



FORUM ON CONTEMPORARY THEORY, BARODA, INDIA

(A Member of the Humanities Centers and Institutes)

In collaboration with

The Department of English, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam

&

International Lincoln Center for American Studies, Louisiana State University in Shreveport, USA

Organize its 25th International Conference

Dates: 20- 22 December 2022

Conference Venue: Don Bosco Institute, Guwahati

Conference Theme: “*A Requiem for Theory! Eschatological Ruminations*”

CALL FOR PAPERS

This 25th annual conference of Forum on Contemporary Theory will attempt to assess through our self-reflection what engagement with “Theory” has done to our critical thinking and reading during the last thirty years or so since the founding of our institution in Baroda in 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. By “Theory” with a capital ‘T’ we understand its generic affiliation with Deconstruction, a critical practice enunciated by Jacques Derrida as a weapon to take on the existing challenges posed by the European metaphysics (“metaphysics of presence”). Derrida’s dramatic interventions at the Baltimore symposium on “Structuralism” in 1966 catapulted him into a heroic status, which he carried on with confidence until his passing in 2004. No other individual in America or Europe in the 20th century in philosophy or literary studies has had such a charismatic presence. His theory of deconstruction was the buzzword during his time, and even now among some of his followers. The kind of theory and its practical use in the classroom he had introduced became an instant success in the US and elsewhere. In order to accord its legitimacy as an American product, Derrida placed it within the cultural and social movements in the 1960s. Like the grand project of European modernity appropriating into its fold smaller projects akin to its objectives, Deconstruction lent its critical strengths to other formations in need of similar strategies to fight the power structures they were confronted with. This productive alliance with those formations enabled Deconstruction to grow into a global paradigm, almost eclipsing some of its contenders in the field. Even New Historicism led by Stephen Greenblatt, a strong challenger of Deconstruction, while trying to provide alternative reading practices, did not have any direct confrontation with Deconstruction.

It seems, after the passing of all the originators of deconstruction (“The Yale Critics”) including Derrida, and in the absence of any formidable rivals to replace them we have arrived at a state of “exhaustion” in the critical scene. The word “exhaustion” may here imply as if most of our critical resources have been “used-up”; or we are tired of our entrenched obsession with “theory,” which was eventually turned into a “fetish” after being excessively exploited. Caught ironically in its own *aporia*, it began to show some signs of decline or diminishment around the turn of the century. But it is still difficult to announce its disappearance from the scene; though its force has weakened, it still continues to remain relevant in the classroom, particularly for those scholars dedicated to philological studies. But it does not seem likely that another tall figure will appear in the near future to replace Derrida and to begin a new trend in critical thinking. However, by reading some signals appearing on the horizon, it seems apparent that new voices are indeed being heard; they do not augur any radical turnaround but only attempt to indicate that it is possible to move on in doing theory not in a spectacular fashion but on an attenuated scale by recycling fragments from the

past to be useable in their changed contexts. However, this art of recycling requires some tact and ingenuity in order to be resilient to the new environment.

While it has not been clear yet the contours of the current critical scene, we have discovered at least two new voices articulating some possible routes to overcome this *impasse*. The first is from a literary scholar brought up on the tradition of American literary criticism and theory taking on this tradition from within and trying to modify it so that it once again returns to its efficacy from its new context. In her book, *Forms, Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, 2015), Caroline Levine tries to provide a hybrid solution to negotiate between the two contesting ways of reading: formalist; and new historicist. She suggests that in loosening their stranglehold of the rigor of formalist closure, the New Critics can facilitate the opening of the text into its immediate contexts; in similar way, by limiting the horizon of their contexts to a limited range of poetic associations, the New Historicists can succeed in integrating the text with its “network” of contexts. Levine sums up her critical strategy as involving “specific encounters between bounded whole and network sprawl” (117).

The second voice is from one, who seems unaffected by the force of contemporary theory. Brought up on classical philosophy and in a Catholic monastery, Zena Hitz, has recently brought out a book titled *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton, 2020), which makes a passionate case for revitalizing the humanities studies in the universities by a return to its classical beginnings and transforming critical pedagogy in the classroom in a refreshingly innovative way, which seems a radical departure from the existing practice of reading, writing, and teaching in a highly technology-driven culture interested only in the “usefulness” of education as a mercantile activity. Perhaps inspired by the work of Alberto Manguel, she believes that the humanities education in the university can be re-animated by a return to a small-sized classroom of motivated students where reading and teaching are done in a non-coercive environment without any pressure from authority. “That practice is called teaching, and it consists in the person-to-person transmission of the habits of mind that underlie all serious thinking, reflection, and discovery. Good teaching is manifest to those who receive it, and it thus inspires a sometimes absurd gratitude; so too, its value is abundantly evident to those who practice it. It has nearly disappeared from our college campuses, surviving only to hardy, dedicated, principled individuals who eke out their beautiful work without recognition or adequate recompense” (200). In her impassioned appeal to whoever matters in educational reform she tries to make a partial diagnosis to what has gone wrong: “... we academic professionals have lost touch with our origins in ordinary human intellectual activity. We have thus lost the capacity to justify and explain to our fellow citizens or to philanthropists -- much less to ourselves—why our institutions matter.” (198) By giving a clarion call to re-animate the much-maligned state of the humanities through an act of deep reading and enjoying the words on the page as one enjoys a piece of music, she returns to Auden’s maxim that “poetry makes nothing happen.” This is perhaps the most eloquent answer to those who feel disempowered by the loss of the magic spell that Theory had cast on them.

By calling the conference theme “A Requiem for Theory! Eschatological Ruminations” we are reminded of the “double-bind” aspect of the word “requiem,” which is both an act of mourning and a celebration of death through a song. The prospect of the “sense of ending” of Theory necessitates deep reflections (“ruminations”); “ruminations” literally means some amount of food needs to be disgorged from the stomach from time to time to be chewed well in the mouth for better digestion. This perhaps is a message to FCT: now is the time to recall fragments of what has been ingested so that a proper understanding of what has been “accomplished” could be put to fresh examination. After successful completion of 25 years of organizing an annual global event, FCT must aim for a state of critical resilience in pursuing its future goals. Therefore the event could as well be a requiem for Forum on Contemporary Theory through a song of celebration and a warning!

One special panel at the conference will be a close reading of Abraham Lincoln’s short speech “The Gettysburg Address” (1863) as an excellent specimen of good prose. It is also perhaps the most succinct definition so far of “democracy” as it encapsulates most qualities that it stands for. At a time when democratic institutions are facing threat from several forces, Lincoln’s definition has stood solid as a rock to inspire those who deserve such inspiration. In 273 words, Lincoln has brought together the unobtrusive rhetorical power of language with the excruciating sense of American historical destiny to fuse together their continuing relevance even today. For me another such powerful evocation of past, present and future as continuum is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s brilliant opening of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Related Themes

Proposals may be formulated around the following themes. These are only suggestions; you are welcome to prepare your papers based on other ideas relevant to the broad theme of the conference.

- ❖ *Theory, Pro and Contra*
- ❖ *Post-Theory*
- ❖ *Theory as Replenishment*
- ❖ *New Formalism*
- ❖ *Ecology of New Humanities*
- ❖ *Theory and History*
- ❖ *Theory as Network (Bruno Latour)*
- ❖ *“Living in Critical Zones”*
- ❖ *Slow Science as Alternative Theory (Isabelle Stengers)*
- ❖ *Plant and Animal Theories*
- ❖ *Indigenous Theory*
- ❖ *Critical Time-Binding*
- ❖ *End of Anthropocene*
- ❖ *Theory as Situated Knowledge (Donna Haraway)*

Keynote Speaker

Roland Greene is Mark Pigott KBE Professor, Anthony P. Meir Family Professor of the Humanities and Director, Humanities Center, Professor of Comparative Literature, and by courtesy, of Iberian and Latin American Cultures at Stanford University, USA.



Greene received his doctorate from Princeton University and previously held appointments at Harvard University and the University of Oregon. He is the author of several books, including *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (2013); *Unrequited Conquests: Love and Empire in the Colonial Americas* (1999); and *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (1991). Greene is also the editor in chief of the fourth edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012), considered the leading reference book on poetry. He is a past president of the Modern Language Association and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Greene is also the founder and director of *Arcade*, a digital space for readers and writers interested in literary studies and the humanities research.

Abstract Submission Deadline

An abstract or proposal not exceeding 300 words is due by **August 30, 2022**. The abstract should have a title along with the name and institutional affiliation of the presenter. Please send the abstract as an email attachment to Prafulla Kar (prafullakar@gmail.com). We also welcome poster presentations.

Registration Deadline

The last date for receiving the registration fee is **September 15, 2022**. However, we encourage earlier registrations for assuring accommodation at the conference venue. All participants need to register online directly with our bank, the details of which will be provided on request. The registration fee is refundable if the conference is cancelled by the organizers or due to Covid-19 regulations.

Registration Fee

- (1) Outstation Participant from India with accommodation : **₹12 000** (Twelve thousand Indian rupees)
- (2) Participant from India without accommodation : **₹ 5000** (Five thousand Indian rupees)
- (3) Student Participant from Cotton University : **₹1500** (Rupees fifteen hundred Indian rupees)
- (4) Overseas Participant (from SAARC countries) : **\$250** (Two hundred fifty US dollars)
- (5) Other Overseas Participant : **\$500** (Five hundred US dollars only)

The registration fee for the first, fourth and fifth categories of participants will take care of accommodation for three nights (20-22 December), breakfast, lunch and dinner as well as conference tea and snacks. Accommodation is on a shared basis. The other categories of participants will be provided with lunch and tea and snacks during the conference. The conference program will begin with lunch on December 20, followed by the annual General Body (AGM) Meeting of the life members of the Forum on Contemporary Theory, and will end with breakfast on December 23.

For further information please contact

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