Unveiling Cultural Hierarchies

in the Global Marketplace

Rafael Villena-Taranilla

LabinTIC (Laboratorio de Integración de las TIC en el aula), Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 02001 Albacete, Spain

Dionisio F. Yáñez

Departament de Didàctica de la Matemàtica, Universitat de València, 46010 València, Spain

Central American writers have perceptively engaged with the concept of world literature from their minor positionality. For instance, as implied in the mocking undertone of its title, Roberto Quesada's Big Banana (2000) deals with being at the edge of the periphery, following a Honduran migrant in the Latin American community in New York. Quesada explores how the protagonist channels his "deseo de mundo", to use Mariano Siskind's words, into a strategy of performing distinction to carve out a place for himself in a cosmopolitan society. Compounding "banana republic"—an expression coined by O. Henry, inspired by Honduras—with "The Big Apple", Big Banana's title underscores the book's play with cultural registers and national and worldly identities. The growing scholarship on Central American and U.S. Central American literature has analyzed the novel through the lens of coloniality, the limits of solidarity, the experience of the Central American diaspora, and as "denuncia social". My article instead traces how cultural productions acquire different valences each time they cross the center–periphery border in the performance of distinction that Big Banana and its protagonist carry out in response to their doubly peripheral position. In other words, this essay is concerned with the novel's problematic instrumentalization of Western hegemonic culture—both highbrow and commercial popular culture—to make claims of worldliness and carve a space for itself in world literary circuits.

Keywords: world literature; Honduran literature; cultural studies; performing distinction

Published online: 11 Feb 2024 Pragmatics 34:1 (2024), pp. 30–48.
ISSN 1018-2101 | E-ISSN 2406-4238

1. Introduction

In his novel, Big Banana (2000), Roberto Quesada explores what it means to be Hon- duran, both within and beyond the country's borders, through the misadventures of Edu-ardo Lin, a Honduran migrant in New York City, and his girlfriend Mirian, who lives in Tegucigalpa.1 Despite Eduardo's promises of loyalty to Mirian, he becomes infatuated with Andrea—a charming Colombian—and obsessed with seducing her. This obsession deepens after he learns that she is immune to most men's advances. Thus, Andrea is introduced as a challenge, a means that can provide Eduardo with the validation that he desperately craves. About halfway through the novel, Eduardo comes across a unique opportunity when a friend leaves him to watch over his apartment while he is out of town. Eduardo resolves to take Andrea to his friend's apartment, which is in better condition than his own, and pretend that it is his. It dawns on Eduardo that he could impress and intrigue Andrea with decoration. He makes a doormat out of past issues of The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker, and The Village Voice, fills the apartment with portraits of well-known authors such as Walt Whitman, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Jean-Paul Sartre, lithographs, posters from magazines, a statuette of Vladimir Nabokov, and—to top it off—creates a chair and a bed made entirely out of books. From the moment she stumbled on the magazine rug, Andrea is entranced by the decoration. As she looks around in astonishment, Eduardo draws her attention to the replica of a chair made out of books, "ésa es la silla. Así soy yo. Mis amigos creen que estoy loco. Mirá la cama" (Quesada 2001, p. 182; "That's the chair. That's how I am—my friends think I'm nuts. Look at the bed", Krochmal trans. (Quesada 1999, p. 137)). By juxtaposing the chair and himself, Eduardo implies that, just like the chair is made of books, so is he.

It is by proving that he is knowledgeable, well-read, clever, and a "genuine intellec- tual", that Eduardo shows himself to be comparable to Andrea in intellect and therefore worthy of her (Quesada 1999, p. 75). However, Eduardo's inelegant affirmation of his intel- lect reveals underlying self-consciousness and insecurity. The book-made chair—the one Eduardo favorably compares to himself—is described as imitación (imitation). This word choice betrays Eduardo's inner fear of being perceived as a fraud. Indeed, if we analyze an earlier moment, when the narrator states that Eduardo did not want to let himself down, it becomes clear that his desire to win Andrea over stems from self-doubt. That is, for Eduardo to feel accomplished, he needs to be accepted as an intellectual. Seducing Andrea is his way of showing he is on par with the smartest, most well-read of their social circles. This scene, one of many such examples in Quesada's novel, demonstrates that Ed- uardo's knowledge of highbrow culture is his social capital. It is his path to establishing himself as a member of a broadly lettered community and of upholding his place in the world (Bourdieu 1986). Eduardo's strategy in the novel is also true of Big

Banana: through its characters—especially Eduardo—the novel alludes to a multitude of prominent literary and cultural figures, displaying its familiarity with the Western canon. Taken together, I argue that Quesada's Big Banana not only presents its protagonist as making his place in a cosmopolitan sphere of intellectuals but that, in doing so, the novel also attempts to carve a space for itself in the canon of world literature. As Eduardo asserts himself in the transnational community of Latin Americans in New York—where Honduras is mostly known for its history as a banana republic—Big Banana seeks its place in a prestigious literary canon through an extensive performance of distinction that engages both highbrow and popular culture references. In this manner, Big Banana illustrates the challenges that writers from countries at the edge of the periphery, such as Honduras, face when seeking to take part in the world literary market.2 Namely, for the writer, demonstrating fluency in mainstream cultural touchstones feels like a requirement to achieve visibility in the international literary field. The availing of widely acclaimed and highly circulated highbrow and popular culture only reinscribes the hierarchies already in place in the "world republic of letters", to borrow from Pascale Casanova.3 Thus the novel is willingly participating in a literary prestige economy, following Casanova, as it actively seeks to distinguish itself before the arbiters of taste in the center (Casanova 2004, p. 15).

Nicaraguan critic and writer Sergio Ramírez remarks in his seminal book Balcanes y Volcanes y Otros ensayos y trabajos (Ramírez 1983) that in Central America there is a tendency to value and desire what is foreign. Central American contemporary literature, Ramírez notes, was born with deep connections to recently adopted artistic forms and striving for European ideals (Ramírez 1983, p. 45). The case is even more striking with Quesada, who himself stated in an interview with Edward Hood that he had not learned anything from Honduran narratives (Hood 1998, p. 503). Though he signaled the work of a few Honduran authors as significant, Quesada reproaches the country's literature for having too narrow of a vision and being too local. The way in which Quesada distances himself from Honduran literary work while drawing on his identification as a Honduran author to then present his writing as "Latin American" is deeply paradoxical. In fact, Quesada embodies the Central American attitude described by Ramírez to such a degree that Big Banana becomes a clutter of references to a Western canon in an attempt to prove the author's cultural fluency and to separate him from a literary circle he considers too folklorist and lacking in internationality. Moreover, Quesada's dismissal of Honduran literature for being "too local" overlooks a significant world-literary point: the local and the global are always already imbricated in the world-system.

In my analysis, I agree with Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste in examining the complex interplay of highbrow and popular culture in

Quesada's novel. Bourdieu contends that cultural taste functions as a "sense of one's place", implying a practical anticipation of what the social meaning of the chosen thing will be. An appreciation of the world literary canon, for instance, befits a more cultivated, worldly individual (Bourdieu 1984, p. 467). Following Bourdieu, I understand highbrow culture as that which historically has presupposed a higher level in social origin, formal education, and/or cultural practices (Bourdieu 1984, p. 4). The highbrow culture, as it works in the novel, is roughly equivalent to "world literature" when understood (uncritically) as a canon of masterworks. For the purposes of my analysis, I model my concept of world-literature after the Warwick Research Collective's definition of it as "the literature of the world-system–of the modern capitalist world-system, that is" to attend to the literary registration of cultural phenomena of the modern world-system in Big Banana (Deckard et al. 2015, p. 8, emphasis in original).4 At the same time, my understanding of popular culture also borrows from Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of the (mostly homogenous) products of the culture industry, or mass media, produced for the entertainment of wide audiences (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 95). According to these scholars, the culture industry establishes a clear interchangeability of the subjects it presents which then become surrogates or copies and allow the members of the audience to believe in the possibility of rising to that level of recognition. Thus, the importation of United States' cultural productions in Honduras leads to an association between higher social status and these products. However, my interest is not in what separates highbrow from popular culture. Although I allow for differences between them, I argue that their status as imported cultural productions eclipses the local cultural production in Honduras.

The boundaries between highbrow and popular culture entangle and blur as they circulate beyond their place of origin, only to be reorganized again as their audiences themselves cross borders. Both of these phenomena take place in Big Banana via Eduardo's exposure to U.S.-produced media in Honduras (where it acquires a higher status) and his repurposing of this media while he lives in New York City. This way of traveling and transforming culture in its passage from the core to the peripheries and back has been studied before in different contexts. In an essay from Combined and Uneven Development by the Warwick Research Collective, for instance, they note some literary responses to the "penetration of regional culture by forms of globalisation" in the Scandinavian fringes (Deckard et al. 2015, p. 136). Following the Sergio Ramírez passage I cited earlier, I hold that this cultural implantation interferes with the cultural and literary production processes in Honduras. For the protagonist, as well as the novel, national productions pale in comparison with those of the U.S. culture industry and its undeniable connection to power, financial resources, and a higher social standing (or, to echo Casanova, their literary prestige or literariness). As a result, there is a rejection of the national

culture, which is found to be inadequate and too local, in favor of foreign productions which facilitate claims to worldliness.

The performances of distinction that take place in and throughout Big Banana shed light on a distinct set of cultural struggles. In his essay "Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular,'" Stuart Hall argues that there is "a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture" (Hall 2009, p. 447). The "popular culture" Hall refers to is an unstable category shaped by a cultural dialectic and its tension with the dominant culture. In his chosen definition of popular culture, he emphasizes how, in a given period and place, popular culture is inscribed into the social and material conditions of the people (Hall 2009, p. 449). When the cultural industry seizes upon and reworks popular culture in order to manipulate the excluded classes, it creates a commercial popular culture. This commercial version aligns with my understanding of popular culture in this essay. The transnational context and setting of Big Banana, however, complicate this categorization. Specifically, the asymmetrical relations between Honduras and the United States, and the existence of, at least, a highbrow and a popular culture in both countries (which overlap in intriguing ways that I will discuss below) necessarily add more variables to the equation. Displacement, thus, becomes a key component in the perception, transformation, and instrumentalization of cultural forms in the novel.

Stuart Hall rejects the notion that cultural domination occupies minds as if they were blank slates; instead, he sustains that their power manifests in the way they rework "the interior contradictions of feeling and perception" of those who respond to them (Hall 2009, p. 447). I propose that these interior contradictions are more strongly felt in marginalized classes facing multiple systems of oppression, as is the case of immigrants. Quesada—himself an immigrant in New York, arriving in 1989—is keenly aware of the role these forms of culture play in the Honduran imagination of self. The similarities between the conditions of Eduardo's immigration and those of Quesada's (same years, same city), as well as the parallels between the author's descriptions of his experience in New York in the interview with Edward Hood and those described in Big Banana (Hood 1998, p. 508), are such that Eduardo can be read as a self-insertion.5 Not only does Eduardo's understanding of culture align with Quesada's, but he makes use of the same means—the Latin American literary canon and Western highbrow and popular culture—to claim his place in a prestigious circle of culture creators. I expand on Stuart Hall's notion of the cultural struggle to a transnational ground in order to account for the reorganization of culture by the dominant classes with the purpose of imposing on both national and international populations. Highbrow and commercial popular culture from the center become intertwined as they spread beyond their place of origin to take prevalence over peripheralized cultural forms. In other

words, both mainstream popular culture and the more "elite" culture from outside of Honduras accumulate value as they enter the country, overrunning the cultural space and pushing Honduran productions to the edges, even within the country. The process I am here describing aligns with how the Warwick Research Collective presents the mediascape of the contemporary world-system as "a breakdown of traditional boundaries demarcating genres and media. . . in which diverse cultural forms, including new and newly calibrated media, compete for representational space and power" (2015, pp. 16–17).

Much like the popular classes for Hall, many culture producers from the peripheries resist this international cultural implantation. These forms of cultural struggle are visible in the moments where the novel attempts to subvert and defy hegemonic culture by instrumentalizing it. I call the acts staged by Big Banana and Eduardo a "performance of distinction" to highlight the performative aspect of their actions and what they ultimately intend to attain: membership of a prestigious intellectual circle. In short, to "perform distinction" is to set up a situation in order to show off cultural knowledge in a way that associates the performer with a cultured class. These are instances in which the oppressed use the dominant culture to proclaim their worth. The performance of distinction, thus, takes place right at the center of the cultural struggle, between the lines of resistance, refusal, and acceptance.

2. Big Banana at the Margins of Visibility

The interplay of national and cosmopolitan identities in Roberto Quesada's Big Banana speaks to the cultural peripheralization of Honduras. As Arturo Arias describes, Central America is doubly marginalized by the hegemonic center and the Latin American center (Arias 2007, vol. xii). However, as Sophie Esch notes in "Passages, Transits, Flows", Central American voices like Rubén Darío and Miguel Ángel Asturias, as well as the literary genre of testimonio, which generated in the isthmus, have been very much at the center of Latin American literary production (Esch 2020a, p. 18). Often, scholarly discussions have focused either on the overshadowing figures mentioned above or on Central American Cold War literature, which mostly came from El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.6 Notwithstanding, Arias's double marginalization describes the situation of Honduran literature perfectly: a literature still largely understudied and underrepresented in explorations of both Central and Latin America.

Another way of understanding the positionality of Honduran literature within the international literary markets is through the framework of the (ultra)minor or minority literature. A fundamentally relational category, the minor and ultraminor are useful when considering the relation between literary communities on different scales, that is to say, in comparison with greater literatures (Moberg and Damrosch 2022, p. 2). As the editors of Ultraminor

World Literatures propose in their introduction to the volume, the size of ultraminor "entails structural handicaps and a systemic lack of capacity and resources connected to both space and time" but, beyond that, the ultraminor "compels compensation strategies generated by a survival struggle" (2022, pp. 2–3). Núria Codina Solá lays bare the case of minor literature even more sharply, holding that it is "constitutively caught up in a performative contradiction" given that the disparities of the production of meaning—which the text hopes to break through—are themselves reproduced in the act of writing (Codina Solá 2022, p. 501).

With globalization, culture from the center has increasingly invaded the national markets of peripheral cultural productions. This has made the considerable disparities between local productions in Central America and the imported ones more evident. Marginal both within the larger discussions of the region and the hemisphere, Honduran productions have found themselves at yet a greater disadvantage vis-à-vis mainstream culture imported from the United States and Europe. Honduras's marginalization in the literary and cultural field has led to an overwhelming desire for approval and attention. Considering the minor position of the Honduran literature field in world literature, and echoing Franco Moretti's ideas on the core-periphery system in Conjectures on world literature (Moretti 2000), it is from the center (consisting of western literary traditions) that this minor literature would receive international validation.8 Here, I seek to nuance the understanding of the way in which Honduran writers respond to their unique situation as a minority in the world cultural market. In other words, I reconcile the paradoxical roles that popular and highbrow culture play in a context where every instance of national cultural production has been overshadowed by foreign productions and undercut by the nation's fractured sense of self. Following this line of thought, I return to Eduardo's infatuation with Andrea in Big Banana, where he constantly sets up situations in which he can display his distinction in a kind of public performance. It is by performing distinction that claims to prestige are validated, given that taste is, at its core, a social marker. Therefore, unnoticed distinction will not grant cultural nobility. Because of this, a performer's target audience reveals the aspirations of the performer. While Eduardo is instantly attracted to Andrea, it is due to the challenge she presents that he continues to pursue her. That challenge is tied to one of Andrea's defining traits: her nationality. Quesada populates every scene where Andrea is present with numerous references to Colombia. For instance, one of her dates with Eduardo takes place at a bookstore called Macondo (which has in fact existed in New York City since the 1970s), resulting in copious evocations of the Colombian author, and recipient of the 1982 Nobel Prize of Literature, Gabriel García Márquez and his well-known novel Cien Años de Soledad (1967). Considering Big Banana's interest in inserting itself into the Western literary canon, its references to one of the most translated and

circulated works of literature from Latin America cannot be regarded as incidental. Just as Eduardo is trying to prove himself worthy of Andrea, the novel is measuring itself up against a classic of Latin American literature. Nevertheless, Márquez's book does not just represent the paragon of a massively influential Latin American novel and a stand-in for magical realism, it also serves as a "global literary currency" for Roberto Quesada.9 Therefore, it is necessary to look closely at the internationalization of Latin American literature through the explosive success of magical realism, along with its legacy in the larger region's literature thenceforth. In my analysis, I consider how, having developed under the shadow of magical realism and everything it came to stand for in Latin America, Honduran literature continues to contend with it as the prototype of what marketable and valuable literature is for the region. While authors have long been challenging the rise of "epigonal magical realism"—prominent examples are the "McOndo" and the "Crack" literary movements—Big Banana occupies a different position vis-à-vis the dominant culture: its primary goal is to join the world literary circuits, not to defy or redefine literature from the peripheries.

Latin American literature had long been characterized by what Mariano Siskind calls deseo de mundo (desire for the world) that allowed "an escape from nationalistic cultural formations and established a symbolic horizon for the realization of the translocal aesthetic potential of literature and cosmopolitan forms of subjectivation" (Siskind 2014, p. 3). Siskind remarks that the subjectivity of the Latin American cosmopolitan intellectual was defined by his marginal position of enunciation and exclusion from global modernity (Siskind 2014, p. 9). After the Latin American Boom and the spread of magical realism, with the exceptional visibility of Cien Años de Soledad, Latin American literature rose from marginality to aesthetic emancipation (Siskind 2014, p. 59). This unprecedented success did not come without unwanted effects: Latin American literature underwent commodification and was reduced into a single marketable format guaranteed to sell books. This format is what literary critic Ignacio Sánchez Prado termed "epigonal magical realism" (Sánchez Prado 2018, p. 91). Now canonized in Latin American literary studies, magical realism lives its afterlife as a marker of class and good taste and continues to be one of the main stand-ins for Latin American specificity.10 Like most authors that came after the Boom, Quesada would have found himself before publishing houses whose definition of Latin American literature is still closely tied to a universalizing version of magical realism. What is evidenced in Big Banana are multiple levels of progression—moving from a Honduran context to a Latin American context, then to a world literary context—that reveal the difficulty of speaking or writing from Honduras.11 The first stepping stone for Eduardo was to be recognized among the Latin American community (which is not clearly distinguished from the Latina/o in the novel), presented in Eduardo's courting of

Andrea, and then proceed to be accepted into a worldly cultural community, which the novel switches to when Eduardo auditions for Steven Spielberg in a completely unanticipated turn of events.

Brazilian scholar Roberto Schwarz astutely remarks upon the troubled contraposition of "a national and a foreign, original and imitative" in discussions of the culture of the peripheries (Schwarz 1992, p. 16). Schwarz breaks through the notion of Brazil's alleged "imitative nature;" to expose the defects of criticism of cultural transplantation. For my own interests in Honduran literature, the most relevant of these defects is that Latin American elites are self-conscious about being a (inferior) copy of "a prior original existing elsewhere", and they thus attach a "mythical solidity (. . .) to the economic, technological and political inequalities of the international order" (Schwarz 1992, p. 16). Though Schwarz focuses on Brazil in his essay, his conclusions can usefully be translated to the case of Quesada's Big Banana. In particular, Schwarz critically engages with the tension between calls for nationalism and concerns over cultural alienation via subordination. For him, external influence is necessary for progress to happen, and yet it is subordinating and blocks the path to progress (Schwarz 1992, p. 35). A similar struggle is present in Big Banana: Eduardo negotiates between his desire to be true to and defend Honduras and his disparagement of the country and its cultural production that undergirds his imitation of and references to hegemonic culture.

With its very title, Big Banana gestures to the national conditions that predetermine how Eduardo is perceived abroad during his long sojourn in New York City. Early in the novel, Eduardo is given the nickname "Big Banana", a play between banana republic (an expression coined by O. Henry to describe the fictional Republic of Anchuria, inspired by his experiences in Honduras) and The Big Apple (where most of the story takes place) (Henry 2012). This nickname makes light of Eduardo's ambitious dreams of becoming a Hollywood star despite his status as an immigrant construction worker in New York City. In New York, Eduardo joins a community of Latin Americans who come together to discuss art and the painful histories of their home countries while dealing with the hardships of everyday immigrant life. Even within this community, Eduardo has to work hard to be acknowledged and is constantly asked to account for Honduras and its history. Eduardo's girlfriend Mirian spends most of the novel waiting for him in Honduras while he tries to achieve the American dream. The narrative interweaves events in the present (Eduardo in New York, Mirian in Tegucigalpa), recollections of a romanticized past (Eduardo and Mirian in Tegucigalpa), and Eduardo's visualizations of an ideal future saturated with major figures of popular culture that would indicate his success.

Following Hall's conceptualization of the cultural and aesthetic process, Eduardo persistently sets up situations to perform distinction before Andrea, the Latin American community in New York, and figures of the entertainment

industry. Early in the novel, Eduardo learns that he has been working on the renovation of a prestigious literary club founded in 1870 by a group of journalists, writers, and critics. It is through this club that he sees a chance to prove himself to culture producers in the center, although he is satisfied with the appreciation he receives from the secretary of the club. Convinced that he was born to succeed, Eduardo knows he will need to show himself to be more than a simple construction worker to the people in the club (note the desire to separate himself from a class that he considers to be beneath him). He manages to make eye contact with the secretary and decides to use this opening to perform distinction. He approaches the woman and asks her if she can get some coffee for "this artist" referring to himself. This is a moment in which knowledge of popular culture becomes a tool to prove membership to a higher class: Eduardo brings up West Side Story and some of the people involved in the 1961 production hoping the secretary would recognize him as more than a laborer. The secretary's excited response to Eduardo's reference proves the power that cultural capital has to endow someone with cultural nobility and, thus, allow them to establish a relation with members of the upper class—as conceived by Bourdieu (1984, p. 81). Eduardo's reference to West Side Story is his method of indicating his cultivation. In naming the actors and composer of this musical, he definitively demonstrates that he has more than surface- level knowledge of the prestigious popular culture production. It should be mentioned that West Side Story has been the sociocultural and aesthetical representation par excellence inside the United States. Similar to magical realism, this representation has constricted the opportunities of Latinx artists to create and participate in other kinds of projects. The scene continues with Eduardo replying that he studied theater and literature but is currently an unemployed actor. The secretary asks him more about theater, Shakespeare, etc., marking his initiative as a success.

The protagonist's display of his cultural capital lays the groundwork for the novel to show its own worth. In the paragraph preceding Eduardo's reply about his current job, there is a clear invocation of Hamlet with his subtle "ser o no ser" (Quesada 2001, p. 58; to be or not to be). This allusion to Shakespeare—one of many in the novel—is strategically placed before the secretary asks Eduardo if he has seen Othello, to slightly conceal it from the reader, yet is obvious enough for the novel's performance of distinction, paralleling Eduardo's own claim to his place in the cultivated circles through his knowledge of the canon. Eduardo then proceeds to visualize his future as an acclaimed actor working with world-renowned directors like Oliver Stone, Robert Redford, and Raúl Juliá. Popular culture is then not simply the instrument to achieve recognition but the goal. There are two levels of popular culture that the novel deals with: that of the production and that of the producers, who have themselves become part of popular culture due to their celebrity status. The protagonist longs to join in the sphere of popular culture producers; for him,

success is achieved through admission to that highly selective circle.

During Eduardo and Andrea's date at Librería Macondo, he uses his social connections to impress Andrea. He tells her about the history of the bookstore and shows off his friendship with the owner, don Jorge (Quesada 2001, p. 130). Afterwards, Eduardo gifts her a copy of La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos by the Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez. In this scene, Eduardo demonstrates to Andrea via this gift that his literary and cultural capital extends beyond the Latin American Boom.12 Furthermore, he establishes how well acquainted he is with the bookstore by recounting a curious anecdote about the place. Before this passage, however, the author had already shared the story of when García Márquez taught a course from Columbia University at the Librería Macondo because of his friendship with the bookstore's owner. In the space of two pages, the incident is alluded to on two occasions: once by the lead character and once by the narrator/author. Quesada follows this first telling of the event by explaining how hard it was for Eduardo to strike up a friendship with don Jorge and incorporates references to a book of literary criticism as well as a mention of the "Grupo de Barranquilla", an intellectual and literary community that gathered in the Colombian city of Barranquilla in the mid-twentieth century (García Márquez among them).

While Eduardo uses popular culture to separate himself from an uncultured working class, he—and the novel—transforms highbrow culture into a tool to claim belonging within the cultural elite. However, popular and highbrow become entangled as both character and author cross cultural contexts. Author and protagonist alike carry with them a perception of culture—world literary, commercially popular, and U.S. produced—that they developed in Honduras as they cross into the so-called "First World", and then back to the peripheries. This is to say that hegemonic culture crosses the center–periphery division three times: during its importation into Honduras, when Eduardo travels to the United States, and when he returns. In each of these instances, it mutates and acquires new valences. Furthermore, the novel destabilizes class markers of taste as commercial popular culture is arguably within reach for the great majority of the population in Latin America as much as it is in New York City. With migration at its center, Big Banana grapples with the concerns that arise from being the Other and the need to set oneself apart from them. This dynamic explains Eduardo's constant effort to show off his cultural knowledge.

In the novel, the possibility of subverting hegemonic culture via Eduardo's use of it to claim his place in a worldly cultured circle is flawed from its inception. In the novel, Eduardo works to accumulate cultural capital without ever being critical of the industry (which the novel does not do either). Indeed, an inventory of the references alone would show that the author indisputably favors Western culture. In the act of performing distinction, both the character and the novel subordinate themselves in the hope of receiving validation from

the hegemonic. Following the arguments from Schwarz described above, this move results in a reification of the hierarchies established by the center.

Thus far, I have shown Eduardo's investment in making an impression on those who he sees as having a greater cultural/intellectual position in a manner similar to the novel's own work in inscribing itself into the literary canon. I began this essay with a preliminary analysis of the preamble to the most iconic scene of performance of distinction in the novel: when Eduardo and Andrea have intercourse. While all of Eduardo's courting of Andrea is a performance, the main test occurs with intercourse. It is in this moment that the novel's own performance of distinction reaches its climax. Thus, the act of lovemaking is not solely between the two characters. Rather, countless authors and thinkers observe, respond to, and even participate in the action, as evident in the following passage:

Encendidos y desnudos se estrellaron contra la pared ante la mirada cómplice de Pound, la estupefacción de Kafka, la curiosidad de Borges, la envidia de Hemingway y la excitación de Neruda. Todos desde la pared observaban aquel infierno divino, escuchaban el respirar confundido, la búsqueda del andrógino. (Quesada 2001, p. 183)

Hot and naked, they slammed into the wall under Pound's accomplice eyes, before Kafka's stupefaction, Borges' curiosity, Hemingway's envy and Neruda's excitement. They were all watching that divine inferno from their places on the wall, listening to the frenzied breathing, the search for the androgynous. (Krochmal trans. (Quesada 1999, p. 137))

This excerpt lays bare the exhibitionist fantasies of the protagonist: he desires not only Andrea's validation but wants his heroes to watch him perform and succeed. Eduardo's papering the apartment with posters of world-renowned authors and his construction of the book-bed play a double function. Together, they allow him to convince Andrea of his intellectual stature and to show off his virile prowess to his idols. The "search for the androgynous" mentioned at the end of this passage symbolically signals Eduardo's pene- tration of the canon by seducing Andrea—who is herself a metonymy for García Márquez and what Márquez came to mean in Latin American and world literature. In this scene, Andrea is disembodied and her body becomes the vessel to fill with literary knowledge.

Although this is not the main focus of my argument, it is important to address the gendered, sexual, and romantic aspects within this scene as well as in Eduardo and Andrea's general dynamic. Firstly, despite being presented as a romantic relationship with the inclusion of sexual relations, Eduardo and Andrea's connection seems to be more of the intellectual and sexual type, rather than one of care and affection. In Big Banana, their entanglement primarily serves to prove that Eduardo is the "genuine intellectual" that he claims to be. The romance mirrors Doris Sommer's understanding of the national romances

serving as foundational fictions in Latin America (Sommer 1991).13 Taking into consideration this dynamic, the dis/embodiment process that Andrea—and, later on, Mirian—are put through in the novel becomes a deeply problematic site. The way in which the minority writer takes possession of the woman's body for his literary (ab)use in Big Banana is reminiscent of the way in which women have, in many national allegorical texts, often been cast as "republican mothers", or as standing in for the nation (Padilla 2012, p. 4). However, Eduardo's disembodiment of Andrea and Mirian in Big Banana to perform distinction is most closely aligned with the argument of Emily Hind's Dude Lit: Mexican Men Writing and Performing Competence, 1955–2012 where "Mexican men perform the role of writer in order to convince others of their artistic and intellectual competence" (Hind 2019, p. 5).

At this point, it is evident that Eduardo is not the only one performing distinction. This scene is pivotal in Quesada's own performance where he chooses as his audience a markedly Western and Latin American canon: Cortázar, Chehkov, Camus, Carlos Fuentes, Umberto Eco, and Allen Ginsberg. None of the named authors are Honduran. In this way, the novel implicitly reveals the author's perception of his country's national literature. Moreover, the literary canon that Quesada evokes is distinctly masculine: it includes only one female author out of thirty-six referenced writers. The intellectual order the author is aiming for is eminently male. It is unsurprising, then, that the most powerful performance of distinction arises within a remarkably gendered sex scene, in which the protagonist performs traditional, sexual masculinity—and distinction—for his canonical male literary audience—Andrea is secondary.

The scene ends when Eduardo climaxes:

Entre la risa sin freno le señaló el libro donde se había concentrado la eyaculación. Y Andrea también rió a carcajadas cuando leyó, entre las letras que no tenían semen y las que tenían menos: Antología de literatura hondureña. Eduardo, aún sin contener la risa, dijo:

—Acabo de fecundar la literatura de mi país. ¡Creced y multiplicaos! (Quesada 2001, p. 185)

Through unbridled laughter he pointed to the book on which his ejaculate had concentrated, and Andrea also laughed when she read, between the letters with no semen and those with less semen: Anthology of Honduran Literature.

Eduardo, still unable to contain his laughter, said, "I just impregnated my coun- try's literature. Be fruitful and multiply!" (Krochmal trans. (Quesada 1999, p. 139))

The Biblical allusion at the end of this passage renders Eduardo's position one of superiority—that of a deity—in relation to Honduran literature—a position he does not dare assume vis-à-vis the world canon. This sole mention of Honduran literature is anonymous: no authors, no poets, no editors.

Moreover, this collection is on the receiving end of the action, and, as an object, it has no agency. This betrays the author's conception of Honduran literature. It is a national literature that has not been created or produced but that will reproduce what is imposed on it from the outside. The depiction of the anthology is gendered: it is fertilized by Eduardo, who hopes to have impregnated it. In other words, while Eduardo and Quesada think of canonical male writers as their equals, Honduran literary production is relegated to a minor, even subordinate status.

I must mention an interesting dichotomy arising from Eduardo's semen on the book. Though he purports to have fertilized Honduran literature, the spilled semen will never result in reproduction. This holds for Andrea as well: Eduardo ejaculates outside of Andrea as she does not want a pregnancy. Throughout the scene, the narrator insists on presenting the world literary authors and texts as complicit with Eduardo, participating in the action, and helping set the ground for the lovemaking. However, while the intercourse is happening, the bed made of books is falling apart. The narrator describes how book after book falls and slides, making it difficult for the characters to make themselves comfortable. In this way, two contradictory lines run through the scene: Eduardo's intense desire to prove he is in tune with the world-literary figures while the figures, books, and Andrea push back and direct him away. At best, one could argue, the world literature representatives come to begrudgingly accept Eduardo's presence. The books and posters provide enough support and validation for him to carry on, yet they withhold their full recognition. Likewise, Eduardo convinces himself that he has fertilized Honduran literature, when in fact all he did was to leave a (perhaps unwanted) mark.

3. The Limits of Performing Distinction

So far, I have drawn attention to the shortcomings of performing distinction in relation to the problematic structures it reinforces as it adopts the Western canon as its model, audience, and goal. Nevertheless, this presumes that the performance only seeks to procure a seat in acclaimed cultural circles for the novel. Quesada, however, introduces another dimension to his project near the end of the novel: he stages a withdrawal from the cultural struggle as Eduardo rejects an offer to star in a Hollywood production directed by Steven Spielberg. This not only suggests that Eduardo's ultimate goal is not actually to join the producers of popular culture, but also that Quesada himself wishes to defy dominant structures. The last few chapters of the book narrate Eduardo's change of luck: his performance of distinction pays off. He has the opportunity to audition with the famed director. In the audition—or more accurately, interview—Eduardo answers questions about himself, his country, and his life, after which the director informs Eduardo that he has been chosen. Eduardo's first reaction is shock, immediately followed by joyous shouts. Nevertheless,

Eduardo rejects Spielberg's offer declaring that the Earth in its totality is a stage full of all kinds of performers (him being an excellent one, validated by Spielberg himself) and implying that gods are watching and either cheering or booing the performances. Spielberg recognizes the Shakespeare allusion ("All the world's a stage"), but instead of considering Eduardo a fraud, he is even more intrigued by him. Eduardo purports that he is not interested in fame nor fortune but in acting. However, before the lead character rejects the offer, he makes sure to receive a letter written by Spielberg that proves that Eduardo "made it".

Spielberg is so impressed that he asks Eduardo to write for him from his own unique perspective. While the protagonist is slightly reluctant at first, he accepts on the condition of writing under a female pseudonym. Eduardo is actually thinking of having Mirian write for Spielberg, with her name, but under the pretense that he is the writer. Spielberg suspects that this is precisely the case but is not bothered by it. The affirmation letter in addition to Eduardo's willingness to write—or make Mirian write—for the director detracts from his rejection. In so doing, Eduardo is disembodying Mirian to embody her with himself. In this case, Mirian is an invisible, disembodied subject within a periphery; the only subjectivity that could be rescued by the center is that of a mestizo heterosexual man.

Despite his ostensibly astronomical ambitions in terms of acting exceeding Spiel- berg's offer and his alleged disinterest in money and fame, Eduardo does not completely withdraw from the international cultural playing field. Instead, he subsumes Mirian's writing to the culture production of the center, and to himself. The writer at the edge of the periphery—Mirian through Eduardo—relies on the approval and support of a canonical culture producer to widen their audience and access the larger literary circuits. Quesada gives primacy to Eduardo's efforts toward visibility over Mirian's creative and intellectual endeavors; in this manner, the performance of distinction of the peripheral takes place over their writing. Additionally, writing from Honduras is again associated with the female (while the performing or acting have been predominantly male), and, in this case, it is eclipsed by Eduardo's role in obtaining the opportunity and receiving formal credit as the author. Eduardo has finally impregnated Honduran literature and made it possible for it to multiply and prosper, but at what cost? The gender and cultural hierarchy is not only repeated but reinforced at every level.

At the very end of the novel, Eduardo and Mirian reunite in Honduras for their idyllic ending. Eduardo mentions that "someone in New York" asked him to write for them after Mirian states that she wants to become a writer of fictional narrative. Before the novel ends, Eduardo offers Mirian two pieces of advice on writing novels: not to write about war nor to have happy endings, because critics consider them fluff. Mirian quickly changes Eduardo's mind

about both of his suggestions and Big Banana gives us its own happily ever after. Reading this move as a metacommentary on the unlikely happy ending of a novel about an immigrant which had, for the most part, painted a realistic depiction of their experience, Quesada defends his own decision to defy critics' expectations. Regardless, Eduardo continues to think that critics would never forgive Mirian for this act of defiance. Even though Quesada keeps his storybook ending, the concerns about visibility and how the novel will be perceived and received prevail.

The end of Big Banana raises a series of yet more provocative questions in light of a critical and tone-altering difference between the English and Spanish editions of the book. In their last conversation, Mirian suggests that they should move to La Ceiba (a Honduran town), and Eduardo's reply differs in the translation:

—Estamos en noviembre; falta poco, seis meses. (Quesada 2001, p. 315)

"Sounds good, but it would be better to divide our time between La Ceiba and New York. Don't forget I have an open offer from my friend Steve. It's November. Our marriage is a short time away, six months". (Krochmal trans. (Quesada 1999, p. 248))

"It's November; it is coming up, in six months". (my translation)

Krochmal's translation implies that Eduardo has a continued desire to remain con- nected to the metropolis (New York) that is not present in the original Spanish. The difference in the editions betrays the distinct projects that they have. While the audience for Arte Público Press (English ed.) would be those in the United States, Seix Barral (Spanish ed.) releases its books for the broad Ibero-American community. Considering its audience, it is possible to interpret Krochmal's ending as a nod to the Latina/o community in the United States, whereas Seix Barral steered clear from that kind of gesture. To complicate things further, Big Banana has an unusual publication history: the English translation by Walter Krochmal was published in 1999, a year before the Spanish first edition came out. It could be said that this novel was "born translated", in Rebecca Walkowitz's words (Walkowitz 2015). One can safely assume that this timeline was a result of the pressure Quesada would have faced to secure someone willing to release the book. The appearance of the English translation before the Spanish in a way subsumes Honduran literature to the project of the dominant classes in the center. At the same time, its status as a born- translated novel also places it in the category of minor world-literature insofar as it is a text that registers, and is registered through, cultural phenomena of the mediascape of the contemporary world-capitalist system.

4. Conclusions

Throughout this essay I have examined Roberto Quesada's Big Banana as an act

of performing distinction, in which the novel, its author, and its protagonist take part. The singular combination of highbrow culture references with allusions to United States' popular culture draws attention to their entanglement as they cross borders. The novel and Eduardo's claim to a presence in the world literary system can be read as a revindication of (ultra)minor cultural production. Nevertheless, Big Banana's performance of distinction reproduces the structures of marginalization prevalent in the center, perpetuating the canon's problematic emphasis on masculinity, as well as the myth that unless marginalized literatures engage with prestigious cultural productions or discussions, they belong to a secondary order.

If, following Bourdieu and Hall, culture is the ground for a larger class struggle, then Big Banana demonstrates the massive scale of distribution of cultural productions over an uneven playing field that both extends and intensifies the cultural struggle into a transnational phenomenon. Hopelessly underfunded and unsupported cultural producers from the periphery are thus forced to compete with the hegemony of the culture industry. Therefore, the cultural struggle is not just a conflict among classes, but it unfolds in larger arenas: among nations with highly asymmetrical relations of power. Furthermore, this conflict goes beyond the Global North and the Global South but also plays out within regions and sub-regions in both contexts. Attending to the literature of countries like Honduras allows for a more nuanced examination of world literary networks and the relationships marginalized literatures maintain with these.

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