Cure, Care & Duty

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. CHRISTIAN MORARU

SEPARATION IS AN ILLUSION

"We specialize early in my home country, so from high school through college, I studied Romanian and other literatures, including English, intensively. Then I went to Indiana and did a double Ph.D. in comparative and American literature.

"My generation was drawn to the American writers of the 1960s and 1970s because we saw them as models of political resistance. Those authors provided models of how to speak back to and against existing arrangements of culture and power.

"I take pride in my UNCG title of distinguished professor in the humanities. My work unfolds at the crossroads of the history of ideas, modern literature, ethics, and politics. As an English professor, I have tremendous appreciation for the neighboring fields that make my work possible. We tend to think of literature as separate from the real world, but that separation is an illusion."

LITERATURE PROVIDES FUNDAMENTAL INSIGHTS

"Literary studies are crucial for the welfare of a democratic society. We're surrounded by stories. You turn on the media, and there it is, a narrative someone is trying to project. It's important people understand what a narrative is, how it works on them.

"Obviously, a poem cannot cure cancer. But what happens or should happen in literature and humanities classes is the exploration, direct or not, of the very notion of cure. Why is it important to cure something, to care for something or somebody? How indebted are we to others?

"Before biologists or physicists get into their labs, they need to value notions like curing and caring, opening up one's mind toward others, critical thinking, and innovation. This is what the humanities teach, and this is foundational in terms of both further learning and citizenship, of what it means to be a good citizen."

COSMODERNISM AND GEOMETHODOLOGY

"I'm flattered that 'cosmodernism,' a term I introduced in a 2011 book, is widely used. That monograph focuses on a transitional moment in American culture – the 1990s and 2000s – when we're moving past postmodernism. I want people to hear a number of things in this term, like 'cosmos' – the notion that we see ourselves as part of something bigger. No matter where we are, we are in visible – or not-so-visible – relationships with others. We have an obligation to the welfare of others. We are responsible for what happens on the other side of the planet. That has become a basic reality in the 21st century.

"My term 'geomethodology' expands the analysis of cosmodernism with more emphasis on the epistemological and comparative aspects. The basic notion here is that you cannot read and understand 'A' without some sense or grasp of a certain element or phenomenon 'B' from elsewhere on the planet. 'Local' things always bear the imprint of vaster worlds."

SOBJECTS

"My latest monograph, 'Flat Aesthetics,' is an analysis of contemporary U.S. literature and the 'contemporary' more broadly. My focus, this time around, is on the non-human entities present in the system of world relationships.

"I try to do away with the distinction – and hierarchy – between subjects and objects. We're all objects, or 'sobjects,' which means, among other things, that we all have some kind of capacity to affect others. A rock, a tree, the coffee mug on my desk – we're all capable of causing events together as part of our entanglements.

"I produce words on paper or on a computer screen. But I am being made, to the same extent, as an author by the so-called 'instruments' surrounding me. Everything can be a source of affect – whatever effects obtain are the result of all those things, human and not, which all exist – all are – on the same level ontologically, if not politically.

"That brings us back to my notions of care, responsibility, and obligation. The more we recognize in things attributes traditionally set aside for humans, the more we have to rethink the way we behave toward non-human others."

I PLAY FOR UNCG

"UNCG has offered me and my family a home and a team to play for, as it were. I am proud of being here, and I remain fully dedicated to UNCG. It is very important to me that the humanities have received strong support at UNCG over my career and the university continues to invest in humanities research and education."

Interview by Mark Tosczak & Sangeetha Shivaji
learn more at english.uncg.edu/moraru



While many distinguished scholars are known as experts in one field, English professor Christian Moraru received the Senior Research Excellence Award for his mastery of several. Known internationally as an – and sometimes "the" – expert in post-WWII American fiction and postmodernism, and one of the most significant 21st-century scholars of world literature, he is also lauded for his deeply nuanced forays into literary theory.

The Class of 1949 Distinguished Professor in the Humanities has 8 monographs, 8 edited essay collections, over 300 articles and book chapters, over 400 reviews, and over 100 invited talks to his name and has published – in multiple languages – in leading journals and with prestigious academic presses. He has held a Fulbright and multiple Humboldt Research Fellowships and is currently supervising a $2 million European Research Council-funded international project on transnational literary history. Over his 25 years at UNCG, Moraru has also been a much sought-after mentor, with his advisees publishing their work as books with Oxford, Palgrave Macmillan, and other top scholarly presses.