The Visual Arts, the Poetization of Space and Writing: An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez

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His Interview is the result of two conversations with Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez at his home in Mexico City in 1987. The first meeting, which took place in May, was an informal chat, during which García Márquez showed me several nineteenth-century drawings of Colombia by Charles Saffray and Edouard André that he had used in writing some of his fiction. (I later found a new edition of the same drawings in Colombia: Fabulous Colombia's Geography, comp. and dir. Eduardo Acevedo Latorre, Bogotá: Litografía Arco, 1984.) Encouraged to pursue the dialogue, I returned to Mexico City in October with my copy of Fabulous Colombia’s Geography and a tape recorder in hand.  

Raymond Leslie Williams  
University of Colorado, Boulder

Williams: The last time we talked, you showed me the drawings you've used in some of your writing. I was impressed with the enormous importance the visual arts apparently have had in your work. As I suppose you know, critics have tended to emphasize the literary texts or written documents in your fiction, particularly since the term intertextuality has come into vogue. Do you think we're missing something with our emphasis on textuality?  

García Márquez: I don't use written documents. I typically drive myself crazy searching for a document and then end up throwing it away. Then I find it again and it doesn't interest me anymore. I need to have everything idealized. Florentino Ariza's very concept of love is idealized in Love in the Time of Cholera. I have the impression that Florentino has a concept of love that is totally ideal and that doesn't correspond to reality.  

Williams: Would you say it is a concept of love taken from the literature he has read?  

García Márquez: From reading the bad poets. It is a literary concept from the bad poets. I think I've said somewhere that bad poetry is very important because you can only get to good poetry by means of bad poetry. What I mean is that if you show some Valéry or Rimbaud or some Whitman to a young small-town boy who likes poetry, it doesn't say anything to him. So to get to these poets, first you have to get through all the bad poetry of the popular romantics, the ones Florentino has read, like Julio Flórez [a Colombian poet well known in his homeland (1867–1925)], the Spanish romantics, and so on. I deliberately tried not to cite a lot of them because they're not universally known. Imagine the Japanese reading these books and me talking about Julio Flórez. Now I always think of my translators when I write.  

Williams: Since One Hundred Years of Solitude?  

García Márquez: No, since The Autumn of the Patriarch. Since then I've received lists of questions from the translators, and what's strange is that in most of the books they're the same questions.  

Williams: Let's return to the visual arts and the fabrication of the nineteenth century in Love in the Time of Cholera.  

García Márquez: I was aided considerably by portraits, photographs, family albums, those kinds of things.  

Williams: Would you say that you have a visual memory? Do you remember things based on what you see?
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I'm not sure if it's exactly a visual memory. At times it seems like I'm always a little distracted, that I'm a bit off in the clouds. At least that's what my friends, Mercedes [his wife], and my children say. I give that impression, but then I discover a detail that reveals an entire world to me. The detail could be something I see in a painting. Perhaps the fighting cock in this drawing [fig. 1] could give me the solution for an entire novel. It's just something that happens to me. I'm totally passive and it's like a flash.

WILLIAMS: Does this detail tend to be something that you see?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: It is always something that I see. It is always, always an image, with no exceptions. A politician came and talked to me over a long weekend once in Cuernavaca. We spent the days talking and having a good time. But when he left on Wednesday, I gave him a sixteen-page synthesis of our conversation, and not one important matter was missing. It's not an extraordinary thing but rather an idea I've had for a long time. That's why I never take notes. I don't forget things I'm interested in, and I forget things right away that don't interest me. So I have a selective memory, which is quite a comfortable thing. Now when I'm correct-

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Figure 1
Figure 2
An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez

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ing a book I make notes in the margins for correcting later on the computer. The computer has been such an important thing for me. It's been one of the world's great discoveries. If they had given me a computer twenty years ago, I would have written twice as many books as I have. For example, I'm writing a piece of theater right now, and every afternoon I pull my work out of the printer. I take the pages to bed, I read them, and I make corrections and notes in the margin. Now I have the privilege of making changes in the final page proofs. Before, the writer did a last reading on the typewriter and the reader did the first reading on the printed page. There was a big distance between the two. Now I make the last correction on the printed page, as if it were the book.

WILLIAMS: How has this “something that you see” surfaced in your novels?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: When I was writing The Autumn of the Patriarch there was a point at which I was struggling a lot. I had a certain idea about the palace, which eventually would appear at the beginning, but I just couldn't get it right. Then I came across this picture [fig. 2] in a book, and the photo solved my writing of the novel. It was the image that I needed.

WILLIAMS: It's the decaying palace and cows described in the opening pages of the novel.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: And at the beginning of every chapter.

WILLIAMS: Did you use drawings from nineteenth-century travel books in The Autumn of the Patriarch and Love in the Time of Cholera?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: More for The Autumn of the Patriarch than for the other books. I found the idea for some strange images from those drawings. For example, images of dead cocks hanging from trees, strung up after being killed.

WILLIAMS: Could you explain more about what you did with drawings in The Autumn of the Patriarch?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I had the idea of creating a total world in The Autumn of the Patriarch. It was a world that hadn’t been very well documented. One would need to read a lot to find out something about the life, about daily life. Then, by chance, I came across these drawings when I was already writing the book. So it was similar to a lottery, yet something like that always happens to me. I don't know why, but the truth is, once I begin to work on a subject, things related to it begin to fall into my hands. Maybe these things were always there and I never noticed them before.

WILLIAMS: Did the drawings serve to describe everyday life better? Better than texts could?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: Better than texts. Texts have a lot of paper. The drawings are like notes for creating the scenes.

WILLIAMS: Setting aside the visual arts for a while, let's talk about visual images from your own life experiences. What about all those images of the Magdalena River in Love in the Time of Cholera? Were those images from drawings?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: No, not all of them. I had important experiences on that river in different periods of my life, and each experience projected different images that I remembered later. I traveled on the Magdalena River for the first time when I was eight or nine years old. I left Aracataca for the first time when my grandfather died and I went to the town of Magangué. I made the boat trip to Magangué with my father because he was born in Sincé, a town in the department of Bolivar, and we went to visit his mother. I believe it was in 1936.
When I made the trip that time the boat only went between Barranquilla and Magangué, in over twenty-four hours.

WILLIAMS: It went quickly then.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: No, not really. It was a long trip. The boat was wood-fueled, as in the novel. They had to carry the wood aboard. That was when they began cutting all the trees down. Unlike today, in those days you could still see alligators in the river, and that was the big entertainment, seeing the alligators at the edge of the river with their mouths open to catch butterflies, or whatever [fig. 3]. And there were manatees everywhere too. What really impressed me was the way the manatees nursed their young. Those manatees are in The Autumn of the Patriarch and Love in the Time of Cholera.

WILLIAMS: Do you recall any other particularly memorable images from this trip?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: What impressed me the most were the alligators, the manatees, and the animals strung up, hanging, as in these drawings [fig. 4].

WILLIAMS: Do you remember much from the other river trips?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I took at least five or six trips down the river from Bogotá to the Caribbean coast while I was in high school in Zipaquirá. When I went again, in 1943, the river had changed. The boats no longer ran on wood, they ran on oil. The river itself wasn't the same as I had seen it before.

WILLIAMS: The novel with the river, of course, is Love in the Time of Cholera. What did you do with the river there?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: In Love in the Time of Cholera I created two trips on the river. The first trip is when Florentino Ariza leaves Villa de Leyva as a telegrapher. I invented this trip for a technical reason, to avoid describing the river during the second trip, because that would have been too weighty and would have distracted a lot. Consequently, I decided to show the river first through the character himself, the idea being that the second time around the river would already be described. I didn't have to distract the reader with too many descriptions of the river.

WILLIAMS: All in all, what do you think about the relation of the real river you saw to the one from the

Figure 4
nineteenth-century drawings, as far as your fiction is concerned?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I was well acquainted with the river back in those days. On the other hand, the drawings helped me realize how, for better or for worse, artists idealized everything in the nineteenth century. In the drawings you find some fantastic birds that don't exist, for example. Or these women, who are idealized [fig. 5]. You see some beautiful women in these drawings, which is the way the Europeans of the period imagined them. Indeed, they are magnificent drawings.

WILLIAMS: Many items from the daily life of the period appear in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, besides the idealizations found in the drawings. These items seem to reflect a thorough understanding of what was in fashion at the time.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I did study those things of daily life in the nineteenth century a lot. But you have to be careful not to fall into my trap, because I am also quite disrespectful of real time and space.

WILLIAMS: Are you referring to the anachronisms?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: Yes, because I don't write with historical rigor. Someone could figure out, for example, that Victor Hugo and Oscar Wilde couldn't have been in Paris at the same time. It's not that these are anachronisms or accidents but that I had no desire to change a detail I liked just to make the chronology function properly. This novel isn't a historical reconstruction. Rather, it contains historical elements used poetically. All writers do this.

WILLIAMS: The physical space in *Love in the Time of Cholera* seems to correspond largely to Cartagena, Colombia, but suddenly the Café de la Parroquia of Veracruz, Mexico, appears. I guess we need to talk about a poetization of space too.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: Right. The Café de la Parroquia could be in Cartagena perfectly well. The fact that it isn't is purely incidental, because all the conditions exist in Cartagena for it to be there. As a matter of fact, the very same Café de la Parroquia of Veracruz would be in Cartagena if the Spaniard who built it had immigrated to Cartagena instead of to Veracruz. It's just a matter of chance, the way it is was for my wife's grandfather, who was an Egyptian who left for New York and ended up in Magangué. Well, that was quite a case of the poetization of space—a bit of an exaggerated one. Cartagena still needs a café like the Café de la
Parroquia in Veracruz, so I took the one from Veracruz, which I needed in Cartagena for my novel. When I'm in Cartagena I sometimes suddenly feel the desire to go to a place like the Café de la Parroquia in Veracruz. I have to go to the bars in hotels and places like that, and I feel something is missing. How marvelous to have the freedom to be a writer who says, "Well, I'm going to put the Café de la Parroquia where I want it to be." Every day I'm writing I say to myself how marvelous it is to invent life, which is what you do, although within the bounds of some very strict laws because characters don't die when you want them to, nor are they born when you want. One of the most emotional experiences I have had as a writer relates to all this. It happened in Love in the Time of Cholera, with the family of Fermina Daza, when she is a child. I was creating all her life inside the house where she lives with her father and her spinster aunt, and the house is a copy of the one that is now the Oveja Negra bookstore in the Plaza Fernández Madrid in Cartagena. I was working on the first draft. I had the girl, her father, her aunt, and her mother, but the mother always seemed extra. I just didn't know what to do with the mother. When they were at the dinner table, I could see the father's face perfectly, and I could see the faces of the girl and the aunt perfectly, but the mother's face was always blurred. I imagined her one way and then another way, I made her like so-and-so, but she remained a constant problem and I didn't know what to do. She was ruining my novel. The aunt took the girl to school. The father wasn't ever home. The maid took care of the house. But what was the mother supposed to do? She didn't have anything to do. And then suddenly one day, thinking that I was stuck on a dead-end road, I realized that what had happened was that the mother had died when the girl was born. And this was the reason the aunt was there, because the father had brought her to the household to raise the child when the mother died. And this was the reason too that the maid took care of absolutely everything in the house. And also why the mother had nothing to do in the house. It was a precious experience for me, and it explains how the character of the mother began to live the very moment I discovered that she had died. So she is always a presence in the house and the characters speak of her as someone who has died, who has left her mark on her daughter. This also explains why the father is so lonely and has the type of personality he has. I solved everything once I said, "I'm mistaken. I'm trying to resuscitate a dead person. This woman died." That kind of thing happens in all my books. In some situations you don't have any more resources than your own interior world.

WILLIAMS: How would you characterize your relationship with the exterior world, with the city of Cartagena, when you were writing Love in the Time of Cholera in 1984?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: It was a very amusing relationship. To begin with, that period in Cartagena was the best year of my life, the most mature.

WILLIAMS: Mature in what sense?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: In the sense of feeling an absolute emotional stability. For many years I had only had a vague idea of how I liked to live, but that year I learned how to live, how I wanted to live, and how I have liked to live. When I was living in Cartagena during that time, I wrote in the morning, and in the afternoon I would go out conscientiously looking for places because I had two cities: the one of reality and the other one of the novel. The latter can't possibly be like reality, because a novelist can't literally copy a city. Have you ever noticed what Flaubert did with the distances between places in Paris? You find that the French writers have their characters take walks that are impossible. It's a poetization of space. Of course, one can sometimes eliminate a totally useless trip, and I did the same thing with Cartagena. Not only that, but when I needed something from another city, I took it to Cartagena.

WILLIAMS: And you took things from several Caribbean cities, right?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: Yes, I took a lot from the Caribbean. There are details from Santo Domingo and Havana, among other cities. That was easy, because the cities of the Caribbean have so much in common. As for Veracruz, Love in the Time of Cholera could take place there perfectly. The only significant difference is that Cartagena has an aristocracy that Veracruz hasn't had since the Mexican Revolution. Never before had I had what I was writing at hand and been able to go out as if with a sack and put in that sack whatever I wanted.

WILLIAMS: And then you could come back to the apartment refreshed.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: No, weighted down like a sack. And at the same time it was very comfortable because I was living in a calm city, set apart from the Caribbean, but with the entire world at an arm's...
reach. Almost two or three times a week we had friends visiting from all over the world. And any time I felt like it I could go to the airport and take off to Europe or New York or wherever. It's a very comfortable city for that. If I was waiting for someone arriving on the four o'clock plane, I would go out on the terrace to read, and when I saw the four o'clock plane arriving, I would run to the car and arrive at the airport just as my visitor was coming out of it. Fantastic, right? After traveling around the world one realizes how easy it is to live there. And then later the situation in the country changes and one is screwed.² It seems to me a great injustice.

WILLIAMS: Sometimes when I look at Cartagena from above, from the fortress of San Felipe, it seems like a little fiction.

GARCÍA Márquez: Well, it's not possible to define Cartagena. And the historians have invented another Cartagena, which has nothing to do with the real one.

WILLIAMS: And what the historians have to say wasn't of any importance to you in this book?

GARCÍA Márquez: No. In a nutshell, that was my Cartagena experience. In addition, my geographic and emotional referents in The Autumn of the Patriarch were Cartagena too.

WILLIAMS: Really? I hadn't ever thought of Cartagena.

GARCÍA Márquez: What happened was that I took away the walls because with them the identity of the city would have been too definite.

WILLIAMS: Cartagena and Veracruz were cities not only surrounded by walls but built by the same Spaniards during the colonial period.

GARCÍA Márquez: Yes, but in Love in the Time of Cholera I used a trick when they go up in a balloon and pass over the ruins of Cartagena. Do you remember that? They see the old city of Cartagena abandoned. As an almost poetic image, it's beautiful, and the use of this image gives an idea of how things can be handled in literature.

WILLIAMS: Once again, the poetization of space.

GARCÍA Márquez: Exactly, and just when I have them convinced that this is Cartagena, then I take them through an abandoned Cartagena. It's a doubling of the city. Let's say it's the same city in two distinct periods, two different temporal spaces.

WILLIAMS: We've spent most of our time talking about visual arts, your poetization of space, and the like. Before leaving behind Love in the Time of Cholera, one last question. Why a nineteenth-century love story?
subconscious or is the natural result of an ideological position or comes from raw experience that I haven't analyzed, which I try to use in all innocence. I think I'm quite innocent in writing. If someone studied my books seriously from a political point of view, it wouldn't surprise me at all if it were discovered that they are completely different from what I say about politics.

WILLIAMS: Let's finish with a political question of interest to many readers of PMLA. I know that at different times the Modern Language Association and other professional organizations in the United States have questioned the State Department's handling of your status as a foreign visitor. In addition, many US academics would like to see you at conferences and symposia. The details of your status are not clear for many of us. What exactly has been your position concerning our State Department?

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: That's an interesting question because the problem with my entrances and exits and the problem of my illegitimacy in the US are more the US government's problems than they are mine. I'll explain why. The reason I'm not totally legal in the United States is because of the McCarran-Walter Act, which prohibits or limits entrance into the United States for some individuals because of their ideas. That's the serious part. The law is in total contradiction to the Constitution and supposed political philosophy of the United States. Of course, I'm not a terrorist. I'm not even a political activist. I do have political ideas, which I express, although much less than some claim.

WILLIAMS: Well, you and I usually talk about literature.

GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ: I'm very consistent about what I do. Except for having political ideas, I can't be accused of an act that violates the McCarran-Walter Act. The State Department knows that perfectly well and always has. Consequently, I really can enter and leave the US whenever I want, and I've been there from time to time. I was a US resident when I was a correspondent with Prensa Latina in the early 1960s. I returned to Mexico when

Notes

1 The dates of the meetings were 12 May 1987 and 21 October 1987. These two conversations were the fifth and sixth private talks I have had with García Márquez since meeting him in Bogotá in 1975; the October conversation reproduced here represents my first published interview with him. The publication dates of the Spanish originals of the novels we discussed are as follows: One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1967; The Autumn of the Patriarch, 1975; and Love in the Time of Cholera, 1981. I would like to express my gratitude to John Kronik for his encouragement and editorial suggestions and to German Vargas of Barranquilla, Colombia, for his helpful efforts over the years to bring me together with his friend García Márquez.
The period García Márquez spent in Cartagena writing *Love in the Time of Cholera* was in the spring and summer of 1984. Since then political and drug-related violence has escalated enormously. García Márquez currently lives in Mexico City, and he mentioned to me in one of the 1987 interviews that he had not recently returned to Colombia, because no one, not even President Virgilio Barco, could give him assurances of his personal safety. The most immediate danger for him would probably be one of the numerous right-wing death squads that have been increasingly active since 1986. He returned to Colombia after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 and regularly during the presidency of Belisario Betancur (1982–86).

The severity of the McCarran-Walter Act has been modified since this conversation. In December 1987 Congress set temporary limits on the government's right to deny visas for reasons of national security. A State Department authorization bill provided that no alien could be denied a visa "because of any past, current or expected beliefs which, if engaged in by a United States citizen, would be protected under the Constitution of the United States" (Washington Post 11 May 1988). This part of the interview has been included, nevertheless, in order to clarify García Márquez's position on the State Department and the US in recent years.