

Comparative Literature in an Age of "Globalization"

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**Abstract:** Lois Parkinson Zamora, in her paper "Comparative Literature in an Age of 'Globalization'," presents a definition of globalization and considers how its cultural and spatial displacements have, and might, change traditional disciplinary practices of comparative literature. Zamora discusses how contemporary Latin American writers dramatize and evaluate the forces of globalization in their fiction and she exemplifies her observations with texts by Carpentier, Borges, Paz, Fuentes, Puig, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa. Further, the author proposes that the cultural specificity of fictions by contemporary Latin American writers may serve as an antidote to current processes of cultural homogenization.

## Lois Parkinson ZAMORA

### Comparative Literature in an Age of "Globalization"

I have titled my essay "Comparative Literature in an Age of 'Globalization,'" trusting that my reader(s) will take note of the inverted commas around the word "Globalization." This punctuation suggests the exploratory nature of my project; in fact, there should probably also be quotes around "Comparative Literature" because the changes occurring under the sign of globalization may have shifted some of the parameters of our profession as well. In what follows, and according to good comparative procedure, I want to weigh seemingly unlike entities -- the cultural processes of globalization on the one hand and the field's disciplinary processes on the other -- to see whether their differences -- and certain similarities -- may prove instructive. I am, of course, well aware that globalization is a venerable process and that cultural contacts have operated globally since antiquity. Here, however, I will consider "globalization" narrowly, as a term referring to the changes in cultural conditions worldwide during the past ten to twenty years and then test my generalizations against a number of Latin American literary texts. In the process, I ask you to join me in considering how (or whether) comparative literary study has changed (or should change), given the effects of what we now routinely refer to as the globalization of culture (see, for example, Grabovszki <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/1/>>).

No doubt most of us already have a working definition of this household word and our definitions are likely to include a strong affective charge; in fact, most discussions of globalization, however academic, are value specific, with description and judgment often interdependent, and sometimes worryingly indistinguishable. Here, I intend to avoid this tendency because my concern is not polemical but pedagogical, and it is this: how are we and our students to engage critically the operations of globalization and their as-yet-undetermined outcomes? For my purposes, it is sufficient to refer to globalization as a complex of transcultural operations characterized primarily by three factors: 1) the presence of new information and communication technologies; 2) the emergence of new global markets; and 3) the unprecedented mobility of peoples and levels of immigration, with their accompanying cultural displacements. The first two are causal, the third is usually an effect: that is, new information technologies and the emergence of new global markets impel immigration -- indeed, more often force than facilitate it.

A general statement of the effects of globalization might be couched in terms of the "shrinking world" metaphor, which goes like this: societies are increasingly interconnected, so that events and information in one part of the world increasingly affect people and cultures in other parts of the world. Indeed, spatial configurations appear to be fundamental to virtually all discussions of globalization, whether space is engaged metaphorically as shrinkage or mobility or distance, or discussed literally in terms of decentralization, deterritorialization, redrawing boundaries, or any number of other terms signifying current spatial realignments. So, then, I would add a fourth characteristic of globalization: the reconfiguration of space, both conceptually and experientially.

Once the presence of these characteristics has been recognized, most discussions of globalization move directly to comparative cultural questions. Anthropologists, economists, ecologists, and political scientists all become cultural comparatists, weighing cultural differences against what is generally considered to be the inevitable function of globalization: the leveling of cultural difference. This comparative quotient runs inexorably, it seems, through discussions of globalization, and it should interest us as a profession, since our own most basic disciplinary methods are, of course, designed to recognize and interpret difference. I think of my own work in comparative American cultures, for example, as moving along a spectrum between assumptions of basic cultural difference on the one hand and literary examples of shared attitudes and expressive structures on the other. I look for common contexts in order to ground my comparisons, but it is the differences that will matter most to my analysis. So, a mirror image begins to emerge, whereas the literary comparatist may be said to value significant differences and to study literature for what we may learn from those differences, the processes of globalization would seem to work in ways that are something like the reverse -- toward a *leveling* of significant difference in favor of insignificant sameness. But this comparison, too, will need to be complicated, for homogeneity and heteroge-

neity are not necessarily antithetical, and in fact may operate in dialectical relationship. Consider, for example, my third characteristic of globalization -- unprecedented levels of immigration -- a circumstance that suggests the following paradox: the processes of globalization may homogenize tastes and habits by means of new information technologies and global markets, but at the same time they may also generate configurations of striking difference, as immigrants occupy new cultural and linguistic spaces. Nowhere is this more true than in the U.S., where we are experiencing the greatest migratory influx of our history. Certain regions of the country are more illustrative of this than others, of course, but let me say simply that my classes at the University of Houston are far more diverse culturally, linguistically, and ethnically than they were ten years ago -- a comparative cultural opportunity that I feel, frankly, I have not yet fully engaged in my own teaching and that our curricular and departmental structures have not yet fully responded to, either.

For example, we have not adequately considered how to engage the new variety of linguistic competencies in our classrooms. As we wait for our students to reach a level in German or French sufficient to read Mann or Gide, we might try to engage their native command of Tagalog or Tamil or Tzotzil. How to do so is a complicated question and here I state the question in the most general terms: the globalization of U.S. culture is providing challenges and opportunities for comparative literature programs and although our disciplinary strategies of engaging difference may be aligned inversely with the leveling effects of globalization, comparative strategies are nonetheless appropriate to the analysis of emerging patterns of global change.

There is another aspect of our disciplinary practice that may *not* be aligned usefully and that is our disciplinary dependence upon nation. National literatures and languages have long been the analytical units of our discipline, but the processes of globalization tend to detach cultural formations from national territories in ways that undermine the territorial coincidence of language, culture, and nation. This development involves the (re)conceptualization of space to which I have referred. Terms like "post-geographical" and "post-national," sprinkle discussions of globalization and there is virtual unanimity on this point: the ratios of local and global are no longer clearly fixed, and familiar distinctions between "here" and "there" are unstable, if not gone (if the recent coinage "glocal," combining local and global, seems unlikely to catch on, we can always recur the venerable term "cosmopolitan," combining "cosmos" and "polis," which John Stuart Mill coined in 1848 in his second volume of *Political Economy* to suggest the changing relations of local and global in his own time). In short, cultural spaces are increasingly mobile, volatile, virtual, fungible, and may now be close to becoming something like the opposite of the fixed spatial category of nation upon which comparatists continue to depend.

A moment of reflection on the ways in which the history of comparative literature as a discipline is tied to the conception of European nationhood will, I think, make clear the assault of globalization upon this particular area of our disciplinary practice. The nation state is a modern Western construction, of course, and as the basis of comparative literature it was first and foremost connected to language communities and to the cultures of those communities. This complex of ideas had its most most pertinent protagonist in Johann Gottfried Herder, to whom our most basic conceptions of national *identity* can be traced. Richard Taruskin provides a useful overview of Herder's argument in his article on musical vernaculars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and he begins with Herder's fundamental assumption that language is what distinguishes us from other animals and since language can only be learned in communities, it functions to form each community's specific contribution to world culture. When the concept of language is extended to cover other aspects of expressive behavior -- belief systems, dress, literature -- these cultural characteristics, too, can be understood in terms of a collective national spirit or personality. Over time, national cultural comes to be seen as a primary determinant of the individual's character and destiny.

Following Herder's conception of nation and national character, Taruskin points out that we may understand the history of nineteenth-century Europe as a progress toward the goal of having the political boundaries of nations coincide with the boundaries of language communities. If the Herderian ideal of the overlap of nation and language unified European countries in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century it generated aggression and intolerance as collective national

identities became increasingly reified. Be that as it may, the redrawing of the European map along Herderian lines continues, most recently in the separation of Slovakia from the Czech Republic and the breakup of the multinational/multilingual Yugoslav Federation, for example. Ironically, current processes of globalization may also conform to Herder's conception of linguistic nationalism in this way: the expansion of English-based electronic and mercantile cultures expands U.S. national territory, although the territory in question is now virtual.

This summary of Herder's ideas is intended to suggest the historical bases of comparative literature's disciplinary emphasis on significant differences among national cultures while at the same time it is also intended to suggest why this model may be less useful to us now than in the past. For one thing, the model has always excluded the Islamic world, in which nation is a sub-category of religion, states were defined by dynasties with shifting frontiers rather than as fixed national boundaries, and ethnic differences are subsumed under the presumptive sameness of religious culture. While I do not mean to say that there are no comparatists working on Islamic literatures and cultures, I do think that a more flexible set of spatial categories might encourage us to foreground cultural relations that are not territorially based, and furthermore, encourage us to amplify our comparative discussion of other world systems that precede or parallel modern Europe. Examples are Immanuel Wallerstein's influential discussion of "world systems" and Enrique Dussel's more recent elaborations of that model (see also Totosy <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/2/>>). Furthermore, several leading comparative literature journals point in this direction in special numbers devoted to the subject of globalization: what it is and how it operates in literature and the teaching of literature.

If, then, nation is the basic constituent part of what comparatists have taken to be the global whole, should we now consider adjusting the relationship of these parts to the whole? And how? Most universities have already seen some de-nationalizing adjustments in literary study: in ethnic studies programs, which focus on intra-national cultural relations; in area studies programs, where trans-national cultural relations are foremost; and in gender studies programs, which may well abandon territoriality altogether as a basis for comparative cultural analysis. Indeed, with hindsight we may even perceive the post-structuralist revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s as the beginning of the de-territorializing of literary analysis in favor of trans-territorial theoretical processes. Masao Miyoshi and others have written about the "decline of the nation state"; at best, they contemplate a diversification of spatial categories that offers us and our students new ways to think relationally.

Having said all of this, I should, perhaps, locate myself. I teach and write about a loose and baggy territory called *las Américas*, the Americas, and most often about the part of that category referred to as Latin America. This latter space includes nations, of course, but the demarcation is far more flexible because of its plural referent. The writers who inhabit this territory possess dual citizenship, for they are self-avowed "Latin American" writers at the same time that they are also Mexican, Argentine, Peruvian, or Cuban. In fact, they are often engaged deeply in describing their own national cultures and are far from ready to throw out the baby with the globalizing bathwater. Mexico is a particularly interesting case of the use of nation as a defense *against* the leveling pressures of globalization -- a nationalism of resistance, in Wallerstein's terms, rather than a nationalism of domination. For example, the much debated NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement -- or the TLC, *Tratado de Libre Comercio* -- opened Mexico's borders to American commercial onslaughts in the early 1990s, but in cultural matters, the treaty encodes a very different attitude. The Free Trade Agreement contains an Annex that provides special protection to Mexico's cultural industries. Some of its provisions are as follows: 1) The use of the Spanish language is required for the broadcast, cable or multipoint distribution system of radio and television, except when the Secretaría de Gobernación authorizes the use of another language; 2) A majority of the time of each day's live broadcast programs must feature Mexican nationals; 3) The use of the Spanish language or Spanish subtitles is required for advertising that is broadcast or otherwise distributed in the territory of Mexico; and 4) Thirty percent of screen time of every theatre, assessed on an annual basis, may be reserved for films produced by Mexican persons either within or outside the territory of Mexico (see North American Free Trade Agreement

<[www.sice.oas.org/trade/nafta.asp](http://www.sice.oas.org/trade/nafta.asp)>). I should also like to mention that it was Canada that insisted on cultural industry protection clauses in the North American Free Trade Agreement originally and the Canadian government achieved partial success, at best. In comparison, protections of cultural industries are common throughout the European Union: France passed recently legislation requiring that French radio stations devote forty percent of airtime to French music, and Spain also passed a law requiring that one-fourth to one-third of all movies shown in Spanish theaters to be of Spanish origin (see Carlson 585). England has long protected its movie industry: the great film director Michael Powell got his start, as did other British directors during the 1930s, making what were called *quota quickies*. So, even as I suggest that comparatists may want to review our nationalist institutional and disciplinary structures in the light of global mobilities, nations continue to protect their cultures against those same forces.

As a literary critic, surely my best source of information on "globalization" is literature and I hardly need to say that this subject is thematic in a great many works of contemporary Latin American fiction. In fact, Latin American literature includes a long tradition of cultural theorizing that addresses the nature and effects of cultural contact, and thus the processes of globalization *avant la lettre*. Since the first decades of the twentieth century, *indigenista* movements considered cultural (and racial) difference and contested the cultural homogeneity imposed by European and U.S. colonialism; *indigenismo* valorized indigenous traditions and practices, and reconstituted the question of cultural inclusiveness. The movement was led by the Peruvian intellectuals José Carlos Mariátegui and José María Arguedas, with related discussions of transculturation and national identity by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada in Argentina, Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, and Fernando Ortiz in Cuba. José Vasconcelos, more than his contemporaries, celebrated the process of cultural contact: racial *mestizaje* had its apotheosis in the 1920s in Vasconcelos's nationalistic concept of *la raza cósmica* ("the cosmic race"). Alejo Carpentier dramatizes this discussion: from his first novel in 1933 he recommends not that cultures struggle against colonialism to remain discrete in their differences, but, rather, that they recognize cultural otherness and embrace it. His formulation of the *neobarroco* or New World Baroque provides an overarching structure to incorporate European, African, and indigenous cultures into a shared Latin American identity. In his 1975 essay "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" ("The Baroque and the Marvelous Real"), Carpentier asks: "And why is Latin America the chosen territory of the baroque? Because all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque. The American baroque develops along with ... the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being criollo; and the criollo spirit is itself a baroque spirit" (Carpentier 100). Carpentier, and following him the Cuban writers José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy, understood the irony of engaging the Baroque forms of the Spanish colonizers to construct a post-colonial identity and they turned effectively the *neobarroco*, or New World Baroque, into an instrument of *contraconquista* (counterconquest). The Neobaroque is an aesthetics and ideology of inclusion by which Latin American and Latino artists have defined themselves *against* colonizing structures, and continue to do so.

Before Carpentier and in a more bibliographic mode, Jorge Luis Borges was also to argue that Latin American culture should be open to all influences. In his justly famous essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," he declares that "nuestro patrimonio es el universo" -- "our patrimony is the universe" (273 [Spanish], 185 [English]). This phrase summarizes Borges's advice to Argentine writers, and refers more generally to the on-going project of Latin American literary self-definition. Octavio Paz follows Borges in embracing all possible intellectual cultures and thus defining his own. Carlos Fuentes, following Paz, Borges, and Carpentier, makes transculturation the central theme of his fiction. His novels are Carpentierian in their ideology of cultural inclusiveness, Pazian in their understanding of Mexico as the first instance of planetary globalization, and Borgesian in their intellectual reach. Take, for example, his under-appreciated novel *Distant Relations*, published in 1981, which dramatizes the transcultural contacts between France and the Caribbean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a region still grounded in indigenous American cultures. A character in this novel is described by the narrator as having: "that quality so characteristic of cultured Latin Americans: the passion to know everything, to read everything, to give no quarter, no pretext, to the European, but also to know well what the European does not know and what he con-



siders his own, the *Popol Vuh* and Descartes. And, above all, to demonstrate to the European that there is no excuse not to know other cultures" (9-10). Beyond the individual's engagement of universal culture, this novel dramatizes the assumption that cultures are cumulative despite conquest, colonization, globalization and other disasters of suppression and appropriation: "All ancient peoples refuse to abandon the old ways in favor of the new; rather than being cast aside one after the other, some realities accumulate in a permanent accretion. When this happens, all things are living and present" (11).

Fuentes's fiction, like that of virtually all Latin American writers, depicts cultures that are indigenous and European and African, colonized and postcolonial, Western and otherwise: the ratios and quotients may vary from place to place and novel to novel, but the experience of transculturation does not. Fuentes was in Rio de Janeiro in March of 2001 at a conference with the intentionally oxymoronic title *Voces universales de la latinidad*; he, along with the Argentine Ernesto Sábato and the Uruguayan Augusto Roa Bastos, spoke about what the Mexico City newspaper *La Reforma* reported as "el futuro de la cultura latina en un mundo globalizado bajo la hegemonía de los valores anglosajones" / "the future of Latin culture in a world that is globalizing under the hegemony of Anglo Saxon values" (C4; my translation). From this phrase, the debate would seem to have been pre-decided, but Fuentes sounds quite a different note. Drawing a globalizing comparison, he states: "Así como los griegos sobrevivieron a través del helenismo en los tiempos de dominio del Imperio Romano, los latinos, con su rico imaginario, tal vez se tornen una isla de resistencia ante la estandarización impuesta por la cultura globalizada" / "As the Greeks survived the Hellenism of the Roman Empire, so Latin Americans, with our rich imaginary, may become an island of resistance against the standardization imposed by globalization" (*La Reforma* C4; my translation). If Latin America is an island, it is a well populated one, where many writers take as their subject the operations and outcomes of cultural contact.

There are, of course, writers who are less sanguine than Borges, Carpentier, or Fuentes, and who dramatize the fragility of Latin American culture when confronted with foreign incursions. I think of *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* by Manuel Puig and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Puig's 1968 autobiographical novel traces the impact of "Hollywood" during the 1940s on a small town, and a small boy, in provincial Argentina. Long before the term "globalization" was coined, the term "Hollywood" and its multiple adjectives -- *hollywoodista*, *hollywoodesco*, *hollywoodense* -- were the reigning metaphor for U.S. cultural imposition and, by extension, for social and economic inequities in the region. In *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, Puig indicts Hollywood's cultural imperialism and he also indicts Argentina's willingness to be colonized. Communal identity, he shows, cannot be established by imitation.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* was written the year before *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, in 1967, and it is a cautionary tale from beginning to end -- from the moment that the Roma (Gypsy) Melquíades arrives in Macondo with his gadgets to the invasion of the gringos and the ensuing banana company hurricane. Recall the scene in García Márquez's novel where the people of Macondo finally get fed up with cultural imports -- here, Hollywood is again at issue -- and they destroy the outdoor movie theatre that has recently been constructed:

Dazzled by so many marvelous inventions, the people of Macondo did not know where their amazement began. They stayed up all night looking at the pale electric bulbs fed by the plant that Aureliano Triste had brought back when the train made its second trip, and it took time and effort for them to grow accustomed to its obsessive toom-toom. They became indignant over the living images that the prosperous merchant Bruno Crespi projected in the theater with the lion-head ticket windows, for the character who had died and was buried in one film and for whose misfortune tears of affliction had been shed would reappear alive and transformed into an Arab in the next one. The audience, who paid two cents apiece to share the difficulties of the actors, would not tolerate that outlandish fraud and broke up the seats. The mayor, at the urging of Bruno Crespi, explained in a proclamation that the cinema was a machine of illusion that did not merit the emotional outbursts of the audience. With that discouraging explanation many felt that they had been the victims of some new and showy gypsy business and they decided not to return to the movies, considering that they already had too many troubles of their own to weep over the acted-out misfortunes of imaginary beings (García Márquez 211).

In this scene, García Márquez engages the same issue of communal identity as Puig, impugning sources of cultural self-definition that are imposed from outside and thus removed from the community's own experience of itself. His critique of this "new and showy gypsy business" does not imply that cultures should be closed entities (impossible, in any case) but that collective judgments must be exercised, as the residents of Macondo appear to be doing, at long last.

I want to refer to one final example, a novel that I consider the most self-conscious and complex treatments of this subject, Mario Vargas Llosa's 1987 work *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*). The novel is set in the fairly recent past in Perú; it condemns U.S. ecological barbarities in the Amazon region but its principal transcultural drama is an internal one involving a character whose name is Saúl, nicknamed Mascarita. This young man from Lima enters into the ancient culture of the Machiguengas, a nomadic indigenous group in the Amazon region, learns their stories and ultimately becomes one of their storytellers. Because the storytellers are the cultural glue of this fragile Prehispanic group, Mascarita's relation to the Machiguenga culture is treated with far more narrative concern than the devastating environmental impact of oil exploration in the region. In the novel, modernity does not overwhelm indigenous culture, but the reverse: Mascarita becomes the premodern other. The narrator, a writer living in Florence, contemplates retrospectively his friend's amazing cultural crossing:

Talking the way a storyteller talks means being able to feel and live in the very heart of that culture, means having penetrated its essence, reached the marrow of its history and mythology, given body to its taboos, images, ancestral desires, and terrors. It means being, in the most profound way possible, a rooted Machiguenga, one of that ancient lineage who ... roamed the forests of my country, bringing and bearing away those tales, lies, fictions, gossip, and jokes that make a community of that people of scattered beings, keeping alive among them the feeling of oneness, of constituting something fraternal and solid. That my friend Saúl gave up being all that he was and might have become so as to roam through the Amazonian jungle, for more than twenty years now, perpetuating against wind and tide -- and, above all, against the very concepts of modernity and progress -- the tradition of that invisible line of wandering storytellers, is something that memory now and again brings back to me, and ... it opens my heart more forcefully than fear or love has ever done (Vargas Llosa 244-45).

The final scene is of the narrator walking through the Piazza della Signoria of Florence, celebrating the profusion of cultural differences in "this colorful, youthful multitude. ... Caribbean maraca players and acrobats, Turkish ropewalkers, Moroccan fire-eaters, Spanish student serenaders, French mimes, American jazz musicians, Gypsy fortune-tellers, German guitarists, Hungarian flutists" (245). Here, Vargas Llosa reminds us that globalization cannot be reduced to American cultural imperialism, that global energies are now decentered and decentering in ways that cannot be reduced to one more narrative in which the U.S. is sole protagonist. Decisions about what a culture is, and what it should be, remain the province of those who live in those cultures, not those who would decide from a distance.

To conclude: the cultural specificity of literary fictions may serve as antidote to current processes of cultural homogenization, and to the *perception* of homogenization as propagated from critical centers in the U.S. and Europe. For it is surprising how little literary theorists of globalization refer to particular works of literature to ground their generalizations about the leveling of cultures. As intelligent as the discussions often are, they sometimes seem to me to reiterate familiar colonizing trajectories from U.S. and European academic centers to the peripheries: Latin America, Africa, Asia. This, I confess, worries me, for however we choose to structure (or re-structure) our approach to the new spaces of global culture, we will need to continue to direct our attention, and our students' attention, to the specificities of literary texts and their cultural contexts. We will, then, be prepared to measure the dialectics of difference in a world increasingly "globalized." This has always been the aim of the discipline of comparative literature and it continues to be so.

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