

Theory on Theory

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Abstract

This chapter assesses three areas of theoretical work: metatheory, via Jason Demers' *The American Politics of French Theory: Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault in Translation* and Galin Tihanov's *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*; three studies that theorize on the history of theory, John E. Drabinski's *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*, John Frow's *On Interpretive Conflict*, and Anne Anlin Cheng's *Ornamentalism*; and five texts indicative of a surge of interest in the linguisticity of 'death', David Wills' *Killing Times: The Temporal Technology of the Death Penalty*, Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, David Simpson's *States of Terror: History, Theory, Literature*, and Marc Crépon's *Murderous Consent: On the Accommodation of Violent Death and The Vocation of Writing: Literature, Philosophy, and the Test of Violence*.

In previous editions of this chapter, 'Theory on Theory' has tended to refer to a metatheoretical discourse informed by the institutional, social and political formation of 'French theory.' According to intellectual historian François Cusset (*French Theory*, Éditions la Découverte [2003]), American academia reinvented the work of 'Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co.' in the image of its own preoccupations against the backdrop of an 'ideological polarity' that was absent from France and brought to prominence thinkers who were not necessarily assigned the same cultural significance in their country of origin. Since Cusset, a number of contextual studies on the thinkers customarily associated with structuralism and post-structuralism have appeared, many of which have been reviewed in past iterations of this publication: the works in question tend to share a general methodology of integrating intellectual history and sociology with theory and philosophy, sometimes contributing in their own right to the scholarship on Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Barthes, and others. Characteristic is a concern with reorienting the study of theory around the idea of the major founding event—the 1966 conference on "Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" held at Johns Hopkins University is frequently cited, but there are others; this historicizing gesture is intended as a response to but also results from the many proclamations of theory's 'death' around the turn of the millennium (for instance, Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Penguin [2003]). The first two books I will review, Jason Demers' *The*

American Politics of French Theory (Toronto [2018]) and Galin Tihanov's *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (Stanford [2019]), follow broadly in the footsteps of such 'metatheoretical' works, which count among them D.N. Rodowick's *Elegy for Theory* (Harvard [2013]) and Jane Elliott's and Derek Attridge's *Theory after 'Theory'* (Routledge [2011]). They, too, are concerned with treating theory as a historical object in order to better grasp its 'legacy' (as a mortified corpus) and react to its dismemberment and redistribution, for better or worse, across fields dealing no longer with the largely linguistic concerns of post-structuralism but with biological, material, political, and other 'cultural' issues (as a shadow of itself, under quotation marks).

I will return later to the question of whether theory's mortification and 'turn' away from language are indeed as factual or irredeemable as they are often proclaimed to be, but first I would like to discuss the works by Demers and Tihanov as possible indicators of a peculiar new trend within what I will call 'metatheory' in shorthand. I say 'possible' because it may of course have been sheer coincidence that two works with such divergent primary objects and intellectual agendas should have both adopted the same paradigm within a year of one another. Seeing patterns, however, is an occupational hazard of a certain kind of intellectual historian, as Demers might confirm. *The American Politics of French Theory* states as its main goal the 'work[ing] through [of] what it means to think about French theory as a product of the global '68 years' (p. 10); its purpose, to restore to theory the 'prominent political questions' that are elided when its corpus is considered solely through the lens of its textual transmission within the Anglo-American academy. Demers is indebted to Cusset's renarrativization of theory as the institutional and socio-political product of an unequal trans-Atlantic exchange, which he credits with opening the door to the possibility of there being multiple narratives and points of arrival of theory's dissemination (p. 9). Unlike Cusset, however, Demers declines to 'understand a set of French thinkers as 'French theory' avant-la-lettre,' opting instead to 'explore what it means to understand these thinkers within the context of the social movements that animate them, and that they help to animate in turn' (p. 3). Accordingly, the book anchors its four chapters in two events: the aforementioned 1966 conference held at Johns Hopkins, during which Barthes, Derrida and Lacan were brought from France to introduce structuralism to an American audience and ended up inaugurating post-structuralism; and a conference organized by Sylvère Lotringer at Columbia University in 1975 on 'Schizo-Culture,' which heralded the arrival of Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault in American cultural politics. Demers dislocates both events from their usual contexts (the sources of Derrida's 1966 lecture, 'The Ends of Man,' in the history of European philosophy, and the academic reception of Foucault) and reassigns them places within associative 'assemblages' that foreground the conferences' respective degrees of engagement with the student and worker revolts, anti-war and civil rights movements, and the pop-cultural vanguard happening around them.

In Demers' 'diachronic' (p. 7), 'horizontalizing' (p. 14) account of theory's becoming, there are nevertheless losers and winners. The evident loser is Derrida, whose

acknowledgement of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in the preamble to 'The Ends of Man' is compared unfavourably in Chapter one to the work of mourning students were doing. For Derrida, King's death represented all who are 'marginalized by the university and by American democracy', whose sentiments he 'translat[ed] ... into the margins of a philosophical address that deconstructs the logic of margins and centres' (p. 39). But this, for Demers, stood in stark contrast to the actions taken by students, who were walking out of university-approved memorial services altogether in order not to 'deaden [King's] spirit' (p. 41). Complex networks existed between student uprisings and the civil rights and black liberation movements, but 'while Derrida's philosophy aims at an ever-inclusive democracy-to-come, the complexity of the margins ... have little place within his discourse' (p. 41). For Demers, Derrida's 'ethical move of leaving the other in a state of indeterminacy—the infinite deferral of *différance* and the *à venir*—is disabling at the same time as it is liberating ... [and] reifies the centre it deconstructs' (p. 41). By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari not only provide Demers in Chapter two with terminological innovations that felicitously map onto his descriptions of the movements in their orbit, they are also cast as active participants in a 'Body without Organs' linking them to French workers, an American underground press, a radical women's collective, several Beat poets, and the anarchist art gang Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers via the trans-Atlantic artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel (p. 65). In the third and most compelling chapter of the book, Demers uses the figure of 'relay' to redescribe Foucault's project with the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP) of transmitting to the wider public prisoners' testimonies with the help of a network of public figures, intellectuals, social workers and family members (p. 121). Demers ascribes special significance to a publication the GIP devoted to George Jackson, whose volume of letters *Soledad Brother* had been smuggled into France by Jean Genet (p. 131). The GIP's *L'assassinat de George Jackson* (1971) documented in an uncredited manner the involvement of intellectuals in disseminating French prisoner demands and, inasmuch as it positioned them as 'translators' of 'neglected voice and their histories' rather than as programmatic leaders, Demers suggestively volunteers its argument against intellectual vanguardism as the backdrop to Foucault's essay 'What is an Author' (p. 141).

Chapter four similarly describes the publication series Semiotext(e) as issuing from the complex assemblage of pop culture and intellectual trends evident at the 1975 Schizo-Culture event. Indeed, this flattening out of centre and periphery and, with it, the disavowal of scholarly idiom and institutional privilege in favour of a reorientation towards 'borders meeting and border crossings' (p. 4) characterizes Demer's historiographic principle as a whole. Theory, for Demers, has to be broken out of what Jakobson called a 'contiguity disorder': the tendency to 'select and substitute rather than think about combination and contexture' (p. 7). The remedy for the 'melancholic tone' that has abounded in 'decades of conversation about the death of theory', Demers submits, is what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih have called 'the creolization of theory' or what Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter and Jacques Lezra have identified as 'untranslatability': thinking the 'proliferation of speech

due to the incommensurability of a lexicon with the tenor of a concept ... [and] find[ing] layers of complexity, including those principles that theory, by association, was working to transmit' (p. 182). Resulting from Demers' adoption of these paradigms from translation and world-literature-adjacent studies are rich descriptions of many hitherto underanalyzed activities that moved alongside what has customarily been known as 'French theory'—yet, for this reader, the payout was surprisingly low in terms of new insights into the major writings that these French theorists, for their part, were producing in tandem with their underground associations. Sadly missing from the entire 'assemblage' was, quite simply, a reading of a text, or indeed a sustained discussion of the ideas themselves and not just a redescription of the surface networks of happenstance; paradoxically, precisely when everything recounted falls into a pattern or assemblage of non-predetermined pathways, what gets lost is real contingency.

It was therefore surprising to find that Galin Tihanov's *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, which sets out to uncover the roots of theories of literariness (as the hallmark of 'Theory' before 'the boundary between literary and nonliterary texts ... [was rendered] porous and eventually insignificant' [p. 29]), likewise applies paradigms borrowed from world literature to his historiography of theory. Tihanov's primary objective is to unsettle the common narratives positing that 'Theory' is equivalent to French post-structuralism which became a 'discourse on itself' after its move to the United States, that Theory can be equated with 'the dialectical method, honed by Hegel' (p. 6), or that theory is 'dead', having 'dissipated' into philosophical, cultural, and other domains Tihanov considers to be extraneous to literary concerns (p. 5). Rather, Tihanov argues, 'the advances in literary theory in its second 'golden age,' the 1960s and 1970s, were ... variations on themes, problems, and solutions [already] worked out in the interwar period in Russia and in Central and Eastern Europe', all of which circled around a founding polemic: what constitutes literariness (p. 9). To reconstruct the 'radical historicity of literary theory' (p. 25) with a view towards shifting its centre of gravity from West to East is, for Tihanov, therefore to eschew the notion that theory has a single point of origin in favour of telling a 'multiple story of [its] emergence, disappearance, and trace that focuses on a particular time-limited episteme' (p. 7). To relay this story, Tihanov adopts from world literature the conviction that transnational mobility, exilic conditions, and estrangement are necessary conditions for thinking theoretically about literature, that is, 'beyond the presumed naturalness of native tongues and traditions' (p. 24). Coining the Foucault-inspired phrase 'regimes of relevance' to underscore that there can be 'prevalent modes of appropriating ... literature in society at [any] particular time' (p. 21) that wax, wane, or come into conflict, Tihanov identifies as theory's defining conflict the 'turf wars' (p. 23) waged by Russian Formalism and Marxism over whether to judge literature on the basis of literariness' and in respect to 'the struggle for the distribution of social and cultural capital in the new states' (p. 23).

This fundamentally agonistic-exilic character of literary theory's formation in interwar Russia and Eastern Europe is paradigmatic for Tihanov; he finds it analogous to the

'eruptive sway of literature in activist social and political debates on campuses in Paris, Prague, and Berkeley' in the 1960s (p. 23) not only structurally but also conceptually, that is, in view of what theory from the 1960s to 1980s, too, regarded as literary or not. Accordingly, the book's five chapters give 'thick' (p. 69) descriptions of the conflicts between regimes of relevance out of which the value of literariness became a question worth asking, suggesting along the way how Kristeva, Lukács, Jakobson and others adapted versions of the same to later debates. Pointing out that Formalism and Marxism were 'competitors in the field of rational enquiry into the objective laws that govern human agency' (p. 33), Chapter one recounts a 1927 dispute in Leningrad at which the two camps debated whether literature's value lay in its autonomy or its social utility. Tihanov then discusses Viktor Shklovsky's theory of estrangement—which would find interlocutors in Jünger, Simmel, Brecht and Marcuse—as an expression of the 'co-existence' of both regimes, autonomy and utility, in the one moment (p. 38). A hitherto unknown chapter of Formalism—Eurasianism—flags an ambition of reconciling Marxism and Formalism for Soviet aesthetics circa 1929 (p. 59). Chapter two examines Gustav Shpet, a Husserlian phenomenologist who later became involved with members of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and originated a concept of poetic 'grammar' that Jakobson would later adapt when he coined the idea of a 'poetic' function (p. 87). For Tihanov, Shpet is a figure through which the remains of nineteenth-century hermeneutics continue to contest the experimental agenda of the Formalists (p. 94). Chapter three recasts Bakhtin as transitioning from ethics and aesthetics to the philosophy of culture during his exile in the 1930s; far from merely a Formalist or Structuralist, Tihanov argues, Bakhtin upheld a 'humanism without subjectivity' (p. 107) in which 'the antagonistic view of [literature's] autonomy and specificity versus its dependence on the forces of society and politics is gradually mitigated ... through reconceiving literature as an intermodal strand in ... cultural memory' (p. 133). In Chapter four, Tihanov examines a group of academics that undertook to reconfigure Formalism under the banner of 'semantic paleontology' (p. 134). Chapter five discusses the re-formation of the Russian literary canon and theoretical debates in journals published by young émigrés who congregated in Paris and elsewhere in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution.

In sum, the book gives a deeply informative account of figures whose orbits intersected with those of contemporaneous European theorists but were never previously accorded a 'regime of relevance' of their own. It serves a valuable purpose in shifting the centre of gravity of theory's history to another geopolitical locus and in lending agency to a diaspora whose peculiar epistemic circumstances may have contributed the single most important question motivating modern literary theory. Nevertheless, Tihanov's singular focus on tracking the career of one question—what is literariness—from the place he considers its genuine birthing arena through all of 'Theory' leads him to utter some bizarre and implausible statements about post-structuralism, deconstruction and adjacent fields. It is of deconstruction, for instance, that Tihanov writes that it 'was setting a new agenda, on

which literature was no more than an item of business among others. Thinking and writing about literature thus lost the edge of specificity and uniqueness, and the boundary between literary and nonliterary texts, so solemnly guarded ever since the Formalists, was rendered porous and eventually insignificant' (p. 29). Not only 'philosophy' counts for Tihanov as 'nonliterary'; 'in a growingly ambitious union with semiotics,' he continues, 'literary theory would try to assume the ultimately self-destructive role of a general theory of culture' (p. 29). For Tihanov, such a 'general theory of culture' is typified by 'Feminism, postcolonialism, and New Historicism,' whose development he describes as 'a symptom of poor health and lack of self-sufficiency on the part of literary theory' (p. 29). The reason he gives for this degeneration of literary theory's 'health' is equally jarring: deconstruction (and Feminism, postcolonialism, and New Historicism) are the result of 'the changing status of literature and its consumption in an increasingly globalized postindustrial society dependent on an incessant flow of information and image-based communication' (p. 29). He then proceeds to accuse such degenerate theories of treating literature 'as another tool of personal therapy or entertainment' (p. 30). In brief, Tihanov's insistence on applying a single pattern for recognizing literary 'relevance' leaves him grasping for straws when encountered with loose threads—similar to Demers' predicament when, following the same paradigm of prioritizing combination and contexture, he loses sight of texture itself. That two otherwise entirely disparate projects should both apply world literature's precepts to metatheory with such similar results probably says more about the paradigm than about the projects themselves.

Is there another way to 'creolize' theory? Can theory's debts and legacies be radically historicized and decentred without flattening out all singularity or distorting the localities of engagement beyond utility or recognition? Earlier I alluded to the possibility that proclamations of theory's 'death', by which it is usually meant that theory's 'linguistic turn' has been irrevocably replaced by a plethora of identity, area, and cultural 'studies', might themselves be symptoms of an anxiety to hold fast to some sense of a unified field. One way to unify a field is, of course, to historicize—and if ever there were indication that there is widespread concern with consolidating the authority of theoretical disciplines, it would be found in the historiographies of formalism, the Yale Critics, critical theory, and even analytic philosophy that have appeared in recent years. As much as the historicization of a field promises to interrogate its myths of origin, it also tends towards policing its boundaries if its underlying aim is to systematize, synthesize, and assemble its data into recognizable patterns. The next three titles I will review take precisely this historiographic principle to task.

The first is a treatment of one of the foremost contemporary theorists of creolization itself, Édouard Glissant. John E. Drabinski's *Glissant and the Middle Passage* (Minnesota [2019]) pays special attention to Glissant's theoretical writings in order to develop the first sustained English-language account of the philosophical dimensions of his work. Drabinski close-reads Glissant to unpack his claims from the texts themselves; at the same time, he places his ideas in 'instructive tension' (p. xviii) with a number of fellow Caribbean and

European thinkers such as Heidegger, Césaire, Fanon, Deleuze and Benjamin. Drabinski's aim is thus twofold: first, he wants to pay homage to the sense in which 'Glissant's poetry and poetics comprise decades of testimony to the centrality of the Middle Passage and demonstrate how thinking at the shoreline, the site of arrival and memory and futurity, makes Caribbeanness a distinctive intellectual force' (p. x); and second, he wants to 'move the question of the Middle Passage to the centre of philosophical thinking about language, time, history, memory, embodiment, subjectivity, aesthetics, and the very idea of the task of thinking itself' (p. x). As Drabinski argues following Glissant, we must start with creolization as a geographically specific, historically irreducible experience, with 'the abyss ... [as] an irretrievable sense of loss' and 'the Middle Passage' not as a crisis of representation (which 'white European' philosophy has fixated on as the site of its own reinvention in the wake of the twentieth century's traumata [p. xii]) but, rather, as 'simultaneously the evacuation of meaning and the beginning of being, becoming, knowing, and thinking' (p. x). Taking 'the experience of mass displacement, death, and forced migration' that marks Caribbean experience 'seriously as founding philosophical moments' (p. x), Drabinski sees Glissant's work as a site from which to launch a 'revision' of 'the anticolonial and postcolonial prerogative of so much midcentury francophone thought in the Caribbean and Africa' that have tarried with 'genealogies of ideas of race' (p. xi) and their deleterious effects, as well as of the tendency of Western philosophy—Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida—to universalize the white European experience of trauma and treat the Afro-Caribbean tradition merely as 'a kind of counter-modernity' (p. xiii). Beginning instead with the 'abyss', embracing 'fragmentation', and remaining attuned to the specificities of 'place' and its 'historicity', Drabinski shows how Glissant dislodges philosophy's inherited notion that it necessarily flows out of and back into Europe and sets up Caribbean thought as excessive, world-making, and operative in itself outside of Western logic.

In Drabinski's treatment of Glissant, the history of theory becomes a philosophy of its own historicity. Creolization, radically emplaced and historically specific, produces excess in Glissant's encounters with European philosophy, replacing the 'colonial spectres of comparison and measure' (p. xvi) with paradox that generates abundance and relation that transforms the colonial Other and its logics and languages. As Drabinski reminds us, the imperative to make comparable and to mix was itself a tool used by colonizers to exact violence on the lives of the colonized, and he finds a direct descendant thereof in 'the long twentieth century in Europe and its capacity to think loss as a form of presencing' (p. 8), beginning with Heidegger's 'commitment to the presencing of [Greek] roots, even in the experience of absence' (p. 8). Such nostalgia ends up 'forestructur[ing] the anticipated (normative) experience of the past' (p. 8)—its 'expect[ation of] connection' (p. 9) produces the sense of loss in the first place—and it also decides what gets experienced as loss and how—with reference to Césaire, Drabinski points out that mass death and disaster 'was always present in the colonies and never provoked serious discourse or crisis' as its counterpart did in European theory (p. 9). Glissant's *'pensée archipélique'* (p. 11), by

contrast, neither treats nostalgia as a condition of possibility for thinking nor partakes in the principle of crisis that structured so much of Europe's concept of history since Husserl. As such, Drabinski argues, it upends a European dialectic of legibility and illegibility and its associated 'ideal of transparent universality' (p. 14; cited from *Caribbean Discourse*), and demands instead a 'right to opacity', to difference, and thus to 'infinite becoming' (p. 14) and the assertion of plantation-born Caribbean experience 'without reference to what precedes' (p. 16). For Drabinski, Glissant's 'opacity' thus contains the potential to undo a Heideggerian century of historical thinking.

This potential plays out in encounters speculative and philological across the book's five chapters. Chapter one interrogates the consequences of Glissant's engagement with European discourses for understanding trauma, loss and historical time via a meeting staged between Glissant's and Benjamin's respective reflections on the destruction of Carthage in the 'Theses on the Concept of History' and 'Black Salt' (p. 44). Chapter two proposes how Glissant's insistence on 'irretrievable loss' (p. 62) not only transforms 'the language of traumatic memory conceived on the white European model' (Blanchot, Levinas, Caruth and LaCapra), but also interrupts linear models of futurity by insisting on repetition and abyssal beginning, not unlike Benjamin's allegory (p. 68) and the Levinasian-Derridean trace (p. 90-1). In Chapter three, Drabinski describes how Glissant appropriates Deleuze and Guattari for a new vocabulary concerning subjectivity unmoored from questions of Being as such. For Drabinski, Glissant, too, formulates a subject that is 'entwined ... with the ontology of earth and roots' (p. 104), thereby providing a 'crucial rewriting of radical French theory in the context of ... archipelag[ic fragmentation]' (p. 104) in view of 'the pain and violence of history' (p. 113) and by positing 'paradox' as subjectivity's mobile and reversible ground (p. 113). Chapter four explores Glissant's rewriting of Continental aesthetics in the context of Césaire's and Lamming's situation of language on the hinge of identity, knowledge, and historical transformation, and rethinks exile not as a new linguistic 'condition' (as per world literature) but as 'errancy' (p. 163), 'exile without the thought of origin' (p. 164), and radicalized anti-systematic thinking (p. 165). Chapter five reflects on the precarity in which Glissant's repudiation of (Western) repetition and mimesis leaves the concepts of collectivity, identity, and intellectual work, but also redeems *poiesis* as a site of creative excess contra both Heidegger's Germanocentrism and Fanon's anti-colonial poetics. Drabinski's staging of Glissant's philosophical encounters not only uncovers the limitations of 'white European' theory, it also sustains an account of 'the geographic character of intellectual work' or, as Drabinski calls it (following Grant Farred), of the 'vernacular intellectual': what its categories, relations, and forms of expression are inasmuch as they are 'Caribbean without qualification' (p. 208). While at times some contact points with 'European philosophy' might have benefitted from more directly related examples—Benjamin on ruins in the New World (in *One Way Street*) or Derrida on cosmology and place in his discussion of *khōra* in the *Timaeus*—Drabinski's account of creolization as philosophical provocation is exemplary for a multiply rooted theory of theory's history.

The second 'metahistorical' book under discussion, John Frow's *On Interpretive Conflict* (Chicago [2019]), starts from a somewhat different premise: that 'interpretation', integral to literary studies and the social sciences alike, has ossified into 'institutions' that forget that even 'the morphological categories that make quantitative analysis possible ... are never simply there to be observed and described, [but rather] are constituted ... by means of an interpretive decision' (p. 10-11). Frow's initial target is the 'surface' and 'distant reading' popularized by followers and detractors of Franco Moretti, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (for instance the so-called 'new formalisms' proliferating across English departments, or various factions calling themselves 'post-critique')—but he also includes Quentin Skinner's intentionalist approach to intellectual history under this banner. For Frow, arguments against interpretation simply neglect that 'we have no choice but to engage in interpretive conflict' (p. 11). In fields where the organization of information and raising of infrastructures for its interpretation—their theories—are indebted to some form of this 'intentional' conflict, patterns involve many different 'protocols' when imputed, and 'such frameworks' are not unitary but 'multiple along both a vertical (diachronic) axis and a horizontal (synchronic) axis' (p. 21-22). Only through this lens do we grasp that the 'meaning of artifacts and texts changes constantly as they enter new cultural formations' (p. 22); interpretive contests are, moreover, 'not reducible to conflicts of interests within and between social groups' (p. 22) but are, rather, frictions that exist within and between 'regimes of value' (Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*) produced in the interpretive act itself (p. 22-23). Unlike Tihanov, who uses almost identical terminology, Frow thus sees these 'regimes' not as structures that precede interpretation but as 'effect[s] of reading' (p. 23); again unlike Tihanov, who affixes two 'regimes' (autonomy and utility) as measures by which to judge and exhaust the value of literature, Frow 'does not attempt to enumerate a fixed set of possible or existing regimes' since 'no interpretation ... exhausts the possibilities given by the regime' (p. 23). Indeed, 'no necessary depth of shared cultural knowledge' need exist 'between the participants to an exchange' as 'all negotiation of meaning ... takes place across cultural boundaries and at points of social tension' (p. 24). This principle allows interpretation to be thought as 'an articulation not of pure differences between fully self-identical formations but of partial ... and constantly contested differences between formations which are themselves internally differentiated and heterogeneous' (p. 25). It is in the 'multiple temporalities' subsisting in the interpretive framework that Frow sees 'the ethico-political dimension of interpretation' (p. 25): interpretation is never singularly past, present, or future, but each of these a function shot through with all of the other temporal modes in which a text or object did or can exist.

'Interpretive conflict' finds applications in the settler colonial world as well, and Frow includes an example thereof in the introduction: the case of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the treaty signed in February 1840 purporting to transfer sovereignty over New Zealand from the Māori to the British Crown. Besides the fact that 'sovereignty' was used as the translation of a neologism derived from a phonetic rendition of 'governor' and had no direct equivalent in

Māori, Frow points out (following Donald McKenzie's *Oral Culture, Literacy and Print in Early New Zealand*) that there existed a 'more fundamental conflict ... between the interpretive regimes of a literate and an oral culture and the different ways of embedding truth in language that they embody' (p. 32). For the Māori to fully comprehend a written signature as a legal commitment 'entirely contradicted [their] oral mode of decision-making for which a written document would have been at most a component of a larger process of discussion ... where the written text had no overriding authority' (p. 32). The signatories to Te Tiriti o Waitangi would therefore have assumed there would be a host of oral understandings accompanying the written word that continued rather than truncated the sovereignty enjoyed by their hereditary chiefs—including over their land, the separation of which from their owners was spiritually inconceivable. 'Distinct regimes of interpretation thus embody distinct cosmological and epistemological understandings' (p. 35), Frow writes; they also 'mobilize distinct forms of participation in the analytic or aesthetic situation and correspondingly distinct effects of subjectivity ... [such that] every regime of interpretation [also] appeals to an implicit metadiscourse which justifies its actions and ends' (p. 36). Agreement, when it takes place, thus always involves 'translation or negotiation or struggle across porous borders, and ... is never guaranteed in advance' (p. 38). In fact, Frow submits, 'interpretive institutions are not the stable counterpart of interpretive conflict but are, rather, the ongoing and always provisional outcome of conflict' (p. 40), such that we ought to consider them 'institutive' of objects that they 'bring into being as ... object[s] of knowledge' along with the methods that come with understanding them as such (p. 41). Chapter one demonstrates how 'interpretive conflicts' are 'productively sustain[ed]' by institutions (p. 41) through a close examination of a 2008 US Supreme Court case that staged a conflict between 'originalist' and 'contextualist' readings of the Second Amendment; the majority judgment invested the Constitution with absolute authority by acting as if its interpretation were a timeless institution.

Chapter two revisits *The Merchant of Venice* as the site where an interpretation anchoring the text on a single historical origin ends up instituting a refusal to reckon with its contribution to the history of anti-Semitic tropes. In Chapter three, Frow turns to objects of worship in the art museum and the aesthetic, religious and ontological regimes that come into conflict under the lens of 'iconoclasm', which he finds operative in the histories of Western art, mass media and celebrity, social media, and indigenous art. Chapter four discusses the meeting of institutions and counterinstitutions in climate change denial to argue for the relative reliability of the institution of scientific knowledge over that of its detractors. Positing that 'interpretive formations ... institute realities and conflicts over those realities' (p. 47), Frow echoes the Marxian injunction for critical theorists to not merely interpret but also to change the world—but takes one step beyond Marx in declaring that the 'ordinary philological politics of understanding strange languages and their creation of real and contested worlds' (p. 48) can lead to real change, positioning himself directly (and unsurprisingly) in conflict with the Skinnerian school of intellectual history and in line

with social theorists such as Michael Warner and Luc Boltanski. Frow concludes with a reflection on aesthetic judgment, understood in the Kantian sense of ‘includ[ing] both cognitive and evaluative acts’ (p. 209), and discusses how each of his four case studies involves some measure of reflective judgment: ‘the work of interpretation [that, in] deferring to a text which its very activity creates as an interpretable object, constructs the universal that is supposed to preexist it’ (p. 210). With this final gesture, Frow joins ranks with a number of critical theorists, most notably Samuel Weber, who have, over the past several decades, revisited Kantian aesthetics as the site of emergence for institutional critique while also applying tools of literary criticism. The publication of this book in 2019 and the insights it affords in regard to the quasi-legal, quasi-authoritarian structures embedded in everyday negotiations with our enshrined liberties, sacred objects and meanings, prejudices and relation to science suggest that the linguistically inclined ‘legacy’ of post-Kantian theory is far from ‘dead’.

The third title to theorize the history of theory is primarily a work of cultural semiotics but deserves mention for the unique encounter it stages between several current discourses—posthumanism, feminist theory, critical race theory, Orientalism, new materialism, and nineteenth century architectural discourse on decorative style—in order to highlight the ‘real formation’ of a ‘ghost in Euro-American cultur[al theory]: the yellow woman’ (p. xii). Anne Anlin Cheng’s *Ornamentality* (Oxford [2019]) compiles a vast archive of the ‘material and representative history’ comprising the idea of the Asiatic woman in the literary, filmic, fashion, culinary, and legal imagination. In her first chapter, Cheng discusses the ‘Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women’, a little known immigration case that was deliberated in the Supreme Court and became one of the most consequential for the American conceptualization of legal personhood in the nineteenth century. Analyzing the prosecution’s case against a group of unaccompanied Chinese women that San Francisco immigration was loath to admit, Cheng shows that what constitutes a ‘natural person’ bearing the full range of rights of legal personhood was decided by a visual-sartorial logic seeking to deprive the women of their right of entry on the basis of what fabrics they wore and how their hair was done. The preeminence of abstraction and ornamentality for the law’s idea of the Chinese woman demonstrates that ‘at stake’ in natural law ‘is not epidermal visibility but racial visibility’ (p. 39), which Cheng takes as a reminder that ‘the hieroglyphics of the flesh’ (Hortense Spillers, cited on p. 60) is, in the legal context, ‘sutured’ from artifices both superficial and inescapable: ‘we are both more and less than the ornaments that unavoidably mark our skin with such mute insistence’ (p. 60). Chapter two, a study of Anna May Wong’s cinematic celebrity, shows that racialized beauty, too, implies a corporeality that ‘seems inextricably woven into an aesthetic and technology of ornamental thingness’ (p. 62), and argues for de-dichotomizing conceptual pairs such as authenticity and artificiality, interiority and surface, person and representation, and organic versus synthetic when discussing the intersection of race and gender. In Chapter three, Cheng uses the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2015 exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*, in

which numerous pieces associated Asiatic female skin with porcelain, to illustrate the urgency of taking seriously 'the life of a subject who lives as an object' (p. 92). Taking both Said and Foucault to task for their inability to imagine such a life outside of a critique of commodification or transgressive pleasure, Cheng argues that the Chinese female body demands to be understood as both more and less than human and also manmade, a 'resemblance' that memorializes bodily wreckage and the inorganic technicity of race making (p. 96).

Whereas Said, Foucault and others have long concentrated on power's penetration and structuration of carnality and flesh, Cheng points out that Asiatic femininity personifies the inhuman, inorganic object that preconditions human embodiment and, as such, poses a singular challenge for the Western category of the human and associated theories of power. 'The Asiatic ornamental object-person', Cheng suggests, 'contains a forgotten genealogy about the coming together of life and nonlife, labour and style, that conditions the modern conceit of humanness' (p. 105). Chapter four applies this insight to the analysis of an anxiety that has 'always haunted the racialized subject': the question of 'what constitutes flesh and what constitutes meat' (p. 108), which plays out in especially evident ways in discussions of Asian alimentary customs. Chapter five then reads Rupert Sanders's adaptation of the Japanese *animé* film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) as a tale of 'the animation of objects through the synthetic, full-body prosthesis of Asiatic femininity' (p. 137). Cheng's reading suggests that cyborg theory be revisited as an allegory of the deracinated, that is, white inorganic body (the main character, the Major, who in Sanders's film is played by Scarlett Johansson) that encases 'the traumatic kernel of Euro-American imperialism and racial history' (p. 135)—the 'yellow woman', who in the film is a young Japanese woman whose body was traumatically annihilated and whose mind now inhabits the body constructed for her in the figure of Johansson's Major.

For Cheng, the 'yellow woman' is a spectre that haunts much of twentieth century 'theory', and after compiling her archive of historical and material witnesses to this haunting, Cheng concludes with a meta-discourse suggesting how and to what end revisiting theory's archive through the prism of Asiatic feminine objecthood—ornamentalism—can 'compel us to reconceptualize what counts as flesh in the history of race making' (p. 152). Critical race theory has been dominated by the idea of the primacy of flesh, and this, she suggests, is due to the predominance of critical attention on primitivism. Yet ignoring the imbrication of persons and things that ornamentalism describes runs the risk of repressing the 'aesthetic and inorganic entanglements ... [that are] critical to [the] history of human materialism' (p. 153). Rereading the image of Sethe's scarred back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through the framework of ornamentalist logic, Cheng proposes that the construction of the yellow body can help us visualize what Hortense Spillers has already pointed out in relation to the black body: that 'even bare flesh is inscription' (p. 153) and speaks to a degree through abstraction and disembodiment. The 'yellow woman's' propensity to unsettle the fantasy of corporeal integrity resonates with emerging work such

as that by Monique Allewaert on a colonial conception of agency, whereby human subsistence is enriched and transformed through its entanglement with ecology and geography, weather and nonhuman bodies (p. 154). How ornamentalism, as a theory of reassemblage in estranged yet all too familiar form, compares with the theories of assemblage and actor-network theory to which Cheng is indebted remains open—Cheng herself references the work of Jane Bennett, but her insistence on the aesthetic dimension of race making's abstract formalism has more in common with the scopophilia and post-catastrophic prosthetic fantasies of Freud's uncanny. Regardless, by upsetting the 'taxonomy of the human' (p. 156), ornamentalism articulates the unconstrained 'possibility of form in the aftermath of radical unmaking' (p. 156); by critically passing flesh through objecthood, Cheng suggests that the thriving of black as well as yellow bodies may be opened up in ways unhinged from the constraints of the life and death of en fleshed existence, which so often are still the constraints theory imposes on itself in regard to questions of ethics and politics.

I would like to conclude by mentioning a few titles that are indicative of a recent surge of interest in a notion of theory's 'death' that is similarly unhinged from the rise and demise of the fleshly theorist: how theory itself has conceived of death in view of language's involvement in deciding what death is and when it takes place. Theory's attunement to death's denaturalized, technical side is partly attributable to the recent English translation of Derrida's seminars on *The Death Penalty* (vol. 1 in 2013; vol. 2 in 2016), which has produced Peggy Kamuf's *Literature and the Remains of the Death Penalty* (Fordham [2018]) and David Wills' *Killing Times: The Temporal Technology of the Death Penalty* (Fordham [2019]). Recent theory's concern with what might be termed the lethal potential of language also reflects a growing concern with its own deeply political nature, which it can no longer cast aside as 'non-literary' or 'non-textual'; as Cheng writes, 'I strongly resist the divide between 'theory' and 'politics' (p. xiii). For some, this has meant plumbing literary, artistic, filmic and literature-based theoretical sources for a new critical paradigm in view of which disciplinary or generic differences subside into irrelevance. Michael Rothberg's *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford [2019]), for instance, takes Arendt's notion of 'vicarious responsibility' as its starting point for remedying theory's 'underdeveloped vocabulary' for describing our indirect, individual and collective entanglements in histories and regimes of violence, sometimes belated or from far. For Rothberg, remedying theory's lexical deficiency in this regard helps it address a fuller scope of the issues surrounding structural racism and white supremacy in the United States and elsewhere and enables it to articulate terms of long-distance responsibility and solidarity. David Simpson's *States of Terror: History, Theory, Literature* (Chicago [2019]), by comparison, seeks to better understand the rhetoric of terror pervading contemporary society (and propping up its increasing militarization) by means of a 'critical-historical philology' (p. xiii) of the term 'terror' as it makes its way from the designation of an extreme emotion to the target of security apparatuses. Simpson tracks this path from Plato's

Protagoras, Homer and Aristotle and the King James Bible, to the novelistic reception of the Jacobin Terror and Dostoevsky's portrayal of state terror. His Chapter six in particular revisits the accounts of subjectivity given by Sartre, Hegel, Heidegger, Freud and Kojève and others in light of emotional extremes and with an eye toward the lack of a comparable discourse linking emotion and the political in the Anglo-American world.

Wills gives a methodological account of this trend in the introduction to *Killing Times*: there has, he writes, no doubt been a 'vexed relation of academic work—and scholarship in the literature-based disciplines of the humanities in particular—to politics' in spite of the fact that Barthes had already argued in his 1966 *Criticism and Truth* that 'the literary is always already the political' (p. 4). 'In 2015', though, 'the argument appeared to have been won' and 'henceforth ..., academics working across the cultural field do not hesitate to foreground political analysis within their disciplines, and currents such as gender studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism very often have overt political critique as their basis' (p. 5). What seems crucial to Wills is not to disavow this 'overt political critique' by policing boundaries but to 'problematize' it in hopefully productive ways, which for Wills involves bringing attention to the 'temporal tension' inherent in the 'presumed efficacy of political action' that is 'related to a 'punctuality' of the moment' and which is at odds with the 'different, slower rhythm' of academic work (p. 5). For Wills, theory's political vocation is precisely to slow things down; it is in this mode of protracting action, he argues, that theory is able to reveal the 'temporal framework of the death penalty, where [a] type of insistence on instantaneous efficacy ('if we must do it, let's make it quick and painless') meets resistance in the requirements of due process and desire for the extension of human life' (p. 7). Ironically, Wills himself suffers momentarily from the same rush to execute that he claims to wish to forestall—he sees an 'uncanny resemblance between [the] relation of urgency' expressed by the aforementioned academics practicing 'overt political critique' versus the 'duration' (p. 7) of thinking and writing, on the one hand, and the relation between capital punishment versus legal procedure on the other, whereas one might think one ought to be more hesitant before comparing the call for political relevance with insisting on the instant of someone else's death.

Wills's effort to unpack the temporal aspects of the death penalty in a way that values life and justice over death and punishment is compelling, however, and culminates in his Chapter six, in which he analyses the 1835 memoir by the murderer Pierre Rivière, which was published in a commentated dossier by Foucault and a group of associated researchers in 1973. The memoir, which was 'conceived before but written following [Rivière's] commission of the crime' (p. 186) during which he killed his mother, sister and brother, illustrates for Wills how 'punishment is ... not just a penalty but also a discursive instance' (p. 12) since it always requires some form of recounting or confession, after which the punishment itself might be modified if enough guilt is admitted. As Wills notes, the memoir did not only end up being used both as a confession by the prosecution and as evidence in support of an insanity plea by the defense, thereby showing how the edges of confession

bleed into those of fiction. It also involved some temporal acrobatics within its narration, such as when Rivière documents his writing of an announcement of the murder before the deed itself is done. Thus, 'in a more troubling sense', Wills extrapolates from Foucault's commentary thereof, the memoir-confession 'opens up the temporal space between conception and act in a way that problematizes the very time of the criminal act: first, with respect to the juridical sense of intent or premeditation; second, by inserting within that space the narrative time of fiction in general, linking the killing time of a murderous act to certain functions of the literary machine' (p. 186). For Wills, Foucault and Derrida (whom he credits for his idea of the condemnation to death as being an experience of time [p. 13]) thus continue to help demonstrate how 'facts and acts of verbal discourse function ... in their own time, overlapping with the murder itself and uncannily disturbing the time of both crime and punishment' (p. 205). And now, more than ever, the book contends, it is necessary to return to Foucault's and Derrida's original insights into the discursive edge of death, for only by applying pressure to the death penalty might it 'expose the technicity or prostheticity of mortal time, something that we experience as a disruption of that time' (p. 13)—for the sake of living.

Wills's, Rothberg's and Simpson's books are also testament to the enduring propensity for 'French theory' to cross the Atlantic in new ways, for their theses echo those of two recently translated books by Marc Crépon, one of the editors of Derrida's seminars on the death penalty. The earlier of the two, *Murderous Consent: On the Accommodation of Violent Death* (Fordham [2019]), originally appeared in 2012 and belongs to a series of works on the encounters between political and linguistic communities. As Crépon writes in its introduction, 'murderous consent' is 'any accommodation with violent death, any habituation to murder, any compromise, in reality untenable, with principles that should forbid even the slightest exception, regardless of who the victims are' (p. 2). The radicality of Crépon's proposal (in comparison to Rothberg's, for instance) exceeds recognizing that when we abide in silence by acts of war in foreign lands or violent destruction of those we regard as 'not us', we, too, are consenting to the murder of others. What Crépon exhorts us to do, rather, is re-examine the very definition of what a life is that is lived, inexorably, 'with' other lives: recognize, in short, that we are without exception enjoined by others to recognize our belief in our own mortality, and that thinking our co-implicated mortality affords us the chance to refuse the separation of morality and politics. *Murderous Consent's* revisitation of a canon of twentieth-century thinkers and writers—Sartre, Freud, Levinas, Kraus, Anders and others—is followed by *The Vocation of Writing: Literature, Philosophy, and the Test of Violence*, first published in French two years later in 2014 (SUNY Press [2018]). There the call is to recognize that our inevitable affective, social and political formation in language (since early education) risks 'lock[ing us] into a language that is not ours' (p. 3) because of the very singularity of our relation to language, because of the risk we always run of 'being misheard or misunderstood but also ... of no longer knowing how and no longer being able to address the person to whom the word is addressed' (p. 9). Thus

‘we cannot ignore that our confrontation with violence is an inevitable dimension of our experience of language’ (p. 13): with each (linguistic-)political judgment we risk ‘get[ting] caught in the endless downward spiral of the murderous consents that frame history’ (p. 6). Literature and philosophy, however, register this confrontation for us in perceptible ways, because they ‘deal with language in any given epoch and take responsibility, not without risk, for the possibility that, crushed under the weight of conventions and clichés and submitted to communication’s imperatives for utmost efficiency and performance, words do not say (no longer say) anything of the singular ... if the sudden jolts and vicissitudes of politics do not reactivate them and reroute them for murderous ends first’ (p. 14). In risking capture and appropriation, the language arts measure the risk of subsisting under the ‘illusion of ... sovereign mastery of language and ... the rights that it grants’ (p. 14). Like Wills, Crépon sees the risk in expecting that expediency of communication should equate to political efficacy.

Like Tihanov, too, Crépon sees literature as coming under threat from ‘an always possible submission to a foreign order and law that it suffers, even if willingly’ (p. 15); these might be those extraliterary pressures Tihanov believes literature has had to face particularly since the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas Tihanov insists that ‘literariness’ plays a privileged role in the shaping of the struggle for (or against) socio-political relevance, however, Crépon refuses to uphold literature as singularly capable of providing viable answers to ethical problems, insisting instead that ethico-political dilemmas inhere in literature and the experience of language as such. The book’s two final chapters—on the emigré experience and on ‘fear of dying’—neatly illustrate where theory might still be headed beyond the world of world literature. Reading Arendt’s writings on emigration and Kafka from the 1930s and 40s, Crépon reminds us, first, that the immigrant cannot be assigned an ‘identity’ that remains the same because his or her identity is always discontinuous and spectral; violence does not stop upon arrival and assimilation demands proofs of allegiance and sacrifice, dividing from within the ‘exilic condition’ that world literature seems, from this view, naive to celebrate. And second, as literature amply shows, it is fear of death (rather than courage or death itself) that, ‘knowing the price of life’ (p. 181), serves as history’s ‘creative impulse, the very first motor of a rebellious upsurge’ (p. 181). Fear of dying is the response literature and philosophy oppose to murderous consent (read: expediency of communication in all its guises); it captures what ‘affects all the relations of confidence that comprise the tissue of existence: the minimal and in this sense vital credit that we need to place in the relations that link us to our body and make us believe in its right to breathe, to move, and to nourish itself freely; the credit in the relation that attaches us to others ...; and finally, for society as a whole, the credit in the institutions and in the protection and security that they are supposed to assure without, for all that, reversing into a permanent threat’ (p. 175). In other words, it captures what theory tends to miss when it analyses a phenomenon ‘from the point of view of its historical necessity or the internal logic of a revolutionary process that owes its survival, as a process, only to the

elimination of all opposition' and the elevation of all victims to 'effective opponents' (p. 174); it writes history, any history, not in accordance with a hero-logic of defeats and apotheoses, but somehow otherwise.

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