

Literature

Literature at MIT embraces an expansive vision of literary study. Our research agendas and curriculum explore a broad array of written, oral, and visual forms, ranging from the ancient world to the 21st century. We teach poetry, drama, and prose fiction, as well as film, television, photography, comics, memoirs, and folk music. We represent a variety of methodologies but share a common dedication to close reading and historical reflection. We are interested in both the established masterpieces and the most recent cultural productions of the digital age.

Literature at MIT aims to maintain a level of excellence and innovation in the teaching and study of literature on par with the best universities while remaining responsive to MIT's distinctive institutional culture. The environment in which we work makes us different from any of our "peer" programs in literary study. Our faculty consists of scholars who are both leaders in their specific fields of study and devoted to enriching the education of undergraduates pursuing a wide spectrum of majors (including Literature). Literature at MIT is one of the homes of humanistic and general education at the Institute. Our courses engage students in the pleasures and challenges of reading, viewing, listening, and interpreting; expose them to fresh ways of thinking about the world; and develop valuable, transferable skills in writing and communication.

The Literature faculty at MIT is all about balance. Along with our other humanities colleagues at the Institute, we are here to ensure that MIT's students have the opportunity for a fully balanced education. We complement subjects taught in the science and engineering disciplines in which many students will major. We conduct mainly small, seminar-style classes that afford undergraduates direct and continual interaction with full faculty members. Being a humanities faculty member at MIT also calls for balance. Our faculty members sustain excellent records of productivity and innovation in scholarship even though they lack the stimulus of a graduate program in their discipline and devote considerable effort to general undergraduate education. When we hire, we seek the special kind of scholar who can thrive in this challenging environment. We are proud of our ability to find and nurture such special talents.

Literature faculty members must possess the agility to shift their mode of approach to their discipline between a generally accessible idiom and a rigorously professional one. We welcome this challenge, believing that the study of literature needs to maintain its ties to broad extra-professional audiences that can benefit from exposure to the knowledge and skills our discipline deploys.

We balance the present and future focus of our students with exposure to the cultural productions of times and places other than the here and now, or the here and tomorrow. We take them out of their comfort zones. We defamiliarize the world they live in by helping them see it as embedded in cultural, historical, and representational traditions that are never simply in the past but are always active or able to be activated in the present. We subject them to the inherent uncertainties of interpretation, whether of texts or of situations, helping them to see how much they interpret already without even being aware of it. We believe this practice of defamiliarization helps them to become more creative thinkers and less likely to take their world for granted.

Overview

Literature continues to operate as a highly effective unit within the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. Our members publish vital works of scholarship, pursue innovation in research and teaching, and explore interdisciplinary partnerships and projects. They continue to win distinguished fellowships and other honors and share their ideas with professional peers at a variety of national and international conferences and meetings. The past year was not without its challenges, but the commitment and professionalism of our Literature community have enabled us to withstand them and to keep moving forward in our scholarly and pedagogic missions.

During the past year the Literature Faculty opted to withdraw from the proposed merger of Literature, Foreign Languages and Literatures (FLL), and Writing and Humanistic Studies (WHS) into a single department that would also become the home of the program in Comparative Media Studies (CMS). After more than two years of keeping an open mind and entertaining the possibilities of such a merger, our members came to feel that we were being asked to submerge our identity and community—which we have built over time and are proud of—into a larger unit in which we might lend our structural stability but would not be recognized as playing a significant part. The dean’s vision for the new department seemed to us to be too exclusively focused on the contemporary world of digital technology rather than on the broader history of “comparative media studies” in which we feel we have many kinds of stakes (*including* in the contemporary, but not limited to it). Our deep interest in issues affecting the MIT undergraduate commons encouraged us to consider joining this new department, for we care about and participate heavily in such essential functions for undergraduates as the Communication Requirement (at the CI-H level, and increasingly at the CI-HW level) and the study of foreign languages. We already are, and will increasingly be, important participants in both the Communication Requirement (in the teaching of writing and speaking) and the study of foreign literatures and languages. We will watch the progress of the emerging new department and hope the lines will remain open for communication and collaboration across the Literature-CMS border, and that many new lines will open up. We are also willing to explore joint appointments to the extent these will help create new opportunities for fruitful interaction.

Over the past year, some of Literature’s junior faculty members were presented with several distinctive honors. Our colleague Arthur Bahr was awarded the Alfred Henry and Jean Morrison Hayes career development chair, The award’s three-year term commenced July 1, 2012. Eugenie Brinkema was awarded a highly selective year-long fellowship at

the Newhouse Center for the Humanities at Wellesley College . Bahr and Brinkema were also awarded the James A. and Ruth Levitan Award for Excellence in Teaching from the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (SHASS)—a testament to the high standard of teaching Literature faculty strive to reach. In addition, associate professor Sandy Alexander participated in the MIT-Balliol Faculty Exchange in spring 2012.

In other developments, Shankar Raman was successfully promoted to the rank of full professor as of July 1, 2012. Broadening our support for MIT's collaborative Ancient and Medieval Studies program, Literature also conducted a search for a junior tenure-track faculty member in classical literature. We are delighted to welcome our newest junior colleague, Stephanie Frampton. Stephanie received her PhD in comparative literature and classical philology in 2011 from Harvard University and was our top choice in our search.

During AY2012, in connection with MIT's relationship with the new Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), Literature hosted a sponsored postdoctoral fellow, Ghenwa Hayek, who worked with professor James Buzard on course development and piloted two subjects that would form the basis of the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) curriculum at SUTD. In his role as MIT representative for HASS in the MIT-SUTD alliance, Buzard spent two weeks in Singapore in the summer of 2012, some weeks after SUTD began its first teaching term. He observed classes, attended meetings, conducted a teaching workshop, and gave advice on the evolution of the HASS program at SUTD. He has written a report assessing the development of SUTD HASS with recommendations for future steps. He also mentored visiting SUTD staff as part of the "Teach the Teachers" program.

Tenured associate professor Margery Resnick joined the Literature Faculty. Her special areas include Hispanic literature and film, literature and culture of post-Franco Spain, European fiction, contemporary international women's writing and film, and the cultural history of globalization. She is chair of the Margaret MacVicar/AMITA Oral History of Women at MIT project.

We also welcomed Mellon postdoctoral fellow Julia Panko, who will be with us through July 2014. Julia comes to us from the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she completed a fascinating dissertation on the novel in relation to emergent competing technologies near the beginning of the 20th and 21st centuries. Panko will be another valuable bridge between our interests and those of the Comparative Media Studies program.

A new member was added to the Literature headquarters staff. Hannah Carpenter joined us in the fall to take up the part-time position (vacated by Jamie Graham) focused on outreach and advertising of Literature Faculty activities. Hannah is doing a splendid job and has already demonstrated her great value to the unit. We are delighted to have the continued support of Jacqueline Breen as the administrative officer, Daria Johnson, the undergraduate academic administrative assistant, and Kevin McLellan, administrative assistant.

Literature faculty contributions to the larger MIT community continued in many forms, collectively and individually. We conducted our annual, highly popular series “Pleasures of Poetry” during the Independent Activities Period (IAP), a daily, hour-long discussion of poetry organized by David Thorburn. Each session of the series was led by a different member of the Literature Faculty or by one of our friends and was open to Institute faculty, students, staff, and the public. We also continued our annual marathon reading event during IAP, this time pairing *Hamlet* with Tom Stoppard’s modern retelling, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Faculty, students, and staff took part. Assistant professor Eugenie Brinkema also began our newest tradition with a very successful IAP class “On the Screen,” a month-long examination of the films of Alfred Hitchcock. Our weekly literature teas carried on this year, bringing together a number of students and faculty members for informal conversations and helping to sustain a community interest in literature. Once again we participated in Institute events such as Campus Preview Weekend and the Freshman Pre-Orientation Program with “Discover Literature.” We also continued to support student activities, including the Literary Society and Rune. Literature awarded the Peter S. Donaldson Prize in Literature to Mariya Samoylova ’12 for her academic achievement and participation in the MIT literary community.

Research and Publications

Since last year, Literature Faculty members have been notably productive in scholarship that is making a difference to their fields of study. This scholarship has been published in important venues and presented at a variety of conferences and symposia in North America and in numerous foreign countries. We are especially proud of the accomplishments of our junior faculty members.

Associate professor Sandy Alexander finished work on her exciting first book, *The Properties of Violence: Claims to Ownership in Representations of Lynching*, forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi in fall 2012. She is currently working on her second book project, which extends her interest in questions of ownership in African American culture, focusing on African Americans’ relationship to commodities and things. The working title for the new project is *Up from Chattels: Thinghood in an Ethics of Black Material Culture*.

Associate professor Arthur Bahr, a specialist in Medieval literature, published two major articles during the past year, “Reading Codicological Form in John Gower’s Trentham Manuscript,” in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, and “Fear, Time, and Lack: The Egesa of *Beowulf*,” in the edited collection *Essays on Aesthetics in Old and Middle English Literature in Honor of Howell D. Chickering*, a Festschrift for a distinguished Medievalist who is one of Bahr’s former teachers. Bahr’s first book, *Fragments and Assemblages: Reading Compilations of Fourteenth-Century London*, will be published by University of Chicago Press in 2013. Bahr is also co-editing a special issue of the distinguished journal *The Chaucer Review*, which is focused on his research interests at the junction of interpretation and codicology.

Assistant professor Eugenie Brinkema continued to publish her highly original scholarship on the role of affect in film and video, bringing out five new articles in this brief period. These include: “Critique of Silence” in a special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* titled “The Sense of Sound,” “Laura Dern’s Vomit, or, Kant and Derrida in Oz” in a special issue of *Film-Philosophy* titled “Disgust and Spectatorship,” “Nudity and the Question” in *The Blackwell Companion to Fassbinder*, “A Mother is a Form of Time: *Gilmore Girls* and the Elasticity of In-finitude” in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, and “Rough Sex” in a collection of essays called *At the Limit: Pornography and the Humanities*. Brinkema is about to sign with Duke University Press for the publication of her first book.

Our newest member, assistant professor of classical literature Stephanie Frampton, has contracted to publish her first monograph, *Alphabetic Order: The Roman Alphabet and the Material Culture of Writing in the Roman World*, with Harvard University Press due to come out in 2013.

The tenured faculty members of Literature at MIT have also continued to be active and influential in their professional communities.

Professor James Buzard had six new articles on aspects of 19th-century British literature published (or soon to be published) in 2011–12, including “Ethnographic and Narrative Frontiers: The Case of Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*” in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*,” “*Impressions of Theophrastus Such: ‘Not a Story’*” in the *Blackwell Companion to George Eliot*, forthcoming; “Nationalisms and National Identities” in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Vol. III: The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820–1880*; “Portable Boundaries: The Question of Race in Trollope’s North American Travels” in the edited collection *Riding/ Writing Across Borders in North American Travelogues and Fiction*; “Trollope and Travel” in *The Cambridge Companion to Anthony Trollope*; and “The Novel and Anthropology” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Novel*.

Ford Foundation professor of humanities Peter Donaldson, an internationally recognized Shakespearean and Digital Humanities scholar, continues to expand his path-breaking Global Shakespeare initiative, focused on Shakespeare in performance the world over. He is currently working with partners in Asia, the Arab world, India, Brazil, and Mexico on a digital archive gathering and annotating performances of Shakespeare in all these areas. In most of these places the artists bring the dramatic text together with local performance traditions in innovative ways. Global Shakespeare has also made its way into our curriculum, fundamentally altering the way Shakespeare is taught through explorations of the plays’ performances in such different contexts.

Professor Mary Fuller’s work on early modern travel writing and cultural encounters has grown to include three new articles, including “‘His dark materials’: The Problem of Dullness in Hakluyt’s Collections” in the edited collection *Richard Hakluyt and Travel Writing in Early Modern Europe*, as well as two entries on Hakluyt for the *Encyclopedia Virginia*. With a collaborator, she has also completed a successful volume proposal for

the OUP edition of Hakluyt's massive Elizabethan compendium of travelogues, *Principal Navigations*. In July 2012 she directed a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at MIT on interdisciplinary approaches to studying early English contacts with the Americas, and she is assembling a special issue of *Studies in Travel Writing* on the topic. A further piece on 16-century ideas of the Arctic is completed and under consideration for a volume of scholarly essays.

Professor Diana Henderson had four essays published recently, three on Elizabethan drama and one on the sonnet form. These include: "Catalysing What? Historical Remediation, the Musical, and what of *Love's Labour's Lasts*" in *Shakespeare Survey 64: Shakespeare as Cultural Catalyst*, "Shakespearean Comedy, Tempest Toss'd: Genre, Social Transformation, and Contemporary Performance" in the collection of essays *Shakespeare and Genre: From Early Modern Inheritances to Postmodern Legacies*, "Afterlives: stages and beyond" in the collection *Thomas Middleton in Context*, and "The Sonnet, Subjectivity, and Gender" in the *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*.

Associate professor with tenure Noel Jackson, a specialist in Romanticism, has recently published two articles: "The Time of Beauty" in *Studies in Romanticism* and "Coleridge's Criticism of Life" in *The Coleridge Bulletin*.

Ann Fetter Friedlaender professor of humanities Ruth Perry, a noted scholar of 18th-century studies, continues her current major project on the ballad in form in the 18th and early 19th centuries. During the last two years she has published several pieces on the topic, including "Brother Trouble: Murder and Incest in Scottish Ballads" in the essay collection *Sibling Relations and the Transformation of European Kinship 1300–1900*. Four further articles are completed and in press.

Professor Shankar Raman's work on literature, science, colonialism, and the public sphere in early modern Europe has expanded with the publication of his second book, *Renaissance Literatures and Postcolonial Studies*, and the long essay, "Learning from de Bry: Lessons in Seeing and Writing the Heathen" in the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*.

Professor Stephen Tapscott, a noted poet and translator as well as a wide-ranging scholar of modern literatures, published a new book of translations, *George Trakl: Poems*.

Senior lecturer Wyn Kelley has continued to produce important work on 19th-century American literature, especially on Herman Melville, on whose writing she is an internationally recognized authority. Her two new articles are "Agath and the Ephemeral Text in Melville's *Clarel*" and "Out of the Bread Box: Eleanor Melville Metcalf and the Melville Legacy," both of which were published in the journal of record in Melville Studies, *Leviathan*.

Fellowships and Awards

MIT Literature faculty members were acknowledged during the past year with a number of awards and honors. As already mentioned above, Associate Professor Arthur Bahr was awarded the Alfred Henry and Jean Morrison Hayes Career Development Chair. Arthur Bahr and Assistant Professor Eugenie Brinkema received the James A. and Ruth Levitan Award for Excellence in Teaching from the MIT School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (SHASS), and Brinkema received the Newhouse Center Fellowship from Wellesley College.

Lectures and Appearances

Faculty members in Literature at MIT continued to hone their ongoing research by delivering a host of invited and panel lectures at conferences and meetings in North America and in numerous foreign countries.

Sandy Alexandre presented “The Bus as Stage and Participant in the Civil Rights Theater of the Rosa Parks Museum” at the Chicago ATHE Conference in August 2011, and “Can Scholarship Grow on Trees?: Thinking Ecologically through Black Culture’s Eco-Logics” at Brown University in November 2011.

Arthur Bahr presented several talks throughout the year, including “Beauty, Labor, Pleasure, *Pearl*,” an invited lecture in the University of Connecticut Medieval Studies Lecture and Conference Series, October 2011; “Urban Romance, Musical Lordship, and the Situation of the Auchinleck *Sir Orfeo*” for the Center for Medieval Studies Conference, Fordham University, March 2012; “Scribal Labor, Literary Value, and the Economies of *Pearl*,” an invited lecture for both the Wellesley College Newhouse Center Symposium on Medieval and Early Modern Literary Form and the University of Rochester Medieval and Renaissance Studies Lecture Series, April 2012; “Knots, Chaucer’s Squire, and *Sir Gawain*” for the International Congress of Medievalists, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 2012; and “Sizing Up Miscellaneity” for the British Academy Conference on Insular Books, London, June 2012.

Eugenie Brinkema gave an invited lecture, “Paris and Film: Then and Now” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as part of its series “Paris: Capital of 19th-Century Art and Culture.” In addition, she delivered an invited lecture titled “Horror is a Problem of a Line: Intermittency, Dismay, Affect” at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. She also presented papers on “The Anxiety of Open Water” for the London Film and Media Conference, University of London; “A ‘zombie’ is a small yellow flower: Distance, Discord, *Dogtooth*” for the World Picture Conference, University of Toronto; and “Aryan Kaganof and Formalism After Presence” for the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Boston.

Diana Henderson ranged widely during the past year. She keynoted on “Magic in the Chain: The Matter of Gender in Cross-cultural Adaptation” at the Shakespeare Across Media Conference at National Taiwan University. She also lectured at the International Shakespeare Forum at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, speaking on “Echoes

and Retrospections: Listening for Other Voices, Hearing Shakespeare Anew.” In Prague, Czech Republic, she addressed the World Shakespeare Congress on “Retrospections: Women’s Sonnets, Shakespeare’s Shadow, and the Literary History of Forms.” In Le Mans, France, she spoke at a Symposium on “Shakespeare in Performance I: The Comedies,” presenting a paper titled “Ephemeral Echoes and Brash Possibilities: the Liberation of Adapting Shakespeare’s Early Comedies.” Back home, she joined Shankar Raman and former MIT historian Peter Perdue on a panel called “From Timur Khan to Tamburlaine” sponsored by the MIT Global History Workshop.

Noel Jackson gave a lecture, “Pleasure Problems,” at the City University of New York Graduate Center Friday Forum Series, and was panel chair and respondent for a panel on “Affect and Aesthetics: New Connections” at the International Conference on Romanticism in Montréal. He also served as a breakout session leader for the conference “Academic Writing in the 21st Century: Looking Forward” at MIT.

Ruth Perry brought her ongoing work on the culture of ballad making to several locations and major conferences this year, speaking on “Education of Women in Northeast Scotland in the 18th Century” in Aberdeen, Scotland; “The Famous Ballads of Anna Brown” at Princeton University; and “Anna Brown’s Ballads” at a roundtable on the Cultural History of Women in 18th-Century Britain in San Antonio, Texas. She also took part in a plenary roundtable in Columbia, SC, on new work about the relationship between balladry and Romantic poetry. She continued to perform as a singer of ballads at several locations.

Margery Resnick gave a talk for Saudi Basic Industries Corporation executives sponsored by MIT’s Industrial Liaison Program on “MIT’s Pioneering Women: Lessons for Corporations,” and a keynote address on “Women and Work: How Far Have We Come?” for the MIT Women’s League.

Teaching

The Literature Section at MIT teaches about one-quarter of MIT’s undergraduate population each year, and all of our faculty members, regardless of rank, spend one-half of their teaching loads on introductory subjects that are part of the Institute’s general requirements. We also deliver a top-quality major to those who choose to pursue it, and over the past several years we have sent literature majors to graduate programs in English at such leading universities as the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California, Los Angeles; Stanford University; the University of Chicago; Yale University; and Cambridge University in the UK.

The Literature faculty regularly plays a major role in the General Institute Requirements by offering many popular Communication-Intensive (CI-H) subjects as well as a wide range of middle- and upper-tier classes, and a growing number of Communication-Intensive subjects in the CI-HW category. Our teaching performance remains very strong, with some of our members routinely receiving student evaluation scores above

6.5 (out of 7) and, as noted, two of our members receiving teaching awards this past spring. We also have four MacVicar Faculty Fellows—David Thorburn, Ruth Perry, Stephen Tapscott, and Diana Henderson—about one-quarter of our total number of faculty.

Ours is a faculty passionately devoted to excellence in undergraduate education. Toward that end, we are always innovating and seeking new ways to engage students with our rich and complex materials. Some examples of these activities in undergraduate education include the launch of a popular new six-unit IAP subject “On the Screen,” which Genie Brinkema pioneered this past January with a class on Alfred Hitchcock; the interdisciplinary teaching collaboration on Global Shakespeare involving Peter Donaldson, Diana Henderson, and Shankar Raman, along with members of the Music and Theater Arts section; Mary Fuller’s Freshman Seminar on exploration, scientific discovery, and representation; Ruth Perry’s Freshman Seminar on “Doing Right;” Wyn Kelley’s development and piloting of the new digital tool “MIXIMIZE: Editing for Readers;” and postdoctoral fellow Ghenwa Hayek’s piloting of the CI-H subject Foundations of World Cultures in Fall and Spring 2011–2012.

Professional Service

Our faculty members continue to play important roles in their scholarly communities. We regularly serve as executive committee members, delegates, chairs of ongoing seminars, advisory board members, manuscript reviewers for presses and journals, outside readers of PhD dissertations, doctoral defense examiners, and outside referees in tenure and promotion cases. Our opinion on all sorts of professional matters is highly valued. Most of this professional activity is done by comparatively senior members of our faculty, although there are notable exceptions to this rule. Our junior colleagues are eager to serve their profession and the Institute, and have been energetic in demonstrating this eagerness.

For example, Arthur Bahr served on the organizing committee for the BABEL conference *Cruising the Ruins* to be held in Boston in fall 2012. James Buzard continues his involvement with the multi-university consortium “The Dickens Project” and joined that group’s executive board, charged with organizing the next two “Dickens Universe” events at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is also helping to organize the 2014 annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, which will be held at MIT. He is on the advisory boards of half a dozen journals and regularly reviews submitted work for them. Diana Henderson is currently the vice president and president-elect (2013) of the Shakespeare Association of America. Wyn Kelley is currently serving as president of the International Herman Melville Society. Noel Jackson is a member of the Organizing Committee for the annual conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism, to be held in Boston in 2013. Margery Resnick was organizer and moderator for a symposium on Women and the European Economic Crisis in Madrid.

Service at MIT

Literature head James Buzard is MIT's HASS consultant for the new Singapore University of Technology and Design. He advises SUTD on curricular and other matters. He visited SUTD this summer and mentored SUTD staff during their visits to MIT for the "Teach the Teachers" program. He was on the committee in the WHS search for a senior scholar in rhetoric this past year.

Mary Fuller is currently associate chair of the MIT Faculty, as well as a member of the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC), the Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP), Committee on Graduate Programs (CGP), and the Corporation Joint Advisory Committee on Institute-Wide Affairs (CJAC). At the request of the MIT Faculty chair, professor Samuel Allen, she also served on a subcommittee of CJAC charged with making recommendations regarding the interface between MIT's administration and undergraduate leaders. She also was a member of the search committee in CMS's recent and successful search for a tenured new colleague.

Diana Henderson continues to serve in the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education as dean for curriculum and faculty support and director of the Office of Faculty Support. She is also a member of the Creative Arts Council at MIT. During the summer of 2012 she visited SUTD to advise, attend classes, and conduct a teaching workshop. Noel Jackson is a member of the CUP (term of service: 2010–2013) and director of the Kelly-Douglas Funds, SHASS (2011–). He also chairs our section's curriculum committee.

Ruth Perry served on the CUP Subcommittee on the HASS Requirement along with Margery Resnick. Resnick also was on the search committee for an assistant dean of global education, has directed the Burchard Scholars Program since 2006, and has been on the Commencement Committee and a Commencement Marshal for a decade. David Thorburn runs the Communications Forum.

These are just examples of the depth and variety of our involvement in Institute business.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, Literature at MIT faces a major opportunity that is also a challenge. We have the opportunity to become a new kind of literary studies program, one that builds upon its proven track record of broad multimedia research and teaching to embrace a truly global perspective. Our demonstrated commitment to follow the story (the lyric, the dramatic), not simply on the page but wherever they travel on the media landscape—on film, on TV, on the stage, in song, in images, and in other media—could inform a new style of comparative literary studies whose global reach would be in keeping with MIT's. Fostering intellectual connections across the expressive cultures of many nations and languages, such a program would “fit” the interconnected 21st-century world and would align with MIT's commitment to expanding the opportunities for international engagement in our curriculum and research. It could also become a launching pad for pioneering work linking residential and online education, and developing new ways of connecting MIT undergraduates with learners and teachers around the world.

We have already begun to take steps in the direction of this vision. For quite some time, Literature at MIT has stretched itself beyond the English-language literary tradition in which most of its members were trained. For example, we have long offered classes that bring our students into contact (mediated by translation or film subtitles) with the works of great writers, filmmakers, and other artists from other language traditions. Some years ago, in support of the Ancient and Medieval Studies program, and since MIT's FL&L program is limited to modern languages, we began offering instruction in Latin. Last year, we deepened our commitment to supporting that program with the hire of a new assistant professor in classical studies, who will expand our offerings of ancient literatures, both in the original and in translation. We have welcomed a new member into the Literature Faculty whose specialty is Hispanic literature and who teaches a popular undergraduate class on “Globalization: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.” Recently our distinguished team of Early Modern scholars has been working to expand its international network in support of the Global Shakespeare Initiative. Literature faculty members have been and continue to be actively involved in the development of a HASS curriculum at the new Singapore University of Technology and Design. Last year we piloted two introductory subjects designed as global versions of the traditional “Great Books” classes. They will be on the agenda as we embark on a series of discussion aimed at revising our curriculum in keeping with this emerging vision for our section. And recently one of our faculty leaders, with the support of the dean of engineering, has begun to develop a HASS subject, “Literature from Anywhere,” that MIT students can take using digital tools while engaged in study or internships abroad.

We never were a conventional “English department”. Our multimedia emphasis alone has long given us a broader profile than that. By incremental steps we have crept toward the vision of that of a multimedia comparative literature for the 21st century.

The questions that accompany this great opportunity are legion, and some of them obvious. How many faculty members does it take to cover the world? How many does it take to handle a few key regions? What is feasible? How can we maintain the wonderful density of intellectual community and the coherence of identity that we have managed to build if we move farther and farther away from a basis in the English language? In other words, how can we avoid turning into a “thin” aggregate with token faculty representation in each of a dozen languages? What would be our relationship to the study of foreign languages at MIT (a matter of keen concern to us)? How would our vision facilitate further collaboration with the Comparative Media Studies program and with other Institute neighbors in the humanities and beyond? These are just some of the questions my colleagues and I have begun to discuss.

One thing we are agreed on: the opportunity that presents itself—an opportunity to link up with major Institute goals and to take our humanities discipline out into the world as never before—would be a shame to waste. So we continue to discuss how some authentic approximation of it might be realized, with the Institute’s help. An excellent, innovative multimedia comparative literature program of global dimension could achieve greater visibility for humanities at MIT and build more and deeper ties of collaboration with our MIT colleagues in Comparative Media Studies and beyond. It would also give substantial support to the study of foreign languages at MIT, an activity sure to grow in importance to our undergraduates in the coming years.

James Buzard
Section Head
Professor of Literature