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A Rupturing of Typecasts through Villoro's Cynicism and Urrea's Heroines

Abstract: This article examines two short stories from the compilation *Los culpables (The Guilty)* (2015), by Juan Villoro and the novel *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), by Luis Alberto Urrea to demonstrate a reworking of fossilized notions of identity and gender to produce narratives that counter stagnated literary archetypes and promulgate a re-writing of self. An exploration of psychological and emotive aspects of the U.S.-Mexican border as a territorial and ideological space for masculinity, femininity, age, and national-international movement is informed primarily by border and migration studies discourses related to multi-spatiality, the historical instability of tropes, and how such instability is advancing stereotype-challenging narratives. Such a lens is woven through the discussion of each work presented here. Beginning with the short story "Mariachi," readers will be acquainted with two characters in particular, Julián and Brenda, to focus on themes of identity, loyalty, and gender. Next, the discussion turns towards "Amigos Mexicanos," where elements of the archetypes of the "ugly American" and U.S. fixations with violence in Mexico are considered against notions of authenticity by examining the characters of Katzenberg and the narrator. Finally, Urrea's novel *Into the Beautiful North* illustrates the crafting of a cohort of multi-generational characters that push issues of identity, gender, and belonging into more progressive spheres.

Keywords: Villoro, Alberto Urrea, US-Mexican Border, Latina/o Literature, Femininity, Heroism, National Identity

Introduction

The short story compilation *Los culpables* by Juan Villoro and *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea present nuanced transnational amalgamations through their characters' storylines and personal and interpersonal development. Using cynicism in one (Villoro) and female-centric heroism in the other (Urrea), the figures of the U.S.-Mexican border and all its associated social, cultural, and political ramifications move over-played stereotypes to be considered as representative of re-negotiated internal socio-cultural contradictions, and a space where identity and gender are re-worked away from antiquated literary tropes.

Viewing the border region through such a trope-challenging lens aligns with perspectives about the psychological and emotive aspects of the U.S.-Mexican border space as proposed by Adalberto Aguirre Jr. and Jennifer K. Simmers. They suggest that beyond a mere geographical separation of territory, an appreciation of the social and cultural dimensions of the area is necessary to grasp the synergism that fuels "the border" and "its people" with a mobile consciousness and, as a byproduct, a palpable vulnerability (99-100). Núria Vilanova agrees, perceiving the border as a "multi-spatial" area that encompasses "social, cultural, linguistic and artistic features" that stretch well beyond economics, geopolitics, and actual physical space (73). Interestingly, she notes how when examining works such as these, one's positionality cannot be ignored since within one sphere, academic discourse can be laden with internalizations of "language, aesthetics, perspective" and ideology to "conceptualize the border... in a globalizing and fragmented world," while in the other, the border "is mainly referential" with characters and settings that are "about, yet [do] not stem from, the border" (emphasis original) (76-77, 79). One lens views the border as "symbolic" or merely referential while for the other, "it affects their entire lives" (77). The works here consider both ends of this spectrum with these particular arguments by Aguirre Jr., Simmers, and Núria Vilanova in mind.

Despite such differences in lens, whether one is at some distance from the border or not, both can succeed in the toppling of trope-laden and stereotypical representations of self, national and global identity, and gender. While N. Finnegan delves into cinematic representations of formulaic and problematically simplistic and dichotomous "Mexicanness" in films such as *Like Water for Chocolate* (a different medium than is of interest here), his point that an audience's "stereotype reception" has crucial implications for the successful dismantling of tropes, particularly those related to identity and gender, is palpable in *Los culpables* and *Into the Beautiful North* (317). Finnegan, borrowing from Stam and Shohat, explains how the "cultural significance of certain stereotypes may undergo a metamorphosis," a process which overturns images, language, etc. that were once tolerated to become utterly rejected, "emphasis[ing] the historical instability of stereotypes" (317). This became a fundamental point for the analysis of the works presented here; such a metamorphosis is the tension point in each plot and for the main characters' development.

In Villoro's short story "Mariachi," the stuckedness of stereotypes related to *machismo* (sexism) and virility is questioned through the lead male character's (Julián) identity crisis and the female lead's (Brenda) role in its resolution. Julián is a famous and much-adored *mariachi* singer who is plagued by what he perceives to be an unfulfilling joke of a career and a history of toxic romantic liaisons. Villoro's second short story, "Amigos Mexicanos," contests several problematic racial, misogynistic, and culturally reductive stereotypes that Mexico's northern neighbor, the U.S., is perceived to have long held towards the nation and its people, all but demanding an evolution away from that maddening rhetorical culture. It is the story of a bungling American journalist who is authoring a magazine article about Mexico. In search of authenticity and street-credibility, he seeks the assistance of a local source that turns out to be deeply disillusioned and takes these feelings out, in part, on the journalist. And Urrea's novel, *Into the Beautiful North*, divided into two parts, "Sur" (South) and "Norte" (North), tells the story of a rural, forgotten, but beautiful small town in Mexico that is deeply struggling due to having lost so many townsfolk (particularly men) to the lure of opportunities in the U.S. A group of young friends become inspired to journey northward, trekking through the whole of Mexico and into the U.S., in search of their long-lost neighbors in order to bring them back and reinvigorate their home. The novel delves into possible *frontera* futures when the notion of metamorphosizing is turned towards advancing generational dynamics and gender empowerment. When the instability described by Finnegan reaches a particular socio-cultural temperature and is then focused with sufficient collective interest and pressure (nowadays intensified by the expansiveness and pervasiveness of the Internet and the rapidity of social media sharing and commentary), a rupturing of tropes may occur, freeing up social and cultural spaces to be filled with agency-holding representations such as those put forth by Villoro and Urrea.

Their characters exhibit this sense of fed-upness that permeates each of their story arcs as they confront fossilized depictions of identity and gender. Both authors challenge patriarchal archetypes that long dominated as national symbols within Mexican, Mexican American, and U.S./American cultural narratives. Yet, both also advance the narratives of contestation and reinvention with characters whose unavoidable trans-nationality induces (and in some cases, forces) a re-emergence of oneself as a more fully realized and confident representative of an archetype turned on its head.

"Mariachi"

While the short story "Mariachi" in Villoro's compilation *Los culpables* is ripe with a sardonic set of characters, the principal male and female leads, Julián and Brenda, are of particular interest. Villoro charges them with toppling gendered archetypes by shifting their gaze and experiences away from traditional male-as-macho and female-as-docile roles. "Mariachi" embarks on a derisive narrative from the start. The reader is introduced to the main character, Julián, as "the only mariachi star who has never in his life mounted a horse" (Villoro 6), a mariachi who possesses "the face like an abandoned ranchero, and the eyes of a brave man who knows how to cry" (Villoro 9) and whose "worst album... had

gone platinum" (Villoro 12), but owes his fame only to the, seemingly contemptible, fact of being "from here" (Mexico), an identity marker that he struggles with (Villoro 9). As a mariachi, Julián is a hyper-culturalized symbol, one that is limited to one stereotypical role of hyper virility and masculinity with no assets to leverage to evolve (or escape). This generates a resentment that becomes obvious to the reader when he responds to the question, "Are you Mexican?" with the declaration, "Yes, but next time I won't be" (Villoro 9).

Since Julián contends so strongly with the implications of occupying the role that he does, it is worthwhile to consider how the mariachi has endured as a leading national symbol in Mexican cultural production since at least the nineteenth century (Mulholland, "Beautiful Thing"). It was during the strife-filled nineteenth century that *rurales*, skilled horsemen recruited to serve as law enforcement, began to dress as *charros* (the garb visually associated with the mariachi). This image was bolstered during the Porfiriato¹ as being representative of "invincible national heroes" and became engrained into a collective psyche of what constituted "manhood, [virility], nationhood, and power" (Nájera-Ramírez 4). As the twentieth century began and the revolution gained speed, politicians exploited the *charro* image while writers romanticized it, creating a perfect convergence within cultural production and consumption for the *charro* (mariachi) to illustrate exactly "the kind of imagined community that [was] the nation" (Nájera-Ramírez 4). Such visual and rhetorical propagandizing reached new heights in the years after the revolution, as the *charro* became a staple of efforts to foster "a sense of national unity and domestic ideals" and generally all that was pridefully embraced as uniquely "*lo mexicano*" (Mexicanness) (Nájera-Ramírez 5). It is within such a context that Julián experiences psychological distress because of his profession and considers the role as an overwhelming burden. Julián physically rejects the weight to exist as a mariachi when he uses a riding crop on stage to "whack away the flowers they [the adoring fans] throw" (Villoro 11). It is an action that the fans interpret as heightening the macho mariachi role, yet in actuality is a desperate attempt to beat down, or hold at bay, the idolization that has become so repulsive for Julián to endure. Such physical rejection is again evident when he dreams of "driving a Ferrari, running over sombreros until they were nice and flat" and of "float[ing] in the stratosphere, look[ing] down at Earth and see[ing] a blue bubble without a single sombrero" (Villoro 12).

As a counterpoint to Julián's brooding disposition and identity crisis, Brenda appears to represent the personal and professional ideal that Julián cannot initially obtain (in his self and in a partner, mature, and self-aware) or achieve (in his career, obscurity and autonomy). She had moved to Spain, even going so far as "defin[ing] herself as a fugitive from mariachis" (Villoro 12), describing how she left the confines of a Mexico that she "hated" behind,² yet becomes involved with Julián despite his stature as the preeminent mariachi. She first perceives him as merely a product to manipulate, though later comes to see him as a person she must help to realize his true self. With the mariachi tradition being so central to the storyline, it is intriguing to note how *mariachera*, all female mariachi groups, have emerged and in some cases exceeded their male counterparts in popularity and marketability within late twentieth and early twenty-first century iterations of mariachi. Mary-Lee Mulholland is one of the few scholars researching questions of femininity as related to mariachi/mariachera. She makes compelling points as to how and why *mariacheras* are re-fashioning the "unequal power relations" of old in Mexico as pertinent to notions of race, gender, and nationhood (Mulholland, "A Beautiful Thing..." 359).

Power relations are of particular interest to home in on since the dynamic between Julián and Brenda is inverted from outmoded models of male-figure being dominant and governing and female-figure being docile and obedient. Julián is the more emotional, moody, unstable, and unpredictable one while

¹ The period of Porfirio Díaz's presidency of Mexico (1876-1880; 1884-1911) – dictatorial rule

² The reasons why Brenda so vehemently left Guadalajara are not revealed to the reader by her or Julián, who explains that he "promised not to tell anyone. I can only say that she lived to escape that story" (20).

Brenda is the self-assured constant. This role reversal breaks from antiquated gendered societal expectations (or rather, stereotypes), particularly in how Brenda, and Brenda alone, is able to counsel Julián. In this way, Brenda's character embodies how women "slip into the in-between spaces of normative identity constructs, sometimes overtly, but most often subtly, to challenge and undermine... categories of gender and sexuality" (Mulholland 360). Brenda seems to be the only character to whom Julián can expressly tell that he does not want to be a mariachi. This suggests that she, the "mariachi fugitive," understands Julián in a way that other characters cannot or will not. Each time Brenda appears in the story, she breaks the mold of docility and submissiveness suggested by antiquated tropes that a woman's role is primarily to be protected and/or to remain within domestic spheres. Precisely because she is inquisitive, persuasive, and worldly, Brenda can engage with Julián on a relationship plane that no other character is able to. While it might seem that Julián is the main character of the short story, it is Brenda. She decenters the masculine and is neither a "harlot" Malinche nor a "chaste" María, successfully shaking off their historical hold as the primary options for female characters to be, by negotiating different signifying systems and still being able to perceive situations and surroundings between multiple cultural paradigms (Mexican, European, masculine, feminine, sexual, independent) (Wyatt 245). Additionally, Brenda is the only character who uses Julián's name; it is not until she speaks it that the reader becomes acquainted with him in this more personalized way, even though the story is narrated by him in first person, as though she, and she alone, is charged with re-introducing him.

"Amigos Mexicanos"

The second short story of interest from Villoro's *Los culpables* compilation, "Amigos Mexicanos," is brimming with examples of a contrasted twenty-first century Mexican persona represented by the narrator, and the archetypical gringo (U.S./American), embodied by the character Samuel Katzenberg. As the story begins, the reader learns that Katzenberg has come to Mexico "to do a story on violence" (Villoro 89), relayed to the reader in a manner that suggests the narrator's deep exasperation about this near exclusive interest in writing about and reporting on Mexico's violence by U.S./American outlets that exists in today's media. Katzenberg embodies the prototype *gringo* outsider who harps with a perverse obsession on notions of Mexican and/or *narco* (drug and cartel centric) crime. The narrator groups Katzenberg into a cohort of individuals such as (Jack) Kerouac and (Allen) Ginsberg, who were "big-time addict[ed]" to Mexico as they perceived it, but "scared [they'd] get jumped" (Villoro 97). To them, the country, its people, their habits, and the culture, are built up in their imaginations to be erringly titillating, yet, nevertheless, overly unrestrained for their comfort. It becomes increasingly difficult for the narrator to work within the illusory parameters of Katzenberg's Mexico, evident when he comments that identifying new, attractive, violent settings would no longer be easy since "all the spots [he'd] been mugged are too ordinary" (Villoro 98). This becomes an obvious point of contention for the narrator: "I silently cursed Katzenberg, incapable of appreciating the richness of Mexican kitsch. He only paid to see violence" (Villoro 101), a perceived lawlessness that in many cases was exaggerated, staged, and derisive.

The narrator's exasperation is tinged with mockery from the outset. He comments on Katzenberg's indefatigable tendency to sprinkle his conversations with the Spanish words he knew, as when describing his new position at a magazine as a *quemarropa* (straight-shooter) and his new boss as a "very cool *mujer* (woman), a one-woman *fiesta* (party)" (Villoro 89-90). Katzenberg further commits the faux pas of establishing himself as an über-*gringo* by embodying several unforgivable U.S./American stereotypes: he is often pedantic in his explanations, as is evidenced in how "...he explained to me the importance of the 'wound as a transsexual construct'... 'very postmodern, beyond gender'" (Villoro 90). He is repeatedly obtuse as is demonstrated by his observation that "Mexico is magical, but confusing," and a subsequent request that the narrator help him "...figure out which parts are horrible and which parts are Buñuel-esque" (Villoro 90). The traits with which the narrator contends the most are the

exploitative qualities of Katzenberg's project objectives, which he complains about by sarcastically explaining that "[Katzenberg] hired me to be his contact with the genuine. But it was hard for me to satisfy his appetite for authenticity" (Villoro 90). The narrator further delves into this latter point of how Katzenberg is blind to the realities of the cultural world he is immersing into (albeit sterilely):

He wanted a reality that was like Frida's paintings, ghastly but unique. Katzenberg didn't understand that her famous traditional dresses were now only to be found on the second floor of the Museo de Antropología [Museum of Anthropology] or worn on godforsaken ranches where they were never luxurious or finely embroidered. He also didn't understand that today's Mexican woman takes pains to wax the honest mustache... (91)

Katzenberg creates a "hyper-Mexican" experience in his mind of what the culture and people "are"; anything else (i.e., reality) is unacceptable. The disdain that this cultivates in the narrator is apparent when he attempts to introduce Katzenberg to an actual expert of Mexican art, the character Didier Morand from Senegal. Much to the narrator's exasperation, he refuses to meet with him since, in the words of Katzenberg, he "didn't need an African source" (Villoro 92). This is an ironic assertion considering how he presents himself as a foreign expert on Mexico, but is deeply offended, even resentful, of the suggestion to consult with *another* foreigner. Indeed, for Katzenberg, not only would such an interaction lack the particular brand of authenticity he was scouting, but it was also deeply perturbing (bordering on a threat) that the expert could possibly "honor so many cultures at once" (Villoro 92), or that an individual could exist who harbors more (actually authentic) knowledge than himself.

Katzenberg is Villoro's instrument to illustrate habits and tendencies of the "ugly American" that are bothersome and exasperating in their persistence and prolongation. Katzenberg is what Stam and Spence would describe as an "armchair conquistador, affirming our [U.S./American] sense of power while making the inhabitants of the Third World objects of spectacle for the First World's voyeuristic gaze" (4). Katzenberg's character and the dynamic between him and the narrator illustrate a literary contestation of the journalists, authors, filmmakers, and other creators who focus so heavily on violence, poverty, and subordination and who frame south-of-the-border neighbors in historically overwhelmingly condescending terms. Rosa Linda Fregoso, in her text *MeXicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* presents evidence as to how such writers consistently and inappropriately cross the line from "information" to "titillation" and "fetish," relying on the warping of images to become better suited to the U.S./American audience for consumption (13-14). Fregoso aligns with the sentiments of embitterment that are expressed by the narrator and his desires for "alternatives to the 'dirty Mexican,' the 'degenerate and menacing Mexican bandido' that has terrorized the cultural imaginary of the West" (31). Perhaps, then, the narrator's function is to offer what Fregoso terms the "greatest opposition to the colonialist project" (31) by refusing to filter his own self-image through the customary "white, benevolent, patriarchal gaze" (49). He instead heavily relies on mockery and pranks that exploit Katzenberg's foreignness and naivety much to his own (initial) enjoyment.

Katzenberg could be also illustrative of another abrasive über gringo behavioral pattern that grates on the narrator: the carnivalization of "lo Latino" as carried out by real-life author Ilan Stavans in *Latino USA: A Cartoon History*. There are certain editorial decisions carried out by Stavans that, when considered against "Amigos Mexicanos," suggest more than a little coincidence in relation to Villoro's Katzenberg character. For example, the reader's first introduction to Stavans in *Latino USA* is the following: "The Author, Scientific name *Deus obnoxious spanglishicus*" (xvi). In a move that perhaps implies possessing more self-awareness than Katzenberg, who does not realize how he is the object of his own aloof socio-cultural follies, Stavans opts to define himself from the get-go in consciously selected terms that are decidedly self-effacing. His introduction goes on to claim how he is

"[r]esponsible for the following mess" and that "most of us here don't really like him" (Stavans xvi). Rather than achieve a laugh at his own expense, he precariously positions himself in the role of "obnoxious Spanish-speaking God-Author" (Allatson 233). This positioning reminds of Katzenberg's many allusions about his omnipotence (savvy that is universally off the mark). This God-Author-Culturist stance is again apparent with several secondary character choices, namely a toucan, who declares how he and his fellow cohort should be grateful that the author (Stavans) created them at all, and a *calavera* (skull/skeleton), who lauds the author for having been an "exemplary historian," one who has not "miss[ed] any major event in [Latino] history so far" (Allatson 235, Stavans 59).

Other ancillary characters in Stavan's graphic historiography are La Maestra, Cantinflas (a Mexican film star), El Santo (a masked *luchador* [wrestler]), and Captain America (adversary to El Santo). It appears that the role of these characters is to punctuate the journey through Hispanic history with cheeky zingers and corroborative one-liners, but it would be more accurate to home in on how their carnivalized appearances and behaviors offer more of a "damaging trope of latinidad" than perhaps the "irreverent historical entertainment" Stavans sought (Allatson 232, 239). As Allatson points out, Stavans feels as though such carnivalizations are harmless due to reliance on a brand of "intellectual cosmopolitanism" (also interpreted as simple superiority),³ much in the same way Katzenberg initially hides behind his self-stated expertise and sanitized musings of what Mexico and its history, language, and culture "are" (243).

Into the Beautiful North

For the principal characters in Luis Alberto Urrea's novel, *Into the Beautiful North*—Nayeli, Yolo, Vampi, Tacho, and Aunt Irma—an interesting contrast emerges when compared to "Mariachi" and "Amigos Mexicanos." Urrea opens the novel by framing how all the events that will transpire occur because of two factors: first, the moving in of *bandidos* (gangs/gang members) to the town of Tres Camarones, and second, nearly all the men having left the town to seek work in the U.S. because of the severe devaluation of the *peso* that occurred in the 1990s. The reader is quickly informed that the term "immigration" was not one in common usage or even recognized before that, and that this remote town, as had happened to many others, was one that "the modern era had somehow passed by" (Urrea 4). Aunt Irma perhaps best represents the consternation felt towards the socio-economic changes of the latter part of the twentieth century that resulted in the mass exodus to the U.S. During an exchange with a vegetable seller, she explains how "[t]hese beans are grown here in Sinaloa... The best frijoles in the world!... Then they're sold to the United States. Then they sell them back to us" (Urrea 36). She makes several such comments that are tinted with an exasperation about what she perceives to be a self-defeating series of systems and policies, self-defeating not only on a personal level, but also more broadly in terms of stagnating the vibrancy of her community, state, and nation.

Much discussion on this topic ensues and it is decided that Nayeli, Yolo, Vampi, and Tacho will venture north to bring members of their community who had immigrated northward back to Tres Camarones. As the journey begins, this cohort of young adults is naïve and ill prepared, almost *gringo*-esque (à la Katzenberg) in their gullibility and naivety. Individual disorientation is conveyed by the following reactions: "It'll be a miracle if we survive traveling through our own country," says Yolo; "Did you know it would be like this?" asks Nayeli, and "I'm not worried about the Yunaites [United States] anymore," answers Tacho (Urrea 78). The group's feelings of consternation only increase as they approach Tijuana. Looking out the windows of a bus, "[None] of them could believe the world they had entered," one with "shacks and huts," where "fences appeared as all trees vanished" and "shanty towns

³ "I write in English for Americans about topics they know little about, and I write in Spanish for Mexicans about topics they are unacquainted with. I act as a bridge, I symbolize dialogue...I am the owner of a divided self" (Stavans, as quoted in Allatson 243).

surrounded the dusty center" (Urrea 85-86). They find themselves as house guests in a *dompe pueblo* (garbage dump village) from where it was possible to see into the U.S. and where Nayeli experiences the first of three moments of candid contemplation: "It shook her, this place. It was awful. Tragic. Yet... yet it moved her. The sorrow she felt. It was profound. It was moving, somehow. The sorrow of the terrible abandoned garbage dump and the sad graves and the lonesome shacks made her feel something so far inside herself that she could not define it or place it" (Urrea 119).

A second incident of similar preoccupation occurs after the Border Patrol apprehends the group of teens during an attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexican border. Observing the holding pens, Nayeli ponders how:

Most of the people herded into the pens were like them. Just... people. Small, brown, tired people. Nayeli was stunned to see mothers with children—kids weeping and snot faced... [She] looked at the migra [immigration] agents through the iron mesh. Big men. Happy, bright-faced men. Shiny and crisp. Green uniforms. Short hair. Mustaches. What made them different from her? She could not tell. (Urrea 155)

Finally, now having crossed into the U.S., a third ruminative moment akin to the above takes place when Chava Chavarín, an old romantic interest of Aunt Irma, who lives in the U.S. and becomes a part of the haphazard crew, takes Nayeli to Camp Guadalupe, a local informal migrant camp, to potentially recruit the younger workers for the repatriation mission:

Chava said, 'This is the richest country in the world.' He looked at each of them. 'This is the richest state of that rich country.' They watched him. 'And this is probably the richest city of the richest state of the richest country'...They could smell the camp before they saw it: smoke, trash, human waste... Improvised tents were gathered in a rough U shape. Splintery poles propped up sheets of plastic...They had managed to hammer together a little wooden shrine... In it, covered by a shingle roof, standing on a small shelf, was a statue of the Blessed Mother. (Urrea 248-249)

While Nayeli is the character whose internalization of the journey is most strongly conveyed to the reader, these three moments in particular are more striking than other introspections that she shares. They stand out for their likeness: all three instances evoke a palpable sense of stripping away preconceptions and, more importantly, acquainting her with a much more complex situation than perhaps she was initially anticipating. The result is a heightened sense of urgency that increases as each of the above three moments is absorbed to achieve their mission: to bring back Mexican men to their Mexican communities so that they might prosper for the benefit of Mexico. The shock that the teens experience at realizing the social and economic conditions of some of their compatriots, coupled with what Nayeli experiences in the three situations described above, highlights the promulgation of policies and relations that have led to economic and creative "brain drain" from Mexico northward. Thus, the tale becomes not a story of fetishizing violence and poverty in the way that Villoro condemns by way of Katzenberg, but rather a story from within which a sense of *ya basta* (enough) increasingly roils through each chapter until the end, when at its boiling point, Nayeli makes her triumphant return to her hometown (compatriots in tow).

The revitalization of Tres Camarones is brought to fruition by young, female heroines who appear to break away from the confines of a traditional literary "discourse that discourages women from leaving the private sphere, the purported site of patriarchal protection and authority" and immersing into the "public space" that has so long been "imagined as inherently dangerous" for women characters (Fregoso 18). The very purpose of their mission, to retrieve men who had fled to the U.S. seeking work, could imply a dependency on men to "fix" things or to "protect" "them" (the women). Yet, the men were recruited via advertisements that were placed in newspapers and through word-of-mouth spreading among "taco shops and barrio stores" precisely to place the "applicants" in a situation of being

interviewed and evaluated by women, a valuation assessment in which the women would have the final say over who would return with them (Urrea 298). As the men nervously await their inquisition, they emit a certain unsteadiness fueled in part by an opportunity to be released from what became an imprisonment being "stuck" in the United States, desperately hoping that a woman, Aunt Irma, will "unstick" them and bring them home (literally and symbolically), something they appear to be unable to do on their own (Urrea 298-300).

Kanellos notes that national protection and perpetuation is often the obligation and responsibility of female characters, something that is evident with Urrea's literary decision to develop young female characters as the heroines of *Tres Camarones*. While Kanellos suggests that such salvation traditionally occurred "within the domestic sphere" (123), Aunt Irma, Nayeli, and her cohort break completely from this norm, as the entirety of their efforts for national deliverance occur well outside of such a space. It is worthwhile to mention another literary trait observed by Kanellos: the lore of the *verde*, a neophyte "who misinterprets American language and culture and becomes the subject of extreme exploitation" (31). Nayeli would be the logical and obvious candidate to illustrate such a *verde* in this particular narrative as she, the leader of the expedition, possesses no first-hand knowledge of the place to whence she is attempting to voyage. This includes a grasp of the more extreme actual and literal border crossing tactics, legal consequences, physical dangers (sexual and other), and the more mundane American linguistic, currency, and societal norms, all of which would be obvious obstacles to success. Kanellos pessimistically observes how, in literature, time after time immigrants who attempt to pursue the American Dream "fail" and "meet their demise," becoming overwhelmed and undone by the devastatingly and paralyzing American technology and materialism that takes shape in a variety of forms (57). Yet Nayeli does not succumb, nor does she fail in her pursuit. Rather, she seems to thrive, even after a multitude of obstacles present themselves. Nayeli is not seduced by U.S./American materiality or capital and is in fact many times repulsed by the conflicting messages of the land of opportunity and the land of the free born from the labor of immigrants, contrasted with the hateful vitriol of public radio and multiple enmity-infused interactions that punctuate the entire second half of the novel. In this way, the contrasts between her native Mexico and the foreign U.S. become increasingly a motivating factor to not remain and to return to *Tres Camarones* as soon, and as proudly, as possible.

When the moment arrives for Nayeli to commence her personal quest to find her father in Kankakee, Illinois, she embarks on a cross-country journey that spans the distance of half of the U.S. with only her friend Tacho (a homosexual male), a mini-van, and a bilingual dictionary. Nayeli literally fulfills the notion that by "cross[ing] spatial boundaries and borders" she (a woman) can "blur, disrupt, and resist them," thus figuratively embodying the concept that in doing so females are able to access new spaces, unavailable to male counterparts, within which social change and revolution is able to take place (Kanellos 109). Indeed, the novel concludes with the triumphant return of Nayeli to *Tres Camarones* with male charges in tow. This closely relates to what Fregoso terms as "a new identity formation of cross-border feminisms" (47).

Additionally, the way Aunt Irma breaks with gendered traditions that would have been imposed on a woman of her generation is best evidenced through her mayoral campaign venture during which she wholly rejects the social and mental conditioning that women were "too moody, flighty, illogical, and incapable" to take on the role of Municipal President (Urrea 39). It was Aunt Irma who "cajol[ed]" and "curs[ed]" them (the women) "out of their ruts," and Nayeli, of the next generation, who served as the "driving force among the young of the village" (Urrea 39), both representative of a trending away from the traditional discourse in which, according to Fregoso, women represent a closed conservatism while men represent progressivity and modernity (77). Aunt Irma and Nayeli are neither inert nor backward looking, nor are they illustrative of a cultural tradition that previously leaned towards conservative gendered principles. For the men in the novel, even Tacho, Atómiko (an enlightened, ostentatious former soldier who voluntarily and proudly resides in the *dompe*), and Chava (Aunt Irma's former

flame), derive their "forward-thrusting" momentum and potency from Aunt Irma and Nayeli, suggesting that progressive modernized patriotism is both activated and actualized by women seizing "a new kind of femininity" (Urrea 42). Indeed, the identities of these two lead heroines "deliberately challenge sexual and gender norms, transgress gender roles, thwart behaviors and expectations, and defy dominant... boundaries of domesticity and femininity" (Fregoso 96).

In developing such strong female protagonists, Urrea achieves a narrative that illustrates the increasingly urgent demand to "challenge the imposition of American culture" and to "preserve a Hispanic past" (and prospect for a future) that is in constant peril to U.S./American commercial exploitation and takeover (Kanellos 102). Nayeli becomes a "transmigrant woman" who unabashedly challenges and shatters stereotypes about *Mexicana* (Mexican) or Latina docility (Kanellos 102). The fact that much of this occurs while she is physically in the U.S. is perhaps significant; she is essentially "within enemy lines" of hostile anti-Mexican socio-cultural confrontation and yet comes out the victor. It is interesting to observe that Aunt Irma (of an older generation) is quite upfront about having neither the desire nor the energy to embark on the journey to the U.S. herself and obliges Nayeli (of a younger generation) to lead the expedition, perhaps symbolic of a type of cultural passing of the torch.

Conclusion

The internal and external dichotomies that result from shedding its long-held sense of subordination are at the forefront of "Mariachi," "Amigos Mexicanos," and *Into the Beautiful North*. Themes of masculinity, femininity, age, and national-international movement are re-negotiated through the situations within which characters find themselves, and problematic tropes are challenged by advancing narratives of contestation and re-invention that break from previous literary norms. Trans-nationality becomes a plot device; Mexico and the U.S. are perceptible characters with whom protagonists' own development advances and crises resolve. Villoro and Urrea access the literary sphere to author into being more progressive versions of long-held archetypes. Writing into existence a cast of characters with non-traditional traits ensures that their newly honed active voice will be consumed and will reverberate.

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