Introduction: Globalization and the Humanities

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Introduction: 
Globalization and the Humanities

As this edition is in the last stage of preparation, resistance to globalization has hit stateside in its most graphic and gruesome form. Al-Qaeda’s terror is in part an act of rage against an American-led expansion of the world market, whose financial and military might is symbolized by the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Like the advances of transnational capital to the farthest corner of our planet, this eruption of atrocious vengeance directed at the metropolitan center is a product of globalization. Al-Qaeda, after all, is an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) beyond state control, and its mode of operation takes full advantage of the sophisticated transportation and network technologies that have come to characterize our world. It is also not without irony that the Unites States—which has done so much to loosen the state’s rein over the march of capital, to deregulate economies and downsize welfare everywhere, to cultivate and compel the integration of peoples and cultures in the name of an emerging global society—should suddenly embrace both a resurgent defensive nationalism and an unapologetic revival of a militaristic big government in the wake of September 11. The protective walls and borders of the nation-state have once again to be erected and maintained, it seems, despite the instant transfer of finance capital and the free flow of electronic information and imagery.

The contemporary phenomenon of “globalization” is certainly marked with complexities and contradictions. In economic terms, it can be understood as the worldwide domination of free-market capitalism and its local accommodations and resistances. In political terms, it speaks to the changing nature of the nation-state and the emergence of non-governmental organizations, both of which negotiate with border-transcending capital for the governance of peoples and the sustenance of their interests. In cultural terms, it signals an individual’s inevitable mediation with the hegemonic regime of commodification and consumption that either universalizes desires or particularizes traditions. Overall, globalization seems to exemplify the proliferation of compressing and distancing mechanisms that transform our experience of time and space as well as of one another. Thus, David Harvey regards globalization as “time-space compression”—that is, an extraordinary speed-up of social life on a global scale together with the shrinkage of physical space through technology and the reduction of time to a perpetual and schizophrenic present (240). Accordingly, globalization can also be viewed as an example of “time-space distanciation,” in which local and distant social institutions and incidents have become mutually dependent and formative. In Anthony Giddens’s words it is “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa” (64). Nowhere could
one find a more telling example of such intensified processes of planetary interaction, of “the stretching of social, political and economic activities across frontiers... on a continuum with the local, national and regional” than the recent carnage in New York (Held et al. 15, original emphasis).

Manhattan is not an island, and the Manichaean claims of good and evil, of freedom versus fundamentalism, be they from the center or the periphery of world power, seem misleading representations of our global condition. Here, I find Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s comments in *Empire* especially relevant:

> It is more accurate and more useful to understand the various fundamentalism[s] not as the re-creation of a premodern world, but rather as a powerful refusal of the contemporary historical passage in course... one could argue that postmodern discourses appeal primarily to the winners of globalization and fundamentalist discourses to the losers. In other words, the current global tendencies toward increased mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity are experienced by some as a kind of liberation but by others as an exacerbation of their suffering. Certainly, bands of popular support for fundamentalist projects—from the Front National in France and Christian fundamentalism in the United States to the Islamic Brothers—have spread most widely among those who have been further subordinated and excluded by the recent transformations of the global economy and who are most threatened by the increased mobility of capital. (146,150)

Fundamentalisms are not geopolitically or culturally exclusive; they cannot be circumscribed within national boundaries or coded solely in civilizational terms. The medieval guises in which fundamentalisms appear are modern articulations of authoritarianism—whether of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Confucian origin. Even in an Islamic world that now seems radically to encapsulate the problematic of globalization for humanity, we behold the coexistence of secular Muslims and sacrosanct Muslims, of people who can readily access the market, mass education, and mass media, and of people who cannot afford to eat at McDonald’s, whose only option of education is the madrasa and only dream of salvation, mecca. There is far too much history to be lived before global capitalism can hope to fulfill Francis Fukuyama’s prediction of “the end of history” wherein all prior forms of historical contradiction will purportedly be resolved. Indeed, there is so much of what Samuel Huntington calls “the clash of civilizations”—occurring both within and without civilizations—that our humanity seems under siege.

Although globalization has for some time been a significant subject of social sciences, the restructuring of the canon, the redrawing of disciplinary boundaries, and the reconstitution of legitimate critical methodologies with which the humanities in the U.S. has been preoccupied for the past three decades reveal a similar scholarly response to the transnational and transformative flow of economic, political, and cultural forces. A more explicit framing of these developments has appeared in Rob Wilson’s and Wimal Dissanayake’s *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (1996), Fredric Jameson’s and Masao Miyoshi’s *The Cultures of Globalization* (1998), Pheng Cheah’s and Bruce Robbins’s *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998), and—most recently—the *PMLA* special issue *Globalizing Literary Studies* (2001), coordinated by Giles Gunn. Ours is a continuing endeavor to chart humanistic inquiries in the ever-changing conflicts and consolidations of a planetary culture.

If the humanities has evolved as historical reactions to theist orders, how does it approach that part of our humanity still steeped in a submission to religious
precepts, hierarchical conceptions of social order, and resistance to secularism? If the humanities are social technologies that engineer autonomous individuals in modernity and sovereign subjects of the nation-state, what is its raison d’être in a world where finance capital and televisual media crisscross national borders in the inculcation of global consumers? If the humanities recapitulates Enlightenment ideals—culturally nonspecific yearnings for universal equality, peace, and justice—how does it address the persistence of a poverty that global capital has simultaneously alleviated and exacerbated or deal with violence that originates from the experience of extreme powerlessness and exclusion, in order to encourage discussion of variant conceptions of common good and the shared practice of human rights? This special issue of *Comparative Literature* is a collective academic enterprise, a discursive exercise of intellectual and educational agency in order more fully to comprehend our volatile world and cultivate a cosmopolitan historical consciousness. Whether in their particular address of texts, areas, and disciplines, or their general engagement with the notions of individual, capital, economy, and community, the contributors to this volume are all fundamentally committed to a full realization of human interrelatedness and an egalitarian model of global distributive justice.

To inaugurate this “Turn to the Planet,” Masao Miyoshi first marks the parallel weakening of the literary and the nation-state. This decline is attributed to the end of the cold war, the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the macro sphere of global political economy, and the spread of desocialized individualism in the micro sphere of the self. The gospel of privatization has the pernicious effect not only of polarizing the haves and have-nots of the world, but also of infiltrating the psychic makeup of the individual who is now likely to regard predatory “self-interest” and “optimal waste” as the rational norm of daily life. Under this general condition, Miyoshi questions the reigning logic of difference and warns against the hair-splitting breakup of group identity. Silence regarding class coupled with the promotion of difference, he argues, makes “diversity” a “favored public policy” of “transnational corporatism.”

Instead of advocating a recuperation of the nation-state, however, Miyoshi endeavors to “restore the sense of totality to the academic and intellectual world,” both professionally and politically. Such a task entails the rejection of neoliberal globalization’s exclusionism and the discovery of an all-inclusive totality that will nurture our common bonds to the planet, our custodial responsibility to it, and our duty to work out a sustainable economy that will “reduce consumption without cutting employment.” It is within the imaginative domain of literature and literary studies, he believes, that this “ideal of planetarianism” can be made culturally persuasive and politically viable.

Such a planetarianism, not surprisingly, is resonant with Alison Jaggar’s provocative challenge, “Is Globalization Good for Women?” Confronting globalization in unambiguous ethical terms, Jaggar seems to have linked Miyoshi’s vision of an egalitarian totality with *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999), a collection of essays which productively teases out the odds of simultaneously affirming group-specific identity and a universal ideal of equality. If globalization signifies the accelerating integration of local and national economies into a single global
market, its dominant neoliberal form—with the free market, privatization, deregulation, and the destruction of welfare at the core—is, she argues, bad for the majority of the world’s women. In its feminist re-vision, however, globalization could be liberating for humanity.

Through an axis of common goods—among them, “peace, prosperity, and democracy”—Jaggar reinserts the concepts of justice and rights to dissect neoliberalism’s theoretical promise and actual effects. The end of the cold war has not delivered the peace dividends once imagined. Instead, increasing militarism exhausts resources for health, education, and social services, exacerbates the subjugation of civilian populations, pollutes the environment, and degrades women. Economic inequality is increasing not only between the North and South but also within them, with women of color and women in the South bearing disproportionately the brunt of low wages, uncertain employment, poor working conditions, and sexual exploitation. With this mapping, Jaggar calls for a redefinition of “peace” as other than the absence of armed conflicts between nation-states, of “prosperity” as other than the capacity for commodity consumption, and of “democracy” as other than symbolic representation. In an argument reminiscent of Amartya Sen’s *Development as Freedom* (1999), Jaggar addresses issues of economic and political redistribution and self-determination, and proposes an alternative “globalization from below.” She envisions, for example, a feminist transnational alliance that would be able to expand the abstract yet implicitly male norms of “civil and political rights” to include “entitlements to education, to work and to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of self and family.” Because women are vastly over-represented in the world’s poor, “a concern for guaranteeing women’s human rights” represents an alternative to neoliberal globalization and could go far in promoting a world of true social good for everyone.

If Jaggar opts for feminist NGOs to fight against the concentration of power in the few First-World societies, R. Radhakrishnan emphasizes the importance of agency and sovereignty for Third-World nation-states. “Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation” exposes neoliberal globalization as a regime of uneven development through which dominant nationalisms dismantle their subaltern counterparts. Because of their historical achievement of full sovereignty, the developed nations now claim an ethico-political authority insisting both on the deconstruction of Third-World nationalisms and the realization of a new world on behalf of the rest. Although this clearly constitutes a problem of political representation on the planetary stage, a model of “techno-globality” has been introduced to dematerialize the agency of citizenship and promote a pseudo form of network inclusiveness.

Working through such figures as Said, Spivak, Charterjee, Ashis Nandy and Amitav Ghosh, Radhakrishnan imagines a world that centers on “the value of human relationality” and the universality of “suffering,” the latter of which also informs Paul Gilroy’s recent argument for cosmopolitan political coalitions beyond the color line (see *Against Race*). If the dominant desire pivots on “the objectification of the other,” “real desire” of the kind Radhakrishnan proposes “derives from a radical ‘lack’ that impoverishes every ego that would seek to sign
for plenitude in its own name.” This model of reciprocal transcendence at the level of the psychological and social should give guidance to a new global imaginary. It would prompt an understanding of cultural and civilizational incompleteness and promote the need for dialogical knowledge production and relational bonding among nation-states. Until we submit it to a dialogical mix of “self-centered perceptions and other-centered perceptions,” he argues, globalization is but domination in another name.

What is “techno-globality” for Radhakrishnan is for Linda Kintz “the psychic fantasy” of cyberspace. In “Performing Virtual Whiteness” Kintz regards the expansion of cyberspace as a primary form of globalization and reveals the spectral centrality of race in the process. George Gilder, a cyber guru and salesman of digitalized imperialism, epitomizes for her the uncanny mélange in the U.S. of the neoconservative agenda of deregulation, the pseudo-scientific justification of dematerialization, and the theocratic belief in God’s natural law. Combining Lacanian psychoanalysis with her own historical critique, Kintz demonstrates how the white body is privileged and abstracted in the virtual visual culture, how the “visible invisibility” of the entrepreneurial corporate discourse shifts blame onto racialized subjects, gender and class minorities, and how the cyber utopia of Gilder is little more than but a postmodern performance of the old Southern ideology of paternalism.

While Kintz pursues the persistence of race in the processes of economic and technological globalization, Olakunle George inquires after “our mechanisms of intercultural understanding” under these circumstances. The apparent triumph of transnational corporatism and consumer culture only intensifies for him the tensions of global representation in the “province of fiction.” “Alice Walker’s Africa” is an analysis of the novelist’s Possessing the Secret of Joy, which deals directly with the topic of female genital mutilation. George wonders about the possibility of fictionally representing an “alien” cultural practice without “violating the inner logic of the culture itself.” At stake are the conflicts contemporary globalization has forcefully foregrounded: the validity of cultural particularity and the demand for a universal ethical standard, the gendered postcolonial nationalist self-determination and the West’s interest in the primitive of the periphery. Equally important are concerns regarding the relationship of an African American text to African female agency, the relationship between the right of victimized Third-World women to their bodies, and African American women’s right to voice in the United States.

George’s interest in the universal and the particular is also evident in other essays whose engagement of the same dialectic concentrates on specific disciplinary transformations. If the case of Walker in a sense troubles the fielding of African and African American studies, Román de la Campa’s “Latin, Latino, American: Split States and Global Imaginaries” shuttles between the national imaginary of the United States and the hemispheric construction of the Americas in order to question the ancient yet animate fables of republican fictions. Such deeply established academic disciplines as American and Latin American Studies, in his view, owe their constitution to civilization/barbarism, Anglo/Latin, North/South divisions.

To start, de la Campa zeroes in on the Latino population in the U.S., linking its migratory shifts and permanent diaspora with the motions of global capital
and the concept of "split states." A split state captures for him a severed entity, the condition of remittance economy and the process of re-territorialization that not only applies to states whose paths to modernity come under stress but also suggests a postnational symptom full of cultural, economic, and political possibilities. With its internal plurality—Cubans and Puerto Ricans on the East Coast and Mexicans on the West—Latino America blurs civilizational models and unsettles the North and South divide. With its hemispherical scope, the Latino-Latina category also demands cross-examinations of Latino and Latin American studies. Attention to new transnational migratory waves, however, must reckon with the racializing and English-only impulses of the dominant narrative of U.S. Americanism. To the extent that their racial profile includes African, Amerindian, and Asian ancestries that have been historically excluded from the melting pot equation, to the extent that a prevalent bilingualism and biculturalism characterizes their cultural identity, and to the extent that their music crosses over both English and Spanish markets, Latino Americans appear to figure new ways of imagining the Americas as well as multicultural redefinitions of the state. At the same time, however, de la Campa cautions against the media construction of consumer citizenship and calls upon academic intellectuals to respond critically to the challenge of neoliberal globalization.

A similar counterhegemonic impulse underlies Rob Wilson’s critique of the “Asia/Pacific” construct. “Doing Cultural Studies Inside APEC” (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) reveals how global/local dynamics expresses itself in regionalization. The yoking of Asia to the Pacific evidences the power of transnational economies not only in remaking the material world but in reorganizing it discursively. The tactics of APEC are for Wilson exemplary of the interests of global capital. Imagined into a consensus-like shape, APEC would “fuse disparate units, from city-states, superpowers, and Third-World entities” into a “teleological optimism” and mandatory “free market capitalism.” This cheery vision of Asian Pacific economic cooperation, while disrupting older Orientalist binaries of formal colonialism, conceals the depth of North/South imbalances and suppresses historical complexities. Discontent with, but not dismissive of, this articulation, Wilson sees an opportunity for a contestatory mode of “critical regionalism” to emerge. If the transnational commitments of APEC indicate the geopolitical ungluing of nation-states and the imagining of an Asia/Pacific community, Cultural Studies will have to transcend its residual attachment to “traditional disciplines (e.g. English) or large area studies formations (e.g. Asian Studies).” A critical Asian Pacific regionalism must be localized to bring out its full contradictory social meaning, and to do so demands “border-crossing, conceptual outreach, nomadic linkages, and interdisciplinary originality.” Citing Bamboo Ridge’s creative endeavors and the critical work done at the English department of the University of Hawaii, Mānoa, Wilson substantiates his theoretical proposal with exemplary practices of a “counter-national localism.”

Critical practice is also crucial in Tani Barlow’s “Degree Zero of History.” For her, economic globalization has given birth to the production of “globalization theory,” which in turn restructures vulnerable university teaching units in the same way that economic globalization reorganizes vulnerable national econo-
mies. Such a comparative focus occasions her rumination on the tension between “history” and “theory,” on interdisciplinary concerns and methodological inquiries. By engaging the works of Gayatri Spivak and Joan Scott, she teases out the definition of a “good historian,” works through the notion of “catachresis,” and finally articulates a practice of “critical history” that enables its practitioners both to retain “an educated self-awareness of the limitations that past writings impose on the imagination” and to “establish an open posture towards the methods and political exigencies of the inescapable present.” This critical practice sounds a cautionary note for existing forms of “international feminism,” as do the essays of Alison Jaggar and Olakunle George. It likewise promises to overcome the limits of the binary “choices” that often dominate discussions of globalization: state politics vs. NGO populism, failed socialism vs. late capitalism, and neocolonial penetration vs. grassroots democracy.

Less concerned with the effects of globalization on changing academic disciplines, Bruce Robbins defamiliarizes for us the metamorphosis of daily sentiments that the planetary integration of capitalism has brought about. “Very Busy Just Now” approaches Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Unconsolled* against a social landscape dominated by what Robbins felicitously calls “everyday harriedness.” Harriedness is a “time deficit” that collapses the conventional boundaries of work and home, national allegiance and international commitments. Reading Ishiguro in terms of this global time crunch, Robbins illustrates the ambivalence such harriedness generates and its serious implications both for the psychological and social reorganization of space and the project of “refashioning ethics to suit our transnational condition.” Both professionalism and cosmopolitanism, as the domain of work and the domain of the international, respectively, seem pitted against the domain of the family, a postmodern remnant of a pre-industrial formation that is asked to stand in for all the values of bonding and belonging. Though against the “eroticizing of expertise” and the kind of “professional affectivity” that “substitutes recruitment for reproduction,” Robbins declines to valorize ideological privatism and insists on cultivating sympathies and solidarities beyond the traditional family. Drawing from the imaginative energy of *Unconsolled*, he proposes that the novel’s premise of “time/space compression” also “includes a utopian foretaste of unearthly temporal abundance” that should energize our effort to reinvent the public at the level of the personal, undercut the gendered divide between work and family, and finally lead us towards a “broader and more inclusive civility.”

Like Robbins’s, my own contribution attends to the affects of global capitalism, in this case, upon a nominal communist state. “What Will Become of Us if We Don’t Stop?” is an allegorical reading of a mainland Chinese film that narrates a peasant woman’s quest for the biggest TV in her county. Condensed in the narrative are the radical leaps from medievality to modernity, the jumbled modes of rural, industrial, and consumer cultural production, and the coexistence of actual agrarian poverty with the hyper-reality of an American TV show, *Dynasty*. By paying attention to the freedoms and fissures that accompany China’s post-socialist participation in the accumulative scheme of global capital, I attempt to generate a conversation among contemporary globalization theo-
ries, development trajectories, and debates on modernity and postmodernity. Similar to Jaggar’s query as to whether globalization is good for women, I explicitly ask what is the end—both as goal and limit—of worldwide economic integration under capital. The posing of this fundamental question, which is implicit in all the collected essays here, returns us to a post-September 11 planet, riven by terror, reuniting with purpose, and yet riddled forever with a sense of precariousness. It is my hope that this special issue of *Comparative Literature* will help us puzzle out, however minuscule, the predicament of our interdependent planetary culture and help us engender as well ways of thinking and means of creating conditions that will warrant the equal, just, and environmentally sound flourishing of the human species.

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**Works Cited**


