

“Pesadillas de noche, amanecer de silencio”:  
Miguel Méndez and Margarita Oropeza

Debra A. Castillo  
*Cornell University*

Reading U.S. and Mexican border literature together leads us inevitably to an awareness of how two dominant cultural discourses—that of the U.S. and that of central Mexico—play off against each other, as well as how these discourses enter into dialogue with the most common stereotypes that each of these dominant cultures has created about the other. These discourses and stereotypes shadow each other with varying degrees of intensity in their discussions of the discursive equivalent of the no man’s land: the fetishized and abjected border other. Thus, for example, from the U.S. side, despite very different politics, Gronk’s comment that “Borders don’t apply now. East L.A. is everywhere” (qtd in Fregoso 273) resonates in the same cultural register as Richard Rodríguez’s “Mexico will soon look like Tijuana. . . . Tijuana is an industrial park on the outskirts of Minneapolis” (94). In each case, the real border is blurred into the shadow of a U.S.-located construct derived from a presumed shared understanding of dominant culture referents. And yet, of course, as border scholar María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba acutely observes, “it is not the same being in the margins within the first world, as the Chicanas/os are, as living in the margins of the third world, as we are” (242).

Furthermore, in many border-related discussions—whether philosophical, anthropological, critical, or fictional—there are typical themes or narrative tics: allusions to the flexible geography that makes the border region both an isolated territory and an analogue for the postmodern condition, the puzzlement over

how to understand the role of the *maquiladoras* and the area's industrial boom, the awareness of a vast movement of people both north and south, a persistent and nagging phobia about feminization, and about female sexuality. In this study I explore these concerns with reference to two novels: Arizonan Miguel Méndez's well-known 1974 novel *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (*Pilgrims in Aztlán*), a fragmentary fiction set in Tijuana, and Sonoran Margarita Oropeza's 1992 novel *Después de la montaña*, which begins with a woman crossing the border at San Isidro and concerns itself with her life as a migrant in California.

Early in her novel, Oropeza's point-of-view character tells herself, "Esto es el Norte, Adelaida, se dice, y no es el sueño que tenías desde los dieciseis años, ahora es cierto" 'this is the North, Adelaida, she tells herself; it's not the dream you had since you were sixteen years old, now it is real' (13). Presciently, however, this newly visible border reality (we could almost call it the actualization of Adelaida's "American dream") metamorphoses into a cryptic phrase: "pesadillas de noche, amanecer de silencio" 'bad dreams at night, dawning to silence' (21). Miguel Méndez, too, has an intimate acquaintance with these nightmares spawned in sites of cultural conflict, and in *Peregrinos* abstracts their full metaphorical force to drive his narrative.

The first-generation U.S. son of Mexican parents, Méndez is a product of the border region and a frequent visitor to border cities in his home state of Arizona. While he had only visited Tijuana once at the time he wrote the novel he found the trip powerfully cathartic. Almost immediately, Méndez realized that Tijuana offered him an organizing image and a metaphor for all that is wrong with those aspects of border culture forged in the pressures from the United States: "en esta ciudad Méndez vertiría todas las historias inconexas que había ido recogiendo" 'into this city Méndez would pour all of the unconnected histories that he had been collecting' (Rodríguez del Pino 41-42; ). In addition, Méndez has a didactic objective implicit in titling the novel with reference to the mythic homeland of the Aztecs, traditionally sited in the U.S. southwest. Most importantly, the ambiguous pilgrimage (from Aztlán to the south; from Mexico to the north) evokes a central Mexican indigenous culture as invented in Mexican

dominant discourse that had been retooled by Chicano cultural nationalists during the late 1960s through the early 1970s for U.S.-related oppositional purposes.

These three aspects—a disparate collection of life histories, a metaphorically weighted city known most powerfully through its infamous reputation, and a reinvented appropriation of a centrist myth for another country's marginal use—sit together uneasily in *Peregrinos*. Méndez's novel, which on the one hand attempts to evoke a lived reality through the eyes and voices of the people who occupy Tijuana's underworld, at the same time and on the other hand invents Tijuana as a mythic construct, a symbolic spatial referent for a generalized political and social problem. *Peregrinos de Aztlán's* author is a socially committed autodidact who set this novel in a city he knew mostly by reputation, and while he states that his original intent was to "alcanzar una sonrisa de aprobación de parte de alguno de los muchos académicos de la lengua" 'win a smile of approval from among the many academicians of the Spanish language' (9; 1), both setting and theme require him to write in the voice of the uneducated border dweller. The preface to this novel makes Méndez's intentions absolutely clear: "Lee este libro, lector, si te place la prosa que me dicta el hablar común de los oprimidos; de lo contrario, si te ofende, no lo leas, que yo me siento bien pagado con haberlo escrito desde mi condición de mexicano indio, espalda mojada y chicano" 'Read this book, reader, if you like the prose dictated to me by the common speech of the oppressed. If you don't, if it offends you, do not read it, for I will consider myself well paid just by having written it in my condition as a Mexican Indian, a wetback, and a Chicano' (10; 2). Méndez, then, lays his own identity on the line in giving voice to the oppressed peoples who share his heritage and circumstances. Accordingly, if somewhat confusingly, he pulls together indigenous myth, the northern borderlands context, and the voice of the people in choosing an old Yaqui odd-jobs man, Loreto Maldonado, as his principal point-of-view character, writing the novel in a brisk colloquial style, using dialogue and staged vignettes to make its political point.

Two themes dominate Méndez's depiction of Tijuana and its inhabitants: (1) the city is a perverse commercial construct, in which the residents are entirely given over to capitalist consumption of people and goods; (2) the city is a phantasmatic way station through which people pass on their way to the United States. In the first construct, Tijuana is a hyper-real brothel space of goods and services, typically anthropomorphized as a powerful and corrupt temptress-whore: "Como una diosa mitológica, cínica y desvergonzada, se va aprovechando la ciudad de las debilidades humanas. . . . Así va la ciudad nocturna sonsacando amargados; sin vergüenza, nalgas de afuera, impúdica; con su vestido de noche adornado con letreros de neón; tronando palmas a los parranderos, como damisela descocada" 'Like a mythological goddess, cynical and shameless, the city takes advantage of human weakness. . . . Thus the nocturnal city draws out the bitter, shamelessly, pants down, butt hanging out, with no sense of modesty; its cocktail dress adorned with neon letters, clapping its hands at the revelers like a damsel off her rocker' (20; 13). In the second imaginary construction the city seems to dissolve into unreality with the narrator's insistence on metaphors of fluidity and of floating that permeate the text and create the effect of a ghost town where disembodied voices whisper in the haunted streets (the comparison sometimes made between this novel and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* can be most fruitfully explored in this analogy between Rulfo's Comala and Méndez's Tijuana). Loreto, for instance, recalls that in other, better times, "había gozado flotando su mirada" 'he had enjoyed letting his gaze drift'; over green fields; now, "navegando como estrella errante," 'navigating like a falling star'; he is lost in "la fluidez de su condición temporal" 'the fluidity of his temporal condition' (14; 8). Examples could be multiplied, as the overwhelming ghostly presence of a floating people contaminates the urban setting, so that it too comes unmoored: "aquella ciudad fronteriza tan peculiar, en apariencia tan alegre y en el fondo tan trágica, de todos los que flotaban sin asiento . . ." 'that very strange border town, in appearances so happy but deep down so tragic, of all those who floated without moorings' (50; 38). In Méndez's novel, the city of Tijuana not only serves as a concrete correlative for a rejected

past, it is also the condensation of that shipwrecked history which must be remembered in order to be forgotten, and must be forgotten so as to release the future from the limitations of an insular perspective: "Así la historia, como en un mal sueño nos dejó varados en la isla del olvido, presos" 'thus the story, like a bad dream, left us stranded suddenly in the island of forgetfulness, prisoners' (209; 178). Yet Méndez's narrative is marked in a particular manner by his own social commitment, his own imprisonment in a border reality that has left the northern border of Mexico out of official histories of that country, and at the same time has left Chicano history out of official histories of the United States. Doubly set adrift from official historiography, the Chicano novelist attempts to piece together an alternative, rooted, genealogical tale (Aztlán, for example), only to come up against the flotsam and jetsam of haunted shadow constructs from both sides of the border that tend to substitute for other forms of historical reconstruction.

Inevitably, Méndez's narrative returns again and again to Tijuana's nightlife, to the bars and clubs that anchor the most persistent stereotypes about this city. His narrator calls them "los antros donde se confunden el dinero y la mierda" 'dens of wickedness where money and shit run together' (147; 124), and one of the more notable voices in this novel, that of a madman nicknamed "Cometa" (Kite), expands upon this confusion of dirt, money, and female sexuality in a long monologue describing the bars in which prostitution is practiced. Cometa, as the narrator reminds us, like so many other characters in this novel, crosses this neon-lit nighttime scene "como un fantasma" 'like a phantom' (147; 123). His version of the prostitutional economy of consumption is appropriately haunted as well, becoming visible only in its effects on the souls of men and women trapped in that world. Cometa envisions the cash influx from the United States that flows through the city as if the dollar economy were covering it over with a shifting surface of green, while leaving the corrupt infrastructure untouched: "Dólares para tapiar todos los edificios por dentro y por fuera, dólares para cubrir las superficies, calles, pisos; dólares para techar todas las construcciones; huracán de dólares como hojarasca de lechugas secas . . ." 'Dol-

lars to plaster all the buildings inside and out; dollars to cover the surfaces, the streets, the floors. Dollars to roof over all the buildings. A hurricane of dollars like a windstorm of dry lettuce leaves' (151; 127). The money, Méndez suggests, floats through the city, only temporarily papering over the shit, before blowing away on the next desert wind.

In this fluid city of ghosts and parasites, it comes as no surprise that the characters highlighted in the various vignettes are also identities in flux, degraded in context. One of Cometa's poetic excursions leads him past the temporary shelters of the men whose unseen backbreaking labor undergirds the city's prosperity. In a typical mixed metaphor, he describes a kind of haunted existence, as men unable to survive on their earnings shift fluidly into ghosts, into coral, into a kind of chrysalis which breaks open to release, not butterflies, but rabid undead creatures: "Allá viven los jornaleros, los hombres que no ganan para comer, que no viven con lo que comen; se alimentan de rencor, la vida se los va formando con la misma paciencia con que el mar aumenta los corales, para que un día cobren alas como vampiros rabiosos y sedientos" "That's where the day laborers live, the men who don't make enough to eat, who can't live on what they earn. They feed on rancor, and life molds them with the same patience with which it expands the coral reefs, so that one day they will grow wings like rabid and thirsty vampires' (152; 128). Again, Méndez's persistent image of Tijuana as a haunted ruin, peopled by ghosts and infectious undead creatures, echoes as it builds upon deeply entrenched stereotypes.

In Tijuana, young girls become old whores; young men, deathless vampires. Other voices remind readers of other analytic and identity slippages. One voice heard in a bar comes from a bitterly angry Mexican American, El Chuco, who like Loreto and Cometa is one of the archetypal characters whose recurrent appearance holds together this fragmentary novel: "¿Qué somos slaves, nosotros la raza? Luego, ése . . . es como si le filetearan a uno los hígadaos. Allá, ése, pos es uno 'greaser', 'un mexican', viene uno acá, ése, y quesque uno es 'pocho'; me empieza a cuadrar que me llamen 'chicano', bato; me cai a toda madre, carnal; siquiera ya es uno algo, no cualquier greaser o pocho" 'Are we

just a bunch of slaves? It's just like they went and cut your liver up into pieces. You're nothing but a greaser, a spick, and then you come over here and you're nothing but a pocho. It really makes me happy when they call me a Chicano, pal. You don't have any idea what a thrill it gives me, brother. A man's somebody, not just a greaser or a pocho, right?' (29; 20). Like other "pilgrims" in this novel, El Chuco is fundamentally uprooted from either U.S. or Mexican dominant culture histories, and yet he is, of course, a hybrid product of both those cultures that have rejected or forgotten him. His pachuco caló fragments both languages in an impassioned diatribe; alternatively called "greaser" or "pocho" depending on his location in the U.S. or in Mexico, he—like the author of the novel—chooses to self-identify as "chicano" because that name, at least, is not charged with the same negative connotations.

If the Chuco's voice captures the alienation of the doubly expelled other, another voice ironically speaks from the very center of both cultures, recalling the Christian story of Jesus Christ. Here too slippage occurs, as the readers are made clearly aware that the old conqueror's religion offers no hope for salvation in this contemporary context where spirituality is evoked mainly to signal its loss: "Nací Jesús en Belem, Sonora, como cualquier pelado; pero la gente necia me hizo milagroso de su pura cuenta." 'I was born Jesus in Bethlehem, in Sonora, just like any other guy down on his luck. But the stupid people have turned me into a miracle worker on their own.' When a chance-met acquaintance in a bar begs him, "quiero ser tu sombra, señor" 'I want to be your shadow, sir' the Yaqui Jesús answers bitterly, "Quieres seguirme porque crees que esta misión es película de gringos en glorioso technicolor" 'You want to follow me because you think this mission is a gringo move in glorious Technicolor' (109; 90-1). Even Jesus's adoring follower is disillusioned by the risks of a preaching career, and decides to give it up for life as a migrant laborer in the U.S.: "ya seré pizcador de algodón, que no pescador de pelaos" 'I'd rather be a cotton picker than a gatherer of the down-and-out' (117-98). Jesús's trajectory is a particularly shocking one, as the shifting imagery associated with him slips from yet another drunk Indian to Yaqui curandero to reincarnated

Jesús to technicolor Hollywood star to betrayed agitator, all underwritten by an implicit racism that makes poor, indigenous Mexicans (“pelados”) unworthy of sustained interest.

In a review of this novel appearing in the Mexican journal *Vuelta*, Christopher Domínguez comments that it is “difícil de hallar un caso de un escritor tan esencialmente fronterizo, desplazado y solitario: frente a la generación de escritores del desierto y frente a los narradores chicanos contemporáneos” “difficult to find an example of such an essentially borderlands writer, displaced and solitary in relation to the generation of writers of the desert and in relation to contemporary Chicano narrative” (88). What Domínguez puzzles about is that neither of these two canonical sets of texts—neither Mexican canonical border literature focusing on narratives about the desert nor U.S.-based Chicano narrative—comfortably accommodates the writing of a working-class, first generation border novelist who writes in Spanish in a style that combines high modernist fragmentation with old fashioned social realism. Nevertheless, Méndez’s narrative is to some degree instantly recognizable insofar as it echoes and shadows dominant cultural forms, including an unnuanced recuperation of the persistent stereotypes about Tijuana.

Oropeza’s novel, tellingly prologued by Miguel Méndez and published a generation later than that author’s most well-known work, picks up on similar themes, carrying them forward into the 1990s. Méndez’s evocation of a fluid border space and its effect on its inhabitants is echoed in another key with Oropeza’s focus on the unsituatedness of the migrant worker. Similarly, his concern with the real and metaphorical perversion of domesticity in the prostitutional economy of Tijuana’s bars finds its analogy in the later novel’s real and metaphorical search for “hom.” Both novels emphasize the question of how to define situatedness when the characters’ social and political condition is one of displacement, and ask us to think about what it means for a migrant to belong anywhere. In each case, the meditation on issues of identity and location is staged abroad, on the opposite side of the border: Mexico for the Arizonan, the U.S. for the Sonoran, in both cases calling to mind and at the same time disturbing stereotypical notions of the relationship between gender and na-

tion. Of particular interest is Oropeza's explicitly female-gendered take on these issues, through a narrative detailing the fictional life history of Adelaida Quintero as she struggles to accommodate herself to the alien system north of the border in which she finds herself living and working. While U.S. and Mexican dominant cultural discourses are differentially weighted in Méndez and Oropeza, in each case the border itself delimits the conflict, propels the narrative into existence, and clarifies ideological, cultural, and ethical stakes.

Méndez organizes his prologue to Oropeza's work around one of his favored metaphors, that of "peregrinaje" 'pilgrimage' (7), and suggests that while *Montaña* "no es novela encaminada de intención a la protesta o testimonio documental. . . . Es . . . reflejo de aconteceres; pormenores de lo que es la circunstancia del mexicano en trance de migrante que pasa por los E.U. sin la debida documentación" 'is not a novel intentionally directed toward protest or documentary testimonial. It is a reflection of events; the particulars of the circumstances of the Mexican in the lifestage of a migrant who passes through the U.S. without the necessary documentation' ("Prólogo" 6). It is, he hints, a novel written in the same register as his own work, combining social consciousness with artistic value. In the precise reverse of Méndez's "pilgrims" like Chuco, however, who travels to Mexico and learns to come to terms with his Mexicanness through reaffirming his Chicano identity, Oropeza's Adelaida offers a transposition of a Mexican worldview onto the U.S., and in so doing, also describes the other side of the coin: the always uneasy coming home to a newly emerging Chicana sense of self.

Adelaida is explicitly referenced in the first sentence of almost every chapter of the novel, providing an insistently located anchoring point of view for this migrant text. The novel follows her through twenty years in the U.S., first as an illegal worker, then as a settled homeowner and legal immigrant, ending with her sale of her house in the U.S. and return to Mexico when she is sixty years old. Throughout this long period, Adelaida's most persistent fear is one of rootlessness and spiritual homelessness. The novel begins with a series of dislocations: "Adelaida llega y siente el temor de que, de nuevo, ese lugar no sea para quedarse"

'Adelaida arrives and fears once more that this might not be a place where she can stay' (23; 59). When she finally is able to purchase a small house in the U.S., her garden becomes the site at which her yearning for stability comes to apparent rest: "El jardín, inmóvil y vivo, es para ella el paréntesis de quietud espiritual en que hace mucho tiempo aprendió a refugiarse" "The garden, live and immobile, is for her the parenthesis of spiritual quietud in which she has learned long ago to take refuge' (59). The garden/refuge can serve nevertheless only as an unstable parenthesis in her daily life and in travels, and as such points to the uncertainty at the core of Adelaida's life, disguising what she later realizes is a vacuum in her heart that has never been filled. There is, she comes to understand, a vast difference between "volver a casa" (which in this novel almost always tends to be laden with culturally-specific references to returning to Mexico) and "going home" (which refers to her personal house in the U.S.).

The difference between "casa" and "home" (or "hom" as Oropeza frequently writes the word, so as to capture both the grain of a Mexican voice and the alienness of the concept) is at the heart of this novel. Adelaida's most concentrated desire is for a place to belong; at the same time, her migrant life has indelibly stamped her with foreignness. The northern house that seemed a potential haven earlier in the novel becomes merely the most notable place where her melancholy concentrates: "La soledad es un cuchillo. . . . Corta la tarde y está acabando sin remedio con su convencimiento de que en el Norte se encuentra la felicidad" 'Loneliness is a knife. . . . It cuts the afternoon and is irremediably finishing off her conviction that she can find happiness in the North' (113). Yet when Adelaida finally makes the decision to sell her house and move back to Santa Rosa, she almost immediately realizes that after twenty years in the United States her ideas and expectations no longer match those of her fellow townfolk. The novel ends with her understanding that she cannot, in any spiritual sense, "volver a casa"—a romantic dream in any case—since the drive that sent her into the U.S., and the experiences she lived there, have made her a different person; or, perhaps, have defined her difference even before she set out on

her migrant journeys: "Presiente que se dará por vencida aunque todavía, dentro de poco tiempo, sentirá el impulso de salir otra vez a buscar eso que siempre ha sostenido sus huesos y la ha hecho caminar sin descanso" 'She foresees that she will give up, although still, very shortly, she will feel the impulse to leave once more to seek that which has always sustained her bones and has made her travel ceaselessly' (137).

"¿A dónde pertenece?" 'Where does she belong?' (88) Adelaida muses as she fills out her residence papers in the U.S. consulate. When her friend Rosenda insists "California es mi patria" 'California is my homeland' (88; 67), Adelaida is scandalized, but the other woman's point of view has effectively been placed into discourse by this statement both for our and for Adelaida's consideration. The reader of the novel realizes that by slow degrees Adelaida too is coming to understand the attractions of imagining herself as a Californian Chicana, although she would never articulate this position so forcefully. At the same time, Adelaida registers, almost subconsciously, a series of actions and behaviors that mark her increasing distance from the values she associates with her homeland. For example, already in her early years in the U.S. she demonstrates her independence in going to dances accompanied by another woman, and paying her own entrance fee, rather than waiting for a man to ask her (37-38). On visits to Mexico she compares the tranquillity and freedom of her life in the U.S. unfavorably with what she now sees as the repression of women in her home country (72); by the same token, she decides that she cannot and will not tolerate any longer the kind of abject poverty typical of her homeland (77). This woman who in Mexico had never lived alone, in the U.S. learns "el valor que tiene disponer de un lugar exclusivamente suyo" 'the value of having a place exclusively for oneself' (47) and celebrates the purchase of her new house with a trip to McDonald's for mega-hamburgers. Oropeza underlines this shift in cultural perspective in other ways as well. Shortly after purchasing the house, Adelaida meditates on the Mexican migrant workers in California fields, describing their lives and customs as if they were strange and foreign, thus turning her countrymen into the "them" against which she measures her own newly settled "us" (51). One

of the main differences between the resident “us” and the newly arrived “them” is, of course, that of perspective; they burn brightly and fast, live for the day and for the delight of spending their handfuls of dollars. Adelaida notes that, in contrast, she “comienza a pensar de otra manera en su futuro” ‘begins to think of the future in a different way’ (91). Unlike the stereotypical Mexican spendthrifts against whom she gauges her own plans, she dreams of managing her money carefully, purchasing large items on credit, learning to drive a car and to speak English, and also of dumping her current unsatisfactory boyfriend for a better one.

One of the most important markers of this change in perspective revolves around Adelaida’s increasing command of English, which is carefully developed in the text through a nuanced evocation of the stages and contradictions in her evolution from terrified migrant to resident Californian. There is a gradual shift from merely registering the use of impossibly alien concepts in a strange and twisty language to an assimilation of many of these same concepts into her own speech, along with the cultural presuppositions that undergird them. Thus, for example, the newly arrived Adelaida meticulously describes the *friwey*, categorizing it as a strange and marvelous sight; she is uncertain how to understand her cousin Anselmo’s comment, “ya casi estamos en *hom*, *Ady*” ‘we are almost home, *Ady*’ (13); she almost breaks into tears at the strangeness of the *breik* and the “media hora de *lonch*” at work, at the oddity of a food called “*hat dog*” (23-24); she has to come to terms with the alien U.S. obsession with time: “*Taim is money* alcanzó a oír algunas veces” ‘time is money, she was able to hear sometimes’ (19). In each of these cases, the fracturing of mispronounced English words over a basically standard Spanish syntax creates a sense of estrangement. There is a violence done to the linguistic expressions with this insertion of fractured English, creating halting and opaque phrases that correlate perfectly with Adelaida’s own struggle to comprehend. These English expressions are words that stand out doubly in the text, both because they reference things and concepts for which Adelaida has no Mexican equivalent, and because the slight distortion of the English spelling reminds us that they as yet have

no firm contextualization in her new existence either. While each of these words points to a key signifier with specific cultural overtones—freeway culture, the U.S. idea of home, the structure of a factory work day, U.S. over-reliance on a fast food diet, a fixation on productivity by the clock—Adelaida still has no way to assess them, so they jostle in overheard speech as untranslatable dissonance interrupting her still fluid standard Spanish.

When Adelaida begins to take English classes, the formalized ESL exchanges offer little real assistance with this problem, since the memorized dialogues remain disconnected from her experienced reality. Deeply anguished by the unexpected solitude and culture shock of life in the North, stressed from days of pressured, repetitive work, she goes to class to learn how to say things like, “¿Ar yu japy in yur work? Yes, ai em japy” (31). It is no wonder that the similar question on the part of her companions at work, “¿Ar yu ol rait?” fills her with fury (25). Adelaida’s trips to work on the bus are daily experiences in what she interprets as an intentionally exclusionary practice:

... sigue el inglés apericado, gritón, salpicado de españolazos que la desespera porque se pierde en una intermitencia de imágenes en su mente que al fin de cuentas no le dice nada. . . . Se siente muy mal nadando entre objetos bonitos, gente güera y calles pavimentadas; entre mexicanos que no hablan para que se les entienda, sino para acompañarse en esta isla que es su lengua a medias, en ese mundo de cosas ajenas que los rodea.

... the screaming, parroted English keeps on, sprinkled with Spanish words that make her desperate because she gets lost in intermittent images in her mind that in the long shot don’t tell her anything. . . . She feels very bad floating among pretty objects, blonde people, and paved streets, among Mexicans who don’t speak so that they can be understood, but rather to accompany themselves in this island that is their half-way language, in this world of alien things that surrounds them. (16-17)

Adelaida is alienated by the newness and the strangeness of the cultures around her, both by the U.S. English-dominant one and by the Chicano culture she registers as a “half-way” experience of marooned islanders in the midst of a güero sea. Her own position is aligned with neither of these two but, as a newly immigrant Mexican, she locates herself within an invisible third com-

munity of those like her who “*todavía habla un español limpio*” ‘who still speak a clean Spanish’ (19) and retain close family and cultural ties in Mexico. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the key word “*todavía*” ‘still’ already hints at the changes to follow, at the instability of language in the border region, and the futility of applying prescriptive definitions of linguistic purity to borderlands practice.

One of the indices of her transformation is that later chapters of the novel register her speaking in just this combination of English and Spanish she once found incomprehensible and off-putting in her earlier days in the U.S. This change is imperceptible to her, but clearly evident to the reader, who notes her bubbling enthusiasm about the prospects for her new life as well as her code-switching in describing to herself her adventures in house hunting: “*Tiene, sobre todo, una yarda enorme. . . . Lo mejor de todo es que tiene un garach largüísimo, para guardar su carro. Se arregla pronto con el agente del ril esteit. . . . En la siguiente esquina hay un super de chinos; a pocas cuadas está un key mart*” ‘It has, above all, an enormous yard. . . The best of all is that it has a really long garage. She quickly makes arrangements with the real estate agent. . . . On the next corner is a Chinese supermarket; a few blocks away is a K-Mart’ (99). This evolution from uncomfortable illegal immigrant to happy California homeowner would seem to mark the end point of this personal journey, just as her Spanglish indicates her new found comfort level with the formerly alien concepts associated with her dominant English-language setting. Here, in germ, is the paradigmatic immigrant experience, leaving Mexico behind for an affirmative and empowering Chicanidad.

Matters are not resolved quite so easily, however. In Oropeza’s novel, the saga of immigration is completed in the cycle of return and disillusionment that allows Adelaida to finally define her difference against her expectations of a common culture, just as in Méndez’s earlier work the Chicano character needs to experience the discrimination against him in Mexico as well as in the U.S. in order to confirm his root identity. In his article on “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah defines what he calls a “tribal fantasy” that models national cul-

ture on an imaginarily homogenous ethnic, linguistic, social, and religious system. This tribal fantasy, he suggests, organizes discourses about presumed common cultures: "Where the common culture of a group is also, in this way, at the heart of an individual's culture, I shall say that individual is 'centered on the common culture'; and I want to make it part of the definition of being centered on a common culture that those who are centered on it think of themselves as a collectivity, and think of the collectivity as consisting of people for whom a common culture is central" (99-100). By extension, I would posit that both the dominant cultures (in the U.S., in Mexico) and resistant cultures (Chicano culture, Northern border culture) necessarily and strategically streamline and homogenize their understandings of each other and of themselves in the crucible of these national and transnational conflicts; the very essence of a common culture, after all, is the ability to generalize about categories and qualities required for membership. And it is precisely to the extent that the concept of a common culture comes into question that the reactive forces of dominant culture production move to shore up its sagging acceptance. Thus, for example, the central Mexican worry about Northern border economic and cultural contamination and Southern border Indigenous rebelliousness that can be most accurately traced in the outpouring of moderate to hysterical affirmations of an essential Mexicanness post-NAFTA; thus too the U.S. obsession with such slippery and ill-defined concepts as "family values" and its recent grassroots anti-immigrant movements; thus once more, in another register, the extraordinary outpouring of studies from European and North American academic centers attempting to articulate a theoretical framework for an indifferently anchored subject of study called "border theory."

The point of these novels, however, is to direct us in precisely the opposite direction, to ask us to look for the difficult heterogeneity rather than the easy commonality. In Méndez's novel, the heterogeneity of the northern border disrupts dominant Mexican perspectives on national culture even as, at the level of social critique, it reinscribes the tired metaphor of the prostitutorial economy of border interactions. In Oropeza's nar-

rative, the uncertain and differential evolution of what might be considered an emerging Chicana consciousness rubs up against clichéd presumptions about U.S. dominant culture practices and also against a romanticization of provincial Mexican life. Read together, the Mexican woman writer's focus on the U.S. side of the border and the Chicano writer's pilgrimage to the Mexican border city offer complementary points of departure for a tentative analysis of this often chaotic and always fluid space.

"Pesadillas de noche," muses Adelaida, "amanecer de silencio"; to some degree the two novels break down neatly along this boundary line. Méndez's nightmare-wracked reinvention of the cacophonous voices of the many migrant souls who define Tijuana by night finds its counterpart in Oropeza's focus on a single migrant women whose meditations on her mostly domestically-oriented dreams jostle against her literal and metaphorical silencing in both U.S. and Mexican communities. At the same time, each novel evokes a geopolitical and cultural space of multiple crossings, one that is far more heterogenous than conventionally transnational. Following Appiah, we might conclude that novels such as these point toward the difficult concept of a non-tribal, non-centered fantasy of identity formation, one in which the U.S.-Mexican borderlands perspectives of border writers from the South looking North as well as from the North looking South are given equal weight—in whatever language(s) they choose to deploy.

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