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Theory, Cultural Studies And Cross-Disciplinary Research: A Dialogue With Jonathan Arac

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ABSTRACT

Jonathan Arac is one of the leading American post-modernists who once taught at Columbia University and served as Andrew W. Mellon Professor of English as well as the founding director of the Humanities Center at the University of Pittsburgh. He is considered to be one of the most notable “New Americanists” with an eclectic range of interests in literary theory, US literature (with an emphasis on the controversy of Huckleberry Finn). His research methods range from theoretical framing, cultural study to interdisciplinary study. This interview, which was conducted in oral and written form at the University of Pittsburgh from December 2019 to December 2020, touches upon such topics as Arac’s academic connection with Chinese academia, the essence of literary theory and its relationship with cultural studies and interdisciplinary research. Arac perceives his studies on literary theory, “new literary history,” and cross-disciplinary research since the 1960s as an integrated whole which “opens boundaries” and “extends our powers.”

中文摘要

乔纳森·阿拉克是美国的著名后现代主义文学理论家，被认为是“新美国主义者”的代表人物之一。阿拉克教授曾执教于哥伦比亚大学，担任匹兹堡大学安德鲁·梅隆讲席教授，同时也是匹兹堡大学人文研究中心的创始主任。其治学内容涉及文学理论，美国文学，尤其是《哈克·贝里费恩历险记》之争，其治学方法融理论，文化研究和跨学科研究于一体，其创办的匹兹堡大学人文研究中心也成为一综合性的人文研究平台。本采访以口头和书面的形式进行于2019年12月到2020年12月之间，阿拉克回忆了自己与中国学界的理论渊源，讨论了理论的本质，理论与文化研究和跨学科研究之间的关系。阿拉克认为其1960年代以来的学术生涯中的文学理论，新文学史和跨学科研究构成一个了不断“拓展边界”“延伸能力”的整个体。

KEYWORDS

Literary theory; cultural studies; interdisciplinary research

关键词

文学理论; 文化研究; 跨学科研究

Lin: Let us start from your academic and personal connection established with Chinese academia in the last century. I have known from your resume and our conversations that you have made several visits to China, for example, giving lectures in China Society of Sino-Foreign Literary and Art Theories and acting as an external examiner for MA in English for Hong Kong University. Given these events in China, I assume that you must

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have been aware of Chinese scholars' enthusiasm for foreign theories by the 1990s. So could you give us a clearer picture of your visits to China? What prompted you to go there? Does it have anything to do with the discussion about theories?

Arac: Yes, the exciting conversation concerning literary theory in the later 20th century motivated and animated my engagement with China and Chinese academic scholars, including my actual visits to China and Hong Kong. For someone of my generation (born 1945), the Chinese Revolution and the new place of China in the world were necessarily part of my awareness, but the reality of China for me as a scholar and intellectual began through my connection to Fredric Jameson. Jameson and I discussed intensely his innovative direction of Duke's Graduate Program in Literature in 1986, just after he returned from his powerfully influential series of lectures in China, fall 1985. Through Jameson, I met Wang Fengzhen from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who interviewed me. Wang Fengzhen invited me to a major international conference on theory he was planning to take place in China in summer of 1989.

Lin: Did you make it?

Arac: Unfortunately not.

Lin: What happened then?

Arac: By happy coincidence, in fall 1989, when I began work as a Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, I met (and eventually directed the dissertation of) Zheng Yi, who had come from Chengdu to study with Gayatri Spivak (now at Columbia, then at Pitt in the Mellon chair that I now hold). Zheng now teaches Chinese in Sydney, Australia. When I finally did first come to China in 1995, Wang Fengzhen proved a warm interlocutor, and I met Wang Ning, who co-organized a major conference held in Dalian after the meeting of the China Society of Sino-Foreign Literary and Art Theories in Jinan. That conference provided the basis for a special issue of *New Literary History* (edited by Ralph Cohen, who also had co-organized), to which I contributed a commentary. In that commentary, I noted that what the Chinese scholars in the issue meant by "Cultural Studies" seemed closer to what the American scholars meant by "theory," rather than referring to work, much of it British, for instance by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, which is what cultural studies tended to mean in the US.

Lin: This early contact with Chinese scholars must have inspired you and laid a solid foundation for further collaboration with Chinese scholars?

Arac: Yes. After returning from China in 1995, I also joined in conversations with *boundary 2* collaborators Arif Dirlik (a historian then at Duke with Jameson) and Zhang Xudong, who were preparing a special issue on China, for which they solicited my commentary. During the 90s at Pitt, I was also in dialogue with my colleague in East Asian Studies Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu (now at U of California, Davis). Meanwhile, at Dalian, I met Q. S. Tong from Hong Kong University. He and I happened to be on the same flight from Dalian to Hong Kong, so we sat together, and our conversation led to my involvement with HKU over the next decade, as well as to QS's involvement with *boundary 2*, which helped foster further developments between *b2* and China (including editorial meetings and conferences in Nanjing and Hong Kong). My second visit to China involved a conference in Changsha inspired by the Chinese publication of a selective edition of Jameson's works, and its timing meant that I happened to be present in Beijing the night Hong Kong returned to China, June 30, 1997. I have not returned to the mainland since then, despite the generous invitation by Dan Shen of Peking University, whom I had met in

conjunction with my work as an Americanist. We had hoped for me to visit in 2012, but family health concerns frustrated the attempt, and the opportunity passed. So my times in China came only in the theory conversation, never as an Americanist.

Lin: Thanks. I would like to turn to the topic of theory. Chinese literary scholars, including scholars of Mark Twain, used to pay a lot of attention to theories. Theories of linguistics and literature, such as structuralism, deconstruction, and post-structuralism, have been used in the scholarship on Twain. But now the situation is a little bit tricky. People claim that it is now an era “after theory” or “against theory,” but for Chinese academia, this is only partly true. They remain concerned with theories. There is abundant testimony, however, that they are now preoccupied with how to get rid of the “anxiety of influence” by trying to construct literary theories with Chinese characteristics. As shown by a recent issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* in Sept. 2018, Chinese scholars including Wang Ning, Zhang Jiang, and Zhu Liyuan address the interchange between Chinese and Western literary theories. In a response to Zhang’s standpoint of “a more or less total rejection of Western literary-critical theory,” J. Hillis Miller expresses his doubt while strongly agreeing with Zhu’s eloquent rejection of formulas or models in literary criticism in favor of reading each work as something unique and *sui generis*. So what is your opinion about the argument of theories with a given country or culture’s characteristics? Put in a broader way, how do you think of the relationship between globalization and localization? Does such a realistic author as Mark Twain need theoretical scrutiny?

Arac: I know that the formulation “with Chinese characteristics” has played an extremely important role in China’s life for the last thirty years, and messing with that is none of my business. In the case of the United States, my own career as an Americanist has struggled against assumptions of the uniqueness, or “exceptionalism,” of American culture and literature, which was the dominant perspective when I began my studies in the 1960s. “New Americanism” as it emerged in my work, that of Donald Pease, and others in the 1980s took one part of its energy from the idea that ‘theory’ provided a basis for thinking about American cultural products in the same way you could think about works from elsewhere. Against this effort, some highly distinguished Americanists, such as Richard Poirier, have wanted to claim, for instance, that you don’t need Nietzsche if you have the home-grown Emerson (who, to be sure made an impact on Nietzsche). But Emerson himself was wholly cosmopolitan in his reading and sympathies, as witness his *Representative Men* (1850) with chapters on Plato, the Swedish mystic Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Napoleon. The very form of his book is closely modeled on *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) by the Scot Thomas Carlyle. Similarly, the argument has been made that you don’t need the European-born scholar of French and German literature and theory Paul de Man (1919–83) if you have our native Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), a great theorist of rhetoric in all its dimensions (and whose ideas on symbolic action Jameson put to use). But Burke’s works draw on all sorts of Europeans, and early in his career he was an important translator from German.

Lin: Can I say that the process of globalization has made it difficult for scholars to do the so-called independent study?

Arac: Yes. In the context of this question, I take it that globalization would mean the capacity for scholars to draw on materials from parts of the world beyond where they live, and that localization would mean the capacity of scholars to address concretely the

situation they live in. Both therefore seem to me necessary and desirable, and both require freedom to make them possible.

Lin: Ok, if the theory has been geographically traveling across the boundary of nations, then how does it travel across the span of time? Does the theory have its limit?

Arac: I do not think literary, cultural, or historical scholarship can ever do without theory, but I also do not think that theory is arcane or limited and limiting. The idea, for instance, that you should read each literary work as unique or *sui generis* is a theoretical position (indeed, also an ideological position). Theory is the term for the capacity to make grounded generalizations, which makes it possible to carry on an organized discourse about categories of cultural productions (the categories are theoretical, as is the idea of cultural productions, or of artworks, or of literature). Realism, as an attribute claimed for Mark Twain, is a theoretical construction, and debates over realism helped fuel the Western theory wars in the decade around 1980.

Lin: Can I say that you are perceiving theory in a wide sense?

Arac: Yes, it is human being's capability to summarize and to reason.

Lin: My next question turns to your study on *Huckleberry Finn* as you did in the 1980s when you gradually became a "New Americanist" and came to focus on teaching and reading in American Literature, for example, the polemical problem of *Huckleberry Finn*. Compared with your previous research in theories, this new field is more of a paradigm of literary history study or cultural study as seen in your essay "Nationalism, Hypercanonization, and *Huckleberry Finn*" (1992) wherein you discussed the cultural work of literary narrative and which, years later, is included into your work *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (1997). This shift from theory to cultural studies curiously matches what has happened to China for the past forty years. So what encouraged you to make this turn? Is there any continuity between theory study and cultural study? What do you think about their relationship?

Arac: I distinguish between "cultural studies" and interdisciplinary studies. I think of cultural studies as including a wider range of materials than did old-fashioned literary studies, primarily works and practices from mass and popular culture (such as films, radio, TV, comics, You Tube); and also placing greater emphasis on how the user or consumer, reader or viewer, responds to the work – what they do with it.

Lin: So you would like to designate your works on *Huckleberry Finn* as interdisciplinary studies?

Arac: Yes. Interdisciplinary study uses the materials or intellectual premises and methods from another discipline, such as those you mention above, and the work from the other discipline is not presented as background but as much at the forefront of study as the materials from the home discipline. For the teachers or scholars, interdisciplinary scholarship requires more work – you've undertaken responsibility on a wider front, on different grounds. For the student the potential is great, but it also may pose greater obstacles yet.

Lin: As far as the teachers or scholars are concerned, I notice that, in the field of Mark Twain studies, for example, despite the political or nationalist analysis of the works of Mark Twain, the English scholarship has also approached Twain by means of gender, religion, economics and even medical investigation. I assume that you would also categorize them into interdisciplinary studies, right?

Arac: Yes, exactly. To further clarify my own position further, I'd add that ever since 1969, I've acknowledged as the slogan for what my work undertakes the phrase "New Literary History" (the title of the path-breaking journal founded in that year). To advance that goal motivated my reading in the area that became known as 'theory' (as I discuss in "Reckoning with *New Literary History* [2009]), and my book on *Huckleberry Finn* as an object of controversy over cultural value ("idol and target") extends that project.

Lin: Then what do you think about cultural studies? Taking into consideration the cross-discipline and cross-cultural academic events playing out in the Humanities Center in the University of Pittsburgh, I assume that you must not have been disturbed by the "intervention" of cultural studies in the literature. How can we hold tight the reading and teaching of literature while taking cultural studies into our sight?

Arac: For me at least, and in this respect it seems to me that I'm on the same ground as Jameson, cultural studies expand the range of what materials may be considered by a scholar or critic who had previously been limited to literature (especially of high canonicity), but as shown clearly in the work also of a leading British and third-world cultural studies scholar such as Stuart Hall, pursuing the materials of cultural studies does not at all mean that you exclude or ignore the resources and concerns of what (in the 80s) was known as "theory".

Lin: You mean that theory and cultural studies are to some degree complementary?

Arac: Yes. In my 1997 piece in dialogue with Chinese colleagues, I explained, "One reason I, originally trained as a traditional literary scholar, have been excited by the possibilities of cultural studies arises from the history of English and American commercialized, "mass" culture. In 1600 Shakespeare was a popular playwright; by 1800 his works had become the core of humankind's highest spiritual expression for S. T. Coleridge (who hated the theater). In 1850 Dickens was a popular novelist; by 1970 even the hanging judge of English letters F. R. Leavis judged him the greatest novelist in English and a worthy companion to Shakespeare. In 1940 so great a critic as T. W. Adorno found in jazz and Hollywood only the degradation of aesthetic experience into a mechanized routine, while by [now] it is universally acknowledged that these two popular, commercial forms are the great contribution that the United States has made to world culture" (Jonathan Arac, 1997: 144).

Lin: Speaking of interdisciplinary and cultural studies, the Humanities Center where you serve as the founding director is a topic that we can not overlook. I assume that you cherish in it the hope of having a good conversation across the borders of departments and disciplines. Is this the reason why you founded this center?

Arac: I'm glad that you would like to talk about it. Pittsburgh University's Humanities Center is composed of colleagues from a range of departments and programs, and we are excited to host and support them. I underline what I take as your larger point, namely that the conversations across the borders of professions and disciplines that we foster at the Humanities Center are not just refreshing entertainment, as if a holiday from one's real work. So we have supported medical humanities lectures given by, for example, Dr. Thurston, a clinical assistant professor, who explored the power of narratives in medicine, with an emphasis on the ways that the medical humanities impact patient care. Also, during the years 2001–06 when I was chair of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, I was lucky to have as my colleague Dr. Rita Charon, an MD who later did a PhD in English, who was at that time developing

the area known as “narrative medicine,” now a graduate degree program at Columbia’s medical school. She was recently honored by the US Government as the 2018 Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities. Her lecture title was “To See the Suffering: The Humanities Have What Medicine Needs.”

Lin: Personally, as a son of a beloved mother suffering from and struggling with cancer, I feel strongly connected to this topic because this intersection field deals with narrative as more of a clinical cure than a sugar coating. In a word, varied types of narrative (literary texts definitely included) can be much more physically and spiritually beneficial than we used to presume. So do you encourage more and more scholars from the literary field to enter this field?

Arac: I do not really think so. To advance learning often requires intensive specialization, for example, my colleague Dr. Rita Charon used to specialize in medicine, which helps her to begin his interdisciplinary research. But on the other hand, research in any area becomes more powerful when its effects can be felt outside its boundaries. The Humanities Center exists to open boundaries and to extend our powers, as in our slogan, “Wherever the human mind leads.”

Lin: Thank you for your time, Jonathan.

Arac: You are always welcome.

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