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## **Review / Reseña**

Adam Lifshey. *The Magellan Fallacy: Globalization and the Emergence of Asian and African Literature in Spanish*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2012.

### **A Gesture Towards a “Global Hispanism”?**

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Adam Lifshey’s 2012 book, *The Magellan Fallacy: Globalization and the Emergence of Asian and African Literature in Spanish*, has been something of an event in the normally staid precincts of peninsular Hispanism—perhaps less so in literary Latin Americanism, which had much earlier and more eagerly embraced the postcolonial turn. One of the central aims of the book is to break up the consolidation of the field of Hispanophone literary and cultural studies around the binary Spain/ Latin America. There have been since at least the end of the 1990s gestures towards an “Atlantic” critical perspective that embraces both Spain and Latin America (though usually not Africa), and, more recently, an interest in the “Pacific” and Asian dimension of Spain’s and Portugal’s empires (mainly the Philippines, but also the Antarctic and South Pacific, and South Asia). But Lifshey clearly wants to go beyond both of these projects for reformulating the field—hence his emphasis on “globality,” both in the

present, as in the current use of the word to designate a new stage of capitalism, but also in the founding moments of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, represented for him by the story of Magellan and his untimely death at the hands of an indigenous tribe on one of the main islands of what is today the Philippines.

*The Magellan Fallacy* studies two groups of modern but relatively unknown novels and collections of stories in Spanish—one from the Philippines itself, dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to roughly 1945, when for all practical purposes Philippine literature in Spanish comes to an end; the second from around 1985, when a series of novels in Spanish begin to appear in the former Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea. The individual chapters involve close readings of these novels and stories, sustained by a prodigious and often intricate supporting scholarship (the texts are themselves often unstable entities, existing in multiple versions, and in one case simply as an unpublished, yellowing typescript in the archives).

The underlying argument seems similar to that of the idea of “minor literature” proposed by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze—that is, of literature written in the language and in relation to the canon of a “major” literature, but from a somewhat askew position: the case of Kafka—a Czech Jew—in relation to German literature, for example, or of Joyce in relation to English literature. The “major” literature involved in *The Magellan Fallacy* is not only canonic Spanish literature from the Golden Age onwards; it is also Latin American literature and literary criticism as such (in the same way, for example, that indigenous literature in Spanish could be said to act as a “minor literature” in Latin America). (Lifshey does not himself make the connection with the idea of “minor literature”, but I find it useful for thinking about his work).

Lifshey’s central metaphor, expressed in his title, is the “Magellan fallacy”—that is, the claim that any one point of view or narrative can master all the circumstances involved in colonial and postcolonial encounters. As he notes in his introduction, “The Magellan fallacy is the conviction that captains can control the consequences of globalization. They cannot. Narrations of the world are always written with one intent of

domination or another, yet all elude the command of their navigators, they who are authors and readers alike” (1).

This makes Lifshey’s book in a way a response to Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions*, a book that strongly influenced the field of Latin American literary studies in the US academy during the 1990s. Sommer showed how novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America constructed allegories of the newly formed or about to be formed Latin American nation-states. They did this by marshalling into a hegemonic unity, usually around the device of a love story (the erotic desire underlying the love story was itself, Sommer argued, cathected with the desire of nationhood), heterogeneous elements of what was or could be the national. In the spirit of his title, Lifshey’s readings appear to involve just the opposite: that is, how these Philippine and Guinean novels and stories *fail* to produce a coherent or hegemonic sense of the national, how they are texts marked by confusion, ambiguity, and ultimately literary and ideological failure (I say *appear* to involve just the opposite, because in fact the distance from Sommer may not be so great, especially in the case of Sommer’s treatment of the Colombian novel *María*). It is that failure, like Magellan’s, which makes them for Lifshey avatars of a “global” sense of literature.

While this argument coincides in significant ways with the postcolonial turn in literary criticism, which dates from the mid-1980s or so, Lifshey does not dialogue much (apart from a passing mention of Edward Said) with representatives of postcolonial criticism as such: for example, Walter D. Mignolo, who has a series of well-known books on the dialectic of the local and the global in colonial situations; or Homi Bhabha and his idea of “colonial mimicry”; or Gayatri Spivak on the presence of the colonial in English novels and modern Indian literature; or, in a more conventionally Marxist frame, Epifanio San Juan’s work on Philippine and Philippine-American modern literature; or (to mention one of many possible titles in the field of Latin American criticism in particular) Gonzalo Lamana’s book *Domination without Dominance* (2008), on the dialectic between conquerors and conquered in the conquest of Peru. This is perhaps because Lifshey feels a “tension” (his own word) in his relation with postcolonial criticism. The nature of this tension is never spelled out

thoroughly, but I gather it has to do with his sense that postcolonial criticism runs the risk of essentializing difference, whereas his aim is to show the complexity and contiguity involved in both colonial and postcolonial globalization. But I think this is an oversight: to borrow his own master trope, it makes it look like Lifshy is, like Magellan, “discovering” for us a discursive territory and problematic that in fact he shares with many others.

Lifshy has previously published a novel (which I have not read) related to many of the themes in *The Magellan Fallacy*, and one senses a decidedly “literary” bent in his writing, if I may put it that way. This produces a prose that is more vivid, less choked with theory, more elastic and playful than is usual in academic criticism. The novels and stories he deals with are not only “texts” but also in a way “characters”—this is the case in particular of Pedro Paterno, the subject of chapter one and part of chapter two, the first of the several Philippine authors taken up in the book and a figure Lifshy has written about extensively in his previous work. On the other hand, one notes as a reader a penchant for literary leitmotifs (beginning with the repeated trope of the Magellan story itself), neologisms, plays on words, and striking turns of phrase that can become a bit trying.

This combination of “creative writing” and literary scholarship and criticism may be part and parcel of the deconstructive urge that seems to animate this book. Many of the individual chapters are, by themselves, original and fascinating, and would make (or in fact derive from) fine essays. The section on modern novels and stories from Equatorial Guinea, rendered against the background of a deeply flawed postcolonial nation-state project, builds compellingly on the work of Marvin Lewis in this area. On the other hand, the book seems less than the sum of its parts. That feeling undermines, to my way of thinking, its most compelling theoretical claim: the need to develop a global Hispanism, or to think of Hispanophone literature and culture globally, both in the present and the past. One has at the end the sensation that the book, despite its many moments of brilliance and complexity, is like an airplane that cannot quite take off, perhaps because it is too heavily laden.

In the aspiration to a “global” (or transnational) sense of Hispanism, there are some points in common between Lifshy’s book and Koichi Hagimoto’s more recent *Between Empires: Martí, Rizal, and the Intercolonial Alliance* (2013), linking at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the figures of the Cuban writer José Martí and Rizal, the center of the canon of modern Philippine literature and a major topic in *The Magellan Fallacy*. However, Hagimoto locates his study in a late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial and anti-imperialist nationalist framework, influenced in this by the work of the late, great Benedict Anderson, whereas Lifshy seems to want to transcend the framework of national liberation struggle in some ways (in other words, of the two, Lifshy is the more “postmodernist”).

Though it should be evident from the above that I have some reservations about *The Magellan Fallacy*, there is no question that it is an ambitious and challenging book that will have an impact on the fields of Spanish and Latin American literature, and more broadly on what has come to be known as World or Global Literature. The massive and patient scholarship that it involves (which produces among other things many fascinating footnotes); the ambition to wrench the field away from time-worn strictures of territoriality; the obvious love for the Philippines and for old and forgotten, or new but hardly read texts; the reminder that modern Spanish literature has a significant African dimension; above all the timely, indeed long overdue, gesture towards a “Global Hispanism” and the discussion of some of the possible consequences for our field of embracing this view (mainly in the concluding chapter)—all of this is admirable, and makes *The Magellan Fallacy* a necessary point of reference for our field or fields today.