Abstract

Not the Whole Story: Narrative Responses to Contemporary Globalization

Accelerating globalization has greatly increased the complexity and density of the connections between individuals, communities, and institutions in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. People around the world are more aware than ever that their lives affect and are affected by environmental, economic, political, and cultural developments thousands of miles away. Many people also realize how scanty their understanding of most of these connections is. My dissertation analyzes how contemporary global literature addresses the challenge of narrating an overwhelmingly complex globalized world. Authors like Junot Díaz and Jhumpa Lahiri explore life in an age of contemporary globalization by distributing their narratives across multiple focalizing characters, time periods, and locations. This multiplicity of perspectives emphasizes the insights, blindnesses, and idiosyncrasies of each. These authors use what I call compositing processes to create a narrative patchwork exploring key globalized connections and contexts while suggesting with its gaps the range of relevant material that still exceeds narration. Sometimes global connectivity is foregrounded, as when Salman Rushdie explores the transnational, transgenerational heritage of a young woman with Kashmiri, Indian, French, and American roots as well as the murder of her ambassador and counterterrorism agent father. At other times, as in Zadie Smith’s *NW*, the global is depicted in the background role it so often plays in our lives, as a web of connectivity subtly shaping characters’ thoughts, actions, and opportunities regardless of their degree of awareness of it. Characters, too, use compositing to understand the world around them, deciding what heritages and connections to emphasize, engage, suppress, and ignore. My dissertation argues that author and character compositing processes reflect and engage the ways readers piece together understandings of texts and how each of us constructs understandings of the world in an age of accelerating globalization.

My dissertation addresses a gap in the critical conversation about literature and globalization.

Cultural and media theorists like John Tomlinson, Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai, Lev Manovich, and Ian Bogost have demonstrated the overwhelming complexity of life amidst globalization. Yet these analyses, in focusing on the nature and current state of globalization, leave open the question of how people deal with the complexity of relevant information as they develop narrative understandings of the world. I demonstrate how global fiction further develops critics’ insights into globalization when it explores specific perspectives and responses to the complexities it embodies, such as when Hari Kunzru and Neal Stephenson juxtapose focalizations grounded in individual experiences with a technology’s-eye-view of global networks. Building on the narrative theory of Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, I argue for the importance of newly prominent composite narrative structures that represent and enact key methods of managing overwhelming globalized connectivity in our lives and narratives. These composite narrative forms complicate postmodern narrative and require that we rethink the postmodern condition in terms of the diverse influences and experiences of globalization.

My Introduction outlines the historical and methodological basis of compositing analysis in media, narrative, and globalization theories as well as global and new media literatures. Chapter One establishes the foundational pattern of compositing as literary subject matter and narrative structure, exploring local agency in the face of globalized complexity in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, Julia Alvarez’s *Saving the World*, Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*. Chapter Two examines how Zadie Smith’s *NW* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* employ narrative compositing to explore the significant yet paradoxically backgrounded framing role of globalization and complex connectivity in the lives and stories of the novels’ protagonists. Chapter Three explains the conceptual origins of compositing in new media studies before analyzing narrative compositing in Atlus’s 2011 videogame *Catherine* and the related role of online collective intelligence in user compositing processes. *Catherine*, like much new media literature, participates in the global dissemination of modern, schematic understandings of identity, providing an example of the larger impact of technology on the ways we engage, model, and understand the world. Chapter Four analyzes the interplay of technology and globalization in the literature of globalization (Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*) and the often neglected literature of technology—science fiction (Neal Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age*). Both novels’ composite narratives offer a technology’s-eye-view of global technological forces and their influence on individuals and societies, highlighting the challenges of understanding global networks from individual perspectives on the ground. Chapter Five focuses on representations of compositing as a way for transnational families to deal with unfinished globalized pasts in Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*. These narratives demonstrate how, for characters and readers alike, the complexity of globalized experiences demand sophisticated understandings of transnational pasts, identities, and perspectives complicated by error, suppression, simplification, and ideological bias. A brief Conclusion considers compositing and pedagogy with regard to course construction and textual analysis. I outline a technique I call “closer reading,” which focuses less on the product of a finished interpretation than on the process of constructing a supportable preliminary reading from student questions and points of confusion as well as insights. This interpretive compositing approach can easily be scaled up from textual to contextual and intertextual analysis, connecting it back to my dissertation’s broader concern with globalized complexity.