

## Kenneth Surin

### Introduction: "Theory Now"?

To posit such a notion as "theory now" at the very least presupposes that there is a before and an after. But what if this "before" of theory is still inextricably linked to this "now," as indeed the presumed or merely posited "after" of theory, now fashionable in certain parts of the profession (as in "the days of theory are over, so let's get back to doing literary studies in a way that really focuses on novels, plays, and poems, etc."), is linked inextricably to the "now" or "nowness" of theory? To say this is not merely to succumb to a conceit or gesture, because the "before," "now," and "after" of theory, even if we use these terms as mere emblems or ciphers, still call for something approximating a genealogy of theory.<sup>1</sup> What did we study or teach before there was "theory," and what will we continue to study or teach in the anticipation of something that will come "after" theory, as a matter of absolute inevitability and not simply the resentment of intellectual conservatives who detest theory because for them it ensued in the alleged sidelining of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, and so on? (As in "How dare you place this Egyptian or Pakistani novelist in the same literary-analytical framework as Faulkner or Günter Grass?")

We owe the invention of theory almost

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overwhelmingly to the voracious enterprise and genius of the American academy. Theory, in its seemingly myriad versions, has created in the American academy a crucial bridge that enabled an initially improbable rapprochement between the “close reading” of literary texts (this being the textual strategy most closely identified with the now-defunct New Criticism) and their analytical or philosophical location beyond the involutions of a plain close reading of the literary text. This was initially regarded primarily as a problematic of genre definition, which the French intellectual tradition is alleged to have breached first, however inadvertently, by having exemplary intellectual figures who produced literary texts filled with a recognizable philosophical import (Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot, and the members of the Oulipo group today), as well as those French thinkers who produce philosophical texts, or at any rate texts recognized to be of a philosophic provenance, which ostensibly have at the same time very considerable literary merits (René Descartes initially, but also Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Michel Serres, among others). But in the United States in the late 1960s, theory became a “science” in its own right (the French *savoir* and German *wissenschaft* each have of course a wider connotative range than the English *science*), and this putative right of theory to claim to be its own coherent discipline or science has been challenged on several fronts in the last two decades.<sup>2</sup>

If theory from its French-inspired inception had an inbuilt propensity to blur its constitutive genres, this blurring propensity is today intensified by the fact that theory in the United States is typically positioned in a field where there is no normative syllabus or curriculum. Can anyone plausibly claim that there is a compelling and uncontested normative syllabus in literary studies and critical theory? This is certainly old news by now, but a couple of decades ago the field of literary studies and critical theory was largely defined by the following features that provided it with a semblance of order and regimentation: first, a movement away from a traditional kind of “comp lit” (inspired at that time by its tutelary figures Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer) toward a more intellectually ramified “comparatism,” involving an increasingly diverse range of theoretical paradigms (the exemplary initiating figure here being Fredric Jameson, who incidentally had Auerbach as his dissertation director at Yale in the 1950s); second, this generally acknowledged but assorted array of “key paradigms” included poststructuralism, cultural studies, feminist theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, film theory, critical race theory, and so on; and finally, an accompanying canon, also generally acknowledged, of “mas-

ter thinkers” (Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Williams, Julia Kristeva, and so forth). One’s place as a practitioner in the field was fairly clearly identifiable in terms of one’s research and curricular focus on one or more of these paradigms, the accompanying master thinkers, affiliation with the concomitant program unit at the Modern Language Association and American Sociological Association, and so on.

These fairly clear-cut alignments no longer obtain. The paradigms and their associated thinkers have spread beyond “lit.” into cultural anthropology, religious studies, philosophy, area studies, women’s studies, sexuality and gender studies, and even history and political science departments, to name but a few. As a result of such cross-permeations, faculty in literature departments are perhaps as likely to give papers at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, the British Sociological Association, and so on, as they are to speak at the MLA. Equally, many lit. syllabi feature contemporary thinkers drawn from other fields, including cultural anthropologists (Clifford Geertz, Jean and John Comaroff), historians (Dipesh Chakrabarty, E. P. Thompson), political philosophers (Wendy Brown, Martha Nussbaum), economists (Amartya Sen, J. K. Gibson-Graham), sociologists (Manuel Castells, Immanuel Wallerstein), social psychologists (Erving Goffman), and so on. In such circumstances, the question “Does colleague X who does ‘theory’ *really* belong to a comp. lit. program?” can be ideologically and rhetorically weighty, but it has also become basically, and (for those who crave a certain kind of tidiness and certainty) intolerably, unanswerable.

This predicament is not confined to literary studies—nearly every field in the humanities and interpretive social sciences is in the same boat, as historians of medicine join psychology departments, cultural anthropologists join departments of religion, semioticians are hired by departments of cultural anthropology, philosophers and political theorists belong to literature programs, sociologists of development join departments of economics, behavioral psychologists are hired by business schools, and literary scholars trained in rhetoric are on the faculties of law schools. Whether this amounts to a reification of “interdisciplinarity” (this reification of interdisciplinarity being one of the themes addressed by several of the essays in this issue) is hard to judge, but *that* the phenomena involved here at least point to the posing of the question of the reification of interdisciplinarity is certainly hard to deny.

In the coming years, administrative and financial considerations

are probably going to carry more weight than intellectual principles and norms when it comes to determining the form and curricular substance of departments intellectually invested in this thing called theory. Economic retrenchment associated with the current recession has led to the consolidation of some departments into schools, and some interdisciplinary centers (such as humanities institutes) are now being given the kind of tenure lines hitherto confined to more traditional academic departments. That's when a tenure line is available, since the visible and pervasive trend nowadays is toward the casualization of academic labor. What these developments will portend in the longer term is difficult to say, but in the shorter term things do not bode well for the institutional bases of theory, as humanities departments are forced to become service units or cogs in the overall enterprise of training students to be competitive in the so-called job market (alas, in an economic situation where not having a job "waiting for you" is more likely to be the rule rather than the exception for an increasing number of students).

The following salient themes, more than one of which is sometimes addressed in the same essay, emerge in this collection of essays.

*Critique.* Here one can mention Michael Hardt on the theorist as militant (Foucault in this case), and Barnor Hesse on the production of the idioms and lexicons of race with a particular attention to what is left unspoken by these idioms and lexicons.

*Discourses and their affiliated strategies.* Ellis Hanson on reparative reading, Patrick Greaney on the quotational strategy of the Situationist International, and Michael Naas on Derrida's theory of photography are cases in point.

*Practice/practices.* Several essays revolve around the question "How is the cultural and social being of the subject to be managed or transformed?" This topic is broached by Rei Terada in her notion of "working through" and by Grant Farred's deconstructive reading of the boundaries between interdisciplinarity and the individual disciplines.

*Recognition, exclusion, and their accompanying logics.* The accompanying logics (sexual, political, economic, race, gender, ethnicity, and so on) hover over the question of the lack or lacks that pervade the field of recognition. In this area we can locate David Ellison's delineation of the seemingly intrinsic connection between embarrassment and the strategies of memorialization where the Holocaust is concerned, Avery Gordon's analysis of the economy of representation used to create hierarchies of people based on biological measurement in a now-discredited form of criminal anthro-

pology, and Eithne Luibhéid's discussion of the cultural positioning of the undocumented migrant. If there is an overarching concern in these essays, it is how we understand the reality of the present and how we continue to be alert to potentials for a world of transformative possibility in a world of constraint and order.

*Context.* There is also a sustained attentiveness to the contexts that underlie theoretical production. Several analyses of these contexts are provided, but the two following are more generally shared by the essay writers. First, theory in its current manifestations is undertaken in a time in which the Platonic unity among the true, the good, and the beautiful has been broken, and irrevocably so. We also do theory in a time marked by a retreat of the political, a time of the postpolitical. The tutelary figures discussed in these essays—Foucault, Derrida, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Gayatri Spivak—operate in a conjuncture where a whole series of notions used to name the space of politics have now reached a point of exhaustion. These names include that of the *citizen* (the pivotal figure for the liberal democratic structures that prevailed in the West from 1776/1789 up to the 1970s), that of the proletarian *worker* (the pivotal figure for social democracy and socialism), and the *militant* (the critical figure for Marxism and other movements of emancipation). With the demise of these three exemplary figures or collective names—the citizen, the worker as a member of the classic proletariat, and the vanguard militant—those desiring a more just and more equal way of life for the overwhelming majority of the world's citizens have to find some new way or ways to represent this more encompassing sociality and collectivity.

Second, the theoretical operations on view in the essays belonging to this volume deal with an array of new and yet appropriate names for our time: the subaltern or member of the lumpen proletariat, the so-called deviant, the joyless consumer seemingly integral to contemporary capitalism, the undocumented immigrant, the bedazzled denizen of the society of the spectacle (whose unacknowledged desire or *jouissance* is manifested in U.S. politics by such declarations as “Sarah Palin totally tells you the way it is” or “President George W. Bush always made his decisions based on gut feelings” (as opposed, presumably, to using forms of deliberation lodged in the cerebellum when deciding to invade Iraq)). But, and this is to state the obvious, none of these are names with a visible or easily communicable emancipatory import. The *problématique*, urgent for our time, of producing new emancipatory names to replace the ones that have become exhausted is for me a focal point of these essays. The pathos of our profes-

sion is that theorists qua theorists cannot conjure up these emancipatory names simply by writing books or essays—it is up to our wider culture to initiate this monumentally complex and messy task, one that invariably occurs without the forethought or any visible contrivance on the part of those who belong to this culture. These essays nonetheless teach theorists that they should strive to read the signs and symptoms accompanying this production of emancipatory names and figures (what processes will such change involve?), and, just as important, they signal the need for us to “theorize” the embryonic and barely visible places of this potentially revolutionary cultural production (but where can such change come from?). In the ensuing I’ll discuss issues more specific to each of the essays, following the order of the themes just identified as defining this issue of *SAQ* as a whole.



Michael Hardt’s essay confronts, head-on, the issue of the relation today between critique and the figure of the militant. Focusing his discussion of Foucault’s fascination with Kant’s essay on Enlightenment, Hardt argues that “Kant . . . allows Foucault to articulate the limits of critique and to define a new model of theory.” Foucault, on Hardt’s account, was the exemplary thinker of the limits and failures of critique (or theory), as well as being the equally resolute thinker of the need to find ways of conceptualizing the figure of the militant that took it beyond its vanguardist antecedents. The situation confronting Foucault in the last years of his life was therefore one involving the quest for a notion of militancy not beholden to (Kantian-inspired) critique, as well as not genuflecting (where Foucault was concerned) to what he regarded as outworn vanguardist notions of the militant. Foucault was “seeking an exit from minority” based on entirely new theoretical and practical premises. According to Hardt, these new premises involved for Foucault the creation of “an alternative subjectivity and a new world.” Foucault’s ultimate dissatisfaction with this aspect of Kant’s thought grew from Foucault’s recognition of a crucial limitation that broke the back of Kantian critique, namely, that this critique could only be undertaken by a minority (i.e., by those who dared to know or understand, in Kant’s nomenclature), with the paradoxical if not contradictory consequence that the “exit from minority” could be accomplished only by the minority who dared to know or understand.

Foucault turned to the Greeks, and in particular to the Cynics, to resolve this conundrum. Where Kantian critique or theory could only whis-

per or stammer its qualms about the ways in which we are governed, the reading provided by Foucault of the Cynics shows them (and Foucault!) to be interested in something much more far-reaching and decisive, namely, the exigent need to find a completely different way of *governing*. This new mode of governing would be nonhierarchical and democratic, where Hardt (and presumably Foucault) is concerned. Hardt's essay ends here, and the reader needs to consult Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* trilogy for a prospectus detailing this richer and more enabling form of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Hardt's essay identifies a rich vein for those interested in understanding the conception of politics Foucault was grappling with in the last years of his life. As Hardt points out, there is much here that is inconclusive and somewhat problematic, such as Foucault's failure to distinguish adequately between biopower (governing that involves the regulation of life) and biopolitics (governing that embraces the power of life in the pursuit of democracy and autonomy). This failure has led some of Foucault's interpreters (Roberto Esposito comes to mind) to consider Foucault to be the proponent of a "negative biopolitics," as opposed to the "affirmative biopolitics" of Hardt and Negri. By making this distinction on Foucault's behalf, Hardt is able to identify a "biopolitical Foucault" much more in line with the vision of the biopolitical canvassed in the *Empire* trilogy. The ensuing debate needs to be joined: some might say that an affirmative biopolitics underemphasizes the constraints embodied in biopower, and others note that a negative biopolitics by contrast overemphasizes these checks and limitations. Who is likely to be right here? Or can there be a *via media* between these two options (Esposito himself thinks he has found one), and if so, what form will it take? Or is this putative *via media* no more than a failed quest for a middle ground that does not really exist?

Barnor Hesse's primary focus is the notion of the "postracial" (like him I place this term in quotation marks), in vogue shortly before and after the election of Barack Obama, the black presidential candidate who did not make race a part of his electoral platform and who seemingly succeeded in getting a significant proportion of the U.S. electorate to collude in this astonishing oversight by voting for him (this being the equivalent of a self-inflicted collective blindness, if one is persuaded by Hesse's analysis, as I happen to be). But how could the idea of an American "postracialism" ostensibly become acceptable to so many Americans, who of course dwell in a country overwhelmingly bifurcated on racial lines, in the short and abbreviated time of a single presidential campaign? Hesse argues that this "postracial" sentiment managed to take root only because its enabling

condition was a massive amnesia regarding the cultural and political environment that made it possible for the ideology of an American “postracialism” to flourish almost overnight. This enabling condition is supplied by what Hesse calls a “race theoretical settlement” that has been the more or less tacit underpinning of American (racial) politics since the end of World War II. This settlement enables a present-day racism to be spoken in public by its adherents without anyone being castigated as a racist, since it eschews the biological or ethnic categorizations integral to the palpably vicious “old” racism. Instead, this “postracial” racism (for that is what it is, despite the oxymoron involved) is couched in the seemingly neutral terms of policies and strategies that are governmental or procedural—states’ rights, determining the original intent of the founding fathers of the Constitution, heritage observance (especially with regard to the relics of the American Southern Confederacy), the flaws of equal opportunity legislation, affirmative action as a form of reverse discrimination, and so on. This transposition of the category of race from its grounding in ethnic and biological principles into the superficially less dastardly domain of administration and government, as well as into the media, makes possible the irony involved in the denunciation of a supposedly “postracial” Obama as a “racist” by an opportunistic media celebrity such as Glenn Beck. For the Glenn Becks of this world, Obama is a (black) racist precisely because he can be positioned by a Beck or Rush Limbaugh as someone seemingly unheeding of the perquisites entailed by Limbaugh’s (white) racism. The black person who spurns the race-categorical impositions of the white racist is somehow and nonetheless a “racist” precisely because he or she, on the face of it at any rate, tries to avoid being categorized in such (white racist) terms by the white racist! The “postracial settlement” delineated by Hesse allows this society-wide American equivalent of an endlessly repeatable conjuring trick to be enacted over and over again.

Hesse’s probing of this postracial settlement is relentless and superbly informed. Gratitude is due to those who characterize a dire and intractable social condition without resorting to facile solutions. Hesse knows that the overturning of this postracial settlement, which of course allows the long-lasting American racism to perpetuate itself even in the moment of its disavowal, looks for a different and almost unimaginable politics of the future (which in my view is prefigured by the figure of Barack Obama, his endless compromises and vacillations notwithstanding). Here Hesse joins, resoundingly, a theme of the essays in this issue—are there theoretical resources that enable us to track the spores of this almost inconceivable,



and yet somehow palpable and near enough to touch, politics of a better future? Is there a thus far unacknowledged place where this politics has already found a way to begin to exist? Hesse leaves us with these questions. But one answer is ruled out by his genealogy of this American postracial settlement: this place is not the U.S. polity of 2010, despite the fact that a black man is now its president.

Ellis Hanson's essay on the late Eve Sedgwick is in part an elegy to a major intellectual force who died all too young (at the age of fifty-eight), but it also sets out to elaborate a textual strategy used by Sedgwick that she called "reparative reading." According to Hanson this is "a critical practice that begins from a position of psychic damage, the 'depressive position,' and that bears within it the possibility of a 'reparative position.' . . . Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about, but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake." Melanie Klein, the source of this notion of reparation, did of course see it as something that everyone had to go through in order to recover from the depressive position, this position being unavoidable because human psychic drives are frustrated from the very first weeks of life, creating a psychic legacy of rage, anxiety, and resentment to be contended with for the rest of our lives. The depressive position arises because the task of overcoming this fraught psychic legacy leaves the individual in despair at his or her uselessness in the face of this seemingly monumental undertaking. The only way out of this profound despair is reparation, that is, the life-sustaining process that allows the patient to hold good *and* bad psychic objects together and in this way to start to attenuate the guilt and grief caused by someone's inability to master these originary and destructive psychic dispositions.<sup>4</sup>

Kleinian reparation is a life project, essentially, one that begins but does not end with the analytical encounter and is therefore potentially interminable; thus it is not immediately obvious how a project whose pivot is the analytical situation can be translated into a reading strategy of the kind espoused by Sedgwick. But Hanson's thoughtful and suggestive reading of Sedgwick's autobiographical writings shows us how Sedgwick overcame this challenge. The indispensable key to the analytical encounter for Klein was the analyst's reading of the patient's transference to the analyst, a reading that the latter undertakes by analyzing her own counter-transference to the patient. A certain kind of reading is thus absolutely integral to the Kleinian analytical situation (and perhaps all analytical situations, regard-

less of the psychoanalytic school or movement underpinning the analysis in question), and Sedgwick's great achievement resides in her ability to view her "textual" responses to the situations and the affective lives of those around her as the structural equivalent of a counter-transference on her part, lives that she analyzes in her texts in order to discern and formulate the intricacies of a particular reparative project. Or as I see it, Hanson enables us to see that Eve Sedgwick was in her writings the equivalent of a thoroughly ingenious and resourceful Kleinian analyst, inimitably fastidious and generous at the same time, albeit without (as far as I'm aware) possessing the official practitioner's mandatory certificates and diplomas.

Patrick Greaney's splendid conspectus of the Situationist *détournement* locates its antecedents in Charles Baudelaire, while displaying the full range of the applications Guy Debord and his confreres in the Situationist International made of the notion or strategy that is *détournement*. Greaney also locates the basis of *détournement* in a "quotational strategy" that is at once strikingly innovative and has some utterly hilarious applications. The enabling condition for this Situationist quotational strategy lies in the deliberate manipulation of the context in which quotation takes place, with the aim of derailing the "sense" that resides in the outwardly original context. Greaney provides germane examples from Situationist practice, including "a new version of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* that would accompany the film's images with a voiceover narrating the history of the Ku Klux Klan." This Situationist quotational strategy has an intellectual and revolutionary brio that cannot be gainsaid, but Greaney also points out how the approaches involving this quotational strategy were undeniably misogynistic (in essence, for the Situationists only men were capable of the political and intellectual dexterity required to carry out the kind of contextual derailing so prized by Debord and his followers). Greaney, clearly a critical admirer of the Situationist International, shirks nothing when it comes to portraying this underbelly of one of the most radical and prescient movements in post-World War II Europe. Debord and his associates outlined the defining features of what they perceived to be the "society of the spectacle," and this has morphed today in the countries of the Euro-Atlantic into the politics of an "audience democracy" or the politics of a theatricalized and hysterical anger, evinced in the antics (politically significant and borderline lunatic at the same time) of the so-called Tea Party movement in the America of 2010. John Rawls, say, would have had no philosophical understanding of this media-driven populism (unmistakably fascist in some of its more outlandish manifestations, as in the legislation just

passed in Arizona regarding “immigration control”), but Greaney shows us why the Situationists, their evident limitations notwithstanding, can nonetheless serve as a resource when it comes to accounting for some of the less immediately explicable political configurations in today’s Europe and North America. Debord, despite the fact that the foundations of his theories had been set in the 1950s, would still be able to provide a theoretical anticipation of the conditions that allowed someone like Sarah Palin to emerge as political force in this country, a claim that cannot be made on behalf of the liberal and Kant-inspired Rawls or his libertarian and Locke-inspired Harvard colleague Robert Nozick. The choice is not between Rawls and Debord (as theorists we need to dissect the intellectual configurations associated with both these thinkers), but Rawls is somehow dispensable in the way that Debord is not when it comes to accounting for the present-day Euro-American “postpolitical” polity.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Naas provides the first (to my knowledge) overview of Derrida’s writings on photography, and as one would expect from Derrida, this is done in a complex and self-reflexive relation to the history of philosophy. The “snapshot” or “still” has the following philosophical properties: each shot is utterly singular, taken at a particular time that is irreplaceable, unrepeatabe, and yet as a *punctum* among other *puncta* in a roll of film, it possesses the quality of seriality. Singularity and seriality, these are the properties of the photograph, and Naas shows us how Derrida’s essay has a form that duplicates this structure. The irreplaceable is also constitutive of mourning, since the strict condition of mourning is loss, the loss of a unique object. As a result, for Derrida all photography possesses the character of mourning—the shot once taken can never be repeated, even if it happens to be followed in a split second by another “snap” of the same scene or object, using roll after roll of film, ad infinitum. Another quality of the snapshot is that of the delay, that is, the duration between the setting or focusing of the camera in anticipation of the shot and the click that marks the actual taking of the picture. Naas states that delay is the very temporality of deconstruction, since without delay there can be no deferral, the quintessential mark of deconstruction.

The still photograph taken by the handheld camera using a roll of film is only one species of photography, and the digitization of photography is bound to have repercussions for prevailing conceptions of delay, temporality, and seriality. Digitization, for instance, makes possible such technologies as Photoshop, which gives even the most amateur of photographers tools to alter or touch up a picture without needing anything more

sophisticated than a computer. How would Derrida's philosophy of photography accommodate such technological transformations? What happens to the ontology of photography when, thanks to Photoshop, the picture of a dog living in 2009 in rural Virginia is inserted into a photograph of Virginia Woolf taken in Richmond, England, in the 1930s?

Ever since Martin Heidegger institutionalized the distinction between ontology (the science of Being as such) and the ontic (the science of mere beings), the question of fitting action into this framework has been a vexed one—whatever Heidegger's philosophical scaffolding enabled, it did not seem to facilitate any kind of resolution of the age-old conundrum of act versus being. Rei Terada examines the psychoanalytic theory of "working through" and argues: "Working through in Freud . . . merges with reality construction writ large. Our registrations of ordinary perceptions of reality, each one a part of the lifelong project of trying to perceive reality together with other people, are both enabled by and enable working through. The theory of working through is a theory of reality. Further, whether they know it or not, theories of reality always want to be therapeutic, to be theories of working through." Action, including political action, resides for Terada in the registering of phenomena that are fleeting and evanescent: "action will have consisted in noticing the cumulative connections of heterogeneous bodies: in perceiving, registering, arranging, naming, representing, comparing, in attending to one's own confusion, in uncertainty, attraction, grief, and satisfaction; in the interaction and expiration of ontic elements and of ontologies." This conception of working through enables us in principle to break through the impasses generated by the dialectic of act and being or that between structure and agency.

Grant Farred provides a subtle and Heidegger-inspired elucidation of the relation between interdisciplinarity and the individual disciplines. Farred's main thesis is that "the discipline only obtains under the condition of erasure." Every discipline rests on its "unthought," so that the thinking enabled by the discipline is always weak, always potentially to be undermined by this "unthought." He goes on to say, "There must, a priori, be interdisciplinarity because the discipline is the surest mark of 'erased' knowledge, . . . the object of that erasure is also the first—if not the final or absolute—guarantee of interdisciplinarity." Interdisciplinarity, then, is the enabling condition for the emergence of the individual disciplines. For Farred, interdisciplinarity comes before disciplinarity—the latter is able to constitute itself, to install something as *a* discipline, only by first putting a proverbial fence around itself and separating itself from the other disci-

plines, but in doing this it only confirms the “space” of the many, or all, disciplines (the name of this prior and enabling space being *interdisciplinarity*). At the same time, the individual discipline cannot be abrogated. As Farred says, to use thought to critique the discipline is to think the discipline haphazardly, to understand how things are within that particular discipline. Farred’s essay provides an ontological structure for understanding the ontic narrative I provided earlier in this essay. There I suggest that there is no normative syllabus in our field today and that what prevails instead is an unceasing flow of thought (congruent with Farred’s interdisciplinarity, this being a thought without disciplinary limit), a comprehensive instability of thought that has to be arrested as a condition of allowing a particular discipline to be formed and maintained. But there is, ontologically, no absolute normativity superintending this arrestation of thought: if there is such a halting of thought, it only reflects the desire to achieve a more or less passing stasis or crystallization that (other conditions permitting) allows a discipline to form, as Farred makes clear.

David Ellison’s thought-provoking and compelling reading of three structures, two in Berlin and one in London, dedicated to the memorialization of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust, uses the notion of embarrassment as a key interpretive tool. As Ellison sees it, the three edifices show in different but striking ways how embarrassment can be used to interrupt the orders of history. Where these orders possess a seamless and seemingly impervious quality, the introduction of a feature that is the vehicle of this embarrassment rends or interrupts what was previously thought to be impermeable. In the case of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, the often loudly kitschy exhibits jar with the austerity and silence-inducing quality of the building itself, thereby prompting an embarrassed response. Where Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust memorial is concerned, the contrast between the somber, tomblike stellae (obviously betokening memorialization) and their physical composition (mere blocks of concrete inviting visitors to play games of tag and hide and seek or to kiss and cuddle behind one of the larger pillars) occasions the embarrassment. Ernő Goldfinger’s starkly modernist house in London, filled however with his Nazi-refugee mother’s baroque and ornate nineteenth-century furniture, allows the incongruous juxtaposition between the light, clean lines of the house’s exterior and the imposing heaviness of the furniture inside to become a source of embarrassment. The embarrassments detailed by Ellison function as a kind of defamiliarization of the viewer’s conventional expectations, in that they set up a dialectic between a certain normativity (“museums *must* look like this,” “memori-

als *must* create *this* viewer experience,” “a modernist building *has to have* modernist furniture,” and so forth) and a form or set of forms that undoes or undermines this normativity. Maybe this is the only way the Holocaust can be commemorated. As an event, or rather an immense assemblage of events and subevents, the Holocaust defeats our available powers of representation (this being an instance of “the sublime,” to use a category well known in philosophical aesthetics), and the tension represented by this dialectic is perhaps the only way to convey this sublimity while allowing the architectural structures in question to serve a commemorative function. I draw this lesson from Ellison’s paper.

Avery Gordon’s contribution is based on her reading of Philip Scheffner’s 2007 film, *The Halfmoon Files*, which gives the history of a prisoner of war camp in Germany during World War I. She uses the film as a touchstone for exploring the profound link between incarceration and racial hierarchy. What is distinctive about her richly ethnographic and historical account is the way she brings together the discourses of the prison, medicalization as a form of discipline, and the politics of race, all of which operate in conjunction with this overarching ideology of the prison. The awareness that this configuration results in more individuals being imprisoned as a percentage of the population in the United States today than in any other country (a fact noted by Gordon) eludes most Americans, who fail to realize that “liberty,” that much-trumpeted “value” of America’s founding fathers, is more often than not trumped by the imperatives of a post-9/11 American “security state.” A cynical political reason in the United States has been able to convince many Americans that their liberty today somehow requires total acquiescence in this security regime, with its meaningless color-coded terrorist threat levels (here I count it a small mercy that I happen to be color-blind), excessive and unwarranted reactions to someone on an aircraft with a turban and dark skin speaking a “strange” language, wiretapping without a judicial warrant, the suspension of habeas corpus, and so on. Gordon’s powerful narrative invites, as its complement, a corresponding critique of this seemingly all-encompassing cynical reason.

The cynical political reason pervading prison discourse as delineated by Gordon is also on display in Eithne Luibhéid’s treatment of the discussions that have “illegal immigration” as their focus. Luibhéid uses Irish immigration policy as her focal point, but her conclusions can be extended to nearly every other recent political argument over so-called illegal immigration in the United States. Faced with the arbitrary impositions of an immigration policy, whose *raison d’être* is to give the achingly hopeful but

hapless immigrant as much of a runaround as possible, the victims (and they are victims) of these policies have no alternative but to look to exploit the most arcane of legal loopholes and the almost invisible bureaucratic oversights of the immigration services, sometimes with unintended but often hilarious consequences, as a way of making do with an impossible system. The upshot is that the immigration services, those presumed bastions of the legal system, resort to methods that may well find approval with the surrealist wing of postmodernism, namely, treating legal norms as artificial conveniences, regarding subjects and their attendant rights as legal fictions, and, as a matter of course, leaving all the rest—usually placed under the umbrella of enforcement—to the sometimes capricious judgment of the local constabulary. The current situation in Arizona illustrates just how far this framework can go, with its potential persecution of anyone who can be *presumed* to be an illegal immigrant on the basis of a mere suspicion entertained by a police officer.

None of the essays in this issue of *SAQ* tell a cheering story. “Theory now,” if these essays are representative in any way, and I believe them to be, is a story overwhelmingly concerned with lost opportunities, constraint, and privation. But this is exactly what we need. After all, we are surrounded by a multitude that still refuses to name the beast that imposes its limits with a snarl or perchance a smile, but whose prey is invariably those least able to resist the snarl or the wolfish smile. If there is a vocation for “theory now,” this has to be it—naming this smiling or snarling beast who won’t permit the aspiration for anything radically different. All the essays in this issue partake of this exemplary vocation, the vocation of “theory now.”

## Notes

- 1 I attempt this genealogy in “A Genealogy of Comparative Literature in the USA,” in *Blackwell Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).
- 2 Hence the injunction on the part of the organizers of the conference in which the essays in this volume were presented: participants should not engage in collective hand-wringing when responding to the challenges confronting theory today.
- 3 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- 4 See Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate, and Reparation* (New York: Norton, 1964).
- 5 This is not to denigrate the accomplishments of Rawls and Nozick but only to suggest that Debord is a superior resource when it comes to understanding a certain American political contemporaneity.