Border Real, Border Metaphor: Altering Boundaries in Miguel Méndez and Alejandro Morales

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This paper explores the different conceptualization of the US-Mexico border region as depicted in Miguel Méndez's *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1975) and Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1993). While Méndez's text relies on a geographically specific region, the clear demarcation of this same region is set in doubt by Morales's elimination of the US-Mexico border. In doing so, Morales effaces the real-border subject and so strips from him or her the voice and space rendered by Méndez.

Méndez and Morales within Critical Border Discourse

Both *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1974) by Miguel Méndez and *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) by Alejandro Morales stand at opposite ends of the current debate over Chicano cultural studies. This recent and still unfolding re-graphing of Chicano cultural identity, as evinced by the title of José David Saldívar's *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), has disposed of the concept of Aztlán[1] for a more visibly concrete borderland. Indeed, Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez's *Border Visions* (1996) makes no formal reference to Aztlán although his area of study is the Southwestern United States, traditionally acknowledged as the location of this mythical place of origin. This movement from a nationalist to a borderlands paradigm is likewise propagated by Saldívar's *Border Matters* in which Aztlán, though still recognized as a

potential though problematic symbol for Chicanos, is denounced for the desired homogeneity it represented for the protonationalist Chicano movement (195). In María Socorro Tabuenca's assessment—quoting Rolando Romero's "Post-deconstructive Spaces" (230)—:

> Aztlán has been left behind and the borderlands are now the new metaphor of Chicano theoretical discourse. For the majority of Chicano studies, the border now 'becomes a Chicano Eden, the original paradise.' (57)

Specifically, this same post-national deterritorialization is also a factor apparent in recent Chicano fiction. As Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez states:

> Upon reading recent Chicano/a literature, it could be claimed that a growing number of texts (especially narrative texts) are shedding off nationalistic concerns that were so common only a couple of decades ago in favor of transnational, diasporic, or globalized considerations. ("Deterritorialization" 391)

Geographically, the border allows for a defined battleground, while metaphorically, the borderland has a fluid quality that permits its usage with regard to language, class, race, sexual identity, and other such distinctions. In the words of Sean de Soto: "By enlarging the frame of Chicano identity, Borderlands has also been a critical model which can better understand and interpret the 'marginalia'" that were often unseen or simply left undisclosed in Chicano cultural studies (401). As Gloria Anzaldúa's case epitomizes, while she is clear to define her status as a border dweller growing up in Texas along the U.S.-Mexico border, she is quick to point out that there are also psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands that are not geographically specific to the political border between these two countries (i).[2]

In simple socio-historical terms, therefore, Miguel Méndez's *Peregrinos de Aztlán* highlights the potential horrors of the border experience while at the same time acknowledging its position within Aztlán; indeed, the novel situates Aztlán along the border. Based on the plight of Mexicans and Chicanos at the Mexico-U.S. frontier, Méndez's characters are in fact on a pilgrimage that is marked and consistently foiled by the toil of everyday subsistence in a harsh physical, social, and economic border climate. Nonetheless, while clearly establishing a poetics of place, Méndez's focus also engages the occupants of this particular border landscape—all of which in one way or another are made marginal by the symbiotic nature of their association to the space they inhabit.

On the other hand, perhaps influenced by his own theoretical and critical forays as critic and professor of Latin American and Chicano literatures, Alejandro Morales's futuristic positioning of the region often designated as Aztlán is supplanted by the borderland; not necessarily the border in its current geographic configuration, but the metaphoric border representing a paradigmatic shift that symbolizes "the division and limits of culture, language, food, traditions, influence,... power... fear, desire, love and hatred" ("Dynamic" 23). Spanning over 300 years of past, present, and future history, Morales's representation of the border in *The Rag Doll Plagues* is characterized by the encounter between culturally different worlds, often resulting in horrific devastations manifested in the

form of incurable disease and ecological destruction.

Méndez: Master of Border Place

Peregrinos de Aztlán has been described as a novel of the grotesque. As such, "it focuses on the most deformed of settings for Mexicans: the border" (Vélez-Ibáñez 237). The abject nature of *Peregrinos de Aztlán*'s narrative representation of a border reality debilitates the reader's faith in his or her way of seeing the world by removing him or her from the sanctity of traditional ways of reading and apprehending the literary, much like Wolfgang Kayser defines the experience with the grotesque (61). Closer to the topic at hand, Harry Polkinhorn's attempt to define border writing conjures up this effect when characterizing the defamiliarizing nature of the border text:

> [...] border writing drags us into a zone of experience which is alien; linguistic diversity is coupled to a raw otherness of experience. The reader becomes the illegal alien who has been forcibly deprived of the right to be. Conditions are extreme, social rules are unknown and unpredictable, guilt universal, violence omnipresent. We are no longer the comfortable citizens of a natural order or a social realm of reasonable expectations, but are reduced to an animal or plant level, or taken out of the body altogether. (40-41)

As such, however fragmentary the nature of the text and the border life experience of its inhabitants might be, the alienation induced by the grotesque is experienced by both Mexicans and those residing in the United States, by those that cross the border into the U.S. and by those Chicanos that venture into Mexico regardless of citizenship as Vélez-Ibáñez implies. In fact, the landscape and its effect on its denizens is always constant, regardless on which side of the line characters might be. Thus the concept of the "other side" becomes hazy in the transborder settings of Tijuana-San Ysidro/San Diego, Yuma-San Luis (both Arizona and Sonora), Mexicali-Imperial Valley, and Tucson-Nogales (both Sonora and Arizona). This trans-geographic specificity however does not, in any way, detract from the metaphoric uses of the border paradigm. Language, aesthetics, and past and present are all issues presented by Méndez in a fluctuating border dynamic that constantly question their traditionally accepted homogeneous forms.

While these border metaphors may be issues to contend with in a reading of Méndez's most commented text, it is still the unrivaled depiction of a border reality in *Peregrinos de Aztlán* that stands above any other of the text's representations of the metaphoric border dynamic. The concrete nature of his narrative's location, for instance, is the reason behind Gary D. Keller's flattering rendition of Méndez as "Master of Place" with regard to the binational Sonoran Desert (1). Francisco A. Lomelí, similarly, while acknowledging the magical, mythological, and symbolic elements of the text, points out that "[t]al vez es más significativo que su novela aporte al entendimiento de una patente y olvidada realidad social fronteriza entre dos países" (16). Juan Bruce-Novoa's reading of the text furthermore celebrates the notion of rescuing the forgotten and silenced voices of the unheard subaltern for posterity (208) given that the transborder social and historical reality of Méndez's characters effectively drowns them out: in *Peregrinos de Aztlán* "society does not acknowledge their worth, and the written

record denies it" (209).[3] As such, Bruce-Novoa concludes, "Méndez, while remaining faithful to his people and their situation as the silent ones, breaks the silence to rescue their images and preserve them" (214). It is this faithfulness, then, which can be broadened to include the geopolitical landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border that is so prominent in the novel.

Cast traditionally as a "no man's land," the effect of Méndez's text with regard to this region works similarly to what Michel Foucault defines as a "magnifying instrument" which, in this case, makes visible the unseen terrain, the peoples, and culture of the border, addressing "a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value" (Foucault 50-51). One of the more prominent examples of this veiled material is the novel's staunch positioning of the Yaqui people of the Sonora Desert on the forefront of the Border landscape and the Mexican Revolution. As Rolando Romero explains, traditionally the Yaqui people "were seen as blocks to Mexican national identity" (39). Referring to Héctor Aguilar Camín's reading of Sonoran history and its relation to national politics, Romero concludes that the "othering" and "dispossessing of the Yaquis led to the modern Mexican nation" by way of a process of self-definition that negated Yaqui culture. Through *Peregrinos de Aztlán* Méndez thus helps remedy the omission of the Yaqui in mainstream Mexican and Chicano culture by way of his indigenous characters, their role in the Mexican Revolution, and the use of the regional Yaqui-inflected Spanish language of his central character Loreto Maldonado. This cultural invisibility—defined by Renato Rosaldo as characteristic of hybrid border spaces located between seemingly fixed cultures, nations, and classes for their "little of this and a little of that, and not quite one or the other" composition (209)—is precisely what *Peregrinos de Aztlán* emphatically highlights and begins to eradicate.

Morales: Remapping, Displacing

If Miguel Méndez situates the border as a backdrop from which it is impossible to extricate his characters and the situations that afflict their daily lives, Alejandro Morales's depiction of the border proves to be the contrary. *The Rag Doll Plagues*'s three sections all take place in different times and geographic areas: stretching from the Colonial Spanish rule of Mexico through a 1980's Southern California and Mexico City, and finally ending in the futuristic reconfigured Los Angeles to Mexico City area known as the LAMEX corridor situated in a post-border end of the XXI Century. In all three cases, there is an obvious conflict forged through the coming together of different cultures as pertains to their distinct loci of power. In the section on which I will here focus, this axis is clearly defined "as the LAMEX corridor, a geo-political entity that prefigures and goes beyond post-NAFTA North America," a place in which "the colonial and the postcolonial, the center and the periphery, the inherited and the created culture, are brought together" (Martín-Rodríguez, "Deterritorialization" 395).

In part, this coming together is due to the reconfiguration of the geographic boundary between the U.S. and Mexico as depicted in this third and final section of the novel. As Gregory Revueltas, narrator, protagonist, and descendant of the namesake narrators in the previous sections explains: "About twenty years after the turn of the century, the border became stabilized

and eventually abolished" (151).[4] This eradication, set off by the political and economic stability between the two countries, dismantles the geo-political division between them, but as a result de-emphasizes the location of the pre-LAMEX border region, its people, and culture. In short, what Méndez places on the map, Morales displaces by remapping the region and re-accentuating the importance of the axis cities of Mexico City and Los Angeles.

Following the guideposts set by the names of the three sections of the novel—"Mexico City," "Delhi" (a Los Angeles neighborhood), and "LAMEX"—the concluding section constantly effaces the peripheral border region while repeatedly centering the already centered center. Note the language used by the narrator to describe the surrounding areas of his home and its direct link to the core of LAMEX:

> The house is only minutes from two commuter travelways that run from *Los Angeles* to *Mexico City*. One follows the Pacific Coast and the other travels through the desert, right to *the center of Mexico directly to its heart, ancient Tenochtitlan*, the name under which the *Aztecs* ruled nearly six hundred years ago, today *Mexico City, the capital*. (133-34, my emphasis)

Geographically, the focus on these core areas is a constant as is reflected in the LAMEX Health Corridor whose headquarters are simultaneously in Los Angeles and Mexico City (134). Culturally, Morales once again privileges the Aztec origins of Mexico, obliterating other indigenous groups such as the aforementioned Yaqui that Méndez situates as important figures in Mexican history.

The novel's privileging of these megalopolises reiterates and promotes the importance of such cities in today's world. The Mexican capital, for instance, is depicted as a cultural hub "where the talented people of the world congregated" (162). Likewise, the narrator is quick to resort to foundational myths that help to falsely define the totality of the Mexican experience:

> Ancient times and cultures issued forth from deep within the soul of the Mexican earth. It was a past ignored, but felt deeply, an ancient fervor that ran through the mind, heart and blood of Mexico. Since the time of Tenochtitlan to today's Mexico City, the Mexicans continually carried their historical ghosts dangling from their modern ritualistic necklaces. (162)

As the "center of the world" for "the Mexican people [... Mexico City] functioned much like the Los Angeles to San Diego area, as a political, economic and cultural core" (162).

Although usage of "the Mexican people" appears to encompass all Mexicans, the text constantly utilizes this centralizing common denominator for all when in reality it simply rejects the peripheral, other Mexican. This false synecdoche first becomes apparent when Los Angeles is hit by a plague that threatens to decimate the local population. While it is true that "Most of the casualties are Euroanglo and Japanese.... Only those Mexicans born in this country [the U.S.] have died" and "Not one from Mexico City" (183). As is discovered by the protagonist, it is "the transfusion of Mexican blood" that proves to be an antidote for the plague (179). It soon becomes apparent, however, that it isn't just any Mexican blood: it is only Mexico City Mexican—"MCM"—blood that is found to contain the necessary mutations that endow it with curative properties. Thus, when the people of Los Angeles

realize the healing nature of the MCM's blood, the number of immigrants from Mexico City

> tripled in a matter of weeks. They came with their identification documents, birth certificates and letters of residence, certifying that they were born and had lived in Mexico City or the surrounding area. These people from ancient Tenochtitlan were in demand. (194)

What then ensues is the "domestication" of the MCM. "Made expensive pets" and prompted to procreate with others of "excellent pedigree" because of their blood's worth (193), "millions of MCMs signed contracts of blood enslavement" (195).

Perhaps with a tinge of irony, but in many ways further underscoring similar stances on the reconquest of what used to be Mexican territory prior to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the narrator registers the projected fulfilment of what Carlos Fuentes has dubbed "imperialismo cromosomático":[5]

> In a matter of time Mexican blood would run in all the population of the LAMEX corridor. Mexican blood would gain control of the land it lost two hundred and fifty years ago. (195)

Without resorting directly to it, the narrator points to the foundational myths regarding the Chicano nation as established in "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" (1969), whereby Aztlán, situated in the U.S. Southwest, is proclaimed as the land "from whence came our forefathers" thus becoming a symbol for Chicano history, culture, identity and—perhaps more important—destiny (Leal, "In Search" 20). While *The Rag Doll Plagues* effaces the geo-political border and its subject, the text indirectly gives primacy to the Aztlán myth that would appear to be backward given Chicano studies' recent post-nationalist appreciation of the border as metaphor. The Aztlán/Tenochtitlan connection serves as a coming together of centers in past and present time, which in turn simply reiterates the LAMEX—Los Angeles/Mexico City—axis of power in geographic space. In both cases, the joining of these entities clearly displaces into oblivion the peripheral in-between border region and its border dwellers.

A border genealogy: The unheard cry of *Peregrinos de Aztlán*

In its manuscript form, Morales tentatively titled *The Rag Doll Plagues* as "The Ancient Tear/La vieja lágrima" (Leal, "Historia" 41). The choice of this first title becomes apparent when considering that all three sections of the novel end with the narrator Gregorio or Gregory Revueltas shedding a tear that can at best be described as simultaneously joyous, painful, and hopeful due to his parting with the past and embracing of the new found present and the forthcoming future.

At the end of "Mexico City," the emotions that produce the tears in Revueltas are a mixture of joy for the recovered health of Mónica Marcela and sorrow for the death of Father Jude. At the same time, there is happiness and sorrow for Revueltas's decision to abandon his initial goal of returning to Spain and his newly found resolve to remain in Mexico City:

> [...] perhaps that was the cause of the tear running down my cheek; perhaps it was an older, more ancient

> tear, traveling through those who had come before me. (66)

The end of "Delhi" is a celebration of the mutual love between Revueltas and Sandra, although she has also died a peaceful death due to the then incipient AIDS virus:

> She, Sandra, who entered, changed and loved my life exactly as I loved hers, who called from deep within my soul an ancient tear that would forever taste to me like our love, the tear both of us shared at the final moment of her passage. (129)

Similar to the previous sections, "LAMEX" ends with the narrator suffering the death of a loved one; in this case the tear comes while reminiscing about his partner, Gabi Chung, and her suicide but is also representative of the hope he finds in contemplating a new life after leaving his job as medical director of the LAMEX Health Corridor.

The concept of the "ancient tear" expressed by the original title is best described in the novel's final paragraph, whereupon the narrator reaches a sense of closure regarding his personal and professional life:

> I am no longer me. I am transfigured into all those that have gone before me: my progenitors, my hopeful ever-surviving race. From the deepest part of my being there rushes to the surface of my almond shaped eyes an ancient tear. (200)

The tear, therefore, though shed in a specific point in time and under very distinct circumstances, is more than the individual's. The transfiguration of the one into the many, akin to the Borges-like assertion that all men are one,[6] places Revueltas in direct lineage, not only to his genetic ancestors represented in the previous sections of the novel, but also to those characters that populate *Peregrinos de Aztlán*.[7]

Near the end of Méndez's novel, upon receiving the news of his son's death while on a tour of duty in Vietnam, Pánfilo Pérez's initial lament is described as "el grito escondido de los indios ancestrales" (177)—akin to the notion of an ancient tear—embodying the pain and suffering endured by Mexicans during turbulent periods of conquest, colonization, Revolution, and migrations:

> El hombre apuñaleado por el destino se sentó con los ojos muy abiertos, sonrió moviendo los labios. Vio una caballería que piafaba encabritándose con sombrerudos enorquetados, portando machetes y carabinas 30-30. Seguido se le trocaron en Border Patrols sobre palominos, siguiendo perros de presa en persecución de un wetback; luego se le volvieron hombres flacos y barbudos, vestidos de hierro con espadas y lanzas, que desafiaban iracundos a las montañas y a los gigantes para darse en toda la madre con ellos. (178)

Again, as with the ancient tear wept by the Revueltas characters in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, though the individual's pain and circumstance can be isolated to Pánfilo Pérez, the suffering and anguish expressed by his cry supercede his personal torment and historical time. This notion of an ancestral pain surfaces once again at the end of the *Peregrinos de Aztlán* when the omniscient narrator, in assessing the present plight of the Chicano people, uses genetic claims to reveal the extreme nature of their oppression:

> Así la historia, de pronto, como en un mal sueño nos dejó varados en la isla del olvido, presos. No sólo eso, han quedado encadenados los genes

> que guardan la cultura, esencia de nuestra historia, vedando las arterias que como ríos traen el ímpetu de la sangre que anima la voz y el alma de nuestro pueblo. (183-84)

Resorting to the blood and genetic make-up of the pilgrims of Aztlán, the text emphasizes the hereditary nature of the oppression, suffering, and pain represented in Pánfilo Perez's cry; much like the ancient tear shed by the Revueltas generation after generation.

After depicting such a bleak reality, *Peregrinos de Aztlán*'s final words amount to an imperative cry for change demanding that the silence of the oppressed be broken: "romped el silencio" (184). The voicing of the silent effected by Méndez is thus a metafictional response to the desperate call made by his own text. The novel both pleads for a re-writing of history that will re-place the border dweller and his or her importance in mainstream culture and power while at the same time openly participating in this project. As Bruce-Novoa surmises, the text articulates Méndez's implication that

> a true version of history will justify us; [that] our lost traditions can grant significance and meaning to time and death, and they can project a viable path towards the goal of human dignity. (213)

As *Peregrinos de Aztlán* itself shows, this human dignity is granted in part by recovering the border dweller from the invisibility relegated upon the peripheral subjects of the centralized order.

As such, linked by similar genealogical characteristics that harken to distant yet similar pasts, both *Peregrinos de Aztlán* and *The Rag Doll Plagues* play on a notion of inheritance that imposes upon the present and future representatives of their familial and cultural groups a tie to past sufferings. If taken as members of a similar kinship group, related by this common adverse history, it would appear that Morales's text fails to adhere to Méndez's call for the re-siting of the border dweller and his or her histories.[8] Indeed, *The Rag Doll Plagues* not only disregards the border dweller by creating a world in which value is measured in terms of what is relevant to urban centers such as Los Angeles and Mexico City, it erases the border completely. Taken further, this analysis would lead one to conclude that by erasing the geo-political border, all that is identified with it is also crossed out of existence.

While the current trend in cultural studies is quick to embrace and celebrate the border paradigm as a new tool for analysis and inclusion of all things marginal, there is also an element of danger involved in simply using the border as a mere trope for the purpose of illustrating theoretical appreciations of processes such as complex identity formation, globalization, and cultural hybridity. In the words of Eduardo Barrera Herrera,

> La frontera se convierte en una abstracción que sirve para medio delimitar las otredades, mientras que los/as migrantes son sólo portadores/as de códigos cruzando las abstractas fronteras, entre territorios que son sólo grandes espacios semióticos. (14)

From the perspective of the inhabitants of the material border that divides and yet brings together Mexico and the United States, post-border equals no defining (b)order.[9] To eliminate the border is to eliminate that which gives meaning and identity to

those who live the complexity of a material, hybrid border existence.

Notes

[1] According to Luis Leal:

> Aztlán has two meanings: first, it represents the geographic region known today as the Southwestern part of the United States, composed of the territory that Mexico ceded in 1848 with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; second, and more important, Aztlán symbolizes the spiritual union of the Chicanos, something that is carried in the heart, no matter where they may live or where they may find themselves. ("In Search" 18)

In many ways, my reading of the border in Méndez and Morales mirrors this twofold definition which captures both a real and imagined appreciation of the borderland.

[2] Curiously, it is this effacing of the local that could explain Anzaldúa's wide readership and popularity among scholars in different disciplines:

> it may well be that her work's remarkably broad adoption has been bound up with the text's figuration of the border and the unique accessibility to border culture it invites. Anzaldúa fashions this accessibility by offering readers a 'universalized' point of entry. (Gutiérrez-Jones 100)

[3] This is precisely Gayatri Spivak's contention regarding the subaltern's ability to speak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The impossibility of speaking is intricately related to the inability to be heard by representatives of the hegemonic order.

[4] The eradication of the border does nothing to erase the problems of the people who live along what used to be the border. In fact, every coming together of distinct cultures represented by the text is marred by a plague that disappears only to reappear at a later time in history.

[5] In Fuentes's short story "El despojo," chef Dionisio Rangel assesses history's irony regarding Mexico's loss in 1848 of what is now the U.S. Southwest. As he puts it, Mexico is in the middle of recuperating the lost territory by way of what he calls "el imperialsimo cromosomático de México." Manifest Destiny aside, Rangel claims, "ahora México les daría una sopa de su propio chocolate, reconquistándolos con mexicanísimas baterías lingüísticas, raciales y culinarias" (69).

[6] Borges's short story "El inmortal" makes the case for a single man being every man that ever lived: Joseph Cartaphilus, Marco Flaminio Rufo, Homer, Ulysses, etc. are all the same person. Likewise, Morales's use of Gregorio/Gregory Revueltas as the main character and narrator of the novel's three sections, which cover a span of over three hundred years, similarly explores the concept of Borges's immortal.

[7] *Peregrinos de Aztlán* also ends with a transfiguration: Pánfilo Pérez's pain at the death of his son transforms him into a giant bird that from the sky can surmise the suffering of all Chicanos throughout the U.S. Southwest (179).

[8] While *The Rag Doll Plagues* disables this general genealogical link, Morales's use of the family theme in his narrative is paramount. *The Brick People* (1988) in particular traces the history of the Revueltas—related to Gregorio in *The Rag Doll Plagues*—and their descendants in conjunction with the history of California. On a more personal level, resembling the transformation experienced by Gregory Revueltas at the end of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales has stated:

> I am my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles, my brothers and sisters, and my cousins. They are my nation that slowly changes. To recover them in history is my goal. In remembering and writing stories with truths and fictions, I accomplish their salvation and my own. ("Dynamic" 15)

[9] According to Tabuenca, something very similar is found in the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña: "The Mexico-U.S. 'border' represented by Gómez-Peña before a mainly academic audience has displaced the material border and what it contains within.... [His work] has given reason for people to believe that his vision is the reality of the border" when actual

border residents and artists like Rosina Conde and José Manuel Valenzuela claim that "his border is nothing like ours" (61, my translation).

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