

“No hay Frontera si no existe la necesidad de cruzar”: Transnationalism and Topographies of Dispossession in Short Stories by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite

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“The high profile efforts by the U.S. government to ‘control’ immigration have been, to a large extent, political theater, measures that could be relied upon to have little real impact while reassuring the voting public that something is being done.”

Timothy J. Henderson, “Mexican Immigration to the United States” (614)

In recent years, immigration, undocumented or otherwise, has powerfully informed public discourse in the United States regarding place, belonging, and questions of local and national identity. The phenomenon, of course, is far from new, and of the U.S.-Mexico border, this is particularly accurate. For many, the surprising success of the Donald J. Trump U.S. presidential campaign (2015-16) forced a reckoning of consciousness with respect to how Latina/o immigration continues to operate as a contentious subject on the national stage. The series of anti-Latina/o stereotypes that emerged from the Trump campaign, as well as Mr. Trump’s frequent use of border tropes and impractical wall proposals for the United States’ southern border, mobilized a cultural script of greatness that accommodated a disdain for Latina/os and, in turn, legitimized a contempt for their cultural and linguistic heterogeneity.

Much like the vision of national identity that these discourses buttressed, Mr. Trump’s speeches reified the nation-state as bounded and monolithic, eliding the transnational forces that compel U.S. bound immigration in the first place, and ignoring, too, the structural blocks that dispossess immigrants of resources in their journeys from there to here¹. For Mexican writers, the story is an old one. Octavio

¹ Political scientist Jason Ackleson argues that “migration is partly spurred by an existing asymmetrical economic order which was further consolidated under neoliberal globalization ... and development needs in Mexico” (“Constructing Security on the U.S.-Mexico Border” 167).

Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Carmen Boullosa, to name only a few, have explored the complex and longstanding cross-border connections between the United States and Mexico in their respective texts². A native of Tijuana, Mexican writer Luis Humberto Crosthwaite likewise explores these themes, but he does so by configuring the mobility and identity of border-crossers through a transnational lens, forcing readers to examine the U.S.-Mexico border as a space that intertwines the geopolitical and the interpersonal.

Methodology and Argument

Examining three of Crosthwaite's short stories ("Recomendaciones," "Muerte y esperanza en la frontera norte," and "La silla vacía") taken from his collection *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera* (2011), this project analyzes, through the framework of transnational studies, the cross-border subjectivities of Mexican characters and the topographies of dispossession from which they emerge. The Mexican characters here emerge as transnational actors who are forced to cross borders and navigate multiple social hierarchies that accommodate different relations of power, all of which are place-based, highly volatile, and reflect the machinations of what anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc would term "the changing conditions of global capitalism" that sustain transnational networks (*Nations Unbound* 22). Past scholars have approached Crosthwaite's fiction from a number of critical perspectives. Jungwon Park has explored how the author's representation of nostalgia and space in Tijuana promotes a "reterritorialización del sujeto fronterizo" that contests understandings of identity as sedentary and permanent ("Comunidad sin comunidad" 67). Núria Vilanova, meanwhile, explores the author's depiction of urban space, relating his representation of Tijuana to the text's language, irony, fragmentation, and cultural reference points ("Textual Frontier" 91-3). Few, though, have explored Crosthwaite's treatment of transnationalism and dispossession, leaving a critical gap that demands further attention. Basch, Schiller, and Blanc argue that we should understand transnationalism as "a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries" (*Nations Unbound* 22). Sociologist Steven Vertovec adds that transnationalism forces us to gauge how social changes emerge from "the ways in which conditions in more than one location impact upon such forms of social

² See, for example, Paz's book-length essay *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), Fuentes's novels *Gringo viejo* (1985) and *La frontera de cristal* (1995), and Boullosa's novel *Texas: La gran ladronería en el lejano norte* (2012).

organization and the values, activities, and relational frameworks that sustain them” (“Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation” 971). In the short stories studied here, these transnational connections allow Mexican characters to develop an “enhanced bifocality” that challenges “identities-borders-orders” (971) and the cultural narratives that envision the nation as closed and uniform.

This project argues that these three stories thematize how social hierarchies and the agencies that they condition do not simply begin and end at the U.S.-Mexico border, even if the border itself continues to operate as a potent symbol for national identity construction. Throughout, Crosthwaite configures the border as a site of both symbolic and state power that strengthens imagined (Anglo) communities in so far as Mexicans (either border crossers or Tijuana residents) are homogenized and misrepresented as invasive criminals or unintelligible others, all of whom, in this view, lack full personhood. The Mexican characters’ constant mobility, longstanding precarity in the United States, and their perceived disregard for law-and-order render them disposable figures for U.S. nationals who envision the U.S. in exclusionary terms. The border is key to this process, but these stories go beyond simple dichotomies by challenging the understanding of the geopolitical border as a mere physical safeguard, and of the nation-state as a bounded and monolithic entity. The Mexican characters here articulate voices where many have been forcibly silenced, ultimately giving primacy to a bifocal vision of belonging that is neither here nor there, but both—that is, transnational. Thus, rather than represent border crossers in reductive terms as pollutants or assailants, these stories situate their actions transnationally, forcing readers to grapple with the social and economic ties binding the United States and Mexico, as well as the topographies of dispossession that often ensue these networks.

Historical Precursors

Nativist anxiety and anti-immigration sentiments are old staples in U.S. history, especially with regards to the U.S.-Mexico border. The Tijuana-San Diego region is a case in point, and since the 1990s, anti-immigration fervor has become increasingly salient in response to a number of complex phenomena. The year 1994 alone offers a number of examples. NAFTA took effect in January, industrializing the northernmost regions of Mexico and dramatically altering trade relations in ways that would eventually configure Mexico and her people as easy scapegoats for the exporting of American jobs. In California, residents voted in favor of Proposition 187 almost exclusively along racial lines, passing a measure that jeopardized the

wellbeing of undocumented Latina/os by limiting many social services for the “legal” English-speaking majority; and in Washington D.C., legislators signed Operation Gatekeeper into law, setting the stage for heightened border militarization and prompting then U.S. President Bill Clinton to affirm, “[W]e will not surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice.”³ Lofty political mantras regarding the need to strengthen and secure the border are both old and effective. President Reagan made similar affirmations in 1984 (“But the simple truth is that we’ve lost control of our own borders, and no nation can do that and survive”), and President George W. Bush would issue similar remarks in 2006 after signing the Secure the Fence Act: “the United States,” Bush argued, “has not been in complete control of its borders for decades”—a fact that, in the view of his administration, demanded the “responsibility to enforce our laws” and to “secure our borders.”⁴

It was also in 1994 that the United States recycled steel used during Operation Desert Storm in order to create a wall between Tijuana and San Diego. Upon its installation, the steel wall set the stage for a dramatic rise in the number of annual cross-border deaths of U.S. bound Latina/os, while doing little to actually prevent or stymie undocumented immigration altogether⁵. With his short stories taking place in the contemporary Tijuana-San Diego region, Crosthwaite grapples with the complex geopolitical maneuvers that problematize the safety of Mexican characters both en route to and within the United States, as well as how these processes affect the day-to-day lives of Tijuana residents. In each of the stories analyzed here, the author calls readers’ attention to the intertwining of the geopolitical and the interpersonal, privileging a bifocal vision of belonging (both ‘here’ and ‘there’) that deconstructs bounded notions of the national community.

“Recomendaciones”: Asymmetries of Power at the U.S.-Mexico Border

As one of the most crossed points of any international border in the world, the Tijuana-San Diego border and its surrounding metropolitan area have long garnered

³ President Clinton quoted in Joseph Nevins’s study, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (1).

⁴ President Reagan quoted in “Mexicans of Mass Destruction” by Leo R. Chavez (92). President George W. Bush quoted in the article “Bush Signs Bill Authorizing 700-Mile Fence for Border,” published by Michael Fletcher and Jonathan Weisman of *The Washington Post* on October 27, 2006.

⁵ Leslie Marmon Silko writes, “[B]efore 1994, when the Tijuana wall was constructed, deaths were about 21 per year. In 1998, after the walls, deaths soared to 145. The number of crossings was not diminished” (“Border Patrol State” 78).

the attention of scholars with respect to its immigration patterns and economic interchange. The increased militarization of the border in recent decades has led several to criticize these dramaturgical maneuvers. Author Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, argues that “the fence along the border is a theatrical prop, a bit of pork for contractors. Border entrepreneurs have already used blowtorches to cut passageways through the fence to collect ‘tolls,’ and are doing a brisk business” (“Border Patrol State” 77). For essayist and cultural critic Richard Rodriguez, the Tijuana-San Diego border cuts across two semantic and symbolic domains between Anglos and those of Mexican descent: “In San Diego people speak of ‘the border’ as meaning a clean break, the end of us, the beginning of them,” while “[i]n Mexican Spanish, the legality takes on distance, even pathos, as *la frontera*, meaning something less fixed, something more akin to the American ‘frontier’” (Days of Obligation 84). Literature from and about the border has represented these phenomena in very different ways. While Chicana/o writers have typically incorporated the border metaphorically, writers from northern Mexican provinces have often treated the border as a physical emblem and territorial marker (Vilanova, “Another Textual Frontier” 77). The short stories studied here by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, however, break this pattern by casting the border as a transnational pawn that serves larger geopolitical ends, and as a literal and figurative threshold conditioning the day-to-day lives of his characters.

In “Recomendaciones,” the first short story of *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera*, Crosthwaite narrativizes how the border operates simultaneously at both the geopolitical and interpersonal levels, bolstering nation-state power and requiring immigrants to develop specialized knowledge of how to perform, to “cross over,” without garnering unwanted attention. This practice strongly corresponds to what Luis Guarnizo, borrowing from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, terms a “transnational *habitus*”—that is, “a particular set of dualistic dispositions that inclines migrants to act and react to specific situations in a manner that can be, but is now always, calculated, and that ... incorporates the social position of the migrant and the context in which transmigration occurs” (“The Emergence of a Transnational Social Formation” 311). Readers encounter as much when the narrator assures his listeners, “Atravesar una línea divisoria requiere de un esfuerzo intelectual, un conocimiento de que las naciones tienen puertas que se abren y se cierran; una idea fija de que un país, cualquiera que éste sea, se guarda el derecho de admisión a sus jardines y podría echarle de ellos a la primera provocación” (“Recomendaciones” 13). Preserving the status quo here takes precedent for Mexican characters whose nationality, physical appearance, and language capacities

mark them as suspicious or dangerous. Crosthwaite highlights how his characters must strategically perform for the sake of long-term expediency, in ways that seek to avert the ill effects of interlocking axes—such as race, language capacities, and citizenship status—that converge in what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has termed a “matrix of domination” (*Black Feminist Thought* 23). The unidentified narrator details how, for example, immigrants might adopt a non-threatening appearance, invent a convincing personal background, or speak in monosyllables to avert further suspicion (“Recomendaciones” 14-6). The characters’ exchanges and the text’s border setting reveal to readers how the Mexican characters’ agencies and belonging extend beyond physical borders but are ultimately restricted by both local and national forces. Particularly problematic, too, is the fact that these phenomena are beyond the control of those who must cross geopolitical borders even as they develop knowledge and survival strategies that also respond to social borders.

This, however, shouldn’t necessarily surprise us. Anthropologists Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson correctly observe that geopolitical borders strongly inform identity construction:

Borders are liminal zones in which residents, wayfarers and the state are continually contesting their roles and their natures. As a result, borders and border people have identities which are shifting and multiple ... but which are nonetheless fashioned to some degree by the structures of the states. (Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State 64)

Given by an unnamed narrator (an experienced border-crosser her/himself), the story’s personalized recommendations to a receptive “tú” humanizes a context that often proves dehumanizing by robbing border-crossers of dignity, or deadly, as readers soon encounter in later stories. The emphasis on survival again demands readers’ attention. The Mexican characters must, according to the narrator, “llevar el pasaporte en la mano y la mente en blanco” since border patrol agents function as “seres omnipotentes, deidades, césares caprichosos capaces de arrojarte de su imperio” (“Recomendaciones” 15-6). The story stresses reserve and caution, exposing how both the geopolitical and the interpersonal condition the subjectivities of border-crossers, much as when the narrator expounds upon the complexities of border crossing:

Hay quienes opinan que trasponer la frontera es un arte, que no debe ser un acto sencillo como el que se describe en este texto, que debe requerir cierto

esfuerzo de la imaginación. Por eso algunas personas de alma aventurera prefieren hacerlo por espacios remotos, de difícil acceso; lugares que son custodiados con recelo por los más amplios recursos tecnológicos, helicópteros y patrullas ansiosas de comenzar la cacería. (16)

Crosthwaite's nuance to the specialized forms of knowledge that immigrants must adopt sets the stage for the types of structural blocks and borders (both geopolitical and social) that his characters will experience throughout the remaining stories. Readers, in turn, grapple with the complexities of these phenomena as they situate the trajectories of border-crossing characters in transnational terms.

“Muerte y esperanza en la frontera norte”: Mapping Topographies of Dispossession

In the short story entitled “Muerte y esperanza en la frontera norte,” Crosthwaite thematizes the plight of unnamed immigrants as they journey to Tijuana but are then forced into the borderless desert in the hopes of one day arriving at what the unnamed narrator terms “el país de las grandes oportunidades” (45). Upon arriving in Tijuana, the characters realize that they must hire a *coyote* to help them complete their journey. A wall of steel blocks their way, but it does nothing to impede their tenacity: “Llegaron a Tijuana y se asomaron hacia el norte, más allá del gran muro metálico. Ahí estaban esos Estados Unidos, esa tierra de dólares y esperanza. Les habían dicho que sería difícil, que apenas ahí comenzaría su jornada ... Ellos no podrían cruzar por la ciudad. Por ahí estaba cabrón. Ellos tendrían que ir al desierto, a las montañas” (45-6). In his essay “Nothing to Declare: Welcome to Tijuana,” Mexican writer Juan Villoro addresses the inefficacy of the Tijuana border in curbing “illegal” immigration, as well as how the steel wall functions as a political pawn:

Placed here as a means of control, the wall is ridiculous ... Running a fence along the border that extends 30 meters into the ocean doesn't stop the illegals, but it does warn them that they will be stopped. The worthless scrap iron functions merely as advertising. It foretells the horrors that the adventurous may suffer. It's no coincidence that the landscape is ugly. Since October 1994, when Operation Gatekeeper was implemented, approximately 400 Mexicans have died trying to reach that temporary heaven we call el otro lado (the other side). (author's emphasis 198)

“Muerte y esperanza en la frontera norte” explores the physical border's inability to curb undocumented migration, and it narrativizes, too, the “horrors that they

adventurous” will suffer. Here, readers should ask what horrors these texts bring to light, and how exactly the characters endure hardships after crossing a wall that anthropologist Alejandro Gimson has termed “the largest known structure of inequality in the contemporary world” (“Cultures are More Hybrid Than Identifications” 100). As the story progresses, the author draws parallels between the wayfaring Mexican characters and the persecuted travelers of Christian lore. The fact that the ensuing passages of “Muerte y esperanza” take place on Holy Saturday further ironizes the Judeo-Christian frame in order to humanize the conditions of our unnamed immigrant protagonists as they cross a desert terrain that bears similarities to that of their Christian Middle Eastern forbearers. From there, the text highlights the transnational connections that prompt these journeys and ultimately maps for readers a topography of dispossession that ensues the asymmetrical relations between the United States and Mexico. Accordingly, readers situate these patterns of mobility as necessities, neither voluntary nor arbitrary, that challenge understandings of identity and of the national community as bounded.

How the author represents these cross-border ties is neither simple nor celebratory. Steel walls, helicopters, and border patrol agents testify to nation-state power as they forestall immigrant mobility. More importantly, the author highlights the concomitant effects of these processes, much as when he underscores how they abject the same Mexican bodies that might, for example, sustain cross-border capital flows. In his book concerning border cultural studies, literary critic José David Saldívar speaks of similar phenomena in his commentary regarding the history U.S. colonialism in the Southwest: the borderlands’ emergence from U.S. imperialism serves as a “territorial and economic fact” that, in his view, configures the region in the long term as a “subject-constituting project” (*Border Matters* 169). Accordingly, Crosthwaite’s stories grapple with the transnational constraints that limit immigrant agency en route to, and within, the United States, situating the Mexican characters as transnational actors who are forced to develop modes of consciousness that reflect their frequent mobility.

If in the Christian tradition it is the figure of Christ that enables the continuity of humanity through redemptive sacrifice, “Muerte y esperanza en la frontera norte” configures the exploitation of Mexicans as a staple that bolsters the U.S. first world economy: recent border policies, low-wage immigrant work (‘legal’ or otherwise), and free trade “in goods, not flesh,” to use Leslie Marmon Silko’s phrase (“Border Patrol State” 77), all operate in the backdrop of “el país de las grandes oportunidades.” Occurring largely during Holy Week, the text ironizes the structural similarities between the persecution and suffering of Christ—Himself a border-

crosser and political refugee—and those of the unnamed immigrants who undergo similar persecution both en route to and within the United States. Here, though, readers find no Christ figure who might circumvent the persecution of Mexican immigrants. Instead, on Holy Saturday, readers encounter the bodies of these same characters in the unforgiving desert (“Muerte y esperanza” 46). Rather than encounter the Eucharist, we read of the broken bodies of ten additional Mexican characters, found on Easter Sunday (47). The metonymic association of Mexican border-crossers with the Christ figure works to reverse a longstanding moral hierarchy that envisions the nation-state as a bounded monolith (“we” are here, “they” belong there), and it interrogates the parameters of legitimate belonging as merely ‘documented’. The author represents the borderlands here as a liminal zone of precarity and possible death, where the optics of national security promote the idea of the nation as neatly demarcated and bounded in spite of the necessary cross-border labor and economic flows that actually benefit Mexico’s northern neighbor. The desert borderlands here occlude the plight of Mexican migrants from non-Latina/o characters, and in conjunction with United States policy, the region robs them of resources to the point of near invisibility. The geopolitical and the interpersonal converge once more, and the author gauges how topographies of dispossession emerge from these transnational and highly asymmetrical connections.

The juxtaposition of Mexican journalism alongside that of the United States highlights an important disconnect regarding how the conditions of the Mexican characters are represented on both sides of the border. The local newspaper of what readers assume is a U.S. border city (the “[s]ección local” of the “prensa norteamericana”) elides the abuses of border patrol programs by extolling these efforts as rescue (“al rescate”) missions: “El Servicio de Inmigración al rescate de indocumentados abandonados. Se utilizan cuatro helicópteros para peinar la zona desértica y montañosa del este de San Diego. El operativo *Gatekeeper*, ¿responsable?” (“Muerte y esperanza” 47). Rather than configure the hardships that migrants experience or even the circumstances that motivate their journeys as the effects of United States policy, the local U.S. press emphasizes vigilance and border security—areas that likely correspond to the interests of the fictional reading public. Hierarchies, of course, are indispensable to constructions of power and the scripts that normalize immigrant disposability, as the story demonstrates time and again. In her article “Transnational mobilities, migration research, and intersectionality,” sociologist Floya Anthias contends that we should also approach nations along similar lines in order to assess the inequalities that characterize transnational

connections: Nations, Anthias argues, are “no longer defined as a bounded space but as providing a node of position and place in a global landscape of inequality” (103). Accordingly, when readers encounter Mexican mobility in these short stories, they are able to map patterns of precarity in ways that reflect “how different nations are hierarchically positioned and how actors themselves are positioned hierarchically through these global dimensions of power,” which includes “ascriptions and attributions given to actors because of their provenance or country of origin” (103).

The Mexican press is far less reticent in its criticism of its northern neighbor’s policies: “Asociaciones de derechos humanos acusan al operativo <<Guardián / Gatekeeper>> por la muerte de los migrantes. Desde octubre de 1994, fecha en que entró en efecto dicho operativo, han muerto cientos de personas. Las autoridades norteamericanas acusan a los <<coyotes>> de estas muertes” (“Muerte y esperanza” 47). In sharp contrast to the “prensa local,” the “[s]ección de opiniones” in the U.S. press faults Operation Gatekeeper as the primary cause for the deaths of those who ventured into the remote desert, and the “[e]ditorial” of the same “prensa norteamericana” identifies border-crossing as an uncomfortable necessity for many Mexicans in search of work: “La desesperación hace que los migrantes ignoren leyes. Nadie culpa a los trabajadores” (48). Lacking this transnational nuance, the same “sección local” characterizes Mexican border-crossers as unidimensional criminals: “El servicio de inmigración está satisfecho por los resultados de Gatekeeper. Han arrestado a miles de trabajadores indocumentados; la mayoría fue deportada” (49). In his book *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization*, poet and literary scholar Michael Dowdy criticizes what he terms the “globalizing logic” of neoliberalism, which, in his view, promotes “open borders for capital and discipline for labor” (19). Open borders for labor, in other words, do not necessarily entail open borders for bodies. It is no surprise, then, that the local press elides mention of the transnational forces promoting the Mexican characters’ necessary border-crossings, thereby promoting a view of the nation-state as necessarily enclosed and presupposing that Gatekeeper, the border policy in question, is as effective as it is necessary. In the end, these omissions trivialize the personhood of Mexican border-crossers, reducing them to anonymous “indocumentados” who simply merit deportation (“Muerte y esperanza” 48). By juxtaposing different representations of border-crossing, the story forces readers to look past simple reductions by stressing both the macro and micro process that work to the detriment of the those whose language capacities and national origins contrast those of a majority Anglo body politic.

The text treats the border on the one hand as a geopolitical entity, a physical construct that demarcates two nation-states; but it also casts it as a symbolic marker that occludes the complexities of transnational networks. Crosthwaite compels his readers to contemplate how immigrants' long-standing precarity and necessary cross-border mobilities reflect a transnational belonging. The border here suggests an image of the national community ("us") as bounded, but the story contests this facile notion, privileging a vision of belonging that is necessarily transnational and exposing how dispossession emerges from geopolitical machinations that condition the interpersonal.

"La silla vacía": Deconstructing Real and Imagined Borders

Borders, of course, are also imagined, and they inform the ways in which individuals construct identities, both personal and collective⁶. Even so, the U.S.-Mexico border has, and continues to, operate as a space where multiple forms of violence (state-sanctioned or local) become encoded and normalized, often through a logic that privileges binary thinking (us / them, citizen / illegal) and, thus, bounded notions of belonging and identity. As cultural anthropologist Olivia T. Ruiz Marrujo contends, "Because of the tension involved in determining who is 'native' and who is 'foreign' ... borders are neuralgic centers of vigilance, exclusion, coercion, and control, and by extension, places of explicit and latent violence" ("Women, Migration, and Sexual Violence" 39). En "La silla vacía," Crosthwaite explores the self / other dichotomy that informs all imagined borders, ultimately suggesting that they just as effectively stigmatize and exclude as do their physical alternatives. The story simulates a counseling session between AAA, a therapist, and his patient, ZZZ, in which both discuss the effects of the border in the day-to-day life of the latter. Rather than represent the border as a vague geopolitical backdrop, Crosthwaite personifies the border as an ex-lover, infusing the story with an ambiguity that forces readers to consider questions of affect, belonging, and how transnational connections between Mexico and the United States condition both. Early in the story, for example, the patient affirms that the border "es imaginaria ... no puedo hablar de ella" ("La silla vacía" 84), and that in order to speak of the border in detail—its changing nature throughout the years, the effects it has produced in his own life in Tijuana—he must instead speak of the border as if it were a woman (85).

⁶ See Lapid, "Now and Then, Here and There" (7); Diener and Hagen, "Conclusion: Borders in a Changing Global Context" (193); and Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (151).

By configuring the border accordingly, the text explores the border as a site of limitation, disenchantment, but also of possibility. In ZZZ's first address to the border, we see how the latter both restricts bodies and limits the feasibility of both present and future social action:

Ya lo sabes. Te conozco desde hace años, desde la infancia ... Tú eras una Frontera solitaria. En ese tiempo eras mi Frontera favorita, no conocía a otra ... Eras una demarcación, pero deseabas ser como yo ... Entonces yo necesité libertad, requerí espacios más amplios para desenvolverme ... Ahí fue cuando sentí por primera vez tu autoridad. Y traté de rebelarme. En vano. Salí de la escuela, busqué trabajo, traté de hacerme una vida normal. Procuré enamorarme de una mujer ... Eras una Frontera inflexible y por más que te insistiera no lograba que me soltaras, no podía ir más allá del perímetro que marcabas a mi alrededor ... No me permitiste amar a esa mujer, ni a ninguna otra. (87-8)

Writing in regards to the author's representation of the border in his early fiction, Vilanova contends that "the border is both the space that permeates the text and the main textual reference," and that because of this depiction, the border "takes an explicit and leading role in his fiction [in] the bustling motion of the urban frontier that molds his fiction" ("Another Textual Frontier" 91). Here, though, the clever ambiguity concerning the border—Is she a jealous lover enacting revenge? A physical wall separating two lovers?—blurs the interpersonal and the geopolitical, reminding readers that the border affects both, in much the same way that the habitus of Crosthwaite's characters cannot be confined to one nation-state. According to ZZZ, "Una Frontera es una Frontera, es un límite, es un confín; no puedo llamarla Margarita o José Agustín. Tengo que llamar a las ideas por su nombre" ("La silla vacía" 89). When AAA later insists that his patient speak in place of the border, readers encounter how the nearly 2,000 mile divide beseeches a mental construction of invisible borders.

As the narrative advances, for example, *la Frontera* assures us that the exclusions that emerge from geopolitical borders likewise produce a series of imagined borders:

No hay Frontera si no existe la necesidad de cruzar. Existen los cercos para mantener afuera lo que no se desea adentro, cierto; pero esas barreras no tendrían razón de ser, un sentido, si alguien no intentara cruzarlas. O sea, el límite prevalece porque hay quien desea traspasarlo. Toda Frontera existe

Polifonía

sólo en la imaginación del que desea franquearla. Es un invento del que vive enfrentándose a ella. Un binomio perfecto. ("La silla vacía" 94)

The border's subsequent dialogue with AAA casts doubt as to which borders prove most detrimental—the social boundaries separating constructive dialogue, or the geopolitical constructs that divide nation-states:

AAA: Percibo que tratas de decir que todas las Fronteras están en la cabeza, producto de uno mismo.

FNT: Sí.

AAA: Eso es cierto en algunos casos; en otros, las Fronteras son reales.

FNT: ¿A qué te refieres con <<reales>>? (94)

"La silla vacía" displaces the primacy of the physical border by exposing how exclusion informs the construction of all borders, whether physical or figurative. The story suggests that the identity markers that result from both encode patterns of exclusion and dispossession. Crosthwaite valorizes the tenacity of Mexican border-crossers, casting their actions as virtuous necessities, and he privileges their cunning and survival strategies that develop in response to transnational phenomena beyond their control. This is to say that if border-crossers and northern Mexican residents alike must cross the physical border from 'there' to 'here,' they must likewise confront a series of invisible borders separating 'us' from 'them.'

The concluding passages of the story thematize as much by displacing the physical border as the primary determinant that limits immigrant mobility. Speaking about *la Frontera*, ZZZ affirms:

He tratado de alcanzarla. He querido tenerla. Nada es posible con ella. Se va, se aleja, cambia su forma. Se mueve cuando menos lo espero. Se modifica ... No puedo traspasarla si está en constante movimiento. No puedo trascenderla si está en constante crecimiento: se expande. ("La silla vacía" 99-100)

"La silla vacía" directs us to the socially constructed borders that extend beyond physical barriers. By doing so, the text affirms that social borders, too, limit mobility, and may in fact be the most difficult to cross since they are socially constructed, invisible, and in constant movement.

Conclusion

With his short stories taking place in cities, deserts, and along the border itself, Crosthwaite forces his readers to gauge how exclusion, asymmetrical relations of power, and transnational networks inform borders—both the geopolitical and the interpersonal. The author provides us his *instrucciones para cruzar la frontera*, but he is also giving us a revelación sobre la frontera by privileging the bifocal consciousness that emerges from these transnational machinations. Rather than represent immigrant or northern Mexican characters as figures lacking agency, these three stories recast their actions as virtuous responses to unequal networks of power linking Mexico and the United States. Ultimately, Crosthwaite's stories dignify the actions of their Mexican characters by representing their seemingly 'illegal' or questionable endeavors as difficult necessities in light of transnational forces that compel cross-border mobility.

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