Hispania Guest Editorial:
Carlos Fuentes: Crossing Borders and into the Classroom

Harry L. Rosser

Hispania 95.4 (2012): 1–4

Hispania Open Access files are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
Editor’s Message:
Carlos Fuentes’s Impact on Spanish Teachers and Professors

As 2012 draws to a close, it is appropriate to pay tribute to literary luminary and our learned and lettered compañero in the Spanish classroom—the late Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012). As devotees of Spanish language and culture, we will continue to enjoy his superb literature and refer to Fuentes’s succinct cultural observations in our classes. Many of us still feel his presence in our classrooms because we use the respected film series El espejo enterrado (The Buried Mirror). To honor the passing of this consummate man of letters and a central figure in the discussion of mexicanidad, I invited Hispania Associate Editor Harry L. Rosser to pen a guest editorial on Fuentes in which he includes an intriguing discussion of the late author’s overall contributions and his often overlooked impact on the teaching profession.

Harry L. Rosser is an Associate Professor of Latin American Literature at Boston College and is one of those indispensable colleagues that you meet at a session during the annual meeting of the AATSP. Having served a recent term on the AATSP Executive Council, he is a staple at the AATSP and has been a contributor to Hispania. Many of his publications focus on Mexican culture and literature. His impact in our field is broad because he is a well-known author and coauthor of instructional materials as well as literary criticism. I invite you to read his bio below and then continue on and enjoy his guest editorial, titled “Carlos Fuentes: Crossing Borders and into the Classroom.”

Sheri Spaine Long
Editor
Hispania

Harry L. Rosser

Harry L. Rosser (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) was raised in Mexico, did his undergraduate work at the College of Wooster, and earned an MA in linguistics at Cornell University. He is an Associate Professor of Latin American Literature at Boston College. He has chaired the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures there, steered as founding Director the Latin American Studies program, and recently coordinated for four years his department’s Graduate Studies for the MA and PhD. He teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literature, culture, and language. Previously, he taught at the Foreign Service Institute, Brandeis University, Boston University, and at Middlebury College’s Escuela Española.

His publications include a book on Mexican novelists, numerous articles on Latin American Literature in journals such as Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos, Revista Iberoamericana, Latin American Research Review, Hispania, Confluencia, Chasqui, Revista de Estudios Hispánicos, Cuadernos Americanos, Kentucky Romance Quarterly, Foreign Language Annals, and ADFL Bulletin. He is also the coauthor of a first-year college text, Tú dirás: Introducción a la lengua y cultura hispánicas, as well as a three-level series of textbooks for high school students, entitled Ya verás. In the area of video programs, he is the narrator-guide for the fifty-two, half-hour episodes of the telecourse Destinos: An Introduction to Spanish, which he also helped create. He is also the author and narrator of Mosaico cultural: Images from Spanish-Speaking Cultures. From 2006–09, he served a term as an elected member of the Executive Council of AATSP. In 2011, he was appointed as an Associate Editor of Hispania.
When Carlos Fuentes walked into a room, you could feel his energy. His vitality was palpable in a living room with friends, in a classroom packed with students, or even in an auditorium crowded with hundreds of people assembled to hear him speak. I was present at such a gathering last fall at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, along with several of my students from our class on Latin American novels. (Sadly, it was his final public appearance before his sudden death this past May.) We had just read *Gringo viejo* (1985), one of Fuentes’s finest works and the first Mexican novel to appear on the *New York Times* best-seller list. That evening, the renowned Mexican author held everyone’s rapt attention as he spoke with passion about “The Creative Spirit as a Force for Humanism,” a topic aptly personified by Fuentes himself.

Speaking eloquently in both Spanish and English, Fuentes focused that evening on the importance of confronting today’s global threats as a united international community, urging us to cross borders to recognize the multiplicity of civilizations and to accept the ideas and cultures of people from other countries. He referred to *Gringo viejo* (1985) as a compelling example of the possibilities for such acceptance. The longstanding conflicts between the people of Mexico and the United States appear insurmountable to the characters in the novel, but, by the end, they learn profound and lasting lessons as a result of their interactions across cultures. One character, an American journalist from San Francisco, comes to a poignant realization: “He had felt freed the moment he crossed the border at Juárez, as if he had walked into a different world. Now he was sure: each of us has a secret frontier within him, and that is the most difficult frontier to cross because each of us hopes to find himself alone there, but finds only that he is more than ever in the company of others” (161).

In his talk, Fuentes also underscored another constant theme in his works: the power of language, specifically Spanish, as an important purveyor of cultural diversity, other ways of viewing the world, and understanding reality. He touched on several key writers from Europe, Spain, England, and the United States, and then pointed to Latin American literature as uniquely able to represent the past as a living force, actively felt in the present. Because of its powerful fusion of history, myth, and fiction, Latin American literature provides important lessons and encourages Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries to forge their own model of development consistent with their own heritage—European, indigenous, black, and *mestizo*—instead of imitating foreign models.

As the son of a Mexican diplomat, Fuentes spent a good deal of his life crossing borders. He spent his childhood years in Washington, DC, Santiago, Buenos Aires, and Zurich. As an adult, he made frequent sojourns abroad, including a period in the seventies as Mexican ambassador to France. Throughout his long and active career, he expressed a deep affection for the United States. At the same time, he was openly critical of US foreign policy in Latin America, describing that policy in speeches and editorial essays as historically arrogant, inflexible, shortsighted, invasive, and fundamentally unjust. His no-holds-barred opinions on US policy made him a controversial figure in the view of the US State Department, which denied him entry into the United States on several occasions.

An outspoken critic and prize-winning author of more than thirty literary texts encompassing four genres (novels, short stories, plays, and essays), Fuentes is recognized as one of the major writers of fiction in Latin America, and certainly in his own country. Literary historian Fernando Alegría describes him as “uno de los escritores mexicanos que más intensamente ha
contribuido a renovar el arte de la novela en su patria” (321). The philosophical underpinnings of his prodigious body of work largely pertain to the exploration and revelation of Mexican identity, the concepts of “la mexicanidad y lo mexicano,” and by extension, identity issues related to Latin America itself and its long history from pre-Columbian times to the present. From his first novel La región más transparente (1958), which is about the rise and fall of a powerful empresario in Mexico City, to his last, La voluntad y la fortuna (2008), which depicts the ever growing armed conflicts between the Mexican government and narcotrafficker cartels, Fuentes’ works turn on three pivotal themes: 1) the fusion of pre-Hispanic heritage and European culture that substantially defines Mexico today; 2) the pervasive, multifaceted influence that the largely unfulfilled Mexican Revolution of 1910 continues to have in determining modern Mexican society; and 3) Mexico City as “an epicenter” where the above two factors converge and then fan out into correlated consequences for the entire nation (Trejo Fuentes 14).

As the more universal Mexican writer that he became, Fuentes believed he had a special responsibility in society where critical witnesses are frequently discouraged, or even silenced, by inflexible political processes, not just within his own country, but also throughout the world. His metaphor of the writer who straddles two horses at once, one aesthetic and the other political, conveys the difficult role he envisioned early on: “Toda obra literaria, fiel a sus premisas, y lograda en su realización, en su expresión, tiene un grado de significación social. No de un programa impuesto desde afuera . . . sino de una convicción. Hablamos no de escritores comprometidos, sino de escritores que se comprometen: hay una gran diferencia entre los dos” (qtd. in Millán 13).

Fuentes’s classic series of essays on literary criticism, La nueva novela hispanoamericana (1969), is often required reading in graduate student seminars. In the collection, he analyzes the phenomenon of the Spanish language itself as dynamically central, much like a protagonist, to contemporary Latin American literature. It functions as “una confrontación dialéctica permanente, a través de la palabra, entre el cambio y la estructura, entre la renovación y la tradición, entre el evento y el discurso, entre la visión de la justicia y la visión de la tragedia: entre lo vivido y lo real” (35). This critical approach not only questions the very values and codes that are embedded in language itself, but also aggressively probes the tension between elements in opposition, an analysis that may lead to a creative resolution.

Among his many accomplishments as a man of letters, Fuentes found great satisfaction in giving lectures and teaching semester-long courses as a visiting professor or writer-in-residence at a number of colleges and universities across the United States. He often spoke of his enjoyment and motivation for interacting with students in a classroom setting: “It is very important that I talk to generations of Americans who are going to govern this country and try to get through to them the existence of a Latin American personality, of a Latin American culture” (qtd. in Shapiro 97). Over the years, in fact, Fuentes became a leading figure in the short list of Latin American writers whose works are most heavily anthologized and frequently integrated into the curriculum at university as well as high school levels, particularly in Advanced Placement literature courses. Many faculty members agree that he had, and continues to have, a broader influence in the Spanish classroom than most Latin American writers.

A few key examples will suffice, but prominent among his most student-friendly works is El espejo enterrado that has become a “canonized staple,” as one colleague describes it, for undergraduate culture and civilization courses. This series of five, hour-long video programs, spanning five centuries of Spanish and Latin American history, is beautifully written and narrated by Fuentes. The entire text is available in a separate book that reflects meticulous interdisciplinary research. The accompanying study guide, with pre- and post-viewing exercises and useful questionnaires, makes this video series fit easily into a course syllabus for students at various levels of oral and written proficiency in Spanish.

For graduate-level seminars in Hispanic Studies or comparative literature, two of Fuentes’s signature novels of the Mexican Revolution, La muerte de Artemio Cruz (1963) and Gringo
viejo (1985), are indispensable for studying literary techniques involved in complex character
development, multiple narrative points of view, and the thorny issues of reliable/unreliable
narrators with their varying degrees of omniscience. In La muerte de Artemio Cruz, the narrative
perspectives radiate from three fixed points: the first-person singular view, based on present
consciousness; the third-person historical vantage point; and the curious second-person singular
perspective of projection, or “pre-intention,” often connected with the future tense, and at times
referring after the fact to what could have happened. In Gringo viejo, an expanding polyphonic
network of voices, inner thoughts, dialogue, and narrative segments make formidable demands
on the reader’s attention in dealing with Fuentes’s daring display of multiperspectivism. Both
novels are essentially narrative kaleidoscopes with truncated spatial and temporal planes that
require an active “lector co-partícipe,” a term Fuentes coined, for tracking and reordering shifts
in narrative sequence and determining the very nature and identities of the narrative voices.
At times, the narrative “source” may be strange or unexpected, such as the “the membrinous
dust” that blows across the border and invades the mind of the school teacher Harriet Winslow
to help her remember her past in Gringo viejo.

Several other texts are most useful for undergraduate courses, such as Introduction to
Literary Analysis. The short gothic novel Aura (1962) is notable for its peculiar and intriguing
use of a central narrative perspective in the second-person singular perspective with the present
and future tenses for recounting the protagonist’s experiences in a house full of phantoms and
fantastic machinations. Among other riveting Fuentes tales of the supernatural for an introd-
cutory literature course is the eerie horror story “Chac Mool” in which a middle-aged man’s
obsession with a life-sized statue of the Mayan rain god leads to the gradual metamorphosis of
the stone figure into a living being. The creature takes over the man’s house, wears his clothes,
demands increasing amounts of food and water, and eventually drives him mad and to his death
by drowning. One final example of a Fuentes text for stimulating class discussion is La frontera
de cristal (1995), a carefully interwoven collection of short stories in which Fuentes portrays an
array of characters on both sides of the US–Mexican border whose lives are inevitably entangled
in the conflicts related to immigration issues and their tragic repercussions.

Looking back on that night in November when Carlos Fuentes last spoke to an audience
in Boston, it strikes me that this remarkable man, an outspoken critic, an inspired teacher, a
masterful writer of fiction, was actually the very embodiment of the “force for Humanism,”
a force which he equated so convincingly with Art itself. His main message reminds me that
an essential function of all art is to stimulate the imagination so that the reader comes to an
intuitive understanding of the complex dimensions of human experience. Fuentes believed
in literature’s transformative power. His lifelong work is proof of his extraordinary ability to
use that power to promote cross-cultural awareness, to connect people, and to envision the
possibilities for positive change.

Harry L. Rosser
Boston College
Associate Editor
Hispania

WORKS CITED
Alegria, Fernando. Nueva historia de la novela hispanoamericana. Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte,