

Foreword: Reclaiming Literature as Public Forum

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To ask questions about what literature can do in the age of globalization is to run into a confrontation with the new trends in cultural studies in the American academy. The insightful essays in this issue of *Concentric* represent an attempt to think about the tensions and alliances between a humanistic discipline and a culturalist response to socioeconomic problems outside the well-wrought urn of the established canons and taste. If literature is not a distinct, bounded object of knowledge or a solitary playground for therapeutic or expressive release, it is part of social and historical movements in modern times. If literature is still active as a protagonist in the ongoing practice that seeks to speak truth to power, pit imagination against instrumental rationality, and transform the conditions of domination and oppression, why would one look for new grounds in cultural studies for a more effective political agency? In its more vibrant forms literature is associated with an unfinished history of the republic of letters, that is, with public opinion, dissent, national self-determination, ethnic memory, and the dream of a just world. Although it has often been domesticated into a handmaid of the ideological apparatus of the capitalist or socialist-turned capitalist state, as in doctrinaire liberal education and the nationalism of the self-inflated ego, literature, in its undying “imagination” of a better world and its critique of the unjust reality, is a reflective, hermeneutically challenging, and public-spirited enterprise.

The vibrant strain of modern literature had the mission of forming a national community; its *Bildungsroman* plots, though individualistic, partake of the narrative of building a nation and envisioning a freer political and civic togetherness. This humanistic spirit is now being pushed aside by the divide-and-conquer, atomizing logic of market and capital. Literature as a forum for debating and envisioning the public good is as true of the emergent bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth-century Europe and America as of the inspired writings of various national allegories. Yet literature in this emancipatory, autonomous sense is clearly in jeopardy in the age of neoliberal globalization.

Surely there are cultural studies that carry on the critical and transformative impulse of the literary practice I have sketched above. In this affinity cultural studies is a continuation of the humanistic and historical inquiry as a public forum and a field of struggle. The cultural studies prevalent in many American universities, however, is edging toward neoliberal, market-oriented globalization. It affirms rather than critiques the unequal structure of power. Cultural studies gives the false impression that the cultural realm is a palimpsest of a radical vision. In this playful realm the centers of power can be subverted, hybridized, crisscrossed, rewritten, transgressed and dispersed. Gone are the nightmares of the nation-state, nationalism, authority, tradition, moral constraints, and repression. We live in a “post-world” where all monolithic structures can be written off with a stroke of the pen or with an idiosyncratic performance. Riding on the wave of globalization, cultural studies induces an intoxicating vertigo, a sea of hybridity in which swims the nameless subject or mobile body with its interchanges, crossings, and libidinal intensities.

The rise of cultural studies in the winds of globalization has hijacked the critical energy and political drive of literature as public and political practice. Its victory is not due to a dynamic, critical spirit or a democratic pursuit. The opposite is true. Despite its supposedly radical sentiments, cultural studies is a secret bed-fellow of the neoliberal discourse of globalization, with which it shares the illusory post-poststructuralist jargon of subjectivity, flow, desire, border crossing, and hybridity. To see this complicity we may consider the touted cluster of ideas: body, subject, mobility, diaspora, and hybridity.

What kinds of imagination have been invested in the body? The body has been more recently seen as a bundle of nerves and energies that create its own freedom between or within the cracks of prescribed norms and teleologies. As such it has become a vehicle that militates against the notion of the autonomous individual: this individual, with his or her ego and rationality, repressed by the cultural superego, is too much wedded to a time of high modernity, to the bourgeois confidence in the calculus of self-interest in the market place. I remember in my graduate days in the early 1990s most discussions of Freud, Foucault, and Derrida were about how misguided a concept the “transcendental ego” was, how every healthy human being fails to be the master of his or her own unconscious house, how great the self-deconstructive body is. The individual is such a self-deluding creature in the eyes of Foucault’s interpreters that one has to articulate and celebrate some more volatile, insurgent, self-creating gymnastics than what is implied by the idea of “an individual.”

One attractive term in cultural studies/globalization theory is the “subject.” The subject is somehow free-floating and vague. It floats above all historical, social and economic constraints. In the eyes of culture studies critics, all sociopolitical institutions seem to be deterministic, patriarchal, authoritarian, and repressive; they hamper the authentic development of a free subjectivity bursting with libido or anarchistic *élan*. The subject, in this light, seems to be a true agent of autonomy. Indeed it is so much a performative, self-styling, self-begetting actor that it changes its face, image, color or body every fifteen minutes. This is said to be an act of defiance against the prescribed, oppressive boundaries of the state, national territories, and the laws of bureaucracy, morality, and society.

Yet being a “subject” does not guarantee complete self-autonomy, for the “subject” may still serve a bigger agent who is ordering it around. It is perhaps because of this that the unbridled body is appealed to as more radically seditious. In current practices of cultural studies one is usually urged to fetishize the body as a place, a site of and for political change. The body is portrayed as a stage for theatrics, performance and scandal that, unfortunately, have at least since the rebellious late Sixties ceased to shock us. These shock-effect performances sound as revolutionary as a new brand of toothpaste or the newest sex drug, and hence are really still a part of capitalism’s (i.e., consumerism’s, advertising’s) “reproductive game.” A performance class offered by an American university may be reveling in outrageous gestures or engaging in convention-flouting theatrics, completely unaware that the Iraq war is just such a performance, violating all known rules of civilization and human relations.

The body’s gimmicks lead to all kinds of facile argument about the body’s experience in global culture. This infinitely flexible body gives meaning or aura to diaspora, border-crossing, hybridity, deterritorialization, denationalization, and mobility. This body is certainly not everybody. It is privileged. It can afford to travel, fly in the jumbo jet, eat in a pan-Asian buffet, lounge in the Starbucks, drink green ice tea or diet Coke, mouth English, flow across borders, and take on hybrid forms of culture and style. But all these freedoms are guaranteed by the expansive powers of transnational corporations, market-driven nation-states in the West and East, accessible to those who may carry American Express and the latest laptops. Chances are that this mobile body carries an American passport and speaks English and is affiliated with an institution with political clout and symbolic capital. The military-industrial complex is thrilled to see this brand of bodies breaking down national and regional roadblocks to the accumulation of capital and imperial power.

A grim body under the rubric of the reality principle may make us think twice. Renamed as the performance principle by Herbert Marcuse to designate the domination by the reigning socioeconomic structure, the performance/reality principle refers to the ubiquitous performativity of work and life in late capitalism. Under its rule, the individual is a cog in the profit machine rather than an autonomous ethical agent. His or her worth is evaluated by “competitive, economic performance,” efficiency, and proficiency with which he or she can perform the assigned task. Satisfaction and fulfillment are determined not by labor of love or meaningful work. Performers/workers work for an apparatus which they do not know and over which they have no control. They cannot take upon themselves to organize a life of their own choosing, but have to perform the “pre-established function.” Economic performance becomes the single most significant mode of being. Libidinal energy is channeled into “socially useful performances in which the individual works for himself only in so far as he works for the apparatus, engaged in activities that mostly do not coincide with their faculties and desires” (Marcuse 41).

In the face of this repressive performance, cultural studies rightly seeks for a nonperformative, non-utilitarian experience, snatched from the repetitive rhythm of treadmill performance dictated by the reigning political economy. This aesthetic performance thrusts us back to the radical ferment of the 1960s when Marcuse critiqued the performance principle in his resounding *Eros and Civilization*. In present cultural studies we may still trace the residual energies of the Sixties: the street arts, anti-war demonstrations, anti-establishment fervor, live theater, Woodstock, experiments in lifestyle, and pop culture. These energies had since migrated into the poststructuralist dismantling of canonical texts and the sovereign subject, but in recent years have resurfaced in the renewed interest in the body, embodied memory, and myriad performances of culture.

The academic investment in the body and its performance stems from the impulse to forge a progressive social imaginary. Its polemical fuel is the acute discontent with the repressive structure of domination and violence. The new name for this domination is globalization, a political economy that has declared triumphantly that the world market of capital expansion is not simply a means to promote prosperity for all but the very human destiny itself. It is the ultimate one-way track of no return, the end of history. The end-of-history thesis can be summarized through these overarching features: society by consumption, politics by television, history by Disney.¹

¹ These phrases are used by Virginia Carmichael to describe the post-Cold War, postmodern condition, which elides the real politics and real problems of domination, violence and inequality,

Cultural studies' worship of the body's performance risks aestheticizing away the blending of real performance into political community that marks the public sphere, the body politic. The drive for transforming the body politic dwindles into a mere politics of the body. The narrow focus on aesthetic questions, on the politics of the aesthetically pleasurable and stylistically variable body, is indeed a glaring failure to take adequate account of domination and violence by instituted powers and unequal socioeconomic relations. Aesthetic performance may alter or challenge the surface contours of the dominant symbolic code, tinkle with signs, styles or postures, but it still falls within the limit of the power-capital nexus.

"The personal is political." This slogan is romantic and prematurely utopian if it concludes that embodied performance is effective cultural politics. Performance and the body are places, we are often told, where political forces constantly clash and converge, but the real fight is not in the body. David Harvey notes that lifestyle has been viewed as a potential moment of resistance to the flattening effect and repressive requirements expected of the disciplined body of the capitalist apparatus. Lifestyle change or theatrics seem to promise a more authentic self-image distinct from the image of the worker as the economic performer. The visual construction and performative presentation of self-image in consumption practice can alter and challenge the prescribed role of the worker as an appendage to the machine. "Workers may open for themselves wider terrains of differentiating choice (social or individual) with respect to lifestyle, structures of feeling, household organization, reproductive activities, expressions of desire, pursuit of pleasures, etc. within the moment of consumption" (Harvey 112). But this rosy scenario fails to reveal, as Harvey quickly adds, that the innovations can easily be absorbed into the process of profit production. It has happened with depressing frequency that any radical change in art, lifestyle or even ideas (cultural studies, for example) can be re-branded and absorbed into the massive slew of reproduction by being captured as distinctive and fashionable market niches for sales.

The conundrum that plagues cultural and performance studies is where to locate the body's struggle against the network of alienation and abstraction. Can we find it in the body itself, in its constantly renewable performance and theatrics? Or does the politics of the body need to refer to broader issues of the political body, the

dissolving them into simulacra. Globalization, which in many ways may look like a benign and positive process, is nevertheless controlled by the Euro-American domination of the world market and world geography. To think that being "global" or "globalized" is beneficial to all is to fall into the neoliberal myth of the market and world trade as ultimate guiding principle of human history. See Carmichael 140-41.

body as a relational, constitutional, and public category, a link nestled in a vast network of alignments and breaches in the world system? Harvey puts this dilemma quite aptly:

On the one hand, to return to the human body as the fount of all experience (including that of space and time) is presently regarded as a means (now increasingly privileged) to challenge the whole network of abstractions (scientific, social, political-economic) through which social relations, power relations, institutions, and material practices get defined, represented, and regulated. [...] To return to it is, therefore, to instantiate the social processes being purportedly rebelled against. (100-01)

Cultural studies raises both hope and hopelessness, possibilities and limits, but privileging cultural and aesthetic motifs elides the real condition of hopelessness. The answer to this aesthetics is to politicize the aesthetic body by investigating the structural limits and contradictions within the body politic.

In the accelerated expansion of global capital and power, the body is also associated with the privileged ideas of flow, diaspora, border-crossing, and hybridity. Somehow a divine presence is watching over humans as equal children under the sun. This brings up the question of human rights, whose exercise underlies all protests against monolithic, traditional structures. But the rights of the body to life and dignity are severely limited in the real world of geopolitical conflict and hostile nation-states. This is because human rights for equality, respect, and security must translate into state-guaranteed civil rights. Advocating the ideas of diaspora and flow, cultural studies practitioners forget the indispensable role of the nation-state and assume that the family, the ethnic group, the distant home country or international laws can guarantee these rights. Hannah Arendt sees diaspora as stemming from the rise of the powerful nations and the loss of statehood for people who suffered from "statelessness" during the two world wars. Diaspora as dislocation can be traced to the vulnerability of human rights, because human right was a great idea but denuded of national protection. The historic proclamation of human rights during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution declared that God's divine command, the custom of history, and the privileged strata of the monarchy were no longer the source of Law. Human beings were emancipated from the tutelage of tradition and were supposed to be the lawmakers of their own political and civic organization. The faith in human rights, however, seemed naïve if unanchored to a

nationalistic framework. If man himself is the source, Arendt observes, of authority and law, no national or state laws are supposed to protect individuals, because all laws are conceived to rest on the abstract, inalienable rights of man. Hence the poignant irony: “man had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people” (Arendt 291). Since the proclamation of the rights of man in the eighteenth century, human beings have been conceived in the image of a family of nations, and thus “the people,” not the individual, was the real image of a human being. Isolated individuals, theoretically blessed with unalienable rights, remain unable to guarantee and assert these rights. “Only the emancipated sovereignty of the people, of one’s own people, seemed able to insure them” (Arendt 291).

Displaced people were minorities who suffered not only the loss of their home, but also “the loss of the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world” (Arendt 293). The denationalized people in the past were precursors of today’s migrant workers, laborers, diasporics, and refugees. Their loss of state-guaranteed rights of citizenship amounts to the loss of human rights, which are as “little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states” as they would have been in the jungle (Arendt 291).

This bleak picture should give pause to the romantic celebration of diasporic flows. This view sounds as if a person or a community can move around and make virtual connections anywhere and still able to protect her or his rights and well-being without engagement with a national government. If a U.S.-based theorist with this view is to cross borders without an American passport, or if her or his ethnic countrymen turn out to be enemy combatants, she or he will run up against the stonewall of the nation-state. She or he will soon realize that the individual and groups are liable to judgment or prejudice within the parameters of a nation-state, whose unstated presumption is that only a citizen, one of us, is a full human being.

The Asian Pacific economic boom and the rise of a professional class in the Asian diaspora have obscured the issue of rights rooted in nationally defined citizenship, devaluing in the process the time-honored attachment to native place and home. The switch from dwelling to drifting parallels a shift from politics to economics. As long as one group can survive economically, we are told, as long as an individual can hold down the job of computer programmer or dentist, the awareness of national origin, ethnic community, and cultural heritage can be thrown to the wind. The nation-states, be they liberal democracy or “socialist” government,

have become market states bent on growth and development. They propagate an instrumental, developmentalist worldview and enforce it by technocratic management.

But if people on the go do not need the nation-state, some nation-states are taking advantage of this neglect by expanding their invisible boundaries and by creating the mirage of a “world community” at the expense of smaller nations and communities. Transnational corporations, according to Timothy Brennan, are a new form of colonialism no less expansive than the old. For all their transnational reach, they continue to “have a distinct national character, not only because they depend on the nation-state system for their functioning” and the products they sell bear the imprints of iconic national-cultural imagery (156), but also because their operations and public policy are directly derived from a single base culture and from a national political economy in pursuit of national interest. They are happy to dissolve national boundaries so as to freely draw up their spheres of influence. Cultural studies romanticizes success stories of cultural exchange or personal mobility when it confuses diasporic freedom with the expansionist liberty wielded by the military-industrial complex in the name of global trade and democratization.

The pain of being on the constant move is dissolved into the romantic mist of economic survival and free hybridized cultures. What Arendt calls “organized isolation” in loose, unconnected individuals reflects the widespread condition of dispersal and ghettoization. Massive isolation undercuts the integrity of the individual embedded in the historically sedimented way of living together with other human beings. “Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed” (Arendt 474). Political isolation goes hand in hand with faith in the productive capacity of men and women in the economic realm. The reduction of individuals into a mere labor force leads to the waning of the human person as a political agent seeking self-rule and community.

In the face of global dispersal, literature, in the sense of public forum, reasserts the idea of a national, ethnic community, registers its trajectory, and retains its language and sensibility. Further, literature is more political than depoliticized cultural studies. “Politics” here does not refer to electoral or parliamentary politics, nor the legal procedure based on civic rights. It goes to the heart of the polis in the genuine sense of democratic participation and public speech and action, and means nothing less than the capacity of “the most elementary form of human creativity which is the capacity of adding something of one’s own to the common world” (Arendt 475). It means the exercise of citizens’ rights and active participation in the

public sphere and debate. This is the point of literature as social and political practice. In contrast, in depoliticized isolation, facelessness and disempowerment are the order of the day and the feelings of home, community and nation become a remote memory.

Literature is a vehicle for re-imagining political community, for critiquing dire consequences of globalization, and for sketching utopian outlines of a better world. In the current situation, literature may again take up the critical, reflective, hermeneutic jobs that it once was used to do. The papers in this issue seem to move back and forth between literature and cultural studies. What is refreshing is the frequent invocation of the critical thrust of literature as it extends into cultural studies. The contributors place the reading and criticism of literature and film in the new context of globalization. Gang Gary Xu's paper focuses on the Benjaminian aura as standing in for literature's critique, reflection, and autonomy. It situates the loss of aura in the unholy alliance of cultural studies with neoliberalism. It identifies Regan-Thatcher neoliberalism's political myth of family and popular sentiments, which actually destroyed all stable social and communal structures *via* the magic of the market. Current practices of cultural studies are usually complicit with neoliberalism in smoothing over the asymmetry of power and resources in capitalist society and the world at large. The aura here is a symbol of humanist critique, which may well be the "old fashioned" function of literature that carries democratic and emancipatory potentials.

Lili Hsieh's paper takes a broad view of the geopolitical domination of power and examines the imperial sweep of the English language and the pitfalls of indigenous resistance in nationalism. It further analyzes the visions of national culture and literature in Taiwan. Checking the universal conception of world history against local instances, Hsieh forcefully argues that while it is important not to lose sight of the self-other, white-colored binary or hierarchical structure, post-colonial critics will gain by bringing in political and economic factors of class, which cut across the binary structure of master-slave in neo-colonialism.

Xinmin Liu focuses again on colonial residues in the American classroom. With vivid examples he argues that critical reflection informed by history is crucial for teaching cultural difference in the ahistorical pedagogical environment. Uncritical pedagogy tends to treat traumatic memoirs of China's past as authentic Chinese history. Ignoring the hidden rhetorical agenda of these personal narratives, educators in the U.S. conduct instructional games and use films to teach other cultures, but they often represent otherness as deficient, deviating or lacking. This replay of master-slave self-positioning *vis-à-vis* the other offers a feel-good sense of

the U.S. as the “penultimate form” of democracy. By espousing a critical “border pedagogy,” humanistic educators, like reflective literary critics, can resist the end-of-history mindset and move toward more dialectic and interactive strategies for teaching cultural difference.

Harry Kuoshu addresses the urgent question of the marketization of literature and its geopolitical repercussions. He uses Wei Hui’s novel *Shanghai Baby* to elaborate a new lifestyle in China that traces back to the petty bourgeois and its tasteful, personal life. Placing this phenomenon in both geopolitical misunderstanding and globalization, Kuoshu’s paper documents various interpretations and shock effects that are intelligible in the context of Chinese politics and the dominant ideology in the last half-century. The paper also depicts the depoliticizing trend in adhering to everyday life and the emergent metropolis as a new setting for contemporary Chinese culture.

Yu-chen Lin’s paper moves on to a specific literary text against the backdrop of global modernity. It explores the dynamic tension between memory and forgetting in the project of nationalism. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* excavates motifs in the nationalist memory of a traumatic past but also transcends the trauma to embrace a future of emancipation. The novel portrays an alternative pre-modern community of happiness, which is more attuned to otherness in the self by desensitizing the self to the oppressive present. This paper is marked by a remarkable historical and textual density, further proof of how intimately literature is intertwined with nation, history, and global situations.

Yingjin Zhang portrays the Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian as a cultural translator. Gao migrates back and forth across linguistic and ethnic boundaries and integrates into his modernist writings diverse cultural elements from the West and Chinese tradition. Gao’s creativity stems from a critical contact zone between languages and cultures. The controversy over Gao Xingjian’s recognition by the “world community” not only foregrounds geo-cultural politics in the era of globalization but also sheds light on Gao’s dilemma in struggling between his claim to creativity, individuality, and transcendence. The Gao phenomenon raises urgent questions of translatability and universality in the production and circulation of world literature.

Chaoyang Liao’s paper also addresses translation. Translation as a vehicle for understanding the other has been touted as a sign of cosmopolitan tolerance and respect for cultural difference. Liao questions this trend and argues that the implicit globalizing flatness in the translator’s cosmopolitan stance needs to be critiqued through a return to the ethical dimension. The ethical dimension refers to the mutual

imbrication between translatability and untranslatability as important aspects of ethically informed translation. In this process translational judgment is both relativized and under constraint. An ethics of the real is called for to explain “linguistic being” as the *raison d’être* of translational practice.

In his provocative paper Frank Stevenson asks not about the possible role of literature in globalization but “In what sense might our conception of ‘globalization’ be displaced, decentered, destabilized by ‘literature’?” Following Lyotard’s notions of “figure” and “event,” Stevenson explores the power of art and literature in disrupting narrative continuity and theories with pretensions to finality. Art’s “irrational” meaning carries a utopia that also recoups the past and nature. This demystification of globalization by recouping literature’s utopian yearnings helps to underscore the transience of the present age, which is like a dinosaur facing extinction and new waves of life-forms.

Yue Ma’s paper takes up Wang Xiaobo’s writing, a literary phenomenon in the 1990s. Moving away from narratives of the Cultural Revolution as an era of sexual frustration, Wang Xiaobo fascinates his readers with “sex carnival” during this political turbulence. Exploring different faces of desire in characters of Wang’s fiction, Yue Ma argues that Wang Xiaobo’s representation of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution is neither a continuity of the humanist discourse that rebels against alienation, nor a simple advocacy of sexual freedom. Instead, it is a critical inquiry into the nature of desire itself. Wang Xiaobo’s writing articulates the complex relationship between political power and sexual relations.

Hui Xiao’s paper explores different modern sensibilities in China and Japan by examining the reception of Hou Jianqi’s film *Nuan*. The paper’s focus on inter-Asian relations signals an Asian sense of global modernity. Xiao argues that the disappearance of the old village and attendant nostalgia in ultra-modern Japan prepared the Japanese audience to embrace Huo’s two films, *Postman in the Mountains* and *Nuan*. In contrast, the Chinese audience does not warm up as quickly to Huo’s films. Xiao goes to literature, comparing Mo Yan’s original story with its film adaptation, and discusses melodrama theory and its relevance to *Nuan*. The paper is another good instance of how literature can illuminate visual presentation.

These provocative papers will hopefully generate more discussions of the critical and utopian thrust of literature and contribute to our understanding of literature as an ongoing public forum against the powers of capital and market. It is my hope that cultural studies as we undertake it now will also acquire the spirit of critical inquiry and investigation, rather than merely aestheticize geopolitics and the global networks of powers that deeply underlie “culture.”

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