PROGRAM PROPOSAL

INCH: CONFRONTING TRANSFORMATION

OVERVIEW

I am applying for a grant from the International Fund to support the work of the International Network for the Comparative Humanities, or INCH, as it is familiarly, even affectionately called. Established at Princeton in 2013 with a grant from the Global Collaborative Network, INCH was conceived as an international consortium to provide Princeton faculty and graduate students from English and Comparative Literature, departments rich in faculty and students whose work is international and comparative, a genuinely collaborative environment to foster interdisciplinary exchange and structured personal contact with their counterparts overseas.

The network brings together a group of faculty and graduate students from American and European institutions. Its meetings, hosted in turn by each partner institution in one of their locations and usually involving around four to six faculty members and at most 25 graduate students, are organized around variations on a major theme that is explored over a period of 18 to 24 months.

INCH thus provides the institutional home for faculty and students eager to learn from, and work with, scholars drawn from across Europe and the United States. Its main features are: the intensive and immersive format of the meetings; a non-hierarchical method for connecting advanced research and higher education; a model of dialogue and debate that exposes students to the international dimension of research and to the various approaches and methods guiding the most sophisticated interdisciplinary investigations.

The grant will allow us to develop and promote INCH as a new model for “networking” in the humanities, one that stresses the importance of collaboration across generational as well as national and institutional boundaries.

With funding from the International Fund, we can consolidate a network whose unique character and intellectual reach serves as a paradigm for scholarly associations specifically aimed to meet the professional as well as intellectual needs of graduate students, for whom opportunities for international exchange are slim to none. Our effort to provide an international community for graduate students, the most under-served population here at Princeton (and indeed across the academy in the U.S. and the world) grows out of our feeling that we have an ethical responsibility to provide our students with the experiences that will make them better able to meet the growing demand for scholars and teachers whose work reflects the broad culture and multicultural sympathies that such international exchanges encourage and make all but inevitable.

PEOPLE

NETWORK DIRECTORS:
MARIA DIBATTISTA (Princeton University, English and Comparative Literature)
BARRY MCCREA (University of Notre Dame, English and Comparative Literature)

CORE FACULTY
DEBORAH NORD  (Princeton University, English)
ESTHER SCHOR  (Princeton University, English)
HELENA BUESCU  (University of Lisbon, Comparative Literature)
SIMONA MICALI  (University of Siena, Comparative Literature)
LUCIA BOLDRINI  (Goldsmith College, Comparative Literature)

10 Graduate students from Princeton’s English and Comparative Literature departments; these students remain part of the network as long as they are enrolled. Once they receive their doctorate, we rotate new students into the roster of Princeton participants.

3 graduate students from Notre Dame

13 Graduate Students from partner institutions, including the Scuola Normale in Pisa and Cambridge University

I should add that we pay for everyone’s expenses, but no one is compensated for their time, not even faculty, who donate their time and expertise.

NEEDS

With careful husbanding of funds, we have been able to extend the initial three years tenure of our grant period. I understand that the International Fund does not normally support previously funded projects, but we are hoping, pleading might be the better word, that an exception might be made in this particular case, given the genuinely innovative character of our network and the paucity of programs and resources to further internationalization of research and interdisciplinary dialogue at the graduate level. I have been meeting with administrators and program directors across campus to find a permanent, or at least sustainable solution to our funding needs and have made some progress. With the equivalent of a two year “bridge” grant, I believe I will be able to find the resources, either within the university or from outside donors, that will allow us to continue with this successful and energizing experiment in international, cross-disciplinary exchange.

HISTORY

Since its inception four years ago, INCH has been refining a model that has proved inordinately productive. Our discussions are organized around a set of preassigned texts and films that participants prepared in advance. This format has proven to be quite effective in generating authentically interdisciplinary dialogue, since there is a common object that solicits different interpretations and makes evident diverse methodological and disciplinary approaches to the same issue. Our first cycle of workshops was devoted to the study of the Emotions. (See Appendix) Our inaugural year concentrated on “the Political Passions” – Ambition, Dissent and Rebellion – and our second was on the Social
Emotions, focusing on the intractability of Social Longing, the dynamic relation between Envy and Gratitude, and Anger in both its righteous and vicious manifestations.

We have now moved on to the question of Transformation, which will occupy us for some time. This theme engages current academic, political and intellectual debates about the character, direction and value of change: personal, political, cultural and ecological. Does change occur from within or without? When and how is transformation lasting, and when are we condemned to repetition? The theme is a natural progression from our study of the Political Passions and Social Emotions. These are psychic energies that are fundamentally reactive, either to external provocations or internal compulsions, whereas with Transformation we will be confronted with primordial acts or events, with where and how things change.

We envision and have planned a series of workshops projected along an historic arc: an initial workshop devoted to change experienced or understood as originating in Supernatural agents (gods, nature divinities, witches, sorcerers and magicians) or supranational aggregations (social and religious movements, political revolutions). The second year focused on change that issues from internal metamorphoses, and took as its primary objects those literary forms, such as lyric poetry, that historically emerged to represent and ideally instigate internal development. If we receive funding from International Fund, we will consider how the emergence of international corporations, which troubles the philosophical as well as legal understanding of persons and collectivities, has altered our conception of as well as social hopes for Transformation as progressive, ameliorative or, in the case of negative or disfiguring change, reversible.

We have already held a workshop on Supernatural Transformation, in which change experienced or understood as originating in Supernatural agents (gods, nature divinities, witches, sorcerers and magicians). Our chosen texts were Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, Seamus Heaney’s translation of an Irish medieval poem, “Sweeney Astray” and Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. This meeting took the more intense, but arguably more amiable form of a retreat, a model we hope to follow in the future. We also heard from a series of guest speakers, among them Fintan O’Toole, who did not just deliver a lecture, but attended individual sessions and joined us in all our meals. These informal as well informal occasions for conversation have helped secure and strengthen the bonds that make the INCH the unique intellectual community it is.

This spring, with the support of Hellenic Studies Program, we will host a three-day retreat dedicated to exploring the theme of Social Transformation. As is our custom, we will select texts and films that reflect our host country. For our meeting in Athens, we presently envision reading the *Oresteia*, poems by Cafavy, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Angelopoulos’ *The Travelling Players (O Thiassos)*. These texts might change, but our commitment to focusing on texts and films that invoke Greek culture and paradigms of change, including descents into barbarism as well as restorations of order.
Future sessions will be devoted to a continuing exploration of the modes, models and consequences of Transformation as a geopolitical phenomenon with enormous impact on everyday lives, national politics, and the ecological future of the planet.

APPENDIX

INCH MEETINGS

Past events:

• Princeton University, November 2013 – “Political Passions – Ambition”
• Notre Dame Humanities Centre in Rome (Italy), May 2014 – “Political Passions – Dissent”
• University of Siena, September 2014 – INCH/Synapsis – “Political Passions – Rebellion”
• Notre Dame International Center in Dublin (Ireland), March 2015 - “Social Emotions – Social Longing”
• Centro de Estudos Comparatistas da Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal), November 2015: “Social Emotions - Envy and Gratitude”
• Princeton University, February 2016 – “Social Emotions – Anger”
• Notre Dame Global Center at Kylemore Abbey (Ireland), August 2016 – “Transformation”

Upcoming meetings:

• Princeton University International Center in Athens (Greece), May 2017 – “Transformation – Social and Political Change”

INCH PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF SIENA

Other Sources of Funding:

I have sought outside support both within and outside the university. For the last two years I have partnered with Barry McCrea, a Princeton Ph.D. who is currently a Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Keough Family Chair of Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame, to secure additional funding for INCH and to provide meeting venues for workshops we held in Rome and Dublin. Barry has had some success in receiving Notre Dame funding to cover some of the expenses for the next workshop. Barry and I are also currently working with Simona Micale from the University of Siena to apply for European funding that will allow INCH to branch out and afford members of the network to stay on for longer periods after our group meetings held at our partner institution overseas.

Respectfully submitted,

Maria DiBattista
Charles Barnwell Straut Class of 1923 Professor of English