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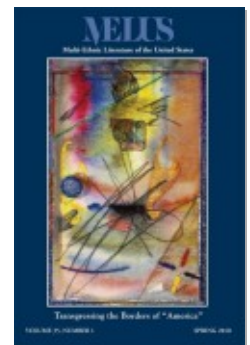
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John D. "Rio" Riofrio

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When the First World Becomes the Third: The Paradox of Collapsed Borders in Two Novels by Gabriela Alemán

John D. “Rio” Riofrio

College of William & Mary

There are concrete reasons why students of American literature or Latino/a studies may not have read either of Gabriela Alemán’s two novels: neither has been translated into English and Alemán does not fit into pre-established categories of either US or Latina writers. A native of Ecuador, Alemán has published five books of fiction—two novels and three collections of short stories—all of which were written in Spanish. One could imagine Alemán’s work appearing in a Spanish class on contemporary Latin American literature, but certainly not in a class on Latino/a studies or American literature. However, as a writer who is deeply immersed in the Latin American tradition of writing and actively engaged in the transnational realities of development and power, Alemán provides an excellent test for pushing against the more traditional conceptualizations of both American and Latino/a Literature. She not only explores the fluidity of form and genre, but also offers an ambitious conceptualization of the contradictory and paradoxical nature inherent to borders of all types.

While recent conference and panel themes at the American Studies Association, the Modern Language Association, and the Latin American Studies Association suggest that inter-American studies is a recent, pressing issue, scholars throughout the Americas have for two to three decades considered the national borders of the United States as both outdated and even misguided when thinking about and examining conceptual paradigms such as American Studies. US and Latin American scholars such as Jose Saldívar, Donald E. Pease, Sophia A. McClennen, Daniel Mato, Néstor García Canclini, and Jesús Martín-Barbero have long questioned the emphasis American Studies places on US national borders as the legitimizing force behind what we understand as “American” studies. Under the rubrics of inter-American, hemispheric, transamerican, transnational, and postnational studies—all terms that are intimately connected to what is now generally referred to as the “transnational turn”—scholars have argued that American Studies is a field of inquiry that extends far beyond the national borders of the United States.

McClennen suggests that one of the most encouraging aspects of inter-American studies is its potential for critically engaging previously

marginalized works such as those by Brazilian and indigenous writers. McClennen favors an inter-Americanist approach because of its ability to “put pressure on nationalist and cultural essentialist epistemes by focusing on the ways that culture often transgresses borders, both geographic and identitarian” (393). The benefit of inter-American studies is its inherent ability to go beyond stolid, overly determined, and outdated borders while simultaneously turning attention to marginalized voices. For other scholars, such as Debra A. Castillo, the turn toward inter-American conceptualizations of literature and culture reflects certain key, hard-to-ignore demographic realities (for example, the presence of at least forty million Latinos/as presently residing in the US). Castillo suggests that to speak of the US without addressing Latin America is to dangerously ignore this undeniable demographic shift. The recent patterns of migration that have brought millions of Latin Americans to the United States have had profound implications in Latin America as well. Castillo argues this point by citing the work of García Canclini, who writes that “the actual condition of latin America exceeds the borders of its territory. . . . latin America is not complete in Latin America. Its image is reflected back by mirrors dispersed throughout the archipelago of migrations” (qtd. in Castillo 4).¹

Castillo’s citation of García Canclini draws attention to the notion that a collective understanding of identity is a process that transcends geography. As an idea, Latin America is manifest in the lives of Latin Americans in Latin America, but the idea is incomplete without consideration of the Latin American lives developing beyond the geographical confines of the region. Alemán’s two novels demonstrate the intricacies and multiplicities of this process. Her first novel, *Body Time* (2003), signals its play with borders by using a title in English for a novel written in Spanish. Focusing on the efforts of a journalist to uncover details of the death of a Latin American literary scholar, this novel uses borders to emphasize the separation *and* simultaneity not only between languages and geographies but also between bodies and time. Although *Body Time* predates Hurricane Katrina by a number of years, it clearly represents and embodies the social conditions that engendered the tragedy resulting from Katrina. Alemán’s second novel, *Poso Wells* (2007), addresses the blurred borders of genre, using the theme of social inequities in the context of contemporary politics in Ecuador. The novel has a variety of points of departure: a short story by H. G. Wells set in Ecuador, the Ecuadorian elections of 2006, and a documentary that depicts the exhumation of a corrupt politician in ways that border on gore. Blending these sources with a hybrid style of noir, detective fiction, and political intrigue, Alemán’s text asks her readers to recognize the varying layers of influence—both material and ideological—that mark Ecuador’s place in the Americas.

Taken together, Alemán's novels frame questions of identity in binary terms with marked distinctions between the North and the South; however, these seemingly rigid distinctions are also shown to be highly promiscuous. Therefore, it is impossible to understand abuses of power in Ecuador without attending to similar influencing structures elsewhere, including the US. Alemán's work offers the opportunity to analyze the aesthetic practice of a writer who refuses to precondition the idea of borders, tracing the idea of them through stories that do not track according to paradigms of first versus third world, Spanish versus English, or oppressor versus oppressed. Not only is the "third" world unthinkable without the "first"; often, it also is indistinguishable from it. Put another way, *Body Time* gives us ample opportunity to consider Latin American identity through its consideration of Latin Americans living Latino/a lives. Equally engaging, however, is the fact that *Poso Wells* pushes us to consider the inverse. The absence of any identifiable Latino/a or even US characters does not preclude a narrative that draws critical attention to how multinational corporations transcend geographical borders. This transcendence demonstrates the hidden corollary to García Canclini's previous argument: to understand the *actual* US condition requires stepping away and considering its presence and image in far-flung places such as Ecuador and the forgotten community of Poso Wells.

Alemán's work is intriguing in an inter-American context because it brings together two contradictory yet equally valid understandings of borders. If we go back, for example, to Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera*, we see the shape of an argument about the porous nature of borders. Anzaldúa's work highlights the notion of borderlands precisely because she sees in them a challenge to notions of fixity. By emphasizing the roles of hybridity and mestizaje, Anzaldúa pushes her readers to reconsider the oppression inherent in fixed binary categories such as male/female, here/there, English/Spanish, and citizen/foreigner.

The virtue of Alemán's work in this regard is that she makes pressing arguments about the *concrete* nature of borders, particularly borders that define social class both locally (in the US) and more globally in terms of certain strata of people in third-world nations such as Ecuador. Additionally, her novels are a scathing indictment of the social factors that contribute to a lack of movement between social classes and possibilities. Simultaneously, however, in generic terms her novels foreground the possibility of movement between fixed binaries. To label either of these two novels "Latin American" is to deny the light they shed on larger, more international understandings of identity and the dynamics of power and inequality. Alemán's novels reveal a particular fascination with borders—

not as porous sites of hybridity, but rather as socially constructed yet ultimately undeniable boundaries. Exploring her elaborations of borders as immovable boundaries alongside genre questions that imply a flexibility of borders highlights the paradoxical, tense nature of borders.

Gabriela Alemán and “Los 39”

My consideration of Alemán begins with an honor she received in 2007 at the Twentieth Bogotá International Book Fair. The Bogotá fair, recently declared by UNESCO as the “World Book Capital,” convened a panel of experts to debate where contemporary Latin American literature is headed. The result of this panel was a list of the thirty-nine most influential Latin American writers under the age of forty, now commonly referred to as the “Bogotá 39.” The list’s most recognizable figure is the Pulitzer Prize-winning Dominican American author Junot Díaz; other notable writers include a Mexican (Jorge Volpi) and two with Peruvian roots (Santiago Roncagliolo and Daniel Alarcón). The status and name recognition of Díaz, Volpi, and Alarcón brought increased visibility to the other thirty-six writers, who, while often successful in their home markets, had yet to achieve regional notoriety and access to US-based readership. Such was the case of Alemán.² While her books have achieved a modicum of praise and support in Ecuador and her works have been translated into several languages, including Chinese, her entry into the US market has been limited by the fact that her novels have yet to appear in English and only *Body Time* has US distribution.³

Colombian literary critic Margarita Valencia sees in the Bogotá 39 two consistent patterns of engagement. Valencia notes that in contrast to the masterly texts and authorial presence of the boom writers of the 1960s and 1970s and the clearly politicized writing of the post-boom of the 1980s and 1990s, this newer generation rejects the aesthetic concerns of its predecessors in favor of less grandiose conceptualizations of the art of writing and the role of the author. Valencia sees in the Bogotá 39 a more pronounced engagement with day-to-day realities and concerns that results in shared consciousness. “The literary figures of the Bogotá 39 are afraid of finding a job or of not finding one. They are afraid because they know that life is difficult and they do not have grandiose dreams in which to take refuge. They know, likewise, that every situation is capable of worsening and tend, the wisest among them, towards immobility, in the hopes of passing unnoticed” (n. pag.). Valencia interprets this sense of invisibility, the Bogotá 39’s tendency to labor quietly but intensely, as indicative of a reflective humility and reluctance to see their work as creating or producing change. Valencia suggests that this fact—this humble posture in the face of pro-

found social realities—most distinguishes them from the generations that preceded theirs. “Their antecedents from the Boom were inventing the world and assumed the responsibility of narrating Latin America, of creating Latin America in the world through their narration. They failed, of course. These young writers, prudent assassins of their fathers, do not wish to invent anything; they just want to be good writers” (n. pag.). Valencia’s observation does not suggest that the Bogotá 39 are unconcerned with the social realities of Latin America and the world, but that they see their role in confronting those social realities as more modestly defined. For Alemán, the desire to narrate coexists with the need to engage in some form with the most troubling aspects of social injustice in Ecuador and abroad.

This scaled-down sense of the task of the writer is complicated by the very existence of the list of thirty-nine. One shared aesthetic of the group is an abandonment of the writerly text, while the existence of the list itself has raised the celebrity of these writers. Alemán’s connection to the Bogotá 39 had the effect of not only boosting her visibility to a general readership but also dramatically accentuating her status as both a Latin American and an Ecuadorian writer. Moreover, this categorization applies to Alemán’s own sense of her intended audience in that her self-perception as a nationally interpellated writer—determined by her Ecuadorian identity—comes into both contact and conflict with the notion that she is also a Latin American writer and that her work is thus deeply embedded in a long-standing critical discourse about the future of Latin American literature.

This problematic is not in any way exclusive to Alemán’s work. The articles that describe both the event and its participants make it abundantly clear that the Bogotá 39 consider themselves to be unquestionably of Latin American descent while simultaneously comprehending their citizenship as global. Collectively, they possess a significant investment in Latin America as both an idea and a social reality that marks their identity in recognizable ways; however, they also believe firmly that these same Latin American identities have been altered and influenced profoundly by the realities of a sharply connected relationship to the US and the world. They envision themselves as Latin American, but the term itself falls short of accurately addressing their diverse self-perceptions. To be Latin American is in many ways to erase the larger world that has also shaped them, their sense of self, and their work. It is a sentiment aptly described by Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children*: “And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me” (4). For these writers, “the stories to

tell” emerge from their experience of a moment in world history when the practical realities of global interconnectedness cannot be ignored and US cultural hegemony continues to pose very real threats to literary cultures such as those of Latin America. As is the case with authors from postcolonial India, writers from Latin America have never been able to ignore their connection to a larger literary world, nor have they been able to overlook the ways their daily realities continue to be influenced by foreign powers.

Efforts to understand the worlds that writers “swallow” have privileged conceptualizations of an author’s work as a product of the writer’s “local” community in conjunction with the “global” reality of the jostling multitude embodied in a writer’s production. However, the concept of the global and the local suffers in many ways from a recent flurry of passionate engagement that has resisted attaching any sense of specificity to the concept. On one hand, we might justly understand the dichotomy of the global and the local as referencing the opposition of a single “local” reality—in Alemán’s case, Ecuador—with a much broader geographical area “out there.” But this dichotomy is misleading in that it suggests that a comparative discussion of Ecuador and Miami, for example, might be interpreted as local versus global. Let me press this point a bit further by offering an example from an article written about the Bogotá 39.

Guatemalan writer Eduardo Halfon, one of the Bogotá 39, offered this interpretation of the event and the fair’s attempts to come to some kind of theory regarding the future of Latin American literature: “‘It is difficult to create groups. We are all different. Authors who write in Spanish or in English, others who live in Spain or France, and so on. It is difficult to know where we are going, but we go together, and are united by two things: our Latin American roots and our pleasure in the literary arts and the act of creation’” (qtd. in Sabogal n. pag.). Of note is an idea that bears currency among the other thirty-eight authors of a shared inheritance: the effect that having “Latin American roots” has on one’s writing.

Part of this inheritance is a world view sharply influenced by the commingling of poverty, racialization, and privilege that typify life in Latin America. However, Halfon’s interviewer, journalist Winston Manrique Sabogal, chooses to focus on the second half of Halfon’s assessment of the commonality shared by the Bogotá 39: the literary. Sabogal’s understanding of their common identity as producers of Latin American literature originates in the notion that these writers conceive of themselves as “inhabitants of the territory of the imagination” and that “from this unique geography emerges a polyphony of voices of *global* vocation” (n. pag., emphasis added). Sabogal’s intervention urges us to see these writers as both products of a local reality and intimately connected to a global

sense of self. As these two positions make clear, the local/global dialectic remains a messy category for these writers and their interpreters. The terms seem to take up reductive notions of a writer's "roots" versus a cosmopolitan literary awareness, whereas there is a real sense that this generation is grappling with what the literary geographies should be for those writers interested in speaking about the world they know—a world that is both globally interconnected and locally diverse.

Valencia and Sabogal urge us to conceptualize the vanguard of Latin American literature as paradoxically rooted in the continent while also deeply "at home" crossing oceans, borders, and hemispheres. This generation of writers has a much sharper sense of how networks of power inform, shape, and transcend the geographies that make up a writer's sense of the local. As these writers struggle to understand notions of citizenship and belonging, social inequality and resistance, they are keenly aware of how ease of communication and the movement of goods and labor have condensed geographical distances. The Bogotá 39 thus see their identities—as broadly-defined writers and citizens of Latin America—as wholly invested in the social conditions of their Latin American communities; however, this sense of identity is complicated by the fact that the places they inhabit are inextricably connected to far-flung global networks of commerce, communication, culture, and ideas. Central to their work is the need to narrate the details of daily experience in a world where daily experience increasingly frustrates existing associations of territory with identity.

New Orleans: Reading the First World and the Third World in the Global South

Alemán's two novels perform the dichotomy of the local and its relationship to the global in ways that tie her closely to the Bogotá 39. However, unlike some of her peers, Alemán is also interested in the inter-related nature of hemispheric dynamics of power. In the case of *Body Time*, she further expands the complexity of the local/global binary by assuming the role of a Latin American who chooses to write about the United States. In this sense, her work is deftly situated in the ongoing conversations the field of inter-American studies has undertaken—conversations that form a productive backdrop to *Body Time* and its efforts to think through the nature of the borders we rely upon to give structure and meaning to our daily lives.

The novel takes place in New Orleans, a fact that could be understood as the result of coincidental biography. Alemán earned a doctorate from Tulane University, and it would not be a leap to suggest that the years she

spent there might have had an effect on her literary imagination. However, a deeper, more historical way of reading her novel in a hemispheric context reaches back centuries. I offer this possibility based primarily on the work of scholars such as Kirsten Silva Gruesz, and Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, who are concerned with reconfiguring the US South via conceptual models like the Global South or “New South” studies. Smith and Cohn articulate their theoretical position in the following terms: “If we define ‘America’ hemispherically, for example, the experience of defeat, occupation, and reconstruction—particularly if this historical trauma is broadened to include the African American experience of defeat under slavery—is something the South shares with *every* other part of America” (2). In other words, Smith and Cohn see significant potential in unhinging the US South from the United States in order to connect it theoretically, as it has always been pragmatically, to the southern hemisphere; this allows them to reassess traditionally defined notions of southern identity.

In Smith and Cohn’s estimation, the US South is not a place of mixing and mestizaje but rather “a zone where the familiar dichotomies of post-colonial theory—unstable enough since the early 1990s—are rendered particularly precarious.” Their discussion emphasizes the notion of destabilization categorically produced by the theoretical move of decoupling the US South from the US. In so doing, “the U.S. South comes to occupy a space unique within modernity: a space simultaneously (or alternately) center and margin, victor and defeated, empire and colony, essentialist and hybrid, northern and southern (both in the global sense)” (9). That the US South enacts a dual existence is made sharply evident in their assertion that “[a]s the uncanny double of both the First and Third Worlds, the U.S. South of course calls attention to (and enables displacement of) the First World traits of putatively Third World writers and the Third World traits of the putatively First World” (10). By engaging the rhetoric of development (i.e., first versus third world), their statement draws focused attention to the imbalances of social equity and power that mark the lives of both the presumably first-world white slave owners and the ostensibly third-world existence of people of color. Smith and Cohn’s consideration of the hemispheric south, particularly the south’s relationship to the north in terms of the wealth extraction typical of colonized Latin America, thus reveals a dynamic more closely associated with paradigms of postcoloniality. The effect of this theoretical redirection is a reconsideration of southern identity that moves beyond the plainly visible dynamics of master and slave to a more nuanced portrait of victimization, one that places white southern men in the role of victim, not as a means of rescuing them from their guilt or status as oppressors, but rather as a reflection of a reality not easily contained by the dichotomy of master and slave, oppressor and oppressed,

North and South.

Although they do not make the explicit connection, this is a rhetorical move that aligns itself well with calls from various disciplines to understand the troubling effect racism and racial inequality have on *both* the perpetrators of racism and its victims. Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum is one such figure; more to the point of this essay, so too is Toni Morrison. Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993) argues that an Africanist presence in the US is the constitutive component of what has long been considered the traditional American literary canon. The troubling inability of literary scholars to see race in the works of canonical, white literary figures of the US is due, in part, to what Morrison identifies as a "pattern of thinking about racism in terms of its consequences on the victim—of always defining it asymmetrically from the perspective of its impact on the object of racist policy and attitudes" (11). Attention to the other side of racism reveals the equally valuable understanding of what racist ideology "does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters" (12). Decoupling southern identity from established binaries the way Smith and Cohn do functions as a paradigm for the kind of critical thinking Morrison believes is the key to slowly coming to terms with racial and social inequality in the US. When placed in the context of global stratifications of power, however, this imbalance in social equity and access to power becomes noticeably nondichotomous.

To students of hemispheric history, this revelation is old news. The nineteenth-century history of New Orleans established it as a place of transition and cultural movement. Taking seriously the historical processes of collapse and connection, New Orleans reveals itself as a site of historical continuity, a city with profound significance both historically and in current times. In its self-described role as the "Gateway to the Americas" in the nineteenth century, New Orleans functioned as a border town that was not simply an open door for US citizens eager for a glimpse of the southern hemisphere but also a familiar place of transition for those residents of the deep, deep South (i.e., Latin America) making their way to the United States.

The "familiarity" visitors from Latin America sensed and sought out stemmed in large part from the position of New Orleans as a nexus of commerce, immigration, shipping, and journalism. Gruesz explains that "[w]ith its once substantial population of *gens libres de couleur* [free people of color] and its vital French culture disrupting dominant codes of national affiliation to create hybrid cultural spaces and alternative aesthetic possibilities, New Orleans was one of the most linguistically and racially diverse cities in the United States" (54). Even more to the point, Gruesz contends that "[e]xpatriates and émigrés from around the Caribbean and

Spanish America would have found New Orleans the least alienating city in the nation” (55). Gruesz makes clear that those who came to the US from Latin America via New Orleans found themselves in a place that looked wondrously new but also both familiar and comforting.

Considering both the long history of New Orleans and the more recent events of Katrina, we might argue that New Orleans has always functioned to compress the differences between the first and third worlds in ways akin to the border towns of Texas and Mexico. This collapsing of geographic and developmental categories problematizes the conceptual borders that allow us a comforting sense of safety, egalitarianism, and superiority. As a manifestation of collapsed borders, New Orleans forms a crucial background to understanding Alemán’s novels. Although *Body Time* is predicated on the kind of multicultural, mestizo history of New Orleans that Gruesz’s work foregrounds, Alemán forcefully resists the notion of New Orleans as a site of social mestizaje.

Confronting the “Immovable”: Categorization and Social Borders in *Body Time*

On the surface, *Body Time* is both a police noir and an internal critique of the world of the academy, which Alemán skewers for what she perceives as its latent hypocrisy and obsession with superficial definitions of success. Though populated by graduate students, department chairs, and department secretaries, the novel centers on the journalist Rosa Travis and her efforts to unearth the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr. Justo Flores, who came to New Orleans to give a keynote address for the annual conference of the Association of Hispanicists. The plot develops along two parallel, albeit uneven, tracks: Travis engages three other academics—the disenchanted graduate student Mariana Capriotti, Carlos Hernández, head of the university’s Spanish department, and Ángeles Conde, an aspiring graduate student who had been romantically involved with Flores—in order to piece together the final moments of Flores’s life. Simultaneously, Travis attempts to discover the hidden past of her father, an older, alcoholic immigrant from the Ukraine known by the local residents only as “the captain.”

From the outset, Alemán invokes New Orleans’s past, describing it as a “city with strong commercial and affective ties with the Caribbean and Central America. . . . A prosperous city which formed a part of the artistic circuit of the grand Latin American tours” (60). By foregrounding New Orleans’s status as a site of both commercial and affective cultural exchange, Alemán reveals her implicit understanding of Gruesz’s notion of New Orleans as a border town of historical importance. Alemán’s New

Orleans, however, is not a place of hybridity, exchange, and *mestizaje* like Anzaldúa's borderlands. New Orleans is not the "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary." Instead it is a city marked by the "open wounds," the borders, which serve "to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" and ultimately which function as "a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (Anzaldúa 25). For Alemán, New Orleans is not an *herida abierta* (open wound) that bleeds and mixes but rather a site of stasis where borders, at least on the surface, are impermeable and fixed. Social classes remain locked in place and Latino/a immigrants appear determined to leave all vestiges of the third world behind by inserting themselves completely and absolutely into decidedly first-world lives.

In one particularly evocative scene, Travis has accepted Carlos Hernández's invitation to go out for drinks. Unaware that Travis is a journalist, Hernández enthusiastically answers her questions, believing them to be a signal to continue his attempt at seduction. Speaking directly to Hernández's ability to imitate the wildly disparate Spanish accents of various Latin American countries, the dialogue develops as follows:

- But where did you grow up? It isn't apparent from your accent. You speak English like a native speaker and your Spanish doesn't betray an accent from any particular place.
- I dislike immigrants with accents. If you are in this country you should, at the very least, make an effort to speak the language well.
- Tell me, this innate ability with languages. Where did it come from?
- I like to position myself within the sites I inhabit. I dislike the margin. To be accepted, to be considered an equal, you have to wield the tools of the enemy . . .
- But don't you think it's important to maintain the identity from one's place of origin. Make noticeable the accent, resist becoming one of the crowd and instead call attention to your difference?
- If you don't want to prosper, yes. I didn't come here to be a second-class citizen. One has to assimilate. (73-74)

Their dialogue reveals the two dramatically distinct ways of understanding New Orleans, and by extension, the US. Although Hernández is signaled as a figure of patriarchal privilege and arrogance, he also becomes a matter-of-fact voice about the social reality of New Orleans, a city plagued by its own categorizations of people by race and by accent. Alemán makes Travis—one of the few figures comfortable moving between groups and classes—the voice of resistance, utilizing her to envision a different space, one in which difference is celebrated and even defended against the encroachment of linguistic assimilation. Hernández's position offers

insight into the stability of categories and the stolid imposition of borders.

Although one might argue that Hernández represents a figure that has effectively “crossed” into assimilation—one who has transgressed the borders meant to separate those who prosper from those who do not, those who belong from those who do not—the relevant question is “at what cost?” Hernández’s success comes at the expense of his own individual and cultural history. He never answers Travis’s question about his roots and instead devolves into a fairly standard, conservative argument about assimilating in order to succeed, a premise that is valid only for those Latino/a immigrants who have the benefit of light-skinned complexions and can rid themselves of all traces of their linguistic origins. Through this discussion, Alemán reveals the inability of most of New Orleans’s racialized inhabitants to cross *any* of the borders implicit in Hernández’s argument for complete and absolute assimilation.⁴

Yet, as Anzaldúa argues, there is nothing natural about this racial and linguistic division that highlights the also unnatural border between presumptive first- and third-world categorizations. This class-based border operates in similar ways on both the macro and micro levels. Alemán sees society’s macro tendency to separate—thus ignoring the existence of others—as a parallel to the micro tendencies of her characters to lead dual lives, effectively trying to be two distinct people. In such a dynamic there is a fluid border between the personal and the public. Alemán addresses this dynamic by exploring the efforts of her characters to maintain the borders between their public and private selves. Flores, for example—the scholar at the center of the novel’s story—is an esteemed intellectual whose public identity is built upon a body of intellectual work that is both brilliant and transcendent. His private life, on the other hand, is built upon precepts of absolute egoism marked by lack of empathy or compassion for the needs of those around him and a barely suppressed desire to make selfish pleasure the embodiment of his being.

Alemán situates Flores’s selfishness as a constitutive part of the larger academy of which Ángeles Conde wants desperately to be a part. Alemán introduces the reader to Conde early on in the novel, presenting her as innocently enamored of Flores’s brilliance and consumed by the desire to earn his regard. Alemán stresses, however, that Conde, like Flores, harbors a misplaced understanding of self and place. Alemán writes: “It took just a glance around the place to know it, to know that she was not a part of that place. These were the people that surrounded her like shadows, because it was upon them that she would base her future academic success, because they were the subjects of her investigations: the marginal, the subalterns” (33). Readers eventually come to empathize with Conde for her status

as a victim in a world populated by patriarchal figures like Flores and Hernández, who see intellectual exchange with women scholars as nothing more than pretexts for their objectifying and demeaning attempts at seduction. However, Alemán also makes clear Conde's own guilt by association. Conde stands in for the academics who populate *Body Time* and see the world divided into intellectual works *about* marginalized peoples and the actual lives they lead. Studying the lives of the subaltern and the marginalized does not offer scholars such as Conde a deeper understanding of them or of New Orleans. It serves to reinforce the construction of difference and allows her to know "that she was not a part of that place." With a vast understanding of the inner workings of academia, Alemán skewers those academics who favor ethereal theories over the material realities of people's day-to-day lives. New Orleans is thus a particularly *à propos* context in that it manifests precisely these social distances, mapping them on streets that exist as borders between those who write and those who are written about.

Body Time engages Alemán's capacity for underscoring the duality implicit in the parallel lives of New Orleans citizens: like Flores, one can live a brilliant public, intellectual life while at the same time living an empty personal life marked by profound egocentrism, categorized in Flores's case by an addiction to drugs and a penchant for sex far beyond the boundaries of the "normal." The notion of a double life is moreover extended in *Body Time* and expressed as moments of disconcerting simultaneity of social classes living remarkably distinct lives separated by just a few city blocks. Alemán writes:

Carlos started his car and went down that stretch of road that had seen better days; down that road which ran the length of the city like an artery, secondary but necessary. The one that further down, in Fauberg, began to recuperate its respectable appearance just in time to work itself into the French Quarter with all its splendor. But there, where the city was pure decay, where no one had intervened to stop time and the houses crumbled like their inhabitants, Carlos tried to alleviate his anxiety. (69)

By constructing a scene that perfectly embodies the way in which lives develop simultaneously along starkly different paths, Alemán forces us to engage the possibility that one can live a relatively comfortable life of "radical" social theorization connected to our subjects by only the thinnest of two-lane highways. The passage reveals how the geographic borders of the city function; the borders divide and segregate, keeping each social class in its place, yet allowing some to rise and succeed while others, as Alemán says, "se desmoronan" (collapse). At the same time, however, Hernández elects to travel a road that cuts across those borders, taking

him from one side to the other, from one world to another. The metaphor is clear: borders are real and can be transgressed, but this does not imply that one has “crossed.”

The simultaneity of lives and the indiscreet rubbing of the third world within the first world (and vice versa) also are visible tropes in Alemán’s *Poso Wells*. Like *Body Time*, *Poso Wells* is a highly visible arena for Alemán to flesh out her own theories about the inequality that, in various forms and to varying degrees, spans the entire continent of the Americas. Unlike *Body Time*, however, *Poso Wells* is not about the US per se. In fact, the US is never explicitly mentioned. Instead, the novel uses Canada to focus on how hemispheric global finance and neoliberalism, most readily associated with US multinationals, have further propagated imbalances of income and opportunity.⁵

Gender and Class in *Poso Wells*: The Invisibility of Social Inequality

Poso Wells was born out of a confluence of events. In an interview in the 29 September 2007 issue of the magazine *El Comercio*, Alemán notes that her reaction to Ecuador’s 2006 electoral cycle was one of profound despondence and anger, sentiments that threatened to transform themselves into a morose resignation regarding the future of an Ecuador marked by constant social and political disasters. At the same time, Alemán recalls rereading H. G. Wells’s story “The Country of the Blind” (1911) and finding it oddly marvelous that a British writer who had never been to Latin America would choose Ecuador as the site of one of his stories. Her reaction to the story, however, was also one of revelation. She saw in Wells’s story a perfect metaphor for her Ecuador as a country of the blind, a blindness that was both social in terms of the inequality with which Ecuador has become comfortable and political in that, as she puts it, “For the third time we had the same candidate emerge as a finalist from the first electoral round” (“Humor” n. pag.) This juxtaposition of the cyclical reappearance of corrupt, self-interested politicians with the endless repetition of social inequalities is at the center of her novel.

Like *Body Time*, *Poso Wells* is characterized by a preoccupation with the nature of borders, but the later novel begins by enacting a *resistance* to the clearly defined borders between genres. By doing so, *Poso Wells* offers a glimpse of Alemán’s own ambivalence regarding borders. Alemán finds some borders, such as genre, to be fluid and others, such as the socially constructed borders between races and economic strata, significantly less so. In interviews, Alemán explains that *Poso Wells* was conceptualized as a serial novel that she hoped to publish chapter by chapter in local newspapers. Instead, it became a novel marked by a clear resistance to

defining itself via one particular genre. At times *Poso Wells* reads like *prensa roja*, the sensationalist press that remains exceedingly popular in Latin America; however, it is also riddled with characters who compose poetry and offer popular song lyrics as nuggets of wisdom. As a satire, or black novel, *Poso Wells* is a stark refusal to back down from the apparent hypocrisies of Ecuadorian politicians who claim to have the interests of the pueblo in mind but whose real purpose is the accumulation of personal wealth. Alemán uses the novel as a platform to suggest that these two acts—defending the interests of the poor and accumulating vast personal wealth—are mutually exclusive. This charge bears weight in the Ecuador of *Poso Wells* as well as in first-world cities of the Americas such as New Orleans.

The plot of *Poso Wells* is deceptively simple. At first, it appears less like social denouncement and more like the Wellsian science fiction that inspired it. The novel centers on journalist Oswaldo Varas and his investigation into the disappearance of three or four women from the Poso Wells community, a story that holds little interest for his newspaper even as his investigation reveals that the number of missing women is closer to fifty than the few who have made the local news. Coincidental luck places him at the scene of Ecuador's most sensational news events, the death of Ecuador's richest man and perennial presidential candidate and the disappearance of Andres Vinueza, his only legitimate successor in the upcoming elections. After the death of the candidate, the tenor of the novel quickly shifts: Alemán underscores the press response to Varas's appeals to investigate the death and disappearance of two of Ecuador's most influential men, writing that the "owners of the newspaper, this time, didn't hesitate in offering him all the necessary resources for this case. He wasn't going to investigate missing women but rather the future of the country" (30). Alemán thus signals that her novel is not merely a narrative exploration of the fantastic but rather a narrative of resistance to multiple forms of oppression.

In a short Internet posting, Alemán gives further insight as to the socio-political motivation behind this engaging, difficult-to-categorize novel. She writes: "Inertia is cozy, it wraps one up. It's a huge, tranquil pool in the midst of an ocean which never ceases movement. As November of 2006 approached, a whirlpool, within that dammed up water, pulled us downward" ("Cooperativa" n. pag.). *Poso Wells* should thus be understood as Alemán's fervent desire to *do* something in order to shake off the subtle seductiveness of inertia. Alemán gives this intention a clear voice within the novel. After deciding to tell Varas what he has seen, the elderly Don Jaime Montenegro pulls him aside and asks a philosophical question: "If one forgets things, is it the same as if they had never occurred?"

(180). Don Jaime's question, placed immediately before the confession that he saw the blind men who abducted Vinuesa, offers us the notion that to forget is to pretend that something never happened. In an Ecuador plagued with social inequality and corruption, forgetting becomes tantamount to sanctioning; for Don Jaime, the only antidote to forgetting is telling. Seen in this light, Alemán's novel becomes a form of resistance to the way inertia allows us to close our eyes to the harsh realities of social injustice and, in doing so, to permit crimes to continue. Read in an inter-American context with *Body Time* clearly in mind, *Poso Wells* exemplifies Alemán's invocation to use writing and remembering to resist the ease of hemispheric social injustice.

Poso Wells leaves behind the de facto segregation of New Orleans and the US featured in *Body Time* for the similarly de facto segregation of Ecuador (and by extension Latin America). Alemán's declamation against "la inercia" begins with a bleak description of the community of Poso Wells: "It was in the foulest smelling, most forgotten hole within the world which exists on this side of the central Pacific" (15). She continues: "And although no one who doesn't have to live there would come within one hundred meters of its limits, it is the quadrilateral within which the greatest electoral battles are waged" (16). The geography of Ecuador—which is divided longitudinally by the Andes mountains into *Costa* and *Sierra*—creates a site of intense poverty separated by wide rivers and vast mountain peaks from the governmental seats of power and commerce in Quito and Guayaquil. For those in power, these natural borders serve to legitimate and naturalize Poso Wells's poverty, ostensibly forgotten by virtue of mere topography. Here, in contrast to *Body Time*, the road that connects the lives of the wealthy and the poor is not a street that runs within the city but rather a political road. The reality Alemán offers is of every electoral cycle's need to assume the arduous task of erasing the physical borders that separate forgotten from privileged communities, the task of braiding lives that normally run along parallel lines free of the "terrible risk" of accidentally crossing and joining.

In Ecuador, the borders are solid and concrete to the point that transgressing them becomes a major undertaking: "an entire brigade of the national police is deployed while a municipal tractor repairs the road or at least fills it in with dirt brought in from the Peninsula of Santa Elena to allow the candidates entry" (18). Whereas *Body Time* narrates a segregated social system wherein physical borders are at the very least permeable, by contrast, in this Ecuador of corrupt politicians—whose lives reflect a direct contradiction between reality and the rhetoric of the public good—borders are well maintained. That is to say, the social labor that might potentially unite Poso Wells with the rest of the country takes place only

once every four years, meaning that the road to Poso Wells is symbolically one-way *in* to Poso Wells, built so that politicians might enter but not so that others may leave.

Alemán stages this novel in the most abandoned corner of the hemisphere in order to theorize the damage inflicted on abandoned communities by Canadian—and by extension US—multinational firms in conjunction with a corrupt Ecuadorian political body. She thus chooses the community of Poso Wells to dramatize not only the most sensational of deaths but also the latent hypocrisy in Ecuadorian politics. The death scene (which I describe below) operates on a number of crucial levels, demonstrating Alemán's ability to move within genres: she pays homage to Wellsian science fiction, the magical realism that held sway in Latin America and the US for decades, and the populist *prensa roja*. Furthermore, the passage serves as a focal point for a blistering critique of the world press that sees the gruesome death of one wealthy man as more pressing and urgent than the slow demise of communities like Poso Wells spread throughout the hemisphere and the world.

The novel commences with the farcical death of one of Ecuador's richest men, a perennial presidential candidate. "El candidato," as he is referred to in the novel, approaches the hole-in-the-wall community of Poso Wells in his private helicopter, ready to enact the performance of populist presidential candidate by offering empty words of change and bearing "bags of corn flour and flour and tins of lard to distribute" (22). The candidate, having imbibed several glasses of whiskey, ushers in his own death, and that of almost his entire entourage, when, in the act of desperately urinating in his pants, he is handed a microphone at the exact moment of a short circuit. Alemán describes his death with the glee of which only the fantastic is capable:

Before the wires explode and the power goes out, which the organizers of the event have robbed—with some loose cables along the ground—from four posts that were installed there by the municipality months ago, the people see the candidate elevate above the dais with a celestial halo emanating from his center, the light expands like a burst among his political masses.

Something to be seen. Of a strange beauty, extreme. Extraordinary.

And then, the smell of grilled meat. The smell of charred flesh invading every corner of the shelter.

And only then, total darkness. (26-27)

Alemán's prose is almost euphoric, immersed completely in the world of fantasy; it is, however, a moment of fantasy tempered immediately in the real. The celestial image of the candidate rising above the crowd is quickly subverted, "grounded," by the overwhelming smell of burned flesh, of fried

meat. The candidate's moment of celestial glory is sandwiched between the unflagging reality of this community and others just like it. The burst of electricity stolen from Poso Wells, which coincidentally had only recently acquired the gift of light from the municipalities, connects rhetorically with the pungent smell of meat all over similar communities in Ecuador as vendors hawk local traditional foods such as *tripa mishqui* (tripe). The candidate's wealth and audacity allow him an illusory moment of heavenly ascension before his death transforms him into nothing more than a bit of flesh charred by the confluence of electricity, sweat, and urine.

When the lights finally come back on in Poso Wells, they reveal the existence of a forgotten community in Guayaquil. Yet Alemán's ideological focus is how Poso Wells bears a striking resemblance to the Lower Ninth Ward and how the Lower Ninth Ward could just as easily have been an abandoned community somewhere in the Americas. Furthermore, *Poso Wells* is also the story of another forgotten community in Ecuador: the larger community of women. Alemán brings this point sharply into focus by delineating the ways in which the absurd death of Ecuador's richest man is news while the disappearance of the women of Poso Wells is not. *Poso Wells* ultimately reveals itself as a story about the nature of oppression, the way in which privilege, whether of patriarchy or global capital, disregards the humanity of those it considers subservient. In order to make this patently visible, Alemán introduces one of the more subtle plot lines of the novel: the story of Vinueza's involvement with Holmes, a Canadian financier who wants to exploit one of Ecuador's ecological cloud forest preserves for its mineral wealth.

Alemán's use of the Canadian multinational is an effort to unify worldwide struggles over inequality by showing that the reach of global capital manifests itself in similar ways throughout the world; in so doing she links the resistance of one small community with the struggles of similar communities in Asia, Africa, and the US. She further suggests that the distance between people is premised in large part on money and ideals but that, more specifically, those ideals are shaped by *access* to wealth. When Holmes's plans to illegally purchase the ecological preserve are momentarily thwarted by the local, economically modest, indigenous, and mestizo residents, it inspires in him a brief philosophical reflection that is revealing in its unintended explication of the nature of greed and power:

Holmes was sick of the problems throughout the world that the peasants and environmentalists caused him, although he found the Latin Americans particularly annoying. Latin Americans have no vision of the future; they only know how to live in the present. They know nothing about progress. . . . If some protected a mangrove with their lives; others—who were in the position to do so, this was the key—were inclined to sell, without hesitation, the

country's entire subsoil for a determined price and with no benefit whatsoever for its inhabitants. No longer for bits of color or paper. No, now it wasn't even for that, just ones and zeroes moving through a digital web, transferring sums unimaginable for most people from one account to another, one country to another. Air, he trafficked in air. (266-67)

For the multinational companies embodied by Holmes, those without money have antiquated values about community and ecology whereas those with access to wealth and power understand individualism as the pinnacle of progress and modernization. The notion that these traffickers in "air," like Holmes, are willing to pick apart the earth and its inhabitants for base, individual profit is the foundation for the despair that impels Alemán to write and engage, a despair motivated by global realities that extend far beyond the arbitrary, long disputed borders of her native Ecuador. In this way, Alemán's second novel situates the problems of Ecuador in a larger hemispheric framework. Consequently, though she makes no mention of the US, she ties this particular manifestation of global economic greed to Canada, with an indictment of the US that is indirect and subtle. Taken in conjunction with her first novel, *Poso Wells* implies that the first world bears as significant a role in Latin America's problems as the region's own residents. This broadens our understanding of the US by giving us an impassioned critique of the egoism of first-world ideology as it operates in both Ecuador and New Orleans. Alemán argues that Ecuador is New Orleans and vice versa. Considered in this light, *Poso Wells* becomes a novel about the many faces and places of social injustice and inequality.

Beneath the surface of Alemán's despair is her hope in the power of words and ideas to resist global oppression. The spread of global capital to which Holmes lends his voice finds its ironic double in the process Frantz Fanon describes: "A colonized people is not alone. In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. It discovers that violence is in the atmosphere, that it here and there bursts out, and here and there sweeps away the colonial regime. . . . The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory" (70). Oppression manifests itself all over the globe, erasing individual contexts, yet rebellion transcends the limit of its frontiers. *Poso Wells* is not just about Ecuador, but about the nature of power and resistance.

Although *Poso Wells* is both dark and ironic, it is also touched by an ethereal hopefulness, for it tells the story of protagonists who have the audacity to cross ideological borders. The journalist Varas risks his job to investigate the unexplained disappearance of scores of women from Poso Wells, which holds no interest for the rest of the country; his close

friend Benito, the Mexican poet, risks his security to come to Varas's aid; and Bella, the beautiful victim of violence marked by a devastating facial scar, refuses to remain on her side of the gender border in a "woman's place." These three protagonists, clearly marked as transgressors, assume risks inherent in the process of crossing borders. Alemán makes clear that these three individuals represent the greatest hope for countries such as Ecuador—countries always vulnerable to the outsized capitalist greed of both nationals and foreigners. The protagonists of *Poso Wells* stand collectively for a fierce declamation against blind faith in borders as they urge us to find the strength and imagination to cross.

Body Time and *Poso Wells* share the goal of prodding the stability of borders. *Poso Wells* confirms Alemán as a novelist intimately connected to the daily struggles of her native Ecuador, struggles deeply emblematic of contemporary Latin America. Because *Body Time* is the work of a writer immersed in the problems and context of Ecuador, and because Alemán is one of Ecuador's most successful young novelists, it must be an Ecuadorian novel. And yet *Body Time* foregrounds Alemán's desire to move beyond the literary confines of Latin America. Representations of New Orleans demonstrate comprehension of the superficial realities of this city and, by extension, the United States. The characters in the novel are Latinos/as but also "gringos," and the social truths Alemán offers for consideration oblige us to confront realities regarding the inequality that marks the US: the racism and social injustice that erect borders between racial and ethnic groups and between wealthy white folks and disenfranchised people of color. What does that leave us? We might be willing to argue that *both* *Body Time* and *Poso Wells* are "American" novels. *This* is the theory of the fluidity of borders made concrete. That which defines and divides also unifies, simultaneously creating hybridizations that make stable categories, such as genre and national literatures, remarkably fluid and deliciously unpredictable.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the original Spanish are my own. In this passage, Néstor García Canclini opts to use capitalization in order to distinguish the geographic region known as "Latin" America from its citizens, which he designates using the lower case "latin America."

2. Little has been written in Ecuador about either of Alemán's novels. However, the few commentaries I found concurred that *Poso Wells* was a success. Xavier Michelena, for example, in a brief piece in the 29 December 2007 issue of *El Comercio* cites Alemán's novel as substantive proof of the healthy, vibrant state

of Ecuadorian literature; and in a September 2007 interview of Alemán the interviewer praises the novel's tone as highly successful and engaging ("Humor" n. pag.).

3. The novel was published by the major Spanish-language publisher Planeta, which is based in Spain but has various publishing centers throughout Latin America. Many of their books gain access to the Spanish-language US market and can be found in mainstream bookstores such as Barnes and Noble.

4. For an engaging discussion of the pitfalls of assimilation, see Chapter 3 from Paula M. L. Moya (100-35).

5. One has only to skim Juan Gonzalez's *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* to understand the outsized role US multinationals have played in present-day circumstances of Latin America. If more evidence is necessary, Stephanie Black's elegantly argued documentary about the IMF titled *Life and Debt* offers Jamaica as a metaphor for the pattern of corporate aggression that has come to typify first world/third world "exchanges" throughout the hemisphere.

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