Can English Survive the Globalization of Literary Studies, and if so, what will it look like? The emergence of what we have come to call global culture, characterized by the rapid circulation of cultural commodities such as books, films, works in electronic media, clothing, and food in a way that seems to overwhelm local cultural forms and practices, has come at the expense of the nation-state’s ability to control the formation of national subjectivities and ideologies. The nation-state, to be sure, is alive and well as a political and military entity, and as I argue later in this essay, critics who predict its imminent demise in the face of globalization are, I think, mistaken. However, it is true that cultural change in nation-states is increasingly beyond their control (with the important exception of fundamentalist states exerting rigid cultural control in the face of Westernization). Culture is now being defined in terms less of national interests than of a shared set of global ones. This shift in the cultural role of the nation-state has profound implications for its institutions, particularly its schools, colleges, and universities. Since the rise of the modern university in the West is directly linked to the development and needs of the nation-state, as a number of critics have recently argued, the globalizing of literary studies portends a remarkable reversal, one that is bound to have a deep effect on the discipline we call English. For in the United States, English has been at the center of a curricular world organized along the lines of a political map, the borders of which have neatly duplicated those between modern nation-states. If the conventional structures of literary study (English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, etc.) have been transparently nationalist, they mirror the aesthetic ideology of literary studies, one that can be traced to the linkage among nation, race,
and literature forged in nineteenth-century Europe by writers like Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine and Matthew Arnold. In the United States Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman articulated the need for a national literature decades before it became incorporated in the curricula of American universities. As Peter Carafiol and others have demonstrated, the structure of American literary studies in United States universities has always been informed by a broadly nationalist ideal.2

While this ideal was based on forging an aesthetic and ideological consensus about culture and identity grounded in a limited set of texts unified around certain themes and values, contemporary criticism has become increasingly preoccupied with difference in ways that undermine the neat, superficial cultural homogeneity informing the study of national literatures. This interest in difference developed simultaneously in the academy and in the streets, driven on the one hand by deconstructive, Marxist, and feminist theories and on the other hand by the civil rights, antiwar, women’s, and gay and lesbian movements, which began to emphasize the difference racial and gender distinctions have made in American life. Deconstruction helped lay the theoretical groundwork for thinking differently about the structure and power of literary, political, and cultural discourses and in so doing contributed to the critique of dominant nationalist ideologies in British and United States literatures. Perhaps more important, critical theories more explicitly engaged with political issues and affiliated with social movements dating from the 1960s helped create alliances among writers, critics, and students across national and state boundaries in a way that has systematically diminished the rationale for mapping literary studies with reference to the old paradigm of homogeneous nation-states. Our awareness of the complex ways in which English and American identities have been constructed historically through migration, displacement, colonialism, exile, gender relations, and cultural hybridity has radically restructured our sense of what Paul Gilroy has dubbed the “roots/routes” of these identities (19).

With this awareness it has become increasingly difficult to study British or American literature without situating it, and the culture(s) from which it emerged, in transnational histories linked to globalization. At the same time the remarkable explosion of English literature produced outside Britain and the United States has made it clear that this literature is becoming defined less by a nation than by a language, in which authors from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds write. The globalization of English from this point of view is not a theoretical formulation or a political agenda developed by radicals in the humanities to displace the canon. It is a simple fact of contemporary history. English literature is increasingly postnational, whether written by cosmopolitan writers like Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Arundhati Roy, and Nadine Gordimer or by a host of lesser-known writers working in their home countries or in diasporic communities around the world, from Europe and Africa to the Caribbean and North America. I want to argue that we can more effectively reorganize our approach to the study of what we have heretofore treated as national literatures (in our curricula and programs) by emphasizing literature’s relation to the historical processes of globalization. Such a step involves rejecting the idea that globalization is a fundamentally contemporary event and recognizing that it has a long history. In the first part of this essay I review the development of globalization theories with an eye toward underscoring some of the differences between globalization conceived of as a postmodern phenomenon and globalization conceived of as a long historical process. The differences, I want to argue, are considerable if we are thinking about how to globalize literary studies. In the second part of the essay I turn my attention to how the concept of culture is being reformulated by globalization studies and to the question of whether globalization is an essentially Westernizing and
homogenizing force that threatens to wipe out local cultures. In the final section I sketch out my approach to globalizing literary studies. Here I deal directly with the vexing problem of how to develop a transnational approach to English that avoids simply colonizing the literature of the “other.”

What Is Globalization?

To say that English literature is becoming increasingly globalized, that its contemporary production and consumption no longer take place within discrete national borders but unfold in a complex system of transnational economic and cultural exchanges characterized by the global flow of cultural products and commodities, is not the same thing as describing how the study of literature could or should be globalized. To do that, we need to review the rise of globalization studies as a theoretical discourse and a disciplinary field. For the study of English or of literature in general cannot be globalized without a thorough understanding of the key terms, issues, and debates that have marked the rise of globalization studies, a critical movement that has only recently migrated to the arena of cultural and literary studies. I want to review some of these debates, debates about the nature and history of globalization, the relative role of economic and cultural exchange in its processes, how globalization theorists have redefined the concept of culture, the rise under the forces of globalization of deterritorialized or diaspora communities, and finally whether globalization is simply synonymous with Westernization or Americanization, including whether globalizing literary studies might end up repeating older forms of colonization.

The study of globalization, initiated by economists and social scientists, developed as a response to the emergence of a global economy grounded in modernization and fueled by the expansion of Western capitalism. Initially, attention was devoted to how the growth of capital production had, by the 1960s, become increasingly tied to the rise of transnational corporations and the proliferation of markets that regularly crossed nation-state boundaries. The rapid growth of a world economy, because it depended so much on the power of the nation-state, began to get the attention of political scientists like Immanuel Wallerstein. Wallerstein’s well-known formulation “the modern world system,” for example, which paved the way for more comprehensive theories about globalization, was based on the notion that nation-state economies facilitated the development of a world economic system in the West: “In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century,” he observes, “there came into existence what we may call a European world-economy. [. . .] It is a ‘world system.’ [. . .T]he basic linkage between the parts of the system is economic, although this was reinforced to some extent by cultural links” (Modern World System 15). There are two principal differences between Wallerstein’s modern world system and later theories of globalization. The first is that the nation-state still has a central role to play in keeping the world system in place (it is not threatened with extinction in Wallerstein’s view the way it is in the eyes of many globalization theorists). Whereas under Wallerstein’s modern world system “core states,” characterized by voracious economic development, strong governmental structures, and a powerful sense of national identity, controlled the evolution of a world economy for their own benefit, in a thoroughly globalized economy the nation-state’s power to regulate and control the flow of commodities and information among transnational entities is so diminished that some globalization theorists postulate the imminent demise of the nation-state. The other important difference between Wallerstein’s modern world system and globalization theory is that for Wallerstein globalization is an overwhelmingly economic phenomenon, while for globalization theorists it is also cultural. Wallerstein gives a nod to how “cultural links” can have a secondary role in re-
inforcing the world system, but that system is in his view fundamentally economic. This is a subject I will return to later, but for now it is important to emphasize that globalization studies has developed by continually rethinking the relation among economies, cultures, commodities, and social behavior and by focusing carefully on how systems of commodity exchange are also systems of symbolic exchange. For globalization theorists culture is not subordinated to the economy. Rather, the two are profoundly interdependent.

In the light of the argument I want to make in favor of viewing globalization historically (rather than as a specifically postmodern phenomenon), it is important to stress that Wallerstein characterizes his modern world system as the product of a long historical process. Many globalization theorists would say that this trait significantly distinguishes his world system theory from theories of globalization, which often equate globalization with postmodernity and insist that it marks a rupture or break with modernity. But in fact globalization theorists are divided on this question, and it is an important one to consider when we think about the globalization of literary studies. If globalization is fundamentally a contemporary or postmodern phenomenon, then it would seem to offer us a way to rethink the study mainly of recent (and emerging) literatures. But if globalization is a long historical process that has dramatically accelerated in recent years, then the globalization of literary studies cannot restrict itself to this contemporary acceleration. Literature’s relation to the processes of globalization as they manifest themselves in a variety of historical periods—indeed, literature’s facilitation of economic and cultural globalization—is becoming a potentially important field of study that might get short-circuited if we think of globalization only as a postmodern eruption.4

A proponent of the idea that globalization has a long history, Roland Robertson argues that the process predates modernity and has been evolving since at least the fifteenth century. He divides the history of globalization into five phases, a “germinal” period, running from 1400 to 1750, an “incipient” phase, beginning in 1750 and lasting until 1875, a “take-off phase” (1875–1925), a “struggle for hegemony” (1925–69), and finally a stage he labels “uncertainty,” which runs from 1969 to the present (25–31). The key moments for Robertson in this long evolution toward globalization include the collapse of Christendom, the development of maps and maritime travel, the rise of the nation-state, global exploration, colonialism, the creation of citizenship, passports, diplomacy and the entire paraphernalia of international relations, the rise of international communication and mass migration, the founding of organizations like the League of Nations and the United Nations, the outbreak of world wars, and finally the exploration of space and a developing sense that communities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and so on, cut across national and state boundaries.

In this approach to dating globalization, Robertson is at odds with postmodern theorists like Anthony Giddens and David Harvey. Giddens links globalization much more specifically to modernity—in particular, to the solidification of the nation-state under capitalism and to what Malcolm Waters calls the nation-state’s “administrative competence” (achieved especially through surveillance and “industrialized military order” [48]). Highly industrialized, rationalized, and commodified nation-states in the twentieth century facilitate, in Giddens’s view, the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across time and space” (21). Like Wallerstein, Giddens sees globalization in fundamentally economic terms, characterized as it is by the dominance of transnational corporations, which turn the world into “a single market for commodities, labour and capital” (Waters 51). For Giddens globalization represents the “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such
a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64).

Whereas Robertson’s approach suggests that literature produced in various periods may be connected to globalization, Giddens suggests a narrower relation between modernity and globalization, in which literary studies and globalization primarily intersect in what we usually think of as the modern and postmodern periods. Harvey goes further than Giddens, insisting that globalization marks a fundamental break with modernity. For Giddens globalization is an extension of modernity, but for Harvey it is inextricably linked to postmodernity. Harvey’s approach to globalization is keyed to the ways in which mechanization and technology increasingly diminish the constraints space puts on time. With the invention and growing sophistication of shipping, railways, and motor and then air transport, the time it takes to move across space has continually shrunk, accelerating the collapse of boundaries and borders and facilitating economic and cultural globalization. These developments, of course, have accelerated in recent years with the proliferation of electronic forms of communication allowing for nearly instantaneous contact and for commercial transactions that cover the globe while ignoring nation-state boundaries. These recent technologies (particularly the Internet) collapse the discontinuity between time and space in a radically new way. If globalization is historicized this way, it seems to be a postmodern turn and suggests that the globalization of literary studies comes under the purview of postmodern studies.

With the differences among Robertson, Giddens, and Harvey in mind, we can see that the question of what globalization is turns out to be inextricably linked to how it is historicized. Robertson’s view of globalization is fundamentally different from Giddens’s and Harvey’s, and as I have been suggesting, each one offers us a different context for thinking about how to globalize literary study. Following Robertson, the globalizing of literary studies would engage literatures and cultures from nearly every period, while if, with Giddens and Harvey, we conceive of globalization as a specifically modern or postmodern phenomenon, we would focus primarily on the literatures of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Which of these points of view is correct? While the arguments Giddens and Harvey make about the acceleration of globalization in the late twentieth century are important, it seems to me that Robertson’s approach is the more accurate one and that it offers wider opportunities for those of us in literary studies interested in the intersection of globalization and literary and cultural production. Although it would be a mistake not to acknowledge that a set of explosive forces unleashed in the last half of the twentieth century have radically revised transnational exchange, it would be an even bigger mistake not to contextualize these changes in a longer historical view of globalization like the one Robertson offers. Globalization can certainly help us map the future of literary studies, but it also provides an important way to rethink our approach to the study of literature across a range of historical periods.

Globalization and Culture

I noted earlier that globalization studies has moved from an initial interest in the emergence of a global economy toward an interest in globalization as a cultural phenomenon. We should not view this shift as a simplistic reorganizing of globalization studies around cultures rather than economies, for it entails a recognition of the reciprocal relation between the economic and the cultural spheres, a recognition that cultures are exchanged along with commodities. One of the central points of globalization studies is that cultural forms (literary narrative, cinema, television, live performance, etc.) are commodities, a position that counters older notions of the literary as purely aesthetic and somehow beyond the world of commodities, economies, even history. We
can no longer make a clear distinction between exchanges that are purely material and take place in an economy of commodities and exchanges that are purely symbolic and take place in a cultural economy. Indeed, that these two forms of exchange have always overlapped (and that they are becoming increasingly indistinguishable) is a singular feature of globalization.

Waters, a sociologist, insists that globalization studies ought to center on the “types of exchange that predominate in social relationships” in and across economies, political systems, and forms of cultural discourse. In his view each of these “arenas” facilitates forms of exchange contributing to globalization: economies facilitate material exchange, politics facilitate exchanges relative to the maintenance and support of power, and culture facilitates “symbolic exchanges” through “oral communication, publication, performance, ritual, entertainment,” and narrative (8). Breaking with Giddens’s economism, Waters rejects the simplistic view that “the driving force for global integration is restless capitalist expansionism” (10) and insists that symbolic exchange facilitates globalization more quickly than either of the other two arenas. He argues that globalization is tied to the acceleration of symbolic exchanges (the production and dissemination of films, novels, advertisements, music, even fast food—cultural forms that are circulated, adopted, and revised in a myriad of locations), since “symbols can be produced anywhere and at any time and there are relatively few resource constraints on their production and reproduction” (9).

The forms of symbolic exchange Waters enumerates under the rubric of the cultural are virtually indistinguishable from the concerns associated with cultural studies, a field that started out with the Birmingham school’s focus on elements of a national culture (influenced by Raymond Williams) but has steadily become more transnational. From this point of view, the relatively new culturalist orientation to globalization theory, which sees the products of culture as integral to the more general flow of economies and commodities, represents the intersection of globalization theory and cultural studies. This convergence has come as a result of our relatively recent interest in culture as a fluid, mobile, transnational phenomenon that predates and often ignores nation-state boundaries. In “Traveling Cultures,” for example, James Clifford questions the conventional anthropological model of culture as something fixed and local. This model, in which local cultures are studied by objective scientists from other cultures who dwell in them, elides “the wider global world of intercultural import-export in which the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed” (100). In effect, the observer, operating in a complex network of mobile forms of exchange and translation (technologies of travel facilitating the encounter in the first place, the international context of such encounters, the degree of “translation” that takes place in cross-cultural exchanges, etc.), “coproduces” the culture studied:

[O]nce the representational challenge is seen to be the portrayal and understanding of local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations and resistances, then one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones. [...] T]he goal is not to replace the cultural figure “native” with the intercultural figure “traveler.” Rather the task is to focus on concrete mediations of the two, in specific cases of historical tension and relationship.

Clifford’s focus on the mobility of culture echoes Waters’s insistence on the ease of symbolic exchange under the forces of globalization. However, Clifford stresses the dis-location of culture, the fact that in an age of accelerating globalization culture has become deterritorialized and diasporic. The dis-location of cultures requires that we rethink where and how cultures are located. “We need,” Clifford insists, to “conjure with new localizations like ‘the border,’” specific
An important development contributing to this new approach to culture is the rise of diasporic communities, a singular feature of globalization connected to increased migration and to the proliferation of electronic media that permit instantaneous communication between diasporic communities and between these communities and their nations of origin. The proliferation of electronic media adds another dimension to the phenomenon of “traveling cultures,” for today literal travel is increasingly facilitated by “virtual” travel, so that “travel, or displacement, can involve forces that pass powerfully through cultures—television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies” (Clifford 103). Arjun Appadurai, building on Clifford’s contrast between literal and virtual travel, approaches globalization as a dual function of increased migration and the rise of new, electronic media. Like Readings, Appadurai suggests that globalization represents a profound weakening of the nation-state:

The wave of debates about multiculturalism that has spread through the United States and Europe is surely testimony to the incapacity of states to prevent their minority populations from linking themselves to wider constituencies of religious or ethnic affiliation. These examples, and others, suggest that the era in which we could assume that viable public spheres were typically, exclusively, or necessarily national could be at an end. Diasporic public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucibles of a postnational political order.5 (22)

Appadurai’s remarks underscore globalization’s profound potential for disrupting traditional nationalist paradigms for literary study. If globalization is characterized by the growing deterritorialization of culture, by the fluidity of its movement across nation-state boundaries, and by its tendency to survive and mutate in diasporic pockets thriving within the borders of multiple countries, and if the religious, ethnic, and cultural affiliations of these mobile populations continue to be transformed by their deterritorialized condition and by the pervasive Westernization that tends to characterize globalization, then the disruption of traditional connections among territory, culture, nation, and literary expression will increase.

For Appadurai this development is positive, even empowering. Whereas Clifford stresses how cultures travel, become deterritorialized, and tend to hybridize under globalization, Appadurai insists on the importance of what he calls “culturalism [. . .] the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity” (15). While culture has been traditionally conceived as a “property of individuals and groups” deployed “to articulate the boundary of difference” (13) connected to the needs of nation-states and to the nationalist ideologies they require, culturalism denotes a concern with identities constructed across national boundaries. As Appadurai thinks of it, culturalism is “the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics” (15). It is often based on identity politics and deployed to fashion diasporic identities imaginatively and to assert the rights of deterritorialized groups in nation-states. As such, culturalism represents an “instrumental conception of ethnicity,” whereas culture is grounded in a “primordial” myth of ethnicity or other traits in which a carefully constructed group identity has been “naturalized” into something substantive, inherent, primary, or originary (14).5

Appadurai links culturalism to processes of identity formation influenced by the media and by the rise of mass consumer culture. Deterritorialization, as he points out, “creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios, and travel agencies, which thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland” (38). This contact is not simply a matter of keeping up with the news at home. It enables transnational subjects or members of di-

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asporic public spheres to imagine or improvise new, postnational identities. Opportunities for mobility and self-fashioning are increasingly worked out in a social imaginary in which the kinds of symbols and imagery we usually associate with narrative and the performing arts engage the imagination in the complex re-formation of subjectivity. To the extent global culture is a function of this “mass-mediated imaginary,” what Appadurai calls the “social work of the imagination” lies at the heart of culturalism, construed as the conscious construction of individual and communal identities that are always making and remaking themselves in response to new localities, social and political pressures, and transnational cultural discourses (31). Global mass culture creates a postnational context for reimagining, organizing, and disseminating subjectivity through all the devices formally associated with literary (or cinematic) narrative. National scripts regularly give way to globally disseminated media scripts that engage the imagination complexly. This process suggests that we need to turn our attention away from a simple preoccupation with how national literatures function in relation to historically homogenous cultures and toward an examination of how postnational literatures are instrumental in the formation of subjectivity in deterritorialized and diasporic contexts.

The Politics of Globalization

One of the main complaints about globalization, of course, is that the proliferation of Western styles, products, and tastes may extinguish difference. From this point of view, globalization simply represents the homogenizing of formerly disparate cultures and identities. This is perhaps the crucial political question regarding globalization studies: is the real object of its fascination the triumph of Western culture, or do the myriad pockets of globally produced cultures around the world simultaneously receive and transform the commodities and styles of Western culture in a way that resists such homogenization? Appadurai rejects the idea that globalization is synonymous with homogenization or Westernization. He insists that “there is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency. [. . .] T-shirts, billboards, and graffiti as well as rap music, street dancing, and slum housing all show that the images of the media are quickly moved into local repertoires of irony, anger, humor, and resistance.” For Appadurai the dissemination of Western or American culture provides a context for the exercise of power, for “action” rather than “escape” (7). The local appropriation and transformation of Western cultural forms and behaviors works against homogenization, in his view, since “different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently” (17). In this logic the United States “is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one mode of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (31). Appadurai’s position is a controversial one, for it works against the popular tendency to see globalization as merely Western capitalism’s triumphant commodifying and exporting of its cultural forms and practices in a ruthless effort (conscious or otherwise) to create new markets for them, an effort that leads inexorably to the collapse of local cultural forms.

I think Appadurai is right that globalization cannot be reduced to Westernization or Americanization. Theories of cultural change under the pressures of globalization have to be complex enough to acknowledge how local cultures are transformed by the products and styles of the West and how those cultures appropriate Western materials in a way that transforms both those products and styles and the cultures from which they come. A Big Mac in Venice or Tokyo is pretty much a Big Mac, but American soul music of the 1960s assimilated and transformed by musicians in Soweto or the Caribbean and then sent back to the United States, where it in
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Turn influences the production of new musical idioms, participates in a much more complicated and less hierarchical process. This process is certainly at work in the global production of English, which is increasingly influenced by South Asian and Latin American writing, a Hispanic tradition grounded in the borderlands of the United States and Mexico, African American literary idioms, and any number of cultural traditions specific to diaspora communities in the United States (Asian, Puerto Rican, South Asian, African, etc.). The culture of English is so thoroughly hybridized, so inexorably based on complex exchanges among these various cultural traditions, that it is getting ever more difficult to identify a dominant Western discourse that is not being subordinated to, and shaped by, this accelerating mix of sources and discourses from outside Britain and the United States.

While it may make little sense, from this perspective, to worry that cultural forms produced under the pressures of globalization will simply replicate Western ones, we ought to pause a moment to consider the class differences that mark these cultural flows and transformations (something Appadurai does not do). While Appadurai may be right that the appropriation of Western cultural forms can be a potentially liberating exercise of power, we need to recognize that this power is inherently uneven. Well-off, secular youth in Dubai, Kingston, Bombay, or Nairobi may have the privilege of exercising this power in cultural consumption, but the poor in such cities and rural populations do not. The kind of transnational cultural hybridity Appadurai celebrates and that we can trace in the literary production of global English is potentially liberating in a number of ways for plugged-in urban youth, but it may not have much to do with the lives of the urban and rural poor who are still caught in the stratifications of a global economy that leaves their lives relatively unchanged. Critics of globalization in general and those of us working with its paradigms in literary studies in particular need to pay more attention to the class differences that restrict and distort the positive effects of globalization Appadurai and others point to.

To argue that globalization represents the disastrous triumph of the West over the rest suggests, of course, that globalizing literary studies might amount to Americanizing or Westernizing global literature. Just as in globalization per se homogenization is tied to the export and rapid proliferation of Western commodities, the kind of homogenization that may become associated with the globalization of literary studies is linked to the export of Western critical categories, terms, theories, and practices, all of which threaten to create a Western critical context for the local literatures studied. It may be that English has exhausted itself as a field of study in the same way that Western capitalist markets began to exhaust themselves before the export of Western commodities fueled a new, global economy. In this analogy United States and British critics, having used up their own literature and feeling guilty about its complicity with the various oppressive practices of patriarchy, slavery, imperialism, and colonization, have turned for new material to the literature of the other. The danger here is that in globalizing literary studies we may replicate the same oppressive structures and practices many critics associate with the homogenizing effects of cultural globalization, structures and practices that further the dominance of expansionist cultures at the expense of local ones. The key question, which I take up in more detail below, is how to shift the center of English away from its traditional British and American focus without colonizing the variety of literatures and cultures now contributing to the transnational explosion of English. For we will not have got anywhere if we end up reconstructing the paradigm of English as the privileged center of a comparative approach to literary studies.

Caren Kaplan touches usefully on a number of these problems, and she does so from a feminist perspective too often ignored in what has
been a male-dominated discourse about globalization. Like Clifford and Appadurai, she is interested in the cultural effects of displacement, especially in how the emerging global “world system” is linked to tourism. However, Kaplan is interested less in how theories travel than in the pitfalls of travel as a mode of theorizing, pitfalls she locates in the critic as nomad, the fantasy of being “the one who can track a path through a seemingly illogical space without succumbing to nation-state and/or bourgeois organization and mastery.” Linking her discussion of the nomad to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization, Kaplan “caution[s] against critical practices that romanticize or mystify regions or figures” and ultimately represent them “through the lens of colonial discourse.” This cautionary tale is worked out in her critique of Jean Baudrillard, whose “theoretical peregrinations adopt the codes and terms of colonial discourse, producing Euro-American modernist aesthetics in the face of postmodernity’s transnational challenges to those values and forms of culture.” While the critic expands his territory, his theorizing of it subordinates its difference to his Eurocentric critical categories. Kaplan sees the same problems in Deleuze and Guattari, where “becoming minor” is all too often a “strategy that only makes sense to the central, major, or powerful” critic, a strategy wherein “the Third World functions simply as a metaphorical margin for Eurocentric oppositional strategies, an imaginary space, rather than a location of theoretical production.” Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of deterritorialization and becoming minor represent the dark side of Appadurai’s vision of agency and liberation, for in Kaplan’s view “deterritorialization itself cannot escape colonial discourse. The movement of deterritorialization colonizes, appropriates, even raids other spaces.”

Kaplan would counter this Eurocentric tendency with a feminist stress on the local, one that aims to reverse the power relations between what globalization theorists call the center and the periphery. For Kaplan, in fact, the “privileging of the local” by critics like Adrienne Rich and Chandra Mohanty requires that we view local cultures as sites of resistance to globalization and underscores the danger that globalizing literary studies will colonize world literatures for Western academic consumption by channeling them through its own normalizing vocabulary. Other feminist critics of globalization share Kaplan’s concern about how often globalization theorists ground their analyses in master narratives in which the mapping of core-periphery relations seems to replicate an older Eurocentrism. For example, Janet Abu-Lughod, who is “uncomfortable with the high level of abstraction of much of the discourse about globalization,” complains that critics like Ulf Hannerz treat the cultural flow between core and periphery as essentially one-way (“global” culture, produced in the West, is exported to a passive, consuming Third World). She argues that more attention has to be paid to specific localities in which cultural products from core cultures are appropriated and transformed in a “two-way process” (her examples come from a bazaar in Tunis and the syncretic relation between “oriental” and Western musical idioms). Barbara Abou-El-Haj also worries about the tendency of major globalization critics to “emphasize the center in cultural analyses premised on the core-periphery model.” These critics see the periphery as the site of “homogenization and corruption,” but they ought to concentrate more on “reciprocity and synthesis” in global cultural flows. Likewise, Janet Wolff sees too much “grand sociological theory” and not enough “concrete ethnography.” In this model the remnants of Eurocentrism lurk in the unequal attention given to the local stake in the reception and alliance with global power brokers.” These critics see the periphery as the site of “homogenization and corruption,” but they ought to concentrate more on “reciprocity and synthesis” in global cultural flows. Likewise, Janet Wolff sees too much “grand sociological theory” and not enough “concrete ethnography.”
local cultures, subordinating them to sweeping formulations that are often Eurocentric.

Valuable as these criticisms are, they run the risk of rigidifying the distinction between the privileged core and the marginalized periphery by insisting on the power and the autonomy, even the privilege, of the local. There is a danger in any discussion of the relation between dominant and dominated cultures of characterizing the local as a pure (or gendered) space in need of protection, as if local cultures were not already hybrid. The danger of ceding dominant power to the core cultures of the West may be matched by the danger of making a fetish of the local in its resistance to global cultures and treating that resistance as more important than the detrimental effect it might have on the inhabitants of the periphery.

Conclusion: Globalizing Literary Studies

The questions raised by Kaplan, Abu-Lughod, Abou-El-Haj, and Wolff ought to give us pause. However we proceed in our efforts to globalize literary studies, we need to avoid the problems these writers enumerate. As Susan Stanford Friedman has written, we need to resist “simplistically universalist and binarist narratives” as we think about globalizing the study of literature; we must undertake the more “difficult negotiation between insistence on multidirectional flows of power in [a] global context and continued vigilance about specifically western forms of domination” (6). This would clearly involve looking at local cultures outside the West not as the passive recipients of mass culture but as sites of transformation or even active resistance. However, this does not mean simply reasserting the autonomy of the local over against the global. The trap here is that we may perpetuate a simple-minded binarism that facilely and uncritically celebrates the local as pure culture opposed to rapacious Westernization. The stress, rather, ought to be on the multidirectionality of cultural flows, on the appropriation and transformation of globalized cultural forms wherever they settle in, with close attention to how those forms are reshaped and sent off again to undergo further transformations elsewhere. This work will take on increasing urgency as globalization accelerates and these processes remake English into something altogether new and more complicated.

We need to continue to reorganize the study of literature in ways that move us beyond the outmoded nationalist paradigm in which we still operate and that highlight how during various periods literature has been caught up in the multidirectional flows Friedman identifies. This does not mean we should abandon the study of literary texts and cultural practices in their relation to the modern nation-state. That study, however, ought to concentrate on the relation in historical and materialist terms. We ought to focus less on identifying what seems inherently English or American in the literatures we teach and write about and more on understanding the functional relation between literature and the nation-state, how literary writing has been theorized and politicized in efforts to define and empower nation-states, especially from the Enlightenment onward. This kind of approach must give primary attention to the historical role literature has had in global systems of cultural exchange and recognize that this exchange has always been multidirectional. With the understanding that globalization is a long historical process, we can usefully complicate our nation-based approach to the study of English, not by dropping the nation-state paradigm but by foregrounding its history and its function for the nation-state, insisting that our students come to understand the instrumental role literature has played in the complicated world of transnational political and cultural relations.

Twenty or thirty years ago English seemed to have a kind of coherence (as the study for aesthetic appreciation of a set of canonical British texts, with some attention to United States literature treated in its relation to this British
tradition), but that coherence was rooted in a
cultural moment that has passed. In the United
States focusing student attention on a privileged
Anglo literary tradition made to embody ideals,
values, and a loosely defined social ideology
based on Emersonian self-reliance had a kind of
pragmatic value in the years after World War I,
a value that continued well into the mid-1960s.
It solidified American nationalism after World
War I and in the context of a huge wave of im-
migration. Although the curriculum walked a
tenuous line between valorizing a British tradi-
tion that writers like Emerson and Whitman
wanted to break with and establishing the im-
portance of “American” literature, the rise of
American literature in English departments ac-
celerated during the cold war, when the United
States sought to consolidate its cultural prestige.
One cannot, or certainly ought not, study United
States literature apart from the social context of
its rise to power in English departments, but the
focus should be on this literature’s involvement
in a global network of forces—aesthetic, social,
cultural, economic—that transcend the borders
of nation-states.

Our desire to rethink the connections among
literature, nationalism, and cultural identity in
the context of ever-expanding transnational rela-
tions is only the latest in a series of develop-
ments suggesting that English has become a
confusing descriptive or organizing term for lit-
erary study in the United States. English more
and more simply refers to the language in which
the texts we teach and write about are written,
and this trend is bound to accelerate as transna-
tional literatures in English proliferate. It might
be argued that this is a recent phenomenon, that
only in the last quarter of the twentieth century
did English begin to undergo the transforma-
tions I have been discussing. But as Robertson’s
approach to globalization suggests, Western lit-
erature has been caught up in the transnational
flow of commodities and cultures at least since
the rise of trade and colonial expansion (Gikandi;
George). We need to bring this transnational
perspective to how we present the history of lit-
erature in the West, moving away from a tradi-
tional division of discrete national literatures
into ossified literary-historical periods and giv-
ing the history of global expansion, trade, and
intercultural exchange precedence in our curric-
ulum over the mapping of an essentially aesthet-
icized national character. In this model the
older, nationalist paradigm for literary study
would cease to stand at the center of the disci-
pline and would become an object of study
among others in a field that spent more time
teaching its students about the history of the dis-
cipline, which after all has shifted remarkably
since the late nineteenth century in ways that
until recently we kept hidden from our students.
Indeed, fostering a more programmatic self-
consciousness about the history of the disci-
pline, what Terry Eagleton long ago termed “the
rise of English” (17–53), can provide one of the
best safeguards against the danger that English
will end up subordinate to an outworn national-
ist paradigm that seeks to colonize world litera-
tures in English. The more we emphasize the
historically constructed, politically and cultur-
ally interested nature of literary studies, the eas-
er it will be to avoid putting British or United
States English at its center and to prevent it
from being disconnected from the history of
transnational cultural politics. This danger can
also be mitigated by a commitment to putting
knowledge about the social, cultural, and politi-
cal history informing global literatures in En-
glish ahead of our ingrained impulse to read
them through the lens of Western theoretical
and critical idioms.

Earlier I noted that Waters’s focus on sym-
bolic, cultural exchange was nearly indistin-
guishable from what we have been calling
cultural studies and that his work, together with
that of critics like Clifford and Appadurai, rep-
resents the steady transformation of cultural
studies into a globalized (and globalizing) prac-
tice. It seems to me that the future of English
lies squarely at the conjunction of these two
fields. On the one hand, the discipline has moved away from a narrow focus on literature per se in the increasing attention it pays to a range of cultural forms, and on the other hand, we have come to realize the inadequacy and even arbitrariness of studying literature and culture within the restrictive and distorting borders of nation-states. Globalization studies in the culturalist mode I have been discussing provides a context for studying literary texts and works in other media not simply as aesthetic objects but also as cultural objects caught up in complex systems of transnational and intercultural exchange, appropriation, and transformation. It offers a context, in particular, for dealing with the proliferation of English literatures written in diasporic conditions, literatures that would otherwise be assimilated to a narrow, nationalist paradigm (“Anglo-Indian” or “Asian American”). The expansion of diasporic English dramatically underscores the sense in which contemporary writing is produced in a postnational, global flow of deterritorialized cultural products appropriated, translated, and recirculated worldwide. Whether we keep working under the increasingly ambiguous concept of English or develop new terms and paradigms to describe what we do, we need to find a way to accommodate the transnational and postnational perspectives of globalization studies in our programs and curricula without subordinating the heterogeneous literatures we deal with to outdated critical paradigms.

How? As I have been suggesting, we ought to make a firm, programmatic commitment to the concept of literature in English, moving further away than we already have from the national categories of British and American literature. This could begin in the survey course, which would better serve our students by covering the historical emergence of writing in English around the globe than by dividing off British literature from American, presenting the two in separate historical sequences, and leaving English produced outside these nationalist contexts for other, marginal courses later in their studies. Presenting our students with a two-semester sequence called Literatures in English, one that stressed the transnational relations (in a variety of periods) of writing in English and that, as it became appropriate, included texts produced outside Britain and the United States, would constitute an important step in reorienting their conception of English and their approach to studying its cultural import. Keeping in mind the long history of globalization, such courses ought to emphasize transnational relations in early literature from Chaucer through the Renaissance (emphasizing the role of travel and exploration in the evolution and transformation of English as a language and a literature). We should also require some discussion of the rise of English as a field of study, with particular attention to its emergence in connection with the need to shape a national and political culture in Britain and the United States and as an instrument of imperial power (for example, in India and the West Indies). We need to include texts in English produced outside the Anglo-American cultural sphere in such courses wherever possible, stress the transnational connections they signal, and make our students more aware of how the nationalist paradigm has operated in literary studies. Students ought to come out of such courses aware that this paradigm was socially and politically constructed, that it is neither natural nor transcendental.

Transforming the survey course in this fashion should have the effect of loosening up and reshaping the curriculum at more advanced levels. The critical perspective students would have coming out of such a sequence would prepare them for courses whose content resisted simple divisions along national (and historical) lines. This is already beginning to happen in a variety of fields across the spectrum of English literary studies. Students can effectively connect the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literatures in English to the early history of globalization by building on the work of Peter
Hulme, Stephen Greenblatt, and others who have helped focus scholarly attention on authors who deal with the complex encounter between Europe and the Americas (including Shakespeare, Behn, and Defoe). More recently, in Tropicopolitans Srinivas Aravamudan has developed a compelling model for reconfiguring eighteenth-century studies by “interrupting the monologue of nationalist literary history” in the field (16). Seeing globalization as an extension of colonialism, his treatment of texts by Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and Olaudah Equiano and of Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas suggests a number of interesting ways to rethink course offerings in this area within a transnational framework. Paul Gilroy’s pioneering work on the black Atlantic is also a useful guide for rethinking our approach to British literature and its relation to Africa and the Caribbean across various periods, work that intersects interestingly with Renaissance and American studies. The study of postcolonial literatures in English provides another obvious model. Its principles and practices offer a variety of ways to study the complex development of English as a transnational literary institution profoundly implicated in the history of what we have only recently come to call globalization, which is, after all, a process deeply connected to the shifting fate of the nation under colonization and decolonization.

Likewise, the field of modern studies has come in recent years to focus increasingly on modernism as an international phenomenon related to globalization in the twentieth century. Another model is emerging, paradoxically, in American studies, where a broad critique of the narrow, nationalist conflation of the American and the United States has sparked vigorous efforts to resituate the study of United States literature and culture in a hemispheric or Pan-American context (a move that can be fruitfully linked to the connection in Renaissance and eighteenth-century studies between British and American literatures [G. Jay; P. Jay; Porter]).

Taking these new, innovative fields as models, we will be in a better position in our more advanced courses, and in our research and writing, to articulate how English has developed over time into a transnational mode of writing. Program requirements at the undergraduate and graduate levels ought to be reconfigured to allow for work that stresses how contemporary and earlier writing in English is connected to globalization. This means, as well, that our curriculum in criticism and theory needs to incorporate globalization theory and its various practices. As I insisted at the outset of this essay, we cannot deal responsibly with the relation between literature and globalization without a clear understanding of the history of its development, the critical debates it has generated, and the theoretical and critical vocabulary it has fostered.

However we ultimately decide—collectively and as individuals—to incorporate a global perspective into literary studies, the longer English construed as an essentially nationalist discipline dominates literary study in the United States, the more it will seem a relic to our students. Indeed, as Robert Scholes has recently pointed out, for United States students “English is now a foreign literature in a (relatively) familiar language,” and it “requires formal preparation in the background of English history and culture, just as the study of French literature requires the study of France” (21). One could argue from his point that we ought to make a renewed effort to deepen our students’ knowledge of all things “English.” But how would this effort prepare them for responsible citizenship in an increasingly globalized world, let alone in a country whose population has its roots in a myriad of other cultures and histories? The literature and culture of England will always have an important place in our curriculum, but I think we need to make a programmatic commitment to the study of English in a newer,
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global framework, one that recognizes the transnational character of English in the past and the global context in which it will be produced in the future. If we do not make such a commitment, we may see the discipline of English become ever more marginal in the university of the future.

NOTES

This essay benefited enormously from the stimulating conversations about globalization and the future of English I had with the members of my spring 1999 graduate seminar at Loyola. I thank them for helping to give shape and coherence to my thinking about this topic and for their intelligent, critical engagement with the issues it addresses.

1 See Eagleton; Readings; Miller; Court; and Graff. For the purposes of this essay and given the focus of this special issue, I have limited my remarks to literary studies. English in the wider sense, of course, includes the important practices of rhetoric and composition and creative writing. It is beyond the scope of an essay of this size to deal with these fields in addition to what I try to cover, but I want to acknowledge their centrality to the discipline and how important it is to consider the effect globalization will have on them. For some interesting proposals about the teaching of writing in a revised approach to English, see Scholes.

2 For critical discussions of the role of nationalism in American literary studies, see Carafiol; G. Jay; P. Jay; and Porter. On American literature and globalization, see Buell, National Culture and “Nationalist Postnationalism.”

3 See Readings 47. I think this position is a bit extreme. In many ways the nation-state continues to function as it always has, and the time when it will give way to a transnational structure seems to me a long way off.

4 For an exemplary work of literary history in this context, see Said.

5 The changes Appadurai reviews here, while profound at the cultural level, do not in my view necessarily portend the arrival of a “postnational political order.” The United States has done a fairly good job so far accommodating itself politically and militarily to cultural change, and in many western European countries there is significant resistance to the effect immigration is having on the national cultural fabric. Given all this, Appadurai’s prediction here strikes me as a bit premature.

6 Helpful as this formulation is, it is a little unsatisfying. For example, it is not hard to see how the demagogic cultural politics of the Third Reich used culturalism, as Appadurai defines it, to perpetuate what he calls culture. It would make more sense, it seems to me, for Appadurai to stress the relation between culturalism and culture instead of drawing such a rigid distinction between them and to acknowledge that culturalism can serve a retrograde, even violently discriminatory, cultural politics as well as a progressive and liberatory one.

7 For a discussion of diasporas and globalization, see Cohen, esp. ch. 7.

8 For an analysis of this process, see Lipsitz.

9 Globalization theory was until recently dominated by male academics who paid scant attention to gender and the role of women in globalization. All the founding figures—Wallerstein (Modern World System and “National”), King, Robertson, Featherstone, Hannerz (“Scenarios” and Transnational Connections), Giddens, Harvey, Appadurai—are men. All the principal critics whose work is collected in Culture, Globalization, and the World-System (King) are male, while women are relegated to the role of respondents (Abu-Lughod; Abu-El-Haj; Turim; and Wolff). As Wolff pointedly notes, there is an “indifference” to gender in these papers (169). This problem unfortunately persists in The Cultures of Globalization (Jameson and Miyoshi), where only three of the eighteen contributors are women and where gender and women’s issues are not part of the discussion. This lack is beginning to be rectified in the work of feminist critics like Kaplan, Friedman, Grewal, and Tiffin, many of whom intervene in globalization studies from the fields of literary and cultural studies.

10 On the role of English literary study in colonial India, see Viswanathan.

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