Involuntary Associations

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The majority of these students are never going to learn much literary English. It forms no natural part of their life needs.

I.A. Richards, Basic English and its Uses

In order to do distant reading one must be an excellent close reader. Close reading for distant reading is a harnessing of aesthetic education for its own counter-example.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘World Systems and the Creole’

Introduction

This series seeks to move beyond expected debates in postcolonial literary studies. In spite of that desire, in order to be adequate to what Wai-chee Dimock calls 'the planetary circuit of tongues' (2008, 142), postcolonial studies remain inevitably invested in forms of English literary studies. On one level, postcolonial literary studies continues to produce individual readings of literary works, writers, and national literatures. Perhaps some commentators argue that it requires no more readings of this type, but there are arguably new things to be argued, and in any case there will always be new works to be considered through the postcolonial paradigm. Alongside such literary critical readings, there is a postcolonial approach to the discipline of literary studies itself, considering the ways its histories have been part of colonial education, helping to frame the identities of the colonizing and colonized cultures. As probably the most influential example of this analysis, Ngũgĩ (1981; 1997) eloquently puts the case that European literary education
restrictively frames the world for African eyes. This historical and cultural framing helps to explain, for Ngũgĩ, the institutional and symbolic value attached to the English department. Accordingly, the obvious extension of his case is for the English department’s abolition (1972). Others have probed the historical details of the literary critical project. In a more narrowly British example, Chris Baldick (1983) examines the ways in which literary criticism through the Victorian period into the 1930s was a response to a never-ending crisis of culture. As mentioned earlier, from a specifically postcolonial perspective Gauri Viswanathan (1989) explores in detail the famously tangled history of English literary studies in the colonies. The incorporation of English literary culture into the civil service examinations throughout the empire becomes a revealing indication of the work for which literary studies was intended, but which it has (hopefully) transcended. These indications still perhaps leave us a little wary of the ongoing role of literary studies, and it can certainly be argued that ‘literary English’ (by which I.A. Richards did not exactly mean literature) is no longer always a major part of teaching English around the world, whether or not it would be a part of the ‘life needs’ of students. Considering the age of Global English, Martin Kayman argues that ‘the modern tendency in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages to teach “the language” divorced from its “literature” is a way of disavowing the latter’s original ideological mission and presenting “English” as free from imperial contamination’ (2004, 6). The cultural politics of English is disavowed through this insistence on divorcing English from culture, particularly literary culture. In certain contexts, this divorce is not only attempted by teachers and institutions; as Eva Lam suggests, there is a conflict between intercultural communication and ethnolinguistic integrity, which means that ‘Some students seek to reconcile these conflicting feelings by separating language learning from cultural learning’ (2000, 380). However, this attempted divorce is necessarily a failure, as Kayman rightly argues, and English is by no means divorced from its cultures; indeed, my own department is not so rare in continuing to bring together literature and linguistics in teaching English to speakers of other languages (see Tam and Weiss 2004). Furthermore, the notion of World Englishes forces us to broaden our sense of which cultures we associate with English, which can be expressed by English, and so on.

It quickly becomes clear that literature is not viably excluded from the discussion of Global English and World Englishes. In fact, it can also be argued that some of the discussions in this specific book are connected to important changes, mooted or under way, in literary studies ‘itself’. Partly that is the case due to connections between literature and literacy which seem inevitable in the histories leading up to World Englishes. Of course, those histories may be losing their pull on users of English today, literary writers or otherwise. If nothing else, focusing on postcolonial literature immediately raises the question of whether or not that literature (which is at best a valuable construct) has come to an end. Perhaps we ought to write in terms of global literature, or world literature, or even World Englishes literature. As mentioned in Chapter
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1, it has recently been suggested (Dawson Varughese 2012) that we focus our attention on the ways World Englishes literatures are quite distinct from the postcolonial literatures that essentially pre-dated them, prefigured them, and in some ways have restricted them, at least in terms of broad international perceptions, particularly perhaps those of literary studies researchers. This shift in attention in literary studies is certainly welcome, but while context-based (or one might say varieties-based) approaches will remain important, it is also necessary to consider the extent to which postcolonial literary studies are in the process of becoming, or have already become, globalized, transnational, and otherwise connected. This chapter puts this emphasis on World Englishes literature alongside recent transformations in comparative literary studies that have led to different versions of world literatures. Some of these transformations have begun with the insight that postcolonial studies has established grounds of comparability quite different from those underlying earlier versions of comparative literature. On one level, then, this chapter seeks to focus less on the content and themes of World Englishes literature, which may indeed be different from those in postcolonial literature (although, of course, postcolonial writers often hated the label ‘postcolonial’, and their themes were diverse, often ranging far beyond those implied by the restrictive title). Instead, it focuses attention on the question of how we read, and in focusing on this question it shares an emphasis with the category of ‘World Englishes literature’, a category that implies nothing about the content of the literature in question. On the one hand, this chapter looks at this question through debates concerning forms of ‘distant’ reading enabled by technological advances, for example, in the analysis of corpora. On the other hand, in common with John Miedema (2009) and Simone Drichel (2011), I am here concerned to address the ongoing significance of forms of ‘slow’ reading, forms that imply the continued importance of a literary education.

Comparatively Slow: The Speed of Postcolonial Reading

Whether understood as ‘close’, ‘distant’, ‘superficial’, ‘symptomatic’, or some other form, postcolonialism as a form of academic discourse has involved a mode of reading global connections. It promises a way of reading the connectedness of the imperial experience, taking in different patterns of economic and political domination, different modes of cultural expression and different disciplinary methods. Programmatically, postcolonial literary criticism, as perhaps the primary example, positions itself close to the literary text in order to trace the ways it reflects, or reflects upon, these broader and more distant connections. Accordingly, Edward W. Said asks the following question about interpretive practices: ‘Are there ways we can reconceive the imperial experience in other than compartmentalized terms, so as to transform our understanding of both the past and the present and our attitude toward the future?’ (1994, 17). This question reminds us that Said was a comparative
literature scholar; indeed, *Orientalism* (1978) itself was a kind of comparative study, and Said is well known for the place that Erich Auerbach occupies in his thinking. Said’s work has long served as a model for how to read the imperial experience, beginning with literature but inevitably ranging wider. Yet it might seem necessary to ask if the resources provided by his work, and others in postcolonial theory, have reached the point of exhaustion.

Fundamentally, it seems that the kinds of connectedness evident in the imperial experience no longer obtain in the globalized experience. Under globalization such connectedness has not only been extended. Its quality has undergone a profound shift, due at least in part to new technological forms; as has often been argued, imperialism was unquestionably global, yet, counter-intuitively we have become with globalization more than or other than global. It is arguable that such a qualitative shift has important political implications. Postcolonial reading obviously imagines itself as a political act, in one way or another. However, postcolonial theory arose in a particular context, and as a response to certain specific historical situations. Evidently it can be argued that the context no longer governs our thinking; accordingly, if reading, and reading literature in particular, is to have ongoing relevance it might seem that new models of reading are necessary. As critics such as Rey Chow suggest, models of close reading or hermeneutics deriving from literary studies may appear limited, unduly bolstering the cultural capital of a specific scholarly community; it has been suggested that literary studies ends up offering far less potential for political intervention because of its complexity, by comparison with other cultural forms. Yet, as James Steintrager argues, ‘we might still see hermeneutics as wrapped up with institutional prestige and a high, scholarly culture carved out of a no-longer dominant print culture and yet love this historically contingent, exposed form’ (2010, 300). In such a situation, literary scholars, while continuing to be unapologetic close readers, would have to recognize their practice as having been superseded as a consequence of qualitative shifts brought about by globalization. Further, any scholars deriving a method from literary close reading would then have to re-evaluate their practice carefully.

Whether or not conditions have really changed in order to produce such a qualitative shift, it can certainly be argued that the central figures in postcolonial theory have much to offer, and part of their ongoing relevance derives from their disciplinary background. Jonathan Culler has suggested that ‘The question of comparative literature has become everybody’s question’ (2006, 255); if this is true, postcolonial theory could plausibly be argued to have played a central role in the process. That is because the theorists most closely associated with the postcolonial paradigm were trained in the comparative literature tradition. In particular, Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have been very much part of this tradition, and so their reflections on the practice of reading are relevant to both postcolonialism and comparative literary studies. Culler himself identifies postcolonial theory as central to the creation of a context of global comparability: ‘What has made possible much recent work
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in comparative literature has been the identification, largely by postcolonial theory, of a general postcolonial context within which comparabilities can be generated’ (2006, 263). Comparative approaches, struck by the specificity and complexity of each discursive location, might once have seemed impossible: it appeared that with increasing knowledge of each (national) discursive context came the awareness that comparison as such dealt in superficialities. Indeed, new discursive contexts beyond the national have become increasingly important, and postcolonial theory has been one driver in reconfiguring meaningful comparison across literatures and cultures. As Roland Greene suggests, postcolonial studies is one approach that emphasizes elements that are in fact central to comparative study as such: ‘Not literature but literatures; not works but networks’ (2006, 214). The connection between comparative literature and postcolonial theory lies in their shared emphasis on the spaces between.

Despite the new perspectives generated by the two fields, the connection between postcolonial theory and comparative literature may have come to seem a liability in recent times. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, just as comparative literature has continued to re-imagine itself alongside area studies and a return to world literature, so has postcolonial theory had to reconsider its relation with its others (see Spivak 2003). When once ‘postcolonialism’ promised new frameworks for understanding old traditions, it has increasingly appeared out-of-step with times of technological instantaneity and multilingual realities. It has begun to seem that postcolonialism is very much yesterday’s news – a necessary phase, perhaps, yet still only a phase on the way to more fully global (and globalized) critical practices. Taking individual literary texts as examples of larger structures of cultural difference is no longer much of a contribution to the ongoing story of critical discourse. Indeed, with its often unspoken reliance on the assumptions (and critical objects) of literary studies, postcolonialism often seems leaden-footed. Nonetheless, as has already been suggested, there is a great deal still to value in the measured approach that the best of postcolonialism has offered and continues to offer, not least its emphasis on a particularly slow reading, a form of reading that in some ways coincides with close reading as traditionally understood in literary studies, but in other ways responds to certain specific critical contexts that are certainly new (or at least are newly felt).

Postcolonialism has, however, appeared in need of a defence; for example, Robert Young has offered a re-statement of the histories and theories that inform his vital work on the history of anti-colonial and postcolonial thought (2001). His title, ‘What is the Postcolonial?’, is a pointed response to suggestions that the postcolonial, as a theoretical movement, has been exhausted. Young suggests that so long as the ‘impoverishments of global power’ (2009, 25) continue, there will be a need for the postcolonial. He explains this continuing need by showing how the postcolonial evolved through a network of genuinely transnational intellectual and cultural contexts. It would certainly appear that this network has only become more relevant under globalization. Young
identifies postcolonial theory as a more specific phenomenon, with ‘the elaboration of theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western ways of seeing things’ (2009, 24). It draws its energies from critical perspectives that evolved in the colonial and anti-colonial periods, and offers continued resources for understanding globalization. Accordingly, Young argues that postcolonialism as a cluster of concepts has not been exhausted by recent developments in politics, technology, and so on. Nonetheless, it is revealing that this defence has seemed necessary, and it is indeed the case that postcolonial studies have been made to look rather ‘slow’ in recent times. Globalization studies, increasingly prominent in many aspects of the humanities and social sciences, holds out the promise of more responsive, up-to-date, and speedy interpretative frameworks. It may seem that postcolonial literary studies must necessarily be drawn into the networks of a nimble and comprehensive world literary studies, if it is to recapture some of its vitality and relevance. However, as Said argued in his defence of humanistic criticism, the speed quite often simply indicates a lack of connection and a lack of thought; he writes that we live in ‘the greatest age of documentary expansion and rapid, if flattening and one-dimensional, communication in history’ (2004, 81). Following Said and the other major figures in postcolonial theory, it may be argued that postcolonial literary studies cannot be understood as simply one relatively small subcategory of world literature, and further that its lack of speed may in fact be one of the chief virtues of postcolonial reading.

How to Read Postcolonially

The meaning of slow reading, as distinct from close reading, for example, will no doubt appear vague. One way to begin to define this reading is found in discussion of postcolonialism’s focus on the status and accuracy of representation, particularly as found in imperial and colonial literatures, but also contemporary work. The definition takes shapes in arguments that insist postcolonial theory must supplement its obsession with representation with emphasis on responsibility. The concern with representation is understandable, to the extent that many instances of Western representation are demonstrably inaccurate and prejudiced. Such representation has been put in the service of political and economic domination, consciously or not; that is a founding claim, if not the founding claim, of postcolonial studies. However, following Said’s Orientalism, postcolonial studies has, much of the time, refined an argument about the impossibility of representing other cultures without bias or prejudice; it has seemed that historical fact has been converted into philosophical constant. According to Robert Spencer, ‘we are left with a sort of separatist ideology which bears little resemblance to the goal of universal emancipation that has inspired – and, just as importantly, continues to inspire – anti-colonial theory and activism’ (2009, 72). Spencer
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focuses on the possibility of accurate representation, even if such representation demands that we readers step outside the literary text. Such texts are inevitably partial, and often play with that partiality through devices such as unreliable narration. Of course, unreliability implies a reliability against which it can be judged, and so to read literature is far from being an experience of irreducible perspectivism. In fact, in putting emphasis on the reader rather than the writer, Spencer encourages us to recall our responsibility as critical interpreters; he wishes to shift the act of representing or rendering from being prior to the text to occurring during the reading process. Such responsibility is one aspect of slow postcolonial reading.

As an example of this slow reading that makes the connection with comparative literature, Spivak argues that we must resist the seductions of the rhetoric of the global, and instead focus our attention on the uneven realities of the planetary. In order to be responsible to these uneven realities, it is necessary for us to pay close attention to the textual. While this continued focus may appear irresponsible in paying such close attention to that which is apparently marginal or unimportant, Spivak argues that it is an important aspect of unlearning our ignorance and becoming responsible to every other: "In this era of global capital triumphant, to keep responsibility alive in the reading and teaching of the textual is at first sight impractical. It is, however, the right of the textual to be so responsible, responsive, answerable. The "planet" is, here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right" (2003, 100–101). Like Spencer, Spivak is clear that it will be necessary to step outside the literary text in order to be responsible. Indeed, it is difficult to see how anyone could argue otherwise. Unlike Spencer, Spivak appears to be focusing on perspectives as irreducible. In fact, the use of ‘planet’ is designed to combat the reduction or elision of perspective implicit in ‘globality’; in this emphasis, Spivak is drawing on Derrida’s distinction between the English ‘globalization’ and French ‘mondialisation’ (Derrida 2004), something touched on in an earlier chapter. Meanwhile, and unlike Spivak, Spencer blames the postcolonial investment in a radical perspectivism, and its apparent consequent political ineffectiveness, on post-structuralist thought. At the very least, post-structuralism appears to supplant Marxism in the conversion of anti-colonial to postcolonial thought. It is necessary, it may then be argued, to make postcolonial studies respond to possibilities that are beyond its current structure of thinking, in order to sharpen the sense in which postcolonial criticism should be responsible. Like other fields, postcolonial theory is often unable to think responsibly about other paradigms, as Spencer suggests with regard to Marxist criticism. It is necessary at least to supplement the postcolonial paradigm, because it might seem that postcolonial studies produces a radically predictable knowledge, one that is irresponsible to the extent that it confirms what its paradigm already sets up as worth knowing or worth thinking. It is important, then, that postcolonial studies should interrupt its own paradigm; its practitioners must constantly interrupt not only those with whom they are impatient.
because their perspective conflicts with their own, but also their own voices. Indeed, from another perspective, postcolonial theory can be seen as rather unpredictable, being the kind of *interdiscipline* that might result from this interruption, the kind of work that might disturb more traditional and stable institutional identities (indeed, as I suggested earlier, postcolonial studies must be interdisciplinary). While postcolonial theory may well make this kind of self-othering gesture, that still does not necessarily answer charges about the ‘datedness’ of the theory itself. It is still possible to argue that postcolonial theory has been left behind by political and technological developments, unable to get *up to speed* with our globalized times. Reading as practised in postcolonial studies seems much too slow, from such a perspective.

**Reading Beyond the Fine Print**

One example of this perspective is Chow’s emphasis, already mentioned, on film and a kind of ‘superficial’ reading (1995). As another example, it is possible to see cheap global communications technologies as extending the idea of the imagined community, or fragmenting such a community still further. In each case, the nature of the technology appears to qualify if not entirely supersede Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006). Anderson’s thinking was of course based on print technology, which he took to be essential in the imagination of modern national identities. In putting print so squarely in the centre of the story of the modern nation, and also at the heart of postcolonial studies, Anderson can be criticized for putting too much emphasis on one cultural mode – literature, and in particular the novel. By contrast, Paul Gilroy conceives expressive communities characteristic of the ‘Black Atlantic’ as being only one alternative to the print-based model, and takes Anderson to task for an emphasis on assumptions about the significance of writing and literature. Gilroy is discussing the specific example of the UK, but makes general criticisms of Anderson; for example, he argues against Anderson’s ‘privileging of the written word over the spoken word’ (2002, 44). While it is still possible to sympathize with Gilroy’s position on speech and writing, it is by now obvious that writing is increasingly speech-linked, particularly in its online variants, and so discussion of Anderson’s thesis moves into another sphere. Instances of social networking indicate something of a paradoxical literalization of the idea of imagined communities, but Anderson’s idea was never quite that of a virtual community, and so it is necessary to explore further possible objections to his position.

Other critics take shifts in technology as marking superficially different but fundamentally similar breaks with postcolonial theory, its emphasis on literature, and its consequent elevation of a measured reading practice. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) provide a powerful argument against postcolonial theory as a mode of criticism appropriate to an earlier technological and political age in which difference could be seen both as unmitigated
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good and necessarily oppositional. However, it is not necessarily clear that our context is really so transformed; has technological change produced just a change in quantity, or has quality been transformed as well? When Hardt and Negri write of the potential simultaneity of revolution, they license others to imagine only technological utopia, even if more sceptical responses are increasingly evident (e.g., Morozov 2011). Older oppositional reading models, based on deliberative slowness and patient reconstruction of oppositional possibilities, inevitably appear inadequate to these new realities. Reading must be immediate and connective, based on networks and simultaneity, if not indeed becoming technological in the ways envisaged by Franco Moretti (2005); in this way, close reading becomes distant reading. Indeed, Moretti famously argues that we need to learn 'how not to read [texts]' (2005, 57), focusing instead on units of a size above or below the individual text. Technology enables us to ask very different questions, and offers accordingly the possibility of breaking out of our literary and cultural critical repetition. By contrast, Homi Bhabha, following Said, focuses on the dangers inherent in the technology, even if the main danger appears to be that it simply replicates older exclusive imagined communities (1999, xii–xiii). The problem is more than that, and is related to the very practice of connective reading. For a long time models of intertextuality have been central to literary studies, and those models of text have been increasingly understood as reflecting or even predicting reading models based on instantaneous communication. It is possible, however, that this increasingly frantic understanding of reading produces the very opposite of the revolutionary practice it apparently desires. If world literature, conceived in terms of graphs, maps, and trees (complex networks of various kinds), is speeding up, perhaps we need to slow down. In short, we ought to read comparatively slowly.

In theorizing the network society, Manuel Castells (2000) argues that technology is actually only one element in a wider process of social change. He suggests that networks constitute our environment, referring to our context generally. Such a shift in our fundamental context leads inevitably to social change through form rather than content. In fact, the social change in question is towards proliferation of networks; this is a change from one type of society to another. Before modern networks, Castells suggests (and in this his argument is comparable with Anderson’s position on imagined communities), societies were ordered vertically, in hierarchies of power exercised by small privileged groups. The network, however, is a form of horizontal social organization; accordingly, the network is potentially a much more democratic form of organization. Networks of people, places, institutions, etc., have always existed, like trade networks throughout history. However, the network was always undermined and overpowered by the way that hierarchy was able to organize and use power; for example, organized religion is partly a very powerful form of hierarchy. Castells thinks there is a big difference in contemporary networks, deriving from what new technologies allow us to do. The speed of decision-making and reconfiguration made possible by new
communications technologies means that networks are now much stronger than in the past. The internet is a very good example of how this works, being designed to be adaptable in just this way; it has also been a shaping factor in the development of new social movements, like anti-war and anti-capitalist movements, which do not necessarily have one single goal and certainly could not have one kind of organization. To follow this to a logical conclusion, in the work of Hardt and Negri we find an argument for an alternative kind of globalization; crucially, they argue that new technologies and networks have put in place all the necessary tools for a fully global revolution. Instead of being the source of our alienation, technology is really what will potentially free us from alienation on a global scale. As will become clear, it is this utopian vision of instantaneous revolution that interests Bhabha, although he is doubtful that it is necessarily revolutionary.

Of course, cultural theorists in multiple fields have long understood the domains of globalization to be irreducibly complex, as this book has already briefly mentioned. Arjun Appadurai famously argues that ‘The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models’ (1996, 32). Different kinds of flow (such as money, information, or people) do not necessarily follow the same pattern or direction. There is, then, an element of unpredictability when we come to model global patterns and directions of power. Importantly, the direction of movement is not the only aspect of the global economy that has taken on new qualities under globalization. It is almost a truism that the speed of this newly complex system has increased, as John Urry argues: ‘people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas and dangers are all, we might say, “on the move”, travelling at bewildering speed in unexpected directions from place to place, from time to time’ (2003, 2). Such de-materialized movement is complex and for most purposes instantaneous. This characterization of our experience of the present (although importantly it remains very far from being a universal experience) is intuitively plausible. This plausibility derives partly at least from the increasing familiarity of technology that produces the effect of the instantaneous. Appadurai writes that ‘technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries’ (2003, 41). Due to this technological speed, Appadurai suggests we need to think about globalization in terms of two related categories. The first is fractals, which are of course repeating geometric patterns, irregular or fragmented geometric shapes that can be repeatedly subdivided into parts, each of which is a smaller copy of the whole. Less familiar is the second category Appadurai introduces to help us understand globalization – polythetic resemblances. A polythetic category has a large number of members who share many similar characteristics, and though the category shares various common characteristics, none is essential for membership. These two categories emphasize that while globalization
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may appear to be chaotic in our everyday sense of that word there are discernable patterns to be found.

Switching the context to the practice of reading literature, specifically in a global context, draws attention to the question of the adequacy of close reading; are reading methods associated with postcolonial theory and comparative literature appropriate to fractal globalized patterns of culture? It has been argued, for example by Moretti, that new corpus-based models of reading are now most appropriate; as already mentioned, this reading can be conceived as distant. Despite the clear differences in emphasis, Moretti’s argument seems to coincide with many of the assumptions found in Hardt and Negri, specifically about the adequacy of certain oppositional models of interpretation; it would seem that models that draw upon both comparative literature and postcolonial theory may well have been appropriate under earlier technological conditions, but their adequacy is now in doubt. It is not clear, for example, that the conclusions of postcolonial literary studies are any more general, any more adequate to historical realities of literary production and consumption, than those of any other apparently less political mode of reading. Whether we think about new ways of reading as fast or distant, it certainly seems that something new is necessary.

Speed and Simultaneity

It is revealing to consider how Bhabha, such a pivotal figure in postcolonial theory, has responded to some of the challenges posed by new ways of conceiving global connectedness and political conflict. In order to understand his response, it is necessary to return to earlier work focused on national identity. Indeed, Bhabha's analysis of national identity helps explain some of his doubts about digital technologies, and his suggestion that earlier models of reading are not yet superseded. As already discussed, Bhabha draws upon Anderson's work concerning the imagined power of national identities. Bhabha's central point is that 'the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal' (1994, 141). Bhabha is borrowing the characterization of metaphor operating 'horizontally' (selection according to similarity) and metonymy operating 'vertically' (combination through contiguity). With industrialization and globalization, there has been a loss of simple community identity; according to Bhabha, ‘The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor’ (1994, 141). Given this emphasis, Bhabha is less interested in nationalism, which is on the side of metaphor, and therefore has a kind of ‘contexture deficiency’. Instead, he is more interested in the unending ambivalent vertical shifts of metonymy; these shifts remind us that while national identity is an achievement, it is an ambivalent one, often excluding those to whom the nation owes much. Instead of progressing serenely and horizontally through Benjaminian ‘calendrical time’, nations are inevitably
beset by vertical instabilities. Bhabha’s fundamental point about nations is that they are structured by an ambivalent temporality: ‘The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past’ (1994, 142). He refers to ‘the disjunctive time of the nation’s modernity’, suggesting that we are caught ‘between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy’ (1994, 142). As argued in earlier chapters, national identities are both pedagogical and performative: the nation is something that is taught as a stable entity but is lived as a constantly changing process.

Such critical perspectives on the nation have led Bhabha to engagement with theories concerning contemporary culture as transnational. His engagement challenges critics like Hardt and Negri, who, as already mentioned, focus on Bhabha’s work as an example of an earlier phase of progressive thought that celebrated difference in opposition to dominant forces of sameness. To recap, they argue that, as global capitalism itself now embraces difference and relativity, progressive thinkers must grasp the challenge of the same or simultaneity, which increasingly is enabled by developments in communications technology. From this perspective, technology now enables a potential simultaneity of global revolution. With his emphasis on hybridity, we might expect Bhabha to celebrate the transnational and the cosmopolitan, but also the kinds of technology that increasingly (and increasingly quickly) enable new forms of cosmopolitanism. However, for Bhabha, the situation is considerably more complex; in the context of comments on Derrida, Bhabha expresses reservations about what we could call the digital technological imaginary, which he believes shares the temporality of the modern nation: ‘Although cyberspace communities do not have the territorial imperatives of nationalism, it is interesting how active xenophobic nationalists are on the Web, often in the cause of nations to which they no longer belong, but to which they now turn to justify their fundamentalist aspirations’ (1999, xi). There is nothing inherently transnational about communications technology: even if its form seems so clearly suited for the creation of bonds beyond the nation state, its content can so easily fall back into easy yet misleading homogeneity. Bhabha is suspicious of the ideologies of digital capitalism, because those ideologies obscure homologies of temporality in principle entirely consistent with the repetition and extension of modernity’s worst features.

In stressing temporality, however, Bhabha is not simply dismissing these ideologies. Much of the world’s population may be digital nomads in some sense, but there continues to be much diversity and conflict and therefore multiple nomadic identities to be scrutinized: not all culture travels easily, or quickly, and some of the time at least culture simply stops. Bhabha does not consider ‘the’ exile to be a normative identity, and he certainly does not assume that all exiles are cosmopolitans like himself; indeed, he has written dismissively of ‘a doctrinal espousal of global nomadism or transnationalism’ (2006, 34). Elsewhere, responding to cultural anthropologist James Clifford, he emphasizes ‘the place of a lack of movement and fixity in a politics of
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movement and a theory of travel’ (Clifford 1997, 42), paying attention to those ‘people caught in that margin of nonmovement within an economy of movement’ (Clifford 1997, 43). Process and circulation actually come to a halt for many different reasons, and are sometimes halted by the marginalized out of necessity. National myths may desire a return to a ‘golden age’ that never existed, and so such myths can be criticized for their damaging effects. Refugees, by contrast, hold onto fixed symbols for their survival, and as a consequence hybridization and stability come together.

It is this kind of unpredictable and disjointed stasis that continues to short the apparently open circuits of culture today. This stasis, of course, causes difficulty for any model of reading that steps back in order to understand the big picture of instantaneous cultural movement. Indeed, in order to see how and where networks become blocked, or nodes become isolated, requires the practice of slow reading. Accordingly, and against the ideologists of digital capitalism, Bhabha has recently developed his emphasis on slowness, something that can help us understand the stability of certain symbols of cultural survival. This slowness is positioned specifically as a counterweight to what he calls the ‘digital impulse of acceleration and immediacy – the split-second, virtual transmission of messages, money, and meaning’ (2006, 30).

Writing in tribute to Said, Bhabha criticizes what he calls ‘telegraphic forms whose rapidity renders the world one-dimensional and homogeneous’ (2005, 11). Describing Said’s critical practice as based upon a ‘philological imperative’ demanding close reading, Bhabha suggests that rapidity (or even simultaneity) has a tendency to totalize and therefore be uncritical. By contrast, when we slow down our reading and thinking, we can be truly critical and attend to the decisions and omissions that necessarily structure our knowledge but that cannot be allowed to go unconsidered and unremembered. Bhabha writes that ‘The slow pace of critical reflection resists processes of totalization – analytic, aesthetic, or political – because they are prone to making “transitionless leaps” into realms of transcendental value, and such claims must be severely scrutinized’ (2005, 12–13).

Such leaps must be interrogated all the more when they occur in the context of well-intentioned attempts to right past wrongs and defend the rights of the greatest number.

Postcolonial Slowness: Between World and Globe

It is certainly not the case that Bhabha, or postcolonial theory in general, is dismissive of the realities and experiences that accompany the networks of globalization. If nothing else, the terminology of nodes and networks provides useful ways for reimagining a great deal of what occurs in his work. For example, in terms of other thinkers’ influence on his work, he has suggested that ‘influences are more like networks than total traditions of thinking’ (Sheng 2009, 161–162). Imperialism was itself a network, or series of overlapping networks, and the models of textuality informing work such as
Bhabha’s derive themselves from assumptions of intertextuality as network. However, it is clear that certain celebrations of the potential of globalization overlook many continuities with earlier forms of its network, and overstate the qualitative changes wrought by technological shifts. In this, such celebrations leap into new forms of rhetoric that are seductive but also dangerous. It is arguable that the discourse of globalization can, in many contexts, resolve or indeed dissolve the real tensions that continue to exist in spite of globalization itself. Reading postcolonially, or from a comparative perspective, by contrast refuses to ignore such tensions. The same logic is at work in Bhabha’s analysis of multiculturalism, which he argues will be a failure to the extent that it imagines harmony and transparency as the goals of a process that will come to an end at some definite point. As he writes with regard to Said: ‘Slowness is a deliberative measure of ethical and political reflection that maintains tension rather than resolves it’ (2005, 11). Rushing to describe the networks of globalized culture, we are likely to miss the continuing blockages.

In place of the globe, then, it is increasingly clear that it is necessary to think of the world, or the planet, terms that come out of rather different discourses and that are not at all the same. Again, this is where postcolonial theory and comparative literature continue to make their contribution. Samuel Weber, for example, develops aspects of Derrida’s thinking concerning the ways using the term ‘globalization’ implies that the globe in question is (as he says in a reading of Hamlet) ‘homogeneous, uniform and pure’ (2007, 63). Weber is concerned to defend what he terms ‘reading over’, a form of reading which ‘repeats without returning to its point of departure’ (2007, 67). Again, this reading is a form of slow reading: close reading in fact is slow reading to the extent that it is responsible to its other (the text in whatever form) and so opens itself to mutability. Meanwhile, as has already been discussed, Spivak insists on the value of the term ‘planetarity’: ‘I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems’ (2003, 72). The false equality of GIS needs to be countered by an emphasis on complexity and disjuncture, as described by Appadurai and Urry. One example of this understanding can be seen in analysis of the worldwide literary system, a network that inevitably grants different nodes continued privileges. Following this analysis, it is necessary to understand the literary world as a system with exclusions and ‘elected connectedness’. As Pascale Casanova has suggested, this world is a ‘floral pattern’ (2004, 20), a network of translators and other ‘connectors’ that govern circulation of the literary. Indeed, this emphasis is one aspect of the distinction between a global literature and a world literature. As David Damrosch has argued, world literature is not one thing, and cannot be understood in terms of an undifferentiated global literature. Further, distant reading and a perspective focused on connectedness give us only one aspect
of any cultural formation: ‘As with texts, so with cultures at large: individual cultures only partly lend themselves to analysis of common global patterns’ (2003, 26). As with Culler’s comments on comparativism, there is at least the possibility that increased knowledge leads to a form of paralysis, and inevitably so, given that each discourse is underwritten by a specific context, and that the identification of a more general context (say, the postcolonial context) is fraught with the danger of simplistic generalization. In any case, as Damrosch continues, we are not faced with a choice between close, slow reading on the one hand, and distant, ‘instantaneous’ reading on the other: ‘we don’t face an either/or choice between global systematicity and infinite textual multiplicity, for world literature itself is constituted very differently in different cultures. Much can be learned from a close attention to the workings of a given cultural system, at a scale of analysis that also allows for extended discussion of specific works’ (2003, 26). Moretti’s distant reading gives us much that has never been given to literary studies before, but it cannot be made to blur into a general technologically enhanced rupture with previous ideas of interpretation and politics.

Conclusion

The slow reading necessitated by the postcolonial context is, to return to an earlier term, a question of responsibility. That responsibility can now be understood as a responsibility to understand the diverse ‘relatedness’ of cultural contexts. As is well known, Said made the connection between his analysis of orientalism in history and more recent representations of ‘the Arab’, etc. The misrepresentations he found in much contemporary media discourse were partly a consequence of undue haste and a technological framing of information: ‘We are bombarded by prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and preempt democratic critique’ (2004, 71). Revealingly, his concern about the jargon of theory in the humanities is partly phrased in terms of its own pre-packaging, and its inability of thinking outside its own paradigm: ‘The risks of specialized jargons for the humanities, inside and outside the university, are obvious: they simply substitute one prepackaged idiom for another’ (2004, 72). Postcolonial theory could be at risk of just such a pre-packaging, without interrupting its own paradigm and ‘deranging’ its own idiom. As has already been indicated, however, Said extrapolates some significant conclusions from this analysis of bite-sized information culture both outside and inside the university:

the prepackaged information that dominates our patterns of thought (the media, advertising, official declarations, and ideological political argument designed to persuade or to lull into submission, not to stimulate thought and engage the intellect) tends to fit into short, telegraphic forms. […] All the choices, exclusions, and emphases – to say nothing of the history of the
subject at hand – are invisible, dismissed as irrelevant. What I have been
calling humanistic resistance therefore needs to occur in longer forms,
longer essays, longer periods of reflection. (Said 2004, 73)

Unsurprisingly, Said wishes to defend the nature of what he calls philology.
Such work ought to make clear all that has been excluded, how it was
excluded, and why. In the end, this work is necessary in order to counter the
glibness of official discourse, and that discourse is ultimately so swift that
we barely notice its looseness, vagueness, or straightforward inaccuracy. We
must, then, read slowly; this slowness is fundamental to responsible politics,
postcolonial or otherwise. It may seem to be impossible to make such a
connection between slow reading and responsible politics, and yet that is
exactly what Spivak does in her own re-imagination of comparative literature:
‘Of course, the literary is not a blueprint to be followed in unmediated social
action. But if as teachers of literature we teach reading, literature can be our
teacher as well as our object of investigation’ (2003, 23). In order to have the
general context of comparability, rather than have versions of it fed to us by
self-interested informants of one sort or another, Spivak counsels that we
learn again to read.

However, in learning to read again, which will be a never-ending process,
we are not returning to an earlier phase of critical practice to re-learn
something we have forgotten. In fact, it can be argued that postcolonial
reading is not a phase of critical practice that we have passed through. It is
not even the case that it is in the past, a critical mode to which we might
return in order to maintain our understanding of the political contexts of
literature and culture. Instead, it is a form of reading that continues to exist,
or rather continues to be demanded. As Greene suggests, postcolonial studies
constitutes, ‘a limit-case that shows how inseparable works and networks are,
how often works must be reinvigorated within networks even as the networks
themselves are reinvented again and again – in the case of colonial networks,
by restaging the conversations between past and present’ (2006, 222). The
general postcolonial context in which comparison can take place keeps our
interpretation focused on the ‘roughness’ of the global space, while there is
always the possibility that the globalized context vaporizes the complexity
and disjuncture inevitably present, producing a misleading smoothness. The
ideologies of digital capitalism, which accompany the dream of simultaneous
revolution, produce an immediacy of superficial solidarity. Close reading, with
literary study understood as fundamental to postcolonial theory, functions
as a form of resistance to this ideology of immediacy, an ideology which in
Hallward’s terms is an ideology of the non-relational (2001). Further, as Said
indicates, close reading necessitates a particular kind of writing to accompany
it, tease out its most complex and paradoxical insights, and not least demand
close reading in turn. One of the challenges posed by World Englishes is for
postcolonial studies to recognize in ‘itself’ that which is most valuable, as this
chapter and the Chapter 1 have argued. This chapter in particular suggests
that only through slow and patient negotiations of reading and writing can we adequately relate the nodes that, with varying levels of connectedness, make up our world.