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#### **Author**

Sefami, Jacobo

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Jacobo Sefamí

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**CENTER FOR RESEARCH  
ON LATINOS IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY**

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*TEMPORARY RESIDENTS: WHEN DOES A FOREIGNER BECOME AN IMMIGRANT?*

*TWO DEBATES OVER NATIONAL IDENTITY: CARLOS FUENTES AND JOSE KOZER*

By Jacobo Sefamí

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The goal of the Center for Research on Latinos in Global Society is two-fold: to examine the emerging role of Latinos as actors in global events (economic, political, and cultural) and to promote Latino scholarship, enhance the quality of research in Latino studies, provide a forum for intellectual exchange, facilitate the exchange of scholars, disseminate research findings, and promote the participation of graduate students in

research on Latino issues. In addition, we anticipate that the research conducted by the Center's affiliated researchers will help guide policy makers in their decisions concerning a society with a growing Latino presence. California has become ethnically and linguistically more diverse than many countries in the world -- over a hundred languages are spoken in the public schools of Southern California alone. The research undertaken supported by the Center is expected to make a contribution towards the understanding of cultural, social, and political dimensions of demographic change such as that which has been occurring in California. Although this research will focus on the population of Latinos within California and the United States, it shall do so in the context of the U.S. in a global society.

## I

Recently, in a *LA Times* article, I was surprised to see that the "accepted international definition of an immigrant" (*Los Angeles Times*, A29) is someone who remains in one place for more than 12 months. A colleague (Manuel García y Griego) later explained to me that with the phrase "accepted international definition", the reporter (Patrick J. McDonnell) meant immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, who stayed past the expiration date on their entry visas, or simply entered the country by whatever means and remained for longer than a year. But, still, the introduction of the time issue in the attempt to define an immigrant is obviously problematic: when do we know that a person wants to move to another place

*permanently*? If an immigrant is, by definition, "someone who moves to a different country for permanent residence", the problem here is with the word "permanent". How do we determine that a move is permanent? For a demographer, a foreigner is an immigrant (regardless of the juridical status, i.e., a student, an undocumented worker, a diplomat, an exchange visitor, etc.) as long as that person is an habitual resident in this country (here is also the problem of deciding the time limits for this "habitual" residency). But more than concentrate on the technical definition of an immigrant, I am interested in the cultural dimensions of the problem on the individual himself (herself): how does a foreigner decide that he or she is an immigrant?

Many Latino residents in the U.S. are not convinced that they are here for good. The reluctance of many Mexican nationals to acquire U.S. citizenship is probably motivated by the idea that they will go back to Mexico. The proximity generates the highest percentage of foreigners who refuse to naturalize themselves (approximately 75% of the total numbers; curiously, Canadians also follow this trend). Even Cubans dream of the day Castro's regime is over, so that they can return to their homeland: *Next Year in Cuba*, is the title of a recent autobiography by Cuban-American author Gustavo Perez Firmat, reappropriating the phrase Jews in the Diaspora utter every year, as part of a ritual:

"Hashana havahah ve Yerushalaim", "Next year in Jerusalem".

Recently, the Mexican government approved a law that would allow dual citizenship. Besides of being a political response to the xenophobia of the last years, it also gives a juridical status to the notion of double identity. It legitimates something that was evident: a movable society, which fluctuates in the territory of both countries. Nevertheless, from the intellectual point of view the issue of a dual faithfulness has been confronted by nationalists.<sup>1</sup> Many Latinos feel pressured to decide for one side or the other. Would it be possible to be both? Here, I will present two examples, which are evidence that the problem of national identity affects almost every individual who decides to move. I am referring to one of the best-known Mexican writers, Carlos Fuentes; and also the most important poet of the Cuban exile, José Kozer. Both intellectuals have used the exact same metaphor to refer to their identity: "The Spanish language is my homeland". Obviously, they have asserted that they are, indeed, Mexican and Cuban respectively, but at the same time have recognized that they have transcended the limits of their own country. "The Spanish language is my country" could be true for many Latinos in the U.S. (especially, first generation Latinos, like myself). This sentence can provoke a discussion about assimilation, igniting the fire from nationalists of both sides. It is hard to judge people who do not consider themselves immigrants, and at the same time feel that have gone beyond their own national identity. It

is precisely that ambiguity the point of attack of the critics.

## II

Carlos Fuentes was born in Panama City in 1928, the son of a Mexican diplomat. Soon, the family moved to Washington D.C., where his father worked as a counselor for the Mexican embassy. Fuentes lived his entire childhood in the U.S., moving at 12 to Chile, and at 16 to Mexico City. In 1988, he wrote an autobiographical text called "How I started to write", included in his book *Myself with Others*. With the pretext of a book review (also on *Old Gringo*, a novel published the same year in English), Enrique Krauze published an article attacking Fuentes, which ignited a bitter debate in Mexico. The article was published simultaneously in *The New Republic*, and in the Mexican journal *Vuelta*. It was a harsh attack on Fuentes' qualities as a writer and as a public figure. In that same year (1988) Fuentes had received three awards: the Cervantes Prize (\$88,000 dollars), the most prestigious literary prize in the Spanish language, presented by the king of Spain; the National Arts Club, in New York, gave him its gold medal for literature; and in Managua, the Sandinistas bestowed him the Rubén Darío award. Some, in the Mexican media, argued that Krauze's attack was instigated by Octavio Paz (an old friend of Fuentes) to harm the possibilities of the Nobel prize. But the debate in Mexico over Carlos Fuentes served to divide the Mexican intelligentsia. The discussion concentrated on questioning Enrique Krauze's lack of credentials as a literary critic (he is a historian), or reviewing if Fuentes was indeed an overvalued writer.<sup>2</sup> But when examining the literature about the polemic, I was surprised not to see much comment on the main attack of Krauze: Fuentes was not a true Mexican, since according to Krauze he is "a gringo child of Mexican origin", "a foreigner in his own country"... "a willing exile from Mexico to the United States, or a reluctant exile from the United States in Mexico?" [Krauze, 28] Krauze was supporting his arguments on Carlos Fuentes' autobiographical text, which oddly appeared in English and has not since been translated into Spanish. To me, the very interesting topic about Fuentes' essay is the evidence of a double identity, although Fuentes emphasizes over and over his Mexicanness: the words "Mexico" and "Mexican" appear countless times in the succinct 25 pages. The first paradox, though, is that Mexico appears in his childhood as a fictitious place, a place of the imagination:

At home, my father made me read Mexican history, study Mexican geography, and understand the names, the dreams and defeats of Mexico: a nonexistent country, I then thought, invented by my father to nourish my infant imagination with yet another marvelous fiction: a land of Oz with a green cactus road... [Fuentes, *Myself*, 4]

I had learned to imagine Mexico before I ever knew Mexico. [Fuentes, *Myself*, 27]

If this quote reveals Fuentes's will to emphasize his early inclination towards literature (remember, the essay is called "How I started to write"), Krauze takes the statement literally:

The appearance of *Myself with Others* is timely. Its autobiographical pages *finally* reveal the origins of his intellectual sleight of hand. The book shows Fuentes's lack of identity and personal history. From the very start, it's clear that he filled in this void with films and literature... The key to Fuentes is not in Mexico; it is in Hollywood. [Krauze, 28, my emphasis]

Moreover, Fuentes speaks proudly of his preferences for the American way of life, showing his double identity:

... I became the first and only Mexican to prefer grits to guacamole. I also became the original Mexican Calvinist: an invisible taskmaster called Puritanical Duty shadows my every footstep: I shall not deserve anything unless I work relentlessly for it, with iron discipline, day after day... No *siestas* for me,... why must I, to this very day, read the complete works of Hermann Broch and scribble in my black notebook on a sunny Mexican beach, instead of lolling the day away and waiting for the coconuts to fall? [Fuentes, *Myself*, 6]

On his vacation in Mexico, Fuentes says:

It was depressing to compare the progress of a country where everything worked, everything was new, everything was clean, with the inefficiency, backwardness, and dirt of my own country. [Quoted by Krauze, 28]

But soon, Fuentes the American child was reminded of his Mexican self. After the nationalization in Mexico of the foreign oil companies by President Lázaro Cárdenas, in 1938, Fuentes was singled out at school:

Instantly, surprisingly, I became a pariah in my school. Cold shoulders, aggressive stares, epithets, and sometimes blows. Children know how to be cruel, and the cruelty of their elders is the surest residue of the malaise the young feel toward things strange, things other, things that reveal our own ignorance or insufficiency... [Fuentes, *Myself*, 7]

I discovered that my father's country was real. And that I belonged to it. Mexico was my identity yet I lacked an identity... [Fuentes, *Myself*, 8]

The political event becomes a dramatic point of departure for affirming one nationality over the other: the consciousness of the foreigner over the one of an immigrant. But, in the eyes of Krauze, Mexico still was a nation out of reach:

...the only early links between Fuentes and his "paternal country were a nationalism forged less by pride in the Mexican tradition than by resentment of the North American world, and by the determined effort he made throughout his childhood to preserve Spanish as his language. [Krauze, 29]

Fuentes left the U.S. in 1941 and went to Chile on another diplomatic mission of his father; four years later, he finally moved to Mexico City. His career as a writer started in the fifties, with his first book, *Los días enmascarados*, published in 1954. The main topic of Fuentes's fiction is Mexico. But Krauze insists that the perspective is of an outsider. Let's take a brief example: "Chac Mool", one of the stories frequently used in anthologies. It is based on a fantastic tale of a miniature replica of a Pre-Columbian rain god, who comes alive, and kills its purchaser. Since the story was based (as Fuentes has explained in an interview) upon an exposition of Mexican art in Europe in 1952, Christopher Domínguez (who continues the line of criticism by Krauze) identifies this text as a "touristic naiveté": Mexico is seen as the exotic with foreign eyes.<sup>3</sup> Krauze ends his attack by criticizing Fuentes as historian, since in *Old Gringo* the facts are distorted:

Fuentes, a foreigner in his own country, skirts that reality, and lingers over externals. For Fuentes, Mexico is a script committed to memory, not an enigma or a problem, not anything really living, not a personal experience. [Krauze, 28]

In the 70's, Fuentes went back to his transient life. According to Raymond Leslie Williams, he lived in 22 different homes from 1972 to 1992, mostly in Mexico, France, Great Britain, and the United States. [Williams, 38] At the end of his autobiographical essay (although it only goes up to 1950), Fuentes recognizes his mobility, escaping from the strict nationalism, expanding from Mexico to Latin America:

I wrote with urgency because my absence became a destiny, yet a shared destiny: that of my own body as a young man, that of the old body of my country, and that of the problematic and isomniac body of my language. I could, perhaps, identify the former without too much trouble: Mexico and myself. But the language belonged to us all, to the vast community that writes and talks and thinks in Spanish. And without this language I could give no reality to either myself or my land. Language thus became the center of my personal being and of the possibility of forming my own destiny and that of my country into a shared destiny. [Fuentes, Myself, 18]

I went back to Mexico, but knew that I would be a wanderer in search of perspective: this was my real baptism... But no matter where I went, Spanish would be the language of my writing and Latin America the culture of my language. Fuentes, Myself, 27]

The adoption of the Spanish language as his way of expression meant also finding a place to be. Fuentes used the phrase "My homeland is the Spanish language" as the title of his acceptance speech of the Cervantes Prize (April 1988, published in the book *Tres discursos para dos aldeas*, 1993). Even if Fuentes identifies himself as Mexican, his constant motion has had an impact on his view of himself. He has become the "leading interpreter of Latin America to the North American reading public" (according to William Styron), and as such identifies as Latin American, if such a thing is possible.



### III

I would like to take this idea of the hybrid in order to give my second example: the Cuban poet José Kozer, who is according to critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat, the "first major poet to have emerged from the contemporary Cuban Diaspora". Kozer was born in Havana in 1940, a son of Jewish immigrants from Poland and Czechoslovakia. At the age of 20, he moved to New York City. This year he will retire from Queens College (where he has worked since 1965), and will move permanently (?) to Málaga, Spain.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat (*Life on the Hyphen. The Cuban-American Way*, 1994) examines José Kozer's poetry as a phenomenon exclusive of the exile: Kozer's stubbornness to write only in Spanish, and at the same time having started his career entirely in the United States, makes him emerge in a vacuum ("No man's language" is the title of Pérez Firmat's essay), as if he were in an empty island. While the references to Cuba are explicit (especially in the use of toponyms), the ones to New York are reticent or non-existent. Since Pérez Firmat's essay is included in a book about Cuban-American culture, the author inserts it as the antithesis to his own proposal. While the other chapters examine the marriage or addition of two cultures: Cuban + American, Kozer represents the subtraction, Cuban -(minus) American. His book ends with a litany of suggestions to the exile's seclusion, encouraging him to accept his reality and, once and for all, assimilate to the American way of life.

Nevertheless, like Fuentes, Kozer is a proclaimer of the idea of plurality. In a lecture here at UCI, he spoke about his Jewish-Cuban identity:

...we celebrate. A celebration of absence. The celebration of multiplicity, doubleness, tripleness, contamination, miscegenation or *mestizaje*, poliphony and estrangement, strangeness and participation... for all Cubans are now Jews, we are all now Jews, in a state of flux and change and migration, painfully moving from one thing to another, being zapped by historical forces... Cuban or Jew, Cuban Jew or Jewish Cuban, we are condemned to... celebrate Diaspora... The irony of my destiny is that I was born a Cuban, from Jewish parents that came from Poland and Czechoslovakia: at age 20 I left my country, both for political and non-political reasons. I never returned, will never return, while alive. My children were born in the United States; they are Americans, non-Cubans. And so, I became first and last generation Cuban. A true Jew. Perhaps a true new Cuban, a true new citizen of a wandering and international nation.<sup>4</sup>

One of Kozer's most quoted poems speaks of the hybrid: "Gaudeamus" ("Let's Rejoice", in latin):

En mi confusión

no supe ripostar a mis detractores, aquellos  
 que me tildan  
 de postalita porque pronuncio la ce a la manera castellana o digo tío por tipo (me privan) los mestizajes  
 (peruanismos) (mexicanismos)  
 de la dicción y los vocablos: ni soy uno (ni otro) ni soy recto ni ambiguo, bárbaramente  
 romo  
 y narigudo (barbas) asirias (ojos) oblicuos y vengo del otro lado  
 del río: cubano  
 y postalita (judío) y tabernáculo (shofar y taled) violín de la Aragón o primer  
 corneta  
 de la Sonora Matancera: qué  
 más quisiera uno que no haber sido ibis migratorio (ludibrio) o corazón  
 esporádico  
 hecho al escándalo de quien a la hora nupcial, a la hora  
 del festín  
 cruza el umbral y aspira un olor a jarabes (olor) a frutas tropicales y eneldo: pues  
 soy así, él  
 y yo, cisterna y limbo (miríadas) las manos que trepan por la escala, contaminan  
 el pensamiento  
 de tiña y verdín (aguas) imperturbables: sin nación, quieto  
 futuro  
 y jolgorio de marmitas redondas (mis manos) son mi raza que hurgan en la crepitación  
 de la materia. [Kozer, 44]

In my confusion  
 I didn't know how to answer my detractors, those  
 who brand me  
 a poseur because I pronounce the c in the Castilian manner or I say fellow instead of guy [I love]  
 miscegenations  
 [peruvianisms] [mexicanisms]  
 of diction and vocabulary: I am neither the one [nor the other] neither straight nor ambiguous,  
 barbarously  
 flat-nosed  
 and big-nosed Assyrian [beards] oblique [eyes] and I come from the other side  
 of the river: Cuban  
 and vain [a Jew] and tabernacle [shofar and taled] violin of the Aragon or first trumpet  
 of the Sonora Matancera: what  
 more could one have wished that not to be a migratory ibis [scorn] or a sporadic  
 heart  
 made for the scandal of whom at the nuptial hour, at the hour  
 of the feast  
 crosses the threshold and inhales a scent of potions [scent] of tropical fruits and dill:  
 well  
 that's how it is, he  
 and I, cistern and limbo [myriads] the hands that climb the scales contaminate  
 thought  
 with ring-worm and scum [waters] imperturbable: nationless, quiet  
 future  
 and mirth of round casseroles [my hands] are my race that  
 dig into crepitation  
 of matter. [Translated by Pérez Firmat, 165, 168]

Basically, the poem is a defense of plurality, in response to the attack of not fitting in one country and  
 form of speech. The identity of the I is the multiplicity: it defines himself through antithetical features: flat and  
 long nose; straight and ambiguous; Catholic (Gaudeamus Igitur) and Jewish (shofar and taled). Although there

are cubanisms like "ripostar" (to answer, word mostly used for boxing) and "postalita" (false or pretentious), the speaker says to love "miscegenations of diction and vocabulary", referring specifically to forms of speech in Spain, Peru and Mexico. Obviously, in the context of the poem, any other Spanish regionalisms might be included. Contrary to the opinion by Pérez Firmat that Kozer's language is in no man's land, this poem would prove that the convergence of diverse Spanish speeches is notoriously found in the United States. All of us who speak Spanish and live in the U.S. know that sooner or later would meet a Chilean, a Peruvian, a Spaniard, a Dominican, an Argentinian, etc. It is mostly in the U.S. where one finds all the lexical varieties of the Spanish language.

The notion of uprootedness and exile is clear at the end of the poem, when the speaker declares himself "without a nation". The absence becomes a blank that is filled with multiplicity:

He who is outside of his natural language becomes and androgynous, a language hybrid, a mestizo of the word. His word is mixed with other words, even in his own language. I have lived the multilinguistic phenomenon in New York, since my arrival in 1960, from Cuba.

When reviewing Kozer's poetry, one has the impression that the originality derives from the separation from the Latin American tradition (since he became a writer in New York). It would be easier to place him among the American tradition, with the long verse and colloquialisms of the Beat generation, and the sophisticated poetic elaboration's of the School of New York (John Ashbery, for example). His mastery of the Spanish language make him awkward within the American tradition.

#### IV

I have tried to show the difficulties pertain to two major writers on deciding their own national identity. In both cases, they reaffirm that they are Mexican and Cuban (respectively), but are reluctant to accept their American side. Instead, they feel appropriate to demonstrate their faithfulness to the Latin American culture and language. That is the target of the attacks I have shown: Krauze accusing Fuentes of being a "gringo", and Pérez Firmat encouraging Kozer to assimilate and, once and for all, become an American.

The uncertainties of a dual nationality come in the individual himself. Ask a first generation Latino if he or she is an immigrant or a foreigner (my guess is that the most likely answer is "foreigner"), regardless of how the demographers would place him or her. The impact of that decision, at large, is multiple: political, social, economical, and cultural. My paper is just

concerned with the questions. I don't know if I will find answers.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In the U.S., the group that initiated Proposition 187 has reacted negatively to the approved law in Mexico, proposing that those people who become Americans should abandon their previous nationality.

<sup>2</sup>See the summary of the debate by Armando Ponce, in *Proceso* 612.

<sup>3</sup>See Christopher Domínguez, "Carlos Fuentes, novelista," in *Antología de la narrativa mexicana del siglo XX*, vol.II (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991), 12-30.

<sup>4</sup>Unpublished text.

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