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Against Network Thinking

The Fetishism of the Network

It does not elude me that the title of this essay is itself the product of the processes that I will be critiquing. Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000) and Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* (2013) are two well-known recent examples that adopt the classic titular form of the polemical pamphlet. It transpires that mine is not even the first polemic 'against network thinking'. In the time between proposing an essay of this title to the editors of *Affirmations* and sitting down to write it, Michael Coward published an essay bearing the same title that addresses the field of international relations.[1] What could be more 'networked' than the use of a construction whose meme-like popularity has shaped and connected adversarial practices of speech across the globe? It is a tacit admission that to speak against networks is the theoretical equivalent of ranting against corporate surveillance on Facebook.

What is network thinking? I use the term 'network' in a general sense. At first, "net-work" referred to a fashioned net-like object made of intersecting threads or thread-like materials (*OED*, 1). It then came to reference biological systems at a time when these were deemed to be God's creation (*OED*, 2). Whether natural or human-made, networks were the result of pre-conceived design. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the term began to be used to refer to expansive interconnected systems. The earliest use attested in this sense (*OED*, 3) is from a sermon by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He uses the term to refer to the global expansion of trade: "the vast depth, expansion, and systematic movements of our trade; and the consequent inter-dependence, the arterial or nerve-like, net-work of property."[2] "Net-work" now designates an outwardly irradiating system; yet, as

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[1] Michael Coward, "Against Network Thinking: A Critique of Pathological Sovereignty," *European Journal of International Relations* 24.2 (2018): 440-63. Coward's analysis is both useful and compelling. His discipline, field, and purpose, though, are quite different.

[2] Cited in Dermot Ryan, *Technologies of Empire: Writing, Imagination, and the Making of Imperial Networks, 1750–1820* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2012), 7.

the movements of trade are "systematic," its patterns of interconnection remain synonymous with organic tropes. The trace of earlier uses creates an ambivalence, pulling between a finite, intentionally *worked* object and an open-ended, potentially infinite one whose agency is immanent. From here networks increasingly referred to globe-spanning open-ended systems, particularly those associated with technological innovation in areas like transportation and telecommunications. The term reached its apotheosis with the advent of real-time communication between computers. The Internet, with its decentralized architecture, is the 'network of networks'. Symptomatically, 'work' is elided.

Whether closed or open, a 'network' is a system whose interconnected elements are defined by their existence within that system. It does not matter if the receivers in a telephone network all look like noses, or if the people in a social network are all misanthropes, insofar as they are networked objects, such nose phones and trolls gain meaning through their function as phones and social beings. Like a heat-seeking device, network thinking locks onto that characteristic of an object that enables it to serve as a node and conduit in a network. Accordingly, network thinking's core purpose is to make the network legible. As Coward summarizes: "an individual node has no specific characteristics or interest for the researcher until they are linked into a network."[3]

Network thinking has spawned a domain of theorising sometimes referred to as 'network theory'. In social scientific circles, it appears to be customary to start with Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* and to go from there. However, across disciplines, 'network theory' does not seem to have a recognised central canon of theoretical ideas. It comprises a range of methodologies that draw on the figure of the network in quite different ways. To be clear, then, this essay is concerned with network thinking as a cognitive mode that has become prevalent in humanistic thought.

The ubiquity of network thinking in the Internet age barely needs remarking. It takes only a moment's reflection to perceive the impact that it is having on our lives. When you join a network of socially connected nodes ('friends') on corporate social media, you quickly learn the kinds of behaviour that will secure

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[3] Coward, "Against Network Thinking," 452.

your position in the network. You realise that fellow nodes cannot, in good conscience, ignore life milestones. You learn that provocative opinions draw attention and move quickly between nodes. You learn that there is a tipping point at which nodality *qua* 'friend' transmutes into nodality *qua* 'influencer' (i.e. that point at which a node has become sufficiently interconnected to acquire exchange value). In all kinds of ways, the network goes to work on its nodes, rerouting relationships and redrawing the boundaries and norms of social intercourse. As Siva Vaidhyanathan has quipped, the company at the centre of the drive to transform humans into nodes, Facebook, seeks nothing less than to make itself "the operating system of our lives."[4]

We might, therefore, talk about the fetishism of the network. Its secret is that what appears as a web of relations between people is actually the network realising its own, autonomous ends. These "networks without a cause" lock onto only those aspects of the entities that they interlink which enable them to maximise their reach.[5] Just as capital transforms our libidinous relation to commodities in conformity with the need to increase their exchange value and velocity, so do networks transform our behaviour in order to optimise our nodality. Specific and idiosyncratic relations are overridden by the demand that everything express its ontology in the terms of the network. Network thinking thus is a cognate but separate form of a broader phenomenon that Theodor Adorno calls "identity thinking": a cognitive mode that works exclusively by equivalences, whether this takes the form of the ontological conflations of positivistic reason or the evaluative conflations of capitalist exchange value. What distinguishes network thinking from positivism and commodification is the insistence that identity follow from the fact of interconnection. Its prevalence should prompt us to ask whether the impetus to *network* is simply a by-product of capitalist globalisation—the "systematic movements of our trade" in turn necessitating that all things acquire a node-like character—or whether it has its own logic that interacts with but is distinct from other kinds of identity thinking under capitalism. I can't hope to answer this question, but, by working from within a particular field in which

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[4] Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Antisocial media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 99.

[5] Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

network thinking has been taking hold, I hope to identify some of its salient features and incipient tendencies. The field in question is 'world literature'.

World Literature and the Networking of the Global South

'World literature' has a long and varied conceptual career. It should be born in mind that it has been only at certain moments that the term has referred to a contested field of academic research. This seems to have been the case in the period immediately following the Second World War when it was debated in a number of prominent articles and conferences largely within the remit of the discipline of comparative literature.[6] In the following decades, however, it tended to be used quite neutrally to designate 'the literatures of the world considered as a whole', where 'literatures' referred to national, regional, and/or linguistic entities variously defined. This was usually accompanied, especially in the US, by the assumption that this breadth brought into view various 'non-Western' literatures that otherwise might not receive attention.

At the turn of the twenty-first century a now famous triumvirate of theoretical interventions reoriented and relaunched the term as a scholarly concern. The very different purposes and, at least initially, intended audiences of key texts by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch were united by a shared ambition to investigate literature's networked character in the age of globalization. (In the case of Damrosch this also included studying previous literary networks.) Whether the network was one of literary actors vying within and between hierarchically structured national fields, of works circulating through networks of translation and reception, or of genres and forms spreading globally during the rise of the modern world-system, these theorists wanted to understand the totality of world literature

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[6] Some indicative essays from this period are: Joseph Remenyi, "The Meaning of World Literature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 9.3 (1951): 244-51; Erich Auerbach, "The Philology of World Literature" (1952), in *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 253-65; Calvin S. Brown, "Debased Standards in World Literature Courses," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 2 (1953): 10-11; and René Étiemble, "Do We have to Revise the Notion of World Literature?" (1964), in Theo D'haen, César Dominguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, eds, *World Literature: A Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 93-103.

by theorising the networks that constitute it. Moretti has even experimented with treating literary texts themselves as kinds of networks.[7]

A pervasive source influence in the new world literary studies has been the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein. Casanova and Moretti both draw on Wallerstein early in their studies, and his work has been referenced across the debates, including in books and special issues dedicated to exploring his ideas in the literary sphere.[8] Some might therefore claim that it would be more accurate to characterise the field as being under the sway of 'systems thinking'. For *system* is a broader term, encompassing relations other than those of direct interconnection. The glosses of 'system' in the *OED* tend to be phrased in either/or terms: "organised *or* connected group of things"; "a group *or* set of related or associated things"; "a connected *or* complex whole," etc.[9] While it may be true that 'system' has featured more often than 'network' as a concept in world literature theory, the former typically has been deployed to identify and explore networked systems. In the opening of their intervention, the Warwick Research Collective outline an approach that is more properly 'systems' thinking, one that includes but is not confined to networks: "we construe 'system' [..] as being characterised by vertical and horizontal integration, connection and interconnection, structurality and organisation, internal differentiation, a hierarchy of constitutive elements governed by specific 'logics' of determination and relationality."[10] So, to be clear, my remarks are not directed at all the theoretical fruits of the new world literary studies, but to the cognitive mode that, I am claiming, has been the main impetus for many of the field's recent innovations. (One instance of 'pure' networking thinking has been advanced by Vilashini Cooppan, for whom "world" is a

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[7] "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," *Stanford Literary Lab, Pamphlet 2* (May 2011), 4. Curiously, this thirty-one-page pamphlet does not contain any references to the progenitors of network theory.

[8] See especially David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi, eds, *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[9] My emphasis.

[10] WReC, *Combined and Uneven*, 8.

"network nodal notion".)[11] My concern is that the object cumulatively constituted by the overall tendency of the theoretical discussions in world literature is a "network nodal" one.

I should note that there have been numerous polemics against empirical network-based approaches. Apter's *Against World Literature* has offered itself as the banner for this counter-insurgency. Here the specificity of the literary, as articulated in terms inherited from the deconstructive tradition, cuts across any presumed omniscient perspective from which one might survey the networks formed by the world's literatures. In this space also belong the contributions of Eric Hayot and Pheng Cheah, whose focus on literary worlds and world-making similarly turn the force of the literary imagination against literature's conscription by the logic of global capital.[12] In routing their theoretical contributions through the literary *qua* the particular/singular, such arguments tend to dismantle not only network and systems-based approaches, but *any* aspiration to think the totality of literature. We confront a polarisation between an empirically defined 'network nodal' set of ideas about literary totality and a notion of the literary as a world-making practice that continually escapes such determinations. (This, of course, reflects and manifests a broader polarisation in the discipline between the new empiricism being driven by the digital humanities and a rearguard action being waged by an uneasy alliance of critical theory and practical criticism.)[13]

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[11] The passage reads: "'World', I contend, is a network nodal notion: both a way to name a totality (the network) and a point of location, a placing or emplotment within the totality. […] If, in addition to world, literature, language and identity, other central categories of world literature such as history and genre are rethought in networked and nodal ways the terrain of world literature begins to assemble itself as a distinctly *posthumanist* project." Vilashini Cooppan, "Codes for World Literature: Network Theory and the Field Imaginary," in Joachim Küpper, ed., *Approaches to World Literature* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2013), 107.

[12] Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[13] It will come as no surprise that Rita Felski has put herself forward as key player in attempts to funnel network theory from positive disciplines into literary studies. Noting in a recent essay that "ANT [Actor Network Theory] is at odds with both traditional forms of ideology critique and with the various styles of poststructuralist critique still in vogue," Felski goes on to claim that ANT offers literary studies "new ways of thinking about

What is tending to get left out of the world literature debates are *non-networked* ways of conceiving of literary totality and literary relationality. In being against the current versions of world literature certain polemical positions have foreclosed other ways of conceiving of literary totality, including those that critical theory, speculative interpretation, and good old close reading make available. These latter practices bring into frame the various kinds of relational thinking that are not grounded in direct connections between literary works and actors and yet aspire to the articulation of literary totality. To name just four, we can point to the 'morphological method' of the 'historical poetics' proposed by Alexander Veselovsky, the 'radiating power' of specific literary *Ansatzpunkte* proposed by Erich Auerbach, the 'contrapuntal reading' of texts in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, and, somewhat more idiosyncratically, Paul Celan's conception of 'meridians' that pass through otherwise separate literary worlds.[14] These critics asipre to the broad vision, the largescale, the sense of the whole, but their critical technology is not algorithmic (or proto-algorithmic) but the speculative and imaginative capacity of literary thinking itself. Such methodologies serve to remind us that the 'literature' in 'world literature' can only be constituted in and through literary experiences, and that these should be the lens for any projections of totality. (Otherwise we're really dealing with 'global textual studies'.) Conversely, the notion of a 'literary node' is an oxymoron, if not a catch 22, for nodality presupposes an object's quality as a literary work before the experience that would judge it as such.

I will return to the question of non-networked ways of conceiving of literary totality at the end of the essay. Before I do, I want to consider whether the problems I have discussed pertain to network thinking *in toto*, or just to network thinking that is, say, complicit with pre-existing hierarchies of power. A comment

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connectivity." "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53.4 (2016): 749-50. An earlier, and more comprehensive attempt at using network theory is David Ciccoricco's *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

[14] Alexander Veselovsky, "From the Introduction to Historical Poetics: Questions and Answers" (1894), in Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov, eds, *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 39-64; Auerbach, "The Philology of World Literature," 253-65; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993); Paul Celan, "The Meridian," in *Selected Poems and Prose*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: Norton, 2001), 401-414.

by Anne-Marie Slaughter, writing in the field of political theory, provides a helpful starting point. If our world is a networked one, argues Slaughter, then to exercise power is to be able to harness networks. "In this world," she concludes, "the state with the most connections will be the central player."[15] This, surely, is also true of networked versions of world literature. Those literary actors and works with the most connections, however construed, gain the most prominent places in the network, and so have a greater role in determining its configuration and purpose. This is why so many recent critiques of world literature (and here polemics by Aamir Mufti and Timothy Brennan stand out),[16] are made on the basis of its imperialistic character. For such critics, a work like Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated*, which examines books by globally prominent authors that are written in ways that anticipate their mediation by translation, entrenches unequal relations of power by giving theoretical priority to the most networked literary figures and works.[17] (We might think of such texts as net*works*.)

For some, though, the problem isn't networks and networked-ness per se, but the theoretician's *choice* of network. One can just as easily choose to focus on the networks forged in opposition to or beyond the reach of those through which power is exercised with hegemonic intent. If the 'born translated' novel is one phenomenon that network thinking can seize upon, then so too are counter-hegemonic relations being forged between those in the dominated or otherwise 'peripheral' outreaches of global literary networks. This has led to the project of exploring 'South-South' networks, including 'South-South' circuits of translation. Here 'South' refers to the 'Global South': the geo-political theoretical construct that has emerged in the wake of the 'Third World' to designate the structurally dominated states and regions of the Earth.

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[15] Anne-Marie Slaughter, "America's Edge: Power in the Networked Century," *Foreign Affairs* 88.1 (2009): 95.

[16] Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Timothy Brennan, "Cosmopolitanism and World Literature," in Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23-36.

[17] Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

We should note that, as with 'network theory', the idea of the 'Global South' articulates differently into different disciplinary contexts. If those active in the area formerly known as postcolonial studies tend to employ the term in a positive sense, in international relations, it has frequently been maligned as a neo-liberal version of Third-Worldism. For some theorists in this area, contemporary 'South-South' relations are no more than the "new transnationalist capitalism of the South," or "Neoliberalism with Southern Characteristics."[18] Far from being anti-hegemonic, transnational 'Southern' economic alliances such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) reinforce the marketization of underdeveloped nation states and exacerbate inequalities within them. This has led some theorists to demarcate this neoliberal 'South from above' from the popular (and more-or-less socialist) 'South from below'.[19] In my own attempts to get my head around the various deployments of the 'Global South', I've found it helpful to distinguish between those for whom the term is primarily analytic and those for whom it signals an ongoing project. In a sharp polemic titled, yes, 'Against the Global South', Isabel Hofmeyr positions herself against both tendencies.[20] Rather than seeking "a reprised Third Worldism" (309), she points to the "mutant cultural forms" emerging from within the capitalist networks formed within the environment created by "South from above" (307). These include Indian Premier League cricket and ASEAN fashion week, whose "new and unexpected strangeness" (314) manifest a lowercase "global south" that eludes the determinations of academic theorists.

While I do not share Hofmeyr's view that attempts to reprise Third World internationalism tend only to "the mourned and the melancholic"—one thinks of the extraordinary resurgence of the term 'decolonisation' over the last decade and a new generation of student activists inspired by it—it certainly is the case that a

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[18] Kevin Gray and Barry K. Gills, "South-South Cooperation and the Rise of the Global South," *Third World Quarterly* 37.4 (2016): 559; and Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (London: Verso, 2012), 10. See also William I. Robinson, "The Transnational State and the BRICS: A Global Capitalism Perspective," *Third World Quarterly* 36.1 (2015): 1-21; and Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia, *BRICS: An Anti-capitalist Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

[19] Prashad, *The Poorer Nations*, 12.

[20] Isabel Hofmeyr, "Against the Global South," in Russel West-Pavlov, ed., *The Global South and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 309, 307, 314.

"redemptive, Third World narrative" underpins the work of those who have embraced the literary critical project of recovering or stimulating 'South-South' collaborations.[21] A recent conference titled *Thinking the Global South* held at Pennsylvania State University included several papers whose titles assume a continuity in historical spirit from Third Worldism to the Global South.[22] For literary scholars this has entailed, as the titles of panels and seminars at recent literary MLA and ACLA conventions have put it, "Charting the Routes of South-South Translation" and seeking out "South-South Translation and Global Cultural Circuits Beyond the West."[23] The editors of a recent issue of *Safundi*, titled "Cultural Solidarities: Apartheid and the Anticolonial Commons of World Literature," state that their purpose is to consider "networked cultural responses loosely figured as 'cultural solidarities' in the Global South, on the understanding that mid-twentieth century struggles to end colonialism were addressed within a transnational domain."[24] Such efforts redescribe and reimagine the Third World project in the mode of network thinking. To take just one example, the largely forgotten journal of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, *Lotus*, is being recuperated as a key piece of evidence for the literary networks formed during the era of the Non-Aligned Movement.[25] Regardless of the importance of the

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[21] Ibid., 314, 307.

[22] See, for instance: "African Literary Studies: From the Global Cold War to the Global South," "Bandung as Method," "South-South Organizing and Racial Policing in the Jim Crow Americas," "Thinking the Global South: A Critical Vocabulary for the 1950s," "Leading to the Digital Tricontinental: Amnesiac Networks and the Work of Anne Garland Mahler." https://sites.psu.edu/thinkingtheglobalsouth/schedule/ (accessed 25/08/2018). Another recent high-profile conference that has ridden the wave of this sentiment was *Bandung du Nord*, held in Paris in May 2018. The conference description includes the comment: "Le Bandung du Nord a pour objectif de proposer l'idée d'une Internationale Décoloniale qui scellerait une alliance politique entre les mouvements". http://bandungdunord.webflow.io/#Programme (accessed 25/08/2018).

[23] See *PMLA* 132.4 (2017): 865. Another panel at the same MLA convention was titled "South-South Translation and the Geopolitics and Geopoetics of Circulation" (932). For the ACLA "South-South" stream see: https://www.acla.org/south-south-translation-and-global-cultural-circuits-beyond-west (accessed 14/03/2019).

[24] Stefan Helgesson, Louise Bethlehem, and Gül Bilge Han, "Cultural Solidarities: Apartheid and the Anticolonial Commons of World Literature," *Safundi* 19.3 (2018): 260.

[25] See, for instance, Hala Halim, "Lotus, the Afro-Asian nexus, and Global South Comparatism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32.3 (2012): 563-83; and Gül Bilge Han, "Nazım Hikmet's Afro-Asian Solidarities," *Safundi*

magazine's contents (and on this I pass no judgement), its nodal character makes it a natural fit for world literature scholarship intent on recovering and theorizing 'South-South' networks.

Now, none of these scholarly activities are, of themselves, wrongheaded, and I admire the work of many of the scholars participating in these initiatives. What is of concern is the way in which network thinking is entrenching itself as a paradigm within an arena of literary scholarship committed to thinking about structurally dominated literary spheres. This is problematic in at least three ways. If, in a 'networked world', the most powerful are the most networked, then to focus on networks is choose grounds of relation and comparison that favour the powerful. One wonders whether those seeking out the networks of the Third World/Global South will find themselves pulled towards narratives of utopian failure. Networks instantiated with the aim of bringing about transnational cultural empowerment either shine brightly before encountering the organisational fatigue that comes with a lack of resources or they are conscripted by the networks of power that they had hoped to circumvent. Second, it will tend to leave in the shade the enormous amount of non-networked, or locally-circumscribed literary activity undertaken by structurally dominated writers and literary communities. Being able to make headway *without* durable transnational networks is a basic feature of literary production in the regions that get grouped together as the 'Global South'. The scholarship on the structural distribution of translation tells us that there are huge quantities of untranslated work in 'minor' languages whose capacity to move between nodes is virtually nil, not to mention the many oral literary traditions that never warrant a mention from the scholars under networking thinking's spell. Stefan Helgesson has called such domains the "negative space" of world literature.[26] There is surely a role for excavating and mapping out the networks

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19.3 (2018): 284-305. In May 2017, the Jordan Center at NYU hosted an event titled *Afro-Asian Writers Association: An Inventory Workshop* which featured a number of scholars who have been researching *Lotus*. http://jordanrussiacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/finalAfro-AsianWorkshopMay19th-1.pdf (accessed 25/08/2018).

[26] Stefan Helgesson, "Translation and the Circuits of World Literature," in Etherington and Zimbler, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, 90. A landmark essay here is Johan Heilbron's "Toward a Sociology of Translation: Book Translations as a Cultural World-System," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (1999): 429-44. For an overview, see Lawrence Venuti, "Translation Studies and World Literature," in Lawrence

established in such conditions, but it can only tell a fraction of the story about the literatures produced in them. If we seek "the liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality," prioritising past and existing 'South-South' networks may well be blocking from view whole swathes of literary activity.[27]

Perhaps the Internet is making it easier for networking 'from below', but even here the question of digital localism needs to be countenanced. Just because activity takes place on the Internet, it doesn't mean that its impetus and telos is that of the network. Further, the algorithmic logic that weaves global digital spaces together is geared to capitalist metropolitan strongholds. I would even question whether it is fruitful to consider that the direct relations forged through such digital localism in terms of 'networking'. The ambition often is to establish viable cultural spaces, sometimes even restricting participation to those involved in doing so, rather than to disseminate literary content indiscriminately. These 'networks' may be, in fact, the relations required to produce literary habitats in the first place. Perhaps the figure of the 'nest' is more appropriate.

Finally, and to my mind, most importantly, the emergence of network thinking in the section of world literature scholarship committed to the Global South is tending to subject its objects of study to the fetishism of networks. Authors, practices, works, and the scene of reception are given attention in their capacity as nodes. The theorist surveys the nodal points, descends, perhaps, for a case study but then departs before contiguous relations and meanings can be properly absorbed and understood. One example of a nodal-centric argument can be found in an essay by Shu-mei Shih titled "Comparison as Relation."[28] Bringing together Édouard Glissant's speculations on the "poetics of relation" and the work of "integrative world historians" (81), Shih sets out to develop a "new theory of comparison" (79). This calls for a "model of world literature" that sees "all

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Venuti, ed., *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 193-208.

[27] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3 (2000): 178.

[28] Shuh-mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, eds, *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 79-98. Page references are in-text.

literatures as participating in a network of power-inflected relations." In a necessarily brief response to her own call, the remainder of the essay sketches a study focussed on literary creolisation. This is because networked forms of relation are "best exemplified in the worldwide and ceaseless process of creolization. […] Relation is a network and shaped by history, however chaotic and unpredictable this network may be" (84). The essay goes on to discuss Glissant, several works by William Faulkner, Chang Kuei-hsing's Borneo-set *Monkey Cup*, and Patricia Powell's Jamaica-set *The Pagoda*. Coming to conclude, Shu-mei Shih writes: "the interconnectedness of the world in turn compels us to consider world literature not in terms of juxtapositions but in terms of a network of horizontal and vertical relations" (95). Acknowledging that a fuller study would need to include "archival and other research work on the texts in question in order to understand their relationalities in historical contexts" (95), she nevertheless indicates that a networked reading practice is undertaken in the hope that "each literary text's singularity stands out" (96).

On this account, the concept of creolisation is a network-nodal one. If the "ceaseless process of creolization" is a basic fact of an interconnected world, to map out the networks that form between different sites of creolisation will allow us to see modes of horizontal interconnectedness that reveal an "ethics of reciprocity" operating in a "kind of minor transnationalism" (95). To my mind, network thinking is the wrong direction from which to approach and concept-ualise creolisation. When the term is used to identify nodal points in worldwide networks of, as a postcolonial theorist might once have put it, subaltern cultural agents, its inherent tendency is to hasten the theorist past the kinds of activity required to entrain their sensibility and perception in the peculiar alchemical processes that produce creolised cultural forms. Developing a meaningful understanding of the creole languages of the Caribbean, for instance, entails a thorough reckoning with the historical-material process that fused lexis, syntax, semantics, phonology, and prosody of multiple source languages in the pressure-cooker conditions of the plantation, not to mention the complex and always fluctuating continuum between deeply creolised and more standardised forms of speech that exist in the different islands. It's the kind of work to which scholars like Maureen Warner-Lewis, Jean D'Costa, Velma Pollard, and Barbara Lalla have dedicated their careers. The same goes for all the operations of form and

rhetoric when dealing with literary creolisation. Shih, a noted scholar in this field, is well aware of all this, and, I'm sure, would vouch for deep research into particular sites of creolisation in addition to network-oriented research. My concern is that a networked-based approach will nodalise creolisation, de-emphasising its situation and tending to render it as a bland synonym for mixing.

Does this mean that I have ended my act of *contrādīcere* with a position akin to Apter's? That we must always use the power of the singular to dissolve all pre-emptive network-based universalisations? To answer, I will pick up the thread left dangling earlier concerning non-networked ways of thinking literary totality. We need ways of thinking literary totality that work with the grain of the kinds of deep, contiguous, locally sensitive modes of attention required to understand the history and cultural meaning of particular sites of creolisation. Comparativists here must always begin with a particular literary world, for which, to reprise another earlier thought, the figure of a *nest* might serve. Without doubt, cultural collisions, usually brought about by situations of extreme power inequality, create the conditions for creolisation. Rather than forming a node in a creole network, though, the reparative cultural work of creolisation is usually at first an inward-facing one.[29] The various elements being creolised get brought together to create a cultural home and place of belonging. In turn, the members of creolised cultures are able to frame, indeed, *make* their worlds with the materials forged during that process. Such activities, of course, are not one-off, and there are insights and meanings to be discovered when thinking across various sites and practices of creolisation. Is this thinking across necessarily a networked form of thinking? No, even if the world that makes for creolisation, is one of ceaseless cultural upheaval and interaction. Thinking across sites of creolisation requires multiple acts of being steeped in the milieu of the creole. It is akin to multilingualism. Just as one could not pretend to learn all of the world's languages, one could not hope to produce a comprehensive map of creolisation. Of course, one can look to the work

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[29] As Mimi Sheller writes: "becoming 'Creole' is a process of achieving indigeneity through the migration and recombination of diverse elements that have been loosed from previous attachments and have reattached themselves to a new place of belonging." "Creolization in Discourses of Global Culture," in Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castada, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, eds, *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 273-94 (276).

of colleagues, but what is really at stake is the nature of the insights that allow one to think in the terms of totality. Comparative literary creolisation, like just about any form of comparative literature, must allow for speculative insights achieved through acts of focused interpretation. Rather than the identity thinking of the network, an outwardly radiating study of creolisation will be able to make out creole meridians in counterpoint to the operations of a homogenising imperial standard.