

An Album Novel for a Border City: The Case of *Idos de la mente: la increíble y (a veces) triste historia de Ramón y Cornelio* by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite

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Media in the United States and Mexico frequently employ the negative stereotype of border culture commonly referred to as “la leyenda negra” of Tijuana.¹ Against this pervasive stereotype of blood-soaked transnational slums, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite portrays a multi-faceted border community through a pastiche of vibrant culture and music in his novel, *Idos de la mente: la increíble y (a veces) triste historia de Ramón y Cornelio* (2001). In the narrative a pair of Tijuana norteño musicians become celebrities on radio and television only to self-destruct under the pressures of stardom. Their rise and fall narrative fictionalizes the musicians Ramón Ayala and Cornelio Reyna from the 1960s norteño band “Los relámpagos del norte.” Through a mixture of media, language and evocations (or appropriations) of music legends, this narrative pays homage to a complex border culture that defies the demonized characterization bestowed it by media in Mexico and the United States. In this study I observe a cross-fertilization of different genres of cultural production such as documentary, music, graphic arts, and film, in innovative cross-media techniques that result in what I call an “album novel.”² In its assembly of media into an album novel, *Idos de la mente* demonstrates the struggle of the heterogeneous border community to define its own identity through appropriations of disparate media, cultural artifacts, celebrities and symbols.

After a decade of relative obscurity, Crosthwaite’s body of work has recently seen an increase in critical attention. He now occupies a prominent place among authors of the border and is the most important recent author of fiction to portray the Mexican Northwest. Crosthwaite’s earlier published works of fiction include the short stories *Marcela y el rey* (1988), *El gran pretender* (1992), *No quiero escribir no quiero* (1994) and *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994), and *La estrella de la calle sexta* (2000), *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera* (2002). These works all take place in Tijuana and reflect a larger border-centric world view. He is also a poet and co-editor of *Puro Border: Dispatches, Snapshots and Graffiti from La Frontera* (2003), an edited album of fiction, nonfiction, poetry and statistics. In spite of Crosthwaite’s tendency to confront social problems and celebrate a heterogeneous border identity, he describes himself, “soy un testigo de la frontera, no soy un crítico.”³ He lives on both sides of the border, working in San Diego and spending his evenings and weekends in Tijuana.⁴

Crosthwaite is often found in surveys of border writing as a representative of the Mexican Northwest. Diana Palaversich places his writing at the forefront of a wave of recent border authors involved in “la creación de mitos en torno de una identidad nortea particular en constante resistencia al centro” (18). Santiago Vaquera Vásquez uses Crosthwaite’s depiction of the slow moving border crossing line from Tijuana to San Diego as an epigraph for his broadly scoped border criticism. Vaquera Vásquez avers of Crosthwaite:

His references to the violent image of the city are undercut by the constant play of references to the bi-national location of Tijuana and the transnational mixings that take place there. In the process of parodying the narrative of violence about the border, he is also reveling in the local culture. (704)

Vaquera Vásquez has noted of Crosthwaite that he enjoys elaborating his fiction to parody a desire by people in the national centers to read violent tales of the border. Similarly, Edgar Cota Torres proposes that Crosthwaite “se humaniza a la sociedad fronteriza del norte de México, acción con la que se establece un distanciamiento de las construcciones estereotípicas que asocian a la ciudad de Tijuana, y a toda la frontera” (145). Cota Torres explains that Crosthwaite’s short stories subvert ‘la leyenda negra de Tijuana’ as a city of vice and crime. Other critics who have published on Crosthwaite’s short stories include Perla Abrego, Miguel Rodríguez Lozano, and Mark Hernández.

The majority of scholarly attention has been paid to his short stories and relatively little has approached *Idos de la mente*. A few critics have commented on the cultural aspects of the narrative. Jennifer Insley specifies of the novel that “Whereas outsiders have long derided Tijuana as a cultural vacuum, Crosthwaite’s novel celebrates the city as a space of nortea innovation” (115). Jaime Muñoz Vargas notes of *Idos de la mente*’s myriad references to both high and popular culture, from nortea musicians to the reference to *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y su abuela desalmada* by Gabriel García Márquez implicit in the title. Muñoz Vargas mentions the pastiche composition of the novel but does not elaborate beyond stating, “La novela -una especie de archipiélago narrativo- sólo en apariencia está construida con base en la fragmentación de sus partes” (1). Núria Vilanova argues that Crosthwaite’s specific depictions of Tijuana’s streets and people reject the utopian notion of a melting-pot style “hybrid” community. According to Vilanova, Crosthwaite’s complicated technique is simple intertextuality. Similarly critical of a melting-pot notion of border culture, Pilar Bellver Saez alleges that theory on hybridity “ha acabado celebrándose como una nueva forma de cosmopolitismo.” These two critics have other concerns than the relationship between Crosthwaite’s multi-media writing technique and the heterogeneous, at times contradictory, character of this border community. Crosthwaite’s use of heterogeneous media, language, music and legends is neither an attempt at cosmopolitanism nor a depiction of a melting-pot society, but rather is a radical local appropriation of the symbols of power from both the national centers to the North and South.

The narrative of *Idos de la mente* does not fit into an easy categorization as a novel because of its album style of construction; however, it has a novelistic cohesion that prevents the various pieces from being isolated short stories or fragments of mixed media. Poetry, letters, lists, documentary, comic book graphic art, song lyrics and film compose together a novel that tells a complete rise and fall narrative. The many pieces parody various genres of writing and speaking voices: the multiplicity of fragments compiles a postmodern, pastiche album novel. The fragments of *Idos de la mente* do not coalesce into a single trajectory as is the case in the modernist novel in Latin America.⁵ This album novel has more in common with the ekphrasis of the poets of the Vanguardia or of the narrative experiments undertaken by Cortázar in some of his later works.⁶

In a personal interview, Crosthwaite noted an eclectic mix of authors and media as having a profound impact on his development as a writer.⁷ While there is an obvious homage to Gabriel García Márquez, Crosthwaite mentions Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Abigail Bohórquez and Rubem Fonseca as inspirations. He is also quick to note the importance of North American authors Richard Brautigan and Ernest Hemingway as influential. Furthermore he describes his lifelong fascination with graphic novels and popular films, citing in particular Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*. Reflecting his preferences, the theme of media consumption and the frequent references to music, literature, graphic art, and film from both sides of the border pervade the text of *Idos de la mente*.

The plot of this album novel can be traced across the heterogeneous fragments, each piece containing a partial view of events. 'Idos de la mente' are the two protagonists of the novel, Ramón and Cornelio. They are described in a series of fragments in the first chapter as boys exploring the streets of Tijuana as would-be musicians. Their first performances are at family parties where they cover popular norteño ballads. Seeking to make a living as musicians, they play in cantinas in 'la zona' in Tijuana. Perhaps no other figure is as emblematic of Tijuana as the wandering norteño musician. Entertaining on the fringes of the music world, they play covers in anonymity until they are signed as 'Los relámpagos de agosto' by Jimmy Vaquera, a Mexican-American record producer.⁸ Cornelio, playing the bass guitar and writing songs, is visited in a dream by a norteño speaking God who inspires his music. Ramón, on the accordion, passes the time asking questions about Cornelio's fetish for women's feet. As they play larger and larger venues, their lives begin to reflect the narrative trope of a star's rise to fame, decadence, and collapse.

"Los relámpagos" are coached by the legendary Ranchero musician José Alfredo. After playing on television extravaganzas hosted by Señor Velasco (a fictionalization of television host Raúl Velasco) they enjoy national celebrity in Mexico and begin to entertain an international audience. The hubris of fame and a divisive woman, Carmela Rafael, cause the duo to separate and attempt solo careers. Cornelio stars in film, mimicking the career of Pedro Infante, and has adopted a cultured speaking style. Ramón secludes himself on his ranch until divorce leaves his life in ruins. At the end of the novel, Cornelio becomes a kind of Elvis Presley figure, eating himself to death while

Ramón attempts to cash-in on his former glory with his new band, “Los bravos de agosto.”

The inspiration for “Los relámpagos” is the norteño band “Los relámpagos del norte” led by Cornelio Reyna and Ramón Ayala that was a popular group in the north of Mexico during the 1960s.⁹ Crosthwaite parodies and pays homage to their accomplishments throughout the many fragments of the album. Some fragments are simple lists of song titles and lyrics, both real and imagined. For example, three separate fragments are greatest hit lists, each beginning as a “Sucesión de éxitos” (70,122,165). These parodic fragments also trace the rise and prefigure the fall of the characters via the song titles. For example, the song “Idos de la mente” was a real hit by Reyna and Ayala. However, the title of Ramón and Cornelio’s first hit in the novel “Entre tus cejas” is fictional and serves to parody them. The last song to appear in these lists is “La muerte de dos norteños” (70). The invented music inventory also serves as a narrative tool that shapes the plot of the novel, pays homage to musical legends, and also parodies their excesses.

The visual media of the narrative are the graphic art pages interspersed as chapter headings. Each illustration by Ricardo Peláez Goycochea is a rectangular slice taken from a larger picture. The style of illustration is that of the comic book or graphic novel. For example, the graphic art in the first chapter is titled “Estos eran dos amigos,” and shows a table with beers and a game of dominoes in progress. The chapter then deals with the musicians’ youth in Tijuana and the cantina scene in which Ramón and Cornelio begin their musical careers. The effect of only showing a fragment of the overall picture mimics the way the various text fragments capture an action or a mood. These partial views serve as a metonymy of the larger story. Much like the fragments of text that reveal only parts of the larger narrative to form in their gestalt a larger story, the illustration fragments also build a larger image which results in the final product resembling an album.

The written mimesis with film brings a visual element to the album novel. José Alfredo is killed four times at Cornelio’s side; each death scene evoking elements of pop culture and film. In each fragment entitled “Cuatro muertes hay en la vida,” as he lies dying, he whispers to Cornelio that he too had spoken to God, “Yo también hablé con él” (118, 132, 148, 170). In his first death, José Alfredo races a car across the desert and crashes spectacularly like James Dean. In his next death lightning strikes him as he plays golf, evoking a scene from the 1980 film *Caddyshack*. In his third death, José Alfredo is assassinated like John Lennon by a fan toting the novel *Catcher in the Rye*. In his fourth death, he appears a bloated former star whose body has collapsed after years of debauchery. These parodic, postmodern vignettes of pop culture demonstrate a filmic sensibility, especially in the *Caddyshack* scene, that enhances the visual element to the album novel.

The ordinary nature of border crossing is a foundational element of Crosthwaite’s Tijuana depicted in the novel. On the radio, the length of the wait at the border control is included in the daily weather report. Cota Torres asserts that the normalcy of border crossing in Crosthwaite’s narrative is a tool to undermine “la leyenda negra” of Tijuana.

When José Alfredo is hospitalized, Cornelio goes to visit him at Scripps Hospital in San Diego. Crosthwaite describes the transit from one side of the border to the other with a mixture of boredom and frustration:

Tener que cruzar la frontera. Y luego en domingo. Con la fila interminable de carros. No parece tener prisa. Lentamente aborda auto, cruza ciudad, llega a frontera, hace fila, escucha radio, larga espera, muestra pasaporte. El oficial gringo no lo reconoce. Pendejo. Sigue camino por autopista, lentamente, sin prisa, no quiere llegar. (171)

Cornelio expects to be recognized as a celebrity by the Anglo border agent, but rather, he is just another car waved across. Crosthwaite describes the border crossing as a tedious daily experience and the border itself is less a transcendental marker of difference than an annoying obstacle to freeway traffic. Similar to the perspective developed in *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson, the border community itself appears to be constructed from the cultural artifacts of language, music, and celebrity. Anderson contends that groups create their group identity via the production of cultural attachments in songs, languages and novels among others. Anderson asserts:

Amor patrie does not differ [...] from other affections, in which there is always an element of fond imagining [...] What the eye is to the lover [...] language [...] is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed. (154)

If, as Anderson argues, particular cultural artifacts such as printed vernacular language or folk songs create the attachments that constitute a sense of identity, then the cultural artifacts of norteño music and the cultural connections surrounding it in *Idos de la mente* create attachments of a borderlands identity unique to Tijuana. This concept is evocative of Carlos Monsiváis' comments about the continued status in Northern Mexico of musicians as cultural anchors. Monsiváis states:

migratory waves have established their own national identity without paying too much attention to their country's 'great history.' What they have is different: loyalty to Mexican food (without being fanatic), faithfulness to styles of religious piety (with or without lifetime commitment), and enthusiasm for songs and legends that serve as collective autobiographies and bring back memories. (119-20)

Crosthwaite directly engages this enthusiasm for songs and legends as central to the Tijuana cultural mythology that appear throughout the fragments of media in *Idos de la mente*. Music legends-- cultural artifacts for Anderson and fixtures of a collective autobiography for Monsiváis-- such as the charro actors Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante,

as well as the Beatles, are appropriated in the text and given *norteño* characteristics. This borrowing of symbols does not make Crosthwaite's Tijuana more cosmopolitan, but rather makes these beloved symbols more *norteño*.

The identity-establishing function of the duo's music is stated in the novel, "En voz de Cornelio, la canción recorre el aire a través de las ondas de radio. La gente la escucha y siente que recibe justo lo que andaba buscando; durante esos de tres minutos o menos, la vida parece ausente de incertidumbre" (80). This uncertainty reflects the constantly changing conditions of life at the border and shows the need to establish border identity through local legends. The cultural production of *norteño* music in Tijuana, thus, becomes a locus of specific meaning to border residents.

A number of text fragments describe in poetic terms the means by which *norteño* music spreads across the city of Tijuana, figuratively entering the pores of the city:

El radio es buen cómplice para Ramón y Cornelio. Derrama música y esta sigue su cauce por las calles de Tijuana, de casa en casa, tocando puertas como un imprudente vendedor ambulante. Los niños, las amas de casa, los hombres desempleados abren las puertas de sus hogares en la mañana y dejan que entre la música para comenzar el día. La ciudad se vitaliza. (16)

Radio, and *norteño* music specifically, is a unifying cultural artifact without which the border loses its center. When a *norteño* song is heard on the radio in Tijuana the narrator describes the effect it has upon the public:

Se paladea en la calle; se oye salir de una cantina; se escucha en los restaurantes; se arremolina en las largas filas de los bancos; entusiasma a las muchachas de secundaria; agradece a las madres su noble esfuerzo; envalentona a los estudiantes tímidos; incursiona en las cárceles públicas; encabeza manifestaciones; desprecia a los políticos; participa en congresos; libera pensamientos; promueve abrazos; encabeza guerrillas; envalentona; atrinchera; fortifica; defiende; auxilia; limpia; salva; hace; ata; da. (63)

Crosthwaite implies in this fragment that the utopic desire for a better future is brought out in the cultural artifact that most unifies the border region: its music. The regional music emitted on the radio gives its listeners a unique sense of cultural identity and solidarity at the same time as it anoints its musical legends.

These giant figures dominate the cultural landscape and provide a mythology for the border region. Norma Klahn acknowledges that through art and literature "A hybrid culture has emerged that is rejected by both hegemonic centers, which are still holding to, on the one hand, the 'American assimilationist dream' and, on the other, the concept of the *raza cósmica*" (137). The problem for Klahn is this process of "othering" that she

calls “South of the Borderism” and “North of the Borderism.” These are pervasive stereotypes of the border as a den of vice or as a region changed by American consumerism respectively held by the national centers of the United States and Mexico. In a nostalgic mode after their long time apart, the narrator reminisces in la Zona in Tijuana, “Aquí estuvieron Ramón y Cornelio cuando nadie los reconocía ni podía adivinar su futuro, cuando sólo eran un dueto entre otros duetos en una frontera como cualquier frontera [...] Ahora, sólo la música permanece, sólo la música es real” (173). The frontier is made normal by this depiction. Far from being a strange or disjointed place, it is a home to citizens of both nations. And while times do change, the music -- the centering cultural artifact -- remains to ground the identity of the city.

Television represents the power of both the United States and Mexico to monopolize discourse in the border region. When the duet first plays on television, they appear before both a live and a national television audience. The experience is unnerving in spite of its success. Velasco is a particularly odious representative of nationalist media. Velasco’s speech reveals a prejudice held by border culture noted by Pablo Vila against a stereotypical “Chilango” resident of Mexico City (247). The “Chilango” is negatively characterized by border residents as having excessive regional vanity and a sense of superiority towards the border regions. In the text Velasco is parodied as having a coterie of “hermosos donceles” whom he surrounds himself with (68). As a gift to posterity, Velasco has his handsome secretary Mónico take notes on his reflections as “El señor Velasco realiza uno de sus pasatiempos favoritos: mirar el pueblo a través de las ventanas de su limusina” (160). Velasco is the manager of hype and self-appointed king of the commercial side of music in Mexico. He usurps the occasion of Cornelio’s death as a chance to self-aggrandize by eulogizing Cornelio as a national hero:

Lo observan millones de ojos. Su discurso es muy elocuente: profunda tristeza, ídolo de México [...] modelo único, recuerdo eterno, minuto de silencio, amor, tiempo, justicia, instituciones, país, democracia, nuestro entorno sociopolítico, las próximas elecciones, la continuidad de nuestro proyecto. (186)

Television reinforces notions of nationalism and homogeneity by making Cornelio not an icon of Tijuana, but rather of the state. The contentious relationship between television and radio in the novel demonstrates how the narrative is at once able to condemn hegemonizing narratives of nationalism that are propagated by television and defend the locally defined cultural project of norteño music played on local radio stations.

Vilanova stresses that *Idos de la mente* is composed of a variety of intertextual fragments. A number of these are letters written from one character to another such as when Cornelio is accosted by a man who claims to be his deceased father. The persistence of the letters eventually breaks Cornelio resolve and the final letter is a legal contract from his lawyers offering the presumed father a pension to desist in writing. The documentary sections, credited in footnotes as being part of a published collection “Truenos y relámpagos: conversaciones con Ramón y Cornelio” by Abigail Bohórquez, imply a kind of historicity and offer the voyeuristic pleasure of a step-by-step depiction

of the collapse of celebrities. The presence of Bohórquez as a character interviewing the duet for a fictional documentary brings academic Spanish into contrast with the language of the protagonists. Bohórquez asks Ramón and Cornelio if anyone taught the duet to play:

AB: ¿Alguien en especial?

Cornelio: No no no, nadie en especial. Y ya es hora de aclarar que nunca tuvimos un maestro, en Tijuana o donde que sea, desde ahora lo desmentimos. Hubo raza que nos apoyó, pero hasta ahí, güey. (34)

The professorial Bohórquez is referred to with the familiar insult “guey” by the norteros and the fragment draws in sharp contrast the nature of this fragment of documentary interview conducted by an academic.

Vaquera and Velasco employ variations of the border dialect. Vaquera’s border language plays a counterpart to the language of Ramón and Cornelio. He speaks an English mixed with vulgarity and bits of Spanish as seen in a press release for “Jimmy’s Records: Where we uncover las estrellas” (59). He embodies a stereotype of the consumerist attitudes that Vila reveals to be espoused by residents of the Mexican side of the border towards Mexican-Americans. Furthermore, this example of English mixed with Spanish occurs in a business setting, bringing to mind Vila’s contention that different identities and attitudes can be employed by border residents depending upon the cultural encounters they have. For Vila, narratives, tropes and metaphors of border experience are selectively appropriated by “persons [who] develop a sense of subjectivity, in part, by thinking of themselves as the protagonists of stories” (247). The stories tend to conform with broad cultural understandings that homogenize the “other” such as “All social problems are related to Southern Mexicans,” “Mexican Americans want to humiliate Mexican nationals” and “Americans are slaves of their consumerism” (247). According to Vila, these stories coexist and at times contradict each other as they are needed for the daily interactions of the border resident. Crosthwaite’s characters are able to adapt to the various social situations then encounter, whether they are making films in Mexico D.F., performing in a cantina in Tijuana, or receiving an award in Miami.

Velasco not only represents what Vila would call the obnoxious “chilango” but also flaunts his superior knowledge of English. He describes Ramón’s solo career, “No cabe duda que ya pasó al olvido. Es un jas bin, un nobary. Ni modo es el destino de los segundones” (117). In contrast, the narrator employs an elevated prose as in a fragment where the narrator describes a melody that Ramón composes, “Es un corrido, una de esas canciones que elevan el espíritu, que dejan testimonio de la presencia del hombre sobre la Tierra” (9). Through passages such as these, Velasco’s mixture of “chilango” superiority and North American greed are posed against the spiritually uplifting music legends that serve as Anderson’s identity grounding “cultural artifacts.”

Throughout his many private conversations with Cornelio, God serves as a spiritual nortero music manager and also contrasts with the villainous Velasco. When

God first speaks, he tries to make a deal with Cornelio to write down his songs, “Tenemos que hacerlo juntos. Tú solo no puedes, yo solo no puedo. Socios, partners, ¿le entras?” (27). When God uses this word in English, it reflects the commonplace cultural encounter of English and Spanish in the U.S.-Mexico business of music production. In another fragment he begs Cornelio to leave his hiding place, “Aquí tengo otra canción para ti, ponte trucha. Es una canción de amor. Un amor que empezó chingón y que luego valió madre” (162). Eventually, he gives up speaking to difficult Cornelio because he is too busy picking out a cowboy hat. Nevertheless, his sympathies lie with the community of Tijuana and he uses the duo as a vehicle for his grace to be bestowed upon his *norteños*.

When Cornelio dies in the narrative, he is brought to heaven by bus (even then, the bus stop leaves him a short walk to arrive at the gates). Heaven is described as a *norteño* festival of beer and music populated by departed music legends, “La música *norteña* llena todas las esquinas y se precipita sobre ti... Por allá andan Pedro, Jorge, Javier y José Alfredo” (185). The idea of a *norteño* heaven contrasts with the fact that these legends of Mexican mariachi, *ranchero* and *corrido* music from the mid twentieth-century, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Javier Aguilar and José Alfredo Jiménez, are not *norteños*, but rather pertain to the national pantheon of music stardom. Infante, though born in Mazatlán, did not become a major star until he played the role of Pepe el Toro in a number of films with a prominent *Chilango* accent. The *charro* clothing of these musicians, especially of film stars Negrete and Infante, has its roots in the horsemen of the state of Jalisco and is prominently displayed by *mariachis*. The *charro* style is differentiated from the *norteño* in a number of ways, but they perhaps are most graphically different in the round *charro sombrero* and the *sombrero tejano* (common to the stereotypical cowboy) popular in Tijuana. Just as Crosthwaite takes God away from more dominant national discourses and gives him *norteño* characteristics, these national music legends are brought into the local pantheon. Through a slight of hand, Crosthwaite appropriates these legends and places a *sombrero tejano* on their heads.

In one fragment, a grandstanding José Alfredo walks the streets of Tijuana and signs autographs. The star that was distant to the adoring crowds in *la Zona*, through a narrative wish fulfillment, becomes a regular at bars and stands on street corners just to be among his fans. An anonymous cacophony speaks of his passing, “José Alfredo. José Alfredo. Hoy lo vi, fue casualidad. Estaba en el bar. Lo miré al pasar. Me saludó. Hablé con él. Le gustaron mis ojos. Es más alto de lo que imaginaba. Es más *chaparro*. Es muy *varonil*. Parece homosexual” (22). The reverence shown him as an icon and myth of Tijuana popular culture in this quotidian street scene is ironic considering his clear origin and affiliation with Central Mexico. One of Jiménez most celebrated songs is titled “Camino de Guanajuato” celebrating various cities and monuments in the *Bajío* region of central Mexico. These anonymous Tijuana voices revere José Alfredo and reinforce Monsiváis’ comment about the role of stars and legends in the creation of a heterogeneous border community. But the uneven and contradictory hybrid process of identity construction is demonstrated by his appropriation from the national to the local.

While it can be read either as camp or parody, the continuous implication of canonical works of high art in Latin American literature has a specific role to play in this novel. Ana María Amar Sánchez notes that the McOndo associated authors and other Latin American novelists from the post-Boom through the 1980s employ “an appropriation of available forms that synthesize the current canon, while also rejecting it through the incorporation of ‘extraliterary’ forms” (208). She suggests that these authors use film and rock music in order to create difference between themselves and their forebears, however she points out, “their wager on mediation serves as a strategy of attack in order to gain ground and position themselves as canonical” (209). Their high voice “exhibits” the low in order to challenge earlier literary works and thereby gain entry to the canon. Stephanie Sieburth affirms that periods of change have produced initial vanguards of novels that react against popular culture by exhibiting “degraded” forms where “the high has become contaminated by the low” (12). These first reactionary novels in periods of drastic expansion by popular culture are succeeded by more accepting visions:

Later novels of each period begin to suggest that ‘highbrow’ literature has always in fact depended on devices and formulas which also appear in mass culture. These novels present the possibility that the fusion of the ‘highbrow’ literary tradition with popular forms might be productive rather than disastrous. (13)

Following Sieburth’s analysis, in the novel by Crosthwaite there is no high voice speaking or miming the low. There is no sensation that when God tells Cornelio “Ponte trucha” that he is being degraded from the elevated language to which he is traditionally associated. Rather, the single narrative voice speaking in border dialect throughout the fragments simultaneously invokes Bohórquez and the Beatles. *Idos de la mente* is less a novel of high literature miming mass media than a truly heterogeneous work that refuses a hierarchy of high art over low.

An example of this comingling of high art with popular culture occurs in a fragment where Cornelio is a movie star playing Tonatihu, (the Aztec god of the sun) and is seduced by Sylvia Selene in homage of Pedro Infante and Maria Felix who starred in a similar scene in the 1957 film *Tizoc*. Cornelio is seduced by Selene, a movie starlet, but rejects her overtures in a manner evocative of don Quijote when defeated by the Caballero de Los Espejos who then demands he renounce his love for Dulcinea. After a six minute on-screen kiss he tells her, “mi corazón es de mi eterna esposa, la sin par Carmela Rafael” (121). By mixing *Don Quijote* with *Tizoc* in a novel about norteño music, Crosthwaite places his sources all on the same level. The heteroglossic threads in the fragment do not begin from a position of high art and then exhibit or comment upon low art, but rather makes the claim that popular culture and canonical literature are equally valid narrative vehicles.

While Cornelio and Ramón in *Idos de la mente* roughly trace a similar rise and fall narrative, they also parody the rise and fall of the Beatles and Elvis. Bakhtin’s

description of parody is particularly useful in understanding the play between the historical figures and their novelistic counterparts. Bakhtin explains:

It is the nature of every parody to transpose the values of the parodied style, to highlight certain elements while leaving others in the shade: parody is always biased in some direction, and this bias is dictated by the distinctive features of the parodying language. (130)

The language of the border, with its Spanish/English hybridity and abundance of neologisms, is the vehicle of parody. The duet's fame reaches absurd levels, inciting fan clubs of women so devoted to one musician or the other that they brawl amongst themselves. Due to the stress, Cornelio becomes a recluse in his Graceland-like home, the streets outside patrolled by bands of admirers while his own neuroses keep him hiding in a closet. The use of parody in the narrative reveals some of the techniques of appropriation that Crosthwaite employs to make the Beatles and Elvis relevant musical legends to place alongside José Alfredo and Los relámpagos.

Much like when the charro stars and God are made *norteños*, the Beatles are also appropriated into a *norteño* cultural milieu. In this case however, their story is parodied by Ramón and Cornelio. The mimicry of the Beatles includes a corrido version of 'Obla di obla da.' In another fragment, Yoko Ono is parodied in the character of the meddling Carmela Rafael. When Cornelio and Ramón are recording their final album, Carmela begins to interfere in the studio. She asks them "¿No podrías hacer que la grabación ... suene ... no sé cómo decírtelo ... más padre?" (98). Her snobbish yet vacuous character nods to the relationship of Yoko Ono to John Lennon which was a factor in the breakup of the Beatles. The last performance of Ramón and Cornelio takes place on the rooftop of their recording studio, reenacting the final performance of the Beatles atop the Saville Row Apple Studios in 1969. After Cornelio's death, Ramón releases a greatest hits album in the United States and is given a Grammy by Gloria Estefan. This parody of the Beatles is also a celebration and an homage to their music as another of the "stars and legends" that serve as cultural anchors to Crosthwaite's narrative. It is a joke that recognizes the hybrid process of heterogeneous media consumption.

Norteño music, the daily occurrence of border crossing, and the appropriation of legends are depicted in this novel's fragments as the cultural artifacts of Tijuana's identity. Nevertheless the powerful stereotype of "La leyenda negra," reinforced by news of regular cartel violence, continues to dominate how the rest of the world perceives Tijuana. The treatment of narco-traffickers in the novel demonstrates a narrative wish fulfillment and what I consider a de-appropriation of a potent cultural artifact. Cornelio is approached on behalf of a drug dealer interested in commissioning a *narcocorrido*.¹⁰ The man asks that he compose a song for his patron's birthday party using a list of words, on the condition that the exclusion of any word from the list would be punishable by death, "Amigo, gallo, valiente, AK-47, périco, Tijuana, pacas de a kilo, cherokee del año, chivo, amápola, mujeres, jefe de jefes" (140). Asking God for help in preparing the song, Cornelio is shocked to hear the reply, "Sabes que, yo no escribo chingaderas... Aquí solo

hay un Jefe de Jefes” (140).¹¹ By refusing to write a norteño song praising the narco, God shows a general fatigue and anger that the cartels think they can dictate how the community should perceive them. The violent power of the cartels is not ignored but it is rejected as being part of the identity of Tijuana by this character.

Through its fragments, appropriations, parodies and homages *Idos de la mente* helps to constitute a borderlands cultural identity unique to Tijuana. The bricolage of fragments in this album novel ranges from graphic novel to documentary transcript, song list to press release, and through them the novel constructs a cautionary tale about celebrity and the negative power of stereotypes of the South, the North, and of Tijuana. The mixed media fragments do not follow a high/low art binary and put on par the local radio musicians with national and international musical legends, scholarly documentary, and popular film. The physical depiction of ordinary days crossing the border and quotidian nights in “la zona” of Tijuana, as well as the rejection of the narcorrido, attempts to dislodge “la leyenda negra.” For the border community, legends such as Ramón and Cornelio, as well as sombrero tejano wearing Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, José Alfredo Jiménez, God, Elvis and the Beatles, all help constitute a sense of identity through homage to music that is a unique blend for Tijuana. The farther the protagonists stray from their Tijuana roots and the local media of radio that fostered their growth, the more disastrous their lives become. Ramón and Cornelio need Tijuana and Tijuana needs them in order to find itself in “el oleaje histórico de encontrarse frente a la mejor banda norteña del universo”(95).

Notes

¹ Edgar Cota Torres has written extensively of the concept of “la leyenda negra.” In a personal interview, Crosthwaite joked that people from Southern California believe that he must step over cadavers when he leaves his house in the morning to go to work.

² Other novels published since 1990 across Latin America that reflect this aesthetic form include *Basura* by Hector Abad Faciolince, *Mantra* by Rodrigo Fresán, *A altura e a largura do nada* and *O anônimo célebre* by Ignacio de Loyola Brandão and *El círculo Blum* by Lucho Zuñiga.

³ Personal Interview, May 24, 2007

⁴ Crosthwaite is a staff writer for the San Diego Union Tribune in San Diego, California, USA and resides in Playas de Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico.

⁵ Raymond L. Williams provides a comprehensive description of the modernist novel in *The Twentieth Century Spanish American Novel*, (New York: Columbia U., 2007).

⁶ Julio Cortázar’s *Fantasmas contra los vampiros multinacionales* (1977) is a mixed-media work that employs graphic art and prose to narrate the story.

⁷ Personal interview, May 24, 2007.

⁸ “Los relámpagos de agosto” is a nod to the novel of the same name by José Ibarguengoitia published in 1965.

⁹ The duet produced over twenty albums and popularized the genre of norteño music.

¹⁰ In norteño music the “corrido” is a ballad celebrating the exploits of a legendary hero. The “narcorrido” or “narcocorrido” is in homage to “narco” drug traffickers and/or “coyote” human traffickers and is commonplace in norteño music.

¹¹ “Jefe de Jefes” is a popular narcorrido by Los tigres del norte.

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