

INTRODUCTION:  
CULTURE AND POLITICS IN THE  
IMAGINARIES OF GLOBALIZATION

Sometimes we come across eloquent stories from writers whom we would rather not cite. A few months ago I read this story by Philippe Sollers: “Two plus two equals six, says the tyrant. Two plus two equals five, says the moderate tyrant. The heroic individual who remembers, with all its risks and dangers, that two plus two equals four, is told by the police: You don’t really want to return to the times when two plus two equaled four.”

You wouldn’t want to return to the times of the dictatorships and the guerrillas, say the politicians. Nor would you want to return to the years of hyperinflation, warn the economists. At the same time, we wonder how much clout can be gained by the countries seeking regional integration in order to protect themselves from globalization in the new world disorder: the United States with Europe against Japan and China, the United States with Latin America so that the Europeans do not appropriate the Latin American market. In the meantime we Latin Americans have established free trade agreements among

ourselves, peering warily outside the region to attract North American, European, and sometimes Asian capital.

The United States has been pushing, with the support of some Latin American governments, the signing of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) by 2005. The fifteen countries that compose the European Union have been meeting with the countries of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and Mexico, and as of June 1999 with the rest of Latin American countries, to study the possibility of reaching a free trade agreement with some of them before 2005, possibly as early as 2001. This, despite the resistance of the French, who see Latin American competition in agriculture as a threat. The United States periodically accuses Mexico and European countries of dumping or protectionism. In the Mercosur countries, disagreements and suspicions threaten treaties each year. What's at stake: Free trade, integration? New forms of subordination or resistance, or regional alliances? Can citizens consider alternatives to prevailing arrangements and decide what would work better, without taking into account intercultural ties? Old histories of rivalries and prejudiced viewpoints burden these conversations about a future that is more imagined than actually possible.

It isn't easy to bring these agreements down to earth with statistics because accounting practices are faulty. In the past twenty years the external debt of Latin American countries has quadrupled or even sextupled. What can nations like Argentina and Mexico do with debts of \$120 or \$160 billion if just paying the interest each year requires half or more of the GDP?<sup>1</sup> U.S. foreign debt (three times larger) is also unpayable.<sup>2</sup> Who can understand at the level

1. Argentina defaulted in December 2001, after the IMF refused to extend further loans due to difficulty in paying burgeoning debt resulting from the adoption of excessive neoliberal policies, including an untenable convertibility between the peso and the dollar, prescribed by that very same IMF. The government had frozen bank accounts and appropriated pension funds in a desperate attempt to make debt payments without devaluing its currency, but riots brought down the government, and in the next two weeks Argentina went through five presidents. Three years later, Larry Rohter wrote in the *New York Times*, "Doomsday predictions abounded. Unless it adopted orthodox economic policies and quickly cut a deal with its foreign creditors, hyperinflation would surely follow, the peso would become worthless, investment and foreign reserves would vanish and any prospect of growth would be strangled. . . . Instead, the economy has grown by 8 percent for two consecutive years, exports have zoomed, the currency is stable, investors are gradually returning and unemployment has eased from record highs—all without a debt settlement or the standard measures required by the International Monetary Fund for its approval." Larry Rohter, "Argentina's Economic Rally Defies Forecasts," *New York Times*, December 26, 2004, accessed December 21, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/26/international/americas/26argent.html>. [Trans.]

2. U.S. debt was substantially more, about \$5.8 trillion, at the end of 1999 (Treasury Direct 2011b). As of December 22, 2011, it was \$15.124 trillion (Treasury Direct 2011a). [Trans.]

of everyday life the numbers that one reads in the newspaper? To think about politics requires imagination, although the statistics are so disproportionate and the conflicts they provoke so barely manageable that they often paralyze our imaginaries.

It is curious that this dispute of all against all, in which factories go bankrupt, jobs disappear, and mass migration and interethnic and regional conflicts increase would be called globalization. It's curious that businesspeople and politicians would interpret globalization as the convergence of humanity toward a future of solidarity, while many critics read this painful transformation as a process that will homogenize us all.

### *Circular and Tangential Globalizations*

Despite these dubious results, a uniform planetary market is celebrated as the only way of thinking, and those who insinuate that the world can move in another direction are disqualified as nostalgic for nationalism. If someone even more daring questions not only the benefits of globalization but the premise that the only means to attain it is trade liberalization, he or she will be accused of wistfully yearning for an era before the toppling of an unbearable wall. Since no sensible person believes a return to those times is possible, it is concluded that capitalism is the only possible model for human interaction and that globalization is its inevitable and superior result.

This book seeks to find out what those of us who work on culture can do in the face of this future, which is promising for some and stifling for others. That is, what questions does interculturality pose regarding the market and globalization's frontiers? At stake now is rethinking how to make art, culture, and communication. If from the purview of culture we examine the shifting relations between Europe, the United States, and Latin America, we may be able to act differently from those who see globalization as an exclusively economic exchange.

The first point that must be clarified is that culture is not only that place in which one knows that two plus two equals four. Culture is also an indeterminate vantage point from which one imagines what to do with statistics whose significance is not very clear, whose cumulative and expressive potential has yet to be discovered. One cultural sector produces knowledge that makes it possible to affirm, in no uncertain terms and against political and ecclesiastic powers, that two plus two equals four: knowledge has made it possible to understand "the real" with a certain objectivity, to develop globalized communication technologies, to measure the culture industries' consumption

and to design media programs that increase mass knowledge and create social consensus. Since the onset of modernity, another part of culture has developed through dissatisfaction with the disorder, and sometimes the order, of the world; in addition to knowing and planning, this tendency seeks to transform and innovate.

To come to terms with these two ways of understanding culture, which pit scientists and technologists on one side and humanists and artistic creators on the other, is a different venture in times of globalization.<sup>3</sup> To know what one can understand and manage and what it makes sense to modify and create, scientists and artists have to deal not only with patrons, politicians, or institutions but also with a pervasive power that hides behind the name of globalization. It is said that globalization functions through institutional structures, organizations of every scale, and markets with material and symbolic goods ever more difficult to identify and control than when economies, communications, and the arts operated solely within national horizons. Nowadays it is hard for David to find Goliath.

To understand this complexity, those of us who study creativity, circulation, and cultural consumption increasingly dedicate ourselves to understanding hard data, the “objective” socioeconomic processes that govern scientific and artistic markets, as well as our unstable everyday lives. Nevertheless, given that globalization is an evasive and unmanageable process, its managers also account for it with narratives and metaphors. Hence, from a socioanthropological perspective on culture, it is essential to work with statistics and conceptual texts, as well as the stories and images that attempt to name globalization’s designs. Moreover the turmoil experienced in migration, ineffective borders, and travel evinces the fractures and segregations of globalization. This is also why stories by migrants and exiles are replete with such narratives and metaphors.

A similar uncertainty destabilizes other social actors who are not usually interested in culture. After the euphoria over globalization in the 1980s, politicians (who do not realize how their role is restructured when national bureaucracies control ever fewer spaces in the economy and society) now ask themselves what they can do and where. Businesspeople, disconcerted by the brusque shift from a productive to a speculative economy, formulate similar questions. Both invoke the need to create a new culture of work, consumption, investment, publicity, and administration of information and communications

3. García Canclini is referring to social scientists and not natural scientists. The Spanish *ciencia*, like the German *Wissenschaft*, has a wider meaning than *science* in English and includes the social sciences and sometimes even the humanities. [Trans.]

media. Hearing them, one gets the impression that they call upon culture as an emergency resource, as if “to create a new culture” could magically give order to what escapes from the economy in terms of work and investment, compensate for what competition cannot achieve in the domain of the media or consumption.

The call to construct a culture out of these globalizing processes can also be understood as a way of establishing order among conflicting imaginaries. How we imagine globalization varies: for the CEOs of transnational corporations, *globalization* principally encompasses the countries where their businesses operate, the activities they engage in, and competition with other companies; for Latin American rulers who focus on trade with the United States, globalization is almost synonymous with *Americanization*; in the discourse of Mercosur, the word also includes European nations and sometimes is identified with novel interactions between Southern Cone countries. For a Mexican or Colombian family with various members working in the United States, globalization alludes to the narrow connections to what occurs in that part of the country where their family members live, which differs from what Mexican or Colombian artists, such as Salma Hayek or Carlos Vives, imagine as they encounter an audience spread throughout the U.S. market.

In reality only a fraction of politicians, financiers, and academics think about the entire world, about a *circular* globalization, and they are not the majority in their professional fields. The rest imagine *tangential* globalizations. The amplitude or narrowness of global imaginaries reveals the inequalities of access to what is usually called global economics and culture. In this inequitable competition between imaginaries one perceives that globalization both is and is not what it promises. Many globalizers operate throughout the world feigning globalization.

Nevertheless even the poor or marginalized cannot disregard the global. When Latin American migrants arrive in northern Mexico or the southern United States they discover that the factory that hires them is Korean or Japanese. Moreover many of those who left their country arrived at that extreme decision because “globalization” shut down jobs in Peru, Colombia, and Central America, or because its effects—combined with local dramas—made the society in which they always lived too insecure.

An American filmmaker who works in Hollywood, that “symbolic home of the American dream,” no longer has the same idea about his country’s position in the world since learning that Universal Studios was purchased by Japanese capital. After so many years of thinking that the West was modern and the

East traditional, the Japanese advance on the United States and other Western regions forced him to ask, with David Morley, if now “the world will be read from right to left, and not from left to right” (Morley and Chen 1996: 328).<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis we place on migratory processes and the populations exposed to these changes suggests how we might understand the movement of capital, goods, and communications as well as the confrontation between different lifestyles and representations. Having to think on a global scale produces vertigo and uncertainty that lead us to entrench ourselves in regional alliances and to delimit—in markets, societies, and their imaginaries—territories and circuits that are a digestible form of globalization. There is much debate about erecting new barriers that give order to investments, ethnicities, regions, and groups that either mix too rapidly or remain threateningly excluded. Can the processes of supranational integration achieve anything in this regard? Although these questions have only just been broached in the European Union, and more recently among the members of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Mercosur, the connections between globalization, regional integrations, and diverse cultures is becoming a key issue, as much in academic agendas as in business.<sup>5</sup>

As an introduction to this type of analysis, in chapter 1 I address three problems discussed in recent years when trying to understand where globalization is leading us. The first is that sometimes globalization is summarized as the opposition between the global and the local, which in my view is better characterized as the diverse levels of abstraction and concretion into which the economy, politics, and culture reorganize themselves within a globalized epoch. The second question, tied to the previous, is whether it is possible to reverse the political impotence we feel when the main decisions are made in inaccessible, even difficult-to-identify places. Third, I explore the theoretical-methodological consequences of these difficulties for transdisci-

4. If Japanese capital in the 1980s acquired U.S. media companies, Chinese capital is now seeking to acquire Internet enterprises (Russell Flannery, “Get Ready for More Chinese Tech Acquisitions in the U.S.,” *Forbes*, August 25, 2010, accessed December 26, 2010, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/russellflannery/2010/08/25/get-ready-for-more-chinese-tech-acquisitions-in-the-u-s/print/>). Internet companies may be more important since most culture is already being circulated or distributed through convergence of tv, telephony, and Internet. [Trans.]

5. The rise of Chávez and his sponsored Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, the Brazilian and Argentine rejection of the U.S.-sponsored continental trade agreements, and even bilateral ones, and the Brazilian-sponsored Union of South American Nations have rendered U.S. trade strategies a serious blow. The newest regional integration scheme, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Nations, excludes the United States and Canada as well as British and French dependencies. [Trans.]

plinary research, which boils down to the challenges of working with a culture's economic and political data and at the same time with the narratives and metaphors with which it imagines globalization.

In chapter 2 I analyze the consequences of globalization as an “unidentified cultural object.” Distinguishing between international, transnational, and global can make things clearer. Even so, globalization is not a clearly delimited object of study, nor is it a scientific, economic, political, or cultural paradigm that can be postulated as a singular model of development. We should accept that there exist multiple narratives about what it means to globalize, but since its central characteristic is to intensify interconnections between societies, we cannot accept the variety of stories without considering their compatibility within a relatively universalizable body of knowledge. This entails a discussion of sociological and anthropological theories, and also that we concern ourselves with the narratives and metaphors being constructed to incorporate what generally remains within the cracks and insufficiencies of theories or policies. Narratives and images reveal globalization's utopian aspects as well as what cannot be integrated, for example the differences between Anglos and Latinos, or the upheavals experienced by people who migrate or travel, who do not live where they were born, and communicate with others whom they do not know when they will see again. The metaphors serve to imagine difference and the ritualized narrations give order to it.

Then chapters 3 and 4 attempt to characterize a possible globalization in the West by means of interactions between Europe, Latin America, and the United States. I try to see how older and more recent migrations shape the ways we view ourselves. The narratives formed in commercial and symbolic exchanges from the fifteenth century to the middle of the twentieth seem to be reproduced in the stereotypes of the most recent globalized decades: the North's discrimination toward Latin Americans, or its alternating admiration and distrust. Nevertheless the reading of these narratives can be more complete if we move from interpreting the confrontation between *identities* to examining the *cultural* processes that either connect or alienate us. Identities may seem incompatible, but business and media exchanges multiply. In order to understand this gap between ideologies and practices, I analyze how the politics of citizenship employs imaginaries of similarity and difference in Europe, the United States, and three Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. For each case, I outline critiques of these models' contradictions, the difficulty in reconciling them, and, at the same time, the need to achieve agreements in a time in which globalization draws distant nations ever closer. I reflect on how to construct a transnational public sphere where

the cultural concepts, and the consequent policies, are not incommensurable. I consider four models: the European republican system of universal rights, the multicultural separatism of the United States, multiethnic integrations under the nation-state in Latin American countries, and—cutting across all of them—multicultural integration fostered by the mass media.

In chapter 5 I propose an intermediate and semifictional narrative. Just as characters and syntheses are constructed in life stories, here I try to imagine the misadventures of a Latin American anthropologist, a European sociologist, and a U.S. cultural studies scholar. Given that one can no longer problematize the relationship between theories and their social conditions of production by referring only to the nation, class, or university in which they are elaborated, I incorporate the daily life of researchers who travel and have access to transnational experiences and delocalized flows of information. This account is constructed with biographical data, both my own and those of others, but that is of little importance because the discussion about the social sciences and cultural studies that runs throughout these pages is concerned not so much with what is true or false as with giving a credible version of the dilemmas in which research finds itself today.

The different ways of globalizing, or transitioning from European to U.S. hegemony, are evaluated in chapter 6 by comparing what happens in the arts and culture industries. The application of industrial formats and transnational competitiveness criteria to the visual arts and literature is modifying their production and valuation, even though most artworks continue to express national traditions and to circulate only within their own countries. The publishing industry is organized by transnational publishers, who group their catalogues and distribution into linguistic regions. Where globalization appears to be most effective is in the audiovisual world; music, film, television, and information technology are being reorganized by a handful of companies for diffusion throughout the entire planet. The multimedia system that partially integrates these four fields offers unprecedented possibilities for transnational expansion, even in peripheral cultures. But it also creates, in the case of Latin America, greater dependencies than those we had in the visual arts in relation to France and now the United States and those that exist with Spain in the publishing world. In addition to differentiating between the challenges of transnationalization or globalization in each cultural area, I explore the tensions generated between homogenization and differences in the existing asymmetric relations between countries and regions.

In chapter 7 I focus on cities, because that is where the global is imagined. Above all, it is in the major cities where the local is articulated with the



national, as well as with globalizing movements. In analyzing the requisites for being a global city and how cities of the “first” and “third” world are differentiated, we must grasp the key problems of dualization and segregation provoked by global processes. We also will see ambivalent opportunities for urban renewal offered by integration into circuits of commerce and consumption, transnational administration, and information. The result is cultural cosmopolitanism in consumption with a concomitant loss of employment, heightened insecurity, and environmental degradation.

In chapter 8 I propose a polemical agenda of what cultural policies in globalized times might look like. Some of the challenges analyzed are how to reconstruct public space, promote a supranational citizenship, communicate commodities and messages to audiences disseminated throughout many countries, and rethink the potentiality of national cultures and regional and global institutions. I discuss why aesthetic questions today are of central interest to politics and how this concern can be addressed in a market cultural economy.

### *First Questions of Method*

There are several difficult problems to resolve in selecting narratives and metaphors, interpreting them, and linking them to hard data. I pose these problems, when the opportunity arises, in various chapters. I want to deal here with one basic problem. Why choose the facts, stories, and symbols that appear in this book about migrants and interculturality, about the relations between Europe, Latin America, and the United States, when so many others exist?

The number of pages in this volume shows that my task is not to write an encyclopedia of stories and metaphors compiled about such topics. The rules for selecting those that do appear are as follows:

1. I chose, after various years of reading ethnographic studies and chronicles and dozens of interviews with intercultural informants from various countries, a repertoire that seemed representative of the existing universe. I strove to cover emblematic structures and transformations more than the diversity of situations.
2. I was interested, above all, in the events, narratives, and metaphors that condense central aspects of international relations and the diverse ways of imagining globalization—or its equivalent forms on a lesser scale: international or regional confrontations and agreements—and that challenge the usual ways of understanding them.
3. I presented this selection and part of the interpretations that will

be read here at conferences in the United States and Latin America (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, São Paulo) and in international meetings of Latin American Studies in Europe (Halle, 1998) and Canada (Vancouver, 1997) and at the Latin American Studies Association (Chicago, 1998). These ideas were also aired at cultural studies conferences in the United States (Pittsburgh, 1998) and in anthropology conventions in the United States (1996), Mercosur (1997), and Colombia (1997) and at a symposium about the borders between various regions (Buenos Aires, 1999). In these meetings I collected accounts of other studies that challenged my selection and also received critiques of my interpretations. Some reworked fragments from these conferences are incorporated in this book. It would no doubt be possible to multiply the debates; the selection and the interpretations can be fine-tuned, refuted, and contrasted in more settings, and alternatives can be proposed. It should be obvious that the examples in these pages represent a provisional closure with the aim of producing an argumentative—not encyclopedic—“totalization” to be published and disseminated for further discussion. At any rate, an effort was made to think of the whole, as this is a book and not a collection of articles and papers.

GIVEN THE NUMEROUS meetings at which I debated parts of this book, the list of those who helped me to think and rethink what is written here is too extensive to acknowledge. Abundant mentions will be found in the references utilized throughout the text. I want to point out, without claiming to be exhaustive, conversations with Hugo Achugar, Arturo Arias, Lourdes Arizpe, Lluís Bonet, Heloisa Buarque de Holanda, Román de la Campa, Eduardo Delgado, Aníbal Ford, Juan Flores, Jean Franco, Alejandro Grimson, Fredric Jameson, Sandra Lorenzano, Mario Margulis, Jesús Martín Barbero, Mary Pratt, Nelly Richard, Renato Rosaldo, Beatriz Sarlo, Amalia Signorelli, Saúl Sosnoski, and George Yúdice.

The conditions for research and teaching provided to me by the Autonomous Metropolitan University of Mexico (UAM), especially the Department of Anthropology, and conversations with colleagues in the Urban Culture Studies Program, whose names and joint publications appear below, contributed to the preparation of this book. The economic support of UAM during my sabbatical year 1996–97, together with the aid granted by the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture, facilitated field research and interviews in these two countries during

that period. Dialogues with Rainer Enrique Hamel, Eduardo Nivón, Ana Rosas Mantecón, Tomás Ybarra Frausto, José Manuel Valenzuela, and Pablo Vila were significant to my advancement in border, multinational, and political culture issues. My references to the art experiences of *inSITE* on the Mexico-U.S. border, which allowed me to elaborate a good part of what I propose about global imaginaries, I owe in part to conversations with Carmen Cuenca and Michel Krichman, coordinators of that program. André Dorcé and Luz María Vargas very ably supported the publication of this book.

In subsequent sections I analyze other justifications for this selection of events, narratives, and metaphors, and I add more personal and institutional acknowledgments. It will also be seen that it is not a secondary detail that I have lived in Mexico during the past twenty-three years as a more or less “Mexicanized” foreigner who does not stop being Argentine and has “compatriots” born in Mexico and in other countries whose proximity requires removing the quotation marks from that word.

It would be contradictory to the thesis and methodology of this book to fail to recognize this heterogeneity or to attempt to speak only from one of these places. For that reason I elaborate at times on what I suppose Tzvetan Todorov’s (1996: 23) expression “this encounter of cultures within oneself” means. If it is complicated to situate oneself within the interaction between diverse symbolic heritages, it would be even more arduous to try to study these themes from a single national or ethnic point of observation. “What makes me myself rather than anyone else,” writes Amin Maalouf (2000: 1) at the beginning of his book *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, “is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions.” Like him and others who share this intercultural position, I have asked myself, “But what do you really feel, deep down inside?” (2). The Lebanese French author says that for a long time that question made him smile. Now he considers it dangerous because of the assumption that each person or group has a “profound truth,” an essence, determined by birth or by religious conversion, and that one could “affirm this identity” as if compatriots were more important than fellow citizens (who can be from various countries), as if biological determination and childhood loyalties prevailed over the convictions, preferences, and tastes that one learns in different cultures.

“Border people,” says Maalouf, can feel like minorities and often are marginalized. But in a globalized world we are all minorities, including English speakers, at least when they accept the many components of their own identity, and we try to understand each other without reductionisms, although some are more minority than others. In short, it is a question of thinking about

the paradoxes of being simultaneously Arab and Christian, Argenmexican or Mexiconorthamerican, Brasiguayo (the 500,000 Brazilians who live in Paraguay), or Franco-German. It is also a question of the differences between these fusions-fissures. They cannot be fixed by saying that two plus two equals this or that, nor by a tyrant's decision nor by individual heroism. These intercultural tensions today are also the most fecund objects of research and an opportunity to construct collective subjects and open, democratic policies.

Mexico City, September 1999