

Racial Amnesia and Queer Identities in Carlos Fuentes's "Chac Mool"

Amnesia racial e identidades cuir en "Chac Mool" de Carlos Fuentes

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Resumen

Pocos cuentos de Carlos Fuentes han alcanzado mayor reconocimiento que “Chac Mool”, que ha sido antologado en numerosas ocasiones. La mayor parte de la crítica se centra en cómo la historia trata las tensiones inherentes a la promoción de un Estado posrevolucionario mestizófilo que fetichiza la modernidad y las cosmologías precolombinas que continuaron existiendo en el país hasta mediados del siglo XX. Según esta lectura, la muerte final de Filiberto al ahogarse en Acapulco resulta de su ignorancia sobre las deidades precolombinas. Nuestro artículo valida estas lecturas previas al mismo tiempo que sugiere que el cuento abre posibilidades para lecturas paralelas que enfatizan diferentes críticas culturales. Junto al paradigma nacionalista, postulamos una lectura queer de la historia. Al leerlo de esta perspectiva, tenemos que modificar nuestra interpretación de los diferentes elementos de la historia, en particular la narrativa que rodea la muerte final de Filiberto. Más allá de simplemente criticar un orden nacionalista que exaltaba su pasado indígena mientras permanecía ignorante sobre los pueblos precolombinos, el cuento también comunica la inquietud del autor con el papel que las personas homosexuales y LGBTQ+ jugaban en la literatura nacional.

Palabras clave: Carlos Fuentes, “Chac Mool”, nacionalismo mestizo, indigenismo, gótico, queer/cuir

Abstract

Few of Carlos Fuentes’s short stories have achieved greater recognition than “Chac Mool,” which has been anthologized on numerous occasions. Most of the scholarship centers on how the story treats the tensions inherent to the promotion of a modernity-driven, mestizophilic postrevolutionary state and the pre-Columbian cosmologies that continued to exist in the country

well into the twentieth century. In this reading, Filiberto's ultimate death by drowning in Acapulco results from his ignorance about pre-Columbian deities. This article validates previous readings while also suggesting that Fuentes's story opens possibilities for parallel readings that emphasize different cultural critiques. Alongside the nationalist paradigm, we posit a queer reading of the story. When read through this register, our interpretation of different elements of the story—particularly the narrative surrounding Filiberto's ultimate death—necessarily shifts. Beyond simply criticizing a nationalist order that reified its Indigenous past while remaining ignorant about pre-Columbian peoples, the story also communicates the author's uneasiness with the role that gay and LGBTQ+ individuals were playing in national literature.

Key words: Carlos Fuentes, "Chac Mool", mestizo nationalism, indigenism, gothic, queer

Few Mexican authors have received greater attention for their depictions of Mexican identity than Carlos Fuentes. The author's most acclaimed works engage the subject in especially direct and problematic ways (Ordiz Vásquez, 1992; Filer, 1984). Throughout his writings, he constantly asserted a need for the nation to, in the words of Malva E. Filer, "integrar sus componentes indígenas y europeos, sus raíces históricas y su modernidad, y elaborar con lo mejor y más perdurable de ellos su propia y auténtica cultura" (1984, p. 476).³ This fact placed his thought in dialogue with most postrevolutionary intellectuals, who, whether they came from the left or right, reified mestizaje as a strategy for transforming Indigenous people into productive, Westernized citizens through racial and cultural hybridity (Basave Benítez, 1992; Cornejo Polar, 1994; Dalton, 2018; Lund, 2012; Palou, 2014).⁴ Fuentes's literature shows how Mexico's homogenous, mestizo ideal elided Indigenous histories and cosmologies from the national memory.

One of his favorite symbols was the palimpsest, where layers of texts, architectural structures, and/or discourses were stacked one on top of the other, thus erasing and resignifying each other in the process (McBride-Limaye, 1985). Most scholarship that engages the palimpsestic structure in Fuentes's literature centers on such totalizing novels as *Terra nostra* (Josephs, 1983; Oviedo, 1977; Price, 1999; Williams, 1996). Nevertheless, this structure also sits at the heart of "Chac Mool" (1954), one of his most anthologized short stories (Acker, 1984)⁵. This palimpsestic structure imbues the text with a potential for multiple significations, a fact that

³ We should note the critique of Carmen Perilli (2003), who argues that Fuentes imposed his own "oracular" mestizo homogeneity onto his proposed reconciliations between the European and Indigenous elements of Mexican identity.

⁴ Such intellectuals followed in the footsteps of Manuel Gamio, whose *Forjando patria* (1916) laid out an ambitious plan for assimilating Amerindians to the state through technology and modernization.

⁵ "Chac Mool" appears in multiple anthologies throughout the world due to its quality and brevity (Campa, 2009), and it was Fuentes's favorite story from *Los días enmascarados*, his first collection of short stories (Harss, 1977).

several scholars have hinted at (Duncan, 2010; Tyler, 1989), but that none have engaged directly. This article argues that Fuentes emphasizes his critique of mestizophilic racial amnesia by queering Filiberto, the character who most explicitly embodies the decadence of the contemporary professional class.

A short summary of the story will facilitate our discussion. In a chronological sense, “Chac Mool’s” narration begins near the end when an unnamed narrator arrives in Acapulco to retrieve the body of his deceased coworker, Filiberto, who has drowned at the beach. After boarding a bus back to Mexico City, the narrator stumbles upon Filiberto’s diary, which he begins to read. Functioning as a second narrator (Gottardi, 2013), Filiberto uses his writing to tell of a trip that he took to La Lagunilla to buy a cheap, life-sized replica of Chac Mool, the Mayan god of rain. He places the idol in the basement after arriving home, but it later comes to life, floods the house, and takes over Filiberto’s home. The protagonist attempts to escape Chac’s physical –and perhaps even sexual– domination by fleeing to Acapulco. He unceremoniously drowns on one of its beaches during Semana Santa. The unnamed narrator arrives at his colleague’s home shortly after finishing the diary. When he reaches the door, an Indigenous man wearing makeup and a robe greets him and tells him to leave the body in the basement.

Both the narrator and the reader(s) seem to face a binary choice at the end. Either a reincarnation of a Mayan god has taken over the residence, or we are looking at a present-day Amerindian: the excluded Other whom the mestizo state would prefer to ignore in its attempt to support a homogeneous, mestizo ideal (Alonso, 2004). The Indigenous man at the door serves as a perfect example of what Ignacio Ruiz-Pérez (2017) calls “ese lapso de indeterminación en el que el lector y el personaje *vacilan* sobre las causas naturales o sobrenaturales de un acontecimiento” (p. 534). Fuentes suggests that *mexicanidad* –which critics like Henry Schmidt

(1978) have defined as a cohesive national identity based on Eurocentric *mestizaje* (pp. 34-37)—may be just a fantasy or a mask to fool people into complacency,⁶ to assuage their guilt over the conquest and contemporaneous treatment of Indigenous populations, and to deny the complexity of the nation’s contradictory heritage.

Of course, if the narrator faces a contemporary Indigenous person, then the initial binary choice breaks down into multiple possibilities. If he is not Chac Mool in the flesh, then who is he? Certainly, the story does not limit itself to a single interpretation; indeed, writing on Chac Mool-related artwork, Fuentes (1998) has stated that “ninguna faceta de este arte excluye a las demás: la realidad es múltiple” (p. 147). One of the most tantalizing readings of this text would suggest that the Indigenous character is one of Filiberto’s —past— lovers. Rather than search for the so-called correct interpretation to the story, we ultimately assert that “Chac Mool’s” true discursive potential emerges at the juncture of its conflicting possible significations.

Critics have approached “Chac Mool” from multiple angles, though most situate it within the body of fantastic and/or magical-realist fiction that was common in mid-century Latin American literature (Ciccione, 1975; Duncan, 2010; Gutiérrez-Mouat, 1985; Ruiz-Pérez, 2017)⁷. Richard Reeve (1971) demonstrates this insistence on a magical-real approach when he writes, “this piece (...) has all the earmarks of a psychological study instead of fantasy until the friend also meets the idol face to face” (p.171; see also Gutiérrez-Mouat, 1985), a fact that apparently precludes the possibility that Filiberto has committed suicide (Campa, 2009; Tyler, 1989). Reeve

⁶ For a discussion on the importance of masks in Mexican culture, see Octavio Paz (2004).

⁷ In the introduction to a 1988 anthology that included nearly forty essays, Ana María Hernández de López highlighted magical realism as one of the principal lenses through which critics should approach Fuentes’s *oeuvre*. That said, perhaps in part because Fuentes distanced himself two years later from the tradition (Fuentes, 1990; Faris, 2002), recent scholarship has begun to place Fuentes more squarely within the gothic, another related mode that has opened much of Fuentes’s literature up to possible new readings. According to Ordiz Vásquez and Ordiz (2012), for example, while Fuentes clearly draws on Mexico’s pre-Columbian tradition, his rendering of the story clearly invokes gothic monsters. See Gottardi (2003) and Gutiérrez-Mouat (2004). According to María O’Connell (2007), we can also view the story through the lens of the grotesque.

thus recognizes a layer beyond the magical-real/fantastic, but he ultimately discards the psychological reading completely. We concur that the magical-realist lens plays a central role in criticizing Filiberto's ignorance about Mexico's pre-Columbian civilizations, which, in turn, alludes to the alienating nature of official mestizaje's preference for European culture and cosmologies. That said, Fuentes provides no conclusive textual evidence –not even the apparition of the Amerindian at the end of the story– to suggest that all valid readings must necessarily accept that Chac Mool has returned to life.

The text ultimately reflects the imaginary of an American continent that, according to Fuentes (1998) “ha vivido entre el sueño y la realidad, ha vivido el divorcio entre la buena sociedad que deseamos y la sociedad imperfecta en la que vivimos” (pp. 11-12). Viewed in this light, Fuentes's own words invite us to read the story through multiple codes that swing back and forth between “sueño y realidad” in an almost palimpsestic form. The Indigenous character's appearance at the story's end provides the rupture that puts each of the aforementioned readings into contact. This scene invites us to reread the story in code to deduce what it says about Filiberto's sexuality. Rather than argue about which approach facilitates the “correct” reading of the text, we will do better to analyze how the confluence of both readings allows us to gauge the text's commentary on postrevolutionary society. Front and center, of course, lies a resounding critique of the myth of mestizaje, which Fuentes deconstructs from various vantage points.

Given that official mestizaje was a biopolitical construct (Janzen, 2015), it should come as no surprise that, beyond functioning to define race relations in the country, it also interfaced with constructs of gender and sexuality. The sexual dimension to this racial construct becomes especially obvious in *La raza cósmica* (2010), José Vasconcelos's paradigmatic treatise on the subject. In his introduction to that essay, he writes that “las circunstancias actuales favorecen

(...) el desarrollo de las relaciones sexuales interracialas” (p. 15). The Mexican philosopher’s focus on the reproduction of a mixed-race nation suggests that this quote speaks specifically to heterosexual relations. Robert Irwin (2003) takes issue with this interpretation when he argues, “while [Vasconcelos] may not have approved of homosexuality, he certainly knew of its existence, and one might conclude that if asked how homosexuality functions, he would have extrapolated his theory of heterosexual racial mixing in response” (p. 171). While Irwin agrees that the focus on reproduction in Vasconcelian and postrevolutionary thought made homosexuality a difficult fit within official doctrines, he also notes that “racial difference was never depicted as a taboo within that [homosexual] subculture” (p. 172). It is for this reason that Irwin’s observations prove especially useful in our approach to “Chac Mool”. If Filiberto and the Indigenous character are interracial, nonheteronormative sexual partners, then their sexual communion represents a common, if frowned-upon –by Fuentes and the state–, practice within midcentury Mexico (Irwin, 2003). Just as the text casts Filiberto’s ignorance of pre-Columbian society as a significant character flaw, his sexual relationship with the Indigenous character would put him at odds with a postrevolutionary state obsessed with (re)producing a mestizo order.

Regardless of the reading –magical-real/fantastic or realist/queer– the story clearly casts Filiberto as a decadent character who fails to uphold the virile values of postrevolutionary mestizo masculinity. His resulting queerness rings clear through his marital status –single–, his mediocre employment as a government bureaucrat, and his total ignorance of his Indigenous roots.⁸ Viewed in this light, Filiberto’s decadence –and even his ignorance about his cultural heritage– result directly from his nonheteronormative sexuality. This fact allows us to better

⁸ Our usage of the term queer in this context refers not necessarily to Filiberto’s potentially nonheteronormative sexuality but to his overall inconformity with statist constructs of power and privilege.

position Fuentes within the debates on homosexuality that have enveloped Mexican literature since the close of the Revolution. As early as the 1920s, debates raged between the supposedly masculine Estridentistas –an avant-garde literary and artistic group that took great interest in national(ist) ideals– and the Contemporáneos, a group of avant-garde scholars, poets, and artists –many of whom were openly gay– whose cosmopolitan worldview and silence on nationalist issues led many critics to dub their literature as effeminate and decadent. Fuentes published “Chac Mool” decades after these discussions had subsided. Nevertheless, his less-than-flattering depictions of Contemporáneos in works like *La región más transparente* (1958), which came out shortly after “Chac Mool” (Irwin, 2003), show that these debates sat at the forefront of his mind. Given this context, it should come as no surprise that the author would cast his homosexual –or queer– character as oblivious to nationalist themes like the country’s pre-Columbian heritage.

Fuentes’s decision to queer Filiberto shows that he held queer aesthetics to be antithetical to nationalist and modernity-driven projects. These conclusions become all the more convincing when we approach “Chac Mool” as a multi-layered text. The queer reading and the magical-real approach function independently from one another for the most part, but the reader ultimately has to put both possible readings in conversation to tease out the story’s twin discourses on race and sexuality. We can finally uncover the story’s patently unprogressive treatment of homosexuality when we realize that “Chac Mool” indirectly charges queer and homosexual authors with moving Mexican literature away from questions of identity and toward other issues that Fuentes perceived as less valuable. Indeed, this move away from nationalist issues contributes to Filiberto’s ignorance about the dangers of swimming in the ocean while fleeing the Mayan god of water. “Chac Mool” thus represents an attempt to move away from the cosmopolitan aesthetics and so-called effeminate literature that had prevailed for the most part in

previous decades in favor of a national –and perhaps regional (Latin American)– aesthetic. Fuentes ultimately aimed to provide a literature that recognized the Indigenous past and pointed the readers toward a more macho literature whose principal goal would be to validate the Indigenous past while at the same time promoting an unapologetically hyper-heterosexual ideal.

Of course, a person who reads the story for the first time is unlikely to make these connections during their first reading. Instead, the story lends itself to a distinctively magical-real interpretation, where a pre-Columbian idol has come to life and recolonized the home of a mediocre, mestizo man in Mexico City. When read this way, we note that Filiberto’s unfamiliarity with the traditions of his own forefathers leads to his demise. Only at the very end of the story, when the “indio amarillo” –whom the narrator codes as male through masculine nouns and adjectives– answers the door dressed in decidedly feminine clothing.⁹ Only here does Fuentes explicitly introduce the possibility of a queer reading. Nevertheless, this scene colors the entire story’s interpretation if we go back and reread the text under the supposition of Filiberto’s queerness. Following the lead of Mabel Moraña (2018), then, we argue that the tension between both “reality and irreality/dreams” and “past and present” imbues “Chac Mool” with its discursive value and social commentary. The balance of this article discusses how the intersection of Filiberto’s queer sexuality with his racial amnesia contributes to different debates that raged across midcentury Mexican thought and letters. We begin by discussing how the story depicts Filiberto’s racial amnesia; from there, we discuss how the depiction of the Indigenous character at the end of the story opens up the possibility for queer readings of an array of scenes that would not otherwise open themselves up to such interpretations.

⁹ Certainly, the character could also be a trans woman.

Fleeing the God of Water by Swimming in the Ocean: On Filiberto's Racial Amnesia

Filiberto's journal entries portray him as a mediocre bureaucrat and heir of a fading family fortune. His modest salary is so insignificant that he can barely maintain the rundown, nineteenth-century mansion that represents the last of his family inheritance. Filiberto's job and disappearing wealth tie him explicitly to a decadent, prerevolutionary order that struggles to find its place in postrevolutionary, mestizo society. What is more, his supposed emasculation – particularly his place of employment and his ignorant fascination with pre-Columbian cultures – queers his character in a cultural –rather than sexual– sense. As such, he represents a type of “spiritual degeneration” that appears in much of Fuentes's literature (Prieto, 1988). Unlike those newly admitted “brown mestizos” who protagonized (post)revolutionary Mexican society (López-Beltrán and García Deister, 2013), his inherited mansion suggests that his family enjoyed some prestige prior to the Revolution, a fact that aligns him more closely with the “white” mestizos of the *Porfiriato* (1876-1911) (Lomnitz, 1992). Beyond representing a disappearing class of old, aristocratic money, Filiberto also embodies a form of national mestizaje that deliberately ignores its Indigenous past. Fuentes (1972) disagreed fervently with such approaches to mestizaje and modernization, arguing instead that the nation would have to take its Amerindians into consideration if it wished to build an autochthonous modernity. Bertie Acker (1984) builds on this aspect of the story to argue that Fuentes charges postrevolutionary society with failing to provide a meaningful life to its inhabitants, particularly those of the growing middle class (p. 119). This results in an alienating order that affects everyone from both the mestizo and Indigenous classes.

Throughout the story, Filiberto demonstrates that Mexican mestizos suffer from a form of racial amnesia that others Indigenous people and distances people of mixed-race descent from

important parts of their cultural heritage. At one level of interpretation, this alienation proves deadly (Sánchez Sarmiento, 1988). Had Filiberto not lost the cultural knowledge of his Indigenous forebears, he never would have made the fatal mistake of fleeing the god of water by visiting –and later swimming in– the ocean. Fuentes alludes to this racial amnesia early on when a character named Pepe claims that Filiberto would not worship Christ if he were not Mexican. Pepe justifies this statement by imagining how Christianity must have looked to newly conquered Indigenous nations:

Llegan los españoles y te proponen adores a un Dios, muerto hecho un coágulo, con el costado herido clavado en una cruz. Sacrificado. Ofrendado. (...) Pero un Dios al que no le basta que se sacrifiquen por él, sino que incluso va a que le arranquen el corazón, ¡caramba, jaque mate a Huitzilipochtli! El cristianismo, en su sentido cálido, sangriento, de sacrificio y liturgia, se vuelve una prolongación natural y novedosa de la religión indígena. Los aspectos caridad, amor y la otra mejilla, en cambio, son rechazados.¹⁰ (Fuentes, 1982, p. 13)

Pepe's comments nullify the continued existence of Indigenous religions in Mexico and posit that they no longer matter. Even if pre-Columbian gods have not yet fully disappeared from the national –mestizo– imaginary, Pepe's words suggest that they cannot represent an authentic facet of national culture. Such an alienating perspective undoubtedly plays a role in Filiberto's doomed quest to rediscover his own cultural roots (Palomino, 2011); nevertheless, this character's overall ignorance ultimately gets him killed. At one level of signification, Fuentes thus articulates Chac's return as an act of Indigenous resistance in which the Mayan god punishes those who have forgotten and trivialized him on the one hand and reasserts his rightful

¹⁰ Fuentes (1972) has long taken great interest in the fact that Indigenous Mexicans reacted positively to the sacrificial nature of Christ more so than Christian notions of love.

place among the pantheon of pre-Columbian –and Mexican– deities on the other. Because Filiberto’s untimely death results from his unfamiliarity with Chac’s powers, the story critiques a society that symbolically kills itself by ignoring its cultural roots.

Filiberto acquires his idol after Pepe tells him about a store in La Lagunilla that sells this item cheaply. It is no mistake that Fuentes refers to La Lagunilla, one of several markets that began to specialize its merchandise by the 1940s (Hayner, 1945). Tourists and residents in Mexico City have long known that this market sells inexpensive –if fraudulent– artifacts of supposedly pre-Columbian origin. Fuentes (1982) alludes to the market’s shoddy reputation when Filiberto narrates, “el desleal vendedor le ha embarrado salsa de tomate en la barriga al ídolo para convencer a los turistas de la sangrienta autenticidad de la escultura” (p. 15). Filiberto attempts to set himself apart from foreign tourists in this exchange by proudly declaring that he knows the idol cannot be real. Nevertheless, he ends up exhibiting the same behavior that he attempts to critique in foreigners when he decides to purchase the figure anyway. The text thus identifies Filiberto as an agent of what Claudio Lomnitz (2001) calls “internal colonialism” (p. 140), a practice that occurred as mestizo agents imposed Westernized culture on the Indigenous masses while appropriating those elements that they deemed useful for enriching the national culture. Mary Vaughan and Stephen Lewis (2006) note that the state was particularly interested in preserving cultural practices and artwork that would attract the money of North American tourists. The case of “Chac Mool” proves interesting because it leads us to expand our definition of tourists to include non-Indigenous people from Mexico itself. Given the size of this particular idol, one would assume that a foreign buyer would be unable to transport it home. The text thus questions Filiberto’s normalized position as a true Mexican; the Indigenous communities that have inhabited his country for millennia are as foreign to him as they are to any Western tourist.

At this level of analysis, then, the text queers him culturally as he proves unable to understand or appreciate his own pre-Columbian roots.

Filiberto emphasizes his unfamiliarity with his Indigenous heritage when he leaves the relic in the basement with other worthless trophies that he has purchased. As he tucks Chac Mool out of view, Filiberto comes to represent an ostensibly mestizo nation that constantly eschews – and even avoids– its Indigenous heritage and opts instead to favor the European. As such, Filiberto represents antirevolutionary ideals; as Fuentes (1994) has written elsewhere, “la Revolución mexicana fue un intento –el mayor de nuestra historia– de reconocer la totalidad cultural de México, ninguna de cuyas partes era sacrificable” (p. 63). People like Filiberto who segregate Amerindians from economic and social privilege “sacrifice” that segment of the population and undermine the multicultural society that Fuentes celebrated across his writing (pp. 63-64). Ciccone (1975b) highlights Filiberto’s “internal colonialism” and his overall indifference toward Indigenous Mexico when he states that, “by placing the statue of Chac Mool in the basement, Filiberto has projected his temporal preoccupations further into the past”; what is more, Ciccone claims that the ancient idol comes to represent an “evil force” (p. 42). Viewed in this light, pre-Columbian society would represent a malevolent entity that mestizo Mexico must overcome. The violent effects of this belief manifest themselves when Chac comes to life, a process that takes place over the space of several days. What begins as a groan in the basement finally becomes an Indigenous god who silently takes over the protagonist’s inherited home and enslaves Filiberto in the process, thus asserting Indigenous Mexico as the dominant force of national identity.¹¹

Filiberto further demonstrates his overarching ignorance about Mexico’s pre-Columbian

¹¹ For a discussion of the ties between “Chac Mool” and Julio Cortázar’s “Casa tomada” (Martínez, 2010; Reeve, 1971; Campa, 2009).

societies when he accidentally offends the Mayan god by asking about his relationship to Tláloc, the Aztec god of rain (Fuentes, 1982, p. 22). Filiberto's mistake here is that he intellectualizes Indigenous cultures through a Western lens. Most anthropologists view Tláloc as a type of *chac mool*, or Mezoamerican god of rain whose roots date back to the Toltecs and the Mayans (Lucet and Casas, 2018).¹² Nevertheless, Fuentes's Chac Mool views himself in direct conflict with the Aztecs' god of rain despite Western attempts to homogenize them. Filiberto's insensitivity to pre-Columbian religions and rivalries underscores the harmful effect of mestizo actors who view Indigenous identities as monolithic despite the fact that the country actually houses diverse native communities with very different cultures.¹³ Viewed in this light, Filiberto's colonialist mentality sits at the heart of Chac Mool's need to "[return] to avenge [him]self against contemporary Mexicans who have turned their backs on their country's Indigenous heritage" (Duncan, 2010, p. 120). Western attempts to categorize Indigenous cultural manifestations ultimately create a construction of indigeneity that Amerindians themselves may not recognize or endorse.

Filiberto's diary becomes more frantic after this conversation. He notes that his turbulent home life has made him an ineffective employee, and ultimately, he explains that he cannot continue working at the office. Filiberto's interactions with Indigenous –and particularly pre-Columbian– culture and cosmologies have apparently made it impossible for him to operate in the modern economy. Fuentes thus levels a severe criticism against a modernity-driven, mestizo state that believes it can only progress if it ignores the Indigenous half of its cultural genealogy.

¹² According to Silvia Quezada Camberos (2012), Chac Mool is not Mayan but of Toltec origin and may or may not be a deity. According to Sara Gottardi (2013), "es fascinante que Chac Mool se asocie con un dios porque no hay base arqueológica para esto".

¹³ Postrevolutionary Mexican cultural production is replete with examples of works that view Amerindians as a monolithic entity. For discussions on this phenomenon (Dalton, 2018; Tuñón, 2006).

Of course, Filiberto makes clear that he still does not know much about pre-Columbian Mexico when he drowns in Acapulco. The unnamed narrator attributes his friend's death to a midlife crisis and Filiberto's desire to relive the glory days when he could have easily swum that distance. A magical-real approach to the story suggests a very different possibility: far from overestimating his swimming abilities, Filiberto has failed to consider the powers of the Indigenous deity from which he flees. By entering the water, Filiberto has crossed into Chac's domain (Gutiérrez-Mouat, 1985, p. 41), an ironic turn of events given his explicit attempt to flee from the god of water. Fuentes seems to validate such a reading when the unnamed narrator discovers the Indigenous character at Filiberto's door.

Queering “Chac Mool”

The Indigenous person at the end of the story plays an integral role in the text's interpretation. Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat (1985) argues that:

para explicar esta presencia fuera de todo orden lógico (...) hay que creer en el relato de Felisberto [sic], y aceptar que de algún modo el difunto se ha convertido en una víctima sacrificial que asegura la supremacía de la supervivencia de los dioses milenarios. (p. 41)

The current study contests the critic's certainty. Indeed, Fuentes's description of this character—dressed in a bathrobe, a scarf, dyed hair, a powdered face, and lipstick smeared on the mouth (Fuentes, 1982, p. 27)—is suggestive of a transwoman or a man in drag. Ken Hall (2009) acknowledges this when he notes that the character “is not dressed in traditional Indigenous clothing; nor is he dressed in normal, everyday Mexican clothes: he is instead dressed in a parody of such clothing, appearing to mock the gender conventions of the culture” (p. 325).¹⁴

¹⁴ Arrington (1990), on the other hand, chalks up Chac Mool's appearance to an elaborate mask; that is, Chac Mool is making a racial statement rather than one about gender: “Chac Mool is seen here wearing make-up, a cosmetic mask which hides his true face, in an effort to conceal his Indian features, the sign of his genuine racial ‘make-up’”. (p. 238)

The narrator expresses his own shock at seeing this figure through what he says and, more importantly, through what he does *not* say: “Perdone... no sabía que Filiberto hubiera...” (Fuentes, 1982, p. 27). Readers must decide for themselves what he has left in the ellipses: “Excuse me, I was not aware that Filiberto might have...” —had a lover? —had someone living in his house? —had a statue of Chac Mool that came to life? Furthermore, the text remains silent on what the man in the doorway knows “everything” about or how he knows it. Nevertheless, the text opens the possibility that a queer relationship may exist between Filiberto and the person in his doorway.

Fuentes’s (1998) call to view art as a medium with multiple levels of signification notwithstanding (p. 147), an array of critics and translators have intervened and attempted to blunt the queer reading that clearly bubbles beneath the surface of the text. Ann González (2020) notes this fact when she observes a “disturbingly inaccurate” translation into English by the respected translator, Margaret Sayers Peden, that defeminizes the Indigenous character’s wardrobe, thus inspiring a wave of inaccurate criticism from scholars who appear to have engaged the translation rather than the original (72, nt. 13).¹⁵ González argues that Peden’s translation perhaps deliberately elides the clear commentaries on nonheteronormative sexualities —and particularly on LGBTQ literary and cultural producers in creating and disseminating national(ist) literature that exists in the Spanish text— by eliminating it from the English translation altogether. The elision of queering elements from the English translation proves especially unfortunate given the intersections of sexuality and literary production that abounded at the time of the story’s publication.

Mexican literature provided fertile ground for debates about sexuality in

¹⁵ Joseph Tyler (1989), for example, completely ignores the Indigenous character’s clear commentary on gender after quoting Peden’s translation.

postrevolutionary society from the earliest years following the Revolution. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado (2009) argues:

la literatura fue un espacio de mayor contención y conflicto, donde los debates sobre la naturaleza misma de “lo nacional” y la forma que esta naturaleza debería tomar en la cultura permitieron el desarrollo de posiciones más diversas que otras manifestaciones culturales. (p. 16)

As a result of these literary conversations, the officially accepted role of gay and non-cis men in the nation-state began to evolve. As Irwin (2003) notes, by midcentury, “what had been unmentionable in the nineteenth century, scandalous at the turn of the century, and un-Mexican and antirevolutionary in the twenties and thirties was now as an essential (if undesirable) part of Mexicanness as *la casa chica*” (p. 200). Given Fuentes’s own careful cultivation of a cis/heterosexual and machista persona in his personal and professional life (Hind, 2019, pp. 14-18), it should come as no surprise that his writings would follow the more conservative currents of national literature and “[show] Mexican homosexuality to be decadent, vacuous” (Irwin, 2003, p. 199). Certainly, the author would have held similar views regarding other forms of LGBTQ identity as well. The extent to which Fuentes associates a supposed decadence with nonheteronormative sexualities becomes especially clear when the unnamed narrator insinuates that Filiberto has become the victim of a “moral” –rather than clinical– depression (Fuentes, 1982, p. 21). The addition of a moral criteria to a psychological condition as the cause for Filiberto’s decline could certainly speak to the fact that Filiberto’s waning fortune comes from dirty money that his ancestors received due to their role in the Porfirian aristocracy. Such an

interpretation would certainly be in line with Fuentes's obsession with national identity.¹⁶ At the same time, this word choice is suggestive with regard to sexual norms as well, and it would certainly be congruent with dominant views on the subject of LGBTQ identities at midcentury. Here, as in many parts of the story, we have at least two potential yet parallel readings: one speaks to age-old questions of class as it relates to *mexicanidad*, the Revolution, and the Porfiriato, while the other draws our attention once more to the possibility of queer sexualities.

The final lines of the story invite us to go back and reread the text in search of clues about Filiberto's implied queerness and the "moral depression" that he appears to suffer because of it. Ciccone (1973) situates Filiberto as one of Fuentes's many protagonists whose "emotional and psychological unfulfillment produces psychological instability" (p. 133). A man in his forties, Filiberto is close to retirement yet remains unmarried, and he appears to have no female friends or colleagues. Nevertheless, Ciccone ignores how this condition alludes to Filiberto's queerness. Filiberto filters all of the rest of the information that we can learn about him through his diary, a fact that calls into question the reliability of the narrator. The constant, magical-real references to Chac Mool could be a cover for Filiberto's queer, sexual relationship with a person who is not a cis woman—probably either a gay man or a trans woman—. One of the elements of textual evidence that first alludes to Filiberto's queerness is his decision to go to La Lagunilla, which, along with the nearby Merced market, has long been associated with prostitution and homosexuality (De Alba González, 2010). Once again, we see a case where our queer reading and a more traditional reading tied to race, *mexicanidad*, and national identity converge. The illegality associated with La Lagunilla reflected class and race-based attitudes and realities.

¹⁶ While his narrative engaged notions of identity at thematic levels, his essays were especially explicit in discussing Mexico's troubled history. Of particular interest are his books *Tiempo mexicano* (1971), *El espejo enterrado* (1992), and *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* (1994).

Throughout the 1950s, this colony, along with Tepito and La Merced, attracted a great deal of people from the popular classes, most of whom were Indigenous –and de-Indianized– people from surrounding rural areas.¹⁷ One valid interpretation of the story is that Filiberto buys an inauthentic life-sized Chac Mool idol. Such an interpretation certainly reverberates with the culture of commerce that continues into the present in La Lagunilla and other colonies with similar histories. At the same time, the majority of the social science literature insists on the fact that the sale of pirated and falsified products tends to correlate with prostitution and other illicit activities (Grisales, 2003, p. 82). When we consider the unreliability of Filiberto’s narrations, it would not be out of the realm of possibility to postulate that he travels to this site in search of sex. This would imbue his description of his idol, “una pieza preciosa, de tamaño natural” (Fuentes, 1982, p. 14), with sexualized overtones.

Filiberto’s own telling of Chac Mool’s marvelous return to life refers to “quejidos terribles” and “lamentos nocturnos” (Fuentes, 1982, p. 16), both of which indicate the possibility of nightly activities between himself and Chac Mool. This reading becomes especially compelling as we consider the following relation:

volví a palpar el Chac Mool. Se ha endurecido pero no vuelve a la consistencia de la piedra. No quiero escribirlo: hay en el torso algo de la textura de la carne, al apretar los brazos los siento de goma, siento que algo circula por esa figura recostada. (...) No cabe duda: el Chac Mool tiene vello en los brazos. (p. 18)

This journal entry, while brief, poses several tantalizing questions about the possibility of a sexual relationship forming in Filiberto’s house. A magical-real interpretation would, of

¹⁷ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (2002) notes that those in power enforced the continued Othering of (de)Indianized peoples throughout the country in order to maintain a segregationist structure of power. In the story, these very conditions have produced the economic conditions that draw Filiberto to La Lagunilla to carry out his desired transaction(s).

course, lead us to conclude that a statue has come to life. Such a reading would fit within much of the scholarship on Fuentes's literature more generally. That said, our acceptance of such a mode requires us to take the unreliable narrations of Filiberto at face value; more importantly, it asks us to ignore Fuentes's call for his readers to entertain multiple realities. A queer reading of the passage opens a new set of discursive possibilities. The notion of touching and hardening, for example, immediately draws to mind notions of the characters' sexual arousal. Equally interesting is Filiberto's admission that he does not wish to write "it," yet he never explains what "it" refers to. Does he not want to tell of the statue's eerie transformation, or does he not want to talk about the caresses he has shared with this forbidden lover? The reader cannot know if Filiberto's great fear is that people will learn that an Indigenous deity has returned to life or if he wishes to hide his sexuality from his readers or even from himself. If we interpret these passages as possible allusions to a sexual relationship written in code in Filiberto's journal, then it would appear that, at this point, the bureaucrat remains the dominant figure in this relationship. The Indigenous lover remains locked in the basement for the most part. This changes once Chac attains greater agency and inverts the power dynamic between them.

Significantly, Chac conquers Filiberto's bed before claiming the rest of the house. The scene where he does this plays out in an especially fragmentary and suggestive way: "se escuchaban pasos en la escalera. (...) Con la mirada negra, recorrí la recámara, hasta detenerme en dos orificios de luz parpadeante, en dos flámulas crueles y amarillas" (Fuentes, 1982, p. 20). This narration achieves two principal ends when viewed through a queer lens: firstly, it shows that Filiberto's sexual escapades with Chac Mool move out of the basement and into the relative openness of the house. The choice to use the term "orifices," with its clear allusions to penetration and sexuality, makes this point especially clear to the reader. Shortly after this

description, Filiberto narrates:

allí estaba Chac Mool, erguido, sonriente, ocre, con su barriga encarnada. Me paralizaron los dos ojillos casi bizcos, muy pegados al caballete de la nariz triangular. Los dientes inferiores mordían el labio superior. . . Chac Mool avanzó hacia mi cama; entonces empezó a llover. (Fuentes, 1982, p. 21)

Each sentence builds on the last to imbue this passage with a secondary meaning that moves beyond that of an Amerindian idol coming to life and instead centers on a queer sexual dynamic between these characters. Immediately after establishing that Chac has entered the bedroom bare-chested –and very possibly naked–, Filiberto goes on to provide a phallic description of Chac’s eyes and nose, which paralyze him either literally or figuratively. The sexual undertones of this exchange rise to the fore as we consider Fuentes’s assertion in *El espejo enterrado* (1998) that “un ancestral signo de erotismo secreto, la mujer bizca mira fijamente con los ojos de un basilisco” (Fuentes, 1998, p. 34). We see this precise phenomenon when, similar to a basilisk, the cross-eyed Chac freezes Filiberto in place. The following sentence could refer to Chac Mool biting his own lips, but it could also refer to a passionate kiss shared between lovers, a reading that becomes all the more probable when we consider the fact that this is the only scene where the characters end up in bed together. The invocation of rain could of course allude to the idol’s status as the god of rain, but it could also refer to Chac’s –or Filiberto’s– subsequent orgasm and ejaculation.

This queer reading ultimately sheds light on Fuentes’s criticisms of Filiberto’s racial amnesia. Like many Mexican thinkers from his time period, Fuentes (1998) viewed the fusion of Hispanic and New World cultures as a series of traumas: “origen de un conocimiento terrible, el que nace de estar presentes en el momento mismo de nuestra creación, observadores de nuestra

propia violación” (p. 23). It thus proves fitting that Chac would mark his displacement of Filiberto’s decadent, Porfirianist *hispanista* take on mestizaje with a –possibly violent– sexual act of his own.¹⁸ The subversive potential of this act moves beyond a mere inversion of roles that makes the Indigenous character dominant and the Hispanicized character subservient. Unlike the metaphorical rape of the Conquest, where Castilian men sired mixed-race children with Indigenous women, Chac’s domination of Filiberto represents an act of nonreproductive sex. As such, their union would, according to Lee Edelman (2004), exist outside of any discourse of futurity: the couple will never have children, and their act will only ever exist in the present. Building on Edelman, Filiberto’s sexual escapades with this Indigenous character could represent “a mode of enjoyment at the social order’s expense” (p. 114). Such a reading becomes all the more plausible when we realize that this scene serves as the climax of the narrative. It is at this juncture that a fully reanimated Chac Mool –figurative and/or literal– becomes reality. Precisely at this moment, the narrative casts Filiberto as truly incapable of contributing –genetically or culturally– to the edification of a mestizo order.

The above reading helps to explain why the dynamics in the relationship between Filiberto and Chac change after this encounter. Irwin (2003) notes that many heterosexual men from midcentury Mexico followed the lead of Octavio Paz (2004), who theorized that “homosexuality [took] on a distinct form in which one participant anally penetrates the other, with the latter being a true homosexual and effeminate, and the former retaining his masculine heterosexual identity” (p. xxiii). While the works of numerous homosexual authors challenge Paz’s thought (Irwin, 2003), his ideas clearly influenced Fuentes. Paz’s (2004) understanding of homosexuality helps explain Filiberto’s original goal, upon making his purchase in La Lagunilla,

¹⁸ For a discussion of the differences between *hispanista* and *indigenista* paradigms to official mestizaje. (Dalton, 2018)

to dominate Chac Mool “como se domina a un juguete” (p. 23). As the dominant figure in the relationship, Filiberto would be able to maintain a purported heterosexuality. Once Chac Mool penetrates him in his own bed, however, Filiberto cannot hide from his homosexuality nor can he take refuge from his lover’s sudden dominance. Even as the power dynamic between them changes, these characters seem to enjoy each other’s company (Gallina, 2011; González, 2020). Filiberto cites several “intermedios amables en que [Chac] relataba viejos cuentos” (Fuentes, 1982, p. 25). Nevertheless, the relationship takes on an abusive tone when Chac expels Filiberto from his bed and begins to hit him while laughing in scorn (p. 23). He even takes Filiberto’s clothes (pp. 23-24), and later on he orders Filiberto to hire a maid in a veiled allusion to a possible threesome or to the idea that he may be looking for a new sexual partner (González, 2020). This final act seems to push Filiberto over the edge as it is at this point that he decides to go to Acapulco –itself a “profane place” associated with so-called sexual immorality (Tyler, 1989)– where he meets his watery grave. Interestingly, the unnamed narrator notes that his friend only bought a one-way ticket, a fact that suggests that Filiberto never planned to return.¹⁹ When read through a queer lens, it appears that, far from dying because the god of water chose to drown him, Filiberto’s unhealthy relationship with Chac has led him to commit suicide.²⁰

Conclusion

Raymond Williams (1996) argues that “Chac Mool” “uses a pre-Columbian deity, as well as fantasy, to develop a story dealing with power and control” (p. 25). Our own reading has

¹⁹ It is especially interesting that Fuentes references Acapulco given the city’s own role in the so-called modernization of the Mexican state. The government began investing significant resources into Acapulco in 1947 when foreign tourism to the city began to tick up. The state continued to use the city as a vehicle for national development for several decades. For an in-depth discussion of the deep relationship between the development of tourism and economic development (Sacket, 2010). Viewed in this light, similar to so many other elements in the story, the reference to Acapulco alludes both to economic and cultural development on the one hand and shifting mores regarding sexuality on the other.

²⁰ According to César Valverde (2002), the story gives clues of psychological duress that result in Filiberto’s suicide.

shown that one can find numerous allusions to control in this story even without accepting the fantastical premise. The story's central discursive elements –particularly those regarding modern Mexico's relation to the Indigenous past– thus hold true regardless of the mode –be it magical-realist or realist– through which the reader approaches the text. Given this fact, we conclude with a brief commentary on how the parallel magical-real and queer readings discussed above converge in communicating Fuentes's own ideas both on racial amnesia and queer sexualities in postrevolutionary Mexico. The queer and magical-real interpretations exist themselves as palimpsestic interpretations that exist in layers as we excavate the text itself. The current reading has attempted to show how these multiple layers coexist, and it has alluded to certain intersections. For example, the queer reading has suggested that we view Filiberto's decadence through a queering lens, a fact that centers the story's discussion of official mestizaje not only on race but on sexuality as well. Indeed, while many postrevolutionary thinkers believed that they could transform Indigenous people into mestizos through cultural –rather than biological– means (Dalton, 2018), the idea of racial mixing necessarily called to mind heterosexual relations between people of different races. Viewed in this light, the confluence of Filiberto's racial amnesia and his probable relationship with the Indigenous character places him at odds with the mestizo ideal on two fronts. On the one hand, he does not know about his own heritage; on the other hand, he cannot reproduce a future generation of mestizos. The queer reading of the text has thus provided a means to better understand and theorize Filiberto's marginalization.

That said, this article's principal intervention may be its contribution to solving the puzzle surrounding the Indigenous character who appears at the door at the story's end. As we have shown, this scene –which, over the years, has provoked many unanswered questions in countless literature classrooms– proves key to catalyzing an interpretation that fuses questions of

queer sexuality with officialist notions of mestizaje in postrevolutionary Mexico. On the one hand, this scene underscores a magical-real reading where an Indigenous idol comes to life and consumes his victim. On the other hand, however, this scene explicitly opens the door for a queer reading of the story by suggesting a shared sexual history between Filiberto and the character standing in his doorway. The simple possibility of such a relationship invites readings of previous episodes of the text that would forward an explicitly queer interpretation. Given Fuentes's own homophobia, these ramifications are generally quite negative toward Filiberto. Ultimately, the text does not ask us to choose between a queer reading and a magical-real reading; rather, it invites us to imagine how these competing readings are intertwined to imbue each other with a deeper significance. Our understanding of Filiberto's decadence and queerness, for example, sheds light on his inability to function in a mestizophilic, postrevolutionary Mexico. If we focus just on his racial amnesia, then we will note how he remains alienated from his ancestral culture; if we focus solely on his queer sexuality, we will emphasize how he remains excluded from a mestizo future (Edelman, 2004). Viewed together, the queer and magical-real readings of the text foreground a degree of alienation that would not be clear if read on their own.

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