

Zac Zimmer. *First Contact: Speculative Visions of the Conquest of the Americas*. Northwestern UP, 2025. xii + 264 pp.

First Contact: Speculative Visions of the Conquest of the Americas is an extremely ambitious book, although that ambition does not lie in offering an exhaustive conventional historical account of colonization or in meticulously reconstructing the American colonial past through traditional documentary frameworks, but rather in centering the genre of Speculative Fiction (SF, following Zimmer's terminology) to think critically about the Conquest. In other words, the monograph's point of departure is that SF dealing with the Conquest, revisited as a historical event, should occupy a privileged place within current debates surrounding it, not merely as a narrative setting or a symptom of the renewed thematic interest the colonial period has generated—although it is certainly that as well—but especially as a space capable of “weaving,” to follow Zimmer's metaphor, authorized forms of knowledge about the historical process itself (3). Most case studies analyzed in *First Contact* are, in one way or another, rewritings of the past with a sense of futurity. From this perspective, the book traces a long and not always obvious genealogy of SF, much of which speaks directly to our present.

In *First Contact*, Zimmer does a superb job of curating a corpus that brings into dialogue literary and artistic works ranging from the canonical to the relatively overlooked—from the traveling exhibition “*Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas*” (2017–2019), Avel·lí Artís-Gener “Tísner”'s *Paraules d'Opòton el Vell* (1968, ‘The Words of Old Man Opoton’), and Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991) to Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: Novelas imposibles* (1992, ‘Wailing: Impossible Novels’) and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance *The Couple in the Cage* (1992–1993), to mention only a few examples. These works generate a series of productive connections that are themselves placed in conversation with early colonial sources such as Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615, ‘The First New Chronicle and Good Government’), the *Florentine Codex* (ca. 1577), El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), as well as with cartographic traditions such as the medieval T–O maps. The dialogue proposed by Zimmer is therefore not unidirectional: rather, these texts and artifacts render one another newly legible in unexpected and often uncanny ways.

Like any ambitious book, *First Contact* inevitably takes a number of risks, three of which deserve brief comment. The first lies in its decision not to follow the conventional chronological sequence of the Conquest, a narrative deeply embedded in both the collective imagination and traditional curricula. Instead, *First Contact* ends—rather than begins—with Columbus's arrival in the Americas, or what the author terms the *Colombo ex frigata* trope, which serves as the subject of the book's final chapter and allows Zimmer to connect a foundational narrative of the Conquest to contemporary debates surrounding the defacement of Columbus monuments across the globe. I welcome this

approach, as it formally embodies the book's refusal to reproduce familiar narratives of the Conquest in a study whose central ambition is, to paraphrase the author, to take seriously the "duty" of imagining unrealized futures (21).

The second risk, equally compelling, is the decision to structure the first half of the book around three chapters devoted to analyzing what the author terms foundational "institutional spaces." These institutions are, respectively, the anthology, the museum, and the map. Although the anthology as a colonial institution remains somewhat underdeveloped in its current formulation, and the chapter devoted to it therefore feels, at least initially, somewhat disconnected from the broader conceptual structure established by the book, the author nevertheless argues convincingly—and in a highly suggestive manner—that these three "institutional spaces" operate as archives, and that their efforts at representation inevitably produce gaps and absences that foreground what remains unrepresented. While the imperial imprint of the map and, especially, the museum appears more immediately legible within the contemporary cultural imagination and criticism, making their connection to colonial processes more readily apparent, the textual analyses remain carefully curated and consistently illuminating, even if the decision of approaching the anthology as an institutional space could benefit from further elaboration.

The third and final risk—and perhaps the least obviously justified—is the decision to devote an entire chapter, in a book overwhelmingly focused on Latin America, to a novel whose intellectual and historical sources seem detached from the region: Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996), set in the year 2060, draws heavily on the history of seventeenth-century Jesuit missions, particularly the experiences of Jesuit missionaries in North America and Haudenosaunee territory, to tell the story of a Jesuit-led scientific expedition to a newly discovered planet called Rakhat in the Alpha Centauri system. Although the Jesuit imaginary informing the historical missions was undeniably global in scope, the inclusion of *The Sparrow* within a predominantly Latin American corpus—whether in terms of authorship, subject matter, or both—may at first appear somewhat dissonant. What some readers might regard as reservations are, in fact, closely tied to one of the book's principal virtues. Rather than smoothing over these asymmetries, Zimmer productively embraces them, opening new questions and lines of dialogue that extend beyond the scope of the monograph. One particularly productive result, which readers may not expect, is that taking speculative approaches to the Conquest seriously calls the genre of SF itself into question.

In sum, *First Contact* is a remarkably innovative and thought-provoking monograph. It is also a book that, contrary to much contemporary academic criticism, does not derive its intellectual force primarily from the conclusions it reaches or the evidence it presents, but rather from the remarkably generative questions it poses throughout. Time and again, Zimmer invites us to reconsider how the Conquest has been narrated and what kinds of knowledge SF can produce about historical events and their enduring afterlives. More broadly, it

is a book that continually prompts us to rethink the ways in which the past remains available for critical reappropriation in the present.

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