The Unreachable Other: The Myth of the *Mestizo* in the Novels of Carlos Fuentes

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In an essay¹ written on the eve of the fifth Centenary celebration of the Conquest of America, the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes (1928) wrote of the need for cultural continuity and the reconciliation of all layers and diverse strands of Mexican society as well as the necessity to make the best selection of the various influences that Mexico had received in its history. Since Mexican culture could not restrict itself to only continental innovations, Giambattista Vico and Mikhail Bakhtin were suggested as possible mentors in this endeavour for cultural continuity, plurality etc. in Latin American thought and literature. This theme has been a recurrent one in Carlos Fuentes’ more recent writings. In *El Espejo Enterrado*² published also in 1992 it forms the basis of a joint history of Spain and Spanish America. The American portion includes chapters on the indigenous world, as also the Conquest of America, Independence and the present state of the Latin American republics. A reviewer of the volume, the historian Hector Aguilar Camin has called it a “settlement of accounts with a neglected part of our historical reality, an exercise in the recovery of our hispanicism through criticism, reflection and the evocative power of literature or better said of literary eloquence.” What follows is an attempt to understand the ideas of cultural continuity, and to deduce from them the ideas of the nation’s history and national identity that Fuentes has put forward, and then examine some of his literary output related to this question in the light of these ideas and the Bakhtinian framework which he has favoured for the understanding of diversity and plurality. His rhetorical use of the phenomenon of *mestizaje* (cultural/genetic hybridity) is germane to this discussion of his ideas on national identity and for this reason references to post-independence Mexican history will become necessary.
For those not familiar with the biography of this illustrious Mexican writer, a few personal details would be in order here as also the cultural influences at work in his intellectual life. This is done because although we consider literature a deconstructive activity which constantly undoes its own projects, culture is ever watchful and through the essayistic tradition (which for many authors is an obligatory activity) has tried to control meaning.

"Culture and literature create each other," as Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria has reminded us "as necessary elements in a process of ideological formation." The concept of culture, he continues, has constantly been a source of authority on various levels ranging from pronouncements by cultural institutions supported by governments of the most varied political hues, to the work of the most revered essayists, critics and scholars concerned with the issue of both national and continental identity. As he states:

A specific social class conceives of Latin American literature as a way of building up and implanting its beliefs and making them predominant. With regard to literature, these founding beliefs are, on the one hand, the existence of the individual self as a unity that seeks to establish its uniqueness and express it through the symbols it creates for itself, and, on the other, the collective presence of a given set of codes through which those symbols, that language of the self, can articulate themselves and communicate with others. One cannot describe this social class as the bourgeoisie in European terms, but it would be safe to say that the founding beliefs of that class are operational in Latin America and are at the base of its ideology. The self and the codes are creations of that class and they often appear cloaked as spirit and nature, spirit being a sort of universal intelligence the individual possesses that allows him or her to interpret the world, and nature, a given system of signs whose propriety is ensured by the collectivity. A class creates these concepts to invent its own way of being and implanting itself.
I would like then to delve into the kind of consciousness that Fuentes would like to create which would receive his ideas and literature. Our intention is to trace the filaments of Fuentes’ web of fictions back to particular strands in culture.

The first impression that comes to mind after a perusal of his biographical details which appear in a collection of his complete works is the apparent cosmopolitanism of the writer. With a father in the diplomatic service his childhood has been almost entirely spent abroad and for many years of his adult life he has either studied or has been a visiting professor in the capitals of Europe and the universities of the United States. His participation in the major intellectual circles of Mexico and friendships with important literary figures of his generation behove an education which ensured that he made the right contacts. Mexican intellectuals are not generally upstarts and lineages in the intellectual sphere are commonplace, dating in some cases to even before the Revolution of 1910. Besides, the degree of centralization in Mexican intellectual life is such that it is often concentrated as Enrique Krauzeironically remarked in a few buildings in Mexico City and since it numbers at best a couple of hundred, the faces are familiar and the cultural family tree has a few scant branches. Krauze proposes a generation classification of intellectuals with the institution builders of the generation of 1915 (Daniel Cosio Villegas, Alfonso Caso etc), the “children of the revolution,” forming the generation of 1929 who later become the friends of Presidents Miguel Aleman and Lopez Mateos and then the mid-century generation which as a reaction to the earlier one adopts militant postures only to be later co-opted during the presidency of Luis Echeverria. This generation to which Carlos Fuentes belongs is generally also characterized by its cosmopolitanism, a result of governmental largesse during years for extended scholarships to Europe and Paris particularly. What further marks this generation is its irreverence and burlesque attitude and its apparent dissatisfaction as Krauze puts it with the state of the nation. Their disenchantment with the Mexican revolution is manifest because the immediate point of comparison is the Cuban
Revolution. They also criticise an effete and ostentatious, un-productive bourgeoisie, administrative corruption and in general, development without social justice. They are however overtaken by the next generation of 1968 as concerns a consistent government critique and radicalism. The students movement in Mexico in 1968 and the resultant Tlatelolco massacre have resulted in more leftist postures on the part of this generation.

There is a general bond among the members of a generation. Common educational backgrounds, long periods of residence in the same city and familial connections among intellectuals especially those who came of age during the first half of this century have made for a close knit community. Under the overarching umbrella of generations there appear intellectual circles. These define themselves through their adherence to particular ideologies. There often is considerable floor crossing during an intellectual’s lifetime as the trajectories of Octavio Paz (who resigned from an ambassadorial posting after the Tlatelolco massacre) and Carlos Fuentes (who has been critical of the present incumbent Ernesto Zedillo for what seems to him as mishandling of the Chiapas problem) demonstrate. But in general the ideas of an established intellectual are in tandem with those of his circle. Moreover the critique of the government, however virulent it may appear to be, is never a critique of the system. Due to the existence of a hierarchical structure amongst intellectuals, ranks are often closed against any outsiders. An intellectual circle is also characterized by a particular discourse which often defines itself in opposition to either government policies or the stand taken by other intellectual circles...In the contemporary intellectual scene in which the grand old men of the mid century generation play a major role, there are currently two groups which represent two ideologies. Advocacy of the free market and a pragmatic approach to national issues is what seems to characterise the group to which Octavio Paz the Nobel prize winning poet and essayist, Enrique Krauze the historian, and Gabriel Zaid the journalist belong. A more cosmopolitan and aesthetic approach to literature and the arts is supposed to be another characteristic of this group but is not restricted to it. The
ideas of this group find expression in the politico-cultural journal, *Vuelta*. Its main rival is the group surrounding the journal *Nexos*. Carlos Fuentes in the literary sphere, Hector Aguilar Camin in the social sciences (though now also a best selling novelist) and Carlos Monsivais in journalism are the counterparts of the *Vuelta* intellectuals. The *Nexos* group has generally been distinguished by its populist, anti freemarket and pronouncedly nationalist stances. Both groups claim to be critical of the government but are nevertheless quite within the parameters of respectability and have so far shied away from positing any radical solutions to national problems. There are thus significant differences between them and avowedly anti-government or ruling party outfits of the far Right and Left. *They are part of the political culture which they outwardly condemn and this becomes inevitable because the state is their main patron as big business is only now beginning to show interest in the arts etc.* I would like to venture the notion here that the aforementioned intellectuals are hegemonic agents, they have dominated public discussions and have been given positions of leadership. They speak not only for their own special interests but are listened to when they opine on others. Their works become hegemonic texts and are facilitated in their functions through being published by an authoritative press and going through several editions.

Having thus somehow placed Carlos Fuentes in his intellectual milieu, it might become easier to work our way around the recurring themes of his work. The reason for the detour of the earlier paragraphs will then become apparent. The contemporary ideologies at work in Mexico have tried to engender specific kinds of readings. Far from denying or acclaiming the veracity of these texts, my endeavour will be to try and probe the myths embodied in the writings of Carlos Fuentes and the special effects which they have created. One of the more valuable lessons of deconstruction has been that literature always undoes its own projects but side by side, the work of authors and cultural institutions continues trying to hold down literature to a given set of meanings. My intention in this essay is to understand the special effects of Fuentes writing, the implications
his texts have in his and the Mexican context, rather than the possibilities that the language of the text offers for richer receptions. To link contemporary Mexican culture to literature is this paper's endeavour. Fuentes has, of course, unlike Borges or Cortazar always affirmed the links that his work has with history and contemporary reality. Fiction can be useful in looking at history from new perspectives according to him. The novel is thus also a form of knowledge in that it fills the lacunae which conventional history writing has left unfilled. However, unlike the Mexican authors of an earlier generation (Mariano Azuela, Martin Luis Guzman) who according to him made direct references to reality and history, he claims to have a mythical approach to history to write a kind of creative history. It is not by its history that the mythology of a nation is determined but conversely its history is determined by its mythology, he has stated. He has consequently reinterpreted history to present a new version of its development and how it impinges on contemporary reality. Part of the fact that he deals with an invented reality has to do with his own biography. For much time due to his father's sojourns abroad, for Carlos Fuentes, Mexico was an imagined country. As he says,

The Mexico of the 40's and 50's I wrote about in Where the Air Is Clear was an imagined Mexico just as the Mexico of the 80's and 90's I am writing about in Cristobal Nonato is totally imagined. Likewise the Mexican reality of Where the Air Is Clear and The Death of Artemio Cruz existed only to clash with my imagination, my negation and perversion of the facts, because remember I had learned to imagine Mexico before I ever knew Mexico.5

The use of myths and symbols has been a constant in his work partly due to the latter fact. Myths afford an economy of expression and considerable leeway for the transmission of ambiguity and contradiction. Despite this, they do generate special effects and encourage particular ways of viewing the past which we would do well to examine. The propensities of the circle he belongs to can be brought in to unravel paradoxes. His non fiction work where he sets out his ideas in reasonably unambiguous terms could be a starting point for this analysis.
El Espejo Enterrado (literally, the Buried Mirror, henceforth EE), is a celebratory volume brought out on the occasion of the fifth centenary of the Discovery of America and Spain’s conquest of the continent. It is dedicated (and here I paraphrase Fuentes) to the search for cultural continuity which could inform and transcend the economic disunity and the political fragmentation of the hispanic world. The need for this joint history is not in itself an innovation. Mexican intellectuals and artists have often sought to bind knowledge of Spain and the Americas and have since the earliest days of hispanismo after the Cuban war of independence given importance to this relationship with Spain. Within the parameters of this relationship, liberal Spain is accepted, the Spain of the Inquisition is lamented but all the while Spain is acknowledged as a mother country.

“Spain the mother country is a double genetic proposition. Mother and father merged into one giving us their warmth at times oppressive, at others suffocatingly familiar, rocking the cradle where the gifts of baptism rest which are the legacies of the Mediterranean world, the Spanish language, the Catholic religion and the authoritarian political tradition.” Despite the traumas which might mark this relation these are “but witnesses of the contradictory tenderness and cruelty which has formed part of our conception.” (EE, 17) : What is interesting is what role the mestizo and the native Indian (whatever pockets of his culture still remain) play in this discourse. America is described as born under the sign of utopia, an invention. The birth of a new peoples is described as a Counter conquest:

In the tension between the illusions of utopia and the realities of the Conquest, a new culture was born in the Americas. The Counter conquest was a much more secret and insidious force in contrast to the naked acts of the Conquest. The defeated indigenous peoples who soon became the mestizos, the hybrids of white and Indian and then the recently arrived blacks to the New World began a process which we can only call the Counter conquest of America, the conquest of the conquered by the defeated, the birth of a properly multiracial, polycultural society. (EE,132)
The mestizos would be the felicitous result of the Conquest when the end comes for the Aztec nation. This end, as will be later discussed, is described as almost inevitable:

Above and below, pululating near the gods and the warriors, there was in Mesoamerica, a vibrant and sensitive society, circulating around the pyramids and creating the values of cultural continuity in the Americas. This tradition would become one of the strongest realities with which these societies would give an answer to the encounter with Europe. (EE, 115)

But in the end if what takes over is the Catholic religion, The Spanish language and the Spanish political tradition then there is very little left of "the vibrant and sensitive society."

Much of the volume is dedicated to the preconquest indigenous world. To be able to provide insights into prehispanic cultures, their elements are continuously juxtaposed with those of the European world. The Americas often seem to be a mere double of Europe and its myths and time and space lose their differentiating power. This has the effect of domesticating difference. Fuentes would like his readers to understand prehispanic culture because the features of the ideal human are distributive. This is a romantic view often shared by the group to which he belongs. In a prologue to Fernando Benitez’s Los Indios (The Indians) he says that where travel writers like Bruce Chatwin, Peter Mathiesson have explored foreign territories, Fernando Benitez has explored his own world which is peopled with others. “The Indians are his own and are alien but he cannot be a complete man without them although they might continue their lives oblivious to his existence.” “Why does this happen,?” questions Fuentes and then returns to his theme of cultural continuity. “Because Fernando Benitez has a plural cultural conscience. He knows that Mexico cannot just be one of its parts but all of them.”
The mirror image of the title is taken from Ramon Xirau who affirms the need for a mirror which would reflect the Americas and the Mediterranean. There are references to Don Quijote and the painter Velazquez. The latter with the mirror figure in his Las Meninas also reflects from the Spanish side the steamy face of the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca when he visits the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl, the god of peace and creation, offering to him the gift of a mirror. On seeing his reflection, the good god identifies with humanity and falls down terrified; the mirror has snatched away from his divinity. Will Quetzalcoatl find his true nature human, and divine, in the house of mirrors of the circular temple of the wind in the Toltec pyramid of Teotihuacan or in the cruel social mirror of Goya’s Los Caprichos where vanity is ridiculed and society cannot deceive itself when the mirror of truth is gazed upon.

With this rash of disparate images Fuentes begins his narrative. The approach, which critics since the publication of his earliest novel Where the Air is Clear (1958), have described as akin to maelstrom and which he himself for an earlier version of the same novel has referred to as “melting pot”, is a continual characteristic of his work and his understanding of mestizaje, I would like to contend, is tinged with this “melting pot” metaphor. With the admittance of all likely discourses within the framework of his “cultural continuity” hypothesis Fuentes at times seems almost relativist. This appears to be so because no influence or tendency among the myriad mentioned is ever engaged with at length or sufficiently penetrated. This would in any case bring out all the contradictions, that the process which Fuentes would like to view as cultural continuity is domination. Five hundred years after Columbus the scene is one of crisis, he continues, but there remains something to celebrate, a cultural heritage which has remained in place and this includes everything. He dedicates the book then to cultural continuity. The fifth chapter with the heading “Life and Death of the Indigenous World” starts with a history of the continent 65,000 years ago. Myth and history are freely mixed. Fuentes
has of course, as said earlier, always privileged this mode of writing. He has preferred to give, he says “free vent to his obsessions, preferences and passions as a Mexican without leaving out autobiographical elements or arbitrariness. What one should look for [in his writing] is less rigourosity and more life, more conviction and less undesirable and impossible objectivity.” In keeping with his own modes of writing the past, he has elaborated on the discovery by Quetzalcoatl of the first grain of maize, the other gods in the pantheon: Coatlicue, the earth goddess, and Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, the Aztec theory of the five suns which mean five cycles of time, we are presently in the fifth one which needs constant appeasement of the gods through human sacrifice and the various sites of the ancient civilisations of Mesoamerica. These mythical constructs are then directly connected to real historical figures, Moctezuma the last Aztec emperor etc. Fuentes also, as pointed out earlier, feels the need to make a connection between these civilisations to others the world over, to remind us that despite the horrific human sacrifice demanding gods he has so exotically described, the civilisations were like any other:

Each one of these themes and certitudes which fed and structured the indigenous world is evident in their magnificent constructions comparable to those of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Above all, indigenous architecture is what its sites reveal it to be, an answer to the questions of nature: a human landscape of tall temples dedicated to the gods. In Europe the romantic soul gave this question its most modern form. Of nature Goethe said: ‘We live within it but we are alien to it.’ Most dramatically Holderlin imagined the anguish of the first man conscious of being part of nature, born of it but at the same time obliged to distance himself from it in order to survive and get an identity. Even before the Freudian theme of being captured within, or unsheltered outside, the great temples of Mesoamerican antiquity reveal this very disquiet of being devoured by a threatening nature or of remaining outside in the cold. (EE, 104)

And again: “Quetzalcoatl became the moral hero of Mesoamerican antiquity in the same way that Prometheus became the hero of the Mediterranean
civilisation, its liberator even at the cost of his own liberty. (EE, 107) Then we are given the opinions of Charles Baudelaire and Andre Breton of Henry Moore and even Durrero in the sixteenth century. The recounting of the story of the Conquest follows the familiar contours. Moctezuma, the Aztec emperor is fatally misled because he is weighed down by a superstition that the arrival of Hernan Cortes is in fact the return of Quetzalcoatl. For this line of thought of course Fuentes need not take the blame for being original. As Inga Clendinnen has painstakingly shown, through a rereading of the same sources, this easy belief despite no real corroboration forms the basis of the racist early nineteenth century history of William Prescott as well as Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America*. Todorov’s and Fuentes’ Mexicans would seem to be “other in ways that doom them”. Fuentes describes the event:

“The king of Texcoco was so sure (of the coming of Quetzalcoatl) that he left his kingdom, sent away his armies and told his subjects to enjoy the little remaining time they had.” (EE, 116) “What misled Moctezuma was fatalism. The gods have returned. Cortes was governed on the other hand by his own free will.” Till the end Moctezuma is described as hanging on tenaciously to this belief. Cortes is described as an individualist and adventurer. “Perfect machiavellian mix of will and fortune, Hernan Cortes would become one of the greatest figures of the European Renaissance when he embarked on one of the greatest adventures of all times: the Conquest of the Aztec Empire.” As is clear Cortes represents here not just Spain which elsewhere Fuentes has even described as retrograde because of the Inquisition, but the best of the European tradition. Though here and there it is admitted that Cortes had his way through trickery, Fuentes feels compelled to say that “the equation of superior information and technology would guarantee triumph” and the whole event is given an air of inevitability. Thus although Cuauhtemoc, Moctezuma’s nephew is described as fighting bravely “his was a sacred world whose downfall had been prophesied by the ancient books, Chilam Balam etc. (EE, 123)
But the regurgitation of the myth of signs is not just a carryover from earlier accounts of the same phenomenon in Mexico. It has to do with the whole Indian attitude completely out of sync with ground realities. In the description of the Conquest of Peru (EE,127) the Indian emperor Atahualpa gullibly believes in the Spaniards, probably believing according to Fuentes in his own immortality! The Indians’ mentalities are shown to be dominated by myths, magic and superstition. They make sense of their world only through magic and for this reason their endeavours fail.

In this glossy volume which is non fiction and made to pass for a history of the two continents there also appear the tropes with which many writers and earlier historians have frequently introduced the Aztec world: human sacrifices to gods who constantly need to be appeased, unrelenting belief in magic and ritual etc. “The metaphor of sacrifice is as important in the indigenous world as the formula E=mc2 for us,” (EE,101) Fuentes says at one place. Ridden as they are by superstitions, the Indians cannot be autonomous agents, instead they stumble from one paralysing belief to another. Their agency or capacity to make sense of their world is displaced on to these eternal truths about them. That is why they can never act effectively on their own. Though violence is endemic to their world, at the crucial moment when they should have been able to defend themselves their irrational superstitious belief in the returning God theory, that Cortes represents their god Quetzalcoatl fatally impairs them. After the Conquest, they are bereft of gods since the Aztec gods have let them down, so they take to the Christian gods in droves, in fact the Spaniards, in a master stroke of genius invented the myth of the brown skinned Virgin of Guadalupe to give sustenance to this continuous need. (EE,155) The point here is not that these myths might or might not exist in the way history about the Aztecs has been written. It is their manner of articulation which is up for discussion here, and the way a culture is represented. The real complexities of the encounter of the two peoples are never elaborated, that the Mexicans during war laid more emphasis on drawing blood rather than killing, and did not fight weakened enemies and that the presents that
Moctezuma sent Cortes, instead of being the bribes of an inept emperor, could have been acts of establishing dominance. Again these are some of the possibilities that writers, about a period for which sources are extremely hazy, could use. Instead, the options chosen to make sense of a world that existed five hundred years ago has the effect of belittling a culture. To be able to salvage more space for human subjectivity generally seems to be the reason for choosing the fictional mode. This would enable one to see things from diverse points of view. The play Ceremonias del Alba\textsuperscript{10} (Ceremonies of the Morning, henceforth referred to as \textit{C4}) is based on the Conquest of Mexico and has as the actors, the main historical figures: Cortes the Spanish conqueror, Moctezuma the usual scapegoat who is made out to be terribly inept and infirm of purpose. Cuauhtemoc his valiant nephew who nevertheless is doomed because he belongs to a “sacred” world and La Malinche the Indian woman who is given to Cortes and who serves as a bridge by which an effete world is penetrated and rendered useless. Thus drawn up, the protagonists go through the familiar motions. Moctezuma is the wicked king blamed even by his own high priests for his over-indulgence in human sacrifice. Moreover the common people are shown to be almost expecting the conquest, “empires have always passed from one hand to another”, (\textit{C4.139}) says an Indian protagonist. Cortes on the other hand resolutely does not believe in fate as he keeps explaining to Malinche. Cuauhtemoc who at times appears to be dissenter among the fatalists and does not want to give in to the Spaniards without a fight, at other times also recognises the hopelessness of his enterprise. In general the Spaniards are more manly, speak forcefully and have a sense of purpose whilst they are engaged in the conquest. What dooms the Indians is their fatal reliance on the returning god theory which has been widely acknowledged to have been formulated twenty years after the conquest by Sahagun’s informants in the desperate need to find reasons for the complete collapse of a culture. The statements of the Indians as well as that of the Spaniards are never dwelt on at length and this would seem to go contrary to Bakhtinian notions of character creation.\textsuperscript{11} The finalizability of Moctezuma’s trajectory is tragic, given that historically
he has remained an enigma. In the play he is continually subject to second hand definitions of his motives which do little to salvage for him more dignity than what he has usually received. His opacity and unreadable will given that he was the "tlatoani" and few could look on his face are portrayed more as a desire for solitude in the face, of impending disaster. What does the text accomplish with such a characterisation? It transforms him into a being whose own representation of reality is made by his belief in fate and superstition rather than reason. Malinche who by the end of the conquest has become a considerably more evolved Indian due to her contact with Cortes admonishes the priest Chihuacoutl who persists in his invocation of Indian gods in these terms:

Stop believing in the gods, imbecile, make the gods believe in you. Unmask the gods, imbecile, and behind each mask you will find the face of an oppressor. (CA,181)

The play has been designed to have a contemporary message too, despite its total setting in a particular time and space as the prologue specifies. Mexico will always be infected by the sign of Moctezuma, is the message, the emperor being the personification of backwardness, cruelty etc.

The white men will see to it that this continues being the land of lords and slaves. Nothing will die. Moctezuma will always be the lord of Mexico. Whenever one man has the power to dominate others Moctezuma will always live. (CA,172)

In his writings on contemporary Mexico, the word mestizo first appears in a newspaper article in 1950. Titled: Discovering the Mexico of 1950: Mexico is the only great mestizo city in the world the word mestizo means the happy synthesis, the melting pot of different forms of living. The city is divided into three, the Mexico of the upper classes, that of the lower classes and Mezzo Mexico which "possesses illogical and irrational beliefs in the occurrences of the improbable." The blood metaphor resurfaces, "Upon the pyramids still stinking with thick and black blood
are raised the elaborate walls of the Cathedral”. It gives credence to the theme of the unrelenting past which resurfaces to haunt the present Mexico cannot escape its autochtonous legacy. Elsewhere he has compared Mexico to the United States. Mexico is static, the U.S. means progress. In *Myself with Others* originally written in English he says: “To the south, sad songs, sweet nostalgia, impossible desires. To the north, self confidence, faith in progress, boundless optimism. Mexico the imaginary country dreamed of a painful past; the U.S. the real country, dreamed of a happy future.”

The 1950 article has many elements which will recur in Fuentes first major novel *Where the Air is Clear* published in 1958. Drawing again on the mural principle, the novel has an army of characters from the different strata of society as well as social groups (bourgeoisie, intellectuals, revolutionaries etc.) Two protagonists with non Spanish names also appear in the list: Ixca Cienfuegos and Teodula Moctezuma. They are the representatives of the mythological element in Mexico City. Ixca’s monologue which begins the novel establishes this. Mexico is Tenochtitlan, the umbilical cord of the world and static images of the past (the myth of the sacrifice to feed the gods) are again circulated and woven into present day Mexican reality. The Mexicans have been chosen by the gods to feed the sun and keep it moving.

The god that became the sun was a humble god, a leper, yes the one who threw himself into the furnace of original creation to feed it. He reappeared transformed into a star. A motionless star. A single sacrifice even if exemplary was not enough. It was necessary to have a daily sacrifice, a daily feeding of the god, in order for him to shine, to keep moving, to feed others.14

In the novel Norma Larragoiti, a beautiful woman who has wormed her way into the bourgeoisie through her marriage to the mestizo banker Federico Robles is sacrificed to the gods, burnt in a fire in her home. What are the effects of *Where the Air is Clear*? They seem to indicate that despite the dizzying speed of progress during the regime of the
“businessman’s president” Miguel Aleman, Mexico would do well not to forget her past. The point is well taken. It is just that vengeful gods are not just here as elsewhere an irritating cliche but a reminder of the different conceptions of national identity in Mexico.

The pre-hispanic past has often been appropriated for various strategic manoeuvres through the history of Mexico. Starting with Las Casas, the agency of the native peoples has been transferred onto other agents. These in turn have viewed the indigenes and their world as shaped definitively by environment and racial composition and through their actions and hegemonic writings have treated the problems of native communities with a mixture of paternalism and pure make-believe. The origins of the Mexican nation find their roots in the writings of Fray Servando Teresa de Mier. To offset the racist theories circulating in Europe about Creoles’ (the progeny of white ascendants but born in the Americas) inability to rule themselves, Creole intellectuals and leaders looked for support to an Indian past to show that the mestizo (the Creole Indian hybrid) was an enriched product and that the Indian nation had always existed and did not need the Spaniards to weld it together. So myth and religion was conflated. Quetzalcoatl became an earlier version of St. Thomas and Guadalupe, the mythical being who had appeared to a shepherd Juan Diego, the Virgin Mary. But all this was done without any real concession to the Indian. His past was appropriated for a particular purpose, to give the lie to theories that the Creole, due to probable tainting of his blood was unfit to rule. Interestingly, the immediate past was always disparaged and an idealized past venerated. Past independence nineteenth century nationalism on the other hand juridically wiped out the Indian as a social category, and its privileges as a community (right to own land collectively) were taken away ironically by pure Indian presidents (Benito Juarez). This measure was taken to curtail the powers of the Church but since in law the Indians did not exist any more, the laws would apply to any large scale holding. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 had as one of its aims the assimilation of the Indian into the Mexican nation, and the gradual replacement of a way of life by a
western developmental ethos. In fact, the words of the father of post revolutionary indigenism, Manuel Gamio implicitly state this:

To incorporate the Indian, we are not thinking of Europeanizing him at one go, on the contrary we should Indianize ourselves a little in order to be able to present to him our civilization diluted in his own, which he will then not find exotic, cruel, bitter and incomprehensible. Naturally we should not go to ridiculous lengths to exaggerate our nearness to the Indian.  

This compares well with the statements of present day indigenists who also look at Indian communities to provide a sense of completeness to national life. As Fernando Benitez asks: “What has the Indian taught me? They have taught me not to feel important, to try and have impeccable conduct, consider animals, the plants and the sea and skies sacred. They have taught me democracy and respect for human dignity”. Fernando Benitez and Carlos Fuentes have been described as the intellectuals of a “profound Mexico” which opposes the “imaginary Mexico” of the economic miracles and subsequent crises. They are the critics of the present regime which has opposed populist models of development of the late 70’s and the presidency of Luis Echeverria. The last two regimes have earnestly put in force a free market model of economy and believe in the trickle-down effect of wealth. This in part explains Fuentes’ positions in Where the Air is clear set in the times of another president who opened the doors of Mexico to foreign investment as well as his rhetorical support to the Chiapas guerrilla movement. Critics have been tempted to view these positions as a continuation of the idealization of surviving Indian communities who they say should receive assistance in the economic sphere rather than help in preserving their identities which are in no danger of being destroyed. The debates on indigenism have little to do as can be seen with the indigenes themselves. Their agency has again, been shifted to the hegemonic agents of contemporary national life.
References


7 Ibid., p.12.


12 Fuentes, Hoy, December 10, 1949 p.32.

13 Fuentes, Myself with Others op. cit. p.5.


15 Quoted in “Apostilla postindigenista”, by Hector Aguilar Camin La Jornada 8th July 1995 p

16 Fernando Benitez in La Jornada 5th July 1995.