

National Taiwan University
Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures
2017 PhD Program Admissions Examination
Subject: Literary Theory and Criticism

This is a **two-part** exam. Please pay close attention to the questions and respond in thoughtful, cogent, and concise essays.

Question 1 – Answer this one in a short essay. [No Choice!]

In a recent issue of the *PMLA* devoted to world literature (October 2016), guest editor Simon Gikandi can rightly ask “What is the world that literature speaks?” The Warwick Research Collective has argued (2015) that “...the effectivity of the world system will *necessarily* be discernible in any modern literary work, since the world system exists unforgoably [sic] as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape and comes into being” (WReC 20), suggesting a certain way of understanding “world literature” [involving combined and uneven development within a world-system]. Critics like Casanova (1999) and Moretti (e.g. 2000) have been widely studied for their research on the literary world system at various points, as has Damrosch (2003), though with a very different notion of system and circulation. While deeply critical of their work, other critics like Pheng Cheah (2016) have suggested how postcolonial literature can complicate and add a necessary cosmopolitan dimension to world literature as a viable project.

By contrast critics like Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan have argued that “‘world literature’ ... results from an act of ideological and hegemonic production: it is a tendentious, normative category with all the magisterial and juridical authority of a taxonomic rubric.” Simon During notes that “the interest in world literature obviously follows the recent rapid extension of cross-border flows of tourists and cultural goods around the world, including literary fiction” (2009), and critics like Emily Apter (2013) and Gayatri Spivak (2010) have taken principled positions *against* world literature. Walter Mignolo (2013) writes, “world literature ... is a regional concept with global and imperial ambitions ... [hidden in] its pretense to universality.”

In any case, *everyone* is talking about world literature. Why? What is your understanding of the issues involved? Why does it matter? What is a world? (Cheah, Hayot, etc. &c.) What is literature? (Beecroft; Spivak, etc. &c.) “In whose or what gaze is literature to be known and possessed as ‘world literature’” (Radhakrishnan) and why does this matter? What are some relevant concerns, practical and theoretical, and what, if any, are the alternatives?

Question 2: Choose **one** of the following and write a short response. [Choose *only* 1 out of 6.]

a) “Both the Deleuzian concept of immanence and the Foucauldian notion of resistance move in this direction: a life that coincides to the very last with its simple mode of being,

with its being such as it is, a life that is precisely ‘a life,’ singular and impersonal, and cannot but resist whatever power, or knowledge, is arranged to divide it in two reciprocally subordinated zones [*persona* and *homo*; *zoe* and *bios*]. This does not mean that such a life would not be analyzable by knowledge, without which, after all, it would remain muted or indistinct, or irreducible to power, but life in a modality capable of modifying both, transforming them on the basis of its own requirements, producing, in turn, new knowledge and new power as a function of its own quantitative and qualitative expansion” (Esposito 2011). With reference to **Deleuze** or **Foucault**, **Esposito** or **Agamben**, others or all of the above (!), explain the terms involved in this discussion, the stakes of the argument, and the consequences for how you understand literary/cultural criticism.

b) “The thought of non-interiority is without doubt what, in a thousand ways, characterizes not only philosophical thought in the twentieth century, in Europe as in America, but also... psychopathology. There is no doubt that this constitutes the common ground of what is called ‘French Theory.’ What however remains at worst ignored, but at best a site that has barely been opened – which thus constitutes ... the major site for a *new critique* – is the pharmacological and therapeutic question constituted by the transitional space of those transitional objects that are *pharmaka*” [referring to prosthesis, to technics in general...] (**Stiegler** 2011). Please explain the terms here and their relevance to debates about posthumanism, technology, and capitalism [or if you prefer, their link back to **Derrida**].

c) “The social critic does not find criteria of legitimation and self-criticism to be given in the culture as one might find apples on a tree or goldfish in an aquarium; she no less than social actors is in the position of constantly interpreting, appropriating, reconstructing, and constituting the norms, principles, and values which are an aspect of the lifeworld. There is never a single set of constitutive criteria to appeal to in characterizing complex social practices. ... The social critic cannot assume that when she turns to an immanent analysis and characterization ... [of a given social practice or discourse], she will find a single set of criteria on which there is such universal consensus that one can simply assume that by juxtaposing these criteria to the actual carrying out of the practice one has accomplished the task of immanent social criticism. So, the first defect of ‘situated criticism’ is a kind of ‘hermeneutic monism of meaning,’ the assumption mainly that the narratives of our culture are so universal and uncontroversial that in appealing to them one could simply be exempt from the task of evaluative, ideal-typical reconstruction. ... Maybe the nostalgia for situated criticism is itself a nostalgia for home, for the certitudes of one’s own culture and society in a world in which no tradition, no culture, and no society can exist anymore without interaction and collaboration, confrontation, and exchange” (Benhabib 1995). The problem is that (for Benhabib and the tradition she exemplifies) we *must* nonetheless find general, universalizable (if not universal) criteria of legitimation and critique. Please briefly explain some of the theoretical issues involved here (in a dialogue between **Benhabib**, Judith **Butler**, Nancy Fraser, and Drucilla Cornell) around critique, norm, and value in social science/criticism.

d) Matthew Calarco (2008) rousingly writes: “the genuinely critical target of progressive thought and politics today should be *anthropocentrism* as such, for it [is] always one version or other of the *human* that falsely occupies the space of the universal and that functions to exclude what is considered non-human... from ethical and political consideration.” Please briefly explain this assertion and discuss how you think it should affect literary or cultural criticism. You might relate this to ecological criticism, ethical criticism, philosophical developments in post-humanism, or other relevant concerns.

e) “Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who let’s himself be diverted from his ‘natural’ purpose by the power of words. This *literarity* is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of actual literary locutions. However, these locutions take hold of bodies and divert them from their end or purpose insofar as they are not bodies in the sense of organisms, but quasi-bodies, blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father to accompany them towards their authorized addressee. Therefore they do not produce collective bodies. Instead they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies” (**Rancière** 2004). Briefly try to explain this passage with respect to Rancière’s larger understanding of politics and aesthetics.

f) “Freud’s discovery of the unconscious places the main accent on the role of labour (*Arbeit*) in the satisfaction of the unconscious tendency (desire or drive) and that it constantly uncovers the productive dimension of the unconscious. This reference to labour should be taken literally. By placing the energetic notion of labour-power at the core of his discoveries **Freud** outlined a *labour theory of the unconscious*. Lacan’s main point of interest in the late 60s evolves around this important aspect in Freud’s theory. In the concept of *jouissance*, **Lacan** brings together Freudian ‘psychic energy’ (libido) and the notion of unconscious labour. In order to fully determine the revolutionary character of Freud’s discoveries, a theory of production was needed, a theory that Saussurean structuralism could not offer. But **Marx** did” [...as we see in later Lacan, including in his theory of discourses...] (Tomsic 2015). Even if you are unfamiliar with the specific argument excerpted here, please contextualize it briefly in your understanding of Lacan’s relation to Freud and try to link that famous “revision” to social criticism we see in the work of **Zizek**.