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***Estadounidenses* and Gringos as Reality and Imagination in Mexican Narrative of the Late Twentieth Century**

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ESTADOUNIDENSES AND GRINGOS AS REALITY AND IMAGINATION IN
MEXICAN NARRATIVE OF THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

Jessica Lynam

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Submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate College
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INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that the United States and *estadounidenses* are frequent topics in Mexican novels. Stephen D. Morris points out in his book *Gringolandia* that “Mexicans encounter *los Estados Unidos* on a daily basis, at virtually every turn, without having to leave the country. Mexicans find the U.S. in their school texts, in newspapers, on television, in novels and magazines, on billboards, or while listening to *políticos* debate national issues” (1). The two countries share 2000 miles of border, yet the case has often been made that nowhere else in the world do two neighboring nations differ so greatly from one another. The renowned Mexican essayist, poet and cultural commentator Octavio Paz comments in “Posiciones y contraposiciones: México y Estados Unidos” that “Nuestros países son vecinos y están condenados a vivir el uno al lado del otro; sin embargo, más que por fronteras físicas y políticas, están separados por diferencias sociales, económicas y psíquicas muy profundas” (168). The shared history has been contentious. According to Paz, the opposition between the two countries began in the Pre-Columbian era, “de modo que es anterior a la existencia misma de los Estados Unidos y México” (170). Mexico lost roughly half its territory to the United States in the mid 19th century and has been plagued by a vague threat of U.S. military intervention on and off ever since. The United States, in pursuit of what it considered its Manifest Destiny to colonize all of North America and, in so doing, to promote its version of democracy and justice, often saw fit to

intervene in Mexican internal affairs. In *Mexico: Biography of Power*, historian Enrique Krauze describes how Manifest Destiny was used in support of the secession of Texas from Mexico in 1836, its subsequent annexation nine years later, and the Spanish American War that followed: “On September 16, 1847 – the anniversary of Mexico’s independence – the troops of General Winfield Scott had raised the Stars and Stripes over the National Palace. Nothing could erase this insult from the collective Mexican memory” (5). Later, Mexico was compelled to relinquish lands rich in gold to the United States, as well as other stretches of land along its northern border; and President Benito Juárez nearly accepted a proposal by President Buchanan under which Mexico would have become little more than a U.S. protectorate in exchange for economic aid and military protections. In his book *Mexico and the United States: Ambivalent Vistas*, W. Dirk Raat writes that the nearness of Mexico to the United States is in itself a cause of the discrepancy between the two countries:

This proximity has dictated that the relationship be asymmetrical: an economically and militarily powerful United States that views Mexico in terms of strategic and commercial interests and geopolitical concerns, and an underdeveloped Mexico that seeks to protect its cultural integrity and national identity while promoting economic growth in the face of the Colossus of the North. (xiv)

Thus, Mexico has always faced – and continues to face – a formidable task as it balances its cultural and political sovereignty with exchange and interaction with the U.S.

The current relationship is characterized by economic dominance on the part of the United States. As Jaime Rodríguez and Kathryn Vincent state in the introduction to *Myths, Misdeeds and Understandings: The Roots of Conflict in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, “[...] the economies and societies of Mexico and the United States become increasingly interdependent, and the environmental and resource management issues faced by the two countries are of ever-more critical importance.” (12). In this context of ever-increasing interdependence, Mexicans have not forgotten historical acts of U.S. hostility in and toward their country, and accuse the U.S. of indifference with regard to the same events. For example, José E. Iturriaga writes in his introduction to *Ustedes y nosotros*, “ocho generaciones de estadounidenses han padecido amnesia histórica acerca de uno de los orígenes de su actual grandeza y expansión y es opuesta a la memoria de los mexicanos que no olvidamos los agravios que agrandaron, *a fortiori*, la dimensión geográfica de Estados Unidos a costa de México” (380). Clearly, the fact that the United States perception of itself differs greatly from that of its immediate neighbor to the South is no secret to Mexicans.

Although there are abundant sociological, historical and political studies of the relationship Mexico shares with the U. S., relatively little has thus far been written about literature describing the bond between the two countries. Robert Weis, Alicia Borinsky and Hugo Verani all comment on the role played by the United States in José Emilio Pacheco’s novel *Las batallas en el desierto*. Lucille Kerr comments on the influence of the North American academic system over Latin American scholars in two novels in her article entitled “Academic Relations and Latin American Fictions”. Debra Castillo and Dolores Tabuenca recognize the impact that the United

States has upon the characters in Rosario Sanmiguel's collection of stories *Callejón Sucre*. Stephen Morris dedicates a chapter in his cultural study *Gringolandia* to the perceptions of the Mexican intellectual and cultural elite with regard to *estadounidenses*. Nonetheless, critical analysis has generally made little more than passing mention of the characterization of North Americans in Mexican narrative.

Notwithstanding the paucity of critical analysis of the depiction of North Americans in Mexican literature, the representation of *estadounidenses* in narrative texts is frequent, complex and worthy of study. The present dissertation makes no pretense of being a comprehensive catalogue of "gringos" in Mexican narrative; it can be better seen as a cross-section of Mexican literature concerning *estadounidenses* published during the final two decades of the twentieth century. My intention is to explore how this Mexican narrative has characterized non-Mexican Americans and contextualize these visions in terms of their cultural and historical origins. In this study I analyze six texts authored by both men and women, border authors as well as writers from Central Mexico. *Estadounidenses* are not necessarily the central theme of these novels, but do have a pronounced presence in them, constituting a part of daily life and a part of the Mexican psyche. In the two narrative texts written by women, *Las hojas muertas* by Bárbara Jacobs and *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos* by Rosario Sanmiguel, other themes such as family, individual identity and gender roles figure prominently and are inextricable from the notions presented about *estadounidenses*.

This dissertation is organized into six chapters, each concerning a novel by a different contemporary Mexican author. These chapters have been organized

according to the region of Mexico considered to be the *sitio de enunciación* of the author. *Las batallas en el desierto*, *La frontera de cristal*, *Las hojas muertas* and *Ciudades desiertas* were written by authors from Mexico City. *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos* and *Columbus* were both written by authors from Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican city directly across the border from El Paso, Texas. Ciudad Juárez is itself an apt object of study. In 1999 it was the sixth largest urban area of Mexico, with a population of approximately two million inhabitants and “considered by some to be the border’s unofficial capital” (Lorey, 3). Indeed, *La frontera de cristal* by Mexico City author Carlos Fuentes takes place largely in and around Ciudad Juárez. It should not be assumed that border authors Rosario Sanmiguel and Ignacio Solares, as a consequence of being border residents, have greater knowledge of the United States than do writers from Mexico City. Bárbara Jacobs possesses a unique perspective on the United States because her own father was born and raised there before emigrating to Mexico. Carlos Fuentes and José Agustín have spent substantial time in the U.S. and their knowledge of that country can be considered at least as profound as that of the border authors. The events of Agustín’s novel, *Las ciudades desiertas*, occur mostly in the United States.

Clearly, a more extensive study could encompass authors from other locations throughout Mexico. Tijuana particularly is an appropriate area of study. It would be interesting as well to consider authors who come from rural regions of Mexico, particularly from the villages supported largely by the remittances sent home by Mexican workers residing in the United States, estimated to have amounted to \$23 billion in 2006 (Castañeda 19). Another region whose literature merits exploration is

that of the resort towns of Cancún and Cozumel, whose beaches suffer the hordes of young *estadounidenses* sometimes referred to in Mexico as *los spring-breakers* as they descend upon the “Mayan Riviera” annually to relax and revel. In addition, the portrayal of Anglo-Americans in narrative written by Mexican-Americans merits critical attention, but it also falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

Las batallas en el desierto (1981) by José Emilio Pacheco takes place in the 1940’s and 1950’s, an era that marks the beginning of the contemporary love affair between the growing Mexican middle class and *estadounidense* popular culture. During this time period, the middle class actively sought to imitate the United States to the point of abandoning local traditions. This love affair continues today, and without it, the present relationship between the two countries cannot be entirely explained (Careaga, 58). Born in 1939 in Mexico City, José Emilio Pacheco is a renowned poet, essayist, novelist and short story writer. Pacheco’s poetry particularly has received critical acclaim, and he was appointed to the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua in 2006. He has been a faculty member of the Colegio Nacional de México since 1986 and has also taught at the UNAM and several universities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. In *Las batallas en el desierto*, the protagonist, Carlitos, falls in love with the mother of his *estadounidense* classmate, Jim. The novel is narrated from the perspective of the adult Carlos who reflects upon his own youthful naïveté and exuberance, which mirrored Mexico’s enthusiasm and eventual disillusionment with the United States.

Although several novels by Carlos Fuentes engage the relationship between Mexico and its neighbor to the north, *La frontera de cristal* (1995) is perhaps the one

that does so most directly and completely. Born in 1928 in Ciudad de Panamá to Mexican parents, Carlos Fuentes is undoubtedly one of the best-known novelists and essayists of the Spanish-speaking world. In addition to sustaining a prolific and influential literary career, he has served as a diplomat and ambassador in Europe and has taught at numerous U.S. universities. *La frontera de cristal* is presented as a novel in nine stories, united loosely around a despotic entrepreneur from Ciudad Juárez, Leonardo Barroso. This multi-faceted collection of voices offers diverging visions of *estadounidenses* and incorporates a brief history of the border region that suggests the transitory nature of national identities.

Las ciudades desiertas (1982) by José Agustín sold an unprecedented 40 million copies in Mexico, FIND THE SOURCE FOR THIS! suggesting the degree to which its generally negative, often humorous representation of the United States resonated with the Mexican public. José Agustín was born in Acapulco, Guerrero in 1944. While he is most frequently associated with “la onda,” a literary movement propelled by young authors in the 1960’s, Agustín has continued to contribute to Mexican letters as a novelist, playwright, screenwriter, and journalist. In *Las ciudades desiertas*, a young Mexico City woman abruptly leaves her husband to attend an international writer’s workshop at a university in the North American Midwest. Her husband pursues her, and together they experience and observe life in the United States as they attempt to repair their relationship with one another.

Las hojas muertas (1987) by Bárbara Jacobs presents a significantly different Mexican perspective describing a North American protagonist who is marginal in every sense. Born in 1947 in Mexico City to a Mexican mother and a Lebanese-

estadounidense father, Bárbara Jacobs began her career teaching English at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. She has translated numerous works by authors such as Walter de la Mare and Kurt Vonnegut, and has published several novels and short story collections that have merited critical attention, including the Javier Villaurrutia prize in 1987 for *Las hojas muertas*. In this novel, the collective voice of the narrators explores the youth of their elderly father, an *estadounidense* of Lebanese descent who emigrates to Mexico and raises a family after a frustrated career in the U.S. military, in journalism, and in the Communist Party. This novel, better than any other considered in this dissertation, shows the diversity of voices in contemporary Mexican letters and shows a correspondingly different portrayal of *estadounidenses*.

Authors from the Mexican side of the border region experienced considerable difficulty in seeing their work widely published and circulated in Mexico until the mid 1980's when, due to an influx of federal funds in support of cultural projects, the works of authors such as Rosina Conde, Ignacio Solares and Rosario Sanmiguel began to attract national attention (Castillo and Tabuenca, 19). The vignettes collected in *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos* (1994) by Rosario Sanmiguel provide a kaleidoscopic view of life in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso that aptly reflects the fragmented, hybrid nature of the border life of Mexicans in moments of transition. Her characters seek out ways of exploring, defining and asserting their individual identities amidst the shifting sands of an industrialized, bicultural, hypermodern society. Rosario Sanmiguel is a native of Chihuahua, Mexico. In addition to *Callejón Sucre* and a novel, *Arboles o Apuntes de viaje*, her work has been published

in several anthologies and magazines, including *Sin Limites*, *Imaginarios*, and *Cuentos Del Norte De Mexico*, this last published by the UNAM. She is the recipient of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes. She lives and works in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

Columbus (1996) by Ignacio Solares concerns historical events that compelled Pancho Villa's División del Norte to launch a singular invasion of the United States in 1916. This historical novel suggests that the Mexican Revolution continues to be the object of reflection for Mexicans, and that not even the single event that most shaped the nation (and which contributed in no small measure to its national identity) is free from the intervention and presence of the United States. Ignacio Solares was born in 1945 in Ciudad Juárez and currently resides in Mexico City, where he is a faculty member at the UNAM. He is the author of a number of novels that have earned him critical acclaim, including *La invasión*, which depicts the U.S. occupation of Mexico City in 1847. In *Columbus*, elderly Luis Treviño reminisces about his participation in Pancho Villa's invasion of Columbus, New Mexico. Treviño at once remembers and revises in an attempt to lend coherence and meaning to the failed invasion and to the other events of his life, which have led him to spend his remaining days in the El Paso bar of which he is the proprietor.

In the treatment I have given to each of these six novels, I have focused on content, structure, style and tone in accordance with their importance in the work. Thus, while in one case the analysis of narrative technique may provide the key to understanding the text, a different emphasis may be more relevant and beneficial for a different novel. I believe that this holistic approach, with appropriate specialization

as indicated by the particular narrative, facilitates the most accurate and faithful interpretation of the material, both in terms of completeness and detail.

Lastly, a word about the term I have chosen to use to designate citizens of the United States in my dissertation. In *Gringolandia*, Morris suggests that no single word is satisfactory: “Indicative of the ambiguity attached to Mexican perceptions of the U.S. is the confusion surrounding what term to use to refer to people from the U.S., along with the recognition that what may be considered appropriate for a Mexican is different when used by someone from the United States” (3). The selection of the appropriate term is further complicated by additional linguistic and cultural matters. “American”, as commonly used in the United States, is both restrictive and presumptive, since Mexicans, Canadians, Cubans and Argentines (among many others) are also Americans. “North American” is an improvement, although still imprecise, and “gringo” strikes a pejorative tone. In most cases, *estadounidense* would seem to be the most accurate and neutral word, and thus we will give it preference in this dissertation. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that “estadounidense” is not the most frequently used term in Mexico, but instead a recently coined descriptor that corresponds with political correctness. Because I have found no satisfactory translation for this word, I have elected to adopt the original Spanish.

INFATUATION AND ABANDONMENT
IN *LAS BATALLAS EN EL DESIERTO*

During the 1940's the relationship between Mexico and the United States reflected an intensification of U.S. commercial and cultural presence south of the border. In his book *Yankee, Don't Go Home* Julio Moreno describes a relationship between the two countries which, while driven by commerce, had broad resonance beyond the business world. According to Moreno, *estadounidense* businesspeople learned – sometimes the hard way – that they would have to adapt their commercial practices to the Mexican market and accommodate Mexican culture in the workplace. As Moreno says, “Americans and Mexicans consciously ‘syncretized’ values and practices as they insisted that modern industrial capitalism was mutually beneficial to Mexico and the United States” (6).

This syncretization consisted of finding a middle ground somewhere between the two cultures in a process of transculturation not unlike that described by Fernando Ortiz in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Although the Mexican government framed this compromise in terms of supporting Mexican nationalism and making Mexico competitive with its industrialized neighbor to the north (Moreno 2), the sudden and massive presence of North American culture introduced the emerging Mexican middle class to new products and priorities. Hollywood imagery and North American music, foodstuffs, comic books, cocktails, words and standards for beauty

and civilization all presented new challenges to traditional Mexican values. As defined by Moreno, “The middle ground allowed Mexicans to drink Coca-Cola and shop at Sears while eating tortillas and celebrating the nation’s indigenous heritage” (113).

José Emilio Pacheco’s brief novel, *Las batallas en el desierto* (1981), is a snapshot of Mexico during this time of transition marked by the presidency of Miguel Alemán. Through the frustrated and unlikely romantic obsession of the main character, Carlitos, we experience the initial hopefulness and wonder, as well as the ultimate sense of abandonment and disappointment, brought about by this short-lived period of intense and unquestioning infatuation with all things gringo.

In Pacheco’s novel, the adult narrator Carlos remembers his childhood love for Mariana, the young and glamorous mother of his classmate, Jim. Noble and sensitive Carlitos does not confess his love to anyone until one day, unable to keep his secret any longer, he skips class to proclaim it to Mariana. She dismisses him, although she does not question the sincerity of his feeling. When Jim reveals Carlitos’s probable whereabouts to the teacher, Mondragón, Mariana invents a lie to protect her young suitor’s secret. Neither the teacher nor Carlos’s parents believe the story concocted by the mysterious single mother. Carlitos’s parents send him to a different school and to a priest and a psychologist, accusing their son of perversion. Carlitos, indignant, refuses to deny his love for Mariana, but is numbed into complacency by the comforts of a new life as his family begins to prosper in the improving internationalized economy. One afternoon, through an encounter with Rosales, a less fortunate former schoolmate, Carlos learns of Mariana’s suicide. In

disbelief, he visits the building where Jim and Mariana lived, only to find it inhabited by unfamiliar faces. Another family now occupies the apartment he once visited, and only Carlos remembers his classmate and his beloved.

From the first pages of the novel, the presence of the United States and its culture in the lives of middle class Mexicans such as the family of Carlitos is palpable. It is clear that the progress and success of that middle class hinges upon its adoption of at least some aspects of U.S. culture. The adult Carlos remembers from his childhood that his elders “se quejaban de la inflación, los cambios, la inmoralidad, el ruido, la delincuencia, el exceso de gente, la mendicidad, *los extranjeros*, la corrupción” (10-11, the emphasis is mine). Pacheco further sets the scene alluding to the atomic mushroom cloud as the symbol of the era, leaving little doubt as to the identity of these *extranjeros*. Nonetheless, along with this negative impact of *estadounidense* influence comes an infectious optimism: in Carlitos’s school the textbooks compare the Mexican map to a “cornucopia o cuerno de la abundancia” and look forward to a future free from poverty and injustice, replete with aerodynamic homes and silent, crash-proof cars (10-11). Moreno suggests that “scientific and technological advancement was associated with mass production and abundance” (127-128), and Emily Rosenberg observes that “the ‘American dream’ championed the United States as a pioneer in technological and scientific achievements and a leader in large-scale industrial production for mass consumption” (7). Tied to modernization and prosperity is the adoption of North American attitudes and vocabulary. Carlos describes the Mexicanization of English words such as *thank you* (*tenquíu*), *shut up* (*sherap*), and *hot dogs* (*jotdogs*). The message, says Carlitos’s tío Julián, is clear:

“Hay que blanquear los gustos de los mexicanos” (11). Mexico’s tastes must be whitened, likened to those of the United States, if it is to progress toward its sparkling future of abundance.

This goal of whitening the Mexican middle class is exemplified in the career of Carlitos’s father, who adopts *estadounidense* behavior and rhetoric in order to succeed. As a moderately successful entrepreneur, Carlitos’s father earns a good income producing detergents; unfortunately, it seems that not only Mexico’s tastes need whitening, but also its shirts. When U.S. products flood the Mexican market he is quick to respond. He avidly studies English and pores over seminal professional self-help books in translation. Carlos tells us: “Mi padre devoraba *Cómo ganar amigos e influir en los negocios*, *El dominio de sí mismo*, *El poder del pensamiento positivo*, *La vida comienza a los cuarenta*” [sic] (51). Carlos’s father undoubtedly hopes that these texts will help him understand how better to do business with his North American competitors. Despite the power of his positive thinking, however, he is ultimately compelled to sell his factory to these rivals and is reappointed as a manager by the company that “absorbs” his brands. In Carlitos’s words, his father’s soap factory was “drowned” by North American competition and publicity. This type of shift is documented several times in Moreno’s non-fictional account of U.S. business practices during the 1940’s and 50’s. For example, the Thompson advertising corporation hired two of Mexico’s most prominent and talented marketing executives but compelled them to work at a local level, denying them access to administrative positions (Moreno 156). Although the new position for Carlitos’s father affords the family the comfortable lifestyle they always desired, it results in a

significant loss of authority for a former factory owner. It would appear that Mexican soap no longer gets things clean enough. In order to be truly clean, modern, beautiful, successful, one must be “whitened”; that is to say, made over in the model of the northern neighbor.

Another example of how *Las batallas en el desierto* illustrates the Mexican middle-class attitude that equates “whitening” with increased social status is observed in the consumer behavior of the characters. In the beginning, Carlitos goes to a reputable, upper-middle-class school, where one of his classmates is Jim. Having been born in San Francisco and being bilingual, Jim is an anomaly in his class. Carlitos’s new friend has access to North American toys and comics, and a photo in his home shows him standing in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. By the end of the year, but now in a different school, Carlitos wears tennis sweaters and reads Perry Mason detective novels. His parents are again financially solvent and his brother, Hector, aspires to a university career in the United States. Years later, reflecting upon the transformation in his brother from skirt-chasing *señorito* to ponderous professional, Carlos muses: “Hector, quién lo viera ahora. El industrial enjuto, calvo, solemne y elegante en que se ha convertido mi hermano. Tan grave, tan serio, tan devoto, tan respetable, tan digno en su papel de hombre de empresa al servicio de las transnacionales” (51). This transformation, occurring somewhere between Carlos’s father’s generation and his own, underscores the rapidity with which U.S. consumerism imposed itself, as well as how closely U.S. business became associated with belonging to the middle class. The priorities of this social stratus, as well as the consumerism made possible by a relatively stable economy, reveal themselves in the

novel through the artifacts that middle-class Mexicans possess and value. For example, Pacheco contrasts the emergent middle class and its “*jáiboles*,” hamburgers and tennis clubs with the lower class that continues drinking tequila, eating *frijoles* and suffering the same poverty as before during this period of Mexican development. The attempts of the middle class to define itself and align itself with the upper class are revealed through the mundane books, unhealthy foods, and saccharine Disney movies imported from north of the Río Bravo. Moreno summarizes this phenomenon:

Even before the 1940's, in fact dating from the rule of Porfirio Díaz, American cafés like Sanborn's and European department stores like El Palacio de Hierro and Puerto de Liverpool catered to Mexico City's elite. They became symbols of the material progress and lifestyle fostered by Western capitalism. Liberal leaders portrayed precisely this image as a sign of Mexico's progress and civilization, associating modern cities with wealth, abundance, happiness, and comfort and characterizing the countryside as antiquated, poor, backward, and hostile to modernity. (114)

The North American material possessions with which Carlitos and his friends (as well as their adult role models) seek to surround themselves underscore the degree to which they belong to the new, urban lifestyle patterned on *estadounidense* consumer habits.

The social divide and the anxiety surrounding it are noticed by even the youngest of Mexicans in the 1940's, and in Carlitos's case his visits to the homes of two friends, Harry Atherton and Rosales, reveal his consciousness of the class

differences that separate them. He states explicitly how he views his status: “Millonario frente a Rosales, frente a Harry Atherton yo era un mendigo” (24). To Carlitos, Atherton’s house represents the image of opulence. In fact, Carlos muses that the only reason that Harry Atherton’s parents have placed him in a Spanish-speaking, upper-middle-class school is “para que conociera un medio de lengua española y desde temprano se familiarizara con quienes iban a ser sus ayudantes, sus prestanombres, sus eternos aprendices, sus criados” (25). Atherton’s house in the cushy Las Lomas neighborhood has a basement pool table, a pool, a library, wine cellar, gym and sauna, and six bathrooms among other amenities, causing the narrator to wonder why the houses of the wealthy need so many bathrooms. Rosales, on the other hand, sleeps on a *petate*. His house has faulty plumbing and waste floats in the water that floods the patio. Despite Rosales’s superior intelligence and performance in school, in the age-old dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, wealth and poverty, the status belongs to Atherton. He has his U.S. provenance to thank, as well as all the trappings of modern urban success. Carlitos’s acute perception of this social hierarchy – Atherton, himself, Rosales – reflects the anxiety experienced by the nascent middle class, caught between the euphoric possibility of rising to Atherton’s family status and the terror of sinking back into Rosales’s poverty.

One way in which the status attached to *estadounidense* culture becomes patently clear in the novel is through references to food. Carlitos’s Tío Julián prohibits tequila in his home, substituting it with whiskey. Carlos compares his mother’s traditional, homemade pozole, birria, tostadas and chicharrón to what Jim eats, a foreign hodge-podge of fabricated products such as ketchup and Kraft cheese.

In his article “Por la verdad del Osito Bimbo: los intelectuales de élite, la cultura nacional y la industrialización de la comida en México,” Robert Weis observes: “Los alimentos definían el grado en que una familia podía acceder a los nuevos modos de consumo y así reformular su identidad de acuerdo a los nuevos modelos culturales” (100). At Jim’s house, Carlitos is introduced to “*flying saucers*”, sandwiches made from “exotic” mass-produced ingredients such as pan Bimbo. Their futuristic title distances them from their identity as food, a trait Octavio Paz has identified with *estadounidense* shame attached to food and the sex act (Weis 109). Carlitos assures Mariana that he will encourage his own mother to prepare flying saucers at home, which will require her purchasing not only pan Bimbo, but also a special kitchen implement to make the sandwiches. Jim tells him that no such thing can be found in Mexico but promises to bring Carlos a sandwich-maker the next time he visits the States. Weis clearly notes the cultural significance of the pan Bimbo sandwich in Mexico: “El pan Bimbo, entonces, aparece relacionado con lo moderno que llega desde Estados Unidos; es inaccesible dentro de México a menos que se salga del país o se rompa con los moldes culturales” (100). By visiting Jim’s house Carlos has, to a degree, left the country, abandoned traditional Mexican cuisine and has become an advocate for North American products.

The difference in diet in the two boys’ homes further reflects changing cultural values. Typically when Carlitos visits Jim, Mariana is absent from the home and has left Jim’s after-school snack in the refrigerator waiting for him: “ensalada de pollo, cole-slaw, carnes frías, pay de manzana” (34-35). These cold, self-contained North American staples reflect the relationship Jim and Mariana share. He can help

himself while she is out at the hairdresser or with her lover. Carlitos, on the other hand, will not eat alone. His mother will prepare from scratch such complex dishes as birria and chicharrón en salsa verde, accompanied by tortillas hot off the comal. The traditional Mexican meal is a family event and represents a significant commitment on the part of the mother, and in the novel underlines the distinctions between the family life of Jim and Carlitos.

It is interesting to observe that Carlitos's memories of both Rosales and Atherton also concern incidents at the table. The racism exhibited toward Carlitos by Harry Atherton Sr. reveals itself at the dinner table, and it is at the table that Carlos's incipient discomfort with Rosales's Mexican-ness comes out. In the first instance, Harry's father uses English to speak to his wife about Carlos. Confident the child cannot understand him, he calls him "the little spic" (25). Harry does nothing to defend his friend, but the next day counsels him on which fork to use on his next sleepover, an invitation which never comes. At Rosales's home, in contrast, Carlos arrives without invitation and is begged to stay for dinner: "Quesadillas de sesos. Me dieron asco. Chorreaban una grasa extrañísima semejante al aceite para coches" (26). As Octavio Paz wrote in *El ogro filantrópico* "La preocupación por la pureza y el origen de los alimentos corresponde al racismo" (Weis 216). While undeniably unappetizing, it is also probable that the meal offends Carlitos for its unappealing presentation and traditional Mexican-ness. In his article "'Disonancia y desmitificación en *Las batallas en el desierto*," Hugo J. Verani observes: "El auge económico de la familia de Carlitos [...] contribuye a su progresiva insensibilidad. Carlitos ha aprendido las reglas del juego adulto y consciente de ello, presenta ya una

máscara de hipocresía” (243). Carlitos demonstrates insensitivity toward Rosales through his reaction to the modest *quesadillas de seso* offered in his home, mirroring adult behaviors that scorn Mexican traditions.

When Carlitos coincides with Rosales after changing schools, he offers to buy his poorer ex-classmate an ice cream. Rosales, however, seeks not a tasty *helado*, but a nourishing *torta*: he is legitimately hungry. Due to his mother’s recent unemployment and her relationship with an abusive man who accepts no responsibility for her children, Rosales suffers needs unknown to Carlitos, as the following memory of the encounter illustrates: “lo encontré muertodehambre con su cajita de chicles y yo con mi raqueta de tenis, mi traje blanco, mi Perry Mason en inglés, mis reservaciones en el Plaza” (64-65). Far from being forced to sell gum in the streets, Carlitos is beginning to attain access to the privileges of the wealthy. Carlitos’s reaction to Rosales’s hunger further illustrates the differences between the two boys, as well as the difference in Carlitos himself before and after his father’s prosperity. Carlos remembers: “Rosales mordió la torta de chorizo. Antes de masticar el bocado tomó un trago de sidral para humedecerlo. Me dio asco: hambre atrasada y ansiedad: devoraba” (60). Just as Harry Atherton criticized Carlos’s table manners, now Carlitos assumes the role of Atherton with respect to Rosales, disgusted by his hunger, his poverty, his preference for the Mexican *torta* over the typically North American *helado*.

Having seen how the urban, the modern and the scientific – Anglo “civilization” – are associated with the United States and the hand-made, the rural, the indigenous – the “primitive” – pertain to Mexico, we can understand that the

middle-class Mexicans in Pacheco's novel consider themselves to be less civilized than *estadounidenses*. Hygiene is the contrast between traditional and modern in Bimbo's discourse (Weis 101), and in Carlos's home it represents survival. Modern North American detergent replaces the traditional soap produced by Carlitos's father:

El jabón pasó a la historia. Aquella espuma que para todos (aún ignorantes de sus daños) significaba limpieza, comodidad, bienestar y, para las mujeres, liberación de horas sin término ante el lavadero, para nosotros representaba la cresta de la ola que se llevaba nuestros privilegios. (23)

Thus, the detergent industry in this novel serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the United States and Mexico in the mid 20th century. Enamored with the effervescent promise of *estadounidense* cleanliness, comfort, well-being and efficiency, Mexicans embrace U.S. goods, ignorant of the negative bi-products. While this dazzling influx of foreign influence brought with it profound and at times positive social changes, particularly in the case of women, it also undercut the ability of Mexicans to do for themselves and made them dependent upon that other culture for economic status and social cues. In essence, Rosales is unclean to the same degree in which he is Mexican; Carlos's home isn't clean enough or good enough because it's a Mexican home. Mexico's food is dirty; Mexico's shirt is dirty, and Mexican detergent is insufficient to cleanse it.

Nonetheless, this enthusiasm for all that is modern, wealthy and "gringo" is questioned in the novel when the characters would need to sacrifice traditional values in order to embrace the new ones. Carlos's mother seems particularly ambivalent to the cultural influence exercised by the United States, and her traditionalist attitude at

once constitutes a counterpoint to the family's eagerness to ascend the social ladder by adhering to *estadounidense* cultural practices as she clings to an anachronistic perception of Mexico. While Carlos's mother brags about her Jalisco family's prestige and bemoans his attending school in Mexico City, with the offspring of "una cualquiera" no less (a reference to Jim's mother), and aspires to send him to a school meant for "gente de nuestra clase", her oldest son, Hector, challenges: "Pero mamá, cuál clase? Somos puritito mediopelo, típica familia venida a menos de la colonia Roma: la esencial clase media mexicana" (48). Thus, within Carlos's own home there exist different perceptions of the family's position in the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, his father embraces modernization because he feels professional pressure to do so. As Carlos says, "No conozco otra persona adulta que en efecto haya aprendido a hablar inglés en menos de un año" (55). Carlos's sister Isabel dates a second-rate Mexican actor because "a falta de Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Robert Mitchum o Cary Grant, Esteban representaba su única posibilidad de besar a un artista de cine" (53). That is to say, like most adolescent girls, Isabel aspires to a Hollywood love affair; she prefers any number of North American actors to Pedro Infante. Unfortunately for Isabel, she manages only to snag a has-been Mexican film star in a family that deplors its national movie industry. According to Julio Moreno, Mexicans "associated education and economic power with their social status in the 1940s as a result of new cultural models emerging from the coexistence between traditional values and modernization" (84). This coexistence, however, is rejected by Carlitos's mother, who believes that modern values such as those reflected in Carlos's father and siblings reflect general moral deterioration and

degradation rather than an ascent in family social standing. Carlitos's mother adheres to an older model of Mexican society, in which the family name and origin and the preservation of traditions and values mattered more than material wealth. Twenty years after the Guerra Cristera in which Mexicans defended the rights of the Catholic church against the implementation of the 1917 Constitution and in which Carlos's maternal relatives participated "con algo más que simpatía" (15), his mother "continuaba venerando a los mártires como el padre Pro y Anacleto González Flores. En cambio nadie recordaba a los miles de campesinos muertos, los agraristas, los profesores rurales, los soldados de leva" (15-16). This criticism by Carlos underscores that despite her warranted skepticism in regard to the changes taking place around her, Carlitos's mother also fails to see the full picture of Mexico's transformation. While her family traipses giddily toward a future of imitating *estadounidenses*, Carlitos's mother is the standard-bearer of traditional Mexican ideals that Carlos suggests were already anachronistic when he was a child.

Carlitos's desired relationship with Mariana and the conclusions others draw from it are revealing about the attitudes each holds toward the presence of U.S. culture in Mexico. As far as his mother is concerned, Carlitos loves Mariana because she is a modern (hence Americanized), promiscuous woman preying upon her son's innocence. In his brother Hector's opinion, Carlitos falls for her in training for greater loves, and Hector compares her to Rita Hayworth. The mention of Rita Hayworth is not arbitrary. In the chapter that William Anthony Nericcio dedicates to the film star in his book *Tex[t] – Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America*, he reminds us she was born Margarita Carmen Dolores Cansino and later

compelled by the film studios to change everything from her hairline to her accent. For this reason, the actress could be considered the consummate Mexican makeover, Mariana's "after" photo. In the eyes of his father, Carlitos loves Mariana because gringo cultural influence is making kids grow up too quickly. He says: "Ve las revistas, el radio, las películas: todo está hecho para corromper al inocente" (56). Looking back on the experience from an adult perspective, Carlos insists: "ni siquiera ahora, tantos años después, voy a negar que me enamoré de Mariana" (57). While Carlos considers his feelings toward Mariana a simple matter of his painfully sincere first love for a woman, those surrounding him perceive the infatuation in terms of what it suggests about cultural relationships between the United States and Mexico. Nonetheless, the object of Carlitos's desire stands out for her exotic North American qualities, reminding the reader that even the young boy's ostensibly innocent puppy love is rooted in the same flurry of enthusiasm for *estadounidense* style that seduce Carlos's brother, sister and father.

The effect Mariana's mystique exerts upon Carlitos also reflects the changing attitudes toward women propelled by North American cultural influence. While Carlitos sees Mariana as modern and glamorous, his traditionally-minded mother views her as the embodiment of the immoral influence of a foreign culture and of the changing times. She doesn't cook; she has machines to do this for her. She and her young son are on a first-name basis. She has a lover and unabashedly sees him in public. In short, she represents the new, cosmopolitan Mexico and possesses the elegance and unattainability of a Hollywood starlet. According to Julio Moreno, marketing toward women in the 1940's "reinforced traditional views by showing

women how to be obedient daughters and wives while teaching them how to be popular, how to attain beauty, and how to conquer men” (113). In consequence, the media messages directed toward women occupied the middle ground by “flirting with ambiguity” and trying to transcend social, ideological and moral standards. In so doing, they pushed the limits of what was considered socially acceptable behavior for women by embracing female sensuality: “Women [...] could be sensual, independent, and even seductive without being classified as whores or social deviants” (Moreno 146). This is precisely the middle ground occupied by Mariana, a woman trying to raise her son and pass off as his father a disinterested, despotic Mexican bureaucrat. Through her relationship with him she attempts to surround herself with the same modern middle-class comforts coveted by Carlitos’s family. Mariana is lonely, dividing her time between her home, the hair salon, and flashy outings with her lover. These small comforts come at a steep social cost to Mariana: her reputation as a loose woman causes Jim to suffer ridicule by his classmates and earns her the disdain of Carlitos’s mother. This ridicule and disdain cast Mariana as an unwitting “Malinche”. Literary critic Sandra Messinger Cypess has observed:

When a woman is used as an object of exchange or is raped by an ‘invading’ male figure and then abandoned or willingly consorts with newcomers and betrays her people or accepts a different culture and rejects her own or is blamed without reason for the evils that befall her people – such elements of characterization relate the woman to the popular configuration of the Malinche paradigm. (153)

Mariana certainly embodies this paradigm. Even her name straddles the Mexican Doña Marina and the starlet Marilyn Monroe. Presumably, she willingly consorts with Jim's North American father and moves to the United States, thereby accepting a different culture and rejecting her own (a rejection reinforced by her Sears Roebuck home). Jim's father abandons Mariana and their child, and she is compelled to return to Mexico seeking companionship, economic support and a father figure for her son in a shadowy public figure who demeans her and takes no interest in raising Jim. Meanwhile, she is marginalized as a traitor to traditional Mexican values as she embraces Hollywood aesthetics and a libertine lifestyle linked to *estadounidense* permissiveness. Indirectly she is blamed for the evils befalling her people; she is the consummate sell-out to U.S. consumerism and wanton sexuality.

While Mariana appears to be cast as a traitor to her culture, through her Pacheco questions the characterization of Malinche as a treasonous consort and suggests instead that she is a natural product of a society in transformation. Mariana the *malinchista*, indeed, seems to fulfill what Messinger Cypess designates as Malinche's trait, "devalu[ing] national identity in favor of imported benefits" (7). Nonetheless, as Nachman Ben-Yehuda observes in his exploration of the nature of betrayal in the history of Malinali or la Malinche, other factors should be considered:

The social construction of Malinali as first a hero and later a traitor reflect [sic] changes in the complex structure and moral content of Mexican society, as well as the changes of power configurations in that society. The acts Malinali supposedly committed were not, in themselves, inherently treacherous. In deciding whether she was a traitor, one must first answer the

questions, who trusted her? Who was expected to trust her and why? Who was she supposed to be loyal to and why? (274-75)

Ben-Yehuda notes that Malinali, as a slave, merely sold out the same people who enslaved her to a group of people who offered her opportunities for greater freedom, and that in doing so she was by no means alone, but instead accompanied by a number of indigenous tribes eager to undermine Aztec despotism. Similarly, Mariana enjoys a certain increased social freedom afforded her by her relationship with a gringo and, through him, with U.S. culture. The only people she alienates are already ill-disposed toward her and, with the exception of Carlitos's mother, often conspicuously guilty of her same infatuation with anything that comes from north of the Río Bravo. In response to the question of whom Malinali is supposed to have been loyal to, Pacheco himself, reflecting on his own poetry on the supposed traitor, offers this: "Now we know that Malinche did not betray anyone: national consciousness did not exist, and loyalty, therefore, could not be demanded of a victim of tyrants who sold her as a slave" (Romero 2). In the Mexico of the 1940's, the locus of threat of conquest has shifted from Spain to the United States, but the Malinche paradigm is alive and well. Mariana is perceived as betraying traditional Mexican values and embracing *estadounidense* ones, but at the time Mariana falls in love with Jim's father, a defensive national instinct against United States influence did not exist. Therefore, no one has the right to demand Mariana's loyalty to a Mexico that is undeniably and irrevocably changing. Indeed, as Messinger Cypess suggests, a reevaluation of the Malinche would seem to be advisable:

Because La Malinche, as an archetypal female figure in Latin America, plays such a vital role in Mexican and Latin American myths, it is imperative that the role she is traditionally assigned be evaluated and reevaluated. Such a study may contribute to cultural revisionism in Mexico, a society deeply involved in the process of change. (6)

It is precisely this evaluation and reevaluation that Pacheco accomplishes through his characterization of Mariana in *Las batallas en el desierto*. Like La Malinche, she is a crucible for changing cultural attitudes and evidence of a Mexican society in transformation, and her central importance to this story characterizes the late 1940's as a period as crucial, dramatic and transforming for Mexico as the Spanish conquest.

In addition to the concern for the influence of U.S. culture in Mexico, *Las batallas en el desierto* also addresses the problem of the corrupt government of Miguel Alemán. In Carlitos's home, school and neighborhood, the government is criticized by everyone from his brother Hector to the local barber. Alemán's regime is publicly lauded, privately despised. The adult Carlos reflects: "Para el impensable año dos mil se auguraba – sin especificar cómo íbamos a lograrlo – un porvenir de plenitud y bienestar universales" (11). Carlitos's classes are frequently suspended so the students can attend inaugurations and unveilings of monuments to the youthful president, and the civilian leader touts his college education as a symbol of his unquestionable moral fortitude. According to the propaganda, the "Cachorro de la Revolución" and his cronies are "[...] los primeros universitarios que gobernaban el país. Técnicos, no políticos. Personalidades morales intachables" (27). These authorities surround themselves in pageantry. Carlos remembers: "Aplausos, confeti,

serpentinatas, flores, muchachas, soldados (todavía con sus cascos franceses), pistoleros (aún nadie los llamaba guaruras), la eterna viejecita que rompe la valla militar y es fotografiada cuando entrega al Señorpresidente un ramo de rosas” (16-17). Nonetheless, no number of statues or bouquets of roses handed to the president by admiring octogenarians can eradicate the everyday dangers of violent crime and poverty, and the public continues to fear their impact. Carlos’s memories of this time also include the fear of riding in the street car through certain areas of the city, as well as his fear of the terrible Hombre de Costal who, millionaire by night, purportedly disguised himself as a beggar by day and attacked the children of Carlitos’s neighborhood (14).

The vacuous optimism and intellectual posturing found with the government is accompanied by rampant corruption from which Mariana’s lover is the first to benefit. Jim’s distant protector “tenía un puesto tan importante en el gobierno y una influencia decisiva en los negocios” (18). As a powerful advisor and close friend of Miguel Alemán, Mariana’s lover rakes in fabulous sums of money from a variety of shady deals, then manages to whisk his dollars far away from national banks with suspicious promptness before the peso is devalued. One of Carlitos and Jim’s classmates, Ayala, accuses Jim’s supposed father of “chingando a México”, but Jim defends him, saying instead that he is “trabajando al servicio de México” (19). Millionaire by day, Alemán’s benchmate takes advantage of his relationship with the Señorpresidente to ransack the middle class under the cover of advancing the national economy.

Pop culture from both sides of the border plays a central role in defining the tone and context in *Las batallas en el desierto*. When Carlitos arrives home from Jim's house, his mother's first comment regards his diet there. She accusingly comments: "qué porquerías habrás comido" (32). While this comment reveals her attitude toward Mariana, a broader concern is for what else Carlitos's generation may be digesting in the form of popular culture and for the effect this might be having on their values. Early in the novel Pacheco employs details from popular culture to orient the reader to the time period and the juvenile perspective of the narrator. Commercial and material signals define the moment in which this story takes place. Carlos begins with the reflection: "Me acuerdo, no me acuerdo: ¿qué año era aquel? Ya había supermercados pero no televisión" (9). This relative method of remembrance – supermarkets, but still no television – both identifies the historical context of the novel and distances the narrator from that context, establishing the imprecise nature of the memories he shares with the reader. His references to radio shows about science fiction, sports and adventure highlight the child's perspective from which he experienced this time in Mexico's history. Although Carlos draws with exactitude the socio-cultural background of the narration, he never explicitly names the year. Thus the mature Carlos who narrates the story suggests that this is an imprecise collection of memories despite the vividness of recollections in respect to radio, cars, toys, fads and actors. In this manner, Pacheco extensively references popular culture to establish the context and voice in his novel, as well as to underscore the omnipresence of *estadounidense* values and explore their effect on the Mexico of Carlos's childhood and beyond.

Las batallas en el desierto suggests that the ubiquity of North American pop culture is responsible for Carlitos's loss of innocence and that of Mexicans in general. Although Carlitos's parents blame his "perversion" on his contact with Mariana, his sexual awakening was provoked not by his classmate's glamorous mother but at the movie house. Carlos remembers: "¿Cuándo, me pregunté, había tenido por vez primera conciencia del deseo? Tal vez un año antes, en el cine Chapultepec, frente a los hombros desnudos de Jennifer Jones en *Duelo al sol*" (sic) (42). If Carlitos suffers a loss of innocence in this novel it is partly because he is exposed to a pop-culture presence greater than any previously experienced in Mexico, facilitated by mass communication modeled after the United States. Research conducted in 1942 by the Sydney Ross Company, a prominent sponsor of pro-North-American radio programming in Mexico indicated that 76 percent of Mexican radio listeners were between twelve and thirty years old (Moreno 64). Meanwhile, Moreno notes, "Advertising images used nationalist and revolutionary rhetoric as they sold American merchandise and presented the middle-class lifestyle and ideals of Americans as models for Mexicans to emulate" (12). Carlos's generation was inundated with marketing messages and media images portraying the U.S. middle class as the standard to which they should aspire. As a consequence, there emerged a pronounced difference between the values of one generation and the next. Many of these messages, intercepted by Carlitos and his peers, are of course directed toward adults. At the same time, the amount of information to be assimilated is too great, forcing the young to mature more rapidly. The protagonist's father proclaims: "Es la inmoralidad que se respira en este país bajo el más corrupto de los regímenes" (56).

Carlitos's father refers not only to Alemán's regime, a topic much commented in his home, but also to a cultural agenda that penetrates the moral fabric of the family. Although he embraces the changes that allow his family a higher standard of living, he also intuits the negative effect provoked by the presence of this flood of mass communication and mass production, largely foreign, that superimposes itself upon Mexican reality in general, and particularly upon the young, unequipped to evaluate it critically.

In addition to depicting the loss of innocence of its narrator, it has been observed that *Las batallas en el desierto* documents the detriment to the innocence of a generation of Mexicans and of Mexico as a whole. In his article "La narrativa de José Emilio Pacheco: Nostalgia por la infancia y la ciudad gozable", Ignacio Trejo Fuentes comments on the role of Mexico City's frenetic expansion:

propicia soledad, incomunicación, frialdad monolítica, indiferencia feroz; promueve desajustes interiores de sus habitantes, que trascienden hasta convertirse en serios conflictos existenciales. Parece ser que en esta desaforada ciudad ya no hay lugar para la inocencia, pues aún la infantil es víctima inmediata de sus efectos devastadores. (179)

In the novel, this loss is presented in part as a consequence of the ample access young people suddenly enjoyed to media previously available only to adults, such as provocative magazines and seductive film performances. Equally significant is that the majority of Jim's North American toys are U.S. tanks, soldiers, guns and other weapons. On the playground the children act out the "batallas en el desierto" of the title, pitting Arabs against Jews in a conflict that, as the teacher Mondragón points

out, does not relate to Mexican children on recess. Addressing the students who can claim Arab or Jewish descent, he reminds them: “Ustedes nacieron aquí. Son tan mexicanos como sus compañeros. No hereden el odio” (13). Carlos points out that as far as he was concerned both Arabs and Jews were “turcos” (14). Carlitos’s innocence to the nature of the conflict that inspires the play-yard battles distances him from the violence being practiced elsewhere in the world. Carlitos associates war with the stuff of movies, or at most views it as a phenomenon of his parents’ childhood (17). He is taught that “Por fortuna en México no había guerra desde que el general Cárdenas venció la sublevación de Saturnino Cedillo” (16). The political events affecting the United States, filtered through the films, newsreels and toys exported by that country, occur on the fringe of Carlitos’s awareness but infuse his childhood with a foreboding with which he grapples. He remembers when at age three or four he saw *Bambi* on the big screen:

tuvieron que sacarme del cine llorando porque los cazadores mataban a la mamá de Bambi. En la guerra asesinaban a millones de madres. Pero no lo sabía, no lloraba por ellas ni por sus hijos; aunque en el Cinelandia – junto a las caricaturas del Pato Donald, el Ratón Mickey, Popeye el Marino, el Pájaro Loco y Bugs Bunny – pasaron los noticieros: bombas cayendo a plomo sobre las ciudades, cañones, batallas, incendios, ruinas, cadáveres. (21)

The juxtaposition of the crude reality of World War II with North American cartoons mirrors the contrast between Alemán’s ribbon-cutting ceremonies and the grinding poverty and violence that pervade the country over which he presides. Presented this way, both the United States and Miguel Alemán come across as at once naïve and

sinister, likeable and yet possessed of dangerous ulterior motives. At the same time, the battles being fought far from Mexico and its concerns inspire ideological conflicts and racial prejudices nursed and rehearsed on the patio of Carlos's school.

As U.S. products infiltrate the Mexican market and media, English words begin to penetrate the Mexican vernacular. Pacheco uses this new vocabulary to foreshadow the unfortunate outcome for Mexicans overzealous to embrace it. English is required in school, and English expressions become part of the everyday vocabulary of the middle class. The grammar and vocabulary Carlos's father studies is related to exchange and business, but the words Pacheco singles out also point to acquisition and deterioration: "Have, had, had; get, got, gotten; break, broke, broken; forget, forgot, forgotten" (47). This concise progression from present to past to participle anticipates the effect that contact with the States will have upon Mexicans eager to adopt the estadounidense language and customs. It is echoed in the language of the last paragraph of the novel: "Demolieron la escuela, demolieron el edificio de Mariana, demolieron mi casa, demolieron la colonia Roma. Se acabó esa ciudad. Terminó aquel país" (67). It is also worth noting that some of the English in the lessons Carlos's father studies is not authentic. He learns to parrot such sentences as "My servant did not call me, therefore I did not wake up" (55). The language Carlos's father is compelled to learn is stilted, unfamiliar and irrelevant to his Mexican, middle-class reality. Nonetheless, to remain competitive in his field he must use the language of the world's emerging superpower. He learns quickly: "No le quedaba otro remedio" (55).

Perhaps the most intriguing and enigmatic use of English in the novel is Mariana's suicide letter, which forces others to deduce not only her motive for taking her life, but also her reasons for choosing to account for this decision in a foreign language. She leaves the letter – written in English, the narrator is careful to explain – for her son Jim to find. Mariana, a single Mexican mother raising her son in Mexico, prefers to leave her suicide note in the language Jim shares with his absent father. One might reasonably ask whether this is because Mariana perceives herself, or is perceived, or wishes to be perceived, as belonging more to the States than to Mexico. In addition, English is almost certainly the language of intimacy between her and Jim's father. At the end of the novel, when Rosales reveals Mariana's and Jim's fate to Carlitos, he tells him that Jim's father comes for him and takes him back to San Francisco. One might surmise that the true intended recipient of the letter is not Jim, but his gringo father. The use of English effectively excludes many Mexicans from understanding her suicide note. Rosales does not possess the details of Mariana's suicide; instead, it is imaginatively represented by Rosales. He says: "Mariana se levantó y se fue a su casa en un libre y se tomó un frasco de Nembutal o se abrió las venas con una hoja de rasurar o se pegó un tiro o hizo todo esto junto, no sé bien cómo estuvo" (62). Rosales's speculations are telling. Lacking a definitive version of what happened, he imagines Mariana drugging herself as Marilyn Monroe did, among other silver-screen-worthy scenarios. If indeed Mariana's death emulated the death of a Hollywood starlet, English would be the appropriate language for her final missive. The details and motives of Mariana's suicide, then, are projected onto

her, much as Malinche's motivations and the details of her life are reconstructed by people exterior to her.

Mariana's use of English recalls Malinalli's role as cultural and linguistic interpreter. The critic Margo Glantz reminds us that the Spanish referred to the interpreter Malinalli as "lengua," thereby reducing her to her rhetorical function, making her a subordinate emissary of messages and incapable of transmitting her own. In regard to cultural and linguistic interpreters such as Malinalli, Glantz says:

Este mismo hecho, el de ser considerados sólo por su voz, reitera la desaparición de su cuerpo o, mejor, lo convierte en un cuerpo esclavo. Si refino estas asociaciones, podría decir que además de tener que prescindir de su cuerpo – por la metaforización que sufren sus personas al ser tomados en cuenta sólo por una parte de su cuerpo --, actúan como los ventrílocuos, como si su voz no fuese su propia voz, como si estuvieran separados o tajados de su propio cuerpo. (105)

According to Rosales, the moment Mariana tries to make her own voice heard, her lover derides her, strikes and embarrasses her in public. When she comments on government corruption, he reacts violently: "la abofeteó delante de todo el mundo y le gritó que ella no tenía derecho de hablar de honradez porque era una puta" (62).

Through her subsequent suicide Mariana is separated from her own body, leaving behind only a voice that expresses itself in a foreign tongue that excludes Mariana's compatriots from further knowledge of her. In this way, after trying to express an opinion she is reduced to acting as merely a ventriloquist for her lover, a trophy of *estadounidense* preciousness, a celluloid spin-off.

The anomalies in Jim's attempts at an account of his family tree perplex Carlitos and present a problem in the narration of the grown Carlos alike. Nonetheless, this information offers important clues to the underlying nature of the U.S. presence in the novel as a negligent steward of a growing nation that only intervenes in a time of crisis. Jim was born in San Francisco and speaks both English and Spanish without an accent. He identifies as his father Mariana's lover, clipping his photo out of newspapers, but Carlos's classmates and the adults who surround him question this dubious heritage. Carlos mentions that Jim bears no physical resemblance to the man and his friend merely responds, "Voy a parecerme a él cuando crezca" (17). The next several pages continue to cultivate doubt as to Jim's parentage, until at last a classmate at recess reveals a questionable truth: "No es hijo de ese...sino de un periodista gringo" (19). This is confirmed much later when Jim's real father comes for him upon Mariana's death (62). Thus, Jim's American father reappears only when Mariana can no longer care for him, and immediately retreats to California with the child. In essence, the U.S. engenders but does not parent except in emergencies. It penetrates, takes advantage, but leaves Mexicans to deal with the after-effects. The *estadounidense* in this case, and Estados Unidos in the novel, provides the whirlwind romance but ultimately retreats from the picture when it comes to consequences and responsibilities.

In the end, Carlitos's love for Mariana is sincere but embarrassing. Through their reactions to that innocent infatuation, the other characters of the novel reveal their own impurities: Hector his promiscuity, his father an abject appreciation for and subservience to the U.S., Isabel her romantic illusions, Carlitos's mother her

prejudices. As Hugo Verani observes, the child adopts the behaviors of the adult Mexican bourgeoisie “cuyas insidiosas normas morales e ideológicas distorsionan la formación del adolescente, transformándolo en un adulto que termina aceptando compromisos que desvirtúan la dignidad del amor y pervierten su conducta moral” (246). All Carlitos does, really, is fall hopelessly in love with Mariana the same way his father falls in love with 1950’s gringo optimism, the way his sister falls in love with Hollywood heartthrobs. But just as it is easier for Carlitos to cry for a celluloid Bambi’s mother than for the thousands of real mothers’ sons killed in war, his small-scale, ill-fated infatuation hits too close to home for the people around him. Pacheco suggests that Mexico’s infatuation with the United States preys upon Mexico’s “innocence” to the ruthless and decidedly unglamorous underbelly of western capitalism the way Carlitos’s parents sense that Mariana preys upon his innocence. Ultimately, however glittering and beautiful Mariana or Sears or the U.S. might appear, they will fail to fulfill, fail to come through, fail to reciprocate, fail to raise the child. The story is rife with lop-sided, unrequited love: Carlitos’s love for Mariana, his father’s love for *estadounidense* rhetoric, Mexico’s love for gringo promises and products, Isabel’s love for Hollywood, as well as Jim’s and Mariana’s desire for a father and partner. Carlos is betrayed by Jim when he reveals to Mondragón that he likely went to see Mariana, betrayed by the sincerity of his love for her. His father is betrayed by the gringo investors who buy his factory and relegate him to a lesser position. Jim and Mariana are betrayed first by Jim’s *estadounidense* father and later by his Mexican protector, who sells out Mexico through his unfair business practices on both sides of the border.

The way the mature Carlos narrates his story reveals the extent to which he himself has lost innocence, abandoned tradition and adopted *estadounidense* values. According to critic Alicia Borinsky, in his novels Pacheco uses irony to trivialize his characters' feelings. One example of this is seen in Mariana's rejection of Carlitos. She uses words that seem lifted from a Hollywood film script, thereby destroying the authenticity of the moment. Another is found in Pacheco's use of bolero lyrics to render banal and inconsequential Carlitos's heartfelt emotions, as when he titles a chapter "Obsesión" and concludes it as follows: "Mariana se había convertido en mi obsesión. Por alto esté el cielo en el mundo, por hondo que sea el mar profundo" (35). Art historian Gillo Dorfles defines *kitsch* as "the attitude of the individual when confronted with artistic and natural phenomena, which are observed from that particular point of view which immediately transforms them into something inferior, false, sentimental and no longer genuine" (Dorfles 29). Ilan Stavans considers that the concept of *kitsch* does not exist in Latin American culture, but notes that the concept of *cursi* embodies a similar function: "parodic, self-referential, inbred with intentional exaggeration, or perhaps misrepresentation, of human feelings" (31). *Kitsch* is studied, marketable *cursilería*, and in *Las batallas en el desierto kitsch* becomes the means of communicating the collective embarrassment in regard to the era the novel evokes. Carlitos trivializes the story of his romance with Mariana to assimilate it and be able to tell it in an off-handed, tongue-in-cheek fashion. This acerbic cynicism is very much the backside of the sparkly optimism of the U.S, a sort of studied inauthenticity. Young Carlitos has not grasped it yet, but the adult Carlos has absorbed it entirely and employs it to narrate his childhood memory. Carlos has

assimilated the consummate *estadounidense* export to Mexico, and this cynicism toward his own first experience of love is his greatest loss of innocence. He is the perfect product of his time. In spite of initially retaining his authenticity, he shows the reader in his re-telling it that he has deeply internalized at least one *estadounidense* value. Just as no one wants to remember the uncomfortable truth of Mexico's naivete and irrational exuberance – the genuine puppy-love before the inevitable disappointment of discovering that the U.S. is glittery but ultimately has nothing to offer – no one wants to remember this national loss of innocence or how the rhetoric of self-reliance, abundance and consumerism has ultimately betrayed them, how the paternalistic U.S. has been more of a self-serving, absentee parent than an emulated and beloved role model.

THE BORDER AS AXIS OF MUTUAL DISTORTION
IN *LA FRONTERA DE CRISTAL*

Critics have referred to Carlos Fuentes's novel *La frontera de cristal* (1995) as the work in which he most directly criticizes the United States and its people. In his article "La intensificación de la problemática de la frontera político cultural en *La frontera de cristal* de Carlos Fuentes y *Columbus* de Ignacio Solares", Alfonso González calls it "una crítica más explícita e incisiva" as compared to previous works by the novelist including *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and *Gringo Viejo* (16). According to González, Fuentes has been consistently ambivalent toward the United States over the course of his career as a novelist, criticizing its division of the world into good and bad while praising its products and amenities. In reality, although the criticism gringos (as Fuentes repeatedly calls *estadounidenses* in the novel) suffer in *La frontera de cristal* is at times mordant – they appear as materialistic, self-righteous, ignorant, xenophobic, crass, hypocritical and obese – Fuentes also takes Mexican prejudices and shortcomings to task and engages readers in a more fine-tuned appreciation of both positive and negative aspects present on both sides of the Río Bravo / Río Grande. Moreover, this novel in nine stories says as much about the manner in which Mexicans and *estadounidenses* construct one another and themselves as it does about those constructions. This analysis will consider first the portrayal of North Americans in the novel, and then the ways in which Fuentes

complicates and subverts these portraits, using the U.S.-Mexico border and its history as the axis of mutual distortion for Mexicans and North Americans.

La frontera de cristal comprises interwoven stories surrounding despotic Mexican businessman Leonardo Barroso and those whose lives he has directly or indirectly influenced. In these stories Fuentes explores such themes as identity, sexuality, nationalism and loyalty from the perspectives of several of the Barroso family members, employees, lovers and acquaintances. Worthy of special mention is the fantastic vignette titled “El despojo”. In this story, epicure Dionisio Rangel accidentally invokes a genie, who serves him a woman to match each course of his insipid meal in an *estadounidense* restaurant. Later, Dionisio returns to Mexico trying to shed the material wealth he has accumulated before he crosses the border, naked. The final story in the collection, “Río Grande, río Bravo” incorporates many of the characters from previous stories, along with U.S. and Mexican history, in a vertiginous reprise: the protests of maquiladora workers and third-generation migrants and the xenophobia of U.S. border patrol officers; the outrage of labor organizers and the conflicted identity of first-generation Mexican-Americans; *mojados* shedding their possessions to return to Mexico and contrabandistas ransacking *estadounidense* trains all clash on the dividing line between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. While the figure and shadow of Leonardo Barroso loosely unite these characters and the stories which transcend borders both geographical and personal, it is the U.S. – Mexico divide, the “frontera de cristal”, that emerges as the focal point of the nine stories.

The names of some characters in *La frontera de cristal* deserve special consideration for their metaphoric significance. For example, “Leonardo Barroso”

suggests the regal *león*. King of his own *maquiladora* jungle, nonetheless Leonardo's last name reminds us that Barroso is inescapably of the earth; specifically, of Mexican *barro*. Dionisio "Baco" Rangel's name recalls both Greek and Roman names for the god of wine and debauchery, and the Mexican epicure certainly embodies the sensual qualities exhibited by his namesake. The conflicted border patrol officer who must decide between ushering in undocumented immigrants and turning them away is named Mario Islas. The play on words of "mar y/o islas" imitates this character's position of shifting loyalties and ambivalent cultural identity. "La capitalina" referred to in the title of the collection's first story is Michelina Laborde, whose name at once evokes the border and the Michelin guide, France's premier collection of restaurant and hotel guidebooks. Indeed, Michelina's initial, negative impression of Campazas stems not from personal experience but instead from a "categórica afirmación de la Guide Bleu" (11). Michelina travels from the distant, traditional seat of Mexican aristocracy, the Distrito Federal, to pass judgment upon Mexican life as experienced at the border with the United States.

One of the salient qualities Fuentes criticizes in and through his North American characters is their materialism. Above all else, he suggests, *estadounidenses* value things and money. Everything has a price: as one gringo aphorism quoted by Leonardo Barroso states, "there's no such thing as a free lunch." Several *estadounidenses* in the novel equate economic independence with individual freedom. For these characters, even emotional and cultural experiences are products to be consumed. One reason for this is the sheer abundance of products available. In Fuentes's hyperbolic tale "El despojo", Dionisio "Baco" Rangel is overwhelmed by the variety and quantity of advertisements

assaulting him through the mail and in the media. Rather than fighting temptation, he soon lapses into an orgy of mail- and phone-ordering: “En vez de ser víctima de la avalancha, decidió comprar la montaña. Es decir, se propuso adquirir todo lo que le ofrecían los anuncios de televisión” (74). During his two-month stay in the United States, Dionisio acquires slimming drinks, Greatest Hits collections, commemorative plates, exercise videos and wonder detergents, among other useless baubles and dubious products. He appears on quiz shows, ostensibly to flaunt his culinary knowledge, at the same time raking in bulky material prizes such as washing machines. His explanation for this “voracidad adquisitiva” is that it kills time, and at least seems to provide an active rather than a passive response to consumer society. By acquiring the goods offered him, Dionisio gains a sense of agency and choice in the face of the advertising onslaught. Curiously, he sees his own consumerism as a generous concession to U.S. culture: “si él aceptaba, expansiva, generosamente, lo que los Estados Unidos le ofrecían – regímenes para adelgazar, detergents, canciones de los cincuenta –, los Estados Unidos acabarían por aceptar lo que él les ofrecía” (74). In this sense, Dionisio’s short-lived shopping spree is about belonging. To be accepted by this consumer culture, one must buy into it, embracing materialism. His return to Mexico causes a shedding of these trappings, a trail of materialism strewn across the desert, an attempt by Dionisio and his traveling companion (a wayward campesino, who had been lost for ten years in a shopping mall) to purify themselves. Dionisio counsels the campesino: “todo, despójate de todo, despójate de tu ropa, como lo hago yo, ve regándolo todo por el desierto, vamos de regreso a México, no nos llevemos ni una sola cosa gringa, ni una sola, mi hermano, mi semejante, vamos encuerados de vuelta a la patria” (100). Dionisio’s advice to his fellow traveler

suggests that a naked return to their native land will restore the unlikely pair's awareness and identity after their vagaries in an unfulfilling, consumptive fog.

This *despojo* by Dionisio and the *peón* inspire the title of the story, but only in part. The greater "despojo" that has taken place is that of Mexican territory by the United States, commented in this story and throughout *La frontera de cristal*: "los gringos, en el siglo XIX, nos despojaron de la mitad de nuestro territorio, California, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, Nuevo México y Texas. La generosidad de México, acostumbraba decir Dionisio, es que no guardaba rencor por este terrible despojo, aunque sí memoria" (68). North American greed on one hand and Mexican generosity on the other, then, are not new factors in the equation, but are rooted in the history shared by the two countries. Dionisio's naked return to the *patria* serves as reminder of the original *despojo*, which he does not resent but certainly remembers.

North Americans have long equated economic independence with personal liberty, and the Reagan administration criticized in the novel considers prosperity the cornerstone of its fight against the perceived threat of communism in the Americas. In "La pena" Juan Zamora, a Mexican medical student studying at Cornell, describes for his right-wing host parents a Mexico which places them at ease, one that seeks economic prosperity through its petroleum industry: "Los gringos sonríen al oír esto pues creen que la prosperidad inculca contra el comunismo" (44). Material abundance is thus touted as a defense against perceived threats to U.S. values.

On a personal level as well, emotional experiences are translated into commodities. In "La capitalina", elderly and eccentric Doña Zarina Ycaza de Laborde dedicates her time to accumulating a vast collection of trinkets and magazines. This

exasperates her children and grandchildren until an *estadounidense* company offers them \$50,000 for her collection of the magazines *Hoy, Mañana y Siempre*. At this point, “todos abrieron los ojos: en sus cajones, en sus armarios, la anciana lo que guardaba era una mina de oro, la plata del recuerdo, las joyas de la memoria” (15). The “Zarina de la nostalgia” trades in memories, for which North Americans hungry for feeling are willing to pay top dollar. The existence of a demand for Doña Zarina’s seemingly worthless memorabilia suggests that in the U.S. there is a market for anything. It also indicates that from a North American perspective, an emotional connection to the past can be calculated in monetary terms and procured for a price.

Other *estadounidense* characters in the novel actually appear to commodify other people, relegating them to the status of possessions. In “Las amigas” Archibald, the protagonist’s politically correct lawyer nephew, works his way through the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago, accumulating an international showcase of girlfriends: “iba escogiendo sus novias por zonas étnicas. Ya había agotado los barrios ucraniano, polaco, chino, húngaro y lituano” (166). Archibald’s apparently altruistic work with Luis María (the imprisoned husband of the Mexican maid Archibald has hired to care for his cantankerous aunt) coincides with his relationship with a Mexican girlfriend. The manner in which Fuentes juxtaposes Archibald’s conversation with Aunt Amy with his own sexual reminiscences suggests that his defense of the maid Josefina’s religiosity stems from the new-found solidarity with Mexico caused by this relationship: “—A ella le parecen repugnantes nuestras iglesias vacías, sin decorado, puritanas – dijo Archibald relamiéndose por dentro de la excitación que le causaba acostarse en Pilsen con una muchacha mexicana” (173-174). Archibald sympathizes with Josefina because right

now, all things Mexican are titillating to him. In “El despojo” as he dines at the American Grill, Dionisio is visited by a series of women, two of whom further illustrate this commodification of other people. The professional woman who materializes as Dionisio carves into his steak asks him pointedly, “Para qué sirve el dinero? Para comprar a la gente. Todos necesitamos cómplices” (91). Even the North American woman Dionisio admires and desires in this story could be considered as guilty of confusing love with an act of consumerism. This woman explains that she adopted a Mexican child, whose doctors concealed the girl’s congenital heart condition until after she had been safely adopted. When the woman laments the cruelty of a country that exposes this child to the danger of death in order to see her adopted, Dionisio comments: “Apuesto a que la niña es linda” (93). The adopting *estadounidense*, he seems to suggest, is motivated principally by the child’s beauty to act on her behalf, paying for adoption and costly surgery.

Perhaps related to this materialism is the lack of respect *estadounidenses* demonstrate toward the elderly, who appear to be an embarrassment. The protagonist of “La raya del olvido”, Leonardo Barroso’s brother, speculates that disdain for the elderly may be “ley de la vida”. Nonetheless, he observes: “Yo creo en el valor del respeto a los viejos. No como mis hijos” (118). What separates this old man from his adult children is their nationality: he crossed the border into the U.S. before they were born. His gringo children resent caring for him because his leftist leanings have cost him access to the wealth enjoyed by their tío Leonardo:

El ruco, los oíste decir. La momia. El cachivache. Matusalén. Vejestorio inútil, carga, no nos hereda nada, nos obliga a ganarnos la vida duramente y encima

quiere que lo sigamos manteniendo. ¿Quién tiene tiempo o paciencia de bañarlo, vestirlo, desvestirlo, acostarlo, levantarlo, ponerlo frente a la televisión todo el día [...] (118)

His age and his failure to accumulate wealth have rendered Emiliano Barroso irrelevant and useless in the eyes of his children. Here again, materialism rules the day. In the U.S. children owe allegiance to their parents in proportion to the material success they are able to hand down.

While Fuentes certainly does not argue that acquisitiveness is unique to the United States, he demonstrates how consumerism pervades the country and suggests that it invades Mexico from the north. In “La capitalina” the *norteña* women at Barroso’s ostentatious home compare themselves favorably with women from the Mexican interior based on their proximity to the United States: “qué se creían las capitalinas que nomás por ser del norte ellas eran de a tiro nacas? Brincos dieran: si la frontera estaba a un paso aquí nomás, a media hora se estaba en un Neiman-Marcus, un Saks, un Cartier, ¿de qué les presumían las capitalinas, las chilangas condenadas a vestirse en Perisur?” (22). For these women, sophistication resides in shopping bags. Their consumer habits redeem them and grant them the refinement they lack in manners and education, and in this regard they surpass old-fashioned, metropolitan Michelina. In an article he published in response to the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992, Mexican social critic Carlos Monsiváis characterized the traditional binary opposition between Mexico City and the provinces as a “juego de los opuestos: civilización y barbarie, capital y provincia, cultura y desolación” (197). Here, the binary opposition is inverted. In their view the wealth accumulated by the *norteños* is its own justification and merits respect. Their

international buying power sets the new standard for civilization, rendering irrelevant the antiquated values of Mexico City.

Whether practiced by Mexican imitators or by North Americans themselves, U.S. materialism is portrayed as valuing abundance over quality. The houses in Leonardo Barroso's neighborhood are atrocious and huge. The insipid quality of the gringo food Dionisio "Baco" Rangel bewails in his visits to the United States is of no importance to young *estadounidenses*. They only value quantity:

La abundancia, eso es lo que celebraban sus estudiantes gringos, exhibiéndose ante el estafalario ("weird") conferenciante mexicano con los cachetes llenos de hamburguesas despanzurradas; las panzas, de pizzas del tamaño de una rueda de carreta, y las manos, de sandwiches altos como los célebres emparedados de Lorenzo-Dagwood [...] (72)

These quantity-oriented "Epicureans" skeptically attend Dionisio's lectures about the diversity and complexity of Mexican cuisine, but still seek to complete their lecturer's culinary education by taking him to McDonald's. Even more super-sized than the fast food meals so rotundly touted by "Baco" Rangel's gringo students are "las gordas," who inspire a perverse fascination in him. Raúl Rodríguez Hernández, in his article "*Viajes con Charley: desplazamiento cultural e identidad en las fronteras de la modernidad*" notes the significance of Rangel's nickname. Baco, "referente al dios de las orgías extravagantes, encierra la imagen de los excesos de la cultura moderna del consumo" (144). Like his mythological namesake, Dionisio Rangel is prone to give himself over to excess in all its forms, making him particularly susceptible to *estadounidense* excess in all its forms. Thus, it is not surprising that he fantasizes about bedding one of the hugely

obese women he encounters in his travels through the United States. Although in the end revulsion proves stronger than curiosity, in Dionisio's eyes these women, as abundant in proportions as in number, represent the ultimate physical consequence of U.S. worship of quantity over quality.

In general the gringos in *La frontera de cristal* are undiscerning and lack taste. In "La pena" Tarleton Wingate reads the novel on the New York Times's best-seller list not out of a personal interest to know what it contains, but in an empty nod to "culture." Dionisio mocks the ubiquitous, flavorless cuisine he encounters at academic banquets: "Generalmente, el banquete se iniciaba con una ensalada de lechuga desmayada, coronada con jalea de fresa: este toque, le habían dicho repetidas veces en Missouri, Ohio y Massachusetts, era muy sofisticado y gourmet" (70). This dispirited repast is invariably completed with tough, dry chicken, instant mashed potatoes and spongy shortcake, suggesting the utilitarian attitude taken by *estadounidenses* toward the table. If Rangel is invited to speak at these universities at all, it is largely thanks to the success of Laura Esquivel's novel *Como agua para chocolate*. In this way Fuentes seems to suggest that the United States vaguely and indiscriminately hungers for the spicy, exotic experience Mexico promises. North Americans, lacking their own criteria for quality, allow gastronomic and literary authorities alike to impose themselves upon their malleable tastes.

Fuentes suggests that North Americans do not like extreme expressions of emotion, particularly eschewing those that depart from established, socially acceptable behavior. In "La frontera de cristal" Audrey reflects on the necessity to be amiably distant at her office: "ser a la vez indiferente y gracioso, tener el wise-crack, la broma, a

flor de labios, saber cortar las conversaciones y los telefonazos con rudeza, nunca tocarse, sobre todo nunca tocarse físicamente, jamás un abrazo, ni siquiera un beso social en las mejillas, los cuerpos apartados, las miradas evitables” (203). When the Wingates learn of Juan Zamora’s homosexual relationship in “La pena”, they quarantine him from all contact with their adolescent daughter. In “Las amigas” Miss Amy Dunbar originally encourages Josefina to have a party at her Lake Michigan home. Once the party is underway, however, she ravages it, complaining: “Fue un abuso [...] Demasiada gente, demasiado ruido, demasiado todo...” (180). The shouting, laughing, music and merry-making of a Mexican fiesta are simply too much for the reserved old woman. Miss Amy particularly despises being touched, and her lonely predicament stems from her inability to express her emotions. Her former suitor and the love of her life chooses to marry her sister instead, due to Amy’s failure to declare her love. Josefina’s unconditional love for her imprisoned husband confuses Amy, and the maid’s kindness and patience astound her.

Estadounidense worship of abundance, lack of subtlety and inability to express emotion are all exemplified in “El despojo” through Dionisio’s impressions of North American cuisine. At the same time, the link between U.S. food and U.S. women in the story is far from arbitrary. Georgina García-Gutiérrez has observed the connection Fuentes establishes in his texts between sensuality and identity in her article “Díme qué comes y te diré quién eres: Ser, sensualidad y arte culinario en Carlos Fuentes”. She writes:

Las personas literarias del universo creado por Fuentes viven con pasión, piensan y sienten como seres excepcionales, olfatean con regodeo el mundo. Sus ojos,

tacto, boca, sexo, olfato, oído, agudizados por el deseo, la adolescencia, el amor o aun la muerte y el odio, se comen literalmente al mundo, al aprehenderlo con la voracidad de todos los sentidos excitados. Los cuerpos poseen sabores, olores, y los deleites que proporcionan se igualan a la sensualidad ejercida al paladear una naranja, al beber pulque, al roer un zancarrón de guajolote en mole. (318)

This communion of the senses is carried to its ultimate consequences in “El despojo”, in which each course of Dionisio’s meal is accompanied by a woman possessing the same “flavor” (or lack thereof). Only one of these women causes a lasting impression in him, the mother of the adopted Mexican daughter who arrives with his refreshing sorbet. The others, just like the other courses of his meal, fail to excite Dionisio. An important aspect unites the foods mentioned by García-Gutiérrez: they are native to Mexico. As she points out, in Fuentes’s novels “las costumbres culinarias son factores importantes del desenmascaramiento y caracterización de un país y de su gente” (321). With the exception of the sorbet woman, sensual Dionisio’s palate and his libido alike are deadened in the United States. Upon returning with *el peón* to Mexico, Dionisio says: “ya se divisa la frontera, abre bien los ojos, ¿ves, sientes, hueles, saboreas?” (100). When he returns to his homeland, he reclaims his senses. If, as García-Gutiérrez argues, Fuentes’s characters seize the world with sensual voracity, the reawakening of the senses upon returning to Mexico underscores the lack of sensuality and finesse – and the subsequent loss of identity – experienced in the United States.

La frontera de cristal implies that, in order to understand Mexico and Mexicans, *estadounidenses* must first become sensitive to subtleties and complexities lacking in their culture. The novel abounds in categorical statements that indicate that North

Americans hold a Manichean worldview, and that these absolutisms reveal the lack of subtlety they bring to bear on their interactions with the world around them. “Las amigas” particularly reflects many of these over-simplified, often racist attitudes. For example, when a murder occurs in Chicago’s Mexican barrio, the police make indiscriminate arrests: “Los asesinos eran cuatro, uno de ellos se llamaba Pérez, tomaron a cuatro Pérez” (166). Amy Dunbar cannot understand what separates Josefina from the Iroquois or the Comanche people, or why Mexican-Americans would insist on their *latino* identity. In another moment she declares: “ningún negro ha hecho nunca nada sino vivir del trabajo de los blancos” (169), and later she generalizes about Mexicans, saying: “Sé que ustedes son muy alegres” (179). Amy’s frustration with her Mexican maid increases as Josefina fails to fulfill her stereotypes. She is neither unclean nor surly, neither lazy nor dishonest, and rather than falling prey to Miss Amy’s attempts to trap her into misbehaving, she preempts the eccentric old lady and gently compels her to reevaluate her prejudices. In the end, Amy learns to reciprocate Josefina’s love and generosity, allowing them to come close to breaking down the invisible but palpable barrier separating Mexicans and *estadounidenses* on an individual level. In order for this to happen, however, Amy Dunbar must set aside her cherished absolutes and relate to Josefina on a personal, not a categorical, basis.

The communication achieved by Miss Amy and Josefina rarely occurs in *La frontera de cristal*. Indeed, in Fuentes’s novel, gringos seem to take pride in their prejudices and even cultivate ignorance as a desirable trait. Television is considered an adequate educator: Emiliano Barroso’s children deposit him in front of the screen “a ver si de casualidad se divierte y aprende algo” (118). The “caja idiota” is the centerpiece of

the Wingate home. The family congregates to watch Peter Sellers in *Being There*, a film in which “el pobre hombre no sabe más que lo que ha aprendido viendo televisión y por eso mismo pasa por un genio” (45). Dionisio Rangel complains about the Beavis and Butthead types he encounters in his classes, describing them as “legiones de muchachos convencidos de que ser idiotas era la mejor manera de pasar por el mundo desapercibidos (en algunos casos) o notoriamente (entre otros), pero siempre dueños de una libertad anárquica y de una sabiduría estúpida, natural, redimida por su propia imbecilidad sin pretensiones o complicaciones” (71-72). These youngsters not only demonstrate ignorance, they seem to Rangel to aspire to it and to flaunt it. The same attitude is found in “Las amigas” as Miss Amy proves proudly to Josefina she has not been listening to what the maid has been telling her. She seems willfully to mispronounce Josefina’s hometown “Juchitán” as “Hoochy-town” to feign incomprehension and thereby antagonize her servant. In regard to her racial stereotypes, she clings to them consciously, saying to Archibald: “Te prohíbo que toques mis clichés, sobrino. Son el escudo de mis prejuicios [...] Mis convicciones son definidas, arraigadas e inmovibles. Nadie me las va a cambiar a estas alturas” (165). Rather than recognizing the harm inherent in her prejudices she adheres to them more fervently. Despite this, her recognition that her nephew might defy them by introducing her to new information or new people suggests that, underneath it all, she knows they are a shortcoming – one she intentionally refuses to address, belligerently downplaying her own intelligence. Similarly, the Wingates, Juan Zamora’s host parents in “La pena”, fear that they have broken with propriety by asking the exchange student to leave, and that they have reacted to an irrational prejudice by kicking him out because he is gay: “Pero los prejuicios no se

extirpaban de un día para otro, eran viejísimos, tenían más realidad, vamos, que un partido político o una cuenta de banco” (58). Like Aunt Amy, the Wingates prefer to cling to their pre-conceived notions, believing that they afford greater security and certainty, rather than to expand their knowledge of the world that surrounds them. This chosen ignorance results in xenophobia that appears both rampant and deliberate, and creates a level of fear bordering on paranoia that particularly erupts where the U.S. borders Mexico. In “Río Grande, río Bravo” Dan Polonsky contrasts his own European immigrant ancestors with Mexican *migrantes* and dismisses the latter as “cobardes [...] mosquitos que le chupaban la sangre a los USA y se regresaban corriendo a mantener a sus indolentes paisanos...” (253). For this reason, Dan defends the border from Mexican “invasion,” likening his tasks as a border patrolman to the defense of Pearl Harbor during World War II.

Generally speaking, Fuentes suggests North Americans place inherent value on innocence. When the Wingates shield their daughter Becky from contact with Juan Zamora, they suggest it is dangerous to expose her to a bad influence at the vulnerable age of thirteen. Ironically, Becky is already more mature than her parents realize, and in fact she observes their naïve painstaking with bemusement. She reflects: “¿Qué le iban a pedir a ella? ¿Que fuera una puritana de la época de la cacería de brujas en Nueva Inglaterra?” (58). While they busy themselves defending Becky’s innocence, in their daughter’s opinion the Wingates themselves engage in the selfish pleasures and “caprichos” characteristically associated with the “Me Generation”. While she still possesses enough innocence not to fully understand what those pleasures may be, Becky certainly senses the hypocrisy inherent in her parents’ efforts to protect her from

knowledge of them. It is important to observe that the events of “La pena” occur against the backdrop of the U.S. participation in the Contra war in Nicaragua between the years of 1981 and 1987. The Reagan administration’s support of Contra attack on Nicaragua murmurs throughout this story. By the time *La frontera de cristal* appeared in 1995, the Iran-Contra scandal and the devastation wrought in Nicaragua and El Salvador during U.S. occupations in the 1980’s had been revealed, but had failed to tarnish the image of the American president. The Wingates’ homage to innocence echoes the *estadounidense* reaction to the political corruptness surrounding Reagan. The text seems to suggest that, just as the Wingates protect the innocence of their daughter (not knowing how much of it she has already lost), the North American public accepts and protects the obliviousness of its president, even as the evening news confirms the rising death toll in Nicaragua. Thus, political corruption and all it unleashes in faraway lands is the ultimate consequence of this cult to innocence.

Another example of this juxtaposition of innocence with corruption is the woman who accompanies Dionisio Rangel’s soup course in “El despojo”. The narrator describes her as “una mujer cuarentona, pero obvia y ávidamente enamorada de su niñez, pues a su vestido de Laura Ashley de estampados añadía un moño rojo coronando sus bucles de Shirley Temple” (88). This puerile woman simpers and giggles, ultimately revealing to Dionisio that she sings herself to sleep with lullabies and Mother Goose rhymes to stave off the disasters she envisions alone at night: “horribles catástrofes, desastres aéreos, marítimos, carnicerías en las carreteras, actos de terrorismo, cuerpos mutilados” (89). In an interview with Jonathan Tittler in 1980, Fuentes comments on the danger inherent in the rampant optimism prevalent in the United States: “There is a Pollyanna mentality at

the very foundation of the United States, one in which you avoid all mention of genocide or crimes [...] We have a future; that is our history [...] But when the future disappears from the horizon, then the crisis that strikes this country is tremendous” (52). Dionisio’s dining companion has retreated into a contrived, happy childhood, and this willful innocence insulates her from horrible fears and contemporary realities.

In the novel *estadounidenses* are depicted as duplicitous and hypocritical on several occasions, unable to see or show themselves as they really are. In “La pena” Juan Zamora’s lover, Jim, allows Juan to confess his humble upbringing before revealing that for him their affair is nothing more than an experimental episode. Unlike Juan, he is not going to live his life as a homosexual. His heterosexual marriage has already been arranged by his wealthy family. In “La frontera de cristal” *estadounidense* professional Audrey laments the transparency of the glass building she works in because it forces her to be forever on display. She despises the routine of the typical New York office.

Audrey shields herself from honest, open contact with the multitude of faces she encounters in city streets: “la obligación de ser a la vez indiferente y gracioso, tener el wise-crack, la broma, a flor de labios, saber cortar las conversaciones y los telefonazos con rudeza, nunca tocarse, sobre todo nunca tocarse físicamente” (203), and Fuentes states explicitly that “rara vez daba ella o le daban el rostro verdadero, espontáneo” (203). Many other North Americans in these stories have hidden agendas: they desire power and money, but want to feel good about how they have attained them. For example, Archibald in “Las amigas” presumably knows that the English and law lessons he imparts to Luis María, Josefina’s husband, will not be enough to help the imprisoned man defend himself in court any time soon, but they allow him to feel altruistic while ensuring his

aunt has a proper maid. The North American factory owners in “Malintzin de las maquilas” prefer to believe that, besides making money, they liberate the women employed in their Mexican manufacturing plants from an oppressive *machista* culture, much the way North American conservatives such as Tarleton Wingate prefer to believe that the bloody conflict in Nicaragua rescues Central America from the threat of communism.

In “La raya del olvido” and “Río Grande, río Bravo” particular attention is focused on the hypocrisy of the *estadounidense* attitude toward Mexican immigrants. In essence, the United States fails to play by its own rules, as the protagonist of “La raya del olvido” argues: “No se puede hablar de mercado libre y luego cerrarle la frontera al trabajador que acude a la demanda” (119-20). In addition to this obvious contradiction, he points out that the U.S. needs and entices Mexican workers but then disposes of them when the work is finished: “Cuando te necesito te contrato Pancho, cuando me sobras te denuncio Pancho” (120). In the novel’s final story Benito Ayala receives similar treatment. His town, Purísima del Rincón, depends almost entirely on *remesas* sent home by generations of Mexican migrant workers both legal and illegal – although their immigration status matters little. The law, far from protecting them, becomes a tool exploited by *estadounidense* employers to intimidate them: “todos sabían que en época de cosechas no hay ley que valga” (249). Despite the fact that North Americans do not want Mexicans to take their jobs, they do not want to do those jobs themselves. The descendents of previous waves of immigrants, such as Dan Polonsky in “Río Grande, río Bravo” pride themselves on their heritage, yet fail to perceive the similarities between the struggles their ancestors faced and those confronted by Mexicans crossing the border in

search of a better life. In sum, as far as its attitude toward Mexican immigration is concerned, United States society practically collapses under the weight of its own hypocrisy.

The negative traits mentioned up to this point are exacerbated by the idea that North Americans, as portrayed in *La frontera de cristal*, think they have nothing to learn from others. On the contrary, they consider that others are fortunate to have the opportunity to observe their clearly superior North American ways. In Dionisio Rangel's diatribe in "El despojo", he refers to the U.S. as "The United States of Amnesia" and dismisses the name "United States of America" as a generic set of directions: "era como llamarse, como dijo su amigo el historiador Daniel Cosío Villegas, 'El Borracho de la Esquina' o, pensaba el propio Dionisio, se reducía a una mera indicación, como 'Tercer Piso a la Derecha'" (77). This reference to the prominent Mexican historian, Cosío Villegas, is significant, at once paying homage to the scholar and connecting Dionisio with Cosío Villegas's view of the shared history – and animosity -- of the two nations. In *American Extremes*, Cosío Villegas acknowledges the historical origins of Mexican hostility toward *estadounidenses*, but suggests that in some measure this hostility is of more recent origin and irrational in nature: "more than anything else it is born of the fact that the two countries follow different paths which, notwithstanding, fatally converge" (30). "Baco" Rangel, in contrast with this diplomatic assessment by Cosío Villegas, reminds the reader that for *estadounidenses* to call themselves "Americans" is both imprecise and pretentious, and suggests that this semantic oversight reflects a broader myopic tendency toward egocentrism in North American culture. Dionisio's students repair with him to McDonald's, "con el aire de proteger a un enajenado o de aliviar a un

menestero” (72). In the American Grill, after confirming that Dionisio is foreign, the waiter affirms that eating the salad before the entrée is what is done in “America” and hence the “normal” manner. Miss Amy condescendingly declares, when accusing Josefina of stealing flowers in “Las amigas”, that “aquí hay algo que se llama la propiedad privada” as if private property were exclusively a North American concept her Mexican servant could never be expected to understand (171). Dan Polonsky challenges the loyalties of his Mexican-American co-worker, Mario Islas, asserting that Mario’s heritage obligates him to go beyond the call of duty to demonstrate his commitment to stopping illegal border crossings, more so than “true” North Americans. It is clear that in *La frontera de cristal*, *estadounidenses* treat not only Mexicans, but also U.S. citizens of Mexican origin as though they were innately inferior.

Gringos in *La frontera de cristal* are at times self-righteous, demanding to be dealt with on their own terms whether right or wrong. We have seen evidence of this in the recognized yet immutable prejudices of Amy Dunbar and Tarleton Wingate, but there are other examples, such as “las gordas” for whom Dionisio develops an obsession. The fat woman who accompanies his meringue pie proclaims that she considers herself beautiful and suggests that the society around her should make such concessions as providing larger seats on airplanes and outlawing diet campaigns. The hyperbolic description the narrator dedicates to her, highlighting her “Fat Liberation Movement” sweatshirt, barrel stomach, and gelatinous hands, contrasts with her self-assessment: “Yo me paseo por las calles diciéndome a mí misma, ‘Soy bella e inteligente’, lo digo en voz baja, luego lo grito. ¡Soy bella e inteligente! ¡No me obliguen a ser perversa!” (96). In her opinion, a society exterior to this repulsive character forces her to be perverse. She

takes no responsibility for her condition and blames others, yet demands unconditional tolerance from those around her.

The patronizing and sanctimonious attitudes displayed by gringos in the novel, coupled with *estadounidense* ignorance, lead to condescending opinions about Mexico and Mexicans. After his series of culinary and amorous encounters at the American Grill, Dionisio Rangel passes by a travel agency where a Mexican “peón” in huaraches and sombrero huddles under a cactus in the shop window, embodying the North American stereotype of a Mexican taking a siesta. The shop owners justify this exhibit as “promocionando a México”. Charlotte Wingate is careful not to refer to Juan Zamora as Mexican so as not to offend him. These attitudes presuppose a Mexican identity as narrow as it is equivocal, one that either needs promoting and romanticizing (Mexicans are noble savages who sleep all day) or that is shameful and needs to be hushed up. In “La frontera de cristal” Leonardo Barroso’s *estadounidense* business associates proclaim him “a tough Mexican” and “one tough hombre” instead of simply a tough businessman or a tough man. The emphasis on his nationality and the use of the Spanish word “hombre” place Barroso apart. His U.S. associates speak to him in a patronizing tone that relegates him to an inferior plane. In other instances, it is the stereotype of the Latin Lover that comes under fire in *La frontera de cristal*. Dionisio Rangel’s Shirley-Temple companion for the soup course is elated to discover that he is foreign: “qué asombroso conocer a un hombre tan romántico, tan sofisticado, tan tan tan extranjero, sólo los extranjeros la excitaban, le parecía increíble que un extranjero se fijara en ella” (88). The text provides no evidence that Dionisio has done anything to elicit these conclusions from his admiring companion; she reaches them by herself. In her eyes, his foreignness is

enough to corroborate that he is romantic and sophisticated. A similar situation occurs in the collection's title story when Audrey and Lisandro observe one another from different sides of the transparent pane of her fishbowl office in the building he has been contracted to clean. Audrey projects onto Lisandro a well-articulated identity that represents all that her estranged *estadounidense* husband is not. When she first sees Lisandro, she greets him as one would a waiter in a restaurant, "con menos efusividad que al portero de una casa de apartamentos" (205). Her impression changes when she perceives in him a quality she finds lacking in her male compatriots: "cortesía". From then on, she begins to imagine how Lisandro would treat her differently:

—Este hombre —se dijo— nunca me llamaría desesperado por teléfono a las dos de la madrugada pidiendo excusas. Se aguantaría. Respetaría mi soledad y yo la suya [...] Me invitaría a cenar y luego me acompañaría hasta la puerta de mi casa. No me dejaría irme sola en un taxi de noche. (207)

Naturally, Audrey cannot know this about Lisandro from this sole, ephemeral encounter. She constructs him as the man she desires and needs him to be, and this is facilitated by the physical, racial and class divides that separate them and prevent a more direct exchange. At one point she remarks "tenía esa actitud de caballerosidad insólita y casi insultante, fuera de lugar, como si abusara de su inferioridad", in this manner betraying her consciousness of this social divide (208). Lisandro, for his part, pities her for the melancholy and loneliness in which she languishes. The brief "intimate" moment Audrey and Lisandro share is based more on the identity each projects on the other than on any true understanding, regardless of whether those identities contain elements of the

truth. In Audrey's view the Mexican subject, despite his imagined virtues, is still an inferior one.

Based on the unflattering characterizations and depictions of North Americans in the novel, often humorous but at times vitriolic, one might be tempted to conclude that the novel is uniformly anti-"American". Nonetheless, *La frontera de cristal* highlights several traits that could be considered to cast Mexico's northern neighbors in a more positive light. The medical student Juan Zamora in particular identifies some of these qualities both during and after his studies in Ithaca, New York. He observes, for example, that *estadounidenses* are hardworking and entrepreneurial, even as children: "se asombra de que los niños gringos trabajen todos desde chiquitos, de niños, repartiendo periódicos o vendiendo limonada en el verano" (45). What he initially perceives as slovenliness in his fellow students he later identifies as irreverence toward class distinctions: "Entendió que el astroso disfraz de los estudiantes era una manera de igualar el origen social, para que nadie preguntara sobre el origen familiar y el estatus económico" (47). While Juan Zamora's observations do not necessarily lead to a favorable impression of *estadounidenses*, they at least demonstrate a willingness to set aside facile stereotypes and recognize the subtleties and motivations that underlie his host culture. At the end of the novel, in "Rio Grande, Río bravo" Juan Zamora strikes an attenuating note by reflecting: "no quiere que sus penas personales interfieran con su juicio sobre lo que entonces vio y entendió de la hipocresía y arrogancia que puede acometer al buen pueblo yanqui" (274). Despite the bitterness of his own experience in the U.S. he establishes a distinction between *estadounidenses* and the arrogance and hypocrisy that *can* overcome them, thus demonstrating a more sophisticated and

tempered understanding of the U.S. than that expressed by many of the other characters in the novel. The North American business executives who visit Leonardo Barroso's *maquiladoras* belie the stereotype that gringos are simply evil, cutthroat despots who wish to see Mexicans suffer. They are not averse to seeing working conditions improved in the factories, and in fact encourage this in order to reduce employee turnover.

Certainly, the bottom line is their pragmatic and primordial concern, but if this produces a bi-product of increased satisfaction and well being on behalf of the workers, so much the better. While this too falls short of a positive portrayal of gringos, it at least subverts a stereotype.

La frontera de cristal also reveals the hypocrisies and flaws of some Mexicans, insinuating that their perceptions and behaviors may have exacerbated the bittersweet relationship between Mexico and the U.S. For example, the *norteñas* that the *capitalina* Michelina Laborde encounters consider her provincial because she lacks access to gringo goodies, suggesting that they measure their own worth with respect to their capacity as consumers of *estadounidense* products, disregarding manners and decency in favor of plastic surgery. Juan Zamora spins a tale about his aristocratic upbringing, telling his North American family and friends what he thinks they want to hear as well as what, in his own mind, will distinguish his family: "ellos desde siempre han tenido tierras, haciendas [...] y pozos petroleros. Se da cuenta de que los Wingate ignoran que el petróleo es propiedad del Estado en México y se admiran de cuanto les dice Juan" (44). This farce illustrates not only the Tarletons' ignorance about contemporary Mexico, but also Juan's responsibility in perpetuating this ignorance by pandering to his host family instead of engaging them in an honest discussion of the matter. In "La apuesta", a

vacationing Spanish tour guide chides her Mexican colleague for directing his hostility toward his gringo clients when the source of his unhappiness resides within himself. The women *maquiladora* workers in “Malintzin de las maquilas” swoon before blond male strippers in a local dance club and sigh at the bridal fashion pageant in which gringo grooms supposedly take Mexican brides. Pageants with Mexican grooms and gringa brides would be unacceptable to these women, who equate success with marriage to a gringo, as becomes clear on the one occasion on which a gringa bride struts onto the stage: “Una vez que sacaron de novia a una güerita de ojo azul, la que se armó, casi incendian el local. Ahora ya sabían. El desfile de trajes de novia era de mexicanas, para mexicanas” (154). In “La frontera de cristal”, Audrey at last offers her name written in lipstick on her office window. In return, Lisandro distances himself by replying only with “Mexican”. In his book examining Mexican perceptions of the United States, Stephen Morris discusses Mexico’s uneasy desire for development and democracy, which compels it to engage with its northern neighbor in ways that potentially undermine its own national identity. Morris suggests that one method by which Mexico dictates the terms of this tenuous balance is by retreating into the pre-conceived notions the ‘U.S.’ projects upon ‘Mexico’: “In some ways then, the only way of effectively engaging the ‘U.S.’ is to hold on tightly to the imaginary, mythical ‘Mexico’ [...] The two stereotypical images, in short, go hand-in-hand as a love-hate view of one echoes deep within a love-hate view of the other” (282). One might well question, as Fuentes’s novel seems to, how *estadounidenses* can be expected to effectively and harmoniously coexist with Mexicans who tacitly underestimate themselves in comparison to gringos and actively conceal themselves from them.

It is also important to point out that the gringos in *La frontera de cristal* are not the sole cause of Mexico's poverty. At a cheap price, Leonardo Barroso sells his countrymen's services to *estadounidense* businesses for personal gain. He thereby contributes to the hegemony that perpetuates and broadens economic and social barriers within his own country. Upon surveying the weekend workers he contracts to wash windows in Manhattan, Barroso is repulsed by their low-class appearance and reveals his own prejudices when he asks: "¿Por qué todos tan prietos, tan de a tiro nacos?" (193). In "La raya del olvido" the reader learns how Barroso has denied his own brother financial and professional help due to their political differences, and he refuses to help Emiliano's children find work. It is Leonardo Barroso who encourages Ted Murchison to purchase segments of Ciudad Juarez inhabited by his own *maquiladora* workers, then offers himself as the middleman for this purchase. Although the protagonist of "Malintzin de las maquilas" bears the name Marina, recalling the name the Spanish gave to the indigenous woman whom Mexicans remember as la Malinche, it is reasonable to consider that the true Malintzin is Leonardo Barroso. It is he who panders to the foreigners and betrays his own workers for personal gain. These actions by the successful nortefío prove that racism, callousness and despotism are not the exclusive dominion of North Americans. Betrayal is nothing new, and if one is looking for someone to blame for Mexican misery, it is necessary to search on both sides of the Río Bravo / Río Grande as well as deep into the area's history.

The last story in the collection further breaks away from the linear structure of the other stories, crossing geographic, historical and personal frontiers with agility unknown to any single one of the novel's characters. "Río Grande, Río bravo" profoundly

challenges the stories Mexico and the United States have told themselves about their own identity and that of the other. This narration suggests that Mexico loses its much-mourned northern territories to the U.S. partly out of its failure to appreciate and defend them. Italicized episodes, juxtaposed with vignettes about individual characters on the border at a given time, summarize the region's history: how it at first belonged to no one, then passed from hand to hand and back again. Throughout this narrative line, the river with two names continues to flow and nature continues to ignore the geographic and political identities imposed upon it. Human traffic across this natural frontier existed long before the appearance of Mexico or the United States: "*esta nunca fue la tierra donde el hombre nunca fue: desde hace treinta mil años los pueblos siguen el curso del río grande, río bravo, descienden desde el norte, emigran hacia el sur*" (250). Indeed, so long has this movement gone on that these migrants can no longer be remembered; their suffering has become the cries of birds, their calendars are no more than ashes (251). The abrupt and unexpected arrival of the Spaniards, motivated by the search for gold, brings new products and practices as it decimates the area with sickness (257). It is the folly of Cabeza de Vaca that first turns Spanish attention to the region, and the lie he tells about another El Dorado across the Río Grande in order to redeem his own years of suffering is what eventually propels Juan de Oñate to found El Paso. The narrator seems to express Oñate's own version of the founding of the city: "*aquí no había nada antes de que llegara Oñate, aquí no había historia, no había cultura: él las fundó*" (267). As the Spanish colonists continue to ply the indigenous people of the region with Catholicism and rifles, and as more and more colonists arrive to populate the region, the territory changes hands continuously. The italicized narration makes it clear that from a Mexican

perspective, much of this land was lost before it was ever won (272). The corruption and negligence of the Mexican government toward its northern-most territories was to blame: “*llegaron los gringos [...] llegaron a las tierras deshabitadas, olvidadas, injustas, olvidadas por la monarquía española y ahora por la república mexicana, aisladas, injustas tierras*” (275-276). Thus, Fuentes’s novel portrays a Mexican regime that, far from defending its territory, despoils and disdains it. In its allusions to the original three hundred gringo settlers in Texas, the novel also illustrates Mexico’s hypocrisies, insinuating that the country invites U.S. intervention at times and rejects it at others, much the way the U.S. invites and rejects Mexican workers to befit its circumstances. In the novel, U.S. General Austin invites U.S. occupation in the region in the hopes of swaying Mexican popular opinion toward private property and legal process and away from centralized Spanish rule: “*que vengan los gringos, ellos también son independientes y democráticos, / que entren aunque sea ilegalmente, cruzando el río Sabinas, mojándose las espaldas*” (276). While Houston schemes, Santa Anna carelessly loses Texas. With religious and imperialist fervor recalling that of the Spanish, the U.S. attempts to live up to its Manifest Destiny and create a country that extends from sea to sea (282-83). The vertiginous span of time covered in these episodes; the uniformly human motives and follies of Spaniards, Mexicans and gringos alike; and the predominance of the timeless mountains, deserts and rivers over it all, remind the reader of the arbitrariness and precariousness of the current national identities we strive to erect and defend. Jaime Labastida has sagaciously observed that in the novels of Carlos Fuentes, the present coexists with history on even footing. He says:

el tiempo narrativo en la novela de Fuentes nunca es circular. Tal vez en algunos casos pueda llegar a ser lineal, pero jamás vuelve a su punto de partida. El tiempo, en Fuentes, tampoco se enriquece en el proceso de la narración. Parece como si se tratara de un tiempo, no sé si decirlo así, coagulado o de un presente helado (13).

In *La frontera de cristal*, the changes wrought along the Río Grande, río Bravo by all its trespassers are too drastic and irrevocable to permit the illusion that time is circular. Nonetheless, the confluence of characters from all nine stories, juxtaposed with historical interludes, distills time down to this single moment within the millennial history Fuentes abridged throughout the novel, implying that it is time for human action to change the course of that history once again.

One anecdote suggests that within the Mexican Revolution there was a moment in which Mexico tried to reach out to the U.S. with its full identity: “*mostrándole a los gringos las heridas que queríamos cerrar, los sueños que necesitábamos soñar, las mentiras que debíamos expulsar, las pesadillas que debíamos asumir*” (290). In this brief moment of clarity Mexico told the truth about itself, but alas, the U.S. simply pigeon-holed its southern neighbor: “*no comprendieron que al sur del río grande, río bravo, por un momento, en la revolución, brilló la verdad que queríamos ser y compartir con ellos*” (290). The U.S. projection of an identity upon ‘Mexico’ could have provoked the real Mexico to prefer to hide its identity even deeper, taking refuge in ‘Mexico’ and the ‘U.S.’ as Stephen Morris calls those imaginary places. The novel asks: “*¿habrá tiempo para vernos y aceptarnos como realmente somos, gringos y mexicanos, destinados a vivir juntos sobre la frontera del río hasta que el mundo se canse, y cierre*

los ojos, y se pegue un tiro confundiendo la muerte y el sueño?” (291). In the last pages of the novel, an important character appears and begins to answer this question. The free-spirited writer José Francisco manages to transcend this shared history of mistaken identity through the pages he carries. The young writer eschews both U.S. and Mexican nationality: “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. No tengo que asimilarme a nada. Tengo mi propia historia” (281). He acts as a messenger, bearing bilingual texts across the border in both directions. When apprehended by border officials who suspect him of being a subversive, he helps them empty his satchels of papers. These stories float off across the desert, and it is this act that at last breaks the “frontera de cristal” separating the two countries. Through the stories he carries, José Francisco does what no other character in the novel has been able to do: he breaks through prejudices and constructions by capturing and transmitting through the written word the subjective and anecdotal, the real pain and love and fear of individuals. In the final italicized section of “Río Grande, Río Bravo, the characters from the collection’s other stories converge upon one spot of the desert, some to die, others to practice acts of generosity, crime, tolerance, violence and courage. As Hugo Méndez Ramírez points out in his article “Estrategias para entrar y salir de la globalización en *La frontera de cristal* de Carlos Fuentes” the border in this novel provides a space in which characters confront one another dialogically and, in so doing, confront themselves and their own identities. He writes:

El *locus* fronterizo, por supuesto, facilita el tratamiento del tema del otro y al mismo tiempo constituye un modelo propio, una aplicación local. En otras palabras, este espacio se convierte tanto en la síntesis ideal de convergencia entre

el *yo* y el *otro* como en el punto de intersección conceptual y real de lo global y lo local. No estaría de más, en este momento, aclarar que el concepto de frontera vertido aquí no se limita a ningún referente geográfico en particular, sino que se refiere a todo espacio – real o imaginado – donde se da el encuentro, el intercambio y la negociación cultural de diferentes individuos y grupos. (589)

Méndez Ramírez's interpretation holds valid for "Río Grande, río Bravo", where the *frontera* lacks not only geographical, but also temporal specificity. The border belongs to all these converged characters equally, and their individual motives for being there recall those of generations upon generations of migrants compelled to cross the river from north to south, from south to north.

It is appropriate that a poetic expression is the acute and virtuosic note that shatters the glass, because Carlos Fuentes confers this power precisely upon literature. Fuentes comments in *Geografía de la novela* that the novel "es la arena privilegiada donde los lenguajes en conflicto pueden encontrarse, reuniendo, en tensión y en diálogo, no sólo personajes opuestos, sino civilizaciones enteras [...] niveles sociales diferentes" (158). Similarly, in a 1996 interview with Ricardo Cayuela Gally Fuentes states that the mission of the novel is to synthesize genres and to reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the modern world: "Estamos nuevamente en un mundo migratorio, de encuentro de culturas. La propia información, instantánea y masiva que caracteriza el mundo actual [...] acarrea un encuentro de razas, voces, y culturas que para mi es lo que la novela recoge de una manera más definida" (Hernández 261). In this manner, the author suggests that in literature the two cultures can meet and engage sincerely and meaningfully.

While it is difficult to know for certain what other factors may have motivated Fuentes to write *La frontera de cristal*, a principal cause seems to find its explanation in the words of Edward Said, written a few years earlier in *Culture and Imperialism*:

stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (xii-xiii)

La frontera de cristal, by offering a polyphonic expression, confronts characters with their dialogic other in a number of binary oppositions – gay and straight, rich and poor, border and capital, Mexican and *estadounidense*. José Francisco and the texts he bears show that just as the power to narrate can silence other narratives or prevent them from emerging, the power to narrate can also break down barriers and bring new narratives into the fore, obligating us to reevaluate our notions of the national and personal identities they describe. The summary of the history of the region now comprising the southwest United States in *La frontera de cristal* illustrates that the U.S. and Mexico, as well as those migratory peoples who preceded these national identities, were moved by

many of the same concerns and motivations, and that indeed the present debate about cultural and economic penetration along the border is only a moment in a continuous human struggle. In a 1989 interview with Bill Moyers, Fuentes suggested that this breaking-down of barriers is imperative to the survival of both cultures. He said: “Estoy convencido de que las culturas que viven en aislamiento están condenados a perecer, y que sólo las culturas que se comunican e intercambian cosas sobreviven” (Hernández 133). This cautionary message is met with hope by Stephen Morris in his book *Gringolandia*, in which he writes: “post-national trends such as globalization, NAFTA and deterritorialization pave the way for the U.S. and Mexico to regard one another differently; perhaps more honestly and with less fear on either side [...] that our national identities are fundamentally threatened” (283). Perhaps, then, José Francisco and his texts ride the vanguard of this coming change, in which the two cultures will at last communicate frankly and openly, in recognition of the multiplicity existing on both sides of *la frontera*.

THANKS, BUT NO THANKS: BUYING IN AND OPTING OUT
IN *CIUDADES DESIERTAS*

Critics disagree as to the definition of “la Onda.” Some consider that literature of “la Onda” does not constitute a literary genre because it fails to transcend its moment of inception. June C.D. Carter and Donald L. Schmidt write in the introduction to *José Agustín: Onda and Beyond*, “Because of la Onda’s innovative modes Mexico’s critics were often at a loss to interpret the works of José Agustín and his contemporaries in an appropriate way” (2). Moreover, the authors widely considered to form part of “la Onda” do not coalesce around a single aesthetic or thematic principle. In an interview with Jean-Pierre Dessenoix in 1993, Agustín himself remarks: “a nuestra vez éramos amigos, pero no formábamos un grupo ni remotamente: nunca nos juntamos a elaborar una suerte de manifiesto ni a compartir premisas. [...] Nunca articulábamos expresiones colectivas, ni nos dábamos una apariencia de grupo ni muchísimo menos” (Dessenoix 160). Where scholars do seem to converge, however, is around two points: first, that José Agustín is a figure of “la Onda” and second, that “la Onda” is composed of a rock-and-roll generation of Mexicans, the first generation to experience a pronounced awareness of U.S. popular culture both in Mexico and through their own studies and sojourns in the United States. In his book *Cultura y sociedad en México en la obra de José Agustín*, Joong Kim Lee writes: “‘la onda’ fue un movimiento social producto de la influencia de la

cultura norteamericana que algunos jóvenes escritores de la Ciudad de México se atrevieron a llevar al terreno de la literatura” (68). Thus, we can expect these authors, who in many cases aligned themselves with the countercultural movement in the U.S. during the sixties and seventies, to regard that country with a perspective that differs from the prevailing point of view of mainstream Mexican society.

Ciudades desiertas (1982) shares traits with earlier works by José Agustín that have come to represent traits of “literatura de la Onda”: linguistic games, overt sexual scenes, crassness and humor. Nonetheless, we should be wary of reducing his work, as some critics tend to do with “literatura de la Onda”, to a text that lacks transcendence and purely reflects a now-spent zeitgeist. In fact, Carter and Schmidt suggest that to dismiss the author’s work as being just as ephemeral as the psychedelic, bourgeois-revolutionary movement that framed it is short-sighted and misses Agustín’s formidable literary contributions (2). Agustín does not pronounce an Onda manifesto but in fact criticizes the genre’s shortcomings and vicissitudes even while embracing aspects of the lifestyle associated with it. According to Carter and Schmidt, in his early novels, “with his ‘anti-solemn’ tone, Agustín evenhandedly unmaskes the excesses, delusions, and hypocrisy of both his own and his parents’ generation” (2). *Ciudades desiertas* can be seen as a continuation of that objective. In this novel he explores the love-hate relationship Mexico shares with the U.S, insightfully lampooning both countries. He bashes the United States on a number of counts, but it is difficult to reproach him for this when he turns the same sardonic eye on his homeland later on the same page, and when the weaknesses of the Mexican protagonists observing U.S. culture are made so apparent. Both countries and

cultures are deeply flawed, he suggests. Nonetheless, Mexico frequently recognizes and acknowledges its shortcomings, and in this it is superior to the United States.

Ciudades desiertas, narrated chronologically in the third person, tells the story of Mexico City poet Susana and her actor husband, Eligio. When Susana is invited by Gustavo Sainz (a contemporary of José Agustín) to participate in an international writers' program in Arcadia, a small university town in the Midwestern United States, she accepts without hesitation and leaves the country without bothering to consult or even inform Eligio. Desperate, Eligio traces Susana's whereabouts and travels to Arcadia determined to retrieve her. He decides to stay on, befriend the other Latin American participants in the ominously-named "Program", partaking in *estadounidense* consumer culture, and mocking the gringo Program coordinators while trying to repair his relationship with Susana. Susana's sexual affair with the Program's Polish participant, Slawomir, causes constant friction for the married couple. At the conclusion of the Program, Susana escapes with Slawomir to Chicago. Eligio follows her and obligates her to leave with him after an altercation with Slawomir. Susana flees again, and Eligio pursues her, this time into the Southwest. Eligio eventually abandons the search and returns to Mexico City. When he has apparently given up hope, Susana returns to him. Susana announces she is pregnant, swearing the child is Eligio's. At last she acknowledges she loves him, and they reconcile.

It seems the Mexican public was hungry for *Ciudades desiertas*, its scathing criticism of the United States, and the new direction in gender roles it seemed to portend. Elena Poniatowska called *Ciudades desiertas* "la primera novela

verdaderamente antimachista escrita en México” (*Ciudades desiertas*, back cover).

The novel enjoyed unprecedented commercial success, exhausting its first printing in only 45 days. It was the first Mexican novel to be promoted on Mexican television via Edivisión, which earned the novel elbowroom among North American best sellers within the country (Calvillo 183). There were multiple attempts to take the novel to the silver screen, including one by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón.

Agustín’s first-hand experience of life in the United States likely informed Eligio’s acerbic descriptions of *estadounidense* small-town living in *Ciudades desiertas*. In 1977, Agustín participated in the International Writers’ Program at the University of Iowa. Arcadia, the small college town described in the novel, is located somewhere near Chicago, the closest airport being forty kilometers away in Little Rapids and accessible via Ozark Airlines. The city possesses two liquor stores (administered by the unidentified state and well-removed from the campus residence of the Program participants), a bank, a shopping mall, a dearth of gay bars that affront the puritanical nature of the rest of the town, and little else. In fact, a Philippine Program participant, Altagracia, comments to the other authors in the Program:

Más vale que se enteraran que habían llegado a Nacolandia: ese estado era famoso por sus mazorcas enanas e insaboras y por su mentalidad estúpida, provinciana y retrógrada. Cuando se hacen chistes sobre *la gente estúpida y provinciana* de Estados Unidos siempre es la gente de *aquí*, porque eso es lo único que hay: estulticia, legañas mentales, piojos en las páginas e ideas reaccionarias [...] (23)

Indeed, the international group of writers speaks wistfully of escaping to New York “que, como todo mundo sabe, es donde está el buen ambiente” and when Susana departs the Program with three Eastern Europeans, their destination is Chicago (23). By not identifying the state in which Arcadia can be found, Agustín underlines the homogeneity, emptiness and dullness of the Midwest, and at the same time suggests that the negative stereotypes associated with the United States – small-mindedness, antiquated and reactionary thinking, ignorance – are products not of the well-known cities or centers of power within the U.S, but instead of so many invisible and identical places like Arcadia.

Although Altagracia and the other international writers perceive the Arcadians as provincial, the *estadounidenses* themselves are utterly convinced that their lifestyle is unique, sophisticated, and inherently superior to that of foreigners. Becky, one of the Program facilitators, explains grain elevators to Susana and gives her a “sardonic” glance when she goggles at a pre-fabricated house traveling down the highway behind a semi (12). Patronizingly, Becky introduces Susana to the television set that will occupy her room in spite of Susana’s wishes, as if she believes Susana has never seen one. Rick, the Program’s creator, expounds on the marvelous spectacle of football, unconvincingly comparing it to a fertility ritual, as if to liken it to his beloved Hellenic culture. The Program coddles its participants, shepherding them through their grocery shopping and banking. As Susana expresses to Eligio, “nos llevaron juntos a todas las idioteces que hacen aquí, sienten que eres un pobre naco que no ha salido del rancho y te quieren llevar a la mano a todas partes” (59). Rick and his wife Wen plan excursions to such stimulating locales as an insurance agency in the

state capital that houses an expensive modern art collection, and Arcadians speak in superlatives about the importance of their town. Susana summarizes: “parece que hace muchísimo, pero *muchísimo*, hace unos cuarenta años, Arcadia fue la capital del estado” (71). Becky is quick to point out that Arcadia houses not *a* shopping mall but *The Mall*. The town, evidently, is not *an* Arcadia, but *the* Arcadia, the unique pastoral paradise where one enjoys a simple, perfect existence, accept no substitutions.

The self-aggrandizement and provincialism of Arcadians in general, and especially that of the coordinators and patrons of the Program, becomes patently clear at a dinner party hosted for the visiting writers by a wealthy local woman known for her writing and patronage of the arts. By means of this event Rick and Wen hope to expose the foreign writers to “lo más culto de la alta sociedad del estado” (106). Shortly before this occasion, Eligio suggests that Rick and Wen make greater efforts to correctly pronounce his name. When Rick replies that Eligio should exercise greater tolerance, since *estadounidenses* often have difficulty pronouncing foreign names, Eligio points out that the *estadounidenses* hypocritically insist that their own names be pronounced properly. On the bus ride to the dowager author’s home, Rick attempts to rouse the group into a chorus of “My Bonnie”, which he considers “una canción universal que todos los participantes estaban obligados a conocer” (109). Rick and Wen have exhorted the international authors to wear clothing from their native countries to dine with the elegant *estadounidenses*, as if tuxedos and gowns were the corresponding U.S. folkloric costumes. In response, Eligio sarcastically suggests that the elderly *estadounidenses* should be disguised as cowboys and

Indians. Here again it is Eligio who calls attention to the condescension with which Arcadians treat the Program participants. He quickly identifies the gist of the evening's activities: "estos pendejos creen que los changuitos extranjeros tienen la obligación de divertirlos" (114). Even more insulting is the moment when Becky requests that the "destacados poetas, prosistas y dramaturgos de más de veinte países" chosen and invited by the Program assist in serving the dinner because it has been insufficiently staffed (10). Far from receiving respect for their literary accomplishments, the authors are converted into spectacles for the amusement and benefit of their ostensibly more sophisticated *estadounidense* hosts.

This arrogant attitude, observed by Susana and Eligio long before the dinner party, actually serves to disguise a sense of inferiority on the part of Arcadians. Susana and Eligio conclude that the Program eschews participants from Europe and other developed areas. Not long after Eligio's arrival in Arcadia, he comments on this:

esta gente trae puro escritor de países raspa, las naciones de piojito, el good ol' tercer mundo [...] con esa gente no podrían lucirse mostrándoles las maravillas de la civilización: teléfono instantáneo, cuentas de banco *personalizadas*... ¡Qué país!, bromeó Eligio, ahora mí ya entender, ellos traer puros cambujos para poder latiguarlos [...] (79)

The Program's condescension is not entirely without self-awareness. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Becky asking distinguished French poets or renowned German playwrights to help with dinner. It is evident that *estadounidenses* consider themselves culturally less sophisticated than Europeans, but still far more urbane than

their Latin American, African, Middle Eastern or Asian contemporaries. They reaffirm their sense of superiority by surrounding themselves with others whom they can still dazzle with a handful of dubious distinctions. Susana and Eligio's cynical response demonstrates that these efforts utterly fail.

The Arcadians are not the only characters in the novel guilty of unfairly stereotyping the foreign authors. Eligio perceives the Chinese authors as constituting an undifferentiated and inscrutable unit and on several occasions refers to Slawomir as inhuman and a gorilla. Although his comments regarding the truculent Polish author are most often intended to wound and humiliate Susana for having slept with him, the premise from which they depart is that Slawomir is a beast and not a person. Out of all the program participants, Eligio refers to and addresses only the Latin American authors and Altagracia by name, thereby suggesting that in his perception only these characters demonstrate a sufficient degree of individuality to warrant learning their names. Cross-cultural understanding within the Program seems impossible to achieve because the authors generally divide themselves into Eastern European, Middle Eastern, Asian and Latin American cliques at parties and readings. Even though Eligio is clearly guilty of pigeon-holing Slawomir and the Asian authors, certainly the environment of the Program is a propitious one for his sniping and stereotyping.

While the gringo coordinator, Rick, and his assistant, the repressive Becky, condescendingly tout the virtues of the Program, they also miss no opportunity to underscore the value of the privilege of being invited to Arcadia. Becky assures Susana that she "llevaría sorpresas *más* que agradables, gente maravillosa con la que

sería un privilegio conversar, y muy *útil* conocer para obtener publicaciones o traducciones en el país” (14). When Susana questions the importance of having a telephone, Becky expounds on the marvels of the U.S. phone system and questions Susana as to whether Mexico can rival it, implying Susana would be a fool not to take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy such excellent phone service. Rick pressures the visiting authors to attend the football game with him, describing it as “algo-que-no-debían-perderse-porque-era-el-rito-de-fertilidad-y/o-fecundidad-del-país” and is careful to mention that the Program has already reserved several costly seats (19). Later he encourages the international authors to take as many free books as they like, provided as a courtesy by the Program – then announces how much the books would have cost at a bookstore. He presses the writers to participate in as many Program activities as they can, because they will not be invited to return for another season due to the exorbitant costs accrued on their behalf. When Eligio and Susana leave Arcadia for several days, Becky admonishes them and runs down the list of remarkable activities they have missed. Though she assures Susana she has set aside her souvenir, genuine silver coin bestowed on a visit to the bank, she will have to do without the toy tractor that could have been hers. The representative who guides the tour of the insurance company’s art collection informs the Program participants of the collection’s value and tells them that they are doubly privileged. José Agustín underlines the opaque nature of this comment by simply explaining its meaning for the reader:

La doble fortuna consistía en que eran participantes del Programa y en que verían los tesoros artísticos. ¿Te fijas?, comentó Ramón, estos yanquis

siempre te dicen que *tú* eres afortunadísimo de estar aquí, y jamás dicen que *ellos* tienen la fortuna de contar con nosotros, ¡qué nuevorriquismo! (110)

The Argentine author and Program participant, Ramón, criticizes not so much the injustice of the *estadounidense* arrogance as its gaucheness. The *estadounidenses*, the *nouveaux riches*, are not satisfied to honor and interact with their guests; they must flaunt their own generosity. In several instances, the Program appears just an empty exercise in *estadounidense* appreciation for the arts and culture. Rick bemoans the expense and hassle of bringing authors from over twenty countries. Out of a sense of obligation, the literary widow hosts annual Program dinner parties she does not enjoy, and does not interact with her international guests. The writers themselves seem to consider that their *estadounidense* hosts could just as well have spared themselves the trouble. One by one, the authors tire of pandering to the Program and assert their independence: Eligio and Susana by buying a car, others by skipping more and more events, the Colombian author, Hércules, by performing a strip-tease before the Program's elderly benefactors; and the Nigerian writer, Jerry, by stalking off the tour bus never to return. Each has grown weary of the pressure to demonstrate a level of gratitude their *estadounidense* hosts consider to be commensurate with the once-in-a-lifetime opportunities they have endeavored to provide.

The aforementioned obligation to demonstrate gratitude is one of many ways *Ciudades desiertas* challenges the notion of "freedom" in the alleged land of liberty, where, far from feeling free, Susana and Eligio encounter an atmosphere of repression and fear. On various occasions Becky emphasizes that the Program participants are free to do whatever they wish, but this statement is consistently followed by an

admonishment or an attempt to intimidate them into following her suggestions. For example, just after commanding the South African writer, Joyce, not to let anyone tell her what to do, Becky tells Susana: “Es cierto que pocos de nosotros fumamos [...] pero si tú quieres hazlo, es tu salud y tu dinero lo que está en juego” (13). When Becky calls Susana to “invite” her to shop for groceries with the other Program participants, Susana declines because she has not had breakfast. Becky responds: “Bueno, naturalmente eres libre de hacer lo que gustes pero yo te recomendaría que en esta ocasión nos acompañes, la próxima salida de compras será en cuatro días” (26). Susana is free to choose a bank other than the one recommended by the Program, but for the sake of convenience she is encouraged to open an account at First National. Eligio is free to drive his car to Chicago, but Becky warns him that the roads will be treacherous. Even the paychecks, ostensibly the property of the individual Program authors, are subject to Becky’s sententious scrutiny. She cautions the authors not to fold their checks for fear the bank’s computer will not accept them this way. Just as the authors feel compelled to behave a certain way to demonstrate their enthusiasm for and cooperation with the Program (despite the insistence of the coordinators that they are free to do as they wish), their everyday actions are subtly curtailed under the auspices of a probably well-intentioned but condescending plan that truncates their supposed freedom.

Ciudades desiertas betrays a general sense of repression eroding the notion of the freedom so often evoked in association with the United States. Becky does not limit herself to monitoring the behavior of the Program participants, but takes issue with their English pronunciation. For example, she cautions Susana to distinguish

carefully between “public” and “pubic”, saying “no queremos consentirnos esas cosas, ¿verdad?” (11). The authors joke together about this fact in a huddle in a room of the Kitty Hawk, the dormitory where they have been provided lodging: “Todos rieron y le hicieron chistes a Becky y su manía de corregir la pronunciación, aunque procuraron ser un tanto cautelosos; en realidad nadie confiaba en nadie” (22).

Distrustful, the writers limit themselves in what they say about Becky. In this manner, perhaps perceiving and responding to the repressiveness exhibited by their hosts, they inadvertently participate in it. On another occasion, however, it is their behavior at the grocery store that provokes Becky’s prudish condemnation. The authors begin opening and eating their groceries before they have paid for them, to which Becky responds: “Aquí no pueden hacer eso [...] si alguien de la tienda los sorprende los pueden enjuiciar” (68). She recounts a cautionary tale about a child who was sent to court for stealing candy bars in an attempt to discourage petty theft. When the writers reorganize their spontaneous picnic in the parking lot, she chides them and explains that in the U.S. it is customary to hold a picnic in a park or other suitable location with the proper facilities. However, it is not only Becky who represses her own behavior and that of others. Arcadia is identified as a Puritanical community that disapproves of pornography and alcohol. The modern art collection visited by the Program hangs over the heads of insurance agents who work unperturbed by the visitors, never once meeting their eyes or even acknowledging their presence. This circumstance elicits the following exchange between Eligio and the authors: “¿Se han fijado que nadie se atreve a mirarnos? Deben de tenerlo prohibidísimo. ¿No serán tímidos? Más bien ha de haber algún cañón de rayos láser

empotrado en la pared, que fulmina a todo aquel que alce la vista” (111). At the dinner party hosted by the wealthy patroness of the arts, nothing can alleviate the stifling, stilted atmosphere until Hércules begins to take off his clothes, whereupon the attitude of the elderly *estadounidense* guests turns from tolerant condescension to horror.

In *Ciudades desiertas*, crass language – especially that of Eligio – serves as a means of juxtaposing *estadounidense* repression and prudishness with Latin American authenticity. Critics have frequently commented on José Agustín’s use of Mexican slang and obscenities. Indeed, such language is a distinctive feature of his work. In his early novels, Agustín used slang to distance his adolescent protagonists from their bourgeois parents. One of the author’s most celebrated works, the play *Círculo vicioso* (1974), was censored in Mexico because of its use of slang popular at the time in Lecumberri prison, where the play takes place. Agustín argued: “Insistimos en que ese lenguaje no era ni ofensivo ni insultante; pues su intención no era ofender sino crear una realidad artística” (quoted in Lee, 86). Similarly, in *Ciudades desiertas* the use of slang and vulgarity is not gratuitous; instead, it acts as a subtle weapon to combat *estadounidense* repressiveness. On one occasion, Eligio and the Latin American bloc of Program participants; constituted by Hércules, Ramón and the Peruvian poet Edmundo, and sometimes Susana; develop elaborate word games to lambaste the gringos under their noses. Spanish, and specifically slang, is a tool used to separate the insiders (the Latin Americans) from the outsiders (the *estadounidenses* and the other international authors). Parménides García Saldaña, another follower and author of *la Onda*, states simply in *En la ruta de la Onda* that “Diferir del modo

general de hablar es tratar de no ser como los demás, es salirse de las leyes y el orden que preestablecen un lenguaje común” (51). The use of idiomatic Spanish effectively excludes even those who might have a cursory academic understanding of the language. For example, when Eligio and the others go to the bar with Irene, Cole, and Elijah, *estadounidense* participants in a writers’ workshop related to the Program, they use Spanish to communicate amongst themselves when they do not want the North Americans to understand. By using their native language, they are able to subvert the stifling environment of Arcadia and are free to express their usually less-than-flattering observations of their host culture.

As the most significant figure representing repression in the lives of the Program participants, Becky seems to take a perverse delight in instilling the authors with alarm in regard to determined aspects of her country. For example, when Susana first arrives, Becky assumes that Susana is intrigued by a sign reading “LAS DECLARACIONES NO SON ASUNTO DE BROMA” (11). When her description of airport policy is not enough to impress Susana, Becky resorts to foretelling threatening scenarios in order to maintain the upper hand in the conversation. When Susana indicates she is familiar with airport security and does not need to have this sign clarified for her, Becky perseveres, explaining that “a cada viajero se le pregunta si no lleva armas de fuego y nunca faltan los bromistas, me temo que por lo general gente de *nuestro* programa, que dice que sí, y los agentes de seguridad se los llevan y los hacen pasar *un muy mal rato*” (11). She obligates Susana and the other authors to open bank accounts, cautioning that it is dangerous to wander the streets of tiny Arcadia with cash in one’s pocket. This admonition is reiterated by the car salesman

who sells Eligio his Chevrolet Vega. Eligio pulls out a wad of bills to pay for the car in cash, and the salesman exclaims: “por Dios mexicano, no andes por las calles con esa cantidad de dinero, aprovecha que ya tienes tu auto y véte a guardar tu dinero en un banco” (73). It appears that the fear experienced by Becky and other *estadounidenses* extends beyond concern for the welfare of foreign visitors.

In addition to the fear of authority and crime propagated by Becky, other Arcadians provide warnings to the international visitors. At the dinner party, an elderly couple expresses concern over the fact that Susana and Eligio smoke: “¿no habían leído los reportes *científicos* acerca del daño que causa el tabaco?: cáncer, pérdida de energía, caída de pestañas, prominencias ventrales, halitosis e impotencia, entre otros (112). The Hare Krishna Eligio encounters in the airport upon his arrival threatens an ominous fate if Eligio fails to buy a copy of the Baghavad Gita: “le dijo que no tenía idea de lo que podía ocurrir si no le compraba el libro” (46). Apparently, whether a real reason for fear exists or not, the *estadounidenses* will find a motive to intimidate and dramatize in order to create an impression of importance and danger.

Although Susana and Eligio do not generally share the fears of their hosts, they experience some alarm and distrust on their own. Susana is reluctant to put her money in the bank and Eligio considers that the only thing accomplished by doing so is “engordar a los banqueros” (73). They fear being taken advantage of in the purchase of their car (not unreasonably, as it turns out) and sardonically imagine the fate of the Nigerian author after he abandons the Program: “lo habían encarcelado, lo habían corrido del Programa, de la ciudad, del país; lo habían entregado a una horda de rednecks que el Programa importó del sur” (119). Eligio experiences a feeling of

“tenue paranoia” before even leaving the airport, and the Kitty Hawk residence is repeatedly described as a distressing space that confines its inhabitants as if they are in a prison or a mental institution (46). Even spaces within the building are vast and barren. The rooms seem to Susana like “páramos alfombrados” and she observes that in the tiny apartment assigned to her “las ventanas eran demasiado altas, ¿para que suicidarse costara algún trabajo? (12). Susana locks Eligio inside the apartment without difficulty. He is forced to call security to get himself out, and when he asks to use the master key, the horrified security guard objects. The residents are cautioned not to make too much noise; however, a mysterious noise resonates inside Susana’s apartment: “[...] un ruido sordo, tumultuoso: ríos de partes mecánicas: tornillos, tuercas, aspas rotas, motores descuadrados y baleros saltantes avanzaban pesadamente [...] El ruido venía de algún aparato oculto que succionaba el aire, aunque en el ambiente no se percibía ninguna alteración. Qué desagradable era” (48-49). The flatness and emptiness of the countryside surrounding Arcadia, the silence of *estadounidenses*, even in the airport, the lack of people and the abundance of machines (vending machines, automatic teller machines, money-changing machines and shoe-shining machines) all contribute to this sense of trapped, quiet paranoia.

Particularly disturbing to Eligio and Susana is the omnipresence of television. When Susana inquires why there is a television set in her room, Becky explains that all Program participants are provided with one, and that Susana should keep it in case it should prove useful at some point. When Susana clearly states that she does not want the set in her room, Becky refuses to remove it, suggesting instead that Susana simply not turn it on. Elijah, another Program assistant, turns the set on anyway.

When Susana leaves the room, she does not turn the TV off, but continues to fret that it remains functioning in her empty room. Susana perceives even the blank screen as an intrusion, and on this occasion it is as though the television has aggressively followed her out of her room and down the hallway. Eligio's first comment when he discovers the television in Susana's room is "qué bajo ha caído esta chava" (40). He turns it on and encounters a Mae West film to his liking, later leaving it on when he goes to retrieve Susana from Slawomir's room. Upon their return, the program has changed: "la televisión seguía encendida, sin sonido y sin la figura redentora de Mae West" (44). Thus, it is clear that Mae West has only temporarily redeemed television in Eligio's opinion. Both the *estadounidenses* and the Sri Lankan scholar who resides in the United States consider television not only entertaining but also useful. The Sri Lankan academic, visiting the Program from the University of Columbus, has left his entire family in the basement watching television during one Program soirée, causing Rick to comment that "la televisión, como se sabe, es el gran auxiliador de los padres que no encuentran o no quieren gastar en las niñeras" (18). Meanwhile, Susana and Eligio seem to find it an appalling habit or at best a guilty pleasure, and the inescapable ubiquity of television sets aggravates the anxiety they feel while living in the Kitty Hawk.

Although Susana and Eligio deplore the omnipresence of another device, the automobile, they recognize that having a car is the key to their independence and the only thing that mitigates life in Arcadia. What makes the liquor stores inaccessible from the Kitty Hawk building is not the distance but the fact that the Program participants depend utterly on the Program vehicles for transportation. The taxi fare

from the airport to the Kitty Hawk is outrageous by Eligio's standards, and Susana explains that the bus service in Arcadia is practically nil due to the fact that "aquí todo el gringaje tiene una o varias naves a la puerta" (67). She tells him that only students walk in the United States because "los demás toman el coche hasta para ir al excusado" (71). As Eligio notes, without a car in the United States one is truly "out-of-service". For this reason, the couple decides to buy a car of their own. Though they are concerned that they have been taken for a ride by the "profesionalmente dinámico" used car salesman who sells them their old Chevrolet Vega, Susana and Eligio are satisfied with the car and its price compared to what they would have had to pay in Mexico. Initially the car provides the sense of freedom and well being Eligio and Susana seek. They are able to get the lay of the land surrounding Arcadia, visit the Mississippi River, and opt out of numerous Program excursions. Susana observes that Eligio seems less tense behind the wheel of the car. She perceives him as competent, powerful and energetic, "con pensamientos tan tenues que no interferían en la seguridad y la fuerza que experimentaba y que, sin duda, tenían que ver con el país: una sensación de poder, de no tener techo ni límite, de absoluta seguridad" (77). The Vega allows Eligio to pursue Susana to Chicago when she escapes there with Slawomir and several other Eastern European authors. The Vega is reinforced as a metaphor for freedom when it acts as the space in which Susana actively decides to abandon Eligio again. When Eligio drives into a snow bank and the car becomes stuck, Susana leaves him asleep in the car, hitchhikes to the nearest town, informs a snowplower of her husband's predicament, and then disappears. Far from the socially incestuous hive of activity that is the Kitty Hawk, inside the car in

the snow, Susana at last has the freedom and solitude necessary to deeply survey her feelings for Eligio. This time when she leaves him, it is not a capricious, neglectful act such as her leaving Mexico City without telling him, but a conscious decision in which she at least takes care of his immediate needs. The subsequent road trip Eligio undertakes in search of his wife provides Irene with a pretense for dropping out of school, a decision she has been contemplating for some time. Together Eligio and Irene pass through Denver, Taos, and Santa Fe, where Eligio concludes that all American cities are sadly alike. Eventually, Eligio discovers aspects of individuality in Santa Fe that redeem the city for him. In the oldest part of the city, “comprendió por qué Santa Fe era algo distinto en Estados Unidos [...] Todo era una mezcla de ciudad mexicana y de pueblo de vaqueros, pero indudablemente había algo propio, irrepetible” (165). Nonetheless, when still entering the outskirts of Santa Fe, he experiences disappointment:

Por doquier eran las mismas avenidas amplísimas, ejes viales de un kilómetro de ancho, los Pollos Kentucky, los McDonalds y Burgers Kings y Der Wienerschnitzels, Shells, Texacos, Conocos, Holiday Inns, Motel 6, Best Westerns, Albertsons, Alpha Betas, K Marts, Walgreens, Sears, Sambos, Woolcos, La Belles, Radio Shacks, Woolworths, Lafayettes, Custom Hi Fis, y por supuesto los grandes automóviles gasguzzlers, las agencias de autos, los bancos con sus cajas de servicio en su auto [...] (164-65)

The homogenous landscape of the United States is thus presented as a by-product of consumerism and, specifically, of a people whose life revolves around cars and driving to acquire consumer goods. The open highway, as perceived by Susana from

the moving Vega on the day Eligio buys it, creates the illusion that “aquí el cielo está cerca, o lo parece, es un escalón no tan lejano, como si hubiera menos fuerza de gravedad en estos lares, por eso la gente siente que vuela” (78). Yet, as Ramón observes in regard to the Interstate highway system, “Estas carreteras pintan a Estados Unidos mejor que nada: una pista interminable por donde correr desafortadamente mientras la vida florece, inalcanzable, a los lados” (109). Thus, the sense of power and liberty afforded by the car is illusory, and highways are unfortunate side effects that have extended the *estadounidense* consumer wasteland even to the most remote and most distinctive locations.

Eligio and Susana find that their purchases in general afford them a feeling of well-being, though this emotion proves ephemeral. Their first destination after buying their car is “the Mall” where they spend a long afternoon marveling at the quality, price and variety of products for sale. Eligio observes that, while the streets of the United States are abandoned, the malls are packed with people, and Susana comments that “¡Si París era una fiesta [...] Estados Unidos era una tienda!” (74). Eligio sarcastically refers to the act of shopping as “pagar tributo a la región”, yet he falls prey to the same *estadounidense* yearning to buy and spend that he criticizes (74). He succumbs and buys a Walkman, which spurs other purchases: later the couple splurges on a number of cassettes to accompany their new equipment because they are so much cheaper than in Mexico. In contrast with the barren fields surrounding Arcadia, the Mall is replete with color, sensation and abundance. After a huge lunch, they leave the Mall “sumamente eufóricos por el vino, la buena comida y el discreto encanto de un eructo” (76). This last phrase recalls the title of Luis

Buñuel's film, *El discreto encanto de la burguesía* (1972) and in this manner underscores the idea that the Mall is a fundamentally bourgeois hangout. This "discreet charm" and satisfaction do not outlast the afternoon. The day of consumerism has allowed Susana to feel as though she, like the *estadounidenses* around her, is flying – as though the sky is the limit. For the duration of the flurry of spending, Susana is satisfied with Eligio; she feels secure and satisfied in his company, and empowered by the things they have been able to obtain. Later, the items with which they have surrounded themselves no longer evoke the sense of plenitude as the day they were bought. When Eligio returns to the Kitty Hawk after Susana has abandoned him in the frozen car, he discovers that she has left all her things there instead of taking them with her. Although he conjectures that she is counting on him to take her belongings with him when he goes, it seems unclear whether she will return to him at all. Before leaving the Kitty Hawk for the last time and setting out after Susana, Eligio surveys his things and even buys new suitcases to hold them all: "Con grandes cuidados empaquetó sus adquisiciones electrónicas y todo lo que Susana había dejado. ¡Qué cinismo de mujer!, se repetía, ¡no es posible! ¡Qué bajo ha caído!" (154-55). It is ironic that Eligio accuses Susana of having stooped to a new level, since the preoccupation with these material items is his and not hers. In taking virtually nothing with her when she leaves, Susana demonstrates that she cares more about her emotional independence and well being than about her possessions. Eligio, on the other hand, still clings to them and seeks satisfaction from them. Nonetheless, these objects prove to be of little comfort even to him in the absence of Susana.

Eligio's acquisitiveness becomes a vehicle for Agustín's criticism of the follies and limitations of "la Onda". It has been said that Mexican "xipitecas" protested the social injustice that allowed their middle and upper-class parents to exploit the Mexican working class (as well as the values associated with those higher social classes), while *estadounidense* hippies lacked similar political motivations. Enrique Marroquín makes this point in his book *La contracultura como protesta: análisis de un fenómeno juvenil*:

El hippie gabacho reacciona contra una sociedad de consumo alienada con productos superfluos. En cambio, México es un país subdesarrollado, con múltiples carencias. Nuestros xipitecas, desertores de la burguesía, pudieron hacer ver a sus familias la forma de vida de una gran mayoría de mexicanos a quienes ellos explotan. Usan huaraches, porque hay miles de mexicanos que no pueden comprar zapatos. (Marroquín 29)

In light of this, it is interesting that Eligio is the character in the novel who falls prey so dramatically to gratuitous consumerism (133-35). Eligio's disdain for social institutions, crass and slangy language, alcoholism, sexual attitudes and love of rock and roll link him to the counter-culture "Onda" as described by José Agustín in *La contracultura en México*. He condemns the vacuity and immorality of the United States, yet he finds the gringo goods hard to resist. By removing this "xipiteca" from his natural habitat, José Agustín exposes the tenuous nature of the sanctimonious idealism of "la Onda", quick to dissolve when confronted with the kind of economic power and security afforded by life in the United States.

One side effect of North American consumerism observed by the international visitors to the Kitty Hawk is the waste it produces. Although Eligio loses no time in surrounding himself with possessions, he prefers to shop at a second-hand store where he and Susana are astounded by the quantity and quality of items *estadounidenses* throw away. Upon their first visit to the store, Eligio buys a handgun, questioning why its previous owner would have gotten rid of it. Susana replies: “esta es la afamada tierra del desperdicio, aquí la gente tira a la basura a sus propios hijos cuando se les caen los dientes” (102). She describes to her husband the prodigious dumpsters behind the Kitty Hawk, periodically emptied by a complicated machine in what represents for the Program participants an engaging “espectáculo”, and relates how Altagracia earned the nickname “la excabasura” by rummaging in them and turning up “sofás, sillones, sillas, alfombras, lámparas, cortinas, suéteres, pantalones, calcetines, bufandas, guantes, bolsos, gorras, y todo está en buenas condiciones” (103). Between the second-hand store and the dumpsters behind the Kitty Hawk, the Program participants are able to acquire everything from scarves to bicycles, and observe up close that even the college students compelled for economic reasons to live in mediocre on-campus dormitories such as the Kitty Hawk can afford to waste and replace perfectly serviceable items. It does not take long, in light of Altagracia’s spoils, for the other authors to secretly follow her example. Before long they cease to observe even meager discretion and, as Susana tells Eligio, can be witnessed openly digging into the dumpsters and showing off their finds.

Some of the *estadounidense* student participants in the writers’ workshop in Arcadia deserve particular mention because they can be construed as caricatures of

several types of North Americans. For example, Elijah, who interacts with the Program authors throughout their semester in Arcadia, even earns the nickname “la Gringuez” from the Latin American faction. Elijah is neither sinister nor despicable; in fact, he comes across as affable, if bland. Upon meeting him Susana assesses him as “un joven recién desempacado de la adolescencia, de cara redonda, gafas también y sonrisa inalterable, the clean-cut-kid-who’s-been-to-college-too” (11). Eligio is even more incisive with regard to Elijah: “desde que lo vi me cayó en gracia porque es la imagen caminante / En veces *reptante*. Es la imagen *escalofriante* de los Estados Unidos, es la pura gringuez” (84). Immediately after he renders this judgment, Eligio, Ramón and Edmundo send Elijah to retrieve more drinks for them, and call him by his nickname to his face in the guise of thanking him. Elijah, who does not understand Spanish, smiles obliviously. This smile reappears throughout the evening. He remains happily impervious to the criticisms proffered by the Latin American authors during the subsequent excursion to the bar, and refuses to be perturbed by Eligio’s attempt to repulse his North American interlocutors with descriptions of Mexico’s exotic cuisines based on insects and monkeys: “Increíble, calificó la Gringuez, sonriendo; nadie parecía estar tan a gusto como él” (95).

Although Elijah appears on several occasions in the novel, what is most notable about this character is the lack of characterization Agustín dedicates to him. While he embodies the United States in Eligio’s opinion and, evidently, in that of the Latin American participants in the Program, his most salient personality trait is his utter lack of individuality or distinction. This suggests that from Eligio’s perspective, the archetypal *estadounidense* is not a power-hungry, immoral despot, but instead a

disquietingly uninteresting, ineffectual, benign non-entity. Nonetheless, the similarities between Eligio and Elijah's names cannot be ignored. If Elijah is "la Gringuez", one could consider that Eligio could be pigeon-holed as "Mexicanness" in a similarly condescending and facile manner. Indeed, Susana repeatedly asks him to lower his voice and to exercise restraint when dealing with her, lest he come across as the *macho mexicano* who browbeats and mistreats his woman. Just as Elijah is imperturbable when confronted with the opinions of Latin Americans in regard to his culture and unruffled by attempts to shock him, Eligio stubbornly resists cultural integration into North American society, preferring instead to remain on the margin and criticize it relentlessly. The docile obliviousness of one and the aggressive resistance of the other make communication between the two of them impossible.

Another *estadounidense* character, Cole, embodies the self-importance and ignorance of the attitude North Americans hold in regard to foreigners. Elijah introduces him as one of his "cuates con lana" and mentions that Cole drives a Camaro, whereupon Cole holds forth about the quality of his car stereo. Cole hails from the Brownsville, Texas area and visited Mexico frequently as a child. Nonetheless, he insensitively informs Eligio that he would be afraid to go back to Matamoros due to the narrow and dangerous Mexican streets, the corrupt police force, the crime, the water, 'Moctezuma's revenge' and the filthy condition of the city. Cole uses the Mexican term "mordida" in reference to police blackmail, as if to demonstrate his insider's understanding of the country, and directs his value judgments about Mexico to Eligio with no regard for the fact that – unfair, pedestrian assessments of Mexican society aside – he is not casually advising a potential

estadounidense traveler to Matamoros in confidence, but instead publicly insulting his interlocutor's homeland. As a consequence, Eligio leaps to the defense of a town he has never visited, averring that gringos exaggerate the merits of cleanliness.

Cole's defensive observation that he has never yet heard anyone complain about the cleanliness of the United States sparks a litany of criticisms not only from Eligio, but from the Colombian Hércules and the Peruvian Edmundo as well. It is in this moment that Eligio silences even his Latin American friends at the table by beginning to rhapsodize about shocking Mexican entrées, glibly describing preparations of baby monkeys stuffed rabbit excrement, insect soup, and tacos filled with bull sex organs and worms. Elijah remains unfazed, but Eligio's comments are directed at Cole. He remarks:

Claro que a ti todo esto debe sonarte horroroso, porque como buen U.S. junior citizen piensas que tu país es el ombligo del mundo [...] Tú crees que todo lo de afuera vale un carajo, pero como se dice aquí, I got news for you, buddy: no agraviando a los presentes éste es un país de nacos, que se cierra a lo que ocurre en otras partes, a no ser que se trate del gran atraco internacional. (95)

Tempting him with a description of Oaxacan *tacos de gusano* may not be the most propitious manner to bring Cole to a better understanding of Mexican culture, but it certainly provokes him. Indeed, as the conversation continues it becomes more openly hostile on both sides. Cole asks Eligio how he dares to criticize the United States when his own country suffers such corruption and poverty, and Eligio retorts that in the U.S. "la gente se ha convertido en robotcitos, se le está muriendo el alma, se han vuelto viejitos cuando en realidad ustedes son un pueblo bien joven" (96).

Eligio goes so far as to assert that, contrary to what is often said, there is no distinction between the *estadounidense* citizens and their government. As far as he is concerned, all are “imperialistas de corazón” by simple virtue of being *estadounidense* (96). Despite Eligio’s comment that he has no intention of “agraviando los presentes”, his categorical condemnation leaves no room for individual redemption. Thus, Eligio seeks to alienate and belittle Cole, not to draw closer to him or create cultural common ground. By disclosing precisely the details about his country that are most likely to shock the gringos at the table, Eligio places greater distance between himself and them. In addition, he increases the likelihood that Cole will fulfill the *estadounidense* stereotype of which Eligio accuses him by closing himself off out of revulsion to all things foreign. In living up to this expectation, Cole provides a pretense for Eligio to reinforce his negative stereotypes and thus pass judgment about *estadounidenses* in general. At the same time, by keeping himself apart, Eligio can uphold the virtues of Mexicans in general because they are the antithesis of gringos.

The *estadounidense* character who demonstrates the greatest interest in Latin American culture is Irene, but her enthusiasm is based on a cursory and idealized understanding. Irene, a student in the workshop is attracted to Eligio for his exotic good looks: “Eligio le parecía un *idolo azteca*, una escultura de obsidiana, nunca había conocido a nadie con un corte indígena tan puro y tan hermoso” (91). She dreams of him in full Aztec costume, imagining him as “un hombre fuerte, lleno de poder, más moreno aún de lo que en verdad era” (157). Irene pities herself because she feels she has never encountered her roots; she has not found her home in

Arcadia nor in the Oregon town where she was born, and projects onto Eligio a mystical, indigenous identity. She agrees to travel with Eligio and has a sexual relationship with him, accepting his condition that he will leave her upon finding Susana. He reflects that “Irene podía llegar a puntos ceros de iniciativa y que se entregaba a él pensando que lo hacía en la piedra de los sacrificios; Eligio era el gran sacerdote, el brujo poderoso que hundiría en ella el debido puñal de obsidiana” (159). This satirical description shows that Eligio is aware of the role he plays for Irene, a role he tolerates in exchange for her consort. Irene has some knowledge of Mexican culture from her readings of Anglophone authors Malcolm Lowry, Graham Greene and Carlos Castañeda, among others, from which “se había hecho una visión de México que le fascinaba y que no estaba dispuesta a modificar salvo mediante numerosas sesiones de golpizas” (159). She chides Eligio (and through him, all Mexicans) for underestimating their indigenous heritage, yet she reveals her own ignorance and naiveté in regard to Mexico and the rest of Latin America when she suggests that *Cien años de soledad* resembles *The Milagro Beanfield War* and intimates that she would love to visit Mexico City in order to meet Octavio Paz and Gabriel García Márquez. Although similarities exist between the novels Irene mentions, she demonstrates a superficial understanding of both, and the notion that she could simply arrive in Mexico City and be introduced to two renowned authors betrays her ignorance. Thus, even the *estadounidense* sympathizer who tries to exhibit her solidarity and cultural understanding comes off as both ignorant of Mexico and guilty of attributing to herself undue importance, since she is full of good advice for Eligio to embrace a Mexicanness she believes she understands. In her

article “Academic Relations and Latin American Fictions”, Lucille Kerr warns against this presumption of understanding:

It has been suggested that Latin Americanists, if not the field of Latinamericanism itself (latinamericanism is understood as the activity undertaken by those who take Latin America as their object of study), need to reconsider what it means to look at and represent Latin America. Moreover, it can be argued that Latinamericanists must consider seriously how to position Latin America as an area for academic inquiry without perpetuating arguably “foreign” images of it, or without restoring to it more than past misrepresentations may have stolen. (29)

Irene may not consider Latin America her area of academic inquiry, but she certainly adopts it as the realm of her spiritual and personal exploration. In so doing, she inadvertently invests Mexico with her foreign perceptions based on equally foreign representations and perhaps misrepresentations.

The novel does offer favorable portrayals of certain aspects of the United States. For example, Eligio commends the flavor of Jack Daniels and the variety and availability of high-quality and affordable goods such as electronics. He portrays the transformation from fall to winter with wonder at the beauty of the autumn leaves. The arrival of snow, much anticipated by the Program authors from warmer climates, does not disappoint them. Even jaded Eligio delights in the snow and wishes to share his first excursion into it with Susana. Other aspects of the United States, such as the notion of courtesy, seem to be portrayed as merely different from Mexican traditions. For example, during Eligio’s first visit to Rick and Wen’s home, they do not open the

door nor offer to shake the hand he extends, nor do they serve him a drink. Instead, they yell to inform him he is welcome to come inside, and insist that he serve himself as much whiskey as he desires. Later, Wen invites a small group of authors to the reception for a visiting author, Bill Murray, and asks them to be discrete about the invitation they have received “para no herir la susceptibilidad de los que no habían sido invitados” (105-6). While these attentions (or inattentions, as Eligio seems to perceive them) differ dramatically from the effusive gestures of hospitality, generosity and formality one might anticipate in a Mexican home, there is acknowledgement of an interpersonal protocol that takes into account the feelings of others.

While these unfamiliar social customs at times provoke value judgments from Eligio, Susana’s success in adapting herself to them further indicates that they are merely differences and do not suggest Mexican superiority or inferiority. In fact there is a pronounced difference between the ways in which Susana and Eligio respond to life in the United States. Certainly this could be due to the different motives that impelled them to go to Arcadia: Susana chose to go to the United States seeking a change and perhaps intending to stay away from Mexico indefinitely. Eligio arrived in Arcadia intending to retrieve his wife after the Program and return to their country. In addition, however, the two seem to have markedly different attitudes toward their host culture that run deeper than their original motivation for going to the United States. Susana is significantly more adaptable, accepting even the initial, uncomfortable adjustments as they happen and making concessions to the Program in order to take the best advantage of her time there. In spite of the complaints she

expresses to Eligio in confidence about the Program, its coordinators and its location, she exerts herself in order to give an excellent presentation as her contribution to it. After her successful presentation, Susana and Eligio celebrate over dinner with Rick and Wen: “Susana se asombró al darse cuenta de que el ambiente era muy agradable: Wen, Eligio y ella conversaban casi como amigos, sin defensas y con gusto, y eso la hizo considerar que, aunque jamás lo hubiera imaginado, había acabado aclimatándose a la ciudad” (122). Although Wen is Chinese, she has lived in the United States for an extended period of time as the wife of Rick, the Program’s founder. This suggests that some of the aspects of the Program Susana and Eligio find gratifying are not necessarily products of the *estadounidense* mentality, but instead the natural consequences of living outside their own culture, and that the chafing moments are mitigated by time and by receptiveness to cultural differences. Yet, while Susana comes to the United States to experience life, Eligio lives to compare. He is surprised each time the United States fails to satisfy his preconceived notions, such as when his taxi from the airport is a disappointingly familiar Dodge Monaco. He gives Cole, Elijah and Irene every opportunity to fulfill his negative stereotypes, and is forever preoccupied with the levels to which Susana has “fallen” by acquiring a television, living in a dormitory and opening a bank account.

Susana acts as a cultural buffer or mediator for Eligio, and upon losing her, his harsh perception of *estadounidenses* becomes exacerbated. While he characterizes North Americans as unnaturally silent and cold from the time of his arrival, after Susana evades him by leaving for Chicago Eligio insinuates ever more frequently that they are not humans, but rather some sort of extraterrestrial being whom it is

impossible to understand. When at last he finds himself alone with Susana in her room in the Kitty Hawk, Eligio describes the airport: “Claro que había una infinidad de sonidos, pero a fin de cuentas era como si no hubiese nada: un congelador inmenso” (46). He is impressed by the mechanization surrounding him and awed by the fact that the crowds of people move through the airport silently and without looking at one another. He and Susana remark on the extreme cleanliness of Arcadia’s streets as they drive around them for the first time, and Susana points out that since her arrival in the United States she has seen no dogs, thus underscoring the lifelessness and artificiality of their host country. Later, when Eligio arrives in Chicago in pursuit of Susana, he stands beside Lake Michigan and contemplates the people around him with a true sense of alienation:

Vio pasar a unos muchachos, bien protegidos del frío, que hablaban a gritos, festivamente y a Eligio le parecieron seres de otra galaxia que se comunicaban en un idioma incomprensible, pues nada de lo que gritaban se podía entender; eran entidades vagas, delgadas, con atuendos extraños que subrayaban la manera como la mente de Eligio se expandía en explosiones lentas pero indeterminadas [...] (129-30)

It is certainly no coincidence that in Chicago and without Susana Eligio feels farther from home than at any other time in his life, and it is in this moment that he perceives *estadounidenses* as alien beings.

Perhaps as a consequence of this sense of alienation Eligio becomes homesick for a series of authentically Mexican sights, sounds, smells and flavors. After meeting several of Irene’s friends in New Mexico, whom Eligio does not dislike but

whose company he suddenly discovers he cannot tolerate, he discovers “un deseo ardiente por estar en México, y ver gente prieta, con los pelos lacios y mal domados, cualquier, cualquier jodido ensombrerado en una bicicleta con una bolsa de mandado llena de herramientas y un radio-grabadora al hombro y tenis-canadá en lugar de huaraches” (169). He craves the market with its abundance of dissonant flavors and unhygienic practices. He yearns for the cantina and its jargon, street performers, pickpockets and petty briberies. In Santa Fe, surrounded by Irene’s hippie friends, the first *estadounidenses* with whom Eligio feels he may be able to have a fruitful and interesting exchange, he wishes only to be in Mexico.

By the time Eligio begins his journey across the United States with Irene in search of Susana, he has resigned himself somewhat to the differences between the two cultures. Nonetheless, he is tired of the way the U.S. saps him of “toda su vitalidad, su jovialidad, su buen humor, su ingenio, su energía” (169). Ultimately, Eligio considers that even with all its faults Mexico is superior to the United States because it is alive and vibrant. In addition, Mexico is able to recognize its own shortcomings. In fact, Eligio suggests that Mexicans are innately self-critical. For example, after punishing his palate in front of the Program authors and coordinators with a record number of hot *chiles* Eligio suffers a bout of indigestion that he punctuates with “chistes suicidas” (121). As he admits to Cole, Mexico has ample flaws, but possesses the capacity to criticize itself and the will to change: “en México la cosa está grave, que nos está cargando la chingada, pero queremos cambiar las cosas. Tú mismo, en cambio, insistes como perico que Estados Unidos es *perfecto*” (97). Eligio prefers Mexico because of its sincerity, its aspirations, and its

hopefulness, as opposed to the sanctimonious United States, which he says has become old and decadent before its time. While he never claims perfection for his nation or for himself, he emphasizes that at least both are still striving. The virulent criticism Eligio volleys at *estadounidenses* is the mirror image of the love and pain he feels toward his own imperfect country and its attempts to transform itself.

In conclusion, *Ciudades desiertas*, in spite of being a largely playful and sardonic text, abounds in keen and complex observations that would appear to come from the author's first-hand experience of life in the United States. These observations resonate precisely because they are neither unilateral nor categorical, and because the Mexican characters making them are not portrayed as innocent, passive victims of *estadounidense* oppression or intervention. At the same time as the North American characters in the novel seem basically benevolent if vacuous and pretentious, the Mexican characters are not without faults. Susana comes to the United States hoping to elude the problems she experiences in her marriage, her work, and inside of herself. Eligio arrives in Arcadia with a set of preconceived notions about North Americans that he is determined to reinforce – so much so, in fact, that at times he creates the circumstances that will allow him to do so. In their own way, Susana and Eligio choose to buy into aspects of the *estadounidense* lifestyle (Susana culturally, Eligio economically), but the U.S. is not responsible for their good or bad behavior. Their actions have consequences. Susana earns Eligio's distrust by cheating and running out on him and Eligio endangers his relationship with the woman he loves by failing to give up the self-destructive patterns Susana sought to abandon when she left Mexico City. As Susana learns, what happens in

Arcadia does not stay in Arcadia. When she returns to the apartment she once shared with Eligio in Mexico City, she is pregnant and the two must decide whether they will raise the child together and begin to repair the damage done. In this context, their experience of the United States is merely a diversionary backdrop each of them uses; Susana, in the hopes she can run from her problems, Eligio, to distract himself and Susana for a time from his own shortcomings by dwelling on the faults of others. The spanking Susana receives from Eligio upon returning to the home they share in Mexico City is a bittersweet welcome home. On the one hand, this macho display diminishes her and undermines the independence that she traveled to Arcadia to seek. On the other, it represents a profound act of communication between Susana and Eligio, expressed in a language that the two share. Susana's *nalgadas* never would have occurred in Arcadia because Eligio feared being stereotyped as a "macho mexicano". In Mexico City, there is no such danger that his act will be construed as representing a cruel and atavistic cultural trait. Instead, it is a social transaction between Susana and Eligio – admittedly, a somewhat crude one – that allows her to understand that she has hurt him and owes him an apology, but that she will be forgiven. By spanking his wife, Eligio expresses that if she truly wishes to come home, she must accept, as Eligio has, both the positive and the negative aspects of Mexican culture.

Just as we could read Agustín's earlier texts as a wholesale celebration of the libertine "Onda", we could interpret *Ciudades desiertas* as a wholesale critique of the United States and *estadounidenses*. To do so, however, would be to miss a whole self-critical dimension of the text. While Eligio and Susana alternately thrive and

suffer during their sojourn in Arcadia, finally they return to Mexico. Eligio's experience in the North American Midwest has taught him that, whatever his criticisms of his country, he is culturally – and counterculturally – Mexican. The couple's return to Mexico serves to reintegrate and reconcile them to their homeland, their relationship and themselves, each complete with strengths and faults. As Elena Poniatowska says in *¡Ay, vida, no me mereces!*, “Nos hicimos onderos, rocanroleros, nos sacudimos un poco, pero sobre todo, pudimos demostrarnos a nosotros mismos que no cantamos tan mal las rancheras” (213). In a way, Eligio and Susana have ended by taking Irene's advice, embracing their autochthonous, indigenous identity, thus proving that when Mexicans choose to, they can still always tune out, turn off, and head south.

BETWEEN PLACES AND SPACES AND UNDER THE BRIDGE:
IN SEARCH OF A FATHER IN *LAS HOJAS MUERTAS*

Las hojas muertas (1987) is the first novel written by Barbara Jacobs and differs from the other texts previously discussed in this dissertation. The daughter of a Lebanese-*estadounidense* father and a Mexican mother, Jacobs writes from a significantly different *sitio de enunciación* than Pacheco, Fuentes or Agustín. The novel has been described as having been written with a tone that is “voluntariamente menor” (Jiménez de Báez 128). The up-close-and-personal experience of *estadounidense* culture afforded by her familial ties gives Jacobs a different perspective on the United States and its citizens from that held by the other authors studied here. Indeed, the novel suggests a much more intimate and more personally invested relationship between Mexicans and *estadounidenses* than that which exists in other texts. At the same time, the *estadounidense* who is the principal object of interest in *Las hojas muertas* is considerably unlike those described in other novels. Because he belongs to ethnic and ideological minorities in the U.S., the narrators’ *estadounidense* father is marginalized, different even in his home country. The father character at once rejects and embraces his *estadounidense* identity. The child of immigrants, he thrives intellectually in the U.S. and integrates himself into North American society, taking jobs at the filling station and enlisting in the armed forces. He embraces socialism and protests many aspects of the *estadounidense* way of life,

ultimately emigrating permanently to Mexico. Even within his cultural minority, the narrators' father stands alone because of his intellectual and political beliefs. Thus, rather than placing Mexicans and *estadounidenses* in exact and binary opposition to one another, *Las hojas muertas* takes a sophisticated, nuanced view of a minority community coexisting within the United States, recognizes the country's diversity and its marginalities, and portrays a character who does not fulfill the images of the *estadounidense* we have seen criticized in other works. Instead, *Las hojas muertas* criticizes from within.

Although the North American protagonist of *Las hojas muertas* resists, challenges and rejects much of his *estadounidense* identity, he cannot fully escape it and thus unavoidably embodies traits that remit the reader to representations of the North American as a self-absorbed, aloof and unknowable individualist. The father's behavior and the narrators' yearning to know and understand him convey that he differs from his Mexican wife and his children just as he does from the *estadounidense* mainstream. At the same time, the attitude the father displays toward his children can be construed as a metaphor for the relationship between the United States and Mexico.

Las hojas muertas is narrated in first person by an undetermined number of siblings who reconstruct the youth of their father, a Lebanese-American man who marries their Lebanese-Mexican mother and emigrates to Mexico. The novel is divided into three sections. In the first, the narrators describe the children's memories of their father from when they were young: their visits to Michigan, their relationship with their aunts, uncles, cousins and grandmother, as well as their life in Mexico

where their father owned and operated a hotel. In the second section, the narrators uncover and describe the experiences of their father prior to his marriage and arrival in Mexico, including his communist leanings, his travel to Moscow as a would-be journalist, and his participation in the Spanish Civil War. In the third section, the narrators explore their father's economic decline, his old age and descent into a depression from which he seems unlikely to recover, dwelling instead on a lifetime of exiles both self-willed and compulsory. He wallows in his failures, contemplating the bridge outside his bedroom window and wondering in vain about the origin of a half-remembered line from one of the many books he has read, wishing only to be swallowed by the eddies of dead leaves under the bridge.

Both the narrative voice and the structure of *Las hojas muertas* deserve careful consideration by the reader. Critics have variously described the narrator or narrators as a single adolescent girl (Patán 1992), three sisters (Patán 1993), and a group comprising all the children of the protagonist (Roberts). The tone with which the narrator tells the story betrays a youthfulness and a femininity that corroborate the identification of the narrator as a teenage girl speaking on behalf of herself and her siblings; however, the novel at no time betrays the identity of that speaker or of those speakers. Instead, the narrator or narrators consistently refer to "las mujeres de nosotros" or "los hombres de nosotros". For the purposes of this chapter, the notion of multiple narrators will be respected, in recognition of the "nosotros" consistently used throughout the text. Perplexingly, this adolescent voice addresses a childhood sufficiently distant that one would expect a more mature tone of adult reflection. Instead, the narrator speaks with a voice that straddles childhood and adulthood,

neither evolving into an individual identity nor maturing despite the decades that elapse between the novel's three segments.

The second and third sections of the novel begin with epigraphs by Emile Jacobs, the author's father. It is, in part, for this reason that the novel has been construed as autobiographical, though the careful reader will not confuse narrator with author. The use of epigraphs bearing the Jacobs surname lends realism and immediacy to the events narrated, but must not be accepted out of hand as pertaining to a reality beyond the narration. To what extent this narrator can be identified with Barbara Jacobs is debatable, but the inclusion of Emile Jacobs's name and apparently direct quotes from his writings strengthen the perception of identification between narrators and author, suggesting that Emile Jacobs is at very least the point of departure for the creation of the father character in the novel and may indeed be the father whose life the novel seeks to reconstruct. As Kristine Ibsen notes in her article "Their Heart Belongs to Daddy: *Las hojas muertas* and the Disintegration of Patriarchal Authority", the prevailing criticism in regard to this novel refers to it as "Bárbara Jacobs's personal homage to her father, in which the daughter voluntarily sacrifices her voice to reconstruct his authority" (174). Ibsen argues, however, that the narrators give voice to discrepancies that undermine that authority and "induce the reader to consider multiple possibilities that put into question not only a one-dimensional reading of the father but the univocal nature of official discourse in general" (174). We agree with this affirmation. Although the book contains autobiographical elements, it denotes itself a novel and as such must be treated as a fictional text.

In the first section of *Las hojas muertas* the reader gains a sense of both positive and negative perceptions of the North American branch of the narrators' family. There is a general perception of wealth, abundance, and commodity when the children visit their family in Michigan. They remember the late-model Lincoln Continental their uncle Gustav consistently drove, with its buttons and contraptions, and they marvel at the automatic garage door. Tío Gustav (without an "o", as noted by the language-conscious narrators) has a video camera and liberally gives his nieces and nephews gifts such as pens, radios and "lo que quisiéramos" (10). In general, Gustav's house "era muy moderna y tenía muchas cosas de madera y olía a casa moderna americana llena de aparatos eléctricos que no sabíamos para qué servían pero que servían de maravilla" (9). Thus we can see that the narrators possess a mental archetype of the "modern American house", significantly developed so as to be associated with a specific smell. They assume that the fancy appliances perform their functions marvelously, despite not knowing what those functions are. Similarly, when the narrators begin to piece together their father's youth, they do so through archetypes of *estadounidense* childhood and adolescence, projecting upon their U.S.-born parent a dossier of memories. Although he was born in Manhattan, the narrators consider that their father's life began "los sábados cuando de niño se convirtió en americano y por las mañanas repartía periódicos en bicicleta entre sus vecinos", revealing that they do not identify him as *estadounidense* until the moment when he begins to deliver newspapers "como hacían otros niños americanos como él" (45). It is probable that few of the other North American children delivering papers in the 1920's had Lebanese parents who came through Ellis Island, yet for the narrators, the

paper route is what grants their father his status of fully alive and fully “American”. In spite of the cultural differences, from their perspective, the narrators’ father is as *estadounidense* as his Cadillac: “los dos eran norteamericanos y su permiso de estancia en México se les vencía y tenían que atravesar la frontera y arreglar y renovar todo para no convertirse en ilegales y ser perseguidos por la justicia mexicana” (16). The narrators again attribute an archetypal identity to their father and to his brother when they begin to support the family by working part time: they become “jóvenes americanos hijos de emigrantes en los Estados Unidos” (46), suggesting that this is a category with identifiable traits to which their father and his siblings belong. Later, the narrators imagine their father’s free time between shifts at the gas station:

Es seguro que entonces no fuera sólo aficionado al beisbol sino que jugara con sus vecinos o con sus compañeros del Flint Junior College o con los que trabajaban con él en la gasolinera que es probable que fueran todos los mismos y que se reunieran a unas horas en un lugar y a otras en otro en la cancha, en la farmacia, afuera del cine, con una cerveza en la mano sobre los asientos del coche descapotado de alguno de los jóvenes amigos de papá [...].

(47)

In this example, the use of the subjunctive contradicts the expression “es seguro”, indicating that, far from certain, these notions of the father’s youth are mainly surmised. The narrators project upon their father’s adolescence, a time he has discussed little with them, what they imagine to be the typical life of the *estadounidense* teenager in the 1930s. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that their

father could hardly have shared his love of Bernard Shaw or his socialist leanings with his teenage friends, nor could baseball and convertibles have distracted him much from his readings. More than that, they seem to inadvertently reveal that this characterization is based on archetypes and stereotypes with which they have become familiar via both personal contact and pure imagination, for lack of greater personal knowledge about what their father's life was really like.

The Lebanese family, settled in Manhattan and later relocated to Michigan, seeks to integrate itself into life in the United States but at the same time emphasizes preservation of their cultural traditions. Mama Salima, the narrators' paternal grandmother, wishes for her children to marry members of their own ethnicity. Both Tío Gustav and Tía Lou-Ma have disappointing or frustrated experiences in their love lives: Gustav broke off his first engagement with a Lebanese girl in order to marry Mildred, and Lou-Ma is widowed four times. Slovenly, drunken, Protestant, and previously married with children of her own, Mildred is considered an inadequate partner for Mama Salima's first son for an entirely different reason: "El primer esposo de Tía Lou-Ma había sido hijo de libaneses emigrados como Papá y sus hermanos y por lo tanto era paisano. En cambio Mildred, la esposa de Tío Gustav, no era paisana y a Mama Salima esto la molestaba" (10). From this standpoint, the youngest son, the narrators' father, is the only one to toe the family line by marrying his second cousin.

The narrators suggest that their extended family thinks less of their father for having emigrated to Mexico, and this stigma seems to have perpetuated itself in the family's younger generations. Lou-Ma and her youngest daughter, Lisa, make the

trip from Flint, Michigan to Saginaw when the narrators' family visits from Mexico: "venían a visitar a Bob, a Mama Salima y a tío Gustav, y de paso a nosotros, su familia de México" (11). This motivation for making the relatively brief trip within the state is different from what the reader might expect. One would think that Lou-Ma and Lisa would drive in expressly to see the Mexican branch of the family and "de paso" their Saginaw relatives. Nonetheless, in this family the arrangement is explicitly otherwise, because "El tío Gustav y la tía Lou-Ma querían a Papá pero no tanto" (12). While the Mexican family, which struggles financially in some periods, travels north to spend time with their Michigan relatives, neither affluent tío Gustav nor tía Lou-Ma visits Mexico very often, despite promising to do "todo lo posible" in order to do so. The narrators have an interesting relationship with their cousin Bobby, Lou-Ma's son. He is significantly older than they are, and condescendingly offers to give them summer jobs in the convenience store where he works. If they learn the trade, he says, they can come and work for him and live in Saginaw, Michigan. Unimpressed by this offer, the Mexican cousins steal Bobby's cake and push and pinch him, a behavior he tolerates indulgently (11). It is possible that Bobby expects nothing more from his Mexican cousins because of their nationality or what he has heard from his mother about his unconventional uncle. Regardless, what seems certain is that Bobby takes it for granted that his cousins would be better off living in Michigan than in Mexico.

The Michigan family's prejudices against black people underline the ideological differences between the narrators' father and his siblings and mother. Mama Salima is estranged from her sister after the sister falls in love with a black man who later

abandons her. Lisa ensures her Mexican cousins that she hates black people for this and for other reasons they could never understand, given that in Mexico there are no black people. Despite their ignorance of the number of black people in Mexico, the narrators are dubious about Lisa's racism, speculating that, if they were to meet black people, they would judge them according to their personal qualities rather than their color. Furthermore, they imagine that their father would feel quite the same as they, and that in the presence of his family "lo que hacía era sólo escuchar porque sus ideas desde entonces eran distintas y prefería sólo escuchar y bajaba la cabeza y casi no decía nunca nada" (12). The narrators acknowledge that in general their father "era bastante diferente de su hermano y su hermana" (15). His perspective on the U.S. is revealed when he hears news about Israel, a country he considers "al igual que los Estados Unidos se había convertido en un país terrorista a pesar de todo" (90). He delights when players from socialist countries win the tennis tournaments he listens to on the radio, and feels disappointed when an *estadounidense* golden-boy wins instead. He enjoys seeing the President's wife fall down on camera, her skirt flying up, and is amused by the aging *estadounidense* President, presumably Richard Nixon, and his purported plot to return to power. The children feel that "quizás empezamos a ser señalados como comunistas como él porque igual que a él nos da gusto cuando al Presidente de los Estados Unidos le fallan sus estúpidas maquinaciones" (95). His friend Yamil Barudi rejects U.S. policy in his capacity as Saudi Arabia's representative before the United Nations, and the father applauds him from his armchair. Mexico does not escape his criticism: under the glass of his reading table he keeps a political cartoon criticizing the corrupt government in his adopted country.

Meanwhile, some traits seem to unite him to the family he left behind. For example, when televisions appear on the market, he is among the first to buy one, and he purchases a record player despite rather disliking music, as if to keep up in some measure with tío Gustav. Indeed, as his children observe, “papá no era tanto emigrante como hijo de emigrantes y quería volverse y se volvió americano aunque después aunque mucho después en ocasiones se avergonzara de serlo pero sin que por eso fuera a renunciar a su nacionalidad” (93). In spite of his opinions in regard to the United States, the father never renounces his U.S. citizenship, and thus must cross the border from time to time so that, like his Cadillac, he can remain a legal resident of Mexico.

The narrators possess partial and immature impressions of the lives of the adults in their family. As Federico Patán states in his review of the novel, “La narradora opta por un modo de expresión que se diría el de una adolescente. Tal indica la sencillez del estilo, el tono y la capacidad de prestar atención a ciertos detalles típica de la inocencia con que la ingenuidad mira al mundo” (165). An example of this attention to detail relates to the great precision the narrators demonstrate in regard to language, both written and spoken. Their father’s brother is named “Gustav sin o” (9). One cousin is called “Lisa por Elizabeth y que también podía decirse o escribirse Liza y Liz” (11). The last guest to stay in the narrators’ family home is named Rose Dustt “polvo en inglés pero con doble te, porque con una no basta” (32). The importance placed on language and languages in the novel has a two-fold effect. First, it perpetuates the sensation of a child-like narrator who dwells on details peripheral to the story. Secondly, it offers opportunities to reflect on the

multiculturalism experienced by the Lebanese-*estadounidense*-Mexican children. For example, the narrators are careful to give the correct name to the pastries their grandmother makes, which they describe as “empanadas árabes”: “En árabe se llaman ftiri o ftaiier, una es singular y la otra plural” (13), and they provide the name “zwedi” for the food their mother prepares for car trips (17). The father insists on using English and fails to learn Spanish, possessing few Mexican friends. In his old age, alone in his bedroom, he listens to North American news and sports on the radio. Most of his friends belong to the expatriate community and are Polish, Italian and Chinese if not North American, and English is the language in which they communicate. He always addresses his children in English and insists that, apart from the extensive studies of his native tongue they receive in school (the boys in a North American school, the girls in a French school that nonetheless emphasizes English), he hires a tutor so that they can further their studies of English at home (19). He speaks enough Spanish to help his sister-in-law, Sara, translate novels into English, but when his coworkers reward him with a deluxe edition of *Don Quijote*, they purchase it in English. In his old age, the father begins to lose his words, or at least to misplace them: “más bien lo que le sucede es que su vocabulario funciona a destiempo” (98). He is relieved to have a chance encounter with one of his children in the street just in time to learn the verb “teñir” in order to repair an old pair of shoes. His grasp of Spanish, at least in this stage of his life, is such that he must rehearse the entire phrase he will say to the shoemaker, and after the encounter he confides to another of his children in English that he had had a difficult time pronouncing the word. The narrators’ mother speaks to her friends on the phone “medio en francés y

medio en inglés y medio en árabe” (79). Mama Salima visits comfortably with her Mexican second cousin when she comes to stay with her son, and continues her customary walks through the cemetery, even experiencing “algo especial” when she carries on with this practice in Mexico. It is curious that the narrators do not list Spanish as one of the languages Mama Salima speaks (it is conceivable that the narrators do not consider Spanish worth mentioning, since for them it is not a foreign language). They indicate that “Los tres idiomas de Mama Salima eran primero el árabe, luego el francés y por último el inglés” (14). The importance granted to language use in the novel also betrays the fact that one of the father’s traits has been repeated in his child(ren); his interest in the written word. The narrators acknowledge that their father inherited his love of books from his mother, Mama Salima, and that their grandmother is also a published author (14-15). The narrators have inherited the same desire to express themselves, which inevitably links them in the mind of the reader to Barbara Jacobs.

Although the narrators’ characterization of their father does not seem to intend to generalize *estadounidense* behavior, they call attention to certain traits he possesses which surprise or intrigue them, and which give rise to discrepancies in the reader’s perception of him as the ideal figure the narrators insist he is. As Ibsen explains, “the memories of the novel are evoked as a child would experience them, without the benefit of adult revision. Unable to share the child’s ignorance, such episodes encourage the reader to assume a more active role in untangling the often unreliable narration” (175). For example, despite constant reassurance that their childhood was a happy one and that their father seldom became angry, the narrators recount episodes

in which he becomes impatient, angry or distant, and others in which he demands silence and obedience from them. He loves to drive and waits in the car in the pre-dawn before family trips, so edgy and intolerant of his wife's prolonged goodbyes to the house and baby that he begins honking the horn to hurry her along. He shushes his children and is exasperated by the youngest one, who stutters. The novel abounds with episodes in which he demonstrates a nasty temper. He swears at the children when they leave the hall door open and when the puppy urinates on the floor. All of these instances erode the assurances by the narrators that their father is the hero of their story.

The father's silence distinguishes him from the rest of the family. He consistently withdraws from the family scene when he is angry, closing himself in his room. To speak openly, the father waits for his annual New Year's Eve party, and it is implied that only on that one evening a year is he able to express himself freely, largely thanks to drink. On New Year's Day the father disappears once again into his office, although his wife insists he is not upset, surmising instead that he has a headache. When describing their father's youth in Manhattan, the narrators comment that "en ese tiempo no le daba tanto por el silencio sino que conversaba y hablaba aun sin tomarse unas copas antes para animarse y despreocuparse" (48). His silence and voracious reading infuriate his wife. On one occasion she flings his book on the floor in order to attract his attention, to which he reacts by calmly picking it back up and laughing at her (29). The narrators affirm that all their father desires is to be left alone to enjoy his books, for which he requires silence; yet in the case of their father, silence is more than just the ideal condition for reading. The adult father, unlike the

trusting, idealistic young man from Manhattan he once was, closes himself off when he feels that he has been challenged or threatened, and the family understands the tenor of some of his silences to register anger or impatience instead of abstraction and repose. The father's preference for silence, juxtaposed with the cacophonous and disorganized narrative voice, constitutes a significant difference between the *estadounidense* parent and his Mexican offspring.

The narrators remember their childhood as a happy time when their family was close-knit and united, yet a number of discrepancies place this description in considerable doubt. When the family house is overflowing with children, the daughters are sent to live with their maternal grandparents, and as Ibsen points out, "Why the daughters are banished from their father's house is never directly addressed. Although ostensibly they had to leave because of lack of space, the family continued to welcome houseguests for many years afterward" (175). Another discrepancy is that, while his own children flounder in school, the father takes a series of young men under his wing. He employs Adalberto and José in the family home as chauffeurs, then pays their college education. It is possible that, in funding the education of these young men of humble means, the father is doing his part to bring the "American" dream of a better life through education to members of a social class for whom that education would otherwise be out of reach. In this manner, the concern for social justice that once found its outlet in communism and rebellion against the United States now takes up house room in Mexico. Once again, the father's best efforts and generosity are expended away from his own children, who

find themselves placed aside so that others can enjoy the benefit of their father's attention and support.

The narrators seem to relate their story during the awakening of their sexual consciousness, and it becomes clear that their father differs from his wife in his attitude toward sexuality. Their mother chides him under her breath for striding around the house wearing his open bathrobe. After a visit to China he returns with low-cut blouses the mother will not allow her daughters to wear. In response to her suspicious questions regarding who helped him choose the blouses and their sizes, the father merely laughs, his usual response to his wife's jealousy. The daughters foster crushes on their father's friends, and "decían que si entre ellos hubiera uno como el del retrato al óleo que mamá había pintado de memoria de papá por lo enamorada que estaba de él ellas de ése sería del que se enamorarían pues de papá no podía ser porque no podía ser" (35). At the same time as they begin to feel attracted to men, they hold up their father as the ideal man yet express understanding of the impropriety of harboring an attraction to him. Nancy Chodorow affirms that the inaccessible father is often the object of fantasy and idealization by daughters (80). From this standpoint, it is not surprising that these particular daughters elevate their father to almost mythic status, and that he becomes the center of their narration.

Curiously, one woman who does not inspire the mother's jealousy is "Barbara sin acento," an ex-girlfriend from Manhattan who calls, faithfully and drunkenly, each New Year's Eve. Far from feeling envious of Barbara, the narrators' mother speaks to her on the phone and becomes concerned when Barbara does not call one year. The narrators affirm that their mother "no sentía celos porque decía Eso ya pasó" (35).

One of the children has been named after one of the father's good friends, Gerry, "en su honor para recordarlo y no olvidarlo y tenerlo presente de la mañana a la noche todos los días de su vida de después" (51). In light of this, it is worth noting that the name of the father's New York ex-girlfriend is virtually the same as that of the author of the novel. This woman, who calls each year crying and begging not to be forgotten, remains present night and day in the family.

The narrators tell their story in simple language that seems to tumble out, conversationally and unplanned, as it comes into their heads. Yet, curiously, what speaks loudest in this novel is precisely what is excluded from its scope. The first sentence of *Las hojas muertas* establishes the purpose of the book: "Esta es la historia de Papá, papá de todos nosotros" (9). In spite of the fact that the narrators affirm that they know their mother better than their father, it is he who forms the center of their narration. They betray scant details of their own lives, instead obsessed with reconstructing his. The plural nature of the narrative voice consolidates the children into an apparently cohesive group lacking individualization. While some grow up, move abroad, marry and have children, this activity is peripheral to what concerns the narrators in the novel. Their *estadounidense* father is the sole, absorbing object of their attention. They constantly struggle to please him and live up to his expectations, to understand him and indulge him.

Within his own family, the father enjoys a degree of importance that has evaded him in the outside world by withholding himself from his wife and children. This is because he has been a disappointment and a failure in every other aspect of his life. As Patán comments, the novel "concentra en 100 páginas la vida de un hombre a

quien la vida le fue traicionando. Del optimismo y la entrega iniciales a la soledad y la amargura últimas, el texto sigue en apretada exposición los cambios sufridos por el personaje” (166). The protagonist goes to Moscow as a foreign correspondent for a magazine called the *Monthly Review* but never sees a paycheck from the magazine, which goes bankrupt before publishing a single issue. Although he eventually finds work publishing his articles in Russian and Polish papers, he is persecuted as a foreigner, shuttled from one apartment to another. He is denied an extension of his visa in Moscow, then fined for overstaying it, and the few possessions he has accumulated there are either dispersed amongst his friends in Russia or confiscated by Customs officers when he returns to the U.S. He is imprisoned in Sète, France, along with other *estadounidenses* in the Lincoln Brigade, before he even has the chance to fight in the Spanish Civil War. He eventually does participate, albeit as an ambulance driver for the losing Republican side. Upon returning to the U.S., his passport is confiscated and he cannot find work except at the Lebanese pavilion at the World’s Fair in Manhattan. Later, he is relegated to an ineffectual desk job in the military after being interrogated about his political tendencies. When he quits and relocates his young family to Mexico, he is again investigated at the border, his suitcases opened, his car unpacked and searched. After selling his modest hotel in Mexico, the father becomes involved with a series of business ventures that allow him to make ends meet, although never to prosper. When his mother dies, his siblings exclude him from the inheritance, suggesting he has no right to it because he left the country and abandoned the family. He is dismissed and sued by the Canadian/British company that he saves from bankruptcy before he can seek retirement benefits from them. At

the end of his life, the father contemplates donating his body to science, but the embassy refuses to cover the expense of flying it back into the United States. The only time the U.S. seems to really come through for him is with Social Security, which unexpectedly pays out not only for him, but also for his wife. He has been abandoned, betrayed and disappointed to the extent that when his children propose that he write his memoirs, he is reduced to tears. The protagonist's father, Rashid, had returned to his native country; and died there. The protagonist thus feels it is as a consequence of his own fatherless childhood that he is a poor father, but when he expresses this to his wife, she argues that it is she who has been remiss as a parent "porque todos habíamos ido saliendo a él y no a ella" (27). Only upon having their last child does it occur to the couple to name one after him, almost as if it were an afterthought.

The father, who has long felt powerless to dictate the terms of his existence, in his old age is reduced to quibbling over sweepstakes prizes in order to maintain a sense of power in his own life. He asks his children to claim his trivial winnings: "cuando gana lo que gana es un dólar o un jaboncito perfumado que nunca le envían y entonces papá pide a uno de nosotros que escriba una carta a los organizadores de la lotería y exija el jaboncito" [...] (93). He goes to the telephone company or the bank in order to complain, demanding to see a manager and to be placated: "si el gerente le dice Un momento papá golpea su escritorio y exige que lo atienda y se enoja y el gerente acaba por darle la razón y prometerle que nunca volverá a suceder y sucede porque no es error sino una gran falla general que parece no tener remedio pero que por lo pronto sirve a papá para enojarse y protestar y exigir y sí, esto lo entretiene"

(94). He rails against the Mexican system, which gets him nowhere but provides an outlet for his frustration and gives him a sense of superiority and control. The narrators suggest that the “gran falla general” their father perceives in Mexico is not due exclusively to his sheltered perspective. Police officers steal the old man’s watch one day while he walks his dog, waving off the bum who he originally feared would attack him. The narrators describe the phone conversations with old friends of the family visiting Mexico thusly:

Escriben o llaman a papá y mamá y les dicen que van a viajar a México pero que no van a pasar por la ciudad de México y que entonces para verse y conversar y recordar les sugieren o incluso los invitan a reunirse con ellos en esta o en aquella playa o ciudad del interior o incluso unas horas en el aeropuerto de la Capital pero lo que sí no pueden es estarse ni siquiera una noche en la Capital ni aunque sea sólo con tal de estar con papá y mamá y no en la Capital propiamente dicha sino simplemente en casa con papá y mamá pues a esto se niegan pues se niegan a estar en la Capital [...] (96)

Whether the perception of the capital as an undesirable place to stay is reasonable or unreasonable is unclear. It is certainly possible that these old friends would not have visited the narrators’ family regardless of their location. Nonetheless, that perception is strong enough to serve as a pretext for even those who have long acquaintances in the city to stay away from it, and apparently the narrators regard this pretext as a legitimate and reasonable excuse. The episode with the watch reveals that the city lives up in some measure to its negative stereotype.

Despite the father's centrality to the novel, the narrators never have a firm grasp on who he is because he withholds his affection and confidence from them. Although he is still alive, the only things they think they know about him they are forced to surmise, as if he were a distant ancestor who had died. As a consequence, they are compelled to seek their father in overheard phone conversations, in his possessions, his photographs, and the occasional conversation or letter in which their mother reveals some small portion of his life. The silk scarf he wore during the Spanish Civil War becomes a mysterious talisman they wear "en momentos difíciles de nuestra vida para que nos diera buena suerte como cuando teníamos exámenes finales" (21). As children they love to peruse the contents of his closet, and they play at locking one another up inside it. If they are lucky, they discover a half-eaten cookie he has stashed there, and eating it before he has a chance to do so becomes an act of complicity with him and gives them a sense of connection to him: "el de nosotros encerrado ahí si la descubría se la comía y se le adelantaba a papá también a escondidas y el encierro se convertía más bien en agasajo" (23). When his wife is away for several days, he confides only in his eldest son before going in for a secret surgery, and he makes that minimal communication only in case something happens to him during the procedure.

The portrait the children's mother made of their father acts as a leitmotif, underscoring the distance between the father and the rest of his family, as can be seen in this example from the novel:

El retrato siempre había estado ahí y era de papá y sin embargo nosotros apenas poco a poco lo íbamos conociendo aunque conociéramos de memoria

su retrato y hasta lo soñáramos. Mamá dormía con la almohada encima para que el haz de luz de la lámpara con la que papá leía no la alcanzara pero lo primero que hacía al despertar era quitarse la almohada de encima para ver el retrato de papá que siempre estuvo ahí a lo largo de toda nuestra infancia. (27)

When their mother awakens each day, she seeks her husband in his portrait, and the narrators only in time come to recognize their father's face in the portrait because "con él casi no estábamos y él casi nunca nos platicaba nada" (27). They look to the portrait for evidence of their mother's love of their father because, as they reiterate several times in the novel, she painted it from memory because she was so in love with her future husband. In lieu of real interaction with the man, the portrait provides the narrators with the security that their father is there, and they perpetually fear he will leave. In one remembered episode, one of the brothers begins to sleepwalk and have nightmares in which "de pronto se sentaba en la cama con los ojos abiertos y azules y estiraba los brazos y decía Cuiden a mis hijos, como si fuera papá que se hubiera ido y de despedida nos dejara encargados con alguien" (31). The narrators seem to fear that their beloved father will disappear completely from their lives before they can really know him.

Another leitmotif central to the novel is a song Bette Davis sings in a movie the narrators see while their father waits, reading, in the theater lobby. The film resonates with them like no other, and they apply the Bette Davis song to their own lives: "[...] se ponía a cantar una canción que decía Le escribí una carta a papá allá arriba y le dije Querido papá te necesito, sólo que cuando nuestras hermanas se hacían más niñas todavía y la cantaban le agregaban Querido papá te quiero y

Querido papá te extraño [...]” (28). The narrators miss their father even though he has not gone away, ever fearing that they will fail to please him and cause him to retreat from familial life. The emotional withdrawal is a way for the father to wield a meager, waning power, at least within his own family, and in his old age it is the reason that his adult children reflect that “Ahora también nosotros queríamos cantarle a papá pero algo hacía que esto tampoco lo pudiéramos hacer y todos nos quedábamos privados de lo que queríamos y que tenía que ver con papá” (88).

Although they cannot identify what has been missing, they know it has to do with their father. What is missing is their ability to feel that he has truly been with them in their lives.

Despite the father’s shortcomings, his children will always consider him and treat him as a hero, as is clear in the following episode the narrators recall:

Nadaba muy bien y a las mujeres de nosotros les daba hasta miedo que se alejara tanto con esas brazadas largas que daba y parejas como de experto y decían Se va a perder papá, y entonces desde la orilla se metían un dedo a la boca y se hacían las más niñas y le cantaban Querido papá te necesitamos, Querido papá te queremos, Querido papá te extrañamos para que volviera y cuando volvía le tendían ellas una toalla y él les decía, Gracias nenas, en inglés [...] (35).

Again, the children fear that their father will leave them. In order to make him return, like Bette Davis on the silver screen, they feel they must render themselves infantile and inferior to their father, thereby demonstrating their devotion to him. He thanks them as he receives their homage in the form of a towel. In return for their attentions, he is

evasive and oblique, perpetuating and even ensuring the continuous obsequiousness of his children.

At the end of their father's life, however, the narrators begin to see the cracks in the foundation of the man they have spent a lifetime worshipping, and who allowed them to do so. In this light, the narration appears to be a desperate attempt to shore up their father's identity even as it crumbles between their hands. Their own lives and identities seem to be merely an afterthought. The narrators are undifferentiated to the point of being a nameless "nosotros" and the focus of their existence willfully subordinates them to imagining and assembling the father figure. Despite these attempts – despite the reputed adventures and the famed acquaintances – the broken and powerless man emerges between the lines of the novel as the narrators, whether inadvertently or surreptitiously, let it be understood that the father they have created and idealized may not be the man they thought he was. Ibsen observes that "the fact that the narration presented through the eyes of the children has already been filtered through the father's idealized memory and the mother's adoring recreation creates an ambiguous interplay between the narrators's {sic} attempt to assert veracity despite limitations in perspective" (176). The narrators proclaim that their father has traveled, worked, lived and fought in proximity to a surprising number of famous people: authors Waldo Frank, Alvah Bessie, and Elliot Paul; musicians and entertainers Arthur Rubinstein, Mae West, and Paul Robeson; Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein; philosopher Will Durant; artist David Alfaro Siqueiros; Bolivian president Carlos Quintanilla, and a number of Arab princes and Russian statesmen, including Mikael Borodin; and *estadounidense* commander of the Lincoln Brigade,

Robert Hale Merriman, whom the narrators refer to as “Merriment”(59). On one occasion, the narrators reinforce their father’s version of events by emphasizing that “El lo recuerda lo recuerden otros o no” (58). Conveniently for the version of events that the narrators wish to believe, each heroic moment in their father’s past is followed by a stroke of luck that disposes of any evidence that he actually did not participate in the historic event. To Ibsen, the “incongruent balance of knowledge and ignorance” demonstrated by the narrators in regard to their father’s past indicates “narrators unable – or unwilling – to differentiate the external historical figure of the father from the idealized one” (177). Jiménez de Báez points out the desire of the narrators to present the story of their father truthfully and objectively (128). However, their insistence on the veracity of their father’s memories, taken into consideration with their inability to corroborate those memories, immediately undermines that veracity, insinuating that they sense the imminence and legitimacy of a challenge to the accuracy of their story.

Perhaps what is most haunting about the novel is that the whole task of reconstructing the father is undertaken in an atmosphere of great tenderness and naiveté. As Patán writes, the infantile narration doesn’t ring true in the final segment of the novel, since more than a decade must have elapsed since the first segment which could, indeed, have been narrated by an adolescent: “¿Por qué conservar la misma inocencia en la voz narrativa? O bien se nos da desde el principio una narradora adulta inexperta en contar, con lo cual el problema desaparece para crear otro, o bien no se tomó en cuenta el paso de tiempo para quien escribe” (166). If, as Patán argues, this exploration of the complex adult world from an innocent

perspective is by nature “sin malicia”, then it is no oversight on the part Bárbara Jacobs that the narrators sustain that adolescent voice well into adulthood. It is plausible to consider that the narrators’ growth has been deterred by their need to appear girlish and childish in order to maintain their fathers’ affection. Indeed, they feel that they must be “más niñas” than Bette Davis in order not to lose him. As Ibsen explains, the narrators face “the rejection of the father if they betray him by growing up” (179). She further explores the “ritual of feigned helplessness” they borrow from Bette Davis’s performance in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*:

[...] in its original context [the song] exemplifies the grotesque spectacle of a woman unable to abandon the little girl role imposed upon her by her overbearing father. The recontextualization of these lyrics in the novel underscores the rigid nature of power relations within the narrator’s family. As adults, the narrators continue to assume a subordinate position as a means of not only reinforcing their father’s authority but to validate their own happiness [...] (179)

Thus, the adolescent voice and perspective protects the narrators from being forced to confront their father’s shortcomings. An adult look at the facts, a perspective that cannot be assumed altogether without malice, would necessarily reveal his vicissitudes. To perceive their father as a failure would erode the narrators’ sense of their own identity, and to confront his indifference could expose the carefully confined, painful memories of separation, silence and anger. The narrators go to great lengths to contort their memories, subjugating themselves to this odd patriarch,

so that their self-image as descendents of a romantic, maverick individualist *estadounidense* will not be threatened.

In this light, the narrators' relationship with their father can be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Due either to a lack of self-confidence and self-knowledge or to a need to ingratiate themselves with their father, the U.S. citizen, the Mexican narrators turn an apparently blind eye to his shortcomings; yet they somehow let it be known that they realize he has become frail, ineffectual and disappointing as a role model. Despite being painfully aware of his own shortcomings, the father does not discourage the sycophantic behavior his children exhibit toward him. On the contrary, their hero worship is the only thing giving him the illusion of control over his circumstances. For this reason he withdraws his affection and approval, compelling them to try harder to seek it. It could be considered that Mexico yields to the United States in order to reap certain economical and political benefits, all the while sensing the limitations of that country and what it has to offer. Simultaneously, the United States' ambivalent attitude toward Mexico allows it to perpetuate its self-image as a powerful and benevolent nation by deciding when to withhold and when to bestow its aid, resources and attention based on the devotion demonstrated to it. Both countries sense that the accomplishments of the United States lie well in the past, if indeed they ever existed. To deny that realization, it is necessary to suppress the truth and utilize a selective memory, a task that becomes ever more difficult with the passage of time. Yet, the amicable relationship between the two countries depends on the accomplishment of that task.

Although *Las hojas muertas* does not openly insinuate such a categorical comparison and indeed concerns an *estadounidense* who rejects his nation's politics, it clearly provides a space in which fatherhood, fatherland and father figures are questioned. In *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* Jean Franco draws comparisons between two works, *The Children of Sánchez* by Oscar Lewis and *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* by Elena Poniatowska, in regard to the role of the father. Their similarity, she says, "deserves comment for its relevance to contemporary writing by women in Mexico. This is the emphasis on the father's power." Franco continues:

What inhibits discussion of this is the all-embracing term "patriarchy" used to describe quite different family arrangements. [...] There are clearly differences between the position of the father in colonial discourse, that of the ideal father in nationalist discourse, and the position of the father as provider in the subaltern classes. It is true that in each case the father is the source of power and authority, but that authority acquires quite different overtones according to whether that position is identified with a broader social meaning – religious truth, nation, or modernity. (182)

In *Las hojas muertas*, notions of paternity, "patria" and patriarch coalesce around the dysfunctional relationship the narrators share with an emotionally absent father. When the father is experienced through the perspective of the narrators, he can be seen as merely a beloved failure, a romantic free thinker whose many misfortunes have embittered him. When the relationship is considered as a metaphor for the

relationship between the United States and Mexico, however, the paternalistic authority seems emotionally manipulative almost to the point of despotism.

Franco's discussion of *Las geneologías* by Margo Glantz also offers insight into the role of the father in *Las hojas muertas*. *Las geneologías* explores Glantz's childhood as the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants in Mexico and pays special attention to the difficulties experienced by her father in integrating into everyday life in Mexico. Franco describes the effect on the young Margo Glantz of her parent's struggle to feel at home in his new country:

The dissonance between the cultures does not allow Glantz to see a unitary self but rather to recognize her own division as she traces ways of life that both belong to her and yet are foreign. [...] Glantz describes herself as the Telemachus of this Ulysses, an inheritor of a tradition that came not from a position of power but from exile. The father is 'deterritorialized.' He cannot be turned into a metaphor for the state or state power since he represents a voice that is outside the dominant culture. (183)

The narrators of *Las hojas muertas* describe a similar sensation of self-division, as revealed when their parents argue: "[...] a veces hacía que nuestras almas se separaran cada una en dos partes no tan iguales, pero la separación era momentánea y superficial, el alma volvía a unirse en un instante y no quedaba en ella huella de separación" (30). If the father in *Las geneologías* has been deterritorialized, the father in *Las hojas muertas* has been doubly so, since he is himself the child of parents undergoing their own process of adaptation to a new country. For this reason,

one must be careful not to consider him exclusively an allegory for the United States or *estadounidense* state power.

Certainly it can be considered that the father's lifetime of failures chronicles historical and social failings by the United States. Jiménez de Báez catalogs some of these failings:

A partir de la vida del padre se organiza la denuncia múltiple de carácter histórico y social: la marginación de las minorías étnicas en Estados Unidos y entre minorías (por ejemplo, las de Canadá y los libaneses que marginan a los negros); de los extranjeros dentro de sistemas dominantes y opresores en mayor o menor medida (el propio Estados Unidos, la época estalinista en la Unión Soviética, el nazismo, etc.), y la marginación política (por ejemplo, de los grupos comunistas en los Estados Unidos). (129)

Thus, the United States is criticized through the life trajectory of the individualist, first-generation immigrant man who ends his days in bitterness, solitude and exile.

Las hojas muertas is 'unhomely' in the sense described by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, in which he describes 'unhomeliness' as "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (9). Bhabha further explores this notion thusly:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow [...] The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and

world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9)

The opposition between domestic and public spaces assumes great importance in *Las hojas muertas*. The father spends considerable time at the hotel, which constitutes for him a “home away from home”, a circumstance that dissolves the barrier between public and private spheres and further establishes the text as *unheimlich*. The motto of the hotel, “home away from home”, begs the question of how this character would define that place and to what place he himself might grant the name of “home”. He is appealing to an *estadounidense* clientele, and for this reason the “home” of the hotel motto can be understood to mean the United States. Nonetheless, for him the Mexican hotel can be considered at best a “home-away-from-home away from home”, since he has left behind the land most of his hotel guests call “home” and which he once did. He returns to Manhattan on one occasion as an elderly man, but indicates that he would not wish to return there to live. Although he finds it confusing and does not look up old friends for fear of discovering they have died, he delights when people ask him for directions, mistaking him for a resident of the city. In Mexico, on the other hand, he needs help even to send his shoes out to be polished. The father, thus, belongs to no culture, but inhabits the interstices of Mexican, Lebanese and *estadounidense* identities. As the narrator describes him, “empezó a tener aspecto de huérfano y de desterrado o de hombre sin familia y sin país y se sumía en sus lecturas y a nadie le comentaba nada” (83). The narrative voice of *Las hojas muertas* also reflects the notion of unhomeliness. The trusting adolescent voice

certainly transgresses the line between public and private, revealing what Freud identifies as the *unheimlich*, or “everything that ought to have remained ...secret and hidden but has come to light” (36). While the narrators provide an official, explicit version of their childhood in which they were happy and their father was never angry, their private, youthful and apparently innocent voice conveys a reality very different from the multicultural idyll they insist upon but constantly weaken, a vision certainly disorienting and dividing.

Even as the novel overlaps, the story occurs entirely on the interstices of national cultures, at the same time breaking down the barriers between past and present, presence and absence, fiction and memoir. At the same time, the narrators assume a liminal perspective to this history, possessing little or no individualization. These characters belong to an ethnic minority, whether they find themselves in the U.S. or in Mexico. The story “remembers” events that cannot be proven and are in some cases supposed by the narrators to have occurred in a past before their memory, events that cannot be corroborated because the participants disappear from the adult world for reasons the childlike narrators, whose immature voice undermines the passage of time, cannot articulate upon remembering. The father himself is *unheimlich*. He is the uncomfortable truth slowly being discovered in this book. The bridge outside his window acts as a metaphor for change and transition, but he is limited to contemplating it. In his old age, “se paseaba cerca del puente que veía desde la ventana de su cuarto y a veces lo subía y lo bajaba y lo volvía a subir y a bajar pero nunca pasó por debajo aunque se preguntara cada vez si eran pobres o ricos los que dormían ahí cubiertos con las hojas muertas y el desperdicio acumulado [...]”

(96). He perceives the bridge only in its vertical dimensions, never crossing it, fixated upon what is above and below it, but never on the other side of it. He is hurt at having been rejected by the nation he himself only partially accepted, unable to wholly make the transition into his adopted nation of Mexico. After the death of his mother and his estrangement from his brother and sister, the father begins a steady decline into solitude. A lawsuit brought against him even compels him to withdraw the family name from the telephone directory. He no longer holds his traditional party on New Year's Eve, no longer answers letters, nor keeps in touch with his friends from the war or the days in which he operated his hotel. Instead, the father retreats ever further from his previous everyday life. By the time the narrators have moved out of the family home, their parents have moved into the home of their maternal grandparents and their father does not leave his room: "mamá iba y venía y la hacía también su casa pero papá no, porque él se fue quedando en su cuarto y no salía de su cuarto y su cuarto era prácticamente su casa" (85). Far from seeing his world expand as a consequence of having traveled, speaking other languages, ostensibly having met famous and influential people, the father's world becomes ever smaller in his old age. He first loses his "home away from home"; next, his home; and finally, "home" becomes a single room, never really his, in which he retreats into his books. He is buried under the "hojas muertas" of his library, the "desperdicio" of a lifetime of failures, wondering whether he is the richer or the poorer for having stayed under the bridge instead of crossing it. When he thinks about his death, he plans to creep off under the bridge outside the window, "con tal de no contribuir ni mucho menos perpetuar el negocio de la muerte y con tal de protestar por todo hasta

el último momento” (102). Meanwhile, his children struggle to cross their own bridge into adulthood. In *Escrito en el tiempo*, Bárbara Jacobs has this to say about the act of writing about one’s childhood:

Cuando un autor escribe acerca de su infancia, la relee, la recorre con la memoria, mira por primera vez al niño que fue, y del que es hijo, y entonces le pregunta cuanto ese niño le habría preguntado a él, únicamente a él, si él hubiera sido su padre; y ese niño, a la hora del recuerdo, resulta con que conoce las respuestas y se las dicta, con naturalidad, al autor que, de niño, nunca las supo. (59)

The narrators of *Las hojas muertas* are confined to consulting their own childhood in search of answers that, no matter how they ask the questions, come back as unsatisfactory. In so doing, they are unable to definitively cross the bridge leading from childhood into adulthood. The novel comprised of their reflections on their father may be considered a new volume of the family dead leaves.

Bhabha speaks of the demise of national traditions in lieu of border and frontier conditions, which he considers the emerging domain of world literature (13). *Las hojas muertas* is an excellent example of a novel that transcends borders both thematically and structurally, residing in the spaces between national cultures. This is not an easy or comfortable place to be. The narrators fantasize about Abuelo Rashid’s brothers, who settled in Grand Rapids area and whom they never met, considering that “a lo mejor nosotros tenemos tíos y primos y a lo mejor hasta sobrinos con los que nos hemos ido topando por el mundo sin saber que somos parientes y no sólo que nos parecemos y que un aire nos une y una atracción

inexplicable” (43-44). They know their cultural heritage is unique and they dream about meeting relatives who share a common identity. The narrators discuss differences between their parents and other parents: “nunca nos habíamos preguntado si serían buenos o malos aunque fueran diferentes entre sí y diferentes de los otros papás de otras gentes que conocíamos y con los que como era natural los comparábamos. Papá y mamá eran diferentes, sobre todo papá...” (27). This example not only distinguishes their father from their mother, but also sets them both apart from the broader culture. The difference between their parents sometimes causes the narrators pain and anxiety, as noted in their reaction when their mother, influenced by a friend, decides to dye her hair and angers her husband:

nuestras almas se fueron separando en dos partes no tan iguales y esta vez creímos que así se quedarían, que se crearía un barranco entre cada parte y que no habría puente posible que lograra juntarlas nunca más pero no fue así, fueron puros miedos imaginarios de nuestra parte que, sin embargo, tenían lo suyo y se acumulaban y quién sabe qué resultados darían despues” (31).

The reader perceives in the lines of the narrative, some of the results of those “imaginary” fears: a family of adult children who never fully matured and who feel they have failed to know their father, but who have a unique story to tell from the in-between spaces formed where present meets past, here meets there, and self meets other. *Las hojas muertas* reveals a unique narrative voice that tells its story unassumingly and between the lines, seeming never to suspect that its own surprising strength resides in its ability to stand astride the conflicting identities that comprise it.

APPROACHING THE *COATLICUE* STATE: TRANSCENDING
BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN *CALLEJON SUCRE*

In *Cultura y comunicación: Entre lo global y lo local*, Néstor García Canclini writes that rethinking identity in the era of globalization requires reconsidering it as a multicultural phenomenon “que se nutre de varios *repertorios*, que puede ser multilingüe, nómade, transitar, desplazarse, reproducirse como identidad en lugares lejanos del territorio donde nació esa cultura o esa forma identitaria” (80). He observes that in light of the diversity in contemporary societies, the importance of identity recedes into the background while this newfound heterogeneity becomes the central object of consideration. Meanwhile, as Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca discuss in their book *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera*, such prominent central Mexican thinkers as Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Fuentes project an identity upon the border region that attempts to homogenize it as an area lacking in culture, having nothing to do with a *capitalino*'s notion of *mexicanidad* (61). In *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos* (1994), Rosario Sanmiguel presents us with a collection of stories in which characters reflect several of the considerations mentioned by García Canclini. While only some of the characters in the collection are multilingual, nearly all are in transit between stages in their lives, and their nomadic existence takes them into previously uncharted territory both in Mexico and the United States. Castillo and Tabuenca note that although the stories make no

systematic effort to define a border theory, “the subjectivities described in them could be understood nowhere else” (29). Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas form the backdrop for all these stories, yet in her portrayal of the sister cities Sanmiguel avoids facile assumptions and associations with regard to both Mexicans and *estadounidenses*. Ciudad Juárez is not depicted as a corrupted, cultural wasteland, characterized primarily by violent crime, drug trafficking and *maquiladoras*. As Castillo and Tabuenca observe, far from asserting a particular border identity, “Sanmiguel [...] shows her readers a vital urban space inhabited by people from different social classes and ages who live in their city day after day, in an ordinary way” (65). Thus, at the same time they explore marginal spaces of cultural confrontation and self-exploration, both the Mexican and *estadounidense* characters in *Callejón Sucre* transcend personal and interior borders in order to assert diverse individual identities that reflect the heterogeneous reality of the border society that they inhabit.

Callejón Sucre y otros relatos consists of seven stories in which the protagonists, predominantly female, find themselves on the verge of significant transitions. In the collection’s title story, the protagonist wanders the streets of Ciudad Juárez reflecting on the impending death of his terminally ill lover and revisiting the nightclub where both previously worked. In “Un silencio muy largo” Francis retreats from her career and home as she abandons her prolonged, unhealthy relationship with a married man. She takes refuge in the seedy bar *Las Dunas*, where she expresses solidarity with the prostitutes until she is banned from the establishment. “Bajo el puente” narrates the experience of Mónica with her

pasamojados boyfriend Martín, who dies attempting to help her cross into El Paso illegally. In “La otra habitación (Segunda mirada)”, Anamaría travels from Monterrey to Juárez in order to settle her late husband’s estate and must decide whether to sign the family home over to her sister-in-law Alicia, whom she dislikes. For her stay, she chooses a hotel she frequented with her husband Adrián, whom she later betrayed by taking a woman as a lover. During her stay, Anamaría becomes fascinated with the life of the cabaret singer, Cony, who stays in the next room. “Las hilanderas” concerns a mother and daughter who emigrate to El Paso to work as housekeepers for a wealthy woman, and who subsequently return to Mexico, although not together. “Paisaje en verano” portrays the adolescent Cecilia in the moments before her first menstrual period, as she skips school to wander the streets of Ciudad Juárez and contemplates the mysteries of her newly discovered sexuality and pending womanhood. Finally, in “El reflejo de la luna”, Chicana lawyer Nicole Campillo considers the political and personal ramifications of a legal case she is handling, the defense of a young Mexican indigenous woman sexually assaulted by Dick Thompson, the son of her *estadounidense* employer. The Thompsons represent important professional connections for Nicole’s husband Arturo. Nicole must juggle her pregnancy, her familial obligations and relationship with her husband, her career, and her client’s concerns with her own Chicana identity in deciding whether to pursue the young woman’s case.

On many occasions, Rosario Sanmiguel provides stark contrasts between beauty and ugliness, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, insiders and outsiders, black and white, as in the following example from “Un silencio muy largo”, when Francis first

enters *Las Dunas*: “Seguramente bajo el abrigo albo su vestido negro mostraba el nacimiento de los senos” (15). Elizabeth Montes observes the profound subversive impact produced by dressing the protagonist in black and white. In her article “Rosario Sanmiguel: *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos*” she writes: “El contraste entre el color blanco del abrigo y el negro del vestido que lleva Francis al igual que el blanco de la ciudad cubierta por nieve con el negro que caracteriza la atmósfera de Las Dunas, son indicativos del intento de desvirtuar un orden social en que la maldad se asocia con lugares y gentes marginales” (96). “Callejón Sucre” is the first story in the collection, and sets the tone for the collection through the use of numerous binary oppositions. While his lover lies dying in the hospital, the protagonist of this story wanders the streets of Ciudad Juárez, where the perfume of the women walking past renders it impossible for him to forget the smell of the sterilized sheets of his lover’s hospital bed. He enters a cabaret to distract himself, and watches a nude dancer whose “hermosa madeja de cabello oscuro” contrasts sharply with “un repugnante lunar amplio y negruzco” upon her thigh (10-11). He remembers watching his lover dance, recalling her delicate feet and slender ankles, then turns to the thought of the huge scar that now spans her abdomen. The title of “La otra habitación” divides the story implicitly into two spaces, creating a line of demarcation between this room and all that happens within it and the other room and the events that occur there. The insistence on such binary oppositions throughout *Callejón Sucre* conditions the reader to contemplate the world of the stories in black and white, a background against which Sanmiguel’s protagonists stand out starkly as they explore and inhabit their own gray areas.

The individual North Americans mentioned in this collection of stories are as diverse as the Mexican characters. In regard to the *estadounidenses*, it is important to note the distinction between Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans. Nicole Campillo and her husband, Arturo, are *estadounidenses* of Mexican descent and preserve, in different proportions, a Mexican identity, while other characters in the collection, such as the Krepfel sisters, are identified as possessing European heritage. “El reflejo de la luna” describes several significant differences between Nicole, her mother and grandmother, and the German-descended Krepfel sisters. The Krepfels own the dress shop where Nicole’s grandmother works, and never direct their employee a smile when they encounter her outside the shop. The sisters are proud of their own European cultural heritage but show no respect for the Mexican heritage of Nicole’s Grandmother. The grandmother responds in kind: “La abuela ni siquiera las miraba. Si las señoritas, orgullosas de su ascendencia alemana, la consideraban inferior por ser mexicana, ella también las despreciaba” (95). The Krepfels attend the protestant church each Sunday, yet it is suggested that at age fifty-something they are sexually repressed and even depraved. Their single suitor, a Turkish man named Atila Hassam, routinely removes his clothing in the presence of the pale, freckled twins and allows them to anoint his muscles with oil. They enjoy a single tryst with this man, as exotic for them as they are for him, before retiring from their sexual life, which is left to collect dust among their bridal mannequins. Several Anglo-Americans in these stories perpetrate acts of violence. Such is the case of Dick Thompson in “El reflejo de la luna”, who sexually assaults Guadalupe Maza and becomes violent with her when she rejects him. The border patrol officer in “Bajo el

puente" makes a secondary income assisting Mexican men like Martín to usher undocumented workers into the U.S. until an altercation provokes him to shoot Martín as he is trying to cross the river with Mónica. Some *estadounidenses*, on the other hand, demonstrate neighborliness and even a pronounced degree of commitment to the Latin American (primarily Mexican) community in El Paso, such as the twelve-year-old boy and his father who come to Guadalupe Maza's aid by calling the police when she flees Dick Thompson. Thanks to the sensitivity of the nurse who attends her at the hospital after the assault, Guadalupe takes refuge in the Sacred Heart, a primarily Latino parish under the auspices of Reverend Kenton, the eighty-year-old priest whom Nicole Campillo describes as "un hombre honesto y útil" (100). Kenton expresses significant concern for Guadalupe and how the legal case might affect her immigration status.

Other *estadounidenses* appear primarily in professional relationships with Mexicans when they contract them as housekeepers or gardeners. In "Las hilanderas," "la patrona" of Fátima and her mother Manuela is barely mentioned. Her role is limited to imposing the rigorous task of keeping her household clean and orderly. In "Reflejo de la luna" Hellen Fernández, the spouse of one of the partners in Nicole's law firm, surveys her garden before the annual Easter party accompanied by her gardener, a presumably undocumented Mexican laborer. Her task is to buy the plants and direct and inspect their care, while don Rito "ejecutaba diligentemente las órdenes de la señora Hellen" (117). Nonetheless, Hellen seems to work side by side with don Rito and seeks him out each week at Sacred Heart in order to secure his

services in her garden. The last name Fernández suggests that her spouse is Latino, although as a successful lawyer he must be far removed from the humble gardener.

At the Fernández garden party, several *estadounidenses* discuss openly the nature of their relationship with Mexico and its inhabitants. They deplore the heightened security at the border and the increased efforts of the Border Patrol to deport undocumented workers. Mr. Thompson, Dick's father, remarks that the recent tightening of the border has damaged his business significantly. He suggests it must have affected Arturo similarly since his clients, according to Thompson, are "trabajadores pobres que cruzan a pie el puente" (121). Hellen's attitude toward her plants may be seen as a metaphor for such *estadounidense* attitudes towards Mexico and Mexican workers such as don Rito. The narrator describes the gardening activity of the woman thus:

Hellen, enfundada en sus jeans, guantes de mezclilla y sombrero de paja, inspeccionaba todos los rincones, que no hubiera indicios de esas molestas plagas que empezaban a invadir las plantas apenas los días se ponían más cálidos. Rito, armado de escardillo y trasplantador, sembraba los tulipanes alrededor del grueso tronco de los sicomoros. Los querían por colores: los amarillos juntos, los rosas en un mismo sitio; sólo los blancos podían ir salpicados con los de color malva. Hellen había comprado diez docenas en el invernadero, todas las que habían llegado de California. Sería difícil conservarlos con las temperaturas de la región, pero si sobrevivían al domingo frescos y erguidos bajo la fronda, se daba por satisfecha. (117)

Hellen has chosen to purchase flowers that are not native to her desert home in spite of her fear that they will succumb to local diseases and infestations. She divides them by color: only the white ones have access to all regions of the yard. Like the white tulips, Anglo-Americans in this territory that once belonged to Mexico are a non-native phenomenon, exert themselves throughout the territory, and require special accommodation in order to coexist with the natives. Meanwhile, they perceive Mexicans, the former owners of this territory, as invading their culture, infesting it with their language and traditions. Despite her rigor in choosing and planting the tulips, Hellen understands that they will be vulnerable in this climate and hopes only that they will survive until Sunday. Thus, although the tulips are living things, they are dispensable, expendable to her. In the same manner, if don Rito failed to show up for work, she could easily hire another undocumented Mexican eager for work.

The proximity of Ciudad Juárez to El Paso lends certain ambivalence to the perceptions that both Mexican and Mexican-American characters express in regard to the U.S. and *estadounidenses*. In a practical sense, the border is highly permeable in both directions for the characters in *Callejón Sucre*, and coexistence with people from *el otro lado* is an everyday circumstance. In “Callejón Sucre” a taxi driver complains that he has trouble redeeming his tips, often left in dollars by tourists. In “Un silencio muy largo”, Rosario Sanmiguel neatly crosses the border by employing an interesting narrative strategy, in an episode in which the aging prostitutes of *Las dunas* reminisce about the days in the 1950’s when they entertained soldiers from Fort Bliss: “Qué diferente era todo, se decían China y Morra, nunca teníamos miedo. Tenían razón, para llegar al *Coco-Drilo*, si los soldados cruzaban por el puente Santa Fe, debían

salir de la ciudad y cruzar los plantíos de algodón. Antes de llegar podían escuchar los acordes llevados por el viento, música en vivo todo el tiempo” (16). Although the memories belong to China and Morra, the narrative assumes the perspective of the soldiers leaving Fort Bliss and approaching the nightclub where the women work, describing their simple journey through the fields as the music carries across the border from Mexico, unobstructed. The border is almost as easy to cross for the soldiers as it is for the music, and the narrative perspective crosses the line smoothly in this passage. The prostitutes allude to a time in which they were not afraid, before the occupation of the Juárez riverfront by *maquiladoras*, which in themselves constitute a further point of intersection, this time between Mexican workers and U.S. companies. In “La otra habitación, Anamaría describes the panorama outside her hotel window: “A través del cristal repasaba una y otra vez los rótulos que alcanzaba a ver: *Woolworth, Café El Norteño, Bar Mr. Frog, Café Ideal, Bombay Dancing Club*” (51). Names in English alternate with those in Spanish, describing the bilingual skyline visible from a window in Ciudad Juárez. At the close of this story, Anamaría returns to her window and observes the inhabitants of the streets below: “Los cholos buscaban sus guaridas cercanas a las vías del tren. Las indígenas recogían sus tendidos de yerbas y dulces. Los gringos cruzaban los puentes para beberse la noche. Los acantonados en *Fort Bliss* buscaban amoríos en el Callejón Sucre” (68). Each person belongs to a group, and each group goes about its own business down on the street; that of the gringos is to cross into Mexico in order to drink and seek amorous encounters. On the northern side of the river in El Paso, a similar sense of “a place for everyone, and everyone in his/her place” prevails in “Las

hilanderas". After her mother returns to Mexico, Fátima's life "tomó el curso que correspondía a una joven como yo" (71). Other young girls employed in the neighboring houses become her friends, and together they frequent time and time again the same places in both cities.

"Bajo el puente" immerses the reader in the realm of the *pasamojados* who earn their living assisting people to cross illegally into the United States, revealing the relative ease with which this crossing can be accomplished. Martín, the protagonist's boyfriend, must compete with others for the coveted turf beneath the black bridge, "el mejor lugar pa pasar mojados" (43). Mónica alludes to the emptiness of the sidewalks on a particular Monday, frequented by neither "gringos ni mojados", ostensibly the usual occupants of the area (44). From underneath the bridge, she observes the activities of her boyfriend in the train yard directly across the river, including his altercation with Officer Harris, one of the Border Patrol officers nicknamed *verdes* because of the color of their uniforms. Harris pays Martín to supply a stream of illegal workers: in Martín's words, "sirvientas, jardineros, meseros y hasta un mariachi con todo y los instrumentos, eran para su cantón y el de sus compas" (46). Later, once Martín begins to escort workers for the New Mexican chili harvest, thus over a greater distance and at a greater risk to himself, Harris becomes reluctant to pay adequately for Martín's services and cuts him out of the transaction by doing business with Martín's rival instead. Martín threatens to turn Harris in for permitting illegal border crossings, which ultimately leads to the confrontation resulting in Martín's death. Although dangerous, Martín's career in illegal crossings is a highly lucrative one. Not only do *mojados* pay him to escort them into the United

States, but he also receives money from the corrupt Border Patrol officer in exchange for workers. Crossing is presented as so simple that Mónica casually entertains the notion of doing so: “le pedí que al siguiente día me cruzara el río porque yo nunca había ido al otro lado” (45). She perceives the journey across the river as an effortless afternoon amusement, having watched her boyfriend make the trip many times in a day.

The protagonists of “Las hilanderas” also cross the border with relative ease. When Fátima and Manuela cross the first time by train, Fátima is a child, and at the time of the narration her strongest memory of the occasion is that of the tedium in the hot railway station. Later, alone in the U.S., Fátima begins to spend Sundays in Ciudad Juárez with her new friends: “Así se sucedieron mis domingos: por la mañana ir de una ciudad a otra, ver una película y comer frituras en la calle; al anochecer, cruzar temerosa el río para tomar de nuevo la rueda de los días” (72). In the morning, Fátima and her friends cross over the Santa Fe bridge “flanqueado siempre por las patrullas verdes”, and in the evening they return underneath it. On one occasion when the girls are detained, they spend the night in jail more annoyed and tired than afraid, then go to a favorite café to wait it out: “Íbamos risueñas y hambrientas. Desayunamos con calma en el café de los domingos, *El Norteño*, ya sin los desvelados de la noche anterior. Dejamos pasar las horas de la mañana sin prisa, luego regresamos al río para cruzar otra vez y las que fueran necesarias” (72). Thus, Fátima characterizes her inability to return to Texas in a timely fashion as more of an inconvenience than a catastrophe, suggesting the uncomplicated manner in which the task of crossing the border can be accomplished.

Castillo and Tabuenca point out that the United States is a constant presence in *Callejón Sucre*, particularly as the locus of sticky moral matters. For example, Cony, the cabaret singer in the hotel room next to Anamaría in “La otra habitación”, crosses in order to have an abortion: “Crucé el puente y me interné en una clínica, en El Paso. Ese mismo día en la noche regresé” (63). In contemplating Cony’s abortion, Castillo and Tabuenca note that “we are asked to think about the complex web of legal/illegal relations in the two countries and in the activities associated with each side of the border in this dynamic exchange” (91). Certainly Martín’s illegal activities in connection with corrupt immigration officials provoke the same type of reflection in the reader, as do perhaps the questionable business dealings of Cony’s lover, Roberto Tejera. Although there is no overt suggestion that Tejera is engaging in illegal activity, he is secretive about the work that requires him to cross the international border and expresses to Cony that he fears for his life in spite of her insistences that “lo que tú haces no cobra vidas” (60).

In “El reflejo de la luna” Arturo Alcántar takes issue with the notion that all Mexicans crossing the border are undocumented workers who settle permanently in the United States. When Mr. Thompson insinuates that the border crackdown will negatively impact Arturo’s pocketbook because his clients are shoeless *mojados* looking to stay and work in Texas, Arturo tactfully responds: “Los agentes de migración por lo general son indiferentes a la dinámica de las poblaciones fronterizas y piensan, equivocadamente, que todos vienen a trabajar, a quedarse en este país. Su poco entendimiento no les permite ver que El Paso es una ciudad que vive gracias al consumo de los mexicanos, incluidos los más pobres” (121). Arturo points out that,

instead of swimming across the river, his Mexican clients typically drive or fly into the U.S. and that the devaluation of the *peso* affects him far more than any tightening of border inspections and restrictions. Arturo thus disputes the *estadounidense* misconception that all Mexicans come to the U.S. to stay. Jorge Castañeda has observed that it is this permeable aspect of the border that is neglected in policy-making between the two countries, and which gives rise to much of the tension of *estadounidenses* worried about Mexicans taking over jobs and local economies. In fact, the immigration clamp-down of the mid-1990's, intended to curb illegal workers in the United States, represented a sea change in the nature of transit across the border, since "for more than a century immigration from Mexico to the United States had been characterized by [...] circularity, or seasonality" (3). After the heightened regulations went into effect, Castañeda argues, workers who previously would have crossed back and forth across the international border with relative ease opted to stay: "People who for years had been coming and going between the two countries, with or without papers, decided it was time to settle down, north of the harder-to-cross border. They gave up seasonal migration, brought the family up when possible and affordable, and hunkered down until they became legal, one way or another" (3). Thus, the attempts by the United States to limit the influx of undocumented Mexican workers by intensifying efforts to patrol the border resulted in making permanent residents out of former migrants. Interestingly, although they may not wish to publicly recognize or accept the bilateral nature of traffic across the border, *estadounidenses* in "Callejón Sucre" such as Dick Thompson and Border Patrol Officer Harris are certainly not unaware of its existence. They not only understand

the dynamic by which the United States depends upon undocumented Mexican workers, but they encourage transit across the international border for their own financial gain.

The ambivalence of *norteños* and *estadounidenses* toward one another, coupled with the permeable nature of the border, effectuates a lack of cultural absolutes in Sanmiguel's stories. In *Callejón Sucre*, gringos shoot and rape Mexicans, but gringos also call the cops when an illegal immigrant is being abused, and transfer her into the custody of those who can protect her without deporting her. The conservative *estadounidense* media ignores the Guadalupe Maza case and dismiss her kind as "un mal necesario", yet *estadounidenses* also advocate for a truce with the Border Patrol and monitor the Mexican economy in order to do better business (119). In "Reflejo de la luna" Dick Thompson attempts to violate a young indigenous woman, yet he is not the only philandering character in the story. Arturo's own grandfather, who emigrated to the United States from Chihuahua after the Porfiriato, sexually harasses his own household employees. As the chicana protagonist of "El reflejo de la luna", Nicole Campillo represents the epicenter of the encounter between Mexico and the United States in *Callejón Sucre*, and the story largely concerns the conflicting identities that compete for primacy within her. The stories in this collection refrain from categorical statements about what it means to be either Mexican or *estadounidense*, and portray characters on both sides of the border who deserve consideration based on their individual qualities.

The dichotomy of a specific, central Mexican identity confronted with a specific, generalized North American identity is further undermined by the presence

of other ethnic groups. Not only Mexican *mestizos* and *estadounidenses*, but also Arabs, Koreans, and indigenous Mexicans inhabit this border space and coexist there. In “La otra habitación” indigenous women sell herbs and sweets, and a barefoot Tarahumara girl installs herself on the street outside Anamaría’s hotel room to chase the pigeons. Nicole Campillo confronts the Mexican aspect of her Mexican-American identity in great measure by taking on the case of Guadalupe Maza, an indigenous undocumented worker. At the Fernández family garden party in “El reflejo de la luna” Asaad, an Arab and the owner of a well-known textile shop two blocks from the river, emphasizes the importance of including Mexicans in bilateral trade discussions. The lover of the Krepfel sisters, Atila Hassam, is identified as Turkish. The Segundo Barrio, home to the Sacred Heart Church in which Guadalupe Maza takes refuge, runs alongside the river on the El Paso side, where “Sus calles apretujadas y sucias estaban inundadas por las tiendas – electrónicos, ropa usada, baratijas – de coreanos y árabes” (99). The church itself is described as possessing “bastarda arquitectura”, suggesting that its origins reflect a culturally diverse neighborhood. Although for the most part these other ethnic groups do not occupy the central focus of *Callejón Sucre*, their presence signals a greater cultural diversity than that generally associated with the border between Mexico and the U.S., lending greater complexity and texture to the binary opposition that inescapably preoccupies the region.

The Mexican-*estadounidense* dichotomy is consistently accompanied by the feminist concerns that are raised in the text. The majority of the protagonists are female, and several stories explore gender issues as much as racial and cultural

matters. Many stories concern the relationships between mothers and daughters, with particular regard to the differences in priorities between generations and the possibility – or impossibility – of reconciliation. For example, in “Un silencio muy largo” Francis reflects upon the “relación tirante y ríspida” she shares with her mother, and how she wishes to bridge the gap of misunderstandings between them. Her mother cannot understand how Francis could desire an independent life and feels abandoned, while Francis becomes active in university politics, protests and other activities, working to pay her own way through college. Cecilia, the protagonist of “Paisaje en verano”, bears witness to the disintegration of her parents’ marriage and the emotional collapse of her mother while she waits for the first menstrual period that she feels will make her a woman. In “La otra habitación” Anamaría reproaches her mother for having thrown her life away on Anamaría's unfaithful father instead of pursuing her own interests. The conversation occurs in the kitchen, where Anamaría's mother grinds coffee, a ritual as familiar as it is annoying to her daughter: “Rítmicamente daba vueltas a la manivela del molinillo, que chirriaba cada vez que cumplía una rotación. Esa mañana, después de un rato, la actitud de mamá y el ruido del artefacto terminaron por descomponerme el ánimo, por eso la agredí con una pregunta que resumía el asunto de una de nuestras acostumbradas peleas” (64). Just as the mother manually grinds her coffee in the kitchen, the conversation between mother and daughter grinds its way around a cycle familiar to both women: Anamaría accuses her mother of wasting her life in deference to her husband, while the mother describes her daughter's life as a string of abandonments amounting to nothing. In addition to – and inextricable from – the racial implications of the Guadalupe Maza

case in “Reflejo de la luna” is the issue of violence against women. Nicole Campillo urges her client to pursue the case against Dick Thompson despite the danger of exposing herself as an undocumented immigrant: “Defendiéndote a ti es como si defendiera a otras mujeres que han sido violadas” (103). Although contact between Mexicans and *estadounidenses* is an integral aspect of the stories in *Callejón Sucre*, it is clear from these examples that it is not their sole preoccupation.

The manner in which Mexican and Mexican American characters in Sanmiguel’s stories engage with the Anglo North American culture is far from uniform. Characters from both sides of the border demonstrate varying degrees of cultural compromise with Mexico and the United States. An excellent example can be found in “El reflejo de la luna”, in which Lupe, Arturo and Nicole demonstrate differing shades of Mexican identities and varying responses to life in the United States. Each feels differently about both cultures and identifies with different aspects of each. Guadalupe Maza is a young woman of Mazahua indigenous descent who arrives in the United States out of necessity in order to work as a housekeeper in the Thompson home. As such, she makes her home in the United States but keeps her Mexican identity largely intact. Arturo is the descendent of Don Manuel Alcántar, a wealthy and prominent Mexican who emigrated from Chihuahua to El Paso during the Mexican Revolution and who “veía llegar con disgusto las primeras hordas de campesinos que huían del hambre y la balacera” (105). Manuel idealizes Chihuahua and spends his final days reminiscing about that city, while his son, Manuel Arturo, attends the University of Chicago and marries a North American woman. After his father’s death, this woman convinces Manuel Arturo to sell the family home on

Porfirio Díaz Street and buy the family homestead on the corner of Luna and Copper. Tiring of Manuel Arturo's womanizing, his wife leaves him and returns to her native Chicago. Late in life, he marries a distant cousin from Chihuahua, Arturo's mother. Arturo lacks his grandfather's business acumen and entrepreneurship and is a disappointment to his father from the time he is a child: "Manuel Arturo quería oír historias que le mostraran que Arturito era agresivo, travieso: todo un hombre. No la persona taciturna que siempre sería, que miraría el acontecer de la vida sin involucrarse demasiado" (109). Arturo, phlegmatic and complacent by nature, spends his college days on the margins of the Chicano movement of the 1970's, when "los chicanos se organizaban en agrupaciones políticas y los mexicanos en la asociación de estudiantes extranjeros. Él no cabía en ninguna de los dos" (109). As the last son of the privileged Alcántar family, Arturo does not identify with the marginalized Chicanos, nor does he share much culturally with the wealthy Mexican students who come to the U.S. to earn a degree. For this reason, "Arturo vivía en una frontera existencial. A un paso de pertenecer, pero al mismo tiempo separado por una línea trazada por la historia" (110). Nicole, on the other hand, is the daughter of migrant farmworkers, and she herself worked in the fields as a child. She comprehends the sacrifice represented by her mother's continued toil in the cotton fields in order that she might attend school, where the teacher punishes her for speaking Spanish. Unlike her husband, Nicole involves herself with the Chicano cause; indeed, the legal case against Dick Thompson is more important for Nicole than for the plaintiff, Guadalupe.

Although the other stories in *Callejón Sucre* incorporate English words, it is in “El reflejo de la luna” that languages and language barriers assume particular importance. The story is divided into seven segments; each has a title, some in English, some in Spanish, and others in both languages such as the one named for the intersection where Nicole and Arturo reside, “Copper y Luna”. Several intersections mentioned in the city consist of a street with a name in Spanish and one with a name in English. Arturo, Guadalupe and Nicole speak the two languages with varying degrees of fluency and comfort. English at times appears in the Spanish of even so-called “native” Spanish speakers. Arturo’s mother tongue is Spanish, yet he prefers to express himself in English. He attends a private Catholic school where the other students are *anglosajones* or, like him, descendents of wealthy Mexican expatriates. Arturo expresses his emotions better in English, “ya fuera por lo flexible que le resultaba o, simplemente, porque relacionaba la experiencia emocional con la experiencia inmediata y concreta en el mundo anglosajón” (109). Guadalupe Maza, a Mazahua Indian, speaks her indigenous language in addition to “el español que aprendió en los juegos con otros niños mazahuas en las calles de su barrio” (101). She attended primary school and studied Spanish for three years before finding work selling *estadounidense* chocolates among the transients in Ciudad Juárez. Later she enters a *maquiladora* where she communicates in Spanish with the other workers. Lastly, she hears and speaks the Spanish “que se hablaba en la casa de la señora Thompson quien, a fuerza de emplear mexicanas a su servicio, se expresaba con frases suficientemente claras para comunicarse con ellas” (101). Nicole notes that Lupe speaks with “claro acento juarense”. Her own Spanish is “permeado por

vocablos y pronunciación inglesa – el que aprendió de su madre y su abuela y que, más tarde, durante sus primeros años de escuela, fue obligada a sepultar en el fondo de la conciencia” or face punishment by *la miss* at school (102). When Lupe and Nicole speak to one another in Spanish, each is speaking her first language, but that language is heavily influenced by English, Mazahua and Náhuatl.

Although Lupe Maza and Nicole Campillo share certain traits, their divergent perceptions in regard to Lupe’s case and the difficulty of communication between them underscore the great distance separating them. Neither is a stranger to hard physical labor; Lupe cleaning houses, Nicole picking cotton. Both seek solace in religion; Lupe willingly, Nicole almost in spite of herself. Nicole tells Lupe that she lacks faith, yet when she takes leave of her client she stops by the chapel, where “De su boca salió un Padre Nuestro en un susurro” (104). Both experience a sense of shame and vulnerability in regard to intrusions upon their intimacy. When Nicole visits her obstetrician, the doctor asks her why she is so tense, to which Nicole responds as follows: “Nada. Sólo que todo esto me hace sentir vulnerable, respondió avergonzada, como si lo que acababa de decir fuera una tontería” (92). Lupe defends herself bravely against the assault by Dick Thomson, but Nicole perceives her as reluctant and ashamed to reconstruct the incident for her lawyer. The communication between the two is made more difficult by the language barrier and by the vast differences in their worldviews, and Nicole feels a sense of solidarity with Lupe that is not reciprocated. In spite of the violent encounter with her employer, Lupe feels satisfied at having found a home at Sacred Heart, and considers the attempted rape as merely the unpleasant circumstance that delivered her into this home. She cannot

understand Nicole's determination that she should pursue litigation against Dick Thompson: "Pensaba que había mucha soberbia en ella si se creía capaz de modificar el mundo; algo fuera del alcance de un ser humano. Para ella el bien y el mal luchaban de otra manera, en planos alejados a la voluntad humana" (103). Despite her differences with Nicole, Lupe Maza identifies her as a woman "animada también por la ingenuidad y la buena voluntad" and agrees to collaborate with her. Nicole presumes to understand Lupe and to identify with her because "Ni Guadalupe era una indígena desamparada, ni ella una chicana indefensa. Las dos eran mujeres sin privilegios acostumbradas a la lucha diaria; hijas de trabajadores migrantes. Ahora ella sabía cómo hacer valer sus derechos y los de Guadalupe" (102-3). In a sense, all that separates Nicole and Lupe is one settled-out generation of migrant workers: Guadalupe Maza, like Nicole's mother, comes to the United States hoping to enjoy some of its bounty and wealth. Nonetheless, Lupe sees her predicament as simply an unfortunate incident, while Nicole perceives it as emblematic of social and political injustice against women and against Mexicans. For this reason, she prods Lupe to come forward with a story that pains and shames her, over the protests and precautions of Arturo.

In addition to causing friction with the reluctant victim, the case produces tension between Nicole and Arturo because the defendant is the son of an important business contact and Alcántar family friend. Arturo attempts to assuage the situation, suggesting to Nicole that she can find another way to help Lupe: "por ejemplo, con lo que ella quiere hacer" (115). From Arturo's perspective, the attitude Nicole demonstrates in regard to the case reveals her ultra-sensitivity to racial prejudice. The

narrator describes this tricky dimension of the relationship between husband and wife thusly: “En ocasiones a Arturo le era difícil comunicarse con Nicole. Se exaltaba con demasiada facilidad, sobre todo cuando se trataba de situaciones que ella interpretaba como actas racistas. Era la fibra más sensible de Nicole y lo más ajeno a la experiencia de Arturo” (114). Just as Arturo exists on a “frontera existencial”, straddling Chicano and *estadounidense* identities, Nicole exists on a similar *frontera*, suspended halfway between Guadalupe Maza and Arturo Alcántar. She struggles to communicate with both of them, but feels an imperative to pursue the case which she has trouble explaining even to herself: “Tal vez Guadalupe Maza representaba ese símbolo que debía conservar intacto en su conciencia; o defenderla era la persecución de un ideal de justicia; o era su propio dolor, su vergüenza y su rabia que encontraban venganza al confrontar a Guadalupe Maza con Dick Thompson” (104). By juxtaposing Nicole, Guadalupe and Arturo, Sanmiguel suggests that the Chicana possesses a unique quality: the sense of herself as an active participant and an agent of change in the world. This quality compels her to speak and act, but distances her from others and causes her to question herself relentlessly.

The names of the principal characters in “El reflejo de la luna” are particularly important in understanding their roles in the story. Arturo is the son of the U.S.-born Manuel Arturo and the grandson of Manuel Alcántar. The first names of the sons mimic the cultural transition that is taking place in the Alcántar family. Each generation’s name maintains something from the previous one, but by the time the grandson arrives, nothing remains of the grandfather. Culturally, this is also true. Arturo’s father is disappointed in him, feeling he somehow does not live up to the

Alcántar name, and Arturo perceives himself as *estadounidense*. The transformation is complete from Mexican (Manuel) to Mexican American (Manuel Arturo) to the “American” (Arturo, but not quite Arthur). Guadalupe Maza represents the traditional *mestiza*, born of Spanish and indigenous blood. The name evokes at once Mexico’s patron saint, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, and Lupe’s Mazahua heritage. In her book *Borderlands/La frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa points out how the Spanish appropriated the Mesoamerican fertility goddess Coatlopecuh and likened her to the homophonous Guadalupe, patron saint of west central Spain (51). Anzaldúa describes the role that the *Virgen de Guadalupe* plays in Chicano consciousness:

Today, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the *mestizo* true to his or her Indian values. *La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth. Because *Guadalupe* took upon herself the psychological and physical devastation of the conquered and oppressed *indio*, she is our spiritual, political and psychological symbol. As a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains and insures our survival. The Indian, despite extreme despair, suffering and near genocide, has survived. To Mexicans on both sides of the border, *Guadalupe* is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middleclass; against their subjugation of the poor and the *indio*. (52)

Thus the story presents Guadalupe Maza as the iconic Mexican woman, at once the essence of “mexicanidad” and the beacon to Chicana activists such as Nicole Campillo. “Nicole Campillo” is a *mestizaje* as well, this time between English (as borrowed from French) and Spanish. If names are chosen by parents in anticipation of what their children will one day grow up to be, it is natural that Nicole’s mother should choose for her a European name. She wishes for her daughter to be an *estadounidense*, to go to school, to have a successful career. When her own daughter is born, Nicole names her Gabriela, a name in Spanish that recuperates something of the heritage that she feels running so deeply inside her.

In “El reflejo de la luna”, Nicole must grapple with *Guadalupe/Coatlatlopeuh* in the flesh, and discovers that the resilient, reserved indigenous woman who has quietly endured the centuries desires not to fight, but to continue to endure. Despite the strength to fight that Guadalupe inspires in Nicole, Lupe herself wishes to remain quietly in the background, resigned to her circumstances. In this sense, Sanmiguel seems to suggest that the Chicano idealization of the *indio* fails to account for the *indio*’s own worldview. By reconnecting with a romanticized interpretation of her indigenous heritage, the Chicana is appropriating portions of the *indio* identity for her own ends – not unlike the Spanish once did. Thus, as a Mexican author (although, not an indigenous one) Rosario Sanmiguel places Gloria Anzaldúa’s ideas in slightly closer dialogue with a segment of the Mexican population represented overwhelmingly more often by others than by themselves. This confrontation does not vilify or trivialize Nicole Campillo nor her understanding of her cultural identity, but instead enriches Nicole’s sense of self. Near the end of the story, Nicole rests her

tired, pregnant body on a stone turtle in Memorial Park, recalling an image evoked by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*. Anzaldúa writes: “To separate from my culture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (43). Through her contact with Guadalupe Maza and the subsequent reconsideration of her own cultural identity, Nicole learns to be at home with herself.

Nicole Campillo is indeed a new kind of *mestiza*, the kind that Gloria Anzaldúa describes as “Nueva Mestiza” in *Borderlands*:

In a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? (100)

Nicole experiences the “psychic restlessness” Anzaldúa attributes to the *Nueva Mestiza*. Torn between obligations to her husband, her unborn child, her career, and her activism, caught between an upbringing that taught her to fight and a client who wishes only to forget, Nicole must decide upon a course of action that satisfies not only those around her, but also her own identity as the daughter of a darkskinned mother who fought hard for a better life. She resists entering what Anzaldúa calls the “*Coatlicue* state”, conditions which “disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life” and “are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase

consciousness of itself” (68). Nicole rationalizes her consternation, blaming it on the fatigue of her pregnancy or on her busy schedule, but at the end of the story when she awakens during the night she encounters herself before the mirror: “Aún de madrugada Nicole abandonó la cama. Su cuerpo iluminado por un haz de luz en la luna del armario reflejó su desnudez. Desde el otro lado del abismo sus ojos en la serena superficie del espejo encontraron a Nicole” (127). Anzaldúa identifies the mirror as a powerful talisman and an ambivalent symbol that reproduces, contains and absorbs both thesis and antithesis. She attributes even greater importance to the mirror:

There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place; it can ‘possess’ us. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge. These seemingly contradictory aspects – the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and ‘seeing through’ an experience – are symbolized by the underground aspects of *Coatlicue*, *Cihuacoatl*, and *Tlazolteotl* which cluster in what I call the *Coatlicue* state. (64)

By placing “Nicole” as the last word of her story Sanmiguel creates a linguistic mirror image. The chiasmus serves to reiterate Nicole as both subject and object of contemplation. Only at the end of the story does Nicole enter the state necessary for her soul to perform the imperative task of knowing itself, yet the reader anticipates the dénouement. Sanmiguel provides clues that Nicole and Arturo stay together and experience together the joy and sorrow of watching their daughter leave the house at

Copper and Luna to pursue her own path. Nicole's marriage with Arturo will survive its moments of miscommunication and endure the conflicted identities of both husband and wife. Her daughter, Gabriela, will go forth with a strong sense of self, yet sustain the tradition that links the family to its Mexican heritage.

American dreams permeate the lives of the Mexican characters in *Callejón Sucre*. For many of them, the United States represents the place where their lives will truly begin: they will marry, settle down, get a job and earn some money. In "La otra habitación", one of Roberto Tejera's business associates attempts to impress a cabaret performer by bragging that he operates a Red Cross helicopter in Arizona for a living. In "Un silencio muy largo" the prostitute Morra remembers the handsome blond soldier with whom she intended to elope: "No era inusual que los extranjeros se enamoraran de las mujeres que trabajaban en los bares y se las llevaran a su tierra" (23). Mónica and Martín in "Bajo el puente" planned to "rentar unos cuartos para vivir juntos, nomás mientras nos íbamos a Chicago, de mojados también nosotros" (46). Mónica's own father abandoned her mother and her shortly after moving the family to burgeoning Ciudad Juárez, claiming that he must travel still further north in order to find work. Mónica contemplates the alluring El Paso vista from under the bridge: "para distraerme me puse a mirar las nubes y los edificios de la ciudad que tenía enfrente, eran muy altos, torres de cristal de distintos colores, verde, azul, plomo, negro [...]" (44). Later, Martín takes Mónica to a hotel near the river, requesting a specific room on the third floor. Mónica describes why the room is Martín's favorite: "contra la esquina del hotel hay un anuncio luminoso que echa una luz rosada, y a Martín le gustaba que entrara ese resplandor al cuarto, decía que se

sentía en otro lugar, que hasta él mismo se sentía como una persona diferente” (45). Here beside the international border, Martín experiences a bit of *la vie en rose*. Like Mónica and Martín, people all up and down Callejón Sucre are wandering and waiting; some for a change that they cannot precisely identify, others specifically for the opportunity to cross the border to a place where they feel their life will finally get started. They conglomerate under the black bridge in “Bajo el puente”: “mujeres y hombres esperaban su turno para cruzar” (47). Likewise, in “Las hilanderas” Fátima and Manuela wait to depart for the United States: “Todos esperan. Unos la partida por el único camino que conduce a geografías diferentes; otros la llegada de alguna carta o del periódico de la ciudad” (69). In sum, for many of the characters in *Callejón Sucre*, it is clear that proximity to the United States produces a sense of possibility, a sort of generalized sense that at any time everything can change for them; that at some moment they will cease casting about and transcend that border, and that everything will be different, better, from that moment on.

Diverse fates befall those who cross the border. Mónica loses Martín when he is shot even before they can set foot together on the El Paso shore. Eventually, in the case of Nicole’s mother, her prince does come. An older *estadounidense* man marries her, enabling her to retire from the cotton fields of El Paso and fund Nicole’s education. Morra, on the other hand, is prevented from leaving the nightclub where she works. Whether for Morra’s good or for his own advantage, her employer tries to convince her to stay. Varela reasons with Morra, promises her the moon and stars, and finally knocks her unconscious in order to prevent her from leaving, but it is possible that he is simply being cruel to be kind. He believes that Uve Lambertz will

end up betraying Morra and that in the long run she is better off under his own protection in Mexico. Fátima considers that her mother returns to México worse off than when she left, with “su vieja petaquilla de lámina más vacía que cuando llegamos” (71). In her only letter to her daughter, Manuela urges her daughter to stay on and work in El Paso, but Fátima disagrees: “Aquí no tienes nada, insistió. ¿Y en El Paso? Un pobre salario, un cuarto con baño y una televisión prestada. Nada me pertenecía, salvo la zozobra de ser cazada en cualquier momento” (72). Like Nicole’s mother, Manuela desires a different life for her daughter. Unlike Nicole, Fátima is Mexican-born and perceives that her home and her future lie south of the border. At the end of the story, Fátima undergoes an awakening. She begins to consider that her experience in the United States has not been her real life, but instead a dream, an “American dream” that did not belong to her. She must return to Mexico to reclaim an aspect of herself that is in some ways just a distant waking life.

Rosario Sanmiguel utilizes interesting narrative strategies to underscore the notion that one’s identity becomes particularly vulnerable upon crossing the border. In “Bajo el puente” Monica feels close to the United States when she is in Mexico, but far from Mexico when she is on the other side of the river. In the moment when she crosses the border, the excitement at the prospect of exploring a new city is replaced with a perception of alienation. Mónica narrates her first (and presumably last) border crossing:

[...] a pesar del miedo que llevaba me ilusionó pensar que allá nos quedaríamos el resto del día, que íbamos a caminar por las calles de una ciudad desconocida para mi, eso me entusiasmó, miré el cielo azul, la

Montaña Franklin, los edificios de colores, un cartel enorme de los cigarros camel y más abajo los vagones del tren, en ese momento escuché un disparo, ya habíamos llegado a la otra orilla, alcancé a ver que un hombre se ocultaba entre los vagones, era un hombre con el inconfundible uniforme verde, ¿qué pasa Martín? le pregunté paniqueada, ¡agáchate!, gritó al mismo tiempo que se ocultaba tras el tubo, se oyó otro disparo, Martín se dobló, el agua oscura del río lo cubrió [...] (48)

From the Mexican riverbank, Mónica can savor the anticipation of discovering a new place, can read the advertisements on the buildings, and can distinguish the different colors of the El Paso skyline. The moment she reaches the other side of the international border, this anticipation dissolves into disappointment and tragedy. Mónica searches the Mexican side for help, but finds none: “busqué auxilio con la mirada, ya no había ni un alma bajo el puente, tampoco arriba, por ningún lado, sentí que todo era lejano [...]” (48). While El Paso looms large and near as seen from Ciudad Juárez, once she has crossed to the northern side of the river, Mónica finds herself in another world, far from home. In a single sentence, the narrator crosses from anticipation to disillusionment, from romantic fantasy to tragic reality, from Mexico to the United States. In “Las hilanderas” first and third-person narrations alternate between present and past tense in a similarly fluid manner, when the protagonist is in the process of crossing the border: “Cuando el tren avanza Fátima busca al hombre de la camisa sudada, pero su vista encuentra el muro amarillento de la estación. A escasa velocidad la máquina bordea el caserío. Desde lejos, las casas se parecen a las crucecitas que mi madre bordaba en los manteles de la gringa” (70).

Later, upon Fátima's decision to remain in Mexico, the story resumes the third person narrative perspective and the present tense: "Dejamos pasar las horas de la mañana sin prisa, luego regresamos al río para cruzar otra vez y las que fueran necesarias. Cuando llegan a la orilla Fátima se ve reflejada en el agua como el primer día, cuando cruza llevada por Manuela" (73). The story ends as it began, in the train station at Malavid. Fátima is identified as the little girl in the station surrounded by flies, waiting to awaken from the dream of life in the home of the wealthy El Paso *patrona*. The seamlessness with which both of these experiences are embedded in the narrative mimics the relative ease with which Mónica and Fátima cross the border from their homeland into the U.S., yet the dramatic and abrupt changes in tone and perspective highlight the profound personal transformation implied in these not-so-simple crossings.

The stories in *Callejón Sucre* occur primarily in public spaces of encounter, an environment that lends itself to self-exploration on the part of the protagonists. In his book *Los "no-lugares". Espacios del anonimato. Una antropología de la sobremodernidad*, Marc Augé alludes to the prevalence of "non-places" in contemporary society. Augé defines these "*no-lugares*" as the spaces created to be propitious for the accelerated circulation of people and goods required by the modern world, as well as the home to an increasing transient population (41). Jesús J. Barquet observed in his article "La frontera en *Callejón Sucre* y otros relatos de Rosario Sanmiguel" that Ciudad Juárez has lost several historical sites of its cultural identity and, through the advent of *maquiladoras* and the proliferation of undocumented workers, has become dominated by such non-places. Barquet points

out that these form the background for many of the stories in *Callejón Sucre*: “Cada relato de ambiente juarense [...] transcurre curiosamente en esos *no lugares*: grandes avenidas, salas de espera, prostíbulos, bares, cafés, hoteles de paso, aeropuertos, trenes, aviones. Una fuerza magnética parece caracterizar a los *no lugares*, pues todos los personajes juarenses terminan acudiendo a ellos” (88). The scenes from El Paso in *Callejón Sucre* are similarly impersonal; even the Alcántar family home or the house where Fátima and Manuela work do not belong to the female protagonists of “El reflejo de la luna” and “Las hilanderas”. Barquet describes characters such as Francis, Anamaría, Cecilia and Nicole as “migrantes de lo íntimo”, who meander through the city juxtaposing their inner boundaries with the geopolitical frontier and the hyper-modernity of the urban environment (90). Francis is in transition between her life with Alberto and her uncertain, independent future, Anamaría is poised to move forth in life as a widow, Cecilia awaits the arrival of womanhood and Nicole must confront the moral responsibilities that accompany her cultural identity. Thus, Sanmiguel suggests that living in these non-places makes it all the more important to assert one’s individuality. The border, this geopolitical point of encounter, is itself a non-place, neither entirely *estadounidense* nor entirely Mexican. The characters in *Callejón Sucre*, far from feeling daunted by this contradictory environment, thrive on this frontier-ness and seek out the non-places in which they may more freely explore their identity as individuals. Unburdened by a comprehensive and cohesive nationalist sense of Mexican-ness, they are free to explore frontiers both interior and exterior. Nicole’s struggle will certainly help her tap into another source of the Mexican part of her identity, but when her interior journey is represented alongside that of many

others it is cast more as a manifestation of her individual reckoning with herself than a categorical statement about border identity in general. In this sense, *Callejón Sucre* provides a significantly different view about the border from that found in *La frontera de cristal* by Carlos Fuentes, a resident of central Mexico. Castillo and Tabuenca express that “border literature” produced by metropolitan Mexican authors possesses an inauthentic quality: “these writers, who are, perhaps, passionately drawn to the dynamic quality of the border cities, seem to have set themselves the goal of redeeming this region through their writing, while at the same time their written apologia necessarily stumbles and falls short in representational power” (61). The authors of *Border Women* consider that “Mexico’s northern border has been perceived from the center of the country as a space where the language, customs and lifestyle of the United States enjoy easy cultural penetration by virtue of immediacy of contact with that country” (59). In addition, Castillo and Tabuenca point out, *Juarense* women have frequently been portrayed as victims of horrific violence or as perpetrators of drug and immigration crimes in Ciudad Juarez (65). In *Callejón Sucre*, in a “non-place” that many residents of central Mexico characterize as lacking in culture and identity and that *estadounidenses* associate with crime and corruption, Sanmiguel’s characters experience liminal, defining moments in the formation of their sense of self – even as they go about their everyday lives.

Estadounidenses as a homogenous group, presented in binary opposition with Mexicans as a homogenous group, do not factor into this narrative to nearly the same degree as in *La frontera de cristal*. This is true despite the fact that the stories are replete with binary oppositions, as we have seen throughout our consideration of

these texts. This insistence upon duality, important as it is, yields to the moments of transition in which Sanmiguel's protagonists find themselves propelled toward the *Coatlicue* state in which they may confront their own identities and thereby transcend the duality of life and even the synthesis of this duality. They thus attain a third perspective that Gloria Anzaldúa considers "something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality" (68). The border, Sanmiguel seems to suggest in these stories, is an area of communicating vessels. The protagonists of her stories move beyond fixation or separation or assimilation with regard to their omnipresent northern neighbors. They have individual identities to sort out, pressing gender issues to resolve, generational conflicts to overcome with their families. Each character is in transit across personal borders, or on the verge of that moment of crossing, and in the sand-shifting border region they enjoy a freedom from absolutisms that allows them to be neither entirely this nor entirely that, but to become entirely at home in between.

UNRULY MEMORY: THE FRUSTRATED SEARCH FOR LOVE, HATE,
MEANING AND HISTORY IN *COLUMBUS*

The Mexican Revolution (1910) profoundly shook the nation, abruptly ended the oppressive dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, and culminated in the creation of the democratic Mexican Constitution of 1917. As John S. D. Eisenhower expresses in his book *Intervention! The United States and the Mexican Revolution 1913-1917*, the Revolution “is universally considered the single most significant event in Mexico’s history” (xi). It also marked a turbulent time in the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Amidst the turmoil and conflict prevailing in their country, Mexicans rejected U.S. intervention in their national affairs, fearing that U.S. involvement would lead not to a swift resolution of conflict, but merely exploitation. The United States argued that its interests and its citizens in Mexico were threatened by prolonged violence and upheaval, and therefore was under a moral obligation to intervene and promote democracy and peace in the neighboring country (Eisenhower xii-xiv). In Ignacio Solares’s historical novel *Columbus* (1996) the protagonist recounts his experience during the Mexican Revolution, how he seeks out Pancho Villa and participates in an invasion of Columbus, a small New Mexico town, in 1916. In this manner, both the protagonist and Villa hope to vent ideological and personal anger toward the gringos. In many ways their hatred appears to be the product of the impotent rage each feels as a consequence of his circumstances. In his

vengeful raid on Columbus, Villa deflects upon the gringos the wrath that he feels at having been defeated and betrayed by Carranza. These enemies are the very same *estadounidenses* whom he previously befriended and who once lauded him in the press as an altruistic man of the people. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Luis Treviño, seeks to avenge thirty-five Mexicans killed by U.S. immigration officials on the bridge between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, and hopes to provide his life with a sense of meaning along the way. In *Columbus*, the gringos, as the protagonist calls them, range from the perverse clients of a Ciudad Juárez brothel and the conniving businessman who wields his political connections in order to secure Mexican lands rich in oil, to a helpless man on his deathbed and the amiable curator of a museum housing a bust of Pancho Villa. While Luis Treviño is not only aware, but vocal, about the real, historical offenses of U.S. policy toward Mexico and other countries, the gringos are also blamed for the powerless wrath created both by international violence and tension and by prolonged domestic conflict and corruption within Mexico. In this novel, Solares presents the reader with a protagonist for whom historical causes of the animosity between the United States and Mexico are still immediate and alive, and who speaks directly to the historical roots of the long-standing bitterness between the two countries. At the same time, the novel explores the limitations and caprices of Treviño's memory, suggesting that the way in which we reconstruct events has more to do with creating a cohesive story we can live with than with a greater knowledge of self, much less a greater understanding of one another.

In *Columbus*, Luis Treviño recounts over bourbon and chablis his experiences of the Mexican Revolution, ostensibly to a journalist from Ciudad Juárez compiling a historical account. During the early years of the Revolution, Treviño leaves the seminary to work in a brothel in Ciudad Juárez, where he falls in love with Obdulia, the madam's daughter. Here, Treviño witnesses events such as Pancho Villa's early military victories and learns of the burning alive by *estadounidenses* of a number of Mexicans who attempt to cross the bridge into El Paso. Later, Treviño and Obdulia run away to join Villa's famed División del Norte which, despite being severely depleted in numbers and resources, plots to invade the United States at Columbus, New Mexico. Treviño learns that Villa's hatred of the gringos stems not from his idealism, but from their recognition of his opponent Venustiano Carranza's government. Life with the troops is grueling, especially for Obdulia. Eventually she betrays Treviño with another soldier. Treviño participates in the invasion of Columbus, in which Mexican soldiers mistake the stables for the barracks and kill the horses, alerting the North American cavalrymen and sealing the fate of the invaders. When panic prevails, Treviño escapes and later makes his way to El Paso, where he opens the bar from which he narrates his tale and intermittently attempts to write his memoirs. At the end of the novel, his mysterious interlocutor, who has never said a word, seems to disappear, leaving Treviño to resume his tale from the beginning. This circular structure suggests that there may have been no interview, but merely the solitary ramblings of a drunken old man.

Luis Treviño's vitriolic hatred toward the gringos reflects the anti-American sentiment that he describes as being prevalent in Ciudad Juárez during the

early twentieth century. In the seminary in Chihuahua Treviño learns about the pending coming of the Anti-Christ, in which he will be attended by demons, and comments that “No era difícil en aquellos años averiguar la nacionalidad de los demonios” (11). By the time Treviño leaves the seminary and seeks work in Ciudad Juárez, the United States has occupied the port of Veracruz (beginning in April of 1914), where its troops would remain for several months. While the expressed goal of the United States was to intercept weapons destined for Victoriano Huerta’s federal troops by seizing the port area and customs house, Mexico perceived *estadounidense* presence in Veracruz as a threat to its sovereignty and a blatant attempt to destabilize the federal government of Victoriano Huerta (Eisenhower 113). Particularly in the border region, the Mexican public feared that the U.S. would take advantage of the political unrest in order to invade in earnest, “Que una mañana nos despertaríamos en Ciudad Juárez ya con los gringos encima de nosotros” (13). The novel includes a number of inter-textual references to North American newspapers such as the *Chicago World* and the *El Paso Herald*. Both publish an article justifying *estadounidense* occupation of Mexico as a moral duty thusly:

El pueblo mexicano ha demostrado que no es bastante fuerte y sano como para gobernarse de una manera estable y eficaz. Una raza como ésta, en su mayor parte compuesta por mestizos, indios y aventureros españoles, casi toda analfabeta, no puede aspirar a la libertad y a la justicia; en una palabra, a la democracia. Necesitará, sin remedio, ser oprimida. (13)

As historians Don M. Coerver and Linda B. Hall write in *Texas and the Mexican Revolution: A Study in State and National Border Policy 1910-1920*, even though the

border had a history of conflict long before the Revolution erupted, the overthrow of the Díaz regime would “usher in a decade of unprecedented turmoil on the Texas-Mexican border” (16). From the Mexican perspective, the rebels postulated the fall of Ciudad Juárez as

a major psychological blow for the Díaz regime that might very well lead to the triumph of the revolution. Juárez had financial and economic importance for the contending factions, since the side controlling the city would have a significant source of income from customs duties as well as a port of entry for war materiel and other supplies. (24)

From the *estadounidense* point of view, the threat of attack on Juárez brought with it the possibility of a major international incident and caused concern for the welfare of *estadounidense* tourists visiting Juárez, as well as that of El Paso residents who might be caught in the crossfire (21). Moreover, Mexican and Mexican-American sympathizers with Madero might cause the revolutionary activity to spill over the international border. Due to these circumstances, as of March, 1911, nearly one fourth of the U.S. Army was on duty in Texas (23). Amidst this ominous climate, Treviño narrates how thirty-five Mexicans who attempted legally to cross the bridge into El Paso were burned alive by the immigration officials. Treviño explains that the *estadounidenses* habitually subjected the immigrants entering the country on foot to “baños profilácticos” in insecticide in order to disinfect them. This time the U.S. officials would use a more dangerous liquid: “rociándolos primero con queroseno dizque para desinfectarlos rápido, y luego simplemente dejando caer por ahí un cerillito encendido o la colilla de un cigarro, como quien no quiere la cosa, ay perdón.

Treinta y cinco mexicanos no más, junto a tantos que cruzaban a diario a sus tierras de jauja” (63). Treviño deplores the North American attitude that identifies Mexican immigrants as “*la degradación, la descomposición, la pudridera, la gusanera*” yet fails to turn them away categorically (62). Instead, he says, *estadounidenses* select the immigrants to turn away and the ones to admit in order to convert them in “una bestia de trabajo incansable y barata” (62). It is not difficult to understand how these circumstances fed the fear and hatred Mexicans already felt toward *estadounidenses* after a long history marked by inequality and dispossession. Indeed, in the novel, the event of the burning alive of the Mexican immigrants enrages Treviño more than any other single event and seems emblematic of the futility of fighting the gringos. Don Cipriano, one of Pancho Villa’s recruiting officers, contrasts the difficult task of recruiting soldiers to invade Columbus with the zeitgeist of the previous century, when the populace hungered to take up arms against “los yanquis”: “[...] no dudó en pelear entonces con sus propias manos – algunas mujeres verdaderamente a arañazos – contra los soldados invasores, unido y alentado bajo el grito de ‘¡Mueran los yanquis!’ ¿Por qué hemos perdido ese espíritu en el México de hoy?” (90). By way of reply, Treviño reminds him of the burning alive of the bridge-crossers, thus underscoring the extent of the demoralization caused by this senseless, violent act.

Underlying the sense of powerlessness and inequality is the fact that, at the onset of the Mexican Revolution, the United States enjoyed significant economic and political toeholds within Mexico as a result of Díaz’s policies encouraging foreign investment. In his book entitled *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century*, David E. Lorey writes that by 1900, “More than a thousand U.S. companies were

engaged in Mexican operations, with more than 20 percent of their activities concentrated in the border states of Coahuila, Chihuahua and Sonora” (40). He notes that in Chihuahua and Sonora during this time foreigners had obtained millions of acres of choice land, and that they invested heavily in mining. The United States was also responsible for the construction of much of the Mexican rail system at the turn of the century which at first served primarily to connect the areas of northern Mexico rich in natural resources with U.S. markets.

Growing nationalism under Díaz, and especially after the Revolution, would change the way in which Mexican politicians engaged with their *estadounidense* counterparts, as is evidenced by an episode from *Columbus*. According to Treviño, at a dinner in El Paso early in 1916 honoring General Alvaro Obregón for his defeat of Pancho Villa at Celaya, mayor Tom Lea toasts the general in the name of peace and progress, introducing a proposal to develop the sister cities of El Paso and Juárez. Lea’s proposal calls for such provisions as increased commerce, opening the border, and a free trade agreement. Obregón receives the offer graciously, but with the following unequivocal response to Lea’s allusion to the “twin” cities:

El Paso y Juárez son, más que hermanas, ciudades gemelas. Sólo que en condiciones muy distintas. Una es rica y la otra es pobre, una es bonita y la otra es fea. Esto no tiene remedio, fue el destino de las gemelas. Pero sus diferencias más importantes no son sólo la riqueza y la pobreza, la belleza y la fealdad. Porque, además, están las diferencias del lenguaje, de la religión, de la filosofía, de las costumbres. Pocos lugares en el mundo son tan diferentes

estando tan cerca. En uno impera la organización, en el otro la improvisación, en uno el progreso y en el otro el retraso. (157)

Obregón concludes that both cities are magnificent, but his plain response to Lea clarifies the obstacles that prevent the two cities from developing in unison and demonstrates that the Mexican leadership no longer intends to automatically yield to the U.S. and its interests south of the border – or at least not to recognize that fact in public.

The description of the clientele of the brothel exaggerates the negative characteristics of gringos, portraying them as perverse, hedonistic, impulsive and violent. When Treviño begins working at the brothel, dwarf prostitutes are en vogue among the *estadounidenses*: “eran las que más dinero dejaban porque los gringos las preferían por sobre cualquier otra clase de mujer” (17). Not satisfied with one prostitute, the gringos want to sleep with two or three at a time, and wait, drinking in the bar, for enough of them to be unoccupied. As they wait, they become belligerent and destructive, damaging the furniture and insulting others. On one occasion, one of the brothel’s gringo patrons urinates in the face of one of the dwarf women while another man holds her down. The owner of the establishment, el Chino Ruelas, tolerates their behavior because of the revenue it generates and because “No tarda en pasárseles el antojo, así son para todo” (17). Although Treviño finds the sight of the gigantic gringos dancing with the dwarves comical, he is disgusted by the sexual scene he witnesses between one *estadounidense* client and several prostitutes. The client seems to enact a sexual fantasy in which he is dominated by multiple women, all physically much smaller and weaker than himself. As observed by Treviño, this

grotesque happening recreates and exaggerates the old scenario in which the gringo exploits the meek and vulnerable Mexican. Nonetheless, although Treviño and many others constantly repudiate gringo behavior, he suggests that the brothel provides an unlikely space in which the tension in the international relationship slackens momentarily. In the brothel, the clients are mostly gringos, but they include Mexicans from all walks of life and backgrounds. Significantly for Treviño, they all get along well: “convivían pacíficamente, como en un territorio neutral. Quizás el único terreno neutral de la frontera” (20). Still, one might question the neutrality of a space in which women exchange sex for money, and the neutrality of this territory is not sufficient reason for Treviño to forgive the violence and excesses of the gringos in the brothel. Their behavior leaves in him a rancor never to be forgotten.

Despite his criticisms of the deplorable comportment of the North Americans in Ciudad Juárez, Treviño suggests that such bad behavior is not denounced by *Juarenses*, but instead to a certain extent condoned and encouraged. Although the exaggerated desire of the gringos for dwarf prostitutes is unsettling, much more so is the Mexicans' obsequiousness in providing them. Seeking out these women and luring them into prostitution is described as one of the most challenging jobs at the brothel, and often has unexpected consequences. One prostitute dies after only a month working for el Chino Ruelas. The young employee whom Luis Treviño replaces in the brothel was beaten up by the family of another prostitute for having coerced her away from her home and into the profession. None of this deters Treviño from accepting the task. The brothel is not the only place in the city that manifests this moral turpitude. Treviño describes the Juárez of the early 1900's as “entrañable,

aunque te doliera en el alma verlo en las manos de los gringos” (25). The city gains a reputation as “La Babilonia Pocha” or “El *dump* de los norteamericanos”, providing bullfights, horse races, brothels, cock fights and casinos for the amusement of gringos with money to burn (26). Even the Revolution provides a source of entertainment. One El Paso real estate agency advertises lots located outside of the danger zone, yet with excellent views of the war zone which Ciudad Juárez has become. Citizens of Ciudad Juárez also congregate on the hillsides surrounding the city: “Hasta niños y comida llevaban, como a un *picnic*” (26). Thus, while the *estadounidenses* certainly engage in morally questionable activities, their Mexican counterparts indulge the insatiable gringo desire for entertainment, and even take part in the spectacle.

The unromantic environment at the brothel causes Luis Treviño to experience difficulty performing sexually, a problem that parallels his growing sense of futility and impotence with respect to his circumstances in general. The brothel environment disgusts him. After witnessing the sexual scene described above, he feels overcome by “algo que se había acumulado durante toda aquella noche, y quizá durante años, y de pronto se concentraba en el sabor de la saliva, en una náusea creciente” (23). The meanness of his surroundings keeps him from being able to sustain arousal: “cuando estaba a punto de entregarme a la sensación, de permitir que aflorara a la piel abiertamente, algo me regresaba al punto de partida: un olor a sudor, unos párpados marchitos, un exceso de colorete, un holán manchado, un gesto demasiado blando o demasiado burdo” (43). A virgin at age twenty-five, Treviño falls in love with Obdulia, the independent-minded, sixteen-year-old daughter of the brothel’s madam. It is with Obdulia that he has his first sexual encounter, although he had previously

attempted to gain experience in a humiliating, failed encounter with a prostitute in a cheap, dirty brothel on la Calle del Cobre. Treviño writes verses to Obdulia, then destroys them before she can read them. He misses opportunities to tell her that he loves her, fearing that she will reject him. At last Treviño wins Obdulia's heart by telling her that he is going to enlist under Pancho Villa. Still, it is not he who seduces her; instead, the opposite is true. When she learns that he intends to join Villa's troops, she invites him into her bedroom and must encourage and coach him extensively before he will make love to her. Treviño expresses the anguish that his sexual inexperience causes him:

Pero cuál blando nadar a los veinticinco años, sin haber conocido aún relación carnal con una mujer – o con lo que fuera – y con aquella necesidad desasosegada por entregar la vida a algo que me trascendiera. O aunque no me trascendiera, total, pero que me sacara de aquel andar tan caviloso: la mala costumbre de rumiar largo cada cosa, terminaba por paralizarme de angustia.”

(68)

The anguish and paralysis experienced by Treviño extend far beyond the physical. The violence and hatred of *estadounidenses* toward Mexicans and the sycophantic servility he must show the North Americans leave Luis with a sense of impotence and rage that manifests itself in a desire to do something, anything. In response to the burning of the thirty-five Mexican immigrants on the bridge, he sets out in search of Villa's army, asking: “¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer si desde que salí del seminario supe que mi destino sería luchar contra *algo*” (14, the emphasis is mine). In spite of his determination to do something, Treviño senses that resistance to the United States is

futile. He describes launching an attack on the gringos as “algo así como casarte *in articulo mortis*, como creer en la resurrección de la carne, como suponer que tus actos influyen en la salvación del mundo” (11). To Treviño, Villa’s dramatically depleted División del Norte represents the last possibility for redemption. In the words of don Cipriano, even Pancho Villa’s irascible behavior toward his own men is justified, since “qué podía hacer Villa si él era la última opción de justicia y libertad para el país [...]?” (87). In spite of his evident cruelties towards his men and towards the civilians of Chihuahua, “Villa era el último hombre que nos quedaba para creer en él” (98). Villa is absolved from his barbarism on account of what his supporters identify as his extreme sense of justice. In the case of Luis Treviño, placing himself under Villa’s command resolves for a time both his emotional and physical impotence. Anguished at the sense of futility that dominates his life, upon enlisting Treviño finds a sexual outlet in Obdulia and a spiritual outlet in Pancho Villa and his planned attack on Columbus.

Initially, Villa represents the ideal channel for Treviño’s rage against the *estadounidenses*. When Pancho Villa enters Ciudad Juárez in 1913, a festive atmosphere prevails. Citizens compete for a vantage point from which to observe the gunfire, the children delight in the sounds of the clarion and people even applaud, “nomás por aplaudir y sin demasiada convicción partidista, tengo la impresión. El fuego de los cañones les resultaba también especialmente vistoso” (27). When the División del Norte leaves Juárez in the direction of Tierra Blanca, the site of Villa’s dramatic military victory in November of 1913, the cavalymen stroke their horses’ manes with sensual reverence and the trains overflow with soldiers. The iron horse

seems to hum with anticipation: “Había algo vivo en el chirriar de sus articulaciones de hierro, en el vapor que jadeaba al escapar de los embolus, en sus agudos silbatos cargados de esperanza” (37). Such descriptions highlight the sense of unreality surrounding the Revolution for the citizens of Ciudad Juárez in 1913, including for Luis Treviño. He expresses his desire to go with Villa “nomás por unirme a ellos, por formar parte de ellos, por seguirlos, por demostrarme a mí mismo que no quedaban rastros de mi vocación religiosa, por quizás azotar, incendiar y destrozarse lo que encontrara al paso, total, el placer de la destrucción – como el placer de hacer el bien – vale por sí mismo, ¿no?” (29). He is stimulated by the presence of the troops in Juárez: “las emociones del burdel resultaban pálidas junto a las de la guerra” (34). After the burning of the Mexican bridge-crossers, Treviño joins the División del Norte in spite of the harm Villa’s men wrought upon his own family. Villa accuses the narrator’s father of skimming some of the money Villa was attempting to steal from the coffers of a wealthy Chihuahuan man. He raids the Treviño family home and leaves the father terminally incapacitated. Despite this, the desire to transcend and transgress his small life in the face of a vast and implacable enemy – los gringos – compels Treviño to join the ranks of the man responsible for ruining his father’s life.

By the time Luis Treviño and Obdulia are united with Villa’s troops, joining the División del Norte is, in itself, an impotent act. They find the soldiers in tatters and with sunken eyes, distrustful of the newcomers and unable to read the letter don Cipriano has sent with them to explain their presence. Treviño describes them thusly:

[...] ya poco quedaba de la antigua División del Norte, la que vi entrar como tromba a Ciudad Juárez en mil novecientos trece, con aquella facultad casi alada de cabalgar, como si en realidad fuera a emprender el vuelo en cualquier momento. Para entonces se trataba de un reducido y desastrado grupo de guerrilleros que se arrastraba por inercia, sonámbulo, y que en la mirada llevaba la huella de las derrotas sufridas. (142)

Even worse off are the *soldaderas*: “mujeres andrajosas, también exhaustas, con apariencia enfermiza, de piel ajada y huesos salientes, con ojos airados y desasosegados” (139). The townspeople in the villages through which Treviño and Obdulia must pass to reach Villa’s camp are similarly negatively affected by the proximity of Villa and his men. When Treviño enters Tosesihua, “un pueblito abatido por el frío y, precisamente, por el miedo a los villistas” wearing the signature gray hat of a Villa supporter, the villagers regard him in terror, with expressions “como de condenado a muerte” (113-116). Treviño ruefully contrasts the Pancho Villa who rode victoriously into Ciudad Juárez in 1913 with the paranoid, ill-tempered man he encounters when he finally manages to locate Villa’s dwindling troops in the desert:

La figura de Villa en su caballo tordillo parecía hecha de un macizo bloque de madera, rudamente tallado, ya con algo de estatua desde entonces, sonriente y cachetón, los ojos achinados como dos destellantes cicatrices, los bigotes lacios y un rudo cuello, ancho y sanguíneo. No había duda de su apostura y de su halo de caudillo del pueblo. Quién iba a decirme entonces que unos cuantos años después lo conocería en circunstancias tan distintas, cuando ya

se había desmembrado la División del Norte y Villa andaba por la sierra en plan de guerrillero [...] desconfiaba hasta de su sombra. (35)

Villa refuses to sleep in the same place two nights in a row, keeps his gun close by and his back to the door, and orders one or another of his lieutenants to test his food for poison before each meal. Treviño observes Villa in an even more vulnerable position when the two leave camp to relieve themselves nearby. Treviño believes that the scene he witnesses makes him uniquely vulnerable to Villa's formidable rancor. Villa demonstrates his cruelty not only toward his own soldiers, but also toward those who refuse to become his soldiers. An italicized fragment suggests a direct quote from Villa, calling for forced conscription of soldiers: "*Aquellos que se rehúsen a unirse, serán fusilados. Aquellos que se escondan y no se les encuentre, sus familias pagarán la pena*" (86-7). In one episode, he visits his wrath upon the *soldaderas*, the women who accompany and attend to the men and see to the necessities of the camp, executing them ten at a time along with their children. After joining Villa, Treviño has occasion to witness the man's brutality with his own eyes: "Lo vi matar a sangre fría a varios de mis compañeros por razones nimias" (150). The cruel and terrified marauder Treviño and Obdulia encounter in the sierra is a far cry from the statuesque and victorious figure who had entered their city three years before.

Treviño sees in Villa a man whose hatred for gringos is akin to his own. At first glance, Villa's anti-Americanism seems to have political, historical and nationalist grounds, and he deftly manipulates this rhetoric in order to propel his troops into battle against Carranza. Don Cipriano, long one of Villa's most loyal followers, has the ever more difficult task of recruiting soldiers for his army,

“hombres con ganas de pelear contra el traidor de Carranza y contra los gringos, algo en que nos jugábamos la salvación de la patria” (86). In a manifesto in *Vida Nueva*, the Villista newspaper, Villa accuses Carranza of selling out to the United States in exchange for recognition of his administration, accepting such concessions as North American rights to develop Mexican lands rich in petroleum, North American intervention in the appointment of Mexican cabinet officials, and retribution paid to North American residents and entrepreneurs by the Mexican government for any damage to their property as a result of the Revolution. Villa assures the people that a Carranza regime will bring about more incidents such as that of the Mexicans burned alive in El Paso, and may even provoke a full-scale invasion by the *estadounidenses*. Just before the Columbus invasion, Villa tearfully addresses his troops in the small village of Palomas, reminding them of “la causa del pueblo, la que obligó a don Francisco Madero a levantarse en armas contra la tiranía” that sends them into battle once again (168). He informs his troops that the gringos supported the treacherous Victoriano Huerta in overthrowing Madero’s government, and compares this act with supporting Carranza as an inroad to Mexico’s resources and wealth. He accuses the gringos of treating Mexican immigrants like beasts, evoking the episode of the bridge-crossers (whom he counts at forty rather than at the thirty-five reported by Treviño). Finally, he refers to the imminence of North American invasion, saying “Ahora ya andan otra vez con querernos invadir porque dizque nosotros mismos no sabemos gobernarnos, y cómo vamos a saberlo con un traidor como Carranza en la presidencia [...]” (169). Thus, Villa constructs the argument that the security of Mexican sovereignty depends on fighting both Carranza and the gringos, leaving

listeners such as Luis Treviño prepared to die in the belief that “era preferible perder la vida a contemplar de nuevo la bandera norteamericana izada en nuestras tierras” (99).

The insincerity of the anti-gringo sentiment that Pancho Villa uses to make the case for invading Columbus is explained to Treviño by don Cipriano. Don Cipriano speaks in glowing terms of Villa’s cause, almost as if it were a religion. When the narrator first meets him, he communicates to Treviño a great admiration for Villa’s loyalty to Madero, his reputation as a man of the people, and the sense that he stands for liberty and justice, yet over time it grows evident to the recruiter that this identity is a fallacy. Increasingly disillusioned, don Cipriano reveals that Villa’s true reasons for hating the *estadounidenses* are their complicity in his defeat at Agua Prieta and their failure to come through on a shipment of arms Villa has paid for. Don Cipriano tells Treviño that the North Americans allowed Carranza to cross their land in order to take Villa by surprise at Agua Prieta, and despite his prior fervor, concedes that Villa “peleaba contra los gringos, pero más por el reconocimiento que le dieron al gobierno de Carranza y porque no le entregaron unas armas que ya tenía pagadas – lo que propició su derrota en Agua Prieta – que por verdadera convicción política” (109). Finally, don Cipriano reveals to Treviño, to his dismay, that Villa once courted the North American press and Hollywood cinematographers who promised to project his exploits on the silver screen, and regaled General Scott with a valuable serape. Don Cipriano ends by discouraging Treviño from even seeking Villa, since the proposed raid on Columbus has more to do with Villa’s wounded pride and quest for vengeance than with his idealism.

Villa is Treviño's outlet for his impotent rage, yet he is also subject to that same rage, and prepared for his men to lose their lives in seeking his vengeance against the gringos. Nonetheless, Treviño has come too far along the path of his own diffuse sense of idealism not to seek out Pancho Villa and ally himself with him. In the words of critic Alfonso González in his book *Voces de la posmodernidad*, Treviño "Parece haber hallado su *raison d' être* {sic}, algo en qué creer, una misión en la tierra cuando cree que los gringos son la encarnación del mal y del anticristo y decide unirse a Villa para ir a matar gringos a Estados Unidos" (128). Having abandoned one form of commitment upon leaving the seminary, he devotes himself in a comparable manner to Pancho Villa:

[...] he leído de personas que, de pronto, encuentran a Cristo y el camino hacia la luz al entrar en una iglesia, al asistir a una misa de gallo, al leer algún pasaje de la Biblia, o simplemente al vivir una pena muy grande o una alegría que los desborda. Yo, por mi parte, a través de don Cipriano, descubrí a Villa y su camino hacia Columbus. ¿Cuál era en el fondo la diferencia? (91)

Lacking anywhere else to invest his hopes for a fearless leader who will defend his country against enemies both foreign and domestic, as well as for a sense of purpose, Treviño dedicates himself all the more fervently to Villa. In his words, "Renunciar a Villa significaba, sin remedio, regresar al ambiente, compacto y negro, en que había vivido [...] crecientemente degradado, sin una razón de peso para abrir los ojos por las mañanas, con la opresión norteamericana en la frontera como una bota militar en el cuello" (110). Just as the doomed attack on the gringos becomes the repository for

Pancho Villa's frustrated rage, Villa and his army become the repository of Treviño's struggle to find meaning in an otherwise narrow and ineffectual life.

Treviño's determination and singleness of purpose in killing the gringos differs greatly from Villa's personal lashing out, and he finds a new hero in Pablo López. When don Cipriano disappoints Treviño by revealing Villa's previous alliance with the *estadounidenses* against whom he now plans to retaliate, he encourages the young man to place himself under the command of López, "ése sí antigriego por naturaleza –se decía que ya había matado varios, nomás por ser gringos" (111). It is Pablo López who leads the attack on Columbus while Villa remains in Palomas. Carranza's response to the incident of Columbus is a conciliatory gesture to the United States, placating the neighboring country in an international publicity campaign denouncing the attack and calling for the execution of López. When Pablo López is captured and ordered to be executed, his last request is to have all *estadounidenses* removed from the premises, and his last statement is "¡Viva México! ¡Mueran los gringos!" (142). Treviño remembers that these last words from his commander were captured in all the newspapers that covered the story, "además de que quedaron como símbolo para quienes habíamos corrido a su lado la aventura de Columbus" (142). López's statement is significant, as is his assurance that it is preferable to be "guerrillero con Villa que esclavo de los gringos" (144). For López, there is no middle ground between a Villa loyalist and a slave to the United States. For Mexico to live, the gringos must die. This outlook seems to coincide precisely with Treviño's perception. When he tells Obdulia that the gringos are evil, she suggests that "en todas partes había gente buena y gente mala" (50). He

responds by recounting a history of the “bondad” of the gringos: their disrespectful comportment in Juárez, the killing of Mexicans in Texas in 1846, the railroad constructed in La Mesilla in 1853 that serviced North American corporations within Mexico, the 1898 *estadounidense* possession of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and the involvement of U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson in the fall of Francisco Madero. Treviño’s ideological grounds for his hatred of the gringos are far broader than Villa’s, and the categorical anti-North Americanism embodied by Pablo López fuels Treviño’s fervor when his faith in Villa begins to falter.

The disillusionment Treviño experiences with Villa is mirrored and brought sharply into focus by his relationship with Obdulia. Treviño relishes in the fantasy that he initiates Obdulia in her sexual life, but in fact the opposite becomes evident. He persists in the notion that he was her first lover, preferring to ignore her references to a previous sexual partner just as he disregards the truth about Pancho Villa’s reasons for hating the gringos. When Obdulia begins to tell him of a prior erotic encounter, “la detuve y no quise saber más del asunto, para qué, preferible suponer que también yo la inicié a ella, ¿no?” (82). In spite of the fact that he never declares his love to Obdulia, discounts her formidable fighting and riding abilities, and turns a blind eye to her unhappiness at being consigned to the kitchens in Villa’s camps, Treviño demands degrees of loyalty from her that she never promises him. Like Villa, Obdulia knows how to exploit Treviño’s idealism to her best advantage, using him in order to escape life in the brothel for what she hopes will be a more exciting and promising existence. Neglected by Treviño and relegated to a secondary plane that he considers more appropriate for the helpless ingénue he imagines her to be (in

spite of abilities that certainly surpass his own), Obdulia at last rejects and leaves him. Obdulia and Pancho Villa resolve Treviño's physical and existential impotence problems, respectively, and grant him a fleeting sense of empowerment. In the end, however, both betray him by proving not to live up to the identity that Treviño projects upon them.

Just as Obdulia and Villa prove to be underserving of unwavering admiration, the gringos do not deserve Treviño's total hatred. Despite his avowed, categorical loathing for gringos, he empathizes with the North Americans whom he and his company ambush on the train to Cusihuiríachic. He remembers experiencing regret when watching the men descend from the train and undress at gunpoint, and excuses them for shivering: "Los gringos, ya encuerados, no dejaban de temblar (hay que pensar que era pleno invierno, sería injusto achacarle toda la tembladera al miedo)" (162). He also shows unusual consideration for the man he kills in the Commercial Hotel in Columbus: "Pobre tipo, la verdad, seguramente se hospedaba en el hotel por una o dos noches, acababa de cerrar un negocito jugoso y suponía que el mundo conservaba algún orden [...]" (119). Even prior to his involvement with the División del Norte, Treviño accompanies a prospective *estadounidense* client of the brothel on his deathbed, sacrificing part of his salary and commission in order to do so. When the man dies, Treviño crosses himself and feels pity for the man: "Finalmente, creo que me había simpatizado desde que entré por él a ese mismo cuarto, unas horas antes, cuando me decía, eufórico: *Really, I'm so eager, boy...*, muy tierno, hasta eso" (122). Throughout the novel, Luis Treviño expresses his concern with the dead and the dying. He describes in grotesque detail men that have been hanged, shot, and

burned alive; and gruesomely foreshadows his own death. He expresses compassion for the fighters on both sides of the Revolution, “esos pobres soldados, de los dos bandos, enganchados por la fuerza, lejos de sus tierras y de sus hogares, sin haber conocido nunca el significado de la palabra ‘legalidad’, por la cual exponían todos los días sus vidas” (151). Thus, Treviño’s empathy with the dead and dying undermines the hatred he professes.

Although Treviño gives Carrancistas and Villistas, Mexicans and *estadounidenses*, equal billing in death and dying, the notion of death as a great equalizer troubles him rather than consoles him. When Don Cipriano provides him with a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* (the preferred bedtime reading of Francisco Madero), Treviño takes no solace from the notion of perpetual life and reincarnation he reads therein, but instead annoyance: “Podía matar a todos los carrancistas y gringos que quisiera, al fin tarde o temprano iban a renacer, lo que no dejaba de ser una chinga y, en el fondo, una nueva frustración” (153). This assertion is undermined by Treviño’s instinct for empathy and the compassion he shows to gringos in other moments of his life. As Douglas Weatherford writes in an article entitled “Reading and Revolution in the novels of Ignacio Solares”, Treviño’s response to his reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* exposes the hollowness of his revolutionary impulse.

Weatherford writes that don Cipriano’s collection of books “is a refuge amidst the chaos of a revolution turned against itself. The library is also a metaphor for the fragility of Madero’s idealism in a world of violence and opportunism. It suggests that action, anchored by careful reading, can still instigate a more just future” (par. 21).

Although Weatherford credits Treviño with being a spiritual person who often

reflects on his place in the world and on his salvation, he affirms that a great distance separates this young late-comer to the Revolution from such idealistic fathers as Madero and Felipe Angeles and even from their devotees such as don Cipriano. He writes that Treviño, despite possessing similarities to those revolutionary leaders, is far inferior to them in terms of his motivation:

In his search for transcendent truths and in his love of books, Treviño is a reflection of these two idealists. In truth, however, these very similarities will belie Treviño's failure to live up to a higher moral code and will establish him as a symbol of the corruption, opportunism, and failure of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, Solares holds this protagonist in special contempt because he is, unlike so many others caught up in the sheer emotion of the violence, a bibliophile who reads the same pages that lifted the consciences of Madero and Angeles without heeding their messages.

(par. 23)

For this reason, Weatherford considers that even Treviño's vehement anti-gringo rhetoric is hollow, rendered utterly meaningless by the fact that he ends his life operating a bar (nostalgically named *Los Dorados* after Villa's valiant soldiers) on the *estadounidense* side of the bridge he swore to Obdulia he would never cross.

In recounting the invasion of Columbus, Treviño recalls the tactical failures in Columbus in wistful terms of the Mexican soldiers' intentions, how things could have and should have occurred. The orders the troops received were to besiege the barracks and confiscate the horses; next, to raid the bank and general store; and finally, to locate Sam Ravel, the man whom Villa had paid for an arms shipment that

was not delivered. The Mexicans confuse the barracks with the stables, killing the horses and alerting the cavalrymen; set fire to the store, destroying anything inside it that might be useful; and so alarm the guests of the Commercial Hotel that Sam Ravel is presumed to have fled. After killing the horses and realizing that the situation has escaped their control, the Mexican troops seek out whatever targets they can find “para compensar la frustración” (173). Treviño considers killing the horses a matter of “mala suerte”, yet even after this had occurred “no parecía problema que los hombres de a pie llegaran a reforzarnos una vez que estuviéramos en la ciudad y tuviéramos controlada la situación” (170). Of course, the front guard of the División del Norte never gained such control. Significantly, the attack on Columbus provokes the United States to launch the Punitive Expedition under the command of General John J. Pershing, whose troops were entrusted with the task of seeking out Pancho Villa. As Berta Ulloa observes in her article “The U.S. Government versus the Revolution, 1910-1917”, the presence of Pershing and his men in Mexico once again brought the U.S. and Mexico to the brink of war: “Upon learning of the events, Carranza notified the American government that he would consider the entry of U.S. troops into Mexican soil a formal invasion, and he accused the United States of provoking war, notwithstanding its excuses and promises to respect Mexican sovereignty” (177). Thus, despite possessing significant advantages going into the battle – a comprehensive plan, the element of surprise – the Mexican soldiers utterly botch the invasion of Columbus and bring upon themselves a military retaliation by the United States.

In Treviño's account of the Columbus invasion, there is a sense of having done something never before accomplished. In spite of his acknowledgement that the battle was an utter failure, Treviño remembers the invasion with pride: "la sensación de que violábamos lo prohibido, que nos metíamos adonde nunca nadie, en esa forma, se había metido, ¿quién nos lo quita?" (173). He suggests that other countries would be jealous of Mexico for this desperate attempt against the U.S., even though the attack fails. When he speaks of the event, he remembers it as "Nuestro éxito – el que pudo haber sido nuestro éxito" (171). Historian Roberto Blanco Moheno does not share Treviño's assessment of the events in Columbus. In *Crónica de la Revolución Mexicana*, he decries the favorable description of the incident accepted among segments of the Mexican population: "¿Cómo llamar hazaña a la irrupción salvaje de cientos de hombres armados, enloquecidos, sedientos de sangre, en un poblado pequeñísimo, desguarnecido, que dormía plácidamente?" (21). Blanco Moheno observes that Villa's wrath fell principally upon civilians instead of upon the handful of soldiers in the barracks, upon townspeople who were extraneous to "las furias de un cabecilla enloquecido, de una fiera imbécil que en su odio contra los políticos de Washington decide vengarse en las personas de ancianos, mujeres y niños" (21). Although the invasion of Columbus certainly represents uncharted territory for the Mexican revolutionaries, it is difficult to agree with Treviño's consideration of the incident as even a potential or partial success.

Treviño attributes the military failure in Columbus to the habitual disparity between the two countries rather than to tactical ineptitude: "en Columbus matamos cerca de veinte gringos, en su mayoría civiles, que es la mitad de mexicanos que ellos

quemaron en el puente. Digo, es un consuelo estúpido, pero la desventaja en las cifras siempre la hemos tenido; en eso y en todo, qué le vamos a hacer” (64-65). He suggests that perhaps the burning of the general store was an accident: “¿Por qué echarnos a nosotros mismos la culpa de todo?” (174). By way of summation, Treviño says “Fue un volado y lo perdimos, como nos ha pasado tantas veces en la historia de México” (172). According to this assessment, Pancho Villa’s thirst for vengeance and Pablo López’s bloodthirstiness and desperation are not to blame for the Mexican soldiers’ fate in Columbus, but instead a national history that provides a precedent for Mexican failure and disadvantage. Such an argument does much to excuse the individual for his actions (or inactions), much as the perverse predilection of the gringos for dwarf women absolves the Mexicans responsible for supplying the women to meet such a demand. Treviño’s sense of fatalism and powerlessness both creates the fury that fuels him to the attack, and provides an effective, unassailable excuse for his failure.

The intended victims of the invasion, the gringos, manage to turn virtually everything about the attack to their advantage. Treviño describes how they launch a well-organized and highly effective counterattack moments after waking up, “para nuestro infortunio” (174). Later, they even open a museum commemorating the incident, whose collection includes a bust of Pancho Villa and whose curator is a woman Treviño describes as a pleasant blonde who thanks tourists interested in the 1916 battle for the economic survival of the town. Treviño comments: “Para que luego digan algunos historiadores que fue un error político la invasión, nomás ve: hasta pusimos a Columbus en el mapa” (123). Thus, the best efforts of the División

del Norte redound to the advantage of the gringos whom they engaged in combat. After the battle, the troops disperse in confusion. Treviño later learns that Pedrito, the hapless young man who was compelled to escort Treviño and Obdulia across the desert in their treacherous search for the División del Norte, was placed in an *estadounidense* reform school after the battle. Pedrito subsequently earns his college degree and establishes himself in the United States as a successful businessman. Thus, the boy whom his own countrymen consigned to die in the inhospitable territory of Northern Mexico was removed from among Villa's men by the *estadounidense* judicial system, which eventually granted him a chance in life that would have been inaccessible to him otherwise. Treviño himself remains in El Paso ruminating on the events of 1916, seemingly unable to accept a version of the events which indicates that his life is as pointless after the Revolution as it was before, "con una cotidianeidad tan insulsa como en la que caí yo apenas terminó la Revolución" (33). He is determined to evoke the invasion as a glorious moment in history, for only in this way will he be able to uphold a vision of himself as having participated in something important, something that transcends himself and allows him, in his words, "suponer que [sus] actos influyen en la salvación del mundo" (11).

The act of writing in the creation of history in *Columbus* is significant. Treviño expresses his love of novels and his life's ambition to be a journalist, precisely the profession practiced by his supposed interlocutor from Ciudad Juárez. He implies that the two have an agreement in which Treviño will recount his experiences of the Mexican Revolution to the nameless journalist, who may then do as he wishes with the resulting "horrendo amasijo de recuerdos y sensaciones" (82).

At one point, don Cipriano had enlisted Treviño's help in organizing his papers into a memoir and even proposed delaying the attack on Columbus to do so. However, this memoir never comes to be because the old man's account of his life is such a jumble: "En hacerla y deshacerla llevaba más de diez años, pues aunque los acontecimientos seguían siendo los mismos, sus juicios no habían llegado a adquirir la consistencia necesaria de perdurabilidad que él apetecía" (100-101). Later in life, Treviño will understand the difficulty of the task when he, too, endeavors to write his memoirs. He shuffles a deck of cards, as he rifles through his collection of newspaper articles and retells his life story to the reporter, trying to evoke and put in order a past that he cannot quite remember. The solitary activity of writing his memoirs alternates with a games of *solitaire*: "Llevo años en el intento de unas *Memorias*?— pero si no llega la inspiración cambio mi cuaderno por esta baraja, y me juego un solitario" (67). Thus, memory and chance are rendered as interchangeable. Treviño considers that it is senseless to consider one's own role in history as important. He clearly expresses his sense of insignificance in light of this notion, and undermines the relevance and sincerity of his intention to remember his participation in the battle of Columbus:

Por qué entonces limitarnos a una sola lucha y volverla trágica por nuestra pura participación personal? Bah, yo solo participé en una: la invasión a Columbus, y aquí me tienes, viviendo y bebiendo de contarla una y otra vez, enriqueciéndola y enriqueciéndome, repujándola con nuevas anécdotas, engrandeciéndola hasta lo heroico para atraer más y más clientes a este mugroso bar —que además se llama *Los Dorados*—, demostración palpable de

que cuanto he intentado de trascendente y superior en mi vida se me queda en las manos, dejándome sólo una fina e inútil lluvia de polillas muertas. (33-34)

In this manner, Treviño acknowledges his own interest in fabricating his life story, embellishing it for personal gain.

History is an eternal recurrence for Luis Treviño. At the end of his story, his life is as shapeless and inert as when he left the seminary, stuck day after day behind the counter of the bar he has named after Villa's brave *dorados* and adorned with images of the Revolution. From behind the counter, he enhances his account of his life, all the while knowing that he has failed to accomplish the kind of enduring heroism to which he aspired. At the end of his tale, when the supposed journalist disappears, Treviño looks for him in order to reinitiate his story. Treviño implores the invisible journalist to listen to him again: "escúchame, déjame escribirlo de nuevo" (180). He then continues, using the same words found in the first paragraph of the novel. The reader can easily conclude that the tale is being told to no one, over and over again. Alfonso González comments on the array of possible interpretations of this ending: "Las posibilidades de la naturaleza de este interlocutor son varias: puede ser una creación de la imaginación del narrador, puede ser su propio *alter ego*, ya que a él también le interesó el periodismo en algún momento, puede ser producto de algún *delirium tremens* sufrido por el alcohol" (130). González concludes that, regardless of the identity of Treviño's interviewer, in recounting events the narrator is compelled to confront his own shortcomings: "su fracaso por adquirir experiencia sexual con una prostituta, su fracaso al identificar el anticristo y tratar de atacarlo, su fracaso al no poder montar una mula" (González 131). Far from laying the past to rest in the

telling, Treviño evokes it over and over again, contemplating his own perdition. In *The Writing of History*, French philosopher and historian Michel de Certeau affirms that the practice of historiography departs necessarily from the notion of a rupture between a definable past and the present:

The labor designated by this breakage is self-motivated. In the past from which it is distinguished, it promotes a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility. But whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant – shards created by the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication – comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: “resistances,” “survivals,” or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line constructed by the law of a place. (4)

De Certeau suggests that the writer of history attempts to render the past coherent for the present, to compel experiences and instances from the past to adhere to an intelligible and coherent program. Nonetheless, the reality of the past comes creeping back each time. Certainly this occurs in the case of Luis Treviño as he remembers his involvement with the División del Norte, his participation in the siege of Columbus, and the numerous failures that time has not been sufficient to place irrevocably behind him.

Treviño comments frequently upon the nature of remembering over the course of the novel. He expresses that he needs to drink in order to remember, and in the novel drinks bourbon, wine and locally distilled *tesgüino* despite being advised of the

dangers of irritating his cirrhosis. He cannot decide whether drinking elucidates or obscures the facts, and instead blames his tangled memories on his old age. In the end, he considers that his memory of events is more important than the reality: “Ya ni siquiera estoy muy seguro de que las cosas hayan sido tal y como las digo, pero también eso qué más da. Las cosas no son como las vivimos, sino como las recordamos [...]” (59-60). Indeed, the novel abounds in instances in which Treviño consciously decides to remember things differently from how they happened, such as when he chooses to consider himself Obdulia’s first lover. In his last encounter with Obdulia, he rapes her to punish her for her infidelity, yet prefers to edit out this incident in remembering his time with her: “preferí quedarme con el recuerdo de cuando nos conocimos, las primeras veces que estuvimos juntos [...]” (165). By remembering Obdulia in this manner, Treviño absolves himself of the responsibility for his violent actions towards his lover, and creates a memory that reconciles him peacefully with his past.

Treviño’s drunkenness, his selective memory, and his acknowledged tendency to embellish cast considerable doubt over the veracity of all the events in the circular narration, as does his loss of idealism. After abandoning the División del Norte, he must ask himself: “¿Dónde me había quedado [...] mi profunda convicción de que nuestra lucha contra los gringos era justa y digna, quizás la última posibilidad de salvar al país?” (175). Now, residing in El Paso, his hatred absorbed by alcoholism and old age, he ponders the indignity of discovering “a estas alturas de mi vida que voy a morir... como un gringo, y, claro, que me van a enterrar en un cementerio de El Paso, Texas, dónde si no?” (180). He embellishes his remembrances to attract

customers to the bar, yet he longs for his employee to arrive and provide an excuse to set aside his ramblings and get to work. Plagued by a sense of remorse, he tries again and again to exile these events definitively to the past, make sense of them and put them to bed, but they are unruly and must be exhumed time and time again. His judgment of himself and of those around him – his lover, his commander, and the *estadounidenses* against whom he fought in Columbus – must contort to fit his version of events, yet his narration of these events refuses to be made cohesive, refuses to lie down and be made into history.

CONCLUSION: “UN MUTUO Y PERTINAZ ENGAÑO”

“Viva México, mueran los gringos”. These are the words of the bloodthirsty military commander Pablo López as he leads the División del Norte into battle in *Columbus* by Ignacio Solares. “Viva México, mueran los gringos” he repeats, the one concept inextricably linked to the other as if to suggest that for the first to happen, the second must occur. For Mexico to thrive and survive, the gringos must die. But who are these “gringos”?

The gringos in these six books are by turns self-absorbed, greedy, calculating, violent, cruel, prudish, perverse, pragmatic, repressed, mercenary, untrustworthy, hypocritical, dispassionate, racist, paranoid, ignorant, uncultured, uptight, sinister, gluttonous, wasteful, slovenly, naïve, negligent, bland and smug. Yet they are also at times resourceful, efficient, generous, creative, trusting, helpful, modern and self-motivated. They are the purveyors of good music, great technology and excellent liquor. Each text acknowledges these and other stereotypes, but each in its way reveals aspects of the Mexican imagination that gave rise to those stereotypes. What these six novels reveal, each in its way, is that the gringo is essentially a Mexican invention. Certainly, stereotypes do not generate themselves or emerge spontaneously. In his article entitled “Mexican Views of the United States”, Michael C. Meyer affirms that “Criticisms of the United States are often exaggerated and distorted, but many are rooted in readily understandable historical fact” (299).

Indeed, most of the negative characterizations of *estadounidenses* described in these texts are realistic and justified by history, when not by simple observation. As Octavio Paz writes in “Posiciones y contraposiciones: México y Estados Unidos”, “La mayoría de los mexicanos tenemos la justificada convicción de que el trato que recibe nuestro país es injusto” (182). Nonetheless, these authors seem to argue that, upon individual consideration, *estadounidenses* sometimes defy the pre-conceived notions Mexicans possess in regard to them; and that furthermore, the caricature of the gringo is a co-production of *estadounidense* bad behavior and the Mexican imagination.

In *Las batallas en el desierto*, José Emilio Pacheco evokes a time in history during which Mexicans actively sought *agringación*. Infatuated with the exuberance of *estadounidense* products, songs, comics, films and food, Mexicans linked social status to being in touch with North American commercial and cultural trends. During Carlitos’s youth, being overtly Mexican became *déclassé*, while prestige was assigned to identifying oneself with North Americans. With the same innocent enthusiasm demonstrated by Carlitos when he falls in love with Mariana, Mexico becomes enamored with the United States and all it offers. Both are destined to have their hearts broken when the object of their affection slips through their fingers. The novel takes a dispassionate look at an awkward moment in the life of its protagonist that mirrors a similar moment of innocence lost in the life of his country, when the can-do attitude and the bountifulness of the United States fail to function south of the border except to advance its own interests. When Carlos sets out, years later, to acknowledge the embarrassingly naïve emotions that characterized not only his

childhood but his country during the same era, he is forced to wonder whether that time even existed, so completely has it been stricken from public memory. Pacheco makes the uncomfortable suggestion in this novel that Mexico's betrayal by the United States was provoked or at least exacerbated by its puppy love of North American products and rhetoric.

Carlos Fuentes's novel in nine stories, *La frontera de cristal*, challenges the validity of Mexican-made gringo stereotypes in several ways. The title story demonstrates the birth of a mutual, distorted perception as *estadounidense* Audrey and Mexican Lisandro project identities onto one another based on pre-conceived notions each has about the other's culture. In Leonardo Barroso, Fuentes introduces a Mexican character who is at least as responsible for the exploitation of his countrymen as the *estadounidense* executives with whom he does business; even more so, perhaps, because Barroso is the insider who facilitates the North American economic stronghold in the *maquiladoras* of Ciudad Juárez, selling out his own brother, nieces and nephews to get ahead with the gringos. The Mexican tour guide Leandro rails against the ignorance of his *estadounidense* clientele until a Spanish woman, who practices the same profession and with whom he eventually shares a romantic relationship, suggests to him that his bitterness toward his gringo clients has less to do with them than with his fundamental dissatisfaction with his own life and circumstances. Lastly, the novel by Fuentes reveals the arbitrary nature of nationhood and national identity by recalling the history of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo region, characterized by numerous waves of human migration. Thus, although Fuentes delivers significant and insightful criticisms of the United States and its

inhabitants, he recognizes ways in which Mexicans have enabled and perpetuated *estadounidense* bad behavior towards the neighbors to the south, challenges Mexicans to take responsibility for their own circumstances, and offers a historical argument against superimposing a limited national identity upon a region characterized by timeless transformation and transition.

In *Las ciudades desiertas* by José Agustín, Susana and Eligio enjoy criticizing the United States along with the rest of the Hispanic American contingent of the international writers' program; yet over time, despite their disdain for their host culture, they begin to participate in elements of it. To her surprise, Susana successfully integrates into life in the U.S. and discovers aspects of the culture that are simply different rather than superior or inferior to Mexico. Susana and Eligio deplore *estadounidense* waste and consumerism until they experience for themselves the heady, ephemeral feeling of wellbeing caused by buying a car or a stereo. The United States is the place where Susana attempts to flee her difficult relationship with Eligio. For a time, this seems to solve the troubles between the two as they are united in navigating and alternately embracing and rejecting aspects of *estadounidense* culture. Nonetheless, not long after Eligio arrives in pursuit of his wife, the same troubles that plagued them in Mexico plague them in their new life in Arcadia: Eligio resumes his debauchery, and Susana leaves him again. Turning a disparaging eye upon the North Americans frees them for a time from grappling with their own failings, but upon returning to Mexico Susana and Eligio must confront their own considerable faults and repair the damage they have done to their relationship, exacerbated by their own actions during the time they spent in the United States.

In *Las hojas muertas* the United States is criticized through the life history not of a white Anglo-American, but of the marginalized, free-thinking Lebanese-*estadounidense* father of the narrator or narrators. The father is an embittered, unsuccessful individualist who, consciously or subconsciously, consoles himself for his failures by allowing his children to idealize him. Overwhelmed by their hero-worship of their emotionally removed, solitary parent, the Mexican narrators are suspended between childhood and adulthood. Their father is the axis around which their lives and their identity revolve, and although he proves to be a disappointment, they subjugate themselves to him rather than concentrating on their own development. The relationship between the children and their father constitutes a metaphor for the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Jacobs suggests that until Mexico frees itself from the overshadowing, tyrannical paternalism of the United States and ceases settling for whatever mediocre largesse that country chooses to dispense, Mexico cannot fully recognize the strength it possesses, assert its unique identity, and move confidently and independently into a better future.

Callejón Sucre y otros relatos by Rosario Sanmiguel reveals a series of characters grappling with moments of transition and self-exploration, some related and others unrelated to the pronounced differences between *estadounidenses* and Mexicans that constitute part of everyday life on the U.S.-Mexico border. The collection of stories challenges gringo stereotypes by demonstrating the diversity of the *estadounidense* community of El Paso, which includes people of Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian heritage as well as European. It also introduces a Chicana character who struggles to forge her own cultural identity on the border between her

Mexican heritage and her *estadounidense* life. Indeed, as it explores passages from childhood into womanhood, from life into death, from daughter to mother, *Callejón Sucre* suggests that in a border society characterized by ever-increasing heterogeneity, identity must be defined in individual terms and not in national ones.

For the protagonist of *Columbus* by Ignacio Solares, the historical motives of the conflict between the United States and Mexico are still relevant cause for bitterness and resentment, and perpetuate negative stereotypes of gringos. Nonetheless, the Mexicans in the novel have wildly differing reasons for keeping alive their hatred of *estadounidenses*, ranging from the personal rancor of Pancho Villa to the political enmity of idealists to the sense of helplessness and futility amidst the topsy-turvy Mexican Revolution. Directing hatred against the gringos becomes a means of creating solidarity among Mexicans. Although Luis Treviño is an avowed hater of North Americans, his memory of an *estadounidense* whom he accompanied in his dying moments contradicts his categorical vilification of them, as does the fact that Treviño spends his last days in El Paso rather than in Ciudad Juárez. Although the novel discusses historical events indicative of North American violence and hatred toward Mexico, thereby justifying some Mexicans' desire to retaliate through actions such as the attack on Columbus, New Mexico, in *Columbus* Solares also questions the process by which historical records are created. He implies that the reconstruction of the past is a struggle to render history into a cohesive, seamless unit in which all of one's actions are legitimized and justified. Nonetheless, Treviño's partial version of the events of his youth during the Mexican Revolution refuses to be smoothed over, plaguing him into his old age as he tries again and again to lay it to

rest, never reaching the transcendent sense of himself or of his place in the world that he seeks.

These six authors indeed seem to argue that for Mexico to truly live, the ‘gringo’ must die. In regard to gringos, there seems to be no pronounced difference between the attitude of authors from the border region and authors from central Mexico. All seem to suggest that letting go of the stereotype and what Morris calls the “paradigmatic anti-Americanism” of the ‘gringo’ is the key to Mexico declaring once and for all its freedom from its neighbor to the north (28). Mexico uneasily embraces economic engagement with the United States and enjoys aspects of its popular culture in the form of music, movies and products, yet historical challenges to Mexican sovereignty and identity – at times perceived, at times real – impel Mexicans consistently to question the motives for *estadounidense* presence in their everyday lives. Yet, in denouncing the United States and all it stands for, Mexico allows itself to be overshadowed by that country because it must perpetually define itself as all that it perceives the United States is not. Morris observes in *Gringolandia* that Mexican perceptions of *estadounidenses* shape Mexican national identity: “[...] Mexican identity, the essence of being Mexican, has often been defined and crafted by traits that serve to distinguish it from the U.S.” (10). Additionally, casting the U.S. in a particular light allows Mexico to defend and justify its domestic behavior: “[...] perceiving or casting a neighbor as hostile or friendly, weak or powerful, straightforward or hypocritical can be instrumental in determining a wide range of domestic policies, from policies seeking to define and strengthen national culture to the repression of certain domestic groups and outright authoritarianism” (9). Morris

suggests that Mexico's desire for national fulfillment compels it to form connections with the United States and view its proximity as a significant advantage, yet national autonomy hinges on sustaining a certain ambivalence. For Mexico to develop independently, he argues, it must supersede its own imagined, unchanging identity, as well as its imagined "U.S.": "Even as a portion of it may seem to be slipping away and changing, this imagined 'Mexico' cannot be abandoned unless a concurrent and parallel change in the imaginary 'U.S.' occurs" (282).

Octavio Paz offers another explanation for Mexico's ambivalence toward the United States. He suggests that nations such as France, England and the U.S., which inspired Mexicans in their pursuit of democracy and modernity in the 19th century, no longer have anything to teach them: "hoy dudán, vacilan y no encuentran su camino. Han dejado de ser ejemplos universales. Los mexicanos del siglo XIX volvían los ojos hacia las grandes democracias de Occidente: nosotros no tenemos a donde volver los ojos" (183). Paz is in favor of a search for a uniquely Mexican model of modernization: "debemos reconciliarnos con nuestro pasado: sólo así lograremos encontrar una vía de salida hacia la modernidad" (183). Thus, he proposes that such a Mexican solution depends on self-reflection rather than on concern for the neighbors to the north.

The balance between acceptance and rejection is a delicate one. In his book *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature*, Fredrick B. Pike writes of the relationship that continues to challenge both Mexicans and *estadounidenses*:

As the old saying goes, it takes two to tango; and the North-South partners who grudgingly share [... North America] seldom make it out together onto the dance floor. Occasionally, though, [...] they do manage to dance. Even then their movements, as in the classic tango, demonstrate a love-hate relationship. But this is what brings spark and drama to their dance. It's a dance of love and hate, of death, and maybe rebirth, pitting civilization against nature, with both partners disagreeing about who assumes which role. They have focused so long on disagreement that neither has noticed how much they have come to resemble each other and how well suited they both are to either role. Ignoring present-day reality, both partners turn to old myths as they seek self-understanding and comprehension of the other. (365)

This last observation is particularly important. Not only do the old myths interfere with comprehension of the other, they also impede self-understanding. The six authors discussed in this dissertation seem to argue that until Mexican national identity no longer depends on asserting itself in opposition to the gringo whom Mexicans presume to know, they will not be able properly to get on with the task of deciding what it means to be Mexican. Additionally, their criticisms of the United States reinforce the view that *estadounidenses* must own up to their faults if they are to earn the respect of Mexicans. Meyer expresses why it is important to do so: "It is far from a futile exercise to listen to the views of others. Even the more overdrawn caricatures are generally rooted in some reality, and even the exaggerations that one finds most offensive are important because they are often believed and acted upon" (287-88). Yet, as Jaime E Rodríguez and Kathryn Vincent observe, "[...] the

majority of the citizens of the United States, like those of other powerful countries, remain convinced that their nation has usually acted with good intentions and for the general well-being. Their neighbors' complaints and assertions to the contrary are hardly acknowledged, much less understood, by most Americans" (3). W. Dirk Raat comments on the task of introspection that the United States has before it in *Mexico and the United States: Ambivalent Vistas*:

If there are limits to friendship, Americans can still learn something about themselves in the image reflected back to them from the waters of Lake Texcoco. In curbing their ethnocentrism, they can learn that language, customs, ideas and habits differ between people, and that one set of values is not necessarily superior to the other" (199).

Octavio Paz calls the history of Mexico-U.S. relations "un mutuo y pertinaz engaño" (169). If Mexico's future depends in part upon its ability to maintain a favorable relationship with the United States, a country with which it is inextricably linked by geography, history, politics, economics, language, culture and blood, this "engaño" must end. The stereotyped "gringo" must be substituted, or at least accompanied, in the Mexican imagination by sincere comprehension both of *estadounidenses* and Mexicans. Yet it must be remembered that the "engaño" is mutual. For the "gringo" to disappear, the United States must overcome its ignorance toward the country south of the border, accept responsibility for the unequal and at times hypocritical dispensation of its power and wealth, and acknowledge historical wrongdoings.

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