

Rudyard J. Alcocer

Time Travel in the Latin American and Caribbean Imagination: Re-reading History.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. xv + 238 pp. (Cloth US\$85.00)

If the preoccupation with history—or the absence thereof—is inescapable in Latin American and Caribbean literature, a fixation with temporality can seem just as inevitable. *Time Travel in the Latin American and Caribbean Imagination* examines the links between fictional time travel and the history of Hispanic conquest, slavery, and servitude in the Americas, with particular attention to the regions mentioned in the title as against the British colonization of the northern part of the continent. The prologue, which begins with epigraphs invoking the cyclical nature of time, is fittingly titled “Time Out of Joint,” suggesting that temporal dislocations from the past will haunt the present and future of this hemisphere. Rudyard Alcocer argues that the primary rupture of the Conquest (and the Middle Passage for African diasporic communities) creates a wound so deep that a substantial corpus of time travel has emerged in literature and popular culture to reconsider, and perhaps overcome, the enduring legacies of those traumas. The question is whether narratives of time travel serve as “escapism” or as “surgical intervention” (p. xiv), and Alcocer’s critical readings of these narratives seem to find both possibilities. One of the book’s strengths is its nuanced perspective of the contemporary comparative literature on the theme, inflected by multiple theoretical and disciplinary approaches (psychoanalytic, postcolonial, deconstructive, historical, anthropological, cultural studies).

The book has four main chapters. The first includes an analysis of a number of texts, including North American fiction (e.g., S.M. Stirling’s *Conquistador: A Novel of Alternate History* and Orson Scott Card’s *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus*) and Mexican film and fiction (e.g., Gustavo Loza’s *Al otro lado* [*To the Other Side*], Homero Aridjis’s *La leyenda de los soles* [*The Legend of the Suns*]), and a few of Carlos Fuentes’s short stories. The second chapter focuses on Trinidadian author Kevin Baldeosingh’s massive Anglophone novel, *The Ten Incarnations of Adam Avatar*, and Cuban writer Daína Chaviano’s *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* [*Man, Woman, and Hunger*]. The third revisits the myth of La Malinche in the Mexican writer Marcela del Río’s play *El sueño de La Malinche* [*The Dream of La Malinche*] and Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli’s first novel, *La mujer habitada* [*The Inhabited Woman*]. The fourth chapter moves to popular culture versions of time travel in films, children’s stories, gaming, and pedagogical sources (language learning) that cement the various stereotypes of the “conquered” peoples: the Mayans and the Incas timelessly frozen in a lost world, prone to savage violence, or annihilated by cultural

apocalypse and superior invaders. Alcocer claims that popular culture largely repeats colonial discourse of the archives, historiography, and high culture in locating modernity and advanced civilization in the era of European colonization and settlement.

The afterword, which discusses how heritage tourism in Puerto Rico disturbingly combines a reification of Taíno culture with a corresponding elision of African elements, demonstrates the continuing obsession with the reinvented past, here romanticized by ethnocentric and consumerist nostalgia. Although multiple titles mentioned in passing can occasionally be bewildering, the book's impressive range makes a compelling case for its significance. Despite the varied terrain, the lucid prose, helpful translations, and clear transitions from one chapter to the next help readers navigate the book without too much confusion.

While the book does not engage time from a philosophical angle as Wilson Harris does in his notion of "infinite rehearsal," it considers various classifications of time. "In other words, what modern readers and writers are inclined to categorize under science fiction or fantasy (i.e., contact between different time periods) may in fact have held similarities to certain pre-Columbian understandings of how time works ... Fictional, interventionist visits to the past ... can also have practical objectives in the present," Alcocer concludes (p. 158). Writers like Alejo Carpentier who flout conventional notions of clock-and-calendrical time may in fact believe in the coexistence of temporal categories that are usually considered distinct from each other, pointing to nonlinear routes of time travel. One therefore doesn't travel *back* to the past when it is believed that the past already inhabits the present. Occasionally, time can move backward or stand still as in the problematic representation of a stagnant postrevolutionary Cuba, which Alcocer does not critique as much as he does the mythification of indigenous peoples or the idealization of origins in African diasporic returns to the "homeland." Conversely, revisionist narratives can actually reify the view of the past as a fated curse, a pessimistic notion that engages in a "negative determinism," inflexibly tying the problems in the present to a blighted past (p. 34). The uncanny re-turns to the past imply unresolved issues that demand repeated visits to moments of crisis. Sometimes these visits congeal the past, at others they rewrite it and critique the dysfunctional present, and at still others they gesture toward a hopeful future once these fictional "interventions" confront traumas.

Alcocer situates time travel in these regions by emphasizing continuous historical trauma, but he does not then account for other contexts of time travel narratives that do not share this history as, for example, in Western fiction. Although it is unclear how these non-Western fictional "interventions"

materially alter the present, the book makes an important contribution to the scholarship of time travel by including Latin America and the Caribbean.

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