

"Attach the Electrodes":

On Ways of Reading the Stories of the Global Information Infrastructure

Amitava Kumar has argued provocatively that the traditional category of World Literature ought now be replaced by the more politically responsive category of "World Bank Literature." In some ways, of course, the clever turn of phrase may ring rather hollow. Some scholars of globalization see the World Bank as something of a relic – an institution defined in the era of the unquestioned sovereignty of the nation state that finds itself increasingly unable to control the forces of transnational financialization that it has helped to unleash. On a different register, in English Departments at least, the term "Postcolonial Studies" has gradually displaced more Eurocentric "World Literature," suggesting, perhaps that the sun has already set on the eras of both World Literature and World Bank Literature.

Nonetheless, I find the notion of "World Bank Literature" enabling in a number of ways. For one, the Bank may not be obsolete just yet. In the same ways that Saskia Sassen has demonstrated the continued efficacy of the nation state (albeit transformed under globalization,) the World Bank's role has also shifted, but it continues to influence global transformations both at the level of policy and on the level of the symbolic and the struggle over symbols. Secondly, in using the descriptor "World Bank" to mark the limits of a literary category, Kumar's term challenges us to think about the ways that institutional structures

shape our understanding culture and the social sphere (something along the lines of an Althusserian analysis of the ideological production of subjects through institutions and apparatus – the canon building function of departments, for example – and the World Bank as a an arbiter of *cultural* as well as economic capital). Finally, the term seems to almost demand a re-conception not only of how we position literature within an understanding of the world, but also of the very term “literature” itself. To argue that among the other literary figures of the contemporary globe the World Bank – masters of technocratic inefficiency – could be producing texts that might be called/read/interpreted as literature is to necessarily stretch the category of the “literary” in new directions.

It is worth noting, however, the ways in which the Bank has turned increasingly to literary narrative as a key element of their self-representational strategies – variations on the Bank success story have become so pervasive that it may be possible to use the term World Bank Literature to refer to a very specific quasi literary genre of promotional document. An excellent example relevant to the conference theme can be found right now at www.infodev.org (InfoDev is the Bank’s information technology division) where the Bank is currently sponsoring a literary contest of their own called “ICT Stories,” judging and publishing the most poignant success stories about various information technology initiatives in the developing world: winners include stories about wiring rural villages in India, hybrid radio/Internet-projects in Nepal, and even a dot-com sandal business in Nairobi.

The stories themselves typically contain Horatio Alger-like parables about hard work, sweat, tears, innovation, much pulling up of bootstraps, and so on. In this regard, then, the stories are rather hackneyed and transparent from a literary perspective – the parables generally make quite clear the preferred meaning of their authors, leaving little room to read for nuance and complexity in ways that are more typical of the methodological approaches of literary studies. On closer inspection, however, and particularly if one abandons the notion of looking for a preferred meaning in favor, perhaps, of the cultural studies mantra of radical contextualization, the stories themselves become quite rich texts for analysis. Raymond Williams' discussion of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural formations can be of some use here. While it would be a mistake to imagine that this new genre might be an emergent cultural response that could challenge the dominant – it is anything but that – it may be possible to locate an emergent sensibility in certain kinds of critical reading practices that use these stories in order to demonstrate the ways in which the Bank is working to produce and reproduce a particular notion of the cultural dominant in an effort, in William's terms, to "seize the ruling definition of the social" (125). Therefore I am suggesting, in this paper, the pressing need for scholarship in an area that might be called globalization discourse analysis (referencing both the Rhetorical field of critical discourse analysis pioneered by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun vanDijk, and colonial discourse analysis – an early and important phase of Postcolonial studies that describes some of the work done by many of its most

familiar names including Gayatri Spivak, Ranjit Guha, Homi Bhabha and many others) and particularly investigations of the relationship between the literary and globalization. Beyond the important explorations of globalization's impact on and reflection in traditional postcolonial literature and the body of scholarship in this field, there is much work to be done, for instance, in theorizing the ubiquitous presence of these kinds of Bank- authored stories, addressing broad questions about the function of narrative, and our apparent need for, or at least powerful attraction to certain kinds of narrative structures. Additionally, scholarship is needed that addresses questions, fruitfully raised in the Marxist tradition, about the political function of various modes of artistic expression and critique, about the production and reproduction of ideological subjects, and about the politics of reading and consumption within this category of World Bank Literature and within the new media in which it is often published. Moreover, Horatio Alger clichés notwithstanding, careful rhetorical and literary analysis of the World Bank stories themselves will prove useful in terms of understanding the foundational assumptions and values that underlie the forms and processes of development and globalization.

In the second half of my paper I would like to look briefly at several stories examining the implications of networked information communication technologies that constitute the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). In developing cursory readings of several GII Stories I want to highlight one pervasive trope within this genre: the idea that GII creates the possibility of a

technologically enabled global citizenship – a theme that has come up repeatedly over the course of this conference.

This notion of a global citizenship will be familiar to most of you – frequently we find it referenced as a defining feature of globalization. Any number of commentators from both the Right and the Left, in popular media and in more scholarly forums have argued that GII has facilitated a shift in sovereign power away from the nation state and towards a global community of wired citizens conceived of at times as individuals participating in a public sphere, at times as corporate entities moving freely across borders. The State, no longer able to act independently, finds itself at the mercy of the market, which for someone like Walter Wriston, former CEO of Citibank and information age pundit, functions in effect as the new global *polis* – the new site of democracy. He argues in *The Twilight of Sovereignty* that the market functions as “a giant vote-counting machine” (9) that takes “constant referendums” (45) on the policies of nation states and “discipline[s] imprudent sovereigns” (59) whose fiscal or social policies are not to the global citizen’s liking.

Writing from the opposite end of the political spectrum, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Empire* that we should harbor no nostalgia for the passing of the era of the sovereign nation state, which in their analysis has primarily served as the protector of capital and capitalists rather than of the proletariat. They argue, in fact, that the first political demand for the revolutionary multitude of Empire is “global citizenship” (400) with the ability to

control the movement of bodies and ideas including “free access to and control over knowledge, information, communication, and affects” (407).

I use this cursory and terribly simplistic reading of Wriston and Hardt and Negri only to suggest a certain type of analytical convergence around this trope of global citizenship. In both cases, what is described is an unbreachable totality. Hardt and Negri repeatedly refer to a “smooth world” where ICT flattens and collapses geographical space. Wriston, similarly, describes a unified biological system in which ICT is conceived of as a “virus carrying the powerful idea of freedom to the four corners of the world” (174). Moreover, Hardt and Negri press the point, arguing that not only has geographical and spatial difference been erased, but also temporal and historical difference as well. Empire, they argue, is a regime that “suspends history,” that is “outside of history or the end of history.” All this is to suggest, then, that the notion of global citizenship global citizenship as a literary trope or conceit is predicated on an erasure of unevenness—a smoothing or flattening—both of geographical space and of historical time.

This trope of global citizenship is figured provocatively in two GII stories—companion pieces almost—that I would like to close my paper by examining. GII story #1 is John Perry Barlow’s 1998 African travel-log published by *Wired* magazine called “Africa Rising: Everything You Know About Africa is Wrong.” Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, argues that Africa is poised on the brink of a digital transformation.

Most Africans stayed out of the loop of the 20th century and were not homogenized into the generic that is now much of the Northern Hemisphere.... And thus their continent – so intensely different from the rest of the world, so vastly different within itself – represents a huge and still unconnected battery of stored potential. All it would take for Africa to leapfrog into the wonderland of an information economy would be to *attach the electrodes* – get it wired, in other words – and then watch its huge voltage zap the gap. (143, my emphasis)

To illustrate his notion that Africans, with a little help from a charged electrode, are poised to leapfrog into global networked citizenship, he offers the example of his trip to “the end of the world,” (148) – Tombouctou in Mali. Here he meets some local jewelry makers with whom he is very impressed and Barlow, whose entire perception of Africa is filtered through GII-colored lenses, can understand this moment only in terms of value added to the network and he begins to fantasize about wiring Tombouctou so that the jewelers can sell their goods on the Web, enriching themselves and the GII citizenry as a whole. Attaching the electrodes is about collapsing the distinctions, or at least producing the illusion of such a collapse, between cultural and economic exchange and the jewelry itself becomes an emblem of just such a doubly valued commodity. In his concluding remarks Barlow maintains that Africans can teach us, “about connection, about wholeness, about joy.... they can teach us how to be human again, because they

have kept their empathy and their openness while we were machining ours away” (158). While the bottom line for Barlow is clearly economic growth, those economic goals are in some sense masked by, but also authorized by, a discourse of cultural exchange. In one sense, knowledge and science are traded for culture. We attach the electrodes; they teach us about “connection, wholeness, and joy.” In another sense, however, we can see in stories like Barlow’s an attempt to define a more nuanced version of global citizenship. After all, citizens do much more than just buy and sell. While economic exchange is one aspect of citizenship, taken alone it offers a rather impoverished definition of the concept. Barlow’s notion of global citizenship may in fact resemble closely this destitute construction of consumer as citizen, but he authorizes that idea through an appeal to the liberal humanist value of universal cultural exchange – an appeal to global civil society. It should not escape us, of course, that “connection, wholeness, and joy” are garnered not through the exchange of ideas, but through the sale and purchase of cultural commodities.

It’s worth taking a moment here to think briefly about the second trope I mentioned – the notion of “leapfrogging” – as it is a term that Barlow uses extensively and a term that appears in almost everything written about the role of information technology in Africa. In the context of attaching electrodes, it is oddly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century experiments with electricity where severed frog’s legs were made to convulse through the applications of an electrical charge (a Frankensteinian metaphor of sorts about using technology to

breath life into body of Africa). As a metaphor about child's play, it participates on one level in a long history of paternalistic/infantilizing representations of the relationship between colonizer/colonized or developed/undeveloped. On another level it engages the metaphor of a gaming system, complete with its rules and regulations that structure the possibilities for movement from the outset. Moreover, like the idea of global citizenship to which it is closely related the leapfrog metaphor functions on the both the temporal and spatial planes. To leapfrog is to skip over "stages of development," to evolve over time more quickly than expected – to jump from the past, into the future. It stands, too, in the Three Worlds model as an invitation to migrate, to change places, to leave the location of third and enter first – in fact, to do away with the distinctions all together.

Let me move quickly to GII Story #2: As if in direct response to Barlow's Tombouctou narrative, the Bank, in partnership with several NGOs, launched the Virtual Souk (<http://www.elsouk.com>), a site "where e-commerce meets economic development" (WB, "Today's Feature"). Although Mali's jewelry-makers cannot yet be found here, the foundations of Barlow's e-commerce dreams for African cultural artifacts have been realized. Thanks to the World Bank, customers from across the globe can browse through a Carpet Souk, a Metalworks Souk, a Woodworks Souk, and a Glassware Souk – all available in either French or English – clicking their way through a gallery of artifacts produced by different North African and Middle Eastern artisans.

The Bank, of course, has a rather predictable interpretation of the development opportunities offered by the site. Azedine Ouerghi from the Bank's Economic Development Institute boldly asserts that,

by being offered access to markets, the artists also learn by obtaining access to information. This capacity building, in turn, contributes to development and empowers the artisans through a renewed sense of cultural heritage. (WB, "Today's Feature")

The potentially democratic connotations of a phrase like "access to information" have been reduced in this context to mean only that the artisans get to see the pages that have been built for them, and to profit from the sale of their goods. "Access to information," has nothing to do, it would seem, with communication, with interactivity, or with technological creativity – in other words, with any component of participatory citizenship. Instead, the benefits of "putting a village woman in front of a computer" are understood solely in terms of a commercial venue – provided by the Bank – where native goods can be displayed.

The Bank has modernized the image of the souk, highlighting the exotic qualities of the labyrinthine African marketplace while simultaneously transforming it into a "user friendly" shopping experience. Making the experience all the more "authentic," the e-Souks are adorned not only with the artifacts being sold, but also with several nineteenth-century French Orientalist paintings – in the flavor of Nerval or Chatauebriand – of stereotypical Middle Easterners, fat, happy, exotically dressed, perhaps slightly lascivious as they sell

their wares in the colorful bazaar and I find the prominence of these paintings in shaping the aesthetic of the site quite fascinating. In this attempt, then, to represent these places and histories (the Middle East, colonialism, and so on) that have been functionally excluded – or at best unevenly included – in the deployment of GII, the Bank is forced to return to the familiar images of empire that Said examined twenty plus years ago in *Orientalism*. As you might expect, the “difference” that Barlow thought Africa could capitalize on is as much about the production and containment of difference through a regime of representation as it is about the uniqueness of African cultural heritage.

Much like Barlow’s piece, the Virtual Souk must be understood here as authorizing a certain relationship between global citizenship and cultural production and exchange. Of course the Souk itself must be understood as a form of cultural production as well, and that as a textual object it works to control its own consumption through a return to the familiar, and perhaps more manageable metaphors, iconography, and languages of imperial orientalism. One is tempted to argue that Virtual Souk’s reinscription of imperialist imagery simply undercuts or deconstructs itself – that the contradictions are too many and too obvious in its references to the golden age of French imperialism as the operative metaphor through which to address the position of North Africa in the new era of global citizenship. Certainly the production of “placelessness,” of “timelessness” masks a radical unevenness in the structure of GII. There are, of course, *places* and the wires that connect New York to Tomboucto or Morocco

cannot be understood to level those unequal geographies. Likewise, of course, there are histories--of colonialism and its legacies, of the underdevelopment of the global south during the post-war, development era, etc.--and neither the simultaneity of real time exchange, nor the naturalized, seemingly unremarkable fusion of aesthetic paradigms from distinct historical eras and artistic periods can be understood to collapse those oppressive histories. Doesn't the mere presence of these paintings, then, make too plain the relationship between the virtual and real – make too plain the inequalities between the citizens of this global democracy. Perhaps it does. And perhaps a reading practice for the stories of GII simply needs to do the work of radical contextualization, of exposing the obvious, of deconstructing the parables that seemingly beg to be deconstructed.

It may be, however, that we can apply to this GII story Frederic Jameson's insight that aesthetics of postmodernism ought in some senses to be read as a new form of realism or mimesis in the representation of Late Capitalism. Certainly "a walking tour" through the Virtual Souk unveils (pardon the pun) elements of a hyperreal spatial pastiche that Jameson's analysis can help to elucidate. Hardt's and Negri's insistence that Empire constructs itself in such a way as to make it appear outside of history suggests, perhaps, that in the context of these GII stories (a context that is instantiated as a certain contextlessness) the orientalist imagery may no longer function as a simple or plain referent to older imperialist traditions of representational practice. We might see this as an instance in which the cultural dominant attempts to seize, produce and

reproduce the ruling definition of social sphere itself in such a way as to exclude the possibility of both geographical scale and historical referent. The degree to which this seizure is successful may indicate the degree to which the GII stories can be understood as a realistic or mimetic representation of the age of Globalization. It is at this level that the stories of GII figure certain kinds of temporal and spatial surfaces – flat and uneven, distorted and mimetic – that both reflect and produce cultural formations. Developing critical practices through which to read the historical and geographical contours of these surfaces, I would maintain, is the challenge presented by the many and varied documents of World Bank Literature.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)." *Mapping Ideology*. Ed. Slavoj Zizek. London, New York: Verso, 1994. 100-140.
- Barlow, John Perry. "Africa Rising: Everything You Know About Africa is Wrong." *Wired*. January (1998): 142-158.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London and New York: Longman, 1995.
- Guha, Ranajit. "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency." *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 45-86.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146. July – August (1984): 53-93.
- Kumar, Amitava. *World Bank Literature*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2002 (forthcoming).
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
- Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City*. Second ed. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Sassen, Saskia. *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1999.

van Dijk, Teun. *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. New York: Academic Press, 1987.
4 vols.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

World Bank, The. "Today's Feature: Where E-Commerce Meets Economic Development." <<http://www.worldbank.org/html/today/html/feature.html>> (3 March, 1999).

Wriston, Walter. *The Twilight of Sovereignty*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.