

The Not-So Mirror Image: Creating Cross-Cultural Connections through Language

Say you have a bird. He is the most beautiful bird you have ever seen, and to show him this you place him in a room with mirrors all around. Only one problem—this bird, once he sees himself in the mirror before him, refuses to look elsewhere. Thus, the true beauty of this avian Narcissus is lost, because he has become so entranced with his singular perspective that he fails to acknowledge the rest. This is the great Western affliction. Americans in particular are affected by this lack of perspective and sometimes view foreign cultures as nothing but weak reflections of Western culture. The truth is, what can be communicated in one culture is sometimes out of reach of another. The only way to see the cultural big picture is to learn another language.

Learning Spanish at first felt like a chore to me. What need had I of reading and speaking of the same subjects in different languages? Only when I began reading material truly born of the language did I begin to understand. No English translation could capture the tension of Gabriel García Márquez's words in *Cien Años de Soledad* when he describes "la peste del insomnio," or the insomnia plague (20). Only in Spanish could he communicate the fear of a village losing its memory, the slow erosion of their history and culture and identity. I, who had slept maybe four hours the day I read this in class, felt the meaning like a punch to the stomach. English as an American mouthpiece could never have captured this adequately, not when lack of sleep is so normalized, not when we are so desensitized to tragedy that both insomnia and memory loss can seem inconsequential. Only through Spanish could I feel the weight of Márquez's words, a weight that continued as I read the rest on my own. His writing had existed in tandem with that of the T.S Eliots and Mark Twains, yet communicated what they never had. I only needed to turn my head, like the beautiful bird, to see what was there all along.

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