colonial or otherwise, you need a legal discourse to name something as bribery or not.

[Read the rest of the conversation here:](#)



# ELLEN MCCLURE



Professor McClure is a member of the French and Francophone Studies Department and the History Department in the UIC 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!

# ETIENNE CHARRIERE



Etienne Charrière received his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Michigan. He was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED) in Istanbul. Working with Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) texts, he specialized in the study of prose fiction in the late Ottoman Empire and in the early Republican era. He is currently working as a Senior Editor in the publishing arm of France's public development bank.

**Your career path took you from Ann Arbor, to Istanbul, to Paris. How was that experience?**

And Switzerland and Greece before that! Looking back, I don't think that I very consciously chose to live in any of those places, it's really been a series of happy accidents, with only fond memories associated with each of them. I suppose meandering paths really are the only paths worth taking.

**What's your job title now, give us a few details about your projects and what do you find more interesting in your work?**

I work as a Senior Editor in the publishing arm of France's public development bank. However, because the context is that of a government entity, which is both a large financial institution and the implementing agency for the State's official development assistance, my position involves roles and projects that would probably not be part of the work of an editor in a "traditional" publishing outlet. I do oversee, as a managing editor, a number of series published by the institution alone or with partners (such as the World Bank for instance) but a very large part of my work is centered around research communication, which itself includes a lot of different things, from participating in the dissemination of the institution's research output and publications at conferences and other academic events to building and running training modules focused on how to turn research findings into public policy - it also includes currently hosting a podcast



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on sustainable development research and soon co-producing a second one with the public radio broadcaster. Finally, because of the institution's overall mission, there is an increasingly strong project management aspect to my position, specifically with the overseeing of a capacity- building project around the social sciences in the Global South. As you can imagine, it's precisely the diversity of all these tasks that I enjoy, no two weeks are the same!

## **How did your experience as editor in Absinthe help you with your editorial part of your work?**

I was incredibly fortunate to be part of the team (Emily Goedde, Yopie Prins, Silk Weineck) that worked on Absinthe when CompLit acquired it from its founder: at the time, it was a relatively well-established journal in the small field of translated foreign literature in the US but also a fairly DIY, one-person operation and there was something really fascinating about turning it into a university-based journal. Overall, I don't think that there is a better way to learn about publishing than working as a journal managing editor! No matter the scale of the operation or the size of your initial readership, the work is inherently more intricate than book publishing and prepares you incredibly well for a career in "professional" publishing later.

## **Tell us more about your translating projects - if I remember correctly you talked about poetry?**

As much as I enjoy it tremendously, translation has always been a bit of a "parergon" for me, and it is likely to stay that way. Being bored and geographically bound to one place during the pandemic allowed me to finish one of many projects; other projects will keep maturing under wraps for now. I'd tell people to stay tuned but, when it comes to literary translation, I'm irredeemably slow and very unashamedly lazy so I'm really making no commitment at this point... And I'm primarily interested in translating long-dead, obscure authors anyways so there is really no sense of urgency whatsoever!

## **Any advice you have for the 2024 graduating class of Comp Lit?**

It's probably not something you'd want to put on a promotional brochure or share with the people in charge of voting your department budget but when (and that feels like a life ago now) I -very consciously- chose Comp Lit, I did so because I felt that it was the only field that would let me commit to the forms of partially-structured, professional dilettantism I craved -and I wasn't wrong. Note that I use the term "dilettantism" in an entirely positive way, as one always should. Counterintuitively, I think that it is ultimately both a great gift and a great skill to know how to be and do multiple contradictory things at the same time, to feel authorized to change your mind, your interests and your path a million times and to only commit to never truly deciding in any definitive way what what you want to be and do.

# CLASS OF 2023

## **MAJORS IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

Sundus Al Ameen  
Tyler Berndt  
Peter Matarweh  
Julia Raguckas  
Julian Wray

## **PHDS IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE SUMMER 2023**

Duygu Ergun  
Graham Liddell  
Genta Nishku

## **MINORS IN TRANSLATION STUDIES**

Kara Kozma  
Peter Matarweh  
Emmanuel Orozco Castellanos  
Momoka (Emma) Saito  
Shuchen Wen

## **GRADUATE CERTIFICATES IN CRITICAL TRANSLATION STUDIES**

Jamie Clegg  
Tariq Elsaid  
Mason Jabbari  
Graham Liddell  
Berkay Uluç

## **First-year Writing Prize**

Maya Bonevich, "Give Me Your Answer,  
Do: To Speak as a Robot"

Sara Wong, "Little Shop of Horrors and the  
Consequence of Choice"

Alex Zhang, "Calculator Kid to Kung-Fu Guy: An  
Address to Asian Tokenism in Media"

## **2023 Senior Prize in Literary Translation**

Fiona Caughey, selections from the prefaces and notes  
for the *Dictionary of the Fine Arts* by Eugène Delacroix

William McClelland, *Bacchae* lines 912–976 by Euripides



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Comp Lit  
community  
for your  
continued support!**

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