

## AFTER HISTORY'S HEGEMONY

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There are hardly anyone who works on world history who is not aware that that the idea of world history - *Weltgeschichte* - is the brain child of the German enlightenment. But when it comes to the word global as in Global History we are astonishingly remiss in understanding its situational history.

The word global as an adjectival modifier was born after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and with America's militarized and imperialized gaze 'turn to the west, - used for the first time adjectivally in the phrase Global War.<sup>1</sup> The subtext was not just new cartographic imaginaries, but a world that was seen as expanded, economic relations that were seen as complex, and a cultural horizon that was seen as Other. It took several decades for these subtexts to become epistemologically valid in their own right – and only in the late 1990s did the word broaden, so to speak, to be associated belatedly with History. The difference between 'world' in World History and 'global' in Global History is thus critical as they have vastly different historiographic tracks and resonances and without that basic understanding one cannot get the conversation of the ground. If 'world' carries with it the legacies of Eurocentric universalism, 'global' carries with it the legacies of American imperialism. Both words, however, have been partially scrubbed from those connotations, if only because of their various proliferations, which allowed them to embrace a broader set of referentialities. As far as 'global' it signifies something unusual, a certain way of *not* operating – of not operating any more that is - and yet it is also a signifier of a still uncertain way *of* operating.

But if someone asks me: What do I mean by global? (which I frequently get from graduate students, eager to be on the right side of history) I really wonder why they do not ask, What do I mean by history? One cannot write a 'global history' and assume any of the usually comfortable securities *even* when it comes to the word history. 'Global' forces the word History into an awkward space between onto-epistemic horizons. So let me just quickly give an example.

The Catalan Atlas, of 1370 depicts Musa I (c. 1280 - c. 1337) seated on a throne and holding a golden orb. Musa was no random African potentate. In fact, he might well have been one of the richest men in the world. In 1324, he made a pilgrimage to Mecca accompanied by a procession that included 60,000 men wearing brocade and Persian silk, an array of heralds and 12,000 slaves who each carried 1.8 kg (4 lb.) of gold bars. It was perhaps the most awe inspiring trans-continental display of wealth in history. Because what we know comes *only* from Islamic sources, we know apart from the details of retinue that he had obvious a lot of gold. That's about it. We also know from later visitors that the topless women in his court did not meet the standards of Islamic law.

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<sup>1</sup> See my articles: "Positioning the Global Imaginary: Arata Isozaki, 1970," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Spring 2018), 498 – 527; "Modernity and Chieftain Continuum," *Dialectic VII: Architecture and Citizenship: Decolonizing Architectural Pedagogy* (2020) 59-67.

These things get repeated endlessly because that alas is 'history.' But there are no documents that point to what Musa brought back from Mecca, nor in our histories that talk about Musa is this question even raised – speculatively. This is important since Musa had to strengthen his alliances with neighboring chiefs and with the Tuareq his transportation specialists in particular, as well as with local riverine groups responsible for gold extraction who were all quite likely scheming to improve their lot during his absence. Musa also had to work with elders, warriors, and slave providers of various sorts and ranks. Though a Muslim, he had to perform prescribed rituals to his ancestors through temple and priest intermediaries. He had to engage with dream-interpreters, oracles, and the numerous deities of the landscape and cosmos. He had to continually grease the transportation system, particularly the one relating to salt and copper that he also controlled.

His palace, at the physical, political and ceremonial center of all of this, was layered with people from different tribal units and ethnicities, each with their respective tasks, histories, obligations and demands. Everything had to be organized and managed not just at the point of a spear, but through gifts, exchanges, speeches, rituals, and sacrifices of various sorts and all calibrated in just the right way. For this he needed cattle, silks, beads, furniture, Egyptian cloth, iron objects, incense and on and on and this means that on his way to Mecca, he would have carefully planned the acquisition of these items.

Musa went to Mecca to pray, but he also went on an extensive shopping trip. He did not return with an ounce of gold and as to the slaves, well they were walking bank accounts and were likely sold off here and there to pay for expanses and for the things he brought back. We know from Spanish sources that he brought in a Spanish architect to build himself a palace and mosque, probably the building depicted at his feet. But that great palace, and its surrounding enclave have disappeared and his capital city is now so irrelevant as a place that one can barely even find it on google earth. But without documents, no archaeology, no ethnography, one has to speculate.

Let us now multiply this problem, for the world of Musa was not an exception to the rule, but one of thousands of variants across the chiefdom continuum. So as we start to multiply the problem of how to write a history becomes so vast in scale that the word history begins to sound premature and downright arrogant.

The academic problems are real. Why for example does the book, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* by Janet Abu-Lughod, make not a single reference to Musa or even to the world of the Bantu, or even mention the word 'chiefdom,' even though these were fundamental parts of the world system at that time. The reason is that she uses only published documents. As a result, she is missing a lot and *quite* a lot. In other words, the history of the 12<sup>th</sup> century – if we are using Musa as the leverage point - is unwritable as history. How then do I – not just enframed in my own subject positionality but as an official representative of the field History - write a history when everything I know derives from the profit and protocol obsessed sources of Islamic geographers.

Today there is a lot emphasis on the agency that comes from the voices of those who have been traditionally excluded from the narratives of history. Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called for "the decolonial turn" as a break from Eurocentric (racist) theorizing toward appreciating the ontologies and epistemes the former had

suppressed.<sup>2</sup> But even so that does not solve the problem of orality in historical culture. How do I tell a story where there is no ‘voice’ – where all has disappeared in to the dark matter of time? And even if there were reams of sources even those would mislead since few historians would admit that orality might be just as legitimately foundational to a reconstruction of events as texts. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus had no qualms. The fall of Sardis took place because of the birth of a lion; Gyges became king because an oracle had so ordained. A queen went to battle because of a dream sent by the gods. Thucydides, one generation later, eschewed the role of the gods, oracles and of omens, and for that is seen as the father of modern history. From the view of the Musa’s world, however, Herodotus was the better historian, for he accepted the fact that voices, dreams and deities were just as important as human actors. Was it not the lightning that hit the palm tree in front of Musa’s palace that lead to his downfall? (Of course, I just made that up, but it could well have been true.)

It might help if we include things that might be considered on the order of historical fiction. But there are no historical novels about Musa and to make matters more complex if we do not want to be accused of being power-centric - there are no historical novels about the slave, for example, who was sold by Musa in Egypt to buy the Egyptian cotton that Musa shipped home. The reasons for such absences are not too hard to find. How would a person of the 21<sup>st</sup> century understand the 12<sup>th</sup>? How would a non-Muslim understand an ostensibly devout Muslim? How would a person of “European” background understand someone from Africa? How would a person who was never a slave tell the story of a slave? Etc. etc.

Unlike Universal History that could care less about these issues, since it is grounded on a (Western) metaphysical foundation that ends in the teleology of modernity, unlike the World History of Abu-Lughod, which is, traditionally at least, civilization centric and thus focuses on the rise and fall of kingdoms and nations, ending in the collated teleologies of textuality and modernity, Global History – at least in my view - starts with the impossibility of ever being really ‘global’ *and* ever being fully ‘history.’ If we seek truth in documents – certainly laudable - we miss the necessities of breadth. If we want ‘voice’ we are forced into the ethnographies of presentism and miss the sub-voices of depth, and if we want historical fiction to fill in the gap, well, we will need to change our ideas about publishing and tenure. We come in this way to history’s Negative Dialectics as the unsignified signifier of history’s bounded condition within its own modernity.

It is not just Eurocentrism that is the problem, it is no just privilege that is the problem, or our ‘subject position.’ We have to factor in the floating and shared operative frameworks of disciplinary expectations, and once those are shattered, a single locus of Great Refusal does not exist; only from within systems of articulation can the mechanisms of the inarticulate become (un)known.

So, one could ask, maybe we should use a different term than even history, one that is more ambiguous and self-implicatory, one that does not lead us down into rabbit holes of historiographic guilt, disciplinary confusion and authorial anxiety. Perhaps - and I am open to suggestions, some of which we have indeed heard in this workshop, all of which I welcome, but in my own work, I love the idea that one has to write oneself *into* the historiographic problematics to find possibilities of research in the same breath as finding and theorizing the liminal impossibilities of that research.

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<sup>2</sup> (Maldonado-Torres Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2008, 6–8).

I will close with a remarkable observation by the 15<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bruni who contends that “the world has very many corners; it has as many as there are in the world.” It is an intelligent and witty thought. The world is of course round and has no corners. It is us who gives the world its ‘corners’ when we make our maps to better “understand” the world, but these corners are neither real nor stable. They change continuously to produce knowledge and yet to also falsify it. The issue is not about the crisis of representation, but about the difficulty to understand the unrepresentable in the space beyond the corners.