Fuentes Fronterizo

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While Carlos Fuentes has always been an attentive and prolific commentator on U.S.-Mexico relations, until the mid-nineties his published works reflected little direct engagement with border issues. It is not surprising, given the dramatic events impacting both Mexico's northern border (especially the tensions and recent legislation concerning migrant flow to the U.S.) and its southern one (the 1994 Zapatista uprising in the southern border state of Chiapas timed to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]), that Fuentes would in recent years focus his creative eye on national identity at the site of its greatest pressure. It is past time, he hints, for central Mexico to turn its attention to the previously ignored fringes of national culture so as to interrogate both the nation's recent past and its future prospects.

In a series of articles written in 1994, some of the more important of which have been reprinted in *Nuevo tiempo mexicano*, Fuentes repeatedly expresses his concern about U.S. economic, cultural, and political inroads into Mexico while reiterating his support for NAFTA and the need for Mexico to integrate itself into a global economy. Fuentes negotiates this difficult balancing act by assuring his readers that Mexico is well positioned to deploy native creativity in the service of change, while maintaining pride in national sovereignty. Written at approximately the same time, the conclusion to his sweeping overview of Latin American culture since Columbus,

El espejo enterrado, phrases his call to action in more measured, elder-statesman-like tones:

> En medio de la crisis, la América Latina se transforma y se mueve [...] mediante elecciones y movimientos de masas, porque sus hombres y mujeres están cambiando y moviéndose. [...] Tal es la política de la movilización social permanente, como la llama el escritor mexicano Carlos Monsiváis. (*Espejo* 387)

It is this question of constant movement and change as it impacts on a strong national identity that most exercises Fuentes' inquiries in *Frontera de cristal* as well.

In both his fictional and non-fictional works, Fuentes has focused intensely on the question of how to define an authentic national culture within the parameters of a politically-circumscribed entity: what he calls "la nación legal." In his fictions, these debates typically crystallize around a strong male figure. Thus, his Artemio Cruz served famously to describe the mid-century corruption of the Revolutionary spirit into a quasi-global industrial enterprise. Similarly, Fuentes himself notes that *Cristóbal Nonato* presciently foresaw the central government's implication in the corruption and narcotraffic scandals of 1994 ("la literatura fantástica latinoamericana tiene un problema y es que se vuelve literatura realista en unos cuantos años" *Tiempo* 76-77). By a natural extension of his double role as fiction writer and political commentator, Fuentes' immediate response to the uprising in Chiapas was to argue its import in both national political and literary terms. His early articles on the topic discuss the Zapatista revolution in the context of other revolutionary actions in 1712, 1868, and 1910 as well as in parallel to fictions by Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez. Likewise, in his early articles on Chiapas he refers patronizingly to charismatic spokesman Marcos as a revolutionary-cum-culture critic "[quien] ha leído más a Carlos Monsiváis que a Carlos Marx" (*Tiempo* 116, 126). If it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that Fuentes' response to the southern border conflict has tended towards normalization of the Chiapan indigenous people into a ready-made centralist reality/fiction of the sort for which he is already justly famous, then on the other hand his engagement with the powerful northern border is most cogently expressed in his diatribe/novel *Frontera de cristal*, in which he addresses powerful economic trends through fictional representations of typical actors in this political drama.

Unlike the southern border, which is rich in indigenous tradition (the other within) and natural resources but poor in influence, in the northern border area Mexican creativity intersects directly with the transformative force of the U.S. economic might (the other outside). A few years ago Carlos Monsiváis, whom Fuentes quotes so approvingly in other contexts, published an article in a volume on NAFTA in which he underlines the political, social, and cultural cost of the traditional division between Mexico City and the rest of the country:

> Se sanctificó el juego de los opuestos: civilización y barbarie, capital y provincia, cultura y desolación. Desde principios de siglo [...] cunde una idea: la provincia es 'irredimible,' quedarse es condenarse. (197)

From Mexico City's point of view, the northern border has been imagined as perhaps the most "unredeemable" of all the

provincial representations, the region most affected by the cultural, linguistic, and moral corruption of Mexico's unfortunately proximate and powerful neighbor, the United States. This region is also, largely post-NAFTA, forcing itself on the Mexican national imaginary as the fastest growing and most prosperous region of the country. Necessarily, then, the engrained oppositional fiction of barbaric desolation rubs uncomfortably up against the economic reality of a booming industrialization that serves as a human magnet to inhabitants of less prosperous parts of the country.

Interestingly enough, both *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* and *Frontera de cristal* are notably silent on the northern border's potential contributions to Mexican national culture (in contrast with the almost purely cultural role he envisions for the Chiapan revolutionaries and their ready availability for fictional reimagination), and he consistently refers to the long northern borderline between Mexico and the U.S., a la Gloria Anzaldúa, as "la herida" or "la cicatriz" (e.g. *Tiempo* 200) where transnationally-imagined Mexican entrepreneurship meets U.S. xenophobia. Fuentes implicitly inserts his work into this volatile arena, and does so with an assumption of considerable authority on the nuances of U.S. culture given his early-childhood experience and his frequent adult visits to the U.S.[1] In so doing, Fuentes reiterates once again, as he has so often in past narratives, the amazingly persistent centrist pyscho-narrative of Mexican national identity derived from the mid-century work of thinkers like Octavio Paz and Samuel Ramos. Estelle Tarica summarizes this phenomenon well when she comments that Mexican identity is most succinctly and accurately defined as a crisis of masculinity. Tarica continues:

> The origins of the Mexican nation lie elsewhere, not in a transculturated reality but in 'pure' Mesoamerican Indian culture, in the Aztec 'nation' which the Spaniards conquered and violated. [...] [A] teleological narrative of progress linked to modernization [...] does nothing to alter the fact of the original violation. This originary violation always remains a violation that cannot be restituted. (mss 8-9)

In Fuentes' telling division of intellectual territory, Mexico's southern border evokes this lost origin, as a nostalgic remainder/reminder of that pure and masculine Indian; the northern border, in contrast, is not only modern and Americanized, it is shot through with persistent metaphors of feminization and violation.

Fuentes, then, perhaps unwittingly (or unwillingly) addresses in this novel the traditional dichotomies of Mexican fiction, where an interrogation of the tight imbrication of provincial identity and deviant female sexuality has often been particularly pronounced. In a manuscript on female prostitution in Tijuana, Gudelia Rangel Gómez writes a concise summary of the working of this stereotype:

> Como puede observarse en el proceso histórico de Tijuana, tanto su crecimiento poblacional como su desarrollo económico han ido de la mano de actividades estigmatizadas o consideradas prohibidas en otros lugares, esto ha provocado que la concepción generalizada de la ciudad haya sido un proceso de feminización de Tijuana; identificada primero con una 'dama generosa' que permitió mejores niveles de vida a su población, posteriormente una 'joven coqueta' que atraía hombres para 'perderlos' y finalmente la

> visión que se tuvo de una "prostituta decadente y grotesca" que utilizaban aquéllos que pasaban por Tijuana. (30)

Rangel Gómez's reading of Tijuana's infamous international image as a meat market for the United States—U.S. men cross the border to purchase sex from Mexican women, while Mexican men cross the border to sell their labor in U.S. fields—is a potent one, suggesting that from both central Mexico as well as the U.S. there arises a tendency to feminize the border in a particularly marginalizing and stigmatized manner. The northern border, in this respect, confirms the primacy of centrist notions about the provinces by antinomy. By setting border inhabitants outside the traditional construction of the motherland (*madre patria*) as a domestic space writ large, they help define the normalized space, holding up a distorting mirror to central Mexico's sense of itself as a nation of decent women and hardworking men. *Frontera de cristal* likewise inscribes the border existence as a particularly privileged location—simultaneously strange and familiar—to explore the gender- and regionally-bound nature of discursive constructions of Mexicanness itself.

While Fuentes is clearly familiar with Monsiváis' (and others') arguments about the cultural (non)status of the northern border in the Mexican imaginary, he is also extremely well-read in the works of U.S. based culture critics and theoreticians, where border studies are currently enjoying a boom. From both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, the region has been, in recent years, submitted to intense scrutiny both as an apocalyptic space of a rejected past/present, and—curiously—as the best hope for a utopic project for the future. And while these two sets of discussions often occur in a parallel manner, much of the discourse echoes those issues that both societies uneasily abject, repress or, curiously, celebrate, often through an exoticizing lens.

In their introduction to a recent *Border Theory* volume, David Johnson and Scott Michaelson summarize recent contributions to the astonishingly popular theoretical formulation of border studies in the US. They note the hundreds of conferences, articles, and books organized around this topic, making it what they call "one of the grand themes of recent political liberal-to-left work across the humanities and social sciences." They continue, in a perceptive and pointed conclusion:

> In the majority of this work, interestingly, the entry point of 'the border' or 'the borderlands' goes unquestioned, and, in addition, often is assumed to be a place of politically exciting hybridity, intellectual creativity, and moral possibility. The borderlands, in other words, are *the* privileged locus of hope for a better world. (2-3)

I think Johnson and Michaelson are absolutely accurate in this summary, and only add to it that, interestingly enough, the general direction of this liberal-to-left work exactly inverts the traditional dominant culture (both U.S. and Mexican) stereotypes about Mexico's northern border as a place of deplorable cultural mixing, intellectual and creative vacuum, and immoral depravity: the equal and alternative apocalyptic vision so succinctly summarized by Monsiváis. In these recent theoretical recuperations of the border, the characterization as a "locus for hope" can occur precisely only to the degree that the U.S.-Mexico border's concrete location is undermined and the border region becomes u-topic, a floating signifier for a displaced self.

Carlos Fuentes' *Frontera de cristal* offers a salient and unusual example of a blend between Mexican centrist thought and U.S.-high culture border theorization. For Fuentes, the political border is less important than the symbolic one: the division between developed and underdeveloped nations, first and third world. As he says in one of his millenary-inspired articles, "Here in Tijuana, in Cuidad Juárez, en Matamoros, all of Latin America begins" ("Milenio" quoted in Van Delden 199). Unsurprisingly, given Fuentes' narrative trajectory of focusing issues through typical figures, it is what one character calls "la frontera interior" (279) which dominates in this work of fiction, and the question of an authentic national identity locates itself only—or most persistently—in relation to displaced individuals who travel, frequently voluntarily, deep into gringolandia.

The "frontera" of the novel follows the flight of first class passengers between Mexico City and New York City, and includes on its border itinerary such equally alien and familiar sites as the deserts of Sonora, the vegetable fields of California, Chicago high rises, and a Cornell University student apartment in Ithaca, New York. Often limits and borders seem to be arbitrarily set, as in this comment, from the perspective of Mexico City debutante Michelina Laborde e Ycaza, on a border city's central plaza in the first chapter of the novel: "hasta aquí llegó el barroco, hasta el límite del desierto. Hasta aquí y no más" (16). The reader is left to wonder on the one hand if this (historically and geographically located) end of the baroque signals the end of high culture and the beginning of low gringo imports, or if on the other hand this profoundly uneducated, opportunistic young woman is merely making another display of her unwitting ignorance. In either case a line is drawn in the sand between fussy Mexican baroque artifacts and U.S. architecture's clean, modern lines. The point, however, is not geographical or cultural accuracy; Michelina's observation describes a psychic rather than a physical boundary line. Alternatively, in a strange blurring effect, Juan Zamora superimposes a bridge over the Río Bravo in Juárez with a bridge over Fall Creek in Ithaca. Even in the context of a solipsistically imagined internal border, surely this is one of the weirder collapsing effects in recent fiction. In such a context, it is no wonder that, en route to NYC on the same Delta flight as Michelina and rich industrialist Leonardo Barroso, Lisandro Chávez ponders his conclusion that: "Ya no había país, ya no había México, el país era una ficción o, más bien, un sueño mantenido por un puñado de locos" (191).

The first chapter sets the tone for this novel-in-stories with the incongruous arrival of arrogant, uneducated, aristocratic Michelina in Campazas on a whimsical response to her godfather's invitation to hop aboard his private plane and fly out for a visit. The first words of the novel, "No hay absolutamente nada de interés," which Michelina quotes from her guidebook, are confirmed by her personal observation:

> No vio nada. Su mirada le fue secuestrada por un espejismo: el río lejano y más allá las cúpulas de oro, las torres de vidrio [...]. Pero eso era del otro lado de la frontera de cristal. Acá abajo, la guía tenía razón: no había nada. (11-12)

Later she complains even more forcefully: "no hay absolutamente nada en Campazas de interés para nadie, forastero o lugareño, chilango o norteño" (25). Michelina's com-

plaint, so forcefully reiterated in the first chapter/story of the novel in both direct quotes and indirect authorial discourse, efficiently reinstates the centrist's contempt for the northern border region so succinctly described by Monsiváis in his summary of that antagonism, and captures as well the yearning of the Mexico City elite toward the delights imagined on the other side of the border. Here, as Michelina insists, there is nothing, only desert, the end of civilization, the limit point of hoary colonial monstrosities like the baroque, of interest to no one at all. There, on the other side, across the border, are the shining glass skyscrapers of modernity. Michelina's greatest disappointment is, of course, that she belongs politically to the uninteresting side, while yearning for transborder acceptance that she can never fully achieve, for all her aristocratic background and megadollars.

In a sense, Michelina poses the question that drives all of the characters in this novel. The northern Mexico borderlands are consistently drawn as absolutely empty and entirely without interest, except for the narrowly defined self-interest of greedy *maquiladora* plant operators. Yet, Mexican citizens confronted with the border experience are required to choose—and to choose this blankness both for reasons of national pride and for a vaguely defined loyalty to an implicitly centrist-defined heritage of cultural richness and hypermacho virility. Furthermore, like Michelina, they more often than not make these choices in an intellectual vacuum. In *Espejo* Fuentes writes, "Es fácil de cruzar la frontera ahí donde el río se ha secado o los montes son solitarios. Pero es difícil llegar al otro lado" (371). The difficulty for the Mexican citizen desirous of participating in the goodies across the border resides not just in the literal "tierra de nadie" at the borderline and the checks created by surveillance of the area by U.S. Immigration patrols, but also in the difficulty of arrival in a metaphorical sense. Another of the characters in this novel, Emiliano Barroso, ventriloquizing his children's complaint against him, explains longwindedly that life on the borderline forces certain unwelcome decisions: "nos obligaste a justificarnos, a negarte, afirmar todo lo que tú no eres para ser nosotros. Ser alguien. Ser del otro lado. [...] Si creces en la frontera tienes que escoger: de este lado o del otro" (115-16). More often than not such choices are made willy nilly for them. People are categorized and locked in place, unwelcomed in the U.S., unwilling to identify with an unwelcoming landscape back across the river.

In *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* Fuentes summarizes the problem concisely:

> Estados Unidos ha tenido éxito en todos los renglones en los que los mexicanos hemos fracasado. [...] Vivimos un fracaso nacional lado a lado con el máximo *success story* de la modernidad. (86)

This dramatically fraught vision gives the entire book a Jekyll/Hyde aggressivity (Fuentes himself uses this metaphor in a 1986 article published in *Nation* and repeats it ten years later in *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* for its explanatory force in describing border existence, 86) as borders are cut and recut, crossed and recrossed: feminine—masculine, margin—center, poor—rich, Mexico—U.S., outpost of the past—threshold of the future, vast cultural resources—impoverished technological obsession. And yet, of course, as Michelina fails to recognize, but the reader inevitably must note, the yearning for the crystalline dream on the other side is merely a mirage,

created out of straining her eyes in Mexico's strong northern desert sun.

Thus, the first chapter/story sets the stage for an impossible journey to the other side, and the inescapable entrapment in the dusty nowhere of the border town. Morever, it enforces the stereotypical centrist reading of the border as a cultural vacuum. In the second story, focusing on Juan Zamora, the hapless Mexican medical student living his border experience in upstate New York, the narrator adds another crucial element to the reader's apprehension of the structure of this tale. Juan, the narrator tells us, cannot face his own truth: "él va a estar de espaldas al lector todo el tiempo" (39). The narrator directly informs the reader that this turning away derives from shame, that Juan speaks out of deep and unrelenting pain about the way his social consciousness and commitment to his people had been sidetracked by his sexual obsession with a rich young fellow student whom he nicknames "Lord Jim," following the lead of Conrad's eponymous novel. The emotional depth of his tale in some sense counterpoints the frivolity of Michelina's; nevertheless, the net effect of Michelina's shamelessness and Juan's anguish is precisely the same. Both perspectives create specific expectations about the location and identity of the implied reader of this narrative. For both of these characters, and for the implied reader as well, the border area, however defined, is an empty space, at best a staging area for transients on their way from the center to the north, important because social movement and change coincide at the international boundary. And yet, because it is an indiscriminate and empty flux, it cannot anchor imagination. It is that messy, leaking *herida*; like the characters, doomed to femininity/feminization. Like Michelina, Juan in looking away from his Mexican reader is looking toward the U.S., turning her/his back not on *fronteras* actual or crystalline, but on central Mexico.

In *Frontera de cristal* the only characters who escape this manichean division do so at the terrible price of multiply wounding interior divisions. Thus, for example, José Francisco, who muses:

> Lo que es de acá es de acá y también de allá. Pero ¿dónde es acá y dónde allá, no es el lado mexicano su propio acá y allá, no lo es el lado gringo, no tiene toda tierra su doble invisible? (278-79)

He then adds: "Yo no soy mexicano. Yo no soy gringo. Yo soy chicano. No soy gringo en USA y mexicano en México. Soy chicano en todas partes" (281). José Francisco, thus, embodies the repressed "doble invisible" of both cultures, the "allá" for whatever local "acá" he happens to inhabit. The political-cultural identity marker, "soy chicano en todas partes," is also and most significantly in this novel an index of deeply seated, binational discrimination. The Michelinas and other elites of central Mexico may yearn for markers of U.S. prosperity, but they hold no brief for their Mexican-American brethren whose provincial origins, lower-class background, and unacceptably ethnic features relegate them conceptually to the underclass in Mexico as well as the U.S. Whitebread U.S. citizens see José Francisco and his ilk as potentially deportable illegal aliens irrespective of their ability to trace a genealogy of four hundred years of continuous residence in the same (now U.S.) territory.

In its Jekyll/Hyde fashion, Fuentes' narrative draws strong, and sometimes offensively stereotypical characterizations, and like other pop culture derivations of Rob-

ert Louis Stevenson's famous literary figure, makes no attempt to resolve the absolute schizophrenic split between competing versions of reality. Through illegal immigration, Mexico, he suggests earnestly through one of his characters, is well on its way to retaking the territories now occupied by the U.S. southwest—a rather tired cliché that is the basis of innumerable jokes in both countries. The problem, this dyspeptic character muses, is that Mexicans do not have the tools to deal with the implications of this demographic phenomenon. He asks himself:

> treinta millones de personas, en los Estados Unidos, hablaban español. ¿Cuántos mexicanos, en cambio, hablaban correctamente el inglés? Dionisio sólo conocía a dos, Jorge Castañeda y Carlos Fuentes. (69)

The point of this strange observation is driven home in another text, in *Nuevo tiempo mexicano*, where Fuentes remarks casually about a conversation he had over dinner with Bill Clinton in the U.S. President's private vacation retreat in Martha's Vineyard (156). It's a fairly good bet that Fuentes' fare at this presidential dinner was not the overcooked chicken that Dionisio complains about in his endless series of university "banquets." Thus, the problems of bad food and bad English run in tangent and, strangely enough, intersect as well with lack of access to the highest levels of public policy in the U.S. On the one hand, then, aristocratic, educated, English-speaking folks like Fuentes are welcomed to the rarefied summit of social and political exchange, whereas poor grunts like Dionisio have been relegated to the outer fringes of academic irrelevance in earnest speaking engagements in Missouri, Ohio, and Massachusetts (though to be sure, the reader is bound to reserve judgment on U.S. university life as the worst of all possible fates).

At the same time, Fuentes seems to suggest a direct relation between being forced to eat tired lettuce with heavy "French" dressing in a university dining facility and doing stoop labor in the lettuce fields of California. With an echo of Alfonso Reyes' famous exclamation, "¡Qué cultos son estos analfabetos!" (*Tiempo* 122), Dionisio sighs over the U.S. phenomenon of power without culture in contrast to the sophisticated grace and aristocratic manners of even the most powerless Mexican illiterate (78), an observation that sits uneasily on the page with the same character's dismissal of Mexican ability to deal with the consequences of the population explosion in the U.S. southwest. Sophisicated Mexican culture apparently has no power against engrained U.S. bad taste, unless the sophisticate in question is Carlos Fuentes himself, where excellent English will presumably free him from the horrors of chicken-fried steak sans *salsa ranchera* to make it palatable.

Dionisio, Michelina, and Juan are all, as must be clear at this point, crudely drawn characters, more inoffensively clown-like than dramatically Dr. Jekyllian. Yet, in placing in their mouths well-known and much re-stated clichés and earnest truisms about U.S.-Mexico relations, in offering no counterpoint to their projection of Mr. Hydian evil onto a vaguely defined US environment, Fuentes risks having all of *Frontera de cristal* fall into strident propagandism. In this respect *Frontera* once again is rhetorically very close to some of the more dramatic essayistic commentaries in *Tiempo.* There, for example, Fuentes draws a direct comparison between California governor Pete Wilson and Adolph Hitler, between *pogroms* and the Holocaust in early twenti-

eth-century Europe and contemporary anti-Mexican legislation in the U.S.'s most populous state, and seems to hint that the genocidal movement in the latter may be even more poisonous than Hitler's final solution because of an overtly racist quality:

> La clase política de California, vergonzosamente, ha atizado la campaña antimexicana. [...] Hitler necesitó judíos [...]. Pero la xenofobia y el racismo desembocan en el *pogrom* y el campo de concentración. Antes de salir a cazar mexicanos [...] los racistas norteamericanos deberían ver la película de Spielberg *La lista de Schindler*. Pero los judíos de Polonia eran blancos. La fobia contra los mexicanos tiene un nombre y un color: racismo. (*Tiempo* 110)

The tone of this comment is quite different from Dionisio's annoying cliché about bad food, yet it resonates in a similar register. Trivial or profound, both statements take a stereotype, elevate it to a truth, and exaggerate it to hysteria.

Undergirding both statements, informing both Fuentes' and his characters' hysteria, is a half-admitted, half-concealed structure of desire. Mexico may in this construction metaphorically represent Jekyll and the U.S. embody Hyde, but at the same time the U.S. is wealth and power and success, just across what should be an irrelevant political boundary, except for the fact that neither Mexico nor the U.S. wants to dissolve it. The U.S. and Mexico are a study in contrasts at all levels, and the existence of a sharply defined border helps keep binaries clean and (presumably) cultures separate and pure. At the same time, the U.S. and Mexico are a single unit, a continuity of land and culture, "Hermanos Anónimos" (119). And again: the U.S. is Mexico's desired and corrupting other, the magnet of spoiled rich girls and earnest students, of desperate *campesinos* and visionary industrialists, of internationally-celebrated writers and hapless mid-level academics. It is the very essence of that which they cannot not want to inhabit, and so it is ideologically normalized as that absolutely alien space which once was home, has always been home, and will be again. In *Espejo* Fuentes writes poetically:

> cuando el trabajador hispánico cruza
> la frontera mexicano-norteamericana,
> a veces se pregunta, ¿acaso no ha sido
> ésta siempre mi tierra? ¿Acaso no estoy
> regresando a ella? (373)

In *Frontera* his character Emiliano Barroso echoes this sentiment in almost the same words when he argues that the migrant workers "regresan a su propia tierra; nosotros estuvimos antes aquí" (120).

There is another valence to the Jekyll/Hyde metaphor as well. In the original story, Jekyll is a mild mannered and well meaning medical doctor; his violent alter ego Mr. Hyde is the result of a scientific experiment gone terribly wrong. Following upon the familiar Gloria Anzaldúa metaphor of the borderline as an open wound, Fuentes too recurs repeatedly in his work to the image of this "tensa frontera común entre México y Estados Unidos: no una frontera, escribí una vez, sino una cicatriz. La herida se está abriendo de nuevo" (*Tiempo* 109). The concluding essay of the volume *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* recapitulates this favored metaphor: "¿no una frontera, piensa uno a veces, sino una cicatriz? ¿Se cerrará para siempre, volverá a sangrar? ¿Cicatriz o herida?" (200). As a logical extension, the character in *Frontera de cristal* most closely associated with the wounded border is the gay former

Cornell medical student, now a physician, whose function is to take cognizance emblematically of the "enfermedad de la frontera" (273) in the final pages of the novel. It is, naturally, a wounding which is both physical (the violence against Mexicans takes a graphic form, including two central characters shot to death at the international border), but more importantly for this novel, the border is lived as a pyschic illness that transcends any specific geographical location.

Juan Zamora's transborder consciousness creates a palimpsest out of Ciudad Juárez and Ithaca, New York. Just before the climactic final scene of bloody death, Zamora indulges in reminiscence so as to more firmly anchor this parallel: "Parado frente al puente de Juárez a El Paso, Juan Zamora recuerda con una mueca ingrata el tiempo que vivió en Cornell" (274). When we turn back to the second chapter of the novel and to his depressed and embarrassed description of his days in Ithaca as a student, we can already see in germ the origins of this unusual conflation. Upon describing the wintery small town, the narrator notes: "Juan se siente, casi, en México, en San Juan del Río o Tepeji, esos lugares donde a veces iba de excursión." Ithaca is already, by an odd metaphorical linkage, identified as a Mexican town. Even more crucially for this extended metaphor, like the U.S.-Mexico border, Juan feels Ithaca too is organized around an inescapably present wound: "La barranca de Ithaca es un gran tajo hondo y prohibitivo, pero por lo visto también un abismo seductor." The difference between border experiences, he seems to suggest, is that while the seduction of the international border is horizontal (to cross over to the other side), the compulsion of Ithaca is vertical: the attraction of heights and depths: "Esa barranca es el vértigo en el orden de ese lugar" (42-43). In Juan Zamora's repeated dream, he and his homosexual lover Jim Rowlands plummet deliciously to their deaths in the Ithaca gorge: "se miran, sonríen, se ponen ambos de pie sobre la cornisa del puente, se toman de la mano y saltan los dos al vacío" (64). This dream is the index of Juan's shame at his weakness of mind and body upon falling in love with, and being abandoned by, an aristocratic young white man. On another level, of course, his entire career—and not just his student love life—has from some perspectives taken this sharp downward turn, from the enchantments of the north to the "vacío" of the borderlands where he ignores slights about his sexuality and tends the illnesses of drug addicts and AIDS sufferers. For Juan Zamora, then, the border is a human garbage pit of disease and violent death, the counterpart and counterpoint to Ithaca's clean water-cut gorges, a place where he redeems his humanity and his shame in service to others.

Juan's meditations in the final chapter of the novel are interrupted by the call of "médico, médico," and while the fragmentary narrative is interrupted at this point, the reader soon learns that he is called from his solitary thoughts by the violent death of Leonardo Barroso, assassinated on the Juárez-El Paso international bridge (275, 292-93). It is far too late to help the rich international investor; nothing can be done to piece together the broken body. In fact, as the narrator makes sure to remind us, the damage to the cranium is so severe that Dr. Juan Zamora does not even recognize in the shattered cadaver his benefactor, the man who sent him to Cornell in the first place. The irony of this lack of connection is underscored in the last narrative vignette of

the novel, which describes small-time gigolo Rolando Rozas, self-importantly reporting the incident in his battery-less cellular phone as he passes by the accident scene on his way to El Paso to look for another gullible young woman to seduce.

Despite all these negative images, and insistently enforced negative stereotypes, the novel intermittently insists upon visualizing the border region both cynically and optimistically as a place of human possibility where differences embrace and cohabit. Fuentes codes this alternative vision in the image of glass, which both gives the novel its title and serves as a leit motiv running through the entire fiction. The symbolic resourses of the image cluster glass-mirror-mirage are familiar to any reader of Fuentes' recent work, where they appear almost obsessively, serving as the dominant metaphor in works as different as *El espejo enterrado* and *Gringo viejo.* Already in first paragraphs of the first chapter of *Frontera de cristal,* Michelina establishes the importance of this image. Looking out over the desert as she arrives in the nowhere town of Campazas, she yearns toward the other side of the border, only to find her gaze interrupted by a mirage and "torres de vidrio [...] frontera de cristal" (12).

Fuentes emphasizes this metaphor even more insistently in the title story/chapter of this fiction, "La frontera de cristal." This story is set in New York City, where the narrator focuses on a hallucinatory excess of glass in that border town's great skyscrapers. Fuentes imagines an almost surreal glass building as the setting for this narrative—"muros de cristal, puertas de vidrio [...] pisos [...] de un cristal opaco." The ubiquity of absolute transparency all around her tempts office worker Audrey, in a manner parallel to the seductions of Ithaca's gorges on Juan Zamora, with the attractive vertigo of the depths: "y a veces le gustaba que su mirada se desplomase cuarenta pisos conviertiéndose, en el trayecto, en copo de nieve, en pluma, en mariposa" (204). Like Juan's repeated nightmare of jumping from Triphammer Bridge into Fall Creek gorge hand-in-hand with Jim, Audrey's dream too involves both falling and flight in various senses of the words: falling in love, falling to her death; flight up from the depths, flight from an intolerable situation.

Inevitably, this most poetic of the stories included in the novel focuses on a transborder encounter. Audrey, working in her office, looks up to see Lisandro Chávez cleaning windows from the outside. As Lisandro gradually wipes away the layer of grime, "la transparencia del cristal fue develando el rostro de ella" (206); she too receives a clearer and clearer visual image of the man on the other side, seeing in Lisandro her dream lover and the opposite to her disappointing ex-husband. Interestingly enough, Audrey in this sense serves as the counterpart to Michelina from the first story, for while Michelina looks through a mirage toward the glass towers on the other side of the geographical border, Audrey, the inhabitant of the glass tower, looks across the border of the window frame into a Mexican's face and reads it as an "espejismo" (208). For inhabitants of both sides of these various borders, then, the gaze involves a duplicitous gesture, mirroring the self, desiring the other, unaware that the object of desire is a mirage.

For Lisandro, too, the unknown office worker figures in an invented narrative about her life in which he projects onto her the image of his desire such that "deseó intensamente tenerla, tocarla aunque fuera a través del cristal" (209). This tale of a fu-

gitive encounter on the fortieth floor is doomed, of course; the gringa and the Mexican man remain irremediably "separados por la frontera de cristal" (210). In the final section of the story, Audrey writes her name on the sparkling glass in lipstick; he responds only with his nationality before exchanging a chaste and passionate salute: "los labios se unieron a través del vidrio," and when she opens her eyes, he is gone (211). It would be easy to overread this ultimately silly poetic scenario as a surreal vision of transborder safe sex; more important to Fuentes' narrative vision, however, is the emphasis it places on reaffirming the centrality of the glass/border metaphor.

José Francisco, the hippy-biker chicano, is the unlikely author of the novel's most redemptive gesture, and the one which brings together the implications of this repeated image pattern focusing on a concept of the border which is as impermeable and as transparent as glass, of a mirrored self and a miraged other. He deals in contraband literature, carrying Mexican manuscripts to El Paso and Chicano writings to Juárez, zipping back and forth across the bridge on his motorcycle, dealing in mutual understanding, "para que todos se quisieran un poquito más" (281). When he is stopped by agents from both sides of the border looking for drugs, he encourages them in their search through his bags, insisting that he is carrying subversive writing. He watches the puzzled agents throw the papers into the air, helps them empty his bags, follows the scattered manuscript sheets as they float across the river on the breeze, sees people in Juárez grabbing for them, and "lanzó un grito de victoria que rompió para siempre el cristal de la frontera" (282). A pragmatist might ask what the actual, functionally illiterate Spanish-, Yaqui-, or Mixtec-speaking people waiting at the edge of the river to cross over to the other side for day work raking gardens or cleaning houses might in fact make of the dense theoretical and philosophical meditations of Antonio Cornejo Polar, or what redemptive power Denise Chavez' or Sandra Cisneros's English-language stories (all cited as examples of these subversive papers) might have to any Mexican other than Carlos Fuentes and Jorge Castañeda, the sole exemptions the novel cites to a generalized inability to deal with the English language. Fuentes' point, however, seems to be the familiar one of the trickle-down effect of a faith in paper, his own *Frontera de cristal* being an exemplary text, for liberatory political action. The metaphor of the glass border serves as a mirror of the self and a mirage of otherness; once illusion is dispelled, the glass disappears, mutual understanding rules, and Lisandro and Audrey can (theoretically) enjoy a real kiss.

The novel does not end quite so idealistically, but rather returns to a more sombre tone in the two closing narrative vignettes of the novel, both focused on violent death, the first involving a group of twenty-three immigrants brought across the river by Gonzalo Romero and murdered on the other side of the border by a gang of white supremacist skinheads (285-88); the second on the assassination of *maquiladora* owner Leonardo Barroso. At the same time, in the italicized poetic interludes between vignettes, and in the final italicized section of the novel, Fuentes evokes the image of the young Chicano flinging his papers in the air: "*al norte del río grande, / al sur del río bravo, / que vuelen las palabras*," leading to the final words in the narrative, echoing pre-Revolutionary Mexican president Porfirio Díaz' most famous pronouncement on

US-Mexican relations: "*pobre México, / pobre Estados Unidos, tan lejos de Dios,/ tan cerca el uno del otro*" (296).

Frontera de cristal, with its explicit borderlands focus, suggests a need to interrogate this old Porfirian claim more rigorously rather than merely repeat a catchphrase from the turn of the last century. Accordingly, Fuentes' final gesture shifts the dictum from its original complaint about an unequal relation ("pobre México, tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de los Estados Unidos") to a shared burden in which the United States and Mexico mirror each other as equal sufferers of cultural proximity, and one which José Francisco's airborne writings will have some role in alleviating. Implicitly, equivocally, the old centrist focus (Mexico City, New York City) gives way metaphorically to a new understanding of the concept of center, based in those territories which represent from each side the limits of individual cultures, but in a more global understanding, the contact zone and thus shared center between them. This center is both the utopia where cultural exchange will flower and barriers will be broken down, and the distopia where the realities of intermingling result in violent death.

From both of the old cultural centers, of course, the borderlands represent an unattractive emptiness, the no man's land between the limit of the baroque and the beginning of the glass towers, the red zone of transgressive and abjected sexuality linked to a traitorous femaleness. *Frontera*'s emphasis on contemporary social movement, on images of center and limit, picks up on and develops a common theme in Fuentes' recent writings. More importantly, the uneasy jostling of cultures and cliches in *Frontera* underlines and undermines Fuentes' traditional narrative reliance on centrist imagery and strong male figures. In an essay in *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* he comments that "el viaje es el movimiento original de la literatura," and that such quests lead inexorably back so as to "comunicarnos de nuevo con el mito del origen," making of all journeys a psychic "viaje al centro del origen" (27). While he is reluctant to specify more narrowly, Fuentes does agree with his friend Martín Caporrós that "México tiene un *origen*" (55). When this *origen* and this journey are described in centrist terms, implicitly harking back to Tenochtitlán, Fuentes is on familiar ground, dealing with the deeply rooted complexities of a sedimented cultural base. However, when the journey is a literal one, and involves a transborder migration through a zone defined as culturally empty, our author runs into difficulties.

Interestingly enough, in *Tiempo* Fuentes evokes the image of the mandala to describe a parallel metaphor for Mexican history and one that helps him resolve the impasse. He writes that "el arte de los antiguos mexicanos" (i.e., the Aztecs, the central Mexican dominant culture at the time of the conquest) returns obsessively to mandala-like figures, "diseños basados en un esquema de cuatro rectángulos en torno a un círculo que es un vacío" (207). In some sense, *Frontera de cristal* describes exactly such a mandala-like structure, reinventing a centrist perspective but now translating it from Tenochtitlán to Juárez, and localizing this empty center on the northern border between Mexico and the United States. In Fuentes' poetic, metaphoric vision, this invented borderlands subscribes to the old, stereotypical Mexican centrist calumny about the northern border in its emptiness and lawlessness. At the same time, it imitates the contemporary U.S.-based border

theory projection of the region as a site of intellectual creativity and social and political hybridity. The border region almost too neatly conflates these symbolic geographic and moral exclusions from the healthy body of the state. From both U.S. and Mexican dominant culture models, it represents that tacky, vile and threatening thing that middle-class morality must resist, and cannot stop talking about. Most potently, the border becomes a powerful countertext defining the whole of Mexico as a passive whore to be fucked over: "Mexico lay down and the gringo paid in the morning" (Rodríguez 88). Rodríguez's phrase succinctly captures U.S. male fantasy as grounded in racist misogyny and reinforced in a gendered structural inequality between nations, while at the same time it echoes a Mexican inferiority complex about its relation to the U.S. as most strikingly captured in Mexican misogyny about traitorous females who sleep with conquerors (the very heart of Paz's much discussed commentary on Malinche, Mexico, and Masculinity).

García Canclini too marks a similar change, and dates the reformation of the old image to a recent shift in public perception:

> Desde principios de siglo hasta hace unos quince años, Tijuana había sido conocida por un casino [...], cabarets, dancing halls, liquor stores a donde los norteamericanos llegaban para eludir las prohibiciones sexuales [...]. (294)

Regardless of the effects of industrialization and modernization that have changed the face of the city, García Canclini finds it necessary to remind his readers of the recent past, if only to tell us that this past is no longer representative of contemporary reality. In effect, then, García Canclini, like Fuentes, has found an answer to Rodríguez's question on how to write the history of so unmonumental a city; all these writers set up a contrast between the distanced and romanticized calumny that overlays upon the city the images of the past as a depraved female and the contrasting image of macho modern industry. This rejected, feminized image must be obsessively called to memory along with the abjuration that it is no longer either accurate or adequate.

In her discussion of the sexual interface of colonial encounters, Ann Laura Stoler offers a helpful point of departure for an analysis of this trope. Her work focuses on what she calls the "analytic slippage between the sexual symbols of power and the politics of sex," and asks the important questions:

> Was sexuality merely a graphic substantiation of who was, so to speak, on the top? Was the medium the message, or did sexual relations always 'mean' something else, stand in for other relations, evoke the sense of *other* [...] desires? (346)

Despite, or perhaps because of its shocking physicality, control and manipulation of the sexualized trope serves both central Mexico and U.S. dominant discourses as a salient instrument of textual authority in constructing and controlling discussions about the dangerous attractions of a degraded border reality.

In this manner the "unhistorical" border city offers a prominent example of the operations of centrist historical discourse that have been so ably dissected by Benedict Anderson, although Anderson's work develops without the necessary additional nuance of attention to that history's gender politics:

> Having to 'have already forgotten' tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be 'reminded' turns out to be a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies. (201)

Stoler would add to this analysis a reminder of the significance of gender politics in the construction of these historical models.

When we turn back to the border with these insights in mind, it is striking how consistently images of sneaky, invading hordes are linked to phobias about female sexuality and disguised in dominant culture's fears of celebrations of social change. Welchman's admirable overview of the "philosophical brothel" in western thought helps bring some of these imaginary overlays together:

> Remembering Derrida's etymological association of the border, the plank, and brothel, Picasso's image [*Demoiselles D'Avignon*] can be read as an arrest and incarnation of the non-processional border, the purest moment of modernist border fetishism. This brothel/border is a place of violence and consumption which objectifies and consumes both women and others. It is this *bordello* that is the scene of the masculinist metaphorics of war and combat, of the appropriative transplantation of so-called primitive faces onto the already fractured bodies of the so-seen deviant women. It is here that the western fantasies of philosophy, the non-western other, and sexual violence converge on the territory of the border (180).

The border region, then, speaks most allegorically, and most clearly, to its old image as an abjected feminine presence. It is the continuing resonance of this image that must and cannot be forgotten which reveals unsuspected weaknesses and fault lines in much Mexican, Chicano, and mainstream U.S. theoretical meditations on any national self image as a function of a play of ossified notions of masculinity and femininity.

In the end, however, Fuentes' mandala and his journey to the origin decry a common basis. Both vacuum (Michelina's desert of the opening pages) and cultural center (José Francisco's redemptive floating papers at the end), Carlos Fuentes' border enters current discussions less as an accurate reflection of the US-Mexico region and its complex politics and social interactions than as a mirror held up to that experienced border crosser himself. *Frontera de cristal* does not provide a study of the border per se, but rather a glimpse into the world of a Fuentes *fronterizo*.

Notes

[1] Fuentes' transnational experience is such that noted Chicana thinker and culture critic María Herrera-Sobek has argued forcefully that he should be considered a Chicano writer.

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