

**From the Other Side of the Border: The Issue of the U.S.-Mexican Border Reflected  
in *The Crystal Frontier***

**Arata Goto**

**Instructor: Diana Garcia-Denson**

**Spanish 4**

**18 April 2008**

**From the Other Side of the Border: The Issue of the U.S.-Mexican Border  
Reflected in *The Crystal Frontier***

**INTRODUCTION**

In the novel, *The Crystal Frontier: A Novel in Nine Stories*, written by renowned Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, he recounts the lives of Mexican immigrants. He tells the side of the story that is often left out and ignored in political debates in the U.S. and gives readers sympathetic insights into the lives of Mexicans.

In the novel, Fuentes relates nine stories with his view on the U.S.-Mexican border and its effects on individuals on both sides. The novel consists of nine chapters and every chapter stands on its own as a short story. Throughout the novel, Fuentes describes the conflict of the immigration dilemma between the United States and Mexico and makes us wonder about the outcome of the conflict given the ethnic and socio-economic differences that exist between these nations. *The Crystal Frontier* has its central figure Leonardo Barroso, who is a powerful businessman with strong economic ties to the United States. Of the myriad characters, all are in one way or another linked to Leonardo Barroso and their lives are affected by the U.S.-Mexican relationship. Some of the characters reappear in different chapters; thus, by reading all the chapters, one can acquire more complete portraits of the characters.

One of the main themes of the novel is the duality of the border. Fuentes repeatedly refers to the river, which divides part of the border between the two nations, by both of its names: Rio Grande and Rio Bravo. The fact that he always addresses the river with both Mexican and U.S. names reminds us that there are always two sides to any border. Fuentes makes us think about the story of the Mexican side,

which is often ignored or forgotten by the main-stream debates of the border issue in the U.S.

### **CURRENT ISSUES OF IMMIGRATION**

The novel was written at the end of 1990's in the aftermath of NAFTA, which created further unequal distribution of wealth within the two nations. Consequently, more and more illegal immigrants have been driven to cross the border in order to escape the often grinding poverty of their native Mexico. The estimated number of undocumented persons present in the U.S. varies from eight to twenty million.

In response to the perceived threat of undocumented immigrants, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security developed the project of building a fence on the border to physically impede their entrance. By the end of 2008, officials of the Department of Homeland Security aim to construct three hundreds seventy miles of fence and to hire eighteen thousand agents. This is one of the more expensive examples of the irrational fear against immigrants.

As we all know, since the early 1800's, immigration has been a vital component of America's growth. The U.S. economy has become heavily dependent on cheap labor, the majority of whom are Mexican. Therefore, it has become crucial in order to sustain the current level of economic growth in the U.S. to turn a blind eye to the immigration laws and allow the employment of illegal workers.

Carlos Fuentes finds the U.S. policies contradictory and highlights this irrational fear towards Mexicans in his stories as a critique. A character, Dan Polonsky, is a member of the border patrol who repeatedly expresses his hatred towards Mexicans due to his belief in "white" race supremacy. Although Polonsky believes in the necessity to

protect the southern border from the “invasion” of the illegal immigrants, he is also aware that his job depends on the existence of those illegal immigrants. “He detested the illegals. But he adored and needed them, without them, there would be no budget for helicopters, radar, powerful infrared night lights, rocket launchers, pistols... Let them come... let them keep on coming by the millions, he begged, to give meaning to my life” (Fuentes 228).

The contradiction can be applied to the general American public sentiment about illegal immigration, which argues for security of the border and focuses on the negative effects of illegal immigrants while benefiting economically from the cheap labor. By pointing out how immigration has been beneficial to the U.S. economy, Fuentes reveals that illegal immigration is a force to be reckoned with.

As the U.S. Department of Homeland Security attempts to reinforce the border by building a fence and militarizing it, the reinforcement of the physical border creates an invisible border in the minds of everyone affected by this issue. This internal border is what divides people across the border and prevents them from coming together. In his novel Fuentes suggests, in order to solve the conflict of immigration and intolerance, we have to address the internal borders we have created by encouraging mutual understanding.

### **CHICANO MOVEMENT**

Ultimately Fuentes questions whether the two cultures can come together by learning from one another. If the U.S. offers economic prosperity to Mexico, what can Mexico offer to the U.S. other than labor forces? Towards the end of the novel, he

proposes the Chicano movement as the answer to this question, concluding that Chicano movement came to exist as the result of this cultural exchange. Chicanos can be a bridge between the two countries and cultures because they embody both. In the chapter nine, Fuentes introduces the character of “José Francisco” who becomes a Chicano poet after having found his true identity. Jose Francisco was born to Mexican parents in Texas. Growing up he felt urged to question where he really belonged. “What belongs here and also there, but where is here and where is there? Isn’t the Mexican side his own here and there? Isn’t it the same on the “gringo” side? Doesn’t every land have its invisible double, its alien shadow that walks at our side the same way each of us walks accompanied by a second ‘I’ we don’t know?” When Jose Francisco started to write his poems, he also started identify himself as Chicano. He claims, “I’m not a Mexican. I’m not a gringo. I’m Chicano. I’m not a gringo in the USA and a Mexican in Mexico. I’m Chicano everywhere. I don’t have to assimilate into anything. I have my own history” (252). As an adult, he goes back and forth over the bridge across the Rio Grande, Rio Bravo to spread his Chicano writings, stories about immigrants, illegals, Mexican poverty, Yankee prosperity and, most of all, stories about families, so that those unheard stories from the Mexican side will be heard on the American side and vice versa. Jose Francisco carries his writing, his “literature from both sides so that everyone would get to know one another better, he said, so that everyone would love one another a little more, so there would be a “we” on both sides of the border” (252). Through the voice of Jose Francisco, Fuentes expresses his wish to put an end to the invisible internal frontier that divides people of Mexico and the U.S. to promote better understanding of each other,

regardless of their nationality so that people of both sides can come together, respect one another, and live together in greater peace.

### **CONCLUSION**

Fuentes presents the duality of the immigration issue as one of the themes of the book. While he criticizes the U.S. schizophrenic politics that aim to remove illegal immigrants from the U.S. by constructing a fence and alienating people from the other side of the border, while taking advantage of them as cheap labor forces, he justifies immigration as a sort of force of nature. Because immigration won't be stopped, Fuentes proposes an alternative solution: a solution that we already have. Towards the end of the novel, he expresses his wish that the presence of Chicanos, who can deal with both American and Mexican culture with sensitivity, will be able to remove this internal border by promoting mutual understanding between the citizens of the two nations.

Work Cited

Fuentes, Carlos. The Crystal Frontier: a Novel in Nine Stories. Tran. Alfred Mac Adam.  
New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.