

Fan Letters to the Cultural Industries:
Border Literature about Mass Media

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Llegaba el domingo

Sunday Arrived

Llegaba el domingo y
llegaba el pánico
Veinticinco horas y nada
que hacer.
Tendríamos que decidir entre
los tres cines.

Sunday arrived and panic
arrived.
Twenty-five hours and
nothing to do.
We would have to decide
between the three theaters.

En el De Anza enseñaban
películas
francesas y no podríamos
entrar porque
estaría henchido hasta los
pasillos con casados.

At the De Anza they
showed French films
and we wouldn't be able
to get in
because it would be
crammed up to
the aisles with married men.

En la Ensenada estarían
exhibiendo una variedad
de películas—
LA VIDA DE PANCHO VILLA
LA MUERTE DE PANCHO
VILLA
EL RETORNO DE PANCHO
VILLA
LA REVANCHA DE PANCHO
VILLA

At the Ensenada they would be
showing a variety of movies—
THE LIFE OF PANCHO VILLA
THE DEATH OF PANCHO VILLA
THE RETURN OF PANCHO VILLA
THE REVENGE OF PANCHO
VILLA

EL CABALLO DE PANCHO VILLA	THE HORSE OF PANCHO VILLA
LA PISTOLA DE PANCHO VILLA	THE PISTOL OF PANCHO VILLA
LA CABEZA DESAPARECIDA DE PANCHO VILLA	THE DISAPPEARED HEAD OF PANCHO VILLA
LA CABEZA ENCONTRADA DE PANCHO VILLA	THE FOUND HEAD OF PANCHO VILLA
Sólo quedaba el Cine México donde pasaríamos la tarde del domingo maldiciendo a John Wayne por cada yaqui, apache y mexicano que mataba.	There was only the Cine México left Where we would spend Sunday afternoon Cursing John Wayne for every Yaqui, Apache, and Mexican that he killed.

Introduction

“What movie to see this Sunday afternoon?” This is the weekly dilemma faced by the *fronteriza* narrator of Gina Valdés’s poem, “Llegaba el domingo” (1986). None of the choices is particularly appealing: the Ensenada theater shows stale Mexican movies about Pancho Villa, and the DeAnze, which features French movies, is overrun by married men. That leaves the Cine México, where the narrator finally ends up spending her Sunday afternoon, “cursing John Wayne for every Yaqui, Apache, and Mexican that he killed.” The theme of the spectator’s conflicted relationship to visual mass media appears repeatedly in the writings of authors who live and work in the border region. The border has served as a source of narrative raw material for the Hollywood and Mexico City-based film industries, especially during the first half of this century, when the U.S. western and *film noir*, and Mexican *cabaretera*, *charro*, and revolutionary pictures, used the border to refer to a world where the reigning values and social systems were contrasted with the interior of each country.¹ Meanwhile, spectators in the border region found themselves located at the crux of two strong national media industries, neither of which seemed to address the subtlety and diversity of

border social structure, ethnic composition, language use, and everyday life.

With its oppositions between spectator and screen, heroes and villains, and reality and fiction, the real and virtual spaces of film culture offer an allegorical framework to reflect on territorial divisions in the context of U.S.-Mexico relations, and to problematize the stability of those divisions from a local perspective. Perhaps the sense of panic felt by the narrator of "Llegaba el domingo" stems from the fact that her leisure time is a return to rather than an escape from imperialist domination of Mexico by the U.S., and political and market-driven attempts to naturalize the borderline. Faced with a menu of masculinist, national products, she and her companions end up improvising a provisional, antagonistic relationship to the hero of the U.S. picture that stresses their own self-identification according to racial and ethnic markers, in addition to national identity. They choose to occupy U.S. territory, as it were, but only contentiously and vociferously, as advocates for Wayne's victims.

Valdés's poem charts the intricate pre-history of the act of consumption, those "tactics" of individuals in the face of capitalism's limited options that are described by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.² I do not wish to rest with an interpretation of this poem as an example of resistant spectatorship, however, for to do so would be to overlook its analytical and performative qualities. As studies of the reception of popular culture increasingly turn toward ethnographic models based on empirical research, active spectatorship has emerged as the norm, rather than the rarity that was once praised over its feminine and untutored other, passive spectatorship.³ Media critics such as Judith Mayne and Ien Ang have further cautioned against the voluntarism of committed scholars who celebrate the fact of heterogeneous reception of media as evidence of resistance, and resistance in turn as intrinsically progressive.⁴ Between the essentialist pitfalls of radical empiricism and de Certeau's declaration that under late capitalism, "marginality is becoming universal" (xvii), I maintain that it is worthwhile to trace the contours of collective regional discourses of reception; these in turn serve as sources of information and points of comparison

in charting transnational flows of media and capital.⁵ The texts that I examine here do not offer case histories of reception itself, but rather are representations of reception, in which a utopian vision of binational film culture emerges to challenge the Hollywood and Mexico City-based cultural industries. My focus on literary production about consumption is a response to trends in contemporary reception studies, which I find too often celebrate consumption as a form of resistance while neglecting to examine the mass media's conditions of production and structures of exclusion. In my analysis of border literature about cinema, I try to steer a middle path between the productionist orientation of the Frankfurt School and neopopulist tendencies of contemporary reception studies.

In this light, one striking dimension of Valdés's poem is its playful critique of existing film production. "Llegaba el domingo" cites real movie theaters in Ensenada, Baja California N., where the author spent her early childhood (Sánchez 277), and her tripartite description of local film fare echoes the descriptions of impoverished national film cultures that intellectuals associated with the New Latin American Cinema movements of the 1960s and 1970s observed throughout Latin America. On the one hand they found low-quality national product, and on the other, high-budget spectacle from the U.S.; the alternative was an aestheticist European cinema. By infusing the European *atelier* model of production with Latin American political content, they offered their own innovative movies in support of national liberation struggles in Latin America and the third world. In a similar spirit, though with different values and spatial imaginary, Valdés's poem, through its manifest dissatisfaction with that which is available, implicitly calls for locally-produced, gender inclusive, binational cultural production, a type of production that is satisfied in oblique fashion through writing and publishing in a bilingual format.

On another level, "Llegaba el domingo" portrays antagonistic identification with Hollywood narratives and heroes as a barometer of political consciousness, and in this respect it reiterates a trope found in many works of neo-colonial literature. Accounts of heterodox identification at the movies appear in the

writings of several generations of anti-imperialist intellectuals who were raised on a diet of classical Hollywood productions. Carlos Fuentes recalls a similar incident to that of the Valdés poem, when, as a child growing up in Washington, D.C. during the period of the Cárdenas oil expropriations, he found himself shouting “Viva México! Death to the gringos!” at a screening of *Man of Conquest* (Fuentes, “How” 8). Similarly, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam chronicle the galvanizing effect that youthful viewing of *Tarzan* movies had on intellectuals as diverse as Haile Gerima, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon (157). In border literature by Chicana/o authors, the rite finds its counterpart in anti-racist struggles within the U.S. John Retchy’s autobiographical essay, “El Paso del Norte,” for example, employs overcoded language to describe a moment of self-recognition as Chicano while passing for white at a segregated “hick cinema” in Balmorhea, Texas: “the man taking tickets said, You boys be sure and sit on the right side, the left is for spiks. So I said I was on the wrong side and walked out.”⁶

It is interesting to note that Anglo-American feminist film theory dating from the 1970s, and elaborated during the “early confrontational moments of [the feminist] movement,” also posited spectatorial identification in either/or terms (Mulvey, cited in Mayne 30). Laura Mulvey’s pioneering essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) described the pulse of classical Hollywood narrative as a dyadic oscillation between the active male gaze and the passive female object, and thus offered female spectators limited identificatory options. These particular examples of dualistic identifications from anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist movements suggest that these scenarios of spectatorial identification are informed by social struggles in which partisanship is deemed crucial. Rather than provide a window on cognitive processes, I would argue that “Llegaba el domingo” underscores the status of the movie theater as one semi-public institution where collective identities may be articulated through participatory spectatorship.

Recent scholarship about spectatorship has tended to shift attention away from the dynamic between screen and spectator toward extra- or para-cinematic engagements with “film culture”

in a broadly-defined sense (Mayne 29). Movie star discourse and fan culture are two emphases of contemporary reception studies that provide links between the viewing experience and other manifestations of film culture. As Miriam Hansen has observed, the appearance of a star in any given movie invites spectators to think beyond the narrative at hand:

Because the star is defined by his or her existence outside of individual films, by the publicity that surrounds his or her professional and “private” personality, the star’s presence in a particular film blurs the boundary between diegesis and discourse, between an address relying on the identification with fictional characters and an activation of the viewer’s familiarity with the star on the basis of production and publicity intertexts. (246)

Appropriating themselves of local historical anecdotes about movie stars and productions in the border region, several border writers have explored the tensions indicated by Hansen—between discourse and diegesis, narrative and spectacle, on- and off-screen existence—both creatively and productively. In this body of work, what emerges is a more diffuse and complex engagement with the cinema than that of the urgent, politically informed scenarios of identification described in the Valdés poem. In what follows, I will discuss the appearance of fan culture in recent works by three *fronteriza/o* writers, all of whom grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in environments saturated by U.S. and Mexican mass media: Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz (Mexicali, 1958-), Norma Elia Cantú (Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, 1947-), and Dagoberto Gilb (Los Angeles/El Paso, 1950-). The treatment of the cinema in their work is complex, marked at once by a desire to employ the *fronteriza/o* in the movies—as director, scriptwriter, or star—while at the same time insisting on exposing the processes of film production to critique the manner in which the border and its inhabitants are implicated in mainstream narratives.

Production “in” and Production “on” the Border

Before I discuss the works that will be the focus of this essay, it is important to survey briefly the type of film and video production that does exist in the border region. The border has never

been the site of a centralized production infrastructure dedicated to making feature-length movies destined for broad audiences. Instead there have been sporadic and short-lived attempts to establish production facilities in cities such as Brownsville, Tecate, and Tijuana. There have been occasional independent feature films that capture regional markets, such as Efraín Gutiérrez's *Please Don't Bury Me Alive!* (1976), a South Texas production that "single-handedly broke Mexico's monopoly over the 400 Spanish language theaters in the United States," and inspired the Chicano film movement (Noriega). And finally, there is a variety of small-scale film and video production, targeted at specific local audiences from activists to the avant-garde art scene.⁷ Perhaps the most commercially successful form of visual media production in the region is the predominantly Mexican, low-budget industry specializing in themes such as *narcotráfico* and cross-border migration. Having risen to prominence in the 1970s, this genre is now marketed primarily on video to migrants from the Mexican interior residing in Mexico and the U.S. (Iglesias Prieto, vol. I).⁸

Alongside this range of local production, the national film industries exert a strong presence. Tijuana and its environs were promoted in Alta California as a "Hollywood south of the border" from the 1920s through the 1950s. Prohibition initially drew U.S. pleasure seekers to the border states, and later Tijuana's glamorous night life and tourism industry attracted visits from both Mexican and U.S. movie stars. They left behind *crónicas* and urban legends that still circulate among the area's older residents, as well as faded photographs that adorn the walls of local restaurants and night clubs (Proffitt 185-216; Trujillo Muñoz, *Imágenes* 6-46). A more substantial manifestation of the cinema in the border now stems from the impact that movies filmed in the region have on the environment and local populations. The 1997 blockbuster *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron), shot on location in the fishing village of Popotla, Baja California N., is only the most recent example. While local authorities praised the jobs that *Titanic* brought to Baja California (Espinosa), other Baja Californians viewed *Titanic* as another *maquiladora*, bringing with it low wages, environmental degradation, and the dislocation of

local populations.⁹ Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz conveys this perspective in his history of the cinema in Baja California. “In Mexicali as well as Tijuana and Ensenada,” he writes, “flyers were distributed announcing, ‘Welcome aboard! *Titanic* seeks people of all ages who have European features. White complexion. Color of hair or eyes not important. If you would like to participate in the film as an extra, come to casting . . .’” (*Imágenes* 95). As the film production was underway, two site-specific art projects featured in *inSITE* 97, the well-known exhibition held concurrently in Tijuana and San Diego, invoked *Titanic* critically, contrasting the space occupied by the enormous movie set to the living and working areas of surrounding residents.¹⁰

The Valdés poem and local responses to *Titanic* demonstrate that an intertextual and comparative arts approach is essential to charting film culture in a region that is saturated with cinema but nevertheless lacks its own large-scale film industry.¹¹ Above other forms of cultural expression, literature emerges as the site of a peculiar, contestatory dialogue with the national film industries that not only illuminates local conditions of film reception and problematizes existing models for studying national cinema, but also demonstrates how literary forms themselves have developed in response to the mass media. (How else could one begin to understand the fact that Baja California’s most prolific film critic, Don Francisco Bernal, composed his forty-year output entirely in rhymed *décimas* and sonnets? [Trujillo Muñoz, *Imágenes* 70-73]). As Yuri Tsivian found when he scanned Symbolist poetry for his study about the reception of early cinema in Russia, “We start by contrasting cinema to traditional narrative; then we come to discover cinema within literary discourse. One ought to think of [film and literature] as an ensemble rather than as consisting of discrete art forms” (12).

“Border Hotel”: An Archaeology of Cinema on the Border

Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz’s short story “Border Hotel” (1993) rehearses many of the stereotypes about the border that have prevailed throughout the twentieth century. The story catalogs a repertoire of roles that the region has fulfilled for the U.S. and

its citizens, from being a site of sexual tourism to a magnet for hippies and existential heroes and a bastion of U.S. militarization. The narrative consists of four vignettes that transpire within the same hotel during different historical moments. Each vignette turns around a dialogue between two characters from south and north of the border. In the first scene, circa 1922, a self-absorbed and self-loathing Rudolph Valentino spends the night with a fifteen-year-old Mexican virgin, whose sexual services he has contracted through the hotel manager. The next vignette takes place in the hotel bar circa 1943, where Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled private detective Philip Marlowe shares a drink and confidences with the leftist Mexican journalist José Revueltas. In the third vignette, set around 1967, Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors, lies in his "mushroom-shaped room" (165) tripping on peyote that he has obtained from Don Juan, the Yaqui shaman popularized by author Carlos Castañeda. In the final vignette, circa 1990, former Panamanian President Manuel Noriega sits poolside with an unnamed U.S. general discussing the recent U.S. military invasion that removed Noriega from office. The final lines of the story place all of these characters in the same space and time. As Valentino and the girl look out their window at Noriega and the general boarding a helicopter, Revueltas and Marlowe spill out into the street singing drunken *corridos*, and Jim Morrison lies in his room hallucinating.

Trujillo Muñoz is a native of Mexicali and author of a diverse and prolific body of poetry, plays, novels, short stories, criticism, and videoscripts. He is noted for his efforts to imbue popular literary genres, such as science fiction and detective fiction, with critical content. And he is one of Baja California's foremost editors and *cronistas*, having compiled ambitious volumes about the region's arts, culture, and history. Trujillo's 1997 history of the cinema in Baja California, *Imágenes de plata*, illuminates his selection of characters for "Border Hotel." Here one learns that Rudolph Valentino married his second wife, Natasha Rambova, in Mexicali in 1922, while filming *The Sheik* in nearby Yuma, Arizona. The newlyweds spent their honeymoon at Mexicali's Hotel Internacional (7-8).¹² Jim Morrison also had a cinematic connection in Baja California. He wrote a screenplay for a re-

make of Ida Lupino's 1953 border thriller *The Hitchhiker* but only a few scenes were ever filmed (40-41). And José Revueltas, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler all authored stories with cross-border themes.¹³ Although these anecdotes do not appear in "Border Hotel," the story's close ties to *Imágenes de plata* suggest that it is an attempt to revisit the historical data creatively, in a manner that disrupts linear chronology while still privileging place. In other words, "Border Hotel" reclaims the historical anecdotes and presents them as part of a pervasive and continuous pattern of inter-American encounters in the border region from the point of view of the Mexican host culture.

"Border Hotel" portrays its fictional, historical, and anonymous characters with equally schematic brush strokes. Quotidian aspects of the celebrities' private lives are stressed over their glamorous public images, and each of the four encounters turns around the revelation of a secret that destabilizes the characters' composure, albeit momentarily—Marlowe confesses to Revueltas that he has just killed a man, for example. On the one hand, the emphasis on the off-screen lives of media figures is an anti-cinematic gesture, which undercuts their screen image in favor of the type of local history outlined above. But at the same time, the story's heterodox portraits only enrich the layers of gossip and legend that surround figures such as Valentino and Morrison,¹⁴ and thus they reinforce traditional notions of the border as a place where people may slip out of character and assume new identities through encounters with the "other."

The Valentino vignette is the part of the story where the themes of inter-cultural encounter and identity formation are most fully developed. While gazing out the window at other gringo tourists accompanied by prostitutes, Valentino reflects on his own exotic image and his ethnic difference with respect to other leading males (hence, his proximity to Hollywood stereotypes of Mexicans). To no one in particular he laments, "But I don't matter: what matter are the images that I am, the characters I assume with happy savoir faire and defiant daring: the buccaneer, the prince, the Arabian sheik, the hero who makes love with all the women, the one who always emerges triumphant from all the intrigues" (160). And then he reveals to his companion

that he needs her because “I can’t live without having a public that sees how I act. . . . It depresses me to get up in the mornings and discover that I’m nothing more than a dirty, greasy Italian not worth a shit, one more man who can be ignored like a minor character in whatever cheap movie” (160). As Valentino rambles, the girl silently makes fun of him and recalls her own acting lessons: “My mother told me . . . that I have to pretend that I like everything he does with me and it excites me” (160). This first vignette is the only one featuring a sexual encounter and a female character. It invokes the well-worn trope of characterizing U.S. imperialism in Mexico through the gendered lens of *malinchismo*. At the same time, it troubles the facile and essentialist nature of this explanation by revealing the self-consciousness of each character’s performance. This encounter becomes a dialogue only for the reader, who is in a position to apprehend the plenitude of the prostitute’s silence in response to Valentino’s soliloquy.

The Morrison/Don Juan and Noriega/General vignettes repeat the unequal power relation that marks the Valentino/Prostitute encounter. If there is the possibility of the border fostering a peer relationship between north and south, this occurs in the homosocial bond that develops between the story’s two intellectuals, Marlowe and Revueltas, both of whom share a private code of justice in the face of overwhelming institutional corruption. This vignette reveals Trujillo’s affection for the hard-boiled detective, and it also revindicates the figure of the critical (literary) intellectual who searches for the “truth which others hide” (161).¹⁵ There is no doubt that Revueltas, the epitome of the Mexican oppositional literary figure and an inspiration for the post-1968 generation of writers, serves as a model for Trujillo. The union of writer and detective is a useful one from a border perspective also, for it rather seamlessly valorizes figures from both Hollywood movies and Mexican literature. On a greater scale, “Border Hotel” repeats this gesture by championing the literary at the level of plot and favoring the cinema in its formal aspects. The story’s format resembles that of a shooting script: its descriptive passages are limited to brief statements that give the time, location, and movements of characters; the events tran-

spire in the present tense; and dialogue is presented without speech markers (in a style similar to the novels of Manuel Puig). At the conclusion of the third vignette, there is even a moment in which the reader is addressed as a spectator by the story's trickster figure, Don Juan, who "turns toward us and winks" (163). This invitation of complicity between spectator and character evokes early U.S. cinema, with its frontal organization of action, emphasis on spectacle, and inclusion of diegetic narrators as mediators of the viewer's look. That mode of direct address would eventually be suppressed in favor of the "classical Hollywood" model that was constructed around the viewer's unacknowledged voyeurism, and where an actor's direct look into the camera would be read as breaking the illusion.¹⁶ In "Border Hotel" Don Juan's wink at the audience asks the reader to consider the orchestration of the story's encounters. The vignettes' ironic and archetypal nature suggests a model of viewing movies as "shows" rather than as engrossing narratives, and in so doing, the story sustains an attitude of both fascination and disbelief toward the cinematic image.¹⁷

Canícula and Fan Culture

Whereas "Border Hotel" focuses on the private lives of stars, Norma Elia Cantú's "fictional autobioethnography" (xi), *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en La Frontera* (1995), weaves fan culture into the fabric of everyday life among the Mexican and Mexican-American communities of Laredo, Nuevo Laredo, and surrounding cities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. *Canícula's* narrative unfolds through over eighty stories and twenty photographs that trace significant moments in the life of its protagonist, Azucena Cantú, dating from her birth in the late 1940s to her adolescence in the 1960s. The stories recounted in *Canícula* are not presented in chronological order, nor are they all illustrated, but they are all motivated by meditation on photographic images, as though "haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred" (xii). In some cases the snapshots that find their way into the text have been visibly altered or do not jibe with the visual details of the stories. This disjunction be-

tween the verbal and visual registers works in concert with other memory-related oscillations in the narrative, such as the juxtaposition of the protagonist's mature and juvenile voices, word-play between English and Spanish, and abrupt changes of time and location from one episode to the next. And yet in spite of these explicit manipulations of linear narrative, an ethnographic rhythm provides a connecting thread among the stories. The "autobioethnographic" impulse of *Canícula* is concerned with highlighting those practices and social institutions that forge Azucena's identity and development, ranging from oral histories and kinship relations, to language use, religion, gender relations, education, holidays, literature and popular culture, medical practices, food, clothing, and political struggle.

For Azucena and her family and friends, the mass media are not perceived as invading influences from north or south; rather, they integrate themselves easily within existing social structures. In fact, it is Azucena's engagement with fan culture as a young girl that produces and nurtures the development of her writerly consciousness. Binational movie culture is also one of the media which seems to foster bonds among women and facilitate communication among generations. As Azucena's paternal grandmother tells her the story of the family's multiple "repatriations" fleeing war and the draft, for example, Azucena references an image from the U.S. cinema to visualize her grandmother's oral history: "Mamagrande tells me stories of crossing the river 'en wayin'—and I imagine a covered wagon like in the movies . . ." (17). Her first description of her relationship with her mother revolves around their shared pleasure in the Mexican women's magazine *Confidencias* which they buy one afternoon in Nuevo Laredo while the men in the family get haircuts and shoe shines: "I'll read [*Confidencias*] a escondidas, during siesta time. Hiding in the backyard, under the pirul, I'll read 'Cartas que se extraviaron,' and pretend the love letters are for me, or that I wrote them, making the tragic stories mine. I pretend I'm a leading star—María Félix, Miroslava, Silvia Pinal. During recess, I retell the stories to Sanjuana and Anamaria, embellishing them to fit my plots" (9). This passage introduces two role models that will play a central part in Azucena's development: the movie star,

here identified with divas of the Mexican “Golden Age” cinema, and the writer, identified with the feminine romance genre. In subsequent stories, Azucena continues to customize the narratives of mass media, inscribing herself and other family members in the language of cinema, “to fit the plots” of her own life. She describes her mother several times as “movie-star beautiful” with “María Félix eyes” (107; see also 42, 48), and extends similar compliments to her proud Tía Piedad and her renegade cousin Elisa (85, 78). Through personalizing the language of movie culture and making public that which had remained the domain of home and family, *Canícula* dissimulates a local movie production, where snapshots become publicity stills, family members are stars, and the events of a young woman’s daily life on the border are worthy of representation to a mass audience.

The force of the English language, required by the U.S. public school system, and a life increasingly centered in Laredo eventually superimposes itself on Azucena’s early Spanish-, familial-, and feminine-identified engagement with mass culture. The shift occurs somewhere around the age of twelve, when she is about to enter junior high school and a repertoire of images from U.S. television and movies plants itself firmly in her consciousness, reconfiguring earlier memories, as in the following description of a photograph: “I’m wearing my cousin Tina’s hand-me-down dress. . . . The wide belt with the cloth covered buckle reminds me of a dress Audrey Hepburn wears in *Roman Holiday* or some such movie I saw many years later, for at that time we only saw Mexican movies at the Cine Azteca or Cine México in Laredo or at the theaters in Nuevo Laredo” (26). Around this point, Azucena’s Mexican cousins begin to react differently to her during her summer visits to Monterrey. In their eyes, she has become a “pocha,” de-Mexicanized, and that makes her all the more “homesick for my U.S. world full of TV—Ed Sullivan and Lucy and Dinah Shore and Lawrence Welk . . .” (22). But Azucena’s growing biculturalism also gives her an increasingly important role in her own household, where she acts as translator of the news and entertainment programs for the elders and presides over the selection of U.S. and Mexican programs for the

neighborhood children who congregate in the living room to watch cartoons and cowboy shows each evening (120).

Azucena's involvement with television reinforces her earlier identification as narrator and mediator of narratives for others. As in the previous example of *Confidencias*, it is through fan culture that she returns to her fantasy of being a writer. This time the desire is awakened by a locally produced cowboy show starring an Anglo Cowboy Sam and the blonde station manager's wife as his cowgirl sidekick. An ardent fan, Azucena enters a story-writing contest sponsored by the show and receives only an honorable mention for this first foray into creative writing.¹⁸ Her recollection of this experience intercalates mature insights about the story-writing contest with grade school memories of square dancing while dressed in a cowgirl costume:

I received the story back with the judges' comments, which I have erased from my memory, but one thing I remember about the story is that it had no female characters and the cowboy, the hero, saved the day for his friend and killed the bad guys in a shoot-out—not very creative and quite predictable given the models in the form of movies and shows I was watching. And all the while my uncles in Anáhuac herding cattle and being real cowboys, my aunts living out stories no fifties scriptwriter for Mexican movies or U.S. TV ever divined. Peewee, Angelita, Sanjuana, and I, our partners stand behind us, second graders square dancing, counting—one, two, three, four, under, one two three four, under—as the music blares over the loud speaker.

The overarching theme of "Cowgirl," the story in which this passage appears, is that of indoctrination to "American" culture and values through television and rote learning in primary school. The figure of the cowboy appears prominently in both of these arenas. Earlier in this story, Azucena contrasts the dashing, romantic Mexican *charros cantores* that she recalls from her early encounters with Mexican movies to the Indian-fighting U.S. cowboy heroes that she finds in television series such as "The Cisco Kid" and "The Lone Ranger," and whose exploits she and her friends faithfully reenact every day after school. In hindsight, she recognizes that neither of the Mexican nor U.S. cowboys correspond to her own firsthand knowledge of border cowboys. Her

fascination with the U.S. cowboy genre is a particularly uneasy one, however, for its formulae provide heroic roles only for Anglo men and belie a history of Anglo violence in South Texas directed at Indians and Mexicans. This sinister association is underscored once again toward the end of *Canícula*, when Azucena recalls the rape of her childhood friend by a local Anglo merchant. Sent by her mother to purchase something from his store, Azucena cannot make eye contact with him and sees only his cowboy boots (120). To that day, she reveals, she cannot bear the sight of cowboy boots.

Like the narrator of "Llegaba el domingo," Azucena's movement towards political engagement, intellectualism, and independence becomes clear through her rejection of certain mass media icons, such as the cowboy. Azucena likewise brings the romance genre full circle from its first appearance in *Confidencias* magazine. *Canícula's* penultimate story describes Azucena's last summer spent in Monterrey before graduating from high school. There she falls in love with a young medical student named René who offers her the opportunity of living out one of the movie fantasies that inspired her as a girl: "And I have a 'pretendiente' whose beautiful words and light green eyes make me dream I'm the character in *Espaldas Mojadas*, the *pocha* who marries the Mexican wetback leaving her border and U.S. existence to become a Mexican with David Silva" (127). The 1953 Mexican movie to which Azucena refers was produced in response to the Bracero Program (1942-1964) and was surrounded by a liberal nationalist arguments in favor of "repatriating" Chicanos/as to their "native" country (Fox 97-118). All too soon, René extends Azucena's narrative beyond the happy ending of *Espaldas Mojadas*, which concludes with the lovers crossing the border into Mexico. René foresees a wedding, a honeymoon in Europe, a house, and many children—and that is when Azucena refuses to go along with his plot. Through Azucena's narratives not chosen—the Anglo Western and the Mexican romance—one discerns another narrative that incorporates elements from both traditions and in turn refracts them through the lens of a local social structure invisible to the producers of national mass media.

One other ramification of Azucena's investment in fan culture is her finely-tuned sensibility to the stars' looks, that is, the hairstyles and fashions associated with them, and her desire to endow herself and other women with those looks. In her adolescence, she even becomes a hairstylist, a specialist in creating looks for others. At the same time, however, Azucena repeatedly reflects on her own unassimilable look, that is, the gaze that she projects outward through the many photographs of herself included in the text.¹⁹ Azucena's appearance as she passes from infancy to adolescence is mercurial. Her descriptions of her own physical and emotional development are complex for their simultaneous insistence on her own sameness and difference with respect to previous moments in her life: "In the photo stapled to my U.S. immigration papers, I am a one-year-old baldy, but the eyes are the same that stare back at me at thirteen when I look in the mirror and ask, 'Who am I?' and then go and cut my hair standing there in front of the mirror, just like Mia Farrow's in *Peyton Place*" (21). This simple and poignant question—"Who am I?"—echoes throughout *Canícula's* exploration of the multiple thresholds between girlhood and womanhood, English and Spanish, and the U.S. and Mexico. The temptation to read the reference to U.S. immigration papers and Mia Farrow above as evidence of a growing identification with the U.S. or with a particular type of mass mediated femininity, for example, is countered by the illustrations that accompany the story in which it appears—two obviously doctored Mexican citizenship documents complete with mug shots issued to "Azucena Cantú" at age one and age sixteen, respectively. In the end, *Canícula* does not resolve the dual attraction for writer and star expressed by Azucena at the outset of the text, and maintained through the narrative's visual and literary registers. Azucena's narrative spans both the verbal and visual descriptions, however contradictory they may seem, and perhaps more importantly, it is fabricated precisely in those moments where the processes of cross-reference, representation, and identification are shown to be faulty or imperfect.

“The Magic of Blood” and the Heart of the Industry

Dagoberto Gilb’s “The Magic of Blood” (1993), a short story from his collection of the same title, also builds tension between word and image, but, in contrast to *Canícula*, it marshals words to cast doubt on Hollywood’s glamorous images. Through ironic, understated prose, the story describes a pilgrimage of sorts undertaken by the narrator and other members of his family from an unspecified city in the Southwest to Los Angeles. The story ultimately suggests that greater proximity to the cultural industries does not make much of a difference for those whose access to mass media production is already highly restricted. In this case, the narrator’s journey to the heart of the U.S. film industry is also a quest for knowledge about his own family, specifically about his great-grandmother, who left a small town in Mexico for Hollywood when she was sixteen years old, and who, it is rumored, had a career as a film actress. The narrator declares, “What mattered, to all of us, was this one glamorous, and verifiable, detail: she had a Hollywood address. It was like believing that there was magic in our blood” (66). He finally gets his chance to find out more when he and his sister are enlisted to take the great-grandmother back to her home after a gala birthday celebration in her honor held at an uncle’s house in the suburbs. But the late-night car ride is seemingly endless, punctuated by the narrator’s clumsy attempts at conversation with this very private, very elderly woman whom he barely knows. During periods of awkward silence, he mentally contrasts Los Angeles to the place he used to live:

I felt like we were underground, not on top of the earth, that I was driving, but not in control of the destination we were rolling toward. I’d had rides like this on roads away from the city back home. I’d driven this very car, headlights turned off, the windows down, wind blowing, and I’d felt a similar sensation, but there it was the stars and the moonlight on the cactus and weeds and on the dirt and rocks. That felt old to me, like I was seeing the past, seeing it like every man who ever passed through at any time saw it. But freeway driving was the future, with its light hanging over us in squares and rectangles, circles and ovals, their reflections on the waxed colors, on steel and aluminum, on the billboards of young

women rubbing themselves with tanning oil, or young men with rippling stomach muscles modeling pants. (69)

The narrator clings to the stability of this distinction between Los Angeles and his former home, even as he acknowledges similarities between them and his own recurring feelings of powerlessness in both places. For him the contrasts are a consoling narrative of progress. His home and Los Angeles are polar opposites—one is traditional, the other is modern; one is natural, rugged, and unchanging, while the other is glossy, commercial, and dynamic. But this conception also poses problems for him, in the sense that it separates two ideals that he would like to uphold. On the one hand, he desires to be part of a traditional close-knit family, and on the other, he is captivated by Hollywood and its promise of glamor, social status, and membership in that larger, exclusive community imagined by movie culture. At the age of sixteen, the narrator's own sister had been inspired by the great-grandmother's example to run away to Hollywood, and now he, half-heartedly, has followed suit. Indeed, most members of his extended family have opted for an atomized existence. They are scattered throughout Mexico and the Southwest and see one another only rarely, to the degree that even his mother must concede, dispersion and distance themselves have become family traditions (68).

The narrator's connection to his great-grandmother holds the key to resolving his apparently incommensurable desires for family and success. The climax of the story occurs when they finally arrive at her modest, run-down home in Hollywood. After what seems an eternity of fumbling with the lock on the door, he helps her into the house and is greeted by an overwhelming stench of cat piss. Suddenly his attention is drawn elsewhere:

I completely forgot about the odor while I was looking at the pictures on the walls. Hollywood photos, black and whites, of her and some other actors and actresses I didn't recognize. She was in costume in most of them, Spanish costume, but also in one which I didn't know the nationality. I felt this swirl of relief because, as much as I wanted it to be true, I always doubted, worried it was a story I'd been fool enough to believe. But now I was here, in this otherwise normal, otherwise sadly furnished, smelly house. (73-74)

There is a bittersweet quality to the narrator's relief at seeing these photographs. They are, after all, portraits of a woman whose movie career is unknown even to her family, and whose costumes suggest that she was probably typecast as a multi-purpose "ethnic woman" throughout her career. The photos' guarantee of status, of having made it, is also undercut by the state of borderline poverty and isolation in which the great-grandmother presently lives. Even the narrator must admit that the famed address, with its gang graffiti and cars on blocks, belongs to a "normal house," "not much different than the ones at home really, though there was something about the street and the lawns, the palm trees all around" (71). These details in turn threaten his narrative of progress. The opportunities for him in Hollywood, in fact, are not much different from the ones in the place he left behind. His new job is at a Firestone station, and his sister, who used to send home sexy photos of herself dressed for a night out at the clubs on Sunset Boulevard, is now a single mother who has hired a Mexican woman to care for her child while she works.

Gilb's story pointedly illustrates the race-, gender-, and class-based exclusions that are the underside of Hollywood's glamorous image. The contrast between the great-grandmother's photographs and her living conditions directly connects stereotyping at the level of narrative content and restricted hiring practices at the heart of industrial production, which in turn perpetuate hierarchical divisions of labor and urban space. Returning to the question of the perceived lack of "localist" border cinema that I described at the outset of this essay, "The Magic of Blood" suggests that the solution is not so simple. It does not rest in *fronterizos'* greater proximity to Hollywood, nor in the elusive quest for an adequately mimetic representation of the border (as though Hollywood could even "accurately" represent itself). Rather, one senses, it would require substantial involvement in the production process on the part of populations who have traditionally been excluded from it. "The Magic of Blood" is not sanguine about the likelihood of this possibility. For the protagonist, the movies are but one manifestation of a pervasive consumer culture, which promotes desires for commodities, bodies, and living standards that are simply untenable for the majority

of the city's residents.²⁰ Los Angeles is for him the set of "some chic American movie" (63), which he observes and experiences with a vague sense of detachment.

At the same time that it demystifies Hollywood, however, the story also tarnishes the nostalgic view of a happier, simpler life in the place that the narrator left behind, by suggesting that this was not the case for everyone. This critique once again arises through contradictions between what the narrator says, generally, and what he chooses to believe, in this case regarding women's roles in the household and the public sphere. His ideal of a close-knit matriarchal family, associated with his mother and his former life in the Southwest, ultimately troubles his cross-gender identification with his great-grandmother. The latter matriarch, it would appear, is well-suited to be the foundational figure of a transnational, diasporic family. The narrator clearly admires her and understands her motives for leaving Mexico to be the same as his own: "She wasn't stupid either, and she wanted all the life that most people want but can't have" (65). But his familial ideal depends upon the labor of a stay-at-home woman, like his mother, who does the work of childrearing and maintaining kinship relations. In this respect, his great-grandmother's abandonment of home and family threatens this ideal, and he transfers his negative feelings about her to his sister, whom he secretly wishes to punish for having left the family, even though he followed right behind her (64). One senses, thus, that other narratives remain untold in this story, and that from the perspective of one of the female characters, the divisions between home and Los Angeles, and the private and public spheres, might look very different.

Conclusion

The political urgency that marks Gina Valdés's manichaeian portrayal of spectatorship in "Llegaba el domingo" contrasts with a more conciliatory attitude of selective assimilation toward the mass media in the three narratives I have discussed. The writings by Trujillo Muñoz, Cantú, and Gilb are characterized less by authorial competition with the movies than they are by a sense

of local authority to supplement that which remains unrepresented in mainstream depictions of border life.²¹ Through this process, “other stories” emerge that reveal local receptions of mass media. Each story builds tension around the truth value of images: the prostitute’s interior monologue which belies her actions in “Border Hotel”; the disjunction between word and image in *Canícula*; and the glossy photos of the sister and great-grandmother in “The Magic of Blood” that are no proof of having “made it.”

As a counterhegemonic strategy from the periphery, literary response to visual mass media has gained significant recognition for border authors in wider networks of distribution.²² But this remapping of cultural production comes at the cost of replacing relatively accessible visual mass media with the more limited circulation of print media. Despite these authors’ strong commitment to local communities, their writing reaches a smaller audience than movies and television, and it is marked by an increased orientation toward elite, educated readers. An irony of their success lies in the fact that the authors’ own self-presentation as *fronterizos* becomes blurred as their works are absorbed into the marketing strategies of their respective national publishing industries, which have further categorized them according to subgroups such as Baja Californian literature, Chicana/o literature, *tejana/o* literature, and proletarian literature. Here one might speak of a “reverse star vehicle” where local audiences are in a position to look beyond the authorial personae created by the publishing industries to recognize these authors’ profiles as cultural workers in the border region—Cantú through her ethnographic research and her long tenure at Texas A & M International University in Laredo, Trujillo Muñoz through his teaching and editorial work at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Mexicali, and Gilb, who cites fellow carpenters and union brothers as his favorite fan base (Ferguson 11).

Despite the differences in perspective among these three works, when read together they foreground key categories of analysis, such as bilingualism, that might serve as a point of departure for the study of movie culture in the border region. They also provide a powerful critique of productions about the bor-

der that emanate from outside the region. Above all, I would like to underscore two key aspects of this critique. First, by treating cinema in an expanded field that includes local forms of cultural expression, and by writing from a peripheral perspective *vis-à-vis* the Hollywood and Mexico City-based cultural industries, these narratives suggest that the production of “others” at the level of content is implicated in the division of labor of industrial production.²³ This relevance of this point is heightened all the more in the post-NAFTA era, given the increasing exportation of Hollywood film productions to Canada and Mexico (Bacon). Second, they insist on the historical authority of lived experience at the same time that refuse to assign discrete moments of origin to mainstream discourses about the border. In all three stories, linear chronology is troubled by the persistence of memory, intertextual references, and recurring events and tropes, to the extent that one senses narrative formulae may be altered, but never stop circulating entirely. The lingering effects of a binational configuration of mass media still weigh on generations of *fronterizos*, even in this age of *rock en español* and pan-American *telenovelas*. Paradoxically, it is a regional approach to border literature that reveals the continued importance of the national to Latina/o cultural workers on both sides of the border.

The task of an ethnography of spectatorship is to describe what is rather than what could be or should be (Ang 149). Reading border literature about mass media, one senses the tremendous need for further research on reception simply in order to broach the question of “what is” (not to mention the sheer magnitude of such an undertaking). Many historical factors about spectatorship on the border, such as the presence of live translators at screenings into the sound era, the persistence of outdoor “rural cinemas,” consisting of a sheet strung between two trees, in Mexican border states through the 1970s (Trujillo, *Imágenes* 64), and the relatively rapid saturation of videocassette recorders and satellite dishes in the 1980s and 1990s (Valenzuela Arce 313-20), make the border region an important counterpoint to contemporary research about cinema and modernity that takes large U.S. cities or Mexico City as its point of reference. But at the same time that I refrain from attempting to define whatever

utopia may be incarnated through individual acts of consumption, I refuse to let go of the “could be” as an important category informing cultural production. The works I have discussed make interventions in the cultural sphere that affirm their own status as literature at the same time that they express a keen awareness of other potentially inclusive configurations for the cultural industries.

Notes

I would like to thank Manishita Dass, with whom I had many engaging conversations about spectatorship while I was preparing this essay.

1. A substantial body of scholarly literature on “border cinema” has developed around representations of the border generated by the Hollywood and Mexico City-based industries (see, e.g., Cortés; Maciel; Iglesias Prieto; Trujillo Muñoz, *Imágenes*). Of these sources, Iglesias Prieto’s historical periodization of Mexican border cinema is useful for signaling moments of departure from stereotypical portrayals (e.g., Tin Tan’s popularity in the 1940s; the commitment that some Mexico City directors and producers have developed toward the border region).

2. I selected De Certeau to represent this pole of argumentation about consumption because of his presence in the border region, through his Visiting Professorship in French and Comparative Literature at UC, San Diego (1978-84), and his critical writings on Latin American alterity, such as *Heterologies*.

3. The turn toward empirical audience research and reception studies follows the prominence of Althusserian and psychoanalytic theoretical models in the 1970s and 1980s. See Mayne for a general overview of these approaches.

4. On the problems of conceptualizing “resistant” or “critical” versus “passive” spectatorship, see Mayne 138, 171-72 and Ang 179, as well as their respective critiques of Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (Ang 98-108; Mayne 82-86). See also the responses to Lawrence Levine by Robin D. G. Kelly and T. J. Jackson Lears in *American Historical Review* (1400-1408; 1417-1426). My own discomfort about “resistant” spectatorship also stems from the researcher’s assumed, yet often unarticulated, horizon of concrete expectations against which the

spectator's "utopian" desire is measured, be it a functionalist coping mechanism or revolutionary activity.

5. I have been especially influenced by Michael Denning's reflections on the theoretical underpinnings of his 1987 work, *Mechanic Accents*, in the "Afterword" to the 1998 edition. He writes, "If the study of readers and reading [or, in this case, viewers and viewing] is not to fall into an antiquarian empiricism, we must remember that our goal is cultural history and cultural criticism, not a history of reading. What is historically significant, what must be a part of any serious cultural studies, is the exploration of the ways in which audiences are organized and mobilized, how cultural movements, subcultures, and cultural institutions attempt to promote and shape readings" (263).

6. In border fiction, a trope related to this one is the appearance of the border itself as a theatrical space where conflictive cinematic encounters take place between nationally coded icons. Harry Polkinhorn and Tomás Di Bella Martínez's collaborative short story "Wayne/Infante: Conversación póstuma entre dos estrellas" has these two cowboy stars, who never met in real life, converse in heaven about the cinematically induced fantasies that Mexicans and Anglos project onto one another's countries. Gina Valdés's poem "The Border" and Carlos Fuentes's short story "Malintzín de las Maquilas" perform similar operations.

7. See Fox on grassroots film and video (41-68) and Trujillo Muñoz on cineclub, art film, and documentary production (*Imágenes* 75-96). One indication of the unevenness regarding production "in" versus production "on" the border is the fact that the "First Encounter of Film and Video on the Border" held in Tijuana in 1985 included no work by local filmmakers. For the next such event, held two years later, an effort was made to address this problem, but this time around the only examples of local production that the festival organizers were able to find were short promotional videos for the tourism industry, documentaries produced by academics, and video and super-eight works produced by students and *cineclubistas* (Trujillo Muñoz, *Imágenes* 91).

8. Rivera describes how a sector of young Mexican filmmakers has also turned to the home video market as a means of breaking into the Mexican and U.S. film industries, as in the case of the sleeper hit *Camino largo a Tijuana* (1987, dir. Luis Estrada).

9. U.S. studio employees also used *Titanic* as a case in point to protest the growing trend toward outsourcing national film production to Canada and Mexico (Bacon).

10. The two projects included in the exhibition were Alan Sekula's photographic suite entitled "Dead Letter Office" at the Centro Cultural Tijuana and Revolucionarte's "Popotla-The Wall" located in Popotla (Yard, 28-37; 180-81).

11. Recently within film studies there has been a growing trend of opposition to traditional studies of "national cinemas" that have developed around textual analyses of canonical nationally produced movies. The newer models propose that cinema be studied in an expanded cultural and historical field. They call for an overall analysis of the cinema's conditions of production and exhibition in a given country; its relation to other media and forms of cultural expression, and cultural policy; and its relationship to the social formation (see, e.g., Miller; Higson). Writing about methods of historical inquiry into film reception, Klinger makes a similar argument in favor of tracing cinema's inscriptions within hypothetically interminable diachronic and synchronic fields.

I welcome both of these approaches for their ability to interface with transnational media, and I find them especially appropriate for the study of film culture in countries lacking strong bases of film production. They do require further definition for the study of film in a binational region—as there is no self-evident spatial or social boundary to limit a study of the border, and any definition of the region necessarily privileges certain categories of analysis over others. Additionally, cultural production from the border region may also be recruited under a number of competing categories that deny regional identification (e.g., national, diasporic, or ethnic identities). My own view of the border in this essay follows that outlined in my book; while delimiting the border according to both geographical (Herzog) and social factors (Vila; Martínez), I privilege an urban frame of reference in my analysis.

12. Valentino's wedding took place one year after the first movie theater in the region appeared in Brawley, California (Trujillo Muñoz, *Imágenes* 47).

13. See for example, *The Long Good-Bye* by Chandler, "The Golden Horseshoe" by Hammett, and *Los motivos de Caín* by Revueltas.

14. Hansen's chapters on Valentino recount many of the rumors surrounding his sexuality and relations with women, for example (245-94).

15. Trujillo's *Mezquite Road* and "Lucky Strike" both feature solitary male detectives as protagonists.

16. I am relying on Gunning's overall characterization of early cinema in "The Cinema of Attraction" and on Hansen's account of the historical shift in film narrative in Part I of her book (23-125).

17. Other examples from border literature suggest a similar way of participating in movie culture. See, for example, the short stories by Cisneros and Paredes cited in the bibliography.

18. This particular episode appears to be based on a real event from Cantú's life (McCracken 35).

19. An interesting text for comparison to this one is Estela Portillo Trambley's comic short story "La Yonfantayn," about a *fronteriza's* attempt to emulate U.S. movie stars and the plots of romance movies in order to seduce the Mexican man whom she loves. Her success depends precisely upon the imperfection of her imitations.

20. I am reminded here of Lila Abu-Lughod's observations in her ethnographic research about Sa'idi (Upper Egyptian) spectators of television soap operas: "The 'uneducated public' at whom these serials are directed participates in the more common form of modernity in the post-colonial world: the modernity of poverty, consumer desires, underemployment, ill health, and religious nationalism" (207).

21. The attitudes of these writers toward the cinema is thus somewhat softer and more comfortable than Jean Franco's characterization of how individual Latin American writers associated with the Boom reacted to new-found competition from the figure of the mass media superstar. Writing of Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, she observes: "Both writers react to mass culture not by adopting a modernist aesthetic (despite Fuentes's trendy experiments) but rather by straining older forms of narrative to accommodate the displacement of significance from author to star" (160).

22. Trujillo Muñoz is the recipient of numerous literary prizes, among them the state prizes for novel and poetry, the national Abigail Bohórquez Essay Prize (1998), the binational Pellicer-Frost Poetry Award (1996), and the international Border Excellence Award (1998); Cantú received the Premio Aztlán for *Canícula*; and Gilb received the Whiting Award, PEN/Hemingway, and PEN/Faulkner awards for *The Magic Blood* (Rodríguez).

23. I am influenced by Nancy Fraser's attempt to theorize a concept of social justice that would integrate demands for redistribution and recognition in her essay "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics."

It seems that a necessary first step in understanding the social mechanisms of what she calls "bivalent oppression" (31), that is the experience of scarcity with regard to resources and social respect, would be to examine cultural production and consumption in the same analytical frame, as the three authors whom I discuss in this essay have done.

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