

HISTORICITY VERSUS FICTIONALITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL E. SMITH, AUTHOR OF “THE AZTEC WORLD OF GARY JENNINGS” (2001)

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Abstract

*This brief interview-based article has been thought of as a relevant extension to the controversial debate on the intertwinement of historical and fictitious narratives in the best-seller *Aztec* (1980), introduced by Dr. Michael E. Smith from Arizona State University, in his essay “The Aztec World of Gary Jennings” (2001). It questions the status of the archaeologist-novelist as well as the reliability of fictionalized historiographical materials. It also offers new evidences of historical distortions that raise objections to the postmodern preconceived opinion – associated with the historiographic metafiction – that Gary Jennings’ primary focus is to endorse the claim of an epistemological superiority of fiction over historiography.*

Introduction

Once considered a best-seller, today a work ignored by most scholars, Gary Jennings’ *Aztec* (1980) seems to have followed the path of many American historiographic metafictionⁱ of the 80’sⁱⁱ (James Michener’s *The Covenant* (1980) or Gore Vidal’s *Creation* (1981) are other good examples). According to Dr. Michael E. Smith, who wrote a rare essay on the novelⁱⁱⁱ – “the most widely read about any Mesoamerican society” (Carrasco 131), this paradox lies mainly in a key ingredient, “the entertaining writing”^{iv}: it keeps readers glued to the pages, but meanwhile tends to diminish the literary value of *Aztec* as a “non-serious book.” Soon after its publication, the novel has also been subject to an epistemological controversy, initiated by several Mesoamerican scholars who harshly criticized Gary Jennings’ suspicious methods, namely for developing “hazardous” interpretations of historical facts without necessarily taking account of the official records, and covering freely the gaps of the limited Aztec historiography with the help of fiction. This *animadversion* led Gary Jennings to eventually write his “Indignant Response” in 1997,^v in which he gave some clear indication that he had no pretensions to scholarship with his book. The authorial statement ended a long-standing issue upon the delineation between history and fiction, but extinguished prematurely scientific interest on *Aztec*. “Actually, I am surprised that there was NOT very much discussion of the book within Mesoamerican studies,” regrets Michael E.

Smith. His essay alludes to a salient contribution of Gary Jennings' use of fiction to archaeology: the existence of an Aztec-Tarascan cross-border trade; a theory that was eventually proven by the Mesoamericanists, in the two decades following the publication of the novel (102-103). This anticipated discovery was allowed by the extensive research strategy of the writer, who spent twelve years at San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, exploring every nook and cranny of the Aztec world, and "on occasion, found [him]self instructing the experts" (Jennings, "Writing The Un-Historical Novel" 265).

The Imitating Archaeologist

In effect, Gary Jennings re-enacts Maurice P  zard's definition of the perfect archaeologist-novelist (623): in his attempt to reconstruct the truth of a bygone era, he has not only dug deeply into the standard works; he felt it was also necessary to devote himself to the study of Nahuatl, the monuments and the civilization of the Aztecs that he wanted to pay homage to; it mattered to him to be one with them and to forget his own race and personality. But Michael E. Smith warns against overestimating Gary Jennings' scientific skills and competences, and the tempting thought that, during his lifetime, *Aztec's* author might have missed a vocational career as a Mexicologist: "Even if I really know very little about him as a person, I doubt that Jennings had the personality to be an archaeologist, and he did not have the training." One must therefore be cautious and limit his expectations on the reliability of fiction as a useful tool for scientific disciplines such as archaeology.

The Expert Lie

As a matter of fact, the blending of fictitious and historical events raises naturally the inescapable question of the exactness. "Most of the information on the Aztecs in the book is accurate," reconfirms Michael E. Smith. "Jennings made many minor errors, which is what one would expect. And as I discuss in my essay on the book, the biggest errors are deliberate changes that are needed for the plot of the book." Most of those historical distortions are overcome by a high degree of likeness reached through the promotion of an illusive omniscience of the Aztec culture. "If you can adroitly manage the accretion of enough realistic details, and thereby achieve verisimilitude," Gary Jennings explains in his essay "Writing the Un-Historical Novel" (1990), "you stand a good chance of being believed, whatever lie you're embedding in the story. And, come right down to it, fiction is nothing but expert and believable lying" (265).

Historical Misconceptions

Gary Jennings' methodological approach of the historical novel paves the way for various misunderstandings in *Aztec*, the most telling ones being the interpretations of violence and sexuality. The treatment of those two recurrent *leitmotive* is pushed to extreme limits in some of the novel's most shocking descriptions. While the non-initiated reader may think, from an imagological perspective, that the repeated occurrence of sacrificial and erotic scenes is consistent with the re-enactment of Aztecs' *modus vivendi*, the well-informed reader may long hesitate whether it is the writer's taste for the provocative, or his fictitious realization of sadomasochistic fantasies. "I would guess that these scenes were meant to be attractive to the reader, to make the reader keep reading," suggests Michael E. Smith, based

on solid historical evidence that Aztec people used to be morally prudish (“The Aztec World of Gary Jennings,” 100-101). Thus Gary Jennings parting ways with official historiography seems here to be a deliberate manner that seeks to appeal a modern mass readership. His *tour-de-force* lies precisely in his ability to transgress adroitly historical accuracy without jeopardizing both verisimilitude and popular interests.

This balance between literary and commercial imperatives applies also to the depictions of cruel and bloody Aztec ritual practices by the novel’s “truth-teller,” Mixtli “Dark Cloud,” but it takes a different twist with the account of the violent circumstances that led to the apocalyptic end of the Aztec civilization. While the responsibility of the Europeans is clearly pointed out by the homodiegetic narrator, one might assume that Gary Jennings thereby simultaneously hints at an analogy between the massacres of the Aztecs committed by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century and the genocide of the Native Americans in the nineteenth. “[Speaking of the Aztecs], I don’t think “genocide” is an appropriate label,” clears up Michael E. Smith, in an effort to dissociate both raced-related phenomena. “The Spaniards did not attempt to kill all of the Aztec people. Most deaths were from disease, not direct killings by Spaniards. The Spaniards needed the Aztecs as laborers in the mines, on plantations, and *haciendas*.” The intertemporal parallel appears therefore less relevant, and – unlike one of the historical novel’s most implemented canons: the past’s reverberation with the present –, hitherto no evidence emerging from the author’s literary works substantiates the claim that *Aztec* intends contemporaneity on political matters (Koster).

Fictionality over Historicity

Gary Jennings’ main concern seems instead to pay greater attention to fictionality given his mythical treatment of the Spanish-Aztec conflict. Indeed, he portrays Moctezuma II as a superstitious monarch, who is a partisan of a wait-and-see policy in response to his belief that Hernan Cortes is the (pseudo-)returned Quetzalcoatl. But “the idea that Moctezuma II thought Cortes was Quetzalcoatl has been disproved by historians,” notes Michael E. Smith. “It was a post-1519 invention by indigenous nobility and Spanish friars. That part of the novel does not agree with current scholarship;”^{vi} neither does the progressive self-identification of the novel’s protagonist Mixtli with the feathered serpent deity (Lehmann-Haupt). In fact, the legend of Quetzalcoatl’s return is converted fictively into a literary construction whose aim is to give supra-dimensional proportions to the rivalry between Spaniards and Aztecs. In this respect, David Cowart’s assertion that Gary Jennings “neglects the necessary subordination of factual to fictive” (22) may sound like an overstatement; the above-mentioned example demonstrates, on the contrary, that *Aztec*’s author allows himself to give more weight to fiction than to historical facts, as a means to provide his own “artistically-biased” version of the Conquest of Mexico.

Conclusion

Yet further examination of Gary Jennings’ treatment of history might still not be sufficient to fully evaluate the percentage of historical and fictitious materials mobilized in *Aztec*. A forgotten literary background exists that has not yet been investigated and deserves consideration as potential influences of the novel. Samuel Shellabarger’s *The Captain of Castille* (1946), David Stacton’s *A Signal Victory: A Story of the Spanish Conquest of*

Yucatan (1960), and even nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon works, such as Edward Maturin's *Montezuma; The Last of The Aztecs* (1845), or Rudolph Leonhart's *The Treasure of Montezuma* (1888), might have very well been inspirational or secondary sources that should not be omitted in the analysis of *Aztec*'s historical spectrum. "I am not familiar with these other books," confesses Michael E. Smith; an admission that transdisciplinary research on the Aztecs is only in its earliest stages.

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Notes

ⁱ Linda Hutcheon defines them as "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1988. 5. Print).

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Engler, Bernd and Müller, Kurt. *Historiographic Metafiction in Modern America and Canadian Literature*. Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1994. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, Michael E. "The Aztec World of Gary Jennings." Ed. Carnes, Mark C. *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. 95-105. Print.

^{iv} All answers from Michael E. Smith were provided in an e-mail interview conducted by me, 18 July 2010.

^v Jennings, Gary. "My Indignant Response" (Letter of the 12th July, 1997). Ed. Carnes, Mark C. op. cit. 105-108. Print.

^{vi} Michael E. Smith's assertion is based on the evidences brought by Camilla Townsend in her two articles: "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico." *American Historical Review* 108.3 (June 2003):659-687. Print; "No One Said it was Quetzalcoatl: Listening to the Indians in the Conquest of Mexico." *History Compass* 1.1 (January-December 2003):1-14. Print.