

Arellano, Jerónimo. *Magical Realism and the History of the Emotions in Latin America*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2015. Print. 211 pp.

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How do we experience wonder? Have people always felt wonder in the same way? How has the way we write about wonder changed over time? These questions lie at the heart of Jerónimo Arellano's *Magical Realism and the History of the Emotions in Latin America*, which examines expressions of wonder in Spanish colonial writings and in Latin American magical realism. These two areas of literary studies have received much critical attention, but Arellano rejuvenates the field by interpreting canonical texts through the critical lens of affect studies. He writes against the conventional scholarly assumption that colonial chronicles of wonder are the direct genealogical source of twentieth century magical realism. Arellano's focus on the "historical variability of the emotional experience" in Latin American writing dispels the idea that magical realism is "a simple repetition, when not a perverse internalization, of the old colonial wonder" (xiv). Instead, he argues for a historical and theoretical reappraisal of the marvelous in the colonial age and its relationship to later magical realist works.

In his reappraisal, Arellano follows contemporary affect theory to contend that the emotional experience of wonder is not merely subjective, individual, and private, but rather that it is also a public, political and collective construct. This approach enables Arellano to show in the first half of the book how colonial writings and early modern material culture (namely the seventeenth-century *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of wonder) provoked "affective turmoil" in readers and viewers. The second half of the book explores twentieth-century literature and art that similarly engage themes of wonder in a historical pattern the author calls the "intermittence of the marvelous" (xix). Arellano contends that Latin American magical realist texts treat the colonial culture of wonder as "a springboard for fictional fabulations . . . while at the same time probing its colonial history to highly ambivalent, self-contradictory, and even surprising effects: a form of wonder that at times seems to move with wonder and against wonder" (xx). Arellano's study is ambitious in scope; it is unusual for a book by a single author to span both early modern and contemporary literature. Most impressive, the breadth of his endeavor is matched by its depth: the greatest strength of the book lies in its close readings of key texts and objects.

Chapter One provides a truly fascinating study of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century phenomenon of the *Wunderkammer* and its relation to the collection of objects from the New World. While these cabinets of wonder are usually described as forerunners of museums and precursors to scientific curiosity, Arellano offers a new angle of interpretation by focusing on how the cabinets were intended to produce emotions in the viewer. He proposes that the *Wunderkammer* is what Lauren Berlant calls a “feel tank” as opposed to a “think tank,” designed to “provide a communal script that contained and regulated affective experience . . . for the purposes of safeguarding subjects from the danger of losing hold of themselves” (17-18). The circulation of objects from the New World in *Wunderkammer* are part of what Arellano calls an “affective cartography of empire, a macropolitical system that assigns particular emotions to colonial territories” (18). In this context, ordinary objects from the New World became marvelous because of their exotic provenance, displayed in the cabinets as “objects of savages” intended to shock the beholder. In the latter half of the chapter, Arellano discusses the decline of the *Wunderkammer* in the Enlightenment and its resurgence in surrealism and postmodernist twentieth-century art. He features the work of North American artists including Mark Ryden and David Wilson, whose installations at museums like the Guggenheim in New York reinterpret the *Wunderkammer* and provide a path to “re-enchantment within a disenchanted world” (26). The renewed interest in the *Wunderkammer* is noteworthy, and Arellano later makes a passing comparison between Wilson’s work and the collection and repurposing of objects *Cien años de soledad*. Yet at this point the study seems to have strayed far from Latin American literature: it is not clear how this section speaks to the history of the emotions in Latin America, as the book’s title suggests.

Chapters Two and Three build upon the discussions of affect theory to shed new light on canonical colonial texts, especially Columbus’s first journal, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, and Jean de Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil*. In these chapters Arellano performs admirable close readings of the works and engages deeply with the existing scholarship by Stephen Greenblatt, Margarita Zamora and Kathleen Myers, among others. Most important, the author makes a new and compelling argument for analyzing the link between collecting and describing objects in these texts. In particular, Arellano brings a new emphasis on material culture to address the longstanding question of how colonial writers tried to communicate the unfamiliar things they had seen. He argues that “in an effort to remediate the impasses produced by the attempt to describe marvelous entities in his text, Columbus resorts to what we may call a ‘collecting gesture’—a gathering of particular objects of feeling” that he repeatedly describes as

marvelous (47). Columbus collected specimens of trees and plants, minerals, skins of animals, and even indigenous people to supplement the verbal pictures he creates. Similarly, Oviedo offers both drawings and narrative in his attempt to communicate wonder and fear, while Léry creates a musical score of the songs he heard while staying with the Tupinamba in Brazil. Each of these techniques ultimately “provides readers with a controlled, guided experience of wonder that mimics and supplements the forms of emotional management taking shape in the space of the *Wunderkammer*” (89). The chapter concludes by describing a “waning of affect” in Latin American literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the face of increased attention on the production of scientific knowledge in contradistinction to emotive wonder.

Chapters Four and Five move ahead to the twentieth century, where Arellano detects the “afterlives” of wonder in works by Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez. He argues that colonial wonder is transfigured in these works into “spectral presences and phantasmatic structures” (104). Chapter Four looks at how two of Carpentier’s works, “El camino de Santiago” and *Los pasos perdidos* actually challenge his famous concept of *lo real maravilloso*. *Lo real maravilloso*, first set forth by Carpentier in a newspaper article in *El Nacional* of Venezuela on April 8, 1948 (and not in the preface to *El reino de este mundo*, as Arellano states), describes an exaltation of the spirit and a belief in wondrous occurrences that arise authentically only in the Americas. “El camino de Santiago,” set in the colonial era, features a Spanish protagonist named Juan el Romero who becomes enchanted by objects from the New World and even travels there, only to be disappointed to learn that they are all fakes. He returns, deeply embittered, and becomes a peddler of false artifacts himself. Arellano makes an original contribution to Carpentier scholarship in showing how the story dismantles the idea of New World colonial wonder as an inevitable and organic experience and instead reveals “its social fabrication, historical contingency, and even potential fraudulency” (107). Arellano incisively reads this ironic reversal as an interrogation of the validity of colonial wonder.

Yet Arellano does not follow that insight as far as he could: is “El camino de Santiago” a self-reflexive story in which Carpentier compares himself to Juan, and his theory of *lo real maravilloso* to fabricated trinkets? On a meta-literary level, does Carpentier view his own writing as a collection of carefully crafted yet fraudulent wonders? One possible answer to this question lies in Carpentier’s *El arpa y la sombra*, which depicts Columbus as an “embustero,” the same word he uses to describe Juan. In that novel, Columbus falsifies American objects for the king and queen of Spain in a display of items from the New World much like Juan’s. There are further similarities between author and character: *El arpa y la sombra* takes place when Columbus is on his deathbed, as was Carpentier when

he wrote the novel. For these reasons, a reading of *El arpa y la sombra* would greatly enrich Arellano's analysis.

Nonetheless, Arellano's reading of *Los pasos perdidos* does move in that meta-literary direction when he posits that Carpentier presents a crisis of the marvelous in the novel. Arellano compares *lo real maravilloso* to the protagonist's theory of the origins of music, which is ultimately proved false in the novel. This intelligent interpretation would be greatly enhanced by a discussion of *El reino de este mundo*, the text most closely associated with *lo real maravilloso* that is also the immediate precursor to *Los pasos perdidos*. To solidify his argument, Arellano needs to address the later "El camino de Santiago" as a counterpoint to *Reino*. In fact, in *The Pilgrim at Home* Roberto González Echevarría noted that Carpentier's prologue to *Reino* is incongruent with his later fiction. Since Arellano does not discuss it, the reader is left wondering why and how Carpentier shifted from the full-throated proclamation of *lo real maravilloso* in *Reino* to what Arellano calls "a landscape of desolation and loss" in *Los pasos perdidos*.

Chapter Five takes on *Cien años de soledad*, the signature magical realist text in the Latin American canon and perhaps the world. Amid a large body of scholarship, Arellano concentrates on the material objects that give rise to wonder in the novel. Following Moretti, he notes that the marvelous in *Cien años* comes not from autochthonous artifacts, but from technological advances lately introduced to Macondo. Arellano argues that García Márquez reverses the traditional trajectory of colonial objects of wonder when Melquíades travels with his display of technological items from the center to the periphery that is Macondo. In Arellano's convincing analysis, the collection of gadgets repurposed by José Arcadio Buendía is a re-enchanting reinvention of the cabinet of wonders of the colonial era. Ultimately, the novel offers a new transfiguration of wonder as a palimpsest that includes emotions of sadness and solitude that Arellano calls a "postcolonial affectivity" (140).

The coda to the book, Chapter Six, analyzes the obsolescence of magical realism in contemporary Latin American fiction. Arellano takes César Aira's *El mago* as an exemplar of the "disaffection of the marvelous" (165). The title character is a disenchanting magician who cannot perform magical acts. In a clear commentary on the state of contemporary Latin American narrative, the magician's enthusiasm for and ability to create magic has ebbed away, leaving him bereft of wonder. According to Arellano, the demise of the marvelous in the post-colonial age reflects a turn toward "emotional flatness" as well as "new configurations of coarse or strong forms of feeling" evident in the increasing violence depicted in post-magical realist fiction. He concludes that even

this turn away from wonder may lead to new interpretations of the marvelous if we view Latin American literature as an “affective laboratory” in which authors explore contemporary forms of sentimentality.

Arellano resoundingly proves that the experience of wonder is neither historically uniform nor an independent individual emotion. His work makes it clear that affect theory can be fruitfully brought to bear upon colonial and magical realist texts. This work could serve as a point of departure for analyses of other magical realist texts, like *Aura* and *La casa de los espíritus*, or earlier works such as the sublime poetry of José Martí. *Magical Realism and the History of the Emotions in Latin America* is a pioneering study of the cultural history of the emotions in Latin America that will be of interest to early modernists and scholars of contemporary Latin America alike.