

**The Border: Imagined, Invented or
from the Geopolitics of Literature
to Nothingness**

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Writing the Border

The Languages and Limits of Representation

The Great Divide

The diverse, complex and contradictory ways in which Mexico, its culture, and its peoples have been imagined, portrayed, glorified or vilified by the people of the U.S. have a long history. They began with the conflicts between the two colonizing powers, Spain and England. And they continued as the young United States expanded into territories occupied by the Indians and possessed first by Spain and later Mexico. In the process, a cultural and physical space known as the Border emerged in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, it resulted in both a physical and a psychological distancing during and because of the U.S. nineteenth-century expansion and its conquest of what is now the U.S. Southwest. For political, cultural and psychological purposes this movement of displacement rendered the region's former owners, the Mexican as 'other,' that is, the construction of a different identity seen as dissonant to monolithic Western discourses of power.¹ The dynamics of "othering" finally becomes self-serving for it affirms an on going process of, in this case, Anglo identity. Constituted as cultural contestants, the Mexican became everything the Anglo was not.

In their studies of Anglo attitudes towards Mexicans Carey McWilliams and Arnaldo de Leon² present the U.S. expansionist project as an acquisition of territory justified by the mission Anglos assumed as civilizers of the hinterlands with a need to control all that was barbaric-sexuality, vice, nature, and people of color. The initial constructions were racist: that

¹See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Random House, 1978) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982); ; Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity : A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

² Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1949). Arnaldo de Leon, *They called them greasers* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1983).

is, essential characteristics of personality, intelligence and morals were attributed to physical appearances. Mexicans were perceived in light of their differences from Anglos. Americans carried to the Southwest values constructed by the founding fathers, of English descent, male, white and Protestant—self-reliance, a puritanical morality, the erasure of the past, and a work ethic. They saw Mexicans as racially impure, descended of the Spaniards, who were contaminated by Moorish blood, and the “blood thirsty” Aztecs. “ ‘They are of mongrel blood, the Aztec predominating,’ asserted Gilbert D. Kingsbury, writing about the Mexicans of Brownsville in the early 1860s”.³ Positioned in relation to their differences to Anglos, Mexicans appeared to be dependent, resigned, complacent, not committed to improvement or progress, but rather to fun and frolic. For these expansionists “to have accepted other than ‘white supremacy and civilization’”, says de Leon, “was to submit to Mexican domination and to admit that Americans were willing to become like Mexicans. The prospect of being dominated by such untamed, uncivil, and disorderly creatures made a contest for racial hegemony almost inevitable.”⁴ Descriptions of Mexicans through the nineteenth century, some inoffensive, most virulent, are all grounded on the trope of difference, a rhetorical construct founded on paradigms of dissimilarity.

The border was the line established both to delineate and inscribe that difference. Where the line is de-limited, the ‘other’ begins. The boundary was sacred, not to be transgressed. Yet, paradoxically, bridges and crossing passages were created as legitimate spaces where separation is established, precisely because the frontier, as de Certeau says, is created by contacts where “the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points.”⁵ In the case of the United States-Mexico border, the “contact zone” has become a “combat zone” where crossings and/or transgressions are the rule, rather than the

³ de Leon, 15.

⁴ de Leon, 13.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, “Spatial Stories” *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 127.

exception.⁶ Constructions, concrete and imaginary, are established distancing the 'other' at least symbolically, and in this case, south of that de-limitation.

The inhabitants of the United States continue to wrestle with that "alien territory." "South of the Borderism" is what I have called borrowing from Edward Said, the way that the United States and its peoples have come to terms with Mexico as they continuously invent an 'other' image, and defend and define their own. In their writings, and in contrast with the way Anglos constructed or invented themselves (stereotypically as morally superior, hard working, thrifty), the Mexican could in the best of cases be mysterious, romantic, fun-loving, laid back, colorfully primitive or alternatively conniving, highly sexualized, disorderly, lazy, violent, and uncivilized.⁷ Hollywood appropriated all of the images, from 'the greaser' and the violent bandits, to the Latin lover and the Mexican spitfire.⁸

This paper concentrats on the way Anglo Americans have invented and constructed Mexicans and themselves textually over the last 150 years, taking the border as a point of departure, and in its widest definition: a literal, figurative, psychological, cultural and ever changing constructed space. It follows the invented images that arise from such texts, and registers the changes that these constructions undergo as interpretations of the border zone increasingly depict it as a space of confrontation.

South of the Border, Down Mexico Way

⁶ I use the word "contact zone" as defined by Mary Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* (New York: Routledge, 1992), that is "a space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict"(p.6).

⁷ Said Edward. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

⁸ See George Hadley-García, *Hispanic Hollywood: The Latins in Motion Pictures* (New York: Citadel Press Book, 1990). For representation of Mexicans in the arts see: James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

As soon as a boundary is established, the other side becomes desirable, the threshold to cross into the unknown, the yet unexplored landscape where 'the self' is discovered and the 'other' is invented. The trope of difference becomes the figure most utilized by travellers and novelists writing about their adventures "south of the border" This trope, established from the initial moment of encounter and still prevalent today, opposes U.S. 'civilization' to Mexican 'barbarism'. It seems, however, an encounter of images where language, as a code of communication, is never or seldom mentioned, stressing and acknowledging that writers cannot (or choose not to) cross one of the main borders: the spoken code. Anthropologically we could say that such literature remains etic, and not emic, that is, the perspective is established as outside and above the culture. Paradoxically, and because of that positioning, the attraction to a regenerative vitality conceived as present within 'Barbarism' continues to seduce the traveller to the point of demarcation, both physically and psychologically, where the 'other' is found. The adventure can be positive or negative. Many times it becomes a place appropriated as material to feed the imagination back home, perceived as devoid of adventure.

In *Another Mexico* , Graham Greene describes the passing of the threshold with positive yearnings.

The border means more than a customs house, a passport officer, a man with a gun. Over there everything is going to be different; life is never going to be quite the same again after your passport has been stamped and you find yourself speechless among the money-changers. The man seeking scenery imagines strange woods and unheard-of mountains; the romantic believes that the women over the border will be more beautiful and complaisant than those at home; the unhappy man imagines at least a different hell; the suicidal traveller expects the death he never finds. The atmosphere of the border-it is like starting over again; there is something about it like a good

confession: poised for a few happy moments between sin and sin. When people die on the border they call it 'a happy death'.⁹

For Paul Theroux, the crossing resembled a descent into hell.

Looking south, across the river, I realize that I was looking toward another continent, another country, another world, . . . The frontier was actual: people did things differently there . . . No people, but cars and trucks were evidence of them. Beyond that, past the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo, was a black slope-the featureless, night-haunted republics of Latin America . . . Laredo required the viciousness of its sister city to keep its own churches full. Laredo had the airport and the churches; Nuevo Laredo, the brothels and basket factories. Each nationality had seemed to gravitate to its own level of competence. The frontier was more than an example of cozy hypocrisy; it demonstrated all one needed to know about the morality of the Americas, the relationship between the puritanical efficiency north of the border and the bumbling and passionate disorder-the anarchy of sex and hunger-south of it.¹⁰

He doesn't stop there; Theroux's racism is rampant: Mexicans are naturally corrupt, lawless, unhygienic, a brutal and beaten people who "cruelly beat their animals." Laredo becomes a microcosm of all the United States; Nuevo Laredo not just of Mexico, but of Latin America. Mary Pratt sees Theroux's writing as exemplifying "a discourse of negation, domination, devaluation and fear that remain in the late 20th century, a powerful ideological constituent of the West's consciousness of the people and places it strives to hold in subjugation."¹¹ In both writings, Greene's and Theroux's, a distancing occurs, either by idealization or denigration.

⁹ Graham Greene, *Another Mexico* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939):13.

¹⁰ Paul Theroux, *Old Patagonia Express* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979): 40-41.

¹¹ Pratt, 219.

The journeys into Mexico say more about the travellers, their desires, fears, ideology and world view, than about Mexico or its inhabitants. The voyages are, finally, quests for self-definition, self-indulgence or self-affirmation. Some are evasions, flights from the law or from unspoken societal codes: searches for spaces where rules can be broken. For others, the displacements become rites of initiation, crossings of thresholds toward the unexplored. For Stephen Crane (1871-1900) the other side became the last frontier, a place where the Anglo hero could be tested and prove his strength, usually against the weakly constructed Mexican. For Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?) it represented a "crossing of the bar," the quest for a romantic and heroic death. For Jack London (1876-1916), who initially supported the Mexican Revolution in his short story, "The Mexican" (written before he had been to Mexico), the country became a moveable feast for horses, bullfights, and heavy drinking. His stories about trials and tribulations pit the 'good' American against the 'bad' Mexican. Only the fittest survive in his fiction; one may very well imagine who they were. Exceptions did exist. There were writers who established a dialogue based on mutual exchange and common goals for humanity. For John Reed (1877-1920), the other side of the border was a revolutionary fiesta, a place where his ideas were being put into practice. His writings had a political agenda, convincing the U.S. public of the Revolution's legitimacy.¹² Another such traveller was John Kenneth Turner(1879-1948) who went into Mexico and wrote an exposé of the atrocities of the Porfirio Díaz regime.¹³

Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) considered Mexico her second home, one where she found her humanistic, accepting and magnanimous self. In "Hacienda," the protagonist, Porter's alter ego, different from ethnocentric Anglos, accepts the brown faces of the inhabitants. The story, however, is grounded on the displacement of the 'other' as subaltern. The Indian is initially represented as a marginal character living within a class-based and racist Mexican system, unchanged by the Revolution. The character is then positioned as the stoic

¹² John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (New York and London:Appleton &Co.,1914).

¹³ John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Chicago, C. H. Kerr & Co.,1911).

figure whose fatalistic worldview renders her/him a passive protagonist in life, lacking agency in the construction of her/his future. The controlling protagonist speaks with the voice of authority and knowledge . "In the Indian the love of death had become a habit of the spirit. It had smoothed out and polished the faces to a repose so absolute it seemed studied, though studied for so long it was held now without effort: and in them all was a common memory of defeat. The pride of their bodily posture was the mere outward shade of passive , profound resistance; the lifted, arrogant features were a mockery of the servants who lived within."¹⁴ Besides perceiving the "Indian" as a homogenous entity, her authoritative positioning leaves no space for her or her contemporary readers to go beyond the monolithic and essentialist construction of the 'other' .

Edna Ferber (1933) was denied entrance into Mexico by that Government for her story, "They Brought Their Women". The story narrates the tale of three protagonists who journey to Mexico not as travellers towards the unknown but as tourists toward the cliché.¹⁵ As they cross the border at Laredo, one of them says, "Look. Those are the peons Rivera's been painting." ¹⁶ It can be read as an excellent story of the way tourists experience the commodified Mexico advertised or recreated by the Mexicans themselves. Xochimilco, Teotihuacán, curios, and the Casa de Azulejos become reified . The characters and language deployed to capture that touristy reality are accordingly stereotypical.

For the children of the sixties, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, Mexico was a place of flight, a hallucinogenic trip where adventure and sex became heightened experiences.

¹⁴ Edward Simmen, *Gringos in Mexico* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1988):140.

¹⁵Paul Fussel differentiates three types of voyagers: explorers, travelers and tourists. "The explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveller that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him bu the arts of mass publicity." *Abroad* : British Literary Traveling Between the Wars, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980:39. Also see James Clifford, "Notes on Travel and Theory" in *Inscriptions* 5: 1989 who takes Fussel's definitions as a point of departure to theorize post-colonial displacement.

¹⁶ Simmen, 205-206.

Certainly, it was a place to play, as is evident in this passage from *Lonesome Traveler* by Jack Kerouac.

The moment you cross the little wire gate and you're in Mexico, you feel like you just sneaked out of school when you told the teacher you were sick and she told you you could go home, 2'o'clock in the afternoon . . . you look around and you see happy smiling faces, or the absorbed dark faces of worried lovers and fathers and policemen, you hear cantina music from across the little park of balloons and popsicles ...You walk thirsty through the swinging doors of a saloon and get a bar beer, and turn around and there's fellas shooting pool, cooking tacos, wearing sombreros, some wearing guns on their rancher hips, and gangs of singing businessmen ...It's a great feeling of entering the Pure Land, especially because it's so close to dry faced Arizona and Texas and all over the Southwest-but you can find it, this feeling, this fellaheen feeling about life, that timeless gayety of people not involved in great cultural and civilization issues . . .

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In another short story by Kerouac "A Billowy Trip in the World" , the protagonist spends a day in a whorehouse living out his sexual fantasies; in a place where rules and laws are not in effect, you can let it all hang out. At the end of the orgiastic rituals he and his male friend (serious bonding has just occurred) very symbolically "got towels and jumped right into ice cold showers inside and came out refreshed and new" before heading back home.¹⁸ For Kerouac, as for William Burroughs and other refugee "hipsters" it became the haven from U.S. law. Burroughs, in *Junky*, writes about his adventures with peyote in Mexico, after having "jumped bail in the States."¹⁹ The goal of the trip: to trip.

¹⁷ Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (New York: McGraw, 1960):21-22.

¹⁸ Simmen, 280.

¹⁹ William Burroughs, *Junky* (New York: Penguin,1977): 142.

Latin American writing of the last decades has exerted an undeniable influence in American and World Literature. Courses on Latin American literature at U.S. Universities and the so called Latin American 'boom' in translations of the last ten years are not only showing Americans the complexities of Mexican culture, but giving readers the view from the inside. A cross-fertilization is certainly at work, at the level of discourse. A story written in 1980 by Eugene Garber, "An Old Dance" is reminiscent of *The Plumed Serpent* by D.H. Lawrence and *A Change of Skin* by Carlos Fuentes who, following Lawrence, continued to unearth the Toltec and Aztec pantheon in literature. In the story, a couple take their son into Mexico, the necessary space for his initiation into manhood. Rituals at the corridas, pyramids and at the local market, the "Mercado Libertad" will make him the macho he may not become in the United States, where he might be considered "a cringing, hypersensitive, maybe gay persona".²⁰

In most cases, at the conclusion of the adventure, the traveller crosses back, returns to the safety of his home, initiated and transformed, but secure in his identity and place in the world. "Tomorrow," says the wife in Garber's story, "back to the good ol' USA."²¹

The neo-nationalism of the last decade in America has accentuated the return sequence. Oscar Mandel in his 1985 story "From Chihuahua to the Border," no longer narrates the crossing of the threshold or the call to adventure, but registers the return. Mexico taught the protagonist nothing; there was no transformation. The apotheosis occurred when he crossed back.

"...And then, unbelievable, Texas-...And that time only, never before and never after-an exaltation of patriotism swelled in my rib cage. I could have kissed the asphalt. We halted at a bright chromium-and-plastic 'Eats,' drank the water, spread the butter, poured the milk, and marveled after three months at the smiles and the cleanliness. Ah ,

²⁰ Simmen, 339.

²¹ Simmen, 367.

those Indians are not a cheerful race...Here was my white-toothed America again, "Hi folks, what'll it be?" 22

In 1974, Drewey Waynn Gunn published a book on U.S. and British writers who had written about Mexico from 1556-1973. It was published in Spanish by Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1977. Written at the time when a new sensibility in questions of ethnicity, class and gender was emerging, this book, although valuable, makes an anachronistic reading all too possible. However critical, the author finally positions himself with the authors and protagonists as an outsider who felt "excluded" from an "alien world" that inspired "fear" to the visitor (traveler or tourist).²³ The reason that Anglos find Europe a more familiar and shareable place, Gunn discovers, is that finally Mexico is 30 % pure Indian and 60% mestizo. At San Cristobal de las Casas, he says, "I faced an alien world from which I was forever excluded and that was therefore somewhat frightening."²⁴ *The Plumed Serpent, The Children of Sanchez*, as he read them in the United States, were exactly how he remembered Mexico: obscure, death and brutality around. He then quotes Henry Bamford Parkes' *A History of Mexico* (1938) to illuminate the reader further: "The Mexicans more than most other people were a race who always lived close to death, a closeness which had belonged both to those who worshipped Huitzilopochtli and to those who had introduced the Inquisition and the bullfight."²⁵ In 1974, Gunn re-elaborates the discourse of 'civilization and barbarism' so prevalent in the 19th century in the American continent, the distancing trope continuously rewritten since the first encounter. Let us not forget that in the Zoot Suit Trials of the 1940s, the accused were introduced as being descendents of the blood-thirsty Aztecs; that

22 Oscar Mandel, "From Chihuahua to the Border" in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry 49*, ed. by J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1985):63. I would like to thank Gaspar Rivera for bringing this story to my attention.

23 Drewey Wayne Gunn, *American and British Writers, 1556-1973* (Austin, 1974), 255.

24 Gunn, 254.

25 Gunn, 254.

is, biologically predisposed to criminal behavior.²⁶ This image is still selling copies of Gary Jennings book, *Aztec*, a "remembrance of things past." The back cover reads thus "This is the story of a man and his people. It is the story of Mixtli.... With Mixtli we experience blood-drenched but awesomely grand sacrificial ceremonies; we encounter other blood curdling forms of violence...."²⁷ Gerald Jonas, in his review in the *New York Times Book Review* section, is especially fond of the descriptions of cannibalism and the way Mixtli describes his first taste of baby stew "tender white meat flaking off delicate bones."²⁸

A real event proving that reality is stranger than fiction seems to mark a continuity. In the month of April 1989, fifteen bodies were discovered at the Rancho Santa Elena 20 miles west of Matamoros by the Rio Grande. The killings involved drug-traffickers practicing occult and sacrificial rituals. Four books narrating the gruesome horror story of these ritualistic killings followed shortly. In 1989 three non-fiction novels hit the market: 275,000 copies of *Cauldron of Blood* by Jim Schutze; 250,000 copies of *Across the Border* by Gary Provost; and 50,000 of *Hell Ranch* by Clifford L. Linedecker. In 1991 *Buried Secrets* by Pulitzer Prize winner Edward Humes was added.²⁹ The true crime genre exemplified by Truman Capote is now placed at the not-so-romantic place, "south of the border".

The anthology *Gringos in Mexico*, compiled in 1988 by Edward Simmen with stories from the late 1800s to today, is even more disturbing. The introduction presents many of the stories anthologized as timeless narratives capturing the unchanging essence of Mexico and its peoples. The foreword, written by the author John Graves once again conceptualizes the

²⁶ Ruth, D. Tuck, "The Zoot Suit Riots", Survey Graphic, vol. 43, 1943, among others during this time period, reported on the trial. This scene is recreated in the play *Zoot Suit*, (1979) and the movie by the same name, both by Luis Valdes.

²⁷ Gary Jennings, *Aztec* (New York:Avon,1980).

²⁸ Gerald Jonas, "Before Cortés" *New York Times Book Review* 14 (December, 1980): 11.

²⁹ Jim Schutze, *Cauldron of Blood* (New York, Avon, 1989). Gary Provost, *Across the Border: The true story of the satanic cult killings in Matamoros, Mexico* (New York: Pocket Books,1989). Clifford L. Linedecker, *Hell Ranch: The Nightmare Tale of Voodoo, Drugs and Death in Matamoros* (Austin:Diamond Books, 1989). Edward Humes, *Buried Secrets: A True story of Serial Murder, Black Magic, and Drug Running on the U.S. Border* (New York: Dutton,1991).

project of this anthology within the trope of difference. Once more, Graves draws the line as he ascertains that "Mexico for deep and ancient reasons is an especially, emphatically foreign country, one that has always rebuffed easy familiarity from outsiders except of a surface sort."³⁰ These stories, written over the last hundred years, are an attempt at comprehension, he affirms. Literature as mediated language is positioned, and in the case of most of the stories discussed, that positioning assumes the "other", as object, thus impeding the creation of a space where dialogue is possible. For Todorov this is possible if: "After having spent some time with the 'other', the 'specialist' doesn't return to the original point of departure; but rather makes an effort to find a space of common understanding, of creating a discourse that not only takes advantage of the outsider position, but that speaks to the others and not only *about* the others."³¹ The asymmetrical positioning in these stories, however, continues to mark the differences as irreconcilable.

El Norte, upward mobility or "push them back, way back"

While Anglos considered the nineteenth-century displacement of the Mexicans as natural, they perceived the Mexican's twentieth-century to the north as transgressive--an invasion. After the 1846-1848 war, a limited migration of Mexicans back and forth across the border appeared natural given the fact that the territory once had belonged to Mexico and that existing blood relations (as is still true today) motivated many of the trips. While the concept of Manifest Destiny sanctioned U.S. journeys to the south, Americans, from the beginning, branded incursions to the north, whatever the cause, as transgressive and to be punished accordingly. Juan N. Cortina's entrance to recuperate land marked him a bandit; Pancho Villa's entry into New Mexico always is remembered as sacrilege.

³⁰ Simmen, xxii.

³¹ Tzvetan Todorov, "El cruzamiento entre culturas" *Cruce de Culturas y Mestizaje Cultural* (Madrid: Ediciones Júcar, 1988):30. "Luego de haber pasado una temporada entre lo 'otro', el 'especialista' no regresa al mismo punto de partida; se esfuerza por encontrar un terreno de entendimiento común, de crear un discurso que saque partido de su exterioridad pero que al mismo tiempo hable a los otros y no sólo de los otros."

The transgressors from the south have been labelled greasers, wetbacks, *bandidos* (bandits), invaders, illegal aliens. But since the boundary was established by the Anglos, many believed that they could cross it at will. For example, entering to kidnap during Bush's presidency was perceived to be approved, as we witnessed in the case of Machain. And in some cases Anglo crossings were perceived to be sanctioned by those 'others' in power, such as in the search for Villa: Says the famous *corrido* (ballad) of the Revolution, "En nuestro México Febrero 23, dejo Carranza pasar Americanos," ([President] Carranza allowed Americans to come into our Mexico on February 23). By 1910, an article in *The Survey* by Samuel Bryan of Stanford University warned that the Mexicans, and with them numerous social problems, were invading American Territory. He said, "although the Mexicans have afforded an efficient, cheap and elastic labor supply for the southwestern U.S., the evils they bring to the community have to be considered."³² His analysis, without regard for economic, political or racial realities, establishes that the evils of the Mexicans are due to "Their low standards of living and of morals, their illiteracy, their utter lack of proper political interest, the retarding effect of their employment upon the wage scale of the more progressive races and finally their tendency to colonize in urban centers, with evil results combine to stamp them as a rather undesirable class of residents."³³

By 1914 the racism is clearly spelled out by E.L.C. Morse in *The Dial*, a semi-monthly journal of literary criticism published in Chicago. "An inarticulate, amiable and immature race have unlimited aspirations for mezcal, gambling, cockfighting, robbery and murder when drunk and no aspiration for representative government, just and impartial judiciary, civil service reform and community altruism,"³⁴ Neither did the "good neighbor policy" of the late 1930s

³² Samuel Bryan, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States", *The Survey*, vol. 28, 1912, 726-730.

³³ Bryan, 730. Earlier in his article, Bryan estimates that "Some 15,000 persons of this race are residents of L.A. and vicinity." (p.730)

³⁴ E.L.C. Morse, *The Dial*, vol. 57, 1914, 11.

alleviate the fear of the brown invasion, although certainly articles in the press became more culturally sensitive.

A short story "Fiesta in St. Paul," written by Grace Flandrau and published in 1946 in the *Yale Review*, although seemingly not racist registers a concern about the increasing migration and presence of Mexicans and the changing landscape that these now not-so-distant neighbors provide.

"A number of people, all Mexicans and mostly in native costume, had, however, arrived ...and it was odd to have them there. An American city on the upper Mississippi does not seem quite the background for Mexicans-especially these full-blooded Mexican Indians who, for the most part, make up St. Paul's Mexican population."³⁵

The story, about the celebration of Mexico's Independence Day at a public park in St. Paul, recreates the festivities of the afternoon and the willingness of the protagonist to participate in this pageant of international good will. The Mexican characters are portrayed again and again, with the same adjectives. Although described individually, they are also collectively signalled as "very dark." Cultural traits and behavior patterns are essentialized, seen as static.

"In spite of their American clothes, they might have been any of the Indians who used to come down from their high villages to work on our Mexican plantation in the coffee picking seasons."³⁶

The female protagonist continues:

³⁵ Grace Flandrau, "Fiesta in St. Paul" (*Yale Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1946):69.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.69.

" Tonight on this Minnesota picnic ground were the same dark, naive faces, the same feeling of zest, amenity, and good manners that did not in the least preclude the ever-present hint of sleeping violence. And just as on the plantation there had seldom been a ball without its stabbing or shooting, so this St. Paul fiesta produced at least one minor knifing."³⁷

The narrator wishes to see the Indians as unchanged in this new territory, but in fact the tone of uneasiness that persists throughout the story belies her affirmations since back in Veracruz, they were servants with little possibility of upward mobility. As she remembers her time at a plantation in Veracruz, she remembers another fiesta where she could distance herself from the "natives" and "their" events. As an outsider partaking in the ceremony in Mexico, the "other" seemed to belong to that landscape, its natural extension, albeit "barbaric" at times. In the United States, the Indian's difference is emphasized, not as against the American, but nature itself, nature, in this case a park where the Mexican's presence seems incongruent, un-natural. Throughout the story, the narrator's nostalgic and on-going reminiscing imaginatively transports the Mexicans back to their original habitat south of the border. It seems wishful thinking in the face of a rapidly changing America and the anxiety this produces.

The Border Zone or There's a place for us

With the continuous diaspora from the south forming communities in the United States with cultures that maintain strong ties to their original homelands, and thus establish regular circuits of communication, the original line of demarcation--the border line-- becomes less clear. The one line separating north from south has expanded, mixing and blurring what were once seen as distinct cultures. The traveller itinerary is diffused. The crossings are multiple

³⁷ Flandrau, 75.

and complex. By 1979 Joel Garreau in the *Nine Nations of North America* saw a third country emerging. He named it MexAmerica, a nation within a nation.

"Its where the gumbo of Dixie gives way to the refried beans of Mexico. The land looks like northern Mexico. And the sound of Spanish in the supermarkets and on the airwaves is impossible to ignore. The news stories it produces point up the trouble Anglo institutions have in dealing with enormous cultural strain. It's a place where cops sometimes shoot third-generation Americans of Mexican descent for very controversial reasons, a region faced with the question of whether the American Dream applies to innocent kids born of people who have crossed the border illegally. It's hot and dry. It has more big dreams per capita than any other place you'll ever know. Its capital is Los Angeles, but it stretches all the way to Houston. The politicians have difficulties comprehending it, because it ignores political boundaries. But it's there, it's there." ³⁸

To the north, according to Garreau, MexAmerica extends as far as San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Fe, and to the east as far as Austin and Houston, to the south it reaches Hermosillo, Chihuahua, Monterrey. By 1988 MexAmerica, as mapped by Lester D. Langley, had further expanded its territory: north to Chicago and Pittsburgh and south to Mexico City. Langley's intent is to show that American culture and politics are heavily influenced by its Mexican American content and that MexAmerica from Chicago to Mexico City is shaping its values: "We can measure the U.S. imprint on Mexico and on Mexican Americans. Until now we have been loath to recognize the effective reach of Mexico north of the Rio Bravo, but the Mexicano imprint is deeper than we want to admit."³⁹ Indeed Los Lobos, Doctor Loco, El Flaco Jiménez, Linda Ronstadt, Frida Kahlo, claiming their Mexican roots, are celebrated as icons of the broad tapestry and often redefined American folklore.

³⁸ Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston:Houghton Mifflin, 1981)ix,x.

³⁹ Garreau, 7.

The imprint began to be acknowledged after the civil rights movements of the 60s when Black Americans shattered the image of homogeneous America by contesting the racism that had pushed them to the margins of society and discourse. Blacks and later Mexicanos, Chicanos, Latinos, women, Native Americans and other previously marginalized groups proclaimed their right to be recognized as participants and contributors to the history of the United States. In her excellent book *America Revised* (1979), Frances FitzGerald shows how racist textbooks written early in the century proclaiming an Anglo worldview to which all had to be integrated were forced to change their master story. In the 1920s, European immigration had accentuated the assimilationist position, and textbooks, says FitzGerald, presented immigrants as outsiders. A quote from David Sayville Muzzy's *An American History* (1911) is representative of the period's preoccupation: "Can we assimilate and mold into citizenship the millions who are coming to our shores, or will they remain an ever-increasing body of aliens, undigested, an indigestible element in our body politic and a constant menace to our free institutions?"⁴⁰ In the 20s, the texts expressed a good deal of pessimism about assimilation, says FitzGerald, quoting from a book from that decade which warns that: "Great racial groups, especially such as speak foreign languages, or belong to races with which we do not readily intermarry do add to the difficulty of solving certain social problems."⁴¹ In the 1930's Harold Rugg introduced the theory of America as the "melting pot," where millions of people of foreign speech and customs were thrown in with native colonial stock to be fused into a new type of American.

However, by the sixties the melting pot had become, as Américo Paredes says, a "sizzling fry pan." The "immigrants" talked back and haven't stopped. Films like *Salt of the Earth* were finally released. Revisionist scholars recorded and rewrote the history of the country to include resistance acts omitted previously. These scholars, many of them

⁴⁰ Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks of the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little Brown, (1979): 78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

Chicanos, published books and articles in the United States that contested the stereotypical images of the Mexicans. Latin American, Mexican and Chicano/Latino Studies programs sprang up in the universities. This time Mexicans presented the view from across the Rio Bravo. Carlos Fuentes, for example, was one of the writers who responded to the accounts of the Anglo travellers. In *Gringo Viejo* (The Old Gringo) he redrew the border. Unlike the Anglo writers who directed their writings to an American audience, Fuentes' novel implicitly erases the border as it addresses both nations. Although also marked by the trope of difference, he chooses characters, themes and contexts from both sides of the border, and maliciously places them in space where confrontation, dialogue, and eye to eye contact becomes inevitable. "The general and the gringo looked at each other in silence, communicating from opposite sides of a deep chasm."⁴² The 'other' meets 'other' and everyone is unmasked. "Americans always moved West, but until the Revolution, Mexicans had never moved at all."⁴³ "Yes, the gringos did. They spent their lives crossing frontiers, theirs and those that belonged to others, and now the old man had crossed to the south because he didn't have any frontiers left to cross in his own country."⁴⁴

Whereas the *Old Gringo* captures United States- Mexico relations in the past, *Christopher Unborn* addresses the present and future of that relationship in a sacrilegious and sarcastic form. The fear of the silent invasion that Americans secretly, and sometimes not so secretly, harbor, is voiced through one of the characters "We've got to terminate this country that exports greasers who are invading us like the plague of locusts that destroyed Pharaoh's power! Michigan is not growing South Carolina is not growing Georgia isn't growing, not even your own home state Texas is growing, Professor, we aren't having kids but all these greasers grow and grow and cross over and cross over and they'll end up coupling with our

⁴² Carlos Fuentes, *The Old Gringo* trans. by Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Geroux, 1985): 28.

⁴³ Fuentes, 109.

⁴⁴ Fuentes, 13.

own daughters and mothers and wives..."⁴⁵ In the novel the north-south border has disappeared and the characters have no choice but to inhabit and interact in a cross-cultural, interlingual space. Futuristic and nightmarish, it is finally a criticism of both official nationalism whose symbols have become commodified objects or empty rhetoric devoid of any signifying process which might viably address the concrete problems facing both nations. Both rhetorics are captured as anachronistically behind the reality around them. In the new redrawn borders, MexAmerica has become an independent state.

The eroding of unifying concepts of national identity both in the United States and in Mexico has made the border zone, once the periphery of both nations-states the center and the main item on the agenda. A hybrid culture has emerged which is rejected by both hegemonic centers who are still holding on the one hand to the 'American assimilationist dream' or on the other to the concept of 'the *raza cósmica*'. 'The cosmic race,' imagined by José Vasconcelos, privileged a hybrid race, a '*mestizaje*' which recognized the indigenous make-up of the Mexican.⁴⁶ In effect, his post-revolutionary discourse helped consolidate a nationalist assimilative construct of the nation which defined itself as homogeneous and essentialist, and was founded on an inclusionary politics that erased difference.⁴⁷ Post-1968 Mexican literature spoke to the heterogeneity of the Mexican people and explicitly and implicitly attacked the reified symbols of official Mexico used to maintain hegemony in that country. Those have been the images exported as folklore to the United States, images of revolutionary heroes, charros, mariachis, sarapes, pre-Columbian gods, *mestizaje*, cacti, Virgins of Guadalupe or the more eventually arrived icon Frida Kahlo. In themselves, their value is not disputed; it is their use that is questioned. Many of these images, however, were creatively appropriated and recycled by Chicanos and Mexicanos in the 70s and 80s. Symbols

⁴⁵ Carlos Fuentes, *Christopher Unborn* trans. by Alfred MacAdam (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Geroux, 1989): 493.

⁴⁶ José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica* (1948; México: Espasa Calpe, 1966).

⁴⁷ See Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía: Identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano* (México: Grijalbo, 1987).

that homogenize Mexicans thus are used by some Chicanos to undermine and resist racist Anglo nationalist agendas, such as the English-Only Movement. Transcultured, or "transcreated," as Juan Flores and George Yudice would say, ⁴⁸ these images open a space where identities within the nation-state are being recreated and transformed.

Literarily and figuratively, Chicanos also crossed the border to Mexico, and were mainly disillusioned. There was no going back to the Old Country that had originally invited them to abandon its oppressing conditions. In the 1940s, the cognitive dissonance of the Chicano, translated into questions of "Where do I belong?," and "How do I balance two worlds that reject me?," giving birth to the Pachuco--the Zoot Suiter--, an aesthetic imagining that became an ethic as Carlos Monsiváis says,⁴⁹ a search and the creation of a new and radical identity, rejected and repressed in the United States and in Mexico. Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude) first published in 1950, sees the Pachuco as an aberration; he is indeed unable to understand the process of ethnic self-valorization implied in this early social movement of contestation.⁵⁰ The spaces, however, created by this identity crisis became the antecedents to the Chicano movements of the 70s. The search for identity took many forms. In their search for origins some crossed spatial borders and found little or nothing; many then crossed temporal borders reaching to the past and finding and founding Aztlan, a utopian space from where a new identity could be constructed-- perhaps problematic-- but certainly establishing a point of departure. Others crossed and made a U-turn. However, the crossing back over the threshold did not provide the same feeling of coming home as in the Anglo traveller.

⁴⁸ Juan Flores and George Yudice, "Living Borders/Buscando América" *Social Text* 24 (1990): 69.

⁴⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, "The culture of the Frontier: The Mexican Side." *Views Across the Border* ed. by Stanley R. Ross (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978): 63.

⁵⁰ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura, 1970).

Since Chicanos are searching for an identity they believe they had left behind, their journeys are more painful. The horizontal crossing did not provide any answers, but problematized further an already complex identity crisis. The protagonist in Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* crosses the border at Juarez. Reminiscent of our Anglo travellers he finds two prostitutes and spends sometime engaged in gaiety, tequila, tacos and twin playmates. He gets arrested, put in jail and not speaking Spanish, is told to go home and learn his father's language. But he thought he was home. Upon crossing back he is told he doesn't look American. "My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history...What I see now... is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice."⁵¹ In his second autobiographical novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach* people, the protagonist goes to Acapulco and learns not only about the struggle for land reform, but that the fight against oppression is not a national, but a transnational class struggle. Ethnic identity becomes class conscious.⁵² In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* the crossings are further complicated by gender and sexuality. ⁵³

The attempts in literature to erase borders somehow cannot compete with the images in the newspapers and magazines. Wonderfully portrayed in the final scenes of *Born in East L.A.*; the fear of the brown and/or silent invasion is generating the most virulent attacks since the 1840s when cultural hegemony and political control were in question. The two-part article in the *Atlantic Monthly* by William Langewiesche (May and June.1992) registers what many feel is a lack of control. "Inevitably, there are calls to seal the border. This could be done, but only with enormous manpower--for instance, with a large-scale deployment of the U.S. armed

⁵¹ Oscar Zeta Acosta , *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books,1973):199.

⁵² Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972).

⁵³Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco:Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

forces and the creation of free-fire zones. It would not require much killing: the Soviets sealed their borders for decades without an excessive expenditure of ammunition. The simple fact that there existed a systematic policy of shooting illegal immigrants would deter most Mexicans." ⁵⁴ Even granting the irony in Langewiesche's piece and his acknowledgements that obviously most Americans would be against his proposal, it is not sufficient to erase the bad taste of the verbal aggressiveness permitted as sayable. The English-Only Movement, the steel fences, the lighting up of the border, the rounding up of Mexicans during the L.A. riots, are certainly phenomena indicative of what Miriam Davidson in *The Nation* had anticipated in 1990 and called "The Mexican Border War."⁵⁵ The construction of an other wall, a north-south one, now that the Berlin Wall is no longer there, seems urgent. The Republicans included it in their platform for the 1992 election year. Reflecting mirrors and headlight beams at the border, however, provide an imaginary of metaphoric contestation where the border becomes the state of siege, within the nervous system to which Michael Taussig alludes, a "state of emergency," not the "exception but the rule"... "where order is frozen, yet disorder boils beneath the surface"...and "tension lies in repose." ⁵⁶

This end of the millennium is one of epistemic crisis, a time when polemical words like "multiculturalism" and "pluralism" are eroding concepts of homogeneity generated by official nationalism both in the United States and Mexico. The backlash is strong. The American dream of assimilation has become Anglophilic and ethnocidal. In *Harper Magazine* (January, 1992), Lewis H. Lapham insists that hyphenated Americans should finally become assimilated to the American dream to end the jumble of confused or mistaken identities.⁵⁷ Eric Hobsbawm answers, "Development in the modern world economy, because it generates vast population

⁵⁴ William Langewiesche, "The Border" *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1992): 53-92. and (June 1992): 91-108.

⁵⁵ Miriam Davidson, "The Mexican Border War: Immigration-bashing" *The Nation* 12 (November 1990): 557-60.

⁵⁶ Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992):10.

⁵⁷ See Lewis H. Lapham, "Who and What Is American" *Harper's Magazine* (January 1992):43-49.

movements, constantly undermines ethnic-linguistic homogeneity. Multiethnicity and plurilinguality are quite unavoidable, except temporarily by mass exclusion, forcible assimilation, mass expulsion or genocide, in short, by coercion."⁵⁸

Epilogue or the myth of the eternal return

The translations of the works of Mexican writers Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Rosario Castellanos, Carlos Monsiváis, José Emilio Pacheco, Elena Poniatowska, Roger Bartra and more recently of Angeles Mastreta, Laura Esquivel, Arturo Azuela, Homero Aridjis, Luis Zapata, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Barbara Jacobs, and Laura Esquivel, added to the literature that the Chicanos are producing, and the new Mexican cinema which entered the popular culture market in the 90s (*Danzón, Cabeza de Vaca, Like Water for Chocolate*), deconstruct the invented images of the past which held Mexicans in a culturally and morally disadvantaged position. Together they create, from across the border, the complex images of Mexico today, and, on this side of the border, the images of creative and struggling people reaching self-affirmation and assertiveness.⁵⁹ After 1968 this literature implicitly proposes a post-national identity based on pluricultural and democratic forms of civic life. Somehow, however, one gets the feeling that we are engaged in *un diálogo de sordos* (a dialogue of the deaf). It is not a problem of literacy, it is a problem of communication; no one is reading, no one is talking, language barriers are not crossed; it is a problem of listening.*

⁵⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, "The Perils of the New Nationalism" *The Nation* 4 (November 1991):555.

⁵⁹ This conference is indicative of the creation of spaces of dialogue that have been emerging in the last five years between Chicano and Mexicano intellectuals, and in particular Chicana and Mexican. See the interview with Richard Rodriguez: David Torres and Joseph Trevino, "De la otra memoria a los días de obligación" *La Jornada* 24 July 1994, 18-21, and Aralia Lopez, Amelia Malagamba and Elena Urrutia ed., *Mujer y literatura Mexicana y Chicana: Culturas en contacto* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1990).

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