theories and methodologies

What Is a Text Today?

JOHN MOWITT

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AT THE RISK OF SEEMING PEEVISH, I SHOULD BEGIN BY NOTING THAT THE TITLE "WHAT IS A TEXT TODAY?" IS NOT MINE. THIS point strikes me as important, perhaps even urgent, but not because the title must be discarded. On the contrary, it has become all the more important to retain because it contains *today*, a word that in denoting the interval between yesterday and tomorrow used to call up that which is simply now but which in the wake of 11 September 2001 has come to connote the rupture that separates "America" from the world it thought it had been contracted to police. Thus, if one were to rephrase "my" title, would it not make sense to write, "Is there a text after 11 September 2001?" (to evoke yet again Theodor Adorno's still-haunting question concerning the link between poetry and the Holocaust)? Put this way—and why not begin by raising the stakes as high as possible?—the query tempts one to reply, "Even if there is a text that belongs to this state of exception, who could possibly care?" Are there not more pressing matters? If there are, if the matter at hand is as clear as all that, then neither you nor I have any business persisting beyond this point.

This is said out of neither arrogance nor cynicism. It is said because much depends on what a text is taken to be, perhaps more so today than ever. As I argued on the pages of *Text,* there have long been two texts: one, an object; the other, a paradigm. They can be distinguished but not entirely separated. The first text, although produced as an object of knowledge at the intersection between paleography and philology, has not been able to resist entirely the pressure brought to bear on it by the second text. The canon wars that have consumed the various fields of literary study in recent decades have charted this rather plainly. Today it is not at all unusual to find many voices that are not dead, white, or male represented on syllabi and preliminary examination reading lists. Indeed, as feminism and the no-longer-new historicism have consistently argued, the texts that matter to the business of literary interpretation need not

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60297 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have much, if anything, to do with literature, relative to an earlier invidious construal of its significance. This tendency toward the pluralization of the text as object (as Roland Barthes would have said) culminated with the emergence of cultural studies and its broad institutionalization during the nineties. It is just as common today to hear virtually every cultural practice referred to as a text as it is to find the term *deconstruction* in broadcast journalism and fashion advertising. The connection between these two things is only thinkable, however, in relation to a process neither the fashion system nor journalism can, "as we speak," name. Academic intellectuals, incited by the promise of popularity and accessibility, emulate this lack of understanding at their peril.

Nevertheless, this pluralization has done little to undercut the object status of the text. There are simply many more objects designated *text*. If one then asks, "Is there *this* text after 11 September 2001?" the answer must surely be yes. Doubtless there are more text objects today than ever before. But the question remains: does the matter that sustains their object status matter? In other words, should anyone care, today, that texts understood as objects—not paradigms—are still with us? It would seem so. Writing in the 30 September issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Margo Jefferson, as if sampling the fictional editor's introduction that frames *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, offered up the consolation of reading to all those left devastated or terminally distracted by the vicious raids on New York and Washington. The notion was—as in Susan Sontag's dramaturgic forays into Bosnia—that the text, and perhaps even nostalgically the literary text (Jefferson proposes Osip Mandelstam's poetry as a "text for our time"), could serve as one's psychic connection with what Goethe, in the introduction to *Werther*, presciently called "the friend." In the context of the general therapeuticization of life required and sustained by "America's" refusal to rein in the predations of corporate capital, the literary text is here placed on par with the household pet. This association does the pet, not the text, a disservice. For the pet, perhaps more even than the friend, benefits conceptually from its association with textuality.

Cynical as criticisms of Jefferson's opportunism would be (compare it, e.g., with the recent advertising campaigns of the major car makers), I find her way of making the text matter after 11 September 2001 to be, as Gilles Deleuze would say, "reactive." Not in the sense of being dilatory or even reactionary but in the sense of failing to recognize that the catastrophe and the text-friend were produced together in a global history to which neither the text nor the catastrophe gives one particularly useful conceptual access. True, this failure manifests itself through a certain delay (the text-friend as compensatory reply), but this is hardly its most serious defect. More telling is the fact that the ideology of the text as object is fatefully consistent with the notion now deemed identical to the essence of patriotism—namely, that war and the inevitable martyrdom of Osama bin Laden are the only way to shield "Americans" from a recurrence of this particular need for the text-friend. Before it becomes treasonous to say so: Is war the only way to limit what is apotropaically called terror? Is it any way at all?

To begin to take responsibility for what no doubt seem like outlandish claims, I have to return to the theme of the text's pluralization, but now from the vantage point of the second text. If it makes sense to say that the text object has never been able to free itself from the pressure exerted on it by the paradigm of the text, it is then also important to stress that pluralization has never simply meant the multiplication of texts. Conceived paradigmatically—that is, as something like the knot of questions and answers we have come to call a problematic—the text has always been a locus of multiplicities and not simply a thing to be multiplied. Thus, what is important about the fact that many instances of cultural practice can be designated texts is the differences represented by this field, differences that necessarily place demands on the paradigm through which this field

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60297 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is approached and by which it is assembled. Such demands require more than attention to the interplay of different objects. They also, and more fundamentally, require attention to the network, the tissue of relations that is put in play as practices called texts are constituted as the focal points of what still deserves to be called reading. This tissue, at least in the hands of Jacques Derrida, has consistently included the media, not simply as technological determinations but as apparatuses of "subjectivation" (decidedly not subjection). Pluralization in this context then refers not primarily to the differences among practices but to the differences between such differences and the tissue of enabling conditions that, as it were, articulate or communicate them.

In this spirit Derrida, as if accompanying Maurice Blanchot, approached the relation between writing and the book. As *Of Grammatology* made clear, writing not only exceeded the era of the book, it designated the movement of excess, of the remainder, in the culture enabled by the emergence of print capitalism. Writing, in being more than the representation of speech, was also more than the medium of print could bear. Specifically, grammatological writing was what the dissemination of the book could neither anticipate nor contain, namely, the networking that the book trade never failed to promote. Although *Of Grammatology* was written in the mid-sixties, this irreducible link to media history prompted many scholars either to extrapolate the textual implications of a then emergent field of informatics or to read "textuality" (the quality exhibited by matters approached through the textual paradigm) as an inscription—in the institutional domain of theoretical practice—of media technologies (notably, e.g., phonography). Armand Mattelart's characterization of Roman Jakobson's model of linguistic communication (sender-line-receiver) as an importation into linguistics of information theory as applied to telecommunications is a well-known version of the latter approach. Either way, what the textual paradigm threw into relief was that if grammar was always already trumped by rhetoric, this was due to the means by which language was materialized in the networking that produced its subjects. Unfortunately, the insight about the link between textuality and power such a perspective generates has largely been exploited to recast writing—and therefore the text—as irredeemably Eurocentric. And this despite the fact that Derrida was among the first, as Gayatri Spivak tirelessly asserts, to discern this dynamic at work in Claude Lévi-Strauss's infamous chapter "A Writing Lesson" (286–97). Even if one concludes that Derrida is merely repeating Lévi-Strauss, the difference at work in all repetition remains to be articulated.

Does it make sense then—given what has been said about texts, networks, and textuality—to claim, as Jonathan Katz or Pierre Levy might urge us to, that what a text is today is found in "texting," that latest rage of the teen age? Well, yes and no. For those unfamiliar with the practice, texting is the exchange of so-called instant messages, typically telegraphically brief ("C-U-L8R"), over pager networks. When covered recently by trend watchers, texting was often characterized as what Michel de Certeau would call a "move" (*un coup*), practiced against the telecommunications corporations, which charge prohibitive rates for mobile phone use, and adults in general. Since much of what is texted involves intercourse (meetings, dates, quickies, deals, etc.)—in effect, the marking of matter by drive—the link between the Talkabout T900 and Freud's mystic writing pad becomes virtually irresistible. Significantly, the structure of a texted message is radically plural: everything from the digitally organized display to the chip-operated mechanism to the bounced trajectory of the signal to the urban distribution of senders and receivers, whose bodies are fully subject to prosthetic enhancement and fetishization—everything is marked by the disseminated relation texting subjects it to. Moreover, like the mystic writing pad, the T900 is conditioned by contradictory demands; it must not only send and receive but also

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locate in a single space finite storage and infinite receptivity (planned obsolescence notwithstanding). Suggestive as this analogy might be, it remains uninteresting unless we emphasize what in it leads us away from yet another exemplification of the text-friend, now with a much more textualized object in the viewfinder but an object just the same. Yes, texting constitutes another instance of what a text is today, but it tends to foreclose what might be teased out of the difference between the two texts. In doing so, it leaves the outlandish claims I referred to earlier untempered.

At the risk of casting Derrida as the sole survivor of the apparently limitless historical event that engendered the second text (given the death of Barthes in 1980, the abdication of Julia Kristeva, and Spivak's predilection for "text-ility"), I turn now to *The Specters of Marx* (1994). The point is to tease out of his account of the New International not just a more topical articulation of the relation between the two texts but a way of thinking about the second text relevant to the question earlier left in abeyance: whether there is a text worth having after 11 September 2001.

Two graphic figures haunt the chapter ("Wears and Tears" [77–94]) in which Derrida outlines his conception of the New International: the black picture on a blackboard and the telegraph. In the first he re-cites a figure from Marx, allowing the reiteration to complicate—indeed, articulate—the rhythm of his own analysis. The second spares him the time and the space of a thorough accounting of the world-historical situation that has prompted his spirited return to Marx and to the theme of the international. The telegraph is imagined to contain ten words or phrases: *unemployment*, *homelessness*, *economic warfare*, and the like. Both figures designate the scene of writing evoked in and presupposed by the chapter, although the telegraph—in the context I have generated—appears to be a texted message forwarded to Derrida from an undisclosed but not unfamiliar terminal. Taken together, the figures offer yet another iteration of the mystic writing pad, but now spread across two terminals, two scenes, where the New International is also at stake and, presumably, at work.

Two notes. First, even before Derrida draws out the link between this discussion and the nonconcept of the text, one recognizes that the techno-tele-discursivity mediating the so-called new world order and its respacing of all borders (regional, national, public, private, and so forth) is a reinscription of the textual paradigm as articulated in the mid-sixties. Although the tone of his discussion is defensive—as if in reply to the accusation, Why have you committed yourself to Marxism only now?—Derrida's strategy is clear. In invoking the language of the trace, of spacing, of *différance,* he is delineating the consistent tenacity of his thought over the past forty years, reminding those given to snap judgments that he was never simply talking about the world of books. But, second, if such consistency exists, then a whole new gloss on the infamous dictum "There is nothing outside the text" (*Of Grammatology* 158) becomes at once possible and necessary. Needless to say, the crucial point here is not primarily otobiographical. Instead, if the emergence of the New International is inevitably figured in the language of textuality, then perhaps this emergence itself, precisely in the way it traces the networking of spectral conjurers, is the persistent coming of the second text. In other words, the shifting fronts between globalization and the New International are not textual objects so much as they constitute the kinds of relations between the immaterial circuits of academic labor and the new ordering of the global that, today, solicit the reading strategies we have learned to associate with textual analysis.

To confirm this proposition independently, as it were, we can consider, albeit perfunctorily, another "latest" Marxism—the one whose spirit is conjured on the pages of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*. There, in the elaboration of the methodology underscoring their analysis, Hardt and Negri initially invoke an approach they call "critical and deconstructive" (47). More telling is the fact that their second

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60297 Published online by Cambridge University Press

approach, the "constructive and ethico-political" one, is apparently necessitated by what they characterize as the specifically "textual" limitations of the first approach. A full accounting of the stakes here will not be possible, but a few key points deserve enumeration. First, as perhaps the most comprehensive theorization of globalization to date, *Empire* makes the legacy of deconstruction again belong to the current situation. In this, the authors obviously repeat Derrida. Second, in putting this legacy to work in the confrontation with empire, however, Hardt and Negri discover a self-defeating limit to deconstruction in the "textual," here understood not as the paradigm of textuality but as the domain of textual objects. What makes this limit self-defeating is not the invidiousness of its construal but the fact that much of what Hardt and Negri go on to theorize as the contest between empire and the new global multitude, in spite of its Deleuzian and Foucauldian inspiration, reiterates the concept of textuality. In this regard, their oft-rehearsed contention that empire knows no limit is legible as a vainly detextualized restatement of "There is nothing outside the text."

Third and last, given that this overcoming of deconstruction is apparently required for an entirely immanent and nondialectical account of the limits empire sets for itself, we are dealing with what Fredric Jameson once called the "politics of theory." In this respect, and in this respect alone, Hardt and Negri appear to make common cause with those partisans of cultural studies, such as Patrick Brantlinger, who cast aside "textualism" in the name of a more substantial and ultimately political engagement with a world that, as in the fable of the emperor's new clothes, needs only to be declared naked—that is, paradigm-free—to be changed. As Derrida observes, the pressing question here is about the difference between interpreting the world and changing it. Because the second text, the text as paradigm, seeks precisely to frame this difference and designate as the remainder, the trace, that which falls out of the immanent unfolding of empire's limits, it continues to matter today. Perhaps never more so.

If 11 September 2001 has something fundamental to do with globalization and its discontents—and it is difficult not to see an inverted acknowledgment of this in the current administration's dismissal, indeed trivialization, of the political grievances agitating Islamic militants such as bin Laden—then the text, specifically the second text, is something about which all survivors might care. If this paradigm is the means by which one can think the global inscription, the tracing, of the contest between empire and the New International as this contest figures in our struggle to make sense of the different cultural practices that articulate it, then a text today is what may well help us turn to a friend before it is far too late, before comfort is needed rather than desired.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60297 Published online by Cambridge University Press