

Moving around the Furniture: Restructuring the Humanities in Challenging Times

Linda Hutcheon

IN EARLY JULY 2010, a mere few days after I had taken early retirement from the University of Toronto, the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science decided that it was time, as he told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, to “move around the furniture a bit.”¹ As a courtesy, he phoned to tell me how he was going to do this: along with other units, the Centre for Comparative Literature (of which I was the first graduate in 1975 and in which I had taught for the last twenty years) was going to be “disestablished” (his word). I found that I took the news personally. But so did everyone else involved—faculty, staff, and students alike.

The centre had been founded in 1969 by the well-known literary theorist Northrop Frye, and it had a long history of pedagogical and scholarly success in precisely the cross-cultural areas of theory that our troubled world requires today: those that promote an acute awareness of the cultural implications of globalization and an ability to think, theoretically and comparatively, across those cultural and linguistic barriers being created by nationalisms the world over. Given this current world situation, there seemed little logic in this closure or in that of the other interdisciplinary and non-Eurocentric groupings also slated for “disestablishment”: the Department of East Asian Studies, the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, the Centre for International

Linda Hutcheon is University Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto and the author of nine books on cultural theory and contemporary literature.

¹ Quoted in Karen Birchard, “U of Toronto Plans to Shut a Distinguished Center as It Downsizes Humanities,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 13, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/U-of-Toronto-Plans-to-Shut-a/66278/> (accessed July 19, 2010).



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Relations, and the Centre for Ethics. As has just happened at Temple University's College of Liberal Arts, our faculty too would be moved back to their "home departments," we were told. The reasons given for the closures at my university were economic, and although there was (and still is) a genuine financial crisis, this furniture moving was interpreted, both locally and more widely, as a move back to departmental and disciplinary hegemony. In other words, it was seen as a retrograde step for an institution that had prided itself (and rightly so) on its vibrant interdisciplinarity and transnational intellectual environment of cultural exchange and that was housed in the urban space that the United Nations once described as the most multiculturally diverse city in the world.

With the dean's announcement, our faculty and, especially, our students went into high gear, alerting the (cyber)world of the crisis and organizing constructive resistance. As a result, colleagues from around the world came to our aid, either by signing the online petition (over 6,500 signatures were obtained) or by writing eloquent defenses of the discipline of comparative literature in general and the centre in particular. Our plight made the front page of Canada's national newspaper.² Happily, I can now say that the dean has rescinded his decision (and interestingly *that* decision only made page 6 of the same paper³). The centre has been saved—with reduced graduate student numbers but with the planned addition of a new undergraduate program. Our students, staff, and faculty have emerged from the ordeal with an increased sense of both intellectual mission and scholarly community. Just as significantly, humanists across campus came together in the crisis for wide-ranging discussions on the "future of languages" at the university. Good sometimes does come out of bad. But here I want to look beyond our particular case and examine views about the humanities in general that led to the original decision. I want to look too at the broader implications of such thinking internationally in order to propose yet another way to move around the furniture in the humanities. Comparative literature has always been the canary in the humanities' coal mine, and this time is no exception. First, however, a bit more local context.

Had the Centre for Comparative Literature been disestablished, it would have had no budget or faculty; no students would have been admitted; no courses would have been offered or degrees granted. As a much reduced version of a "collaborative program," we would have been folded into a new School of Languages and Literatures along with the language- and literature-teaching faculty members from the interdisciplinary Department of East Asian Studies. We were to join with our colleagues from four (formerly freestanding) departments: Slavic Studies, German, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. The larger departments of English, French, and Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations would expressly *not* have been part of the school. The resistance to this new agglomeration of some, but only some, of the literature departments, led to a new acronym as a form of witty verbal protest. The proposed school became known as SSSLUT:

² Elizabeth Church, "U of T plans to Shut Down Centre for Comparative Literature," *Globe and Mail*, July 13, 2010, A1. The closure was also reported by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, both on radio and in the online report, July 13, 2010. An article by Carson Jerema appeared in *Macleans* magazine on July 28, 2010: "Academic Vandalism," <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2010.07/28/academic-vandalism/> (accessed July 30, 2010). Many bloggers also discussed the issues: e.g., <http://theacademicblogspot.blogspot.com/2010/07/university-of-toronto-dissolves.html> (accessed August 23, 2010).

³ *Globe and Mail*, October 29, 2010, A4. See also *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 29, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Reprieve-Is-Possible-for/125210/> (accessed October 29, 2010). CBC Radio also reported the rescue on October 29, 2010.

School of *Some* Languages and Literatures at the University of Toronto. The kind of instrumental thinking that went into the school's conceptualization was that these departments of *foreign* languages (French is not foreign in Canada, of course) should be institutionally housed together because they engaged in the same kind of teaching—that of language. But what such thinking manifestly ignored is the obvious fact that these merged groupings were, in fact, departments of literature and culture, as well as language. Happily, this more extensive moving of furniture did not come about either, as external and internal pressures caused the dean to withdraw from this decision as well.

The utilitarian and economically driven thinking that is discernible in those proposed closures and mergers is not unique to my university; there are now fewer than half a dozen other comparative literature programs left in Canada.⁴ (Indeed, the University of British Columbia has just terminated its comparative literature program.) Though presaged earlier, in 2003, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, this recent danger to our discipline's existence could not come at a worse time in our national—as well as our collective, global—culture: to deal with today's complex cultural and political realities, we need to be able to think outside our disciplinary limits, to think across those borders that separate us from speaking to and learning from others in diverse fields, with helpfully differing perspectives. Despite its name, comparative literature as a field of study does not examine and compare only literatures, just as so-called language departments do not teach only language. Obviously, neither language nor literature exists in a vacuum: it is the entire culture—in all its forms and discourses—that is being taught and learned. Self-reflexive cross-cultural knowledge and, even more importantly, cross-cultural *understanding* of both commonalities and differences are precisely what we need today. And in recent years, comparative literature in North America has added to its Eurocentric historical base a new and important emphasis on both North/South and East/West cultural exchange. It has developed new interdisciplinary ways to study the complicated interactions between different art forms and different cultural and social discourses.

I know this not only from my own experience in the profession but from the over ninety passionate testimonials and defenses that members of the international and national community sent to my dean, president, and provost during our summer of discontent. But the question is: can we move beyond this very effective protest mode, however successful it was in retaining the status quo—and however treasured our status quo was, and is? Can we use this consciousness-raising, money-driven crisis to rethink not only what comparative literature, in particular, but also what the humanities, in general, might look like in the twenty-first century?

In other words, what if, instead of administrators “moving around the furniture *a bit*” in the house of the humanities, we (as the intellectual stakeholders) considered the possibility of moving it around *a lot*? The economic crisis, with its concomitant demands for social and economic relevance, is not likely to go away in the near (or distant) future, so our local crisis will recur—and it will more than likely have echoes in other institutions as well, no matter how poorly or how well endowed they might be. I find it both heartening and chilling that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has recently answered a bipartisan call from the US Senate and House of Representatives to create a Commission on the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

⁴ MA and PhD programs exist at the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta, the University of Western Ontario, Université de Montréal, University of Sherbrooke (in comparative Canadian literature); the MA degree is available at Brock University; BA specializations are much more frequent across the country.

In that call, the elected representatives admitted to being afraid that “our nation’s humanistic research enterprise is shrinking as a result of growing financial challenges and a diminished interest in our national history and shared values.”⁵ Again, the economic and the intellectual are being invoked together. These problems we face today will not disappear, so addressing them through concerted and creative responses is crucial.

The institutional status quo—that is, our current arrangement of the furniture—is not written in stone, to switch metaphors. Nor has it ever been. The medieval trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and even the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), to which it was meant to lead (and, from there, to philosophy and theology), gave way over time. In the nineteenth century, the German idealist version of the university, as articulated most clearly by Wilhelm von Humboldt, gave the new Faculty of Philosophy primacy over the established faculties of theology, law, and medicine. This move contributed greatly both to the redefinition and reformation of existing disciplines and also to the addition of new ones to the academy—thereby paving the way for our current status quo.

By the “status quo” I mean a situation in which university and college departments function as institutionalized disciplinary structures. This is where our students learn how to *think* using disciplinary modes and critical models of thought—for instance, how to interpret and contextualize literature within linguistic, literary, historical, social, and cultural frames of reference. Departments too have had to change with the times: so-called “national” language departments know that they no longer teach a unified culture, if ever they did, because of the realities of immigration and diaspora. I have come to believe very strongly in disciplinary training, and not only because I was formed (or deformed, as the French would say) in this way. I think it offers the kind of rigorous engagement in intellectual modes of thought that we owe our students. That said (because I am well aware of the fine line between rigor and rigor mortis), once we have trained them well in a discipline, we need to encourage them to think *across* and *through* departmental borders, not to be imprisoned by them: knowledge today—and maybe always—is a messy affair that rarely fits inside our current (and, as history shows, transient) humanly constructed disciplinary boundaries. Even before the arrival of the “digital humanities,” major shifts in knowledge formation have often come about precisely because people did *not* think within the conventions of their disciplines.

This is why it was no accident that a whole series of small interdisciplinary “centers” and “institutes” had proliferated in my university (and others as well), housing some of the most intellectually engaged and therefore most adventurous (and serious) configurations of faculty and students, all focused on a particular constellation of pressing issues—things like diasporic and transnational questions or international relations or ethics. Our Centre for Comparative Literature was such a grouping—functioning, in effect, as a kind of intercultural, interdisciplinary laboratory that could (and did) incubate new currents of thought for dealing with our current global and electronic world. In our case, the dean decided that these smaller units were not cost-effective and so should be closed. Yet these were the very places where active, collaborative learning could happen, and *that*, he claimed, was one of the aims of his furniture-moving exercise. In his restructuring report, he admitted that “the most challenging problems for our

⁵ “Shared ideals” are defined in the same letter as “liberty, equal opportunity, free markets, and the rule of law.” See http://www.humanitiescommission.org/_images/senatePage2.jpg (accessed February 23, 2011).

complex, interconnected world do not always fall neatly into academic disciplines.”⁶ And that is precisely the point.

So here’s my first (and totally immodest) proposal: that, in a grand neo-Humboldtian gesture, we dissolve *all* the current departmental structures and rethink where knowledge is really happening today.

Given the manifest unlikelihood of this ever happening, however, I have a second, more modest proposal, which in an un-Swiftian mode, I do want to take seriously, not ironically, however outlandish it may sound: instead of closing down these proliferating centers (for they proliferate for a reason, a good intellectual reason), let’s make them the rule, not the exception. Let’s encourage faculty and students to form—for flexible but *limited* periods of time—centers where they can work, both collaboratively and individually, on topics of shared and pressing interest, in a climate of provocative and yet supportive scholarly camaraderie. Transient, working on the margins, perhaps, for that’s where things often happen intellectually, these would be intentionally ad hoc structures with fluctuating membership.

Departments would still exist, and their major (and highly valued) mandate would be undergraduate and graduate core disciplinary training. But the difference would be that departments would not be the *only* institutional home of faculty or students. Designated as temporary, flexible groupings of like-minded scholars, at all levels, from across all the disciplines, the new centers would be self-selected research communities that would be expected from the start not to be permanent fixtures: in other words, these would be Yeatsian centers that, by definition, would “not hold.” Graduate and even undergraduate students could choose to work in collaborative programs both in their home discipline and in the center in which they have intellectual connections. Moving the furniture around in this way would not threaten our graduate students’ employment possibilities within more traditional departmental structures (for they would still have their disciplinary core training), but it *would* offer a means of promoting interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue and interaction. Such transient but institutionalized meeting places would increase the chances of fruitful cross-fertilization without fixing or reifying the subject being studied or forcing those studying it into a permanent, intellectually limiting role. When stakeholders, individually or collectively, feel the need to move on to other groupings, that center would dissolve, shift focus, or lead to the formation of others.⁷

Yes, it’s utopian, but we desperately need some new and flexible reconfiguration for humanities scholarship—one that makes sense for us as teachers and students responding to a world where things change much more rapidly than do our institutional structures. Let me cite one defense: it “is not a panacea; it is not a cure; it does not solve social problems. What it does is to base education on the sense of a participating community which is constantly in process and constantly engaged in criticizing its own assumptions and clarifying the vision of what it might and could be.”⁸ Those are the words of Northrop Frye, my late colleague who founded the University of Toronto’s Centre for Comparative Literature. He was defending *not* my outlandish model, of course, but literary study itself. The year was 1968—another year of crisis and turmoil. But I

⁶ Faculty of Arts and Science Report, 14 (no longer online).

⁷ The example of the specific problem-solving science laboratory might be a model to adapt here.

⁸ Northrop Frye, “The Social Importance of Literature,” in *Northrop Frye’s Writings on Education*, ed. Jean O’Grady and Goldwin French, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 334.

think Frye articulated well an ideal toward which we could work institutionally today: dynamic, unfixd communities of learning, committed to careful reflection, creative development, and ongoing self-critique. I can't help hoping that such a model might be able to answer the societal demands for relevance better than can the current business model of offering so-called client services to our students.⁹ A

⁹ Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein, *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 340–41.