

Hermann Herlinghaus

On the concept figure of the Global South, and ecological narrative promises and deceits

1 Remarks on the “Global South”

Major parts of the discussion of World Literature deal with conceptual mapping. The metafigure of the map has led us to consider categories less as stable entities, and rather as moveable frameworks that help drawing transversal and yet recurrent links between distant imaginaries, and sometimes realities. What comes quickly to mind is Franco Moretti’s treatise *Graphs, Maps, Trees* and, above all, his critical remark that comparative literature, as a discipline, has not lived up to “its beginnings”, which he ties to Goethe and Marx (Moretti 2007). Comparative literature has “been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more” (Moretti 2013: 45). From an angle that does not take literature as its vantage point but the transnational and transregional constitution of new, ethno-geographically diverse spaces, experiences, and maps of imagination, Arjun Appadurai has suggested the figure of global ethnoscapes. Today, the “*ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality” (Appadurai 1996: 48–53).

The explorative term “Global South” proffers a major change in perspective, as it does regarding questions of status and legitimacy regarding unequal distribution and exchange, including the realms of narrative culture and criticism. The term has emerged in order to further make flexible the conundrum of the planetary, the regional, the local, and foreground paradoxes in contrast to previous “world system” models that talked of a core, a periphery and a semi-periphery. Although there has been an avid uptake of the term in many academic labels and conversations, its meaning is diverse. Caroline Levander and Walter D. Mignolo, among others, have attempted to set a mark by editing a special issue of the journal *Global South* entitled *The Global South and World Dis/Order* (2011) however, the contributions therein on literature are scarce. The preliminaries state their major interest in a “global southern grid”, prioritizing “South-to-South-networks that have the potential to engage decolonial forces of art, knowledge, ethics, politics, and creative practice” (Levander/Mignolo 2011: 1). In this case, the grid-like relationships with

Hermann Herlinghaus, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

the North appear as secondary, and the central regions (Central Europe, Central America, Central Asia) seem to be of less interest. This is, to an extent, understandable since North-South, as well as South-Central relationships are always implied: we are dealing with categories that have been historically constructed by modern discourses, politics, and economics. “East” and “West” are concepts that come from the Renaissance; “North” and “South” from the Enlightenment¹ (Levander/Mignolo 2011: 2). Once regions were classified, these classifications started acquiring a both symbolic and material force, and were applied across centuries.

There is another perspective, that of Djelal Kadir, who discusses World Literature in terms of convergence and sustainability, while maintaining a comparativist stake. Written, oral, cognitive texts from highly diverse spaces regularly converge within certain scenarios and at certain points of time. What converges are multiple fields of literatures, stories, and networks of their intersections. “The maximal convergence”, writes Kadir who is inspired by Erich Auerbach and Edward Said, “is called world literature” (Kadir 2011: 2). The other term, sustainability, refers to the privileged place of texts and textuality which are seen as keystones “for the sustainability of our cultural edifice” along the lines of memory, ethics, poetics and ekphrasis (Kadir 2011). In his book, *Memories from the Besieged City*, the author takes the figure of the “besieged city” as a lens for a globally oriented reflection about various authors and scenarios of writing (South and North), scenarios traversed by energies – says Kadir recalling Walter Benjamin – that labor to wrest memory away from comforting strategies of ruling discourses and interests. There are other important conceptual figures, such as “global narcoepics” that help to map heterogeneous ethico-narrative territories in their own right, in order to decenter as well as reformulate traditional North-South discourses (Herlinghaus 2013: 27-50). For an aesthetico-conceptual rethinking of narratives emerging around the Mexican-U.S. border, without prioritizing “high literature”, see for example the study, “Troposcapes of Imagination and the Figural Engagement of Border Crossing” (Herlinghaus 2009: 57–66).

It remains somewhat difficult to give a conclusive description of the Global South. One may, however, conceive of the Global South as a hermeneutic, conceptual and ethical lens that allows the strategic foregrounding of an experiential epistemology marked – to different degrees – by both present-time experiences of forced neoliberal adjustments and past-time layers of colonization and precarious, or heterogeneous modernities. “Heterogeneous modernity” is understood, in the first place, as markedly different from a normative modernity. The Global

¹ See also Mignolo (2011).

South is not an allegory, and it is not necessarily a referential mapping limited to southern territories. We are, rather, dealing with new spaces of reflexivity and self-consciousness, as they come connected to narrative and imaginary formations of surprising affective, as well as epistemic force.

A Global South-sensibility among writers, artists, and other intellectuals is not an entirely new phenomenon; the difficulty lies in the fact that modern categorial systems have for a long time barred, or closed the avenues that could allow for the translation of such sensibility into major concepts and segments of legitimate academic reflection. The relationships between writers with a Global-South sensitivity and particular aesthetic categories, or styles is not conclusive. Yet tendencies can be observed that require closer examination such as, for example, uncommon negotiations between newly emerging forces of epical writing and non-epical narrativization, or approaches of a global aesthetics of sobriety, by which I mean a consciousness of minimalism and simplicity among writers and artists in view of an overflowing universe of superfluous information, pathological media addiction, and languages of excess or waste that pertain to global commodity cultures.

Since Postcolonial Studies has achieved major standing, a principal interrogation resonates stronger than it once had. It is related to a major doubt: if Western philosophical and scientific traditions of reflexivity and self-reflexivity are the most suiting for comprehension and analysis today, or if they should be amplified and rethought with the help of more dialogic, as well as holistic (*ganzheitlich*) ways to make sense of the dilemmas of human beings in today's world, and their resonating genealogies of the immediate and distant past – whether dating back one year, 27 years, 500 years, 2000 years, or 5000 years.

With the Global South, contemporaneity turns most paradoxical and thought-provoking. Scenarios of, and sensitivities resonating with the Global South can be perceived as being more “contemporary” than the Global North (Herlinghaus 2013: 29–30). That can mean uneven or heterogeneous contemporaneity is appropriated or thought of as heightened contemporaneity. Whatever preference one might take, we think that the terms “decolonial imagination/ decolonial thinking” provide a necessary signpost. To speak of a “Global South” today, in decolonial terms implies a multiple awareness, taking into account (a) the (political and cultural) historicity of the concepts, (b) the particular epistemological and creative resources that emerge from de-centered experience and imagination, and (c) an ethically alert reflexivity regarding any kind of discourse construction that works with the major divisions, or dualisms invented by colonialism and perfected, as well as sublimized by, our hegemonic Western modernity.

2 Categorical irritations, abnormal interpretation

Let me evoke a few scenarios that may incite trouble at the interface of literary analysis and cultural understanding. “Translation” can work as de-localization, it can for instance allow for an interruption of a continuum of discourses, making visible moments of emergence, transformation and displacement of existing meanings. We might take the example of translation of the concept of “magical realism”. Let’s ponder, for a moment, its translation into concerns that characterize our situation today as literary theorists whose theoretical baggage has become highly paradoxical. Regarding Latin American magical realism, we can, on the one hand, look for a fairly unlimited chain of “magical realist” (re)narrations as they have spread across the world, including the United States, India and other parts of the globe. One might, on the other hand, shift perspective for a moment and remember that both Alejo Carpentier (“lo real maravilloso”) and Gabriel García Márquez (“lo mágico real”) had shaped their conceptual preferences in order to make a point about particular “poetics of reality” in Latin America. In other words, it is not enough and perhaps not even very original to look for “magical realist” writing styles on the basis of traditional categories of literary analysis. Rather, it seems interesting to reconsider (retranslate) the term so as to reflect on modes of perception of the “incredibly real”, one that is not possible to categorize as that which we know as the commonly real “with a positive content”, or then “real” that serves as the basis for a normative logics.

In order to illustrate the point let me briefly mention two literary texts from Colombia that have been belittled – by elements in literary criticism – as pseudo-sociological, or “too sociological”. Quite on the contrary, their innovativeness consisted in exploring and shaping documentary narratives to the point at which they seemed to dissolve the borders between anthropology and politics, as well as fiction and magic. I am referring to Alonso Salazar’s *No nacimos pa’ semilla* (1990) and *Pablo Escobar, auge y caída de un narcotraficante* (2001). At stake are the criteria with which we understand and judge literary projects that do not fit into commonplace academic denotations. A brief hypothesis, at this point, may simply state: *Pablo Escobar* written by Salazar is one of the most surprising magical realist books of the global present, not because of its style but owing to its narrative epistemology. This is to say, we are not referring to a portentous fabulosity, or oneiric talent, nor to particular synesthetic effects that can draw the reader headlong into the most astonishing peripeties; rather, the book calls for attention as “magical realist” because it defamiliarizes a mythifying public discourse, and Manichaeic media coverage that have turned the image of Escobar into the hyperbole of evil, while hiding crucial mechanisms at the governmental, juridical, economic, and geopolitical scale, which have contributed to nurture

and sustain, for more than a decade, the conundrum of “evil”. Wouldn’t it make sense to rethink magical realist narratives by attending, for example, to their power to demythify hegemonic narratives with the help of a variety of unconventional means including magical and fantastic elements²?

There is no doubt that Escobar’s history can be viewed as at least as compelling and “fabulous” as the genealogy of the entire Buendía family. It is common knowledge that “El Capo” was one of the biggest criminals, and also that big criminals tend to fail when they are not backed any more by existing major power networks. The demythifying effect of the book, together with its sober, almost notarial, slightly ironic style is paradoxically strong because it was neither by fortune, nor mere evil that Escobar could impose an informal state of exception on Colombian society for several years. With genealogical and ethnographic accuracy, including the use of a fantastic figure, Salazar turns into a chronicler of the most disconcerting facts and non-modern dynamics within the history of a modern political system, while focusing on Escobar’s trying to “re-write” twenty years of national and hemispheric destiny. The testimonial account on the narcotraficante is still a fictional text, its fictionality resting on the combinatory talent of the author, as well as on the invention of ghosts speaking for those witnesses that wanted to remain anonymous. It is also a matter of the defamiliarization of norms: the epic discovery and renarration of the life of the “Gran Capo” allows the capturing of the Baroque excess that marked Escobar’s life and death, while avoiding any hyperbolic expression on the linguistic and stylistic side. Epic writing and investigative accuracy are fused together. This way, the entire, improbable and unbelievable story can be brought forth as if it were pure fiction. “Magical realism” as deconstruction of a public mythical discourse, yet narrative reconstruction of a baroque setting brought about by an informal sovereign who sought to decide life and death in one of Latin America’s pathological arenas of global capitalism. The “disease” did not only lie in Escobar’s human nature, it was also rooted in an unbearable degree of social crisis and overall situation on the Western hemisphere.

I would like to use a second example in order to deliberately mistranslate a second concept – the concept of fantastic writing: *La virgen de los sicarios* by Fernando Vallejo (1994). Without doubt, Vallejo’s is one of the most hyperbolic, even transgressive narratives of contemporary literature – rhetorically, morally, politically, and aesthetically – from irony to satire to cynicism, and back. If we

² Here it is interesting to remember Walter Benjamin’s relevant remarks on how “minor narratives”, such as the fairy tale “meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits” (Benjamin 2002: 157).

submit it to an exercise in reduction, we might realize that, devoid of all its hyperbolic rhetoric, what remains is a sober story whose peripeties are nothing less than highly improbable (“*altamente inverosímil*”). Fernando, an elite intellectual (“*el último gramático de Colombia*”), and homosexual, returns, at advanced age, to Colombia from abroad in order to die in his country; the time is shortly after the death of Pablo Escobar. In the antediluvian (“*predeluvial*”) environment of an old friend’s chalet he receives an adolescent youth – “un sicario” who is also gay – as a “present”, together with whom he will endeavor to launch a vendetta of assassinations among Medellín’s civil population. When Alexis, the adolescent *sicario* is killed by another hitman, Fernando the “*gramático*” falls in love with his assassin, Wilmar, who will later be killed as well. After having played the role of his country’s violent Messiah, and miraculously not being held responsible for the assassinations that he inspired, Fernando decides to leave his country again, and the novel ends with a sarcastic remark directed to the reader. The mere story line, devoid of its hyperbolic rhetorical ornaments, would perfectly suit Jorge Luis Borges’ *Historia universal de la infamia*. It would allow for a sweeping fantastic tale, the difference being that Fernando is not a small criminal of modest social status but an elite intellectual. The rest of the story is fantastic literature in Borges’s framework: the improbable, “*lo inverosímil*”, is turned probable and narratively shaped as if it were self-evident. Here I am reading the concept of fantastic literature against the grain. My purpose is not to make Vallejo’s tremendous literary, and ethical provocation invisible but to raise a major doubt: are the categories of interpretation that are still in common usage suitable for these and other salient cases of literary stance taking from the “Hemispheric South”?

Here I present a third example for reflection: Roberto Bolaño and the ecological paradox. In what way might 2666 be read as an “ecological novel”? Nothing seems to point in that direction. The text is, in its Spanish version, over a thousand pages long; it repeatedly indulges in epic storytelling, and it displays the life lines of a large variety of characters. In what looks like a novel of excess, ecology is not a thematic issue, and in terms of language and composition reduction, minimalism, and the modest use of narrative resources seem unlikely to have been major criteria for writing. However, there is something to 2666 that lends the novel a profoundly antipsychological, notarial, and sober tone. I will discuss the “ecological” aspect in the final segments of this text.

My aim, by referring these three examples, is to offer test cases of “abnormal interpretation” (Herlinghaus 2013: 30–31). I am not suggesting a new kind of paradigm. The argument is that abnormal interpretation arises as a challenge at the point at which vital narratives and experiences that emerge from the Global South (Latin America, in the above cases) should not be contained any longer within the discursive logics of “qualified” criticism the way it has developed from

“normalized” lettered citizenship, or canonical representations in the centers of modernity. From the Global South there arise crucial impulses to rethink the normality of the normal, owing to modes, or *dispositifs* of globalized imaginaries, and identities that however, can or prefer not to lay claim to an “enlightened” cosmopolitanism or strictly subject-centered epistemologies, or even to a normative civility as a promise of good life. As it seems, we have to become aware of a *Global South Literary and Epistemological Sensorium* that is not properly “cosmopolitan” yet charged with uncommon features of worldliness.

3 Emergences – Challenges

Let me finally address a possible relationship between what Gregory Bateson called an *Ecology of Mind* and literary, as well as cultural interpretation (Bateson 1972). Bateson spoke of simple and yet paradoxical relations between spiritual health and disease, between the destruction of resources for sustained planetary human and non-human existence, and the chances for healthier, “ecologically” relevant modes of thinking and interpreting. We might not share Bateson’s bio-cybernetic hypotheses, but can still draw some considerations from his metaphorical concept.

Aristotle spoke of “*physis*” as existing reality and “*techné*” as the world created by human beings. Bateson names these two kinds of reality with the gnostic terms “*pleroma*” and “*creatura*”. *Creatura* is that part of living, organic nature which possesses consciousness, while *pleroma* is physical or inorganic nature. In his book *Mind and Nature*, he discusses them as interactive unity. *Creatura*, the world of spiritual processes is “both tautological (related to itself and constantly confirming itself) and ecological (interacting with a found environment)” (Bateson 1979). Bateson suggests, according to my interpretation, that a large segment of *creatura* – the human segment, so to speak – has become “tautological”. It shows a dynamic toward inner consistence of (logical) ideas and formalized (for example linguistic) representations, which circle around themselves. Here we can recognize the idea of a culture of consciousness that, fascinated and empowered by the consistence of its own truths and discursive orders (as in Michel Foucault) becomes tautological: repetitive, self-referential, and exclusionary. This culture of consciousness tends to become wasteful – *verschwendisch* – in that it obsessively legitimates the perpetuation of that which Bruno Latour called the modern labor of separation and purification: on the left knowledge and representation of things, on the right, politics and economy, and beneath both the so-called nature (Latour 1993: 20–21). At issue is the well-established autonomy of the sacred realms of Western modernity, which

allows the bringing of the sphere of consciousness – sublimely sustained by science and philosophy – into a self-referential spiral that circles vertiginously. However, the underlying situation of modern societies is outrightly hybrid; this is why Latour entitled his book *We Have Never Been Modern*.

I continue freely referring to Bateson here. There is, on the one hand, an obsessively creating, appropriating, ordering and accumulating mind that has become omnipotent, and which can be identified as the superlative, great moving force of a statistical, technological-military and economic high modernity. On the other, and paradoxically, the *creatura* of the human being has black holes in its consciousness, registers gaps of causality, and limits of both understanding and communication. The “gap of consciousness” is especially manifest in our analytical and interpretive thinking habits. Why? Because rational consciousness thinks of itself as a distinct subjective entity, or agency, and assumes that it corresponds to the center of the human brain, ignoring that the brain has powerful spheres that – in terms of life processes – regulate much more than the cortical cerebral spheres. I am alluding to the brain stem that is responsible for the autonomic body functions and nervous system, and the limbic system that actively partakes in the regulation of our emotional existence.

Taking this into account, Bateson speaks of a kind of immanent, permanently active and creative, and regulative “mind”; one that is not ego-driven, that is to say distanced from the environment. This is the other mind which, in biological and anthropological terms, is more relevant than the rationalizing and tendentially self-reflective supermind. The problematic relationships between both minds in modernity has been discussed with singular plasticity by Aldous Huxley in his essay “The Education of an Amphibian”. In sum, an *ecology of mind* addresses a realm of consciousness that is not merely focused on the “I”, the ego-driven part that strives for perfection, wasting of nature, and self-reference but considers a more heterogeneous mind that constantly incorporates flows of connectedness with other human beings and the environment on a non-instrumental basis. Here we might ask ourselves about the possibility to think of an ecology of literature as well. This would not necessarily mean, as I have tried to show, to search for another literature but for different approaches to literature.

To scrutinize (the concept of) world literatures today offers genuine resources for recognizing, or conceptualizing a literary consciousness that transcends the representational conventions of an individually subject-driven and divisive (in Latour’s sense) identity. This is not new, especially not for literature. For example, several perspectives have already pointed to the limits of the modern psychological, introspective, or obsessively self-reflexive novel. A significant Latin American case is Borges’s prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares’s novel *La invención de Morel* (1940). This short text adds to the reflections, and narratives in which Borges exemplifies his concept of fantastic narration in which paradox, reason and the completely

inverosímil constantly coexist. In other words, at issue is not an abandonment of consciousness novels but the question how seriously we venture to think of *different kinds* of consciousness novels. An interesting case that comes to mind is the novel *Plasma* (2005) created by the Chilean writer Guadalupe Santa Cruz, a masterwork of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “minor literature” (Deleuze/Guattari 1986: 16–17). It can teach us that an ecological narrative is not a text *about* ecology, the way it tends to be posited by the instrumental discourses of today’s societies, rather *Plasma* is inherently ecological in its way of poetically and linguistically capturing a flow of exchanges; we could say between *creatura* and *pleroma*. The storyline of this genuinely multilayered text: Rita, a marginal woman from the Chilean cordillera is turned into a victim by regional and local players of global economic adjustments of the country, because of her capacities to communicate somatically and spiritually with both living nature and the environment.

At this point, we can recall our previous thoughts on Roberto Bolaño. His overflowing novel *2666* can well be scrutinized for a kind of reflexivity that is neither explicit nor guided by ego-based affects. For example, the reader is (fictionally) acquainted with several characters who are European literary critics of high academic standing. These critics act on the basis of schooled erudition and well trained rational conventions. They are university professors that are very successful in their social systems of professional life but incapable of resolving the core questions that the narrative weaves together. Deeper “consciousness” is located elsewhere, not in one or the other character nor in a distinct narrative agency. “Consciousness” is immanent to the narrative process and the experiential realm in its fictionalized form. The ecological posture that traverses *2666* is a matter of deep skepticism regarding the possibilities of an individual, that is, a subject-centered hermeneutics of the world. Such hermeneutics, divided between instrumental and transcendental reason, cannot sensibly think about the forms of violence that a global modernity is producing, and facing today because it is located within a dualistic frame of rational versus irrational violence. To understand violence, different forms of rationality (scientific and experiential, ethnographic and ethical) need to coexist in non-autonomous ways, and interact with transrational epistemologies whose categories are still precarious, or not yet taken seriously. There is an immanent thread to Bolaño’s narrative, related to the question of how a new sustainability of ethical intellectual (ad)ventures in today’s highly uneven world can be imagined; one that is able to reunite creative independence (the artist) and academic expertise (the scholar). The implicit network of possible answers into which we as readers are drawn is accompanied by uncomfortable images, shocking signposts for reflection, and terse experiences that are located more often in the realm of bare life than that of qualified life. As an epistemological denominator keeps resonating, allow me to state it again, the skepticism regarding subject-centered, well-schooled and sublimely

modernized identities which strive for perfection and safety, but have unlearned how to listen to the very profound needs of sustainability and sobriety.

My aim with this short reflection was to argue that the narratives of heterogeneous descent discussed here, as well as others are not just calling for a more inclusive stance within the existing symbolic and institutional cultural fabric, they may well suggest notions of literature that are theoretically and anthropologically unfamiliar, and thus warrant different frameworks to be understood and taken seriously. One of the challenges inherent in this discussion is to rethink a notion of ecological literatures based on the way in which they emerge from the existential quests, narrative fantasies and epistemological needs of the Hemispheric South, or even the Global South.

Works cited

- Appadurai, Arjun (1996): *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bateson, Gregory (1979): *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: Dutton.
- (1972): *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing.
- Benjamin, Walter (2002): *Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935–1938*. Edit. by Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bolaño, Roberto (2004): *2666*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Félix (1986): *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Transl. by Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Herlinghaus, Hermann (2013): *Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- (2009): *Violence Without Guilt: Ethical Narratives From the Global South*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huxley, Aldous (1956): “The Education of an Amphibian”. In: *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, and Other Essays*. New York: Harper, pp. 1–32.
- Kadir, Djelal (2011): *Memos from the Besieged City: Lifelines for Cultural Sustainability*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Latour, Bruno (1993): *We Have Never Been Modern*. Transl. by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Levander, Caroline/Mignolo, Walter (2011): “Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order”. In: *The Global South*, 5, 1, pp. 1–11.
- Mignolo, Walter (2011): *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moretti, Franco (2013): *Distant Reading*. New York: Verso.
- (2007): *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. New York: Verso.
- Salazar, Alonso (2001): *Pablo Escobar, auge y caída de un narcotraficante*. Barcelona: Planeta.
- (1990): *No nacimos pa' semilla: la cultura de las bandas juveniles de Medellín*. Bogotá: CINEP.
- Vallejo, Fernando (1994): *La virgen de los sicarios*. Bogotá: Santillana.