



IDENTITIES ON THE BORDER: REFLECTIONS ON ART, SUBJECTIVITY AND MIGRATION

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Border and migration are recurrent themes in artistic, literary and cinematographic production. As points of reference, they are often presented mainly in negative terms. However, for migrants and non-migrants alike, the border and migration pose unavoidable questions of identity and self-image. For many migrant artists, the obstacle and opportunity represented by the border and migration are central to their creative self-expression. Paradigmatic figures of the hypermodern condition, migrant artists are a reflection of its fundamental ambivalence. Crossing borders is concomitant with disruption and destruction, but also gives rise to new forms of artistic expression and hybrid productions, various and ever-changing cultural forms and new cultural content.

In this article, most of the examples are taken from the Mexican-American border and Mexican migration to the United States. But our analysis highlights processes of general significance that might be tested in case studies of migrants across other borders, beyond Mexico and the United States.

Does economic globalization inevitably bring in its wake the cultural homogenization of the planet or does it open up spaces for exchanges and mixes so as to promote exchange and dialogue, giving rise to new hybrid cultural forms? If much globalization literature focuses on economic processes and *assumes* cultural homogenization, I ask: under globalization, what happens to culture and is cultural exchange fundamentally asymmetric?

There are various ways of answering this question. I intend here to approach it from the point of view of the cultural actors -that is, those involved in the cultural sphere, e.g., writers, filmmakers, and artists, and the multiple meanings they produce. The authors and the works referred to here have been chosen for their aesthetic qualities but also because they express, in a creative and non-ideological manner, an experience shared by an increasing proportion of mankind, that of migration, of the crossing of borders and of the emergence of transnational identities and networks. I shall refer primarily to the experiences and creations which are located in one of the main settings of globalization: Mexico and the Mexican-American border and the circuits of the Mexican migration in the United States.

Migration, loss of self-identity and reconstitution

Migration is often experienced as a process of fundamental alienation and deracination. In *De l'autre côté* (2002), a documentary backed up by an itinerant installation which deals with issues of Mexican

migration to the United States, Chantal Akerman expresses this point of view with poignant clarity. Immigrants appear to be attracted by the border, symbolized by a depressing wall of corrugated iron. Yet, when they cross the border, they disappear -into the Arizona desert or the concrete jungle of Los Angeles, if they are lucky. If they are unlucky, they are intercepted by Border Control and driven back to Mexico.

The depths of horror that may be associated with migration are most obvious in the serial crimes targeting immigrant women, who have been kidnapped, raped, tortured and assassinated. We have here inexpressible horror. Yet, writers, journalists, film-makers and photographers have attempted to express the inexpressible. At best, they have restricted themselves to suggestive but safe modes of representation, maintaining a distance that respects the suffering of the victims. At worse, they have played on a morbid fascination, cultivating sensationalism about the most sordid aspects of human life. In this instance, any attempt at aestheticism is out of place, indecent, turning people into objects; such 'aestheticism' borders on pornography.

Countless works of literature, theatre or photographic or cinematographic documents give a less tragic and a less depressing vision of migration than the two examples mentioned above. Ken Loach's film, *Bread and Roses* (2000), portrays Latin American immigrants in Los Angeles through individual and collective stories which are indeed dramatic but nonetheless convey hope and optimism through family and communitarian bonds of solidarity and collective action. The janitors, working for office cleaning firms, are fighting for better wages and decent working

conditions, but also against the anonymity and solitude of the huge sky-scrapers in the business area which are deserted at night. The victims, most of whom are women, demonstrate a capacity for becoming actors, both in real life (they were the leaders of the most important trade union struggles in recent years, in the megapolis of Los Angeles) and in the film (where some of them play their own role). In the same spirit, Patricia Cardoso, a Colombian-American director gives a dynamic and positive image of the young Latinas in Los Angeles, in her film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002).

Economic need is the main motive for migration but does not express its full significance. Those who undertake the journey are not necessarily the poorest, and aspiring to a better life cannot simply be described as a financial aspiration. For young people in particular, it is also a question of adventure and experience, a rite of passage, giving meaning to one's destiny and "making something of one's life". In some Mexican villages, young people who do not attempt illegal migration to the United States are regarded as cowards; failure to attempt migration means losing the respect of your peers. In this schema, those who leave for the United States are understood as fighters and, upon return, are often celebrated as heroes. They come back as life's winners, parading their success in conspicuous consumption, in money sent to their family or to the community, and in money squandered at village festivals. Yet their success is not only economic; it is also a marker of self-fulfilment.

From national culture to border culture

What about the creativity of the migrants themselves and their capacity to produce a culture that reflects their interstitial experience of movement between national and transnational spaces?

Until recently, Mexico was an excellent illustration of a national culture rooted in an ancient past, displaying considerable historical continuity. It relied on internal sources of creation; when external

influences were incorporated, they remained distinct, apart. American cultural penetration, in particular, was limited by a symbolic frontier that treated aspects of American culture as foreign and 'other'.

During the 20th century, culture, in its established forms, occupied a central place in Mexico, often poised above society, and always closely linked to power and politics. The cultural scene, like the political scene, was dominated by the shadow cast by the major national revolution. The idea of the nation became a living reality in monuments and institutions like the National Anthropological Museum, as well as in the personalities of creators as immense and established as the photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, the painter Diego Rivera, or the writer Octavio Paz. Cultural nationalism, of which Carlos Fuentes is the last major living representative, had no difficulty in allying with the cosmopolitanism of the elite and the avant-garde.

Writers and artists who are eager to shake free from regional or national stereotypes, but just as resistant to a dry cosmopolitanism which would claim to rise to the level of the universal by delinking itself from the particular, seek the universal in experiences which are fragmented and saturated by the flows of globalization. These flows of globalization are not limited to transnational capital, but include people, norms and cultural artefacts. The cosmopolitan intellectual or artist responds to such mixed transnational flows, but from particular locations. These 'artists of ubiquity', as Néstor García Canclini has put it, are both witnesses to cultural globalization and *producers* of cultural globalization 'from below.' In their intellectual and artistic creations, they self-consciously celebrate the intersections between transnational flows and local cultural particularities; in so doing, they not only reflect and respond to new global-local hybrids, but actively *create* them. This is a genuine cultural globalization 'from below,' quite different from the spread of globalized cultural industries, like the mass media.

For cultural nationalism, the border acts as a safety curtain for identity (the Mexicans speak of a "cactus curtain"). Cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, either

denies the existence of the border or transcends it. From the nomad artist's point of view, borders are incorporated and internalised. The border and the artist interact; each crosses the other; the border becomes a principle of creation. What is true for the individual artist is also true for a national culture which is increasingly transnational: Mexican cultural identity was strongly focused on Mexico, the capital, on the history of the nation and the revolution; it remains so but is becoming decentralized, increasingly defines itself in relation to the border it shares with the U.S., making it its main locus of enunciation.

In Chantal Akerman's documentary and in the case of the women murdered in Ciudad Juárez, migrants are no longer acting subjects but the anonymous victims of a terrible violence. However, the challenges faced by migrants do not only mean hardship – they can also inspire a potentially constructive tension. *Creative dynamics* may originate in the challenges faced in the struggle against the threat of death, inherent to crossing the border, as well as in the resistance to the destructuring effects of migration. This resistance takes place throughout Mexico, in each region, in each community and within each individual Mexican. As the "Hispanic border" moves farther north, penetrating each State, each town, each county in the United States to various degrees, the explosion of migration means that the whole of Mexico right to the most distant villages of Chiapas is in contact with the neighbouring country in the north. This contact is real, literally embodied in the networks of migrants stretching from Mexico to the United States. This contact is also imaginary – based on dreams, fantasies, re-imagined ways of living in a world that is no longer simply local, but hybrid or transnational.

Migration is an ordeal; there may be tragedies. But for many migrants, migration is also the only possible horizon. Its risks have to be confronted to get "al otro lado", ("to the other side"), to go from one set of imaginary images to another, to escape a lifetime of poverty and the weight of imploded traditions, to forge a future for oneself and thus to be able to afford to "buy back" one's past, to give meaning to past struggles,

hardship and relationships. In the majority of cases, the Mexican migrant does not leave with an intention of breaking with the past and never going back, but with a project in which his personal history and that of his loved ones are included and take on a new meaning.

Artistic creation has this in common with migration: both are border line experiences. It implies the integration of the experience of limits, making them the basis for the reconstruction of self.

From the lost community to the imagined community

The nomad creators are neither representatives of a national culture, nor members of a cosmopolitan avant-garde; nor do they exclusively define themselves from notions of belonging. Their experience is one of a community breaking-up or of their separation from it. They never entirely lose their longing for a community, real or imagined, and are torn between the desire to live a communitarian experience once again and the need to create, to establish a distance. Aesthetic creativity thrives on this tension and dies when it subsides.

Some of these creative agents remain more attached than others to their place and social circle of origin. The majority of them do at some point endeavour to return. Sometimes this is successful and the individual project of one artist can invigorate a whole community. More frequently, the artist's return gives rise to friction and is experienced as conflictual, so leading to new departures.

At the same time, insofar as the artist is an active participant in the desire to save or to reconstitute communities which have broken up and are threatened with extinction due to the exodus of their vital elements, he is also working out an image of the subject connected with the community in crisis. This is the case with Nicolás de Jesús and other *amateros* painters from the villages of Alto-Balsas in the Mexican state of Guerrero. In a neighbouring region, the whole state of Oaxaca, just as it is losing a considerable number

of its inhabitants, is being transformed into a land of painters, photographers, video film makers, musicians, singers, potters, etc. These people are creating an imagined Oaxaca, an "imagined home" in which the Oaxaqueños from Oaxaca, Mexico, California and elsewhere recognize themselves. "If our destiny is migration, let it be the whole region which travels in our works," in the words of one of the organizers of a network of craftspeople and artists from one of the Indian regions, the most affected by emigration. Artists moving between Mexico and the United States (sometimes Europe) or permanently settled beyond the border, contribute to the emergence of identities and transnational communities –like the one referred to by the neologism Oaxacalifornia –which combines attachment and detachment, reference to a country of origin and a feeling of belonging to a transient community.

From the search for community to the search for self-identity

The figure of the nomad artist is not exclusively one found in the "minor arts" or in collective cultural productions. The work and life history of Francisco Toledo, the most prestigious of living Mexican painters, is a symbolic illustration of this.

Toledo is not turning his back on tradition; he is picking up the pieces of a tradition which has become fragmented or which he himself has exploded and, with the fragments, he is creating a work, he is recomposing a subject. Even if he does incorporate elements thereof, this subject is neither the community, nor the nation. This "soul" which the painter says he is seeking, is not the same thing as a form of communitarian or national identity. Toledo only creates an atmosphere of tension and conflict, by withdrawing from the scene, putting himself at a distance from any form of community and by refusing the image in which people want to confine him.

Constructing oneself on the border

The creators who, like Toledo, have lived through the experience of being uprooted from their community ("we are the sons of migrants, people who have left their community") and maintain a tense relationship with it, do endeavour to stick the pieces of individual trajectories together: childhood dreams, private heartbreaks and separations, crossing the border, cultural barriers... By doing this, they weave the fabric of new identities; they invent representations which are part of the re-composition or composition of a new social fabric, of networks which include elements of the original community, relations with the host society and with the new environment.

They do not usually produce linear works, which would obey a geographical or chronological order, but a recomposed imaginary world, the elements of which are mixed and dealt like cards to constitute new sets, and to be distributed in new configurations.

The itineraries of these creators, as well as their works, are evidence of different approaches which mingle and criss-cross in the experience of migration: there is a desire for emancipation and modernization; the juxtaposition of cultural elements of various origins; the attempt to re-appropriate an image of the self and the assertion of a subject.

Conclusion

Cultural globalization is a question of flows, movement, crossings and interpenetration and should not be analysed merely in the traditional categories of imperialism and dependence, the contrasting pairs of tradition/modernity, dominant culture/dominated culture, centre/periphery or developing country/developed country. However, it would be wrong to conclude that cultural globalization implies the establishment of a "global village," a universal community, a space of possibilities equally open to all, a world in which cultural creation would be within everyone's reach. North/South relations remain unbalanced and asymmetrical. The relationships

of domination, economic exploitation and social inequality are just as strong and brutal as in previous periods and have at least as much influence on the capacity to express feelings and emotions, to produce images and to invent an imagined world.

The characteristic of cultural globalization in its present phase is that cultural issues are also core issues of conflicts. They are governed by rationales which are relatively independent of political or economic rationales; cultural flows are eminently transnational in nature and are not one-way flows going exclusively from the centre to the periphery or from the north to the south. The importance assumed by the "Hispanic question" in the United States is a clear illustration of this -to take a different cultural form from the one dealt with in this article, the development of Latino Catholicism north of the Río Grande being the counterpart of Protestant penetration in Latin America. This can also be seen with the question of Islam in Europe and in the world in general.

From this point of view, uniformity is neither inevitable nor even likely. Within the countries of the South, but also within immigrant origin populations in the North, we are witnessing the emergence of sources of creativity of varying levels and strength; some dry up quickly while others remain fertile and spread within these societies and beyond the borders. They are themselves nurtured by flows from the centres of globalization which they appropriate, transform and return in their own productions in various directions, including in the dominant spheres. The networks thus constituted are complex, heterogeneous, shifting and sometimes hard to detect. They give rise to an infinite variety of manifestations and productions.

We are witnessing a multiplication of transnational cultural dynamics which are sustained by migration and exchanges and which integrate and go beyond the separations between communities, between nations, between north and south. Far from dissolving differences in a cross-fertilization conceived of as being homogenizing, these dynamics are conveyed by new cultural expressions. In a recent radio interview, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who nevertheless has frequently

warned against the threats endangering the diversity of cultures, rejected the risk of uniformity, stressing that at the same time as mankind destroys differences, it never stops creating new ones.

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