

World Bank Literature
edited by Amitava Kumar
U. Minnesota Press, 2003.

"Tiko can't be developed,' Manu declared, 'unless the ancient gods are killed.'
'But the ancient gods are dead. The Sabbatarians killed them long ago,' countered
the ancient preacher.
'Never believe that, sir. Had they died Tiko would have developed long ago. Look
around you.'"

—Eveli Hau'ofa, *Tales of the Tikongs*

In *World Bank Literature*, editor Amitava Kumar has brought together a number of engaged literary critics, political economists, ethnographers, and cultural critics, to explore the possibility of new avenues for theory and criticism in the wake of fundamental shifts in the landscapes of global politics and cultural practice, as well as in academic and financial institutions around the world. At stake is a critical understanding of the processes of capitalist globalization (in its current stage), and the multiple and varied articulations of ideology, culture, and political discourse that both undergird and reflect (as well as potentially protest and counter) such processes. Kumar's move is an attempt to shift critical analytical frames and pedagogical infrastructures from the Western, "liberal-diversity model" of World Literature, as well as from the increasingly theoretical domain of postcolonial studies, to a broader, interventionist framework that understands literature (and, one would expect, cultural practice in general) as inherently linked to the political and economic realms of what is generally understood as "globalization." Kumar's proposal is intended to be a provocation, and in many ways this collection succeeds in demonstrating an open willingness to collectively explore some of the various possibilities and limitations that such a political and theoretical shift can bring about for the work of literary critics, political economists, and activists in general. It also provides suggestive new reading strategies, necessary to adapt to a wider, global transformation that is both economic as well as cultural in its multiple manifestations. At the same time, the book furthers the impression of a fundamental gap between academic politics and the "on-the-ground" mobilizations of the so-called anti-globalization forces, revealed in Kumar's claim that this collection is a necessary "theoretical response to what emerged so dramatically on the streets of Seattle as excitement but not always as an explanation, and as protest but not so much as pedagogy (xx). If this book is inspired by, and in response to, actions such as those in Seattle that helped put the WTO, IMF, and World Bank on the world stage, it seems that there was plenty of effective pedagogy in such protests. Nonetheless, this book is a crucial addition to recent attempts to rethink and theorize the cultural logics of globalization and counter-globalization struggles around the world, and cannot be dismissed as merely another academic colonization of trend-setting political struggles. The vital spirit and sharply critical energies in evidence here lend to the sense of a general shift from the cynicism and defeatism of the last twenty or so years, towards a hopeful (if realistic) horizon of new and wider fronts in the struggle against Western imperialism.

The collection seems designed as a casebook for a new humanities pedagogy, one that attempts to fuse literary studies with the more recent political and economic focus on globalization. Some of the essays read as thought-experiments in direct response to Kumar's call for a study of "World Bank literature," teasing out several different theoretical and pedagogical issues that arise from such an approach. As such, there is an experimentalism that at times can be quite refreshing, as writers avoid conventional academic platitudes and risk forays into multi-disciplinary territory. At the same time, the apparent presumption of an academic audience—of fellow teachers as well as advanced students—also lends the book something of the feel of an academic conference, with insiders talking amongst themselves, often with the result that "globalization" feels like it might become simply one more discourse for the humanities to colonize. For instance, the first section of the book—a "Dossier on the Academy"—is devoted to economic and political conditions within American academic institutions, with a focus on the humanities and student activism. While the corporatization of the university and the revitalized engagement of campus activists in "anti-globalization" movements are both important trends worth investigating, the specific connections to transnational capitalism and the broader themes of the book are not clearly articulated. It may be true that the "onset of the severe job crisis [in U.S. humanities departments] turned English professors into economists almost overnight" (xxiv), as Kumar puts it in his introduction, and that student organizers have opened some professors' eyes to exploitative labor conditions within the university (from grad students to cafeteria and janitorial workers); however, placing such issues at the beginning of this collection threatens to privilege concerns of the primarily American intellectual classes. Nonetheless, to the extent that this book may be read alongside Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and/or Cary Nelson's *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, themselves both undergraduate-level introductions to campus politics and their connection to wider international issues, it is a useful reminder to include a look at the conditions on the ground of the academy as part of any pedagogical and theoretical intervention within the humanities.

Though weighted towards the cultural studies side of things, there are some helpful analyses that focus more directly on the economic and political-economic issues confronting any contemporary critic of globalization. Doug Henwood successfully dismantles many of the presumptions and clichés of what tends to go under the rubric of "globalization," redirecting our attention to the long historical view that sees the current period as an continuing expansion of Western imperialism. In a similar vein, Gautam Premnath helps burst the myth of the weakening nation-state, showing how the U.S. and its dominant partners have continued to use military, political, and economic force to act on behalf of its own "interests" (i.e., the interests of the corporations that largely fund the ruling power structure). Richard Wolff reminds us of the frequent absence of class analysis in discussions of globalization, both in the neoliberal ideologies of the World Bank and WTO, as well as within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other oppositional movements.

Other critics look more specifically at the policies and practices of the World Bank itself (and other organizations like it), interrogating its rhetoric and ideologies for the deeper logics of transnational capital and, quite often, Western racism. Bret Benjamin unpacks

the discourses of racism, power, and the control of women's bodies (literally, the reproduction of labor, in all respects) in various groups working on the issues of overpopulation and population control. In another interrogation of racist paternalism, Suzanne Bergeron looks at how the World Bank and the IMF both promote notions of development that tend to erase both women's roles and well as non-Western approaches to autonomous rule. Subir Sinha reveals how Western social movements and NGOs, defending the environment or promoting "sustainable development," can often mirror World Bank and IMF ideologies in both their paternalism as well as their "developmentalist" discourses. At the same time, many of these deconstructions read as exercises in literary criticism, of the sort that can read almost any social and material practice as "discourse," and thus render it into a series of texts and narratives to be interpreted. This is all fine and necessary, though one hopes that we can continue to distinguish from the textual *character* of certain policies and practices and the *actual material and social effects* such practices have in the world outside of the strictly "discursive."

Other contributors focus more strictly on cultural objects and practices, in order to see how reading culture under the sign of "World Bank Literature" might bring about new interpretations and critical strategies. In "Developing Fictions," Rashimi Varma looks at the figure of the "tribal" in English-language writing from India (as well as Indian literary criticism), heeding Kumar's call for a "different protocol for reading," especially in regards to the "literature of [India's] New Economic Policy." Claire F. Fox investigates what she calls the "left sensationalism" of U.S.-Mexico border discourses, focusing primarily on border detective fiction. In an exploration of (white) American, Mexican-American, and Mexican novels, ranging from the ecofeminism of Judith Van Gieson to the leftist-noir of Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Fox details how the trappings of genre create both limitations to, and new openings for, different kinds of utopic possibilities. Her essay is also exemplary for its critical reading of a popular cultural form without either condescending to the material or overly-romanticizing its oppositional politics. Phillip E. Wegner also takes on a popular genre, science fiction, to explore alternative modes of mapping global relations. Working from Jameson's notions of cognitive mapping and the "geopolitical unconscious," Wegner reads the novels of Joe Halderman as complex allegories for the uneven geographical development of global capitalism.

Anthony Alessandrini pays perhaps the most attention to questions of form and genre. With the rise of postcolonial studies over the last twenty years, especially in regards to literary criticism, there has been a disturbing split in terms of what constitutes the proper object of study. While Western avant-garde texts continue to retain privileged status in English departments, where literary history is largely the history of formal innovation, postcolonial (as well as many Western "multicultural" or "ethnic") texts are read primarily for an easily recoupable content, in a process that Gayatri Spivak has called "information retrieval." This mimics the international literary marketplace, which tends to celebrate non-Western realist novels that include enough "local color" and exotic difference to mark them as other, with an expectation that such realism offers an authentic "experience" for the Western reader, or what Alessandrini terms "a demand for representational accuracy" (265). Focusing on retrievable themes and motifs in such texts

can provide the left-leaning critic with forceful tools with which to interrogate conditions of postcoloniality; however, by avoiding questions of form and innovation, critics limit potential reading strategies as well as condescend to presume a kind of transparency and authenticity from postcolonial writers (as with the "native informant" of the "old" ethnographies), a tactic that is understandable from a certain political perspective ('look here, see how bad things are for *them*?') and yet is ultimately a disservice to both the literature and the cause (as with the recent scandal over Rigoberta Menchu's "autobiography"). Similarly, the continued privileging of conventional Western forms and genres can blur the extent to which, especially in the realms of popular culture, they can be used to promote a variety of ideologies, leading to the rise of what Lila Abu-Lughod has elsewhere termed "developmental realism."

How such forms and practices are received, recycled, and reappropriated is another question. In postcolonial Africa, for instance, the dumping of Western goods has quite often led to a complicated and dynamic hybridity. Both Manthia Diawara and Grant Farred, for instance, take on mainstream and leftist discourses of "Afro-pessimism," that see postcolonial Africa as either a backwater of corruption and hopelessness or completely crushed by Western-imposed market policies. Instead, both authors look at the role of regional and local markets, from informal trade networks to above-ground "black markets," as sites for alternative negotiations of transnational trade and economic regulations. Here the cultural and the economic meet and co-mingle, as illegal currency markets co-exist with a healthy trade in knock-off American apparel, pirated videotapes and CDs, and other cross-cultural consumer goods. While such markets perhaps do not always challenge outright the increasing fetishization of the West and its ideologies, they do help create an arena for resistance to the dominant financial logics of global capital, as well as providing agency to local traders and consumers—mostly women, peasants, and lumpen proletarians—who, as Diawara puts it, become "modernized in the marketplace" (78). Against the oversimplified binary of Western capitalism vs. "traditional" African culture and customs, such locations help construct what Diawara calls a "regional imaginary" in which cultural (re)appropriation and transnational trade can carve out spaces for new forms of non-Western modernities. At the same time, World Bank and IMF platitudes about development and modernization require the policing, and eventual erasure, of such alternative spaces for such practices, severely limiting the terms by which "development" could be said to occur outside a strictly Western capitalist model of debt, austerity, and a sacrificing of autonomy and sovereignty.

Here we might begin to see linkages between discourses of development and those of modernity (or more specifically, Western notions of modernization). As uneven development becomes not simply a byproduct of capitalist globalization, but increasingly *its intended result*, a certain kind of uneven modernity could be said to manifest itself as well. Often characterized variously under rubrics of postmodernity and postcolonialism, contemporary conditions in most of the world are marked by the violent continuation and expansion of a centuries-long imperialist project that promises "modernity" (in political, economic and cultural forms) while at the same time, through policies of primitive accumulation and neoliberal structural adjustment programs, severely limiting the possibilities for any autonomous and sovereign polities and cultures to emerge on their

own terms. Western notions of modernity simply cannot be created by loans or by force, not because the rest of the world is somehow 'backward' or mired in 'pre-modernity' (one of the current tropes of anti-Islamic racism), but because the conditions under which Euro-American modernity was forged (five hundred years of global imperialism underwriting the slow march to bourgeois democratic society) cannot be recreated in the contemporary context. The current phase of post-1989 developmentalism could be read as the capitalist West's attempt—in the aftermath of the demise of its main imperialist rival—to consolidate its global hegemony and avoid potential crises of over-accumulation at the same time. "Globalization" might then be seen as less of a force of homogenizing American "sameness" (though it is often that as well), but as the (often violent) creation and exploitation of difference, as long as such difference is contained within the logic of capitalist exchange value. Although organizing against cultural imperialism is easier than 'naming the enemy' as capitalism itself—how many activists know Jose Bové as 'that crazy French peasant who crashed his tractor into a McDonald's' and not as the founder of the workerist, environmentalist *Condédération Paysanne*?—it remains crucial to continue to construct a "dual-front" of strategic resistance to both Western and global-capitalist hegemonies.

What then, are the cultural logics of such transformations? Are there direct homologies between, to use Hung Q. Tu's phrasing, "uneven development, uneven poetics"? Could there be a viable, radical, and transnational-popular (to update Gramsci's term) "World Bank Literature" that did not succumb to the institutional hegemony of "Western Lit"? Is the battleground for such struggles the academy and the canon, or in the daily cultural practices of those global citizens whose (physical *and* intellectual) labor power is fast becoming the transnational commodity *par excellence*? These kinds of questions are not answered definitively in this collection, but that they are beginning to be framed and debated in this way is the kind of development worth investing in.

This review is dedicated to the memory of Lee Kyung-Hae.