

Carpentier, Alejo (1904-1980), [the](#) Cuban writer, journalist, and cultural attaché, [was](#) born on December 26th [in](#) Havana [to](#) Jorge Julián Carpentier, a French architect and devoted [cellist](#), and Lina Valmont, a Russian language teacher and pianist. Following in his parents' footsteps, Carpentier made many contributions to the [study of Cuban music](#); however, he is mainly known [as](#) a narrator and essayist, and as one of the precursors of the boom of the Latin American novel [in](#) the 1960s. [He contributed greatly to](#) Afro-Caribbean culture, [and](#) is regarded as the first Latin American novelist to utilize the stylistic techniques of the European avant-garde [in order](#) to highlight the centrality of blackness [in](#) the constitution of a Latin American ethos and world-view. Latin American literature and criticism continue to be influenced by Carpentier's theory of the "marvelous real," which [finds](#) marvelousness [in](#) everyday Latin American reality, thanks to the co-existence, in the same space, of different temporalities, and of native, African, and Catholic beliefs that are often inharmonious.

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Comment: Some sources say that Carpentier was actually born in Switzerland and then moved to Cuba. Has his birthplace been proven to be Havana?

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Comment: Here, given the nature of the Dictionary in which this biography will appear, perhaps you might add "especially in his study of and writings about Afro-Cuban influences on Cuban music."

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According to Donald Shaw's chronology (1985; summarized [below](#)), in 1922 Carpentier began studies in architecture at the University of Havana, but, needing to financially support his mother, withdrew from the University in order to embark on a career as a journalist, which, along with advertising, supported him throughout his life. As a young adult, Carpentier participated in avant-garde cultural groups such as the Grupo Minorista, calling for reforms of public education in Cuba, and for the island's financial independence from American interests. He was also involved in political protests against [dictator](#) Gerardo Machado, and spent time in jail, eventually [leaving Cuba for Paris](#), where he met André Breton, Pablo Picasso, Louis Aragon and others, and was influenced

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by Surrealism; he would gradually—although, not completely—distance himself from this influence. His friendship with leading Spanish writers and artists, and his [opposition](#) to fascism, led Carpentier to attend the Second Congress in Republican Madrid, where, in 1933, his first novel, *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!* had been published.

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In Cuba and abroad, Carpentier was either a founder or contributor to literary magazines, such as *Revista Avance*, *Social*, *Carteles*, and *Imán*. In 1939, he returned to Cuba, and edited the journal *Tiempo Nuevo*. Later, he worked for Cuban radio stations, and as musicologist at the National Conservatory of Music.

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In 1945 began what critics have called Carpentier's South American stay, which followed his long-term [sojourn](#) in Paris and preceded his celebrated return to Havana. He moved to Caracas, Venezuela, and worked in radio, journalism, and [TV](#) advertising. Carpentier's stay in Caracas, and his visit to the Venezuelan interior, influenced the writing of one of his best-regarded novels, *Los pasos perdidos* (1947; *The Lost Steps*, trans. Harriet de Onís, 1956), the most salient mid-century [contribution](#) to the Latin American *novela de la selva* ([novel of the jungle](#)). Similarly, a trip to Haiti in 1943 would shape the writing of *The Kingdom of This World*, possibly Carpentier's most famous novel today.

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In 1959, after Fidel Castro's victory, Carpentier returned to Cuba. In 1962, he became director of the Editorial Nacional, and [later](#) moved to Paris in 1966, as the [appointed](#) Cuban cultural attaché. In 1978, he was awarded the most important literary prize [for](#) Spanish-[language literature](#), the [Miguel de Cervantes](#), which he donated to the Cuban

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Communist Party. The Nobel Prize, for which he was a contender several times, eluded him, a slight regarded by some critics as egregious [and comparable to the Nobel Prize committee's failure to recognize Jorge Luis Borges](#). Carpentier died in Paris in 1980.

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Carpentier's most eminent critic [and commentator](#) in the United States, Roberto González Echevarría, has suggested that Cuban literature, and the island's modern history, began as a result of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). The same may be argued about

Carpentier's connection to Afro-Caribbean culture: it begins not with his birth to foreign parents, but with the [region's greatest convulsion to date](#), which lies as either the core or tacit conclusion of two of Carpentier's most celebrated novels, *El reino de este mundo*

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(1949; *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís, 1957), and *El siglo de la luz* (1962; *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock, 1962). The first novel remains, to this day, the most prominent fictional account of the Haitian Revolution written in

Spanish, as well as, thanks to its prologue, the epitome of a marvelous realist vision of

Latin American history and ethos. The second novel, published many years before metaphors of flows and networks became common currency in descriptions of Caribbean identity and relationality, may be viewed as the maximum exploration of the aftershocks

of Enlightened ideals in the Americas, and as one of the few successful attempts to [render the Caribbean landscape in the tradition of the Sublime](#); to construe, in [the](#) words of

González Echevarría (1983), "...an American poetics whose energy is found in the relation of Neo-African cultures in the New World to European notions of history."

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Carpentier's engagement with Afro-Caribbean culture, however, did not begin and end with the two pinnacles that were *The Kingdom of This World* and *Explosion in a Cathedral*, but expressed itself through work in other genres, such as the ballet-scenarios "El milagro de Anaquillé" ("Miracle at Anaquillé") and "La Rebambaramba," the burlesque "Yamba-Ó," and the documentary film *Le Vaudou*. The ballet scenarios and burlesque predated *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*, while the documentary anticipated by a year the widely-anthologized short-story "Viaje a la semilla" (1944; "Journey Back to the Source," in *War of Time*, trans. Francis Partridge, 1970), that includes a black character who controls time itself, and [who](#), along with Borges, may have served as [a](#) model for Melquiádes in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Carpentier published nine novels, eight short-stories, and five collections of essays including *La música en Cuba* ([Music in Cuba](#), 1946), commissioned by Mexico's Fondo de Cultura Económica. However, when discussing his contributions to the study and representation of Afro-Caribbean cultures, the works that critics most often [mention](#) are "Journey Back to the Source," *¡Écue-Yamba-Ó!*, *The Kingdom of This World* and *Explosion in a Cathedral*, which, along with other minor compositions and *La música en Cuba*, support the following declaration by González Echevarría (1983): "it was Carpentier... who showed that the presence of Blacks in Latin America was an important historical difference, a force that had to be reckoned with in any writing or rewriting of Latin American history." Carpentier identifies in black culture a kernel [a foundation](#), resistant to the impetus of Western, European modernity, and one of the central [reasons](#)

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why the "New" World ought not to be considered a simple appendage of the Old

Continent, but rather the locus of a radical difference.

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Many critics utilize an evolutionary model when writing about the "development" of Carpentier's vision of Afro-Caribbean culture between the 30 years that spanned the publication of *Écume-Yamba-Ó!* and *Explosion in a Cathedral*. Shaw (1985) argues that this development was analogous to that of indigenist literature elsewhere in the continent; it, too, moved from an early, primitivist and exoticizing vision of the Other, to a more sophisticated and effective attempt to represent the Other from within, thanks to a focalization more in tune with the heterogeneity that comprises Afro-Caribbean cultures. Thus, the representation of Blacks in *Praised Be the Lord*—a novel Carpentier initially renounced, not allowing its reprint until 1977—veers on the stereotypical: blacks are often portrayed as hyper-sensual, or as an extension of the natural landscape. However,

the novel also contains positive elements in its portrayal of black Cubans, arguably representing their culture as superior to that of the effete, decadent whites. These positive elements would later become apparent in *The Kingdom of This World* and *Explosion in a Cathedral*, novels that, in technical terms, show a higher level of virtuosity than *Praised Be the Lord*, and that secured for Carpentier, a Caucasian author, not only a place in the canon of Latin American literature, but also in the limited catalogue of writers who, in words of Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2004), found in "the connection between history and a faith deeply linked to magic..." a way of "grounding his historical fiction on the non-Western, African-derived mythologies and rituals that remained vital elements in the cultures and practices of the New World." Carpentier's valuable contributions to these

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shifts in vision continue to find expression in the work of a later generation of Caribbean writers (e.g., Mayra Santos-Febres, Zoé Valdés and Mayra Montero), despite and beyond the recognition that the marvelous real and magical realism are not the only mode of approximation to the realities and fictions of the continent.

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[Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "The Haitian Revolution in Interstices and Shadows: A Re-reading of Alejo Carpentier's The Kingdom of This World." *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 \(Summer 2004\). 114-127.](#)

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