
Introduction

What We Talk about When We Talk about the Eighties

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What do we talk about when we talk about the 1980s? A standard history textbook in the West would probably define the decade as the Reagan and/or Thatcher Era in political and economic terms. In the Eastern Bloc, as it still existed then, the 1980s were likely experienced as an exhilarating period that commenced with the founding of Solidarity in Poland (August 1980) and culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 1989). If you were living in East Asia back then, you might recall the gloomy decade stretching from Gwangju (May 1980) to Tiananmen (June 1989), and of course the gilded age of bubble economy in Japan. So much depends upon where and how we experienced each of these historical moments when we talk about the 80s.

What about our experience with Theory and Criticism? One might talk about the theoretical sophistication he finds with Stuart Hall's "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" (1980) and Homi Bhabha's "DissemiNation" (1990), while another might have in mind the critical advance she comes across in the work of Adrienne Rich ("Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 1980), Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1990), and Eve Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990). Yet another, with a decidedly Continental orientation, might speak of the pathbreaking envisioning of the human collectives in Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* (1980) and Giorgio Agamben's *La comunità che viene* (1990). There should no doubt be thirteen different ways of looking at Theory in the 1980s, if there were

Ex-position, Issue No. 40, December 2018 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.201812_(40).0001

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Ex-position
December
2018

thirteen theorists seated at a dining table.

What then was the status of the “literary” in “Literary Criticism Scene of the 1980s”? Already in 1988, Jonathan Culler, one of the contributors to this issue, pointed out a dramatic change in the status of literary studies in North America in the 1980s:

In the 1960s and 1970s, literary studies seemed in the business of importing theoretical models, questions and perspectives from fields such as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, the history of ideas and psychoanalysis. In the 1980s, however, the situation seems to have changed: on the one hand, literary studies has become an exporter of theoretical discourse, as other disciplines—law, anthropology, art history, even psychoanalysis—have taken note of developments in what literary critics call “theory” and have turned to it for stimulation. On the other hand, literary critics themselves, grown confident and sophisticated from their interdisciplinary encounters, have increasingly turned to writing about phenomena that fall outside the boundaries of traditional literary study. . . . (*Framing* xii)

As literary studies “situate[d] itself at the center of interdisciplinary exchange,” so did many “theory journals” flourish, especially among major Comp Lit departments across the United States, as the platforms for those “exporter[s]” to talk about Theory.

The truth is, the talk was not only interdisciplinary but also intercontinental. Theory landed in the East Asian Theater without delay and exploded in various forms and on various scenes on this side of the Pacific as well. This excitation is the very backdrop for the emergence of this journal, first founded in 1985 with the name *Studies in Language and Literature* (and renamed *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* in 2000). The 1980s were a time of vibrant energy in and outside of academe in Taiwan, and the journal was created to take on that momentum. Now, in the process of reinventing ourselves, the journal proposes this theme of revisit as a journey of self-examination. What topics were dominating the conversations in literary criticism back then? What critical and theoretical terms were casting intellectual debates? At a time when the humanities and humanistic social sciences are embracing thematics of periodization (the Cold War, the post-Cold War era, neoliberalism, to name a few), our feature topic in a way joins these moves in taking an interest in reassessing a historical development and its reverberations. If the 1980s saw the institutionalization of neoliberalism in the two Western powers, UK and US, and the nominal end of the Cold War, how can we refashion literary

criticism and theory of the time in light of these historical frameworks?

For this feature topic, we solicited contributions widely from scholars of different backgrounds and nationalities who are keen to reconsider the critical scene of the 1980s from their own perspectives. We are particularly fortunate to have Jonathan Culler and John Thieme, who actually *led* the scene on each side of the Pond, to share with the younger generations of scholars their reflections on the issues and debates they engaged themselves in at that time. Culler's revisionist approach to the strange case of "Poststructuralism" in the U.S., which harks back to the question he already posed in *On Deconstruction* (1982), is not a crude denunciation of the American fabrication of the empty category. Rather, it offers a historical analysis of the cultural (mis) translation that begot the illusion of post-ness of Poststructuralism, as well as a penetrating critique of the intrinsic risk that even the most authentic of French Structuralists embraced, that is, the risk of yielding to the hermeneutic "temptations of interpretation," to the extent that Structuralism's promise of the "more difficult enterprise of poetics" was shunted aside if not deserted outright. In effect, Culler explicates, with his characteristic lucidity, the essentials of the revolutionary intellectual movement called Structuralism, while presenting a good case for his recent, somewhat controversial claim that "cultural studies is really a disguised return to the uncompleted projects of structuralism, a return that highlights some aspects of structuralism that have been neglected" (*Literary* 249).

If Culler's is an attempt to re-collect some scattered moments of Structuralism's unfulfilled promise, Thieme's "personal retrospect" is a lively documentation of the moment of emergence of a yet-to-be-named field. It is indeed a rare and rich case of a "personal" experience coinciding with history's eventfulness: how a British professor of English with a special interest in "Commonwealth literature" was activated, as it were, not only by his personal academic commitment but also by the demands of this particular historical conjuncture that saw the inner-city uprisings of 1981—and general repercussions of the empire decentered—to embrace a new field that was to be known as postcolonial studies. Thieme's presence at the forefront of this scene proved to be long-lasting and fruitful: *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* under his stewardship grew to become an open forum fostering important conversations in the field.

Keiko Nitta and Yoshiaki Mihara, both of whom started their academic training after the 1980s, take up the task of revisiting theory. Nitta engages in the American feminist criticism of the 1980s by focusing on the issues raised by Black and Third-World feminists, such as the Combahee River Collective, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Rey Chow, among others. In their trenchant

critiques of the mainstream (i.e., “White”) feminists, Nitta sees not only their significant dissent from the “liberal and maternalist feminism,” but also “the germ” of the “planetary” vision with an “ethical comparativist impulse” that Spivak is to propose in the following decades. Mihara’s ostensibly “anachronistic” attempt to revisit the critical scene of the 1980s by virtue of the quaint juxtaposition of Vico and Spinoza takes, perhaps paradoxically, the form of close-reading of the two texts that belong to a very specific date (“on or about February 1983”), namely, Edward W. Said’s “Secular Criticism” and Paul de Man’s Messenger Lectures at Cornell University. Rather than simply opposing Saidian *criticism* to de Manian *critique* in order to pronounce a certain judgment, Mihara probes into the conditions on which criticism and critique may *supplement* each other by the careful teasing out of warring forces of theoretical implications within each text and across each other. One may call his essay an attempt at exercising a “poetics” of Theory, after the manner of Culler’s calling for a return to “the uncompleted projects of structuralism.”

While these essays deal with the Anglo-American scenes, the other four in this feature topic revisit the scenes on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Takeshi Kimoto’s depiction of the so-called “new academism” fad as a by-product of the Japanese “postmodern” condition and Jung-Hwan Cheon’s description of the “labor-intellectual alliance” under the oppressive military regime in South Korea are strikingly dissimilar and incongruous despite their geographical contiguity. Kimoto analyzes the theoretical as well as historical significance of Naoki Sakai’s cross-Pacific intervention in the Japanese critical scene, i.e., Sakai’s deconstructive critique of the putative unity of the “Japanese” people and language in reference to the (representation of) “translation” of Chinese classical texts into the still-born “Japanese” language. Kimoto shows how Sakai’s “schema of co-figuration” critically problematizes the construction of a national language and identity, as well as the binary opposition between the “West” and the “non-West.” Cheon, on the other hand, adopts a broad critical cultural studies approach in order to reassess the underground network of solidarity among workers, intellectuals, and student activists that gave birth to a distinct dissident cultural politics and literature “from below” in the 1980s South Korea. Cheon’s full-scale reevaluation of “the intellectual and emotional *élan* that fueled the democratization movement during the decade,” supported by an engaged analysis of the structurally produced “intellectual gap” (his term) together with sociological surveys of the student demographic, offers a fresh historical and critical view.

Taiwan-based Chinese Malaysian scholar Tee Kim Tong, too, gives an engaged take on his subject. Sinophone Malaysian literature has never ceased to be a site of

heated debates—as a matter of fact, the relatively recent neologism *Sinophone* is, to be sure, stirring up new controversies while casting new configurations for the community. A veteran writer and critic nurtured by this literary tradition, Tee is no stranger to these fierce scenarios. His essay seems to take it lightly, reading for us a short story of the Chinese Malaysian writer Xiao Hei. This apparent lightness is nevertheless overlaid with grave historical meaning. His re-visioning of the Sinophone Malaysian literary community in a time of disenfranchisement poses this difficult yet unavoidable question to all of us: What may be a proper lens through which to look at moments of political injustice? Parabolic? Allegorical? Or realist (if not realistic)?

Our feature topic closes with a piece written by a scholar from the home institution of the journal. Hsien-hao Sebastian Liao looks back to the 80s by interweaving personal and critical reflections—reflections not only on the (possible) missed opportunities for Taiwan to gain productive dialogue, but also on the limits and limitations of Western theory. Conversant with various schools of theory, Liao posits a thought-provoking, if not provocative, appeal at the end: turn to Asian cultural traditions for inspiration—or, more precisely, find convergences among different philosophical and theoretical strands and tackle the immanence/transcendence question, a question that, he argues, will prove urgent if we wish to seriously engage in our situation on both the political and ontological fronts.

With this feature topic, we never intended to present a thorough survey of the era in question. What we find remarkable about the essays and articles included here, however, is that they form a virtual dialogue among themselves, addressing similar critical concerns and pointing to historical exigencies which resonate with one another albeit grounded in rather different social situations (the postcolonial, the post-authoritarian, the post-New Critical, the neocolonial, the neo-authoritarian, and the fake progressive). But what is even more significant, we think, is that these scholars did not shy away from polemics: they are honest, they are straightforward, and they make compelling observations. This in itself should make for a good start for self-renewal.

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