EXAMINATION OF HALLUCINOGENS, DREAMS, PROPHECIES, AND OMENS *YOU DREAMED OF EMPIRES* BY ÁLVARO ENRIGUE

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Abstract :

This paper examines the intricate role of hallucinogens, dreams, prophecies, and omens in Álvaro Enrigue's You Dreamed of Empires, analyzing how these elements function as narrative and structural devices that challenge conventional historical representation of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Through close reading of the text, the study reveals how Enrigue employs the symbolic "ant" motif associated with Quetzalcoatl as a recurring prophetic framework that permeates political decision-making and cultural interpretation. The research explores the significance of the "Legend of the Suns" recited by ceremonial figures with elaborate titles, demonstrating how prophetic traditions inform the Mexica worldview and response to the Spanish invasion. The analysis also investigates the novel's treatment of altered states of consciousness, including references to ritual smoking and the "feelings-shaman," which create liminal spaces for political and spiritual insight. Additionally, the study examines how dream sequences, particularly Cortés's dream narrative, function as sites of historical revision and psychological exploration that blur temporal boundaries. By examining these interconnected elements, the paper argues that Enrigue constructs a narrative framework where supernatural perception and rational calculation coexist, challenging Western historical epistemology and offering a multidimensional representation of cultural collision that privileges neither European nor Mexica perspectives but reveals the profound epistemological divide between them.

Keywords : *You Dreamed of Empires*, Álvaro Enrigue, Nahuatl, Caxtilteca, Dreams, Hallucinogens, Translation, Prophecy, Conquistadors, Mexica.

Introduction :

Álvaro Enrigue's *You Dreamed of Empires* represents a bold reimagining of the Spanish conquest of Mexico through a narrative lens that deliberately blurs the boundaries between historical fact, dream logic, and prophetic vision. The novel, which takes its title from a line in Pedro Calderón's *Life Is a Dream*, functions as what Enrigue describes as "a conversation with 'The Secret Miracle'" (Enrigue *Acknowledgements*). This Borgesian approach creates a textual space where hallucinogens, dreams, prophecies, and omens are not merely narrative devices but fundamental structural elements that challenge conventional historical understanding. As Enrigue himself notes in his author's note, "There's nothing

nostalgic about it, nor am I driven by ideology. All the spellings and all the Nahuatl terms are open to discussion. I realize that if an English speaker can say Moscow instead of Moskva, there's no reason I should say Tenoxtitlan instead of Tenochtitlan, but I'm a writer and words matter to me. They may signify and signal, but I believe they also invoke" (Enrigue n.p.). This paper examines how Enrigue employs hallucinogens, dreams, prophecies, and omens as narrative mechanisms that destabilize linear historical accounts and create a multidimensional representation of the encounter between the Mexica and Spanish worlds.

Hallucinogens as Bridges Between Worlds :

Enrigue presents hallucinogens not as mere recreational substances but as legitimate pathways to alternative realities and divine communication within Mexica cosmology. The novel repeatedly depicts Moctezuma's ritualistic use of psychoactive substances as a means of accessing prophetic knowledge. When Moctezuma requests "two pieces" of hallucinogens before meeting with Cortés, the chamber-shaman warns him: "It's very strong, he said, something to try once in a lifetime, maybe twice, and this would be the fourth or fifth time I've given you one; you might get lost on the trip" (Enrigue 137). This exchange reveals both the sacred nature of these substances and their potential dangers, while also suggesting Moctezuma's increasing dependence on them as his empire faces crisis.

The hallucinogenic experiences in the novel function as narrative portals that connect different temporal and spiritual planes. When Moctezuma consumes the "little 'shrooms," he enters a state where "he was once again Moctezuma, or Moctezuma multiplied and sometimes plumed. The tlatoani said: Don't be afraid, you're seeing me and my nagual, but I'm here with you, it's like a fit of drunkenness, very brief, it vanishes on its own, it doesn't last, like flowers; dream now" (Enrigue 179). This passage illustrates the Mexica understanding of the permeability between physical and spiritual realms—a concept that stands in stark contrast to the European worldview represented by Cortés.

Enrigue's depiction aligns with anthropological research on pre-Hispanic ritual use of psychoactive substances. As Alfredo López Austin explains in *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan: Places of Mist*, the Mexica believed certain plants and fungi provided "a means of penetrating the divine realm, of seeing what was invisible to ordinary sight" (López Austin 147). Enrigue incorporates this understanding into his narrative structure, using Moctezuma's hallucinogenic journeys to reveal the emperor's psychological state and his perception of the impending Spanish threat as something both supernatural and inevitable.

The novel also references Cortés's own "cactus-of-tongues-induced trance," which the author acknowledges is "inspired by Sergio Pitol's voyage to the center of hypnosis in *The Art of Flight*" (Enrigue Acknowledgments). This parallel treatment of altered states of consciousness across both cultures suggests Enrigue's interest in the universal human impulse to seek meaning beyond ordinary perception, even as the cultural interpretations of these experiences differ dramatically.

Dreams as Alternate Histories :

Dreams in *You Dreamed of Empires* function as spaces where historical possibilities

converge, diverge, and transform. The section titled "Cortés's Dream" represents the novel's most explicit exploration of this theme, where Cortés experiences a fragmented, nonlinear journey through his own past and potential futures. As he sleeps, Cortés moves through a series of images: "There was a moment of darkness and then came another painting, of his Jesuit preceptor at school; he had a book in his hand and a lash in the other. Laughter rose up in him. Fade to black and then a field in Extremadura with Juana in the distance, the washerwoman who'd made him a man. Fade to black and there was Lola, the dog he'd loved and left in Medellín" (Enrigue 180).

This dream sequence exemplifies what Enrigue describes as the novel's "Borgesian" architecture. Like Borges's "The Secret Miracle," which features a playwright experiencing an entire year of mental activity in the instant before his execution, Enrigue's novel presents dreams as spaces where time expands and contracts according to psychological rather than chronological logic. Cortés's dream becomes a compressed history of his own formation—a reckoning with his past that simultaneously reveals his anxieties about the present conquest.

Moctezuma's dreams operate similarly but with different cultural parameters. In one significant sequence, Moctezuma dreams of a "fat man" who enters his throne room: "In his dream, Moctezuma watched him enter the throne room escorted by four guards; people made way for him. The warriors accompanying him forced him to kneel down. The fat man raised his head. He looked Moctezuma in the face, to the horror of the court. His eyes were big and staring, partly because they were that way naturally, but also because he was in the grip of a terrible fear. Don't make a mistake, he said, spreading his very long arms" (Enrigue 92). This dream vision—likely representing Cortés himself—functions as both prophecy and warning, yet Moctezuma, like Cortés, remains unable to fully interpret its meaning.

The novel's treatment of dreams reflects the Mexica understanding that "the gods roamed the world" and that "unlike their European contemporaries, they thought the gods inhabited time in the same way they did but were ethereal beings—which is why they stuffed themselves with hallucinogens at festivals in the hope of catching a glimpse of them" (Enrigue 126). This fundamental difference in cosmological understanding creates a profound epistemological gap between the two cultures that Enrigue explores through his dream sequences.

Prophecies and the Weight of Historical Determinism :

Prophecy functions as both political tool and existential burden throughout *You Dreamed of Empires*. The most significant prophecy in the novel concerns Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity whose prophesied return creates both opportunity and terror for Moctezuma's empire. Enrigue depicts how Moctezuma himself attempts to manipulate this prophecy for political advantage: "Moctezuma suggested—again, just another order—that they should summon his brother Cuitlahuac and send him to the coast with a considerable army to clear a path for the Caxtilteca, tempt them every so often with ambassadors laden with gold and jewels, and cause rumors to be spread among the people: let it be said everywhere that in Tenoxtitlan it was believed these newcomers were descendants of Quetzalcoatl—mortal enemy

of the Colhua gods" (Enrigue 100).

This passage reveals the complex political calculus behind Moctezuma's response to the Spanish arrival. Rather than seeing the prophecy as a fixed destiny, Moctezuma attempts to shape events to fit the prophetic framework, hoping to transform potential destruction into a peaceful transition of power. As Matthew Restall explains in *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, this interpretation challenges the traditional narrative of Moctezuma as a passive victim of his own superstition: "Moctezuma was not paralyzed by belief in Quetzalcoatl's return but was actively using the prophecy as a diplomatic tool in a complex geopolitical situation" (Restall 87).

The novel also explores how prophecies function within Mexica culture through the "Legend of the Suns," a lengthy prophetic text recited by a priest figure identified as "He Who Looses the Rain of Words and Governs the Songs Lest We Be Like the Flowers and Bees That Last But a Few Days" (Enrigue 87). While Tlilpotonqui listens to this recitation, he reflects on "the moment when, at the end of the previous fall, the pipil sent by the emperor to the Gulf coast had returned with confirmation that the sporadic visitors from beyond the Mayapán had landed in imperial territory" (Enrigue 95). This connection between prophetic tradition and contemporary events illustrates how Mexica leadership interpreted current events through established mythological frameworks.

Enrigue's treatment of prophecy resonates with Miguel León-Portilla's analysis in *The Broken Spears*, where he argues that "the Nahuas conceived of time as cyclical, with events repeating themselves in different eras or 'suns'" (León-Portilla 45). The novel's structure embodies this cyclical understanding, with its dream sequences and hallucinogenic visions creating a narrative that moves non-linearly through time, suggesting that past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the Mexica worldview.

Omens and the Politics of Interpretation :

Omens and their interpretation represent another crucial element in Enrigue's exploration of how different cultures make meaning from signs and portents. The novel depicts a society in which calendrical calculations and ritual observation determine nearly every significant decision: "the supreme priests of Cholula, now taking refuge in Tenoxtitlan, had the people under a spell, and their interpretations of the favorable dates for just about everything in the calendar conflicted with the imperial priests'" (Enrigue 77). This conflict over omen interpretation reveals how religious authority intersects with political power in the final days of the Mexica empire.

The Cholulteca priests' growing influence, particularly their promotion of "secret ghost dances proclaiming the god's imminent return" (Enrigue 77), demonstrates how competing interpretations of omens can destabilize political authority. Moctezuma's government faces not only the external threat of the Spanish but also internal challenges from rival priestly factions who interpret the same signs differently. This situation reflects historical reality, as Bernardino de Sahagún documents in his *General History of the Things of New Spain* that "there were

many different schools of diviners, each with its own methods and interpretations" (Sahagún 789).

Enrigue cleverly uses the conflict over omen interpretation to highlight the fundamental epistemological differences between the Mexica and Spanish worldviews. While the Mexica see meaning in natural phenomena, celestial events, and ritual observation, Cortés and his men interpret events through a Christian providential framework. This difference creates profound miscommunication, as when Cortés dreams that "Jesus said: Tell him about me" (Enrigue 105), while Moctezuma interprets Cortés's arrival through the lens of Quetzalcoatl's prophesied return.

The novel's treatment of omens connects with more recent scholarship by Leonardo López Luján, who argues in *The Sacred Landscape of the Aztec Capital* that "the Mexica conceived of their capital as a cosmic diagram where earthly space mirrored celestial patterns, and where every event carried symbolic significance" (López Luján 112). Enrigue embodies this understanding in his depiction of Tenochtitlan as a city where political, religious, and cosmological realms are inseparable—a place where the interpretation of omens isn't merely superstition but a sophisticated system of meaning-making.

Conclusion :

Álvaro Enrigue's *You Dreamed of Empires* fundamentally challenges conventional historical storytelling by using hallucinogens, dreams, prophecies, and omens as narrative strategies, not mere decoration. Drawing on standard historical sources, Enrigue refuses to privilege either Mexica or Spanish epistemologies, presenting both cultural frameworks for understanding reality as equally valid to convey the profound disorientation of their encounter. By weaving these elements together, the novel embodies Michel de Certeau's concept of "the practice of everyday life," showing how each culture made sense of their world through coherent, context-specific systems. Ultimately, it suggests history itself is a collective dream or prophecy—a constructed narrative attempting to order events far more complex and dreamlike than traditional accounts admit. The title, echoing Calderón's Life Is a Dream, underscores this view, framing empires as powerful, destructive, yet ultimately ephemeral dreams and inviting readers to question whose dreams become recorded history.

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