“GS”

“GS” is the shorthand used among faculty and administrators when writing about graduate students. Much more stands behind these two letters. It is well known, although hardly talked about, that graduate students constitute the heart and soul of any graduate program. Without them there is simply no program to speak of. The Comparative Literature program at UCSB is fortunate to be able to attract a healthy number of gifted students. As their Faculty Advisor for the last two and half years, I had the privilege of getting to know all of them, to talk about their work and to guide them in finding the faculty and courses that match their highly diversified interests and curiosity. I also had the pleasure and satisfaction to see each one of them progress from a certain perplexity in finding their way in a new program to smiles of accomplishment after completing their first seminar papers, to their growing, if a bit nervous, mastery of the subjects of their field exams, to the joy of passing them, on to the presentation of their thesis topics, the writing of their dissertations and the pride in defending it and being called for job interviews.

And I am constantly amazed at the diversity of their interests. They take courses in Spanish and Portuguese, French, Italian, German, English, Greek and Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Women’s Studies, Black Studies, Religious Studies, Philosophy, Chicano@ Studies, Film Studies, Music, History, History of Art and Architecture, Theater and Dance, as well as, of course, in Comparative Literature.

A quick look at this year’s new students reveals that they joined our program to work on the diseased body and medical practices in 18th-century British literature, the Chinese vernacular novel, and Asian American immigrant literature (Christina Cheng); “The Southern Question,” national identity and social movements in Italy (Erik Eppel); the translation and reception of classical texts in modern languages (Katie Kelp-Stebbins); the political and historical contexts and gender roles in Spanish, English and Italian early modern literature (Elizabeth Lagresa); the way in which narrative art structures and complicates global subjectivities through colonial radio, Nigerian and Ghanaian video film, Onitsha Market literature, Francophone and Anglophone African novels (David Platzer); the construction of the city and intersections of gender, navigation, and displacement in twentieth-century French and Spanish poetry and short stories (Meaghan Skahan); Chicano@, African American, Latin American, Spanish and Brazilian literatures (Marzia Milazzo); the Jewish literatures of Argentina and Chile, modern German literature and Holocaust Studies (Emily Parsons).

In their dissertations, advanced students explore topics such as the use of personal narrative to establish private realm in Italy during the Second World War (Amber Godey); nationalism in Virgil’s Aeneid and Joyce’s Ulysses (Randy Pogorzelski); the reception and modern transformation of the 16th century Chinese vernacular novel The Journey to the West (Yan Liang); the influence of mesmerism on 19th and early 20th century aesthetics (Kieran Murphy); haunting and telepresence in the works of August Strindberg, Samuel Beckett, and T.S. Eliot (Chris Lee); feminist engagement in the short stories of Edith Wharton, Jovita González, and Amparo Dávila (Danielle La France-Borgia); the construction of a poetics of place in 20th century Spanish, French, and North American exile literature (Karen Bishop); the feminist aesthetics of experimental French, German and Anglo-American women authors (Linda Kick); the way network technology permits the emergence of a new selfhood (Lisa Swanstrom); the issue of minority rights in the dialogue between 20th century literature and jurisprudence (Mary Seliger).

The lists are long and I haven’t mentioned the work of the graduate students who are neither starting nor finishing, which is just as interesting. But I wanted to give a good idea of what lies behind that “GS” (men and women whose research is as diverse as it is vibrant), and pay homage to them. The Comparative Literature Program at UCSB provides them a structure that is flexible enough to allow them indeed to pursue their curiosities in a large number of departments on campus. But it is they who do the work, who build the bridges between disciplines and who create the atmosphere of interdisciplinary exchange we all seek.

Sydney Lévy, 2008
Graduate Advisor and Co-Chair
Reflections (from the Other side) by Nathan Henne

I set out to write this piece with an eye toward letting those of you right behind me know what I would most have liked to know at the beginning of the market cycle last year.

No doubt my greatest apprehension involved the popular belief in some circles that a Comp Lit doctorate would be a liability on the job market. People had me convinced that my success on the job market coming out of a Comp Lit program was tenuous at best because, among other reasons, most Comp Lit programs around the country do not usually do their own hiring. So…I feared the worst: that the home departments who end up having the last say on new hires were looking for people who had met the specific canonical requirements of an English or Spanish or (fill in the blank) PhD program. As you may know, my training does not remotely resemble any traditional department as my program was designed to elude those boundaries by wresting approaches to ancient and modern Maya poetics out of the structuralist hands of the anthropologists and linguists and into the theoretical interstices of Comp Lit. If Comp Litters are outsiders in the market, I was an outsider to the Comp Litters.

Nonetheless, the first round of the job market went well; I got four MLA interviews. However, those interviews were for jobs in either English or Modern Language Departments. And…I still feared the worst: that upon closer, in-person, inspection they would realize that I could not converse effortlessly in some theoretical jargon from some lynchpin canonical piece that I had somehow missed in my grad school movement from one to another department to support my non-traditional project and dissertation. In fact, in those MLA interviews I did swing and miss on a couple of questions and I got the feeling that these were somewhat spectacular misses that even a run-of-the-mill scholar with standard training in those departments would have handled effortlessly. But I swung and connected on a couple of other questions in unique ways that I believe were enabled by my Comp Lit training and its interstitial approach to theory. Apparently those connections were more important that the misses…because I got flybacks on all four of those interviews and then got a fifth flyback from a non-MLA interview. Surely, at this stage my ignorance would be exposed; the MLA’s little one hour (or even half-hour sometimes) interviews had been nothing compared to the sixteen-hour interviews that awaited me on my campus visits.

But…I no longer feared the worst; the flybacks were fun because, by that time, I had learned to recognize that my interstitial training was a breath of fresh air to these people, most of whom wanted to hear something besides their own voices coming back to them from the well. It turns out that in all of my hours of swimming against the seminar grain and knocking heads with, for example, the Englisheese I had learned enough of their canonical theoretical approaches so that the seasoned professors in, for example, English departments knew that I could handle myself in their contexts. And better, I could approach their literary challenges from somewhere besides the dead center. Of course, this was what had attracted me to Comp Lit in the first place: a place where we do not read “their” literature through “our” theories; we reread “our” theories through the intersections of alternative literatures and see what we can make out of the inverted gaze. You know how to maneuver from the outside, and that ability, though perhaps less measurable, on the job market will serve to separate you from the masses…and separation is what you need to move you to the next stage. What you lack is really something that you have. And it must have worked. I got four tenure-track job offers…and so can you.

Understanding that dynamic of the job market world will allow you to bring pure energy to the interview room, an energy those rooms and interviewers have not felt for hours. And, in the end, I believe that energy might have been the single most important factor in my job market success. (Yes, my dear former grad student colleagues, professors and administrators, that same energy that mostly annoyed you, as I was pacing the byways of Phelps Hall, raising my voice as I taught in that room next door, and getting entirely too excited about another eureka moment…).

Thus far this academic year, Comp Litters received interviews for jobs and/or post-docs in several departments (e.g. Classics, Comp Lit, Composition, English, New Media, Romance Languages and Literatures, and Spanish) at numerous colleges and universities including the following:

- Bowdoin College
- Brandeis University
- Butler University
- CSU Fullerton
- CUNY
- Dartmouth College
- John Jay College of Criminal Justice
- Laselle College
- McGill University
- National SUN Yat-sen University in Taiwan
- New Jersey Institute of Technology
- Ohio State University
- Philadelphia University
- Purdue University
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- SUNY Potsdam
- Texas A&M, Corpus Christi
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- University of Mary Washington
- University of Oregon
- University of Maine at Presque Isle
- Washington University, St. Louis
- Wellesley College
- Vassar College
- Wofford College
- Wesleyan College

Photo taken at the UCSB Commencement, 2007

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- Wesleyan College

Photo taken at the UCSB Commencement, 2007
Teaching Experiences at UCSB

Nanette Pawelek:

Teaching a language has been both frightening and exhilarating. When you’re not a native speaker, sometimes you get a bit self-conscious that you don’t know everything or that your language skills aren’t perfect. I’ve heard a few of our first year graduate students express this anxiety when discussing the topic of teaching a language. Although it’s a bit intimidating, trust me when I say it’s okay to not know everything, but it’s not okay to be down on yourself about it, especially in front of your students. You may not be perfect at every grammar construction or know the correct word for every situation, but chances are your vocabulary and skills are solid enough to find alternative routes for the situation. If you get the opportunity to teach a language, do it; above all, have fun with it and be confident! I’ve had a great time teaching German. When I teach, I feel alive and extremely productive. Many times I bring in songs or short newspaper clippings that illustrate a grammatical or cultural concept and I know my students get a bit of a kick out of me singing along with the songs too. It’s definitely a worthwhile experience to teach a language. Not only does it sharpen your own skills on the basic fundamentals, but the opportunity to witness your students’ progress is absolutely gratifying. When you’re enjoying yourself, so are your students! You can do it!

Randy Pogorzelski:

One of the challenges of being a graduate student in Comparative Literature at UCSB is finding financial support. This is not true in all graduate programs in Comparative Literature, and I used to consider it a disadvantage of the program at UCSB. It turns out I was wrong. It’s true that it is a challenge to find employment on campus and I spent some sleepless nights wondering where I would be teaching in the next quarter. I always, however, found a satisfying job, and the experience taught me how to find a job outside of the university.

I recently accepted a position as a lecturer at Scripps College—a fantastic opportunity I never would have had if I had not learned a few things about finding a job at UCSB. I got my job in large part because of a connection I made at a conference with a Scripps professor, Ellen Finkelpearl. I learned at UCSB that introducing myself and saying that I am looking for a job in person is ten times more effective than submitting a written application. But making a connection is not only about who you know. I was able to connect with Professor Finkelpearl not only because she knows my dissertation director, but also because she was impressed by my conference presentation. I am moving on to a good job after my UCSB experience because UCSB taught me how to produce good scholarship, and also because UCSB taught me how to market my scholarship effectively.

Letter From Abroad, by Danielle LaFrance

I have been studying in Mexico City since July 2007. The University of California has a wonderful program here called Casa de las Californias that offers courses for undergrad and grad students from all of the UC campuses. I attended review courses this summer in Spanish language and Mexican history that were terrific because of the experienced and committed professors and small class sizes. Now I am taking graduate seminars at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. Mexico City has a vibrant literary scene, with conferences, talks, and readings every week. I also had the opportunity to see a great exhibit of Frida Kahlo’s work and another that showcased the drawings of Jose Ruelas for the magazine Revista Moderna. I recently published an article titled “Fantasies of Feminism in the Short Stories of Women Authors in the U.S., the Borderlands, and Mexico” in an anthology of Mexican and Chicano literature and literary criticism titled One hundred years of loyalty in honor of Luis Leal, published jointly by UCSB, UNAM, and Tec, edited by Sara Poot-Herrera, Francisco A. Lomeli, and Maria Herrera-Sobek. I also gave a different version of this essay in Spanish at the conference we had here in Mexico at the Biblioteca Nacional in the Ciudad Universitaria, November 15-17.

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Photo: Danielle and her advisor, Sara Poot Herrera, celebrating Mexican Independence Day in the home of writer Hernan Lara Zavala.
Contact the Department

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