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### Borderlands revisited: *La frontera norte in contemporary Mexican fiction*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses Mexican literary interventions on the Mexican-US-border, during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Linked to the question what qualifies today's literature written in the border region on the border as subject matter, it revisits the depiction of transfronterizo culture and borderlands in three novels written by Mexican authors of two generations: Luis Humberto Crostwaite's *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994), Heriberto Yépez' *A.B.U.R.T.O.* (2005) and Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009). The article starts with a short introduction into the literature of the northern border, sketching out the determining views on the border/different approaches to the border space – Chicana/o views and the counter move/reaction from the Mexican side. In this discussion, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* plays a crucial role. Anzaldúa's border thinking captured the dynamics at the border and of the border connected to the embodied, lived experience (history, indigenous presence, sexuality), the act of remembering/recordar /rememorar the manifold affiliations through the flesh. Although Gloria Anzaldúa's text is not at the forefront of the analysis, it has aesthetic and conceptual repercussions in all three novels.

**Keywords:** representation of borderlands, Crostwaite, Yépez, Herrera, Anzaldúa, Tijuana, border space, subaltern subject positions, journey/quest, regional literature, cross-genre text



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## **Borderlands revisited:**

### ***La frontera norte* in contemporary Mexican fiction**

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#### **Introductory remarks: Some hypotheses on Mexican *transfronterizo* culture**

More than ten years have passed since I dealt with this topic for the first time<sup>1</sup> and the situation both in the literary field as well as in the sociopolitical context in Mexico and the US has changed dramatically. In Mexico, the violence in relation to narcoculture, the imbrication of state institutions and organized crime emerging all over the country cannot anymore be limited to Mexico's border region at its supposed northern periphery. The recent political development in the US reinforced a policy and a discourse of the border as neat line. This dramatically changes the picture. It makes us painfully aware that borders and border territories are a dynamic and precarious construction – crucial in their national, transnational and transregional significance and negotiation.

[...] both hybridity/resistance to state boundaries and polarization/embracing of state boundaries are emergent features of deep sociohistorical processes. Both cultural differentiation and polarization are contingent outcomes that need to be explained, and are likely to co-occur at borders, rather than being ontological natures of border cultures as such, which would require an absolute debate over which characterization is correct. Because they are emergent states of being, this requires a historical structural approach to borders. Nor are these cultural stances the distinct possessions of well-defined social groups. Within the border setting, some populations are carriers of specific processes, but often the same people are affected by both tendencies and manifest both cultural styles at different times and in different relationships (Heyman 2012: 48f.).

The crucial understanding to take from the above quote is that in the formation of border culture, competing processes are at work that also frame the views on and *transfronterizo* literature itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My first intense encounters with the region's literary and cultural production was during my doctoral thesis (completed 2002 on Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga) and on a field trip with students of Latin American Studies to the Mexico/US-border in Tijuana and San Diego in February 2006. This led to various master theses by my students on the cultural production coming out of Tijuana as well as on dynamics of migration, discursive practices and violence at the border region. Some of the results are documented in a publication, see Bandau et al. (2009). My encounters with various cultural agents and writers (Humberto Félix Berumen, Rafa Saavedra, Heriberto Yépez, Amaranta Caballero Prado) back then did shape my approach to Mexican border literature and the different views on the border region, north and south of it.

<sup>2</sup> See Heyman (2012) and Wilson / Donnan (2012).

Textual and visual representations in the 1980s and 1990s established the border as an epistemological category in Cultural Studies and other fields such as Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science; Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La frontera* (1987) has been seminal in this process at least in Cultural Studies. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, repercussions with other border-cultures were explored and Border Studies on various European (as well as other regions) (re-)emerged – German-Polish border, German-French border, Spanish-African border, Mediterranean Sea as border space.

The notion of the border space has been reworked from *la línea* to a space that is not easily demarcated and affects, subverts and changes the national and cultural entities coming into contact with it. A complex concept of the border has been elaborated, linking material and symbolic dimensions and establishing the simultaneous existence of the border as a demarcating line, an extended but still defined border space as well as a transregional *borderscape* contravening defined territorial demarcation.<sup>3</sup> Anzaldúa's notion of the *borderlands* was crucial in the conceptualization of the latter. Notions of space – as the transareal – were refined and had repercussions not only in Border Studies. Mexico became an enlarged *transfronterizo* space between the American North and South, between the US and Latin America. Certain cultural strategies and techniques coming out of the transborder practice were adopted to other regional and national spaces.

In what follows, I want to ask what qualifies today's literature written in the border region on the border as subject matter and I will link this question to the depiction of *transfronterizo* culture and borderlands in three novels written by Mexican authors of two generations: *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994), *A.B.U.R.T.O.* (2005) and *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009). I will refer to some aesthetic and conceptual repercussions with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La frontera*.

### **Mexican visions of the borderlands / of *la frontera norte***

Mid-nineteenth century stereotypes refer to the US-Mexican border as a hostile, violent, immoral, lawless and anarchic place where antithetical national entities are demarcated and conflicts within society are negotiated.<sup>4</sup> Mexican authors and artists have appropriated these historical stereotypes and confronted them with their visions of the contemporary situation to present a more differentiated image of the border region. According to M. Rodríguez Lozano,

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<sup>3</sup> See Schimanski (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Vasconcelos' famous phrase: "En el norte donde termina la civilización y comienza la barbarie" is only one example of this view, see Berumen (2004; 2003).

Mexican border literature developed between "two fronts" ("entre [...] dos frentes"; Rodríguez Lozano 2004: 163): on one side the US-American Chicana@ literature, that has been dominating the discursive terrain – as well as Border Studies – from the 1990s, and on the other, the centralist Mexican literary production, that has been ignoring as well as marginalizing regional literature from the Mexican North.<sup>5</sup> The field of *transfronterizo* literature is defined by, at least, three points of view:

1. The Chicana/o or Mexican-American perspective.
2. The emerging transnational Mexican perspective that destabilizes Mexican centralism.
3. The view on the border from people neither dwelling in the borderlands nor in the respective nation states which it occupies. All three have different approaches and views on the border (territory).

During the 1980s/90s, Mexican authors, mainly from the region, published the first texts that provided a different picture of the border space to the older versions of it as an alienated, violent space. Some of these authors are Federico Campbell, Rosina Conde, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, Rosario Sanmiguel.<sup>6</sup> Their texts speak of the actual life at the border region (*la frontera norte*), narrate experiences of migration under specific geographical conditions (desert) or of suburban life in cities such as Tijuana. They also approach subjects such as work in the maquiladoras, border crossings as a daily experience as well as the routes of illegal border crossings. The literary forms and genres that prevail are poetry, testimonio and chronicles, essays, literary columns in self-edited journals, as well as, from the younger generation, blogs. Writer and critic Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz from Baja California considers immediacy as the central characteristic of this literary tendency marking a sharp contrast to the – according to him – more universalist and cosmopolitan, highly metaphorical and mythical strand that Gloria Anzaldúa's text *Borderlands / La Frontera* represented.<sup>7</sup> He implicitly saw Anzaldúa's intervention as a claim to a territory and its representation that from his point of view, had to be contested. In general, critics of Anzaldúa's metaphorical vision of the borderlands tended to marginalize the very tangible, specific and physical aspects in her writing.

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<sup>5</sup> See Rodríguez Lozano (2004: 161ff.).

<sup>6</sup> The various regional literatures of the Mexican north are a universe on their own and come more and more into focus of literary criticism and establishment. Daniel Sada, Ricardo Elizondo, Hector Alvarado, David Toscana, and more recently, Julian Herbert and Carlos Velasquez are just some of the authors with public acclaim.

<sup>7</sup> See Rodríguez Lozano (2004) and Trujillo Muñoz (2005).

There has, however, been a feminist reception of Anzaldúa's work that valued the gendered perspective on Mexican culture and dealt with mutual recognition and shared grounds – as well as dissimilarities – in a more integrative way. An early publication on Mexican and Chicana literature in 1990 (published by the COLEF and COLMEX and edited by Aralia López González, Amalia Malagamba and Elena Urrutia under the presence of Norma Alarcón)<sup>8</sup> testifies to this in addition to María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba's *Mujeres y fronteras. Una perspectiva de género* (1998) of the Chihuahua Institute of Culture.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Anzaldúa's text is a classic that serves as a reference for countless literary and theoretical interventions: the integration of a whole set of marginal subject positions, the incorporation of popular culture as well as adding a mythical dimension of the borderlands, the departure from a gendered and queered perspective have given Gloria Anzaldúa's text, written in 1987, its importance and visionary character and made it a point of reference ever since. Her concepts of *nepantla*, new mestiza, borderlands / frontera enable a multidimensional take on the notion of borderlands. The intent to open up Mexican, Chican@, border identities for / to marginal positions is crucial here. They negotiate geographic, territorial, physical, social, political and symbolic aspects of individual and collective self-representation and identity positions – so important in the context of minority movements and identity politics during the 1990s. The strength of Anzaldúa's text lies in her "theory in the flesh" (Anzaldúa / Moraga 1983: 23), the physical acting out of the conflicts and of transformation. Although the quasi alchemistic process of transformation and healing that is required to arrive at the new mestiza consciousness has holistic and mythical undertones, it speaks to the now very timely aspect of conviviality.<sup>10</sup> Anzaldúa's border thinking captured the dynamics at the border and of the border connected to the embodied, lived experience (history, indigenous presence, sexuality), the act of remembering / *recordar* / *rememorar* the manifold affiliations through the flesh.

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an interest not only on an international, but also on a Mexican national scale grew, where especially Tijuana became an epitome of the postmodern.<sup>11</sup> The younger generation of writers at *la frontera norte* that includes authors such as Rafa Saavedra, Omar Pimienta and Heriberto Yépez continues to claim a space for literature and culture from the border. Yépez especially criticized the outside perspective of literary and

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<sup>8</sup> See López González / Malagamba / Urrutia (1990).

<sup>9</sup> See Tabuenca Córdoba (2003). I have written elsewhere on the dimension of third world feminism of Anzaldúa's text and Chicana literature, see Bandau (2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Gilroy (2004) and Ette (2012).

<sup>11</sup> See Palaversich (2012). Between 2000 and 2006, a discussion on the character and status of border literature evolved in main Mexican literary journals as *Letras libres* and *Generación*.

cultural critics as well as border theoreticians whose understanding of cultural hybridization and view of the border were dismissed as simplistic, often celebratory, missing the 'real' nature of encounter and collision of border identities. The author from Tijuana repeatedly launched harsh critiques against the Mexican literary establishment that he accused of silencing and marginalizing the literature coming out of the North.

In the discussion of the following, the intertextual dimension to Gloria Anzaldúa's text is not at the forefront of the analysis, but will be engaged to different degrees, as it resonates with all three novels through authorizing strategies that Anzaldúa used.<sup>12</sup> These strategies encompass the focus on subaltern subject positions that inhabit the borderlands, the re-negotiation of the indigenous element in mestizaje, Aztec myth, work on language, the text as art of network.

### **Three Contemporary Mexican Novels on the border**

I have selected three male writers – Luis Humberto Crosthwaite (born 1962), Heriberto Yépez (born 1974) and Yuri Herrera (born 1970) – to highlight themes emerging from Mexican literature on the border. All three authors present the US-Mexican borderlands 'as well as' border crossing as central to their texts. They also resonate with Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* and the vital aspects of her vision of the borderland.

#### **Luis Humberto Crosthwaite's *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994)**

Tijuana born writer, columnist, editor and academic Luis Humberto Crosthwaite (\*1962) gained international attention with short stories and several novels on the border region. His publishing house Yoremito was founded in 1997 in Tijuana to publish and promote literature from the North of Mexico to counteract the centralist publishing politics of Mexico D.F.<sup>13</sup> As a columnist he worked for the San Diego Union Tribune.

I will discuss Crosthwaite's sixth novel *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994; *The Moon will forever be a distant love* 1997) as a response from south of the border to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*. Using pop cultural elements to create his vision of *la frontera*, his take on the journey across the border recounts the making of Mexico within the logics of capitalism as a narration of migration, (border) crossing and (transnational) identity formation through corrido, telenovela, modern fairy tale / romance and the principle of collage. The main protagonist is not a mestiza, but an indigenous woman who travels from the Central valley – where the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán was founded – to the border, fleeing from poverty,

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<sup>12</sup> See Bandau (2004).

<sup>13</sup> The first three texts came from authors from Baja California: Roberto Castillo Udiarte's *Gancho al corazón...*, Rafa Saavedra's *Buten Smileys*, Juan Antonio Di Bella's *Yízus the Man y los Kiosko Boys*.

alcoholism and the authority of the priesthood. The modern-day Malinche meets the modern-day conqueror Balboa in search for employment – alter ego of the historical conqueror and adventurer Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who from 1500 onwards participated in various expeditions and founded the first settlement on the American mainland. But this present-day Balboa stands also for other conquistadores and the transition from conquest to colonial bureaucracy in sync with capitalist rationalization. Crosthwaite's characters link different time frames as they belong to the times of conquest (1500s), the viceroyalty *Nueva España* (1540s) and the nation state Mexico at the same time. Their fictitious quest, a journey and story of migration and border crossing in search for happiness, takes place in a time frame that fuses the time right after the Spanish conquest (1500s) and the present of the 1990s marked by the introduction of NAFTA (free trade agreement resulting in the maquila industry). The encounter between Balboa and Florinda alias Xochitl is told in the style of romance, the fictitious world of the chivalrous romance is intertwined with the modern world and its rational logics of consumerism and the mode of telenovela. Balboa's conquest of the Northern Empire – that is, the US – and its stereotypical blond women fails and, according to the ratio of modernization, he returns home with empty hands. Florinda, who had been waiting in the borderlands to join him, on the other hand, finds not only work in a maquiladora, but also starts to emancipate and is, finally, able to live on her own.

The borderlands become, it turns out, the space that enables Florinda's emancipation. In Crosthwaite's novel, the border line as well as the border territory unfold according to the different subjects' trajectory (the indigenous woman, the conquistador) in multiple, changing ways.

La frontera adquiere significación dependiendo del particular sentido y razón que dentro del espacio social se le otorga a su particular geografía, política e historia. Así es como, desde distintas perspectivas y posiciones, los grupos sociales traman su lógica y sentido común en relación con ella; por tanto, la frontera es un sistema simbólico, pues participa en la interpretación de determinados aspectos de la realidad (Ábrego 2012: 10).

Crosthwaite's text personifies the border that becomes a protagonist itself:

The Border wakes up, stretches, takes a shower and opens its portals to admit the waves of people who pour through in buses and cars and cabs; all of them traveling, all crossing each other's paths and interconnecting, all commuting enormous distances because the day is starting and it will not wait. [...] The Border of New Spain spreads out, revealing contents of streets and people who wait. The Border is a long wait. [...] The Border is a long anticipation, but at the same time it's a longer desperation, one that comes when it's not invited—usually at lunch time (Crosthwaite 1997: 34f.).

The reality of the actual border region, characteristics of the local life of maquiladora workers, are part of this story as well as the national and transnational aspects of the border space.

The text playfully weaves vignettes, fragments of documents, apocryphal journal articles, letters, recipes, illustrations, poems, lyrics of pop songs in a postmodern intertextual and intermedial reference to various genres: the epic, the novel of the Siglo de Oro, chronicles of the Conquista, Columbus' journal, letters, codices, telenovela, melodrama/romance. Colloquial language and regionalisms mingle with the baroque language of New Spain. The reader has to piece together and interpret fragments and voices, numerous inter- and paratexts: a whole universe of Latin-American literary tradition from García Márquez, Vargas Llosa to Augusto Monterroso's micro-narrations (*microrrelato*); global rock music; Mexican and US-American tradition of melodrama. Crosthwaite's postmodern multimedia hybrid novel pays homage to Anzaldúa's multilayered – cross-genre – text. The resulting tone, though, is very different from Anzaldúa's painful and utopian portrayal of the borderlands. His narration is filled with humor and playful, tongue-in-cheek references to consumer culture, its mediation through the popular genres of telenovela and romance are made highly present throughout the novel. The text's predominantly optimistic take on the borderlands with ironic undertones is achieved through the technique of montage and collage: the eclectic lumping together of different contexts, styles, time frames and historical narratives – practicing the pastiche of classic and popular genres such as parody and persiflage – generates comical effects.

### **Heriberto Yépez' A.B.U.R.T.O. (2005)**

A writer from Tijuana who belongs to the next generation of writers is Heriberto Yépez (\*1974), a fierce critic of the literary and cultural processes in the border territory, he is a philosopher working at UABC (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California) and a writer of poetry, essays, novels, journalism, blog entries in Spanish and English. In his blogs, he positioned himself as one of the central figures in Tijuana's cultural scene, writing from an insider perspective (as other authors of his generation Rafa Saavedra, Omar Pimienta, Amaranta Caballero Prado have done). In 2015, he created his blog *borderdestroyer*<sup>14</sup> where he declared himself a post-Mexican, post-nationalist writer between two literatures; his writing aims to undermine nationalist thinking from both a US and the Mexican perspective. Ten years earlier, he published his novel *A.B.U.R.T.O.* in 1994, which in an apocalyptic context tries to tightly link

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<sup>14</sup> Please **abstain** from using the URL <http://borderdestroyer.com>! It seems to be compromised by a pop-up scam. In the bibliography we provide a link to screenshots of the blog via the *Internet Archive*: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181123060613/https://borderdestroyer.com/> [iMex Editorial Staff].



the border region to the wider Mexican society, a moment of deep crisis when after seventy years the power of the PRI cracked decisively, the Zapatistas (EZLN) launched their armed rebellion in Chiapas and the free trade agreement NAFTA came into existence. The novel narrates the assassination of the politician Luis Donaldo Colosio during his election campaign for the PRI in Tijuana. The unsolved case was officially presented as the act of a lonely assassin, Mario Aburto, but its link to Mexico's profound social, political and economic crisis was already explored prior to Yépez, by two other Mexican writers who used the genre of the detective story (*novela negra*): Jorge Volpi in *La paz de los sepulcros* (1995) and Élmér Mendoza, a writer from Sinaloa, in *El asesino solitario* (1999). *El asesino solitario* made the genre of *narconovela* popular in Mexican literature, a category being associated with the country's north and the border region. Whereas Mendoza's text saw political corruption and struggle for power at the highest level at work connected to Mafia structures,<sup>15</sup> Yépez concentrated on Mario Aburto's story and perspective on the events. In his version the sub-proletarian – the ultimate subaltern – takes vengeance against the political and intellectual establishment and the corrupted power and violence it established during the 1980s and 1990s under the PRI-presidents Salinas de Gortari and his predecessor Miguel de la Madrid.

Yépez' protagonist, too, undertakes the typical trajectory and quest – this time from the Mexican west – to the border region. He grows up in a village in Michoacán (La Rinconada) under the condition of violent gender and family relations and an abusive father. As an adolescent, he leaves his village to migrate via Mexico City to Tijuana to rejoin his father and brother. There he strives to not only make a living in a maquiladora, but to live up to his expectations "to be somebody" (Yépez 2005a: 32, 47, 175). The narration portrays the protagonist as someone with a split personality: between Mario who is lucid, develops his own political convictions and takes action on one side, and Aburto who is mentally disordered and abused, on the other. The connotation of his last name Aburto – pointing towards a competitive, aggressive and violent behavior associated with traditional masculinity in his home village – mutates into his Tijuana nickname meaning waste, trash and deficiency: "Alguien que fue abortado, en una expulsión [...]. Algo peor que un zombie. [...] Un verdadero desgraciado [...] un forastero. Un ser absurdo. Un aburto" (Yépez 2005a: 40).

Mario finds work as a maquila worker – becoming one with the machine he works at – and is a protagonist who strives for his own understanding of truth: *la neta*. He reads Marxist theory (*los maquilocos*) and reveals corruption of government officials and police officers in his letters

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<sup>15</sup> See Regalado-López (2012).

to the local newspaper. To set things right by means of self-justice becomes his goal and secret project that ends not only in the assassination of the politician 'but' culminates in a phantasmal vision of Mario taking ultimate control of the politics at the border by opening the border for the subaltern masses stranded in Tijuana. Mario "se había vuelto un guerrero autónomo. Mario era una maquinaria" (Yépez 2005a: 38f.) In sync with Deleuze's theory of the nomad as ultimate warrior, the machine empowers the protagonist to link and control the subaltern masses as well as to lead them across the border. Mario fantasizes ultimate control:

Mario y sus infinitos botones mentales lo administraban TODO. Absolutamente TODO estaba bajo su control. Mario era esa mañana, en el trono de su máquina, el presidente del complete devenir de la frontera (Yépez 2005a: 209).

In this reminiscence to a cyborg figure (Alejandro Morales' *Rag doll plagues* come to mind but also Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto'), he opens *la frontera norte* to send all the victims of a capitalist and neoliberal abusive system and illegal border crossers to the other side.<sup>16</sup>

The key to understanding the chain of events and the action of the assassin Mario, but also to grasping the underlying issues of Mexican society, lies in the city of Tijuana.<sup>17</sup> In Yépez' novel, Tijuana becomes the decentralized center, the simulacrum of chaos, dysregulation and hyperbole.<sup>18</sup> Yépez introduces a whole range of stereotypes attached to Tijuana, the clichés of violence, abuse and exaggeration: "Tijuana juega a la baraja de estereotipos" (Yépez 2005a: 57). In his intent to disperse and disseminate these clichés, deregulation is re-read as chaos and chaos becomes the underlying principle in Tijuana and in his story. For his poetics he is indebted to the popular culture of Tijuana, "ciudad de reciclaje" (Yépez 2005a: 27), and its language of the border. The aggressive tone of North Mexican slang overtly present in the book attests to this.

His protagonist Aburto matches Tijuana: "Tijuana fue hecha para mí. Y yo fui hecho para Tijuana" (Yépez 2005a: 49). Tijuana is the hyperbole of violence, but the whole country is saturated with violence: starting with relations on the individual level (the chingada / chingón syndrom that Octavio Paz saw as constitutive for the Mexican nation) and going up to the political elite. Yépez' borderlands – represented by Tijuana – is inhabited by thousands of subaltern figures, "tropas de jodidos" (Yépez 2005a: 224), "millones de dobles" (Yépez 2005a: 223), "tus dobles, todos tus enmascarados" (Yépez 2005a: 224) – driven north by structural

<sup>16</sup> See Yépez (2005a: 207ff.)

<sup>17</sup> See Yépez for his view on Tijuana as maquiladora of myths ("mitote de los mitos") and stereotypes for national and international use (Yépez 2005b: 14).

<sup>18</sup> "[A]rquitectura comercial, autoconstrucción caótica, ciudad de reciclaje" (Yépez 2005a: 27), "Tijuanicémonos todos lo más pronto posible" (Yépez 2005a: 31), "Tijuana es una mentira" (Yépez 2005a: 119).

violence. He resonates Anzaldúa's famous description of the inhabitants of the *Borderlands / La frontera*:

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal' (Anzaldúa 2007: 25).

In Yépez' 2006 novel, Tijuana and the trajectory of Mario become clues to decipher and rethink the whole of Mexico. In a paradoxical move, the eccentric, chaotic other – that is, the third country, the borderland – turns into the blueprint for the supposed center. It ultimately preconditions any understanding of the entire nation state entwined in global development.

The author makes it excessively clear: there is no concise story of the events possible. His novel starts a sparkling display of poststructuralist theory that contests the status of all narrations feeding the novel, doubting authorship and authenticity: be it the third person narrative of the narrator, one alter ego of the author, or the prison psychiatrist who writes down and comments on Mario's testimonial, or be it the different versions of Mario's testimony, that contradict each other on various occasions. The familiar genres of testimony or *crónica* that are expected to represent subaltern voices fail to unveil the truth.<sup>19</sup> But as the testimony fails to present a credible version of the events on the discursive level of the narration, Yépez' novel fails to represent the complex character Mario Aburto and his explanatory power for the complex political and socioeconomic situation in Mexico in a convincing manner. Yépez wants too many things at once (an explanatory pattern for the assassination, the political and economic crisis in Mexico, and the border region) and finds neither the convincing approach to his protagonist, at the same time "vulgar y demoníaca" (Ornelas 2009), nor the appropriate tone that does not tire his readers.<sup>20</sup>

The following passage in this context almost reads like an anticipated apology for this insufficiency:

Yo soy un escritor. Soy la persona que menos fe tiene en la verdad. No me culpen de las versiones que aquí anoto. Esas versiones no las inventé yo. Son las que cuenta todo un país y yo, acaso, acomodo unas con otras, les saco punta o caricaturizo. No me interesa relatar la verdad. Solamente me interesa dejar claro que yo también pertenezco, como todos ustedes, al narcorrealismo.  
Bienvenido, baby.

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<sup>19</sup> See Yépez (2005a: 215).

<sup>20</sup> Several critics see in Yépez' text the failed intent to overcome stereotypical presentations of the border region, Tijuana and violence. The playing with fragments of discourse as well as the abundance of interpretations and rhetoric excess lack a convincing vision. The poet Ornelas regards *A.B.U.R.T.O.* as "fracaso": "No le fue posible generar la potencia artística requerida para el drama interior de una mente a la vez vulgar y demoníaca, como la del supuesto tirador solitario" (Ornelas 2009).

Y de la manera en que les estoy contando esta historia, no culpen a la literatura. Francamente, de esa pobre tipa nunca he sabido mucho. A mi no me enseñaron a narrar los libros. Mis maestras fueron drogas más a la mano. Fue Tijuana, brothers. Fue Tijuana. Lo que Tiyei significa. Fueron los corridos de Los Tigres del Norte, las telenovelas de Verónica Castro, Alarma, La Carabina de Ambrosio y los Tijuana Bibles (Yépez 2005a: 137).

Very different from Yépez' angry novel full of philosophical concepts and allusions to low and high culture, the third writer, Yuri Herrera, undertakes his rewriting of the story of migration with the help of a reduced number of protagonists that is typical for the literary genre of the fable.

### **Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009)**

Yuri Herrera (\*1970) was born not in the actual border region, but in Actopán (Hidalgo). He studied political science and creative writing and holds a PhD in literature from UC Berkeley. Throughout his career he has been teaching at several US universities. He is considered one of the most promising voices in Mexican literature and was awarded the Anna-Seghers-Preis in 2016. His short novel *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2009), part of a trilogy, has been translated into several languages.<sup>21</sup> In various interviews Herrera points out his interest to mediate the urgent topics of Mexican society through artistic elaboration, that is, literature's possibility to create a different understanding of events.

Herrera's novel establishes a multi-faceted dialogue with a multitude of literary and non-literary texts and is situated in several discussions around issues such as migration, border crossing, and also narco-literature. He avoids, though, the overdetermined notions of 'narcotráfico' or 'migración' and creates a highly poetic approach that opens various roads of understanding. Herrera's short novel evokes various intertexts such as Dante's *Divine comedy* or Homer's *Ulysses* as well as the myth of Orpheus, but, more importantly, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and the myth of Mictlán.

Herrera reconstitutes parts from the basic structure of a well-known Mexica myth: the mythical passage to the Aztec kingdom of death – Mictlán – where the individual arrives through nine between-world / stages. The author superposes this symbolic structure with the story of migration that the protagonist – Makina – undertakes, retold in nine steps and chapters – from "La tierra", the center of Mexico, via D.F. ("El Gran Chilango") to *la frontera* (probably Tijuana) and finally the US (San Diego). Makina's journey to the other side – in search for her brother – links the territories south and north of the border and succeeds in creating real and

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<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Herrera (2014) and Herrera (2015).

symbolic places like the cantinas, Mexican villages and regional centers with their hierarchical structure of capos and caciques. The reader is not provided with the well-known topographies of specific locations – Hidalgo, D.F., Tijuana – but gets hints of possible specific geographies: the river as a demarcation of the border, San Diego's important military base, the stadium – "el cerro de obsidiana" – in the fourth chapter. Nevertheless, we follow Makina on the typical route of migration: arriving at the border, crossing with the help of los coyotes / polleros, the encounter with border patrol and self-organized paramilitary home guards on the US side, as well as the transnational network of migration once on the other side. Herrera's narration of Makina's quest intentionally leaves the reader undecided whether Makina is part of the world of the living or dead: We deal with "a plot that can be read in several keys, from realism to allegory" (Volpi 2013).<sup>22</sup> The journey that Juan Preciado (in Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*) undertakes to the world of the dead to find his father is clearly a parallel.

The allegorical use of telling names, especially the protagonist's name – Makina / machine – alludes to the notion of the machine and in the Deleuzian sense to its systemic dimension: the alienating aspect of automated maquila work and mass production in the border region is present only as a subtext, but the protagonist's name is still a reference to the thousands of female maquiladora workers of indigenous origin that came into the border region and were exposed to this specific workspace, a dimension we already saw in Yépez' account of a border protagonist. In the system of narco-infiltrated provincial government structures that define regional politics, Makina is presented as messenger for these authorities, a kind of relay station for the village's communication.<sup>23</sup> She is able to speak three languages and serves as linguistic and cultural transmitter of information and as mediator in her work at *la centralita* (the telephone station), between the indigenous rural population and the transnational field of migration to the north (gabacho), the rural population and the narcobusiness infiltrated power structure.

[...] había demasiada gente esperándola. Alguien la cubriría en la centralita mientras viajaba, pero sólo ella hablaba las tres lenguas y sólo ella dominaba la cara de tabla de las noticias malas o el descuido con que tenía que anunciar ciertos nombres, ay, tan largamente esperados (Herrera 2009: 27 f.).

Herrera underlines the positive characteristics of his protagonist: she is part of a complex system and at the same time a unit of her own. This Deleuzian take on the machine presents

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<sup>22</sup> Santiago Navarro Pastor gives an interesting and very detailed analysis of the different levels of interpretations, the status of intertextual references as well as of Herrera's subtle work on language for the representation of timely topics such as violence and migration, see Navarro Pastor (2012).

<sup>23</sup> See Herrera (2009: 19f.)

Makina as one replaceable part of a system, but at the same time as central unit with a potential for resistance. Sharing a demonstrative toughness with various heroines from graphic novels (Wonder Woman), Makina is strong and able to defend herself not only in the male world of Mexican provincial culture.<sup>24</sup> In this respect her utopian features resonate with Donna Haraway's cyborg concept and make her part of female resistance against gendered violence in central Mexico, both on her journey to the border and also against an assault by a racist (self-proclaimed) police man north of the border.<sup>25</sup> It is significant that the female migrant is to a certain extent in control and is the one who finds a way to legalize her status (after having found her brother). Her laconic vision of the manifold dangers she encounters might be a result of her in-between-status, the fusion between Greek, and Mexica mythology, the Cyborg fantasies and postmodern mass media take-offs. This liminal dimension of her existence has an interesting impact on the character of Makina and feeds into her ability to mediate and overcome several odds.

The significant title *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo / Signs that will precede the end of the world* has several implications: it refers here to Makina's migration to the other side that leads for her into a transformation of identity. At her final step – the ninth and last chapter that also symbolizes her arrival at Mictlán – Makina receives new papers and this means to her an altered identity. We are not sure what this final stage, the end of the world, means to Makina and her story: arrival at or point of departure from the world of the dead, a cultural and linguistic border territory.

Makina tomó el legajo y miró su contenido. Ahí estaba ella, con otro nombre y otra ciudad de nacimiento. Su foto, nuevos números, Nuevo oficio, Nuevo hogar. Me han desollado, musitó. [...] [M]as un segundo después – o muchos – dejó de sentir la pesadez de la incertidumbre y de la culpa: evocó a su gente como a los contornos de un paisaje amable que se difumina [...] y entendió que lo que sucedía no era un cataclismo; lo comprendió con todo el cuerpo y con toda su memoria, lo comprendió de verdad y finalmente se dijo Estoy lista cuando todas las cosas del mundo quedaron en silencio (Herrera 2009: 119).

It is the final step in a series of liminal situations: each one has been a new variation of the experience of liminality:

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<sup>24</sup> See Herrera (2009: 29, 32ff.).

<sup>25</sup> See Herrera (2009: 109f.)

Me interesaba el aspecto fronterizo del viaje de Makina. Aunque su viaje termina en algún lugar de los Estados Unidos cercano a la frontera, lo fronterizo para mí no se refiere únicamente a una situación geográfica, se refiere sobre todo a una condición en la cual uno está permanentemente entre dos cosas, o entre más de dos cosas. Además, si al cambiar de país se cambia también de lengua, uno debe encontrar nuevas maneras de decir el mundo, de decirse a sí mismo y también de estar en el mundo (Herrera / González Veiguela 2010: 42 in Navarro Pastor 2012: 121).

Herrera's creative approach embraces the constantly changing character of language as a living mechanism. The author is not mimicking the violent language to achieve an effect of authenticity, but invents a new and 'intermediate' language (Herrera 2009: 73).<sup>26</sup> To characterize, he does not use the highly sexualized language of swearing, typical for (North) Mexican slang, but rather captures the orality of Mexican everyday talk and the onomatopoeic quality of this orality ("hijuelachingada", "el tiiiiit"; Herrera 2009: 48f.). He invents words as "jarchar" (throughout the text; Herrera 2009: 15, 65, 69, 81) and explores the linguistic transfiguration between Spanish and English.<sup>27</sup>

Herrera's borderlands and its protagonists – first of all Makina – are situated in the realms of language. In the fifth chapter, center piece of the narration in nine chapters, the reader is confronted with the poetics of the author's—and the protagonist's—use of language:

Son paisanos y son gabachos y cada cosa con una intensidad rabiosa; con un fervor contenido pueden ser los ciudadanos más mansos y al tiempo los más quejumbrosos aunque a baja voz. Tienen gestos y gustos que revelan una memoria antiquísima y asombros de gente nueva. Y de repente hablan. Hablan una lengua intermedia con la que Makina simpatiza de inmediato porque es como ella: maleable, deleble, permeable, un gozne entre dos semejantes distantes y luego entre otros dos, y luego entre otros dos, nunca exactamente los mismos, un algo que sirve para poner en relación.

Más que un punto medio entre lo paisano y lo gabacho su lengua es una franja difusa entre lo que desaparece y lo que no ha nacido. Pero no una hecatombe. Makina no percibe en su lengua ninguna ausencia súbita sino una metamorfosis sagaz, una mudanza en defensa propia (Herrera 2009: 73f.).

This description refers not only to a language but also to its speakers and the liminal situation, in which this intermediate language is processed and practiced: clever metamorphosis, change out of self-defense resonates with the flux and flow, and Herrera's vision is neither celebratory nor pathetic. Makina's new mestiza consciousness qualities become visible in her angry response to the self-authorized police man in the eighth chapter ("La serpiente que aguarda"):

<sup>26</sup> See Herrera (2009: 73).

<sup>27</sup> See Navarro Pastor for a thorough linguistic analysis of the meanings of the neologism *jarchar* (Navarro Pastor 2012: 120f.).

Nosotros somos los culpables de esta destrucción, los que no hablamos su lengua ni sabemos estar en silencio. Los que no llegamos en barco [...]. Los que venimos a quitarles el trabajo, los que aspiramos a limpiar su mierda, los que anhelamos trabajar a deshoras. Los que llenamos de olor a comida sus calles tan limpias, los que les trajimos violencia que no conocían, los que transportamos sus remedios [...] Nosotros los oscuros, los chaparros, los grasientos, los mustios, los obesos, los anémicos. Nosotros, los bárbaros (Herrera 2009: 109f.).

Makina's speech sounds as a timely response to contemporary politics in the US where the US-Mexican border has become a battlefield on which national politics is negotiated. President Trump produced a crisis at the border that serves him to justify his project of a wall between the US and Mexico. As was the case with the two preceding texts, Herrera's echoes, too, with Anzaldúa's famous statement on those who live in the borderlands at the beginning of *Borderlands*.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Crosthwaite and Yépez can be read in the context of regional literature, Herrera goes beyond this clear regionalization. All three texts share their main protagonists and subject – the journey of the indigenous subaltern to the border. Yépez' *A.B.U.R.T.O.* establishes a synecdochic relationship between the border region and wider Mexican society: the marginalized region of the border space projects the stereotypes ascribed to it back onto the Mexican center. Already in Crosthwaite's narrative, the focal point of his historical take on Mexico shifts to the border and a transnational perspective. Herrera takes the narration of migration and border crossing one step further and at the same time resonates some of the aspects of his predecessors. Here it is not the actual, physical borderlands that are highlighted. We can read the specific border region into this story as well as the myriad testimonials on migrating North. However, this is not the crucial point of Herrera's novel. The border travels with Makina from the Northern Central Valley via D.F. to the borderlands and back and the notion of Schimanski's *borderscape*<sup>29</sup> comes again to mind as it is embodied in Makina's trajectory: "[A] flexible entity that goes beyond the space of the border and the borderland" and can be understood as "border, disseminated or diffused across space" and as "landscape of resistance" (Schimanski 2015: 35f.). In this sense, the tale about Makina could be situated at any border, and the status of liminality is explored in a way that speaks to the whole of Mexico, as well as to the US and beyond.

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<sup>28</sup> See Anzaldúa (2007: 25).

<sup>29</sup> See Schimanski / Wolfe (2007).



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