

## Transitional Space: Reading Contemporary Border Literature Through Historical Representations of Baja California

Lugares intermedios: Literatura contemporánea de la frontera  
a través de las representaciones históricas de Baja California

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**Abstract:** Critical approaches to border literature rely on and reinforce stereotypes about local culture. This article reads the work of contemporary authors written near the U.S./Mexico border through the frame of Baja Californian history, offering a corrective to readings which center their marginality to U.S. and central Mexican literary production. These works draw on new and old myths about the peninsula, and its long history of representation in the writings of explorers and missionaries. Jesuit missionaries, for example, experienced the peninsula's extremity in terms of psychological challenges for which ethnographic practices provided relief and a sense of control. In contrast, contemporary writers Regina Swain and Aglae Margalli analogize bodily experiences like crying, sweating and breathing to environmental processes of flooding and erosion, showing that the relationship between subject and environment can be negotiated, rather than imposed. In this way they demonstrate the embodied limits of colonial historiography and articulate the gendered logic behind the idea that writing from a place means being resigned to, determined by, or representative of it.

**Keywords:** 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mexican Literature, Literary Criticism, Baja California, Border Literature.

**Resumen:** Aproximaciones críticas a la literatura de la frontera requieren y refuerzan estereotipos sobre la cultura local. Este artículo lee el trabajo de algunas escritoras contemporáneas producido cerca de la frontera norte dentro del marco de la historia bajacaliforniana. Estos textos recurren a los mitos antiguos y contemporáneos de la península, y además a su larga historia de ser representada en la escritura de los exploradores y los misioneros. Los jesuitas, por ejemplo, experimentaron la extremidad de la península como un reto psicológico y las prácticas etnográficas les permitieron conservar cierto control sobre sus entornos. Escritoras contemporáneas comparan las prácticas corporales como llorar, sudor, y respirar con los procesos ambientales de inundación y erosión. Nos muestran una relación entre sujeto y ambiente de concordancia en vez de una de imposición. De esta manera describen los límites encarnados de la historiografía colonial y su lógica de género.

**Palabras clave:** literatura mexicana del siglo XX, crítica literaria, Baja California, literatura de la frontera.

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Critical perspectives on cultural production at the U.S./Mexico border often foreground questions of economic violence, the impacts of globalization on local culture and neoliberalism's effects on art and literature markets. However, these approaches can naturalize linear historical narratives which clearly differentiate between precolonial, post-independence, post-revolutionary and post-NAFTA periods when approaching literature. Instead of relying on these historical boundaries, I will consider here how regional boundaries both shape and enforce historical periodization. Considering literature from Baja California I suggest that the present image of California, especially as it circulates in contemporary literary texts, cannot be so neatly separated from its history of regional representations.

One way of characterizing cultural production at the border, especially from Tijuana, is in terms of a "Tijuana Syndrome": a sense of "being caught helplessly between two giant propaganda machines," of the North American and Mexican cultural industries (Castillo and Tabuenca 190). As Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca describe it, this positioning produces a "feeling of living on the wrong side of the defining edge of national culture while at the same time persisting as an obsessive object of discourse" (190). The question of whether and how one inhabits the northern region, and if its writers are truly inside of Mexican national culture, has been a topic of debate and polemic<sup>1</sup>.

Like the region of Northern Mexico in the sphere of literary criticism, different discourses have used representations of Baja California as a more or less habitable place as a kind of transitional object to sustain fantasies of ambition and delimit the boundaries of national and/or "modern" reality in the context of Mexico<sup>2</sup>. The result is that it is difficult to consider literature produced there without positioning it as either inside of or outside of national literary culture, or considering

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<sup>1</sup>Humberto Felix Berumen argues that "el vacío territorial" which the Northern periphery of the country represented for the central post-revolutionary state was really "su imagen invertida, que de esa manera delimitaba también su periferia." As the limit of national culture, then, this region has provided both a buffer between the country's center and the "ambitions" of the United States, while also providing a foil or "internal border" against which central culture came to define itself. For a more polemical approach to the terms of this debate, see for example "Los norteados: Apuntes sobre la desorientación de una transgeneración" by Heriberto Yépez.

<sup>2</sup> In object relations, a branch of psychoanalytic theory, the transitional object is considered an intermediary or "between" that aids in the development a sense of shared or social reality. According to D. W. Winnicott, recognizing the transitional object requires "a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved." This intermediate zone is one that Winnicott says is hard to accept for the philosopher, who prefers to see objects as either inside of or outside of the subjects, destroyed or not destroyed. Here I am suggesting an analogy between the function of the transitional object in psychoanalysis and the representational work that two imaginaries of national culture have required the peninsula to perform, as an internal or external limit to national culture.

it primarily in relation to the economic asymmetries with which urban tourism and the post-NAFTA border have become synonymous<sup>3</sup>. Focusing too heavily on the contemporary border's presence in texts like Regina Swain's short story collection *Señorita Superman y otras danzas*, published in 1992, can prevent engagement with longer histories of representation, in which the peninsula has also been positioned as an "obsessive object of discourse." (Castillo and Tabuenca 90). In what follows, I trace the afterlives of colonial-era perceptions that imagined the peninsula as the limit of human and geographical difference—a place mythologized as unconquerable and unreachable because of its uninhabitability and supposed barbarism of its inhabitants. At the same time, the area's potential habitability has been crucial for articulating successful historical narratives of colonization and national incorporation. The persistence of this representational aporia—of Baja California as both uninhabitable and habitable—indicates the ongoing relevance of considering its literature within a decolonial frame, a practice which, I argue, offers an important critique of Euro-centric universalizations of literary value<sup>4</sup>.

In her third book of poetry, published in 1999, poet Aglae Margalli re-activates histories of anthropological and scientific observational perception in order to show how the peninsula had historically been represented by outsiders in order to justify colonial and missionary activity. Jesuit missionaries turned to these modes of description in order to preserve a sense of what I refer to as epistemological stability in the face of their clash with radically different human cultures and environments. The work of these missionaries in the "contact zone" of Baja California has informed a variety of writers who also traveled there on their own types of voyages of discovery in the mid-twentieth century, including John Steinbeck and Fernando Jordán, the latter of whom wrote a "biography" of the peninsula, titled "El Otro México," published serially in a Mexico City literary

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<sup>3</sup> In her article "Sketches of identities from the Mexico-US border (or the other way around)," Maria Socorro Tabuenca defines "South/North of the Borderisms" as North Americanist and Mexican centralist cultural attitudes which seek to establish distance from perceptions of the northern region of the country as an "other space" in order to shore up different ideas of unified national identity (498).

<sup>4</sup> In a dialogue between them published in 2009, Fiamma Montezemolo quotes anthropologist Néstor García Canclini's reappraisal of the city of Tijuana: "*Diría que ya para mí Tijuana no es, como escribí en Culturas híbridas, un laboratorio de la posmodernidad sino quizá un laboratorio de la desintegración social y política de México como consecuencia de una ingobernabilidad cultivada.*" This idea of "ingobernabilidad" is, I would argue, one contemporary reprising of the figure of uninhabitability. Regarding Eurocentrism, Santiago Castro Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel describe it as a mode of thought imbricated with the hierarchical categories that operate in the wake of, and because of, the imposition of colonial rule and reason: "*el eurocentrismo es una actitud colonial frente al conocimiento, que se articula de forma simultánea con el proceso de las relaciones centro-periferia y las jerarquías étnico/raciales*" (Castro Gómez and Grosfoguel 14).

magazine starting in 1949. Moreover, the nature of the colonial-era textual historical record of the peninsula, which contains some of the only ethnographic information about its Indigenous communities, which Margalli draws from in *En las lumbrerías de la California*, resonates with ongoing debates about literary representation of Indigenous cosmologies in Latin America. Theories of transculturation, of literary heterogeneity, and the writer as “cultural intermediary,” position the Latin American and, more specifically in this context, the Mexican writer as *either* “la corporalización ética y estética” of conflict *or* of harmony between European-derived definitions of culture and history and Indigenous or autochthonous cultures and epistemologies (Pistacchio)<sup>5</sup>.

Instead, I argue that contemporary writers in Baja California are aware of and often thematize this double pressure to operate as successfully self-marketizing cultural intermediaries between the periphery of the country and the literary ideals of the capital, *or* as representatives of a place characterized by its peripheral nature and irreducible cultural difference. Margalli’s work, and the experiences of the missionaries whose writing she draws from, show how the twinned colonial imaginaries of Baja California’s environment as both uninhabitable and inhabited continue to frustrate attempts at articulating historical, and geographical transitions. This is to say that they raise the stakes for intellectuals’ and writers’ self-location, both historically and geographically, and minimize the space allowed for considering how these identities are negotiated within different social and environmental landscapes. In this essay I focus on representations of the confusion and discomfort involved in processes of individual and collective negotiation with place that is characteristic of migration. This negotiation of discomfort is also an epistemological response to experiences of disorientation produced by the proximity of different cultural and economic realities and the failure of historical narratives to account for this difference. It is easy for critics to receive and respond to a writer’s explicit or presumed self-location or identification or to read their work through what Margalli (“Cuánta mudez”) calls the “preformed stamp” of border literature. It is more difficult to consider the obstacles to and limitations of such rhetorical gestures and consider moments of confusion, discomfort and dissatisfaction that come from orienting oneself historically, geographically, and socially.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the theme of the “transcultural” in Latin American Literary Theory see Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s article “The Persistence of the Transcultural: A Latin American Theory of the Novel from the National-Popular to the Global.”

### Geographic Extremes and Delirious Subjects

While eighteenth century accounts of the Baja Californian peninsula described its geography as either an insurmountable challenge to the colonial project, or as a place of “wasted” resources which had yet to be extracted, the Jesuit missionaries serving as the vanguard for the colonization of Baja California faced the threat of psychological breakdown. Ivonne del Valle identifies the conflicted and “delirious” register of their writing as occupying “Un lugar intermedio entre el orden letrado y las fronteras” (15). The distance between the “lettered city,” or the epistemological ordering that it represented for literary theorist Ángel Rama, and the “real city,” or the oral and extra-textual liveliness the former seeks to incorporate or represent and thereby dominate, is exacerbated in the case of Baja California<sup>6</sup>. While the “lettered city” that Rama describes as an epistemological tool of colonization seeks to incorporate the “real city,” the “real city” itself always exceeds its practices of ordering. This figure of incommensurability, or of the unrepresentable excess of the “real” city and its connection with oral and pre-colonial culture, is a residue of continued and unresolved colonial anxiety about where reality is anchored. This figure continues to structure debates about border literature which seek to situate a critical position that resists the fetishizing gaze of either North American literary theorists or of the Mexico City-dominated publishing industry by stabilizing the diverse “quotidian reality” of border life as external to and the proper referent of literary texts (Castillo and Tabuenca 68).

A kind of historical parallel to the “obsessive” discursive positioning of border culture in Tijuana, the Jesuit missionaries’ chronicles of their experiences in the peninsula before and after the order’s expulsion demonstrates how Baja California has historically served as a place where this difference, or excess, can be deposited or recuperated. At the same time, the peninsula’s geography has opened the question of how cultural and political programs can be exported and applied to the margins of an empire, a nation, and an economy. In this sense, Baja California has functioned in theory and in cultural representations as shorthand for the distance between signifier and referent that pries open the ordering logic that accounts of

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<sup>6</sup> Following Rama’s reading of the juxtaposition of “the real city” and “the lettered city,” which, “although functioning with different logics [...] could not exist in any manner independently from each other,” Santiago Castro Gómez adopts a genealogical approach of tracking the interrelation of different discourses *about* a difference like the one Rama highlights, in which the predominantly orally transmitted culture of the “real” city masquerades through the centuries as the lettered city’s referent (Castro Gómez 115). This results in his articulation of “norms of truth” and “autonomous regimes of signs and relations of force,” a Foucauldian way of approaching cultural production which positions Nestor García Canclini’s celebration of Tijuana as the “laboratory of postmodernity” as inheriting this problematic.

political economic and national historical reality seek to impose. In a similar way, I argue, Regina Swain's stories see Baja California, and Tijuana specifically, as perpetually on their way to being incorporated into someone else's map of the world. It is in this sense that California has served as a limit to the symbolic regimes of the *letrado* order, of the Jesuit project of verifying Catholic universality, and as the defining limit of two national cultures. Only by reading contemporary writers through this longer history of representation, can we situate questions about the pressure put on representations of daily life at the border, especially as this pressure arises in relation to theorizations about national and economic reality. This framing also allows for analysis of contemporary deployments of colonial-era myths as the Californian inheritance of border literature. Reading this way shows how the constructedness of border identity might have less to do with postmodernity than with a longer history of strategic deployments and representations of Californian marginality, both geographically and in relation to projects of imperial expansion and, later, national culture.

As Ivonne Del Valle argues in her account of the occupation and evangelization of the peninsula in *Escribiendo desde los márgenes*, northern territories such as Baja California and Sonora constituted "extreme geographical spaces" (19; unless otherwise indicated all translations of quotations are mine) whose landscapes and Indigenous populations challenged the textual and epistemological expansion of the colonial project. Geographic extremity also appears in Ángel Rama's distillation of the kind of Western reason that underpinned the practice of colonization, disrupting an idea of harmony between this form of rationality and the world that it traces<sup>7</sup>. His paraphrasing of the colonizers' definition of their crucial term "order" suggests that producing or making things would have been equivalent to putting them in their place, their proper place, "*el lugar que les corresponde*" (19). But if the Europeans were "producing things" in the New World, how would they know their proper places? That is, what rule would have guaranteed the correspondence between things and "*el lugar que les corresponde*"? Between putting things in their proper place, and producing them according to a rule intervenes that which Ángel Rama quickly summarizes as "*Concierto, buena disposición de las cosas entre sí.*" (19).

In describing the project of colonialism through the planning and construction of cities, however Rama hints at how geographical contingency threatened the

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<sup>7</sup> I am using the term "extremity" here in the sense that the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "The extreme or terminal point or portion of anything; the very end," and invoking the thought of the end or limit of the known world (*OED online*). As Del Valle explains, this sense of geographic extremity or marginality frequently coincided with descriptions of extreme environmental conditions.

colonial project of making the world uniform through the application of uniformity. Ventriloquizing the voice of the king, Rama explains, “*con anterioridad a toda realización, se debe pensar la ciudad, lo que permitiría evitar las irrupciones circunstanciales ajenas a las normas establecidas.*” Furthermore, “*Una ciudad, previamente a su aparición en la realidad, debía existir en una representación simbólica*” for, in the absence of drawn plans, the plans and directives of the founders “*podían sufrir correcciones derivadas del lugar o de prácticas inexpertas*” (21). The limits to the uniform symbolic world created by planning the city as physical manifestation of a projected social order lay in the capacity for either “local conditions” or “inexpert execution” to produce changes in this symbolic order. Later on, reproducing an idea behind Thomas More’s imagined rational *Utopia*, Rama quotes him as claiming: “He who knows one of the cities will know them all, so exactly alike are they, except where the nature of the ground prevents” (24). Again, here, geographic and topographic extremity is formulated as the limit to the general application of Western rational rule (of rule itself) which relies on an anticipated sense of harmony between imperial plans and the environments in which they were mean to be actualized. A sense of harmony like that often assumed to pertain between written language and what it describes—an act both of tracing and of projection. Such “harmony” could only be troubled or disrupted by inexpert execution or the fault of the ground itself.

In practice, however, this harmony was not experienced. In the example of Baja California, there is a discrepancy between local practices of survival developed at the “margins” of the colonial project and the textual products later compiled by the very missionaries who developed them, or by others using their notes. Jesuit missionaries served as “metonymic” representatives of European epistemology who had to develop their own physical and emotional strategies for surviving life on the edge of an empire (Del Valle 20). Moreover, the re-publication and circulation of their narratives and observations came to serve an ideological function as evidence of the Spanish empire’s successful expansion. These missionaries directly experienced “*la tensión entre ciertos planes de dominio y la epistemología que los sostenía y el saber práctico y necesario para sobrevivir en entornos geográficos con grupos humanos particulares*” (Del Valle 22). This tension had effects on the writings of Jesuits situated in Baja California, who developed “*una duda respecto a las posibilidades de coherencia y transferencia de una epistemología y una cosmovisión a otros sitios, independientemente de las circunstancias*” (Del Valle 19). Jacobo Baegert and Miguel del Barco are the primary examples Del Valle provides. Their physical experiences and textual production in and about the peninsula, serve as “*palimpsestos*,” where different layers and practices of signification and worldmaking coexist alongside each other



(Del Valle 19). This coexistence might otherwise be described as the “*desencuentro radical entre dos universos*,” between the Western worldview brought with them by the Jesuits and the worldview of the Indigenous peoples for whom the peninsula would not have represented the margins of a foreign empire (Del Valle 220). Missionaries in what is now northwestern Mexico experienced a lack of harmony between colonial rule and local conditions. The tension that took its place suggested not just the unsuitability of local conditions, but a more profound doubt about the transference of European epistemologies to different locations.

The situation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in this region can be seen as an embodiment of “*un profundo abismo entre esa ciudad presa del impulso ordenador de la letra y la ciudad real (popular y oral) que pujaba por mantener su propia diferencia*” signaled by Rama’s thought, a contestation over reality whose violence was experienced not only by the Indigenous peoples whose worlds were disrupted by the missionary project, but also by the Jesuits themselves (Pistacchio). In one sense this chasm was larger in places like Baja California during the colonial period, where the geographic and social terrain was unpredictable and where the institutions with the power to resolve disputes were far away<sup>8</sup>. Del Valle also defines the extremity of sites like the Californian peninsula in terms of a logistical difficulty they introduce into a familiar dialectical construction, as “*el viaje occidental —de lo mismo a lo mismo vía la mediación de otro— debido a sus circunstancias particulares no podía hacerse con la comodidad de poder girar el rostro y encontrar una lengua y una densidad histórico-cultural similar a la propia*” (Del Valle 22). This metaphorization of the dialectical operation between self and other into a voyage suggests that these European subjects may have struggled to get back on course from their confrontations with otherness in California. This seems to have had lifelong consequences for the missionaries who in many cases had difficulty re-integrating themselves into European society.

Del Valle’s argument unfolds through a suggestion that cultural discourses and forms are primarily functional as long as they have their basis in a lived reality of “*densidad histórico-cultural*” (Del Valle 22). This argument uniquely reverses the priority of the terms of the “*ciudad letrada*” and the “*ciudad real*,” subjecting

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<sup>8</sup> The Jesuits were acutely aware of their role in Baja California as mediators between imperial acquisition and colonial rule represented by the soldiers who accompanied them, and the Indigenous peoples whose languages and customs they necessarily became familiar with. They were also aware, however, of the fact that their power derived, in a certain sense, from these same soldiers. Antonia Castañeda’s account of the liabilities such a military presence presented to the Franciscan missionaries in Alta California, in the form of sexual violence inflicted on Indigenous women, shows how physical delays in the form of travel time between the courts and viceregal edicts which could adjudicate the limits of acceptable and criminal behavior in the capital of New Spain exacerbated the effects of interpersonal disagreement and gender violence.

the former to the logic of the second. It implies that the *letrado*'s lettered city in practice *actually* functioned as a "real city," defined by oral and popular transmission of shared cultural codes which would not have been able to operate or be projected elsewhere without this aspect of customary and non-textual shared reality. In this sense, Del Valle suggests that it might have been *more* possible for the Jesuits to retain their sense of epistemological stability in a European city, or even in a larger city in Mexico at that time, than in an extreme and marginal location like Baja California. In this sense, Del Valle herself relies on the geographical extremity in order to invert a traditional hierarchy. Paradoxically, this kind of argument about cultural density providing a center of "*histórico-cultural*" stability is the kind of argument against which Northern Mexican writers have had to fight in order to position "*literatura del Norte*" as more than either a fetishized simulacra generated by Mexico City writers and readers, *or* as defined solely by its marginality to national cultural production. The inversion this argument rests on leaves open the question of what lies between the lettered city and the real city, between the imposition of Western order and the geographical contingency articulated as its primary limit. In one sense, madness, or the loss of reality-sense is a guide for this in-between space<sup>9</sup>.

The fragmented writings of the "*sujetos delirantes*" among the Jesuit writers from whom later European authors borrowed information for the production of maps, encyclopedias, and natural scientific texts, represent, "*una escritura que ocupa un lugar intermedio entre el orden letrado y las fronteras*" (Del Valle 15, 19). The "intermediate" nature of their writing and experiences derives not only from the tension between the "order" they were meant to both *find* and *impose* on these "new" territories, and the unfamiliar environmental and interpersonal challenges which they came to face, but also from their positions as representatives of the colonial project. From this perspective it is easy to read accounts of missionaries expelled from California leaving their new adopted "homeland" as a sentimental narrative defense against this intermediate register and the traumatic epistemic violence experienced and expressed by these very missionaries to which it refers. They were confronted not only with the loss of sense of their pre-existing worldviews, but also with the *limits of the applicability of these epistemological frameworks*. In this scene, the practices of natural scientific and ethnographic description served as a defensive gesture or a last recourse. These methods provided a way of recuperating some value from the frontier and for the missionaries to

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<sup>9</sup> As were the confrontations between missionaries and their military backup and rebellious alliances of Indigenous, mulatto, mestizo and black inhabitants of these northern regions who occasionally rose up to confront the colonial system (Del Valle 281).

imagine themselves not as having been unnecessarily isolated from their familiar cultural centers, but as working in service to an external European audience. In this sense, scientific production functions as “*la práctica occidental de autopreservación en condiciones de absoluta desventaja, un mecanismo aislado que permitía establecer con el medio ambiente una relación en la que el sujeto occidental conservaba cierto control*” (Del Valle 186). This “mechanism” of Western scientific production was not something arbitrarily deployed in and on newly encountered environments, but a tool to help establish a relation with the environment as a way to maintain sanity and a sense of control in the face of epistemological instability. Baegert’s and Del Barco’s texts are proof that the peninsula was neither fully uninhabitable nor fully habitable for them, and their “deliriousness” might be described as an effect of writing in a register and for an audience with no room for this experience of being between worlds.

### Californian Myths, Re-articulated

At the beginning of her story, which reworks an urban legend, “El Diablo también baila en el Aloha,” Regina Swain writes, “*La ciudad sigue siendo la misma, no importa cuánto llueva o cuánto se vaya en los deslaves. La Frontera sigue siendo la misma: Zona Libre desde que era sólo una pequeña isla llamada California*” (23). Here there are multiple oversimplifications: that the city doesn’t change, no matter how much erosion the physical landscape undergoes; that the border continues being a free-trade zone, perhaps as it has always been; and that, despite having started out as “*una pequeña isla llamada California*,” the border region is really unchanged since this romantic mischaracterization was first projected onto the northern frontier of the Spanish empire in the Americas<sup>10</sup>. The first two of these comparisons are ironizing. The idea that changes to the city (even landslides which would affect its residents) don’t change its image or the underlying dynamics is cynical in a similar way that reducing the border city to the term Zona Libre is cynical, suggesting that the view from which the city is seen is always as abstracting as the perspective of transnational capital. The economic overdetermination of border culture makes it a wonderful critical object, but can have the effect of

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase “*hubo una isla llamada California*” comes from *Las Sergas de Esplandíán*, written by Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The book describes a fictional island called California, depicted as an earthly paradise populated by “*mujeres negras*” who lived without men, “*casi como las Amazonas*,” and their queen Calafia who fought with weapons made of gold and rode tamed griffins. The name California deployed in this romantic narrative was also not new as Fernando Jordán describes in his “biography” of the peninsula but was itself derived from an eleventh century poem, the *Canción de Rolando*, in which California along with Africa represent the last territories to be conquered by the epic poem’s protagonist.

freezing a particular image of the border, one which emphasizes dynamics of economic inequality solidified by free trade agreements. This framing leaves two options for reading border writers, who are seen either as re-affirming or as subverting these neocolonial dynamics. Instead, Swain ironizes the frozen or ahistorical image of the border city in her 1992 collection *Señorita Superman y otras danzas*, in order to allude to the persistence of older problems of colonial-era representation of the region. Her last suggestion, which seems the most explicitly humorous—that the border grew up from a little island called California, *and* that this developmental process has not produced significant changes—is a suggestive and confusing conflation. What would it mean for the border to have its origins in the colonial-era myth of California as island? And would reckoning with these colonial-era representations reinforce the status of the territory as former colony? Reading Swain's stories through a decolonial frame instead challenges the easy periodization of Californian peninsular history into discrete eras, such as the period of conquest, the period of colonization, and the period after independence. Instead the myths and ideologies prevalent in different areas are shown to exist together and overlap, with consequences that are both ironic and devastating.

Regina Swain begins her story "Carta al Conquistador Balboa" with a disorienting parody of the kind of introduction one might find to an explorer's travelogue and the ease with which such a text would have thrown together disparate elements of a foreign culture. Here the mythical Amazonian queen Calafia begins by citing a date, "*Año 6704 del Periodo Juliano, según lo marca el Calendario del Más Antiguo Galván,*" which would correspond to the year 1991, two years before the collection was published, and a place, "*Desde una isla llamada California*" (Swain 57). Swain brings together an anachronistic collection of terminology—the Catholic Julian calendar, an almanac whose first edition was published in Mexico in 1826, and the name of an island which, by that point, was known to be a peninsula—under the ironic rubric of a situating epigraph to a letter written *by* the mythical queen of the Californian Amazons, to "*mi buen Conquistador Balboa,*" who never would have traveled as far north into the Pacific as Mexico. Calafia writes from this disoriented spatiotemporal location signaled by these jumbled referents which the letter's writer summarizes as "*este Imperio del Norte.*" The purpose of her letter to the character Balboa attempts to seduce him back to her shores which she claims he did visit. Calafia's letter has the tone of Dido writing to Aeneas, and includes accounts of her "*buen imperio éste que usted conquistara,*" "*repleto de objetos que a usted alguna vez le parecieron mágicos: pieles de sirena virgen, cuernos de unicornio, telescopios para ver el alma...*" (Swain 57). She describes the "island" to him as a place where "*el reflejo de los sueños sigue siendo igual, no importan salidas o llegadas,*" depicting it as a place

frozen in time where “*el conquistador sigue siendo conquistado por los ojos grandes de las de mi raza*” (57). Here, in a different context than before, Swain describes the “island” as an unchanging place, while the imperfect subjunctive phrasing leaves its conquest a source of unrequited desire. Referencing Balboa’s failed career as a farmer, she asks, “¿*Tedrá [sic] usted rebaños de olas en su imperio marino? La distancia lo acerca ahora, como a la A y la Z en esa tabla tan suya de hacer palabras.*” (58). Calafia, the writer of the letter, wills her “empire of the North” and his “empire of the sea” to approach each other, as the letters A and Z, seemingly far from each other, are brought together as members of the same category, by the horizon of the alphabet and, by extension, a world of words. This gesture analogizes textual proximity to the closure of distance between empires and is characteristic of Swain’s stories and her inclination to trouble the borders of historical periods, as well as those between fiction and historical fact. Here the realities of historical time and geographical distance are made to seem mythical from the perspective of a textual world where the mythical, the fictional, and the factual coexist.

In the next story about Calafia, and the last in the collection, she grows up as a girl in a Tijuana neighborhood subject to flooding, where Swain again converts the mythic into the thinly fictionalized quotidian and viceversa. This Calafia is named for the city taxi-bus on which she was born and the passengers dub her a queen, “*porque jamás llegaría a princesa*” (Swain 61). In her daily world of mudcakes and lizards her grandmother tells her stories. One story is about Noah and the great flood, but Calafia doesn’t believe her grandmother’s affirmation that the dinosaurs and griffins drowned as a result of this flood, as “*Calafia estaba segura de conocer a varios*” (Swain 62). When the character named Homobono deserts this Calafia of the second story and their children, she begins to cry. As the story explains:

Lloró porque ya nadie le platicaría que la Tierra es redonda y que el Río Colorado no tiene vergüenza, que las misiones no son secretas y que los cirios no crecen en la iglesia, sino en el desierto. Lloró también porque se le dobló una uña y porque aprendió a querer a Homobono por zonas: la del norte, cabello sedoso y ojos de fruta; la del sur, piernas fuertes para atrapar las suyas; la del centro, ¡ay la zona Centro! (Swain 64)

Here Swain stages a conflict between two perspectives. Calafia responds to language literally—she thinks the Colorado, or red river, is blushing, while Homobono knows Colorado is just a name. Where her frames of reference for “missions” and “cirios” are spy movies and churches, his are the Baja Californian

desert. And while the mapping activity she engages in is as a lover learning to admire different parts of his body, Homobono knows that the world is round. The narrator ridicules here the juxtaposition of different kinds of referents. Calafia seems petty, she wants to chat, doesn't take things seriously, and cries because she's bent a fingernail, among other things. But when Calafia cries, her tears become "*un río impresionante que se llamó Ama-ZONAS, en honor al mapa fabuloso de la anatomía de Homobono*" (Swain 64). In this character's reality, personal stories connect names to places and mapping is an act of desire, not of knowledge production or the imposition of a scientific ordering logic. For her the world, like the body, is less of a globe than a collection of zones, and the experiences connected with them. Swain disarticulates the myth of Calafia, Amazonian queen, and puts its parts back together across two stories, connecting this myth with the woman who is resigned to a specific place while the conquistador, and even the "good" husband, both leave to explore the world they authorize through their narration. At the same time the worlds these men narrate naturalize their positions of authority and of knowledge as something separate from embodied experience and desire. Swain parodies the dialectic of local specificity and global knowledge and shows how its structure is gendered. The mythic story of the unrequited desire of the black Amazonian queen of California is the other side of a story about a woman who is resigned to be left behind, condemned to the bounds of her kingdom no matter how poor, limited, or fantastical it is.

Swain shows how the depiction of a place as mythical and full of underexploited resources is just another version of a story that sees the place as poor and worthless. In both cases its relative value and position in the world is projected and traced by an outsider. Given the gendered dynamics attributed to this frame in these stories, writing *from* a specific position is defined *in opposition to* universality. Whether it is the border of a country or the marginalized position of female experience, this attribution of specificity implies a relation of resignation and condemnation to a limited sphere. Nevertheless, this position is also one where a different relationship to language may be articulated, one that doesn't have knowledge production and a global horizon as its aim. To phrase this suggestion as a question: What are the alternatives to viewing a writer's production either as determined by or condemned to their regional environment, *or* in terms of their writing's universality?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In "The Persistence of the Transcultural," Ignacio Sánchez Prado describes a similar formulation as a kind of "dual crisis" for "the theory of the Latin American novel" (368).

Regina Swain's stories explore the feminine underside of practices of mapping and imposing external logics on a landscape that go hand in hand with ideas of discovery and conquest. The inhabitants of her stories live beyond the bounds of ordering logic represented by the alphabet, and the map; but their responses to being positioned as the limit or being just beyond the limit of the thinkable are irony in the face of isolation. The perspective of her Calafia figures suggests that what is lost in the abyss between order and the territory its names are imposed on are experiences of desire, negotiation, and intimacy. While Swain shows us how feminine desire can testify to the existence of this in-between space, poet Aglae Margalli's articulation of the relationship between gender and landscape shows how a negotiation between one's body and its surrounding environment might provide ways of resisting the "coloniality of gender" (Lugones 744). While Swain's stories explore the way that female desire escapes and exceeds colonial modes of mapping and knowing a place, Margalli's poetry explores the landscape of the peninsula as a resource for inhabiting and negotiating what Maria Lugones calls "the colonizing construction of the fractured locus," (747) or the colonial imposition of gender as a constitutive horizon of being<sup>12</sup>. They both are technically considered part of "*la Generación de la Ruptura*," a national cohort of writers, although Margalli aligns herself less with this generation, and more with the aesthetic potential she sees in "*la poesía del norte*" ("Cuánta mudez").

### **"Una queja interminable"**

California has conjured an idea of literature as a natural product for writers in the United States and in Mexico. As an example, when referring to the poets of Baja California among which he counts himself, in *Fronteras de Sal: mar y desierto en la poesía de Baja California*, Jorge Ortega writes, "*Somos extensión del terruño que habitamos*" (11). At the same time, in a seemingly opposite direction, in his introduction to the poetry collection *Across the Line/Al otro lado: The Poetry of Baja California*, Mark Weiss notes that while "almost three quarters of the poets in this anthology were born in Baja California, very few of their parents were, and almost none of their grandparents" (12). If many of the poets of Baja California have not been long-term residents of the area, how are we to understand an assertion

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<sup>12</sup> Although both writers were writing from Baja California in the 1990's when the works analyzed here were published, they received different levels of recognition. Regina Swain's *Señorita Superman y otras danzas* was awarded the Premio Nacional de Literatura Gilberto Owen, in 1991. It is considered a touchstone of writing about Tijuana, and is one of the texts discussed in Castillo and Tabuenca's *Border Women*. Margalli's third poetry collection *En las lumbrias de la California* received the Premio Estatal de Literatura, in 1998 given by the Instituto de Cultura de Baja California.

like Ortega's, which affirms a close relationship between the land itself of the peninsula, and the cultural products of its inhabitants?

Ortega suggests that these writers bring the environment into their texts: "*Cuando un poeta asume el entorno físico que habita como una toma de conciencia estética, se da lo que podría llamarse una poética del paisaje, fundada en los atributos de éste para gestar cápsulas literarias igualmente habitables: poemas*" (185). Ortega clarifies here that this relationship between poet and environment is not just a question of relying on the local landscape to generate language. Instead, he suggests, "*Un poética del paisaje*" refers not to the content but to the form of poetry. Although he later describes the practice as, "*hacer del paisaje referido vuelto ya cifra poética, metáfora*" (185), implying that the environment is brought into the poem as a source of reference for the generation of a specific code of figures, the "gesture" in the previous quote describes a parallel formal structure. There he claims that the poem provides an experience of inhabitation not unlike that of the writer's environment. Ortega describes Aglae Margalli's poetry collection, *Selvarena*, as one written to annex the jungle landscape of Tabasco, her birthplace, to that of her adopted Mexicali, as a summary of her own identity. The title, and the collection, he suggests, perform a duality, but he asks "*¿puede haber dualidad donde hay dialéctica, o viceversa?*" (198). From the perspective of Margalli's poetry, however, neither dialectic nor duality can fully account for the experience of frustrated and frustrating transition present in her poems. Rather than simply juxtaposing the two environments, she describes the effects of the environmental shift on her perception of her own body.

The identity staged in *Selvarena* is an identity which coheres through a narrative of movement, of migration, and of negotiation with environmental pressures, beginning with a series that focuses on the title's first half, "*selva*." In her poem "*Selvática*," the river Grijalva parts the jungle, the poet's vegetal soul. She writes "*En lomos de madera/ mi alma vegetal galopa/ sobre esta herida abierta/ esta desgarradura que me ahonda en el barro/ en el origen*." The connection between embodiment and the forest is the figure of "*esta herida abierta, esta desgarradura*," which sinks the poem's narrator into the clay of the biblical origin. Both her wooden legs and her "vegetal spirit" are anchored to the "*barro*" of her sexed origin, which slows their gallop. In this sense Margalli shows that the question of a duality between body and mind or body and spirit is tripped up by the opaque and malleable problem of her gender and, specifically, its connection to biological sex, which is associated with "*el origen*," or the specter of original sin, as is made explicit in another poem from this first section, titled "*Eva*." In his analysis, Ortega devotes more attention to the third section of the book, "*Tolvaneras de sombras y chamizos*," which contains poems about the desert heat of Mexicali.



In this section, the poem “Desértica” describes how “*esta tarde de agosto/ mi cuerpo es una queja/ interminable.*” Here, again, the body surfaces as an obstacle, and this obstacle refuses to be encapsulated neatly into a dialectical self-narration.

There seems to be a clear dualism in the relationship between physical sensuality experienced in and through the jungle environment versus the mysticism of the desert in *Selvarena*, where the body is only a source of complaint and discomfort, weighing down the soul. Ortega writes, “*El desierto de Aglae Margalli es una mística en cuanto a que se lleva auestas como una cruz (el desierto calorífero es la cruz de quien habita Mexicali. De los tijuanos la violencia)*” (199). In an interview, Margalli characterizes this difference in straightforward terms. She describes “*La selva como metáfora de la sexualidad, de mi lado apasionado, de la mujer que soy y el desierto como la parte mística, como la parte espiritual; es, dos mujeres que dialogan a través de esa geografía, eso es Selvarena*” (“Cuánta mudéz”). While the *poemario* may stage a dialogue, it is not symmetrical, Margalli stresses in the interview, “Pertenezco al desierto.” Instead of resolving this dualism, however, by emphasizing one over the other, however, or incorporating the story of her origins into a dialectic of self-development, Margalli literalizes the break. There are two women, not one, and they speak to each other through the geography of both places. This dialogue, I suggest, invokes Maria Lugones’ description of what it means to live with the colonality of gender, in what she calls “a fractured locus constructed double, who perceives double, relates double, where the ‘sides’ of the locus are in tension” (748). Instead of choosing one side over the other, or resolving the difference into a narrative, Margalli’s poem articulates this fracture.

In the poem “Metamorfosis” from the first section, the narrator sees herself in the mirror: “*En el espejo/ una mujer me observa/ en su pupila cabe/ la arena del desierto.*” The poem performs a metamorphosis in the narrator’s self-perception. She changes, in her own estimation, from a being of the jungle, “*en ella soy la selva prodigiosa/ un follaje de minúsculas serpientes/ corazón vegetal de venas sabias,*” into a being of the desert, but both sides develop. In the poem the body identified with the jungle and its sensuality interacts with, exposing and complementing the dune underneath: “*En el espejo/ vaho de tierra fértil/ devela mi duna/ erosionada.*” This is not a rebirth, but nor is it a maturation. The body she describes as a “house that I inhabit” is shown not to correspond to the narrator’s inner nature, “her dune,” which is neither idealized nor pristine, but as caught up in its own environmental processes. While the descriptor “*erosionada*” might seem to signify damage or deterioration, in a later poem the poet describes this capacity for erosion as a positive characteristic.

In “Éxtasis,” from the section concerned with Mexicali, she writes:

*Miro la vastedad  
 y mis ojos serpean  
 como cachoras [sic] perseguidas  
 por esta piel de ámbar que se expande  
 detrás del horizonte de mis cejas  
 atrás del filo de mis pies desnudos  
 hay momentos en que quisiera ser arena  
 y tumbarme a la deriva del verano  
 yacer completamente abandonada  
 como se tienden los algodones  
 en vitrales de luz bajo el crepúsculo  
 he visto cómo avanza el desierto  
 en culebras de polvo  
 reptando enloquecido  
 por las venas de asfalto  
 he sentido su aliento calcinante  
 y me han entrado ganas de ser duna  
 pero soy esta arcilla  
 que se disuelve en llanto de sudor  
 comprometida con su origen. (Selvarena 52)*

In this poem, the possibility of becoming sand is desirable, because the body puts up too much resistance to the summer heat. The urge to “*ser duna*” comes from outside, it enters in the form of a wish to be as well adapted to the environmental conditions of pressing heat as the sand and dust, which are blown about so easily that they could hardly constitute a body, at least not one as solid as the clay of her origin, which she cannot abandon or leave behind. “Committed to her origin,” [“*Comprometida con su origen*”] the narrator is bound by the clay from which Eva was formed, and whose response to the heat of her surroundings is to sweat and dissolve.

For the poems’ narrator, the relationship between dune and desert heat seems, on a first impression, to be a figure for the duality between body and spirit. Her body of clay is inadequate to the heat of Mexicali, and an impediment, it cries with sweat and cannot drift with the summer wind. This dissatisfaction through which the narrator experiences the split between physical sensuality and what Margalli calls “*la parte espiritual*,” Ortega decides, is resolved dialectically, in the movement from “*lo físico panorámico (inspiración referente del poema) a lo estrictamente formal, zona de trabajo donde yace en continua efervescencia la formula sujeto (interior)-realidad (exterior), imprescindible para el proceso explícitamente escritural*” (198). Citing the final section of the book, whose poems

open questions of identification and reality by turning to the topic of language itself, Ortega suggests that the poet overcomes the dissatisfying opposition between spirit and sensual body in the body of the poem, where the relationship between subjective interiority and objective exteriority can coexist in the continuous effervescence of poetic language. This reading suggests that the problem of the female sexual difference raised by Margalli's poems can be solved by substituting it for the textual body of the poem. But what if we imagine this "*zona de trabajo*" of the poem not as the dialectical and gender-neutral resolution of the duality set up in *Selvarena* but as a space of transition and negotiation, where the female body can only make it into the poem in a state of ongoing degradation, but this degradation itself is something which allows the poet to respond to her environment. Disintegration and erosion are the figures for this negotiation, where being carried by the wind or pounded by the hot sun are not ways to disappear, but ways to survive. These provide a suggestion of how to account for experiences of overlapping transition, migration, and gendering through terms of neither resignation nor melancholy. As Lugones describes, "adaptation, rejection, adoption, ignoring, and integrating are [...] always performed by an active subject thickly constructed by inhabiting the colonial difference with a fractured locus" (754). For Lugones, these processes are modes of resistance to seeing "either the coloniality of gender as accomplishment, or a freezing of memory, an ossified understanding of self in relation from a precolonial sense of the social" (754). Margalli's poems suggest that the responsiveness between one's body and specific environmental conditions (the jungle, the desert) hold open the space between this false choice. Eroding, melting, and dissolving provide ways of conceptualizing how one's experience of self, including of one's body and gender, can shift and move and be renegotiated depending on the local environment and the conditions of reception.

The question of these intermediate zones, which provide space for negotiating one's identity, is one Margalli claims in an interview to explicitly address in her work. She says, "*en Mexicali, por ser una ciudad joven, apenas cumple sus primeros cien años de fundación, empezamos [...] a construir la identidad cultural, las propuestas artísticas como punto de partida, preguntándonos quiénes somos en esta tierra a la que llegamos, la que nos ha abrazado y en la cual nos asumimos*" (Margalli, "Cuánta mudez"). The city and desert of Mexicali and, in her later poetry collection *En las lumbrierías de la California*, the environment of the peninsula, is at the same time a place of arrival, a subject who embraces, and a background for a community coming to terms with itself through representation. This ambiguous or transitional space opened up by responsiveness to the environment is something that Margalli's poetry deals with explicitly, and which she marks as a consideration

of “*una ‘literatura de frontera’*” (“Cuánta mudez”). She puts the epithet in quotation marks, warning that she does not mean to place a preformed stamp on border literature, but that the sense of “la frontera” that she refers to should be given more substantial weight. Specifically, she responds,

La literatura de frontera va mucho más allá de hablar de la frontera como espacio geográfico [...] Es la frontera desdoblada, también, en las fronteras humanas, en ese aislamiento, en esa soledad, en esa suma que somos las diversas individualidades, cada quien está dando o dejando escuchar su propia voz. (“Cuánta mudez”)

Elsewhere she explains that the capacity for poetry from the north of Mexico to answer the aesthetic questions posed by the turn of the century, has to do with it being “*una tierra de migrantes.*”

In elaborating her own migration to the desert of Mexicali, *Selvarena* demonstrates that the significance of a place is established by renegotiating the boundaries between one’s body and new environmental conditions. The processes don’t end in the production of a pristine origin for identity, a place to speak from and for, but find a form in the unstable figure of the dune and its evocation of the mud which came before.

## Conclusion

Both Swain and Margalli struggle with what it means to inhabit a zone considered both uninhabitable and habitable. While uninhabitability surfaces in *Señorita Superman* as a fantasy perpetuated by tourists and originating in mythical representations of the peninsula as an island kingdom, in *Selvarena* habitability is a question of inhabiting one’s identity, of being able to recognize oneself in the mirror and speak from and for a gendered body and one’s own history of movement, in this case relocation. These texts could be considered border literature to the extent that they interrogate the borders between contemporary and historical reality, and between individual and collective identity. Focusing too heavily on the contemporary transnational border’s presence misunderstands the historical use of the peninsula which has served to imagine the limit of human and geographical difference. On the one hand, that imagination conceived of the peninsula as unreachable—a boundary beyond, one which could not be crossed and which was also a boundary of human difference (in the attribution of “barbarism”). On the other hand, the peninsula was imagined as habitable and therefore a boundary which could be crossed, one which could support historical narratives of incorporation (first for the colonial project, and then for the nation state). These ideas frame

perceptions of the peninsula today and illustrate the nature of colonial-era boundary making which are still with us.

As Del Valle's work shows, colonial-era descriptions of the peninsula were primarily required for epistemological stability, as necessary ground for the expansion of empire and Western reason. In the contemporary period, it is not enough to consider writers as cultural intermediaries, caught between the inheritance of the colonial-era textual record and the desire to consider other local histories and epistemologies of belonging, including Indigenous histories and cosmologies, and histories of local cultural production (in Tijuana, for example, as an exemplary border city). This tendency repeats the transitional positioning that is used to resolve questions of inside and outside. In this way, regional boundaries shape and enforce historical periodization.

The idea that historical periodization determines the limits of reality creates a demand to respond to the question of self-location, in its gendering, geographic and historical registers, and the idea that this question is the primary question of and for a writer. This focus frustrates attempts at articulating transitions, which are necessary because identity is formed through a negotiation with social and environmental conditions, rather than being imposed by them. Thinking with the negotiation of transition makes room for experiences of discomfort, confusion, and dissatisfaction, which are characteristic of migration, and for experiences of "adaptation, rejection, adoption, ignoring, and integrating," forms of creative resistance to the logics of both colonialism and capitalism. These should be read as epistemological responses that arise in the failure of historical narratives. The question of a writer's self-location or identification with place, as a geographic and historical figuration, is easy for critics to find and receive because it reinforces the historical boundaries of overcoming uninhabitability or being outside, without a coherent identity, into being reachable. Instead, I am interested in figures that arise from the problem of orientation and the status of transitional activity, the difficulty of movement between positions and spaces, a regional problematic which is otherwise not read.

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