

Dispelling the Border Myth: Zonkey Writers and the Black Legend

Édgar Cota-Torres

This article studies the negative discourses associated with cultural and literary representations of Mexico's northern border. Mexican border cities such as Mexicali and Tijuana are often equated with sin, corruption, political and social negligence, and lawlessness as portrayed by the American media. These images, deeply imprinted in the social imagination of Mexico's northern neighbor, have created what is known in the border region as *la leyenda negra*. At the same time, a similar negative narration arises in Mexico about its northern frontier: the border has been perceived as a weakened first line of defense against the threatening influence of the United States. Cota-Torres counters these negative stereotypes with what he terms "Revolutionary Zonkeism." As a discursive practice, Revolutionary Zonkenism puts into question *la leyenda negra* by employing those same negative stereotypes in an ironic refashioning or inversion.

The border shared by Mexico and the United States has been a site of exchange as well as of conflict resulting in the emergence of a new culture, not purely Mexican, nor exclusively American. This in-between border space is made up of many spaces cut by a line like a "crack between two worlds" (García Canclini 1995: 238). An "open wound" in the formulation by Gloria Anzaldúa, the border is not one space but many, a heterotopia at the limit of two nations. While some may agree with Néstor García Canclini that "all cultures are border cultures" (1995: 261), the border zone of Northern Mexico stands out marked by the wound of its history and by the cultural imaginary that emerged from a negative narration about the border. For the media in the United States, Mexican border cities such as Mexicali, Tijuana, and Ciudad Juárez are cities often equated with sin, corruption, political and social negligence, and lawlessness. These images, deeply imprinted in the social imagination of Mexico's northern neighbor,

have created what is known in the border region as *la leyenda negra*. At the same time, a similar negative narration arises in Mexico about its northern frontier: the border has been perceived as a weakened first line of defense against the threatening influence of the United States, an idea born out of the Mexican American war, and later reinforced during the Mexican Revolution, and subsequent historical conflicts between both countries.¹

As a counter to these negative pressures from the north and the south, northern Mexican border culture has responded through what Sergio Gómez Montero has referred to as a culture of resistance, a culture that in recent years has produced a wide array of artistic representations: “[T]his region is being pressed from both sides of the border by a pathogenic centralism as much as by hegemonizing and discriminatory artistic practices. Hence, artists and intellectuals are beginning to construct a discourse of creation and reflection” (1994: 99). Participants involved in this resistance culture are local border writers, such as Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, Rosina Conde, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, among others, who use the negative stereotypes of the border to expose the discourses that form the Black Legend.² In what follows, I will propose a metaphor for understanding how these writers construct their border realities to expose the negative representations of the border, and then I will place this resistance culture against the history of violence that leads to *la leyenda negra* of the US/Mexico border.

I: The Curious Case of the Border Zebra

The complicity of the United States in the physical and imaginary construction of the Border and its Black Legend—in which Mexico is considered the victim of this hyperbolic myth—does not exonerate Mexico as a complicit partner. It is important to remember that in the border area the coexistence of the United States and Mexico is based on mutual benefits. Mexico provides souvenirs and attractions, and the United States the consumers. In this game of give and take Mexicans benefit monetarily while the tourists from the North acquire souvenirs and “services” that not only continue the existing myths but also further confirm the Black Legend. Border cities have created a modified and exotic Mexico that exploits an indigenous Mexican past absent to this area, while constructing an image of its own out of its

realities and necessities that complement those associated with *la leyenda negra*. Examples of such constructions appear in the *curio* (curious) shops in border towns that offer a wide variety of Mexican souvenirs that include ceramic figures and paintings depicting indigenous motifs, such as pyramids, Aztec calendars, chieftains, Aztec gods and maidens, as well as t-shirts and souvenirs depicting alcohol use and other adult motifs. Tourists may purchase miniature replicas of pyramids, cathedrals and historical sites that do not exist in the border areas as in other regions of the country. There is also the peculiar case of *Avenida Revolución* in Tijuana, the main tourist strip, where donkeys painted as zebras—“zonkeys” [z(ebra) (d)onkey] (Yépez 2005: 50)—wait to pose for a picture with tourists. These “zonkeys” are often shown pulling a colorful cart decorated with Mexican scenes. The zonkey masks the donkey, in much the same way that the trinkets and colorful objects representing Mexico mask the border. Mexico is “performed” for the tourists, the zonkey carts become a mimetic device, a theatrical stage upon which the country is displayed.³ García Canclini writes that:

The simulacrum comes to be a central category of culture. ... The obvious, ostentatious illusions—like the zebras everyone knows are fake or the hiding games of illegal immigrants that are ‘tolerated’ by the United States police—become a resource for defining identity and communicating with others. (1995: 237)

These Border attractions—the “trinketization” of Mexico—with time have come to define Mexican northern border cities and have molded traditional Mexican border tourist experiences. The mask and the farce become the inscription of cultural identity, as they create an ambiguous zone of dynamic alterities.

While the farcical zonkey defines the carnival image of the border, the indigenous paraphernalia—popular in tourist areas in the central part of Mexico—serves two basic purposes: first, it satisfies foreign tourists’ expectations of what to see in Mexico;⁴ second, for Mexicans, it spurs a nationalistic pride in an Aztec past that is associated with abundance and power. As Benedict Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*, “Spanish-speaking mestizo Mexicans trace their ancestries, not to Castilian conquistadors, but to half-obliterated Aztecs, Mayans, Toltecs and Zapotecs” (1991:154). This reference to a grand past has bolstered Mexican nationalist pride since

the nineteenth century. The trinkets found in the *curio* shops—the Aztec representations and the objects depicting vice—can be read as elements of a “borderism” trope that has been identified by Norma Klahn and by Socorro Tabuenca. This trope comes in two parts—“South of the Borderism” in Klahn’s version, and “North of the Borderism,” in Tabuenca’s (working off Klahn’s earlier work)—and functions to create meaning about the US/Mexico border. On the one hand, the use of nationalistic imagery could very well be a partial response to Tabuenca’s “North of the Borderism” (1997: 186), and refers to a disdainful gaze from the interior of Mexico to the northern border cities. In general, this centralist vision consists of viewing this area as an Americanized region. On the other, the souvenirs depicting vices reinforce what Klahn has identified as “South of the Borderism.” This refers to the way that the United States seeks to impose meaning on its southern neighbor, culturally constructing the Mexican as “everything the Anglo was not” (1997: 123).

These souvenirs are also mercantile constructions based on the expectations and demands placed by tourists. Images like the painted donkeys were crafted by Mexican businesses intending to represent a Mexico that does not exist in this area, thus inventing Mexico as a zone crafted to and by the circumstances that emerged during Prohibition. Nevertheless, the “zonkey” has become the classic postcard of a visit to Tijuana’s *Avenida Revolución* while, at the same time, this hybrid image may be interpreted as retaliation to both “North of the Borderism” and “South of the Borderism.” The zonkey offers at least two meanings: it denotes the exotic in its representation of a zebra—referencing an exotic “Other” that can be had in Mexico—and denotes trinket/kitsch/toy in its obvious representation of a donkey painted as a zebra. The zonkey is a disguised border creation, its painted stripes attempting to cover the donkey beneath. Yet it is a poor likeness, a simulacrum of a zebra that subverts its exotic referent in favor of its “trinketized” self: a donkey painted with stripes. The zonkey masks the donkey. Its painted lines are a type of gesture of resistance to the colonizing “eye” of the tourists who cross the border seeking to colonize the exotic “Other.” As a hybrid figure, the zonkey is central to what I have termed “Revolutionary Zonkeism.”

“Revolutionary Zonkeism” is a form of border resistance that counters the negative stereotypes that central Mexico and the United States convey about their shared border. As a discursive practice, it puts into question *la leyenda negra* by employing those same negative stereotypes in an ironic refashioning or inversion to expose the underlying codes that attempt to place meaning upon the border. In other words, “Revolutionary Zonkeism” refers to a strategy of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: deterritorialize centripetal discursive forces from power centers (Mexico City, Washington DC) that attempt to place limits on the border and reterritorialize those discourses on a perspective coming from the border. This functions to discredit external negative border discourse in order to dispel the border myths hyperbolized and sustained by “North of the Borderism” and “South of the Borderism.” “Zonkey writers,” like Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, demonstrate in their narratives how people who circulate and consume the stereotypical image of the border are dominated by that image—the zonkey’s stripes—and in doing so emphasize that there is more to the border than just the artificial stripes. Crosthwaite’s stories reconstruct the Mexican northern border from the gaze of *el fronterizo*—the border native—and also counter-create, as Said indicates in *Culture and Imperialism*, another memory and regional language with which to write border conditions and realities in the nation’s life and memory: “from slogans to pamphlets and newspapers, from folktales and heroes to epic poetry, novels and drama—the language is inert; national culture organizes and sustains communal memory” (1994: 215). A memory which functions in the border would be to disarticulate hegemonic discourses in order to grant justice to subjugated peoples. It is in the counter-creation that Crosthwaite proposes from the multiple perspectives and events that compose the Mexican northern border as a complex Mexican community, a northern border that is “imagined” by *el fronterizo* from his/her own experiences and necessities.

II: A History of Violence: *La Leyenda Negra*

The political demarcation between the United States and Mexico is a line that does not define cultural differences. What is today the dividing line between both countries was arbitrarily created as a result of the war between the two nations. The border carries the echo of this

violence through its negative narration as a geographical and cultural space of unleashed trafficking, alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, drugs, and endemic corruption promulgated in political discourse from both sides of the border. Impending controversies, such as illegal immigration, continue to nurture this bad reputation and stigmatize border cities in northern Mexico. The majority of studies on this region conclude that the derogatory image of this region begins with the Prohibition (Berumen 2003), which emerged from the Eighteenth Amendment of 1917. Border cities such as Tijuana and Mexicali in the state of Baja California and Ciudad Juárez in the state of Chihuahua flourished thanks to Prohibition and the immense flow of American tourism and investments in bars, brothels and casinos from 1919 to 1933. The image of the border that takes form during these years and comes to be associated with the Black Legend was popularized thanks to the deeply rooted hegemonic and stereotypical association of the Mexican Border region, and revived with each political tension between both countries. One of these conflicts was the Mexican Revolution, creating bi-national conflicts that directly affected the border region and are still felt today.

Violence increased dramatically during the second half of 1915, and especially in the beginning of 1916 due in part to Pancho Villa's incursions across the border.⁵ During these revolutionary times, the image of the Mexican as a barbarian, unable to solve his own problems became the standard stereotype that informed discourses on everything associated with the border. In that play of supremacy and stereotypes, what is today known as the Black Legend of the northern Mexican Border was constructed. "Mexican inferiority" versus the "military and economic superiority" of the Anglo Saxon society to the North played an important role as an advertising mechanism that worked satisfactorily to the United States favor, not only during moments of conflict but throughout the twentieth century. This frontier's historical coexistence is rigidly hegemonic, but at the same time ever-changing and repetitive. In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha argues that supremacy between groups "requires iteration and alterity to be effective" (2002: 29). As history shows, this hegemony was established by repeated violent occurrences between the two countries,⁶ and by the construction of a derogatory image of the other. One manifestation of the manufacturing of such an image is Tijuana, a city that because of its "bad" reputation became a symbol for border

life: a place where all the elements that make up the Black Legend can be found. As Humberto Félix Berumen observes in his book *Tijuana la horrible*, Tijuana became “el patio trasero para el desenfreno moral” (2003: 61-2).⁷ During Prohibition, illicit activities in the United States took place on the other side of the border on a grand scale, and the border, Tijuana especially, became the escape valve for American Puritanism. What was considered immoral and illegal in the United States was commonplace on the Mexican border. Border cities, like Tijuana, Mexicali and Ciudad Juárez prospered as a result of American tourism and, in spite of American criticism, the tourists and the investors of illegal trade profited from the border’s negative reputation. The border not only delineated the division between two countries but also a cultural and economic exchange based on demand and consumption illegal to the North American consumer. That other geographic side where Mexican border cities flourished economically became a space outside the law. With the influx of tourism, Tijuana and Mexicali evolved into urban spaces, engendered by the necessities of the North. “Revolutionary Zonkeism” contests this history of violence by claiming that the actual events, the history that is being created at the border, is rooted, to an extent, in a construction that was partially built by the United States. In other words, exterior approaches to the Mexican border region often times do not consider the foundational events, such as the Mexican American war, the demarcation of the border between both nations and the Prohibition era that originated the border’s negative reputation.

III: *Y con esto me despido: The Zonkey Writer*

Border writers, “Zonkey writers,” employ the Black Legend as a means to expose the ideologies behind the negative representations of the border. As a metaphor, the “zonkey” serves to present an exotic image for an unsuspecting spectator ready to believe that zebras could exist south of the border. At the same time the fact that the animal is obviously a painted donkey puts into question those very expectations: things are not what they seem. Zonkey writers propose the location of a more humane border culture, through, as Sergio Gómez Montero suggests, the beginning and continuation of a “discourse of creation and reflection” (1994: 99). Behind the “zonkey’s” stripes, there is a local border life that once again goes to “the beach at ‘the line’ where

‘fragmented families’” can gather for Sunday picnics (García Canclini 1995: 236). A recreation of this kind of culture, another border space, created out of the human complexities and border cultural hybridity, will contribute to dispel, to rewrite another story that is different from its myths, but integrated to the many border elements, transnational needs and realities; the same as, but different from the history and the economic necessities that has reinvented that imaginary space, although too real, that is the border zone of Northern Mexico.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a discussion on these negative narrations, see the articles by Zúñiga and Vaquera.
- ² See also Vaquera’s article in this volume for a discussion on the ways that local artists have used the physical border as an element in their works to “claim” the border as their own.
- ³ Ramón Eduardo Ruiz points out something similar in his book *On the Rim of México. Encounters of the Rich and Poor*. The purpose of this Mexican Disneyland is to please outsiders, especially the tall and blond. To cite David Nicholson-Lord, an English author, all of this adds up to what he refers to as “airport art” and the “trinketization of cultures.” In diverse ways, tourism, he argues, “changes tradition,” and “particularly in the Third World,” where one must situate the Mexican border, “that change looks and feels like degradation.” That bit of wisdom strikes you with startling clarity when you wait in your auto at international gates to enter the United States; on one side, there is row after row of wooden stalls (“the last chance to buy”) displaying vulgar statues, grotesque clay pigs, and gaudy blankets and, on the other, vendors on foot hawking identical merchandise. Obviously, what Americans purchase determines what is made and sold. You wonder about the taste of the Americans who buy these eyesores, and if you are of Mexican descent, you feel ashamed for what has befallen the country of your parents (1998: 57).
- ⁴ Canclini observes that for some people “it also refers to the myth that North Americans bring with them, that it has something to do with crossing the border into the past, into the wilderness, into the idea of being able to ride horseback” (1995: 236).
- ⁵ These conflicts were resolved diplomatically and culminated in what is known as the Punitive Expedition. This act involved the entrance of U.S. troops into Mexico with the sole goal of finding and capturing Villa. As could be expected, the Mexican people were against such an action and consequently tensions increased even further between the two nations.
- ⁶ This situation is reminiscent of Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* when he refers to the relationship between Europe and the Orient and much later between the United States and the Orient (1994: 94-95, 321)
- ⁷ “A playground for the absence of moral restraints.”