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Articles

Conflicts of exile. The border as non-place in *La mitad del infierno* by Óscar Palacios

Conflictos de exilio. La frontera como no lugar en *La mitad del infierno* de Óscar Palacios

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the novel *La mitad del infierno* by the writer from Chiapas Óscar Palacios, in which the representation of the southern border of Mexico is examined as a non-place. The study employs this category proposed by Marc Augé. Based on it, the multiple plots that underlie the novel are analyzed. In addition, Ricoeur's hermeneutics serves to understand the ideological implications that surround the reader to represent the Mexican southeast. Based on the above, the representation of the southern border is palimpsest of places (historical, relational) where, according to the plots, the idea of non-place is imposed as one of the ways of conceiving the boundaries between Mexico and Central America.

Keywords: border, literature, non-place, Chiapas.

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Resumen

Este ensayo es un análisis de la novela *La mitad del infierno* del escritor chiapaneco Óscar Palacios, en el que se examina la representación de la frontera sur de México como no-lugar. El estudio emplea dicha categoría propuesta por Marc Augé. Con base en ella se analizan las múltiples tramas que subyacen en la novela. Además, la hermenéutica de Ricoeur sirve para entender las implicaciones ideológicas que envuelven al lector para representarse al sureste mexicano. Con base en lo anterior, la representación de la frontera sur resulta palimpsesto de lugares (histórico, relacional) donde, según las tramas, se impone la idea de no-lugar como una de las maneras de concebir los límites entre México y Centroamérica.

Palabras clave: frontera, literatura, no lugar, Chiapas.

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Guide on the Non-Place and its Representation

The French anthropologist Marc Augé published a thought-provoking book in 1992: *Non-Places, introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*¹. He argues that *modernity* has accelerated time, produced an excess of events and places, and increased individualization. This proposal is supported by two critical positions: the first, as already noted, is modernity, which he prefers to call *supermodernity* due to a triple excess; that is, 1) of time or events, because we live in the ephemeral, in the vertigo of an incessant diachrony with superabundant and ever shorter events; 2) of places or spaces, because distances in the planet have diminished, as if it were a global village; and 3) of individuals, because in the absence of great stories to tell the world, it has turned to the individual as an explanation. This, in turn, has caused an absence of references (Augé, 2000). The second criticism is to the anthropological profession. He wonders whether the modern world, immersed in the conditions described, is “open to ethnological observation” (Augé, 2000, p. 19). This concern leads him to question the methods and theories of anthropology. It considers that new empirical terrains—objects that are constructed by observing a supermodernity that, although it has been observed, has not been since the disciplinary approach (Augé, 2000)—must be tackled.

Concerns regarding anthropology and supermodernity are the beginning of the inquiry into non-places. One of the dimensions of the triple acceleration, which refers to the overabundance of spaces, leads Augé (2000) to elaborate the theory of non-place, rather than anthropological place. The latter has at least three characteristics: identifiable, relational, and historical. It is identifiable because it gives meaning to whoever inhabits it and is constitutive of its identity; it is historical because, unlike places of memory—those that refer to the past—, it is the result of a history that continues to be present and does not need to be evoked (it is historical for those who inhabit it even though it is not historically important); and it is relational because the bodies and things that inhabit it shape the space, relating to each other and occupying a place.

Places that cannot be thought of as places of identity, relational, and historical are defined as non-places. Supermodernity has multiplied and produced them. The planet has shrunk, experiences happen briefly and quickly and with them come the non-places. They are thought of as places of transit, spaces of anonymity; their users do not appropriate them as they do anthropological places, on the contrary, their use is perishable. Marc Augé says the following about this:

A world where one is born in the clinic and where one dies in the hospital, where, in luxurious and inhumane ways, transit points and temporary occupations multiply (...) where a tight network of means of transportation is developed that are also inhabited spaces, where the habitué of supermarkets, vending machines, and credit cards renews with the expenses of “silent trade”, a world thus promised to solitary individuality, to the provisional and the ephemeral, to passage (Augé, 2000, pp. 83-84).

¹ This work uses the Spanish version *Los no lugares. Espacios del anonimato*, 2000 edition.

Airports, train or bus stations, supermarkets, motorways, and cars turn out to be non-places. So are borders. In them we observe that places and non-places overlap, they are palimpsests.² Non-places are found in places. The border, from this perspective, is a palimpsest of places. It is logical to think that its natives establish identity and historical relations with it, but it is also not unreasonable to assume that the stranger, the migrant, is only passing through, that they consider it a place of transit.

How can either of the two statements be taken? The representation of the border means evoking it through testimonies and scientific or artistic devices. This evocation will allow us to understand the border as a palimpsest of places, in which one representation will end up imposing itself on the other; this implies listening attentively to the testimonies and reading the representation devices in the same way. A scientific article, even a journalistic piece, will try to represent reality through metonymy: sticking to its regime of truth—empiricism—to evoke what it represents with certain fidelity. A work of art, literary or of other nature, uses tropes to evoke as a metaphor or analogy what is being represented (Beuchot, 2013).

Concerning these readings, it is important to warn of the ideological implications of the story, to think of the border as a place or non-place suggests a look, a point of view, it is the observation of the communicator that tries to involve the reader or receiver. With what purpose? Paul Ricoeur (2004), in his theory of narrative, maintains that what is narrated unfolds into three mimetic moments: the first, the time lived, which foreshadows what is to be narrated; the second, the configuration of the plot, which orders the narration; and the third, the narrated time, which reconfigures the actions. The author and the reader are ethically involved in this operation. The narrative suggests another assessment of the world, different from what was narrated; there is an intention from the author, but there is also a motivation from the reader, who assumes the world as if it were represented in this way. This results in a kind of ideological explanation, as Hayden White (2001) suggests when he analyzes the intersections of history and fiction.

These conceptual considerations—the places, the representations, and the implications—point to the southern border and to its literature. This pair, as will be seen, is found in a structure of longer duration, where history and literature are intertwined, and a history of literature is modulated.

A Frontier in Fiction Narrative in Chiapas

The first literary gesture in Chiapas left a long-lasting mark: the publication in 1870 of the novel *Una rosa y dos espinas* by Flavio Paniagua (1991), from San Cristobal, marked the hiatus between history and literature. Classified as a historical novel, *Una rosa y dos espinas* narrates the struggles between republicans and imperialists that occurred only a few years later during the establishment of the Empire and its echoes in southern Mexico. Paniagua's concern is part of the nineteenth-century literary tradition: the artistic act as an ideological instrument, the propagation of ideas, and the transfer of debate to fiction (Maldonado, 2017). His other novels follow the same path: they place the liberal and conservative debates in the context of the indigenous rebellions.

² Augé (2000, p. 84) maintains the following: "The place and the non-place are rather false polarities: the former is never completely erased and the latter is never fully established. They are palimpsests".

For years, local literature has followed this example. Although it is true that Flavio Paniagua narrated the events of the turbulent 19th century, his century, other writers from Chiapas returned to that time and to events even more distant, and used it for their fictions. In this manner, the Tzeltal rebellion of 1712 appears as the main or secondary theme in novels such as *Jovel, serenata a la gente menuda*, by Heberto Morales (2010); the screenplay *Los agravios de su ilustrísima*, by Alfredo Palacios (1994); the historical fiction *María Candelaria, india natural de Cancuc*, by the historian Juan Pedro Viqueira (1996); and the film script *Los embustes de San Tanás*, by Antonio Coello (2005).

Other historical events that occurred in Chiapas have a place in local literature. The Tzotzil rebellion of 1869 was the subject of the novels *Florinda*, again by Flavio Paniagua (2003), *Oficio de tinieblas*, by Rosario Castellanos (1962), and *Los confines de la utopía*, by Alfredo Palacios (1992). The Mexican Revolution was portrayed in *La simiente del corsario*, by César Coutiño (2001), *Shalo*, by Amín Miceli (1994), *Yucundo*, *Lamento por una ribera*, by Heberto Morales (2008), and the second part of *Los confines de la utopía*, by Alfredo Palacios (1992). The climax of this literary cycle, which narrates the nineteenth century events that shaped the 20th century, is the tetralogy of Eraclio Zepeda. Best known for his short stories, Zepeda published four historical novels between 2006 and 2013: *Las grandes lluvias* (2006), *Tocar el fuego* (2007), *Sobre esta tierra* (2012), and *Viento del siglo* (2013). They narrate the formation of Chiapas, its political decisions, and affiliation to the Mexican nation; the internal wars that discussed the projects of the nation, sometimes liberal and conservative, sometimes centralist and federalist; as well as the Chiapas singularities of the Mexican Revolution and its immediate scope in the first third of the last century.

The eruption of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has also been the subject of local novels. Such is the case of *Canción sin letra*, by Heberto Morales (1999) and *Nudo de serpientes*, by Alejandro Aldana (2004).

We arrive at a constant: the relationship between history and literature, the imposed discourses of the novelist as a historian, and the reality represented as a novel. A study on this subject will show us how, in addition to ideological discourses, manifested or implicit, a hermeneutic reading of history in novels, incessantly dialogues with historiographical currents and theories of history (Perkowska, 2008). Nineteenth-century literature is close to the historiographic pretension of truth, therefore, the representation of the past, in historiography, attends to the old idea of mimesis related to the Rankean pretension of narrating something *just as* it happened. Historiography represents that past from the hermeneutic point of view of univocity, whose aim is to adjust as far as possible to the referentiality that summons us to it. The postmodern theory of history is best accommodated by another representation, one that calls for polysemy and that looks for things in the past and not the backdrop, but history itself open to meanings (Perkowska, 2008). This is the case of novels that reference history.

The relationship between history and literature, and between historical events and novel, situates other events, such as the beginnings of modernity, daily life, migration, and the border in the literature of Chiapas. The period of the Central American guerilla, as well as the economic dynamics, show the movement from these territories to the North, that is, Mexico and the United States. It is these movements that have been represented by the literature. It is at this point that we pause.

Central American Migration

Recent Central American history has been marked by violence. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the advance of communism drew the attention of the United States. Its international policy in this context was one of containment. The Central American countries suffered from such a policy. This meant American interference in the political life of Central America, the rise of dictatorships, first, then followed by false democracies. One of the consequences was the migratory flows of the 1980s.

According to Abelardo Morales (2007), the migratory movements in Central America can be divided into three stages: the first is linked to the development of economies that are exploited for agro-export, the second to forced displacement in the context of the guerrillas, and the third relates to the processes of labor transnationalization.

As expected, migration is multi-causal and does not necessarily involve going over political boundaries. The migratory flow corresponding to the agro-exporting economy has been occurring since the 19th century. The development of the plantation economies required labor, and to reach this point, there was a process of land dispossession: the indigenous were removed from their properties and became laborers; their lands were used in plantations and the boom of this activity demanded workers. Therefore, the laborers moved between territories, internally, and extraordinarily, the migration was cross-border (Morales, 2007, p. 114).

The second migratory moment takes place in the context of the guerrilla and state repression. Migrants escaped the violence, first individually and then en masse. In this regard, three phenomena are identified: international migration, mainly to Mexico, internally displaced persons, and returnees (Morales, 2007, p. 117).

Finally, the transnationalization of labor. This migration occurs in parallel with armed conflicts, but the cause is different. The interdependence of economies and their globalization processes explain migration beyond state borders. The insertion of local economies in global processes meant the end of the inherited agro-export model, and gave way to a neoliberal model. The causes are structural: falling wages, precarious employment, and the selling of banks and other state-owned enterprises. The consequence was that, especially in the 1990s, migration increased because of these circumstances, and farmers migrated to the cities and abroad (Morales, 2007).

We will pause at forced displacement. The figure of the *caudillo* and the Central American dictatorships originated in the emergence and development of agrarian capitalism. The institution of oligarchic power had its downside in founding movements, such as that of Augusto Sandino, in Nicaragua, and Agustín Farabundo Martí, in El Salvador, in the 1930s (Torres-Rivas, 2007). The defeat of the popular movements at the time brought the military to power almost until the 1980s (Torres-Rivas, 2007).

By the 1960s, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the expansion of communism, U.S. politics had boosted economic growth in Central America and established strategies for political democratization. It did so through the *Alianza para el Progreso* (ALPRO) program, which consisted in providing economic aid to Latin American countries. Edelberto Torres-Rivas (2007) calls the regimes that arose from here “front democracies”, which consisted of the rise to power of militaries through periodic elections, whose function was to legitimize dictatorships. “The presidential election was attended by several candidates but only the Army nominated General won” (Torres-Rivas, 2007, p. 102).

Façade democracies were established in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. In these countries, the opposition sectors, comprised mainly of farmers, academics, trade unionists and reformist politicians, were harshly repressed, while business groups were strengthened and played an important role in establishing political practices and discourses. The context favored social mobilization and it did not take long for armed groups or revolutionary outbursts to appear. The scenarios were Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala; Costa Rica, however, had the capacity to build a “state capable of stimulating growth and development” (Torres-Rivas, 2007, p. 107).

In Nicaragua, the Sandinista National Liberation Front was founded in 1961. The movement fought the Somoza dictatorship. It found allies in the bourgeoisie after the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. In Guatemala, several fronts were organized against the dictatorship: the Rebel Armed Forces were founded, the Guatemalan Labor Party appeared, and the Guerrilla Army of the Poor and the People’s Organization in Arms were organized and amalgamated in the Guatemalan Revolutionary Unity. The dictatorship of this country was harsh against these guerrilla movements; it murdered activists, students, peasants, and journalists. The state actions, its combat, caused thousands of people to be displaced, especially indigenous people, which has been described as the largest ethnic massacre in the history of Latin America. In El Salvador, the scene was similar; in 1970 the Popular Liberation Forces and the Revolutionary People’s Army were founded and later united to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Torres-Rivas, 2007).

Southern Border Literature

The context described is the situation that allows us to understand the migration towards the south of Mexico. The region known as Soconusco has been a place of settlement or transit for migrants, but this situation also includes the recent local and Mexican literary production, whose writers have kept alive.

The Chiapas fiction narrative tells stories of trauma. On historical trauma, Dominik LaCapra (2005 and 2009) suggests that his narrative is a thin line between history and fiction. Historians and novelists inhabit this border, especially since the traumatic event is a historical fact that many would prefer to forget (LaCapra, 2005). For his part, Paul Ricoeur (2006, pp. 909-912), when addressing narrative identity in his reflections, explains that fiction is placed at the service of history to tell about memorable events, that is to say, events that are worth remembering or execrable, that is to say, events that should not be forgotten. History is fictionalized by telling these events as positive or negative epics, which give identity to the peoples.

The idea of trauma is often used to describe an event that shocks a person or a people, or also, as events that have occurred in the past, near or far, and that are current (Sanfelippo, 2011). Why is trauma a motif of literature in southern Mexico? It would seem that this trauma is linked to Central American history: I believe that it is possible to approach the above from the idea of *identity*, which according to Gilberto Giménez (2009) is constructed relationally, that is to say, with the others. It is also possible to approach its comprehension from the identification of elements of distinctiveness: belonging to a plurality of groups, recognition of idiosyncratic attributes, and biographical narratives. These distinguishable units, in the case of the southern border,

are interchangeable to sustain a national identity and a cultural identity. In this regard, it is necessary to say that national identity, according to Valenzuela (2015, p. 93) “refers to the ideological dimension that implies identification with a nation project”. In the case of cultural identity, it is appropriate to approach it from the construction of regions. According to Young (1992), a region is composed of *regionality*, “the quality of being a region” and *regionalism*, “the conscious, cultural, political, and sentimental identification that large groups of people develop with certain spaces over time” (Young, 1992, pp. 432). This allows us to state that in the south of Mexico there is a national identity, built artificially from the hegemony of the Mexican nation as a result of the incorporation of Chiapas to this nation in the 19th century. At the same time, there is a cultural identity in the space of a region, given that the southern border shares qualities such as the jungle and the mountains, but also distinguishable common units that have not been built politically, but culturally: idioms, music, ethnic groups, gastronomy, and history, to name a few. The convergence of Mexican identity as national, and regional identity as cultural, is what I call border identity.

If one of the units of distinction is the biographical narrative, southern Mexico has participated tangentially in recent history and directly in the distant history of Central America. LaCapra (2009) argues that the effects of the traumatic event are not suffered exclusively by the victims, but that, in a different way, it also affects “anyone who comes into contact with it: perpetrator, collaborator, witness, resistance fighter, those born after” (LaCapra, 2009, p. 21). Let us remember that Central America and southern Mexico were a common historical project. The province of Chiapas, in colonial times, belonged to the General Captaincy of Guatemala along with San Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and the governorship of Costa Rica (Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 13). When the fights for independence of the Spanish colonies began in 1821, Chiapas was on the fence. At the time a decision was made, they launched their proclamation of independence. The first obstacle that had to be overcome was a major decision: due to the conditions of poverty, it had to be integrated into the project of the Central American republic or Mexico (Gutiérrez, 2004). Finally, after intense discussions, the local elites preferred the Mexican nation. This Central American past has not ceased to permeate today; the culture in Chiapas, the way of speaking, and its music keep a relation with Central America, especially Guatemala. However, it is not because of this that the Central American identity is assumed, but rather because it is borderline.

Remains of this common past can be seen in local literary production. If I mentioned Flavio Paniagua as the first writer from Chiapas, it was because his novel *Una rosa y dos espinas* appeared in 1870, when Chiapas had already been integrated into that entelechy we call Mexico. But at the same time, Guatemalan literature published historical novels of events that occurred in Chiapas, such was the case with the novel by Agustín Mencos Franco, published in 1898, entitled *Don Juan Núñez García*, which recreates the Tzeltal rebellion of 1712. Since then, the literature of the southern border has shared themes and concerns, among them, according to Jesús Morales (2005). We find that the narrated spaces are predominantly rural, mostly in the jungle. The indigenous matter also permeates it; rebellions, riots, and insurrections are raging, including the recent ones that have occurred since the 1970s.

Therefore, trauma is common to the historical region. Novels are places of memory because their reading takes us to the past,³ or to places of trauma, as explains LaCapra (2009, p. 23):

A site of memory is usually also a site of trauma, and as long as it remains invested with the marks of trauma, it marks the extent to which the memory has failed to capture the trauma, especially through grief.

The recent history of Central America has been traumatic: the greatest genocide of the recent Latin America; the displacement of many of its inhabitants, who have seen hope in the Mexican border (Morales, 2005). Literature operates as a strategy for recovering historical memory and shared trauma. Alfredo Palacios Espinosa (2005) has written a dramatic text entitled *Límites perdidos*, which tells the story of a group of refugees on the border. The background of the story alludes to conflicts of identity, on which a love story develops as impossible. The subject has also been recurrent in Nadia Villafuerte's literature. Her collection of short stories, *Barcos en Houston* (2005), is the beginning of a literary journey along the border trails; the stories of *¿Te gusta el latex, cielo?* (2008) and her novel *Por el lado salvaje* (2011) follow suit. Another writer from Chiapas, Gabriel Hernández García, wrote *Lejanías* (2008), a novel about the stigma that defines the undocumented Central American man.

We cannot leave out *La mara* (2011), a novel by Rafael Ramírez Heredia. Referentiality alludes to the phenomenon of Central American youth cultures, explained by structural economic, political, and social conditions. This translates into violence, drug trafficking, and gangsterism, which occurs along the porous border of the Suchiate River, specifically between Tecún Umán and Ciudad Hidalgo.

The literary works indicated above speak of the condition of the migrant and of the border, which are social phenomena linked to the reality of Central America, to its historical well. The Central American guerrilla in these countries is the background that gives rise to the story of the novel *La mitad del infierno* by Óscar Palacios, which we will talk about below.

La mitad del infierno

Óscar Palacios was born in 1942 in Yajalón, Chiapas. He is a poet, narrator, and playwright. His literary production, which began towards the end of the 1960s, has been characterized by addressing diverse themes, including those related to social and political positions and discourses. At least two novels are part of one of the aspects of the Chiapas literary tradition: the link with distant or recent history; for example, *En memoria de nadie* (1982) and *La mitad del infierno* (1993).

En memoria de nadie is a 1982 novel with a story that is not made up, but which is found in the past of southern Mexico. It relates the murder of a Yucatecan trade union leader, Efraín Calderón, also known as "Charras". His death occurred in 1974 in Mérida, a city to which Palacios has a connection, as he studied law there.

³ When Pierre Nora (2008, pp. 23-24) refers to places of memory, he does so based on the distinction of history. The latter, as a representation of the past, ignores the lived ties that unite individuals and peoples with that past. It is those ties that try to be maintained as bonds. Therefore, as stated by Nora, places of memory are artifacts that save memory from the forgetfulness of history.

La mitad del infierno was first published in 1990⁴. The novel situates the story between the years 1982-1983, in the Soconusco, Mexican region bordering Guatemala. It was at the time of the dictatorship of Guatemalan President Efraín Ríos Montt, the only historical figure referred to, named General Arroyos Montt. His government was characterized by the repression towards social, university, and trade union sectors, as well as indigenous groups. He was tried and sentenced for genocide in 2013. The sentence was subsequently annulled due to irregularities in his trial (Vásquez & Hernández, 2013).

The reference to Ríos Montt is important in the fictional universe. It explains the journey that one of the characters, Álvaro Vidal, a Guatemalan recently graduated from law school, has begun. His arrival in Mexico was due to the repression of the government, which took over the university because it was “filled with communists” (Palacios, 1993, p. 18). The journey to Mexico takes place in the company of another migrant: Oscar Figueroa. Salvadoran and mulatto, this character aims to go further north, to the United States. In Soconusco, specifically in the city of Huixtla, where several of the actions take place, the Central American characters meet two Mexicans: Don Gonzalo, a tax collector who serves as an assistant to the travelers; and Teresa Luviano, a landowner, owner of the estate *El Desengaño*, who has a romance with Alvaro.

La mitad del infierno is the story of these four characters, while the actions happen in overlapping places. As Augé points out, anthropological and non-anthropological sites are intertwined as palimpsests. In the novel, a frontier is represented as an anthropological place, whose inhabitants appropriate as a handle of identity and history. The non-place is imposed upon it: a space of transit, represented as such by migrants and their projects. The four stories of the characters are also intertwined, but the tragic plot prevails over the secondary plots. From this perspective, the effect of this is the representation of the border as a non-place.

The Border as a Place

We would like to begin the analysis of the representation of the border as an anthropological place. If we remember Augé, his works are characterized by being identifiable, relational, and historical. Next on the list is to observe the fictional story and the border space as a place.

In *La mitad del infierno*, one of the characters that is used to make the reader think about the anthropological place is Don Gonzalo. He represents this place because his vision of the border is balance, he does not look at the conflict in it, on the contrary, his function in the narrated world is to guide the two migrants. His friendship is important as it makes Álvaro stay for a period of eighteen months in Huixtla, and several of them stay as foremen of the *El Desengaño* estate. Oscar, for his part, was never able to establish himself and was employed in various jobs until Don Gonzalo gave him a plane ticket that finally allowed him to travel to the United States.

⁴ This edition was published by Programa Cultural de las Fronteras. Other editions are from 1993, published by the Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura; in 2009, by the Colegio de Bachilleres de Chiapas; and in 2015, it was gathered in a volume of three novels and published by La otra. The edition consulted for this paper is the 1993 edition.

The actions of this character offer a conciliatory look at the border. If the anthropological place is constitutive of identity, the following passage suggests it. Don Gonzalo says:

I came to this town twenty years ago.... I accepted, without any practice for it, to be a revenue collector, what is today called a collector or a delegate. I accepted this kind of work, so far from my reality, because it was the only thing a dear friend offered me, and I needed to eat and to have the space to write. The theme I had imagined was developed in this prodigy of fertility that is the Soconusco (p. 26).

It is not necessarily an idyllic look. There is, of course, an identification with space, the adjective “prodigy of fertility” suggests it. Elsewhere in the narrative, this same character gives the critical and comical flavor to the border, as the journey through which he guides the migrants includes epic drunkenness. At the end of it, the image given by the border is not, in appearance, wild or violent⁵.

Another characteristic of the anthropological site is its historical dimension. As Augé stated, it is different from the place of memory. Pierre Nora considers that places of memory are spaces where “memory is crystallized and sheltered” (Allier, 2008, p. 88). Conversely, in the anthropological site, memory is not a refuge. This characteristic does not evoke a past but lives in that past. One of his characters, Teresa Luviano, serves to understand the historical relationship with the place. In the fictional world, Luviano is the owner of *El Desengaño*, the most important coffee farm in the region, and her family, in addition to the economic power that can already be seen, has a relation to the spheres of political power. They have occupied the municipal presidency of Tapachula, the most developed border city in the southeast. She will have that chance herself.

In this regard, the narrator says:

El Desengaño estate, formerly with a German city name, showed the Luviano family's power, a power that had been established when the prices of “green gold” rose, thanks to the fact that Brazil threw its harvest into the sea to maintain market prices. Old Luviano had made it; father of Teresa Luviano and grandfather of the current owners: Alberto, Teresa, and Estrella, when the first owners of the estate returned in their old age to their country of origin, leaving old Luviano as administrator (p. 32).

Here we explain the origin of the power held by the Luviano family, thinking this way launches us to the present, while the nod to the past is a resource that helps us understand the importance of a family of landowners in times of action. This is the power they seek to maintain and perpetuate. Teresa's brother, Alberto, moves in the field of politics; he arranges her candidacy for the municipal presidency, which will allow them to continue with the political and economic hegemony of the family.

⁵ This condition is expressed in the following manner: “Well, we will have a taco and then we will go to one of the most *sui generis* places on the Chiapas coast: the tolerance zone.

Álvaro is surprised by the comment. He smiles and gets in the van. They are on their way to the market, where Doña Chenta's roast meats are famous in the area. There they stop and while waiting, an icy beer runs down the warm throats of Don Gonzalo and Álvaro. It is the ninth hour. The time when the fire seems to come out of the concrete streets” (p. 29).

This historical present is directly related to the place, not only to the estate but also to Soconusco, as well as to another past that affects the present. This is the rape of Teresa Luviano, which occurred on the property she owned.

Alberto, her brother:

With a trembling hand he used the sheet to cover her and stopped for a moment to gently squeeze her left nipple. From there, softly, with a mix of doubt and lust in his eyes, he traced her breasts with each hand... the blood of his youth blinded him to reason and he lay down next to Teresa, unzipped her fly and, like a fierce beast in heat, raged on, as if trying to break all of his fear and shame. A long groan between pain and pleasure flooded the room (p. 43).

The scene and the act haunt Teresa and feed her fears and insecurities. The rape is also a historical trauma, but this trauma is not a memory, it is experienced as something in the present. The anthropological place is also symbolized as violence. Augé describes the historical relationship evoking a past without conflict, and projects the present as a comfortable place, but this is not always the case. The story of Teresa Luviano symbolizes a border where the abuse of power is a daily matter; it is the imposed patriarchal culture where Central American women are employed in brothels. Nadia Villafuerte has already pointed out this condition in her literature; it is also the violence that is expressed in gangsterism and in discrimination against migrants, of which the novels of Rafael Ramírez Heredia and Gabriel Hernández are examples.

The stories of don Gonzalo and Teresa Luviano are different, but they are not excluded. The first one, with nuances, suggests a possible border, where its inhabitants overcome the conflict; however, the second one is a conflictive story, like dead end streets. Together, these two types of plotting paint the border as an anthropological place.

The Border as a Non-Place

The plots in *La mitad del infierno* become representations of places and non-places. If the stories of the Mexican characters offer a glimpse of the border as a created space, that is, appointed, those of Central American migrants do not reach this condition; with them the non-place is configured. These two representations are not excluded, thus, the overlap that appears is only an illusion: a place is a non-place, but it depends on the appropriation of its users. The same territory will have this dual condition, in this sense, places are possibilities. In the novel the non-place is re-inscribed in the anthropological place, even more: it is imposed.

The characteristics of the non-place are defined in relation to the place. A territory that is neither historical, relational, or provides identity will be a non-place. The triple acceleration of time, space, and individuals results in the overabundance of places, events, and individualities; this allows the proliferation of non-places. They are spaces of anonymity where their users, due to these conditions, are generally passing through, and the residents are ephemeral as long as they do not manage to appropriate the place. This is why, according to Augé (2000), the traveler is the archetype of the non-

place. As travelers, we must distinguish the tourist from the migrant; the former travels for pleasure, their attitude is one of contemplation (Navarrete, 2014); the latter for necessity, displaced from their place of origin (Feldman-Bianco, Rivera, Stefoni & Villa, 2011) and does so on a regular or irregular basis (García, 2015).

In the fictional universe of *La mitad del infierno* the traveler is a migrant; the characters flee their countries for reasons of dictatorship and guerrilla struggles. Álvaro Vidal is persecuted as a politician and Óscar Figueroa escapes from the cam, they are the ones who are in transit on the border; their projects are different but neither appropriates historical and identity characteristics of Soconusco.

The border as a non-place appears in the plots that are built around these two characters, it manifests in the conflicts of exile. First, the love story between Álvaro Vidal and Teresa Luviano. Through it, identity conflicts and conflicting ideological and class positions are traced, all of them make up their brief stay in Mexico. Second, the story of Óscar Figueroa, a comedian whose transit through the border is ephemeral, while seeking to reach the United States, he has a wide variety of works and paints his passage as a festive one.

The main story is plotted in tragedy. Hayden White (2001, pp. 18-19) argues: here, in tragedy “there are no festive occasions, except the false and illusory ones”; this concludes with “the fall of the protagonist and the shock of the world in which he lives”. The story is the romance of Alvaro and Teresa. In them the border tension is present from the beginning; he is Guatemalan, she is Mexican; he is a university student of progressive ideas, she is a landowner accustomed to exercising power; he resents classes, she is an oppressor. This duality implies a tired idea of the border as a limit and not as a common space, in fact, the inequitable relationship persists in the novel from the very moment that the Guatemalan becomes the foreman of the *El Desengaño* estate.

There, on the estate, romance begins as well as the conflicts of exile. As this dialogue between Don Gonzalo and Álvaro testifies:

—She (Teresa) is weird, very weird; she leaves and blocks her feelings (Álvaro says).

—A swallow does not make summer.

—This is a swallow that nested inside me.

—Don't be carried away by your conflicts of exile.

—It is not that, I think Teresa...

—Don't think anything; you are alone, in the mountain, she is an attractive woman.

—But if there was an encounter, why does she ignore me?

—She is not ignoring you, she is ignoring herself. She always runs away from... I don't know what. Be calm, only today matters, tomorrow isn't here yet. Let's go... (p. 81).

The conflicts of exile make it impossible to have an affective relationship with the border. These conflicts, many of them in the private sphere, jump into the public sphere. The love affair becomes a scandal and also makes identity disputes visible. The tragedy began to take shape with the intervention of Alberto Luviano. “How dare you go out with that starving little thing?” Alberto tells Teresa (p. 104). Together with this character, the idea of border as a non-place is also clarified, his appearance destabilizes

the love relationship. This collapse ends with a breakup and with Teresa's sentence to Álvaro: "You go back to your territory and I'll stay in mine" (p. 121).

The tragic story prevails over the secondary plots because it symbolizes the idea of the border as a non-place, due to one of the migrant characters. His stay at the border is as brief as the love affair was. The journey then does not stop. Both protagonists assume their destiny with resignation: she reluctantly accepts to run for the municipal presidency of Tapachula, while he returns to Guatemala. Meanwhile, the Central American migrant does not manage to appropriate the space as an anthropological place, the destination projects an ephemeral place.

The second story is that of Oscar Figueroa, the Salvadoran. Although it does not have the same development and intensity as the story of Álvaro Vidal, its plot is comical. The character is situated in a context of violence, the border, where his actions are out of place. In the story, his jobs, drunkenness, and stubbornness are narrated almost as anecdotes: "You can only live here if you are mad or drunk," he says (p. 58). But there is a purpose. The character, who escaped forced recruitment by the Salvadoran Army, is determined to arrive in the United States. Although this is not the first time he has tried, his efforts have only reached the northern border. Again and again he is returned to Suchiate, the border with Guatemala. Returning to this border he wanders through the different villages, calling himself *Máscara mortal*, a professional fighter. He also acts as a chauffeur's assistant or as a lover; the following passage describes this:

—I stayed a few days with my *gorda* in Cachoatán, then I went to Tapachula and everything was fine until there was a chance to go to the north. I arrived in Arriaga, and as my bad luck would have it, in the restaurant where we ate—I was a truck driver's assistant—we had a fight with some people who were from migration, they beat me, locked me up, and then they returned me to Frontera Hidalgo and before arriving I had to take care of a bastard from the migration police to leave me on this side.

—You killed him —Álvaro said in shock.

—Hahaha, no! He was a muscle Mary and I had to sleep with him so that he would let me go (p. 56).

As we have indicated before, the anthropological place is not always in agreement, and the non-place is not synonymous with conflict either. Comedy is a critical look at social reality (Sánchez, 2005) and is also a strategy of resistance (Scott, 2007). The comedic story of Óscar Figueroa is a non-place because of its condition of passage. The relationships he establishes are ephemeral, perhaps in the knowledge that his destiny lies elsewhere. Just because it is different from the tragic story does not mean that it is excluded. They complement each other, especially in understanding that their purpose has not failed. At the end, Don Gonzalo gives him a plane ticket that will place him on the northern border and, some time later, it is reported that he has finally arrived in the United States. Achieving the objective—a situation that does not happen with the Guatemalan character—constitutes the sense of wandering. The southern border was only transitory.

The history of the migrants, whose plots are different, is articulated by the journey. The subject of the non-place is the traveler. Through them, one of the representations

of the border, the one that imposes itself on the other, allows us to look at it as a space of anonymity, even beyond the border.

If we return to the idea of the story plots, the various nuances of representations, a teleological idea takes root. The novel is located on the Mexican border and rarely refers to the Guatemalan side. When it happens, it offers an uneven view. On this side, the Mexican side, the consensus; on the other, the conflict. Duality seems to fade when you think of the two sides as commonplace. This happens when Alvaro returns to his place of origin. The character assumes that this side, his, is half of hell (*La mitad del infierno*); the other has remained on the Mexican side, and it is not just the geographical side.

Conclusion

The representation of the border as a place and non-place has its implications. Both literary and historiographic works are explained and understood with their own regimes of truth. These two types of works, however, are united in the realm of narrative, their approach as narrative construction is hermeneutic. The historiographic work offers a reading close to the historical truth. The literary work offers a reading of the plausible. In this sense, literary works with historical references are problematic.

The historicity found in *La mitad del infierno* places it in this dilemma. The border as an anthropological place is such because Soconusco is a historical place with all that it implies. The representation of the border as a non-place is a possibility and, in the novel, there is this juxtaposition of places, it is a palimpsest: one stable and the other ephemeral.

The nuances of representation lead me to another implication, which refers to the ideological. The author involves the reader in looking beyond the novel, that is, looking at the border with its nuances. The reader is involved in other views of the world that are not necessarily his own. From this perspective, thinking of the frontier as an anthropological place, or as a non-place, is a suggestion about ways of questioning the world.

On the other hand, almost at the same time as Marc Augé published the book *Non-places*, *La mitad del infierno* was also published. This simultaneity would complicate the theoretical appropriation for the analysis. However, it is important to note that non-places are not exclusive phenomena of supermodernity. An interpretation of Herder's thinking leads us to the 18th century as one of its origins. In addressing the problem of belonging, Herder (Berlin, 2000) argues that history, language, and culture have allowed men to take root in their vital center, that is, in a territory. In this manner, an exile does not feel at home, because they do not feel at home in the same stream of history, language, and culture. The idea against belonging to the nation and its territory, as the previous sentence suggests, certainly fits in with what Augé has considered a non-place. Incidentally, urban designer Melvin Webber used the term in 1964. He did so to refer to "the inauthentic, repetitive, and impersonal spaces" of large cities (Navarrete, 2014). In so doing, it announced the dislocation of the *civitas*, that is, of the community of citizens who inhabit the cities (Choay & Urrieta, 2009). What Marc Augé warned, in short, was the overproduction of places but not the appearance of new places.

The border is also not a typical characteristic of supermodernity, its construction is historical. An idea of border takes us to the border, the no man's land (Fábregas, 2005). The beginning of the European expansion highlighted and widened the borders by consolidating the dispute for the planet, the construction of nation states is proof of this. Since then these no man's lands have been non-places. Supermodernity has exposed them and also built new boundaries.

In this sense, *La mitad del infierno* is a representation of the historical boundaries between Mexico and Guatemala as a non-place.

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