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## René Wellek Prize 2025, Monograph

Committee:

Chair: Simona Bertacco (University of Louisville): 2022-2025

Jeremy Glick (Hunter College): 2023-2026

Jing Tsu (Yale): 2024-2027

**Winner:** *Reading across Borders: Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism*, by Aria Fani

We are delighted to award the ACLA René Wellek Prize for an outstanding book in the discipline of comparative literature to Aria Fani, *Reading across Borders: Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism*. The book is organized around two major words: *adabiyāt*, the Persian term for literature derived from the modern European notion of literature as an institutionalized corpus of texts that expresses the ethos and the achievements of a people, and *adab*, the non-European derived Persian word that unites the aesthetics and ethics in its idea of literature. *Reading across Borders* maps the transition from *adab* to *adabiyāt* and the institutional role played by literature in the nation-making process of Afghanistan and Iran between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries.

One important element that complicates the study of the national literary traditions of Iran and Afghanistan is the language question. As Arian Fani writes, “The Persian literary tradition had no natural homeland. [...] In fact, Persian only accrued “homelands” as it spread into other regions, coming in contact with the cultural zones of Sanskrit, Turkic, and many other languages.” (2) Fani’s book thus documents the adaptation of the nationalizing project to the multilingual and polycentric cultures of Afghanistan and Iran with an eye to foregrounding the inter-national connections, dialogues, and collaborations among the intellectuals in the region.

*Reading across Borders*, however, is not only about Persian literature, or about the entanglements between the literary cultures of Iran and Afghanistan. What makes this book an “outstanding book in the discipline” is its ability to show the crucial role that comparative literature plays to understand the complexities of our contemporary world by using a context-specific study to engage with the major debates within world literature, postcolonial studies, and the humanities. Methodologically, *Reading across Borders* offers a convincing example of what twenty-first century comparativism can and should look like. In the words of its author, “*Reading across Borders* insists on the specificity of non-European cultures and concepts, but not through the tired and essentializing model of untranslatability. Instead, it brings the sensibilities and semantics of Persian terms into academic English, underlining the ways in which new intellectual approaches are undertaken by non-Anglophone literary cultures.” (4)

There is a lot to praise in this book and we would not do it justice by listing the main lessons one can learn here, but we do want to mention the epilogue, “Who Needs Literature Today?” as a personal, vulnerable meditation on what it takes to enter the classroom each day and engage with “what it means to be a living person and reading literature” (183).