theories and methodologies

Introduction: Reading Now, after Helen Tartar

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THIS CLUSTER OF ESSAYS IS A SELECTION OF PIECES DRAWN FROM A COLLOQUIUM HELD AT FORDHAM UNIVERSITY ON 9 MAY 2014 IN honor of Helen Tartar, the editorial director of Fordham University Press, who was killed in a car accident on 3 March 2014.[1] A legendary humanities editor responsible for having secured the reputation of Stanford University Press as a beacon for critical theory and then having brought to Fordham a stellar array of titles in critical theory, philosophy, literature, anthropology, and religious studies, Helen changed the landscape of academic publishing. To many, her death was a shock of historic proportions, the abrupt cutting off of a still-unfolding epoch of critical theory, an era of interdisciplinary renewal across the humanities and beyond, and the coming-of-age of multimedia comparative literary studies. It is still too soon to measure the full impact of Helen's editorial genius. The aim of the May colloquium, titled "Reading Now, after Helen Tartar" and organized by Fordham's comparative literature program in conjunction with Fordham University Press, was to begin the work of assessing Helen's far-reaching influence, including the significance of her editorial vision for the way we read now.

"Reading Now, after Helen Tartar" sought to work through and beyond the shock of her sudden loss, a shock that has been felt far and wide by countless scholars, authors, editors, and readers. The organizers of the American Comparative Literature Association's annual meeting at New York University arranged a memorial event on 22 March; and Fordham University Press held a memorial at Fordham University on 8 April. Each event featured tributes from a wide range of authors, friends, and colleagues.[2] To Judith Butler, speaking both personally and for the many other authors (famous and less well known) whose work depended on Helen's editorial engagement and steadfast advocacy of scholarship and theory, Helen's loss epitomizes the precarious situation of all current work in the humanities. The May colloquium was designed, in part, to take up the challenge Butler later articulates—to do justice to Helen's legacy

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and to the care Helen brought to all aspects of scholarly, critical, and creative reading. When we consider what it means to be reading now—reading in the fullest sense—there is an imperative to think through carefully, listen carefully, and assess carefully the legacy of a life's work that was cut off, so suddenly, by someone's careless driving.

Reading with care was always at the heart of Helen's editorial vision and practice. This care is documented in the pieces collected here, whether they focus on the early stages of reading a manuscript, on the editorial attention paid to making a scholarly argument clear, or on the later stages of producing the physical book. The care for language and translation characteristic of so many of Helen's books is connected with the kind of "European theory" she incubated in Palo Alto and brought with her to the Bronx.[3] Helen's commitment to translating European theorists was a hallmark of her success at Stanford. Translations of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Emanuel Levinas, Friedrich Kittler, Bernard Stiegler, and Niklas Luhman, as well as series like Meridian Crossing Aesthetics (edited by Werner Hamacher), made the Stanford imprint of the 1990s one of the most recognized points of reference within the changing contours of "theory." European theory is most easily associated with French deconstruction; certainly that kind of close attention to reading touched many, though not all, of the strands of theory Helen wove together for Stanford and was still interlacing in the list of books she brought to Fordham.

Helen's contribution to the work of translating French deconstruction shows the extent to which her editorial genius encapsulated an epoch of theory. Two recent books by leading figures in the field of comparative literature—J. Hillis Miller's collection of essays *For Derrida* and Henry Sussman's *Idylls of the Wanderer*—foreground the practice of close, attentive, deconstructive readings associated with Derrida's work. Each offers a retrospective survey of, and theoretical reflection on, Derrida's shaping influence over the practice of reading in the last thirty years. Each reveals, too, the usually hidden figure of the editor, providing a glimpse of Helen's editorial hand at work cultivating decades of comparative literature. Dedicating *Idylls of the Wanderer* to Helen and affirming "her ongoing advocacy of critical theory, rigor, and invention," Henry Sussman writes that her "editorial practice contains a philosophy of books." Miller writes of his "unrepayable debt" to Helen in the acknowledgments to *For Derrida*; and in one of that book's essays, a reading of Derrida's *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* in which Miller develops an argument that "the hand is already . . . a prosthetic extension of the body," he writes, "As Helen Tartar reminds me, the Confucian *Analects* say, 'When making an axehead, the model is not far away'" (248). The editor's craft surfaces suddenly in this moment as a part of the work of reading, of thinking, of theorizing that usually remains hidden in the final product of the book.

It is impossible to name all the books and authors shaped by Helen's editorial hand, not just because the list is too long. Jacques Lezra, referring to the catalog of ships and men with which *The Iliad* begins, shows that the very notion of "Helen's list" presents a reading challenge. As Lezra explores the way another Helen, of Greek myth, figures the list of battle names, he conflates the two Helens while questioning the conflation, inviting us to measure its rhetorical effect against the legacy of "European theory," deconstructive readings, and philology. His tribute refers, too, to Barbara Cassin's essay "Seeing Helen in Every Woman" in her *Sophistical Practice*, a book from Fordham that Helen herself never saw in its final published form. Cassin's argument there returns us to the classic grounds of theory, in multiple senses: to the classics, to classical debates over reading philosophy and

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literature, and to the return to philology that characterizes the epoch of theory. *Philology*, indeed, might be another name for the kind of reading with care that lies at the heart of Helen's editorial genius.

Although no single practice of reading can sum up the kind of European theory Helen brought to the Bronx, it is possible to trace a lineage back to the roots of an old European model of comparative literature. Helen positioned herself in such a lineage, in remarks given at a two-day conference on "comparative modernisms, medialities, and modernities" at Fordham and New York University that she organized with Jacques Lezra and me in 2012:

> I am a scant two generations away from the early giants of comparative literature in the U. S.: such figures as Erich Auerbach (born in 1892) and Leo Spitzer (born in 1887) were roughly my grandparents' age. In intellectual terms, not until I published *A Scholar's Tale*, the beautiful memoir of Geoffrey Hartman (whose Wordsworth seminar I was fortunate enough to experience as a graduate student), did I realize that as a young scholar he quite literally walked the same streets as Auerbach in New Haven, at a time when I existed, but hadn't yet learned to spell. There is an odd intimacy in this timeframe of comparative literature, even in comparison to the relatively short institutional history of "English." (3–4)

This sketch of her own relation to a certain lineage of comparative literature partly explains the title of one of her most recent, visionary achievements, the Mellon-funded Modern Language Initiative (MLI), whose success the conference was also designed to celebrate. The guiding principles of this initiative reveal the practical genius of Helen's ability to combine old and new models of comparative literature. Committed to publishing books by first-time authors, to publishing books in English on works of any kind in languages other than English, and to collaborating with a consortium of university presses throughout the United States, the MLI has nurtured, supported, and promoted books that embody a new spirit of comparative study, focusing both on traditional European languages and on non-European languages, as well as on interdisciplinary approaches to literature and multimedia. Notable books published with support from the initiative include Toral Gajarawala's *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, Edmund Jacobs's *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature*, and Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. To the extent that Helen's editorial practice embodied the best of a European comparatist tradition (or European theory), it was not in curatorial acts of securing or rescuing that European heritage so much as in editorial acts of transforming and reinventing that past for future models of comparative study.

Reading recent titles by established authors that Helen brought to Fordham next to titles by first-time authors in the MLI offers a glimpse of her editorial intervention in the changing landscape of comparative literature and European theory. Helen's list extends well beyond comparative literary studies, too, to include titles in philosophy, anthropology, religious studies, and media theory. Interdisciplinarity was always a dynamic feature of the kind of comparative literature Helen nurtured and sponsored. Junior scholars, working on their first books, were as central to Helen's vision of scholarly publishing as well-known and established authors.

Even the books most closely associated with deconstruction defy the partisan battle lines we might associate with the epoch of theory. Two Fordham University Press board members (both former chairs of the board, one from the philosophy department, the other from the English department) summed up their long tenure on the board (coinciding with Helen's ten years as editorial director)

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and their long, collegial acting out of the "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" by agreeing that the philosophy list was too full of literary concerns, the literature list too full of philosophy. If this was the sort of disciplinary exchange, practically and institutionally speaking, that Helen was able to turn to everyone's advantage, it was also the disciplinary difference that makes deconstruction defy partisanship. Helen was by no means, of course, the only editor to publish translations of Derrida or to promote philosophical and literary studies associated (narrowly or broadly) with deconstruction. The distinguished list of books by (and on) Derrida and others that Helen brought to Stanford and Fordham defies any simple classification in part because these books represent a convergence of different occasions, different disciplines, different series (Hent de Vries and Mieke Bal's Cultural Memory of the Present, Hamacher's Meridian Crossing Aesthetics, John D. Caputo's Perspectives in Continental Philosophy). The list also defies classification, in part, because it remains incomplete—not only because of the tragic loss of Helen's editorial hand in shaping the way we read things now but also because many projects have yet to appear as a result of the work Helen did before her death (before she became that image, the Benjaminian Angel of History, projected in her last e-mail to Judith Butler). We can glimpse her legacy in a short book released in July 2014, a few months after Helen's death. Jacques Derrida's *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, edited and translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, includes a discussion between Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy from 2004, the final conversation between these three philosophers (jokingly dubbed the three musketeers by Derrida), whose books Helen had published throughout her career. As in the other essays and transcripts collected in that volume—and organized in tribute to the "refuge" that Strasbourg gave to Derrida (perhaps like the one Fordham provided for Helen after the battle storms of Stanford)[4]—what emerges from this final conversation between the three philosophers of deconstruction is not so much agreement as disagreement. These philosophers' differences regarding the theories and practices of deconstruction—more simply, reading—are constitutive of their long collaboration. Each understood something slightly but crucially different by the project of deconstruction they shared. We see these differences surface throughout the selections chosen in *For Strasbourg*: Lacoue-Labarthe's more skeptical, more political and critical engagement with the Heideggerian legacy; Nancy's investment in the project of "deconstructing Christianity" (whose full scope is only now beginning to emerge, mostly in Fordham books); and Derrida's skepticism, even suspicion, of the implications of the other two "musketeers." These differences emerge in a deliberately impromptu, as it were unscripted, form in the selections from *For Strasbourg*. Reading those conversations from 2004 now, in their 2014 translated and edited form, demands a rereading of the differences marked by those three philosophers. Reading the "now" of this particular reading after Helen means coming to terms with the interrelation between at least three profoundly different trajectories of deconstruction.

At the heart of the care for reading embodied by Helen's work as editor, then, is a potentially far-reaching disagreement over reading itself and over the "responsibility" of reading (responsibility is a theme taken up in the Strasbourg conversations and addressed both in Miller's *For Derrida* and in Sussman's work). Having just proposed that philology might be another name for the care that defines Helen's editorial genius, it may now be appropriate to note how Helen herself might have questioned that formulation to open it up to further debate. In her remarks on the naming of the MLI, Helen touches on

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philology as she discusses her choice of the word *modern*. Extending further her remarks about the MLI, and working toward a rationale for the conference she helped organize to showcase MLI authors, these comments provide a glimpse of Helen's editorial vision, in practice and theory, and in her own words:

> The Mellon program that funds the MLI is designated to finance books in underserved or emergent fields, and the name was chosen to align the initiative with the aims of the Modern Language Association, to help address the frequently voiced lament that in recent years publication opportunities for its members, especially junior scholars, have been drying up.
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> But then the term becomes historical: at the turn into the 20th century, the MLA was, I believe, distinguishing itself from classical philology. A methodological distinction (even if not the same one) was what I wanted to make: to emphasize interpretation and the creation of new knowledge through the unpacking of linguistic meaning and the specificities and materialities of language rather than description or mere competence. (2)

Resisting the return to "philology" I noted above, Helen here makes a "methodological distinction" that nicely articulates the principles on which the MLI was founded. At the same time, she opens up the debates for which the two-day conference was organized. Let me quote a few more lines from Helen's remarks:

> But *modern* has a shadow: both a history of use as a value term and the fact that some people take it to mean some things that happened after about 1900. This I most emphatically did not want. Indeed, one draft of the grant proposal states that we could imagine an analysis of the *Gilgamesh*—so far as I know, the most ancient text in the history of civilization west of the Indus—that would be eligible for funding from the initiative. And one of the languages I definitely wanted the MLI to benefit was my own early love, Chinese, which in the mid-seventies, when I was studying it, didn't count as a "modern language" for purposes of presentation at the MLA, despite the fact that it numbered more living speakers than any other language on earth.
>
> The upshot of these ruminations was that I committed an act of language use: I proposed the name "Modern Language Initiative" to the Mellon and my colleagues in the consortium. And then I didn't think too much more about it, even had it worked into a logo. Until one day, at lunch with conference co-organizers Chris GoGwilt and Jacques Lezra, the bottom dropped out from under this slightly queasy, rather shopworn, and a bit boring term *modern*, revealing a whole scholarly debate about comparative modernisms, modernities, and what "modern" might amount to after all, one that I had no idea was going on. That moment of having the bottom fall out (and in the process discovering an involvement one didn't know one had) is, in a nutshell, what I think the study of language is about today. And for me, it was the origin of this conference. (2–3)

I excerpt these remarks to give a sense of Helen's own "involvement" in the shaping of debates about comparative literature (in this case, one might rather talk of an incitement or intervention, since Helen turned a small-scale May colloquium into a two-day conference involving two universities and six university presses).

Her comments highlight, too, an unfinished debate over the question of philology and reading with care. Alongside the "shadow" Helen sees over the word *modern* is a shadow over the term *philology*. Helen's distinction between "classical philology" and the "modern" languages (of the MLA) is clear, but it leaves in the shadow another philology, the comparative philology that is not only at the heart of the conference whose rationale she introduces and orchestrates but also, in many ways, a key element in the landscape of comparative literature and European theory she helped shape over the decades of her work at Stanford and Fordham.

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Emerging from the list of books Helen brought to Fordham is (among other things) a question of philology: in what sense is philology the point of reference for the range of new interdisciplinary, comparative, and media studies to come? Recently published books, and books still to appear, may provide answers to that question, but Helen is no longer with us to continue this debate. Her editorial genius has left us, however, with volumes to debate, across all the disciplines. At least some degree of philology, surely, attaches to every discipline of reading. This may be the kind of care in reading that Helen's work requires us to think through. It is a care that should be brought to the legacy of books Helen produced over her years at Stanford and at Fordham, and of all those other books that bear the imprint of the debates Helen promoted. I would include my own argument about "postcolonial philology" in *The Passage of Literature* as something shaped by my conversations with Helen about the MLI. The underlying principles of an imperative to care that Helen brought to reading (its relation to the model of comparative literature, to the modern—and also to that other term from the 2012 conference, *medialities*) may become clear as we engage books that have just appeared or that have yet to appear from her editorial guidance: Hamacher's *Minima Philologica*, Barbara Cassin's *Sophistical Practice*, and the books in new series Helen helped bring to Fordham: Idiom and Lit Z. The full scope of Helen's editorial vision and its influence on the way we read now still need to be assessed. The underlying principles of that vision, however, may be seen in the work she sponsored at Stanford and Fordham and in such visionary initiatives as the MLI, combining critical theory, comparative literature, and interdisciplinary studies in an editorial practice of scholarly innovation.

All these principles are evident in the critical edition of Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein. As Andrew Parker discussed at the May colloquium, this book is comparative in an exemplary but surprising sense, since it is a reprint of one of the most notoriously problematic English-language studies of the Chinese language. Reframing Pound's editorial work on Ernest Fenollosa's essay, the book resituates Pound's influential intervention within the linguistic, cultural, and philosophical context of a cross-cultural moment all but invisible up to the book's publication—which is to say, all but invisible to readers of high modernism, critics from within Chinese-language studies, and a century of poets and other writers working under the shadow of Pound's argument about the Chinese character. It does so, moreover, with an editorial apparatus that makes visible the problems of translation discussed in Saussy's introduction. Those questions are themselves inseparable from the problem of the medium that had all along been a key feature of Fenollosa's essay and whose significance—for Pound, for Pound's readers, and for modernism more generally—is made newly visible, newly new, as it were, in the palimpsest of different versions of the essay and the juxtaposition of different scripts. As Parker so graphically pointed out, the book is an eloquent demonstration both of Helen's devotion to the traditional book form and of her interest in future media. Mourning the loss of Helen demands that we celebrate the work she promoted, work that still embodies an epoch of critical theory, an era of interdisciplinary renewal across the humanities and beyond, and the coming-of-age of multimedia comparative literary studies.

Helen's editorial vision, thoroughly committed to individual, original, and inventive readings, never promoted *one* version of reading. European theory, comparative literature, and interdisciplinarity—all the faces of the "humanities" (which, for Helen, included the sciences)—formed part of an ongoing de-

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bate over what reading meant. As Timothy Campbell noted in prefacing his talk at the May colloquium, Helen's sense of what a series list should look like was adaptable to the changing demands and needs and strengths of the books that emerged. In the words of her assistant, Fordham's acquisitions editor, Tom Lay, "Nobody had less use for dogma." Her commitment as an editor was to bring out the best in an author, in a collection, in a series—and in the list as a whole. If her work embodies an epoch, it is not because she was allied with a theoretical position, a school of thought, or a trend but because she was fiercely committed to critical inquiry in the broadest sense.

Notes

1. The colloquium consisted of talks by Timothy Campbell, Jonathan Freedman, Jacques Lezra, Kevin McLaughlin, Neni Panourgiá, Andrew Parker, and Annika Thiem. Although not delivered at the May colloquium, Judith Butler's remarks are included here because they show the link between the work of mourning Helen's loss and the work of assessing her legacy. Butler presented versions of her tribute at the ACLA meeting on 22 March and at the Fordham memorial on 8 April.

2. Online tributes include Alan Liu's, Haun Saussy's, and Henry Sussman's ("Helen Tartar").

3. I borrow the term "European theory" from Kevin McLaughlin's tribute to Helen at the colloquium.

4. For details of what led to Helen's leaving Stanford, see Saussy's online tribute.

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