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Long Version of LASA paper on Rosina Conde

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“They wanted to turn us into pseudo-Chicanos/as”

Rosina Conde, interview, 164.

A few years ago Carlos Monsiváis published an article in a volume on the North American Free Trade Agreement in which he underlines the political, social, and cultural cost of the traditional division between Mexico City and the rest of the country: "Se santificó el juego de los opuestos: civilización y barbarie, capital y provincia, cultura y desolación. Desde principios de siglo . . . cunde una idea: la provincia es 'irredimible', quedarse es condenarse" 'A play of opposites was sanctified: civilization and barbarism, capital and provinces, culture and desolation. Since the beginning of the century . . . the idea has propagated that the province is 'unredeemable,' that to stay is to be condemned' (197). From Mexico City's point of view, the northern border is imagined as perhaps the most "unredeemable" of all the provincial representations. It is from a centrist perspective the region most affected by the cultural, linguistic, and moral corruption of Mexico's unfortunately proximate and powerful neighbor, the United States. Rosina Conde, a product and chronicler of the Californian border, has been, I suspect, one of the victims of this centrist snobbery about the northern border region of the country. Her numerous volumes of fiction and poetry <sup>1</sup> have been published by a variety of small, provincial presses, have received very little attention from the Mexico City mainstream cultural critics, and have been unfortunately understudied in Hispanist

circles in the United States as well. As María-Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, a culture critic working in Juárez, reminds us, both Chicano and mainstream Mexican writers have tended to ignore contributions of Mexican border writers like Conde, who do not fit well into either group's cultural agenda: "for Chicano/a literature the border is a topic, an inexhaustible utopia. . . . In Mexican border literature the topic of the border occupies an ordinary space, a place which is infrequently represented in writing" (161-2).

Reading Conde's works requires a shift of attention. She asks us to move away from a world imagined in terms of Mexico City vs. the provinces or Mexico vs. the United States; likewise, her works also demand that we rethink a notion of human motivations based on gender stereotypes of passive women and aggressive men (c.f. Paz' influential dichotomy of men and women in Mexico according to the Chingón/Chingada binary in his Labyrinth of Solitude). For this border writer, the consciousness of liminality extends itself to all realms of experience, and with it an effort to imagine/produce the subject of writing as more complex. She often focuses on what Trujillo Muñoz describes as a region "beyond taboos" in his brief note on this author, and he continues with a lapidary phrase that has become the most quoted comment on Conde's work: "Rosina Conde fue la primera escritora bajacaliforniana en explorar, sin ninguna clase de cortapisas, la relación amorosa en un mundo de dominados y dominadores" 'Rosina Conde was the first Baja Californian writer to explore, without any restraints, the amorous relationship in a world of dominators and dominateds' (181). I would go somewhat farther than Trujillo Muñoz in this characterization, and say that Conde's work directly addresses the traditional dichotomies of Mexican fiction, and inscribes the border existence as a particularly privileged location--simultaneously strange and familiar--to explore the gender- and regionally-bound nature of discursive constructions of Mexicanness itself. Her explorations of the intimate spaces of daily lives of border dwellers offer themselves at the same time as a political release from erasure on the national cultural scene as they also effect a rejection of sexually-marked repression in relationships both ordinary (portraits of stress lines in working class and middle class families) and liminal (her

delicate explorations of the insistently border-inflected worlds of assembly plants, prostitution, and strip tease).

This is most strikingly true when Conde brings her reader, as she often does, into the liminal world of abusive relationships, or of female sexuality bought and sold in Tijuana's many night clubs. In these stories Conde's interrogation of the tight imbrication of (provincial) identity and (deviant) female sexuality is particularly pronounced. In a manuscript on female prostitution in Tijuana, Gudelia Rangel Gómez writes a concise summary of the working of this stereotype:

Como puede observarse en el proceso histórico de Tijuana, tanto su crecimiento poblacional como su desarrollo económico han ido de la mano de actividades estimatizadas o consideradas prohibidas en otros lugares, esto ha provocado que la concepción generalizada de la ciudad haya sido un proceso de feminización de Tijuana; identificada primero con una "dama generosa" que permitió mejores niveles de vida a su población, posteriormente una "joven coqueta" que atraía hombres para "perderlos" y finalmente la visión que se tuvo de una "prostituta decadente y grotesca" que utilizaban aquellos que pasaban por Tijuana. (30)

As one may observe in the historical process of Tijuana, its population growth as well as in its economic development have gone hand-in-hand with activities that are stigmatized or prohibited in other places. This has resulted in a generalized conception of the city in terms of a process of feminization of Tijuana; identified first as a "generous lady" who allowed a better standard of living to her inhabitants, later as a "frivolous young woman" who attracted men who "got lost" and finally, the vision of a "decadent and grotesque prostitute" who used those who passed through Tijuana.

Rangel Gómez's reading of Tijuana's infamous international image as a meat market for the United States--U.S. men cross the border to purchase sex from Mexican women, while Mexican men cross the border to sell their labor in U.S. fields--is a potent one, suggesting that from both central Mexico as well as the U.S. there arises a tendency to feminize Tijuana in a particularly marginalizing

and stigmatized manner. Tijuana, in this respect, confirms the primacy of centrist notions about the provinces by antinomy. By setting Tijuana and its inhabitants outside the traditional construction of the motherland (madre patria) as a domestic space writ large, those Tijuanan generous ladies, frivolous women, and decayed prostitutes help define the normalized space, holding up a distorting mirror to central Mexico's sense of itself as a nation of decent women and hardworking men. Even more curiously, in view of Tijuana's notorious representation through an image of un-domestic femininity, until very recently, whether because of or despite the stereotype, writers and social scientists have tended to avoid analysis of the actual women who work in the night clubs as waitresses, dancers for pay, strip teasers, and prostitutes. As Patricia Barrón Salido acutely comments, even in respected studies of marginal figures from Tijuana, "parecería que la prostitución queda entre puntos suspensivos" 'it seems that prostitution remains in the ellipsis' (9).<sup>2</sup> It is this slipperiness of a term which is both essential and elided that Conde explores, and that requires further analysis.

This slipperiness is patent in one of Conde's recent stories, narrated from the point of view of a suicidal ex-prostitute called Sonatina currently involved in an intermittently oppressive relationship with Pilar, the lesbian lover who took her out of the life on the streets. "Nunca se esperan que una reaccione" 'They never expect one to react,' says the lover to Sonatina at one point when two men threaten them silently and Pilar responds with an aggressive gesture. Sonatina tells the reader that Pilar specifically emphasizes the feminine form of the word "one": "porque siempre se refirió a sí misma como una, recalcando la a para reafirmar su condición femenina. Pilar es ingeniera agrónoma, y estudió en la UNAM porque, dice, es la única universidad en América Latina que te da el título en femenino" 'because she always referred to herself as one [feminine gender marker] stressing the a in order to reaffirm her female condition. Pilar is an agricultural engineer, and she says she studied in the UNAM because it is the only university in Latin America that gives you a degree in feminine' (Embotellado 25). Pilar's gesture and her insistence upon finding an equal space for the feminine in language is an important one. Likewise, her consistent ideological stand on the issue of all degrees and levels of gender oppression is admirable, ranging from her attention

to biases built into the language to a concern for women's right to hold fulfilling professional careers. For Sonatina, however, her lover's familiar response is at the same time appropriate and excessive. The ex-prostitute initially applauds her lover's liberating feminist gesture, while later she comes to believe that men need such mostly harmless displays of potential violence in order to reaffirm their oft-threatened and insecure masculinity. Extrapolating from Sonatina's perspective, the reader is lead to understand that the aggressively butch attitude of the lover only inverts an unjust gender-based hierarchy without seriously questioning it.

Thus, the most nuanced commentary on gender performativity in this story comes from an unexpected source, as filtered through an insistently female-gendered perspective, but one that is referred to the readers through the counterpointed perceptions of that most unreliable of storytellers, a prostitute, and the most marginalized of women: a butch lesbian defiantly out of the closet. Conde's overall project in this story offers a point of view similar to that espoused by Monique Wittig. In her 1984 essay, "The Mark of Gender." Wittig reminds us that in French (as in Spanish, and unlike English), "Sex, under the name of gender, permeates the whole body of language and forces every locutor, if she belongs to the oppressed sex, to proclaim it in her speech, that is, to appear in language under her proper physical form and not under the abstract form, which every male locutor has unquestioned right to use. The abstract form, the general, the universal, this is what the so-called masculine gender means . . . " (6). What Conde does in her story is to disturb this assumed universality of the masculine gender in foregrounding gender itself as a problematic social and ontological category. "Sonatina" privileges the point of view of a feminine "they", who provide its basic narrative grounding. Yet, there is no attempt to counterpose "ellas" to "ellos" in a universalizing gesture, but rather to open up the discourse to a multiplicity of distinctly positioned "ellas" whose streams of voice combine to create the narrative point of view. And it is this technique, more than any other, which marks Conde's literary practice and makes it a welcome addition to modern Mexican literature. It is this same estranging technique which makes her stories seem so unfamiliar, difficult to read, and so ineluctably part of a border reality.

This same edgy quality, it seems to me, is exactly what will make Conde's stories attractive to the U.S. literary establishment, which has a long, if largely untheorized, connection to border-ness. María Rosa Menocal points to the significance of the community of exile scholars in the United States in shaping the discipline of comparative literature, which she argues is structured along the lines set out by "the legacy of exilic Romance philology . . . [having] no set languages or texts, no necessary borders, no temporal constraints or narrative shape" (137). Likewise, Emily Apter too picks up on the importance of remembering the degree to which the personal experience of displacement has come to shape the theoretical concerns of literary study: "From Spitzer to Bhabha (despite their being worlds apart) one discerns a recalcitrant homelessness of critical voice." Apter goes on to characterize "this unhomely voice,<sup>3</sup> together with the restless, migratory thought patterns of the discipline's theory and methods" as the grounding of comparative literature, concluding, "I would tend to frame the issue as a border war, an academic version of the legal battles and political disputes over the status of 'undocumented workers,' 'illegal aliens,' and 'permanent residents'" (94). Apter's description of elite theory in terms of a metaphorical border crosser may make some border scholars uneasy, yet her point about the freshness of this emerging, unhomely theory is well taken. According to this argument, U.S. elite literary theory returns to the shock of recognition born from these cultural displacements; thus, crossing the border offers an occasion for theoretical production precisely because of necessary personal accommodations involving a doubled cultural location.

Conde's contribution to U.S. theoretical discussions may well have something to do with an insistently gendered awareness of these border issues, as well as with sharpening our consciousness of the many regional differences among these writers and of the sometimes uncomfortable spaces they portray. Her characters, however, often operate in a translational hermeneutic space, and tend consistently to function in an implicitly contestatory relationship to the everyday operation of the basic premises that underlie centrist political structures on the one hand and patriarchal authority on the other. In this doubly displaced cultural and social location, Conde's women (her point of view characters tend to be female, or marginalized males) engage in activities and exchanges that point

up to the the frame for this limit space while at the same time demonstrating how sexist thinking distorts the relationships of women to each other.

The longest section of En la tarima is a series of nine short prose pieces (eight numbered fragments and an epilogue) entitled "Viñetas revolucionarias" (Revolutionary Scenes) and carrying the dedication: "Para Gilberto, hermano de armas" 'For Gilberto, brother at arms' (11). Given the traditional obsession of Mexican writers with the 1910 Revolution, the reader newly come to Conde's work might forgivably expect to find in this section of the book a contribution to that well-nourished sub-genre of post revolutionary fiction. Conde's En la tarima, however, is specifically Tijuanan, referring not to the Mexican Revolution, but its namesake: "Revolución," the main avenue in Tijuana, the center of that international city's tourist industry and site of such notorious delights as the world's longest bar and some of Tijuana's toniest strip tease and prostitution establishments. Each brief vignette in the sequence of "viñetas revolucionarias" gives the reader a glimpse into this Revolution: either through introduction to a half-dozen of its warriors: initiate stripteaser "Virgen, aún virgen" 'Virgin, still a virgin' (15); Lyn, "la reina de la rumba" 'the rumba queen' (16); Zoraída, immaculate in white (18); Mariela, the cocaine addict (20); Darling, the transvestite (22); and Zarina, who buries her pain in gluttony (24); or to evocation the sounds of its battles: the songs "Granada" (17) or "Rumba-rumbera" (21), and the eager solicitations of sidewalk callers: "¡Camin, sir! ¡Camin, sir! ¡Chou taim nau, sir...!" (29).

In each of these brief sketches, the excessiveness of performance belies a narrative of lack. Thus, for example, the poignancy of the first vignette comes from the performative qualities of an unexpected display of virginity poised on the imminence of its loss. This young woman, still technically a virgin, performs a masculinist stereotype of virginity as a titillating spectacle in a strip tease club. The performative innocence evoked through Virgen's appearance on the stage is, however, framed by two references to her sensuality which offset it and raise questions about the traditional Mexican society's obsession with a bit of hidden female flesh. The first reference to sensuality also involves a performance of sorts, and is called into being by (presumably) her boyfriend: "Pablo vendría a verla y habría que ser sensualmente bella, sobre todo después de las

flores" Pablo would come to see her and she'd have to be sensually beautiful, especially because of the flowers' indicating a quid pro quo in which the man's gifts require a certain payment of a sensual--if not necessarily sexual--nature on her part. The second of the two men, the Master of Ceremonies, constructs her along similar grounds and demands a stage and off-stage performance aligned with that image: "A él le gustaba así: sexy e ingenua" 'he liked her that way: sexy and naive' (15). Notably, it is very clear that what the men like in and desire from her is the staging of sexuality rather than the fact of it; as Virgen recalls to herself, her entire performance consists of simultaneously projecting sexuality and convincing the audience of her innocence--a double bind requiring an intense awareness of a denied presence. The central section of the sketch precisely delineates this dilemma: "Habría que bajar lentamente la escalera, apretando las piernas sin ver el público . . . cruzando las rodillas para esconder aquello con los muslos" 'She had to come down the stairs slowly, squeezing her legs together without looking at the audience . . . crossing her knees to hide that thing with her thighs' (15). Virgen's performative focus on her physical virginity estranges her sexuality and makes it unhomely: a contortionist's trick. Furthermore, the display of virginity on the stage points to its fungibility; when the narrator tells us that she is "aún virgen" 'still a virgin' Conde not only signals the appropriateness of the stage name to the physical woman, but also marks a temporal moment, that of the time just before virginity's loss, a moment of transit between physical states and identities.<sup>4</sup>

The focus on something hidden is common to other sketches as well, and tends to arise in situations that emphasize the estranging qualities of the strip teasers' lives. Zarina eats potatoes compulsively until they provoke nausea in order to hide from herself her possible pregnancy. Despite her efforts to deny it, her pregnancy is, nevertheless, narratively acknowledged, and makes itself seen and salable in the short run: "subió a la tarima en biquini sacundiendo las nalgas y las chichis aumentadas de tamaño por el posible embarazo" 'she stepped up to the platform in her bikini, shaking her ass and her tits, enlarged by the possible pregnancy' (25). In the stuttering syntax of this phrase the "possible" pregnancy becomes the proximate cause of the dancer's enlarged breasts, shifting the reader's perception between a fearful potential and a concrete actuality.



Darling, too, has a secret which must be hidden and displayed. A transvestite dancer, Darling's act consists in convincing the audience of her realness, to the point of inciting a sexually aggressive gesture on the part of males eager to "prove" their masculinity (here satisfied when a young man leaps on the stage and kisses her), then revealing the secret that she is really a he: "Darling avienta penacho y lentejuelas y, sonriente, triunfante, muestra de lleno el flet up y un pecho plano y brillante ante los ¡ohes! estupefactos de los admiradores. Un hombre vomita" 'Darling throws aside feathers and sequins and smiling, triumphant, shows off flat top and smooth, flat chest for the stupefied Ohs! of the admirers. A man vomits' (23). Darling's act is staged as much in the carefully chosen syntax of the sketch, which scrupulously avoids revelatory male gender markers until the reader and the audience is hit with the punch line at the same time. Curiously, both Zarina and the hapless over-eager audience member in Darling's performance respond to the unhomely intrusion (the presence of the unwanted fetus, the unwanted--or unacknowledged desire for--the touch of male lips) with an identical gesture of physical rejection: the nausea which symbolically expels the forbidden/undesirable object.

The fifth sketch opens when Mariela applies makeup to her eyes to hide the traces of her disappointment with a man as she prepares for her act. The word choice in the meticulous description, however, once again calls attention to itself by a minute strangeness in the syntax: "Mariela optó por abrir el estuche de malaquita" 'Mariela opted for opening the malaquite box' (19). The importance of this odd phrasing, with its implication of options not taken, becomes clear only at the end of the sketch in which Mariela hesitates before going onstage, and picks up the malaquite box again: "y lo abrió por el fondo; tocó con cuidado el talco--ahora blanco--con la yema del anular, lo acercó a la nariz, e inhaló" 'and she opened the bottom, touched the talcum powder--white now--with the tip of the ring finger, held it up to her nose, and inhaled' (20). Economically, Conde turns the familiar scene of a woman's betrayal by her man into something quite different. The familiar and the estranged touch each other in the two sides of the malaquite box, which holds facial powder to cover up bags under the eyes on the one side, and on the other, secret side, hides cocaine. At all times then, Mariela has two choices when opening the box, and the sinister weight

of that unusual verb "optar" becomes clear in retrospect. Here two very different but equally stereotypical performances of the feminine touch in counterpoint. Yet, that very knife edge of contact between contrasting stereotypes points to the particular issue problematized in this sketch. In the contact between the two sides of the box, Conde once again addresses the contrapuntal force of the edgily marginalized border reality.

The title of Conde's later volume of short stories, Arrieras somos (Women on the Road...) emphasizes these edgily self-aware displacements once again, in a different key. From the very title of the collection readers know that we are dealing with a moment of transit, and indeed, the book as a whole interrogates the boundaries of contemporary Mexican society through the active forgetting of the stereotypical domestic life. In an article on aporia, Derrida makes an apposite comment in his discussion of what we might call the border trauma induced by such transitional actions: "The crossing of borders always announces itself according to the movement of a certain step [pas]--and of the step that crosses a line. . . . There is a problem as soon as the edge-line is threatened. . . . There is a problem as soon as this intrinsic division divides the relation to itself of the border and therefore divides the being-oneself of anything" (11). For Derrida, the play on "pas," the French word for "step" and for "not", serves to clarify and delimit this problematic defining and dividing of the self. At the same time, the action of "crossing the line" evokes both literal movement across a boundary and the ontological and ethical decision to step outside traditional moral judgments.

Thus, for example, the narrator in "Barbarella," following a trajectory exactly the opposite of--and in implicit dialogue with--actress Jane Fonda's famous roles on film and in life, was once a perfect little lady according to her own self-description, but now wears Madonna-style, aggressively sexy clothes. In this story, then, female self presentation has everything to do with a nuanced understanding and manipulation of implicit dress codes from at least two cultural contexts: middle class Mexican and Hollywood American. Each context offers its own stereotypical coding of proper and improper dress, and each offers an implied narrative of the woman's destiny as ciphered in her choice of clothes. In "Barbarella", the two narratives play off against each other, each opening a space for commentary on the vagaries of female dress and on the shared affinity in both

Mexican and U.S. cultural settings for encouraging girls to play with dolls, and to play with themselves as if they were just life-size Barbies. Thus, an exaggerated Shirley Temple mode of dress provides the young girl with the rewards of familial approval while allowing her to retain an ironic distance from her own style of presentation. Likewise, the aggressively rebellious implications of rock singer clothing become part of a code tacitly understood by the narrator and the reader, and intentionally incomprehensible to the mainstream manifestations of either Mexican or U.S. culture, where Madonna(s) are always blonde Barbies and Barbarellas.

In this manner Conde's protagonist demonstrates how an exaggerated performance of femininity--whether through childlike bows or tight bustiers--points to a deplorable internationalization of pop culture bad taste in which the worst of U.S. cultural models serve as visual signs of a Mexican woman's "stepping across the line" in both senses of the phrase, and with all the double charge of negativity and forward action that Derrida uncovers in his discussion. At the same time, and more importantly, Barbarella also reminds us how a performative attitude infuses clothing style with ideological content. She says of her clothes: "They intimidate whoever looks at me and they force him to swallow his thoughts because the sensual intimidates and attacks" (73-4). This perception of an edgily violent dimension of sensuality, one that women can manipulate to attack men rather than the reverse, gives overt form to a conflict that elsewhere in the collection is more often expressed in barbed comments, suggestive silences, and subtle rebellions against the status quo.

Frequently, though, for these women on the road, powerlessness and empowerment equally turn on questions of self-presentation, and on the aggressive rereading and reinterpretation of a specific style. One of the most dazzlingly accomplished stories in the collection, "Rice and Chains," utilizes the metaphor of knitting, and mimics a woman's thoughts as she knits a sweater for her unborn child. As Elizondo notes in his introduction to the collection, the narrative technique in this story has a deliberate--and deliberative--monotony about it that simulates the placid activity it describes. At the same time, "we come to realize that the stitch that goes 'backwards,' the purling stitch, reveals that the protagonist also takes steps backwards; then, by knitting a few more

stitches, she advances. . ." (17). Knitting, then, is not just a typically female task, but also serves as a way of silently coming to a greater understanding of the narrative of a human life as well as a concrete embodiment for that activity. It too, then, concerns itself with a metaphorical "stepping across the line." In this complementary and counterpunctual activity of knitting and purling, Conde not only signals the strange shape of an embodied language, but also continually foregrounds its gendered quality. Knitting can stand for gender oppression, and the lulling process of setting stitches smoothes over the unhappy circumstances described, until at last we are pulled up short with a telling metaphor: "Isn't your knitting like your mother's life? Everything's made up of rice stitches and chains; stitches to the right, back stitches, loops, knots. Rice when she got married, chains in her marriage, knots in her throat" (28). Rice, chains, and knots symbolize a woman's life and her entrapment in the repressive discourse that harms her. In evoking her mother's story, the narrator, a single mother-to-be, signals the deep spiritual wounding of a Mexican woman living with repressive customs. Trinh T. Minh-ha comments, in words that seem equally applicable to Conde's aesthetic, and also capture the back-and-forth motion of a woman's painful unlearning of institutionalized tropes as she works towards a more liberating language: "In trying to tell something, a woman is told, shredding herself into opaque words while her voice dissolves on the walls of silence. . . . And often [she] cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said" (79-80). Conde, however, differs from Trinh, for while she impresses upon us the potent image of the marriage chains and the knotted throat, her work also imagines an alternative to the mother's silencing. Silent herself, the daughter recognizes the fact of her mother's oppression, and through her own coming to terms with her knitting, allows us to see in this womanly task an unlikely process for working through a liberating discourse.

In this way, the words that wound and silence women, and that women use to wound and silence themselves, have an ambiguously empowering outlet by which the young woman is able to reevaluate her own life in the light of her mother's and to move toward a more conscious and empowered position. The young woman in this story, thus, imagines herself in the context of a

textured, knitted language, and in the projected embodiment of the next child in this knotted text, her own baby. While retaining from her mother's repressed world the silent and seemingly inoffensive practice of knitting, the younger woman uses that occupation as a strategy to situate herself on the borders of a different way of imagining that knitted text of a woman's life.

Still further: through the powerful image of a marriage characterized by "knots in her throat" of a woman who finds refuge in what hurt her, and of another, unmarried mother-to-be who uses the knotting threads as a silent reproach to masculinist constructions of narrative, Conde implicitly questions the Enlightenment heritage of a mind-body split, and also outlines the far more radical question about the nature of representation itself. As Butler says of Irigaray, in words roughly applicable to the Mexican border writer, "Irigaray would maintain, however, that the feminine 'sex' is a point of linguistic absence, the impossibility of a grammatically denoted substance, and, hence the point of view that exposes that substance as an abiding and foundational illusion of a masculinist discourse" (10). Substance, in these stories, is an abiding illusion, one ideologically charged by an unexpected performative, just as illusion offers a foundational reality for self-reinvention. Both alternatives involve a conscious self-presentation that may be deeply estranged from the home (as in the sketches from En la tarima, and in Barbarella's hip rebellion against her family mores) or, in "Rice and Chains," the coming to awareness of a practice of repression from within that repressive structure.

"My Birthday Gift" revolves around a busy husband, who leaves his wife a check and a note "in which he wished me a happy birthday and assured me, 'not without a certain perverse pleasure,' that the check was to be used to buy myself 'some lingerie'" (43). The wife takes umbrage, seeing the ostensible gift to her as in fact a gift to him, intended for his pleasure. The sister, on the other hand, reinterprets the gift as a way for the husband to show his appreciation of his wife, to enhance her pleasure (45). Each of these alternative interpretations is plausible, and each fits into a certain, well-traveled domestic economy. Conde once again takes a further step, one that crosses the line. The story ends, not with a resolution of this counterpoint between these two homey alternatives, but with an ambiguity that suggests a third, more "perverse" interpretation. The wife arrives home,

strips, and steps into the shower, only to discover her husband already there. Here is the last sentence of the story: "Finally, I threw my stockings on the bed and stepped into the shower naked, surprising Gustavo, who smiled, delighted, with my lace panties in his hands" (47). Is Gustavo delighted because his wife is, as he imagines, offering herself for his pleasure? Or is the sister's interpretation more accurate? Or, equally likely, does Conde's delicate initial suggestion of a streak of perversity in the husband hint that his pleasure is found not in his wife, but in his wife's lingerie, which he enjoys as fetish objects or as the core of a transvestite wardrobe? The point, I think, is not to decide among these alternatives, though to my mind the body of Conde's work convincingly demands of its readers unhomely readings of unhomely situations, but rather to open out the ideological spaces by virtue of which dislocation and border-ness themselves become interpretative categories.

Other stories also turn on a conscious manipulation of stereotypical expectations about male-female relationships. In "Do You Work or Go to School," both Miguel Angel, the sales manager at the narrator's job, and her boyfriend, Antonio, manipulate the rhetoric of feminism in the service of ends that support male privilege. Miguel Angel "laid on a line about women's liberation: that I was intelligent, self-confident, and super sexy. . . . He lays it all on me and proposes that I go take modeling classes in San Diego" (31). When she tells Antonio about this suggestion, the boyfriend "starts on his women's liberation line, the exact opposite of Miguel Angel's. He started telling me how women become objects, things to be used, and how models are the worst thing about the capitalist system . . ." (32). In each case, the men's motive is exploitation; reading the one against the other tells us exactly in which mode. Antonio, who tells the narrator that women become objects through modeling, is concerned because he does not want to lose the comfortable woman-object he has been enjoying for his sexual pleasure. Miguel Angel, who tells her that she is sexy and independent, eventually exploits her as the company prostitute to soften up potential investors. In this respect, the warnings of both men are very much on the mark. The narrator's eventual conclusion, however, once again shifts the discussion to surprising grounds. The rhetoric of liberation does not serve her, she finds, as the world is controlled by men, "and look! while guys

don't come to some agreement as to what liberation is, well, we'll be going to hell, because they fix things to their advantage." Her decision is to astutely play the system against itself, refusing to participate any longer in this self-serving rhetoric. Instead, she uses a particular performative enunciation of her femininity to her gain:

That's why now, when I meet a guy and he asks me, "Do you work or go to school?" I answer, like some bimbo, "Oh, gee, I don't work or go to school!" because that's what they want, idiotic little women who won't think and aren't economically self-sufficient.

They're finally paying for everything. (36)

Once again in this story, as in "Barbarella," sensuality attacks, creating an unfamiliar, dislocated space for a feminist intervention in the unlikely staging of a helpless femininity. In each case, awareness of the undercurrents of language and of the shifting ideological frames allows the women in these stories to use men's strategies and expectations against them.

Conde puts us all, puts herself as well, in the position of observers upon these strange and familiar scenes, and the fact of our reading, writing, and thinking about them identifies us ineluctably as outsiders to that space. To some degree her stories rely for their effect upon an implicit bond between the reader and the narrator involving a shared understanding and a shared quirky humor about social representations, a reader-narrator complicity that requires the exclusion of each society's typical self-imaginings. Conde's intimate exploration of the Tijuana underworld, for example, is not a knowledge she can expect all her readers to share; however, we as readers are aligned with the liminal characters in her stories. More broadly, as a border writer, she is displaced by definition with respect to mainstream Mexican concepts of themselves. Monsiváis, in an ambiguously tongue-in-cheek taxonomy of Mexico's self-definition, lists eight different variations on how to imagine the "provinces" in central Mexican thought, among which he includes the northern border states as a provincial entity characterized by international cultural shock and the commercialization of nationalism: "en la frontera norte la mexicanidad es, a un tiempo, selección de lo entrañable, coraza defensiva y disfraz esporádico" 'on the northern border Mexicanness is, at the same time, the choice of the essential, a defensive shell, and a sporadic disguise' (201-202). While

Monsiváis' descriptions are meant to be provocative, it is precisely this corrosive attention to marginality as essence, shell, or disguise that is one of the hallmarks of Conde's prose, whether in her oddly inflected domestic scenes or her nuanced portraits of women from the border underworld. Our illusion of complicity with her--of a joke or a delicately phrased insight shared--is undercut by the shifting positionalities of characters and narrators in the borderlands she limns.

I am tempted to end my discussion at precisely this point. However, that would be to ignore the central problem haunting this reading of Conde's work. Strikingly enough, while it seems to me that it is this distancing element that is most likely to earn Conde additional readers in this country, that appropriation of her work, like this paper, tends to organize itself neatly around theoretical concerns Conde--unfortunately--might well reject. Her border is not, finally, contained in or defined by Derrida's or Apter's border metaphor, nor by Bhabha's academic homelessness. If indeed the theoretical structure of U.S. literary theory has a long historical connection to thought elaborated through the crucible of displacement and exile (the same could perhaps be said of the most influential variants of French theory as well: thinkers like Derrida, Kristeva, Todorov, and Cixous all carry with them impressive border-crossing credentials as displaced intellectuals), then those elements are precisely the ones that allow us to naturalize Conde within that literary-theoretical establishment without questioning its boundaries. Like Carlos Monsiváis, whose meditations on the central Mexican-northern border axis served as the frame for this paper, Eduardo Barrera has commented on the strangely circular construction of much theorizing on border issues. Referring to one of the most prominent performers of "borderness" for U.S. and European audiences--Mexico City native Guillermo Gómez Peña--Barrera writes: "Gómez Peña fabricates his border by drinking from the same theoretical watering holes as the academics who test their arguments with his texts. This quasi-incestuous relationship has turned into a vicious circle which excludes primary referents. Gómez-Peña's border turns into the Border of . . . Homi Bhabha" (152). Rosina Conde, too, has commented on the alienation of the border from itself in these cultural productions. Conde was one of the members of the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo, founded by Gómez Peña. She tells Tabuenca Córdoba in a 1994 interview that she left



the workshop, however, because “they wanted to present a border art much different from ours, but this was not a problem. . . . [T]he problem was that they wanted to impose their will. They wanted to turn us into pseudo-Chicanos/as, or into a *fronterizo/a* that did not represent us” (164).

Conde and Barrera put their finger on precisely the problem that exercises me here, and to which I confess to having no solution. While imaginatively we can shift our positions, aligning ourselves with Conde’s characters and, with a complicitous wink, pretending to step outside both the U.S. and the Mexican mainstream cultural establishments, in fact the presuppositions we bring to our readings inexorably shape our understanding of them. Neil Larsen poses the conundrum eloquently in his recent book tracing the intersection of North American Latin Americanists and Latin American writing:

. . . writing and reading “North by South” has had continually to pose the question of its own authority. Even the most exoticist of gazes presupposes the exotic as an object whose legitimacy must be at least equal to the domestic. Thus, in directing its attention elsewhere, the North necessarily concedes something about its own sense of identity and authority, its own position on the hermeneutic map. The question of the object’s legitimacy--why read this and not something else?--cannot finally be detached from the question of self-legitimation: what, at the outset, authorizes or justifies the subject as the reader/writer of this object? (3)

Larsen’s question brings us directly into the realm of the ideological and cultural biases encrypted in the literary canon. He suggests, for example, that the Boom writers of the 1960s and 1970s became an international academic phenomenon partly because non-Latin American Latin Americanists found the Boom amenable to readings in which a European High Modernist aesthetic coincided fortuitously with a sensibility made acute in opposition to the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

I suspect that the Rosina Conde who resisted being turned into a Gómez Peña/Homi Bhabha pseudo-Chicana nostalgic for a universalizing, utopic, abstract borderness, is equally careful in her stories to resist cooption into another version of the North’s hermeneutic map. The unsettling

edginess of her stories, the slipperiness of terms and positionalities represent the first place to search for such traces of resistance. In these powerful texts, it is through Conde's reinscription of concepts of gender right that she exposes the weakness and bias of much Mexican, Chicano, and mainstream U.S. theoretical meditations on borders.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>(Hilda) Rosina Conde (Zambada; Mexicali, 1954) is the author of the short story/novella collections Embotellado de origen (Bottled at the Source, 1994), El agente secreto (The Secret Agent, 1990), Volver (Return), En la tarima (On the Platform, 1984), De infancia y adolescencia (Of Infancy and Adolescence, 1982), Arrieras somos... (trans. as Women on the Road, 1994). There is a considerable overlap among stories in the collections. She has also published several volumes of poetry: Poemas de seducción (Poems of Seduction, 1981), Bolereando el llanto (Crying to Boleros, 1993), De Amor gozoso (textículos) (On Pleasurable Love: Texticules, 1991), has worked in theater: "Cuarto asalto" (Fourth Assault; the fourth act of a collaborative play entitled En esta esquina [On this Corner]), and has written a novel, Genara. It would be impossible to study all her works in this short space, so I will concentrate here on short stories drawn from two collections: En la tarima and Women on the Road.

<sup>2</sup>Barrón Salido is referring to a specific report on the situation in Tijuana. She quotes Martín de la Rosa's extensive list of marginal persons: "Vamos a ocuparnos en este apartado de los peones, los albañiles, meseros, lavacoches, periodiqueros, las 'marías,' los que 'ya volvieron del otro lado' (metedólares), los que 'quieren ir al otro lado,' las empleadas domésticas, las 'que lavan ajeno,' los yonkeros, los 'cholos,' los barrenderos, los artesanos, los vendedores ambulantes, . . . los desocupados" 'We are going to concern ourselves in this report with the peons, the construction workers, the waiters, the car washers, the newspaper sellers, the indigenous women workers, those who came back from the other side, those who want to go to the other side, the servants, the washerwomen, the junkies, the gang members, the street sweepers, the handicraft makers, the street salespeople, the unemployed.'

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<sup>3</sup> Apter is referring to Homi Bhabha's coinage of the word "unhomely" as a way of re-thinking Freud's classic study of the "Unheimlich" (usually translated as the "uncanny). For Bhabha, the postcolonial critic/writer's experience of the unhomely follows from "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" and he describes it as a common feature in border culture, in exile literature, and in Third World literature in general: "In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (141).

<sup>4</sup>The titillating anomaly of the virgin-whore follows directly from ambiguous legal status of prostitution in Mexico. Federal law makes procuring illegal, but does not proscribe prostitution per se. The result, as Barrón Salido notes, is that establishments "hide" their most notorious function: "únicamente no se registra como actividad económica, aún cuando se presenta de manera abierta" 'it is just ignored as an economic activity, even when it occurs in an open manner.' One consequence is an inevitable spill-over of function and of public perception. Since the prostitutional economy is "hidden", there is tendency to assume that all women who work in such places are necessarily prostitutes (39).