theories and methodologies

How Do We Write, Now?

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I. Constructing a Recipient

HOW DO WE WRITE, NOW? SINCE I AM WRITING FOR THE PAGES OF THE *PUBLICATIONS OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA*, I presume the "we" here describes teachers of literature in the United States. I, outside in that "we," think that most of us write, for a variety of reasons, with the presumed inclusion of "the global South" in our audience; although I also have the feeling that a lot of us, folks that I do not really know, ignore this requirement altogether. Geraldine Heng's important work has made us aware of this absence in the study of the literature of the Middle Ages. From the early modern era on, however, progressive writing does have this cultural requirement.

I feel out of joint with this requirement. I think *the global South* is a reverse racist term, one that ignores the daunting diversity outside Europe and the United States. We decide to define what we are not by a bit of academic tourism, choosing academics to represent the global South at conferences and in journals from countries elsewhere who have class continuity with us and thus resolving our own sense of ourselves as democratic subjects resisting definition by race and gender. Thus our "we" remains the embarrassed and tacit custodian of a presumed global norm. And the metropolitan (nonmetropolitan academics have passport problems) diasporic stimulus flows over national frontiers, as it were, and goals meaningless to the subaltern (voting groups on the fringe of history) happen to be geographically located in their countries of origin, outside. That's the "we" carrying a double consciousness, where *double* stands for *global* understood as *abroad*.

I feel out of joint with this phenomenon. Recently persuaded by an old friend to be on the advisory committee of an online journal that is supposed to address and include the global South, I was filled with distaste, because I was convinced that this was the body-count way of being democratic. Recently persuaded by a local university of repute to suit a master class specifically to the demands of the global South, I was troubled by the organizers' careless constitution of the students in the class, for which the only entry requirement seemed

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PMLA 133.1 (2018), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be that students be people of various colors—but there were no African American students—or, for the two white students in the class, that they want to be taught by what they presumed to be my expertise in the subject matter of the course. (The best student, from mainland China, has become a junior colleague in spirit since then.) If, as I have often said, an uncoercive rearrangement of desire is the obligation of the teacher of the humanities, in this case the obligation might have been to shift from the desire to be the global South at all and turn one's eyes toward the class discontinuities within one's own civil society.

How do we write these days? Having narrowed down the "we," I would say as if to or as the global South.

It is time to remember that subject positions are inscribed in our writing for perusal by others, afterward. I must continue to believe that claiming unique subject positions is the problem—that is, the inability to acknowledge that we cannot look around our own corner and therefore must resist subject positions offered to us as tokens, by the other side. Am I doing much more than echoing the 1979 commencement address by Adrienne Rich, during which people supposedly walked out from the audience as she warned women of color not to accept tokenization? I believe that hers is a position that is as pertinent today as it was nearly forty years ago.

I think we should write resisting what amounts to a call for identity claims—all but the claim to the dominant place, class, and gender. I was amused by a request from the French journal *Philosophie* to comment on a remark by Daniel Dennett in *The Guardian*:

> Maybe people will now begin to realise that philosophers aren't quite so innocuous after all. Sometimes, views can have terrifying consequences that might actually come true. *I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts.*
>
> (qtd. in Cadwalladr; my emphasis)

It was spoken from that identity that does not need to be claimed or described as such and that can decide that one's own disciplinary turf is "the world." This global version of the unclaimed North—oligarchic ideology (often unwitting yet resentful and therefore more harmful) of the dominant class, race, gender—is the unclaimed identity that crawls across all and makes us produce the global South. This is often and also a justified but unacknowledgeable response to the tendency of the class-continuous identitarians to essentialize the precolonial period, provoking in the breast-beating dominant the playing of cultural relativist games that exacerbate the ire of ideological oligarchs like Dennett.

I spent three months reading the manuscript "An African Scholar," by Francis Abiola Irele, who died on 2 July 2017. In this extraordinary book, Irele looks at African modernity rather than claims to nationalist identity, just as Gauri Lankesh, assassinated on 5 September 2017, invoked universality as the goal of people marked by caste oppression. These ways of understanding "we," affirmative sabotage of modernity and universalism—not simply proposals of countermodernities and counteruniversals with the global South as center—may provide a way out of claims to identity in intellectual work. When we say "black lives matter," we are correctly and passionately confronting the definition by the other side of ourselves as nothing but "black." That important confrontation cannot reflect the reality of one's position when responsibility is claimed, as well as when rights are claimed: the double bind of democracy. Long ago, I opened an essay on responsibility with the following words: "Responsibility annuls the call to which it seeks to respond by necessarily changing it to the calculations of answerability" (58). Today, writing more simply, I would say that responsibility is so to go toward the other that a response comes forth, rather than an expected echo that will then be rewarded.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To acknowledge this responsibility, our definition of the global South ignores the largest sectors of the electorate in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, below the radar of nongovernmental organizations and below the class apartheid in education. The terms *global* and *South* must be shaken up in different ways—recognizing that empiricism is without guarantees. The day before I wrote this piece, I would not have included this ignoring in the program of subaltern studies. But on that day I reread, after many years, the introduction to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, for a class on postcolonialism and pan-Africanism. I was quite startled to notice that caste is nowhere mentioned; rather, *the subaltern* is defined as "the people" (Guha). I now understand why Yashadatta Alone claims that to concentrate on the subaltern is to concentrate only on class and not on caste at all. In Antonio Gramsci's writings, the subaltern is not, of course, a class but social groups on the fringes of history (52). The subaltern is not generalizable. And this is the biggest blow to our desire to generalize the recipient for our enunciation's utterances, as reflected in the definition of the global South.

At a recent conference in Durban on disrupting the curriculum, Margaret Daymond, a fellow member of the 1991 New Nation Conference of writers called by the African National Congress, asked me if there should be general textbooks to be shared by the entire South African state. I have been involved in curricular matters in South Africa for some time, and I said yes, but I also said that humanities texts should not be generalized; rather, they should be suited to the class or language context. Margaret and I, bare acquaintances, have shared history. Our public exchange allows me to segue into the flip side.

II. Deconstructing a Sender

I have so far considered how we construct the presumed subject/object as recipient for our utterances in general these days. I will now consider how we might construct ourselves as senders: as subjects of digital humanities or global humanities. My feeling is—would you believe this is to echo Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, written fifty-odd years ago?—that we do little more than save intellectual labor for old-fashioned research, think of the globe as "they are just like us" rather than probe the difficulty of imagining "we are just like them," and pretend to be tremendously amateur statisticians when we go "global" (15–41).

Look how Du Bois stages that difficulty—indeed, that near impossibility—in a book written over eighty years ago. On page 87 of *Black Reconstruction*, in the chapter "The Coming of the Lord," the text offers us an unclaimed declarative, what rhetorically looks like an open bit of free indirect discourse describing emancipation: "It was the Coming of the Lord." On page 121, Du Bois stages an attempt to claim the subject of that bit of free indirect discourse: "[C]an we imagine this spectacular revolution? Not, of course, unless we think of these people as human beings like ourselves in a position where we are chattels and real estate, and then suddenly in the night become 'thenceforward and forever free.'" Notice the delicate move from "they are like us" to "we are like them." The next few pages describe the effort rather than stage a success. The impossibility is given:

> Suppose on some gray day, as you plod down Wall Street, you should see God sitting on the Treasury steps, in His Glory, with the thunders curved about him? Suppose on Michigan Avenue, between the lakes and hills of stone, and in the midst of hastening automobiles and jostling crowds, suddenly you see living and walking toward you, the Christ, with sorrow and sunshine in his face. Foolish talk . . . (123–24)

I cannot go any further than this in a piece supposedly devoted to how "we" write, not to how a master wrote in the twentieth

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century (I have developed this in my forthcoming book on Du Bois). Also, we are discussing being digital global, so commenting on the bad gendering inaugurating the entire book would be beyond our scope here. I move, then, to a somewhat different theater. I ask the reader to shift the membership to a "we" somewhat different from the membership of the Modern Language Association of America, though there is no reason why the entire association could not be a part of the other "we" as well. As has been my way for the last few decades, I will attempt to propose a solution to the problem, in this case the problem of constructing a monolithic global South, recipient subject, even as we construct ourselves as global digital subjects as senders, not necessarily always coordinating sender and receiver.

Thus equipped, we try the old deconstructive method: we do not accuse the digital of being artificial, as opposed to the naturalness of the human. This is a precritical view of the human that will not take us far. But we also will not excuse the digital as simply allowing a natural network to make possible a communication between fully cognizant subjects. We relocate the moment of transgression in the global digital—namely some version of a desire to create a level playing field—and turn that around to use it, attending to the various reminders that we have given ourselves. How can the global be made to work for the ungeneralizable subaltern?

I am going to give an African example because that is the one I know. Different answers to this question can be found in terms of the textuality of different situations, different (old) histories and (new) geographies.

Many first languages in Africa were not systematized by the missionaries. These are in use today, by underclass communities but also by highly educated folks, because of the appeal of the mother tongue, and by electoral candidates, who campaign in these languages and maybe provoke ethnic violence, typically before elections. There is tremendous dialectal continuity between these languages, and when there is not, there is an enviable level of multilingualism among adjacent subaltern communities. Our concern here is how we write. These communities write on the memory, and, you can say, only half-fancifully, they practice a prescientific digitization. In other words, the lessons of nineteenth- and twentieth-century linguistics—stabilizing the language by giving it a name; putting it in a box separating it from other languages; grammatizing; establishing orthography, vocabulary, and script, among other things; maybe establishing a historical moment—become symptomatic when confronted with these languages. These lessons depend on a limited concept of writing, whereas writing on memory as these unsystematized first languages do, creates a stream that today's digitization has exponentially enhanced.

Understandably, then, a certain vanguard of the discipline of linguistics is now investigating the ways in which these languages were taught or absorbed in the context of prevailing multilingualism. It should be mentioned that we are not speaking of languages that are going extinct and that many institutions are seeking to document and preserve. These attempts are altogether admirable, but they are not identical with the work that I am describing.

Now, suppose we acknowledge that the business of sustainable underdevelopment is today the greatest barrier to the creation of a level playing field. Much of the failure of this process, even when well-intentioned, is due to the lack of the sort of responsibility discussed above, a responsibility enhanced by the teaching of literature as the cultivation of an imagination that can flex into another's space. It is not possible for the development lobby today to attend upon those who are to be developed—inserted into the circuit of capital without adequate subject formation—so that their desires can be rearranged into wanting the possibility of development in mind and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

body, regulated by themselves. We assume, however, that among development workers there are some who really do wish to touch the ones who are being developed.

Let us remind ourselves that the humanities are worldly, not global. Let us also remind ourselves that this distinction obliges the humanities to work through collectivities, not only through global networks (even as we also remember that this is a taxonomy, not a binary opposition). We further remind ourselves that we draw a response from the other—act "response-ibility"—through language. And finally, on this list of self-reminders, let us remind ourselves that the subaltern, on the fringes of history, located in language, is not generalizable. Although this is not usually the case, we can indeed find sincere people among health workers and agricultural workers. Typically, job descriptions for development workers do not include language requirements. And, also typically, the best-intentioned development workers may learn a well-established lingua franca such as Kiswahili or IsiZulu and feel that they are preparing themselves, unaware that to those who customarily use the unsystematized first languages, these lingua francas are themselves also languages of power.

Some of us are trying to push for the establishment of a language requirement in the development job descriptions and for the creation of simple on-the-field techniques for those few well-meaning development workers to learn the unsystematized first languages of those who are being developed and thus to put digitization into the service of the continuous and persistent destruction of subalternity and pass agency to the subaltern.

"How do we write now?" then transforms into "How do we learn how to write on memory, from before different styles of what we recognize as writing developed?" We will not undo that magnificent tradition of writing, on material substance with material substance. But if it can be held within memory writing, the unrestricted phenomenology of writing might allow us to learn—if we are prepared for it—the gift of responsibility as extended to the ungeneralizable. Harnessing the literary skill of learning from the singular and the unverifiable, hanging out in textual space with the help of digital inscription as instrument rather than a relentless organizer of everyday life, then . . .

Then? Do I think everything will change? Only if I were silly enough to think that the reader of this essay can be dragged into being the writer of that other deconstruction. Prove me wrong, someone.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.166 Published online by Cambridge University Press