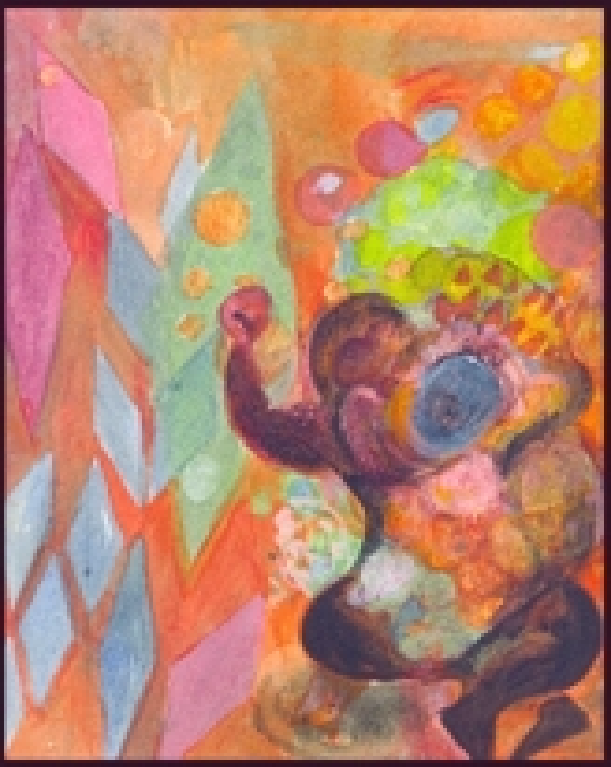
Victoria Carpenter (ed.)

(Re)Collecting the Past



History and Collective Memory in Latin American Narrative

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Introduction: (Re)Collecting the Past

In his reaction to Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory*, Paul Ricoeur states that 'history concerns itself especially with differences and oppositions. It then belongs to the collective memory, mainly at the time of great upheavals' (Ricoeur 2004: 397). This quotation is particularly applicable to the link between history and collective memory in Latin America, where political upheavals and social instability have become an integral part of life. Some may argue that this instability is precisely what drives Latin American literature and gives it an unmistakable, unique character. Mario Vargas Llosa's famous pessimistic yet ironically prophetic view of creativity born out of social conflict, violence and desperation, is recounted over and over in the studies of the links between Latin American history, social development and artistic expression.[1]

Since the neo-colonial period, literature in Latin America has been viewed as more than a form of entertainment; it has also taken on educational, informative and propaganda roles, especially when official sources of information were silenced or censored. Suffice it to say that, following Sarmiento's neo-colonial principles, Latin American literature has long transcended its entertainment purpose and established itself firmly as a transmitter, decoder and safeguard of the memory of history. There are two significant points to consider briefly at this point: the view of literature as the repository of historical 'truth', and the role of the myth in literary representations of history. The relationship between the actual events and the variation retained in society's conscience represents 'the twofold sense

1 Shaw (2002) refers to Vargas Llosa's statement that 'optimistic writers are liars' (8). Carpenter (2007) quotes Vargas Llosa's 1999 essay 'Los sicarios' in the discussion of violence fuelling creativity and literary production.

of the word "history", considered as the set of events that have occurred and the set of reports on these events'.[2] In Latin America, literature has become a depository of historical events – from the Conquest to coups d'etat, from the rise and fall of dictators to the fate of the 'disappeared'. González Echevarría argues that Latin American novel mimics historical documents not only to protect their content by depositing it in collective memory, but also to demonstrate that historical narrative is governed by the same rules as literary narrative.[3] One can therefore surmise that neither narrative should be treated as the depository of objective facts, the holder of unshakeable historical truth. This supposition becomes even more accurate when we consider that sometimes, literary works are the only source of information on a political or social event in Latin America, with testimonial accounts scarce and official rhetoric nonexistent.[4] In fact, when addressing particular historical developments in Latin America, many critics view writers as the 'cartographers'[5] of the region's history and in particular its lesser covered or more problematic areas. So, it is hardly surprising that when discussing literary representation of history, critics remove literature from what González Echevarría calls society's 'ideologically authoritative core.'[6] Hart continues the theme of literature's relationship with society in his study of Latin American literature from the Conquest to present day, assigning the writer a role of 'an outspoken critic of state politics and practices'[7] – an approach similar to Sarmiento's view of the purpose of literature.

The place of myths in literary portrayal of Latin American history has been the subject of many studies, all of which agree that the interpretations

2 Ricoeur 2004: 305.

3 González Echevarría 1990: 8.

4 The Tlatelolco 1968 massacre in Mexico City is an example of literature keeping a record of the event. See Carpenter 2005, Harris 2005 and Long 2005 for the analysis of the role of literary narratives in retaining the memory of the shooting.

5 De la Campa 2000: 23.

6 González Echevarría 1990: 8.

7 Hart 2001: 166. Hart also emphasises the personal facet of Latin American literature born out of the chronicles of the Conquest, written as testimonies rather than official state documents or works of fiction.

of Latin American history since the Conquest are steeped in pre-Columbian myths. The Conquest itself has taken on mythical qualities because the depictions of the events (mainly the Codices) used pre-Columbian myth as the narrative form. The intertwining of myth and historical reality removes both narratives from the realm of objectivity, and all but eliminates a single historical 'truth' from Latin American historical narrative. Martin appropriately calls Latin American history and literature 'labyrinthine',[8] echoing not only Octavio Paz's seminal work, but also the complexity of the representation and interpretation of Latin American history.

This collection addresses the representation of history and collective memory in Latin American literature. The volume presents a variety of perspectives on the subject linked by the common themes of collective memory, subjectivity of time and history, literature as a political tool, and the representation of marginalised groups. While it is not this collection's aim to explore literary representations of every political event in Latin America, there are certain cornerstones in the region's history that are mirrored in literature. Arguably, these representations both reflect and affect the collective memory of events.

The essays presented here assume an original approach to viewing national history as represented in literature. While there are other publications addressing some issues raised in this collection, the volume goes beyond literary representations of history, and examines technological, political and social developments as a means of creating, re-structuring and (in some cases) potentially destroying nations. It is helpful to start with the analysis of the way time is treated in Latin American texts, so that the examination of a cyclical nature of history is carried out from an informed theoretical perspective. Thus, the key theme of the volume is the non-linear nature of time and the resulting multiplicity of 'histories' in the creation, destruction and re-creation of collective memory and, consequently, national identities.

The non-linear nature of history and memory is the volume's main theme. The uncertainty of time becomes the uncertainty of historical

8 Martin 1989: xii.

narrative as it re-creates not an actual event, but one of its many representations in official, collective and individual memories. Just as deconstruction takes the control of the text away from the author and removes the certainty of meaning,[9] textual representations of history reveal the uncertainty of history. Thus, the removal of a singular entity of history and its replacement with 'histories', in accordance with what Hannah Arendt terms 'human plurality'[10] presents us with the importance of considering all historical narratives as equally valid representations of past events.

The first section, 'Uncertainties of Time', presents a cross-disciplinary analysis of the works of twentieth-century Mexican literature. The uniqueness of this section is the selection of current physics theories as an alternative to traditional approaches to non-linear narratives. The treatment of time as a nonlinear or cyclical phenomenon is based upon contemporary scientific theories, in particular the uncertainty principle and string theory. Peter Beardsell's essay 'Some Thoughts on Quantum Theory and the Treatment of the Past in Mexican Theatre' uses the uncertainty principle to address an inherent difficulty in finding the path that events took in the past. Using Richard Feynman's famous 'sum over histories' theory, this essay addresses multiple simultaneous interpretations of historical events, concluding that there is no single 'true' interpretation or outcome. The second essay in this section, Victoria Carpenter's 'When Was Tomorrow? Manipulation of Time and Memory in the Works of Mexican Onda' continues the theme of the multiplicity of timelines by applying string theory to the analysis of largely overlooked works by Mexican 'Onda' writers of the 1960s. Both essays note that multiple timelines are complemented by multiple treatments thereof within the text: in Beardsell's essay, these interpretations are presented in the form of eyewitnesses' accounts; in Carpenter's essay, the interpretations appear in the form of interferences from the editorial text.

9 Two essential works of postmodern canon are Derrida 1967 and Barthes 1968. These outline the principles of the deconstructivist approach to text analysis: the author's lack of control over the text, and the uncertainty of meaning.

10 Arendt 1958: 30.

Multiple perspectives on a singular historical event are examined in the second section, 'Re-telling History', which is devoted to the re-visiting of significant historical events. In Anna Reid's 'The Re-working of Conquest in Three Recent Mexican Novels', the nature of the Conquest as one of the defining factors of Latin American identity is questioned from several standpoints. The challenge of re-telling a famous story from the point of view of the vanquished highlights the clash between the written and oral history, and ultimately raises the question whether the fact of writing determines which interpretation is accepted as an official version of the event. The essay by María de los Ángeles Rodríguez Cadena, '*Relajo* and Melodrama in the Fictional Portrayal of the Mexican Independence of 1810', continues the theme of multiple interpretations of historical events, changing the focus to the degree of seriousness with which the event is treated. Rodríguez Cadena argues that understanding history is an ongoing creative process because history as a human construct changes with the changing nature of humanity. The treatment of history as a fluid phenomenon parallels the non-linear approach taken in the first section of the volume; the examination of history as a human construct continues in the third section dedicated to establishing parallels between individual and collective histories and memories.

The third section, 'Life Stories, National Histories', contains three essays which analyse the representation of individual histories and their connection with contemporary events in their countries. Lloyd Davies' essay 'Tomás Eloy Martínez and the Literary Representation of Peronism: A Tale of Bifurcating Paths?' compares the representation of Juan Perón's regime in a variety of narrative forms. The essay is particularly concerned with self-representation and the creation of the individual by others. The conflicting or complementing nature of the two reinforces the notion of history's nonlinear temporality and multiplicity of interpretations. The other two essays in the section, Niamh Thornton's 'Being Fruity in the Big City: Re-membering the Past in Enrique Serna's *Fruta verde*' and Dolores Flores-Silva's 'Re-Writing of History and Self-Representation in *The House on the Lagoon* by Rosario Ferré' address the parallels between individual self-identification, national trends in treating certain population groups, and changes in national identity in general. Flores Silva's examination of

the written word as a means of creating a long-lasting historical account is reminiscent of Reid's analysis of the discord between written and oral history. Both essays use gender as one of the factors which determine the interpretation of history as they juxtapose the supposed female 'submissiveness' and the fluidity of history.

The fourth section, 'National (Dis)integration?', examines national identity not as a single unit but as a conglomerate of often disparate, conflicting yet complementing factors. Amit Thakkar's essay 'One Rainy Market Day: "Integration" and the Indigenous Community in the Fiction and Thought of Juan Rulfo' examines fragment 48 of *Pedro Páramo* in the context of the narrative of the novel itself and in that of the wider narrative of Mexican history. The analysis is based upon the notion of the remoteness of indigenous population and a disjointed nature of Mexican society, where the indigenous, mestizo and white populations are often occupying parallel spaces. The essay considers the use of irony as a tool of political commentary, as well as the studies of market economy as a means of analysing the conflict between the indigenous and the mestizo communities. The theme of intrasocietal conflict is explored further and in a wider context in Audrey García's essay 'Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture in *El corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viana' and goes on to include intersocietal and cross-cultural conflicts underpinning Mexican immigration to the United States. This essay examines how the Peruvian writer, Eduardo González Viana uses the Mexican immigrant ballad (immigrant folk songs) or 'corrido del inmigrante' as framework and as metadiscourse in his novel, *Dante's Ballad*. The novel recreates the testimonial character of the 'corrido' throughout the protagonist's narrative thus rendering Dante Celestino's experiences as 'true' accounts of the hardships and challenges that the undocumented Mexican immigrant worker must face in his quest to overcome poverty by looking for work in the United States. The essay also provides an overview of the ongoing process of Mexican immigration to the United States, and questions the supposed homogeneity of Mexican immigrant population as it juxtaposes the characters of immigrants, coyotes and the immigrants' children born in the United States. The multiplicity of identities and their inevitable clash make the Mexican immigrant community a fertile ground for the destabilisation of national identity.

However, it would be superficial to consider Latin America solely as a self-destroying entity. The last section, '(Re)Inventing Nations', focuses on the analysis of national identity as a constantly changing, fluid product of political, social and technological developments. Revisiting the approach to history as a human construct, this section focuses on the effects of scientific and technological developments on Latin American identity. In the essay 'Technology and the Making of Memory in José Martí's Exilic Writing' María del Pilar Blanco explores Martí's impressions of North American advancement. Blanco's work focuses on José Martí's *crónica* detailing the emergence of Thomas Alva Edison's phonograph, and analyses how a certain sentimental register comes together with the empirical description of new objects, in order to announce both a solution, and a threat, to collective memory. Silvia Kurlat Ares' essay, 'Science Fiction Utopia as Political *Constructio* in Angélica Gorodischer' expands the theme of scientific discovery as an aspect of national character. This essay links science fiction and the rest of the country's cultural field and considers the materials and codes used in science fiction as ideological tools. Finally, Kurlat Ares focuses on the notion of political utopia and the multiplicity of its representation in Gorodischer's canonical work, concluding that it establishes a dialogue with contemporary ideological debates while demonstrating that history based on myths and utopian interpretation of the past is a form of stagnation. Instead, Gorodischer's work replaces this utopia with history as a human construct.

Overall, this collection of essays on the representation of time, history and collective memory is united by the common themes of the multiplicity of timelines and contexts. The notion of temporal uncertainty permeates the analyses as they reveal the absence of a single 'true' history and the emergence of multiple interpretations thereof, each stemming from distinct context and none dominating the rest.