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### **Review/Reseña**

Luis de Lión. *Time Commences in Xibalbá*. Translated by Nathan C. Henne. Afterword by Arturo Arias. Tempe: The University of Arizona Press, 2012.

## **Decolonizing Guatemalan Textualities: Luis de Lión and the Aesthetics of Identity**

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Nathan C. Henne's translation of Luis de Lión's foundational novel of indigeneity *Time Commences in Xibalbá* invites English language readers—for the first time—into an indigenous Guatemalan town on the brink of eruption. Published posthumously in 1985, De Lión's novel is now regarded as a classic and the first to novelize the Guatemalan Maya experience. To many critics' surprise, it is also a complex, avant-garde text, which other than its subject matter, fits well within the experimental

context of Latin American fiction of the 1960s. Stylistically, de Li3n's narrative is experimental in its nonlinearity, its use of flashbacks and flash-forwards, which interweave the narrator's telling of characters' experiences with the characters' own reflections via stream of consciousness. Critics have noted that the time of the novel is circular and spiraling, while the space of the text is highly symbolic. Although it dialogues with techniques associated with Latin American literature of the 1960s, it also resists classification when compared to other classic texts of this time period.

De Li3n's narrative opens with an apocalyptic, wind battering the townspeople, stripping the trees of their leaves, and ceding to a new time: "like in the time of nothing" (4). But from this cataclysmic return to a simultaneously prior and subsequent nothing, the narrator reconstructs for "you" the reader (or "you" the villagers) the town's dirt roads and thatched roof huts, the dogs and roosters crisscrossing the streets, the imposing Catholic church on the hill, and above all else, the peculiarities, struggles and anguishes of the novel's Maya characters.

Concha, the "virgin whore," is the indigenous double of a wooden, white Virgin Mary statue kept under lock and key in the local church. For this resemblance, all of the men in town—except for Juan and Pascual—have sex with her while dreaming of the statue of the Virgin. Concha's frustrated attempts to sleep with both Juan and Pascual, who deny her because she is not the "real" Virgin, eventually lead her to critique the racist attitudes toward indigenous women that the town's men have internalized. Like the wind's destruction inaugurating the novel, Concha's new awareness leads her to dramatic, destructive actions.

One of Concha's main frustrations is her husband. Juan Caca refuses to "dirty his hands with shit" and therefore avoids sleeping with his sexually charged wife (68). Juan's fixation on whiteness, both material and racial, manifests itself in his obsession with the white Virgin, his religious training in the white mestizo world as a young man, and his denial of his own indigenous identity. He surrounds himself with ornamental whiteness—his white clothes and spotless, white house, for example—which stands in stark contrast to the brownness of his skin; the symbolic "dirtiness" of his own name and racial identity (*caca/shit*). The narrative

follows his racialized anguish by tracing his self-denial in all of its contradictory manifestations. Like the spiraling progression/regression of the text's nonlinear narrative, Juan himself spins out of control into a surrealist existential crisis.

Although similar to Juan in his exposure to the mestizo world outside the indigenous town, Pascual's negotiation of internalized racism and self-denial materializes in a violent rebellion against the Catholic norms dictating life in the small town. His frustration with the impossibility of penetrating the mestizo world, and the mestiza woman more specifically, leads him to commit a treacherous act—a decolonial “radical transgression,” as critic Emilio del Valle Escalante puts it. This, in turn, sets off a series of events dragging the town into a violent crisis. Pascual's transgression and the resulting destruction, then, also parallel the brutality of the wind that destroys the town in the first few pages of the novel. De Li3n's narrative incessantly leaps between these three characters' tribulations and the natural forces of destruction and regeneration simultaneously occurring in the town. All of these factors point to the truly unstable and uncertain identity of the town itself and its inhabitants.

If identity is uncertain in the world de Li3n creates, we can consider that de Li3n's literary project aims to center the untranslatable, unstable identity of Guatemala more generally. His personal trajectory and the historical moment in which he lived reveal exactly why this issue would take center stage in his literary work. Born in 1939 of Maya-Kaqchikel origin, Luis de Li3n left his small indigenous town for Guatemala City after finishing his elementary and high school education. In the City, he would earn his teacher's certification. Armed with his degree, he lived and worked in rural communities throughout the country, an experience that exposed him to the multiplicity of ethno-racial identities circulating within the nation. He eventually landed in Guatemala City where he taught courses at the University of San Carlos, and became involved in the leftist political movement fighting the oppression and abuses of successive dictatorial regimes throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This period of continental political polarization and revolutionary utopian thinking marked the first time in which indigenous peoples had become radicalized in Latin America

since the Mexican revolution, many opting for insurrectionary means to end racism and oppression.

We can situate de Li3n's novel in this context, as his characters are indigenous subjects questioning racism and mestizo-indigenous relations. They are also questioning the fundamental alienation and racialization of indigenous subjectivities within the Guatemalan national "mestizo" cultural imaginary. Being "outside" of this national imaginary leads to, as de Li3n suggests, the internalization of the notion of self as "other," or of self as "uncertain" within the mestizo imaginary. The coming to consciousness of this racialization, or at least grappling with it, is therefore a major theme in de Li3n's novel. His depiction of this process and its hurdles is why the novel is an important piece in the complex puzzle of the Guatemalan literary and intellectual history of this time period. It is additionally important in Guatemalan texts because, as Guatemalan literary scholar Arturo Arias sees it, de Li3n's novel would "open the floodgates" for the emergence of what he calls a "New Maya Literature" in the 1980s and beyond (95). Although de Li3n finished his transcript in 1972, for a variety of reasons it was not published until 1985, one year after his disappearance, and subsequent murder by the Guatemalan army.

Understanding *Time Commences in Xibalb3* means appreciating de Li3n's textual language and intertextual symbolism. In this regard, the present edition is particularly helpful thanks to Nathan C. Henne's "Translator's Introduction" and Arturo Arias' "Afterword" titled, "Racialized Subalternity as Emancipatory Decolonial Project."

In the original Spanish language text, de Li3n's incorporation of Maya linguistic elements invites the reader to confront the persistence of indigenous ethno-linguistic traits within the context of Spanish linguistic colonization. In other words, the language of de Li3n's text demonstrates that the mestizo desire for a monolingual Guatemala (historically articulated in State policies aimed at 'integrating' or 'assimilating' indigenous groups into a singular 'mestizo' national identity) was ultimately unsuccessful in eradicating a Maya linguistic patrimony in indigenous Guatemalan Spanish. In the textual space of de Li3n's indigenous village, all of the characters use a Spanish peppered with

“Kaqchikel apocopes and other linguistic traits,” which Arias notes result in the “unique double-voicing” of the novel’s literary language (86).

In translator Nathan C. Henne’s insightful introduction, he describes this literary double-voicing in other terms; that is, as an “indigenous poetics of the uncertain” operating at multiple levels of the novel, one of which is linguistic (xi). He describes the poetics of the uncertain as “a way of making meaning in language that always recognizes the resulting meaning as only partial and fleeting, underscoring the fact that language cannot ever precisely define” (xi). In this sense, de Lión’s literary language reveals “the various mestizo identities” (xxiv) or the “underlying intermittent, multiple identities” (xvii) of the novel’s characters, who resist translation or definition. If one of de Lión’s primary strategies is to translate the ambiguity of these “uncertain” identities into the original Spanish text, Henne is faced with the challenging task of translating this translation into an English language text.

It is therefore helpful to consider Henne’s translation through theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah’s description of “thick translation.” “Thick translation,” for Appiah, is one that does not erase, but rather purposely highlights resonances of source language cultural identity (Maya/Guatemalan Spanish) in the target language text (English). “Thick translations” challenge the target language reader to recall that he or she is in fact reading a text marked by cultural difference. A reader confronts the unfamiliar, perhaps even uncomfortable, difference of the text because he or she is led to pause during the act of reading. Pause interrupts the reader and the otherwise seamless processing of textual information. Henne successfully reminds his English readers of the original text’s multiple identities and differences by interrupting the reader’s reading; he gives the reader pause.

One of Henne’s strategies is to use extratextual glosses, or footnotes, explaining certain terms or practices particular to indigenous towns or to Maya languages. He couples these with descriptive footnotes that explain non-Maya specific terms or practices. The combination of these two kinds of footnotes makes it abundantly clear that multiple linguistic and cultural identities are operating in the shared space of the text. Another effective

strategy Henne uses to mark indigenous discourse in the English text is his incorporation of archaisms found in de Li3n's Spanish. The most obvious is the English verb "commence" as opposed to "begins." He uses this less comfortable verb in English to indicate a verb particular to indigenous voices in contemporary Guatemala—*principiar*—which is not a commonly used verb in contemporary Latin American Spanish varieties. It is, however, common in indigenous villages in Guatemala. Henne also consistently glosses the informal second-person-singular "vos" in the text, and finally, he plays with the aesthetics of the printed text by conforming to Spanish uses of exclamation points and question marks. Both appear at the beginning and end of sentences, with the initial marker inverted (ex: ¿who is it?). Visual markers of difference as such are a key way to give the reader pause, to interrupt the flow of reading. Interruptions communicate that another epistemology is at play in the text, one that is foreign to the reader. With the incorporation of these markers into English through the above-mentioned translation strategies, the reader cannot help but negotiate the identitarian uncertainty of language itself. This is an impressive feature of Henne's translation, one that captures de Li3n's linguistic multiple identities in the original Spanish.

Finally, we must note that *Time Commences in Xibalbá* is considered a forerunner to contemporary Maya literature in part because it engages the symbolism of the *Popol Wuj*, or the Maya-Quiché creation story. While de Li3n's novel is not the only one to employ such intertextuality, it is the first that, through it, communicates a revolutionary project for indigenous subjects without falling into the trap of idealizing *mestizaje* or locating indigeneity as a kind of dream-like unreality. Arturo Arias's "Afterword" in the present edition is an excellent resource in this sense, as it provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the structure and multiple narratives within the genesis story. Arias highlights the diverse ways de Li3n engages the poetics of the *Popol Wuj*, including the interrupted narrative lines, key protagonists, and symbolic elements. Additionally, Arias offers a decolonial analysis of de Li3n's frustrated version of the Maya-Quiche genesis story, and situates this author within the genealogy of decolonial Maya literature in contemporary Guatemalan

textualities. Finally, both Arias and Henne provide bibliographic references signaling the most insightful essays treating de Li3n's work. These are excellent resources for a deeper appreciation of the novel. For the careful translation and the accompanying critical analysis, this edition finally makes Luis de Li3n's revolutionary novel available and accessible to an English-language audience.