

Brantley Nicholson, *The Aesthetic Border: Colombian Literature in the Face of Globalization*

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In his new book, *The Aesthetic Border: Colombian Literature in the Face of Globalization*, Brantley Nicholson gives his readers a comprehensive view of Colombia's turbulent encounters with globalization as reflected through literature. He calls literature a "hologram" of the two Colombian entrances into globalization through the coffee and narcotics boom of the mid-20th and late 20th century, respectively. Two prominent writers bookend the literary period he studies, Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Gabriel Vásquez (b. 1973) (Nicholson, 1). As Nicholson says, Colombia has been the space of one of the most "tumultuous entrances into globalization," making it an excellent case study for this book (1).

In his attention to the second half of the 20th century to the present, Nicholson contributes two main concepts to help analyze Colombian literature: the aesthetic border and literature of national reconstitution. On the one hand, the aesthetic border refers to "the place where multiple forms of systematic and institutionally buttressed perception converge" (2). On the other hand, literature of national reconstitution "grapples with the literary clichés it built up over the previous century" (2). The second concept is helpful because Nicholson illustrates the aesthetic border by placing Juan Gabriel Vásquez and his most famous novel, *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011), within this literary current. Vásquez balances the large literary shadow that Gabo's canonical *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and the narco-novels of the late 20th century, such as Fernando Vallejo's *La Virgen de los sicarios* (1994), cast on the 21st century (13). Nicholson argues that *The Sound* is the first novel in Colombian literature to attempt to represent the post-Pablo Escobar period, which he sees as its innovation.

The Aesthetic Border comprises four chapters, which build upon each other to show the direct relationship between socio-politics and literature in Colombia. Chapter 1, "Gabo Against the World," examines what the author deems "the Gabo paradox." The paradox is that García Márquez attempted to re-write the Colombian national story using Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a stand-in for Colombia, and Colombia as a stand-in for the world, thus symbolizing Colombia's entrance into the modern world, a form of early

globalization. The novel fuses the local and rural Colombia with the global by placing Macondo within the larger history of humanity as if it were the Biblical Eden (19-20). Chapter 2, "Literary Shipwrecks: Colombian Aesthetic Citizenship After García Márquez," discusses the enormous shadow that Gabo cast on future Colombian and Latin American authors by becoming the literary face of Colombia and Latin America (39-41). Nicholson examines post-Gabo authors such as Fernando Vallejo, Héctor Abad Faciolince, Jorge Franco, and Mario Mendoza and their works. He argues that these authors are heirs to the *novelas de la Violencia*—novels written about the bloody, partisan, conflict-ridden period of the 1940s-1960s—reincarnated as gritty urban novels, as opposed to Gabo's rural, magical realist literary settings (42, 49). Chapter 3, "Narrating Disruption: From the *Novela de la Violencia* to the Narco-*Novela*," analyzes the formal characteristics of *novelas de la Violencia* and their influence on the more recent urban novels and narco-novels such as *La Virgen de los sicarios*, *Rosario Tijeras* (Jorge Franco, 1999), *Delirio* (Laura Restrepo, 2004) and *No nacimos pa' semilla* (Alonso Salazar, 1990), which are set in urban spaces (77). Because these novels deal with drug trafficking and anomie or lawlessness through *sicario/as* and narco characters, they represent Colombia's next brush with globalization through the cocaine boom (80). The fourth and final chapter, "Recasting the Colombian National Culture after the Inrush of the World," is about Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Colombia's current rising literary star. Like Gabo, Vásquez exhibits many paradoxes in his life and work, including his "desire to write national novels from outside of Colombia," which sets him apart from his Generation X cohort in an era of post-national literature (95). Nicholson analyzes two of Vásquez's novels, *The Sound of Things Falling* (2011) and *The Informers* (2009), highlighting that the former "marks a moment of national reconciliation at a time when the theoretical world is conceived as post-national" (113). In *The Sound*, the nation reconciles with and works through the trauma of the Pablo Escobar years while dealing with Gabo's literary legacy.

Nicholson nicely achieves his goal of analyzing the relationship between literature and globalization in Colombia. He clearly and effectively traces the currents in its national

literature from the second half of the twentieth century until today and their aesthetic responses to different stages of globalization. The idea of troubled development that *The Aesthetic Border* posits dialogues well with Jean Franco's seminal book, *Cruel Modernity* (2013), by focusing only on Colombia. The prose is smooth and easy to read and provides brilliant textual examples and analysis. Nicholson also poses several excellent questions throughout the book that intrigue the reader. Although *The Sound* is a post-Escobar novel, can it still be a narco-novel, given the prevalence of drug trafficking and its effects on the plot? The author's choice to include Vásquez as a bookend to Gabo was astute since he is a younger, award-winning, and emerging author.

The Aesthetic Border is timely since it points out that Colombia might enter a third wave of cultural globalization due to the world's increasing interest in its literature and cultural expressions. Nicholson cites visible cultural examples such as the artists J. Balvín, *Narcos*—the controversial Netflix series—, and Pablo Montoya's *Tríptico de la infamia* winning the 2015 Rómulo Gallegos Literary Prize (14). I would add the successful Disney movie, *Encanto* (2021), to this list of increased cultural interest in Colombia. Nicholson's book is fantastic for professors, graduate students, and advanced undergraduate students of contemporary Latin American literature and culture. It is a must-read for Colombianists. I will be citing this book for my own projects.