

Preface to *A Game of Mirrors. Colonial Culture and the Latin American Imagination*

FRANCISCO RAMÍREZ SANTACRUZ | UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
ISAAC MAGAÑA G. CANTÓN | UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL
AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO

For centuries, literature has been one of humanity's preferred tools for deepening its knowledge of the world and expanding the horizon of its understanding. Through writing, humans have weighed up hypotheses and theories, as well as investigated new connections and correspondences between materials and ideas.

This use of literature as a tool for exploring unexpected connections between objects, concepts and events was accentuated during the 20th century. After the psychoanalytic revolution consolidated by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in the early part of the century, several authors aimed to disentangle the enigmas of the present through writing about the past. In Latin America, this took the form of a restless search for meaning about the continent's colonial roots.

This is understandable and even natural since it was precisely during that period that the identity of the so-called 'Latin American subject' emerged —the tumultuous encounter between Europeans and Indigenous Peoples not only produced cultural conflicts that, from today's perspective, appear irresolvable, but also a new ethos. Without being purely Indigenous

or Spanish culturally, the subjects of the New World developed certain characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors that slowly shaped the continent's new identities.

Identities that, like almost everything that emerges from a violent collision, arose with cracks, confusion, and deep trauma, especially over their multicultural roots. Issues that, ultimately, have led a large number of authors to embark on a fierce search for the aesthetic forms that best represent these conflicts, igniting debates along these lines about the Americas' colonial legacy and the ethical imperative of Latin America's art and literature.

It was in the midst of these debates that, at the end of the first half of the 20th century, some Latin American authors started to observe the present through the prism of the colonial past—although not with the aim of understanding it *as it happened* but rather with the purpose of rethinking and reimagining it. Strikingly, since then, the interest of historical fiction has slowly shifted from history itself to the ways in which history could have unfolded. Of course, this does not mean that literary accounts and reflections that seek to recreate history as it occurred no longer exist, but rather that in Latin America the desire to make sense of the past has also produced an entire form of literary reflections that draw on the colonial past, not to recount how it happened or how it is most likely happened, but to completely reinvent it and reimagine it.

The result of those counterfactual approaches to the past has been a large corpus of works that, without reaching a consensus on how the past looks from the present and what should be done about it, have raised an interesting set of question and hypotheses regarding our origins—to what degree is our colonial past still conditioning our institutions and most profound character? In what sense does our colonial past determine our identities? To what degree can our understanding of the present help us to reframe and reinvent such a past? How much does our understanding of the present allow us to reinvent and reformulate our

roots? And finally, how does this work of reinvention impact our relationships with the rest of the West and the world?

With these questions as context and with the desire to think along these lines, the contributors of this volume have written about the relationship between Latin America's colonial roots and the literary imagination of the present. Without the promise of resolving any debate—which, incidentally, seems irresolvable at present—but rather with the goal of showing the current state of the discussion in the realm of literature.

We, specifically, aimed to achieve two things. On the one hand, we wanted to observe how these issues have been addressed in literary accounts, and, on the other hand, we wanted to study the ways in which these topics are currently tackled by literary critics. That is why, when inviting our collaborators to participate in this project, we asked them to think about the relationship between the past and present of Latin America through the lens of art and literature, but without suggesting or requiring any conclusion or interpretation from them.

It is our view that research must be a creative process, and therefore its final form cannot be anticipated. Writing should be an adventurous journey, a deep investigation of profound questions for which answers should not be prescribed by agendas or external actors. We believe that, when we write, we must not expect or look for a given result, but instead examine our questions with openness and curiosity. Otherwise, we believe, thinking is impossible.

It is with this conviction that we extended the invitations to our collaborators and, finally, we welcomed the eclectic nature of this collection of essays, which, while uniformly exploring how the imagination of the Latin American present and the colonial past interact, do so on their own terms and according to their own criteria.

For this reason, given the fact that the materials collected in this volume were difficult to anticipate, we believe that the

best way to understand this book as a whole is not through its argumentative cohesion but rather through its thematic unity. A sort of state of the art that captures the relationships between the continent's colonial past and the imagination surrounding it —both in terms of how it has been represented in literature, as well as the way in which some of the critics interested in this interaction currently understand it.

The book opens with Enrique Macari's "El tiempo y el amor son uno solo": a Figural Reading of Elena Garro's 'La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas'", which begins examining Erich Auerbach's concept of *figura*, a term whose semantic richness often makes it difficult to explain. According to the author, although the concept is brilliant and productive for typological thinking, it implies a universality that becomes its greatest weakness because it leaves the question of what lies outside the figural reading unanswered. An outside within which, in his view, there is an incommensurable and irreducible other that challenges the universality that the concept of *figura* constructs. In other words, according to Macari, the necessary existence of an outside and the undeniable presence of the other defy the supposed universality of Auerbach's concept by creating a blind spot that the figural reading represses.

Having established a solid foundation of what he understands by *figura* and having raised the problems he finds in the concept, in the second part of the essay, Macari discusses Elena Garro's short story "La culpa es de los tlaxcaltecas". By carefully reading the story, he draws a distinction between "sight" and "gaze" in the context of the figural reading —"sight" being what attempts to be universal and "gaze" being what is incommensurable and lies outside the figural reading. For the author, the story offers an opportunity to reflect on this distinction, as well as to investigate the scope of the figural reading, via the main character's two husbands (one mestizo and the other indigenous).

The insolvable conflict between the husbands is what Macari examines with the aim of understanding what lies outside the figural reading, concluding that what the “gaze” reveals in the text is the possibility of looking at our colonial roots differently. The “gaze”, which in the story comes from the indigenous husband, is the ignored side of the history of Mexico —a point of view that can retell the roots and identity struggles of the Latin American region.

The second chapter, “El arte moderno que comenzó en Nueva España”, analyzes Álvaro Enrígue’s *Muerte súbita*. The essay explores the relationship between featherwork art and Caravaggio’s artwork as depicted in the novel. According to Isaac Magaña G. Cantón, author of this chapter, Enrígue uses the gaps in the historical documentation to present an alternative —albeit plausible— narrative of the origins of modern art. With the goal of tracing the historical evidence that feeds into Enrígue’s novel, the essay starts by recounting how Vasco de Quiroga encouraged the Christian refashioning of the pre-Hispanic tradition of painting with feathers, and how this art was received in Europe by kings, bishops, and wealthy families such as the Medicis and Borromeos.

The main point of the chapter is to show the ways in which, by imagining the colonial archives within the boundaries of what is possible, *Muerte súbita* brings to the table a hypothesis about a possible encounter between Caravaggio and featherwork art. An encounter that, if it occurred, something that it is not out of question, could have been crucial for the refinement of the Italian *chiaroscuro*, and therefore for the history of modern aesthetics; this being so because, according to the novel, Caravaggio understood the power of light (a characteristic that is central to his work) at the precise moment that he saw a featherwork piece illuminated by the sun at Borromeo’s palace. In short, what this essay explores is a new proposal to understand the history of Western art, one that would have the indigenous craftsmen at the foundation of Western modern painting.

The third essay, “Sierpe de doña Juana de Asbaje: sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y el neobarroco cubano”, explores the relationship between the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the work of José Lezama Lima, Alejo Carpentier, and Severo Sarduy. Daniela Gutiérrez Flores, author of this chapter, argues that Sor Juana’s life and work were a point of reference for the Cubans when discussing the originality of their aesthetic and political proposals.

The essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, the author discusses how Lezama Lima used the poetic imagination of Sor Juana to articulate his theory about the American Neo-Baroque and to advance his idea of the Neo-Baroque counter-conquest. In the second part, the author discusses Carpentier’s readings of the literary impact of the nun, emphasizing the influence of her work upon Nicolás Guillen and Black poetry. A literary genealogy that, according to the author, places Sor Juana at the origins of modern anti-colonialism and Latin American counter-conquest expressions.

Finally, in the essay’s third part, Gutiérrez Flores discusses Sor Juana’s work in relation to Sarduy. In this case, her reading centers on the fact that, while omitting Sor Juana’s name in his work, Sarduy enjoyed dressing as the nun whenever he had the opportunity. Something that the author interprets first, as active position taken by the Cuban writer in the face of the nun’s “literary conservatism”, and second, as a performative quotation that shows an affinity towards Sor Juana; in the sense that, according to her reading, both authors used transvestism to obtain new forms of knowledge.

Sebastian Imoberdorf’s essay, “Conquest 2.0: Rewriting Colonial History”, is the fourth chapter of the volume. In this essay, the author examines two novels, Abel Posse’s *Daimón* and William Ospina’s *Ursúa*, both of which, he explains, are examples of the New Historical Novel. In the first part of the essay, the author summarizes the characteristics of this sub-genre in order to provide a common frame of reference to read both novels. Then, in

the second section of the essay, he discusses the characteristics of *Daimón* and *Ursúa*, stating that the novels challenge and update conventional portrayals of the conquerors Lope de Aguirre and Pedro de Ursúa. As such, Imoberdorf observes, these books are useful for looking at the ways in which the colonial past has been imagined and reinterpreted.

In the last part of his essay, Imoberdorf proposes a new way of understanding *Daimón* and *Ursúa* and, by extension, the New Historical Novel. In essence, he proposes to read both novels within the framework of the Anthropocene, claiming that the Conquest had an apocalyptic impact on pre-Columbian civilizations which is appropriate to look at through this lens. Finally, within this framework, Imoberdorf reads both novels using a variety of postmodern approaches, concluding, at the end, that *Daimón* and *Ursúa* rewrite the colonial past highlighting the fact that the Conquest had catastrophic implications for the inhabitants of the New World.

The last essay, Hanno Ehrlicher's "Revisiones e inversiones de la conquista de América", examines four novels related to the Conquest of the New World. These novels include Abel Posse's *Los perros del paraíso*, Federico Andahazi's *El conquistador*, Sessuh Foster's *Atomic Aztex*, and Laurent Binet's *Civilizaciones*. The essay focuses on counterfactual narratives that imagine how the world would have been if pre-Hispanic civilizations had conquered Europe instead of the New World being conquered by Europeans. To situate his observations within a proper framework, Ehrlicher begins with a discussion of the New Historical Novel and the concept of *uchronia*, a rewriting model that reimagines how history could have unfolded if something different had occurred.

Ehrlicher moves on to discuss each novel in the chapter's corpus, focusing on how these literary works imagine the conquest of Europe by pre-Hispanic civilizations. Subsequently, without neglecting the specific aspects of each novel, Ehrlicher focuses on

how this particular way of imagining the relationship between Europe and the Americas has evolved from the early 1980s to the present. Along these lines, Ehrlicher traces the evolution of postcolonial discourses and how they have nurtured these alternative worlds. Arriving at the conclusion that, whereas postcolonial discourses and postmodernism have in some ways already become a standardized way of thinking and a global mindset, “literature will continue harnessing its potential to recreate history, and, therefore, push us to reflect on it over and over again”.

As the reader can attest, this collection of essays not only deals with a wide range of topics related to the interactions between the Latin American imagination of today and the continent’s colonial roots, but does so from a number of theoretical approaches. This makes it difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, which ultimately had never been our intention. Our understanding is that the richness of this book lies precisely in the possibilities it offers for examining and engaging with diverse ways of imagining the Latin American colonial past and tackling this complicated topic. That being said, our hope is that the five chapters of this book contribute to the debate over the meaning of the colonial past in present-day Latin America, as well as to better understanding the different works and topics that the collaborators of this volume examine.