Hybrid Resolutions: Liberal Democracy and Ethnic Identity in Montserrat Fontes's *Dreams of the Centaur*

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One of the functions of fiction bound up with history is to free, retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past.
—Paul Ricoeur (191)

Literary critics have recently proposed unexpected gen-ealogical origins for Chicano literature, thus suggest-ing a reconstruction of its history. Previously thought to be a post-World War II cultural phenomenon, Chicano literature can now claim ancestral ties to colonial literary productions, such as Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá's *Historia de la Nueva México, 1610*, or to Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*. These foundational texts, expressive of discourses of conquest and of cultural hybridity, are considered as referential markers of post-colonialism, therefore (so the argument runs) the discursive background of a "global cultural studies movement."[1] Aware of the intent to explain continuity in discontinuity, Genaro Padilla nonetheless welcomes the publication and analysis of politically unfashionable and multi-ideological literary texts:

> It is not a matter of resuscitating the Spanish colonial literary discourse in a move to heroize a rather ideologically problematic past; rather, we must reexplicate the formative lines of literary practice that constitute our cultural epistemology, the topology of which was broken by the dominant American hegemony and recently has been dismissed as Hispanophilic by our own Chicano scholars. (35)

These critical positions are best understood in relation to internal transformations in the field of Chicano Studies. We are now realizing that criticism, to be creative (hence truly radical and anti-dogmatic), should have no restrictions, no "guiding" ideology. In this open critical context, the rethinking of "politically unfashionable" eras in Mexican/Chicano history may lead to productive paths: for instance, one could reflect on the manner in which preexisting paradigms for Mexican/Chicano "history" have conditioned—hence limited—the scope of Chicano cultural criticism. One should not be surprised with the findings: Chicano studies has been deeply indebted to the counterculture of the 1960s, and to Mexico's nineteenth-century nationalist discourse of *mestizaje*, anti-Spanish sentiment, and Anglo-French democratic liberalism. In other words, the "global" has been an ideological bedrock all along. Writing about Latin American art and the debate on identities, Néstor García Canclini analyses the problem of national representation as follows:

> The foreign 'influences' were translated and relocated in national matrices, in projects which united the liberal, rationalist aspiration for modernity with a nationalism stamped with the romantic, by which the identity of each people could be one, distinctive and homogeneous. The pretension of constructing national cultures and representing them by specific iconographies is challenged in our time by the processes of an economic and symbolic transnationalisation. (502)

Traced back to its historical beginnings, Mexico's nationalist discourse and cultural imagery constitute the political foundation of its Wars of Independence (1810-1821), of its 1824 federal constitution, the banner of Benito Juárez's generation, and the liberal credo of revolutionary movements that overthrew the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. How is this political and cultural history reconfigured allegorically in the Chicano historical novel so as to interconnect the past with the lived present? How are we to analyze events such as the Mexico-United States war of 1848 (at the core of Chicano history, marking both the separation from Mexico and the origin of an "ethnic" status), or the differences between Chicanos and Mexicans on the basis of an alleged "synthetic interlingualism" and cultural "authenticity" (Bruce-Novoa 17)?

To briefly address these questions in relation to the historical novel, I propose the analysis of *Dreams of the Centaur* (1996) by Montserrat Fontes, a novel that reconstructs, in a global context, the history of Sonora during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, a period when Mexico's minorities (e.g., Yaquis) mirrored the neocolonial status of U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry on the northern side of the border.[2] Our analysis involves the following interpretative framework: on the one hand, as a fictional configuration of neo-colonial historical forces that would ultimately produce the conditions of possibility for the Mexican Revolution; on the other, as an ideological reconstruction of the racial and political contradictions in the state of Sonora during the years 1885-1900—the most dynamic in Mexico during the *Porfiriato* in terms of modernization and demographic growth, as well as in its neo-colonial status in relation to the United States.[3]

Conceived in this way, *Dreams of the Centaur* allows us to imagine the true scope of the Chicano historical novel: it opens possibilities to rethink the ideological foun-

dations of Chicano cultural studies, and interconnects the symbolic and political heritage of Chicanos and Mexicans in a world context.

I

The Chicano historical novel has traditionally used a *family* history to make sense of national and international events. These novels, written by José Antonio Villarreal, Arturo Islas and Eliud Martínez, to name only a few, are (respectively) recollections of family affiliations during the Mexican Revolution to various political factions (e.g., to Francisco Villa, to Porfirio Díaz), or memories of Mexican land dispossession in Texas after the Alamo and, on a larger scale, after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). For the most part, these novelists narrate the impact of said events on a family history. Fontes's novel, on the contrary, contains a hidden subtext: it tells the story of how her family played a leading role in the Mexican Revolution.[4]

In our interview, Fontes refers to her maternal line, connected to the Elías clan of Northern Sonora, as one of the biggest cattle ranch families; of Sephardic ancestry, they converted to Catholicism when the Inquisition reached Mexico. At the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, Fontes's maternal and paternal grandfathers spearheaded military forces against Porfirio Díaz. One of the grandfathers, Colonel Paulino Fontes, was a railroad promoter and a member of President Venustiano Carranzas's elite guard; the maternal grandfather, General Arnulfo R. Gómez, was a presidential candidate in 1927, running against Alvaro Obregón. The execution of General Gómez in Veracruz made international headlines and partly inspired one of Mexico's modern literary masterpieces, *La sombra del caudillo* (1928), by Martín Luis Guzmán. When I asked Fontes to summarize her family history, she stated:

> I'm fortunate that both sides of my family have led raucous, wild, dangerous lives. They've also suffered and dared a great deal. All of us grew up with the Fontes/Gómez clan talking about the revolution, the exiles, the suicides, the love affairs, the battles, the history, the executions.

Such a robust and violent existence fits well with the stereotype that Southern Mexicans have of *norteños* (Northern Mexicans): *broncos, rebeldes, francos*—usually sketched on horseback in the popular imagination. The cognate status of these terms points to their expressive influence in the Mexico-United States border. Such a "crossing" of borders is mediated by the symbol of the *centaur* who—as a half human, half beast hybrid—can be read, on the one hand, as the conventional human dichotomy between reason and irrationality or, on the other hand, as Latin America's nineteenth-century notion of "Civilization against Barbarism." Fontes sustains in her novel an interplay between these two readings, hence the promise of a new national culture, or the realities of a "racial" war.

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of mestizaje as an operating historical force in *Dreams of the Centaur*, Fontes has a deep sense of respect toward the Yaquis for their resistance to Mexican assimilation. When I alluded to the partiality of the novel's point of view in favor of Yaqui Indians, Fontes responded:

> My concern was focusing on the clash and injustices perpetrated by the powerful upon the indigenous peoples, especially the Yaquis who have survived *because* they have re-

> fused to be Mexican. *First Confession* focused on the clash of two cultures: American and Mexican. *Dreams of the Centaur* focuses on the clash of Mexicans with Yaqui Indians who suffered enslavement in their own land. The pattern I saw emerging as I researched *Dreams of the Centaur* was that no dream is fulfilled without hostages, without victims, without blood.

Patterned after Mexican frontier themes, *Dreams of the Centaur* is structured according to notions of hybridity, breeding, and a symbolic *metamorphosis* (e.g. the Centaur), thus producing an identifiable conceptual matrix that generates ideas related to civilization (e.g., social manners, noble "breeding") and to genetics: new hybrids, new breeds. The novel's opening paragraph—focusing on Felipa's premonition of her husband's untimely death—begins with the theme of a wife's fear coupled with jealousy: she witnesses the image of the husband (José Durcal) chasing after Rosario, a young Yaqui woman whose parents work in José's ranch. This opening scene underscores José's "crossbreeding" inclinations, congruent with the novel's governing trope, namely: *mestizaje*. As anticipated, nine months later Rosario gives birth to Charco, the Yaqui youth with blue eyes and the scythe-shaped birthmark linked to José's personal fantasy of a *conquistador* genealogy, thematically associated with ranching and farming interests. When asked about her love of horses, Fontes disclosed the organizational "plan" of her novel:

> Moro symbolizes the gachupín, the conqueror who took the Indian woman in the mestizaje. The first chapter of *Dreams* has the literal making of a mestizo (José taking the Yaqui girl and making Charco), and the last chapter has Moro mating with the Indian Appaloosa mares, thus echoing the first chapter and symbolically repeating the mestizaje.

Beyond the trope of the hybrid or *mestizo*, *Dreams of the Centaur* charts three major narrative planes that converge on the Catholic iconography of the *Holy Family*, Sonora-style: (1) José Durcal (the father) in conflict with the economy and social stratification of late nineteenth-century Sonora; (2) Alejo's story of a son's geographic and moral journey on a *national* level, therefore an allegory of Mexico's *imperial crisis* (i.e. the Díaz dictatorship); and (3) Felipa's resolution to come to terms with the loss of her husband and her first-born son, while confronting her racial prejudices toward Yaqui Indians.

II

Divided into three parts with a total of thirty chapters, *Dreams of the Centaur* contains two narrators: an omniscient voice covering parts one and three of the novel, and Alejo as the consciousness of the second part, written in a first-person, diary-like present tense that endows the narration with the intimacy and freshness of a historical experience unmediated by memory. The first five chapters of the novel—a mere sixty-two pages—serve as a stage for José Durcal's rise and fall during the years 1885-99, a period that corresponds to the historical twilight of Yaqui autonomy under the leadership of José María Leyva, popularly known as Cajeme. His execution in 1887 marks the beginning of "white" (i.e. Mexican criollo) colonization of the eight Yaqui pueblos. These years also correspond to the financial era under Mexican treasurer José Limantour, who shifted Mexico from the silver to the gold standard, and made

possible Porfirio Díaz's railroad boom during the years 1888-94 (Meyer 442). After the initial five chapters, the narrative becomes the setting for Alejo's various rites of passage, abruptly slowing to a sustained narrative rhythm so as to cover only one year (1900) in almost three hundred pages. The novel's framework of temporal succession is thus constructed according to narrative principles governing (1) an archetypal story of a hero's revenge, wanderings, and *nostos*[5] (subverted in the novel in the form of a hero's maturation, homecoming, and subsequent exile), and (2) a symbolic figuration of a nation's neo-colonial history. Such a framework can be visualized in an ordering relation that reveals the temporal and thematic interconnectedness in the novel's parts and sequence of chapters:

	Part One	
A	**B**	**C**
1885	1892	1899
Chap. 1	**Chaps. 2-5**	**Chaps. 6-12**
(pp. 17-31)	(pp. 31-62)	(pp. 62-182)

Part Two	**Part Three**
D	**E**
2 months later	One month later (Jan. 1900)
Chaps. 13-20	**Chaps. 21-30**
(pp. 185-251)	(pp. 255-349)

Read according to its thematic sequence, Part One of the novel contains a cluster of plot features that include (A) José Durcal's economic ascendancy in Alamos, Sonora, and (B) his murder. With José's death, the narrative shifts to (C) Alejo, José's first-born, who immediately enters into several rites of passage that include revenge; incarceration in the *bartolinas* (the infamous prison caves that passed as jails during the Porfirio Díaz era); conscription; and (Part Two, D) a national journey that takes Alejo from Sonora to Yucatán, hence from Yaqui to Maya territories. Interpreted as a subtext, Mexico's national history finds its elaboration through a crisis in a colonial economy, as portrayed by José Durcal's emphasis on ranching and farming, and his vehement opposition to foreign mining interests in Sonora, represented in great part by the United States. In other words, his death by murder underscores, if only at a symbolic level, the growing presence of international investments in Mexico. As a textual corollary, the June 1, 1906 strike organized by Mexican miners in Sonora against Colonel Greene's Cananea Consolidated Copper Company—a strike that was motivated politically by the reemergence of liberalism under the Magón brothers—can be understood, thanks to the perspective given by hindsight, to be the unmasking of Porfirio Díaz's neo-colonial policy, namely: to protect the interests of foreigners at the expense of Mexican nationals (Meyer 488).[6]

Caught between a father's dreams and a mother's "psychic" connection, Alejo's revenge and subsequent national journey are thus composed of tests and rites of initiation, symbolically "coming into the world" as an adult, ready to take his father's place in a ranching economy. With his return from Yucatán (narrated in Part Three, E), Alejo undergoes yet another trial, this time by fire: his participation on the Yaqui side against Mexico's federal army in the Battle of Mazocoba (1900), a battle that—from the perspective of Fontes's novel—foreshadows the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Overall, there are a total of three tests or initiatory rites, one for each part of the novel, beginning with the taming of Moro under the guidance of Tacho, an old Yaqui, friend and mentor of Alejo's father. Secondly, the Yucatán rite of Pan-Mexican Indian *solidarity*, hence symptomatic of a "native" way of imagining the nation in direct opposition to that of the *criollo* caste that

ruled Mexico under Porfirio Díaz. This second rite is overseen by Anginas, an old Maya who survives persecution from the *hacendados*. Lastly, the Battle of Mazocoba, an event that logically unifies the previous two rites in the context of a nation's growing crisis, namely: the imminent downfall of the Porfiriato. Seen in this light, the year 1892 (Part One, B) stands in symmetrical relation to 1900 (Part Three, E): one marks the fourth centennial of Columbus's discovery of America; the other, a symbolic pan-Indian banner of democracy and national unification. In 1892—shortly before his death—José remembers Cajeme's Yaqui insurrection against Mexico's federal army, and mourns his 1887 execution:

> Hearing of Cajeme's last moments, José wept openly. [...] Alone or in public he sang corridos about Cajeme—not the songs that described his death, but those that heralded his hero's bravery. (33)

In 1900, and about to leave Yucatán, Alejo hears Anginas's melody humming through him: "turn Sonora into a land of generosity. Tell them what you saw here. When they enslave men there, they enslave us here. Tell them" (250).

The novel's ending turns against the expectations that govern a literary genre like romance. In *Dreams of the Centaur*, the heroic quest is set aside, presenting us instead with a sixteen-year old Alejo quietly settling down across the Mexican border, dreaming of breeding horses and of spending his life with Ana María. The psychic connection between son and mother thus comes to an end with Ana María's love, and Alejo—seeing his mother "for the last time"—is transformed into the father *redivivus*, now a living incarnation of José Durcal insofar as his dream was to breed cattle that would withstand the Southwestern heat and, through hard work, keep the ranch like a wheel, turning by itself.

The novel's ideological mission, consequently, is made evident in its solidarity with Yaqui autonomy and in its examples of Yaqui appropriation of Christian ritual and iconography. One of these examples is the taming of Moro. Alejo's rite of initiation (performed in chapter 7) soon turns into a metaphorical battle, orchestrated by Tacho into a war between Christians and Moors, a conflict layered with a symbolism that applies both to the rite of maturation (Alejo taming Moro) and to an ancient *conquistador* history (specifically, the Spanish *Reconquista* waged against Spanish Moors). The ritualized war is organized by Tacho through chromatic symbolism (blue for Christian, red for Moor) and as a Yaqui internalization of the "enemy," thereby achieving a frontier metamorphosis of the self that is textually constructed through the image of a baptism: "Today you and Moro will enact the part of Moors attacking the church. I will be the Christians trying to force you into the water to baptize you" (107-08). This theater of reenactment that associates a remote event (Christians against Moors) with a contemporaneous historical conflict (Mexicans against Yaquis) illuminates not only Tacho's vulnerable condition in the Sonora of his time, but also underscores one of the novel's salient structural features: the telescoping of different national eras prior to Porfirio Díaz's downfall. Tacho's precarious state is confirmed shortly after Moro's taming (113-16) when, after meeting a group of *rurales* (Porfirio Díaz's version of the Texas Rangers), he is bound and taken away with six other Yaqui Indians. Alejo never sees him again.

Between parts One and Three (thus between 1885-1990), Sonora is portrayed as a region undergoing rapid economic changes fostered by a developing global market. In accordance with the expanding industrialization of both Europe and the United States, the emphasis is on Mexican natural resources, illustrated in the novel by Sonora's minerals, *henequén* from Yucatán, sugar from the fields of Oaxaca and Morelos, and oil from Veracruz.

> José warned against foreign investors from the United States coming into Sonora to colonize Yaqui lands. He pushed for a Mexican-owned railroad to link Alamos to Guaymas and Hermosillo. [...] His stand for Yaqui autonomy drew angry criticism from friends. Felipa never argued with his long tirades, but it was clear she could never be convinced of Yaquis coexisting peacefully with Mexicans. José refused to cooperate with government orders that miners, ranchers, and farmers count and report the number of Yaquis they had working for them. He urged fellow ranchers not to obey the authorities. (57)

Another glance at the narrative structure allows us to reinsert in our analysis a *corrido* written by Fontes, titled "El Corrido de los Durcal," found at the beginning of the novel. This *corrido* raises expectations in the reader, who assumes it belongs to the Mexican vs. Anglo frontier variety, such as the traditional ballad "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortés"; on first impression, it appears to be a thematic overture to the novel, providing the reader with a synoptical reduction of the novel's conflict. Deployed as a distant variant of the theme of the *Reconquista*, "El Corrido de los Durcal" tells the story of two *compadres*—José Durcal and Esteban Escobar—who covet the same horse (Moro); however, more than just good friends who are divided by a common desire, they represent, respectively, the enterprising Mexican farmer and Sonora's old ranching elite allied to international mining interests, mostly of the United States.

José Durcal embodies fundamental changes in the image itself of a centaur and the dreams that are correlate to the condition: he is an orphan with no knowledge of who his father was; moreover, he is from Sinaloa, hence not a native of Sonora; lastly, he carries a stranger's surname (therefore the implicit shadow of the social counterfeit):

> No, she would not tell Alejo the story a mezcal-filled José had told her one night. How he had taken the name Durcal from a newspaper in Sinaloa, because "it sounded strong." José had been barely older than Alejo when, after burying his mother, he had migrated to Sonora. [...] She had supported her son by washing, ironing; alongside Indians, he had worked other men's fields, designed another life for himself [...]. (137-38)

José represents the Romantic hero as well as the rising "new man" of the frontier, belonging to the social category most likely to establish alliances with the Yaqui Indians. José's wife—daughter of the Spanish-born Octavio Robles—is the Mexican female from Sonora who fears and hates Yaqui Indians; knowing that her mother was murdered by Yaquis, Felipa's marriage to José becomes a personal test, first in having Yaquis around the ranch as hired hands, then jealous of their daughters who become the object of her husband's sexual desires.[7] Felipa's character thus operates at levels proper to cultural criticism; molded by experience and personal losses (e.g. a mur-

dered husband, a jailed son), Felipa's character seems to suggest that an index of our humanity is our constant self-examination, accompanied by a willingness to endure loss and suffering, for after all "no dream is fulfilled without hostages, without victims, without blood." The theme of self-examination and penance becomes, as a result, a guiding moral continuum in Felipa's character evolution, reaching a moment of recognition close to the end of the novel, when she wishes for an Indian wife for her son:

> I wished a good *Indian* woman—to serve him. Ashamed of her disloyalty to her son and to Carmen, Felipa makes a rushed sign of the cross, vows to the sky to let her sons marry who they want. [...] Vows can't change this ugly rejection of people like me and those whom José called Mexico's primera gente. José was a better person. [...] People like me allow the Mazocobas that maimed my son. (328-29)

In this passage the almost unregistered shift from omniscient to first-person would seem to underscore a purpose: instead of the usual paraphrase of Felipa's thoughts and point of view, we now witness, as it were, her new understanding of a formerly hated Other, the Yaqui Indian. As a formal feature that determines or shapes our reading of the novel, the first-person interventions by Felipa and Alejo become the sites of suffering, metaphorical death, and rebirth of a national consciousness. Read in this light, Felipa's thoughts regarding colonial prejudices, such as "forbidden" marriages (*criollo* + Yaqui Indian), are equivalent to a *personal* resolution of the ethnic/criollo conflicts in nineteenth-century Porfirian society.

As we read *Dreams of the Centaur,* we can at first orient ourselves easily through the coordinates of history, cultural geography, and the many references to a daily ranch routine in northern Mexico; however, with the constant overlapping of historical planes and colonial "types" (e.g. Indian, *conquistador, mestizo,* etc.), our analysis advances with the knowledge that somehow both historical planes and colonial types constitute a mural-like montage of the entire spectrum of Mexican history, from pre-Columbian to the Porfiriato. As our reading experience overcomes this initial disruption caused by the synchronicity of the nonsynchronic, we begin to understand the novel's organizing principles: on a surface level, it illustrates a fractured nation, with less "evolved" or quasi-integrated frontier regions that continue to thrive at the margins of "civilization." Consequently, the Sonora frontier is revealed as the site where the Conquest continues (hence the "war of extermination" over land and river rights against the Yaqui Indians) during an era of increasing industrialization, foreign investments, and a shift from ranching and mining to a global market economy. Market routes also function ironically in the novel, as is the case with goods that are traded between Sonora and Yucatán. Thus we read that José Durcal orders "precious hardwood and rope made of the finest henequen" from Yucatán (35); he buys a "stuffed quetzal" from Guatemala, "near Yucatán" (41); later the rope around Moro's neck—a sign of captivity—is identified as being made of henequén from Yucatán (122); lastly, José Durcal's coffin is made of a "Yucatán log" (70). This thematic network based on distant trade routes—reminiscent of ancient trade in quetzal feathers and precious woods in pre-Columbian Mexico—is later in the novel revealed as part of an international economy of deforestation and Yaqui enslavement. Given José Durcal's positive

identification with Indians, his burial in a coffin made of Yucatán wood somehow encloses its own literary and historical logic.

Symbolically, in Fontes's novel Yucatán is the land where Pacal "resurrects" as the youthful incarnation of the ancient lord of Palenque, and where Alejo kills the plantation's *majocol* (foreman or overseer) in the form of a metaphorical decapitation ("I bring it full force down on his head. Martino is silent. A bloody stain swells around his head" 240). This intertextual connection to the *Popol Vuh* and, by extension, to Quiché methods of war—associated with the hunt, the harvest, and astronomical calculations—underscores a Mexican military history with a trajectory of conflict and mestizaje as identifiable steps towards nationhood, therefore with major nodal points that could be drawn from the Spanish Conquest to the Battle of Mazocoba and the Mexican Revolution.

III

We arrive, inevitably, to the question regarding the novel's protagonist, and we may easily be persuaded, particularly on a first reading, that Alejo's role corresponds to the main character. One's initial discomfort with such a choice, however, might prompt a more complex solution that turns instead to a character system, thus allowing us to question reading tendencies based on categories such as "well-rounded," "flat," or stock characters. In his interpretation of characters in terms of their narrative functions or as bearers of action, Fredric Jameson offers a way to demystify the "illusions" of anthropomorphic representation:

> [...] in strategic cases what seems to be a single unified character, held together by a proper name, can under narrative analysis be revealed as an uneasy plurality of quite distinct *actants* or functions, a structural coexistence rather than an organic substance or 'identity.' (49-50)

Such a reading of the character system in *Dreams of the Centaur* produces an allegorical typology, with characters that represent diachronically a recapitulation of Mexico's history and, synchronically, a collective prefiguration of nationhood. The novel's focus on colonial types in a caste-like hierarchy (e.g. the Indian, the *conquistador*, the *criollo*, the *mestizo*) could then be viewed as a character "held together by a proper name" (e.g. Durcal), thus allowing for a different reading of the narrative functions of a hybrid genealogy (i.e. José Durcal, Alejo, and Charco) through a trans-individual typology of three characters whose intersection—in addition to their common blood lines—takes place in the collective desire for a homeland. This interpretative framework would also produce other readings of the novel's second part, particularly in relation to its vocabulary of fragmentation, moral decay, and symbolic resurrection. Narrated by Alejo in the present tense, as a Robles and not as a Durcal (therefore as a collaborator—even if unwilling—in the enslavement of Yaqui Indians), the narration simulates a confession, much like Fontes's first novel. When they arrive at the Hacienda de San Jacinto in Yucatán, both Alejo and Charco realize the results of their complicity, as *bartolina* soldiers, with Mexico's treatment of Yaquis and other Mexican ethnic groups:

> Torches throw light and dark shadows across the faces of men and women. I see enough for me to identify eyes and cheekbones. Yaquis. Body, numb, I pray God forgives me. [...] Charco and I exchange glances.

> I know his next question. 'Yaquis?' Yes. Also Mayas, Mayos, Chinos, Coreanos. (227)

The international dimension of Mexico's "slave labor" during the Porfiriato is rendered through totalitarian or Nazi-like imagery, contributing to the novel's double movement of recapitulation and prefiguration, a telling anachronism that functions as the historical "double" of Díaz's dictatorship, namely: Hitler's Germany:

> We arrived with the Yaquis packed into cattle cars. Tired federales and bartolina soldiers stood in admiration as fresh, precision soldiers formed a human corral to escort the Yaquis to an army post. The soldiers' uniforms were spotless. Boots too. The men moved as if commanded by a single mind. I remembered the inside of Father's watch. (209)

Fontes's language reinforces mental associations with Nazi Germany in a vocabulary of dehumanization, either through zoomorphic transformations (Yaquis in "cattle cars") or through a technological mutation of robot-like beings ("precision soldiers," "commanded by a single mind," "the inside of Father's watch"). In an apparently deliberate association of German and Mexican totalitarian practices, the narrative puns with the words "forbidden" and the German *Verboten* as paradigmatic of a Nazi "disciplinarian" discourse:

> One of the foremen comes to the center. 'Running away is forbidden. Failure to meet your daily quota of two thousand leaves is forbidden. Abuse of a henequen plant is forbidden. All fighting is forbidden.' (227-28)

Obviously, Mexico during the Díaz dictatorship was not an empire, but a country whose neo-colonial status was hidden under the façade of modernization and Porfirio Díaz's motto, "Order and Progress." When asked by Charco if Mexicans are the enemies of Mayas, Anginas answers:

> 'Mexicans aren't our enemies. They too have lost their country.' He points to the English flag on the steamboat. 'Díaz is giving it away to the señores distinguidos.' (220)

Close to the end of Part Two, Alejo kills for the second time (Martino, the plantation's *majocol*), generating a profile of a hero whose destiny will leave traces of blood, either for reasons of revenge or political convictions. The rest of Part Two corresponds to Alejo's symbolic death and resurrection near a sacred tree, the Maya *ceiba* known as the *flamboyán*, thus suggesting the theme of "paradise regained" (let's remember, however, that Alejo's journey back to Sonora in the company of Gustavo and Charco ends in war and exile). As Part Two comes to an end, Alejo experiences the dissolution of a personal ego—highly suggestive of a metaphorical death—and the merging into a collective entity known in Maya as *In lak'ech,* thus concluding with a double theme: Alejo's completion of his second rite of initiation under Maya guidance, and the symbolic reunification of Mexico's criollo and ethnic groups into a *national body*:

> I'm empty and weak with a sweet tiredness I've yearned for all my life. I rest my head against the trunk, close my eyes, and hear the voice of the tree speaking with all the voices I have known—Mother, Ana María, Father, Tacho, Héctor, Andrés, Tía Mercedes—all are together and separate. All and none. My eyes open and

> my gaze falls on Charco. His face is mine. Gustavo, Juan, Anginas are me. *In lak'ech.* (251)

The three types—the *conquistador,* the *criollo,* and the *mestizo*—appear in the novel's first part, representing the early colonial (XVI-XVII), the late colonial (XVIII-XIX), and the post-colonial inhabitant of New Spain/Mexico, respectively. One can identify all three in the following characters: Esteban Escobar (the son of a local wealthy *hacendado*), José Durcal (proud of being "blanco y decente" [26], but able to speak Yaqui fluently [38]), and his sons Alejo and Charco, who stand for Mexico's tradition of *egalitarian* politics and national identity, as constructed through *mestizaje.* The conflict and resolutions are telling: the two friends die violently, leaving Alejo to his national wanderings, inner transformation (with a change of surname—Durcal to Robles—as an index of his relations with Mexico's Indians), a found "double" in Charco, a political alliance with Yaquis, and an anticipated wedding with Ana María at the novel's conclusion.

At this point in our reading we begin to trace a pattern of three characters, a rhetorical continuum that can be read as one of historical contrasts and of blood relations. For instance, Alejo has two brothers—Héctor and Andrés—who collectively represent a transition from ranch to city life; on the other hand, during his journey to Yucatán, Alejo is accompanied by two "blood" brothers, Charco and Gustavo Saldaña: the former is José's son with a Yaqui woman (hence, Alejo's half brother); the latter is the son of a criollo landowner (hence, Alejo's historical "twin"): "The Saldañas are wealthy *hacendados* from northern Sonora. Gustavo told us that he studied in Europe" (205). Gustavo speaks French, is destined to a position of power in his father's *hacienda,* and yet his destiny is elsewhere: he dies in the battlefield alongside Yaquis in Mazocoba (or so we thought, however Fontes might "resurrect" Gustavo in her forthcoming novel, *The General's Widow*). As if to symbolize their blood and "psychic" connection, both Alejo and Charco fall in love with women who share a name and an "alien" condition: Luz María (a Yaqui young female) and Ana María (a Mexican American woman); the former is never seen by Charco again after she vanishes in the Yucatán fields; the latter, a woman ten years older than Alejo, turns into the symbol of Alejo's maturation as they prepare for their nuptials. As the former wife of Rafael Castillo—Alejo's protector and father figure ("My own father couldn't have done more for me," 348)—Ana María functions as the character who displaces Felipa as a mother-figure. Moreover, at the novel's conclusion, it is evident that Charco has become Alejo's "double" or filial replacement, therefore an heir of José Durcal's property in Sonora.

The motif of the three brothers can ultimately be read as an allegory of Sonora's history of Yaqui-Mexican conflicts over land and river rights. One of the best histories on the subject is *La frontera nómada,* by Héctor Aguilar Camín, who writes of how the Salido brothers (José, Juan, and Martín) invaded the *Valle del Mayo* in 1865, thus beginning—during the first years of the French occupation of Mexico (1863-67)—the "first phase" of a regional policy of extermination and land dispossession against Mexico's Yaqui and Mayo nations. The Salido brothers—maternal ancestors of president Alvaro Obregón (1920-24)—called their hacienda and the water canal by the same name: *Tres Hermanos* ("Three Brothers"). According to Camín:

> La fértil región, largamente ambicionada por los proyectos de colonización blanca, encontró en los Salido las puntas de lanza civiles, la instigación concreta para los designios blancos de expulsión del dominio indígena. Las haciendas de los Salido proporcionaron los contundentes argumentos económicos del caso y proveyeron la expectativa de la agricultura intensa y técnica que después caracterizaría a la región. (23)

The second phase, composed of twelve years (1875-87), belongs to a Yaqui rebellion under Cajeme's leadership, who temporarily obtained an independent territorial jurisdiction for Yaqui Indians. With Cajeme's capture and execution on April 21, 1887, a new generation of *hacendados* was created, composed mostly of the military who defeated Cajeme (e.g. General Luis Torres), and of migrant farmers from the neighboring states of Sinaloa and Jalisco. Lastly, the third phase would correspond to Aguilar Camín's account of how between 1888 and 1896, General Torres sold 15,000 hectares of Yaqui lands to an investor by the name of E. Salisbury, who in turn sold the lands to California farmers (48). Not to be left behind, Carlos Conant founded the Sonora & Sinaloa Irrigation Company with stocks owned by New York investors who, by 1901, pulled away their capital from Sonora because of Yaqui uprisings (49). According to Aguilar Camín, the Yaqui "problem" had unfortunate results: Mexico's war of extermination against Yaqui Indians, their deportation to Yucatán, and the dramatic reduction in Sonora's agricultural fields of its pool of "cheap labor," historically obtained from Yaqui Indians. Ironically, with the increasing penetration of U.S. interests in Sonora's mining and ranching economy, the local hacendados will begin to rethink their "neo-colonial" status as similar to that of the Yaqui Indians. The ideological terrain was ripe for a recovery of Mexico's tradition of liberal democracy, accompanied by a growing sentiment in favor of an insurrection against Porfirio Díaz: "El gobierno [...] debía velar por los intereses de los sonorenses, no por los norteamericanos [...] y cumplir con las leyes" (78).

On this basis—war and land annexation—was created the *Ilustración sonorense* (Sonora's Enlightenment) during the years 1888-1902, with massive land developments and irrigation projects in the eight former Yaqui pueblos. What followed was totally unexpected by Sonora's *criollo* elite: the "colonial takeover" of Sonora by U.S. capital. A retrospective look at the novel's historical focus reveals the importance of the chosen years (1885-1900) in the drama that was unfolding both in Sonora as well as in the rest of Mexico.

This reading of Fontes's historical novel would allow us to identify—back in the conventional category of a novel's protagonist—José and Alejo as the *fictional* co-protagonists whose political desires foreshadow Mexico's post-Revolutionary era as the homeland of all Mexicans, regardless of race or ethnic background. Concomitantly, Charco's "homeless" condition in the novel (as a criollo/Yaqui mestizo) situates him as the character whose desire for some sort of homecoming could identify him as the novel's historical (albeit not fictional) protagonist. This analysis would also resolve a problem if *Dreams of the Centaur* is to be interpreted as a national allegory: the murder (José's) and final exile (Alejo's) of the fictional co-protagonists leaves the hero's homecoming to Charco.

Close to the end of the novel, Charco tells Felipa of his mother's probable death by hanging in a miner's camp, and of his

sense of belonging to "something big—like the sky up there, only bigger." The obvious reference to heaven, and Charco's tears, prompt a maternal response from Felipa: "Meanwhile, Charco [...] come to your father's ranch, because on earth, that's where you belong. That's what's right" (347). A few pages later Felipa—a name that means "lover of horses" if read through its Greek etymology—prepares her solitary return to Alamos, while Alejo remains with Ana María in Arizona with plans to produce a new breed of horses. Before Felipa departs, she reminds Charco: "Remember I'm waiting. [...] Tu casa está en Alamos" (349). The novel's conclusion, therefore, is motivated by a "desire" of its own, hence the "hybrid resolution" it offers to the future of Sonora: with the Mexican Revolution, it should have belonged to the criollo/Yaqui mestizos like Charco, thus resolving through *mestizaje* the colonial problems that began centuries ago with the conquest of Mexico.

Of course, given that such a hybrid resolution did not occur in Sonora, one could dismiss this interpretation as yet another example of a novel's imaginary resolution to a real historical contradiction. But as Fredric Jameson reminds us, the structural paradox of the historical novel is to interpret the historical past through the present; read from this interpretive angle, *Dreams of the Centaur* situates itself in an ironic position in regards to the Chicano historical novel that treats, for instance, the fate of *Californios* as an anticipatory example of the land loss and political powerlessness of present-day Chicanos. The tacit argument would run as follows: the historical contradiction found in Anglo-American settlers/squatters and *Californio* landowners after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is homologous to that of Mexicans and Yaqui Indians in Sonora from the nineteenth century to the present.

In most Chicano historical accounts of Mexican land dispossession at the hands of Anglo-Americans, one seldom finds references to the injustices suffered by Native Americans during the years of colonial Spanish-Mexican expansion. In their introduction to María Amparo Ruíz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don*, a novel originally published in San Francisco in 1885, Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita write:

> Interestingly, unlike Helen Hunt Jackson's novel, *Ramona*, published in 1884, *The Squatter and the Don* avoids addressing the dispossession of the Indians, seen here only as ranch hands and servants. (8)

A few pages later, these critics add the following observation:

> That Indian lands are considered 'public lands' is certainly not questioned in the novel; in fact those lands are said to be there for the squatters' taking, if only they would. (32)

Interestingly, one could add, *The Squatter and the Don* proposes a "hybrid resolution" of its own, for according to the same critics:

> a new [ethnic] construct is suggested in the intermarriage of Californios and Anglos to produce new 'mestizos' like Mariano Mechlin or Josefina Alamar. These children thus also embody a resolution, which can be read ethnically or culturally, that is, as constructs of acculturation. (34-35)

What remains, obviously, is a "resolution" that continues to operate at an ideo-

logical level, with hardly any significant anchoring in historical reality. In our interview, Fontes addresses such a disjunction between the history and the fiction in *Dreams of the Centaur*:

> As to the narrative's point of view being an exception to how most Sonorenses viewed the Yaquis, that is true then and now. The Mexicans (yoris) and the Yoemem (Yaquis) still live separately and view each other with suspicion and hostility. This is a generalization of which I am well aware; however, a trip into the Yaqui pueblos will bear out what I am saying. Any conversation with the people of Ciudad Obregón will also uncover their hostilities. [...] And yes, the novel is more concerned with an ideological perspective rather than an ethnographical analysis of Sonora's residents.

The history of Sonora has particular features that set it apart from Mexico's national history, as has been well argued by Aguilar Camín; one could perhaps propose parallel "dissimilarities" in former Maya territories, from Yucatán to Chiapas. The fact remains, however, that these frontier regions—with their native populations threatening to secede from Mexico at different moments in history—question by their mere "ethnic" presence the empirical limitations of the hybrid ideological construct, imagined by Mexican liberals of the nineteenth century as a foil against a colonial caste system and as a means to achieve the egalitarianism promised by liberal democracy.

One finds, fortunately, a way out of this "socially symbolic" dilemma in a Chicano historical novel—*Voice-Haunted Journey*, by Eliud Martínez—where Mexico's multiple ancestries—as "recovered" by an act of consciousness in Texas, another *frontera nómada*—overwhelm, as it were, the paradigm of the mestizo or hybrid. In *Voice-Haunted Journey*, Miguel Velásquez must invent—in the sense of rethinking, imagining, and reconstructing—a sense of "being" beyond the body, namely: as a participant in a collective history that has been shaped by the contradictions, both global and regional, in the Mexico-United States frontier.

IV

An instructive debate took place in 1980 in the *Academia Mexicana de la Historia* when Josefina Zoraida Vázquez gave her speech, "El dilema de la enseñanza de la historia de México," as required of every new member admitted into this exclusive academy. Her respondent was Edmundo O'Gorman, one of Mexico's leading historians and known for his sharp wit and love of polemics—and, no less significant, a former teacher of Dr. Vázquez. O'Gorman's response was titled "El estado y la verdad histórica," and such was the importance of both speeches that they were immediately published in the journal *Diálogos* shortly after their presentation.

Briefly stated, the polemic turned on what version of Mexico's history should be taught at the elementary level. As Dr. Vázquez noted, the circulation of books in primary schools often contained contradictory versions of Mexican history, some with the liberal version (with its anti-Spanish, anti-Porfirio Díaz, anti-clerical, and pro-Revolution biases), while others stressed the conservative version, which included Mexico's Spanish colonial history and pro-Catholicism.[8] Dr. Vázquez proposed that the State (with the advise of educators) should be

responsible for an updated and standardized version of Mexico's national history, and that it be implemented in all primary schools of the nation.

In a respectful but combative tone, O'Gorman expressed his opposition to this proposal. Instead of an "official version" of Mexico's national history, he suggested a *versión histórica* to be produced by historians not tied to the State's ideological interests. In other words, the teaching of a national history should be the task of educators, and not of instructors collaborating with politicians. At the core of the pedagogical mission was the question, What to stress in Mexican history: its Indian, its Hispanic, or its *mestizo* historical versions? Clearly, this was a rhetorical question, for the *mestizo* version was the national construction of nineteenth-century liberal thought, a political legacy claimed by the Revolution of 1910, and—viewed from the perspective of the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre—"perverted" by Mexico's leading political party.

O'Gorman argued that, contrary to received opinion, the Mexican Revolution is not the fulfillment nor the continuation of the nineteenth-century liberal construct of the *mestizo*. Understood in the context of their own regional dispersion and heterogeneous complexity, Mexicans—after the 1910 revolution—were finally able to view themselves as agents in an historical process that promised a new sense of the nation, so that being "Mexican" no longer had anything to do with ethnic differences or "racial" mixtures. Thus, the Indian and *criollo* national projects are considered by O'Gorman as historically obsolete; in his view, the Mexican Revolution created the possibilities for the conception of Mexican identity beyond a "colonial" or racial model. Although an independent thinker, O'Gorman's argument contained echoes of ideas expressed by other writers, such as José Ortega y Gasset, José Gaos, and Octavio Paz—who has had the misfortune of being generally misread by most Chicano/a literary critics. Although belonging to different generations and to different countries, the ideas of these writers (and I name only a few) are also a legacy and a logical entry into the global that must be claimed by Chicano cultural studies.

V

Before concluding, we must setaside the anecdotal elements in the narrative so as to focus on the historical forces that—registered in the novel as ideological underpinnings—remain nonetheless beyond the structural limits of Mexico's nationalism, notions of hybridity, or ideals of liberal democracy. In other words, as we read through the narrative, one comes across references to foreign workers, fortune seekers, and immigrants (e.g. Hong, Billy Cameron, Octavio Robles); international mining and oil companies, new technologies, and multinational capital, with neo-colonial results on the culture and the economy of Mexico. Lastly, one finds allusions to ideological models imported from metropolitan centers (e.g. positivism). In the novel's attempts to trace a world context around its anecdotal center, the above global forces insinuate a historical "sublime" that, by definition, evades representation.

According to García Canclini, these same forces or processes have liquidated ethnic or national mono-identities that insist on holding on to their local exoticism and non-temporal essence (505). Although his observations address the problematic of Latin American art in today's international market, their relevance to areas in Chicano

cultural criticism and literary theory can serve to bring this study to a close. Viewed from his vantage point, the contemporary debate on identities has resulted in a "discordant" dialogue between nationalist fundamentalism and an abstract globalisation. García Canclini proposes a way out of this impasse:

> Like today's identities, their works [those of Latin American artists] are polyglot and migrant, they can function in diverse and multiple contexts and permit divergent readings from their hybrid constitution. (505)

Having found the way to reformulate the "false" dilemma facing Latin American artists, García Canclini admits the obstacles and conflicts that some of these same artists will have with fellow artists, the public, state promotions, and museums and galleries, who demand that Latin American art obey market expectations:

> [T]he strategies of the market, of international exhibitions and of the critics almost always banish it [Latin American art] to the margins as the magic realism of local colour. Even when our people migrate extensively and a large part of our art work and literature is dedicated to thinking about the multicultural, Latin America continues to be interesting only as a continent of a violent nature, of an archaicism irreducible to modern nationality, an earth fertilised by an art conceived as tribal or national dreaming and not as thinking about the global and the complex. (499-500)

Dreams of the Centaur depicts Sonora's violent nature, and yet it "thinks" the global and the complex; it speaks of tribal and national dreaming, but its purpose is to rethink Mexico's multicultural history. The novel also maintains an ironic affiliation with the modern Latin American novel in its tacit proposal: American democracy requires that "satelite" countries be governed by dictatorships friendly to U.S. interests. Organized as an historical montage, the novel can be read as a vast mural where pre-Columbian Mexico, the Spanish empire, post-Independence Mexico, and the modern world converge simultaneously in Sonora with—at first glance—hardly a chance of producing the "hybridity" or *mestizaje* that could resolve Mexico's social and ethnic contradictions after the Mexican Revolution of 1910.[9] And yet that is precisely the *telos* in Fontes's novel, namely: to trace the historical forces that were leading the nation towards revolution and unification. But symbolic resolutions aside, we feel certain that we are reading—embedded into the fictionality of *Dreams of the Centaur*—a family history of revolution, exiles, suicides, love affairs, battles, and executions: a history of the Fontes/Gómez clan whose members suffered and dared a great deal.

Notes

[1] As most of these critics admit, Luis Leal proposed this project in 1973, and yet it took two decades to heed his call. Why? The response might be explained by the year 1992, the negative imagery it brought to mind (Christopher Columbus and the expansion of European empires in the Americas), and the many debates it elicited. On the other hand, the question regarding a Chicano literary history with origins in the Spanish colonial era is problematic (i.e., if constructed on an alleged trans-historical mode of existence that is "unique" to Chicano/as), and yet the critical positions that support it are promising.

[2] Fontes's first novel, *First Confession* (1991), is a hermetic critique of Mexico's leading politi-

cal party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, and of its policies of national development between the presidencies of Miguel Alemán (1946-52) and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-70), politics that were also challenged during the 1968 student rebellion that coincided with Mexico's hosting of the Olympic Games. In *Dreams of the Centaur*, Fontes manifests her sense of history as posed by her family's anti-Porfirian politics and violent connections to Mexico's post-revolutionary government, in particular that of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28). Fontes's published novels, consequently, could be read as a constant reflection on Mexico's failed attempts to establish a liberal democracy.

[3] Fontes's tacit refusal to essentialize power and greed through racial categories can be read in the Yaqui-Mexican conflicts, interpreted as a direct analog of the contradictions that define Chicano history in the United States (e.g., the "racial" persecution of Mexicans in post-1848 years, the dispossession of lands, the continuous transgressions to the tradition of liberal democracy in the United States, etc.).

[4]For information on Montserrat Fontes's life background and published novels, consult my article entitled "Montserrat Fontes" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and my interview with the author.

[5]*Nostos*: the Homeric return home—the Ulysses theme.

[6]According to Michael Meyer, between the years 1880-90 three mining developments with American, French, and German capital began on a large scale in Mexico; these large mining enterprises were based in Coahuila, Chihuahua, and in Baja California. The mines "made a fortune for its owners" (Meyer 447). Foreign investments came later in the form of "huge conglomerates," among them the Guggenheim interests, with plants in Nuevo León, Chihuahua, Durango, and San Luis Potosí. By the year 1902, "Guggenheim investments in northern Mexico totaled some $12 million" (Meyer 448). Lastly, Sonora's Cananea Consolidated Copper Company was owned by Colonel William Greene—the "copper king of Sonora"—with stocks sold in Wall Street. At the helm of one the leading copper mines in the world, Greene's huge earnings allowed him to turn to Sonora's lumber and ranching interests; he is claimed to have owned close to forty thousand head of cattle in his Sonora ranch (Meyer 448).

[7]Accounts of Yaqui culture and history are a developing genre in Mexican-American literature, and well established in novels by Ana Castillo, Alfredo Véa, and Alma Luz Villanueva. In most cases, a Yaqui ancestry forms an important part of the characters' family background, but factored in as a "repressed" spirit of insurrection and vitality that somehow must be 1) liberated through art (e.g. Ana Castillo's character, the artist Pastora Velásquez Aké ["Aké was Yaqui. Her maternal grandfather was born in Sonora, Mexico," *Sapogonia* 310]; or Alma Luz Villanueva's Rosa Luján, painter and teacher, whose best work of art is her child ["Both of us Yaqui. Then perhaps those genes will dominate," *The Ultraviolet Sky* 231-32]); or 2) claimed as a way of life (Alberto, in Alfredo Véa's *La Maravilla*).

[8]The liberal interpretation achieved its most influential reading in Daniel Cosío Villegas's *Historia moderna de México* (1955). Villegas proposed that Mexico's legacy of liberal democracy, originating in the Wars of Independence, reached a culminating point in the Benito Juárez generation; the reactionary figures—such as Antonio López de Santa Anna and Porfirio Díaz—were a political aberration in Mexico's democratic tradition. In other words, Mexico's "liberal project" remains incomplete. For a counter-interpretation, see O'Gorman, 1960, where the latter disagrees with Villegas's "Jacobin" interpretation.

[9]This is a governing theme in many novels of the Mexican Revolution, beginning with *Los de abajo* (1915), by Mariano Azuela. Closer to Fontes's novel is, of course, *La región más transparente* (1958), by Carlos Fuentes; in this novel—which could be read as a sequel to *Dreams of the Centaur*—Fuentes also resurrects, as it were, Mexico's historical past—pre-Columbian, Colonial, post-Independence, and modern—during another critical moment in Mexico's post-revolutionary history: the presi-

dency of Miguel Alemán (1946-52). Alemán master-minded the changes within Mexico's leading political party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, and was considered by Daniel Cosío Villegas (1947) to be a neo-Porfirist president, hence an "aberration" in Mexico's tradition of liberal democracy.

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