

# REMEDICATION: AN ACLA FORUM

SOPHIA A. MCCLENNEN

## Introduction

**M**ENTION THAT YOU ARE WORKING on a piece on remediation to anyone outside of the field of literary and media studies and they are likely to imagine that you're working on an essay connected to the cleanup of the latest oil spill, the problems in public education, or perhaps a legal crisis. The simple fact that we *read* remediation in a way that goes against every dictionary definition and every common everyday use seems worth investigating more thoroughly. How did the public's use of remediation as a term linked to healing (*mederi*) transform for us into a term linked primarily to media (*medium*)? Perhaps more than any other word used in our field, "remediation" signals a massive disconnect between the public's use of language and ours. And given our own constant need to explain and defend the logic and value of our discipline, it seems urgent to rethink that gap and attempt to address it productively. Against those who would gesture in frustration at such a miscommunication or who would dismiss the public as irrelevant for the theorizing central to our field, I am calling on us to take this disconnect as a serious challenge—one that I believe we are uniquely trained to remedy.

Comparatists have traditionally considered "remediation" to mean literature's incorporation of and incorporation into other media and modes. Dating back to Henry Remak and as more recently inflected by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the term "remediation" has meant the consideration of how narrative modes are translated across different media. In traditional approaches to comparative literature remediation has often been taken to mean the re-representation of a narrative from one medium in another, especially from literature to another art form (Remak). For new media studies scholars Bolter and Grusin, remediation means "the formal logic by which new media technologies refashion prior media forms" (273).

Typically, if not predictably, a forum such as this would have examined the effects of the digital and other forms of new media on literary studies. It would have thought about the ways that different media refashion narrative. It would have gathered essays rethinking the boundaries of the literary media we analyze and the cultural modes we examine. It would have asked how the remediation of new media studies contributes to or threatens traditional comparative literature.

It would have wondered whether the literary should continue to be the central medium within which comparatists work. It also might have asked: How does the digital put pressure on the idea of the literary? How has the study across media changed over time for comparatists? In what ways has the cross-media work of comparative literature been overly dominated by a Western notion of literature? How might those practices be remedied without turning the field into another version of comparative media studies? Or would that be such a bad thing?

While such work is clearly valuable, and while the growth of new media offers further avenues within which to consider these issues, this forum takes the term “remediation” beyond its typical use within the field of comparative literary studies. The intent is to consider remediation both in its broader lexical function as remedy, repair, removal, and rectification and in relation to a number of other discourses where the term takes on meanings quite different from those commonly associated with its application to comparative literature. If remediation in comparative literature has tended to focus on the question of translation across media, where media are understood as modes of communication, this forum considers remediation in relation to other ways of mediating and in full awareness of the term’s other uses.

The term “remediation” as it is used in the broader lexicon is itself highly loaded—at once signaling gestures of ethical sincerity and constructive intervention, while also often cloaking imperial designs and normative measures. When one studies the use of the term “remediation” in public discourse, one finds ample opportunities to function as an intermediary—to remediate as it were the public use of the word itself. Here remediation as healing and remediation as communicating across media can come into productive contact. Rather than understand remediation/healing and remediation/media as oppositional notions, the essays included here consider the various registers of remediation comparatively: in dialogue, in conflict, and in context. This forum, then, takes the comparative method and applies it to the field itself.

In the first essay, “How to Read a Discipline,” Peter Hitchcock uses the theory of Bolter and Grusin as an invitation to think about how to “read” comparative literature as a discipline. Calling for “mediational reading,” he urges us to use remediation as a way to be meditative about the protocols of reading that govern the boundaries of academic inquiry. He then goes on to think about comparative literature as both mediated and mediation, as a field that creates its own readings even as it attempts to undo them, a fact of great significance for a field that takes reading itself as a central feature of its identity. Written as a provocation, Hitchcock’s essay offers two unlikely bedfellows as his guides to reading the discipline, textual interlocutors who provide models of reading that, when considered comparatively, open up new, and perhaps unexpected, potentialities for the field.

The next essay takes remediation out of academic discourse and places it squarely in the world of climate change, petro-dollars, and environmental disasters. “Remediation” is a term that most commonly appears in relation to the removal of pollutants and contaminants from the environment. In that version of remediation the concept signals both regulation as well as the general protection of human and ecological health. What might comparative literature learn by thinking its ties to remediation in these terms? To begin that process Lee Medovoi’s “Remediation as Pharmakon” takes the two competing meanings of remediation (as healing or

as medium) and illustrates how they, in fact, converge. Moving away from Hitchcock's call to reverse Derrida and turn to reading as opposed to writing, Medo-voi draws on the complex layers of meaning in the notion of the Pharmakon, highlighting its reference to both medicine and rhetoric. From there he looks at the ways in which actual practices of environmental remediation function as a re-presentation of the environment that is both mediated and remedying. He then goes on to show that cultural representations critical of these practices also involve similar re-presentations, always yearning for, but never attaining, the magical cure for environmental damage.

Remediation is also a key term in human rights discourse—an area that has drawn increased attention from comparatists since 9/11. But is the remedy of rights discourse the remedy of comparative literature? And what are the ethical implications of an ongoing double-speak between these discourses? Kerry Bystrom addresses these questions in "Literature, Remediation, Remedy (The Case of Transitional Justice)." Comparing the "drama" of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission with the play *Death and the Maiden*, which was referenced in Desmond Tutu's foreword to the final commission report, Bystrom turns to remediation as remedy and reads that usage of the term within current debates about transitional justice. Pointing to what Joseph Slaughter has called "literary social work," she then goes on to consider the implications of reading literature as a remedy for human rights abuses. What happens when literature is "refashioned"—to reference Bolter and Grusin—as human rights remedy? What are the risks and the misreadings of such practices? What are the reparations?

In yet another realm of remediation relevant to comparative literature practices, we find increased attention to the human, to the body, and to the boundaries between bioethics and the humanities. If we understand remediation—here specifically in reference to the regulation of the body—as it occurs in the fields of disability studies, bioethics, and science and technology studies, what insights do we gain for the methods of comparative literature? Julie Minich starts her consideration of these questions by focusing on losers. Referencing Judith Halberstam, Minich suggests that literature can offer ways to remediate—rectify and correct—the circumstances that produce loss and create losers. In "Disability, Losers, and Narrative Remediation" she explains that for scholars in disability studies there is a fundamental distinction between remediation as the solving of a problem and remediation as a cure. She layers those distinctions into a nuanced reading of *Lost City Radio*, a novel that asks about the role that media, both radio and literature, can play in remediating the suffering of those who have been on the losing side of social resistance movements.

The forum closes with an essay that thinks through remediation in its educational register. At a time when the field of comparative literature is watching its institutional strength diminish, the practice of remediation is on the rise in educational practices, especially those linked to high-stakes testing and "Rise to the Top" funding. Here remediation of learners is often linked to corporate mentalities and neoliberal attitudes. As the rise in remedial learning overtakes K-12, there is another form of educational remediation undergoing rapid change in higher education moving in the opposite direction: higher education no longer remediates inequality; its costs in fact exacerbate it economically. In the neoliberal era the idea that higher education is a public good meant to rectify social inequity has

been replaced by a view of higher education as a consumer good—and one that comes at a high price. In “The Remediation of Higher Education and the Harm of Student Debt” Jeffrey Williams reminds us of Truman’s call in 1946 to make education accessible to all, regardless of race, creed, sex, or national origin. That moment, he explains, inaugurated an educational “golden age” for language study and global perspectives; it also led to a distinct rise in support for fields like comparative literature. He compares that moment to the current neoliberal era in which society rejects any responsibility to remediate inequity, expecting, rather, that students bear all of the costs and receive few, if any, social gains. Documenting the realities of student debt, Williams shows how the courses our students take may literally be destroying their future. Debt means reading becomes a luxury and the space to contemplate an impossibility. Williams’s piece is a sobering call to consider that as we struggle to save our discipline and to fill our courses, we would do well to recognize how what he terms “the pedagogy of debt” may be teaching our students more than we ever can. Any remedy, then, must fight to save not only the discipline, but also the students who make it possible.

Asking how these versions of remediation might influence the field of comparative literature is meant to be a provocation—to spur us to consider ways in which our own field of inquiry seeks remedy and can act as one. While we may conclude that some comparative literature practices are in and of themselves remedial, in the spirit of looking ahead common to the exercise of this type of forum, the essays here also imagine what can and could come next.

*Pennsylvania State University*

### Works Cited

- Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 2000. Print.
- Remak, Henry H.H. “Comparative Literature, Its Definition and Function.” *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*. Rev. ed. Ed. Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971. Print.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights, Inc: World Literature, Narrative Form and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007. Print.