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2021

El-Malik_OnAnotherStory.pdf

Shiera S Malik



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/shiera_malik/20/



On another story

Shiera S. el-Malik¹

Accepted: 6 February 2021

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It is my turn to make dinner at the end of our work-from-home day. Usually, I would listen to podcasts, but J has asked me if I would like to listen to some of his new music. The sounds fill the room. The satisfyingly sharp knife in my hand is slicing the shallots as if they were butter. Boy's (2019) voice comes through the speaker. He says: 'To understand Nigeria, you need to appreciate where it came from'. My ears perk up. The request for historical context, in a sentence like this, hints to me that I am going to get some information from an archive. It alerts me to the possibility that hidden transcripts are about to crack through the coherence of the illusions that give shape to the world that we think we know.

'Another Story' continues.

In 1900, Britain officially assumed responsibility
For the administration of the whole of what we now know as
Nigeria from the Niger Company
And then, gradually over the years
British protectorates were established throughout the territory
In 1914, the protectorates were amalgamated into one Nigeria

I hear a traditional history lesson of 'the past', a story as smooth as a stone that the sea has worked over and over. Scholars and activists who work in the area of decolonial politics understand that narrating histories of colonialism is an important task. It is important to find the stories and to collect other stories, ones that are still rough, that have not already been worked over. To do this, we seek archival remnants to read the still rough stories against the smooth ones. We collect and amplify the perspectives and the knowledges that we find in those rough stories. How is Burna Boy using this recording of the story that 'Britain' wants us to believe?

Heavy in my hand, the knife slices garlic. The preparation of ingredients for our dinner mesmerizes me.

Burna Boy (2019) tells me that, 'Actually, there's one additional detail that bears mentioning'.

✉ Shiera S. el-Malik
shiera.malik@depaul.edu

¹ Department of International Relations, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA



I turn my head towards his voice and he tells me:

In order to take over the territories from the Niger Company
 The British Government paid eight hundred and sixty-five thousand pounds
 A huge amount in 1900
 So let's establish a simple truth
 The British didn't travel halfway across the world just to spread democracy
 Nigeria started off as a business deal for them
 Between a company and a government

I am trained to be attentive to historical narratives and the gaps in them that help us, '[unlearn] the processes of destruction that [imperialism] made possible' (Azoulay, 2019). My sharp knife slices with a refusal to accept what appears before it, while Burna Boy's art enacts a similar refusal.

'Incidentally,' he says tantalizingly. 'The Niger Company is still around today.'
 I tilt my head and move to slice vegetables.

'Only it is known by a different name'. And, before I have a chance to blink my eyes, he says, 'Unilever'.

My knife pauses in mid-air before I set it down on the counter to replay this segment. 'But that's another story', Burna Boy concludes.

Another story, indeed. After listening to this again, my head races over all that I know about Unilever – not much, it turns out. I leapt (incorrectly, it seems) to some of the loudest culprits of destruction in my world: weapons, oil, and pharmaceuticals, but the truth may be more insidious. A glance at their website shows that Unilever sells 169 household brands of foods, cleaning supplies, beauty supplies, etc., commodities that are inexpensive and quick-moving. I look through other tabs on their website and notice that they are a 'global company'. I refuse their request that I accept their cookies and click off.

Unilever uses the word 'global' in their description of the company. In the academic world and in the branding world, we might call the word 'global' a concept. But if we do, we must acknowledge that a concept is heavy. It carries sets of relations with(in) it. Different people can wield a concept in different ways and to different ends. Burna Boy has me looking at Unilever's 'global' and asking: what sets of relations does this 'global' encompass? I am pretty sure that I have the start of an answer in Isaac Kamola's *Making the World Global*.

I came to listen to Burna Boy craft narratives about global power dynamics in my kitchen because J bought a new album. He made the purchase after we heard Burna Boy's music in the soundtrack of the HBO show *Insecure* (Rae 2016–2020). Consumer relations may condition the very possibility for me having had the experience of listening to an artist whose art carries elements of surrealist refusal of distance and narrative occlusions. I could say something similar of Isaac Kamola and his



work; I think that *Making the World Global* enacts a refusal in the manner of Burna Boy's, a refusal that begins with the question: 'what was the massive expansion of global-speak a symptom of?' (Kamola, 2019, p. xv).

With a set of empirically rich 'case studies', Kamola produces an historicized reading of the emergence of the 'global' and globalization as ideas and the traction they generated in elite circles. His is a story in the vein of *Democracy in Chains* in which MacLean (2017) writes about James McGill Buchanan whose work forms the intellectual base of the American radical right's political agenda. MacLean exposes a political agenda that hides its power, but her project did not start with that goal. She explains in her introduction how she 'stumbled' on Buchanan's private papers and that those papers revealed: 'how and why stealth became so intrinsic to the movement [of saving capitalism from democracy]' (Ibid., xxii). Thus, her book becomes a contribution to efforts to refuse elite aims to hide their strategies for maintaining power. I want to show that Kamola also presents us with the 'how' of a politics that we may recognize and avoid too easily because it takes a concerted effort to refuse its obfuscation.

In the historicized stories about consumerist-driven desires, everyday life, colonial history, violence, and faith that Burna Boy (2020) relates, we can find a clear understanding of how to narrate global power dynamics. We can find this also in Kamola's (2019) case studies that develop intelligible stories of how some elite institutions produced a kind of 'global' as a new, ahistorical, not-colonial relation that describes the-world-out-there. A reader new to these stories of the global will have what they need in *Making the World Global* to understand the historical tracing in the model of story-telling that Kamola engages. Courage-permitting, such a reader can then follow up with a study of how other international/domestic institutions and universities (and maybe also primary and secondary education) are related to the stories at hand, for '[i]t is not knowledge that we lack', Lindqvist, (1997, p. 172) tells us. 'Rather, we don't have 'the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions' (Ibid.). Moreover, Kamola's introduction to (institutionalized) knowledge production and its relationship with consequential policy-making apparatuses may encourage readers to further trace that relationship with other cases or concepts. Like Burna Boy, Kamola (2019) takes up the challenge to refuse the obfuscation. They both enact a practice of what Azoulay (2019, p. 498) calls 'bearing witness', which is to refuse the complicit spectatorship of the already-packaged narrative. They refuse the smoothed-over stories of how things appear before us as they do. This alone makes Kamola's book a significant contribution to rewriting the story of how the wealthy regroup in times of political change.

Kamola (2019) offers us other narrative approaches that can help us slice through stories as smooth as stones that the sea has worked over, if we are willing and able to hear them.

He shows how knowledge both constitutes and is constituted by the world, with his claim that 'universities are worldly institutions' (Kamola, 2019, p. 9). The very



idea that the international is comprised of discrete self-governing autonomous units works to obscure the relationality inherent in whatever we may call an international system. And, several elite white men (mostly American) at elite institutions (the World Bank, Yale, etc.) argued tautologically that because the world is becoming global, globalization is a reality. Although some readers might reduce Kamola's claims regarding the worldliness of universities to a sort of base constructivism, I think instead that he offers us the opportunity to read differently. Readers who are willing to follow him or who are already familiar with the politics of knowledge production can practice how to 'peel back the layers of the onion' in order to 'follow the money' and/or to figure out what must be done in order to make space to imagine different futures. In this sense, Kamola's book represents a surreptitious intervention into positivist forms of analysis and institutionalized forms of knowledge production (Mudimbe, 1992).

For Kamola (2019, p. 193), 'imagining the world otherwise is a political question, not just an academic one'. The placement of utterances that have not been in dialogue with each other can achieve the sort of surreptitiousness that this imagining requires. Kamola's bibliography indicates this political orientation most clearly. He brings together African thinkers on education, International Relations scholars, historians, anthropologists, sociologists who write on colonialism and its racial politics, and scholars of politics. In fact, his book, which is subtitled 'U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary', includes 22 sources published with African presses. This number does not include the also numerous periodicals, journal articles, and books published in journals or with presses under the categorization of African Studies or Area Studies. Whether or not he has made it explicit in the text, Kamola's bibliography indicates that he has intentionally made space for African viewpoints on the question of 'the global'. Here, I think his agenda dovetails with Burna Boy's whose stories that contextualize Nigeria and Britain, oil and poverty, and other global relations start from the vantage point of Africans, and often people under the age of 30.

In order to unlearn imperialism and imagine possible futures, we must consider how past storylines are made to make sense in specific moments and how they remain available for engagement as potential histories (Azoulay, 2019). We can see how Kamola makes sense of the story lines early in the first chapter on 'W.W. Rostow and the Rise of Modernization as a National Imaginary'. In his discussion of area studies and its relationship with the national imaginary, Kamola (2019, pp. 37–38) hails both W.E.B. DuBois and Nkrumah as thinkers in-the-world with a vantage point useful for the consideration of a U.S. national imaginary. Throughout the book, Kamola makes similar interpolations. In chapter two, he discusses the emergence of vanguard African universities, an incidental or accidental outcome of World Bank policies which he cites as having yielded a 'highly heterodox intellectual environment' (Kamola, 2019, p. 75). Indeed, Kamola weaves the context of vibrant anti-colonial thinking and writing into his narrative of the production of the global as an example of imperial flexibility in the strategic maintenance of power. The weave that buttresses Kamola's case studies is evidence of his deeply relational stance, his recognition of the importance of Ferguson's (2006) shadows, and the perspectival sites from which the most robust stories emerge. It is evidence also of an



orientation to examining power that we learn from our anti-colonial intellectual forebearers and one that is necessary for imagining decolonization. As Azoulay (2019) and others indicate, the past is not past (Trouillot, 1995). For Burna Boy, we must first know that the Niger Company has been reconstituted as Unilever. For Kamola, we must know that ‘the global’ was a political project of elite institutions. With this in mind, we *can* take up his offer of how to strategically refuse the political power of ‘global-ness’ and orient ourselves towards a decolonizing of the university, if indeed we *want* to take up his call to imagine the world otherwise using our sharpest tools.

Kamola explicitly calls for action. Burna Boy does not. Perhaps they differ because they have distinct audiences or perhaps because of distinct political locations, as Chow (2020) indicates. Nevertheless, like Burna Boy, Kamola refuses the dominant story that hides power in plain sight and focuses instead on another story: the capacity and flexibility of a capitalist elite to protect its interests across historical moments. For both, we must refuse the occlusions produced when the dominant remake themselves. We need a sharp knife, a good grip, patience, and an attentive ear to slice through the strategic obfuscation that produces that which is made absent and to engage potential histories.

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