In recent years, the value of critical theory has been questioned by various thinkers for reasons that may seem contradictory. On the one hand, it has been subject to criticism for its excess, for being redundant in the face of actual facts. On the other, it has been seen as lacking, impoverishing the object of analysis by forcing upon it a limiting framework. In response to this, humanities scholars have sought out new analytic tools, for example in the fields of neuroscience, cognitive science, and biology. The status of theory is reflected in economic difficulties confronted by university departments within the humanities, where comparative literature departments at many institutions are either diminishing—what is now termed “right-sizing” the departments—or being closed altogether, both in the U.S. and abroad. The 20th anniversary issue of theory@buffalo speaks to this “existential crisis” being experienced in the humanities. Is it time to move on from theory and cultivate other ways of thinking? Or is it time to rethink the ways we do theory and clarify its importance as a mode of engaging with the world—one that is just as indispensable as the scientific?

We want to emphasize the importance of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” for the theme of this issue of theory@buffalo. In her essay, Sedgwick asks, with a considerable degree of urgency, what knowledge does. In this issue of theory@buffalo, we echo her words, asking: What does theory do?
What can or could it do? According to Sedgwick, critical theory tends to assume a predominantly suspicious or “paranoid” attitude toward its object of investigation while it can also take other forms, among which is “reparative reading”—a position that allows for ambiguity and a coming-to-terms with an imperfect world. Importantly, Sedgwick’s stance towards theory is a reparative one; she does by no means reject paranoid reading, but points to its shortcomings with the possible solution of reparative reading in mind. Thus, she strives to repair theory where it needs mending. This is exactly what some of the authors of this issue are doing as well, focusing in particular on how theory can be done on more democratic or just terms, in ways that are accessible and strive to be better. The issue’s first two pieces focus on the importance of listening for theory; Cecilia Sjöholm’s “Speech in the Belly: The Ear of Critical Thought” and Cheryl Emerson’s review of Jill Stauffer’s Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard both approach the topic of “hearing” the other, for doing theory more effectively as well as for bringing justice to those who have suffered in unjust circumstances.

When we say we want to “do theory” we mean doing theory that is accessible. Our approach is informed by disability studies, a relatively new field of study, that thinks of disability as a political category and a mode of difference, which does not require medical intervention, but social accommodation. We understand accessible theory as theory that engages with political concerns—the way Elizabeth Grosz discusses it in an interview that appears in this issue. Doing theory accessibly is to invite voices and populations that have been previously excluded from academic and public discourses and to invent new ways and languages, perhaps more creative or less restricted by academic jargon, of addressing politics.

The urgency of the issue of accessibility is heightened in the current political atmosphere, where new populism is on the rise, causing a growing feeling of anti-intellectualism across the world. This political climate is of great interest to our issue. Elisabeth Anker’s article speaks directly into this development in the U.S. with the recent election of Donald Trump into the presidency. In this context, as it relates to the university in the U.S. and outside it, neoconservatism and neoliberalism go hand in hand in the onslaught to academia and especially humanities departments within it. This phenomenon often translates into political violence on theory. Critical theory is a threat to populist politics and thus nativist-nationalist politics try to “do theory in”—to terminate it. The economically-driven downsiz-
ings and closures of humanities departments in the U.S. and Europe take a more political-ideological agenda in non-Western countries. The government-led onslaught on the Central European University in Hungary and the ongoing crackdown on “academics for peace” in Turkey are just two examples of illiberal politics within the academia in the recent years.

The status of theory changes in terms of the task(s) assigned to it in different geographies. In non-Western contexts like Turkey and India, where one witnesses a significant rise of nationalist-nativist populisms, theory is often subjected to ideological and political categorization, as it can be a suspect for bringing thoughts and concepts (mostly of Western origin) foreign to the native and national specificities of such contexts. A similar attitude of designating ‘inside and outside’ is particularly common among post-colonial nationalist visions of culture, as observed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*. The distinctions of inside and outside, ours and theirs, friend and enemy exert violence on theory by subjecting it to modes of operations alien to theory. Hamit Bozarslan and Madhavi Menon offer invaluable insights on the position of theory between love and aggression, Eros and Thanatos, in non-Western contexts.

For this issue of *theory@buffalo*, we invited a wide range of articles discussing the topic of theory and its practice, some of which provide excellent examples of the ways theory can be done and, crucially, *is done* in today’s political climate. The issue will begin with texts that deal with theory and its potentiality; texts whose authors consider how theory could be done differently and more effectively.

In her article, Cecilia Sjöholm discusses the ways listening is crucial to critical theory, suggesting that under current conditions of censorship and failure of democratic processes, it is crucial to develop an “ear for critical thought.” She argues that this ear can be developed as an aspect of the capacity of thought as such, through the writings of Hannah Arendt, and then proceeds to explore the tonalities of thought and the importance of mood for engaging with the world and incorporating the voices of others in our critical thinking. The effort of incorporating listening in the way we conceive of critical thought, which, as Sjöholm points out, has historically been defined mainly in relation to vision, involves acknowledging “how thought implies the existence of the other in me, not through content but through tonality.” Listening does not only involve developing an ear for tonalities and voices, but also for silences, taking in to account the limitations of critical thought and the fact that some voices
have traditionally been deemed unworthy of being listed to and thus tend to be unheard.

Cheryl Emerson also tackles the problem of listening in her review of Jill Stauffer’s *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*, in which the author visits various sites dedicated to what could be termed “ethical” hearing, such as “international courts, war crime tribunals, truth commissions, and other formal settings,” where hearing fails despite good intentions. As Emerson points out, “From the title onward, Stauffer’s book responds to multiple failures of language: a double abandonment by humanity, the first experienced in conditions of unspeakable suffering, and the second when attempts to speak of such suffering go unheard.” As Emerson notes, the particular isolation experienced by those who have experienced this double abandonment is what Stauffer describes as “ethical loneliness;” loneliness that differs in important ways from the loneliness experienced by those “within the web of human relations.”

Rey Chow’s article marks a transition from discussing the ways theory can be done differently to providing an example of how theory is important for exploring specific historical moments and shifts within culture. In her article, “The Remains of Our Day: Evolving Conceptual Frames,” she offers new ways of conceptualizing the notion of the “global” by invoking the 2016 death of African-American Philando Castiles and the use of social media in live-streaming his killing. Chow understands the global here as an evacuation of a temporal difference or “a capacity for going viral.” However, a production and an immediate consumption of images of violence does little to ameliorate the causes of violence itself. In order to think through the relationship of the global and violence, Chow brings up the concept of the “remains” and juxtaposes it with the contemporary impossibility of losing data provided by the web and “save” function. She ends by urging us to consider “the global-as-viral” when conceptualizing contemporary biopolitics.

The two articles that follow Ray Chow’s piece deal with different cultural and political contexts; the current state of affairs in the U.S., where Donald Trump was recently and controversially elected president and the war-torn geographies and temporalities in the Middle East. As Elisabeth Anker discusses in her article, the erosion of structures maintaining state power and individual autonomy over recent decades has resulted in a political backlash against the global, as well as an effort to “reinvigorate state sovereignty over and against the forces siphoning control over state territory.” Ank-
er’s focus is on one particular important effort to shore up state sovereignty; the election of president Donald Trump. Through analyzing the speech Trump gave to the Republican National Convention during his campaign, Anker shows that Trump’s vision of sovereignty, which appeals to so many U.S. citizens, “eliminates participation and equality from visions of the political and disentangles freedom from the promise of sovereignty.” In her analysis, Anker explores how Trump’s discourse appeals to his supporters, which are predominantly white and to a great extent male, through the promise of “Making America Great Again” and thus restoring “sovereign greatness to a nation weakened by its openness to foreigners,” at a time when many of his supporters feel the privilege to which they have historically been entitled to be precarious.

Hamit Bozarslan’s article, translated from French by Donald Cross for theory@buffalo, is an attempt to theorize the current crisis of nation states in the Middle East as well as an exploration of what violence does to the conditions of possibility of “doing theory” in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. But even though Bozarslan’s reflections on violence have their point of departure in the Middle East, he sees violence as a universal phenomenon. In the concrete examples from the recent history of Middle Eastern politics, Bozarslan draws attention to a kind of violence as “pure destruction” that “sweeps away everything in its path” including time that unifies and regulates power relations and everyday interactions. According to Bozarslan “the fragilization and fragmentation” of time and space bring along the destruction of any sense of future horizons, and hence a basic condition of possibility for society to continue existing.

Bozarslan’s discussion of Thanatos’ calamities in the Middle East is followed by Madhavi Menon’s critical intervention to the notion of Eros in India. In her essay, Menon presents “a history of desire” as an alternative to challenge Michel Foucault’s taxonomy in The History of Sexuality. For Menon, the temporal and terminological distinction of the history of sexuality overlaps with Foucault’s cultural distinction between East and West: “the ars erotica belonged to the past, while the scientia sexualis is now.” The “history of desire in India,” in Menon’s view, complicates that distinction central to Foucault’s analysis. Menon also points at the absence of the colonial encounter between Western forces on the one hand and India and the Arab world on the other in Foucault’s framework. Menon argues that, without reference to colonial relations, the colonial mindset’s association of “the East” to “a primitive and backward moment in
relation to the developed ‘West’” seems lacking.

The issue ends with two interviews on the topic of theory, the first one with Rodolphe Gasché, who holds the Eugenio Donato Chair of Comparative Literature at the University at Buffalo and the second with Elizabeth Grosz, who is a former professor at the Department of Comparative Literature at University at Buffalo but now holds a position at Duke University. Both of them engage with the question of what it means to do theory at American universities today and what kind of urgencies academia needs to address. Having an issue titled ‘doing theory,’ of course, called for an invitation to Rodolphe Gasché, who has been doing theory for at least five decades. Our interview with Gasché visits the inside and outside facets of theory and dwells on theory’s relation to violence, praxis, and larger social-political issues. Throughout the interview, Gasché takes us to a fascinating stroll in not only the deep waters of theoretical discussions on thinkers like Kant, Derrida, and Arendt but also the student movements of the 1960s and the current hardship that academia and the humanities in particular have been going through. He also shares his ideas about the situation that theory is in today.

In 1999 Elizabeth Grosz wrote an article for *theory@buffalo* entitled “The Problem of Theory.” In 2017 we asked her to revisit that piece as we were curious which theories and fields of study that emerged after 1999 surprised her and created new and exciting avenues for engagement. 2017, though, is a year in which Trump became the U.S. president and thus Grosz discusses pressing political, social, and environmental issues theory needs to address and the role of universities in responding to the changing political landscape. By discussing this particular historical moment, Grosz addresses the interconnection of theory and practice and what it can and should do now, but she also urges us to look beyond this specific moment and think more broadly about the ways in which knowledge is produced and its relation to time and capital.