



DCGS, UNAM

A Zeal to Embrace Everything

Elena Poniatowska*

“What are you going to be when you’re grown up?”

“Everything.”

“What are you going to do with your life?”

“Everything. I’ll be absolutely everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll start a new era, shake up good consciences, change the status quo, take chances, be a writer, go into every house, slip into virginal and Victorian beds, shoulder everyone’s guilt. I’ll show all my contemporaries and their children and the children of their children all the corruption and hypocrisy of society passed down from the Mexican Revolution, let out all the sails, walk every parallel and every meridian,

I’ll dare to do everything, circle everyone’s brains, every woman’s waist.”

“But you can’t do everything.”

“I can, because I’m the *icuiricui*, the *macalacachimba*.”

Mexicans are hard nuts to crack. They either don’t understand or they are wildly indifferent and cruel, and they refine their envy and rejection over time. They are also courtly and obsequious because in politics fine words bring you promotions. In his *Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz analyzes our character traits, and Carlos Fuentes sets off in the right direction on a lifelong journey of discovery and encounters the ambitious banker who once spurred on his horse for the revolutionary cause, the genteel yet impoverished little rich girl, divested of her haciendas and fearful of being declassed if she marries the one who “the three hundred and a few more” consider their footman, the ambitious typist who shows off her legs, the middle-class teen whose only aspiration is to appear in the *Society* supplement of the national newspaper.

* Mexican writer. This article was previously published in Spanish (“El afán totalizador”) in *Revista de la Universidad de México* no. 100, new era (Mexico City), June 2012, pp. 9-13.

Our thanks to the author and the magazine’s editors for granting us permission to translate and publish it in this issue of *Voices of Mexico*. Photos in this section, courtesy of DCGS, UNAM.

"I'll start a new era, shake up good consciences,
change the status quo, take chances,
be a writer, go into every house, slip into virginal
and Victorian beds, shoulder everyone's guilt."

CARLOS FUENTES

Swiping as he goes, Carlos Fuentes collects his characters all the way from upscale Las Lomas and El Pedregal de San Ángel down to Bondojoito and Candelaria de los Patos; he mixes them in the huge transparent blender of his writing and seats the prostitute and the prim girl at the same table to confront each other and to confront us with a Mexico that is making a painful transition toward what is today called modernity.

The 1950s, 1960s, 1980s, 2000s are Carlos Fuentes's years just as the 1930s belonged to José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, Alfonso Reyes, Martín Luis Guzmán, José Vasconcelos, Mariano Azuela, and the rest. If the Big Three paint, Fuentes writes about and derobes the city cursed by the name Federal District, while he invents a new narrative form. A dual revolution: revealing and naming, exploring and domesticating. The Carlos Fuentes phenomenon begins in 1958 with *La región más transparente* (Where the Air Is Clear), although, in 1954, before the main banquet, an aperitif —*Los días enmascarados* (The Masked Days)— has already been served. *Where the Air Is Clear* excites or enrages. Fernando Benítez's defense of it proves to be prophetic: "Whatever lies in store for Mexican literature, it has been saved from a future of miserable and stale critical snubbing."

The sophisticated, cosmopolitan young man then used his talent and iron discipline to prove that he was in control of himself and his work and that his work made him happy. Happiness is very important, and Carlos Fuentes's love of life shows through. Just as Pita Amor would arrive at Sans Souci or the Leda naked under her mink overcoat, which she would then open and shout, "I am queen of the night!", Fuentes says, "There are types of prestige that encompass everything." He sets off in the early morning to see what he can find; the days pass too quickly, as do the nights; he buzzes with energy; his eyes cannot take in everything he wants to see, but inside he has another pair of eyes. A key to success is having two sets of everything. Behind him there is a spare Fuentes. And another, better Mexico, another book in the making and an utterly different destiny than that awaiting the "fine and subtle" writers that Antonio Castro Leal listed in an anthology that got bored

in the afternoon light like Agustín Lara's peacock. In Mexican literature, straying from the canon is as criminal as César Garrizurieta, who used to say that being outside the [public] budget is to be in error and a poor politician, a politician in poverty—he would later commit suicide. In this way, Fuentes writes off those *arrivistes* who abuse their power and rejoice in their cynicism and wealth.

I had the fortune to know Fuentes before he became a writer because we went to the same parties at the embassies and residences in Las Lomas, where I would watch him sitting beside the mothers and chaperones of the daughters, whom he would ask to dance and enquire without hesitation whether their handbag was Hermès or Cartier and their perfume Chanel No. 5, the same one that Marilyn Monroe used as a night-dress. "Oh what a charming and intelligent boy this Carlitos is!" In houses built in the Californian mission revival style with Hollywood-esque staircases, Fuentes pointed out to me, "Look closely, the walls are blotchy." "What do you mean, blotchy?" "That's right, blotchy, their skin is crawling. Look Poní, over there in each corner there are golden spittoons—Moctezuma's treasure, *my dear*— and see that distinguished father of the girl whose party it is? He spits into them." In the Barbachano home, Fuentes drinks one glass of *horchata* after another: "This soothes the soul," he'd say, lifting up his glass. "It washes away all your envies." After the party, at five in the morning, he would rush over to the rough Indianilla neighborhood for a soup and to speak with the sandwich-maker, the taxi driver, and the Christ of Alcalá, who spread his doctrine along the Canal del Norte and the Ferrocarril de Cintura and made the rats float in the waters of the drainage canal, La Bandida who wrote tunes so that politicians would not shut down his club, Gladys García, the prostitute on San Juan de Letrán, stationed on the corner of Madero street—"Hey, *güerito*, want me to sharpen your pencil?"—, the one who ended up as a turtle woman because she disobeyed her mother, the shoe-shine-boy, and the untouchable *noviecita santa* virginal girlfriend. Carlos gulped it all down, adjusting his pace to walk alongside the delivery man and the office worker out on the town, and back home he would write that Gladys García, with eyes like black cherries and a little body like a tamale, longed for a home where she could take refuge. Fuentes, sensitized to the point of exacerbation, was neither polished nor discrete, neither elegant nor subtle (essential characteristics for a writer in the 1940s); Fuentes, typing out with one finger a torrent of his spectacular obsessions: sexuality and excrement, nationalism and archae-

ology, verbal terrorism and political maneuvers, the child inside him, the same one who made him spoil himself and who discovered illnesses. (Fuentes, for example, chewed his food a lot; any gristle found would be made into a little ball and deposited carefully on his plate; once I counted ten little balls—the *steak au poivre* cannot have been up to scratch.) Fuentes wanted to take possession of everything (but without it hurting him).

At a fancy-dress party when we were both very young he once told me,

“I’m going to discover language.”

“Language?”

“Yes, I’m going to lose my innocence; language will make me its own; words will make me live, and I’ll live only for words, I’ll become their master.”

I didn’t really understand, and only managed to ask, “And what about me?”

“I’m afraid you’re never going to lose your innocence; you’re naïve; you’re like a little nun.”

(And in fact I *had* just spent three years at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Torresdale, Philadelphia.)

This exchange has stayed with me ever since I was 18.

As he did me, Carlos defined everything and read the future, and in deciphering the city, nothing stimulated him more than how people spoke on the streets. During his childhood and adolescence, he spoke the formal Spanish of diplomatic circles. Then he discovered another kind of language that was suggestive and magical, and he was excited by the possibility of recording it. You have to visit El Overol, El Burro, Las Catacumbas, El Golpe with its boxing ring where the Gladys Garcías were sashaying around. The large mirrors reflect a swinging crowd, illusions, and the “how gorgeous the sea must be.” It might seem contradictory that this well-heeled boy, with a broken face and a broken-down suit, should go for the coarse “bronze race,” but nevertheless the well-heeled girls find his enthusiasm contagious and share his nighttime adventures together with Enrique Creel, his close friend with whom he co-wrote his incomplete first novel, *Holofernes*. Carlos invites the beautiful people—always hungry for big new experiences—to the California Dancing Club. And when anyone approaches the porcelain dolls dancing mambo in a line (and who are also more than willing to get down with democracy), Carlos forestalls the fight in a state of agitation. His quips attract and repel in equal measure, his verve makes him adorable; Saturdays and Sundays are inconceivable without Fuentes, who introduces Amecameca, *because of Sor Juana*

of course, days out in Teotihuacán, winding up the party in the market under cloth awnings where Fuentes tastes *garnachas* and *chalupas* in a joyful atmosphere and an exaltation that soothes his soul with a *horchata* drink or with one of those stridently sweet fruit drinks arranged on a bed of alfalfa.

All these experiences are part of his zeal for it all, of that vast enterprise: to change Mexico’s destiny by reflecting its sorcery and putrefaction and not only that; to look for other authors who would like to inscribe the life and history of a continent into books and give them universal resonance. *Boom!*

Mexico, through Carlos Fuentes, is a conjuring trick, the meeting of civilizations, the confrontation between the down-and-out aristocrat from the Roma neighborhood—who could be Archie Burns, a Mexican writer critical of Fuentes—and the local gang leader or a gonzo from the Bondojito neighborhood. Fuentes is in a hurry. Images rush by and you have to snatch the conversations while you can, before they move on. Carlos keeps Enrique Creel on the move: “Hey, let’s go whoring because I still have to do Chapter 13.” The country is Mexico, and Carlos is going to show the nation’s history like the muralists before him, the surface of corn, and the burnt water—pre-Hispanic symbol of sacrifice—all together but not mixed up because everything fits into a small jug if you know how to put things in.

Fuentes was the doyen of national literature at its “lift-off” during the presidencies of Miguel Alemán and Ruiz Cortines, in the period known as the Mexican Miracle. The country became industrialized, credit-worthy, and Las Lomas de Chapultepec—formerly Chapultepec Heights—became the emblem of the Mexican Revolution. The slogan for the last year in government is: “*Éste es el año de Hidalgo, pendejo el que deje algo*” (It’s the year of Hidalgo, only a moron wouldn’t take it all”), and everyone in government, ably assisted by their buddies and former schoolmates, sets about emptying the coffers. Since politicians see theft as something normal, everyone gets in on the act—from the president to the porter—each at his own level. Guillermo Haro used to say that this kind of politics would destroy us; Fernando Benítez argued that if politicians at least do something, then it does not

Fuentes writes about and derobes
the city cursed by the name Federal District,
while he invents a new narrative form.
A dual revolution: revealing and naming,
exploring and domesticating.

Avid, determined, nowhere is off-limits
for Fuentes. If everything can be used in his work,
Fuentes democratizes literature, gets it moving,
turns it into an object of change.

matter so much if they steal. Guillermo Haro was proved right. We are the country of the bribe, and we were living in the times of winner-takes-all, and winning is screwing over others before they screw you.

Fuentes also inaugurated a surprising new phenomenon, something never before seen in Mexico: literature as a profession. Before Fuentes, writers were public officials who wrote on Sundays. Their writing was tinged with a gentle melancholy of sacrifice and service to the nation. Writers had a certain honor, yet that honor was not about the writing but the sacrifice in honor of the national flag. Under the fine cashmere, slowly but surely, the bellies of the new revolutionaries—the Federico Robles, the Artemio Cruzes—were growing. In the meantime, nothing was happening on Plateros Street, now called Madero Avenue, except for poor people being prohibited from stepping out of line and up onto the sidewalk. “You, Indian, walk in the middle of the street!” An acute observer, Fuentes squeezes us into Mexico wherever he can fit us in. He crams us with images, and gives us plenty to choose from. Avid, determined, nowhere is off-limits for Fuentes. If everything can be used in his work, if you know how to fit it in, Fuentes democratizes literature, gets it moving, turns it into an object of change. Readers return to Fuentes the author not just to be informed but to see their portraits and, in their reflection, find themselves. Literature is about real life and life is in books.

Fuentes’s second achievement has been to give prestige to the writing profession, to make it glamorous, fun, and respected. Carlos leans toward Neruda, Arthur Miller, Moravia, Styron, Pasolini; he courts Shirley McLaine, Jean Seberg, Candice Bergen, Debra Paget, Susan Sontag, Geraldine Chaplin, María Casares; and in that boy who shouts, “Look at me, I’m here, look at me, pay attention to me,” there is a lot of the adolescent who obliged Siqueiros to read his first novel on a beach at Mar del Plata. Buñuel loves Fuentes and he encourages him, shouting into his ear things that make him laugh. Mexicans used to stay on the sidelines, brooding over their resentments, thinking that if each successive distinguished visitor did not need them, they had no reason to turn up at the banquet. Fuentes saw the famous and Wham!, be-

fore you knew it he was already Fuenticing them. A tongue-twister that I associate with Fuentes comes to mind: “*Perejil comí y me emperejilé ¿cómo me desemperejilaré?*” (I pigged out on parsley and parsleyed out, how will I ever even partly unparslify myself?) After reading *Where the Air Is Clear*, you think you might never get Fuentes out of your system, because nothing is quite as captivating and insatiable as seeing him move inside the skin of his characters.

By becoming a writer, Fuentes opened the door for those who would follow. Neither Agustín nor Sáinz were scared of their vocation: they had the example of Fuentes who at the same time as building a monumental work was conscientiously building his own monument.

Between 1958 and 1980, Fuentes wrote up to two books a year. In 1962, for example, two seminal works in Fuentes’s career as a writer were published: *Aura* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz). In pre-Fuentes Mexico, people were not professional writers. Alfonso Reyes himself advised him to continue studying law to be able to earn a decent living and especially to avoid being looked down upon. In those days, literature was a hobby that did not bother people, not even the author. But Fuentes launched himself pen first at the risk of cracking his head open, tackling everything from explanations of the national consciousness to recipes for *huitlacoche* crepes. Until the end of the 1950s, no writer possessed such a formidable work ethic. Carlos’s life consists of writing, reading, feeding his brain, traveling his country, talking, and making love. His conversation is just like his prose: overpowering. Silence worries him. For Fuentes, Latin America’s history has been silenced ever since Sor Juana was forbidden to write. Given this state of affairs, Fuentes feels obliged to introduce the history and life of a continent; his zeal for everything explains his fecundity. Just as the muralists accumulated kilometers of painting without leaving any gaps, without forgetting a single character, Fuentes fills his pages with signs. No writing is as bright or uneasy as his. Unlike Julio Torri, Fuentes acts out his emotions well; he is an extraordinary communicator of his own work. By 1972 the list is overwhelming: Arthur Miller, Alberto Moravia, Joseph Losey, John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur Schlessinger, Kurt Vonnegut, Milan Kundera, Hermann Broch, Norman Mailer, William Styron, Gregory Peck, Susan Sontag, Shirley McLaine, Geraldine Chaplin, Jane Fonda, Debra Paget, Jean Seberg, Candice Bergen and her husband Louis Malle, and María Casares to whom he dedicated his play *El tuerto es rey* (The One-Eyed Man Is King). Carlos surely does not want to lose



In his national homage, when he turned 80.

them as he lost his childhood friends, his classmates, when his father, Mexico's ambassador in Chile, Rio de Janeiro, Washington, took him by the hand to his new school to be taught in different languages. How many periods of exile did Fuentes live through? For each new country a new skin, a salamander boy, a boy who always sought to feel comfortable in his own skin or, as the French say, *bien dans sa peau*.

The Fuentes phenomenon devours the universe in which he no longer fits. For the moment, he lives away from Mexico; he chooses Paris, London, Berlin, or he is a visiting professor at Princeton after a time at the Smithsonian Institute. His books are required reading for getting a master's in Spanish in France and at universities in the United States. From reviews in "México en la Cultura" he graduated to the *New York Review of Books*, *Sunday Times*, the *Times*, "The Times Literary Supplement," *Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Monde*, *L'Express*, *Les Lettres Françaises*. His books are printed in paperback editions all around the world and, in 1974, when he was not yet 46, his complete works were published by Aguilar. Fuentes could sing at the top of his lungs the song "Antes de que tus labios me confirmaran que me querías, ya lo sabía, ya lo sabía" (Before your lips told me you loved me, I already knew, I already knew.)

Perhaps one aspiration of Latin American literature is to take control of man and his condition, just as Ortega y Gasset requested. But no one embodies this desire as strongly as Fuentes. Unlike European writers who seem to have run out of things to say, and North Americans who struggle to prevent the TV, movies, radio, social anthropology, the Internet, and the iPod from stealing their material, in Latin America everything

is yet to be said, and Fuentes gives "a complete voice to a present that would not exist without his literature" and to a past "that lies there, inert, stiff, waiting to be recognized. This history of Spanish America is the history of a vast silence. . . . We have to rescue the past, use literature to break the silence and confront the lies of history."

In the prologue to *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Passion for Buenos Aires, 1923) Borges writes, "If any of the following pages contain an accomplished line of verse, I beg the reader to forgive my impudence for writing it first. We are all one, our trifles are essentially the same, and our souls so influenced by circumstance that it is almost random that you are the reader and I the writer."

No such modesty for Fuentes; he is an unaccidental writer; he has worked hard at it. Readers remain in their place, and while Borges may want to include them, Fuentes does not open himself up to being belittled. Since his youth he was the city's shepherd—when Mexico City still had something to be shepherded. His incredible stories bear witness to this: in the seedy dive called *El Golpe*, the table suddenly begins to move and a lady dwarf pops up, complete with make-up and curly blond locks, rosy cheeks, and chubby arms. "Carlos, this isn't possible; you saw this in a Buñuel film." "No, believe me, she even took me out onto the dance floor. First this lovely lady was cross because she had been sleeping under the table, but once she had sobered up a little she was perfectly happy to sit on my lap. She brought her face close to mine, and I saw that she was old, old, old, like a 150 000 years old, her face a parchment, and her massively strident voice drowned out even the shrieks of Pérez Prado's mambo." Carlos depicts one adventure after another, and it is easy to sense that the dwarf is the dress rehearsal for a good chapter of *Where the Air Is Clear*.

Carlos Fuentes knew how to go it alone, to get at the past, to lose himself in order to rediscover himself, to write "your personal misery will be the fate of your possible greatness; you and I will fight against ourselves." His life has been heads and tails. Since *Where the Air Is Clear* he has inserted us into his novels and showed us alternatives to failure. He managed to expand us. At Berkeley I heard the writer J. J. Armas Marcelo say that no version of Spain is as important for writers between the ages of 30 and 40 as that written by Fuentes in *Terra nostra* from his Mexican perspective: "Fuentes achieved what we attempted." ■■■