

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 25
Issue 1 *The Literature and Popular Culture of
the U.S.-Mexican Border*

Article 12

1-1-2001

Crossing Laterally into Solidarity in Montserrat Fontes's Dreams of the Centaur

J. Douglas Canfield
University of Arizona

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Canfield, J. Douglas (2001) "Crossing Laterally into Solidarity in Montserrat Fontes's Dreams of the Centaur," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1501>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Crossing Laterally into Solidarity in Montserrat Fontes's *Dreams of the Centaur*

Abstract

Fontes's novel begins with a *corrido* announcing typical themes of murder and revenge. But the novel has from the outset been interimplicated in a history of the persecution of the Yoeme (Yaquis) at the turn into the twentieth century. Its three main protagonists become mavericks on the border, as they cross ultimately not only into safety in Arizona but into solidarity with the oppressed. Such crossings are existential, resulting in new identities that eschew racial or ethnic purity but instead embrace mixed ethnicity, or *mestizaje* (to borrow key concepts from Anzaldúa). Such crossings are lateral, non-hierarchical. But Fontes does not allow refuge in some romantic vision: even as one crosses over, one retains one's membership in the group that oppresses. Instead, Fontes's mavericks—and Fontes herself—become tellers of a story too little known, too horrible to be obliterated. United in a *kinán* of spiritual force, they become potential "drops of water that penetrate and soften the land," leaving prints for others to follow."

Keywords

Montserrat Fontes, *Dreams of the Centaur*, Yoeme, Yaquis, border, oppressed, crossing, border narrative, identity, mixed ethnicity, *mestizaje*, *kinán*, solidarity, Chicana fiction

Crossing Laterally into Solidarity
in Montserrat Fontes's *Dreams of the Centaur*

J. Douglas Canfield
University of Arizona

A voice vibrates through me. "Return to your country. Be priests of this vision, and you will be men of action, be men who move without doubt to turn Sonora into a land of generosity. Tell them what you saw here. When they enslave men there, they enslave us here. Tell them. That is why you have been saved. Be drops of water that penetrate and soften the land. Leave prints for others to follow."

—Montserrat Fontes, *Dreams of the Centaur*

In the recent film *The Mask of Zorro* there occurs a remarkable visual event. An American audience witnesses a truth that has been occluded from its consciousness: the enslavement of Indians to work the mines of Mexico. Three centuries of such enslavement is a history not well known, even denied. In the spring of 1998 (just before the *Zorro* film was released) on the American Indian listserve a scholar protested that, since slavery was officially outlawed by the Spanish crown, it could not have existed.¹

In her remarkable novel, *Dreams of the Centaur*, Montserrat Fontes tells part of this history, the enslavement of the Yaquis at the turn of the twentieth century.² Héctor Durcal, the intellectual younger brother of the protagonist Alejo Durcal, voices the shock of those who would deny such enslavement if they could: "Slavery is against our Constitution. To sell a human being is

treason" (267). Like the other Durcals, however, Héctor sees the evidence, condemns Porfirio Díaz, the infamous President of Mexico for most of the later nineteenth century until overthrown in 1913, and agrees that the story must be told. Indeed, the Yaqui word *etehoi* means stories, which have enormous importance in oral cultures, for they represent memories that constitute a people's history: "Tellings. *Etehoi* is how Yaquis record events" (300). Fontes brings us voices designed not only to obliterate forgetfulness or denial but, as my epigraph puts it eloquently, to "penetrate and soften the land"—of Sonora and, by extension, of the Americas—leaving "prints for others to follow." The immediate, harder result would be the Mexican Revolution; the distant, softer result would be the raising of consciousness of North Americans as we enter the new millenium with the prospect of continued (economic) colonization, imperialism, and, yes, slavery and even genocide. The holocaust of Yaquis the novel describes reminds us of other, more recent holocausts, including those of Indians in Central America. Yet *Dreams of the Centaur* leaves prints: hints and dreams of a *mestizaje*, to use Anzaldúa's apt term, that represents successful cultural crossings.³

Dreams of the Centaur begins with a "corrido" 'ballad' that tricks us into thinking this is a typical Borderlands novel about rivals and revenge, about a horse, a card game, and a shot from a fatal gun. José Durcal has a dream that the Sonoran ranch he has built with his own hands will be passed on to his sons, that his name will live on. But he and his "hacendado" 'wealthy landowner' friend, Esteban Escobar, contend over a magnificent black stallion named El Moro, whom Esteban has unfairly bought out from underneath José's desire and whom José has won back in a poker game. Potent on the back of his stallion, José is known as El Centauro, as he increases his ranch and his influence in the community especially by means of a breeding business involving both Moro and the aptly named "Sueño," his prize bull. Overreaching, perhaps, José wins rich river-bottom land in another poker game with Esteban, and is found dead. Esteban maintains he shot his friend by accident, but José's wife and sons know it was murder. They just cannot prove it against the powerful Escobars. Op-

est son severally plan their revenge. Indeed, presciently José has primed his oldest: "Swear to me that if I fall, you will complete my dream. . . . If I die . . . or if something happens to me, swear to keep the Durcal name alive. Make the Durcal ranch a wheel that turns by itself" (37). Alejo shoots his godfather Esteban in the face. Thinking the judge will grant leniency in such a case of honor, the family and the community are surprised when Alejo gets twenty years in the dreaded "bartolinas" 'pit-prisons' of Mexico. Thanks to his mother's interest, he is allowed to join the army. He endures hardships, escapes, and ends up happy on a ranch in Arizona, complete with his adolescent love interest, Ana María, the rejected wife of the lawyer who arranges everything.

A typical romance, a *bildungsroman*. But intertwined from the beginning is another story, that of the Yaquis. On the opening page, José chases a Yaqui girl. He allows Yaquis to work his ranch, despite the fact that his wife Felipa hates them, for they killed her mother in a raid. The Yaquis have never sworn allegiance to Mexico, and José secretly admires their resistance leader, Cajeme, who is finally caught, paraded, and executed. José warns that Díaz is selling Mexico out to American and other foreign speculators at a cost to mid-level men like himself and especially to the Yaquis. Esteban Escobar's friend, the American speculator Billy Cameron, responds to José's anger over this exploitation with the classic Lockean argument for the appropriation of Indian land: "[T]he fact is, Yaquis are not developing what they have" (51).⁴

Alejo Durcal, who has an intimate and at times clairvoyant relationship with his mother, Felipa, "[o]n the subject of Yaquis, . . . was torn between his adoration of Felipa and respect for José" (58). But Alejo has an Indian for a surrogate father, the Yaqui Tacho, who teaches him how to make and use a bow and arrow, regales him with stories of the making of a Yaqui warrior (who was as ferocious and formidable as an Apache), and eventually trains him to break Moro to accept him as, implicitly, the new El Centauro after José is murdered. This last training constitutes his entry into manhood.

The Durcal boys' aunt, Tía Mercedes, cautions them against avenging their father, and her warning uncannily places the

Durcals in a space between, a space Alejo especially must learn to negotiate. She tells them they are powerless against the Escobars, who are well connected all the way to the Capitol: “‘Look at what they do to the Indians! Their families can’t bury them until the bodies have rotted.’ . . . ‘Tía, we’re not Indians!’ . . . ‘You’re not Escobars!’” (90).

The question of just who he is becomes paramount for Alejo. Only sixteen years old when he avenges his father, riding Moro into the cafe where Esteban drinks and shooting his “padrino” ‘godfather’ in the face, Alejo embarks on a remarkable journey. Alejo attempts to justify his vengeance to his mother by arguing that he has avenged the Durcal name, saved “Father’s dream—that our name would live” (137). Felipa responds cynically, “Bah! He took that name because he had none of his own” (137). The narrator explains that “he had taken the name Durcal from a newspaper in Sinaloa, because ‘it sounded strong’” (137). Thus Alejo is deprived of the essence a name is supposed to bestow. Alejo plans to turn himself in, to take responsibility for what he has done. Felipa wants him to run away, to avoid the “paredón” (137), the wall against which he will most likely be executed by firing squad.

Instead, Alejo is sentenced to the dreaded “bartolinas” ‘caves.’ He is first incarcerated in the caves rather than the pits, and here he makes an extraordinary acquaintance that continues to destabilize his sense of who he is. The boy in the cave next to his carries his father’s and his brothers’ birthmark. (They all have the birthmark, Alejo included.) Charco, a kind of *enfant sauvage*, is his bastard half-brother, the offspring of José’s fling with the Yaqui girl. “The boy claimed to have lived everywhere. Under a table, in a stable, in Mayo and Yaqui villages, with Mexicans and gringos. He didn’t know if he was Mexican or Indian and he was glad,” because, Charco explains to Alejo, “in Sonora everyone shoots someone, sooner or later. Like you. Best if people don’t know what you are” (155). Yet Charco ineluctably resembles his father, as everyone notes eventually. Like Alejo, Charco too is caught between identities, between cultures. He just doesn’t know it yet, for Alejo does not reveal to him his Durcal heritage until

<https://www.phaenipress.org/stcl/vol25/iss1/art12> her’s ranch after their ordeal.

Alejo himself, however, searches for meaning in this uncanny encounter: "How could two of José Durcal's sons end up side by side in these bartolinas? Surely that meant something" (162). The meaning only gradually unfolds, creates itself out of their bonding. Charco is tortured for information concerning the whereabouts of the Yaquis. Alejo is pressured to spy on Charco. Both end up in the pits for their resistance, where they enter into each other's spirits in order to remain sane. They endure by means not of any European religion or philosophy but Indian spiritualism, the Huichol prayer with which their one kindly keeper leaves them: Alejo narrates, "We prayed until we met in the empty wooden bucket outside the pits. At first we only saw each other's eyes. Next our faces" (188). Released from the pits and inducted into the army, as they marched to Guaymas, "Charco and I sent each other ánimo and because of that, we did not die" (189).

As we see, Fontes makes a daring switch in narration. Part Two of the novel switches into first-person so we can get into the head of Alejo during his crossing from one consciousness to another. He experiences a painful identity crisis fomented by his increasing awareness of complicity. In order to escape the pits, he must surrender his identity as Alejo Durcal, assuming the new surname, Robles, his mother's maiden name and the one arranged by the lawyer Castillo. Alejo feels he is "*losing something*" (181) in giving up the name for which he killed Esteban. When Capitán Carrasco, the commandant of the prison, calls out Alejo's new name to induct him, Alejo nearly faints: "I was more than naked, I was stripped of flesh and memory" (189). In taking on a new identity, he obtains a new "memory," indeed, one that he must struggle to keep alive, to share, to tell as *etehoi*.

He first experiences shame at his complicity now, as a soldier, in the persecution of the Yaquis, whom the army rounds up for shipment to Mexico City and beyond. Alejo wishes the silent Yaqui prisoners would curse him: "I would welcome their curses. It matters not that Charco and I were forced to do this. It matters that we did" (185). He takes refuge in a kind of schizophrenia, in his new identity as Alejo Robles, for, he says to himself, Alejo Durcal would never have participated, as he did, in the atrocities

against the Yaquis, including raping the women. He continues his schizophrenic reflection:

Alejo Durcal would have remained loyal to the Yaqui. He would have remembered the Yaqui legend Tacho taught him. According to this legend the little girl, the prophet Yomumuli, translated the words from the talking tree. Those words warned of the coming of the white man and the railroad. Sadly, Durcal would have seen the dark part he played in that legend, a legend that saw the Yaquis expelled from their own land. (197)

Alejo sees his dark self as an agent of the white man and his destructive domination, foretold in the legend from the talking tree.

Talking trees and crosses will play an important part later in the novel. Meanwhile, as Alejo, Charco, and their band of *bartolinas* soldiers escort Yaquis on a forced march from the sea to the railroad depot in Tepic, they are caught in a ravine in a flash flood, and Alejo and Charco seize the moment for their escape. But Charco cannot abandon the women and children and returns to save them: “Ashamed, I see my part in this terrible cruelty” (201), Charco says, for he has torn away “the curtain” that has blinded Alejo to his complicity, that has separated his schizophrenic selves:

I ask God, what blood runs through my veins? . . . While Charco argues—chest out, eyes burning—I see a true son of José Durcal, known as a defender of Yaquis. But am I the son of José Durcal? Not when I fear death more than how I manage to live through this. What will we do to these people? Why don’t I know? Why haven’t I asked? (202)

How he manages to live through his ordeal involves his own as well as the Yaquis’ dehumanization: he becomes a raping dominant male.

Witnessing the loading onto trains of the “enemies of the state” (207), Mexicans like himself whose only crime is speaking out or writing against the injustice and who are being sent to sugar plantations where they will be worked to death; witnessing the loading also of the Yaqui boys, ripped from their mothers to be taken to Mexico City and “sold to labor contractors” as slaves;

arriving in Yucatán where those labor contractors will work those Yaqui boys to death on henequen plantations, Alejo slips to his nadir:

My mother's face returns and I see my life with fresh eyes. I see no future for myself and my past is blurred. . . .

It's possible to feel death.

I felt mine when I delivered Yaquis to men who speak the language I speak.

I turned over Sonora men and women I have known all my life to men who paid sixty-five pesos a head for them.

Sixty-five.

My father had tried to make me curious about my country and failed. Now I'd crossed my homeland, ocean to ocean, and my country poisons me. (208, 215)⁵

Alejo's nadir is not his abjection in the *bartolinas*, then. It is his consciousness of being thus poisoned. What especially poisons Alejo is that his country is contaminated, polluted by an injustice so inhumane as to betray not just its ideals but its ruling-class ideology of benevolent paternalism. Thus Alejo confronts the problem of evil, muttering a Jobish complaint: "God, why do you let this continue?" (200). Nevertheless, Alejo's reflections are shorn of faith in traditional European theodicy. They are existential, an argument of absurdist logic:

Saltillo [the most indomitable of the *bartolinas* soldiers] says there's always a worse place than the one you're in. And if we imagine such a place, then our place isn't so bad. That is of little comfort. Why must we choose between bad and worse? Who sets up the choices?

My instinct tells me that if we can imagine a worse place, we'll make sure someone ends up there. That must be how evil places get started. That's how Yaquis got chained—someone thought of a worse situation than his own, then he created it. (198-99)

No deity, benevolent or malevolent, sets up such choices. Humans, capable of incremental degradation, do.

Alejo begins to be presented with his own choices. He and Charco befriend the patrician sergeant, Gustavo. In Mexico City, Gustavo brings friends he had met in Europe, members of his *hacendado* class, to gawk at "your famous wild Yaquis" from Sonora (210), as if they were nothing more than curious animals

in a zoo. When Charco pisses on the ladies' skirts, the patricians demand Charco be punished. Gustavo controls their rage, dismisses them, and returns laughing. Alejo approves of the gesture of solidarity: "I liked that he had protected Charco instead of siding with people of his class" (210).

Charco is half Yaqui and a *peón* and identifies easily with the Yaquis in their desperate plight. Alejo, from an aspiring *ranchero* class, and Gustavo, from an established landed class, have a much more difficult crossing, but increasingly they too identify until the crucial moment when they are ordered by an overseer on an henequen plantation in Yucatán, whither they have been brought because they know something about ranching, to teach the overseer how to brand Yaquis so he may reclaim them when they run away to other plantations. Predictably, Charco refuses and is whipped. But Alejo too refuses and is whipped. What enables him to endure is another out-of-body identification, this time with a naked Yaqui man hobbled for branding. Gustavo agrees to do the branding, but only to gain time. Alejo brands the overseer instead. When Charco trips him up, Alejo then smashes his head in and frees the hobbled Yaquis.

Alejo has crossed laterally into solidarity with the oppressed Yaquis, Yaquis oppressed by him, his people, his government: "*We did this*," he says (227). His new identification is underscored by the Mayan Anginas, who has actually engineered Alejo's experience so he might return to Sonora and tell the truth to the Yaquis, to Mexico. Anginas says of the Yaqui with whom Alejo has bonded, named Juan, and Alejo himself, "You come from the same land. Different cribs, same land, but here, you're the same" (247): both Sonoran, separated by class, now yoked by the experience of oppression, by empathy.

Anginas was a Talking Cross, a member of the Mayan resistance, whose ability to talk was nearly stifled forever by his being made to swallow coals as punishment. Now he makes these Sonorans experience the full horror of Yucatán so they will be "priests of this vision" and therefore "men of action," men "who move without doubt to turn Sonora into a land of generosity": "That is why you have been saved" (250). In a way, Alejo, Charco, and Gustavo have become the new Talking Crosses.

Crosses mean sacrifice, however. The three (plus Juan) survive the chaos they have unleashed on the plantation by being buried beneath a heap of corpses, another descent into abjection.⁶ They return from the dead, as it were. But we take no refuge in Christian meaning. The symbolism is transformed back into Mayan pagan. Fed liquor to facilitate endurance of being transported in a wagon of corpses, Alejo has a hallucinatory vision of a great flowering *flamboyan* tree. Alejo reaches for the flowers, but they're too high, yet the tree tells him to climb:

The rest follow and soon our heads are surrounded by flowers that form a net of joy that cradles me. . . . I cry and laugh until I'm empty and weak with a sweet tiredness I've yearned for all my life. . . . A voice. "Take the word of the ceiba, the *yaxché*, the tree of life through which all creatures live. The harmony of its smallest leaf contains the harmony of the heavens. Submit to the *yaxché* and your *kinán* will heal the cruelty of your land." (251)

The "net of joy" is their solidarity. The ascent they make is up the Bacatete Mountains, up Mazocoba Peak, last refuge of the Sonoran Yaquis before they are slaughtered by the Mexican army, the remaining Yaquis being enslaved or escaping to Arizona.

Aided by Anginas to escape Yucatán and by Gustavo's *hacendado* father to return to Sonora, Alejo and the others learn that there is a new, unofficial governmental policy: "The popular saying about Sonora is 'New century, new land. Forget coexistence'" (258). Word is out that there will be a massive government effort against the Yaquis. Alejo, Charco, and Gustavo, equipped by Castillo with the means to go to Arizona themselves, declare that they will keep their word to the Mayan resistance and inform the Yaqui chiefs of what fate awaits them if they do not make peace. They follow Juan to Mazocoba, but it is too late. The slaughter is imminent. They choose to join the Yaquis atop the mountain: "We belong on the right side. That's up there," announces Alejo for all of them (282). But the Yaquis have been betrayed by one of their own. The army knows their secret routes to the top, their escape route off the back of the mountain. As the narrator puts it, speaking in her own voice in this Part Three, "A world is ending" (287). Coexistence has been terminated.

Coexistence survives on a different level, however: *mestizaje*, Anzaldúa's term for a new, multicultural consciousness. It takes the form of the dream of the new centaur, the transformed Alejo, whose dream changes, expands that of his father:

What was Father's dream? That the name Durcal live after him through his sons and the ranch?

Small dream.

Well, thinks Alejo, I will change El Centauro Durcal's dream. Father said, "A man must make good dreams—if not, he is capable of the worst." I say a dream should be bigger than one man's ranch or one man's land. I killed more than Esteban when I fired that gun. I killed Father's old dream too. No, made it bigger—to include everyone. And I need not step through his ghost to live my dream. I will stand on his shoulders to carve my own dreams. (275-76)

The killing of his father's dream is not Oedipal; he needs not "step through his ghost," through some symbolic parricide. Alejo can succeed his father not through supplanting him but through expanding his father's vision laterally:

Fondly, he looks at Charco, Gustavo, and Juan and remembers the *flamboyan* tree in Yucatán. They too abandoned their personal dreams. Anginas changed us, he thinks, united our *kinán*. (276)

This *kinán*, this positive energy, gives force to solidarity, gives it healing power. Its inclusivity is what's important. Alejo survives the battle, survives the loss of a leg, replaces it with wood from a tree—as if it were *yaxché*, the "tree of life." In the end, as he approaches his new home in Arizona, as he purchases from the Nimipu, the "real people" from the north, the spotted horses (*peluse*) with which he will begin his breeding farm like his father's (334), his dream is inclusive. He explains it to a reluctant Felipa:

Please. See the good fortune in all this. We survived. The *peluse*, the Nimipu, the Yaquis, Charco, me. People tried to kill us and couldn't. We're all joined somehow. I don't have the words, but I see the picture clearly in my head. It matters that I work with those who struggled. It unites our *kinán* into a circle. (337)

Alejo is priest of a new vision of solidarity of the oppressed, a vision with leavening power to raise the consciousness of those—perhaps unwittingly—complicit in the oppression. Their *mestizaje* offers pagan redemption, leaving prints for others to follow. It is appropriate for the stallion, both Moro and Alejo, to be reunited with his mare of choice at the end, for this is romance, a novel where good triumphs—or at least transforms. Charco says they were “meant to fight” with the Yaquis (269). In the end, they will meaning onto their stories, their lives. It is the rhetoric of desire. Fontes grants her characters not just agency but efficacy.

Alejo is not the only major protagonist in *Dreams of the Centaur* to be transformed into a maverick on the border. This is a novel written by a woman, and Fontes frames it within a woman’s consciousness, Felipa’s. At the beginning Felipa is a devotee of the Virgin of Guadalupe—and a Yaqui hater. The first major change in this young bride of El Centauro is that she escapes the usual sacrificial sexual role of Mexican wife and experiences female desire and orgasm. This awakening is symbolic of a larger awakening—of Felipa’s enormous energy, her *kinán* and also of her consciousness.

Felipa’s *crise de conscience* occurs when, like the she-bear searching for her cub suggested in Alejo’s youthful lamentation at his father’s bringing home a stuffed bear cub, she responds to her son’s plea as he leaves for the Bacatete that she come find him after the battle. She rescues her wounded son from among the corpses of old men, women, and children, slaughtered as they tried to escape the carnage. She ministers to him in her wagon through the night, till the light dawns, both literally and metaphorically:

First light shows Felipa the battle’s tally. Walking toward her must be a thousand people. In torn bloody rags, faces sooty, burned lips blistered, cut, they move in slow, heavy silence.

Outraged, Felipa demands, “Dónde estás, Virgen Santa?” She shakes a fist at the sky. . . . Holy Mother, doesn’t this silence wring your soul? (293)

She witnesses Mexican families, arriving in their buckboards, buying surviving Yaqui children for domestic slaves: "Numb, Felipa can't believe what she sees" (294). She too finds European theodicy lacking, and she ceases praying to her beloved Virgin.

Instead, Felipa takes matters into her own hands. She rescues the captured Charco too. They get the wounded Alejo to a small ranch, where she herself amputates his lower left leg, supervises his healing, and simply wills him back to life. Charco explains to Alejo, who is feeling sorry for himself, " 'You lived because of your mother's rage,' he says. 'I saw the rage in her eyes as she fought off death. Her passion saved you. And this is right, for that's what we are.' He slaps his chest with the palms of his hands. 'The flesh of our mothers' " (321-22).

Felipa also changes gradually here in this small ranch house, where the Peñas, Manuel and Carmen, relinquish their bedroom to Alejo, sleep in the wagon, and assist in every way they can. Felipa admires the quiet, strong Carmen, who is Indian. Typically for not just Felipa's higher class but for aspiring *mestizos*, Manuel's family "rejected his Indian wife" (328). Felipa admires their love amidst sparseness, their ability to know "when you have enough" (328). Moreover, "[s]he has seen Alejo eye Carmen, and Felipa admits she's wished he would find a good Indian woman like her" but she realizes she is stereotyping (328). She vows to let her sons marry whom they will, then realizes even that is a gesture. She is undergoing an important process of self-knowledge here:

Empty gesture, she thinks, unable to wed her vow to passion. Vows can't change this ugly rejection of people like me and those whom José called Mexico's *primera gente*. José was a better person. . . . People like me made the Martinos [the overseers] who scarred Alejo. People like me allow the Mazocobas that maimed my son.

She remembers it was Carmen who spoke up and asked her to bring her son to the ranch. Manuel, the mestizo who is most like herself, was ready to turn her away. (328-29)

The upper class, the *primera gente*, is not morally superior. José, in his tolerance of and even admiration for Yaquis, was morally superior to them, to her. Furthermore, her supposedly unmixed

caste of Hispanos is actually morally reprehensible for its inhumane practices of slavery and genocide.

This remarkable transformation takes place as she lies in the road to Arizona reflecting, indulging her sexual desires. She remains a vital woman, the only person besides José and Alejo who can ride Moro. She is an empowered woman. She effects their successful crossing of the border, as she crosses internal borders of her own. Felipa concedes to herself that Alejo and Charco “aren’t wrong to want to end the evil in their country” (333). Felipa sees things differently, philosophically:

On some days the clouds separate, creating a broad aisle for the sun’s setting. This gives the desert plain a uniform hue, turning it into an endless mantle, a cloak spread over the earth. Where is she on this vast cloth? At the end of the material, where edges fray into nothingness? She does not feel ragged. (333-34)

Gone is Catholic ontology. She belongs to a universe of becoming, and she is not frightened.

Felipa, at first resistant, comes to accept Alejo’s new dream. And she accepts Charco as the virtual reincarnation of José. Upon his quick return from Tucson with two Yaqui families, “Felipa looked at the boy’s handsome face. José and his Yaquis. Again” (343). What is more, despite her jealousy of Charco’s Yaqui mother, she comes to accept her husband’s bastard as her own son, embracing him as “hijo” (349), the last word of the novel. Fittingly, the novel ends with Felipa independently beginning her four hundred mile trek back to Alamos, driving her wagon alone, with faith not in Christianity but in something like Charco’s vision, where we are part of “something bigger” (347), where “[e]verything already happened, right, hijo?” (349)—the *mestizaje* version of Hegel’s alpha and omega of Becoming.

However much we romanticize the primitive, we cannot—Fontes and her sympathetic, *fin de siècle* readers—indulge ourselves in a vision that is not *mestizaje*, not creolized, somehow pure, *indio*. Fontes knows this. Thus at the end she focuses on Charco’s identity. If he is just the flesh of his mother, his identity is fluid: “The boy claimed to have lived everywhere. Under a table, in a stable, in Mayo and Yaqui villages, with Mexicans and grin-

gos. He didn't know if he was Mexican or Indian and he was glad." (155). But Charco is the inescapable spitting image of his father; he carries his birthmark, "the sign of conquerors" (22), the ineluctable sign of Hispanic forbears, of Conquistadores, of European heritage.

When Alejo informs Charco of his heritage, he denies it:

Charco lashes, "I'm no one's brother! And I don't belong here. I'm only here because I'm the son of Moro and a mare." He stops; voice low, he adds, "I don't belong anywhere on earth, and I never have—that I remember." (347)

Felipa asks how much he remembers. He doesn't remember his mother, thinks she was hanged by Mexican soldiers and that he was sold first to Mexicans, then to Americans, for whom he worked until he found the Yeomem.

"But *before* that, I belonged to something big—like that sky up there, only bigger. It was huge, and I knew that though it was big to me, it was part of something bigger. No matter what happens, I don't fear death, because when I die, I'll go back *there*."

Tears roll back into Felipa's hair. "Meanwhile, Charco," she says, remembering that Charco can't be more than fifteen years old, "come to your father's ranch, because on earth, that's where you belong. That's what's right."

"Señora," Charco murmurs. (347)

We all are children of the cosmos. But we have specific histories, which cannot be denied. Charco's murmur marks his submission, his acceptance of being his father's son as well as his mother's: Mexican as well as Yaqui, joined not just to the oppressed but to the oppressors.

Crossing the border to Arizona emphasizes the arrival in a new world, a new space, but with its ineluctable links to the old. Charco's mixed identity seems to be a synecdoche for a potent *mestizaje* these three mavericks now share. No people can lay claim to being the "real people." At best we can aspire for a solidarity that enables potential drops of water to penetrate and soften this hard land. Felipa parts saying to Charco, "Tu casa está en Alamos" (349). Just as the Yaquis have a traditional "homeland" (*passim*), so do we all. Fontes's final hope seems to be the

message of the *flamboyan*: "Submit to the *yaxché* and your *kinán* will heal the cruelty of your land."

Notes

1. For details about such slavery, see Forbes.
2. For details about the deportation of Yaquis into slavery, see Spicer, chapter 3.
3. See Anzaldúa, especially chapter 7, "La conciencia de la mestiza" 'mestiza consciousness,' where she develops the concepts of *mestizaje* and crossings.
4. For a contemporary expression of this opinion—as well as other reasons the Yaquis should be subjugated and civilized—see the letter of Dr. Manuel Balbás reproduced by Spicer (141-42) and Spicer's following commentary (142).
5. This passage provides an excellent example of Fontes's minimalist style. Such understatement restrains the narrator—be it Alejo or Fontes—from screaming at us.
6. For an excellent analysis of the concept of abjection and its role in regeneration through violence, see Kristeva.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Fontes, Montserrat. *Dreams of the Centaur*. New York: Norton, 1996.
- Forbes, Jack D. *Apache, Navaho, and Spaniard*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1960.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- The Mask of Zorro*. Dir. Martin Campbell. Tristan Pictures, 1998.
- Spicer, Edward H. *The Yaquis: A Cultural History*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1980.