ABSTRACT
This review essay revisits Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender* by focusing on two issues that relate queer theory to East–West comparative literature: the relationship between the textual and the social in literary criticism and the tension between universality and cultural specificity when applying West-originated theories to non-Western texts. Drawing on Butler's discussions, it suggests that literary criticism should be treated as a socially embedded political and ethical critique, and queer knowledge production should be situated in local and transnational contexts to displace and decenter the epistemological hegemony of Euro-American queer theory.

KEYWORDS
Judith Butler; *Undoing Gender*; transnational queer theory

中 文 摘 要
本文在东西方比较文学的语境下，从文本与社会的关系以及理论的普遍性和文化特定性的张力两方面重读朱迪斯·巴特勒的著作《消解性别》(*Undoing Gender*, 2004)。本文提出文学批评应被视为根植于社会的政治与伦理批判，而酷儿理论的知识生产应与本土和跨国语境结合，以挑战欧美酷儿理论的话语霸权。

Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (2004), published 14 years after her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990), is a collection of 11 essays that address a range of gender- and sexuality-related issues including: transgenderism; kinship arrangements; social norms; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Inter-sex (LGBTI) movements; and international feminist politics. While most of these essays are self-contained, they are threaded by an overarching concern about the “tasks of persistence and survival” (Butler 4), which, as Butler eloquently demonstrates throughout the book, are key to the problematics of gender and sexuality. It would be misleading to suggest that this book is in any way less theoretically dense than *Gender Trouble*, especially considering its rigorous cross-disciplinary engagements with theories of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, anthropology, and philosophy. However, it is safe to say that *Undoing Gender* is a more accessible book for readers, since it lays out, in a candid and self-reflexive manner, the relationship between abstract reasoning and theorizing and embodied and lived experiences. Indeed, if the strengths of *Gender Trouble* lie in its philosophical critique of feminist theory and proposal of a new, open-ended approach to gender, the most compelling characteristic of *Undoing Gender* is its contemplations
on the social roots and social impacts of theory. The book, in other words, foregrounds
the ethical and practical dimensions of queer theories, and compliments as well as
complicates the theory of gender performativity and the critical paradigm of gender
trouble.

To summarize all of the ideas explored in this book would be a task that is both
impossible, due to the limited scope of this essay, and obsolete, as it has been under-
taken by a large body of scholarship since the book’s publication. In this review essay,
instead, I would like to relate some of the key themes in Undoing Gender to the study of
East–West comparative literature. My discussions will be organized around two axes.
The first is the relationship between the textual and the social in queer theory, and how
such a relationship informs our ways of doing theory and literary studies. The second is
the tensions between universality and cultural specificity in conceptualizing queerness,
which necessitate reflections on the situatedness of queer theory itself. By so doing, I
hope to offer a contextualized account of how East–West comparative literature can
both benefit from and reconfigure queer theory.

1. Thinking queer theory in the textual and the social

The close connections between literary studies and queer theory are epitomized by their
shared commitment to the textual. Many queer theorists, including Eve Kosofsky
Sedgwick, Diana Fuss, and Lauren Berlant, ground their analyses in the close study of
literary texts to observe the construction of the hetero/homo binary and scrutinize its
arbitrariness, malleability, and instability. Such a convergence between literary analysis
and queer theory has been mutually constructive in many ways. On the one hand,
literary studies’ focus on the meaning-making processes of symbols, imageries, and
texts has provided rich resources for queer theorists to probe into the politics of
knowledge production, allowing them to present a comprehensive and nuanced picture
of how gender and sexuality have become fundamental in our self-perception and
understandings of the world. On the other hand, queer theory has also reshaped literary
studies by prompting it to interrogate canonized texts and consider the workings of
homophobic, misogynist, and heteronormative logics, thus extending its scope from
liberal humanism to political criticism (see Eagleton 170–183). While the focus on the
textual has proved effective for queer theorizing in literary studies, it has also attracted
criticism from scholars who are concerned about the social consequences of such a text-
based approach to theory. Most notably, Steve Seidman argues that queer theorists’
reliance on the deconstructive critique of the hetero/homo hierarchy has resulted in an
“under-theorization of the social” (Seidman 133). Abstracting the social into “categories
of knowledge” that are further “reduced to linguistic, discursive binary figures,”
Seidman contends, queer theorists surrender to a “narrow textualism” characterized
by the absence of “a critique of the social conditions productive of […] textual figures”
(Seidman 139). As a result, he points out, queer theory merely gestures toward
anarchistic or democratic pluralistic ideals, without articulating its own social, political,
and ethical stance (Seidman 135–139).

Although Seidman’s queries about textualism are not directly responded to in
Undoing Gender, the book’s concern over the ethics of queer theory addresses the
questions raised in his critique and informs our understandings of the relationship
between the textual and the social. Butler approaches the ethical and social dimensions of queer theory from two levels. The first is the practical level, or the relations between queer theory and social norms and realities. The second is the theoretical level, or the politics underlying the process of theorization. To start with, the book’s discussions about the practical conditions for queer theory revolve around the notions of social norms and the livability of lives. Butler points out that autonomy cannot be cut off from the institutional apparatuses that produce social norms, for these norms serve as the prerequisite for any practices of individual agency (Butler 7). To be oneself, in other words, one has to “dra[w] upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed [oneself]” (Butler 32), since they form a “social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects” (Butler 48). Butler identifies here a field of constraints and paradoxes that saturates queers’ endeavors to lead a livable life, which she exemplifies through the case of the diagnosis before sex reassignment surgeries. The regulatory and pathologizing discourses of the diagnosis, she suggests, “involves one in a measure of unfreedom” since it “demeans the self-determining capacities of those it diagnoses” (Butler 92). Simultaneously, however, by granting the right for sex transformation, the diagnosis also furthers self-determination and enables an exercise of freedom (Butler 92). Such a paradox behind the practice of autonomy highlights the intricate relationship between nonnormative gender and sexuality and the regulatory apparatus, one that cannot be reduced to the generalizing rhetoric of resistance and liberation. More importantly, it also outlines the mission for queer theorists to “loo[k] both for the conditions by which the object field is constituted, and for the limits of those conditions” (Butler 27, emphasis in original). Queer theorists should, in other words, “allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested” to allow for the possibility to denaturalize social norms through bodily citations and practices (Butler 30). In this sense, instead of invoking utopian anarchism or celebrating pluralistic differences, queer theory concerns itself deeply with the social conditions that make lives livable. To deconstruct a social norm in queer theory is not to disregard it through an insistence on self-will. Deconstruction is an embodied process that entails the painstaking efforts of questioning, intervening, and expanding existing norms in order to open up spaces for resignification. But how do queer theory’s engagements with bodily struggles and lived experiences translate into its philosophical reasoning on an abstract and theoretical level? Butler explores this issue through the discussions of kinship, where she warns against the ethical risks in foreclosing possibilities in the process of theorization. When the Lévi-Straussian account of kinship as based on heterosexual exogamy is given “the status of fundamental linguistic structures” in Lacanian psychoanalysis, she observes, culturally embedded kinship positions are transmuted into the “symbolic,” which, separated from the social sphere, governs the elementary structures of intelligibility (45–46). The symbolic law in such a theorization, Butler points out, sustains its own authoritative force by setting the limit to contestation, thereby envisioning a foreclosed field of incontestability where efforts at change and struggles against the authoritative account of gender are thwarted (Butler 47). The distinction between the symbolic and the social law, however, “cannot finally hold” since “the symbolic itself is the sedimentation of social practices, […] and radical alterations in kinship demand a rearticulation of the structural presuppositions of psychoanalysis” (Butler 44). Butler further concludes that “any claim to establish the
rules that ‘regulate desire’ in an inalterable and eternal realm of law has limited use for a theory that seeks to understand the conditions under which the social transformation of gender is possible” (44). The ethical concerns of queer theory over the livability of nonnormative lives require that we must “put our own epistemological certainties into question” to expand our capacity of imagining ways of knowing and living in the world (Butler 228). Our engagements with literary, cultural, and social texts and our efforts of understanding and theorizing them, to borrow Butler’s words, are “tied in rather direct ways to questions of individual and collective suffering and what transformations [are] possible” (Butler 238).

The discussions of the ethical and social basis of queer theory are of particular relevance to literary studies scholars in that they underline the fundamental link between the textual and the social. In an important sense, our analyses and theorizations of texts are underpinned by specific social and cultural conditions, and entail political and ethical consequences. As Fran Martin remarks in her response to the critiques of textualism, “cultural production is at once indicative and reproductive of social relations of power that sustain dominant formations of knowledge on sexuality” (Martin 39). Therefore, “the cultural and the textual are themselves already inherently political,” and textual criticism is inseparable from social critique (Martin 39). Such a connection between the textual and the social, however, sometimes fails to be rendered explicit in the writings of queer theorists (Martin 40). Martin proposes that instead of reading texts as “isolated, self-enclosed sign-systems,” we should treat them “contextually’ as far-reaching ‘cultural events’” to foreground their socially embeddedness (40). Indeed, if the key question navigating literary studies is “not what [literature] is or how we should approach it, but why we should want to engage with it in the first place” (Eagleton 183), then it is instrumental for scholars in queer literary studies to regard literary criticism as a political engagement in itself and spell out its connections to social, cultural, and political apparatuses. Paying equal attention to context as to text in our analyses and writings would enable us not only to better situate texts in their cultural and social settings, but also to reflect on our own ethical and political standings in our efforts to examine, query, and displace dominant structures of knowledge production.

2. Situating queer theory: between universality and cultural specificity

The situatedness of queer theory in social and cultural conditions raise another important question especially for area and comparative studies scholars: if gender, sexuality, homophobia, and heteronormativity are discursively produced and culturally specific regimes of knowledge, then to what extent are queer theories originated in Euro-American contexts applicable to non-Euro-American circumstances? Does not the attempt to subject non-Western forms of gender and sexuality to the analytical gaze of a Western theoretical framework reinforce an imperialist logic? Petrus Liu makes a striking point about this issue in his discussions of the relationship between queer theory and China. Scrutinizing the theoretical language in some of the founding texts of queer theory, for instance, Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1976), Butler’s Gender Trouble, and Sedgwick’s Between Men (1985) and Epistemology of the Closet (1990), Liu argues that queer theory is “critically dependent on the binarism of East and West.”
where the East is imagined as “a civilization sealed off from the rest of the world” (Liu 300). While the West has been theorized as a totality bound up by the emergence of scientia sexualis, the East has functioned as the Other that is characteristically nonscientific, illogical, and above all, non-West (Liu 301). The tension between Euro-American queer theory’s anti-universalist stance and its exclusive focus on the West as the axis for knowledge production suggests the significance and urgency of the task to scrutinize the heterogeneity and the politics of inclusion and exclusion within queer theory itself.

This task is partly taken up by Butler in her discussions about the Anglo-European divide in conceptualizing issues of gender and sexuality. Responding to Rosi Braidotti’s insistence on employing a paradigm of sexual difference to defend a European feminism against U.S. hegemony, Butler remarks that while “[t]heory emerges from location” and one doubtlessly “needs the distinction between European and American in order to mark the hegemonic functioning of the American scene within feminism,” it is important to note that the “transatlantic exchanges at work” make it problematic to “return to the bipolar distinction between European and American with ease” (201–202). She also points out that it is more pressing to take into account feminisms that have been left out of the picture of Euro-American theorization (Butler 202). For Butler, the terms of universality in feminist and queer theory is an issue to be at once used and interrogated (Butler 179). As she writes,

To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the “not yet” is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains “unrealized” by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the “who,” but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them. The excluded, in this sense, constitutes the contingent limit of universalization. (Butler 191, emphasis in original)

Butler’s reflections on the geopolitics of queer theory and the boundaries of universality shed light on how queer theory can be approached in non-Western contexts. First and foremost, it is essential for scholarship on non-Western expressions of gender and sexuality to provincialize Euro-American queer theory and decenter its epistemological hegemony. This requires scholars to focus on local contexts and cultural specificities to displace Euro-American queer theory’s claims to universality, thereby challenging and expanding the terms of universality themselves. Second and concurrently, it is also important to account for the heterogeneity of “Euro-American queer theory” and remain cautious against reinstating the East–West binarism. Instead of insisting on cultural essentialism and exceptionalism and dismiss the relevance of Euro-American queer theory, in other words, we should pay attention to the global connectedness of sexual knowledge and politics, and examine how the convergence of the transnational flows of theories and local identities and experiences engender fundamentally new knowledge, politics, and modes of becoming. It is only through the constant interrogation, reinterpretation, and expansion of our own presumptions and conceptions about universality that we can work together toward a critical, open, and truly global queer theory.
To sum up, in this review essay, I have read Judith Butler’s book *Undoing Gender* against two issues which I believe are fundamental to queer studies in East–West comparative literature. Through a discussion of the relationship between the textual and the social in queer theory, I have suggested that literary criticism should be treated as a political engagement, and that our analyses and writings on literature should pay equal attention to context as to text and reflect on our own ethical and political standings. By situating queer theory in the tensions between universality and cultural specificity, I have argued that our studies of non-Western queer texts should both provincialize Euro-American modes of queer knowledge production and highlight the transnational processes of cultural translation and hybridization. By doing so, we can work toward a global queer theory by constantly reconfiguring its terms of universality.

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