
REVIEWS

Claire F. Fox. *The Fence and the River*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 188p.

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One morning two years ago, I was in the Los Angeles International Airport. That evening, I was sitting on the stairs leading to the doors of the *Estrella de Oro's* bus station in Acapulco, Mexico. What I experienced in such dissimilar settings made me realize the difficulties associated with creating a fair and accurate representation — “figuration” as Frederic Jameson calls it — of each city; focusing on the images and interests of each city’s people. A few days ago, the mayor of Juárez, Mexico, complained to the Mexican Attorney General about the labeling of the *Juárez Cartel*, asking instead for the alternate name *Carrillo Fuentes’ Cartel*, in order to avoid misrepresentation of that city.

An attempt to study and comprehend these environments, products of post modernity, would call for a postmodern rationalization. Even when one could find some important elements for representation between Los Angeles and Acapulco, those elements multiply and become much harder to define for cities like Tijuana, Nogales, Juárez, or Laredo, all of them located on the U.S.-Mexican border. *The Fence and the River* attempts precisely that. It focuses on a collection of aesthetic productions vying for a share of representing the border.

Fox’s book consists of an introduction and five chapters. According to the author, the study is “about representations of the U.S.-Mexican border that have appeared in literature, art, and mass media in the twentieth century, focusing especially on texts from the past three decades” (1). To do that, Fox “decided to explore three major areas of enquiry: artistic productions about the border; the work of political activists on the border; and the writings of U.S. and Mexican intellectuals about the border” (6).

Fox organizes the book’s critical essays on creative productions about the U.S.-Mexican border according to genre: the novel [Luis Spota’s *Murieron a mitad del río* (*They Died in the Middle of the River*), 1948], cinema [Alejandro Galindo’s *Espaldas mojadas* (*Wetbacks*), 1953; María Novaro’s *El jardín del Edén* (*The Garden of Eden*), 1994], and performance [Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *Border Brujo*, 1988-90 and *Year of the White Bear: The New World (B)order*, 1992-94].

Chapters one to three in the book try to establish the context for depicting the border, looking for a relationship between the socio-cultural environment and its representation in the arts, as well as the effect of implementing economic strategies dictated by NAFTA and GATT. Although the discussion here attempts to be unbiased, it is noticeable how the author underscores in several occasions the exploitation of nationalism as a last resort for the Mexican intellectuals. The author neglects to point out that nationalism is the only door open to criticism due to the lack of more definite proof of the effect of NAFTA on the Mexican population (although this is questionable: it is widely known how many Mexican companies have closed their doors due to lack of competitiveness). In addition, the authoritative stance and the unwillingness of President Zedillo's government to correct their course, makes the use of nationalism, if not rational, at least appropriate. Critical essays on aesthetic products selected make up the rest of the chapters. These essays attempt to close the gap between images and interests of people at the border.

Representation of the "other," be it an individual, gender, city, or region, is always a hard feature to achieve. It does not matter how complete the task is intended to be. Although *The Fence and the River* intends to provide a complete picture of the U.S.-Mexican border and attempts to portray its true essence, there are noticeable holes. For the cities in question, there is no discussion of recent socio-cultural factors that have strongly influenced not only — but mainly — the border, but the rest of the Mexican Republic, from the border to the peoples in the high sierras: the culture of drug trafficking, or *narcotráfico*, eulogized in the popular *narcocorridos*. Otherwise, *The Fence and the River*, achieves the author's stated goal. My only other criticism would be the "desecration" of the popular song "Canción Mixteca," a kind of hymn for the lonely Mexican away from home. The book includes a portion of it as follows:

O tierra del sol
Respiro por verte [I breath to see you]
Ahora tan lejos [Now so far away]
Yo vivo sin luz, sin amor. (110)

It should be:

O tierra del sol
Suspiro por verte [I sigh to see you]
Ahora *que* lejos [Now that far away]
Yo vivo sin luz, sin amor. ✨