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Frontera Crossings: Sites of Cultural Contestation*

> Where the transmission of "national" traditions was once the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature.
>
> Homi Bhabba, "The World and the Home" (1992)

In an influential manifesto, "La Cultura Fronteriza," published in *La Línea Quebrada/The Broken Line*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña theorized the trans-*frontera* urban galaxy of Tijuana and San Diego as a new social space filled with multicultural symbologies. Though perhaps too steeped in poststructuralist playfulness (at the expense of multicultural work), Gómez-Peña nevertheless hit upon one of the central truths of our Borderland culture: the extended *frontera* culture stretching from the shanty barrios of Tijuana and San Diego to the rich surf and turf of Santa Barbara (dominated by the megaspace of Los Angeles in the middle) is an enormous "desiring machine".[1] Such a notion of the *frontera* as a real zone with flows and interruptions, crossings and deportations, liminal transitions and reaggregations, is fundamental to my reading of U.S. border writing, for it will permit us to travel along different routes other than, say, the "Sunshine or Noir" and "Black or White" master dialectics thematized in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. While this is not the place to attempt a complete definition of U.S. border writing, the power of this formulation as developed by Chicano and Chicana writers is that it allows us to challenge nativist "Seal the Border" campaigns in California and the Southwest which feature so-called illegal aliens as invading pure national or cultural spaces. U.S. border writing, thus envisaged, allows us to begin remapping the national imaginary in more global terms.

The two-thousand mile-long U.S.-Mexico border, without doubt, produces millions of undocumented workers from Central America and Mexico who are essential to North American agriculture's, tourism's, and *maquiladora's* economic

machines. The border thus not only produces masses of agricultural farmworkers, low-tech laborers (mostly women), dishwashers, gardeners, and maids, but a military-like apparatus of INS helicopters, Border patrol agents with infrared camera equipment used to track and capture the border crossers from the South, and detention centers and jails designed to protect the Anglocentric minority in California who fear and even loathe these scores of *indocumentados*. Moreover, this desiring machine also comprises an enormous bureaucratic, political, cultural, and legal machine of *coyotes* (border crossing guides for hire), *pollos* (pursued undocumented border crossers), *fayuqueros* (food peddlers), *sacadineros* (border swindlers), *cholos/as* (Chicano/a urban youth), notary publics, public interest lawyers, public health workers, and so on, a huge "juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus" (JAT)—to use Nancy Fraser's coinage (154).[2]

What matters here for our purposes is that the U.S.-Mexico border apparatus constructs the subject-positions exclusively for the benefits of the North American juridical-administrative-therapeutic state: juridically, it positions the migrant border crossers vis-a-vis the U.S. legal system by denying them their human rights and by designating them as "illegal aliens"; administratively, the migrant border crossers who desire amnesty must petition a bureaucratic institution created under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) to receive identification papers (including a social security card); and, finally, therapeutically, migrant border crossers in their shantytowns in canyons throughout California have to grapple with various county Health Departments and the Environmental Health Services offices. For instance, at one shantytown called El Valle Verde (Green Valley) in San Diego County, the Environmental Health Services's director shut down the migrant border crossers camp "for violations dealing with lack of potable water for drinking, building-code violations, fecal materials on the ground" (cited in Chávez), and so on.

In what follows, I will analyze Helena María Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" (1985) as an astonishing example of U.S. border writing. In broad strokes, Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" follows an anonymous washer woman's forced migrations from an unnamed Central American *pueblo* (where the military has disappeared her five-year-old son) to Juárez, Mexico, where she crosses the border without documentation into the United States, and finally makes her way to Los Angeles, where she phantasmatically continues searching for her missing child. In less than fifteen pages, Viramontes gives her readers a complex, passionate story about the cultures of fear simultaneously present both in Central America (the government's torture of subversives) and in Los Angeles (the government's unleashing of the INS and the LAPD on undocumented workers), and how the marginalized washer woman uses her subaltern position to reclaim what Jean Franco, elsewhere, has called the new social "polis."[3] Once on the mean streets of Los Angeles, Viramontes's protagonist turns the Anglo-American owned Cariboo Cafe into an arena of cultural contestation by substantially altering material tradition in the Americas, casting herself both as new cultural citizen and as a pan-

Latina Llorona (wailing woman), thus aligning herself with Mexican and Chicana new social movements.[4]

If "all machines have their mastercodes," as Antonio Benítez-Rojo suggested in a different context (17), what are the codebooks to the cultural machines of this Chicana Border writer? What networks of subcodes hold together Viramontes's multicultural work of art? What are the central rituals, ceremonies, and ideologies in the texts of the transfrontier "contact zone" (see Pratt)? And finally, what are the benefits of examining U.S. Borderland texts as cultural practices with institutional implications for (multi)cultural and critical legal studies?

To begin answering some of these questions, I want to continue examining "The Cariboo Cafe," by Helena Viramontes, coordinator of the Los Angeles Latino/a Writers Association and former literary editor of *Xismearte* magazine. I emphasize Viramontes's institutional grounding as coordinator and editor in Los Angeles because it is an unsettling fact that all too often U.S. Latino/a writers are omitted from intellectual surveys and literary histories. Even sympathetic, New Left surveys exploring the role played by waves of migrations of intellectuals to Los Angeles—from Charles F. Lummis and Theodor Adorno to Carey McWilliams—such as Mike Davis's superb *City of Quartz* schematizes his intellectual history in exclusively racialized black and white terms, or in linear East and West global mappings.[5] Like the scores of gardeners with their brooms and blowers working all over California, is not it about time that we sweep away once and for all this Manichean construction? Might not a sweeping, even crude, transnational South-North mapping (using the interpretive power of liminality) be more appropriate?

Anthropological discussion of migrant border-crossers as "liminals" can be said to begin with Leo Chávez's experimental ethnography, *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society*, where he describes migrant border crossing as "transitional" phases in the three-step process of ritual initiation. Relying and elaborating on Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* and Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*, Chávez traces the interstitial stages migrant border crossers from both Mexico and Central America make in their journeys to the U.S. Borderlands. While Chávez, perhaps, overemphasizes "the transition people undergo as they leave the migrant life and instead settle in the United States" (4), we could indeed extend his sensitive reading of liminality by adding a synchronic dimension to the concept of liminality as Victor Turner suggested. For Turner (as put forth by Gustavo Pérez Firmat), "liminality should be looked upon not only as a transition between states but as a state in itself, for there exist individuals, groups, or social categories for which the "liminal" moment turns into a permanent condition" (viii-xiv).

A liminal reading of Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" thematizing the ritual process thus would emphasize both a temporal, processual view with a topo-spatial supplementation. Seen in this light, "The Cariboo Cafe" is built upon a series of multiple border crossings and multilayered transitions that an undocumented migrant washer woman undergoes as she moves from the South into the North.

Foremost among the transitions thematized in Viramontes's story are the actual border crossings the washer woman makes, for crossing both the *frontera del sur* in Central America and the U.S.-Mexico border without documentation is what anthropologist Chávez sees as the "monumental event" of many migrant border crossers' lives (4).

Like many undocumented migrant workers, the washer woman in Viramontes's text gathers resources and funding from her family and extended community (her nephew Tavo sells his car to send her the money for a bus ticket to Juárez, Mexico), for crossing the multiple border apparatus with its extended machines of *coyotes*, *sacadineros*, and *fayuqueros* is a financially exorbitant undertaking. Fundamentally, "The Cariboo Cafe" allegorizes hemispheric South-North border crossing in terms anthropologists such as Chávez see as emblematic of undocumented border crossers in general: "a territorial passage that marks the transition from one way of life to another" (4). As an exemplary border crossing tale, then, we can initially map "The Cariboo Cafe" in Chávez's temporal, ritualistic terms: it moves (in a non-linear narrative) through the phases of separation, liminality, and (deadly) reincorporation. Viramontes throughout her disjunctive narrative privileges the everyday experiences (the rituals of separation and liminality) the washer woman must face as she travels from her appointments with legal authorities in Central America (the military has tortured and "disappeared" her five-year-old son) to the actual border crossings and her final searches (together with two Mexican undocumented children Sonya and Macky) for sanctuary at a Borderland's cafe. The Cariboo Cafe, but whose sign symbolically reads as the "oo Cafe," for, "the paint's peeled off" (64) except for the two o's.[6] In other words, while anthropologists such as Chávez see the border "limen" as threshold, for Viramontes it is a lived socially symbolic space.

But why does Viramontes represent the border limen in "The Cariboo Cafe" as position and not as threshold? The reasons for this are complex, but one reason is that the washer woman, like the majority of undocumented migrants in the U.S., never acquires what Chávez calls "links of incorporation—secure employment, family formation, the establishment of credit, capital accumulation, competency in English" which will allow her to come into full cultural and legal citizenship (5). Not surprisingly, the washer woman in the story remains a "marginal" character whom the Anglo-American manager and cook of the "zero zero" cafe crudely describes as "short," "bad news," "street," "round face," "burnt toast color," and "black hair that hands like straight rope" (65). Given such racist synecdochic views of undocumented migrant border crossers as "otherness machines" (see Suleri 105), blocked from ever attaining full cultural and legal citizenship, why did the Central American washer woman migrate to the U.S. Borderlands? What narrative strategies did Viramontes use to represent the washerwoman's shifting and shifty migrations?

The first question is easier to answer than the second While the majority of undocumented border crossers from Mexico migrate to the U.S. for economic reasons and a desire for economic mobility (often doing so for generations and thus

seeing migration as family history), migration from Central America as Chávez emphasizes is a "relatively recent" phenomenon and is closely related to the Reagan-Bush war machine in support of "contras" in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.[7] Viramontes's washer woman thus migrates from her unnamed *pueblo* in Central America to escape from the political strife waged on Amerindians and mestizos/as, and more phantasmatically (given her post-traumatic stress syndrome) to continue searching for her five-year-old son:

> These four walls are no longer my house, the earth beneath it, no longer my home. Weeds have replaced all good crops. The irrigation ditches are clodded with bodies. No matter where we turn ... we try to live ... under the rule of men who rape women, then rip their bellies ... (T)hese men are babes farted out from the Devil's ass. (71)

Displaced by civil war, defeated by debilitating patriarchy (what Viramontes straightforwardly sees as "the rule of men" who have been "farted out from the Devil's ass"), and deranged by the murder of her son, the washer woman migrates, in stages, to the U.S. extended *frontera* to flee from guerrilla activity. Once across the U.S.-Mexican border, she will work "illegally" at jobs that, for the most part, legal Americans disdain: "The machines, their speed and dust," she says, "make me ill. But I can clean. I clean toilets, dump trash cans, sweep. Disinfect the sinks" (72).

These multiple border crossing rites of passage, however, are not narrated in a traditional realist fashion. Rather, the totality of Viramontes's story is scrambled in three separate sections, with each narrating the washerwoman's and the two undocumented Mexican children's shifting, interstitial experiences. The decentered aesthetic structure of Viramontes's text has elicited the most fanciful and controversial attention from literary critics. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, for example, suggests that Viramontes "crafts a fractured narrative to reflect the disorientation that the immigrant workers feel when they are subjected to life in a country that controls their labor but does not value their existence as human beings" (223). Likewise, Barbara Harlow elegantly argues that the political content of Viramontes's text merges (in strong dialectical fashion) with the tale's aesthetic form: "Much as these refugees transgress national boundaries, victims of political persecution who by their very international mobility challenge the ideology of national borders and its agenda of depoliticization in the interest of hegemony, so too the story refuses to respect the boundaries and conventions of literary critical time and space and their disciplining of plot genre" (152). In other words, for Saldívar-Hull and Harlow, Viramontes's experimental "The Cariboo Cafe" challenges both the arbitrariness of the nation-state's borders and the institutionalized mobilizations of literary conventions such as plot structure, space and time; moreover, Viramontes strikingly represents the washer woman confined to what Abdul J. JanMohamed has termed "the predicament of border intellectuals, neither motivated by nostalgia for some

lost or abandoned culture nor at home in this ... culture" (102).

If disjunctive separation, liminality, and reaggregation are the central cultural rituals performed in "The Cariboo Cafe," then it is hardly surprising that rhetorically and tropologically Viramontes relies heavily on prolepsis (flashforwards) and analepsis (flashbacks) to structure the tale. It begins *in media res* with a near-omniscient narrator situating readers about the realities of migrant border crossing separation: "They arrived in the secrecy of the night, as displaced people often do, stopping over for a week, a month, eventually staying a lifetime" (61). From the very beginning, liminality is thematized not as a temporary condition of the displaced but as a permanent social reality.

Given that both of Macky's and Sonya's parents work (undocumented workers are rarely on welfare), the children are instructed to follow three simple rules in their urban galaxy: "never talk to strangers"; avoid what their father calls the "polie," for the police he warned them "was La Migra in disguise"; and keep your key with you at all times—the four walls of the apartment were the only protection against the street" (61).[8] But Sonya, the young, *indocumentada*, loses her apartment key. Unable to find their way to a baby-sitter's house, Sonya and Macky begin their harrowing encounter and orbit with the *frontera's* urban galaxy, what Viramontes lyrically describes as "a maze of alleys and dead ends, the long, abandoned warehouses shadowing any light ... boarded up boxcars [and] rows of rusted rails" (63). Looming across the shadowed barrioscape, "like a beacon light," the children see the sign of "oo" cafe.

Without any traditional transitional markers, section two tells in a working-class (albeit bigoted) vernacular of an Anglo-American cook the lurid story of the undocumented workers' experiences at the Cariboo Cafe, especially those of the washer woman, Sonya and Macky. Situated in the midst of garment warehouse factories where many of the undocumented border crossers labor, the zero zero cafe functions as an apparent safehouse where many of the workers can get away from the mean streets of Los Angeles. On an initial reading, however, it is not at all clear how the brave, new transnational family of the washer woman, Sonya and Macky met, or why they are now together at the cafe. All we know is reflected through the crude testimonial narrative of the manager: "I'm standing behind the counter staring at the short woman. Already I know that she's bad news because she looks street to me ... Funny thing, but I didn't see the two kids 'till I got to the booth. All of a sudden I see the big eyes looking over the table's edge at me. It shook me up ..." (65-66).

Viramontes, of course, shakes things up a bit more by describing another of the underclass's predicament of culture, Paulie's overdose at the cafe: he "O.D.'s" in the cafe's "crapper; vomit and shit are all over ... the fuckin' walls" (67). Not surprisingly, the immense border machine shifts into high gear. "Cops," the cook says, are "looking up my ass for stash" (67), and later on "green vans roll up across the street ... I see all these illegals running out of the factory to hide ... three of them run[ning] into the Cariboo" (67). Given the events of the day, section two ends with the cook telling us: "I was all confused ..." (68).

Having moved through separation and liminality in the first sections, Viramontes's denouement (section three) provides readers with what we may call a phantasmatic folktale of (deadly) reincorporation. Slipping in and out of stream of consciousness derangement, the narrator explains: "For you see, they took Geraldo. By mistake, of course. It was my fault. I shouldn't have sent him out to fetch me a mango" (68). Eventually the washer woman fills in the gaps to the earlier sections: when Geraldo failed to return, she is hurled into the spatiality-time of night, for "the darkness becomes a serpent tongue, swallowing us whole. It is the night of La Llorona" (68).

With this reference to La Llorona, readers familiar with one of Greater Mexico's most powerful folktales, can begin to make sense of the tale's freakish entanglements. Though the washer woman tells us in her own fraught logic how she "finds" Geraldo in Macky ("I jumped the curb, dashed out into the street ... [and] grab[bed] him because the earth is crumbling beneath us" (72)), reader's acquainted with the legend of La Llorona know even as they do not know that the wailing washer woman will surely find her children at the Cariboo Cafe. Thus using and revising La Llorona legend to produce cultural simultaneity in the *Américas* (uniting Central American and North American Borderland [post]colonial history), Viramontes allows us also to hear the deep stirrings of the wailing woman. Recalling the history that the inhabitants of the *Américas* share—a legacy of 500-years of Spanish conquest and resistance—the legend of La Llorona creeps into the zero zero place of Chicana/o fiction: "The cook huddles behind the counter, frightened, trembling ... and she begins screaming enough for all the women of murdered children, screaming, pleading for help" (74). But why is the cook so frightened? Why do males "tremble" in La Llorona's presence?

As anthropologist José E. Limón suggests, La Llorona, "the legendary female figure" that dominates the cultures of Greater Mexico, is a "distinct relative of the Medea story and ... a syncretism of European and indigenous cultural forms" (59). While various interpreters of La Llorona have not accorded her a resistive, utopian, and liminal history (viewing her as a passive and ahistorical creature), Limón systemtacially takes us through what he calls the "genesis and formal definition of this legend," arguing that "La Llorona as a symbol ... speaks to the course of Greater Mexican history and does so for women in particular" (74).

As far back as Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's chronicle of the New World, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, La Llorona, Limón writes, "appeared in the night crying out for her dead children" (68). Moreover, for our purposes, Sahagún's chronicle collected and recorded indigenous Amerindians's narrations telling their tale of loss: "At night, in the wind, a woman's voice was heard. 'Oh my children, we are now lost!' Sometimes she said, 'Oh my children, where shall I take you ?'" (Sahagún cited in Castañeda-Shular 98) In later colonial versions (as reported by Frances Toor), the legend incorporates other forms: a lower class woman is betrayed by an upper-class lover who has fathered her children. She then kills the children and walks crying in the night.[9]

In Limón's utopian reading, La Llorona's "insane infanticide" can be said to be a "temporary insanity *produced historically by those who socially dominate*" (his emphasis 86). Seen in this historical light, that Viramontes's wailing washer woman grieves and searches for her lost child (finding Geraldo in her kidnapping of Macky) is not something that is produced inherently but rather produced by the history which begins with Cortés's conquest of Mexico. If all children of loss in the *Américas* (produced by Euro-imperialism) are also children of need, they are also what Limón sees as potentially "grieving, haunting mothers reaching for their children *across fluid boundaries*" (my emphasis 87). We may now be in a better position to understand why the manager of the Cariboo Cafe is so frightened by the washer woman/La Llorona. In her act of infanticide, La Llorona "symbolically destroys," what Limón argues is "the familial basis for patriarchy" (76).

Nevertheless, in Viramontes's hands, La Llorona/washer woman offers her readers a startling paradox: while her folktale in section three always suggests the symbolic destruction of patriarchy—represented in the washerwoman's fight to the death with the police at the story's end—, there also remains the washerwoman's utopian desire to fulfill the last stage of her territorial rite of passage, namely, her dream of incorporation, or better yet, what Debra Castillo justly calls the washerwoman's "project[ed] ... dream of re-incorporation, of returning her newborn/reborn infant to her womb" (91). Viramontes writes:

> She wants to conceal him in her body again, return him to her belly so that they will not castrate him and hang his small, blue penis on her door, not crush his face so that he is unrecognizable, not bury him among the heaps of bones, of ears, and teeth, and jaws, because no one, but she, cared to know that he cried. For years he cried and she could hear him day and night." (74)

Like Rigoberta Menchú, the exiled Quiché Indian woman who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, the washer woman (even in her abject solitude) finally becomes an eloquent symbol for indigenous peoples and victims of government repression on both sides of the South-North border. When confronted in the zero zero cafe by the Los Angeles Police, "with their guns taut and cold like steel erections" (74), the washer woman resists them to the bitter end rather than unplug her dream of an incorporated, transnational family: "I will fight you all because you're all farted out of the Devil's ass ... and then I hear something crunching like broken glass against my forehead and I am blinded by the liquid darkness" (75).

Our subject here has been the multicultural, intercultural and transnational experiences of migrant border crossers from the South into the North represented as a complex series of traversing and mixing, syncretizing and hybridizing. As both Leo Chávez and Helena Viramontes emphasize in their narratives, migrant Border crossing cultures are often formed under powerful economic and political constraints. Like the Black British diasporic cultures of, say, Stuart Hall (*Identity*) and

Paul Gilroy (*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*), U.S. Border cultures share what James Clifford has described as a "two-sidedness, expressing a deep dystopic/utopian tension. They are constituted by displacement "under varying degrees of coercion, often extreme" (6). And as Chávez and Viramontes adamantly argue, migrant Border crossing cultures represent alternative interpretive communities where folkloric and postnational experimental narratives can be enunciated. What is finally remarkable about Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" is that borders—as Barbara Harlow suggested—"become bonds among peoples, rather than the articulation of national differences and the basis for exclusion by the collaboration of the United States and [Central American] regimes" (152). In other words, in Viramontes's "zero zero place" a worlding of world historical events has erupted—from Cortés's Euro-imperialism to Reagan-Bush's wars in Central America—and their coming to the *Américas* was embodied in the haunting, resisting figure of La Llorona. Viramontes's "The Cariboo Cafe" is an emergent multicultural story to pass through the entangled borders of world literature.

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NOTES

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1. Using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's famous concept of the machine in their *Anti-Oedipus.*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña envisioned a radical rereading of the U.S.-Mexico border as an ensemble of desiring machines. See also Emily D. Hicks's "Deterritorialization and Border Writing" (1988).

2. Nancy Fraser's term, "juridical-administrative-state apparatus," echoes Louis Althusser's phrase, "ideological state apparatus," in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." In general Fraser's JAT can be understood as a subclass of an ISA, and this is how I am using it in this essay.

3. See Jean Franco's superb "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private."

4. For more on this cultural and legal re-definition of citizenship, see Renato Rosaldo's "Cultural Citizenship: Attempting to Enfranchise Latinos." Rosaldo uses cultural citizenship "both in the legal sense (one either does or does not have a document) and also in the familiar sense of the spectrum from full citizenship to second-class citizenship" (7); he uses the term cultural "to emphasize the local people's own descriptions of what goes into being fully enfranchised" (7). Also relevant here is Gerald P. López's "The Work We Know So Little

About."

5. Even at the mass-mediated level, the national press rarely mentions Latinos/as when discussing race relations and urban problems. As Gerald P. López writes, "when people visualize the goings-on in this country they most often don't even seem to see the 25 million or so Latinos who live here (12)". Thus, it is hardly surprising, López notes, that "we Latinos haven't made it onto some list of nationally prominent folks—in this case, it's 'THE NEWSWEEK 100" of cultural elite ... Having no Latinos on the NEWSWEEK list might not get under our skin were it not so utterly familiar." See López's "My Turn," in *Newsweek*.

6. According to Debra Castillo, "What tends to drop out of sight ... is ... the *Carib*, the indigenous element that waits, another hidden layer of writing on the scratched surface of the palimpsest, the unrecognized other half of the backdrop against which the transients shuffle, and suffer, and die. What remains undefined is the nameless act of violence that has suppressed the *Carib*, as well as the outline of the form the history of its repression might take" (81).

7. As Leo Chávez suggests, "While migrants may not sever family ties, those ties are stretched across time, space, and national boundaries" (119).

8. According to legal scholar Gerald López, "Data strongly suggest that only one to four percent of undocumented Mexicans take advantage of public services such as welfare, unemployment benefits, food stamps, AFDC benefits and the like; that eight to ten percent pay Social Security and income taxes; that the majority do not file for income tax refunds; that all contribute to sales taxes; and that at least some contribute to property taxes" (636). See López's fine monograph, "Undocumented Mexican Migration: In Search of a Just Immigration Law and Policy."

9. Frances Toor, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways*.

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