

THE RIVER AS BORDER IN MONTSERRAT FONTES' *FIRST CONFESSION*

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ABSTRACT

The river as the positive and evolutionary symbol of fertility, eternal renewal and flux of life, among others, is one of the most recurrent symbols found in the history of mankind, and accordingly, of Literature. Nonetheless, this positive and even mythical conception of the river somehow and sometimes differs when analysing the story and reality of the Chicano community. Materialized in the image of the Rio Grande, the river constitutes at first sight, on the contrary, one of the deepest and most painful boundaries that has intricately shaped the reality of this community. This is the case of Montserrat Fontes' *First Confession* (1991), a story that portrays the life of two Mexican high-class children, who offer a particular vision of the river and what it represents in their lives.

KEY WORDS: River, identity, childhood, holy communion, confession, border.

RESUMEN

El río como símbolo positivo de fertilidad, renovación eterna y fuente de vida, ha sido, entre otros, uno de los símbolos más recurrentes en el devenir de la historia humana, y consecuentemente, de la literatura universal. No obstante, esta concepción positiva y casi mítica del río, difiere notablemente cuando analizamos la historia y la realidad de la comunidad chicana. Materializado en la imagen del Río Grande, el río se convierte en una de las más profundas y dolorosas fronteras de la realidad de dicha comunidad. Este es el caso de la novela de Montserrat Fontes, *First Confession* (1991), una historia que describe la vida de dos niños de la clase alta mejicana, quienes ofrecen una visión muy particular del río, así como de lo que representa en sus vidas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: río, identidad, infancia, primera comunión, confesión, frontera.

*Al otro lado está el río
y no lo puedo cruzar
al otro lado está el mar
no lo puedo atravesar.*

Isabel Parra, "En la frontera"

On the other side is the river
and I cannot cross it
on the other side is the sea
I cannot bridge it.

Isabel Parra, "At the Border"



The river as the positive and evolutionary symbol of fertility, eternal renewal and flux of life, among others, is one of the most recurrent symbols found in the history of mankind, and accordingly, of Literature. Regarded as an ambivalent entity, the stream of water symbolises the dichotomy of life and death, the entering into the state of Nirvana, it represents a purifying force for the Indians, the crossing between the Ying and the Yang for the Chinese and it was offered diverse sacrifices by the Greeks. The river, to sum up, has epitomised the convergence of good and bad forces into a positive, renovating and healing superior force. Considered as one of the most essential necessities for the development of modern civilization, one only needs to fleetingly glance back in time to History to verify that the story of humankind and its development has been directly linked to that of rivers.

Nonetheless, this positive and even mythical conception of the river somehow and sometimes differs when analysing the story and reality of the Chicano community. The river, materialized in the image of the Rio Grande, constitutes at first sight, on the contrary, one of the deepest and most painful boundaries that has intricately shaped the reality of this community. Both a geographical-physical frontier, as well as a more mythical-symbolical one, the river may well represent the strong divisions that the American society relies on, which thus provoke different class, ethnic and gender-bound types of discrimination. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848, enormously contributed to the conception of the River as one of the most important geographical frontiers that separated the old, Mexican way of life, and the new, American one. This clear-cut physical division gave rise to the creation of one of the most feared and rejected institutions, designed to maintain such frontier: The border patrol, the federal institution that repressed and persecuted those who dared cross the *uncrossable* line between past and present, the line which represented and fostered a profound loss of identity amongst its nearby dwellers. As the Chicana critic Gloria Anzaldúa posits:

The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country —a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. (3)

Not only does the Rio Grande symbolise a hard-crossing physical border, as inferred from the above words, but its strength and force establish the untrespassable inner cultural border that has long marked the difference between the ruling Anglo, white class, and the foreign “Other” community of the Chicanos. Hence, the river depicts both the geographical as well as the cultural border that marks the Chicano experience as one of alienation and displacement from their roots and traditions, as well as from the prevailing social order and rules.

Given the aforementioned circumstances, one may well assume that the Chicano conception of the river probably differs in various aspects from other worldwide extended more positive understandings of it. Viewed as a threat by many, it represents a menace to the integrity of the Chicano identity, as it acts as the source

of the fragmentation of his inner self. This ambivalent and often dichotomous understanding of its reality, has paved the way for the creation and spreading of its image as a mysterious setting, in which many of the most mythical, fantastic and simultaneously most respected and transmitted legends that the Chicano community relies on have taken place. The legend of *La Llorona* is, amongst others, an illustrative example of the idea outlined above, depicting the story of a woman who wanders around the crossroads and ditches, yearning for her lost child. *La Llorona*, a mythical figure that has given rise to different interpretations, may well symbolise the damaged river, the river of death, as inferred from Clarissa Pinkola Estes' version of the legend:

Among Spanish-speaking people, there is an old tale called *La Llorona*, "The Weeping Woman". (...). It is a tale about the river of life that becomes a river of death. The *protagonista* is a haunting river woman who is fertile and generous, creating out of her own body. (325)

We could therefore assume that this negative envisioning of the river as a constraining cultural and geographical border could often be chronicled in many of the writings of the contemporary Chicano authors, for as Dennis Walder manifests, "To write is usually an attempt to express the particularity of your self or your situation, an attempt to engage an audience with what you have to say" (1). This is the case of Montserrat Fontes' *First Confession* (1991), a story that portrays the life of two Mexican high-class children, Victor and Andrea, who at the time the story takes place are preparing for their Holy Communion. As the story evolves, the kids experience several encounters with the inhabitants of the town they live in, all of whom are part of less privileged social groups: the town prostitute, the river kids, etc. These encounters contribute to the loss of the innocence of the two central characters, as well as to provoking a strong moral conflict in them. The novel magnificently portrays the class differences that have often characterised the development of modern societies, but, as opposed to many other writings produced by Chicanos, whose protagonists are in many cases members of the less privileged social groups, the portrayal is presented through the eyes of two wealthy children. The river, whose existence is discovered at the time the story takes place, symbolises the geographical, social and psychological border that will account for the dismantling of their well-established identities, as well as for the difficult maintenance of their stable, easy reality.

The two children, who live in a comfortable dwelling and are being taught the morally good and acceptable Christian ways, discover the river which symbolizes the diametrically opposed kind of life to theirs. Said river is inhabited by poor and dirty people, uneducated and uncultured, but nonetheless, feared and respected by the children. This rejection confirms the big, untraversable gap between "us" and "them" (Anzaldúa 3), a division which clearly establishes the hierarchical and discriminatory frontier between the mainstream, "normal" and acceptable community (personified in the two kids) and the deviant "other" society, silent, mute, but in constant motion. As Gloria Anzaldúa describes:



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, or go through the confines of the “normal”. (3)

This geographical and social border is quickly accepted and assimilated as such by the two children, who unconsciously understand their superiority in relation to the river kids. Nonetheless, the discovery of this unknown terrain symbolises the axis around which the plot revolves. The emergence of the two children from the naïve and protected shelter of their house, where they had been kept shielded and simultaneously trapped, chronicles the entering into the new unknown world, in which the discovery of the river represents the symbol of their rites of initiation into the adult, complicated and often corrupt world. From the beginning of their first encounter with this new life, the river is seen as a dirty, polluted, yet interesting place by the kids. This distorted and dirty representation of the river could well epitomise the oppression of the Chicano people, symbolized by the hard living conditions of those who live next to it. As explained by María Herrera-Sobek: “For Chicana poets and writers alike environmental contamination becomes linked to the oppression of the Chicano people” (94). Moreover, the river is depicted as the physical expression of the mysterious, dark side of life, and their attempts to approach it, as well as its inhabitants, portray the painful crossing towards an adult, more masculine life.

This negative masculinization of the river is materialized through its opposition to the more feminine, protected and naïve milieu that the house symbolizes. Thus, the house, *la casa*, is the realm of femininity, where Andrea and Víctor are protected and secure. The dirty, polluted and corrupt river, *el río*, is the depiction of the masculine, adult and unknown side of life, which has been concealed from the children. This clear-cut division of the kids’ existence into one of a feminine and protected space and its opposed version, the masculine or one-to-be-avoided space, becomes instrumental in the fragmentation of their identity, as well as in the inner conflicts that the fact of the constant collision between their education and their real experience produces.

Consequently, the first steps Victor and Andrea take towards their crossing are the least fruitful. Conscious of their class superiority, as Andrea admits, “I guess you could say that we were rich. Our friends were too” (9), this social and personal gap is portrayed as extremely difficult to surmount. The author, in a metaphorical way, thus opts for portraying and at the same time criticising the well-established dividing lines existing within modern societies, and more specifically within the American one, which promote the idea of the necessity felt by those in the ruling classes to govern and control the lives of the unprivileged. Hence, the river in Fontes’ story becomes, as exposed by Homi Bhabha, the “*terra incognita* or the *terra nulla*, the empty or wasted land whose history has to be begun, whose archives must be filled out, (...) (246). Moreover, the legends and stories that the river has always been surrounded by, transform it into a more monstrous and threatening entity, in the eyes of the kids, the “suspected other” that justifies their superiority. As portrayed in their own words:

When Alma and Rosa first came to work for us, they told me that people sometimes threw unwanted babies into the river. One spring, when the river flooded its banks, people drowned in their sleep. In the morning their corpses floated down the current. According to Alma and Rosa, the river ripped their clothes right off their bodies. People could see them dead and naked. (27-28)

The assimilation by the two kids of the idea of the river as a dangerous place to live, where disease is rife and living conditions are difficult, as opposed to their easy, upper-class life, makes them aware of their superior reality, thus creating a sense of both pity and guilt within them towards its inhabitants. This feeling, which will constitute the catalyst for their desire to cross and discover this “other” life, together with their need to avoid and silence the existence of this unknown reality in the eyes of their wealthy family, leads them to infinite problems, which promote their many inner identity conflicts, for as Stephanie Lahar posits, “Invisibility and violence are strangely and intimately related; refusing to perceive or acknowledge another person is one end of a continuum whose other is murder and genocide” (93).

Assuming their more comfortable reality, as Bhabha suggests, they opt for helping the river kids in an extremely protective, patronising way. They thus attempt to create a bridge between their controlled, respectful, “cultured and adult” way of life and the disorganized, savage, “natural and infant” one of the river kids, in order to find a balance between these clashing worlds, for as Ynestra King proposes “the process of nurturing an unsocialized, undifferentiated human infant into an adult person (...) is the bridge between nature and culture” (116). Nonetheless, after organizing a race for them,

Victor and I watched the race in silence. I was mad. It was supposed to be my race. We both knew what was wrong: Beto. Beto had stolen our game from us and there was not a thing we could do about it.

When the winner, a girl with long, thick braids, raced up to claim her prize, Beto told me to give her a doll. I obeyed. There was no glory in my action. I felt nothing. That exhilaration that had run through my body when we first arrived at the river was gone, vanished, replaced by humiliation. (Fontes 79)

As the result of the disastrous attempts to approach the river kids, their feelings towards the river and its inhabitants will become extremely contradictory and conflictive for the two protagonists. On the one hand, the difficulties they find in their approximation to the river life are surmounted when they do so with the members of their own family. Accustomed to crossing the US-Mexican border easily for lucrative reasons, the vast gap between their real identity and their desire to belong to the unknown world that the river represents increases rapidly, promoting their sense of superiority:

For the next few days Father kept us out of the house as much as possible. In the morning we crossed the border to the American side, where we had breakfast, shopped, lunched and shopped some more.



Every time we crossed the bridge Victor and I looked down at the river shacks. We saw women washing clothes and saw people standing around fires. (Fontes 49)

Notwithstanding, this obvious external division and contradiction which they remedy by means of their class dominance, is fostered by the deep inner conflict both kids are subjected to as a consequence of their departure from this “house/sanctuary”, for as explained by Roberta Rubenstein, “rooms, walls, houses-including the more emotionally saturated meaning associated with “home”-are tropes for inner experience, as are imprisonment, escape, flight, and homelessness” (234). The emergence and integration into this new, “other”, displaced world is directly linked to their breakthrough in the prohibited world of sex. The discovery of Armida, a woman who sells herself, will be followed by the children stealing her money. The fact of familiarising oneself with sex as something to be concealed, associated with strong and dark negative connotations, together with the stealing of Armida’s money by the kids, directly collide with the rigid and “positive” religious and moral education they are receiving. This education, based on the preaching of each individual’s strong feeling of sin and prohibition, represents a diametrically opposed attitude towards the kind of life they are discovering in the realm of the external world. The river, which becomes the uppermost symbol of this desired, unknown world, is “ruled” by anarchy and necessary survival, whereas their existence is controlled by different elements and institutions, such as the family and traditional religion.

As a result of the combination of their sense of superiority towards the inhabitants of the river, and the religious education they are receiving (which promotes Bhabha’s aforementioned notion of helping the unprivileged), the fact of stealing Armida’s money is regarded in a positive light by the two children, who decide to spend the money on toys for the river kids. Nonetheless, the outcome of their action will be extremely negative, as observed before, for their patronising and controlling intentions will be despised and boycotted by the river kids, who contribute to the disastrous failure of Andrea’s “humanitarian” action.

In conclusion, the First Confession they are preparing for epitomises the crossing into the correct moral adult world, in direct opposition to the morally incorrect, albeit real world they are about to discover. This painful conflict they are subjected to, becomes the catalyst for the fragmentation of their self-secure and comfortable identities. Andrea, representative of the strong, contemporary woman, opts for accepting her “difference” and “otherness” from the river kids, understanding her “marginalized” position in relation to them.

We didn’t talk about the river or the money; we played the way children are supposed to play. Every time my aunt looked out and saw we were still there, I felt proud that we were doing what she expected of us. (Fontes 94)

Only by assimilating this difference, will she be able to overcome her conflicts and pave the way for the delineation of her consciously-chosen identity, which is the outcome of the amalgamation of the diverse information that she has imbibed. Victor, on the contrary, will be unable to accept his decentred position,

which will lead him to a tragic end, suicide. In Víctor's case, his refusal to see his difference and accept the existence of the river kids, provokes his personal murder and the symbolical genocide of the inhabitants of the river by means of considering them invisible. Thus, the different approach of the two main characters to the river, provides it with a dual identity, by means of which it becomes the symbol of the flux of life and renewal, as it is in the case of Andrea, and that of death, as in the case of Víctor, who, as the river that dies in the sea, is unable to assimilate his capacity to reinterpret his place in life.

The river, thus, becomes an important symbol in Fontes' novel, where it represents the *healing wound* described by Anzaldúa. It is an important geographical frontier, as well as the symbolic fragmentation of the identities of those who live around it. The dividing line between *them* and *us*, the river is what marks the difference in the lives of our two protagonists. Concomitantly, in a more revisionist and positive stance, this border gives rise to the renaming and reshaping of a new inclusive and integrative border identity.

The distinct attitudes towards this difference, accordingly, influence the means of solving the identity conflict of the characters. To sum up, we could posit that Fontes calls for a inner revolution by which the "marginalized" person accepts such marginalization as the most positive way of confronting the various dividing lines that conform our existence. This revolution calls for the assimilation, amalgamation and transformation of each individual's existence and identity into a positive, binding force. This positive and transformative renegotiation of the marginalized position, as well as of the inner cultural and identity conflicts that it fosters, becomes the uppermost (r)evolutionary overcoming and trespassing of the constraining borders.

Somos una gente

*Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen a la gente
pero por cada frontera
también existe un puente.*

Gina Valdés



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