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**WHEN LESS IS MORE: TOWARDS A THEORY WITHOUT A FIXED  
ADDRESS**

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**Abstract:** Theorization is rendered more necessary than ever by globalization, it is the most privileged manner of delineating phenomena and articulating the manifest; without it, anthropological unity is denied and regression to self-destructive competition for survival and domination becomes inevitable. Revathi Krishnaswamy expounds that, rather than mere explicit bodies of theory, an inclusive approach to literature should welcome implicit, latent, emergent concepts and practices from every excluded area, every language and every cultural minority. The aim of this diversification runs against radical relativism, it is a quest for aesthetic and other universals beyond all the particular features that construct actual literary practices. Similarly, in the complex dialogic exchange staged by Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller, the two thinkers practice and exhibit a kind of “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah): it would seem that, to exploit texts in context, or to transfer a theoretical set from one culture to another, you need to belong somewhere, to possess and be possessed by some origin. Contrary to the narrative of rooted extension that remains linear even if it is liable to bifurcate, experimental cosmopolitanism considers that we owe no debt to initial or prior circumstance and that our obligations and initiatives, determined by species and trans-species solidarity, apply in the framework of spatial proximity for practical reasons exclusively.

**Keywords:** across-cosmopolitanism, nomadic thought, theory, world literature.

If we ask the question of the “locations and/or dislocations of theory”, we cannot but be struck by the contrast between the singular unicity and implied obviousness of “Theory” and the unstable plurality and asymmetry of its spatialities and configurations. To this underlying semantic conflict that generates a whole sheaf of questions, I must add a supplement of *miroitement* brought by the French-English faux-amis/false friends: location and *location*; dislocation and *dislocation*, a supplement that is certainly relevant when Theory is supposed to be French *par excellence* in the USA, and it is mostly *anglo* nowadays for continental academics. *Location*, in French, means “rental” of premises and dwellings, vehicles and machines, it involves a loan, mobility, exchange, while *localization* is the word for the spatial/geographical situation or positioning of an object. *Dis-location*, in French, only means putting out of joint, throwing out of order, not “displacing”, for which the French language has *délocalisation* in economic terminology, “offshoring”, suggested by oil exploration and exploitation platforms, being the curious equivalent in English usage. It is then important to realize that, if “untranslatable”, in Barbara Cassin's sense<sup>1</sup>, proliferate on the critical and metacritical battlefields, they entail the necessity of multiple, perhaps innumerable or infinite operations of *translatio* or displacement, linear or not, that will restore and activate the mobility and dynamics inherent in theorizing.

My first move, therefore, will be to propose a working definition of “theory” as we practice it in the Humanities and the Social Sciences in general, and in Literary and Cultural Studies in particular. The fact that the use of the word in the singular relies on obviousness, consensus or common sense (it is apodictic without evidence) is interesting in that it obliges us to question its status, not only as “locations and dislocations” does it here from a spatial point of view, but also like “life and death of” would do in a temporal approach.

Secondly, I will ask how explicit and visible theory (once tentatively defined) should be to count as theory; in other words, how shall we identify theory, *where* shall we look for it?

Thirdly, and at length, I will examine an intriguing critical and theoretical dialogue between generations and locations embodied in a landmark book, *Thinking*

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<sup>1</sup> See Cassin 2014, and Cassin, Reinhardt and Habib 2015.

*Literature Across Continents*, that bets on the universal appeal of transcultural negotiation and commonalities, as well as on the value of rooted differentiations, resulting in the perpetuation of an unresolved binary tension between the triple situatedness of text, context and interpretation, and a de-centered, aleatory or experimental outsider position that would facilitate the transferability of values by imagining the other as adoptable.

Fourthly, I will evoke Tagore's foundational and inexhaustible talk on "World Literature" to evoke a kind of universalism that, not emanating from the West (or from the East) or from the negation of difference, cannot succumb easily to the violence of "de-colonial" relativism and separatism. Just as he valiantly resisted the temptations of nationalism and a return to supposed unified roots, the "Great Wanderer"<sup>2</sup> claimed a theory of no fixed address that, beyond his persistent influence on over a century of high and not-so-high Indian culture, allows us to construct new theoretical models that make the most of mobilities without consenting to errancy or the globalized indifferentiation of place.

Finally, I will question once more any literal or "objective" understanding of the location or locations of theories, insofar as it would pave the way for an empirical post-truth renunciation of heuristic encounters and hospitality.

### **1 - Proceeding with theory and theories**

What do "we", in the Humanities, and more specifically in Literary and Cultural Studies, mean by "theory"? Also, why do we tend to use it in the singular rather than in the plural, a crisp single theory (even when it is in fact, like Feminist theory, a cluster of theories) contrasting with the indefinite plurality of Studies (Women's Studies, for example)?

There are several ways, not all of them compatible, of responding to these two capital questions, capital although, or perhaps because rarely asked – note that I say "responding", not "answering". For the sake of economy and clarity, I will limit myself to two approaches: semantic/etymological on the one hand, ideological/polemical on the other.

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<sup>2</sup> As he was called by Maitraye Devi (1961) in the title of her book.

“Theory”, from the Ancient Greek θεωρία, used in English with a range of meanings close to modern discourse since the Renaissance, and earlier in France, presents itself as something of an etymological puzzle. It is supposed to derive from [θεωρός](#), something like an “ambassador” sent on a mission to attend religious ceremonies, at a seat of oracles, for instance. The etymology of [θεωρός](#) is not very clear, at least in the composition of the word, related to a radical meaning “gaze”, to which is appended either a simple termination or a suffix derived from another radical meaning “sight”, thus intimating pleonastically “viewing with sight”. Dictionaries tell us that the extension of [θεωρός](#) could include “travelling abroad” in general. On the other hand, the value of lucid contemplation and abstract synthesis leading to general ideas would have appeared in the times of Plato. Later on comes the separation between the material and dynamic sense of procession, cortege, line (of people going forward) and the hypostatized sense of body or system of ideas that describe or attempt to explain a group or sequence of phenomena. A theorem can and must be proved, an axiom cannot, but “theorem”, as a unit of theory, has acquired the apodictic authority of axiom or law. I also suspect that, in modern languages, the notion of theory has been contaminated by its proximity to one or more gods, as found in theology, theophany and theocracy. Θεός derives either from θεῶμαι (I see everything) or the Sanskrit *deva* or *dyaus* that gives *deus* in Latin and, in Greek, Ζεύς). In both cases, Θεός is related to light. Hence, maybe, its quasi-sacralization by both late modern and postmodern avant-garde thinkers from the 60s to the 80s: theory, at the time, acted as a substitute for philosophy that had itself replaced theology.

Occupying the same, structurally limited mental space of speculation entails some similarities of status and similar reactions of lay opponents or old-fashioned professionals who feel expelled, spoliated, because they have not been able to carve a substantial niche for themselves in this (redefined) space. The violence with which Raymond Picard or René Pommier attacked Roland Barthes, the caustic rejection of contemporary art by Marc Fumaroli, the more insidious anti-theoretical pose of the later Antoine Compagnon<sup>3</sup> are some examples of antagonism to “theory” in the name of practice, in this case, of reading practices that would preserve the eternal truth of

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<sup>3</sup> See Coste 2015.

the text, the *ne varietur* “great classical” text. To the mystique of theory contemplating itself, deeply absorbed, in its metatheoretical mirror, responds a fake empiricist materialism that denies its own inherent proclivity for universality supposedly embodied in the ultimately univocal literary (or artistic) work of art; it likes to label itself criticism despite its sheer lack of self-critical aptitude, its legitimacy being built on the appropriation of the supposed strength of creative works canonized by institutionalized tradition. Between the eventually sterile rites of a theory of theory and the hidden theoretical agenda of anti-theory, it is not easy to find a third epistemology that would take the double risk of visible audacity and experimental fragility, but the search for such a protocol might become less arduous if we try to determine both the why and the whereabouts of “theory” as an always emergent companion of humanistic/cultural inquiry.

I shall personally redefine Theory, in this context, as the conceptual rationalization – in the sense given to it by Freud and E. Jones<sup>4</sup> – and systematization of desire for meaning and meaningful practices. Or, to put it less brutally, Freudian rationalization is an incorrect, sometimes pathological use of theory by a subject to make one's inappropriate or failed behavior appear coherent and justify it by a form of logic that transcends it. What theory and rationalization have in common is the following: 1) They try to describe and explain particular events and phenomena in the framework of more general, possibly universal facts and categories; 2) They respond intellectually, and often narratively, to feelings of ignorance, puzzlement, loss, *manque*; 3) They are processes of abstraction and calculus (conscious or not) that dematerialize and de-localize the events and phenomena that motivate them and on which they purport to bear. Theory is a form of transcendence. We could say that the tragic is a theory *and* a rationalization, in that it attributes to destiny (the all-powerful will of the gods/way of the world) the compulsions of human characters.

What is important about this re-definition of theory, nevertheless, is not the suspicion cast on it because of possibly self-serving, perverse or delirious motivations and purposes, it is the placement of theory in the category of “general ideas”, ideas

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<sup>4</sup> Rationalization is not only pathological: “Rationalisation is a very common process which occurs throughout a broad field stretching from deliria to normal thought. Since any behaviour is susceptible of a rational explanation, it is often difficult to decide when such an explanation is spurious– not in what it says but in what it neglects to say” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, 375).

that are species-specific but not culture-specific: theory, wherever it originates or is introduced, implies the possibility of universal (in)validation as much as it relies on the presumption of anthropological and scientific universals and translatability – a shared code is its horizon. For instance, “French theory” or Indian aesthetic theory (of *rasa* and *dhvani*), whatever they are worth in their domains of application, are not constructs that have ever limited their scope to French or Indian cultures respectively, they can and must be tested on cultural products, visions of history and social outlooks other than those prevalent where they originated, noting that their emergence and evolution are linked with cultural diversity, miscegenation, *métissage*: French theory owes a lot to German philosophy, and, in its later developments, to its importation by the American academic establishment; Indian aesthetic theory bears traces of Aristotelian and other Greek views, it evolved under the influence of Persian mysticism and has largely absorbed European Romantic and Realist factors since the nineteenth century. It is also true that a theory sometimes concerns a very specific phenomenon or was initially meant to describe a specific genre, historical period, etc. Foucault's concepts of archive, biopower or heterotopia, elaborated for very specific purposes, can be extrapolated, for example, to construct a theory of migrant habitat in contemporary Delhi. Concepts migrate from theory to theory and are reshaped in the process.

It must be understood that whenever I say “theory” from now on, it is short for “theorization”, I mean a process, a procession, a collective that is always on the move and will not get a clear, final explanation of the world when it reaches the Delphic temple, if it ever does: the oracle will nourish the theoretical machine with more material to interpret in general terms. “Theory” has/is the power to reinvent itself all the time... Because of its a priori universal scope or ambition, the proliferation of theories would tend to demonstrate that today’s “theory” faces an impasse. Nevertheless, for the same reason, theorization is rendered more necessary than ever by globalization.

Although it may remain hypothetical and never explain phenomena in a definitive fashion, theory is the most privileged manner of delineating them and articulating the manifest; without it, anthropological unity is denied and regression to war (self-destructive competition for survival and domination) becomes inevitable.

## 2 - Where can we find theory and theories?

Terry Eagleton, in 2003, both limiting and expanding his Marxist or Neo-Marxist ambitions to a survey and prospective of “cultural theory”, opened a series of somewhat nostalgic assessments with the bold affirmation that “The golden age of cultural theory is long past” (Eagleton 2003, 1). The list of “high theorists” that follows is exclusively European with the doubtful exceptions of Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Adding that “if theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever” (Eagleton 2003, 2) is not of great worth if one fails to accept that “moving beyond” Althusser or Derrida also involves moving, in space, beyond and outside the European lineage of which those thinkers were rebellious offspring. Insisting on the historicity of theory – meaning, if not its determinacy by the historical context in which it arises, a critical response to it – is only valid if the context or the pretext taken into account is not kept within the boundaries of a West, from Plato to Kristeva, which mostly ignored other epistemologies, language structures and life experiences. The second chapter of *After Theory*, titled “The Rise and Fall of Theory”, covers exclusively a short period from the 1960s to the 1980s in an area that does not extend beyond Western Europe and North America, unless we agree to call Fidel Castro a thinker. As late as 2003, Arjun Appadurai, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Anthony Appiah, Édouard Glissant, whatever we think of each and all of them, are astoundingly absent from a book purportedly dedicated to (cultural) theory and anti-theory: the postcolonial turn has just not happened. More surprisingly, the Central and Eastern Europeans of the Formalist Generation who were still fully active and influential in the 60s and much later (Jakobson, d. 1982, Shklovsky, d. 1984, or Dolezel, d. 2017, among others) and the Tartu School of Semiotics, formed in 1964 by Juri Lotman, a cultural theorist par excellence, are not even mentioned. For Eagleton, the stage of the drama opposing theory to anti-theory, or modernism to postmodernism, is narrower than that of the Enlightenment.

In her article on “Literary Knowledges” (2010), Revathi Krishnaswamy expounds that, rather than mere explicit bodies of theory, an inclusive approach to literature should welcome implicit, latent, emergent concepts and practices from every walk of cultural life, every area, every language and every minority excluded or

ignored by the Euro-American hegemony in the practice and teaching of Literary Studies:

The notion of “world literary knowledges” (...) aims to go beyond inducting a few token non-Western greats into theory’s hall of fame; rather, it asks us radically to re-vision the question of what counts as theory in the first place. The conceptual contributions of diverse cultural traditions across the globe, I contend, cannot properly be recognized or evaluated unless the domain of theory is extended beyond the formal explicit systematic meta-discourses of dominant, prestigious, textual traditions to include regional, subaltern, and popular epistemologies that may be “emergent” (more informally formulated; less fully systematized) or “latent” (embryonic; embedded in praxis) (Krishnaswamy 2010, 401).

The choice of the term “knowledges” “instead of theory, poetics, aesthetics, or criticism” is part of a program “intended as both a critique of and a contribution to the field of comparative poetics” (Krishnaswamy 2010, 401). Stemming from the critique of an expansion of the literary canon in the *Norton Anthology* without a corresponding expansion of the body of formal and informal poetics, criticism and theory, or “World Lit without World Lit Crit”, as she funnily puts it, Krishnaswamy’s strategic move is definitely one that heartily embraces the globality or at least the planetarity of cultural phenomena, bypassing the condition of circulation beyond borders that was demanded by David Damrosch a few years earlier for inclusion of literary works into a corpus of “World Literature”<sup>5</sup>. Now, if we read this manifesto article more attentively, we can see that a dilution of the notion of theory, as well as a measure of terminological laxity and confusion seem to have crept in with views to reaching the anti-hegemonic goal of all-inclusiveness in the field of Literary Studies.

Krishnaswamy’s preventive line of defence, namely that “this is not a call to abandon the study of formal poetics; rather, it is a call to expand the definition of theory and to relocate its study in the broader field of world literary knowledges” (Krishnaswamy 401) betrays a measure of uneasiness about the scope of theoretical conceptualization. Are we dealing with the “domain of theory”, its

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<sup>5</sup> “Works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture” (Damrosch 2003, 514).



territory or location, or with its “definition”? Theory, in the singular, has been presented initially as an established, traditional, canonized, almost monumental body of discourses present in certain textual cultures, not as something dynamic, processual, necessarily incomplete, subject to changing ideologies and to the difficulties of accommodating changing practices. It is also unclear whether it is, or rather was about “literature” or about “culture” at large, and whether literature – if “textual” – can also include orature, presumably not... Does an “expanded definition” automatically break open the “domain” of theory (where it reigns)? Or vice versa? If “anticolonial nationalism and postcolonialism, despite their enormous influence, have only dented, not dismantled, Eurocentric practices of knowledge production” (Krishnaswamy 401), what tools can be used/invented to dismantle these practices? But, more decisively, are *practices* of knowledge production theoretical, and/or is it another theorization process, or simply different, oppositional practices that will dismantle them?

In fact, after reclaiming “great” non-Western corpora of literary theory, “abstract and illuminating thought about the structure, function, effect and origin of literature, (...) comparable, if not superior”, she says, “in clarity and sophistication, to much pre-Romantic European literary theory” (405), Krishnaswamy dedicates the last part of her essay to three very dissimilar Indian case studies that aim at developing an ever more inclusive vision of the construction of “literary knowledges”, not pitted this time against Western (Eurocentric) hegemonic epistemologies, but against regional and casteist Indian hegemonies. In the first case, that of an “alternative explicit literary knowledge” (408), the domination of Brahminical sanskritism over local traditions, such as the Tamil poetics of landscape, is still largely blamed on British Orientalism. The second case, an example of *latent* literary knowledge, is the poetics of *desi* (popular) *bakhti* (devotional) poetry in vernacular languages, ignored by Sri Aurobindo, among others, as his theorization was modelled by the struggle and reactive negotiation with British poetics. But, even though it can be deemed regrettable that this author, with his notion of the poet as seer, missed the dialogic dimension of poetic production in the popular kannada tradition, one could well attribute this (mutual) lack of exchange and recognition to conditions of production of lyrical and narrative poetry, and the corresponding “literary knowledge” that were poles apart, geoculturally and historically. We should come to

terms with the fact that literary theories, whether explicit or latent, have to make sense or an illusion of sense for those who produce them, in the context of specific tensions, before they can project themselves onto the rest of the imagined world. Aurobindo Ghose, born in Kolkata when it was the capital of an Empire, grandson of a Brahma leader and educated in Cambridge, wrote in English in the twentieth century; writing a huge, brilliant epic of the mind in English, as he did, was an original way out of the ideological ghetto in which a merely political struggle for independence could easily lock up Indian artists and thinkers during Aurobindo's whole lifetime; comparing the value of Aurobindo's explicit poetics with the implicit poetics of a twelfth century female *bakhti* poet who composed in a “substandard” dialect is about as awkward as arguing that Chaucer was closer to the people than Browning, or François Villon than Mallarmé.

The last case study is that of contemporary Dalit poetics, labelled “emergent” by Krishnaswamy, for various reasons that include its tentative and oppositional character, its deliberate art of artlessness and its secession from both Western and elite Indian aesthetics, a secession that makes an implicit appeal to respect and integration. But again she fails to acknowledge that all theories of literature and art, in India as everywhere else, have shared these features at the time when their development and affirmation became necessary; it is not only true of modern or post-modern movements: makers and proponents of theories may believe, rightly or wrongly, that they engage in a quest for the truth, but, in any case, theories are intellectual tools with a political and social function insofar as their logical or pseudo-logical re-construction of chains of events justifies and supports, or modifies and distorts the feelings, the needs and actions that motivated them in the first place. Theory, once formulated, “accompanies” the production and circulation of the literary work of art, it is even forged as a “weapon” (413). If we talk of literary knowledges, we should accept that they are never exclusively produced and disseminated to enhance purely aesthetic enjoyment, for there is no disinterested knowledge of the sort.

After this discussion, we could think that Krishnaswamy, as she unwittingly maintains many of the dichotomies and keeps erect the barriers she wants to abolish (between West and East, Euramerica and the rest of the world, high class and popular culture, erudite and vernacular languages, subconscious and explicit theories etc.), is

a fervent adept of radical cultural/epistemological relativism. However, fortunately, she is not. If her efforts to relax the criteria of what “counts as theory” do destabilize theory as it is conceived by elite literary traditions (European, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese, Arab and Hebrew...), adopting a point of view that no longer privileges these theoretical formations does not deny their existence, their influence, the possibility of their renewal – accelerated, perhaps, by the irruption on the world theoretical scene of previously invisible theories located in minority, isolated or dominated seats of literary production. Krishnaswamy proclaims, rightly, a right to theory for all, she is just a moderate, cautious relativist when she concedes (although once more in confusing terms) that “critical standards derived from one literary tradition may or may not be applicable to another” (415). It is the inevitable consequence of not wholly confessing that as an elite metatheorist writing in English, partly grounded on both sides of the divided world she presents to her fellow academic readers, she is using tools (or weapons) afforded by her elite Western formation to side militantly with the theoretical “damned of the Earth”. There is nothing wrong with using firearms against slavery. Contrary to the blind, counterfactual “de-colonial” rewriting of history, Krishnaswamy finally insists on expanding “*our common*<sup>6</sup> storehouse of aesthetic concepts” and expresses the hope that an inclusive comparative theory “may lead us to discover what aesthetic concepts are universal, what concepts are limited to certain cultural traditions, and what concepts are unique to a particular tradition” (415). The first-person plural here stands for *anthropos*, the conceptual totality of mankind. And concepts may be limited to certain traditions in their production without being invalidated in their application elsewhere.

However, when we talk about theory and theories, the stress placed on “tradition” and “traditions” is one of the many problems that remain to be solved in this approach that characterizes traditions as geocritically circumscribed, a transmission across time in one place, be it as large as a continent or as small as a tribal territory in the Caucasus mountains. For this kind of metatheory, any theory produced and/or held as valid by whatever subject, is from “here” *before* the subject and her theory can travel, compare and mix with others. Theories, accordingly,

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<sup>6</sup> My emphasis.

should remain and prosper (or decline) *in situ* and be collected, examined, compared and integrated into the corpus of World Theory on the basis of the territories they occupy rather than the commonality of the theoretical impulse.

Next, with the help of a major dialogical debate between two theorists who are not content with locating themselves in a single culture, I shall study the productivity and limits of bifocal theoretical selves when they experiment a distinctly dynamic positioning.

### **3 - Theory across continents**

In *Thinking Literature Across Continents* (hereafter *TLAC*) (2016), a triple dialogic exchange is staged by Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller. Taking place between the two authors and within each one's private sphere of thought (but disclosed to the public), it definitely dis-locates theory in both senses of dislocation, but it is at least superficially legitimized by the (asymmetrical) dual location of each of them.

From the very beginning and throughout the volume, Ghosh bets everything on two prepositions, *trans* in Latin, and *across* in English. Although the mobility of crossing/going through is certainly in the background, both *trans* and *across*, unless they are associated explicitly with a means or an action of transport (the Trans-Siberian, transatlantic travel), frequently refer to a static "situatedness", a location on the other side of some limit or obstacle (*Across the Black Waters*, our Transalpine neighbor).

The zone of trans maps the effects of difference between communities of thought and paradigms of ideas without being oblivious of the difference, the specificities, the peculiarities that each thought through its own cultural parentage carries with it. The trans-moment or trans-now is about enacting a communication – difficult and debatable – between apparently incompatible paradigms of thought and concepts (*TLAC*, 5).

Despite the respect expressed for tradition, affiliation, "parentage", all of which manifest forms of transmission in linear time, the notion of "trans" is the framework for "an event of presentness". The paradox is only apparent, unfortunately, and not very puzzling: if the flow of/through historical time is not relevant to a

communication between opposites that the theorist tries to operate, movement risks to become a mere figure of dis-course; if a system of thought, even in its complexity, with multiple components and origins, is considered as an in-scription, the reader and the meta-reader, the subjects of criticism and theory seem to go out of their way only to grab the other-text, the text-as-other and bring it back to them intact – a miraculous catch – rather than migrate themselves, at least temporarily, towards the text's supposed territory and transform it by their own transformation, playing with all the resistances around.

“A poem's truth is a distinct form of knowing, a belief in situatedness, a tradition, as Gadamer would argue. (...) A poem, for me, cannot overcome its prejudices, that is, the prejudgments, the logical-linguistic space for understanding both itself and its limitations”, writes Ghosh (*TLAC*, 87). But *who* believes in situatedness? What kind of active anthropomorphic subject is (presumably) a text turned into by this approach? Is there not another truth of the poem, one that the poem cannot know, does not know, or pretends not to know it knows – supposing that a poem knows anything? Is there no truth generated by the reader and for the reader, by uprooting, displacement, dis-location, of both the reader and the voice constructed as originating the poem and its effects? Whether such displacement is perceived as occurring in time or space, it must be a kind of mild or not-so-mild pressure exerted on inertia.

In all that precedes, Ghosh does not allude much to overarching fuzzy theoretical universals about poetry, he is clever enough to talk about the (good) poem as an ideal with which to interact, rather than embarking on the unstable boat of the sacredness of *sahitya* at large; he does not propose a theory of reading and interpretation very different from Miller's “quasi-scientific commitment to beginning with the ‘evidence’” (*TLAC*, 93), where “evidence” must mean something circumscribed like the textual materiality of an object that can be classified as a poem by general or majority consent (“most people”). But again, *who* are these people? And who are those few who might not agree to stick the same generic label? That is, are they human beings in general, or are they culturally and historically located in the same mind space as Miller, or yet in an *ad hoc* space shared by Miller and Ghosh, the confined space of the joint book? A candid confession comes soon after under Miller's pen:

My primary interest in teaching and writing about literature has always been accounting for specific literary texts by reading them for myself. I want to identify what they really say, how they say it, and how it matters to me. Theory, for me, is ancillary to reading poems. Theory is a handmaiden, not a queen who is a sovereign end in herself. Theory, for me, comes inductively, after reading, not before (*TLAC*, 94).

While Miller often reprimands (disagrees with) Ghosh for placing theory before reading (literature, “the poem”), he does not seem to consider as theoretical statements the notion that texts “really say” something, or that reading as a personal, subjective experience, is not at least to some extent determined by a pre-existing theory, implied and promoted by a liberal but socially responsible ethics, of what literature and reading are *for*. On the other hand, Ghosh does nothing very different from Miller when he talks of the “prejudices” of the poem as unsurpassable; for him, as we have seen, the truth of the poem resides in what its context or constraints of production made it really say. I do not think that Ghosh places theory before reading, he gives this impression (and perhaps even believes that his theory comes a priori) because he reads and writes theory as a noble literary genre, one in which he hopes to excel, a “queen” equal to lyrical poetry, epic or drama.

What matters in my present line of inquiry is that, for both theorists-cum-critics (in whatever order we arrange these terms), meaning and aesthetic effect are doubly context-bound, once by intrinsic properties of the texts read, and a second time, by the personal interest and background of the professional as well as the amateur reader. When Ghosh broaches on one of his favourite paradoxical neo-concepts, the “more than global”, he proclaims that

it is not going beyond the global or reducing the local to a form of representation or meaning formation. It is the destruction of an expressive and organic “totality” but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality (...) The more than global is radical immanence, not a choice but an event (*TLAC*, 113).

An abstract change of scale, a philosophical distancing happens here; it does reintroduce some movement, but perhaps only to relax the tension between localist/parochial relativism and a debilitating global uniformity. Ghosh calls on

Jean-Luc Nancy (2000, 3) to back this escape without dialectical resolution: “there is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation. But this circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times opened by presence to presence” (*TLAC*, 115).

I am not sure that above ground ontological rhetoric is the right way to restore the movement of theory. The landscape described by Jean-Luc Nancy resembles the random agitation of particles known as Brownian motion or pedesis more than strong flows of desire for meaning as difference. In fact, Ghosh and Miller, each in his own stylistic register, practice and exhibit a kind of “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah 2005, 213 sq.): to exploit texts in context, or to transfer a theoretical set from one culture to another, you would need to *belong* somewhere, to possess and be possessed by some origin. Even when it is double or triple (hybrid, mestizo, migrant, exilic, etc.), origin – the *wherefrom* (of text and reader) as a given and as a constraint – appears to be a key factor about what horizons can be imagined and what destinations can be chosen. Critical self-examination, presented and probably perceived as an act of good will, folds back on the supposed “self” with a dangerous surge of narcissistic fascination: “Cross-cultural understanding is not merely about reaching out (...). It is also about judging and orienting one's peculiar nativism, cultural exclusiveness, constellative patterns of belief (...)” (*TLAC*, 116). Thus, such non-nationalist, potentially cosmopolitan theorists still proceed, like the most conservative Comparative Literature scholars with a step-by-step expansion, beginning with what one is supposed to know best (“oneself”, “one's own” culture) and checking in back there every second night. Moreover, this obsessive “one's own” is in fact far from singular and atomistic: creatively forging a personal cognitive style, a theoretical mode, seems to be necessarily linked to the collective formation(s) in which one has been initially nurtured. Theory, then, would be a minimum risk operation; it could never become a heuristic scheme of radical departure and haphazard identifications: conversions, adoptions, hospitalities.

Contrary to the narrative of rooted extension that remains linear even if it is liable to bifurcate, experimental cosmopolitanism<sup>7</sup> considers that we owe no debt to initial or prior circumstance and that our obligations and initiatives, determined by

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<sup>7</sup> See Coste 2018.

species and trans-species solidarity, often apply in the framework of spatial proximity for pragmatic reasons exclusively.

#### 4 - World Theory or Wandering Theory?

East West, or North-South geographies of the mind, can betray or confess (inter)-dependence, but they can also serve as a pretext to build strongholds on either side. There is only a fine line between these two motivations, as we can see when recent conferences<sup>8</sup> in the wake of the Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies tsunamis of the 90s and early 2000s still define their purpose as a struggle for an affirmative action of sorts, to establish a fair balance between two geographically named poles. I say named rather than located, because North and South, after West and East, do not reflect serious cartographies and are little better than abusive metaphors to talk of dominant and dominated, early and belated modernizations, center and periphery, etc.<sup>9</sup> Australia, as a renewed colonial enterprise, belongs to the “North”, and so does Argentina, while contemporary indigenous cultures of Canada belong to the “South”. But the opposite of foundational binarism should not be vagueness, erasure, levelling of features, indifferentiation, or yet solipsistic closure: it must be the mutual inscription of the other and the *subject-to-be* in spacetimes open to chance, emergence, discovery, the unexpected. To re-instate this possibility, Tagore’s revolutionary brand of universalism keeps all its appeal over a century later. His advocacy of “World Literature” (1907), which is by vocation a holistic theory of literature, remains powerful because it detaches itself radically from the narrow surroundings, from the historical “opportunity” that gave rise to it and thus produces its unique location beyond contradiction and non-contradiction: neither home nor the world, both home and the world.

This now famous lecture, given at the request of the Bengali National Council of Education, an organisation in which Tagore held responsibilities, was soon

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., World Literatures and the Global South Conference – Sydney 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Such dichotomies are hard to get rid of in general, and even harder without diluting into a mire of global political correctness what — like “class struggle” — they used to emblematised: “Doing southern studies is unmasking and refusing the binary thinking – ‘North’/‘South,’ nation/South, First World/Third World, self/other – that postcolonial studies have taught us is the most damaging rhetorical structure of empire. Doing southern studies is thinking geographically, thinking historically, thinking relationally, thinking about power, thinking about justice, thinking back” (Romine and Greeson 2016, quoted in the CFP for the Global Souths Conference, March 19-21, 2020). <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/5050094/cfp-global-souths-conference-march-19-21-2020> accessed May 20, 2020.



collected with other essays in a volume simply titled *Sahitya* (Literature) that marks, according to Sisir Kumar Das, a theoretical turn in Tagore's writings on literature, for “none of the eleven essays relates to any specific literary text” (Kumar Das 2001, 11). This lack of specificity would become the hallmark of Tagore's essays on literature for the rest of his life. A political event, the first partition of Bengal decided in 1905 by Lord Curzon in agreement with a Muslim delegation, had triggered protests from two sectors: Bengali nationalists whose action was meant to be curbed by this partition, and, less obviously, humanists like Tagore who thought that all divisive moves on the grounds of religion, caste or class are intrinsically bad. Tagore had called for subtle demonstrations against partition by symbolically tying *rakhi* (brotherhood or protection) threads in Kolkata, Dakha and Sylhet, thus transforming a religious Hindu tradition into a secular motif of unity<sup>10</sup>. His theoretical stance was derived from his affirmation of anthropological oneness beyond any particular traits that would allow comparison and ranking in terms of differences between localized cultural products. The Council had asked Tagore (in English) to give a talk on “Comparative Literature”, he titled his talk “World Literature”, perhaps recalling and mixing references to Goethe and Matthew Arnold, but certainly for the sake of bonding all truth seekers rather than invoking roots: “Whatever faculties we have within us exist for the sole purpose of forging bonds with others. (...) Otherwise, there is no sense in saying ‘I am’ or ‘something is’” (Tagore 2001, 138). Sense is relational, it depends on the other.

In need of the other, how and where are we going to meet *her*? Tagore gave an unequivocal answer in an autobiographical metaliterary meditation quoted at length by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1985, 78) after Ernest Rhys's early biography of the poet:

My heart began to say, “There is a stranger going to and fro in this world of ours – her house is on the further shores of an ocean of mystery. (...) The tune of my song led me to the very door of that stranger who ensnares the universe and appears in it, and I said:

Wandering over the world

I come to thy land,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/how-rabindranath-tagore-used-raksha-bandhan-as-means-to-prevent-1905-bengal-partition-4785042/>

I am a guest at thy door, thou Stranger.

Some days afterwards I heard someone singing along the road:

How does that unknown bird fly to and from the cage?

(...) At times the strange bird comes to the closed cage, and speaks a word of the limitless and the unknown (Rhys 1915, 43).

The leitmotiv of the stranger is all pervasive in the self-translated/adapted poems collected in *The Gardener*, but written prior to *Gitanjali*. It is nothing original in itself, we could certainly find this motif in many Western Romantic poems, but the reciprocity of strangeness, if I dare say, along with a coming-near that does not result into a shared flight or long-term living together, go well beyond any form of nostalgia or sentiment of fleeing time. On the one hand, the lyric voice says: “I am restless. I am athirst for faraway things, (...) I am eager and wakeful, I am a stranger in a strange land” (G 12). On the other hand, there are always (other) strangers who insistently go by or come to “my door” whether the lyrical first person is male or female. Providing hospitality is a vital condition to exist as a sentient being: “Turn away my silent guest I cannot. I look at the face through the dark and hours of dreams pass by” (G 11). The subject wanders in his heart, but “Thy tongue is known to my heart as my very own” (G 11). We can see that not only *sahitya* is of the other *before* it is of something like a self, but that the role of the other is finally swappable, with some minimal effort to overcome a reticence to be-in-the-world, never becoming a *sadhu* or a *sannyasi*. With Tagore, the spacetime of theory becomes as flexible, as “wandering” as that of the dream and the poem. Theory happens in playful swift sands. The only address of theory is where it happens, a dis-location that is not perceived as a loss, but a gain. The prose essay, distanced from poetic enchantment merely translates for the “general public” a theoretical experience made possible by the liberating power of poetic discourse. We can thus justify on different grounds Krishnaswamy's endeavor to dig theories out of unconventional sources: no longer for their profound difference or marginality under a hegemonic regime, but for the stateless power of the insurrectional, othering experience they share.

## 5 - Opening remarks to in-conclude

I was alluding to Barbara Cassin at the beginning of this essay. In an interview she gave some eleven years after the first publication in French of her edited *Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles*, she writes about the multiple versions in other languages:

It's the transmission of knowledge or bodies of knowledge in constitution, in the making. They are all in some way or another related to a certain experience of a limited corpus of European philosophical texts, a corpus that does not take into account – because it is unable to do so – philosophical traditions, paths of wisdom and knowledge from “elsewhere” (I don't even know exactly what this word refers to) (Cassin 2015, 9-10).

There are several ways of (not) understanding “elsewhere” in this context. Plainly not knowing what this word refers to would probably imply that, from a European point of view, any elsewhere is invisible or unintelligible and, therefore, that there likely is no elsewhere: Europe, whatever it is, is the entire knowable world, or the whole World is indistinguishable from Europe. But Cassin, saying she does not “even know *exactly*” what elsewhere is, where elsewhere lies, suggests something entirely different, namely that for her, or for her brand of theory, there is no certain, bounded, fixed location from which “elsewhere” can be identified as that, that is, as “not-here”. In this sense, there is no place in which one can place oneself to theorize that is not temporary, in transit and the result of a previous dis-placement, dissipating somehow the illusion of a domicile (of a home that seems to confer some authority and authenticity to you because it holds authority over you).

On a very different level of elaboration, it is equally worthwhile to listen to some utopian, slightly naïve and optimistic apology of exile as liberation. Statelessness as rebirth is the central motif of *The Stateless Citizen* (Al Da'mi 2016), a clumsy and hardly lifelike, but highly symptomatic novel recently self-published by a male Iraqi academic who, in the fiction, assumes the persona of a TV hostess, a young divorcee with child. Fleeing the dictatorship of Saddam to a neighboring country, she cannot settle there either and decides to boldly migrate to the USA, destroying her passport in the plane restrooms:

I threw the remaining ruined rubbish into the drain and flashed it [*sic*] away forever: once, twice and thrice, till no trace of a paper remained floating on the water anymore. It was literally an unimaginable moment as a novel sense of relief took possession of me once my life-retarding travel documents were severed from me and from my son's life for good, paving the way for both of us to dive into the global waters of universality to be baptized anew in order to re-emerge as a fresh species of humans, “citizens of the world” (Al Da'mi 2016, 164).

A national identity is just crap, and it is with great relief that one expels it from one's bowels. It is an act of purification to tear it to pieces beyond recognition and eliminate it forever. The slip on “flush” and “flash” in the passage quoted above is unconsciously brilliant as it combines cleansing with revelation, and the conversion of flesh into enlightenment. The act of abstraction/subtraction that detaches the subject's mind and conscious body from an imposed national/patrimonial identity can operate as one striking metaphor of theory, a self-appointed embassy of the general people sent abroad, outsiders in a borderless de-territory, in search of a perhaps higher, but certainly broader truth for the future.

Returning to *TLAC*, my critique was a constructive one insofar as the keyword “across” is fully operational in the dialogues of these vastly different theorists, even in cases of recognized severe disagreement. However, several important interrogations remain.

Theory is always a going out, but is it a projection or an extraction? Miller opposes his own “instinct” to Ghosh's universalizing assurance:

Ghosh does not hesitate (...) to advocate a transcontinental theory and practice of poetry that is exemplified as much by Sanskrit *sahitya* as by all the Western sources Ghosh cites. My instinct, on the contrary, is to hold that a special theory should be derived in each case as much as possible from the terminology of the text at hand in the light of its specific surrounding historical, biographical and linguistic context (*TLAC*, 135-136).

If a “special theory” should be sought for every text, or at least every author, linguistic material and historical context, as Miller contends, is not “theory” just another name for hermeneutics? In any case, whatever it is, it wants to be detached from the

reader/theorist and as strictly located as possible in a cultural space in which “the text” is supposedly embedded. A contemporary problem arises: how can we define the cultural space of the allophone, bilingual or multilingual text, of the diasporic text, etc.? Where should we locate the theory of Chinese sonnets (Feng Zhi), Mexican haikai (Octavio Paz), Indian detective novels (Satyajit Ray), Nikkei Peruvian poetry (José Watanabe)? The globalization of genres is an age-old phenomenon that has accelerated more and more since the nineteenth century. If so, a “transcontinental theory” would have better chances to “account for” all the texts that belong somehow to World Literature, whether they are in transcontinental circulation or not (the latter being generally the case of the list of displaced genres above and many more miscegenated productions such as Arab theatre or Francophone griotism).

Miller motivates in part his contextual theorization through the fact that, contrary to Ghosh, he does not possess alternative theoretical traditions. Without calling it an ambiguity, let alone a contradiction, he remarks, on the same page, that Ghosh wants to practice “innovative reading strategies that straddle multiple continents – a kind of no-centric approach. (...)”, but he also “wants to show, under the aegis of *sahitya*, the power of Sanskrit traditions to provide a strong and valid way to read even texts in English and American literature (...)” (*TLAC*, 181).

Is Ghosh's universalizing theorization actually floating around with no center? We could well doubt it insofar as it privileges the Sanskrit tradition, but this same tradition, according to Ghosh, calls on “the other”, as we have seen it earlier with Tagore's poetics. By rewriting the word “literature” in English as “sahitya” without italics, Ghosh effects a brave and necessary theoretical translation:

The ethics of *sahitya* (literature) are inscribed in a variety of hunger. *Sahitya* creates its own hunger, the desire to feed on the “other” and be fed upon. It is formed out of a hunger to explicate ways of human experience and engagements with emotions. It is anchored in a hunger that is *eros*, its creative aesthetics, its power of sustenance and motivation (*TLAC*, 207).

Although I would not readily accept that “explicating” is the function or the horizon of literature, thus reduced to its theoretical dimension, I guess the *eros* of otherness is exactly what can protect the theoretical subject from the risk of staying stranded in

the middle of the black water or at “the other end”. Yet, I think that even Ghosh's aspiration to a nourishing intimacy with the other is somewhat timid, as it finds support in a double something (classical Indian plus modern Western epistemology) that *belongs* to him by birth right and education.

Ghosh's theorization is nomadic in the sense of pastoral or merchant nomads who spend each part of the year in places and on routes marked by ancient habits. The one I advocate, without being errant, does not follow a pre-established form of commuting. Experimentally doing away with the relevance of origin, whether it is supposed to be mine or that of a text, it will systematically try surprising, or even incongruous approaches: for instance, reading popular romance for its production of aesthetic value, as if it were the high language of lyrical poetry or the epic, is one rewarding kind of dislocation that relies on a universalizing theoretical hypothesis; symmetrically, applying *rasa* theory to a non-Indian literary genre that scorns emotions would be both a way of altering the theory and dismantling the barrier of denial built by these texts around their emotional motivations. Locations and dislocations, in theoretical perspectives, would then end up manifesting no more than the traces of kinds of migrating minds as they move about, repeatedly identifying with the other and the other of the other.

We could see this ever-going, both untranquilly and disquieting, but not circular journey as an expansion, a sometimes arduous and sometimes joyful flourish of the non-binary attitude demanded by any type of comparative thinking – the kind of thinking that collects and collages distinct mental objects considered on a par, treated a priori as equal. No two terms alone can be compared, a *tertium comparationis* is always required. According to Djelal Kadir, the *tertium* is not an object, but rather something like a position:

Comparative Literature has always justified its *métier* by leveraging a *tertium quid* beyond dichotomous antitheses. Now implicitly, now overtly, a non-binary principle has governed the discipline, namely, that the view from nowhere is bound to be limited, and, conversely, the view from everywhere is unlikely to be anything other than delusional (Kadir 2006, 125).

The theorist, contrary to the empiricist or the legislator, ceaselessly compares. S/he has no time to reify or fetishize anything, even a pure idea or a Holy Grail. What will be, from where will be a point of view that is neither from nowhere nor from everywhere? Perhaps can we find an answer in Barbara Cassin's "not exactly" referenced *elsewhere* – often redefined without becoming simply hazy – rather than in a suspended in-between that could maintain binary oppositions in place? And this shifting elsewhere, in its othering, constructed otherness, is the not-yet-known goal of an *exos* that will turn out to be a *nostos*, or vice versa. Many theories on many roads: with a little luck, some paths will cross.

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