Annual Report: Committee on the Literatures of the People of Color in the United States and Canada

Submitted by: Jesse Alemán (University of New Mexico), exiting co-chair

Committee Charge:
The Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada develops projects designed to encourage dialogue across ethnic and racial boundaries and to promote intercultural perspectives on and comparative analyses of the literatures and languages of ethnic groups historically underrepresented in the United States and Canada. [revised Feb. 2010]

Current Members:
Deepika Bahri, 2017-2020; 2019-2020 (co-chair)
Veronica Calvillo, 2019-2022
Denise Cruz, 2018-2021
Eve Dubar, 2019-2022
Sandra Marie Grayson, 2018-2021
Margaret A. Noodin, 2019-2022
Ricardo L. Ortiz, 2017-2020; 2018-2020 (co-chair)

Exiting members:
Jesse Alemán, co-chair
Beth Piatote
Paul Devlin

Committee Meetings

In fall 2018, the CLPC met twice via Zoom teleconference. It held one face-to-face meeting at the 2019 MLA convention in Chicago and held to date two more teleconference meetings in 2019.

2019 MLA Convention

The CLPC ran three sessions at the 2019 conference, each with over 25 attendees:
1. (Ab)Original Forms: Great Lakes Indigenous Writing

2. Critical Pedagogies Now: Literature, Race, and Political Consciousness

3. Monumental Racism: Public Memory and Civic Spaces

The (Ab)Original Forms session was held jointly with the LLC Indigenous Literatures of the United States and Canada. Its focus on Great Lakes writing gestured specifically toward the CLPC’s purview to include the languages and literatures of the United States and Canada, though the latter often gets occluded in programming.

The Critical Pedagogies session has become a signature session for the CLPC. Its first iteration focused on Black Literature Matters (NYC 2018) and the second one, Critical Pedagogies Now, emphasized the importance of radical pedagogy and the power of literature during the current political climate, nationally and on campuses. Critical Pedagogy sessions draw large audiences and has become an active link on the CLPC’s Commons page: https://clpc.mla.hcommons.org/category/critical-pedagogies/

Monumental Racism rounded out the sessions by taking up campus climate as a way of exploring the issue of historical monuments, the legacy of racism they might embody in public spaces, and the way the literature classroom and the writings by people of color offer spaces of resistance and critique.

2019 Conference Business Meeting

Over the last year, the CLPC’s major order of business has been to prepare for its fiftieth-anniversary programming at the 2020 MLA. To that end, the Committee discussed, planned, and proposed a Plenary Session for the Seattle, WA, MLA meeting around the central theme: What Was the Future of Minority Literatures?

Rather than a commemoratively retrospective, the Committee opted to use the occasion to gauge the current state of minority literatures in the field in relation to its past challenges and developments, with the intention to envision alternative directions for minority literary studies in the MLA. Co-chairs Alemán and Ortiz wrote the Plenary proposal and arranged for its participant programming.

The CLPC worked on three interrelated proposals for Plenary Programming: A Plenary event focusing on “keywords” and two linked sessions.
The Plenary and Linked Sessions

The CLPC’s Plenary pivots on two general questions that invite a broad range of discussion: What was the future of minority languages and literatures and what is the future of the field? The Plenary features junior, mid-career and senior scholars in a roundtable format on “Keywords” related to race, ethnic studies, and the conference presidential theme, “Being Human.” The Plenary is forward-looking in its prompt to have emerging scholars discuss future directions of minority studies around key concepts that are taking the field in different analytical, critical, and geographical directions.

The first linked session, “Academic Empire,” features scholars who have served on the committee. Structured like a roundtable as well, the session invites retrospective commentary to understand the current state of the profession. Drawing from the experiences of established scholars, we ask: what changed and what hasn’t changed in the field, and how can the production, teaching, and study of literatures of people of color make an impact on the cultures and practices of higher education in the United States and Canada?

The second linked session, “Critical Pedagogies: Precarity, Contingency, and Professional Practice,” is an open call panel that focuses on the challenges and rewards that scholars of literatures of color face in and out of the classroom when enacting forms of critical pedagogy that openly invite intervention, institutional change, and the stakes of labor, promotion, assessment, and security. The session continues a “Critical Pedagogy” thread that has become a central category on the CLPC Commons page (https://clpc.mla.hcommons.org/category/critical-pedagogies/).

The Plenary was approved and is scheduled for the 2020 conference. Afterwards, the Committee will decide on formats and venues for disseminating the proceedings to commemorate in print the CLPC’s anniversary. The Committee envisions interrelated outcomes from the Plenary event: blog posts that commemorate the CLPC’s history through retrospective entries solicited from former members of the, as well as scholars whose own work the CLPC’s publications have influenced; and a special issue of
ADE that incorporates the brief keyword position pieces with a longer critical assessment of the field by current CLPC members.

**Looking Ahead:**

The Committee looks forward to building on the momentum of our programming for the 2020 MLA Convention in Seattle to pursue a number of projects, including: transferring the work of some of the sessions into published form, both as blogposts on the Committee website and as a more collection using the platform of an MLA publication (*Profession, ADE Bulletin*, etc.); reflecting further on the mission of the Committee in the changing contexts of the politics of race and ethnicity, as well as the institutional conditions for race and ethnic studies-driven work in literary and cultural studies, in North America; assessing the effectiveness of the processes that currently govern how the Committee does its work, from member selection and representation, to the division of labor among members as well as between the Committee and the MLA, to the function of Committee meetings, both remote and in-person. The Committee also looks forward to planning the sessions for the 2021 MLA Annual Convention in Toronto.