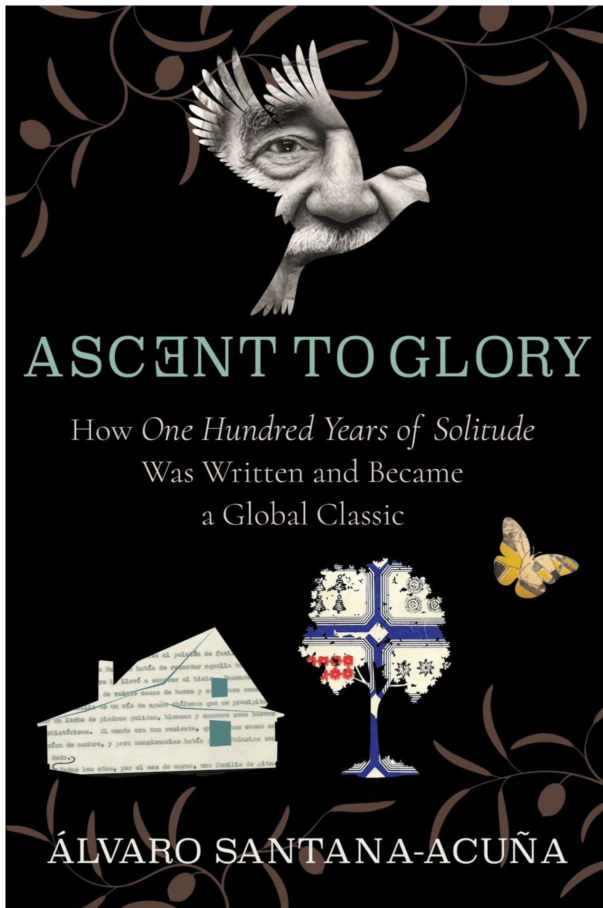
"A Dialogue on *Ascent to Glory*, Imagination, and Global Consecration"

Jun Fang and Alvaro Santana-Acuña

Jun Fang (Northwestern University) interviews **Alvaro Santana-Acuña** (Whitman College) on *Ascent to Glory: How* One Hundred Years of Solitude *Was Written and Became a Global Classic* (Columbia University Press, 2020).



Jun Fang: Congratulations! How does it feel to publish your book during a pandemic?

Alvaro Santana-Acuña: Thank you. Publishing a book in the middle of a global pandemic is truly an unforgettable experience. I am happy it is out after eleven years of research. In a nutshell, *Ascent to Glory* is an in-depth analysis of the making and consecration of one of the most influential cultural goods of the last fifty years, Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude (OHYS)*. Its influence has further expanded lately. When Covid-19 started spreading, I revised the manuscript to explain that readers around the world were reading the novel as if it were a book of prophecies about pandemics. I later wrote an Op-Ed for the New York Times on the surge of interest in this novel during the pandemic.

JF: Who are the primary audiences of *Ascent to Glory*?

ASA: *Ascent* is written for academic and non-academic readers. Keeping that balance was challenging and time-consuming. But both audiences seem to be enjoying it so far and coming up with their own ways of reading it. For cultural sociologists, *OHYS* is a superb case to interrogate major questions such as value and cultural brokerage. This case also contributes to key issues in the fields of literary studies and the history of the book.

JF: Could you elaborate on *Ascent*'s theoretical intervention, especially its engagement with Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu? How does your concept of "networked creativity" contribute to the existing literature on the collaborative nature of creative production?

ASA: *Ascent* builds mainly on the production of culture approach, art worlds, and field theory. It aligns with Becker's art worlds by emphasizing the role of collaboration, especially in the earliest stages of making an artwork. Yet *Ascent* introduces the concept of "networked creativity" to analyze something that it is unclear in Becker's approach: how do professional conventions travel across art worlds, especially in a transnational setting? To answer this question, I use insights from the production of culture and field approaches to theorize the role of collaborators in the stages of imagination and production (especially collaborators

outside tightly knit collaborative circles) and of cultural brokers in the stage of circulation.

JF: I am surprised by your emphasis on "imagination," since cultural sociologists often focus on the stages of production and circulation. What is the sociological significance of studying cultural imagination?

ASA: In his *Questions de sociologie*, Bourdieu made a point that struck me the first time I read it. He criticized "the received idea" that sociology could only "give an account of cultural consumption but not of production." His book on Gustave Flaubert's classic novel *Sentimental Education*, which compellingly studies consumption and production, proved that sociology is indeed fully equipped to explain both stages and how they overlap. Scores of research have proved this point ever since. Clayton Childress's *Under the Cover* is a recent, brilliant example.
In *Ascent*, I seek to criticize another received idea that still lingers, namely, sociology cannot give an account of cultural imagination. What I mean by this is that when artists are thinking about potential projects, they do not do so in the void or solitude. As *Ascent* shows, imagination takes the form of traceable rules, values, ideas, experiences, people, organizations, and objects that furnish an artist's creativity before s/he undertakes the production of the work. For this reason, imagination is not located only in the creator's mind. Collaborators play an important creative role. They help the creator imagine the work and push it into the stage of production. This is why I argue that imagination is the first (and understudied) "gatekeeper" and that cultural production starts once social filters in place in the stage of imagination are overcome.

JF: Your account of imagination draws our attention to the creative stage before production, which is challenging to study sociologically. But I like that your conceptualization foregrounds the role of collaborators – both inside and outside the proximate collaborative circles – in the early stage of creativity. How do you analyze cultural imagination with historical and literary data?

ASA: In the case of *OHYS*, to flesh out the stage of imagination, I had to understand García Márquez's professionalization and worldview as much as the ones of those who accompanied him in his journey to write the novel. Tracing this trajectory was difficult because he was working on that novel for fifteen years in seven countries and the experiences that nurture the story go back to his childhood. Thus, one third of *Ascent* maps out and analyzes the norms, values, beliefs, emotions, people, organizations, and objects that shaped the world in which García Márquez could imagine a novel such as *OHYS*. I found that neither his imagination nor his story for the novel were unique. Around 1950, author Jorge Luis Borges was writing a short story about a family saga that shared structural similarities with *OHYS*. Borges and García Márquez never met. Borges neither finished nor talked about that short story in public. But García Márquez read other fiction by Borges, who was among the authors, like Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka, whose professional writing structured the imagination of the budding writer García Márquez at the time he started thinking about a story that evolved into *OHYS*. Inspiration and imitation are key strategies of action in the stage of imagination.

JF: I wonder why you chose the specific word of "imagination" in this case, a word that some may see as "not sociological enough." Many cultural sociologists use "creation" to refer to developing and evaluating ideas; in my research, I interchangeably use "development" to describe the collective creation of film scripts among creatives. What were your considerations?

ASA: I think imagination is completely sociological. In many introductory sociology courses around the world, one of the lessons students first learn is that sociology and imagination are related. I am referring here to Charles Wright Mills' classic idea of the sociological imagination. Furthermore, we humans are imaginative creatures. And I take the act of imagining something as a form of social action. Émile Durkheim's "collective representations" or Charles Taylor and Gérard Bouchard's "social imaginaries" also remind us that imagining is at its core a collective social process.

For me, the word "creation" is too close to "production" and, hence, "creation" does not convey the sense of a different creative stage with its own social dynamics such as imagination. I considered

the word "inception," but it implies a specific point in time, an origin. We know that creativity is not an event; it is a process punctuated by crystallization peaks aka eureka moments. No single point in the imagination of *OHYS* was an inception; unless we understand his fifteen-year-long imagining of the novel as a single moment. I needed a more processual concept and thus I chose imagination. Its relevance is not confined to art making. We, scholars, have projects in the stage of imagination ("in the pipeline") for years. Sometimes these projects die. Sometimes they come back to us: when we take a shower, browse a new publication, run into "collaborators" at conferences... And we do these and more things without sometimes having written a single word about that project. These social dynamics that shape a project before it is put on paper belong to the stage of social making that I call imagination. What I try to show in *Ascent* is how and why a project moves from the tray of imagination to the tray of production, from an "interesting idea" into something worth writing and publishing. Like artists, scholars are not just producers and consumers, but also are *imagineros* (this Spanish word would translate into English as *imaginers*). The truth is that many a paper does not get passed the stage of imagination; as we all know that happens to a paper in the stage of production (many of them never get published after several rounds of peer-reviewed rejections) and the stage of circulation (many published papers die the unpleasant death of no citations).

FJ: I am overwhelmed by your rich data and all those primary sources you present in *Ascent*. What are the pros and cons of this strategy?

ASA: As commonly said, the devil is in the detail. Since *Ascent* talks to audiences beyond sociology, I wanted to make sure that the empirical demonstration relied heavily on primary sources, rather than secondary ones. This was a time-consuming strategy for I had to spend months in the archives of García Márquez doing lots of fact-checking. But this strategy was also important to understand the making and consecration of *OHYS*. A key finding in *Ascent* is that works become classics because legends and myths end up surrounding them. In other words, it is very hard to think of a classic that is not connected to a myth or legend of some sort. By now, many legends are used to explain the making and consecration of *OHYS*. And, of course, if one of the goals of my book is to understand how such legends help to create the novel's classic status, relying on legendary facts that are common in secondary sources would have been a serious methodological mistake. On page one, *Ascent* opens by giving the impression of making this mistake and then turns the story upside down.

JF: Cultural sociologists have been criticized for not paying enough attention to the content of art in their analyses. I am glad that your examination of global consecration incorporates the content, which is especially salient in Chapter 7 on indexing a classic. It reminds me of the works of Wendy Griswold, and I think you even take a step further to bring content and cultural brokers together.

ASA: Yes, Griswold's "The Fabrication of Meaning" is a classic example of how sociologists can and need to engage with the content of works effectively. *Ascent*'s theoretical and empirical contribution is to redefine the concept of "indexical," by which I mean small units of significance, such as the one mentioned above ("the devil is in the detail"), that different kinds of people are familiar with, use, or come across in all sorts of situations (conversations on public transportation, social media… at bars, airports...). I first theorized what indexicals do for classics in an award-winning article in the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. In "How a Literary Work Becomes a Classic," I showed that classics have the unusual capacity of creating indexicals (e.g., *Hamlet*'s omnipresent "To be or not to be"). I also found that indexicals associated with classics create social patterns. In *Ascent*, I gathered data in forty-five languages encompassing more than fifty years and ninety countries to show how different parts of the novel (sentences, events, characters, locations…) have become indexicals that have helped to create its classic status globally. Fortunately, this analysis in *Ascent*, which connects readers to a text, has been well received by readers who are suspicious of sociologists: literary critics and fiction writers.

JF: Your analysis of censorship goes beyond the traditional understanding of censors as simply ideological watchdogs. It echoes my findings on the role of Chinese censors in China-Hollywood

co-productions: they are cultural gatekeepers who shape aesthetics.

ASA: Indeed, censors are ideological watchdogs that police artworks, looking for cases of insubordinate politics, pornography, and dubious morality. Their role on this front is well known and studied. Less known is that censors can also act as "aesthetic tastemakers." In publishing, this role is typical of peer writers, agents, and publishers. In *Ascent*, I show that censors dealing with manuscripts of Latin American novels in the 1960s became *sui generis* collaborators in the creation of literary works. For example, writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante submitted the manuscript of his novel *Three Trapped Tigers* four times to censors in Spain. Later, he acknowledged that their feedback helped him improve the text. The practice of resubmitting the manuscript to reviewers is common among book editors and publishers. But it is unheard of among censors. And yet in the 1960s in Spain, this practice had a major effect on the commercial success of Latin American literature, because this country was the largest producer and consumer of Spanish-language books and the largest exporter of such books to Latin America. These censors not only policed morality and politics, but also shaped the aesthetics of what consumers read. Spain's case is not unique. Censors were active in most developed countries until the 1950s, including the United States, United Kingdom, and France, or today in China, as you show in your research. So, censors' role in promoting cultural products that become commercial hits and even classics deserves further sociological research.

FJ: I must admit that I have never finished reading *OHYS*. But as you suggest, people still can talk about classics even without having read them. How does it contribute to consecration?

ASA: Well, I must admit that social experiences such as yours inspired me to write *Ascent*. Broadly speaking, social theories tend to highlight that the action that matters, the one that has long-term structural effects, is performed by actors fully embedded in a specific social situation. In the case of literature, we have superb theories to explain how the opinion of critics and scholars help consecrate artworks. But I also came across examples of many people who readily admitted that a cultural product has high value without firsthand knowledge of it and, in so doing, their opinions help with the artwork's consecration as classic, too. Thus, in *Ascent* I argue that non-reading (and more generally non-action) is an underappreciated type of social action. In my analysis, I vindicate the role in consecration of what I call non-readers, that is, people who have not read or seen the artwork, say *Don Quixote* or *The Mona Lisa*, and yet can agree that it is a classic and even engage in a meaningful conversation about it. As I was studying this social practice, I realized that we all are non-readers (or non-actors) of sorts, and our non-actions belong to that "surface of agreement," to use Erving Goffman's terms, that keeps the rhythm of social life going and ultimately ensures the reproduction of social orders.

Concluding remark: There are other themes we do not have space to get into. *Ascent* touches on the differences between the canonical and the classic, the concepts of niche and disembedding, the distinction between meaning and "meaningfulness," or the role of cultural counterfactuals. We hope this dialogue gets readers (and non-readers) interested in what *Ascent* has to offer to cultural sociologists.