

# **Anthropological Discourse within *Los Pasos Perdidos*: Contact Zones and Myth-Making in the Latin American Travel Narrative**

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Since the time of its discovery, Latin America has been subjected to scrutiny, study, and documentation. Beginning with Columbus' writings, European vision of Latin America has been inextricably tied to the written word, thus creating the beginnings of the Latin American mythos and the antecedent to the travel narratives. According to Roberto González Echevarría, Alejo Carpentier's *Los Pasos Perdidos* "is a turning point in the history of Latin American narrative, the founding archival fiction." However, much of the scholarship has moved away from the fundamental thematic of ethnographic writing within the novel. As this paper argues, the ethnographic underpinning that Carpentier sets forth through the protagonist-narrator's encounter with a cultural "other" is crucial in understanding how the text situates Latin America within the ambit of literary fiction, as well as within the anthropological discourse it emulates. Drawing largely from the works of James Clifford and Mary Louise Pratt, this paper examines *Los Pasos Perdidos* as an archetype of the European myth-building of Latin America as it revisits the underlying anthropological discourse of the novel through the concept of the contact zone. In doing so, this article questions the space Carpentier configures for Latin America within the intersection of anthropology and the travel writing that emerges from this region.

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Latin America was written into existence through European language, beginning with Columbus' writings and continuing on with colonial chronicles of the "New World." Through their ostensibly truth-bearing

capacities as eye-witness accounts, these early texts provided the framework for the Latin American travel narrative that would emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a means of legitimizing the Latin American novel through association with “those texts that tell the first stories” (“Archival Fictions” 184). However, it is not merely the historical aspect of these accounts that tacitly enters into the Latin American narrative; underlying these early writings were the inchoate stages of anthropology that, as Roberto González Echevarría points out, became the hegemonic discourse of the Latin American narrative in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—its other envoy of authenticity (*Myth and Archive* 144). Paradoxically, however, it is the anthropological nature of the early chronicles that initiates European myth-building of Latin America, thus, problematizing Latin America’s place within the intersection of anthropological discourse and the Latin American travel narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Anthropology emerges with the Discovery and comes to fruition in the colonial period; indeed, Echevarría notes how Columbus first appointed Fray Ramón Pané with the task of learning about the native *Taínos* in Hispaniola and documenting his discoveries, unknowingly creating the fundamentals of anthropology (144). Chroniclers and scientific travelers would follow suit as precursors of modern anthropology, establishing the validity and authenticity of their firsthand accounts of the New World (146). By the 1950s, however, the authority vested in this discipline as a purveyor of cultural truth was deeply shaken with the dissolution of colonial powers across the globe (*Writing Culture* 22). According to James Clifford, this *crise de conscience* contested the “traditional” place of “peoples long spoken for by Western ethnographers” (6). As such, the propensity of Latin American writers to engage with anthropology created a complicated dialectic between the ethnographic construction of Latin America and that forged within the ambit of the Latin American narrative. Latin American writers utilized anthropology as a means of authentication; however, in doing so, they simultaneously mocked the discipline’s conventionality, “its being a willful imposition on the material studied as an act of appropriation” (*Myth and Archive* 159). Among these narratives that sought out an ethnographic simulacrum, perhaps none more closely reflects this turn towards anthropologic discourse than Alejo Carpentier’s *Los Pasos*

*Perdidos*, which is openly marked by anthropological gestures that, in effect, underlie the novel in its totality as the unnamed protagonist-narrator himself is configured as a species of anthropologist.

Frustrated with his failed marriage and shallow lifestyle in New York, the protagonist-narrator travels to South America on a quest to seek out indigenous instruments. In the course of his travels, he attempts to integrate himself into the life of Santa Mónica de los Venados, a small town established in the midst of the jungle, separated from the reaches of mainstream civilization. However, the culmination of the novel comes in the protagonist-narrator's recognition of his failure to truly become a part of the culture there as "ciertas potencias del mundo que ha dejado a sus espaldas siguen actuando sobre él" (Carpentier 278) ("certain forces of the world he had left behind continued to operate in him [277]). Because of these "potencias," or "certain forces," the protagonist-narrator is unable to assume any role other than that of an outsider looking in, which reveals what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "contact zone," the "space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (*Imperial Eyes* 6). And it is this concept that lies at the forefront of the problematics that are engendered through the meeting between the ethnographic and the literary construction of Latin America that is found within Carpentier's novel. Drawing largely from the works of Clifford and Pratt, this paper examines *Los Pasos Perdidos* as an archetype of European myth-building of Latin America as it revisits the anthropological discourse of the novel through the concept of the contact zone.

### **The Emergence of Anthropology in Latin America**

In order to examine *Los Pasos Perdidos* and its ethnographic underpinnings, it is important to look at the development of travel writing as a point of entry for anthropology within Latin America as a way to understand how the Latin American mythos emerges and becomes an integral part of Carpentier's narrative. What follows in this section is a brief tracing of this meeting between travel writing and anthropology. The primary text to inform this outline is Columbus'

*Diario*. In *Reading Columbus*, Margarita Zamora explores the shift of Columbus' *Diario* from a maritime log to a travel narrative (120). According to Zamora, the *Diario* of the first voyage reads as a strictly technical, navigational record of "maritime phenomena"; however, with Columbus' landing on October 11, 1492, the *Diario* assumes the narrative voice which becomes a way to communicate an experience, thus lending a mode of understanding for those who are not there, i.e., Europeans (97, 121-122). Herein lies a fundamental basis for ethnographic studies—the attempt to render meaning to an experience for an absent audience. Within this conversion of textual expression, Columbus takes another turn that not only gives continuation to this early adumbration of anthropology, but also presents a crucial moment in the development of Latin American mythos. This turn entails the rhetoric of "la maravilla" that Columbus employs in his writings. Stephen Greenblatt proposes that a stratagem was put into play by Columbus in his construction of the New World as a "marvelous" place. Following what must have been a massive disillusion in the European imagination, Columbus' undertakings in Hispaniola were called into question and even attacked as the highly fantasized treasures and marvels of the New World were nowhere to be seen (73). So, in lieu of "caravels laden with gold," Columbus reinscribed onto the European imagination "la maravilla" of the New World through his writings, and it is here where both the mythology of America and the problematics of anthropology begin to germinate (Greenblatt 73).

Clifford notes that the "invention" and not "representation" of culture has historically been at the foreground of ethnographic writing (*Writing Culture* 2). This is not to say that anthropological texts are founded on lies, but rather, certain systems of thought, power, and history work through these texts and their authors in ways that inevitably yield a distorted vision of culture (7). Such is the case with Columbus' "invention" of the marvelous New World and his attempt to maintain favor with the Spanish Crown. So, in looking at this early contact between the Old and New World and the travel writing that grew out of it as the beginnings of anthropological practice, how does Latin American literature enter into a dialectic with this discipline? For Echevarría, the *Diario* is the first presentation of the major underlying thematic of Latin

American literature: “how to write in a European language about realities never seen in Europe before,” which echoes the early foundations of ethnographic writing (*Myth and Archive* 26). According to Echevarría, this is the point of departure for the construction of Latin America as a fictitious place—first through European eyes, then through constant reinvention by Latin American writers (*Pilgrim at Home* 26-28).

### **The “I” of the Ethnographer**

In looking at *Los Pasos Perdidos* as an archetype of European myth-building, one crucial element of the novel that situates it as such is the narrative voice. The use of the pronoun “I” in this first-person narrative is briefly looked at by Echevarría as an obstacle in treating the novel as a completed work since the protagonist-narrator remains nameless and the temporality of the text remains ambiguous (*The Pilgrim* 166). For Claire Emilie Martin, the “I” or “Yo” encompasses multiple meanings within the text that are linked in one way or another to the autobiographical elements of the novel, in particular, as both Echevarría and Martin have noted, those associated with the search for identity (*The Pilgrim* 159; Martin 80). Though there are indeed numerous autobiographical aspects within the text, the “I” of the narrative is more likely an indicator of the ethnographic models of authority the novel seeks to reflect, which will be examined shortly. What Martin does mention, however, in keeping with the study at hand, is the “Yo” of the Discovery and later chroniclers: “Colón y Juan de Amberes, como Bernal Díaz, anteponen un ‘yo’ testigo y hacedor de la historia”(Martin 21).<sup>1</sup> As Martin mentions further on, this “yo” is not one that merely puts historical events to paper; more significantly, “al empuñar la pluma sufren una transformación ... no solo serán testigos de la historia ... sino también traductores e intérpretes” (21).<sup>2</sup> It is within the early texts of the Discovery and Conquest that ethnographic practices begin to unfold, practices such as those mentioned here, the most important being the inscription of the first-person, “I.” According to Clifford, the “I” is paramount in ethnographic works prior to the crisis of anthropology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as it signals “experiential authority,” thus all that is narrated is legitimized through the seal of “I was there” (*Predicament* 35). So even before the narrator begins to recount his journey in South America, he engages in the language of

ethnography, the telling of an experience. The “I” serves as a point of entry in establishing the novel as an ethnographic text and the protagonist-narrator as its author.

While the narrative voice of *Los Pasos Perdidos* serves to situate the novel within anthropological discourse, it also calls into question the “who” of this voice. It has been established that early ethnographies carried with them the authorial dictum of “I was there,” but in *Los Pasos Perdidos*, it is precisely this “I” that begins to reveal the problematics of this inherent authority as well as those inherent in the contact zone in which it is carried out. Early on in the novel, the protagonist-narrator reveals that although he comes from Latin American origins, from his adolescence on, he had been moved and indoctrinated into the “theories,” “intellectual labyrinths,” and “‘modern’ themes” of European thought (Carpentier 73). He himself bemoans having left his country of origin: “Yo percibía ... cuánto daño me hiciera un temprano desarriago de este medio que había sido el mío hasta la adolescencia” (75-76) (“I could see the harm my uprooting from this environment, which had been mine until adolescence, had done me” [73]). The dual nature of the protagonist-narrator’s origins presents two different modalities in how this first-person narration might be interpreted.

If the protagonist-narrator’s Europeanism is brought to the foreground, then the problematics surrounding the dissolution of anthropological authority are brought forth as well. As previously mentioned, certain systems of thought, power, and history work through ethnographies in ways their authors cannot always control. Having been immersed in European thought and educated through a Western system, the protagonist-narrator inevitably carries with him a certain mode of thinking that is not so easily left behind. The “ciertas potencias” cited in the introduction work through him as well as through the text he narrates. As with the ethnographic “I”, the first-person narration here calls into question the legitimacy of this perspective, and reveals some of the “perils” that come with writing from the contact zone: “miscomprehension [and] incomprehension,” all of which is underscored by the protagonist-narrator’s inability to integrate into the culture of Santa Mónica de los Venados (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 37).

Reading the text as what Pratt calls an “autoethnography” presents a different set of complications in who or what the “I” represents. The idea of the autoethnography is similar in part to what Clifford references as the “indigenous ethnographer” (*Writing Culture* 9). That is, the idea that “insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding” (9). For Pratt, the autoethnography presents an engagement with “the colonizer’s own terms” from the colonized subject’s point of view (*Imperial Eyes* 7). Granted, the protagonist-narrator is not a colonized subject *per se*, but having his origins in Latin America means that in writing this, he is in fact engaging in the “collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the conqueror,” in this case the idioms of ethnography, as opposed to an “authentic” form of presentation which Pratt emphasizes does not constitute an autoethnography (7). So, in adopting the ethnographic form, the “I” of the narrative becomes a much more politicized voice. The “I” here fails to become the envoy of legitimacy but is nonetheless what makes this an ethnographic work and an attempt at “knowing” Latin America; thus the “I” of the narrator is not merely a representation of the autobiographic, but a representation of the ethnographic.

### **Western Institutions**

In his study of Carpentier’s oeuvre, Echevarría traces the trajectory of the protagonist-narrator’s journey, linking the landscapes he traverses with Carpentier’s real life travels as a way of bringing forth the autobiographical elements of the text (*The Pilgrim* 168-176). While Echevarría gives a detailed account of the South American panorama in *Los Pasos Perdidos*, this section will briefly look at the two institutions that initiate the protagonist-narrator’s undertaking in the jungles of Latin America in order to understand the context from which his anthropological persona emerges as well as how they reflect the conflicts of the contact zone. These two institutions are comprised of the university and its Museum of Organography. Through his chance encounter with the Curator, the protagonist-narrator reveals his former involvement within the university and the museum which reifies the ways in which occidental thought has been inscribed in him. Indeed, when the protagonist-narrator’s mistress, Mouche, proposes a plan to

turn in fraudulent instruments to the university, he comments on his reverence for this establishment which reveals the prestige and authority it holds for him: “La Universidad se irguió en mi mente con la majestad de un templo sobre cuyas columnas blancas me invitaran a arrojar inmundicias” (Carpentier 35) (“The university arose in my mind with all the majesty of a temple whose white columns I was asked to defile with dung” [32]). The protagonist-narrator sets up the university as a classical, limpid establishment devoid of any impurities or duplicity. However, just a little later, the protagonist-narrator acknowledges the faulty scholarship that allows for dubious works to be set forth as “genuine” under the shelter of being housed in a university or museum: “los museos atesoraban más de un Stradivarius sospechoso” (36) (“Museums treasured more than one doubtful Stradivarius” [34]). So, the protagonist-narrator himself recognizes the underbelly of these institutions that purport to be the purveyors of cultural knowledge and “truth.” As such, it is interesting that the persona of the anthropologist is created for the protagonist-narrator through these very establishments. According to the protagonist-narrator, the Curator dubs him “el colector indicado para conseguir unas piezas que faltaban a la galería de instrumentos de aborígenes de América ... dándome la estatura de un Von Horbostel joven” (26) (“the very collector who was needed to secure certain examples still missing from the collection of aboriginal American musical instruments ... conferring on me the stature of a young Von Horbostel” [22-23]). The establishments that bring about his journey present an issue of legitimacy as they represent a certain prestige that leaves their institutional practices largely unquestioned.

The uncontested jurisdiction of the university and museum is made even more apparent in looking at the charge the protagonist-narrator is given. As previously quoted, he is asked to bring back “certain examples still missing from the collection of aboriginal American musical instruments” (22-23). The fact that the museum deems their collection incomplete without these particular instruments reflects the core of the Western practice of collecting as well as the myth-building inherent in Western attempts at cultural representation. According to Clifford, the practice of collecting is concerned with “what from the material world specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value and exchange”



(*Predicament* 221). The specific groups Clifford refers to here are undoubtedly constituted by prestigious institutions, like the museum, that take it upon themselves to systemize culture, appropriating and mythologizing the makeup of certain peoples. And here again the conflicting relations of the contact zone make themselves evident. The museum ascribes value specifically to those missing pieces under the belief that acquiring them will render an authentic, complete representation of aboriginal American music culture; the crux here is that it is the museum and not the indigenous makers of the instruments that determines such a representation. In undertaking the Curator's mission, the protagonist-narrator himself partakes in the "Western subjectivity" of these practices, thus underscoring his place as an outsider looking in—or as Pratt puts it, "the 'seeing man' ... he whose imperial eyes passively look out and posses" (*Imperial Eyes* 7).

### **Anthropological Acts**

Equipped with the support of the university and museum, the protagonist-narrator travels to the jungles of South America in search of the musical instruments. While it is the Curator who first appoints him as a species of anthropologist, the protagonist-narrator is quick to assume this role himself. Indeed, he goes so far as to situate himself as a participating member of the Conquest when he and his traveling companions make their way up the river that will lead them to the entrance of Santa Mónica: "somos Conquistadores que vamos en busca del Reino de Manoa ... yo me otorgo, en la empresa, los cargos del trompeta Juan de San Pedro, con mujer tomada a bragas en el saqueo de un pueblo" (161) ("we were conquistadors who had set out in search of the Kingdom of Manoa ... My role was that of Juan de San Pedro, the trumpeter, who had taken himself a woman in the sack of a town" [159]). Anthropology emerges from the Discovery and Conquest, and here the protagonist-narrator, in mimicking the conquistadores also mimics the anthropological gestures of invasion and appropriation thereby situating himself as one outside of the culture. However, nowhere is this more pointed than in his encounter with the musical instruments he is charged with bringing back to the museum. Before examining the moment in

which he actually finds the instruments, it is worth looking back to the initial assignment of this task. The protagonist-narrator relates:

se confiaba en mí, firmament, para traer, entre otros  
idiófonos singulares, un injerto de tambor y bastón de  
ritmo que Schaffner y Curt Sachs ignoraban, y la famosa  
jarra con dos embocaduras de caña, usada por ciertos  
indios en sus ceremonias funerarias, que el Padre  
Servando de Castillejos hubiera descrito, en 1561, en su  
trato *De barbarorum Novi Mundi moribus*, y no figuraba  
en ninguna colección organográfica” (26)

(I was being entrusted with the task of bringing back,  
among other unique idiophones, a cross between a drum  
and a rhythm-stick which Schaeffner and Curt Sachs  
knew nothing of, and the famous jar with two openings  
fitted with reeds which had been employed by certain  
Indians in funeral rites that Father Servande de  
Castillejos had described in 1651 in his treatise *De  
barbarorum Novi Mundi moribus*. This was not listed in  
any organographic collection [23])

At least one of the musical instruments the protagonist-narrator is asked to bring back has been described and documented in colonial writings; as such, it can be said that in seeking out these musical instruments, the protagonist-narrator is completing the anthropological works begun in the colonial period, or rather, continuing them. Not surprisingly, his mimesis of anthropology is underscored once he does in fact come into possession of the instruments: “Al concluir los trueques que me pusieron en posesión de ese arsenal de cosas creadas por el más noble instinto del hombre, me pareció que entraba en un nuevo ciclo de mi existencia” (178) (“After concluding the barter that put into my possession that arsenal of objects created by man’s noblest instinct, I felt as though I had entered upon a new phase of my existence” [174]). Yet, here again arise the problematics of anthropology and the contact zone. The protagonist-narrator believes himself capable of understanding the essence of the objects he possesses as well as the history and culture they carry.

In the previous quote, the protagonist-narrator describes how he perceives the origin of the instruments, calling them “objects created by

man's noblest instinct." The connection between the instruments and the sublime nature of man is something he attributes to them, but it does not necessarily mean that he has reached a genuine appreciation that goes beyond the emotion of having come into possession of the instruments. Clifford mentions that "Cultural or artistic 'authenticity' has much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation, or revival" (*Predicament* 222). In this case, the protagonist-narrator has the power to attribute authenticity to these instruments by virtue of his position as an anthropologist. It could be said that this "inventive present" allows for the protagonist-narrator to objectify the objects. His authorial designation of the instruments as a link to man's beginnings demonstrates how subjects, or in this case, objects, are constituted within the contact zone's "asymmetrical relations of power" (*Imperial Eyes* 7). In his study of the protagonist-narrator's journey as an attempt to return to man's origins, Francisco La Rubia-Prado notes that "El origen es en la tradición romántica, y ciertamente para Rousseau, algo ficticio" (38).<sup>3</sup> The illusive idea of returning to origins could also apply to the protagonist-narrator's encounter with the musical instruments; his conviction that they are a link to man's origins or "man's noblest instinct" is merely a fictitious notion he has created through his belief that he is on a "quest for primitive purity" and that there is indeed such a thing as "primitive purity" (Martin, McNerney 491).

Reinforcing the protagonist-narrator's position as an outside observer is the way he affectionately describes the instruments, noting the distinct details of each one, seemingly demonstrating a deep understanding of their making. However, even though he may seem to have an appreciation for the instruments as cultural artifacts and works of art, in reality he cannot value the history or praxis of the instruments since he admires them from the perspective of a discovery. Indeed, from the first moment that the narrator comes in contact with the instruments, he notes: "Con la emoción del peregrino que alcanza la reliquia por la que hubiera recorrido a pie veinte países extraños, puse la mano sobre el cilindro ornamentado al fuego" (Carpentier 177) ("With the emotion of the pilgrim who reaches the shrine for sight of which he has journeyed on foot through twenty un-known lands, I laid my hand upon the fire-ornamented stamping tube" [175]). Granted, here the protagonist-

narrator draws parallels between a shrine and the instruments, which on the surface signals a deep reverence, but this is complicated by the fact that he reveres them outside of their function. That is, he values them as his “findings” and not as indigenous musical instruments, underscoring how he, as an anthropologist, establishes the instruments’ value in relation to himself.

Another aspect that the protagonist-narrator attributes to the instruments is representation. Clifford notes that collections “create the illusion of adequate representation of a world by first cutting objects outside of specific contexts ... and making them ‘stand for’ abstract wholes” (220). The protagonist, delighted with possessing the instruments, also falls prey to this illusion Clifford mentions. The protagonist-narrator relates his “connection” with the instruments, particularly the jar: “El objeto crecía en mi propia estimación, ligado a mi destino” (Carpentier 181) (“The object grew in my esteem, linked to my destiny” [175]). When he relates the instruments to his “destiny,” he is essentially living the illusion that these objects represent an abstract totality of the culture and that in possessing the instruments, he becomes a part of it or comes to an understanding of it. Citing from Susan Stewart, Clifford notes how this illusion of representation attempts to replace “a social relation” (*Predicament* 220). That is to say, within the illusion of collections, objects can be recontextualized and come to represent a culture so that the possessor of these objects, be it a collector or a museum, comes to believe that they have a relation with the culture through the object. However, “social relation” cannot exist via possession. Here, the protagonist feels that the instruments are a conduit to the culture, ignoring that culture is lived and not possessed. Moreover, he fails to note that in appropriating the objects he erases “the concrete social labor of [their] making,” in other words, the singularity of each instrument along with their history and praxis (*Predicament* 220). The protagonist-narrator once again takes part in the miscomprehension and incomprehension of the contact zone as well as that inherent in his discipline.

## **Conclusion**

Echevarría sets forth the idea of the novel as having a “mimetic quality, not of a given reality, but of a given discourse that has already ‘mirrored’ reality” (8). In *Los Pasos Perdidos*, an unmistakable exemplar of the travel narrative, the discourse it mimics is that of anthropology. The implications of such an act of mimesis that have been examined here reveal the incoherence of engaging with a discipline that, prior to the crisis of anthropology, purported to “know” Latin America. There are complications that come with engaging in the rhetoric of the colonizers (*Imperial Eyes* 7). *Los Pasos Perdidos* exemplifies this complicated issue of contact zones through the protagonist-narrator, whose attempts at understanding the culture of Santa Mónica through Western means end in utter failure. The ethnography *Los Pasos Perdidos* mimics does not legitimize the novel as earlier novels attempted to do, but rather reveal the layers of myth-making inherent in the discipline and question its practice of knowledge through appropriation (*Myth and Archive* 159). Through *Los Pasos Perdidos*, Carpentier, an anthropologist in his own right, seems to anticipate the crisis of anthropology that would radically change the authority of the discipline as an envoy of understanding and knowledge of Latin America.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Columbus and Juan de Amberes like Bernal Diaz put forth an “I” witness and maker of history

<sup>2</sup> in taking up the pen they undergo a transformation ... they will not only be witnesses of history ... but also translators and interpreters

<sup>3</sup> Origin is in the romantic tradition, and certainly for Rousseau, something fictitious

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