Title
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Journal
TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 10(2)

ISSN
2154-1353

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Publication Date
2023

DOI
10.5070/T410261305

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Hagimoto (H).- Thank you so much for your time to do an interview with me. It's been a great pleasure and honor to help you as an interpreter during the faculty seminar at Wellesley College.[1] For this interview, I am interested in learning about your perspective on Latin American literature and culture.

Murakami (M).- My knowledge of Latin American literature is very limited, but I hope I can be helpful.

H.- First of all, when you think of Latin American literature, what comes to your mind?

M.- Well, I have been a reader and a translator of American literature for a very long time. In my opinion, American literature reached a deadlock in the mid 1960s with the rise of the counterculture. The previous literature supported by writers like Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner was somehow stalled. For me, it was at that time that Latin American literature emerged as an alternative.

H.- Which Latin American authors have you read?

M.- I have only read translations in Japanese, but my favorite authors are Gabriel García Márquez and Manuel Puig.

H.- May I ask you what attracted you?

M.- For García Márquez, I was absolutely blown away by the power of storytelling. I think American authors during that time were not able to write such a powerful story. Of course, Faulkner came close to that kind of writing, but there was no one who followed him in America.

H.- What did you like particularly about García Márquez's narrative style or voice?

M.- I liked the quality of his story. The way he attracted the reader with the story itself rather than through specific theme or style. I think his power of storytelling is shared by other Latin American writers, too.

H.- I just read your latest novel and was excited to see a reference to García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*.[2] What was your motivation to include this book?

M.- Well, I finished re-reading *Love in the Time of Cholera* while working on my novel. It was during the COVID pandemic, so the topic of contagious disease was extremely relevant. I've watched the movie too, by the way. I also enjoyed *Chronicles of a Death Foretold*, which is another film based on García Márquez's novel.

H.- What about Puig? What did you like about his writing?

M.- For Puig, it's more of a personal taste. It was his narrative style that I liked. The story itself was not that striking. Many of Puig's works deal with his personal concerns. He couldn't stand the mainstream culture of machismo in Argentina, so he created his own world, and that is what drew my attention. The first novel I read by Puig was *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*. I read it on a plane and immediately read it again because I loved it so much. I still remember how fascinated I was.

H.- Any other Latin American writers you've read?

M.- I've read quite a few, but it wasn't like I wanted to read the entire collection by a single author. Of course, I read Jorge Luis Borges, but not everything by him. I've also read some works by Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. These writers were popular before in Japan, but I don't know about now.

H.- We can say that Latin American literature never became part of the dominant literary culture in Japan, overshadowed by European and American canons.

M.- That's true. It wasn't like the French Nouveau Roman that was celebrated as an intellectual trend in Japan at some point in the past.

H.- Anything about Borges, Vargas Llosa, or Fuentes that you remember?

M.- Not much, but I enjoyed reading Vargas Llosa's *The Green House*. I think Latin American literature often deals with political themes. Isabel Allende, too.

H.- Do you think a political theme would influence the quality of a story?

M.- Of course, it's impossible to talk about García Márquez without mentioning his politics, but I think the politics itself is not a theme or motif in his work. As for Puig, there is also the feeling of anger and frustration against Argentina's militarism and state violence, but I don't think that's the central theme. It's the way people live under oppression that Puig wanted to describe in his story.

H.- Would you say you were influenced by any of these writers?

M.- Not really, but I was impressed by García Márquez's ability to tell a story. I told myself, "this is how a great story should be written." I still think my goal is to write such a powerful story that can inspire people.

H.- During the faculty seminar, you mentioned that you consider your literature "realism" and not "magical realism." Could you explain the difference?

M.- A lot of people in Europe or America categorize my work as "magical realism." I'm not saying that's a bad thing. In Latin America, though, I think people write about realism through folk tales because their stories are directly linked to their geographical or cultural "roots" (土壌). When Western society stopped believing in folklore, Latin American literature not only emerged as a shining example, but also gave new blood to American literature. Writers like John Irving, Thomas Pynchon, and Phillip Roth were certainly moving in that direction with the new blood, I think.

H.- You're saying Latin American literature brought American literature to a new level?

M.- I think so. It was revitalized. Without any model or example to follow, it's difficult to move forward. American writers saw a different possibility in Latin American literature.

H.- You mentioned people's "roots." Do you think that has an important effect on a writer?

M.- Absolutely. For example, I grew up in a quiet neighborhood in the Kansai area with an ordinary family, so that environment is definitely shown in my work. Kenji Nakagami had a different upbringing (born in a small mountain town in the Kinki area), so his writing is very distinct from mine. The only thing we can do as writers is to create literature based on our own individual "roots," but I think these differences can complement each other too.

H.- I want to return to the difference between "magical realism" and "realism." Can you tell me a bit more about your perspective on "realism"?

M.- Well, I'm no expert on the subject, but in Japan "realism" is often associated with the "I-novel" genre. I don't like this genre at all. I think I'm allergic to it. Rather than the individual reflected in the "I-novel," my approach to "realism" is through universal human consciousness. In this sense, my literature is a little different from Latin American literature, as well. While Latin America's magical realism is rooted in its native traditions, the elements of "magic" in my work stem from the psyche or unconsciousness. In my new book, for example, the "wall" is an important symbol and can be understood as a boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness. But I'm not interested in psychoanalysis. I don't like to *explain* the human psyche. Instead, I want to translate unconsciousness into fiction, which I believe would allow me to connect with my readers on a deeper level. It is my understanding that in Latin America this "connection" between the writer and the reader is made possible through shared stories within their community.

H.- We've talked about Latin American literature, but how about music? Do you listen to any music from Latin America?

M.- Yes, I especially enjoy Bossa Nova. Unlike samba, bossa nova is not the kind of music to dance with because it represents asymmetry. It was first developed by the middle and upper-class intellectuals

in Brazil before reaching American soil in the 1960s and becoming popular here. The music eventually returned to Brazil and rediscovered its roots. Today bossa nova is considered part of the country's autochthonous culture as well as having considerable influence on Western music, such as American jazz. As you know, Antônio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto are the pioneers of bossa nova music. While Gilberto always sang in Portuguese, Jobim was more open to translating his lyrics into English in order to make bossa nova more universal. So, there were these two separate movements. I think this is a tendency that can be seen across Latin America. For example, Junot Díaz writes in English but can be considered a Latin American writer. I find it really interesting.

H.- That's true. We can say that Latin America has long been close to the United States, with its immigrant history and its rich cultural influence.

M.- Yes, many immigrants from Cuba, too. I liked Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. That was also written in English.

H.- Regarding music, you mentioned in a previous interview that you write a novel like how you play music. Can you explain what you mean by that?

M.- Well, I never officially learned how to be a writer but I always listened to music. So, I feel like I'm translating some methodology of music into literature. For me, the essential aspect of writing is rhythm. No one would read a sentence without rhythm. I always try to maintain rhythmic fluidity in my writing because I believe that truth lies in movement, never in a static condition. In Latin American literature, even though I don't read them in the original Spanish, I think there is an element of rhythm, the rhythm of the roots.

H.- As a Japanese writer, are you conscious of the musical rhythm of your own country?

M.- Not really. I've been a fan of jazz and rock & roll, but I don't really know much about Japanese music. I don't even like *enka* (a traditional music genre in Japan).

H.- I've also read in your essay that you never had the aspiration to be a fiction writer in the beginning. And that you were surprised that your fame has become worldwide.

M.- Yes, it feels strange to me. I feel like this is someone else's story.

H.- Is it true that you rarely do an interview in Japan but you are more willing to accept an offer when you're abroad?

M.- When I'm in a foreign country, I feel a sense of responsibility as a Japanese writer to speak in public, to represent my country.

H.- Speaking of travel, I know you visited Ecuador before. How was it?

M.- I loved the Galapagos. I didn't know there were iguanas that could swim in the water! That was impressive. They can no longer find food on the island, so they have to go into the ocean in search of seaweed. It's amazing how these iguanas have evolved over time and now they can swim for two hours without breathing.

H.- Did you give a talk in Ecuador?

M.- Yes, it was amazing. There were like 2,000 people in the audience. That day someone was supposed to translate my Japanese into Spanish. Suddenly, I was told that the translator couldn't be there. I had to translate my speech into English so someone else could translate it into Spanish! That was a surprise. I also remember that I had three bodyguards following me around because of safety issues. That made me pretty nervous. The same thing happened during my visit to Israel.

H.- Have you been to any other countries in Latin America?

M.- I once took a bus trip by myself around Mexico for almost two weeks. It was an interesting experience. I saw some dead bodies on the mountainside. At some point during the bus ride, armed police officers came into the vehicle to make sure that the passengers were safe against a possible attack by bandits. A few years later I learned that there was a revolt by indigenous people in that area. But the people there were so nice and friendly. Coming from Japan, I was surprised to see so much economic disparity.

H.- Going back to your writing style, I've read in an interview that you described your writing as a "cave style." I was wondering if you could explain that term.

M.- Well, long ago when we were all living in caves, we used to build a fire or sing songs at night staying inside those caves to avoid the cold weather or dangerous animals. There was always someone in the group who was a great storyteller, kind of like Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna*. Someone, maybe with a nice voice, who was good at entertaining everyone with simple stories. That's just what I want to do: to tell a good story. If the reader finds a deep meaning or some life lesson through my story, that's even better. I also want my story to be warm and welcoming, like the fire people used to enjoy in those caves. In any case, I believe that fiction should always be entertaining. Basically, my image of a writer is a good storyteller in the cave. To be honest, if Jean-Paul Sartre is telling a story in a cave, I will find it kind of boring! Of course, his writing is interesting in its own way, but my understanding of literature should first and foremost be able to draw people in. If you have the power to entertain people, then you should use that power to do something great, something meaningful in life. It's impossible to convey a message if you don't know how to attract people's attention. In Latin American literature, based on my limited knowledge of the field, I think there is a narrative voice that is very unique. One that is capable of moving people's hearts, which may be related to the communal characteristic of Latin American societies. A tribe always has a good storyteller in their group.

H.- When you say "communal characteristic," do you mean identity as well?

M.- I think so. Rather than addressing the entire world, Latin America's storytellers would speak to their "tribes" or communities, in my opinion.

H.- When you are writing, do you have your own "tribe" or a group of readers in mind?

M.- I don't really think about that, but interestingly there seems to be a "tribe" that likes to read my literature. I know those people exist, but I don't know who they are. Nor am I interested in marketing. I can only believe that there are people out there who are waiting to read what I produce. Now it looks like my "tribe" has gone global. I mentioned earlier that I feel a sense of responsibility as a Japanese writer. For example, people read my work in China or Korea where the anti-Japanese sentiment

remains strong. Despite such a feeling of hatred, if some people in China or Korea would enjoy reading my books, I think that means something. The power of a single individual can be quite significant.

H.- Lastly, one of the characters in your new book talks about the idea of "inheritance" or "succession" (継承) being the opportunity to "present the possibility of a new future." Could you explain what you wanted to say?

M.- Now that I'm in my mid-70s, I've been thinking about this idea in general. It's not like I have a "successor" in mind or anything, but I think it's an important concept. I've decided that I will donate all my personal belongings (books, translations, records, etc.) to Waseda University.[3] I hope future generations will find these resources useful. Also, when I started doing full marathons over 40 years ago, many people made fun of me saying how strange it was for a professional writer to run a marathon. They thought it would end my career. Most writers before me, like Kenji Nakagami, were dedicated to literature in both professional and personal ways. But I've always felt comfortable being an "atypical" writer having an "ordinary" life outside of my literary career. These days it's rather normal for a writer to run a marathon or do something else, so I think the idea of what it means to be a writer has changed over time. There is more freedom now. I would be very happy if some people had discovered in my lifestyle an example—a different model of being a writer—, regardless of their preference for my work. It is my fundamental belief that a good story is universal and can be enjoyed by everyone around the world. A writer must keep writing a good story without being afraid of criticism.

H.- Well, thank you so much for spending time with me and for sharing your insights. It's been a great honor to talk to you about Latin American literature and much more.

M.- Thank you.

Notes

[1] Haruki Murakami was the Mary L. Cornille Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities at Wellesley College during Spring 2023.

[2] His new book, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (街とその不確かな壁), was published in Japan in April 2023.

[3] The Waseda International House of Literature, aka "The Haruki Murakami Library," was established in 2021 to preserve all of his valuable materials.