

Rural and Urban Rivers: Displacements and Replacements in the Modern Latin American Novel

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The real and invented rural and urban rivers in the modern Latin American novel have a variety of representations and functions. In *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985) (*Love in the Time of Cholera*), Gabriel García Márquez constructs a Magdalena River that is a nostalgic gesture toward a now lost past of the nineteenth-century natural world—the river as an important vehicle of transportation and Romantic setting. In this late-twentieth-century Colombian novel set in the nineteenth century, García Márquez uses his visual memory of the Magdalena River not as he actually witnessed it, but as he saw it represented in drawings of a nineteenth-century artist who had never actually seen the Magdalena River.¹ Thus, García Márquez’s river is a literary construct of another artistic construct, a double artifact related in only distantly metaphorical ways to the geophysical entity known by social scientists and nineteenth-century riverboat captains as the “Magdalena River” (or “Río Magdalena”). At the end of the novel, two elderly lovers, who had fallen in love as adolescents, consummate their supposedly true love by celebrating their honeymoon—a twentieth-century rewriting of love as written in literary Romanticism—on a riverboat.

Some three decades after the publication of García Márquez’s novel, a much younger Colombian novelist, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, takes readers to a vastly different construction of the Magdalena River in a novel published under the title *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2011) (*The Sound of Things Falling*). In this novel about a drug dealer, one setting is the upper Magdalena River region that includes the town of La Dorada and the Hacienda Nápoles where the drug kingpin Pablo Escobar built an enormous private zoo. In *El ruido de las cosas al caer*, as will be discussed later, several references to the Magdalena River appear at crucial junctures in the

novel, this despite the fact that the work is fundamentally an “urban” novel: Vásquez writes, as a Colombian, about his generation’s relationship with the city of Bogotá.

The transformation of the literary course of the river in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the focus of this essay. The initial example of Vásquez’s novel is significant because I am not limiting this discussion to the strictly rural geographies most frequently associated with rivers in literature. Indeed, in the literature of the nineteenth century and before, the rivers of novels were usually the actual fluvial waters that flowed from the uplands downstream and corresponded to names such as the Amazon River, the Orinoco, the Río del Plata, and the like. Indeed, until the advent of the Industrial Revolution, rivers were essential sources of water and transportation; with the invention of the train and other motor-driven vehicles, the river began losing much of its central role in Western society and culture. In many parts of Latin America, railroad systems were built in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As Sarah Misemer points out in her study of trains, literature and the arts in the River Plate region, railroad construction and national identity were closely bound: railways on the pampas were constructed on a terreplein above the ground and thus served as elevated signs of recognition through the mobile demarcation of frontiers. In first reducing the pampas to empty space and then remaking them as a slate upon which images of power and progress might be displayed, Argentina transformed the space of national territory via technological progress.² In the nineteenth century, rivers still had enormous potential to overwhelm the human populations living near them. Trains, on the other hand, as Leo Marx observes, held the promise of national unity and even social equality, for this technological innovation (available to the rich and poor) promised to equalize the condition of men.³

In the early twentieth century, the classic *novelas de la tierra* (novels of the land) were often nostalgic reflections on the vanishing nineteenth-century rivers and adjacent rural life of the landed aristocracy. In these works of the 1920s and 1930s, rivers were often fictionalized as the nineteenth-century natural sources of power and inspiration of the literature of this period. One of the most nostalgic of these novels was *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), Ricardo Güiraldes’s canonical *novela de la tierra*. In this work, a small river and associated water imagery provide the structural basis for the harmonious three-part structure of the novel. Thus, in the first nine chapters, which deal with the young protagonist leaving home and his interest in pursuing the nomadic life of his role model, the gaucho Don Segundo Sombra, the young boy contemplates a small river, an “arroyo” (creek). The second nine chapters deal with the boy serving his apprenticeship with the gaucho and, here, his actions are suggested metaphorically by the flow of a river. Finally, the last nine chapters tell of the boy’s culminating adventures in the pampas and his acceptance of a

sedentary life; in this third part the serenity of this lifestyle is suggested by a lake. Guiraldes exhibits his alliances with nineteenth-century storytelling by having his protagonist, at the end, explain his use of rivers and related water imagery: he states that in his life water is like a mirror that reflects images of the past. On the banks of the *arroyo*, as a youth, he had recalled his childhood. While watering his horse in a river, he explains, he reviewed five years of his wanderings. At the end, seated above a small inlet of a lake, on his own land, he reconsiders his obligations as a landowner. All in all, the river and water imagery support the lofty ideals of a protagonist committed not only to the lifestyle of the dying breed that was the rural gaucho but also to the values of the landed aristocracy and the cultural avant-garde.

In other canonical *novelas de la tierra*, such as *Doña Bárbara* (1929) (Doña Bárbara) and *La vorágine* (1924) (The Vortex), river basins are significant settings. *Doña Bárbara* is a novel of the plains, or the llano, of Venezuela. Descriptions of the llano and the river basin constitute much of the imagery of the region, which is an important feature of the novel. These two elements—the llano and the river basin—seemingly define the very people who inhabit the region, as well as their customs and legends. In the abundant critical corpus on this novel, no one denies that the exposition of civilization versus barbarism is the main theme.⁴ The land, the rivers, and Doña Bárbara (the barbarism) and the Santos Luzardo family (the urbane “civilization”) are, in the end, reconciled. As in *Don Segundo Sombra*, the rivers seem to have noteworthy symbolic value throughout the majority of the novel, but in the end are situated in a way that diminishes their importance and suggests that the rivers are of waning importance for the culture and life (indeed, “civilization”) of the still relatively new twentieth-century nation.

In *La vorágine*, the nature of Colombia in general and the Amazon River basin in particular might seem, on a first reading, to be nineteenth-century realist projections of Colombia’s real nature. In reality, however, the rivers in *La vorágine* are a false front, for Rivera’s real interests are not the social and political reality of the rubber workers in the river basin of the jungle. That is, *La vorágine* is a questionable replica of a nation’s rural story, as has been seen in the national rural stories of *Don Segundo Sombra* and *Doña Bárbara*. The story is less of a “vorágine” (vortex) in the Amazon River jungle—of natural phenomena in a New World—than of a self in the process of writing, of establishing a writerly identity that interrupts the narration of a story. The decade of the 1920s was a period of cultural transformation in Latin America, a period of change from oral to written culture; a parallel transformation was from the river and river basin as the source for storytelling to the urban centers.⁵

Novels that dealt with this transformation in the 1930s, such as *Don Goyo* (1933) by the Ecuadorian Demetrio Aguilera Malta and *Piedrahita’s Toá* (1933) by the Colombian César Uribe, are also set in river basins. *Don*

Goyo is a novel about fishermen who live on islands close to Guayaquil. Of the two main characters, one of them, Don Goyo, is both a legend and a man, something along the lines of Don Segundo Sombra. The other one, Cusumbo, is an inhabitant of the riverbank (identified as a “montuvio”). His real-world problems distinguish him from the legendary Don Goyo. The river is key to the characterization of Don Goyo as a special person: his only appearance in the novel’s first part is when he passes in his canoe saying “Buenas noches de Dios” (Good nights of God), making him more a presence than a personality. A key event in this novel is also linked to the riverbanks: the one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old Don Goyo has a mystical experience in which a mangrove tree actually speaks to the old man, telling him that trees are like people and must not be destroyed. This passage on the riverbanks might well make *Don Goyo* a pioneer work of environmental awareness and eco-critical consciousness. Aguilera Malta uses the natural setting of the riverbank to suggest how human relationships work in subtle ways: as a couple sits on the trunk of a mangrove tree on the riverbank, sensing the water almost lapping their feet, they press together, as if “engraved” on each other. In this novel, the roots of custom are found in the land, but a land always closely associated with rivers, water, and riverbanks. Beyond the *novelas de la tierra* and more sophisticated works with some common interest in “the land” as a part of national identity, such as *Don Goyo*, rivers also play an important role in novels of social protest in the 1930s. Among the most prominent of the “novelas indigenistas” of social protest is Jorge Icaza’s *Huasipungo* (1934). In this novel, the river functions as the classic motif in Latin American literature of calling for human rights for indigenous peoples: the exploitation of these people by the traditional triangular power structure of the military, the church and the local caudillo is aggravated and made an ongoing crisis by the fact of the river’s flooding. In this and other novels of the region, natural disasters tend to represent more than temporary crises for those that live on the margins of society.⁶ Icaza describes repugnant scenes of human disaster, with Native Americans not only uprooted by the flood but also dying while working in the swamps where the “patron” orders them to work. The author’s successful description of the strong attachment the protagonist has to his home—in the face of natural disaster and human exploitation—make *Huasipungo* a classic work of Latin American literature in general and literature of eco-critical awareness in particular.

The culminating work in this novelistic tradition of the *novela indigenista* in Latin America, *Los ríos profundos* (1958) (Deep Rivers) by José María Arguedas, reserves a special role for rivers. As an insider and an outsider to Native American culture and society, Arguedas had a relationship with indigenous culture that provided him with insights into rivers and local peoples that were not common. *Los ríos profundos* is the story of Ernesto, a young boy belonging to the white world by birth but to the Indian world by

cultural orientation. Narrated in the first person, the novel relates Ernesto's close and seemingly mystical relationship with the entire natural world—including rivers and living things. He identifies with inanimate objects and waters that have a special meaning in his cultural heritage: the stone walls of Cuzco and the rivers are as significant as human beings.

Parallel to these Latin American novels in natural environments from the 1920s to the 1950s are the works of the same period set in urban settings. During the 1920s and 1930s, the zenith of the predominant mode that was the *novela de la tierra*, two general types of urban fiction were produced. On the one hand, urban novelists such as the Argentines Roberto Arlt and Juan Filloy, as well as the Colombian José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo, fictionalized a working-class and lumpen proletarian urban world distanced from the rivers and river basins of the *novela de la tierra*. On the other hand, urban novelists of the historical “vanguardia” (avant-garde), such as Jaime Torres Bodet and Gilberto Owen in Mexico, Vicente Huidobro in Chile, and José Félix Fuenmayor in Colombia, were relatively indifferent to rivers in rural settings. Rather, they looked to the avant-garde movements in Europe as models for an urban writing associated with the aesthetics of European Modernism.

These two groups of pioneer urban writers were the novelists who employed substitutes for rivers that corresponded to the modernization of Latin America: the trains, cars, and other vehicles that took over the roles of rivers in a variety of ways, primarily as the new vehicles of transportation and communication. Consequently, Torres Bodet clearly was fascinated with that newest urban river that was the “tranvía” (trolley), the tracks of which snaked through Mexico City in some ways comparable to rivers weaving through the rural plains and jungles of Latin America. Using a similar object of modernity, the Peruvian Martín Adán takes care to set a scene on a streetcar in Barranco in his novel *La casa de cartón* (1928) (The Cardboard House). These two authors tied their cosmopolitan interests with specific places in their respective countries, and this was also the case for other authors of “novelas de vanguardia”: Gilberto Owen writes in an ironic mode of the Mexican city of Pachuca, while Salvador Novo invented a city of modern miracles that was also the capital of Mexico. As opposed to the *novelas de la tierra*, however, the protagonist in Owen's *Novela como nube* (1928) (Novel as a Cloud) as well as in Torres Bodet's *Primero de enero* (1934) is an observer, a Latin American variant of the flaneur. That is, this flaneur flows through the urban spaces of the *novelas de vanguardia* as the metaphorical substitute for the river that flows through the rural spaces of the nineteenth-century novel and the *novela de la tierra*.

Two Argentine novels of the 1940s move beyond the experimentation of the *vanguardia* with new approaches to urban reality. On the one hand, the technology of modernization is omnipresent in the *novela de vanguardia* and a culminating work on the predominance of technology over nature and

rivers is *La invención de Morel* (1940) (The Invention of Morel) by Adolfo Bioy Casares. The novel deals with a condemned man who invents a way to mechanically reproduce people he knows. Less important than nature is the question of what is real and what is not. On the other hand, the novel *Adán Buenosayres* (1948) by Leopoldo Marechal is a voluminous work that delves into a new urban understanding of rivers: the underworld of “cloacas” (sewers) and associated subterranean spaces. This novel begins with an “Indispensable Prologue” in which Marechal (who signs this section) describes the burial of a writer named Adán Buenosayres. Marechal claims to have been one of the friends of the deceased man and decides to publish his two manuscripts. One is a series of autobiographical memoirs titled “Cuaderno de Tapas Azules” (The Blue-Covered Notebook), a series of memoirs written by Adán Buenosayres that is similar to Marechal’s own biography. The title of the next section of the novel *Adán Buenosayres* is “Viaje a la Oscura Ciudad de Cacodelphia (Journey to the Dark City of Cacodelphia), an account of a descent into the underground urban space of the cloacas: the rivers. There are also several sections narrated by a third-person narrator that relate the life of the author of these two books. When Adán Buenosayres is not on his journey underground, he is with his group of young intellectual friends functioning as the flaneur who observes the cultural life of Buenos Aires as a distanced participant who exhibits both a satirical and nostalgic attitude toward this urban environment. After Marechal, Latin American urban writers have continued the exploration of *cloacas*, and contemporary Colombian writers such as Fernando Vallejo and Héctor Abad Faciolince have been interested in this topic.

The inversion of the roles of technology seen in *La invención de Morel* and *Adán Buenosayres* also takes place in Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) (The Lost Footsteps), a novel in which the protagonist travels up a mythic river of time but in reverse: as he travels inland on a river similar to the Orinoco, he moves backward in time to a pre-modern river and nature. In this trip, he lives the process of rejecting modernity and embracing a primitive nature. He also experiences the European conquest of the New World, the mythical Odyssey, the rediscovery of authentic human relationship, the redefinition of society, and the origin of art, arriving at the most elemental expression of feeling. Here, the river is a vehicle for a return to an American past, to discover origins and authenticity. The river is also what Carpentier uses to novelize his awestruck response to the “real maravilloso” of the New World.

The urban figure that flows throughout Carlos Fuentes’s first novel, *La región más transparente* (1958) (Where the Air is Clear), Ixca Cienfuegos, is the flaneur with far more mobility in society than those brief experiments of the *novelas de vanguardia*. A panorama of Mexico City, this novel includes all social classes in the city along with detailed descriptions of the economic and cultural habits of these classes. The flaneur figure is unique:

he is a difficult-to-define representation of the Indian influence in Mexican life, but what makes him interesting as a flaneur figure is his inexplicable ability to be seemingly everywhere. We can never know exactly who he is, and this quality is an important element of his symbolic value; the indigenous element in Mexican culture is generally recognized in this novel but not well defined. Just as Guiraldes had used the river to express what was difficult to define about gaucho life, Fuentes uses the flaneur to express what is difficult to define about the indigenous element of Mexican society.

Among the novels of the Boom and of the latter half of the twentieth century, three of the most significant pieces of writing with respect to rivers, nature, and the novel are Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963) (Hopsotch), Mario Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* (1966) (The Green House) and Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra* (1975) (Terra Nostra). Centered on two large urban spaces with rivers, Paris and Buenos Aires, *Rayuela* indisputably is an urban novel par excellence and one in which the flaneur is an important metaphor for the river of the traditional rural novel. The physical setting of the Seine River in Paris and the Río del Plata in Buenos Aires provides the riverbanks on or near which the protagonist Horacio Oliveira wanders in his existential crisis. In this urban treatment of rivers, bridges are the key connections between opposite sides of the rivers. Thus, bridges appear first in this novel as part of the routes in Paris that connect Oliveira and La Maga in their chance encounters—dates decided by luck. In these encounters, bridges connect the two as much as anything else. In Buenos Aires, one of the most discussed scenes of the novel involves a different kind of bridge: a board extends from the window of one building to another, and Talita crosses an urban river (a street) on the board, thus situated between two men, Oliveira and his alter-ego Traveller.

In *Rayuela* both the innovative writer Morelli and Cortázar invite us to think beyond the established patterns of reading, writing, and living. They experiment with a variety of texts that break such patterns. Consequently, this is a Latin American novel that also invites a reconsideration of the concept of rivers as they have been imagined and constructed since nineteenth-century Romanticism. Thus, this is a novel in which the flaneur figure and the metro are both easily conceived as urban metaphors for the rural river.

For Cortázar, the Seine River might be seen as a decorative backdrop, as much cerebral activity, for Latin American intellectuals, has taken place on the Left Bank (of the Seine River) of this landmark urban space for well over a century. For Cortázar, however, as well as for Vargas Llosa in *La casa verde* and Fuentes in *Terra Nostra*, the river is far more than an urban ornament or decorative backdrop. Vargas Llosa uses the river as a metaphor of the nation and Fuentes fictionalizes several real and implicit rivers that serve as metaphors for concepts about history and culture. The basic anecdotal material of *La casa verde*—with fragmentation and multiple

narrators—is relatively complex. The text consists of four parts, each of which is preceded by a section that could be considered a prologue (although is not identified as such in the text), and an epilogue. Parts I, III, and the epilogue contain four chapters; parts II and IV have three. The chapters of parts I and II contain five narrative segments; those in parts II and IV have four narrative segments. The novel in parts I through IV, then, consists of sixty-three narrative segments, which are generally four to six pages in length. Given the complexity of this fragmentation and the multiple physical settings, *La casa verde* and its uncanny unfolding can be likened to the fluvial webs in the Amazon with its maze of main rivers, tributaries, and small streams, now joining unexpectedly, now virtually disappearing in the thick undergrowth. This description of the novel is particularly appropriate when one takes into account one of the two main physical settings of one of the two main plots, for they involve the story of indigenous tribes, merchants, government officials, and missionaries in the area of Santa María de Nieva in the Amazon River basin. The governor operates a profitable business by trading for rubber—the stuff of Rivera’s *La vorágine*—and other goods at a very favorable rate of exchange and then selling the goods in the Amazon River city of Iquitos. For much of this story in the Amazon, an unidentified and mysterious voice tells stories of the governor’s abuse of the indigenous people, including the torture of the Indian chief Jum for attempting to sell his own goods. Eventually, as the novel unfolds and stories are constructed in the way that the rivers weave through the jungle, it becomes apparent that a character named Fushía is narrating these stories (and the story of his life) to his friend Aquilino.

In *La casa verde*, the fragmented and chaotic stories of the Amazon River Basin eventually connect to stories set in an entirely different place, the town of Piura in Peru’s northern coastal region. In this setting, the young Anselmo arrives as an unknown, but eventually builds the “Green House,” a brothel on the outskirts of town. Among the fragmented stories in this setting are those of young men in the lumpen proletarian neighborhood identified as “La Mangachería.” Connections with the Amazon story include one member of the neighborhood group who had been a soldier in the jungle and a young Indian girl from the Amazon who ends up a prostitute in Piura. The complex pattern of relationships—again, as complex as the Amazon River Basin itself—determines the reader’s perception of the characters as human beings. They tend to lose their individual identities and exist, rather, as elements within the overall scheme. Thus, the crucial acts in the lives of the characters define them not so much in terms of their own personalities as in their relationships to the surrounding world of the Amazon and beyond.

As innovative as these narrative strategies and others in *La casa verde* were in the 1960s, Vargas Llosa is sometimes a traditionalist when he writes about nature within the Amazon jungle. In a subtle description of Fushía’s death scene, for example, Aquilino observes a “montecito de carne viva y

sangrienta” (477) (small pile of living and bloody flesh) in the vegetation—with the focus on nature. In this passage and throughout the book, Vargas Llosa equates physical nature with humans by means of a language that emphasizes neither: both nature and human beings are portrayed by means of brief exterior descriptions. Descriptive passages of any length are very rare. Rather, Vargas Llosa fixes on a single image. He leaves the reader with the impression that the Amazon River Basin, as much as authorial control, has determined the way the natural setting is described. In addition, the reader is in constant contact with a reality—a river basin jungle—that is in constant flux.

In *La casa verde*, Vargas Llosa presents an initially fragmented and chaotic narrative world of the Amazon that, through the act of narration, becomes a coherent whole by the end of the novel. Thus, the Amazon River Basin is a metaphor for Peru in the novelistic vision of Vargas Llosa: the chaotic and irrational world of the Amazon is the chaotic and irrational nation of Peru. This is also a central image for many of Vargas Llosa’s other novels. In *El hablador* (1987) (*The Storyteller*), which takes place in the Amazon River Basin, and several other works, Vargas Llosa establishes chaos and disjunction as the central, initial image and then develops the novel toward harmony and unity.

Matters of rivers, metaphors and nation are more abstract and conceptual in Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra*. Three rivers that are important for this novel are present or implied: the Guadarrama River, the Seine River, and the Guadalquivir River. *Terra Nostra* bears an intimate relationship to the cultural and political object that served as its catalyst: the Spanish palace of El Escorial. Fuentes rewrites the medieval, Renaissance, and neoclassic architecture of El Escorial in *Terra Nostra* in addition to fictionalizing a series of cultural and political issues related to the Spain of El Escorial.⁷ Fuentes states at the beginning of his essay on Cervantes, *Cervantes o la crítica de la lectura*, that the relationship between Spain and the Americas has been ambiguous at best and antagonistic at worst. *Terra Nostra* is Fuentes’s most elaborate and complex treatment of the interaction among the cultures of Spain and the cultures of the Americas. Here he considers the historical origins of Latin American culture, looking back to Greco-Roman culture and to the cultural and religious practices of the Middle Ages. Rethinking Spain’s historical legacy of domination and rule during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Fuentes inquires what Spain’s other options might have been had the kingdom pursued different political and cultural alternatives. His concerns include the Spanish Crown’s decision to isolate Spain and its colonies from cultural difference and from the other political entities of Europe. Following the model of Borges (who also imagined the future), Fuentes imagines near the end of the novel a future without the expulsion of the Arabs and Jews in 1492, a future without the politics of the Spanish Inquisition and the like.

The historical setting for *Terra Nostra* and the construction of El Escorial encompassed the sixteenth-century Spain of Phillip II, the Inquisition, the European Renaissance, the Reformation, and the conquest of the Americas. El Escorial consists of a granite rectangular building, measuring 101-by-261 meters and constructed in the shape of a grill, located one thousand meters above sea level in the foothills of the Guadarrama Mountains and above the Guadarrama River. The nearby river and water were important for the decision to build El Escorial at that location, for when Philip II initiated his search for a location in 1558, he declared, “It should be a healthy place, with *good air and water* [my emphasis], isolated in the country; a place for contemplation, and distant from Madrid, but not too far away” (qtd in M. López Serrano, *El Escorial* 12). In 1562 he located the site near the Guadarrama River and the construction began soon thereafter. Thus, this is the setting for not only El Escorial of Phillip II but also for Fuentes’s El Escorial: the Spain of *Terra Nostra* was the nation that lived what Fuentes calls, “the night of Escorial,” and El Escorial was, in this novel, the predominant architectural image of the Spanish Empire and Hispanic culture in the sixteenth century. The military exterior, the confluence of the political, the military and the religious in the interior, and the art painted and placed on the walls of El Escorial all had manifestations in Latin America. Fuentes uses this image (associated with the Guadarrama Mountains and Guadarrama River) not only to critique this imagery but also to explore the origins of Hispanic culture and identity.

Terra Nostra opens with the presence of another river, a more spectacular Seine River than in Cortázar’s *Rayuela*. The novel begins and ends with the character of Polo Febo in Paris in the year 1999, which, at the time of the novel’s publication in 1975, was twenty-four years in the future. Febo helps his ninety-one-year-old concierge to give birth to a child with a cross on his back, then observes great chaos on the streets of Paris, sees masses of women giving birth to babies on these same streets, and finally meets with a woman with tattooed lips who throws a bottle into the boiling Seine River, into which Polo Febo falls. Many of the incredible events in *Terra Nostra*’s twenty-two initial pages along the Seine and the equally incredible characters, whose motives seem illogical or incomprehensible on first reading, appear and reappear in the seven hundred pages that follow. The manner in which Fuentes deals with history relates to the 1999 setting along the Seine River.

The concept of history that Fuentes writes against in *Terra Nostra* has its roots in nineteenth-century ideas of history that were still predominant ideological constructs in Mexico and much of Latin America in the twentieth century. The Romantic conception of history as progress, promoted by numerous Mexican institutions, including the PRI, and which Fuentes critiqued initially in *La región más transparente* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*), is subverted in *Terra Nostra* by

the novel's structure. Kant, who had inherited from the Enlightenment the belief in a wholly irrational past and a wholly rational future, saw man as a rational being and history as a progressive advance toward rationality. In *Terra Nostra* (and essays written in the 1970s), Fuentes reverses the tradition of the Enlightenment and Kant: he fictionalizes a more rational medieval past than that of orthodox Christianity and an irrational future represented by a boiling Seine River, multiple births on the streets of Paris, and other equally irrational events that occur in a future beyond the year 1975, when, again, *Terra Nostra* was published.

The only hope for renovation in the work of Fuentes lies in the future, when the weight of history has been alleviated. For one critic, his earlier novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* is a “notable expression of the anxiety over the past” (Souza 128).⁸ This desire for freedom from the past is constantly expressed in Fuentes's early fiction; it is also a desire that accompanies competing and conflictive ideas of history in *Terra Nostra*. Consequently, the ultimate place of history in *Terra Nostra* is the future: Paris and the boiling Seine River in 1999. The future is implicit, however, at all historical moments in the novel, for acts in Rome, in the Middle Ages, and in the sixteenth century frequently have a future referent. Thus, the Polo Febo of the late-twentieth century is associated with the Agrippa of Roman times, just as Agrippa is logically associated with Febo and the boiling Seine River at both the beginning and the end of the novel.

History and culture undergird the concept of identity in *Terra Nostra*. The project of cultural definition, as Carlos Alonso has argued, has a lengthy history in Latin American cultural discourse, which can be depicted as a succession of statements of cultural crisis.⁹ In addition, the perennial sense of cultural crisis is characterized by an inability to experience historical flux except in a mode of crisis. This is the crisis of the beginning and the end of Febo in the Paris of 1999 and along the Seine River.

The Guadarrama and the Seine are named in *Terra Nostra*; the Guadalquivir is never named, but rather implied. Geographically unnamed, the Guadalquivir is an important river conceptually, for in *Terra Nostra* Fuentes crosses the Guadalquivir River in southern Spain to cross over into the Arabic culture that was negated by the Spain of Phillip II. El Escorial and *Terra Nostra* function internally on the basis of metonymic associations, while both works function as metaphors for Hispanic culture. El Escorial is a metaphor for Spain as a colonial power and, as stated by Phillip II, “a dwelling place for God.” *Terra Nostra* is a metaphor for the monumental grand narrative of the Boom—indeed, it is one of the lengthiest, most complex, and elaborate novels ever to be published in Latin America. As such, it is one more text of the curse of heterodoxy, taking its place after other works written south of the Guadalquivir, such as the *Kaballah*, the *Zohar*, and the *Sephirot*. Thus, *Terra Nostra* finds its place among the most important Latin novels: as an Arabic novel for which Fuentes crosses the

Guadalquivir.

If *Terra Nostra* was the most elaborate metaphorical fictionalization of rivers to be published in Latin America in the twentieth century, Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004) could well be the equivalent in the twenty-first century. Bolaño, like Fuentes, opens his monumental novel in Europe and invites the reader to speculate about the non-fluvial connections between old rivers in Europe and the ones in the modern nations of Latin America. Descriptions and images of traditional and highly visible rivers are relatively sparse in this five-part novel. Nevertheless, subtle urban imagery of river-like movement is important in *2666*. The group of intellectuals in part I of the novel are the flâneurs who ramble around European cities fulfilling academic rituals (including several conferences) related to their literary idol, a German writer named Beno von Archimboldi. For the better part of part I, these young intellectuals seem to be models of academic specialization and post-Enlightenment reason. Nevertheless, there is an incident in part I that stirs the waters of what has been, up to this point in the novel, a smooth flow of academic life among enlightened intellectuals: an urban river boat pilot—a taxi driver—offends two of the young academics and they unexpectedly attack the taxi driver. The brutality of their assault betrays their otherwise rational and intellectualized dedication to their literary master. By the end of part I, some of these dedicated Archimboldians travel to Mexico in search of Archimboldi, the mysterious, vanished writer, and they eventually arrive at the river city that will become the unlikely geographical center of the novel: a fictionalized version of Juárez identified in *2666* as “Santa Teresa.” Distant from the political and cultural center of Mexico City and across the Río Bravo from the United States, Santa Teresa first appears as the seemingly peaceful setting for a university where an aging Archimboldian, the Chilean philosopher Oscar Amalfitano, inexplicably settles in to pursue his scholarly agenda. Around Santa Teresa, nature in general and the Río Bravo in particular are the opposite of the “ríos profundos” (deep rivers) of many South American novels: the river that divides the United States from Santa Teresa is described only in passing as a seemingly inconspicuous dry riverbed.

The Río Bravo is barely visible, and so too is death. In part I of *2666*, “The Part about the Critics,” the initial descriptions of the city make only a few allusions to the death of women. Even though the informed reader knows better, Juárez seems to be a city with hardly a river or a death. When the young intellectuals of part I leave Mexico and cross the border into the United States, however, the physical scenario changes immediately and the contrast is stark: they see a stream full of water and woods. With this description, a pattern is evident in *2666*: the rivers in Europe and the United States are fountains of vibrancy and life; the dry riverbed of the Río Bravo is associated with decadence and death. In a scene that is perhaps a premonition of the deadly river setting in Juárez, an artist in part I cuts his

hand off and throws it into a river.

As the physical setting of Juárez (or Santa Teresa) is more fully developed, it assumes a dark identity comparable to the grey and decadent urban scenarios of sewer imagery in the fiction of Leopoldo Marechal and Fernando Vallejo. In part II of *2666*, “The Part about Amalfitano,” for example, one character describes Santa Teresa as a “shithole with no future” (214) and then he glances across an urban space on the north side of the city and sees a “canal or creek” carrying the neighborhood trash to the north (214). In the remainder of the novel in parts III, “The Part about Fate,” and IV, “The Part about the Crimes,” the river imagery is similar, never describing a robust or vibrant river and instead referring occasionally to the sewers and ditches of Juárez. For example, a minor character in part IV, Pedro Pérez Ochoa, lives in a shack that he built of bits of adobe and trash located “a few yards from the waste pipe of the East West maquiladora” (413). The corpse of an American girl killed in Juárez is eventually found a few yards past some gas tanks in a “ditch” running alongside a highway. The corpse of an eleven-year-old girl is found, after a week of searching, by some city workers in a drainage pipe that runs beneath the city of Juárez to a garbage dump. Even the underground water systems, however, are described with images of emptiness. For example, the eleven-year-old girl lived in a house built from cardboard and stray bricks next to a trench that two of the maquiladora companies had dug to build a drainage system that in the end was never completed. The city is also infested with “streams” of rats. Similarly, brief physical descriptions of the American cities of Detroit and New York emphasize grisly subterranean sewers rather than vibrant rivers. In summary, the images of fluvial waters in *2666* are often grey sewers, ditches, and canals.

In this way, *2666* is a novel of multiple paradoxes and enigmas, and the rivers in the novel are equally problematic. For example, even though rivers are sparse in the novel, there is brief reference in part II to some mysterious aquifers, the supply of murky drinking water. Equally enigmatic is a mural in the home of a character named Charly [sic] Cruz. The mural is six feet tall and approximately ten feet long and shows the Virgin of Guadalupe in the middle of a lush landscape of rivers and forests along with gold and silver mines. The Virgin has her arms spread wide, as if offering this river and all the riches “in exchange for nothing” (320). Such a lush and vibrant series of images would be an anomaly in the novel if it were not for the end of this passage. A character notices that there is something wrong with her face: one of the Virgin’s eyes is open, and the other one closed. Somehow, a positive imagining of this lush nature is not possible in the Juárez of *2666* without some questioning or doubt of that representation, and this is the function of the Virgin’s one closed eye. Near the end of part III, Bolaño offers a spectacular river metaphor: as the north American journalist Oscar Fate drives down a highway near the border, contemplating the killings, he

thinks that “at moments the highway was like a river” (348). This is the only moment in the novel—contemplating all the assassinations and, in reality, on a highway—that a river actually flows along the border or in Juárez. In part V, “The Part about Archimboldi,” the setting is once again, as in part I, in Europe, and this is the Europe of Hitler’s rise to power and the subsequent European war. The main character in the early sections of part I, Hans Reiter, is drafted into the war and forced to serve in a battalion that invades Poland. Reiter and his fellow soldiers of two assault companies cross a river at midnight. Set in a forest of pines and poplars, this river is the geographical starting point for the war that defines Reiter’s life.

Despite the enigmas and the generally low visibility of rivers in *2666*, the movement of events and people in this novel corresponds, metaphorically, with the ultimate destination of rivers. The ultimate destiny of water in rivers is the same: it vanishes, disappearing into the sea, into subterranean routes, or it simply dissipates into dry lands before making it to the sea. One way or another, inevitably, rivers vanish. This is the movement, over and over, in *2666*: from the vanishing writer Archimboldi in part I to the vanishing women throughout the novel, this is a novel about vanishing in many literal and metaphorical ways. Thus, rivers are a strong metaphor for the most important act of vanishing in the novel and are symbolic of the human ecology in operation in the novel: the vanishing of the women of Juárez are this elaborate novel’s central matter.¹⁰

In conclusion, in twentieth-century Latin American fiction, rivers have a variety of functions that range from the literal use of rivers as rural and urban vehicles of transportation to more metaphorical and conceptual uses. In the twenty-first century, even though most writers, like Bolaño, have insisted on their cosmopolitan interests and tended to associate rural settings with a literature of the past, they still use real rivers in key roles. In Vargas Llosa’s *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000) (*The Feast of the Goat*), the focus is on the dictator Trujillo of the Dominican Republic. The point of departure, however, follows the classic Vargas Llosa model: a fragmented and chaotic fictional world (somewhat associated with rivers) is presented in the early chapters and, as the novel develops, the chaotic elements are progressively resolved. The rivers mentioned in *La fiesta del Chivo* are important in the representation of the dictator’s chaotic world in the first half of the novel: the Masacre River in the first chapter, an unnamed river in chapter 2, the Ozama River in chapter 7, the Nigua River in chapter 11. The unnamed river in chapter 2 provides the dictator with a place of seclusion from the tensions of his intensely perverse political life: he escapes from the capital to San Cristóbal in order to ride alone under the trees and along the river, feeling “rejuvenated” after this excursion to the river.

Vargas Llosa’s representation of the dictator in the entire novel is constructed around the presence of the Masacre River in the first chapter. In this chapter, the dictator’s use of racism against the Haitians is described in a

setting on this Masacre River, where the Haitians, according to the dictator, supposedly cross the river into the Dominican Republic to steal animals, take jobs of the citizens, pervert “our Catholic religion,” rape women, ruin “our Western, Hispanic culture,” and the like. Using racist and nationalist arguments such as this, the dictator justifies the massacre of Haitians in 1937 as well as other abuses of his dictatorial government. The catalyst for these tragic events—one of the historical disasters of the Dominican Republic of the twentieth century—is a river crossing.

As mentioned in the beginning of this discussion, even a twenty-first century urban novel, such as Juan Gabriel Vásquez’s *El ruido de las cosas al caer*, moves from the city of Bogotá and the urban experience of the “drug wars” to the rural area of the Upper Magdalena River. It is the story of how members of Vásquez’s generation in Colombia found themselves involved almost inevitably in the drug trafficking industry. One of the main characters, who comes from a distinguished family of airline pilots, develops a relationship with an American woman who originally went to Colombia with idealistic plans to improve Colombian society by means of the Peace Corps. The unemployed airline pilot is from a family that has lost its economic power and class status in Colombia, so the opportunity to fly an airplane over the Magdalena River Basin is quite special: once in the air for the first time in many years for his honeymoon with the young American, he experiences a type of euphoria that is the turning point in his life. Unfortunately, from this moment on, he follows the career of a smalltime marijuana exporter and, eventually, a gets involved in a larger enterprise involving the illicit air transportation of cocaine from this relatively isolated region of the Magdalena River. In the early twenty-first century, as in the early twentieth century, rivers play important roles in Latin American novels, and frequently blur the boundaries between what have traditionally been considered “rural” and “urban” novels, as is the case of *El ruido de las cosas al caer*.¹¹

Notes

1. García Márquez discusses his use of nineteenth-century drawings in the construction of his novels in an interview. See Raymond L. Williams, “The Visual Arts, the Poetization of Space and Writing: An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez.”
2. See Sarah Misemer, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: Trains, Literature and the Arts in the River Plate*.
3. See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, (180)
4. See Carlos Alonso, *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony*. See also Jennifer French, *Nature, Neo-Colonialism and the Spanish American Regional Writers*.
5. I develop this discussion of *La vorágine* in more detail in *The Colombian Novel: 1844–1987*, Chapter 3.

6. For further discussion of natural disasters in the Latin American novel, see Mark D. Anderson's book, *Disaster Writing: the Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*.
7. I discuss this reading of *Terra Nostra* in *The Writing of Carlos Fuentes*, part II.
8. *La historia en la novela hispanoamericana*.
9. See Carlos Alonso, *The Spanish American Regional Novel* (13).
10. My understanding of rivers in *2666* has been enriched by discussions with graduate and undergraduate students who, over the past two years, have read and discussed this novel with me. In particular, I would like to recognize the work of graduate student Enrique Salas-Durazo and the sixty-eight freshmen who read *2666* and diligently identified rivers in the winter quarter, 2012, at the University of California, Riverside.
11. In this brief introduction, I have been unable to mention many of the works associated with the vast literature on rivers in Latin America. With respect to the Río Grande/Río Bravo, for example, the voluminous literature would include Carlos Fuentes's novels *La frontera de cristal* and *Gringo viejo*. Concerning the Amazon River, the vast literature would include numerous writers in Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch (from Suriname). Among contemporary writers, the Brazilian Milton Hatoum has written a set of noteworthy novels set in the Amazon.

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