Melanie U. Pooch

DiverCity
Global Cities as a Literary Phenomenon

Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles
in a Globalizing Age

From:

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Based on the structured analysis of selected North American novels, this work examines global cities as a literary phenomenon (»DiverCity«). By analyzing Dionne Brand's Toronto, »What We All Long For« (2005), Chang-rae Lee's New York, »Native Speaker« (1995), and Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, »Tropic of Orange« (1997), Melanie U. Pooch provides the connecting link for exploring the triad of globalization and its effects, global cities as cultural nodal points, and cultural diversity in a globalizing age as a literary phenomenon. Thus, she contributes to a global, interdisciplinary, and multi-perspectival understanding of literature, culture, and society.

Melanie U. Pooch received her doctoral degree at the University of Mannheim, Germany.

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1 Introduction

The two decades after the beginning of the 1990s saw a paradigm shift across various academic fields, one that also sustainably changed literary and cultural studies. During this time, as a result of the interdisciplinary research of the socioeconomic phenomenon of globalization, North American literary and cultural studies were increasingly denationalizing, reflecting the world-wide globalization process with its increased connectivity and convergence, the erosion of borders, and a growing multidirectional migration. At the same time, interethnic writing was gaining significance, particularly in Canadian multicultural literature and Asian American literature, and established schools of urbanism were performing in-depth studies of global cities as global cultural nodal points in a global network of flows and as major points of intersection for different ethnicities. This co-existence of the rising significance of interethnic writing and the greater understanding of global urbanism has meant that the urban literature of the time illustrates and reflects the multiplicity of cultural diversity in a globalizing age.

As this work's title 'DiverCity – Global Cities as a Literary Phenomenon' expresses, the literary representation of cultural diversity in a globalizing age is analyzed by focusing on the North American global cities of Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles. The neologism 'diverCity,' a compound blend of 'diversity' and 'city,' stresses this study's emphasis of the impact of cultural diversity in a globalizing age on global cities as a literary phenomenon. Thus, globalization functions as the temporal frame, global cities as the spatial frame, and cultural diversity as the topical frame. The common aesthetics of global literature, urban fiction, and ethnic writing identified in this literary analysis are 'the poetics of narrative,' 'the poetics of place,' and 'the poetics of code-switching.' Thus, the three selected contemporary North American novels serve as examples of how an analysis by a 'poetics of diverCity' provides the opportunity to analyze ethnic urban literature in a globalizing age in a structured way.

This analysis aims to identify and distinguish specifics and synchronies of global cities as a literary phenomenon. Whereas the term 'specifiCity' explains the specific particularities of each global city as a result of its individual economic, geo-political, and socio-cultural present and past, the concept of 'synchroniCity' describes parallel phenomena in a global context, in particular for globalization and its worldwide effects. Using a structured literary analysis involving a poetics of narrative, place, and code-switching allows common as well as individual aspects of global cities as a literary phenomenon to crystallize. As a prerequisite, however, the key terms and particular aesthetics of this analysis need to be introduced.

This work begins in chapter 2 with a brief definition of globalization and its effects. The term 'globalization' has been used in literature since the 1980s, soon being applied all-pervasively across different disciplines. Although globalization is claimed to have started as early as around the discovery of the Americas and was accelerated by the nineteenth century's globe-encompassing transportation and communication, the term gained stronger momentum with the growing global economy in the 1990s. In this globalizing age, increased connectivity, improved technologies, and perceived convergence lead to growing global interdependence, the slow erosion of geo-political borders, and multi-directional migrations. These forces and innovations have triggered global economic, cultural, and media exchange. In this work, homogenization and hybridization, which describe a form of standardization and heterogeneity, are presented as the main departure points within the discussion of globalization.

Chapter 3 places the emphasis on global cities as cultural nodal points, while exploring the interactional relationship of globalization, cultural diversity, and urban space. After introducing the two rivaling movements of urban studies, the traditional Chicago school and the more recent L.A. school, and the main characteristics, functions, and qualities of global cities, attention is shifted to the cultural significance of urban centers in a global network of flows. In this study, the global cities of interest are Toronto, New York, and Los Angeles, three of the largest, most culturally diverse, and globally connected metropolis in North America. While Los Angeles and New York are *the* American global cities, the preeminent Canadian global city of Toronto is included to show how different regional and national discourses impact cultural diversity in global cities in a globalizing age.

In chapter 4, the concept of 'cultural diversity' and the wide array of neighboring terms are explored. Due to the acceleration of cultural flows and the porosity of borders, cultural exchange in a globalizing age is increasingly understood and practiced multidirectionally. As a consequence, constructions such as

'national identity' are progressively questioned because cultural identity is being understood more flexibly and dynamically. Emerging in American discourse in the late 1970s, the term 'diversity' describes the process of individual and group identity formation, involving a range of different cultures. In literary and cultural studies, 'diversity' is connected to a multitude of neighboring concepts, such as 'postcolonial hybridity,' 'transnationalism,' or 'the melting pot,' each indicating topics of integration, immigration, adaption, cultural dominance, or assimilation. To analyze the type or degree of integration of specific ethnicities, minorities, or immigrants in a particular global city, the different forms and conceptualizations of diversity need to be examined.

Chapter 5 then focuses on the particular aesthetics of the subsequent literary analysis – the poetics of diverCity – a main component of this work. The combination of the three aesthetics of analysis, 'the poetics of narrative,' 'the poetics of place,' and 'the poetics of code-switching' forms the basis for identifying and interpreting ethnic diversity in global city literature. The text here explores how the novels illustrate and translate the multiplicity, complexity, and heterogeneity of the interaction and negotiation of different ethnic influences in the cultural contact zone of North American urban settings in a time of globalization. Concepts of identity and space, movement and loss, and border experiences are recurring subjects in global literature, ethnic literatures, or both, while hybrid text forms, intertextuality, and polyglossia are recurring elements of style. The 'narrative,' 'place' and 'code-switching' aesthetics allow the literary (re)presentation of 'diverCity' to be grasped through the common features of the selected novels. This analysis provides the connecting link required to show how a literary analysis can fill the gap when examining the triad of globalization and its effects, global cities as cultural nodal points, and cultural diversity in a globalizing age as a literary phenomenon.

In chapters 6, 7, and 8, the 'poetics of diverCity' will then be applied to the literary analysis of the three selected ethnic global city novels, examining and comparing the synchronic impact of globalization, the specific characteristics of global cities, and the multiplicity of cultural diversity. Each selected novel, Dionne Brand's Toronto, *What We All Long For* (2005),[1] Chang-rae Lee's New York, *Native Speaker* (1995),[2] and Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange* (1997)[3], constitutes all of the three types of literature: global, urban, and ethnic. Furthermore, they encompass the common characteristics of having

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1   Hereafter referred to as '*WHA.*'

2   Hereafter referred to as '*NAS.*'

3   Hereafter referred to as '*TRO.*'

been published within the last two centuries, of being mainly set in a North American global city and of incorporating themes of globalization and its effects. The three selected contemporary novels are written in English by authors with an immigrant background. Each novel features a multi-ethnic cast of characters in which a variety of ethnicities are incorporated, each trespassing the ethnic background of the respective author. While each novel features different forms of socio-cultural integration and self-definition, different forms of an 'interethnic imagination' represent a recurring theme. Moreover, since the 'real' and the 'literary' city have an intrinsic relationship, each global city and its particular development and unique composition of cultures is briefly introduced preceding the respective novel's analysis. It is these chapters that provide the detail to tackling the challenge of comparing global cities in a globalizing age: the challenge arising from being as influenced by global process as by national or regional particularities.

In chapter 6, Dionne Brand's Toronto, *What We All Long For* (2005) can be described as 'the world in a city' because the diversity of the world becomes visible in one city, illustrating the coexistence and overlap of the different worlds. The novel rewrites the formerly anglicized city of Toronto by focusing on a selection of characters that forms an interethnic coalition across the boundaries of the different worlds within the city. The new ethnic diversity of Toronto's formerly anglicized society is made audible with a new vocabulary and reveals the multiple meaning and associations inscribed in a certain place. Brand's Toronto is an urban cultural contact zone where people of different ethnicity, class, or gender encounter each other and intermingle peacefully, while others still struggle for the integration, equality, and social acceptance promoted by the political ideal of Canadian multiculturalism. The novel thus manages to combine the two contradictory discourses of how the integration of the first generation, African Canadians, or illegal immigrants failed and how Toronto offers a space of diversity and tolerance to culturally diverse second-generation immigrants who identify themselves with a new collective form of global urban citizenship that circumvents cultural categorizations.

In chapter 7, Chang-rae Lee's New York, *Native Speaker* (1995) becomes 'a city of wor(l)ds' (*NAS* 319) because the poetics of code-switching is the novel's dominating strategy for the visualization, exploration, and translation of urban immigrant life and the integration of the different ethnic groups into society. The novel's depiction of the linguistic distinctiveness of the diverse immigrant groups is achieved without drawing on voicing vernacular in a written form. As the novel's title illustrates, language and conventions have the power to both marginalize and integrate because, even if an immigrant speaks English fluently,

recognition as a well-integrated American citizen is difficult. By comparing the particular experiences of the two Korean Americans, Henry Park and John Kwang, the general opportunities and limitations of immigration and integration are explored in a 1990s 'Giuliani time' New York. With the application of different narrative strategies that go beyond Asian American literary traditions, globality and diversity manifest themselves in the novel's structure and form, reconciling Asian and African Americans and creating an interethnic vision beyond the two groups.

In chapter 8, Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange* (1997) is presented as 'the world city' in which different worlds, such as the 'First World' and the 'Third World,' converge, collide, and cooperate. In the novel, the poetics of narrative, place, and code-switching are equally important. Thus, whereas Brand's Toronto is expressed as a city with many different, overlapping worlds and Lee's New York as a city in which language is the governing structure, Yamashita's Los Angeles captures both and the complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of the globe, virtually representing the world. Yamashita's Los Angeles is a fragmented urban complex in terms of geography, politics, ethnicity, and class, while the novel's mixing of genres paves the road for a new ethnic literature in a globalizing age. Set in a 1990s post-riot Los Angeles, each character is presented with an individually tailored narrative voice and the same number of chapters, thus coming as close as possible to grasping the global. When the whole geography is moved and everything converges in Los Angeles and its neighboring border zone, the global city, its appearance, and cultural identity are altered. In the end, the interethnic collaboration of the seven culturally diverse characters advocates globalization as a process of hybridization and global mélange, challenging the insistence on borders in physical-geographic, literary-generic, ethnic-categorical, and socio-political terms.

Based on the structured analysis of the three selected North American novels – Dionne Brand's Toronto, *What We All Long For* (2005), Chang-rae Lee's New York, *Native Speaker* (1995), and Karen Tei Yamashita's Los Angeles, *Tropic of Orange* (1997) – this work examines the cultural diversity of global cities as a literary phenomenon ('diverCity') by applying 'the poetics of narrative,' 'the poetics of place,' and 'the poetics of code-switching' to illustrate specific occurrences ('specifiCity') and common developments ('synchroniCity') in a globalizing age. However, before this can be accomplished, the three key terms of this work – globalization, global cities, and cultural diversity – must be explained, beginning with a brief definition of globalization and its effects.