

# Crossing the Topographies of Modernity in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: *Towards an Ethnography of “Out of Place” Ideas*

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## ABSTRACT

As the national economies of Mexico and the United States intertwine more tightly under NAFTA, the role of the U.S.-Mexico border as a catalyst for wider economic development has emerged as a central preoccupation of the administrations of Vicente Fox and George W. Bush. Yet, the sociocultural and intellectual contexts for successful cross-border development are riven by discrepant visions of the political possibilities inherent in achieving authentic transboundary integration. Drawing on recent key English—and Spanish—language works, the author attempts to account for this discrepancy in the transboundary spatial imagination by rooting observed discourses in diverging traditions of modernity, modernism, and modernization, focusing on the Latin American intellectual negotiation of the postmodern condition. Rather than celebrate the U.S.-Mexico border as a postmodern space of radical openness or defend its position as a vital bulwark against the dissolution of “heroic” nation-state building projects, the article attempts to view both sets of discourses from a fragile middle-ground, hinting at possible linkages (and solidarities) with other, non-Western, “peripheral” modernities.

*Keywords:* 1. modernization, 2. de-territorialization, 3. postmodernit(ies), 4. United States, 5. Mexico.

*Cruzando las topografías de la modernidad, en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México: hacia una etnografía de las ideas “fuera de lugar”*

## RESUMEN

En el ámbito de una cada vez más acelerada integración entre México y los Estados Unidos propiciada por el Tratado de Libre Comercio, el papel de la frontera entre ambos países como catalizador de un desarrollo económico más amplio ha emergido como una preocupación central para ambos gobiernos. Sin embargo, como sugiere este ensayo, los contextos socioculturales e intelectuales para el desarrollo transfronterizo se caracterizan por enfoques distintos de las posibilidades políticas inherentes a una auténtica integración transfronteriza. El autor intenta explicar las razones de esta discrepancia, buscando en discursos que encuentran sus raíces en tradiciones divergentes de modernidad, modernismo y modernización, haciendo hincapié en la negociación intelectual latinoamericana de la condición posmoderna. En lugar de concebir la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México como espacio posmoderno de apertura radical o defender su rol como baluarte inviolable contra la disolución de proyectos “heroicos” dirigidos hacia la construcción del Estado-nación, el ensayo abarca ambos discursos desde el punto de vista de un espacio intermedio y todavía frágil, además de indicar posibles vínculos (y solidaridades) con otras modernidades “incompletas” que perviven de manera marginal en Occidente.

*Palabras clave:* 1. modernización, 2. desterritorialización, 3. posmodernidad(es), 4. Estados Unidos, 5. México.

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*This trip through the mysteries of St. Petersburg, through its clash and interplay of experiments in modernization from above and below, may provide clues to some of the mysteries of political and spiritual life in the cities of the Third World—in Lagos, Brasilia, New Delhi, Mexico City—today [...] Petersburgs “state nomads without home,” find themselves at home everywhere in the contemporary world. The Petersburg tradition [...] can provide them with shadow passports into the unreal reality of the modern city.*

Marshall Berman (1982:286).

*¿Cuáles son, en los años noventa, las estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad? [...] En América Latina, donde las tradiciones aún no se han ido y la modernidad no acaba de llegar, dudamos si modernizarnos debe ser el principal objetivo.*

Néstor García Canclini (1989:13).

*Aun cuando pudieran estar constituyéndose fragmentos de nuevas identidades o abóndandose las preexistentes, éstas no anulan aquella identidad regional que surge del reconocimiento del “otro” como diferente del “nosotros” [...] subyacente a las visiones diversas de los diferentes grupos sociales en las ciudades, frecuentemente existe un discurso consensual y de alto orden o jerarquía sobre la racionalidad social.*

Tito Alegría Olazábal (2000:100-101).

## INTRODUCTION

As the national economies of Mexico and the United States intertwine more tightly under the driving force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the role of the U.S.-Mexico border as a catalyst for wider economic development has emerged as a central preoccupation of both governments. Unlike the period of experimentation with cross-border integration in the early 1990s, however, the issues of immigration, cross-border labor markets, and the future of a border industrialization program rooted in a globalized branch-plant sector have emerged as primary concerns framing the binational agenda within the context of global market slowdown and rising economic malaise throughout the hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> I argue here that the recently transformed policy landscape influencing U.S.-Mexico cross-border integration has been conditioned

<sup>1</sup>One of Vicente Fox's first acts as the president of Mexico was to demand a full and open border policy vis-à-vis the United States. Although this gesture was more symbolic than substantive, the intention was not lost upon Washington policymakers, who would prefer to maintain the long-standing “containment” approach to the U.S.-Mexico border region. More recently, Fox has joined forces with the North American labor movement in a historic move to promote an expanded “amnesty program” that would grant permanent resident status for undocumented Mexican citizens residing in the United States. The aim is to forestall a Republican and U.S.-business-backed plan to re-inaugurate a temporary guest-worker program on a scale unseen since the days of the notorious *Bracero* Program of the 1950s and 1960s (Greenhouse, 2001).

as much by the legacy of sociocultural dynamics occurring within each nation-state as by processes of cross-border economic development strictly defined. Indeed, sociocultural, institutional, and economic approaches to the border cannot be disassociated one from the other in attempting to grasp the complex and evolving regional spatialities of the contemporary borderlands (North, 1990; Storper, 1997; Storper and Salais, 1997; Scott *et al.*, 1999).

This article attempts to locate the historical specificity of the current cultural and economic conjuncture in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands within the terms of debate surrounding the conflictual evolution of Western modernity, broadly defined as a particular historical period generated by a specific form of industrialization and urbanization (rooted in processes of socioeconomic “modernization”) and a critical intellectual response to that development (associated with “modernism”) (Berman, 1982; Soja, 1989; García Canclini, 1989). The precise causal relationship between modernization and modernism has long been rendered more complex than the crude base-superstructure models of Marxist orthodoxy would allow (Jameson, 1990; Dear, 2000). Thus, a key achievement for this debate is its insight into the intricate ways in which the very terms of uneven socioeconomic development—of “progress” and “backwardness”—are, in turn, defined by wider intellectual and political commitments involving state elites and non-state actors as they attempt to negotiate the contradictions produced by the encounter of accumulated local sociocultural traditions and transnational economic forces, which threaten to make “all that is solid melt into air” (Marx, cited in Berman, 1982). It is these more diffuse sociopolitical and intellectual engagements, I argue, that serve to legitimate and enable particular national governance regimes in the border region, and, in turn, help shape pathways for future regulatory policy options.

Against this conceptual backdrop, a key thesis of this article is that, in the current round of reflection on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the core of modernism's available narrative repertoire—its very language of space and time—is, despite its promise of cross-border transcendence, informed by a state-centric geographical bias that only serves to reinforce the border as a line demarcating separate and asymmetrical socioeconomic spheres. Thus, rather than view current patterns of socioeconomic inequality within the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as the result of an inadequately assimilated European modernity of Weberian rationality and efficiency, I suggest, on the contrary, that it represents the “state of the art” of a certain “hybrid” modernity, whose inner con-

traditions are negotiated in the specific social practices bounded within national territorial space.<sup>2</sup> Here, precisely in the way that Mexico's modernity "plays" with the possibility of transgressing the border without ever fully achieving that, lies the key to understanding the region's future dynamic. Its "state nomads" seek "shadow passports" to enter the as-yet-unrealized city of the binational frontier metropolis, but they pull back at the last moment, the better to absorb modernity's unfulfilled promise, defined in a vocabulary of *national* sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> The political-economic consequence of this move, I conclude, is a reinscription of socioeconomic difference, the product of recalcitrant and differentiated modernities juxtaposed on either side of the political dividing line (Alegria, 2000:90).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Prompted by the comment of an anonymous Spanish-language reviewer, I must clarify that no cross-border teleology is envisioned here. Indeed, one can apprehend U.S.-Mexico border space as various "sedimentations" of the modern, premodern, and postmodern. The crucial point is that whereas the metaphor of sediment implies a temporal stratification, the specific interplay of modernities grasped here would gesture instead towards subterranean tunnels and channels, "hidden" crevasses and ravines striating these "geologic" formations: the thunderous "vortex" of Michel Serres' angels (1993).

<sup>3</sup>In Europe, economic modernization and the cultural modernism of national sovereignty developed more or less within the same territorial frame (Agnew, 1987). Thus, the emergent nation-states of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were founded on a construction of rational, profit-maximizing individuals, which, in turn, formed the basis of internally coherent markets (Marshall, 1965; Hirschmann, 1977; Rothschild 2001). I argue that where Western modernity took root outside this European core, as in nineteenth-century Russia or early twentieth-century Mexico, no such territorial isomorphism between political economy and practices of sociocultural "translation" existed. In both contexts, the resultant "gap" between the scales of economic modernization and cultural modernism produced a certain "homelessness" on the part of elites, who responded in kind but to varying degree by affirming the temporary solution of the "imagined" modernity of the nation-state (Anderson, 1991). The production of such a state-centric bias, of course, is more than a mere reflection of the particular de-linking of economic modernization and cultural modernism within Mexico. For the peculiar "ambivalence" of Mexican modernity is profoundly informed by its experience with that "motor" of modernity, the United States, which expropriated more than half of Mexico's territory in the nineteenth century. (Special thanks to an anonymous reviewer for recalling this fact to the author.)

<sup>4</sup>With this formulation, I realize I risk turning Marx's base-superstructure model "on its head." But the point is that in understanding the complex causal interweaving between modernization, modernism, and modernity in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, no single axis can be privileged at the expense of another. In adopting a more fluid conception of modernity than that embraced in productivist accounts, I find myself more sympathetic, then, to the Latin American position, which understands the challenge of modernity in a "sociological" frame, defined by the way in which various elites "assume responsibility for the multitemporal heterogeneity of each nation" (García Canclini, 1989:15; author's translation). The goal of research, then, is to investigate the "indirect uses of power" (*poderes oblicuos*) that insinuate themselves within the institutions of liberal thought, "tragically" replicating authoritarian habits and predispositions (García Canclini, 1989:15).

*REFRAMING LATIN AMERICAN POSTMODERNITY: TOWARDS A  
TEXTUAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF BURIED SIGNS IN THE U.S.-MEXICO  
BORDERLANDS*

It has become somewhat fashionable to suggest that the U.S.-Mexico border—indeed the Latin American subcontinent as a whole—represents a form of postmodern space *avant la lettre*, having for decades encapsulated the social flux, cultural heterogeneity, and contested multitemporalities associated now with late capitalism (Jameson, 1990; Rouse, 1988; Franco, 1987). But, as García Canclini reminds us, despite all the elements of heterogeneous pastiche found within contemporary Latin American societies, for many of its elites, the goals of economic and political modernization remain primary (García Canclini, 1989:19; Paz, 1979). Whether in the rhetoric of the latest political campaign strategy or in the exhortations of macroeconomic structural adjustment packages, emphasis is clearly placed on technological advancement, economic modernization, and the replacement of informal political alliances with more transparent and accountable political structures. Thus, for the greater part of the Latin American social-science literature, modernity:

will continue to maintain necessary ties [...] with the disenchantment of the world, with the experimental sciences, and, above all else, with the rational organization of society resulting in productive and efficient industries and a well-run state apparatus (García Canclini, 1989:22; author's translation).

Since the Mexican Revolution, the overarching importance of nation-as-project has conditioned liberal thought in Mexico, defining its spatiotemporal possibilities and limits. Within this project's early historical development, the cultural field in Mexico was riven by cultural “traditionalists,” who attempted to create “pure” objects based on “authentic” national traditions protected from the ravages of industrial modernization and urban consumer culture, and “modernizers,” who believed in an aesthetic of art for art's sake, entrusting their hopes for progress to an autonomous form of experimentation and innovation that would transcend all territorial boundaries (García Canclini, 1989:17).

Soon, however, an interclass process of cultural mixture (*mestizaje*) created “hybrid” formations within all social strata of Mexican life, thereby confounding and disassembling these two original categories, which allowed for the

most innovative and heterogeneous mixing of local and cosmopolitan impulses in the crafting of a specifically Mexican modernization trajectory (García Canclini, 1989:71). Cultural “hybridity” would be appropriated at the turn of the century in the service of a national regenerative project bent on overcoming the legacy of uneven development rooted in oligarchic social structures and dependent international economic relations. In the words of Renato Ortiz, Mexican modernity, far from being a rarefied European transplant, would simply become an “idea ‘out of place,’ expressed as a project” (1988:34-36; author’s translation).<sup>5</sup> Rather than lead to the de-nationalization of local cultures, then, modernity-as-project is filtered into the Latin American intellectual imaginary through a vast “translation matrix” (García Canclini, 1989:78), capable of promoting a repertoire of symbols in the service of a distinctive national identity.

I argue that, in its cautious embrace of postmodern forms of theorizing space and place, the Mexican modern continues a tradition of taking ideas “out of place” and transforming them into living “projects.” For as influential an urban sociologist as Néstor García Canclini, the promise of postmodernity has offered Latin American intellectuals an opportunity to think beyond evolutionist categories framing much social-scientific thinking for the better part of the twentieth century (García Canclini, 1989:23). The postmodern condition affords Latin American intellectuals such as García Canclini the opportunity to rethink social dichotomies that these evolutionist paradigms once took for granted: colonizer/colonized, traditional/modern, “high” culture/popu-

<sup>5</sup>The notion of an “idea out of place” has a special resonance for Latin American intellectuals, many of whom have built their careers writing deeply and insightfully about their countries of origin from locations physically far removed: Berlin, London, Paris, New York... Nijmegen. It is one of the more perverse (but not entirely unjustified) pleasures of the New World “local” to remind the Europeanized scribes how oblivious and “out of place” they truly are. It is here, in a curious dialectic, that “modernization as routine”—the humdrum, prosaic reality of the border, its inherent everydayness (*cotidianidad*) (Bustamante, 1989)—collides deliciously with the wishful “modernization-as-adventure” fantasies of European(ized) intellectuals (Berman, 1982; Herzog 1990; Kramsch, 1990). The interesting question, of course, is what “newness” is gained in this encounter? And, what opportunities for dialogue are lost? From this complex dialectic of “global” modernization drives—now witnessed on the streets of Seattle, Prague, Nice, and Genoa—Latin American social scientists should at least question the assumption that, contrary to Mexico, the North American side of the border “only responds to impulses [originating] from within its own country” (Alegría, 2000:90). It is cause for hope that the legacy of such “structuralist-necessitarian” imaginaries has been subjected to pioneering critiques from Brazil, the “forward edge of the [Latin American] third world,” which leading members of Fox’s cabinet, such as Mexico’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Castañeda, have embraced (Castañeda, 2001; Unge, 1987).

lar culture. It is particularly through the analytical space of the cross-border metropolis—he purported crucible of hybrid social forms par excellence—that such categories are destabilized to greatest effect, mirroring the fractured morphology of the city itself. In cities such as Tijuana, for instance, such hybridized forms are exemplified through processes, one rooted in rupture and mixture of the formal organization of cultural systems, and the other rooted in the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of symbolic processes (García Canclini, 1989:264).

Regarding the latter, de-territorialization is linked to the “loss of any ‘natural’ association between culture and specific geographical or social territories.” Processes of re-territorialization, in turn, are tied to “relative and partial territorial relocations of old and new symbolic productions” (García Canclini, 1989:288; author's translation). With these formulations, García Canclini attempts to question any *a priori* relation between the production of popular culture and national territorial space, including its role as eternal opposition to international cultural codes. His narrative focuses particularly on the role of migration in deconstructing traditional social scientific notions of “community,” applied across a range of spatial scales, from isolated indigenous locales to the abstract space of the State (García Canclini, 1989:292).<sup>6</sup> Applying a broader macro-orientation, cross-border migration becomes a cipher heralding the erosion of traditional North-South relations as theorized in much Latin American dependency theory, grounded in visual metaphors of concentric circles of power emanating from metropolitan centers towards structurally debilitated peripheries. For García Canclini, the “implosion of the Third World within the First” signals the demise of “authentic culture as an internally coherent and autonomous universe” (Rosaldo, 1988:217).

Yet, how do such processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization express themselves in the actual sociocultural patterning of Tijuana-San Diego cross-border relations? It is here that the frontiers of the Mexican modern are revealed, where postmodern attempts to overcome the ideology of state-centric modernization-as-evolution collide with the agenda of making national projects from ideas derived “out of place.” So, for García Canclini, the

<sup>6</sup>As a case in point, García Canclini refers here to the migration of rural inhabitants from the village of Aguililla, Michoacán to Redwood City, California. In their annual northward pilgrimage, these Michoacanos stretch the boundaries of traditional community studies beyond all recognizable shape (García Canclini, 1989:292).

new phenomenon of cross-border “hybridization” is suggestively expressed in the billboards vying for space in Tijuana’s urban corridors, which, in their bilingual intertextuality, prefigure the cosmopolitan “transfrontier metropolis” of the future (Herzog, 1990). It is also powerfully captured in the figure of the painted donkey, a major attraction on *avenida* Revolución, Tijuana’s main thoroughfare and primary generator of tourist revenues. In this street scenario, vendors photograph tourists astride donkeys painted, for heightened exotic effect, to resemble zebras. The resulting photograph makes an inimitable souvenir. The “illusion” of donkey-as-zebra—as with the “game” played by the U.S. Border Patrol in tolerating the crossing of illegal Mexican immigrants onto U.S. territory—is meant to serve as a “recourse for the construction of cultural identity and [as a way of] communicating with others” (García Canclini, 1989:293; author’s translation).

García Canclini’s interviews with Tijuana residents during the mid- to late-1980s confirm that the underlying motivation behind the creation of the archetypal painted *burro* indeed befits the characterization of postmodern hybridity as inventive *bricolage*, *mélange*, *pastiche*, and the creative production of *simulacra*:

In light of the absence of other things, such as in [Mexico’s] South, where there are pyramids, there is nothing of the kind here [...] so there is the feeling that here we have to invent something for the *gringos* (anonymous respondent, cited in García Canclini, 1989:300-301; author’s translation).

This has also something to do with the myth that North Americans bring with them, which has to do with crossing the border towards the past, towards that which is savage, for the wish to ride off into the sunset (García Canclini, 1989:300; author’s translation).

The work of a number of performance artists who emerged in the Tijuana-San Diego region in the 1980s also intentionally reproduces and invokes the effect of cross-border, self-reflexive hybrid space.<sup>7</sup> Conscious of their peripheral status vis-à-vis established centers of cultural production in Mexico City, these artists and writers seek intentionally to ground their art in the ironic half-

<sup>7</sup>I cannot possibly do justice to the richness of cultural activity and symbolic experimentation that took place in the U.S.-Mexico border region over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, nor can I account for the more mundane (but no less vital) experience of residents as they navigate the border in their daily lives. Therefore, I ask for the indulgence of the reader in regard to what follows.



spaces of the U.S.-Mexico border. Guillermo Gómez-Peña<sup>8</sup> and Gloria Anzaldúa, arguably the best known Mexican and Mexican-American writers/performance artists on either side of the border, capture this sensibility vividly:

Border culture is a polysemantic term [...] [it] means boycott, complot, *ilegalidad*, *clandestinidad*, transgression [...] hybrid art forms for new contents-in-gestation: spray mural, techno-altar, poetry-in-tongues, audio graffiti, punkarachi, *videocorrido*, *antibolero*, *antitodo* [...] to be fluid in English, Spanish, *Spanglish*, and *Ingleñol* [...] transcultural friendship and collaboration among races, sexes, and generations [...] a new cartography: a brand-new map to host the new project; the democratization of the East; the socialization of the West; the Third-Worldization of the North and the First-Worldization of the South [...] a multiplicity of voices away from the center, different geo-cultural relations among more culturally akin regions: Tepito-*San Diejuana*, *San Pancho-Nuyorrico*, Miami-Quebec, San Antonio-Berlin, your home town and mine, *digamos*, a new internationalism ex centris [...] The border is the juncture, not the edge, and monoculturalism has been expelled to the margins [...] (Gómez-Peña, 1993:43-44).

From a “spatial feminist” perspective, Anzaldúa writes of her emergence into a new cross-border *mestiza* consciousness:

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with [...] is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

I am a border woman, I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions.

However, there have been compensations for this *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien element' [...] [that] has become familiar—never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home (Anzaldúa, 1987, unpagged preface; and cited in Soja, 1996:127).

<sup>8</sup>Gómez-Peña represents an updated variant of Latin America's “out-of-place” intellectual-artist since he hails originally from Mexico City but now divides his time between Los Angeles and New York. It is perhaps not a coincidence that his work irritates many long-time residents of the U.S.-Mexico border region, who resent his presumption in claiming insights about their day-to-day lives (García Canclini, 1989:302).

In contrast with processes of cross-border de-territorialization, processes of *re-territorialization* are only hinted at in García Canclini's text, when he writes that the reassertion of border identity occasionally translates into a geographical chauvinism directed against those inhabiting the central parts of the country. It can also target recently arrived immigrant groups via discrimination in the provision of equal access to schooling and housing (García Canclini, 1989: 304). Overall, however, his text gives the impression of the borderlands as a hotbed of cultural mix, cosmopolitan engagement, ironic and sophisticated detachment. Nevertheless, in line with my previous argument, I suggest that the internal logic of modernization runs much deeper than these anecdotal passages allow, overshadowing the much trumpeted “de-territorialization” of borderland social relations and reinforcing the state-centric territorialization of social values and norms. The very example used to describe accelerating patterns of cross-border hybridity—for instance, that of the painted *burro* on *avenida Revolución*—speaks more to the role of irony as a defensive mechanism in national Mexican modernity reinforcing the mutual incomprehension between Mexico and the United States. Postmodern “hybridity,” thus defined, rather than resolving the opposition of nationalism/cosmopolitanism that so engaged an earlier generation of Latin American artists and intellectuals, is placed in a line of direct descent from its modernist predecessors. This represents not a “de-territorialization” of cross-border social relations but a solidification of border-as-barrier effect. In this context, *contra* García Canclini, strategies for “entering and leaving modernity” are quite limited and much less voluntary than the texts of Gómez-Peña and Anzaldúa would suggest.

*FROM PUSHKIN'S BRONZE HORSEMAN TO THE  
DONKEY-AS-ZEBRA ON LA REVO: MEXICO'S  
STATE-CENTRIC MODERNIZATION AS “NECESSARY MYTH”*

Latin American intellectuals, such as García Canclini, observe that, contrary to modernist intellectual currents, postmodern de-territorialization has no referents against which to craft a stable language of resistance (García Canclini, 1989:307). But here I have attempted to show that a referent exists, although it is partially hidden in the rush to deconstruct the legacy of modernity in much of Western social theory in the 1990s. It continues to haunt Mexican

social life in the form of a still active state capable of assimilating foreign influences in order to stoke tensions between an underdeveloped modernization process and its evolving cultural modernism.

Whereas the state-imposed modernity of Petersburg—epitomized by Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman"—could only provide its subjects with "shadow passports," never fully providing a "home" capable of reconciling the demands of Western modernization and an authentic brand of cultural modernism, Mexico—as with much of Latin America—continues to successfully transform modernity as an "idea with no place" into a national project underpinning much of its developmental imagination to this day.<sup>9</sup> The question remains, however: When will the "myth" of state-led modernization in Mexico no longer be deemed "necessary"? What are its conditions of transformation? Who will be its protagonists? Think of the petty clerk before Pushkin's Horseman: "You'll reckon with me yet!" (Berman, 1982:284). But, will the Horseman this time chase him across the "public plaza" that is the borderline? As both the Fox and Bush administrations converge on a shared policy to define labor rights in the new century opening for Mexican immigrant workers, one can at least safely assume one thing: *their* passports will be for real.

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<sup>9</sup>For the critical Latin American social scientist/intellectual, however, the task, it appears, is *not* to genuflect before state-centric ideological forms:

Modernity is not just a space or a state within which one remains or emigrates. It is a condition that surrounds us, in the cities and in the countryside, in the metropolises and the developing world. With all the contradictions that exist between modernism and modernization, and precisely because of them, *it is a state of ceaseless transformation in which the uncertainty of what it means to be modern is never resolved*. To radicalize the project of modernity is to sharpen and renovate this uncertainty, creating new possibilities so that modernity can always be something else and again something other (García Canclini, 1989:333; author's translation, emphasis added).

In recent Latin American social-scientific work, are we perhaps witnessing the closing of this open-ended flexibility towards the "Mexican modern"? If so, in the context of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, how can we trace the histor(ies) of the opening and closing of this Peterine epistemological "window on the North"?

afforded the opportunity to visit the Estonian-Russian border on a conference/field trip (June 29-July 3, 2001), which, in turn, led me back to the work of Marshall Berman. The author accepts any errors as his own.

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