

Special Focus: Teaching 20th and 21st Century Literature

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The first issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* was published in fall 1976. *STCL*'s aim, to publish scholarly articles on literature originally written in a variety of languages (French, German, Spanish, and Russian, at the time of founding), in a journal neither devoted exclusively to comparative literature nor sponsored by a professional organization, was acknowledged as "unusual" in the inaugural introduction. This introduction described *STCL* as "in the classical sense of the word, a scholarly journal, one seeking the expansion of knowledge. Excellence in literary criticism is our objective" (González-del-Valle 5). A single issue cost \$8.

In the fifty years since the journal's first issue, changes have been made: beginning in 2004 with Volume 28, Issue 1, the name was updated to *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*. In 2014, with Volume 38, Issue 1, the journal moved to an online, open-access format. Laura Kanost, editor, explained that "Moving from print to an online format has been a process of letting go of our journal's physicality in order to realize its full potential as an international 21st-century forum for literary dialogue and collaboration" (Front matter, 2014, 1). This makes an issue of *STCL* an extremely rare item that costs less today than it did in 1976! In addition to publishing nearly 100 issues (2 per year until 2020, one per year since then), the journal has also published two books.

STCL began as a project of Kansas State University faculty in Modern Languages who made personal donations and shared responsibilities associated with mailing and handling to maintain the viability of the journal during the most critical time of its development. The founding members were known for their research in Modern Languages, but also for their teaching, which is why we have decided to devote this anniversary issue to the teaching of literature. We wish to highlight in particular the contributions of the late Bob Clark, a member of the Kansas State University faculty and *STCL* editorial board whose research focused on French medieval literature. Though he might seem like an odd fit for the editorial team of a journal whose scope begins in 1900, Bob was a dedicated member of the journal team, enthusiastically copy editing articles and serving for many years as the subscriptions manager. In his courses too, Bob frequently taught 20th and 21st century literature. In his last semester at Kansas State, Bob was teaching a class on French narratives of resistance during the Second World War, a class that could easily fit within the scope of this special focus.

In honor of the teacher-scholars who founded *STCL* in 1976 and who have edited it in the fifty years since then, this issue is dedicated to teaching 20th and 21st

century literature. Though most of the scholars who have contributed to *STTCL* over the years have been teachers, until now, only two articles have been primarily devoted to teaching or pedagogy. [Laura Barbas-Rhoden](#)'s 2015 "Teaching 'Global Learning' through the Ecotestimonio: *Ojos negros* by Eduardo Sguiglia in Class" demonstrates how teachers can use ecotestimonial narratives in undergraduate teaching, encouraging students to "confront the multiple facets of wicked problems of environmental degradation and to become aware of how the representation (or lack of representation) of those problems in different contexts shapes social responses to them" (2). [Debra Castillo](#)'s 1996 "Gorgeous Pedagogy" reads Elena Poniatowska's *Luz y luna, las lunitas* ('Light and Moon, The Little Moon') within the frame of a pedagogical endeavor. within the frame of a pedagogical endeavor.

The articles in this volume celebrate the diversity of approaches to teaching 20th and 21st century literature—from elementary language classes to advanced classes, from classes taught in French, Spanish, or German to classes taught in English, online and in-person, studying authors ranging from established greats of world literature (the likes of Franz Kafka, Colette, and Gabriel García Márquez) to known fascists (Louis-Ferdinand Céline) to hyper-contemporary responses to Hurricane María. The articles also share some common concerns: declining enrollments in languages and humanities classes, student resistance to reading literature, and post-cell-phone reluctance to read longer texts. In an effort to bring some kind of order to this diversity, this introduction arranges its discussion according to the language experience of the student addressed by each article. Thus, the focus begins with an article centered on teaching students in the intermediate language sequence, moves through articles about teaching students taking their first class dedicated to literature in a second language, and concludes with articles intended for more advanced students and students studying literature in translation. In this introduction, in addition to providing a brief overview of the new articles that appear, we are also gesturing toward the rich history of *STTCL* by discussing articles that have been published in the journal in the past that share a topic or framework with the teaching approach described.

Tama Engleking makes a compelling case for incorporating 20th century literature in foreign languages earlier in the language curriculum. Her article "Hooking Intermediate-level Students on Literature: Reading *La Maison de Claudine* with *La Maison de Colette*" presents a step-by-step approach to teaching French novelist Colette's short story "My Mother and Animals" in an intermediate-level French class, a task made particularly challenging by Colette's love for specialized and esoteric vocabulary. Engleking's lesson weaves together a variety of sources, including the Musée Colette housed in Colette's childhood home and pedagogical materials related to Colette's recent inclusion on the French baccalaureate exam.

STTCL has treated the works of Colette in the past: in 1984, [Ann Leone Philbrick](#) considered Colette's characters Léa and Chéri in terms of the relationship between these characters and the spaces they inhabit—resonant with Engleking's efforts to use the space of Colette's childhood home to help students discover the complexity of her works. In 1996, [Juliette M. Rogers](#) analyzed ways that Colette shaped her own reputation in *La Naissance du jour* (*Break of Day*), an attention to reputation and image that students encounter (in a very introductory way) through publicity photographs of the author in Engleking's approach. Finally, also in 1996, [Laurel Cummins](#) explored the power dynamics of reading in Colette, focusing on *La Maison de Claudine* (*My Mother's House*), the same work that Engleking uses for her lesson.

In her article, ““Vous en avez d'autres comme celui-ci?” (“Do you have any more like this one?”): Teaching Françoise Sagan's 1954 Novel *Bonjour tristesse* to 21st-century Students,” Mariah Devereux Herbeck provides a compelling case for using Françoise Sagan's novel *Bonjour tristesse* in a French literature survey class for more advanced students. She offers a wealth of reasons that Sagan's text works well at this level, including the compelling beach-read narrative, the youthful protagonist (the 17-year-old Cécile would fit right into many university literature classes), the lighter writing style (perhaps a distinct contrast to the difficulty of teaching Colette evoked by Engleking), and the relatively short length of the novel, making it possible for students to read it in its entirety.

Devereux Herbeck acknowledges that Sagan is rarely used in literature survey classes due to a common perception that her novel is not “high literature.” It is perhaps for this reason that Sagan has not previously been considered in the pages of *STTCL*, save for a 2020 [book review](#) of Diana Holmes's *Middlebrow Matters*. Could a new attention to lesser-researched works be a project for *STTCL*'s next 50 years? Contributions to the journal have, however, considered adolescence and its representation in literature. [Annabel L. Kim](#)'s 2016 article “Marie Darrieussecq's *Clèves*: A Wittigian Rewriting of Adolescence” argued that Darrieussecq removes the adolescent female body “from the sexualized and objectified optic through which it is usually viewed in order to stage it instead as a body in process, as a situation.” [Warren Johnson](#), in an article from 1999, explored the dialogic of the self in the autobiographical writing of another French novelist, Annie Ernaux. Finally, in a recent 2025 issue, [Carolina Rocha](#) explored both adolescence and the father-daughter relationship, central to *Bonjour tristesse*, in a study of *Un comunista en calzoncillos* (2013) by Claudia Piñeiro.

In “Teaching Humor in French Literature in the 21st-Century Classroom,” Jennifer J. Willging explores the pleasure of teaching comedic texts as well as the potential difficulty of trying to teach humor both in a second language and in “what can seem like an increasingly humorless time” (2). Willging walks us through an approach to teaching humor in French, with special attention paid to teaching

Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage* and Paule Constant's *Balta*, concluding with a discussion of Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Whatever). These choices do not shy away from controversial, even potentially offensive texts, but Willging argues that for today's students, maybe even especially for today's students, the risks inherent in teaching such texts are worth it, developing students into "informed, articulate, and resilient adults" (2).

We can see Willging's appreciation for humor and wordplay even in her own previous contributions to *STTCL*, including a 2005 article on Céline titled: Surveillance and Liberty in Céline's New York, the City That Doesn't Sleep (Around). Céline has also been considered in *STTCL*, though with a less ironic angle, in Ann L. Murphy's 1994 "Style and Otherness in L.-F. Céline's *Rigodon*" and Mary Jean Green's 1985 "Toward an Analysis of Fascist Fiction: The Contemptuous Narrator in the Works of Brasillach, Céline and Drieu la Rochelle." On the topic of academia, certainly at question in Willging's article, Nurit Buchweitz has quite recently (in 2025) considered Houellebecq in "Academia and Society: Reading Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* as an Academic Novel."

Diana Aramburu's "After Hurricane María: From Chaos to Rebellion in Contemporary Puerto Rican Fiction" describes using a trauma-informed approach to shape a course analyzing literary and artistic responses to the devastating 2017 Hurricane María. Aramburu describes how this approach simultaneously promotes critical thinking while also being mindful of student well-being. In this course, students discovered ways that literature born from this ecological and humanitarian catastrophe not only illustrates chaos and crisis but also attempts to heal, resist, and decolonize. The article concludes with some reflection on the potentially transformational possibilities of such an approach, speculating that such a course "can challenge us to question the colonial status quo, to not be content with the answers we are given, but most significantly, it is disruptive and disorienting as well as healing" (12).

Though *STTCL* has not previously treated Hurricane María, articles have dealt with environmental disaster and its place in 20th and 21st century literature. 2015 saw two articles on literature and environmental disaster: in 2015 Erin S. Finzer analyzed literary responses to another devastating hurricane in "Bleeding Mud: The Testimonial Poetry of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua." In that same 2015 issue, Julia L. Frengs turned her attention to the Oceanic Region in "Anticipatory Testimonies: Environmental Disaster in Claudine Jacques's Fictional Prophecies," showing how works from New Caledonia engage in environmentalism by bearing witness to and challenging environmental injustices. Trauma has also featured in *STTCL*, in another work by Aramburu, the 2017 "Revenge by Castration: Breaking the Narrative Thread of Rape in Maria-Antònia Oliver's Fiction." In 2005, Dawn Fulton read Maryse Condé's *Desirada* through the lens of the traditional Caribbean identity quest novel, arguing that "collective memory may be fragmented not only

because of traumatic events, but also, and perhaps more irreparably, along the faultlines of temporal, spatial, and interpretive divides” (2).

Florina Matu describes a process-oriented approach to teaching literature from the Francophone Maghreb in her article, “Exploring Maghrebi Literature Through the Lens of Active Learning Strategies.” Matu provides examples of a series of student surveys, focus groups, and feedback forms which inform her use of Process-Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (POGIL) in two advanced Francophone literature classes. In these classes, students read Maïssa Bey’s epistolary novel *Nulle autre voix* (‘No Other Voice’), published in 2018, and two volumes of Leïla Slimani’s trilogy, namely the 2020 *Le Pays des autres: La guerre, la guerre, la guerre* (*In the Country of Others*) and the 2022 *Regardez-nous danser* (*Watch Us Dance*), with the support of “scaffolded reading guides aiming at increasing language proficiency, highly structured activities based on graphic organizers and note-takers, and collaborative learning” (2).

Though *STTCL* has not (yet) published articles on Bey or Slimani, the Francophone Maghreb has been a rich source of scholarship in our journal. In 1980, one of *STTCL*’s founding members, Claire Dehon, edited a [special issue](#) on “Francophone and Lusophone Literatures in Africa.” In her introduction, Dehon explains that the aim of this issue is to “promote these literatures and at the same time to contribute to their study” (1). This issue treats enduring names in Francophone literature including Sembène Ousmane and Francis Bebey. A [second special issue](#), this one in 1993, “Contemporary Feminist Writing in French: A Multicultural Perspective” included articles on Maghrebi women authors Assia Djebar and Fatima Mernissi. In 2014, [Amy L. Hubbell](#) analysed Leïla Sebbar’s fictional account of leaving Algeria just prior to Algerian independence and how authors use a “layering technique to simultaneously draw in and distance the reader from extraordinarily painful personal experience” (2).

In his contribution, “Teaching *One Hundred Years of Solitude* through Talmudic Eyes,” Illan Stavans describes how he has used the Talmud and its method as an analytic frame for teaching Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. According to Stavans, the value of using a Talmudic method to approach literature is the way that this reading practice encourages, even insists on, dissent and disagreement. Rather than encouraging students to arrive at a “correct” interpretation of the text, this approach valorizes a diversity and multiplicity of interpretations. Stavans’ article also takes a unique perspective on the teaching of literature in translation—rather than bemoaning mistakes or deficiencies in the translation, Stavans celebrates them, concluding that “There are indeed a few mistakes in the translation. But there are also mistakes in the original, some of which the translation quietly resolves” (11).

Unsurprising for a journal that treats literature in Spanish, García Márquez has appeared numerous times in the pages of *STTCL*. The earliest article on García

Márquez dates from 1978—[Joel Hancock](#) read one of García Márquez’s stories in light of the fairy tale, particularly the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, a reading that is echoed nearly two decades later in “A Contemporary Fairy Tale: García Márquez’ ‘El rastro de tu sangre en la nieve’” by [Arnold M. Penuel](#). A 1984 article by [Nina M. Scott](#) considered the meaning of the Buendía house itself in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In 1993, [M. Keith Booker](#) warned against gullible reading of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a text that was also considered, by [Mabel Moraña](#) in 1990, in terms of modernity and marginality.

In the final article of the special focus, “Reading, Seeing, and Teaching Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* in Translation,” Mary A. Bricker describes an approach to using Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* in translation in an elementary German class. Bricker calls our attention to a number of advantages to using this text—it is short, timeless, and fascinating. The use of the translation is necessary because students in elementary German do not yet have the linguistic capacity to read Kafka in German, while reading this text in translation does allow students to have a far more nuanced grasp of the richness of German literature than they might gain otherwise. Bricker describes a series of discussions that guide students through an analysis of the text, using a multiliteracies framework that incorporates images from Peter Kuper’s graphic novel version of the text.

Of all the authors treated by contributors to this special focus, I believe that Kafka appears in *STTCL* the largest number of times, with 105 distinct articles that mention or treat this author. This includes, as recently as 2022, an [article](#) and a [book review](#), and stretches all the way back to the very first issue of the journal in 1976, where [David J. Bond’s](#) article on “Jewish Destiny in the Novels of Albert Cohen” included a reference to Kafka. Kafka has been considered in terms of his [influence on African literature](#) (1980), his [anarchist modernism](#) (2011), [his ‘spiritual’ world](#) (1978), and his [rhetoric of dys-communication](#) (1993).

What do we hope the next 50 years of *STTCL* will bring? As many of our contributors have highlighted, the humanities find themselves in a state of crisis in the university, though the death of the humanities has been a theme in our discipline since the journal’s founding. It is our hope that learning about literature, culture, and media in languages other than English will continue to hold interest for students and scholars as the journal enters its next half-century. Open-access scholarship is a younger innovation than the journal, and our journal finds itself in a particularly precarious position as we neither charge scholars for access to our content, nor do we charge authors processing fees to publish with us. We remain committed to this model of truly open scholarship for the next period of the journal’s existence. In the last year or two, we have also had to contend with the existence of large-language model artificial intelligence, capable of drafting academic-sounding articles in minutes. We insist on human-authored scholarship in our journal. It is

our hope to continue the journal's legacy and publish excellent, relevant scholarship on literature for the next 50 years.

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