

**Eating the Nation:
Selling Like Water for Chocolate in the USA
by Harmony H. Wu**

Refiguring Foundational Fictions

Latin America, Doris Sommer argues, has a long tradition of re/writing the nation through its novels and novelists. Capitalizing on the gaps left by historians, novelists essentially wrote or created the nation: "The writers were encouraged both by the need to fill in a history that would increase the legitimacy of the emerging nation and by the opportunity to direct that history toward a future ideal."¹ These nation-building novels or "foundational fictions" overwhelmingly took the form of romances, displacing the problems of forging a nation onto the successful coupling of two lovers from different races, classes or regions.²

In 20th century Mexico, film production has inherited the role of re-writing the nation, particularly in the popular melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s that focus on the Mexican Revolution. These "revolutionary melodramas," as Deborah Mistrón names them,³ spoke to national concerns of whether or not the Revolution had sufficiently addressed the social needs of Mexico.⁴ Laura Podalsky seems to draw a connection between Doris Sommer's argument and the role of the revolutionary melodramas when she writes:

By repeating highly conventionalized stories which the reader/spectator already knows, the texts continually work through ideological conflicts which remain unresolved in the reader/spectator's lives...revolutionary melodramas like Flor Silvestre provided a fictional space within which to work out the meaning of the Revolution in light of contemporary circumstances.⁵

Implicit in Podalsky's analysis of the social role of these melodramas is the historically critical and revisionist function of these filmic texts in the imagining of the Revolution. Rather than writing a foundational fiction, these films were re-creating the actual historical foundational moment of the Mexican Revolution itself. In so doing, the revolutionary melodrama in essence re-imagines the modern nation.

The classic revolutionary melodrama Flor silvestre [Wildflower] (1943), directed by Emilio "El Indio" Fernández and photographed by Gabriel Figueroa, is a film very much in the tradition of Sommer's foundational fictions. The problems of the Revolution and its resolution are played out in the film as romance and familial conflict, the two mainstays of melodrama. José Luis is the son of a landowner; Esperanza's family is among the peasants who work for him. They marry in secret, reconciling in romance the class conflict at the heart of the Revolution, but José Luis's father disapproves strongly when he learns of the

marriage, representing in generational terms the resistance of the "old" Mexico toward the installation of the "new." Joining the cause of the Revolution, José Luis must fight against all that his father represents. But, when his father is killed as a result of revolutionary activity, José Luis seeks to avenge his death, a move which, as Podalsky points out, places him at odds with the national interests of the Revolution.⁶ Thus José Luis's familial dilemmas reflect those of the emerging nation in a state of transition.

It is the generation to follow, Esperanza and José Luis's child, who will inherit the great legacy of the Revolution. This is explicitly figured in the narrative frame with an aged Esperanza overlooking the lands which were the site of conflict in her youth, but are now peaceful, with her grown son in military uniform at her side. She speaks poetically about the love of the earth being the greatest and most painful, and espouses that every person must have his/her piece of land: "Eran muy pocos, los que tenían tanta tierra. Otros, en cambio, no tenían nada" [They were few who had so much land. Others, on the other hand, had nothing]. The issues of class and land reform are thus explicitly indexed as the concerns of the melodrama to follow. And, she highlights the continuity of the past represented in the narrative with the present of the frame (which was, of course, the "present" for the contemporary audiences). The blood spilled in the past, she says, gave birth to the Mexico of today. Her monologue gives purpose to the personal suffering about to be related in the film,⁷ as well as outlines what is at stake in this text: the lionization of social justice and the ideological realignment of the meaning of the Revolution.

As seen in Flor silvestre, the revolutionary melodrama is a rich form for representations of the nation. As a foundational moment, the Revolution becomes the site of multiple and changing discourses, of honor, justice, revenge or family. The melodramatic form, for its part, lends its strong allegorical capacity, allowing the family and the coupling of José Luis and Esperanza to be overdetermined with the issues of the nation.⁸

Revolutionary Melodrama for the 1990s?

Against this history of foundational fictions and revolutionary melodramas comes Como agua para chocolate [Like Water for Chocolate] in the early 90s. The salient question to ask for this film in relation to this context is what is its agenda in appropriating the forms for re-imagining nation-ness in 1991? Como agua para chocolate, directed by Alfonso Arau from the novel written by ex-wife Laura Esquivel who also adapted the screenplay, again returns to the Revolution with its own re-imagining of the nation. Como agua para chocolate uses the Mexican Revolution as a backdrop, returning to this foundational moment in Mexican history, but it also returns to the foundational texts of the classic revolutionary melodramas like Flor silvestre that

first re-imagined that moment cinematically. Almost as markers of narrative progression, Arau quotes the visual style of Fernández and Figueroa with low angle shots and wide expanses of sky and sculptural clouds,⁹ almost requiring that Como agua para chocolate be read within the diverse context of its intertextuality. It is at once revising the classic revolutionary melodramas like Flor silvestre, engaging in a historical discourse (both in its own representations and in its references to the revolutionary melodramas which were themselves historically revisionist), eliciting comparisons with the novel from which the film is adapted, and activating a discourse of magic realism that necessarily invokes classics of this genre in the literary tradition. At the same time, its unique production and box office history—as a staggeringly expensive production in Mexican terms and at the time of its release the most successful foreign film ever distributed in the U.S.—grafts additional considerations of capital (cultural and otherwise) in examinations of the film.

Given the complex intertextual matrix of Como agua para chocolate, it is no surprise that its ideological implications and re-imagining of the modern nation are quite changed from Flor silvestre. The academic and popular discourse in the United States has articulated the ideological agenda of Como agua para chocolate as a liberal, feminist treatise, and the film certainly suggests these possibilities. However, I argue that the text itself doubles back against its own feminist pretensions, resulting in what is ultimately a conservative text.

Woman, Nation, Revolution

But before examining the film's feminine representations, there needs to be an accounting for of the history of representations of women in Mexican cinema. Since the Golden Age, representations of women have undergone various revisions and reinterpretations. From the strict dichotomy of virgin/whore, the image of women in Mexican screens has diversified, particularly since 1968.¹⁰ Como agua para chocolate must be positioned within the history of this larger movement of redefining representations of women. Indeed, Como agua para chocolate has been heralded by scholars of Mexican cinema as the film that has established new ground in positing "positive images" in terms of cinematic representations of women. David Maciel writes, "Como agua para chocolate is perhaps the most powerful and skillfully realized women's story of recent Mexican cinema."¹¹ And, Alex Saragoza and Graciela Berkovich argue that the feminine representations in Como agua para chocolate are an ideological break with films that show women who are liberated but still confined within the patriarchal system.¹² However, a close reading of Como agua para chocolate shows that the break is not as clean or radical as it has been figured.

Continuing in the tradition of the classic revolutionary melodramas like Flor silvestre, Arau's film projects ideological

issues onto the individual matters of the family. Conflict between "old" and "new" is again rendered in generational terms. The narrative of Como agua para chocolate concerns the subversion of the rules of Mama Elena, who has decreed that according to family tradition, her youngest daughter, Tita, may never marry, and is instead condemned to care for her mother until the matriarch's death. In the repression of feminine desire and its figuration as "tradition," Mama Elena and her ideas represent outdated, patriarchal ideology. But Tita falls in love with young Pedro, and their desire to consummate and marry threaten Mama Elena's social order. As in Flor silvestre and the foundational fictions, it is love and the union of lovers that represent a break with the past, and in Como agua para chocolate, the threat of subversion to the dominant patriarchal order. But the issue here is of feminine agency and desire, not class conflict as it was in classic revolutionary texts. Como agua para chocolate has appropriated the form and forum for ideological change from Flor silvestre and other classic revolutionary melodramas, but apparently has altered the goal of change from class to gender concerns.

Even the Revolution itself as represented in Como agua para chocolate is no longer associated with the agendas of class justice and land redistribution at the heart of the (historical) Revolution. Tita's magical food, into which she sublimates her own desires, has an erotic effect on everyone who eats it. Tita's sister Gertrudis is so turned on by the food that she sets fire to the bath house with her burning desire. A Villista miles away in the midst of battle smells her passion and rides off to capture a nude and burning Gertrudis and fulfill both his and her erotic fantasies. Gertrudis joins the Revolution, not for social justice, as did José Luis in Flor silvestre, but for sexual liberation. The Revolution becomes a sexual one, reinscribed as a discourse of erotics and gender, endowing these ostensibly feminist concerns with historical and national importance.

Another important marker of the text's feminine/feminist point of view is the narrative voice-over. Like Flor silvestre, Como agua para chocolate charts the re-imagined Revolution's impact on the present through a narrative frame set in the spectator's present. The film opens with Tita's great-grand niece chopping onions, which triggers Proust-like memories and reflections on the narrative past.¹³ The great-grand niece's voice is heard throughout the master narrative, the story of Tita and Pedro, offering subjective insights and providing explanation. As narration, the voice is omniscient and powerful: this disembodied voice effectively dominates the text, suggesting that a feminine voice and a feminine perspective control the narrative.

Clearly, as demonstrated in the examples cited above, Como agua para chocolate figures itself as a feminine/feminist text, presenting feminine subversion of the patriarchal system in the past to realign the nation's "future ideal" (our present, figured

in the frame) with feminine agency and empowerment. However, upon pressing this reading, it soon becomes clear that elements in the narrative itself frustrate this position. Sommer's paradigm of the foundational fictions is again helpful to elucidate this problem. The purpose of romances in Latin American foundational fictions, Sommer argues, is to symbolically weave together previously divided classes and races in order to produce a hybrid new generation. She writes, "Unproductive eroticism is not only immoral; it is unpatriotic."¹⁴ Classic revolutionary melodramas and Flor silvestre follow that logic: Esperanza and José Luis's child represents the fruit of their suffering and is the new nation, the unity of social classes. But Como agua para chocolate turns problematic on this point of reproduction. Tita's only moments of maternal plenitude (which suggest alternatives to a patriarchal system) are both given to her and taken away by the patriarchal/male figures. Tita first takes on the role of productive matriarch when her virgin breast magically produces milk to feed Rosaura and Pedro's child—but this power is bestowed on her by Pedro's erotic gaze, which imparts the maternal flow. Tita's nurturing maternal agency is thus sanctioned and conferred by masculine desire. Later in the film, Tita and Pedro consummate their love for the first time, after Mama Elena has been killed by bandits. Tita thinks she is pregnant, a thought which is at first horrifying, but Tita and Pedro soon await the child with hopeful anticipation. But this promise of a new generation built on their subversive, magic love is taken away: the pregnancy was actually a hysterical one wished upon Tita by the ghost of patriarchal Mama Elena as punishment for her indiscretion with Pedro. Even though the text attempts to create an alternate feminine discourse through its magic realist aesthetic, one outside traditional realism aligned with patriarchy, these maternal and patriotic moments are still tightly conferred and controlled by patriarchal power—and the supposedly alternative, feminine magic is shown to be bound to patriarchy and the thrust of traditional, phallic narrative.

The power of the patriarch is shown to be still intact and potent in another significant sequence. When Tita and Mama Elena hear of Rosaura's son's death (Elena has sent the family to live over the border so as to separate Tita and Pedro), Tita's anguish is overwhelming, but Mama Elena proclaims, "¡No quiero lágrimas!" [I don't want any tears!] With this latest frustration by the patriarchal mother of the free flow of feminine feeling, Tita breaks down, openly accusing Mama Elena of her injustices. Elena strikes her, and Tita sequesters herself in the dovecote. Days later, when the servant-girl Chenchá goes to her, she finds that Tita "está como loca" [is crazy] and has turned mute. While on the one hand her madness and loss of voice (or agency) is consistent with other Mexican screen depictions of women turning mad under patriarchal pressures,¹⁵ it is her "cure" from this patri-

archally-imposed madness that creates ideological disjunctures in this ostensibly feminist text.

Mama Elena sends Tita to an asylum across the border under the care of Dr. Brown. This young widower with a son gently cares for her, and the great-grand niece's voice-over informs us that for the first time, within the space provided her by this new, sympathetic and North American patriarch, Tita feels free. It soon becomes apparent that Dr. Brown is falling in love with Tita, as he describes pedantically how every person has a box of matches inside, which can only be lit by a true love. Tita's matches are damp, and Dr. Brown implies that he would like to dry them. (Magically?) Tita recovers her voice in the very next scene. The juxtaposition of Dr. Brown's nurturing attitude and Tita's recovery suggests that the resolution of her "madness" is achieved through the protective care of this American doctor, problematizing even further a feminist interpretation; with Tita under his wing, Dr. Brown gives her back her voice. Tita uses her reinstated but limited agency to consent to marriage with Dr. Brown, trading one patriarchy (Mama Elena's) for another. Here, the narrative recovers any residual doubt that it is the patriarch who retains the power to both take away and restore—and control—feminine agency.

Any remaining progressive message in this story about the power of Tita and Pedro's amor loco is effectively squelched in the final resolution of the master narrative. Free from the patriarchal impediments and the old order by the deaths of Rosaura and Mama Elena, Tita and Pedro make love for the first time without fear of patriarchal or social reprisals. This should be the foundational moment of the text: the final consummation of the new ideology of the nation. But, Pedro's death during sex frustrates the fulfillment of both Tita's erotic desires and the foundational moment. The re-imposition of patriarchy is made even more pronounced and assertive by the narrative voice-over of Dr. Brown that reiterates the metaphor of the internal box of matches. The action on screen follows the narration on the soundtrack as if obeying orders, and the room explodes in fire. The film, which has relied on the feminine narrative voice throughout, in the last instance cedes control of the text to a white male North American. The ideology and the narrative are re-contained within a patriarchal, conservative discourse, showing that the only thing this magical true love succeeds in ending is not a repressive patriarchy, but the lives of the lovers themselves. The resolution promises that there is no danger of subversion to patriarchal order to come out of their union, making their story a cautionary tale rather than a liberating one.¹⁶

The film closes with the book-ending of the frame in the present tense. Both Tita and Esperanza, Tita's surrogate daughter (Pedro and Rosaura's second child), whom she rescued from the family's repressive tradition, stand behind the narrator as spectral visions, emphasizing now visually the connections of the

present with the past. But this epilogue vision of the "fruit" of the narrative suffering, however, cannot re-contain the memory of the patriarchal system's nullification of the power and frustration of the desires of these fictional Revolutionary proto-feminists. The would-be positive, feminist frame is "disjointed"¹⁷ by the discourse that unfolded in the narrative.

Disjointed Discourse

Given the ideological contortions of Como agua para chocolate around feminism, a crucial question must be asked: what is it about Como agua para chocolate that activates the critical blind-spot to these gender dynamics in the film? Why did it inspire such feminist adulations by critics and scholars alike, as described earlier? It certainly is not that the aforementioned scholars are unaware or unsympathetic to the kind of ideological nullification that occurs in Como agua para chocolate. In fact, Saragoza and Berkovich in their article "Intimate Connections" talk about his very dynamic in another Mexican film from the same year, Danzón, saying:

...the female character (Julia) undergoes a change of consciousness that does not rupture the dominant order...The film uses gender to suggest alternatives to the ideology of the dominant masculinist order, both on individual and societal levels. The system and its rules, in short, are vulnerable to subversion. But Danzón eschews an abrupt rupture of the dominant order.¹⁸

They see something very similar going on in Danzón as I see in Como agua para chocolate, yet they hold up Arau's film as a "ray of hope" for changing and improving parameters of cinematic representations of women.¹⁹ If it is clear how other would-be cinematic subversions of patriarchal order are invalidated within the text, why is that very same dynamic occurring in Como agua para chocolate ignored and its "feminism" paradoxically praised?

A simple yet extremely important answer is the revenue and the international prestige that Como agua para chocolate brings to the entire Mexican film industry. Como agua para chocolate must be read against yet another discourse: the financial instability of Mexican film production. Grossing almost \$20 million at the United States box office, this is the first Latin American film—indeed, any foreign film—to have this kind of popular reception in the Hollywood-immersed North American market.²⁰ Such a huge success is perhaps the only antidote to the worries of an industry so dependent on a government that changes its film policy every sexenio. As Maciel explains: "It is critical for filmmakers to find creative and aggressive ways to successfully distribute and exhibit Mexican cinema outside its borders, since international audiences are equally important for its survival."²¹ The scholars and patrons of Mexican cinema assume a tricky stance in relationship to such a popular and successful

film text. Marsha Kinder iterates this problematic relationship when she writes about studying a different, marginalized national cinema:

As Christian Metz observes in The Imaginary Signifier, the film historian frequently finds herself becoming an intellectual publicist for the texts she describes: "Often, by unexpected paths, unperceived by those who have quite unintentionally taken them, ... writings on film become another form of cinema advertising and at the same time a linguistic appendage of the institution itself." I cannot deny this dimension in my own work; in fact, far from being "unperceived," I hope to demonstrate that it is part of the process being described—the reconstruction of national identity through the production, promotion, and reception of popular culture.²²

Scholars and critics, as "intellectual publicists" of Mexican film, surely cannot attack such a commercial success, on ideological grounds or otherwise; to do so would be to attack the tenuous life-flow of the whole national industry. I would argue that it is within this dynamic which Kinder describes that ideological readings of Como agua para chocolate are realigned.

This is true not only for U.S. scholars writing about Mexican cinema, but is manifested in the press discourse in Mexico as well. In 1992, at the time of the Mexican release of Como agua para chocolate, the Espectáculos section of the Mexico City daily Excelsior ran articles expressing anxieties about the state of the national film industry almost every day. Bylines such as "El cine mexicano sufre una de sus crisis más severas, dice Cristian González," [Mexican Cinema is Suffering One of its Most Severe Crises, Says Cristian González] (September 22, 1992) and "Considera Silvia Pinal que el cine mexicano vive un buen momento y que puede ser mejor" [Silvia Pinal Thinks Mexican Cinema is Living a Great Moment and Can be Even Better] (April 16, 1992) exist alongside headlines such as "Los cineastas mexicanos hacen gran esfuerzo para elevar la calidad de sus películas" [Mexican Filmmakers are Making a Great Effort to Elevate the Quality of Their Films] (April 20, 1992). There is plainly a national cinematic identity crisis being worked out on the pages of the paper.

This crisis can explain in part why in spite of lukewarm Mexican reviews (Mexican critic Tomás Pérez Turrent writes "...la respuesta del público en el mundo fue el chocolate mientras la respuesta de la crítica fue el agua"²³ [the response to the film by the world public was "chocolate" while the response of the critics was "water"]), Como agua para chocolate walked away with 10 Ariel awards on April 27, 1992, just 11 days after its "chocolatey" Mexican opening and "watery" critical reviews, suggesting that the Mexican Academy felt pressure to compensate for the mediocre reviews in light of the popular box office reception.²⁴ This did not go unnoticed or uncriticized—the weekly news magazine Proceso reported on the Arieles awards with this article: "La Tarea and Dan-

zón, reconocidas en el mundo, sin Arieles; falible, la selección, reconoce la Academia" [La Tarea and Danzón, Recognized Throughout the World, Go Without Arieles; the Academy Recognizes that Selection is Fallible]. This review of the awards barely mentions Como agua para chocolate, the film that siphoned the Awards away from these other critical successes, merely listing the categories Chocolate won towards the very end of the article. The focus on La Tarea and Danzón's lack of awards and the absence of substantive discussion of Chocolate's Ariel successes implicitly criticizes and accuses the Academy for rewarding/awarding popular success over cinematic achievement—or, realigning its discourse to fit the buzz and money circulating around a surprisingly popular film.²⁵

Clearly—perhaps even obviously—then, the economic factor is extremely powerful and is a necessary consideration in filmmaking and intellectual discourse, and perhaps particularly so in the Mexican situation. But this begs more questions: What reasons can we look to for Como agua para chocolate's extraordinary popularity, and what problems does that popularity raise? Of Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, with whom Como agua para chocolate shares a continuity in the revolutionary melodrama, Julia Tuñón writes: "It is important to recognize that Emilio Fernández constructs an image of Mexico which influences ideas about Mexico abroad as well as at home."²⁶ This interface of national representations and international reception is certainly in operation with Como agua para chocolate's unprecedented foreign viewing audiences, all of whom are consuming an image of Mexican nation-ness along with the magical love story. This revised revolutionary melodrama not only reimagines the Revolution and the modern nation for "home" audiences, but for export markets too. As a Mexican critic relates, "cuando alguien se entera de que uno es mexicano, dice reaccionando de inmediato, 'Ah, sí, Como agua para chocolate' [when someone discovers that you are Mexican, s/he reacts immediately with, "Ah, yes, Like Water for Chocolate!"].²⁷ So, the question of nation necessarily enters into the international consumption of this film text.

Eating Magical Otherness

After the film had established a word-of-mouth familiarity and had started showing its incredible box office potential, newspaper advertisements in the United States read, "Experience the Magic" and later, "Experience the Magic—Again." This zippy slogan sums up one of the main aspects of Como agua para chocolate that sold American audiences on the picture: the strong element of a magical realist style. Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Guiu point out the following passage in Janet Maslin's New York Times review:

This film, a lively family saga that is centered on forbidden love and spans several generations, relies so enchantingly upon fate, magic and a taste for the supernatural that it suggests Gabriel García Márquez in a cookbook-writing mode. (The best-selling Mexican novel by Laura Esquivel, who also wrote the screenplay, inter-

weaves the fanciful story of "Like Water for Chocolate" with actual recipes.) Whether you approach this swift, eventful tale on the culinary or the cinematic level, prepare for a treat.²⁸

Zamudio-Taylor and Guiu protest Maslin's take on the film, saying, "After all, there is more to the novel and film than magical realism and food,"²⁹ but their objections too easily dismiss the reality that this is the level at which a majority of United States film-goers consumed the movie. In fact, the distribution and promotion of the movie actually sought this kind of reception, as can be seen in the newspaper ads and other promotional materials. Whether or not this approach was anticipated or desired by the filmmaker and the author, the promotion of the film essentially plugged into an established perception of Latin-ness, actively courting the art-house public familiar with the best-selling magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez's Cien años de soledad [One Hundred Years of Solitude] and Isabel Allende's La casa de los espíritus [The House of the Spirits]. Arau and Esquivel's film even quotes the well-known image from Cien años de soledad, the magical encounter with the gypsy's block of ice, framing the erotic summer rendezvous between Pedro and Tita with fetishized close-ups of a huge block of ice. Magical realism and Como agua para chocolate are reductively commodified as identifiable markers of Latino cultural identity, obliterating national or cultural distinctions of Mexico, Colombia, Chile, etc. As Chenchu says of the exchange of Tita for Rosaura as Pedro's bride—"You can't change tacos for enchiladas!"—but the film does just this with distinct national and cultural Latin identities.

To take the second half of Zamudio-Taylor and Guiu's objection, promotion for the film did precious little to assert that there was more to Como agua para chocolate than food. Distributor Miramax convinced Mexican restaurants across the country to re-create the dishes made in the film, and held a contest for "amateur chefs" to submit "seductive recipes" for a prize trip to Mexico. A New York party celebrating the film's success, with Mayor David Dinkins in attendance, had actress Claudette Maille (Gertrudis) re-create on the West Side Highway the scene where she is carried off naked by a Villista on horseback, with the festivities ending in a wedding feast identical to the banquet in the film.³⁰ These promotions suggest that there is nothing but food to Como agua para chocolate, with the possible exception of the spectacle of nude women riding bareback.

The cross-promotion with hard-cover copies of the best-selling novel sold at the movie theaters further commodifies the Como agua para chocolate representation of Mexican identity.³¹ As Variety wrote, "the book, a Gabriel Garcia Marquez [sic] type story spiced with recipes, is really cooking."³² With the recipes in the book to be tried at home after watching the film, Como agua para chocolate, both novel and movie, really does present a García Márquez "feel" in cookbook-writing mode.

One can sympathize with Zamudio-Taylor and Guiu in their desire to discredit that reading and recuperate for the film "its historical awareness, national specificity and gender construction,"³³—even though the dynamic they argue against very apparently is at work in the cultural marketplace and even though it has been seen how the film itself thwarts progressive/positive gender and national construction—because the usual implications for Mexican representation in the global sphere are not, to use lingo in the spirit of the film, appetizing. These implications can be deduced from the following excerpt from an article attempting to define the elusive nature of magic realist cultural production:

In fact, the strength of Magic Realism in the "periphery" (Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean) and its comparative weakness in the "core" (Western Europe, the USA), could be explained by the fact that collective myths acquire greater importance in the creation of new national identities, as well as by the more obvious fact that pre-industrial beliefs still play an important part in the socio-political and cultural lives of developing countries. Magic Realism gives popular cultures and magical beliefs the same degree of importance as Western science and rationality. In doing this, it furthers the claims of those groups which hold these beliefs to equality with the modernising elites which govern them.³⁴

This passage links the magical realist mode to the production of national identities, but more significantly, at the same time it unwittingly extracts the problem of reading magical realism. Magical realism, author William Spindler argues, belongs to those cultures on the margins, in the "periphery," in contrast to the cultures at the center or the "core," whose Western scientific rationalism forecloses participation in this aesthetic discourse. He is very clear about where magic realism exists (Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean) and where it doesn't (Western Europe, the USA); one is the periphery, the other the core. Magic realism, as exemplified by this academic typology, is a sign of primitive and pre-industrial culture and its encounter with modernity, limited to and defining those nations on the margin.

While Spindler is arguing in some capacity for this marginal aesthetic's subversive potential, I suggest that when commodified for popular international consumption, magic realism fixes a frozen identity of Mexican-ness—and then by consuming popular perception, latinidad. In demanding and consuming endless reproductions of magic realism, the dominant U.S. culture condemns a lumpen, undifferentiated pan-Latin culture to repetition of an aesthetic that, from the point of view of the rational, industrial and dominant cultures that consume the images, both defines it as Third World and fixes its status there. Magic realism becomes not a challenge to Western rationality and scientific discourse,

but rather reaffirms their hegemonic position of power. Paul Willemen calls the effect of this dynamic "cultural apartheid" and the cultural "ghetto."³⁵ Confining the parameters of "authentic" Mexican (and in its perceived amorphous unity, Latin American) national culture in this way denies Mexican identity in the internal sphere passage to what Homi K. Bhabha calls "the living principle of the people," whereby cultural and national identities transform and evolve in the daily performances of both culture and life.³⁶ Como agua para chocolate plugs into and perpetuates this cultural apartheid of the fossilizing magic realist aesthetic, and adds fuel to the exotic fire with its fetishization and eroticization of commodified, consumable images of border life and food. And as these images are bought and eaten with U.S. dollars, they are digested and become just another ingredient of the mess of the melting pot, drained of any residual "Mexican" meaning. Much as the disturbingly intense impact of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits is transformed/re-situated through the endless postcard reproductions tacked on American walls for their chic exoticness and foreign tokenism, magic realism and Latin identity are condemned to the cultural ghetto in the name of pluralism.

Thus, we have finally arrived at an explanation for the immense success of Como agua para chocolate in the hermetic U.S. film market. Embedded in the melodrama is a representation of Mexico/Latin America that characterizes it as magic, folkloric, exotic, provincial—in short, other. Even the final attempt at realigning the narrative with its glossed over but disjointed frame elicits this subordinate national relationship. Tita's surrogate daughter, Esperanza, whose name invokes Dolores del Río's famous character in Flor silvestre, is explicitly figured as the "hope," the success of the new ideology. Significantly, she marries the son of Dr. Brown, symbolically and literally crossing the border of two national communities. If we take Doris Sommer's definition of a foundational text, it is in the marriage of Esperanza and Alex Brown that Como agua para chocolate becomes such a text, not in the story of Tita and Pedro. Esperanza and Alex's union is productive and marries together two classes, races and nations, but the message is quite different from the subversive feminist one that is first promised. In the context of the early 1990s political ambitions and economic troubles, the message of the final frame set in our present evokes pre-NAFTA aspirations, laying the foundations of "natural" family bonds between Mexico and the United States in the past, justifying appeals for aid and (inter?)dependency in the present. The happy ending comes when the "hope," Esperanza, trades Mama Elena's pre-Revolutionary patriarchy for Alex Brown's and Uncle Sam's late-capitalist patriarchy.

Seeing the movie, buying the book and maybe going to a Mexican restaurant afterward become a way of indulging in an easy but ersatz multi-culturalism and a problematic political correctness.

There is nothing threatening or subversive in the text; both its national and feminist messages fall in line within dominant Western/North American parameters. The film's familiar and comfortable claims to exotic otherness reassuringly reaffirms the status of the U.S. as the "center."

While the literary foundational fictions of the previous century sought to define and differentiate national identities, Como agua para chocolate as foundational fiction obfuscates boundaries and forms alliances with border nations. Alfredo Alvarez Padilla writes in the 1990s, "New images and myths have been created by the publicity industry as a means of improving the international perception of Mexican-American relations."³⁷ Como agua para chocolate certainly can be read as part of that on-going project, and it can be argued that Como agua para chocolate represents a new foundational fiction for our postmodern age of multinational capital and blurred cultural identities.

Alfonso Arau himself can be seen as confusing the boundaries of distinct national identities. Prized in the U.S., as we have seen, for his aesthetic of "otherness," he is regarded more cautiously in Mexico, and is sometimes referred to as too commercial-or by extension, too "American." Arau responds to his Mexican critics by accepting their charges of commercialism as a compliment.³⁸ Indeed, Arau seems to personify the ambivalence of the problem of Mexican cinema: while repeatedly returning to Latin American themes (his in-the-works Regina deals with the Mexican student massacre of 1968,³⁹ and he was instrumental in changing the protagonist family of A Walk in the Clouds [1995] with Keanu Reeves from Italians to Mexicans⁴⁰), in interviews he comes across as mostly concerned with U.S. critical reaction to his work and being able to make "un plato para el primer mundo, hecho con gente y dinero del tercero" [a dish for the First World, made with people and money from the Third].⁴¹

Scholars writing and audiences watching within the margins of U.S. national boundaries and capital must be cautious in embracing the admittedly appealing universalist message of Como agua para chocolate. That the film articulates (multi)-nationality through discourses of gender is extremely significant and must not be overlooked. What does this kind of new foundational fiction do to representations of culture and gender? What and who gets distorted or forgotten in the (re)telling of the (inter)national history? Even in a magically re-imagined past, the white patriarch dominates. The dangers of fetishized fossilization on the one hand and cultural homogenization on the other are very real. Alvarez Padilla asks, "Will the Mexican artistic soul be transformed by trade negotiations?"⁴² I would add that woman's "soul" is also at stake here, insofar as discourses of the nation in the global village depend on representations of the feminine. We must be careful to consider what we are asked to consume: who is being shortchanged when taco is switched for enchilada?

NOTES

¹ Doris Sommer, "Irresistible Romance: The Foundational Fictions of Latin America," Nation and Narration, Homi K. Bhabha, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 76. For a book-length discussion, see Doris Sommer, Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

² Ibid., p. 81.

³ Deborah E. Mistrón, "A Hybrid Subgenre: The Revolutionary Melodrama in the Mexican Cinema," Studies in Latin American Popular Culture 3 (1984), pp. 47-56.

⁴ Laura Podalsky, "Disjointed Frames: Melodrama, Nationalism, and Representation in 1940s Mexico," Studies in Latin American Popular Culture 8 (1993), p. 63.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸ Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film, Christine Gledhill, ed. (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), p. 21.

⁹ For an excellent discussion of the Fernández-Figueroa cinematic style and its ideological implications, see Charles Ramírez Berg, "The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style," The Mexican Cinema Project, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Steven Ricci. (Los Angeles: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1994), pp. 13-24.

¹⁰ Charles Ramírez Berg, "The Image of Women in Recent Mexican Cinema," Studies in Latin American Popular Culture 8 (1989), p. 161.

¹¹ David Maciel, "El Imperio de la Fortuna: Mexico's Contemporary Cinema, 1985-1992," The Mexican Cinema Project, p. 37.

¹² Alex M. Saragoza with Graciela Berkovich, "Intimate Connections: Cinematic Allegories of Gender, the State and National Identity," The Mexican Cinema Project, p. 31.

¹³ Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Guiu, "Criss-Crossing Texts: Reading Images in Like Water for Chocolate," The Mexican Cinema Project, p. 47.

¹⁴ Sommer, p. 85.

¹⁵ Ramírez Berg, "The Image of Women," p. 172.

¹⁶ Charles Ramírez Berg notes a similar dynamic at play in films set in contemporary time dealing with the sexual liberation of the woman. The liberated woman, he argues, is figured as losing both her femininity and her humanity, setting up the question, 'you can have liberation, but why would you want it?' (Ramírez Berg, "The Image of Women," p. 164).

¹⁷ I use the term here in the spirit of Podalsky's analysis of the narrative frames that do not fit and are out of synch with the rest of the narrative exposition in Flor silvestre and María Candelaria. (Podalsky, p. 66).

- ¹⁸ Saragoza and Berkovich, p. 30.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 31.
- ²⁰ Daniel S. Moore, "Mexico Poised for New Age," Variety (March 28-April 3, 1994), p. 37.
- ²¹ Maciel, p. 43.
- ²² Marsha Kinder, Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 8-9.
- ²³ Tomás Pérez Turrent, "Entre Agua y Chocolate," Dicine 55 (1994), p. 11.
- ²⁴ Como agua para chocolate was the second most successful Mexican film in 1992 in Mexico—but still came in behind Batman Returns, Beauty and the Beast, Lethal Weapon 3, Basic Instinct, Alien 3 and the Mexican La risa en vacaciones 3 (Laughter on Vacation, 3). Nelson Carro, "1992: un año de cine, segunda parte," Dicine 51 (May 1993), p. 3.
- ²⁵ Héctor Rivera, "La Tarea y Danzón, reconocidas en el mundo, sin Arieles; falible, la selección, reconoce la Academia," Proceso (May 4, 1992), pp. 58-59.
- ²⁶ Julia Tuñón, "Between the Nation and Utopia: The Image of Mexico in the Films of Emilio 'Indio' Fernández," Studies in Latin American Popular Culture 12 (1993), p. 159.
- ²⁷ Pérez Turrent, p. 10.
- ²⁸ Janet Maslin, "Emotions So Strong You Can Taste Them," New York Times (February 17, 1993), p. C13.
- ²⁹ Zamudio-Taylor and Guiu, p. 51.
- ³⁰ Lauren David Peden, "Big Little Movies Stand Up to Summer's Blockbusters," New York Times (August 22, 1993), p. 10.
- ³¹ See "Like Water in a Desert: Selling a Tie-In in a Theater," Publisher's Weekly (March 8, 1993), p. 22.
- ³² D. T. Max, "Like Money for 'Water': The First Hardcover Movie Tie-In in Memory is Selling Strong," Variety (May 3, 1993), p. 59.
- ³³ Zamudio-Taylor and Guiu, p. 51.
- ³⁴ William Spindler, "Magic Realism: A Typology," Forum for Modern Language Studies 39, no. 1 (1993), p. 82.
- ³⁵ Paul Willemen, "The National," Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 207.
- ³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Nation and Narration, p. 29.
- ³⁷ Alfredo Alvarez Padilla, "Perceptions on Mexican Art and Culture in the 1990s," Voice of Mexico 24, (July-September 1993), p. 73.
- ³⁸ Carlos Puig, "Defiende Alfonso Arau 'Regina,' otra visión del 68," Proceso (March 8, 1993), p. 48.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 50.
- ⁴⁰ Guy Garcia, "Seven Lives Later, a Director Starts His Eighth," New York Times, (August 28, 1994), p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Pérez Turrent, p. 11.
- ⁴² Alvarez Padilla, p. 74.