

*Así fue:*  
**Anti-colonial Narrative in Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* and  
Reinaldo Arenas's *El mundo alucinante***

**Sophia A. McClennen**

**Penn State University**

Sólo en la absoluta ignorancia de los pueblos, y en una opresión tan feroz como poderosa, cabe el mantener atado a un rincón miserable de la Europa, distante dos mil leguas de océano, un mundo sembrado de oro y plata con las demás producciones del universo.

Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, *Ensayos histórico políticos*<sup>1</sup>

Alejo Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* (1974) and Reinaldo Arenas's *El mundo alucinante* (1969) are anti-colonial narrative revisions of history. Their literary campaign of redirecting power from Western, imperialist ways of understanding and controlling Latin America forms the epistemic ground for their literary project.<sup>2</sup> For Carpentier and Arenas, the anti-colonial imperative emanates from their observation that colonial power structures still persisted in Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Carpentier's *Concierto barroco* narrates the coming to consciousness of an upper class Mexican in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonist, who lacks a proper name, is symbolically referred to as *el Amo*

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Perea.

<sup>2</sup> The term “postcolonial” has enjoyed a great deal of debate. An excellent summary can be found in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* (186-192). A strong critique by Stam and Shohat in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* suggests that the term is ultimately apolitical, poststructural and inattentive to context and history (37-43). Neil Larsen also critiques the term for similar pitfalls in *Reading North by South*. These critics notice the ways that the term has been used to suggest ubiquitous relativity and unceasing fragmentation and I agree with much of their criticism. While borrowing from certain aspects of postcolonial theory, this article uses the term “anti-colonial” to designate opposition to colonialism and to the persistence of colonial practice, economically, ideologically and politically. I take “anti-colonial” to mean, first critical of the institutions and historical practices associated with imperialism, and second, in favor of social independence and cultural autonomy.

or the Master. On holiday in Venice, *el Amo* is confronted with a European version of the conquest in the form of an opera and the blatant Latin Americanist arrogance of the production ignites *el Amo*'s resistance to colonialism. Arenas's *El mundo alucinante* presents a fictionalized account of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier who spent his life persecuted after delivering a sermon in 1794 where he suggested that the first appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe pre-dated the arrival of the Spaniards. Told from various viewpoints, Arenas's novel describes Fray Servando's persecution as symbolic of Latin American struggles for freedom and independence. Both novels center on the problem of history and the power it wields over Latin American identity. Each text has a key scene that rewrites and revises the "así fue" of official discourse from an anti-colonial perspective. By offering an alternative version of "así fue," both writers narrate against colonialist ideology and the hegemony of Western history. In their shared concern over which version of history should hold the most ideological power, Carpentier and Arenas challenge the persistence of the colonialist epistemes that regulate the region's cultural identity. Yet, Carpentier and Arenas employ rather different strategies. An analysis of their distinct narrative approaches, which I argue can be broadly divided between Carpentier's modernist and Arenas's postmodernist aesthetic, suggests that the project of countering imperial history is not a unified effort, but, rather, a varied and multiple endeavor. While comparative work on Carpentier and Arenas has tended to emphasize their opposition, and while I agree that these writers have different literary agendas, I argue that they share common ground.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Comparative works on both writers, which argue principally for divergence, are by Andrea Pagni and Juan José Barrientos.

The claim that Carpentier's project is an example of modernism while Arenas is an example of postmodernism may seem ahistorical given that *Concierto barroco* postdates *El mundo alucinante*. Part of the logic for this difference stems from the fact that Carpentier and Arenas come from different generations and that they were tied to Cuba in vastly different ways. For instance, both writers spent time in jail, but Carpentier, imprisoned in 1927, was protesting the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado and Arenas tells readers that he was imprisoned in 1973 and 1974 for his sexuality. These distinctions position these writers differently vis-à-vis the post-revolutionary Cuban state. Arguably, Carpentier's more secure role as cultural representative of post-revolutionary Cuba in contrast with the ostracism and persecution of Arenas explains why Arenas's critique of official history also includes (and often focuses on) versions produced within Cuba.

Another factor that reveals the different versions of anti-colonial narrative in their work relates to their literary context. Carpentier, while writing at the same time as Arenas, is part of a literary generation associated with the Boom. Arenas, in contrast, is notorious for his rejection of totalizing grand narratives and the authoritative narrative voices that he associated with Boom aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> The following analysis focuses on the critique of colonialism present in both *Concierto barroco* and *El mundo alucinante* and suggests that their oppositional aesthetics overlap in a common narrative desire to dislodge imperial claims regarding Latin American culture.

While Carpentier and Arenas represent different generations of Cuban literature, this fact does not fully account for the discrepancies between the anti-colonial histories

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<sup>4</sup> Félix Lugo Nazario describes Arenas's work as attacking the pre-revolutionary Cuban literary tradition, especially that of Carpentier and Lezama Lima (124). The intertextuality between Arenas's work and that of Carpentier, specifically between *El*

they create. Carpentier, having studied architecture, has an architectonic vision: he builds and rebuilds, structuring alternative vistas of Latin America. The act of reconstruction combines with Carpentier's narrative goal of encountering deep meaning or uncovering long, lost truths.<sup>5</sup> In *Concierto barroco*, Carpentier attempts to construct an autochthonous source of Latin American identity. Yet, as González Echevarría argues, the primary concerns of Carpentier are the unfinished task of the Enlightenment, Latin American Independence, and the region's cultural disentanglement from official colonial rule (26). Raymond Leslie Williams describes the modernist project of Carpentier as closely tied to his interest in the marvelous real – a mode of representation he employed in order to highlight the fundamental differences between Latin American and European culture (35). Armed with neo-baroque literary language and a vision of Latin American cultural hybridity as his tools, Carpentier erects new ideological edifices that he hopes will replace the repressive cultural architecture left in place by colonialism.

Perhaps this desire to construct a new cultural habitat helps explain why an omniscient narrator, who provides a unified account of the story, orchestrates Carpentier's *Concierto barroco*. In contrast, Arenas's text resists any attempt to unify the history of Fray Servando. His novel is narrated from multiple points of view (first, second, and third person), complicating the notion of a faithful source of history. These multiple voices with their contradictions and inconsistencies stand out against what

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*mundo alucinante* and *El siglo de las luces*, has been well documented (see Juan José Barrientos).

<sup>5</sup> For example in *Los pasos perdidos* the protagonist makes a journey into the jungle seeking primitive musical instruments and eventually his own cultural identity and, in "Viaje a la semilla" the protagonist takes a trip back in time and winds up in a pre-natal state.

appears to be a fixed source of counter-discourse in *Concierto barroco*. Alicia Borinsky describes the multiple narrative voices in *El mundo alucinante* as constitutive of a decentered discourse, and Pagni takes this point even further arguing that such a splintering of voices blurs the source of knowledge (141). The etiological goals of *Concierto barroco* sharply oppose the narrative of *El mundo alucinante*. Arenas is suspicious of any authoritative narrative voice that pretends to provide deep answers to the historical dilemmas that plague present culture and, consequently, Arenas concentrates on exposing how power structures fabricate truth in order to control society.

In an interview with Jorge Olivares and Nivia Montenegro, Arenas explains: "No me interesa dar una visión histórica desde el punto de vista académico de la época de un personaje. En ese aspecto discrepo las cosas que hace Alejo Carpentier. Carpentier es un cronista de la historia y se somete a la historia" (59).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Arenas very explicitly has his own hermeneutic vision of history, which he explains during the same interview: "Hay una historia que es la historia del hombre luchando contra el medio ambiente, contra elementos, o contra la persecución. Esa es la historia válida" (59). To this end, Arenas does not construct a new Latin American heritage in the sense that Carpentier architecturally erects one, but, instead, asks his readers to observe the

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<sup>6</sup> This negative characterization of Carpentier may be due, in part to the fact that Arenas has been plagued by critical accounts of his indebtedness to the work of Carpentier, García Márquez, and other Boom writers from Latin America. In a note that appears with his article, "Fray Servando, víctima infatigable" from *Necesidad de libertad*, Arenas comments on the widespread belief that his writing has been influenced by Boom writers: "Me informan que informes desinformados informan que hay en esta novela -- *El mundo alucinante* --, escrita en 1965, Mención en el Concurso UNEAC, 1966, influencia de obras que se escribieron y publicaron después de ella, como *Cien años de soledad*, (1967) y *De donde son los cantantes* (1967). . . . He aquí otra prueba irrefutable, al menos para los críticos y reseñeros literarios, de que el tiempo no existe" (90).

landscape from a multi-perspectival view that unveils its fractures, cracks and fault lines.

While I want to attend to these differences in order to sketch out the varied aesthetic and political components of Latin American anti-colonialism, I also want to suggest an alternative reading of both Arenas and Carpentier, one which is suspicious of the ways that they have been positioned in opposition and one which registers the ways that their projects represent ideological overlap and dialectical engagement. Readings of Carpentier that focus on his totalizing, authoritative approach tend to deemphasize his hybrid narrative, just as those that read Carpentier teologically de-stress the ways that he represents history as layered, circular and repetitive. In many ways, *Concierto barroco*, a novel that follows *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), can be read as testimony to Carpentier's continued concern for the persistence of colonialist culture in Latin America well after the Cuban Revolution, suggesting that Carpentier felt that the struggle for an autochthonous culture was far from complete. Similarly, studies of Arenas that highlight his narrative fragmentation and experimentation might miss the ways that this fragmentation is a desperate effort to find a new form of political narrative and a new way of critiquing the forms of social control that continue to lead to cultural oppression.

Ultimately, these two approaches diverge in terms of the degree to which each writer engages with Cuban revolutionary ideology. Anti-colonialism in Carpentier is a step towards a revolutionary project that Arenas is unable to wholeheartedly accept. Instead, Arenas, ostracized by the Cuban revolutionary collective, finds that he has more questions about the nature of revolution than answers. On the one hand, Carpentier argues that the revolution is best served by ending the legacies of colonialism, that

cultural independence is fundamental to successfully changing society because the Wars for Independence were unable to adequately disentangle Latin America from cultural dependence on Europe and North America. Arenas, on the other hand, because of his marginalized position within the Cuban revolution, and within Latin American society as a whole, questions the problem of the self within the collective and worries that any overarching external definition of identity necessarily negates the organic and complex nature of being. Where Arenas is full of questions about politics and the self, Carpentier is more confident in his ability to trace an emancipatory cultural trajectory for Latin America. Yet, it is important to bear out the ways that these projects overlap and, I would argue, complement rather than negate each other, because each author is totally committed to an anti-colonial vision. At a broader level, then, careful attention to their anti-colonial positions also allows us to consider the relationship between literature engaged with anti-colonialism and (or) with leftist revolution. To what extent do these positions necessarily overlap and to what extent might they diverge?

### **Modernist and Postmodernist Anti-colonialisms**

Linda Hutcheon explains that postcolonial literature negotiates the once tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with a revalued local past (131). Both *Concierto barroco* and *El mundo alucinante* demonstrate such negotiation while employing different strategies: Carpentier's modernist novel recasts the monologue of official history with a chorus of new players, whereas Arenas's postmodern narrative concentrates on dismantling the notion of one central source of history. Given the fact that scholarship has tended to associate postmodernism with postcolonialism it seems necessary to briefly sort out the intersections of these critical approaches since a key

feature of my argument is the notion that anti-colonial writing can be found across a broad range of narrative forms. It is also important to point out that I favor the term “anti-colonial” rather than “postcolonial” when discussing the cases of Arenas and Carpentier. The “post” before colonial too often signals a transition, an ending, a paradigm shift, which makes the term “postcolonial” problematic in Latin American contexts. As has been well documented by others, decolonization in Latin America is a complex process and in many cases Spanish and Portuguese rule was quickly replaced by British, French, and US neocolonialism.<sup>7</sup> Even though postcolonial (i.e. anti-colonial) culture has existed since the inception of colonialism, it is more common to associate the postcolonial and the postmodern. Hutcheon argues that the two projects share some traits, but postmodernism is politically ambivalent where postcolonialism is not (130).

Hutcheon sees an ideological convergence of the two posts on the issue of ex-centrism: “it is not just the relation to history that brings the two *posts* together; there is also a strong shared concern with the notion of marginalization, of the state which we could call ex-centricity” (132). Or, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain, the postmodern and the postcolonial often overlap even though postcoloniality, taken as a counter discourse to colonialism, has existed since the beginnings of colonialism. Every major aesthetic movement is capable of harboring postcolonial critique. The point of connection between the two posts, they argue, stems from the fact that: “The decentering of discourse, the focus on the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience, the use of the subversive strategies of mimicry, parody and irony – all these concerns overlap those of postmodernism and so a conflation of the two discourses has often occurred” (117). If Arenas’s work is postmodern and anti-colonial because it

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<sup>7</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt.



endeavors to destroy all central sources of ideology, then Carpentier's search for an alternative representation of Latin America, which can challenge the ideology of empire, signals his modernist impulse. To adapt a concept developed by Neil Larsen in *Reading North by South*, Carpentier engages in "canonical decolonization" because he deploys High Modernism as an antidote to Western imperialism (7). Carpentier's effort at undermining the neocolonial practices of dominant Western narratives rests on a desire to substitute a multi-layered, autochthonous culture as a new counter canon.

Each novel tackles the hegemony of Western truth claims: Carpentier values the indigenous and the hybrid as sources for a counter culture and Arenas attacks imperialism through a deconstructive assault on the concept of truth. Moreover, in keeping with the political nature of anti-colonial narrative, each writer believes that representation has a measurable effect on social organization. These novels are committed to destroying imperialist claims to power by rewriting colonial versions of the past. Their fundamental differences, though, relate to what should replace imperialism and how best to destroy it. Donald Shaw explains that Carpentier's first interest in his roots occurred while the writer was in Paris in 1928: "he experienced in Paris a kind of culture-shock that awakened in him a passionate interest in the Latin America he had been forced to leave" (15). This interest, which would later be elaborated in numerous essays and which was associated with the concept of the marvelous real, was integrally tied to a re-valorization of Latin America's past from an anti-imperial standpoint.

Describing his postcolonial interest, Carpentier wrote: "Sentí ardientemente el deseo de expresar el mundo americano. Aún no sabía cómo. Me alentaba lo difícil de la tarea por el desconocimiento de las esencias americanas. Me dediqué durante largos años a leer todo lo que podía sobre América, desde las Cartas de Cristóbal Colón, pasando por el

Inca Garcilaso, hasta los autores del siglo dieciocho” (cited in Shaw 130). Carpentier’s challenge to colonialism comes, then, in the form of a powerful counter narrative.

Arenas, in contrast, focuses his challenge differently, preferring a guerilla attack and an anarchistic solution to oppression. Andrew Hurley and Jacqueline Loss describe this tendency as relating to Arenas’s interest in questions of individual freedom:

“Arenas’s constant question is why difference must be a curse, why any attempt at freedom of self must finally lead not just to our imprisonment . . . but ultimately to our own destruction” (411). Nevertheless, it is important to locate what may at first glance appear as nihilism and bourgeois individualism within the political imperative of anti-colonialism. Arenas maintains a clear notion of difference and hierarchy in terms of political power and he consistently challenges hegemony. In a move which signals a key difference between his writing and that of Carpentier, he describes what he sees as the persistent colonization of Cuba: “As a Spanish colony, we never freed ourselves from the Spaniards; for that, the Americans had to intervene, and then we became a colony of the United States; then, attempting to free ourselves from a fairly conventional sort of dictatorship in the colonial vein, we became a colony of the Soviets” (*Color of Summer* 227). Arenas later explains that his writing is dedicated to exposing these multiple colonizations by recounting the history that has been suppressed. While such comments often lead to dismissals of his work as counter-revolutionary, Arenas’s relentless effort to expose multiple sources of power and oppression may be read as presenting a dialectically nuanced critique of colonialism which takes the efforts of writers like Carpentier, who also look to hybridity and dialectical dialogism as an antidote to Western power structures, a step further. Once again, this leads me to suggest that their literary projects may be best read dialectically and in dialogue, rather than at odds and in conflict.

### Rewriting History

History is the narrative source of both novels and forms the basis for their anti-colonial critiques since the institutionalization of historical knowledge perpetuates and structures cultural colonization. *Concierto barroco* is a carefully structured text consisting of eight chapters that can be schematized as follows: The travels of the Amo in chapters one in Mexico, two in Havana, and three in Madrid; the build-up to Vivaldi's opera "Montezuma" (1733) in Venice in chapters four at the "Carnival", five at the "jam session" in the Ospedale della Pietá, six at the cemetery and seven at the theater; and, lastly chapter eight in which the Amo bids farewell to his *criado*, Filomeno. The text is a time machine that blasts its characters forward to the present, so that in the last chapter Filomeno attends a concert given by Louis Armstrong in Paris and two hundred years have elapsed. The central historical source is Vivaldi's concert, which serves as an example of a colonial vision of the conquest. The anti-colonial moral to the narrative is the fact that *El Amo* accepted the colonial version of his past until he was confronted with the oppression of it from within Europe.

Arenas also describes a time lapse of approximately two hundred years. His text follows the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1765-1827) and, like *Concierto barroco*, narrates a *recorrido* through Europe. But instead of fast-forwarding through time and ending in the present, Arenas includes elements from various epochs, creating a historical imbroglio. These time shifts are accompanied by extreme geographical displacements. The novel begins in Mexico, moves to Spain, France and Italy; goes back to Spain, then to Portugal, England, and the United States; back to Mexico, then to Cuba, back to the United States, and tries to come full circle leaving the reader and Fray Servando in Mexico where the friar died in 1827. But the circle is not closed, and in an

epilogue Arenas informs us that the remains of Fray Servando were later exhumed, transported to Argentina and sold to a circus owner, ending up some time later in Belgium, and possibly continuing to travel as part of a circus show. This representation of time and space as uprooted and unpredictable is common to both novels, but is more extreme in *El mundo alucinante*.

The disordering of time and historical chronology visible in both texts provides the most tangible signs of an anti-colonial refiguring of the past. For example, in *Concierto barroco* Vivaldi (1678-1741) attends the funeral of Richard Wagner, who died in 1833. And in *El mundo alucinante* the protagonist, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1765-1827), has an encounter with Virginia Woolf's character Orlando (1928). For the reader, these historical impossibilities produce a disconcerted impression of time. Even though both novels revolve around and evolve from specific historical occurrences -- Vivaldi's opera about Montezuma (1733) and the memoirs of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1765-1827) -- the deliberate challenge to linear time is an explicit attack on "official" history.

The use of history as the basis for narrative is essential to the anti-colonial project of countering the imperial vision of the past. González Echevarría explains Carpentier's perspective: "History is the main topic in Carpentier's fiction, and the history he deals with -- the history of the Caribbean -- is one of beginnings or foundations" (25). Interestingly, though, *Concierto barroco* is not a tale of the voyage to America, where Europe influences the New World. The anti-colonial twist on the tale is evident in the inversion of cultural power. *El Amo* travels to Europe and, instead of being indoctrinated by Continental culture, he questions the validity of Vivaldi's version of the conquest, which, according to González Echevarría, results in a "a series of events that will lead to

a new ‘Western’ culture, of multiple origins, cut off from any single one source that will give it shape” (267). The degree to which *el Amo* actually influences Vivaldi is questionable, but his own personal transformation is clear. Donald Shaw argues that the novel’s protagonist learns that his social role in history is to fight for independence: “He discovers, that is, his ‘task’, his role as an actor on the stage of history, and returns to Mexico implicitly to join the class of those who were preparing the ground for the struggle for independence from Spain” (108). In this way Carpentier’s text underscores the need to combine thought and action and draws a direct connection between resistance to dominant ideology and political activism. *El Amo*, through his rejection of Vivaldi’s characterization of the conquest, becomes politically active and interested in Mexican Independence. *El Amo* becomes modernized, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century use of the term, as he begins to acknowledge the need for political change and independence and as he recognizes the oppression, both political and cultural, of European dominance.

This focus on Enlightenment thinking, the Wars of Independence, and the Mexican region is a strong historical link between these novels, both of which include protagonists who travel from Mexico to Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The historical material used by Arenas for *El mundo alucinante* comes from the life of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, the French Revolution, Mexican Independence, and the moment of the Cuban Revolution. The sermon by Fray Servando, which begins his life of struggle, was delivered in 1794, at a time when the Spanish hold over colonial Mexico had begun to weaken. Héctor Perea explains that the sermon’s challenge to the ideological control of Spain over the region was perceived as a direct threat to their political power:

a finales del XVIII el sermón fue visto como un ejemplo inaceptable del espíritu crítico que caracterizaba a la Ilustración y que campeaba ya por el horizonte mexicano. Obviamente, lo que menos buscaba la iglesia por entonces era la puesta en duda de las tradiciones piadosas. No podían arriesgarse los cimientos de la fe católica ni mucho menos el poder que ésta aportaba tanto a la institución eclesiástica como a la monarquía española. . . . Detrás del “criticismo histórico,” y como efectivamente interpretó Mier, se percibía una “conspiración criolla” (n.p.)

The political danger posed by Fray Servando’s sermon emanated not from defying Christianity, but from questioning the role of the Spaniards in the region. According to Raymond D. Souza, the sermon of Fray Servando is an open invitation to rebellion that does not derive from outside, but instead from within religious ideology (166). The challenge posed by Fray Servando is not over whether the Virgin of Guadalupe should be worshipped and adored. Rather, he maintains her religious importance while undercutting the social, political, and religious hegemony of the Spaniards. As Souza explains, in Fray Servando’s efforts to subvert the political application of dominant ideology he fails to question the ideology itself (167). Fray Servando’s fight against Spanish authority and the dominant modes of thinking, which, while originating in the West, had been reproduced in the New World, functions as a role model for an anti-colonial rewriting of history. This struggle is a pervasive and ubiquitous aspect of Arenas’s novel. Consequently, both Arenas and Carpentier narrate protagonists who challenge Western versions of Latin American identity: Fray Servando argues that the

Virgin of Guadalupe is in no way indebted to the legacy of the Spaniards and *el Amo* refuses to see his people turned into exotic entertainment for the European upper class.

Anti-colonial narrative must confront the issue of history because it has been through the truth claims of history that colonial domination persists. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain the seminal importance of history:

the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous with the rise of modern colonialism, which in its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world, found in history a prominent, if not *the* prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples. At base, the myth of a value free, 'scientific' view of the past, the myth of the beauty of order, the myth of the story of history as a simple representation of the continuity of events, authorized nothing less than the construction of world reality (*Reader* 355).

By re-ordering historical events, by challenging the origin of knowledge, and by suggesting the primacy of an autochthonous view of the past, Arenas and Carpentier begin the process of subverting the cultural capital of Eurocentric truth. Imperial history requires that the logic of colonialism control truth and all forms of knowledge, and it is precisely this claim to truth which Arenas and Carpentier endeavor to subvert. In this way the work of these two writers destabilizes the Imperial truth claims that argued that "a single narrative truth . . . was 'simply' the closest possible representation of events" by suggesting that truth is multiple, complex, and hybrid (*ibid.*). Their attention to the decisive role of history in creating regimes of truth is also underscored by the fact that they locate their texts in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries— a definitive moment in the

installation of colonial historiography. Their texts counter colonial claims to truth by utilizing tactics associated with resistance: “The post-colonial task, therefore, is not simply to contest the message of history, which has so often relegated individual post-colonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress, but also to engage the medium of narrativity itself, to reinscribe the ‘rhetoric’, the heterogeneity of historical representation as White describes it” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *Reader* 356).

In rewriting official history both writers complicate the notion of a historical source by focusing on Latin American foundational figures. These novels do not only rewrite texts, they rewrite texts, which actually are textual versions of cultural icons. Referring to *Concierto barroco*, González Echevarría explains that: “The text is a composite of stories told again, not in their original version; the original is forgotten, deformed, by means of a new amalgam” (267). A similar retelling takes place in relation to Fray Servando’s famous sermon in *El mundo alucinante*. The cultural icons upon which the “original” texts are based were first and foremost oral histories. Arenas retells Fray Servando's version of the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but he does not focus directly on the question of the Virgin of Guadalupe, he focuses, instead, on Fray Servando’s retelling of her appearance. Alternatively, Carpentier narrates the story of Vivaldi's opera: a musical version of the legend of Montezuma. These authors are constructing a new cultural context, through their narrative, for an understanding of two figures that are foundational to Mexican identity and more broadly to Latin America. The differences between the two icons in their "original" version and between the authors' treatment of them in their novelistic versions provide yet more information about the specific approaches these texts have toward history.



In the case of Carpentier's treatment of the tale of Montezuma, the mediating factor is the opera by Vivaldi. As history recounts, Montezuma was the great leader of the Aztec empire when Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico. Aztec myth held that Quetzalcoatl, a white god, would one day appear to provide salvation for the Aztec people. Hernán Cortés fit the description and was able to brutally conquer Montezuma. The fall of Montezuma, therefore, represents the break from an entirely indigenous culture to the creation of a *mestizo* culture permeated by the Spaniards. Malinche, the lover of Hernán Cortés, is said to be the mother of the Mexican *mestizo*, thus creating a miscegenational community of indigenous and Spanish origins.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of *Concierto barroco* Carpentier's character, *el Amo*, who is alternatively named "el indiano," does not identify himself as *mestizo*. Being wealthy and of nobility, he considers himself to be purely Spanish. In a foreshadowing gesture Carpentier alludes to *el Amo*'s identity crisis in the last chapter. Early in the novel we learn that *el Amo* has a painting of Montezuma and Cortés in his home. It is a luxurious and masterly work:

el cuadro de las grandezas estaba allá, en el salón de los bailes y recepciones, de los chocolates y atoles de etiqueta, donde historiábase, por obra de un pintor europeo que de paso hubiese estado en Coyoacán, el máximo acontecimiento de la historia del país. Allí un Montezuma entre romano y azteca, algo César tocado de plumas de quetzal, aparecía sentado en un trono cuyo estilo era mixto de pontificio y michoacano, bajo un palio levantado por dos artesanas, teniendo a su lado, de pie, un indeciso cuauhtémoc con cara de joven Telémaco que tuviese los ojos un poco almendrados. Delante de él, Hernán Cortés con toca de terciopelo y

espada de cinto - puesta la arrogante bota sobre el primer peldaño del solio imperial - estaba inmovilizada en dramática estampa conquistadora. (11)

This description of the painting in *el Amo's* home is relevant to an understanding of Carpentier's approach to history in two significant ways. First, it provides an important commentary on the perception of culture and history that plagues *el Amo*. The painting presents a romantic view of Montezuma and Cortés. Cortés appears as the invincible conqueror, Montezuma as the idealistic leader (like Caesar). Montezuma wears feathers. Cortés carries a sword. Cortés stands in front of Montezuma overshadowing an exotic, yet out-dated, culture. The second, and perhaps more pertinent, function of this painting is the extent to which it only represents decoration in *el Amo's* home. Here history has become nothing more than embellishment. This painting is only one of many that adorn the salon, which is surrounded by paintings of the master of the house and of beautiful Venetian women. *El Amo's* relation to the figure of Montezuma begins as mere ornamentation. He feels no more attachment to this historical event than he does to the silver and other valuable objects that surround him.

The figure of Montezuma reappears when *el Amo* decides to assume his identity during the Venetian carnival. From *el Amo's* perspective this disguise does not represent his desire to connect with his *mestizo* past. In fact, *el Amo* has chosen this costume because it allows him to play an exotic role. Nevertheless, the choice of this disguise leads to an identity crisis for *el Amo*. At first, it underlines the distance that *el Amo* feels from the actual historical context of the legend of Montezuma, and it paves the way for *el Amo* to begin his search for these lost origins. Because he has dressed in such an outlandish way, he attracts the attention of Vivaldi, who has been trying to

compose an opera about Montezuma. The text hints that without the disguise of Montezuma the meeting of these two men may never have taken place. Therefore, the disguise becomes the narrative device that connects the "real" Mexican with the composer who wants to narrate Mexican history.

The connection between these men begins with a mask, a carefully constructed narrative mask, which leads *el Amo* into collaboration with Vivaldi. *El Amo's* first reaction to the pomp and splendor of Vivaldi's production is jubilation and awe: "¡Bravo! ¡Bravo! '-- clama el indiano --!' ¡Así fue! ¡Así fue!' -- '¿Estuvo usted en eso?' -- pregunta Filomeno, socarrón. -- 'No estuve, pero digo que así fue y basta'" (66).<sup>8</sup> The contrast between Filomeno and *el Amo* is clear here. Filomeno questions the possibility of understanding history without having experienced it, sarcastically poking fun at the sheltered life that his master has led. But *el Amo* sees the glamour of the opera and enjoys the association of this glamour with his past.

Later *el Amo* experiences a radical change. As the opera draws to a close, Vivaldi depicts a "happy ending" in which Montezuma declares life-long fidelity to the king of Spain and the stage erupts in jubilant celebration. *El Amo* is shocked and he bursts forward with the exclamation: "¡Falso, falso, falso; todo falso!-- grita . . . -- '¿Falso . . . qué?' -- pregunta, atónito, el músico. -- 'Todo. Ese final es una estupidez. La Historia . . .!-- 'La ópera no es cosa de historiadores'" (68). *El Amo* is shocked out of his

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<sup>8</sup> For practical purposes I have confined my references to the protagonist to "*el Amo*" even though he receives multiple names throughout the text: *el Amo*, el indiano, and Montezuma. In support of my thesis that he is in search for his identity, neither his first or last name is ever mentioned. In contrast, Filomeno, while also referred to as "el criado" and "el negro," has a proper name. Another significant feature in relation to the naming of the protagonist is that he ceases to be referred to as "*el Amo*" shortly after he and Filomeno arrive in Venice. His aristocratic superiority has been lost and he is often presented as Filomeno's sidekick, certainly no longer master.

complacency when he realizes that Vivaldi sees the myth of Montezuma as nothing more than an interesting diversion for his public and he is further disturbed by the way that Montezuma submits to the colonial powers. Unlike his earlier acceptance of the colonialist representation of Montezuma that hangs in his salon, *el Amo* now cares about such colonialist visions of the conquest. History now has a capital "H". It has become serious for him and is no longer entertainment.

Vivaldi refuses to listen to the Mexican's "lunatic" ravings as he maintains that poetic illusion supersedes history with or without an "H". Their conversation continues: "La Historia nos dice . . ." -- 'No me joda con la Historia en materia del teatro. Lo que cuenta aquí es la ilusión poética. . . 'En América todo es fábula'" (69-70). In a subsequent conversation *el Amo* recounts to Filomeno the impetus behind the transformation in his point of view about the figure of Montezuma. The entire situation has disturbed him greatly and he wants to leave Venice to return to Mexico. He tells Filomeno: "Me sorprendí, a mí mismo, en la aviesa espera de que Montezuma venciera la arrogancia del español. . . Y me di cuenta, de pronto, que estaba en el bando de los americanos, blandiendo los mismos arcos y deseando la ruina de aquellos que me dieron sangre y apellido" (76).<sup>9</sup> The subtle ornamentation of the painting of Montezuma and Cortés in *el Amo's* home has become the basis for a soul-searching affirmation of his autochthonous heritage and *el Amo* now has a revolutionary perspective of his colonial context.

"Así fue" becomes "Así no fue" in reference to *el Amo's* previous outburst of enthusiasm while watching the opera. Nevertheless, *el Amo* continues to trust that he is capable of interpreting history and uncovering truth. He was born of Mexican land:

"pues mejor que nadie podía saber yo, nacido allá, cómo ocurrieron las cosas" (75).

Disregarding his Spanish name, he yearns for contact with Montezuma. If it were not for his cowardice, he would like to continue Montezuma's struggle. *El Amo* has begun to recognize the power of representation and of hegemonic ideology and he has begun to disentangle himself from its powerful web.

As an example of Carpentier's modernist impulse the exclamation -- "Así fue" -- does not lose its connection with truth. It has simply been shown to function differently. *El Amo* understands his link to Montezuma "better" than before. Vivaldi's opera provided the catalyst for *el Amo's* epiphany. The narrative technique of Carpentier in *Concierto barroco* is a means of exposing deep meaning and opens doors once closed by history. Filomeno as the spokesman for the text's method explains: "Gracias al teatro podemos remontarnos en el tiempo y vivir, cosa imposible para nuestra carne presente, en épocas por siempre idas" (76). *El Amo* has become enlightened about his past and Filomeno has learned that he must wait to join the revolution that will liberate his culture. "Y sonará la trompeta" (73). Salvation is near. The future is conceptualized idealistically. Through the architectonic narrative revelation of *Concierto barroco*, the reader receives one version, where *el Amo*, Filomeno and Montezuma appear as subjects of the narrator's discourse and as objects of interpretive history. True to modernism the novel shows the growth of its protagonist who has now found the path to real enlightenment. It is worth noting that, as a member of the criollo elite, *el Amo* is prepared to support a War of Independence but not a leftist revolution. Filomeno, on the other hand, is ready, but the text suggests that he must wait for his time to come.

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that the reader never learns *el Amo's* last name.

"Así fue" functions very distinctly in *El mundo alucinante*, where another Mexican icon becomes the object of hermeneutic re-writing. The Virgin of Guadalupe was supposedly sited in 1531 by Juan Diego, and, in 1746, she became the Patroness of New Spain. The original myth was particularly important to the conquistadors because it demonstrated that only after the arrival of the Spaniards was the territory open to the appearance of Christianity. The Spaniards brought God, and the Mexicans were blessed, until Fray Servando decided, with the helpful advice of Ignacio Borunda, to rewrite the story claiming that the Virgin dated back to pre-Columbian Mexico. As a result of this revision Fray Servando spent his entire life in and out of prison, constantly confined and pursued. At least this is one version (See Souza).

*El mundo alucinante* provides at least four renditions of the results of the sermon that Fray Servando delivered on the Virgin of Guadalupe: Chapter VI, "Del sermón", the first chapter VII, "De las consecuencias del sermón", and two more variations of chapter VII entitled "De la consecuencia del sermón." Arenas abandons what he would define as the totalizing authorial impulse of *Concierto barroco*. Arenas's text will reveal multiple voices in struggle in contrast to the harmonic unity that eventually results from *el Amo's* experience with Vivaldi. Furthermore, the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe, while central to the development of the friar's life, does not occupy the main narrative movement of the text. Instead, the novel is dominated by the protagonist's concern over why he is being persecuted. What he has done, of course, is disrupt the authority of the Spaniards' claim as the Christian missionaries of Mexico. The political import is enormous, as the renovated Virgin later becomes the emblem on the Mexican revolutionary flags of 1810. Clearly the Spaniards believed that Fray Servando's explanation of the historical event was a perversion of it and such actions were

considered treasonous. Unlike Vivaldi, in Venice, providing recreation for the idle nobility, Fray Servando's relation to the Virgin of Guadalupe is already an attempt to detach Mexican culture from a dependence on Spanish domination. Fray Servando's effort to dislodge the Spanish claim to history is then further fractured by Arenas. The epigraph to *El mundo alucinante* highlights the blurred line between history and imagination: "Esta es la vida de Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, tal como fue, tal como pudo haber sido, tal como a mí me hubiese gustado que hubiera sido" (11). The line between what really happened and what the author would like to fantasize happened has been erased. Arenas's anti-colonial narrative turns official history into hallucinogen.

In this sense the hermeneutic gesture behind the multiple instances of "así fue" in this novel is not parallel to the case of *Concierto barroco*. Each "así fue" will not bring the reader, or Fray Servando, closer to the truth. Narrative has become fragmented even though it continues to advance. This narrative fragmentation is a literary means used to depict a constant struggling with and a detachment from faith in the agency of the subject. Moreover, the structure of the novel makes clear that this constant struggling will not be remedied by uncovering long, lost truths. Arenas's interpretive tactic is essentially a method for confronting and critiquing the project of a text like *Concierto barroco* and authors like Carpentier.<sup>10</sup> Arenas does not search for "the truth." Rather, he tries to prove that the truth can not be monologic, that representations of the truth must be dialogic and dialectical. For him, there is no one, true version of history and this must be revealed. Such revelations might help to unsettle unquestioned sources of

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<sup>10</sup> Arenas makes a direct jab at Carpentier's novel *El siglo de las luces* near the end of the novel when Fray Servando is back in Mexico. Fray Servando overhears an old man who, "con gran parsimonia anotaba todas las palabras pronunciadas en un grueso cartapacio en cuya tapa se leía *El saco de las lozas* . . ." (284).

knowledge and thereby teach the reader to become more critical of “historical truths.” Arenas explains in an interview: "Yo siempre he pensado que hay muchas realidades y que la labor de un novelista es tratar de dar a conocer las diversas realidades" (Olivares 62). What is most interesting is that in his attack on Carpentier Arenas fails to see the ways that their projects intersect: both writers suggest that history is complex, multiple and layered and both dispute Eurocentric, authoritarian cultural control. Where they differ, though, is in their faith in finding a coherent, alternative version of history to replace colonialist discourse.

Following Arenas’s strategy of disordering history, in *El mundo alucinante* repetitions of "así fue" become a leitmotif that does not weave the text into a perfect pattern. Instead, the thread becomes undone and threatens to unravel all of history. So, even though the novel is committed to an anti-colonial political project, his hyper-dialogism and narrative fragmentation run the risk of losing sight of any clear political project. The expression "así fue" literally appears all over the novel, but one of the most telling examples of its use is in Chapter XV, "De la visita a la bruja." On one page there are three instances of the expression, all of which follow three radically different stories of the same moment in Fray Servando's life. The first example is in first person narrative: "Y así fue que después de tantearme inútilmente, la mujer se marchó, soltando risas por todo el cuerpo." The second use is in second person: "León, enfurecido, ha dado muerte a dos docenas de frailes por tener cierta semejanza con tu manera de abrir la boca . . . Pero huye. Así fue." And the third example goes back to first person, but the narrator is not the same as the previous first person narrator: "Y oigo sus voces que me dicen - ' . . . Levántese usted, que nosotros tenemos que irnos a trabajar y el desayuno se enfría en la mesa.' Así fue" (143).



Perhaps one of the most significant differences between the distinct treatments of history in these texts is the impetus behind their protagonists' travels. *El Amo* of *Concierto barroco* travels because he is bored. Being wealthy and aristocratic, his life in Mexico has become monotonous. So he decides to take his servant, Francisquillo, and travel to Europe. Unfortunately, during their stay in Havana, Francisquillo dies and *el Amo* has to decide whether or not he can travel alone. He meets Filomeno, an afro-Cuban who loves music, and contracts him to be his servant and travel with him. What at the surface appears to be a frivolous vacation becomes, in fact, a search for origins.

In contrast to *el Amo's* voluntary search, Fray Servando does not choose to spend his entire life on the run. His story is one of persecution, exile, incarceration, and flight. Fray Servando does not have the bourgeois luxury of seeking answers to existential questions; he is trying to survive. In an exemplary illustration of his frustration, Fray Servando declares, "Lo mejor hubiera sido no haber dicho lo que dije. Pero ya qué voy a hacer. Lo mejor hubiera sido no haber nacido. Eso dije. . . . Pero estoy seguro que lo mejor no es lo mejor. Y lo mejor hubiera sido que yo no hubiera sido. Que no fuera nada" (121). Fray Servando's nihilism does not derive from a failed search for identity: it is the result of a frustrated desire to avoid the tangible threat of death and imprisonment. His constant flight deranges him to the point where he is unable to believe that his life is not in constant danger. Finally, free in Mexico he lives in the presidential palace, but he still is haunted: "Y pensó que otra vez, como siempre, estaba en una cárcel. Y trató de encontrar la salida . . . Quieren aniquilarme, quieren que yo muera sepultado en un foso. Han construido una cárcel de la cual no sé cómo escapar" (271). Fray Servando's paranoid mind has become an inescapable prison.

Parallel to these textual treatments of history, these novels approach the communicative power of language with a mutual project of anti-colonialism and a divergence between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic practices. If historical knowledge serves as the foundation for colonial enterprises, then language and representative strategies are the tools that are used to construct it. Both texts destabilize the colonizing power of fixed meaning through ludic representation, but Carpentier's work attempts to use language to create a new social order, whereas, Arenas calls the process of representation entirely into question. For instance, *El mundo alucinante* is riddled with pleonasm. Chapters repeat themselves: there are three chapter I's and three chapter II's. Sentences repeat themselves: Así fue, Así fue, Así fue. And most importantly history repeats itself: Time apparently progresses but Fray Servando continues to live the same life of persecution, exile, and censorship. In comparison, the main example of pleonasm in *Concierto barroco* occurs in the first chapter where "plata" appears 22 times within the first 45 lines (Vila Selma, 129). Yet the repeated use of "plata" serves to underscore the wealth of the protagonist. It is not meant to change the meaning of the word. Furthermore, at least nine sentences within this chapter begin with "y" or "pero" and the first two words of the chapter "de plata" are also its last two. This circularity demonstrates the tight and confined world in which *el Amo* lives, and from which he must depart, if he is to truly understand his historical origins.

In both Arenas and Carpentier pleonasm becomes paronomasia: one cannot avoid detecting linguistic humor in these gross exaggerations. Repetition is both linguistic and visual as these authors toy with the movement of time. But the crucial difference that separates these similar stylistic techniques is the effect that they produce. Arenas deranges time. Chapters may have the same number and title, but they do not

narrate the same information. Contradictions appear within the same paragraphs:

"Venimos del corojal. No venimos del corojal. Yo y las Josefás venimos del corojal.

Vengo solo del corojal" (23). The result is that language's connection to communication is frustrated in accordance with a postmodern mistrust of the representative possibilities of the text.

In contrast, *Concierto barroco* never loses a beat and while language is used ludicly, it does not lose its communicative force. The repetition of "plata" sets a rhythm for the first chapter that is never completely abandoned. Musical terminology reinforces this effect. For example in the first few lines "acompañadamente" and "percutiente" set a tone of musical order (9). Anti-colonial narrative in *Concierto barroco* does not lead to disharmony or to chaos, even if it challenges the colonizer's worldview. "Plata," unlike Arenas's use of "Así fue," never loses its standard references. It contributes to the description of a highly ornate and garish scene. *El Amo* is surrounded by silver and other luxury items (like the painting of Montezuma). Colloquially "plata" does not only refer to silver, but to money in general and Carpentier's use of it emphasizes the class distinction between *el Amo* and his servants that is firmly established at the opening of the text and is less certain by the conclusion.

There is no question that the two authors differ greatly in their treatment of history and their use of language, but the two texts under consideration here share certain uncanny resemblances. And, most importantly, both texts see the reinterpretation of history to be a necessary means of explaining the present. Carpentier's greater faith in revolution and Arenas's profound distrust of linguistic fixity may seem to place them at irreconcilable odds. For instance, Arenas, more so than Carpentier, recognizes that neocolonial practices also emanate from within Latin America and he refuses to reify

Latin America as a pure and untainted cultural source. Pagni argues that Arenas considers the history of revolution to be a history of failures unlike Carpentier who sees revolution as emancipation (143). The two writers differ in terms of their conception of revolutionary possibility, but I would argue that, rather than considering struggle doomed to failure, Arenas is obsessed with the hope of liberation. Fragmentation and relativism do not lead Arenas to celebrate. Indeed, they lead him to continue searching. His literature returns again and again to the need to resist oppression and the need to change the social structures that cause suffering. What Arenas has lost is answers, a vision of utopia, and a sense of what post-revolutionary society should look like. And yet, it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that Carpentier's novel, written well after the Cuban revolution, suggests that the anti-colonialist project is not over and that revolution has not closed this chapter of history. Carpentier is more confident in the goals of the revolution and its social blueprint, but he still feels that it is a work in progress and, like Arenas, he is not celebrating; he is still searching. In this sense, Carpentier and Arenas may have different degrees of faith, may use different strategies, and dream of different outcomes, but they do overlap in their belief that it is necessary to confront hegemony and that literature still needs to play a role in social critique.

These narratives subvert the traditional primacy of analysis over storytelling, fact over fiction, Eurocentric perspectives of Latin America over autochthonous views. Both novels frustrate official history's utterance of "así fue" and they demonstrate the critical power of literature. Most importantly, through their different approaches, both texts demonstrate the complex and varied strategies that form the anti-colonial project. As Fray Servando wrote: "Mi imaginación es un fuego, pero mi corazón está sobre la región

de los truenos.”<sup>11</sup> Despite their differences, both Carpentier and Arenas express a profound interest in Latin American cultural independence.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Perea. Source: Servando Teresa de Mier, *Memorias*, II. México, Editorial Porrúa, 1982. *Escritores Mexicanos*, 38, p. 294.

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