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Reading the Other Side of the Story: Ominous Voice and the Sociocultural and Political Implications of Luis Spota's *Murieron a mitad del río*

Abstract

It is always controversial to proclaim a literary work, at face value, as a sociocultural study of a particular society. It is even more controversial when one deals with a hybrid work, combining factors from two completely distinct societies. Yet, there are some literary works that seem to call for exactly this type of analysis, presenting a range of ideas which in retrospect reveal origins of significant sociocultural trends. Such is the case of Luis Spota's *Murieron a mitad del río* (1948). This novel presents a panorama of ancestral problems in the life of thousands of immigrants and inhabitants of the Mexican-U.S. border region trying to achieve a "better life for them and their children," yet forced to live in social limbo. These individuals reside neither entirely in Mexico nor in the United States, but in a place where the existence of tensions started with the competition for jobs amongst the "already in" and the "newly arrived" (regardless of the legal status) augmenting the differences created by a new environment. Although only implicitly present in the novel, some of these problems are approached from a legal point of view creating, contrary to their intended purpose, a better means for the selection of immigrant manual labor. Although not in the novel, a case in point would be the new "walls of ignominy" along the Tijuana-San Diego crossing, where undocumented migration has shifted east toward Calexico and other parts of the Arizona desert. Since conditions to cross the border there illegally are more rigorous, only the young and strong dare to do it. This essay examines the manner Spota uses to expose his particularly "urban" point of view and a set of social problems, from a cultural theory point of analysis. It demonstrates that *Murieron a mitad del río* presents a microcosm of the issue and in a way, predicts some of the main dilemmas that both countries will encounter through the years. Thus, Spota becomes a visionary, dealing in his own idiosyncratic manner with a still compelling topic.

Keywords

sociocultural, political, Luis Spota, *Murieron a mitad del río*, north, el norte, border narratives, immigrants, Mexican-U.S. border, border citizens, identity, nationalism, conflict, border conflict, in between

Reading the Other Side of the Story: Ominous Voice
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Luis Spota's *Murieron a mitad del río*

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He querido reseñar la historia de unos cuantos mexicanos que se embarcaron en la aventura de cruzar la frontera, en busca de dólares. Cruzarla sin papeles, ilegalmente, por supuesto. Sin embargo, la angustia, el dolor, la ira, las alegrías, los golpes que ellos reciben, no son particulares suyos. Pertenecen también, en odiosa multiplicación, a los que llegaron antes o allí permanecen: casi trescientos mil hombres, en península humana de su patria. Podrá parecer extraño que dentro de la democracia americana sigan repitiéndose casos como los que sirven de base a esta novela, a este sucedido, debiera decir. Lo es. Pero no hay que mezclar a la democracia norteamericana, ni culparla tampoco. Esto sólo acontece en Texas, que no es lo mismo.

I have attempted to relate the history of some Mexicans that took the adventure of crossing the border in search of dollars. Crossing it without documents, illegally, of course. Even then, the anguish, the pain, the anger, the happiness, the setbacks they receive, is not theirs only. All of that also belongs, in a despicable accretion, to the ones that arrived early or remain there: almost three hundred

thousand men, in their country's human peninsula. It could seem strange that these cases are still happening inside the North American democracy, we should not blame it either. This happens in Texas only, which is not the same.

—Luis Spota (Preamble, *Murieron a mitad del río*, 1962)

Mueren tres migrantes mexicanos y un agente de la Patrulla Fronteriza. El vehículo en que viajaban cayó a un barranco de 35 metros, en San Diego.

Three Mexican migrants and a Border Patrol Officer died in San Diego. The vehicle they were traveling in plunged thirty-five meters into a precipice.

—Jorge Alberto Cornejo, correspondent, Tijuana, BC (Mexico City's *La Jornada*, March 28, 1999)

It is always controversial to proclaim a literary work, at face value, as a sociocultural study of particular events in society.¹ It is even more controversial when one deals with a literary work that approaches a polemical subject by defining a space where fiction and “reality” almost completely overlap each other. In the case of *La frontera (The Border)*,² factors from two dissimilar cultures come together on a common strip of land, where fiction and reality can be interchanged with no great loss of “veracity.” At times, literary works seem to call for exactly this type of analysis because they present a range of ideas, which in retrospect reveal origins in significant sociocultural trends. Such is the case with Luis Spota's *Murieron a mitad del río (They Died in the Middle of the River [1948])*.

The existence and confrontation of two main sets of forces are said to define the limits within which each person acts: the “acto-espacio” ‘act-space.’ One set of forces is external, coming from society's norms, values, and traditions; these forces presses inward, attempting to impose limits. The second set of forces is internal, arising from the actor's own will; this set of forces presses outward as the actor seeks to expand the limits of possible activ-

ity. The tension between these two sets of forces creates an unstable zone that illuminates the actor's motivations, ideologies, and desires to transgress. In literature, this act-space has to do with how characters act and their attitudes and willingness to transgress. These act-spaces can be determined from the narrator's discourse presented to readers, who compare them to their own, either accepting or rejecting them, producing a syntagmatic communicative narrator-text-reader relation. A narrator, conferred by the "power" of how things are presented, can become (without being part of the action) a regenerator of ideology. All of this happens in spaces provided by the author; in this way he gives to his construction a portion of his own ideological baggage; in that way one could talk about the author-text relation.³ In this essay, the concept of act-space is used to examine how Spota uses his journalistic style to approach the Mexico-United States border's sociocultural and political controversy and the myth of *El Norte* 'The North.' I demonstrate that *Murieron a mitad del río* presents a chosen microcosm of the issue and in a way predicts some of the main dilemmas that both countries will encounter through the years. I also examine how Spota centers his attention in an attempt to destroy the myth of *El Norte* and becomes a visionary, coping with, in his own idiosyncratic manner, a still compelling topic.⁴

It has been noted that there are very few novels dealing with the Mexican-U.S. border from the Mexican point of view (García 162).⁵ Spota's *Murieron a mitad del río* presents an interesting although very pessimistic and desolate panorama immersed in the ancestral problems in the lives of immigrants and inhabitants of the Mexican-U.S. border region. Hoping to better their lives and the lives of their children, they are forced by circumstances to live in a social limbo.⁶ They are accepted as neither Mexicans nor Americans, but as a vexation to the diplomatic, political, economic, and social relations of both countries. They are located in a place where act-space becomes, if not blurred, at least conditioned for survival, forcing the creation of a new act-space every day: the act-space of the border is made up and maintained by forces and factors present in this place. Here, tensions abound and are intensified by the competition for jobs among

the “already in” residents, the “newly arrived” (regardless of their legal status), and the more “deserving” individuals (citizens, residents), thus augmenting the differences created by this already distinct and aggressive environment.⁷

It is well accepted that Mexico began modernizing in the forties, more particularly, under Miguel Alemán Velasco's presidency (1946-1952). Not forgotten were previous years of the nationalization of oil production by President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) and the alliances that were formed during World War II. At this time, the Mexican government, after the relative success of the first years of the Bracero Program (1942-64) and other labor migration movements to the United States, distanced itself from the encouragement given by then president Cárdenas to the rural part of society (Levy and Székely 131). Instead, the government concentrated on the growing “urban” society and on the creation of opportunities for the nouveau riche, sons of the Mexican Revolution, the growing bourgeoisie (national and international), and the old aristocracy. This decision resulted in a lack of financing and opportunities for rural areas. At this time, because of the need for manual labor in the United States, a migration started and accelerated from all areas of Mexico to *El Norte*. If understanding among neighbors along the Texas-Mexican border was flawed from before the time of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty (February 2, 1848), the massive migration of laborers contributed to more antagonisms all along the Mexican-U.S. border. In the last few years, this friction has caused many political and social tensions, including the passing of legislative initiatives that negate social services to undocumented immigrants.⁸

In this novel, Spota approaches the topic of the border from two directions: the indictment of economic conditions in Mexico and the exposing of U.S.-Mexican people's relations along the border. He puts into play different act-spaces, while the readers have their own with which to compare. In the novel, shrouded by censorship, economic conditions in Mexico are ascertained through some of the characters in the novel. This situation prompts readers to recognize that such circumstances force Mexicans, with very little to lose and only capable of offering manual labor, to leave the country in search of a better livelihood. In her

book about Spota, Elda Peralta comments on the uproar caused by Spota's denunciation of the bad treatment of Mexican immigrants caused by Alemán's government:

La Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores se apresuró a negar que esa situación existiera y el Cónsul de México en San Antonio, alarmado ante una eventual protesta de las autoridades norteamericanas, hizo gestiones ante la Secretaría de Gobernación para que se incautara la edición. "La protesta llegó a hasta Los Pinos"—recuerda Carlos Román Celis—"pero ahí el presidente Alemán se rió, diciendo que él había recomendado la publicación del libro . . ."

The Foreign Relations Department came forward to deny that the situation existed, and the Mexican Consul in San Antonio, alarmed the possibility of a formal protest from North American authorities, made plans with the State Department to confiscate the edition. "The protest went all the way to *Los Pinos*"—Carlos Román Celis remembers—"and there, President Alemán laughed, saying that he had recommended the publication of the book . . ." (117)

It is very possible that without the blessing of President Alemán, *Murieron a mitad del río* would have not seen the light of day. At the same time, one could venture to say that President Alemán saw in the novel a form of nationalistic (although selective) vindication of Mexico.

Spota's literary works, despite popular acclaim,⁹ have not always been well received among critics.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is some interest in trying to revive attention in his works (Pouwels 421, Escalante 62, Bell 17). As Sara Sefchovich's commentary indicates, Spota's works belong to popular literature (17). As such, Spota's works are to be seen and understood by readers according to their own ideologies imposed by the social act-space. Sefchovich also points out that Spota's works

debe ser vista como una unidad de forma, contenido y proyecto ideológico que se inserta en una tradición de literatura política mexicana y de cultura nacional. Spota plantea y propone preguntas sobre la realidad, propone una interpretación de nuestra historia y una utopía para el futuro con las técnicas narrativas adecuadas al cumplimiento de esos propósitos.

ought to be seen as a unit, in form and content as a part of an ideological project that is inserted into a Mexican literary tradi-

tion and part of national culture. Spota poses questions about social reality and, aided by techniques appropriate for the purpose, proposes an interpretation of our history and a utopia for the future. (*Ideología* 76)

In this sense, *Murieron a mitad del río* is an integral part of Spota's project. In this novel, the author uses his journalistic style to report the "facts" through a narrator in his chosen space of conflict. In her essay about the novel, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas explains some of its structural characteristics and points out that "El espacio ficticio-construido—el relato—se basa en una serie de sucesos demasiado *verídicos* que vierten la visión particular de la frontera mexico-texana de un narrador *subjetivo*" "The fictitious space—the narrative—is based on a series of too *veritable* happenings that portray the *subjective* narrator's particular vision of the Mexican-Texan border' (73). Spota's presence behind a subjective, partially omnipresent narrator, as well as the existence of a Manichaeian vision, have been noted before. This particular approach to his literary production is one of the reasons why Spota's works are sometimes ignored as if there were no ideological reading manifest.

In this novel, readers can find several of the criticized techniques Luis Spota uses to expose the novel's central theme: the loss of purpose in the act-space of the characters. One of these techniques is the use of marginal stereotypes and extreme archetypes. Steven M. Bell explains this in a different way:

Earlier in Mexico, novelists of the revolution such as José Rubén Romero (1890-1952) and Rafael Muñoz (1899-1972) had capitalized on their glorification of the simple life of the popular classes to reach large audiences. Spota, in a contemporary urban context, employs a variant of this tactic, counting on the public's taste for gossip, for the sensational, for purportedly behind-the scene looks at public figures and events. (417)

I argue that it is not just the public's taste for gossip that attracts readers to Spota's works. It is also the reader's recognition of some actions (with a degree of distortion) that appear in his novels and are taboo in Mexican society: erotic desire, sexual orientation, and sexual practices of chosen segments of society as well

as the “corruption” of one’s act-space. These are topics discussed only behind blinds; to do so otherwise would be in “bad taste.”

Another of Spota’s techniques is to give the narrator a discourse heavy in hidden ideological meaning and interpretation, without any warning of doing so. In his novels, life is simple enough for readers to identify the events by themselves with what is “natural,” an everyday occurrence, a mere fact of life; here the narrator merely points out the “convenient” facts. In this case, Spota tries to approximate “real life” as all of us experience it without a narrator explaining all its intricacies. This technique directs readers to identify the happenings in the novel with what their social act-spaces embrace or sanction. From this general ideological convergence of the narrator’s discourse with society emerges the idea of the lack of ideology in Spota’s novels. In fact, it becomes a tool for the assertion of the system’s ideology and social beliefs.¹¹ In *Murieron a mitad del río*, the crossing of the river to either side represents the breakpoint for the main characters in the novel, and remains throughout a romantic view of the returning to an environment that is “better” overall, of going back “home.”¹²

The main characters here are José Paván, the most educated of the initial immigrant group, a student from Mexico City; Luis Alvarez; Lupe Flores; and a character nicknamed *Cocula*.¹³ It is worth pointing out that the urbanite Spota chooses to center the narrator’s omniscience in the main character, the urbanite Paván. Spota uses the old tradition of weighting the knowledge of the “capitalino” ‘the one from the capital’ more heavily than that of the “provinciano” ‘the one from the province.’¹⁴ In this way, Paván represents the one who knows and is able to propose “educated” judgments that would have been less credible coming from any of the remaining characters who are from different Mexican provinces.

In the first lines of Spota’s *Murieron a mitad del río*,¹⁵ the narrator places the reader before an illegal and potentially violent confrontation: the act of undocumented people crossing the sanctioned boundary, the river, into the United States. At the same time an antagonistic atmosphere is perceived:

¡PERROS texanos!

Desde la orilla frontera los reflectores venían peinando el agua del río. Paván calculó que no andaban muy lejos.

—Es la patrulla—reconoció brevemente, y las ingles se le estremecieron con su miedo amargo.

Texan DOGS!

From the opposite side of the border, the lights were combing the river's water. Pavan reckoned they were not too far.

—It's the border patrol—he recognized briefly, and his groin trembled with bitter fright. (1)

Actually, the reader does not know who shouts the first two words; there is no indication of this until later. This leaves open the possibility of a narrator-Paván communion. Here the first of many dichotomies in the novel is defined: the undocumented people versus the border patrol. By crossing illegally, the act-space of the characters is completely reshaped; their act-space confronts a new one proposed and enforced by a different society. This confrontation of dissimilar act-spaces is the prevailing one throughout the entire novel, and Spota approaches it from the extremes, from the use of the notorious and stereotypical models. On the same page, the narrator says that Paván repeats (which suggests that he said it at least once before) the word “¡Perros!” and also:

En ese momento no quería pensar en *Cocula*, ni en que volviera a gritar como diez segundos antes. “Que no lo haga ahora el cochino joto . . .” deseó con toda el alma.

At that instant he did not want to think about *Cocula*, nor did he want him to shout again as he did ten seconds before. “That dirty faggot, he better not do it now . . .” he wished with all his heart. (1; second emphasis mine)

Very early in the novel, the character *Cocula* is removed from the reader's space with the following words (the character appears later on in several flashbacks): “El grito de la ribera, el último llamado de lo suyo, había concluido. Quedaba sólo un pequeño llanto sin fin, de *Cocula*” “The shout from the riverbank, the last of his call, had ended. There remained only *Cocula*'s feeble endless cry’ (23). *Cocula* appears again, not as a reference, but with his own voice, twenty pages before the end of the novel (241).

This clearly shows one of Spota's techniques: let the narrator point out the "facts" and the reader can grasp an already aligned meaning. That is, Spota, through his narrator's discourse, uses a one-way route toward an ideological meaning. In this case the coincidence of the sociocultural act-space with the condemnation of *Cocula's* actions is apparent: *Cocula*, being a man, does not behave like a "man" should. Notice that the narrator has told us how *Cocula* starts crying as they cross the river into the United States.¹⁶ This "unmanly" action forces the rest of the group to abandon him rather than risk being caught by the border patrol. Near the end of the book we find *Cocula* again working as a cook for a restaurant;¹⁷ of the initial group of four characters, he is the only one who has "succeeded" in the U.S. This poses several possible interpretations: 1) Initially *Cocula* does not have what it takes as a man to cross the border illegally. Later on, he buys a bogus Social Security Card, and it is not until this false document provides him with a name that he becomes someone: Manuel Hernán Rosales (245). One could say that he undergoes some kind of character transvestism. At the beginning of the novel *Cocula* is labeled by Paván and then by the narrator: he is a homosexual or at least an effeminate male,¹⁸ someone different enough to be singled out from the background of "normal" society. With the bogus social security card he becomes someone and is able to get a job. 2) He is the only one of the group who has the ability to succeed: a homosexual has a better chance to make it in the U.S. 3) Menial jobs culturally related to woman's roles (cooking, washing dishes, cleaning tables) are the only ones available to immigrants in the city. In the fields, the jobs require more physical strength, culturally cataloged as jobs for men.¹⁹

In the novel, the relations among people at the Mexico-U.S. border are divided as follows: a) the community of Mexican undocumented people; b) undocumented Mexicans/Mexican U.S. legal residents; c) Mexicans/Mexican-American citizens;²⁰ d) undocumented Mexicans/U.S. citizens, as well as Mexican-American citizens/Anglo-Saxon U.S. citizens. These types of relations fit into one mold: the weaker (culturally or otherwise) are in a complex relationship with the stronger. A series of conflicting pairs are formed: undocumented—documented; non-citizens—

citizens; Mexicans—Afro-Americans; Mexican women—Anglo-Saxon women; the well-behaved police—the badly behaved police; racist Anglo-Saxon—religious Anglo-Saxon, and others. In all of these cases, the use of stereotypes is very common.²¹

It is noteworthy that once the group crosses the river, their act-space is no longer the original one, because it is changing according to the tensions resulting from their encounters and never comes to be the same as it is seen at the end of the novel. Once in the United States, the narrator says: “Advertían que ya no eran como antes, que no volverían a serlo. Experimentaban la permanente sensación de creerse observados, analizados por todos” “They notice themselves differently than before, they knew that they would never be the same. They felt the enduring feeling of being observed, analyzed by everyone’ (41). Consequently, in this instance, those analyzing looks are in fact act-space-reshaping pressures. Later, after the first encounter with the police (39), which makes them leave town, Paván, according to the narrator, thinks: “No habrá mano abierta de amigo, sino puño cerrado para golpearte si no cumples. ¿Has visto que eres mexicano, *greaser*; que no sólo es el gringo tu enemigo sino también los que llevan la sangre de tu raza? Estos, los más implacables . . .” “There will not be a friendly hand, rather, a fist ready to hit you if you don’t perform as expected. Have you seen that you’re a Mexican, *greaser*, that not only the gringo is your enemy, but in addition those carrying your race’s blood and heritage? Those are the most implacable . . .” (42). This is in fact a very bleak vision coming from someone trying for some time to find a “hidden” and better world to live in. Paván’s statement suggests that the appearance of the first flashback in the novel is not a coincidence. After arriving at a dilapidated house, where a Mexican couple lives and charges them for the “privilege” of sleeping on the bare floor in a cold smelly shack, Paván remembers Pancho Orozco and his wife on the Mexican side.²² In contrast with the couple in the U.S., Pancho and his wife advise the migrants as to how to avoid trouble with “*pateros*”²³ and border police. This flashback is the beginning of a romanticized view of Mexico, suggesting an ideal “home”²⁴ to which to return.

At the Walkers' place (44), the group finds a job and here Spota builds his chosen microcosm: here we find the U.S. citizen born from Mexican parents in the person of Mascorro, a kind of foreman, who takes advantage of the undocumented migrants. Then there is Manuela Farfán, a legal resident who provides them room and board at a lower cost. She represents the maternal figure who gives them nourishment and advice on going back to Mexico to get the necessary documents. There they find Manuel Farfán, Manuela's²⁵ son, who has a "better" job as a "bodeguero" 'storehouse attendant' and who will very soon to be "promoted" to driver in a lumberyard (86). Manuel is a legal resident. They also find Felipe Romero Mascorros' wife's²⁶ son who works as a delivery boy in a Brownsville drugstore. He is a first generation U.S. citizen. Manuel has an air of superiority toward the group but still he talks in a conciliatory way. In contrast, from the beginning there is no camaraderie with Felipe:

Los tres amigos miraron a Felipe. Vestía además un pantalón de casimir azul. En la *mano oscura*, un anillo con piedra roja.

—¿Son mexicanos?

—Ajá. ¿Y tú ?

Sonrió con un desdén que no trató de disimular:

—No, texano. De MacAllen. Americano puro.

The three friends look at Felipe. He was wearing blue cashmere pants. In his *darkskinned hand*, he wore a ring with a red stone.

—Are you Mexicans?

—Aha. And you?

He smiled without trying to hide his disdain:

—No, Texan. Pure American. (62; emphasis mine)

This shows how the narrator is trying to make sure the reader notices Felipe's superior attitude toward the immigrants. At the same time he points out the color of his skin, as if Felipe were passing through a process of "whitening," a "pocho"²⁷ becoming a "gringo." This, in a way, means that to be born in the United States fixes the legal but not the racial status: the visible, the skin color, remains Mexican, foreign; thus skin color becomes a limiting part of a personal act-space. On the other hand, Manuel and Felipe's jobs are still perceived by Mexican culture as low paying jobs proper for people with no skills; thus these "Ameri-

cans” come to be positioned at the bottom of the social strata in this social environment.

For the immigrants, unconventional limiting social forces start to come into view in the the chosen microcosm. For example Benito Fortis, another undocumented worker, says:

—Mira: nosotros somos mojados, gente sin papeles. Cuando llegué también me asustaba con los patrulleros. Ahora hago como que ni los viera. Somos mojados, entramos a la mala, por el río. Venimos a trabajar, lo estamos haciendo. Ellos lo saben pero no les importa.

—¿Entonces para qué están?

—Para que sigamos trabajando . . . Tus brazos y mis brazos y los de muchos miles como nosotros—seguía Fortis accionando los puños—producen dinero para Texas, para que Texas les pague y los traiga bien vestidos, en buenos coches. Si tú y yo y todos los demás no estuviéramos partiéndonos el cuero aquí, el Valle no podría levantar ni la décima parte de las cosechas. Por eso los patrulleros se hacen de la vista gorda; somos útiles, ¿comprendes? Útiles para ellos.

—Look: we’re *wetbacks*, undocumented people. When I arrived here the patrolmen scared me too. Now I just ignore them. We are *wetbacks*, we entered illegally, across the river. We came to work, and we’re doing it. They know it and don’t care.

—What are they for, then?

—To insure we continue working. Your arms, mine and thousands like us—Fortis continued waving his fists in the air—make money for Texas, so Texas can pay and dress them well, provide them with good cars. If you, me and all others were not here working ourselves to the bone, the Valley would not be able to harvest a tenth of its total production. That is why the police act as if they don’t know anything; we’re useful. Get it? Useful to them. (55)

Here, it seems that the immigrants’ act-space is conditioned by peculiar circumstances: they know themselves to be illegally in the country but the law enforcers don’t seem to be interested in that fact, unless their objective of being there (to work in the fields) is somehow unfulfilled. This “convenient” social arrangement continues today. It is common to question what would be the cost increase for food products from the fields if these immigrants were not working for such low wages. In turn, this unknown becomes an excuse to justify the “need” for immigrant

Gender act-space is another area of Spota's criticism in the novel. Here, most of the women are found in the kitchen, or behind a man, performing what is "expected" from them in a patriarchal society. There is one exception; while the collection of act-spaces in the novel continues, there is a paradigmatic situation parallel to a common stereotype. In this case it is the sexually liberated American woman personified by Leslie, Walker's wife,²⁹ who "seduces"³⁰ Paván and actually pays for sexual favors. When doña Manuela³¹ sympathetically scolds him for this, Paván finds an excuse in the fact that Leslie is an "amancebada" 'a concubine.' In a way, he becomes her judge: he considers her to be acting outside of her act-space; yet at the same time, being a Mexican *macho*, he needs to cope with the occasion (Leslie's offering) by accepting the relationship. In this situation, readers, applying the social discourse for their act-spaces, could sympathize with Paván. His situation is one of a subaltern passing, through his sexual appeal, to a "higher" position. Mr. Walker, who is in a higher position, is now a deceived man, a cuckold. No doubt, this is a use of discourse as an attire: the subaltern taking revenge, right where it hurts the most in Mexican culture (sex, masculinity, taking advantage of the other's wife) against the one that has power. It is apparent that Leslie (a former prostitute) prefers a not-so-covert sexual relationship with Paván to Mr. Walker's money and position. To finish her story, we are told that she leaves Walker for Martin Gold, a war veteran.

In a classical "Spotean" tradition, the narrator presents the most dramatic episodes in the life of the group. Paván, in a circumstantial situation, first tries to steal from his protector, Chego, without success and then helps him to get away from a lynch mob of racists. After going back to the Mexican side of the border (they are robbed along the way), their act-space becomes more and more undefined. When they return to the U.S., Lupe is killed. As noted by Cota-Cárdenas, he is the only one who physically dies in the river crossing.

To position an undocumented Mexican on the social ladder, Spota provides several illustrations: when an African-American asks for a job in the fish processing plant he is offered wages that are twice as high as those offered to Paván because he is Mexican

(180). Later, the immigrants find a war veteran called Smith. He tells them, as Paván remembers later: “Ser mexicano aquí—fueron sus palabras—no es una nacionalidad, sino una profesión” “To be a Mexican here—these were his words—is not a nationality but a profession’ (193). This comment reminds him of another comment that illustrates a very real situation: Texas is a concentration camp (193). To show them how badly Mexicans are treated, the next morning Smith leaves with Luis’s shoes, leaving his old ones in their place.

The incursion to “el otro lado” ‘the other side’ has shifted the group (now made up of Paván, Luis, and Limón) to a position of degradation: a violent attack against others in their own position, who, like themselves, are nobodies and, so it seems, unworthy of respect. This is illustrated when they meet a Mexican man in his forties and his almost adolescent wife en route back to Mexico. First they rob him and then take turns raping her (200). In a typical “Spotean” twist, in the next chapter the group comes to *El Cielo* (*Heaven*) where they start working for a deeply religious Robinson. In contrast with Mr. Walker, Spota presents us with a religious “fanatic” in the character of “Mister Robinson” in *El Cielo*. And here, it is Limón, an undocumented Mexican, who denounces his fellow immigrants after the group takes Robinson’s son to a house of prostitution, and Luis, as if it were a punishment from heaven, becomes infected with gonorrhea. On their way back to Mexico, Paván purposely abandons Luis so he can get some cure for his disease. Later on, Paván is apprehended by the border patrol and is deported.

We can see in this series of events that the act-space of the group is always changing for the worse. Like true romantics, these characters are in pursuit of a false image of the United States. Theirs is a romantic vision of the most democratic country in the world that offers riches at every turn of a corner. The narrator chooses carefully the worst and most extreme situations in order to destroy this view. He proposes that the situation in their own land is, overall, better. In a way, *Murieron a mitad del río* tries to convince the reader that economic rewards are not sufficient to live in a place with a radically different act-space. Even

Chego, having money, does not remain in the U.S. He goes back to Mexico, older but with hope for a better life. He and his wife return to their own village. When Paván is back in Mexico, the narrator says:

No era el mismo. El “otro lado” lo había cambiado. Ahora regresaba, siguiendo las huellas de quienes lo antecedieron; sintiendo sus mismos sentimientos de fracaso, dolor y rabia. Pero volvía distinto: murió del otro lado, no en lo físico como Lupe, sino en lo espiritual. Texas, y lo que encerraba, operaron la transformación, regresaba amargado, endurecido, frustrado.

He was not the same. The “other side” had changed him. Now, he was back following in the footsteps of those who came before him; having the same feelings of failure, pain, and rage. Texas, and all it encompassed, consummated the transformation; he was returning bitter, hardened, frustrated. (261)

In a way, the last part of the novel is a nationalistic vindication of Mexico: nothing is better than one’s own land.

While the novel develops almost entirely in the United States, other than in a very few instances, the reader is not confronted with the tension produced by the lack of a common language. The novel develops in what one could call “pockets of cultural resistance” where Spanish is the prevailing language and English belongs to the powerful minority. These cultural pockets are commonly found in places such as East L.A., South Phoenix, Guadalupe, Arizona, Chicago, and other places. In these pockets, people do not feel compelled to learn the “foreign” language, sometimes supported by the popular saying, “trabajamos con las manos no con la boca” ‘We work with our hands, not with our mouth.’ The existence of these cultural enclosures becomes a point of attraction to newcomers, becoming a type of safety net in a foreign land. Once an immigrant is established, relatives will probably follow the same path to *El Norte*. And this is precisely what Spota, in his process of myth destruction, fails to consider: the thousands of immigrants who remain in the U.S. with the possibility of maintaining very important “hidden” Mexican and American economies. He fails to consider those thousands of dollars sent to families in Mexico. Without them, who knows what

would happen to the Mexican economy that is permanently in crisis? Thus Spota succeeds in pointing out some of the darker sides of *El Norte*, but as noted before, and corroborated in practice, he fails to destroy the myth, one which continues to attract thousands of people every month. Spota's novel tries, and is successful in a way, to provide a nationalistic pride in what Mexico has to offer to the millions of impoverished people in urban and small towns. Many of them do not feel it is enough and choose the river crossing instead.

Notes

1. Juan Loveluck talks about this tendency in the United States where "Debido a la perduración de rasgos positivistas en la enseñanza de la literatura, se dio en creer que las novelas podían constituir una preciosa e irrefutable fuente de conocimiento de la idiosincrasia y las costumbres hispanoamericanas. Recurríase a las novelas "ejemplares" como un *non plus ultra* en la generosa exhibición de lo típico, para que sirviera de documento, de retrato fiel y hasta de estadística o texto de ilustración histórico" 'Due to some positivist features in the teaching of literature, it was believed that novels could become a precious and irrefutable source for the knowledge of the idiosyncrasies and manners of the Hispano-Americans. It used to be that "classic" novels were considered a *non plus ultra* in the generous exhibition of the typical, so it would serve as a document, a photography and even a statistical document or a historical text' (22).

2. Fernando García Núñez has a comment to this respect: "La frontera, en cuanto [a] forma de vida, no tiene límites definidos: en ella confluyen gentes, actitudes, valores y conflictos oriundos del contacto diario entre dos sistemas de vida distintos, pero entremezclados a pesar de las aduanas, y las revisiones migratorias" 'The border, with respect to a way of life, does not have defined boundaries: there is a confluence of people, attitudes, values and conflicts born from the daily contact between two different ways of life, but commingled regardless of customs procedures, and migratory inspections' (159).

3. See Manzo-Robledo, "Los *acto-espacios* y los *espacios queer* con una aplicación a la obra *Don Juan Tenorio*."

5. Besides *Murieron a mitad del río*, there are *Ciudades desiertas* (1982) by José Agustín (Mexico: 1944-); *Todo lo de las focas* (1982) by Federico Campbell (Mexico: 1941-) and the better known *Gringo viejo* (1985) by Carlos Fuentes (Mexico: 1928-). In Chicano literature, there are several examples, such as Miguel Méndez's *Peregrinos de Aztlán, Entre letras y ladrillos* (1996) (*From Labor to Letters* [1997]) and Aristeo Brito's *El diablo en Texas* (1976).

6. This is a very common reason cited by people coming to work in the U.S.A.

7. Although they are only implicitly present in the novel, some of these problems are approached from a legal point of view and create, contrary to their intended purpose, a better means for the "unofficial" selection of immigrant manual labor. A case in point would be the new "walls" along the Tijuana-San Diego crossing, where undocumented migration has shifted east toward Calexico and other parts of the Arizona desert. Since conditions to cross the border illegally there are more rigorous, only the young and strong dare to try it. Several newspapers have reported about the death of nine undocumented Mexicans when a group of about fifty were abandoned to their own fate by their "polleros" 'guides' during the snow storm on the eve of March 27, 1999. The border patrol in Tucson has reported that while about 50,000 undocumented people were deported in February, in March that number increased to 60,537 (Mexico City's *Excelsior*, April 3, 1999, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/9904/990403/nac11.html>).

8. Today, it is common to find newspaper reports about the problems coming from the enforcement of new immigration laws in the United States (sometimes closely related to drug busts). In the same way, one finds allegations about increasing numbers of dead immigrants and confrontations in court produced by heavy-handed application of the law by police and special border patrol forces. Cota-Cárdenas refers to the Hanigan Brothers Case, when three Arizona ranchers tortured three undocumented Mexicans in 1978. There are some pending cases in courts from Texas to California where undocumented people, have taken police to court accusing them of harassment. The passing of some initiatives (for example in California and Arizona) is the partial result of these problems.

9. He has sold more books than any other Mexican writer.

10. See for example, the criticism his *œuvre* received from the group called *Los Contemporáneos* (such as Salvador Novo [1904-73]).

11. Raymond Williams mentions three common versions for the concept of ideology; see *Marxism and Literature*.

12. The river mentioned here has two names for the same stretch: *Rio Grande* in the United States and *Río Bravo del Norte* on the Mexican side, an indication of the differences existing between the two sides. The non-acceptance of a common name reflects resistance to “domination.”

13. The word *Cocula* comes from the Coca tongue, which in turn comes from Náhuatl: *Cocolli*, meaning “God of Fire and Earth,” and the ending *tlán*, meaning “place.” In the novel, this nickname brings up interesting questions. Cocula is a small city in the state of Jalisco, one of the many with a large population that has migrated to different cities in the United States (Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, etc.), most of them working in service areas. Cultural tradition says that the mariachi, as a musical group, was born here; the same is said with respect to French bread called “birote” or “virote,” a very popular bread in Mexico. There is another small city called Sayula, also in the state of Jalisco, where tradition says that homosexuals abound. These people trying to escape from tight machista-religious rules go to the rest of the country, mainly to Jalisco’s capital Guadalajara, to Mexico City, and to the United States. In this case, it is possible to suggest that Spota is making an allusion to this cultural tradition and that he might have the names Sayula and Cocula mixed up. On the other hand, he might be making a contrary allusion to the popular belief that mariachi music is related to “machos” and their amorous conquests and manly deeds, something for which *El Cocula* is not a prime example. There is a popular mariachi song celebrating this fact that says:

De Cocula es el mariachi
de Tecalitlán los sones,
de San Pedro su cantar
de Tequila su mezcal,
y los altos de Jalisco
afamados por entrones
por eso traen pantalones

From Cocula is the mariachi
and from Tacalitlán the *sones*,
from San Pedro its songs,
from Tequila its mezcal,
and the highlands of Jalisco
famous for their fearlessness
that is why they wear pants.

14. According to John Brushwood, the internationalization of México City comes with Spota's *Casi el paraíso* (1956) and Carlos Fuentes' *La región más transparente* (1958); before this, Spota had used urban space for his *Más cornadas da el hambre* (1951). Thus behind is left the literature about the Revolution and the provincial space.

15. In this essay, I use the 1962 edition.

16. Later, in another flashback, the reader's perception of *Cocula* is reaffirmed:

Era *Cocula*. Traía una maleta en la mano. La maleta de cartón café con que salió de México.

¿Para qué trajiste eso?—Paván lo sacudió por uno de los brazos fofos.

—¡Ay!—gimió *Cocula* débilmente—. Son mis cosas.

—Déjalas.

—Si son mis cosas . . . Mi ropa, mi perfume y el espejo.

No tuvo para él más que una palabra terca:

—Déjalas.

Comprendió *Cocula*, al mirarle la cara, que no tendría más remedio que obedecer. Tomó la maleta y regresó por donde había venido. "Marica latoso." Fue un insulto sin palabras, sin despegar los labios.

It was *Cocula*. He was carrying a suitcase. The same brown suitcase he left Mexico with.

—Why did you bring that?—Pavan shook him by one of his spongy arms.

—Ouch!—he moaned weakly—. Those are my things.

—Leave them.

—But those are my things . . . My clothes, my perfume and mirror.

He had nothing for him but obstinate words:

—Leave them.

After seeing his face, *Cocula* understood that he had no choice but to obey. He took his suitcase and went back the way he had come. "Impertinent faggot." It was an insult without words, without opening his lips. (26)

17. The following passage is noteworthy, because of the narrator's interest in pointing out how "queer" it is for a man to have such an uncluttered and neat quarters: "Había un olor peculiar, a lociones y afeites, y un cuidado extremo en los muebles, en los objetos, prolijamente ordenados en el buró, la mesa, el tocador" 'There was a peculiar smell of lotions and makeup, and an extreme care in the furniture, in the things carefully placed on the end-tables, the table and the dresser' (243).

18. The author implies certain mannerism in *Cocula's* behavior. This of course is used in a derogatory way, denoting superficial peculiarities, which in Mexican culture is enough to catalog someone.

19. It is imperative to take into account that these comments are coming from a Mexican cultural point of view. Hence, these are references to traditional woman's duties in society: cooking, cleaning, etc.

20. Mexican-American is, in its general assertion, people born in the U.S.A. of Mexican descent.

21. In this novel, stereotyping becomes a very strong tool, a part of the discourse, mostly against the "upper class" culture.

22. In this novel, married women remain always in the background, most of them without name, affecting what happens in the novel through their husbands. This coincides with the cultural tradition of submissiveness.

23. This word has a Peruvian meaning, "the ones who shoot or kill ducks," that is a better one than the one implicitly provided by the narrator when describing the killing of a Mexican family trying to go back to Mexico, crossing the river (90): the one in charge of a barge to get undocumented people across. When crossing the river, immigrants actually become sitting ducks to be hunted down. This is to what Paván refers to: " 'Deben traer carabinas,' se previno, pensando en los hombres de la patrulla. 'Deben traerlas; nunca las dejan, y en el río se puede cazar.' " "They should have rifles," he warned himself, thinking about the men in the patrol. "They should have them, they never leave them, and in the river it is possible to hunt" ' (18).

24. This romantic view does exist in every immigrant. But for Mexicans, different from, for example, Chinese or even Guatemalans, the proximity of Mexico to the U.S.A. makes it a more realistic safety net for all of those willing to risk themselves in the pursuit of a better life. In the first flashback, Paván remembers an old man in a town near Monterrey, Mexico, who tells him: "—¿Para qué se van tan lejos? Si quieren trabajo aquí pueden encontrarlo . . . en *su tierra*." "Why do you go so far away? If it's a job what you want you can find it here . . . in your own land' (35; emphasis mine).

25. In Mexican culture it is customary that the first child take the name of the father, if a boy, or the mother if a girl. In this case, Manuel takes the name of the mother indicating that she was the dominant part in the marriage, that she was the father, or that she was abandoned to

raise the child alone. There is no such indication for her daughter Catalina.

26. At this time in the novel she is in her second marriage. It is important to note that, in those days, divorce in Mexico was a very rare thing; thus Mascorro's wife, living in the U.S.A., has expanded her act-space by separating from the first husband and becoming Mascorro's wife. The reference to her is not a product of fate when her son fights against Paván's friends, after seeing her son bleeding, the mother; who the narrator, keeping with the "machista" cultural tradition, refers to only as "la mujer de Mascorro" 'Mascorro's wife' says:

La mujer de Mascorro abrazó a Felipe y lo recargó contra su pecho liso y hundido.

—Mugrosos desgraciados—bramó, mostrando los dientes de madre a los otros tres, que la miraban torvos y agresivos—. ¡Me la pagarán, cochinos mexicanos, hijos de mala perra . . . !

Mascorro's wife embraced Felipe against her flat and sunken bosom.

—Dirty Mexicans—she raged, showing her mother's teeth to the other three, who were looking at her fierily and aggressively—. ¡You'll pay for it, Mexican pigs, sons of a bitch . . . ! (100)

27. This term literally means discolored, faded. It is applied to Mexicans or descendants in the United States who still have all the physical characteristics of a Mexican but try to assimilate into the new culture. This assimilation is perceived from, for example, the way the person dresses to the way and language he/she talks.

28. In February 1999, the INS started a general "round-up" of undocumented migrant workers in the Yakima area in the state of Washington. This action brought an immediate protest from field owners and processors; their main complaint: after taking about eight hundred workers for deportation procedures, what would happen to the product in the fields and warehouses? Interest in the workers *and their families* did not begin until a human rights organization came into play, pleading to the Governor for his intervention to allow these workers to get their legal situation dealt with. Also, the new INS tactic of requesting workers' documents from companies (as of April 8, 1999, this was taking place in Nebraska, Washington, and Northern California) to determine the legality of the worker is being met with lots of protest from management. Workers not able to produce pertinent documents are deported from the country.

29. At the same time Mr. Walker is portrayed as a *cornudo*, in this case as a sexually impotent man.

30. To start with, in Mexican culture, a man is expected to perform the initial courtship and amorous “conquering.” If the contrary occurs, the woman is then labeled as “easy” and unworthy of respect. The Leslie-Paván situation fits this pattern; that is why Paván takes the stand of a man who could stop the relationship at will. This relationship is already out of the act-space since Leslie is supposed to be a woman living in a intimate relationship with Mr. Walker.

31. Doña Manuela fits the part of the Mexican woman, submissive, maternal, in control, once the husband is no longer present, but reproducing the same patriarchal pattern of the patriarchy. One can see the residuals of a certain kind of *marianismo* (a follower of the model of the Virgin Mary), prevalent in Mexican culture, parallel to *machismo*.

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