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Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures

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Repeating Border Narratives

I - Borders

Borders. To connect and to divide. Not a frontier, its deadly imagination of a line between the savages and the civilized. Not exodus, with its mirage of a promised-land to end the wandering, and not simply exile or diaspora, with its involuntary sense of never-never-home. But borders. A part yet apart, home and not-home, neither 'here' nor 'there.' A boarder who can suddenly become uninvited. Borders on the edge and on the inside. Not just for those on whom America descended, making them wanderers in their own homeland. Not just for those about whom America had 'reservations' regarding whether they could be or should be American—or even human. And not just for those forced to be immigrants against their will and then resident aliens—not pilgrims—in plantations in Hawaii, Mississippi, and elsewhere. But borders also for those strangers from a different shore who chose to be an immigrant, or were forced to choose, and then found their very presence made alien one generation after the next. Even for their descendants, whose border-zones and towns may not be always so dramatically marked but are there still, in daily events such as the question 'but where are you *really* from?' Borders. A new America that isn't bounded by such borders as much as *defined* by them.

Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, "On the Borders between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory"

Borders and lines (physical or narrative), like national anthems, give countries and our own selves the limits we live by. They territorialize our thinking, our world vision, and provide the parameters we need to live safely within. And we are all active participants in constantly "mending [the] wall"/border, to paraphrase from Robert Frost's poem. There exists, for example, a fine and clear line which separates the US from Mexico. Like a good and conventional story it has a beginning, middle and end. A similar line, and similarly policed, separates Spain from Africa. It is a fluid line which varies with tides and clear nights; it becomes slightly thinner in the summer and widens in the winter, but like the US-Mexican border and the liquid line which separates the US from Haiti, equally separates presumably distinctive

nationalities. The border, as Alfred Arteaga has eloquently argued (1997: 92), is an infinitely thin line which supposedly differentiates the US from Mexico, the haves and havenots, those who are supposedly legitimately rich from those who are (also rightfully) poor of their own accord. The absolute certainty of this discrimination, as Arteaga clarifies, instills confidence in national definition. The thinner the border the clearer and more acute sense of nation it defines and isolates. Thin borders or, should we say, "Good fences," to paraphrase from one of Frost's speakers, "make good neighbors." The border is, from this perspective, another "grand" narrative, with its own hero (those within), and its antagonist (those without), whose goal is the definition of a national identity and narration.

If in 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner established the frontier as the distinctive shaping concept of American history, the notion of the border(lands) has proved a most fertile one in the current critical debate. Together with Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), we have to mention Alfred Arteaga's eloquent visions of the border in *Chicano Poetics* (1997), as well as Ramón Saldivar's *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991), and *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), among many other works. To the seminal writings of Chicano thinkers and writers we have to add the work of Emily Hicks's *Border Writing* (1991) and her adaptation of Bakhtinian dialogization to her vision of the border (or multidimensional) text, as well as Mary Louise Pratt, especially her acclaimed and clarifying *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Henry Giroux in *Border Crossing* (1992), Paul Jay's *Contingency Blues* (1997), David E. Johnson & Scott Michaelson, with their cautionary vision of the border paradigm in their edition of *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*, Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton's *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas* (1997), with their selection of essays on comparative literature, as well as the publication of more pedagogically oriented collections such as *Border Texts: Cultural Readings for Contemporary Writers* (1999), edited by Randall Bass. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt's *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* (2000), with its mapping of US studies into two distinct groups, which they refer to as the "postethnicity school" and the "borders school," has brought the border paradigm and the responses to it to the fore of US studies. More recently, *Border Women* (2002), by Debra Castillo and Socorro Tabuenca, represents a significant contribution to the creation of a convincing critical framework for border discourse which bears in mind both sides of the border, and warns against the dangers of metaphorizing a border which stubbornly remains physical for the flesh-and-blood border crosser.

If in Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) the frontier was "the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (1995: 545)—contemporary uses of the

border have explored this site as the legacy of oppression and domination. The border, as "spatial historicity," to use Rosaura Sánchez's words, is construed, maintained and policed by state power, but it also allows the presence of a "fuzzy area," a borderlands which is capable of generating counter action (Sánchez 1998: 107). The reconceptualization of the border, from political and historical imposition to site of resistance characterized by instability and indeterminacy is of paramount importance. For José David Saldívar the shift has helped introduce what he calls a new dynamic, a "new transnational literacy" in US academy (1997: xiii). This transnational perspective has also contributed to creating a theoretical and conceptual framework for rethinking US American national and cultural spaces, as well as their connections and interactions both within the country as well as in relation to other literatures and cultures of the continent. This revisionary paradigm, as Paul Jay suggests, has reformulated our approach to American literature within a multiculturalist and postcolonial perspective which has effectively changed the way we think of literature "by directing critical attention to the liminal margins and permeable border zones out of which cultures in the Americas have emerged" (1997: 168).

The decentering of the *locus* of culture has been accompanied by a change in methodological terms. Border theory seems to require a "borderlands approach" to literature and culture, that is, a revisionist position which sees literatures and cultures not as finished and self-contained projects isolated from other influences, but as constructs based on interaction and dialogue, which consequently evolve and unfold relative to each other. Literary and critical borders, like physical boundaries, are therefore porous and susceptible to being crossed. Criticizing from the borderlands, as Arlene A. Elder has suggested, implies transgressing the vision of the border as a separating and dividing line to acknowledge the interrelationships of cultures, literatures, aesthetic theories and critical practices in the modern and post-modern world (1996: 9). As Henry Giroux (1992: 26) and Paul Jay (1997: 174-75) have argued, the attempts to theorize that space in between have run parallel to the efforts at challenging, remapping and negotiating the boundaries of knowledge which claims the status of master narratives, as well as conventional discursive dichotomies (or divisive borders) such as essentialist/anti-essentialist, centralist/pluralist. As Jay concludes in his analysis of Arnold Krupat's *Ethnocriticism*, the space in between "is thus a *methodological* as well as a geographic one" (1997: 175). The purpose of this chapter is to address these spaces in between which are shared—although in different ways—by a series of border narratives such as Morrison's *Beloved*, Helena Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" and *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Carlos Fuentes's *La frontera de cristal*, and finally Mahi Binebine's *Cannibales*. In outlining the continuities among these diverse narrations, we intend to focus on border encounters and their similar or repeating mechanisms. The chapter, in part, is a response to the comparative discussion of cultural histories which

Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt put forward in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States* (2000); it is also a continuation of the transnational approach to literature critics such as José David Saldívar have illustrated in works such as *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991) and *Border Matters* (1997); within the confines of US literature such a comparative discussion, however, was previously outlined in Paul Lauter's *Canons and Contexts* (1991).

As Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt point out, when we use the term "border" in the context of cultural history, we refer to "the construction or mobilization of difference" (2000: 7). The first reaction when we encounter someone different is to imagine him or her inferior, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued in *La conquête de l'Amérique*: "La première réaction, spontanée, à l'égard de l'étranger est de l'imaginer inférieur, puisque différent de nous: ce n'est même pas un homme, ou s'il l'est, c'est un barbare inférieur" (1982: 99). Every encounter can be susceptible to the mobilization of difference. Moreover, as colonial and postcolonial encounters have demonstrated, this difference, as Todorov explains, is immediately equated with inferiority, especially if the Other does not speak our language. The term border, then, goes beyond the imposition of an artificial boundary or geopolitical line—like the one between Mexico and the United States in 1848—to refer to the invisible boundaries between groups, peoples and cultures, as well as to the constant interaction between and among them, as Gloria Anzaldúa has pointed out: "The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch" (1987: Preface). As Anzaldúa explains, the image of the border has become fully meaningful not only when we consider it as a physical line, but when we decenter it and liberate it from the notion of space to encompass notions of sex, class, gender, ethnicity, identity and community. The border may manifest itself in a non-threatening—if revealing—manner, with questions such as the one Singh and Schmidt mention in the epigraph to their introductory chapter, "but where are you really from?," or more menacingly, through police searches in or out of border zones, wherever the signs of a policed state are made manifest in searches for "illegal aliens" or the "undocumented."

But some terminological clarification of the concepts of border and borderlands is imperative. "Border" is in itself a "borderish" concept or hybrid term which implies both a line of division and a line of encounter and dialogue. The very title of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* seems to identify "borderlands" with the Spanish *frontera* or "frontier/border" in English. A few pages into the book, however, Anzaldúa distinguishes between the two terms: "A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place

created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1987: 3). Alfred Arteaga has taken up this distinction when he clarifies between "the thin and severe borderline," and the notion of a broader zone, a borderlands, "the border zone" (1997: 92-93). Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton introduce in *Margins and Thresholds* the term "threshold" as one of the ways the border is transgressed: "If a border is viewed as the line, imaginary or real, which separates these two spaces, then the threshold is the opening which permits passage from one space to the other" (2000: 6). Borders, then, engender border-zones, that is, liminal spaces which allow for *mestizaje* as well as racial and cultural hybridization. The two terms, then, imply each other: the existence of the border, however thin and demarcated the line is, requires its own negation, the borderlands. Obviously, different ways of communication evolve and result from these exchanges across the border. Mary Louise Pratt's term "contact zones" is extremely illuminating to focus on these dialogues: "I use the term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1992: 6). Interestingly, the edging of cultures Anzaldúa refers to bears strong similarities to the meeting, clashing and grappling of cultures of Pratt's contact zones.

In its double aspect as a line of division and exchange, the border is both strengthened and policed, but also crossed and subverted all over the world. Mexicans go into the United States, Haitians traverse a perilous passage to arrive into the promised land of the United States, just like Africans are pressing against European borders in Spain and France. Most frequently, immigrants lack any kind of paper or textual form that may identify them. They are *harragas*, to use the Moroccan term. Like Beloved in Toni Morrison's novel, all they have is their bodies, bearing the symptoms of a nightmarish Middle Passage. But journalists and some writers, such as Michael Finkel, Alf Lmrabet, or Mahi Binebine have textualized their experiences. These contemporary border narratives talk about similar experiences in crossing new versions of the Middle Passage, the space separating Haiti from the richest country in the Western Hemisphere, and the line which divides Africa from the dream of a prosperous Europe. There are similar preparations for the crossing: like a rite of initiation with no return, the trip starts in Tangier or Tetuán on the African coast, on Port-de Paix or Île Tortue in Haiti. The money paid for the passage varies radically depending on the kind of boat or the shade of color—racism in misery, as Alf Lmrabet calls it (2000)—but it often requires the passenger's (and his/her family's) life savings; another amount is reserved for braving military positions on the coast. Deception is frequent on both routes. Sub-Saharan Africans are returned to deserted beaches in Tangier, convinced they are in Spain; Haitians may be dropped off on a deserted Haitian island, thinking they are in the Bahamas

(Finkel 2000). A more insidious scheme, Finkel writes, involves taking passengers a mile out to sea and then tossing them overboard. About 75% of Moroccans are ready to leave their country, writes Lmrabet; two-thirds of Haitians would leave the country if given the means and opportunity (Finkel 2000). According to *Time Magazine* more than 800, 000 people cross the border between Mexico and the United States every day, not to count the 4, 600 or so who hop the fence and get caught almost right away (2001: 38). Spanish, and especially Andalusian TVs, show the bodies of Africans washed up on Spanish southern shores or on the Canary Islands almost daily. Luckier ones struggle to get ashore, barefoot, disoriented, and cold. From Haiti the trip echoes a recurring sense of history: "We came to this country on slave boats," "and we're going to leave on slave boats," clarifies David, one of the passengers on board. The passage recalls the heat, the sickness, and the odor so often described by African slaves such as Olaudah Equiano in his narrative or in the novels of contemporary writers such as Toni Morrison in *Beloved* and Caryl Phillips in *Cambridge*. Finkel describes the heat in the hold which "seemed to transcend temperature," the sickness, and the unavoidable humiliation of the bucket. The uncertainties as to the outcome of the voyage itself remain, but the dreams upon arrival have definitely changed; David's dream was to marry an American woman; Steven, another passenger, fantasized about buying a pickup truck, a red one.

This pressing at the borders suggests the deconstruction of the border as grand narrative which does not problematize its own legitimacy, and denies the historical and social factors that made it possible. These historical aspects talk about a common past in which cultural, linguistic and racial borders are blurred: Mexicans lived in the Southwest of the United States, and claim that territory as part of the mythic Aztlán; Africans lived for eight centuries in southern Spain. As José Piedra remarks, "in spite of the early success, persistence, and lingering insidiousness of European colonialism, Africa has been in Europe as much as Europe has been in Africa, and still is" (1993: 822). A similar reasoning can be applied to the impossibility of establishing a border in space and time between the different North Americas, Mexico and the United States. Notwithstanding this common past, history in the United States and in Spain has always revealed a desire for closure and for erasing the migration tracks between countries and continents. From this perspective the border as the outer line of a nation or an identity needs to be closed. But there are different kinds of geographical borders; according to *Time Magazine*, the United States' 4, 000-mile border with Canada, is basically defended by a couple of fire trucks, and it is commonly agreed as sufficient; in contrast, the southern border is half as long, has the equivalent of an army division patrolling it, and many US citizens think it should be watched and patrolled more closely (2001: 39-40). Something very similar happens with the two different visions of the border which separates Spain from Portugal and France on the one hand, and from Morocco on

the other. While the European Union has favored the dismantling of boundaries among its members, it has reinforced the policing of the thin border which separates it from Africa. The border is thus the line which separates countries but also the *locus* which defines and secures the integrity of a nation *versus* other mores, cultures and economies. Only a closed frontier with the poorer, more alien neighbor can presumably secure a fixed, stable and finished identity. At the border, always carnivalesque in its unfinished quality, technology on the cutting-edge represses the transgressors; consequently, democracies loosen up. The border becomes a paradigmatic site to realize the workings of the system, since, as Eduardo Galeano suggests, "in the outskirts of the world the system reveals its true face" (1988: 113-125). It seems possible to argue that the frontier is the outskirts of the world, where the countries that fortify the notions of nationality and national identity are truly revealed. In the barbed wire separating the United States from Mexico, the system reveals its true policed nature; likewise, on the border separating the Spanish colonies in north Africa from the rest of the continent, as well as in the detention centers where immigrants are interned for uncertain periods of time, the European dream of a solid and prosperous Europe reveals its true face. "El Estrecho," "The Strait" separating Spain from Africa, was described by Paul Bowles as "the center of the universe;" for Mahi Binebine, a contemporary Moroccan writer, it is just "the abyss of the world" (1999a) which separates the poor from the affluent. But there are not only external borders; the abandoned *cortijos*, *mercados* or rundown apartments occupied by North or sub-Saharan Africans on the outskirts of wealthy agricultural communities in southern Spain also reveal who supports a blooming agricultural society.

As Gómez-Peña has stated in his bicultural manifesto "The Border Is," (1993: 43) the border "means boycott, ilegalidad, clandestinidad, contrabando, transgresión, desobediencia binacional;" at the same time, it also offers "transcultural friendship and collaboration among races, sexes, and generations. It also means to practice creative appropriation, expropriation, and subversion of dominant cultural forms." Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Gómez-Peña has put forward a theory of the border and border culture as a place of cultural and literary negotiation and interaction. Speaking about the possibilities of this hybrid location, Anzaldúa asserts that border artists "*cambian el punto de referencia*. By disrupting the neat separations between cultures they create a culture mix, *una mestizada*" (1998: 165). This shifting space introduces difference into the old, and creates new meanings within restrictive literary and cultural spaces. Hybridity—in identity, community and in literature—is the offspring of the border. Borders, then, not only separate but also, as Anzaldúa and Gómez-Peña have suggested, "enlarge the geopolitical space" (McKenna 1997: 11). But it seems necessary to qualify this enlargement. It is not only a geopolitical question, but also a cultural, linguistic, historical and, of course,

literary issue. The presence of other cultures, languages, or histories, does not simply enlarge or amplify the site but radically modifies the meanings of borders as well as the meaning of culture and literature.

But the border, as Rosaura Sánchez puts it, is no "twilight zone or ideal space" (1998: 106).¹ Furthermore, the forms of collaboration between both sides of the boundary are not always creative, as Rus Castronovo explains: "Not only does the border push up against and disturb the nation, but in a strategic turnabout, the nation also employs the border to imagine the limits beyond which it might expand, to scout horizons for future settlement, to prepare the first line of attack" (1997: 196). The porousness of the frontier may thus signal the dangers of the ever-expanding border of globalization, which only admits one way of communicating, and has very clear notions of how to dominate border language and culture in order to advance its own interests. As Rosaura Sánchez has rightly assessed, "The US-Mexican border is the edge of the periphery, marked by a string of multinational industries relocated on Mexican soil from Tijuana to Matamoros in order to make use of and exploit cheap Mexican labor" (1998: 107). Through the North American Free Trade Agreement, for example, US prospectors have crossed the southern frontier by opening factories in Mexico which otherwise would have ended up in Malaysia. This apparent opening, however, is rent by economic inequality, since the Mexican worker earns slightly more in a day than an American makes in an hour (*Time Magazine* 2001: 41). Paradoxically, the opening of the border only confirms economic inequality and contributes to mending "the wall" between the two countries.

The border is thus configured as a most debatable and contested ground. Borders separate but also create borderlands or contact zones, fuzzy areas which allow interactions, sometimes abruptly, sometimes creatively, of cultures, languages and world-views. As Homi Bhabha explains, "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1994: 1-2). The border(lands) offer a unique location of culture, literature and language which can be the *locus* of exchange of values, meanings and priorities, but also of antagonism and conflicts (Cf. Bhabha 1994: 2). This is the double edge of the border, as Gómez-Peña has pointed out. This is also the double nature of the contact zone, according to Mary Louise Pratt: "Auto-ethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression—these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehen-

¹ See also "Border Secrets: An Introduction" by David Johnson and Scott Michaelsen (1997: 1-39).

sion, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone” (1999: 373). The linear narrative of development Turner fleshed out in his frontier thesis has thus shifted in the borderlands paradigm to address the multiple exchanges across the different zones. If the frontier in Turner’s thesis was imagined as a place of containment, invented to control, separate, and mark the process of civilization, the multidirectional and hybrid quality of experience on the border is characterized by its irreducible instability and heteroglossia (Saldívar 1997: xiii). These crossings create hybrid identities and energies which are constantly alchemized and negotiated. Hybridity on the borderlands, however, cannot be reduced to a reactualization of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, an optimistic locus of assimilation predicated upon progress toward consent and a definitive order. This imprecise territory, in Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt’s words, “is neither the site of assimilation nor the making of an alien Other” (2000: 6); it rather becomes a space of itself, “a realm of exile, mobility, survival strategies, and the emergence of alternative and multiple identities mixing old and new” (Singh and Schmidt 2000: 13). Paraphrasing from Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” these critics term this hybrid locus “a third cultural space” which, very cautiously, they remind us, is no recent discovery, but goes back to the first colonial encounters when the Americas were “discovered.”

II - Border Narratives

It is our intent in the following pages to focus on the border encounters and on its mechanisms, as well as on the identities which are negotiated in these imprecise spaces. Since there is not just one border but a series of frontiers, both external and internal, the workings of these encounters can be transplanted all over the United States, and remain continually mobile. They can extend outside the US but also branch into multiple ways within its cities and countryside. One does not need to live on the physical line to live “on the border.” There exists, therefore, not a Border with capital B but unpredictable boundary encounters which show how the border is repeated in different locations and times. Consequently, we cannot talk about a central *versus* a marginal line. This fragmentation of the physical border makes it unexpectedly unstable, and allows us to envision a peculiar space which is explicitly present nowhere and yet can make itself evident anywhere. Drawing from Benítez Rojo’s application of chaos theory to the Caribbean in *The Repeating Island* (1996), we propose to find the processes, dynamics, and rhythms that appear to connect marginal, incoherent, heterogeneous, and unpredictable border encounters. In *The Repeating Island* Benítez Rojo describes the Caribbean archipelago as an island which repeats itself in different locations. This does not mean we are talking