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**Legacies of the Borderland in
*The Crystal Frontier***
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[Hipertexto](#)

The Crystal Frontier by Carlos Fuentes is a highly interesting and at the same time a hilarious novel that is made up of nine short stories and each one occurring in the borderline between Mexico and the United States. The stories explore themes familiar to anyone that has lived or read about the Mexican-American experience. As a result, they focus on different people's lifestyles, their experiences and struggles on both sides of the border, and their interrelationship with each other. In addition, the context of Carlos Fuentes's novel is very rich and his writing style is very simple and direct, which makes the stories well crafted. Therefore, the focus of this research will be a deep analysis of *The Crystal Frontier's* book cover, its symbolism, and its connection with the frontier as a geographical, social, cultural, and literary space, which it is fundamental for the cultural diversity that the writer portrays.

Something that is highly representative and that can captivate the attention of any reader is the book cover illustration in Carlos Fuentes's novel *The Crystal Frontier*. It is a two dimensional artwork, which was designed by Lisa Peters. In this art piece, she enclosed a lot of symbolic meaning that can be easily related with the nine short stories that make up this novel. It seems that Peters used acrylics, which now a day is among the synthetic painting media that is most widely used by artists (Preble 133). The main visual element that is clearly seen in the cover is the sharp, jagged black line that gives the artwork a sense of motion. It also seems to split up the illustration in two sections. This type of line is used to represent the Río Grande River that divides the Mexican people from the Americans and its uneven form can be seen as the direction of the water flow, which is represented by the light blue color painted around the already mentioned line. This interpretation can be well sustained by the assigned meaning of the colors that Lisa Peters used and by Carlos Fuentes's description

of the Río Grande River. In this case, the black color symbolizes “power and death” while the light blue color represents “coolness” (“Color...”). Therefore, in the short story “Río Grande, Río Bravo,” Fuentes makes the following poetic remarks about the river,

...río grande, río bravo, did the creosote, the cactus, the sagebrush not forget you,
thirsty for your passage, so obsessed by your next rebirth that they have
already forgotten you death?...now God, every day, gives a hand
to the río grande, río bravo, so it may rise to his balcony once more...
for everyone would get lost here if the Guadalupe mountains
were not there to protect the river and drive it back to its womb,
río grande, río bravo.. (216).

Furthermore, the idea of the Río Grande River is highly presented throughout the novel, especially as a separator of two nations. In other words, it should be considered as the divider of “The Crystal Frontier” that separates two very close, but at the same time indubitable different worlds that are always rebelling against each other, instead of being like brothers. Unfortunately, this is not like the happy endings of any Disney or Hollywood’s movie. Therefore, the border fence is still a constant remainder of the resulting “Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo,” which was signed on “February 2, 1848” and it contains “the seeds of bitterness” (Samora 99).

The border fence that forms part of any frontier does not stop *mojaditos*-wetbacks not only from Mexico but from other parts of the world as well- to continue risking their lives just for the sake of following the American dream by crossing the Río Grande River, which will lead them into this so call “land of promise and fulfillment” (Anzaldúa 29). However, it is important to keep in mind that these desperate people or should I said *los olvidados de Dios* take the extremely unsafe quest of actually crossing the turbulent waters of the Río Grande River, which are well portrayed in the cover too. In the book cover, the waves are seen as five curved and irregular bold black lines that give the effect of turbulence of the river that was previously described. Therefore, the border crossers are forced into implementing several high risk methods as clearly described in the following lines,

the “*mojados*” (wetbacks) float on inflatable rafts across *el río Grande*, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to [the] *Virgen de Guadalupe* on their lips: *Ay virgencita morena, mi madrecita, dame tu bendición.* (Anzaldúa 33)

But sometimes, the wetbacks’ faith is not enough and their dreams are dissolved as plain and weak sand castles as Carlos Fuentes put it in his short story “Río Grande, Río Bravo,” which describes how “Salvador Ayala, Benito’s father, the son and grandson of the Fortunatos, became a wetback who crossed the river at night and was caught on the other side by the Border Patrol. It was a gamble for him and the others. But it was worth the risk” (221). The image of the Border

Patrol, a representative of the law can be identified by the geometrical representation of a man in the right hand corner of the book cover (The representation of this man will serve as a symbol for several aspects of this novel, which are going to be discussed later). In this case, the black color, which is considered a neutral color, is used as a symbol for “death and evil” (“Color...”). Those characteristics can be associated with the outrageous racism of Fuentes’s Anglo character Dan Polonsky, a Border Patrol in the short story “Río Grande, Río Bravo.” Polonsky is described as a man that “detested the illegals,” and he was “implacable in his hatred of Mexicans” and often referred to them as “cowards” (227, 239). He even detested the idea of getting a tan or sun burn because he did not want his skin to look like the color of a “copper veinte centavos coin” and to be confused as a *Mexicano* (Cisneros 34). For that reason, he loved the “pale complexion of his European ancestors,” which made him feel superior. Therefore, on the cover, the geometrical representation of a man is portrayed at a higher eye level than the other man, which gives to the whole composition of the artwork the idea of a winning position, superiority, and advantages over others. Even though Dan Polonsky’s portrayal may seem excessive and stereotypical, it is hard to deny that such attitudes exist along this troubled border.

Another level of interpretation that can be assigned to the above geometrical representation of a man is seen as a portrayal of some Americans, which Carlos Fuentes strongly criticized and stereotyped. The short story “Las amigas” is an excellent example of how Fuentes denounces the behavior of some Americans toward Mexicans, something that he reprobates, since Mexicans are all human beings with feelings and values too, and most important of all capable of doing wonderful things. In “Las amigas,” Fuentes presented his readers with the description of the relationship between Miss Dunbar, a wealthy white matron and her abused Mexican housemaid, Josefina. Her prejudicial ideas went even beyond “the crystal frontier,” she was very sarcastic, insulted, and disdained blacks, Jews, Italians, and especially Mexicans. Miss Amy Dunbar whose real name was Amelia Ney Dunbar was constantly saying that, “Mexicans are supposed to be lazy” (147). In addition, she was always mean to Josefina and made nonsense remarks but at the same time cruel ones such as “you’d like to be white, wouldn’t you” and “I’m convinced Jesus loves me” because “he made me white” (154-155). As it is clearly seen, Miss Dunbar who claimed herself as a pure American possessed a rotten inner self and an exterior which wasn’t the best portrayal of perfection. Carlos Fuentes stereotyped her as a woman that every time she laughed, “show[ed] those horse teeth that with age protrude farther and farther in Anglo-Saxon women” (146). Yet in the story “Pain,” an American woman by the name of Charlotte is described as a woman with “platinum blond hair,” the ideal color of hair of any American woman, a color that in a way romanticizes them and makes them one of a bunch, like a replica of the Mona Lisa.

A third explanation for the geometric man on the cover can be perceived as the typical rich Mexican that is able to cross the frontier as if he was the owner of it. A vivid example of that can be seen in the personage of Don Leonardo

Barroso who is an ambiguous figure of great wealth and power (he is the main character of the whole novel and each of the nine stories comprising this work explores the life of someone touched by him). The following lines can help support this idea: “[T]he invisible line of the frontier passed through his head. He was well-known in the luxury hotels on the other side; they never asked him for identification or baggage and simply rented him the most luxurious suite”(21). In addition, Barroso’s unlimited power was often spreading from one country to the other without even being questioned.

The fourth and last interpretation that can be assigned to the enigmatic figure of the geometric man is that it can also represent some Mexicans that live in the United States but discriminate against other *paisanos*. In the story “Las Amigas,” this is sadly mentioned and stated as follows, “[t]he ones who come first don’t like the ones who come later. Sometimes we’re unfair among ourselves. It isn’t enough that others treat us badly” (149). Unfortunately, this type of discrimination is nothing new and it can sadly be observed now a day.

Another aspect of *The Crystal Frontier’s* book cover that is highly symbolic and that captivates the attention of any person is the second geometrical representation of a man on the left side of the cover. This portrayal of a man can also be assigned a few connotations. First of all, it can be seen as any Mexican man living in Mexico, but with insufficient economic resources. Therefore, Carlos Fuentes did not omit this prevalent aspect of a Mexico that most of the time is invisible to the eyes of others, which leads me to the interpretation of the two houses -also portrayed on the left side- that can be clearly distinguished as part of Mexico City. It is important to realize the way that the houses were painted and their location. They look very simple, modest, and in a way, kind of primitive. In fact, they obtained that form because the artist used geometrical shapes such as squares and triangles. This can be well sustained with the crude but somehow true description that Carlos Fuentes made of the effects that poverty causes to a person and his/her struggles for survival, even in the worst conditions. Therefore, in his short story “Pain,” he depicts Juan Zamora’s house as “in dire need of a good coat of paint” with clothes “hanging on the balconies to dry” (51). However, its location added some sense of poverty because in order to get there, he had to cross “the densest urban spaces, spaces swirling...as a river made entirely of loose stones” and he had to “cut through the brown crust of polluted air” (51). In addition, the houses were painted at different eye levels and different sizes, but the reason for that is that the artist wanted to give the whole artwork some sense of distance and depth.

Returning to the interpretation of the geometrical portrayal of a man, it could also be appreciated as a symbol for the typical Mexican person that crossed the Río Grande River in an illegal form, just for the sake of a better life style and especially for a better job with a higher salary. Therefore, all of us may even ask ourselves, why did they (meaning some border crossers) risk everything they have, especially their life just for a job? Why don’t they stay in Mexico? Well, the answer is very simple, since “[t]he population of Mexico has been increasing rapidly over the past several years” (Samora 145). Furthermore, its’ “development has not been able to keep abreast of its growing population”

(Samora 145). As a result, some of them became border crossers and as Fuentes described them as “all between twenty and forty years old, all wearing straw hats, cheap cotton shirts and trousers, sturdy shoes for working in a cold climate, short jackets of various colors and designs” (217).

In addition, in the book cover a very interesting detail that relates to this connotation is the way in which the geometrical man was painted with his arms raising up and spread wide open, and his legs crossed, which can be related with the image of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion. In this case, the wetbacks can be seen as persons that suffer and in a way ask for some sort of divine protection or salvation, when asking for a job. This can be related with Benito Ayala’s description in the short story “Río Grande, Río Bravo,” in which he depicts how immigrants asked, or begged for a job,

They all raised their arms, spread them in a cross, clench
their fists, silently offer their labor ..., hoping
someone takes note of them, saves them, pays them heed.
They prefer to risk being caught than not to advertise themselves,
declare their presence: Here we are. We want work. (217)

Because all people no matter what nationality they possess or what is their migratory status, they all want the same thing, which is “bread but roses too” (*Bread and Roses*).

The third interpretation that I assigned to this amazing geometrical design of a man is the abused Mexican worker that sometimes can still be seen. These abuses can range from lower salaries than in the United States to even sexual harassments. In the lively short story “Malintzin of the Maquilas,” Carlos Fuentes vividly depicted the volatile bonding among three women that are factory workers. The majority of these *maquiladoras* (also known as industrial parks or factories) allow “the gringos to assemble toys, textiles, motors, furniture, computers, and television sets from parts made in the United States, [but] put together in Mexico at a tenth the labor cost, and sent back across the border to the U.S. market with a value-added tax” (119-120). However, those women saw themselves forced to accept such jobs “even if the salary was a tenth [of] what it was in the United States, [because] it was ten times more than the nothing paid everywhere else in Mexico” (120). In addition, Fuentes described the *maquiladoras* as some sort of “Disneyland” but “full of ogres who eat innocent princesses” (121). The majority of the times, those women are constant preys of sexual harassment by either women or men. This is clearly seen in the already mentioned short story “Malintzin of the Maquilas.” In that story, Carlos Fuentes give emphasis to the abuses that the *maquiladora* workers undertake, which is something usually ignored.

However, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which is located at the bottom left hand corner, is considered a national icon of Mexican religiosity. Her image also helps as a contributor hint that the left side of this piece of art represents Mexico because without the *Guadalupana*, Mexico wouldn’t be Mexico any longer. In this case, the Virgin of Guadalupe represents our indigenous heritage and the faith that feeds the souls of the Mexican people –

poor or rich-. It also gives them hope that things will change or at least be better and will bring them some sweetness to their existence. Now a day, most people believe that the *Guadalupana* is the mother of all Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and that only through her grace and through the followers' faith, they will be rewarded by her favors. In addition to that, some people even make promises that in return for the Virgin's favors, they will do all sorts of penitence or give her special offerings in her honor. Therefore, it is very common to see shrines with great amounts of candles, flowers, pictures, etc. As a result, "*la Virgen de Guadalupe* is [seen as] the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new" (Anzaldúa 52). The seven little triangles that are spread out around the *Guadalupana* have a symbolic aspect too. They can be seen as the seven days of the week, meaning that the Virgin of Guadalupe is always there for all Mexicans, no matter what day it is. Furthermore, the artist Lisa Peters emphasized the image of the Mexican Virgin by using the following colors around her image: red, orange, light blue, yellow, pink and black, and each one with a specific meaning, which connects to the image of the *Guadalupana*. Furthermore, the assigned meanings for the colors used are as follows: Red is a primary hue, which in this case symbolizes the Virgin's love, courage, and respect; orange, a secondary hue that gives to the *Guadalupana*'s followers a sense of fascination; light blue represents tranquility, truth, heaven, wisdom, and loyalty; yellow, a primary color that can be seen as optimism and enthusiasm; the color pink represents one of the main features that have been assigned to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, which is compassion and lastly, the neutral color black stands for mystery, which is something peculiar of this religious icon ("Color..."). In The Crystal Frontier, the reader can find a few references to the Virgin, but one that is kind of strange was the one that Michelina Laborde (the daughter-in-law and mistress of Leonardo Barroso) was asking the Virgin. In the short story "A Capital Girl," Michelina used to pray a lot and often asked her the following, "I always want to be a girl. Blessed Virgin, help me. Don't turn me into a woman" (10).

Now moving into the actual classification of Mexico and the United States, which I have already made clear as to what side is which, it is important to describe in more depth the meaning of the colors that illustrate the terrain of both lands as well as the remaining images in the art piece. On the Mexican side of the frontier, the image of three mountains is clearly observed, creating what looks like triangles. That only tells us that Mexico is still a non-developed country, as when compared with the United States, which is a country highly industrialized. The United States' industrialization is represented by the two half of circles positioned in the middle, right hand side of the cover. The four little squares around the upper half of a circle just gave the icon of industrialization a sense of movement, which can also be interpreted as improvement. This leads to the colors that form part of the American terrain. The majority of the space assigned to be a symbol of the United States was painted green, which represents "growth," in this case it can be economical, technological, medical, educational, and even political ("Color..."). Meanwhile, the minimum strokes of brown color –a

color that is created through a value variation (combination of colors)- are seen as a suggestion of stability as well as “a color that hold us to the earth and materialistic thoughts” (Heart 4). Therefore, a vivid example that can be associated with a nutritional as well as an economical welfare is the image of the fish. However, it is important to realize that there is only one image of a fish and that it is positioned on the American side. This of course refers to the abundance of food that has always formed part of the United States and to the end of hungriness of its population. Therefore, in the short story “Spoils,” Carlos Fuentes satirized the United States as having “[f]orty million of what others pejoratively call fat people” (83). However, the Mexican people have never counted on any type of assistance, neither any type of comestibles nor economical. In Mexico, the situation is different. If you have money, you eat. If you don’t, then, you starve yourself and this is another contributing factor for the constant immigration of illegal Mexicans to the United States.

On the Mexican side of *The Crystal Frontier’s* book cover, it is also important to make notice of the color that the artist, Lisa Peters used to illustrate the Mexican land. She mostly used the colors red and brown. The red hue can be related with the courage and passion that Mexicans represent. It can also be perceived as the courage that most Mexicans or Mexican-Americans posses to go against adversity. Then, the brown hue can be looked as “the color of earth,” which keeps telling us as the popular saying states, “keep your feet on the earth” (Hearth 3). In the story “A Capital Girl,” Campazas (a Mexican town) is being described as “a city somewhere in that panorama of desert, bald mountains, and swirling dust” (4).

The last three images that are going to be discussed are the American factories or businesses, the image of the fire on the Mexican side (even though, some people think that it looks like an aloe vera, the interpretation that I am going to assign it and sustain with the novel is to view it as a symbol for fire), and finally the sun. In the event of the American factories that are overlapped by the first geometrical representation of a man discussed earlier, they represent the factories that hire Mexicans. In the short story, “The Crystal Frontier,” this idea is sustained through the character of Lisandro Chavez, who, along with dozens of other men, is flown into Manhattan to spend the weekend cleaning the inside of a glass skyscraper. Therefore, he became the representative of the latest high-tech form of migrant labor.

Then, we may ask ourselves, what is the significance of a fire and why is it located in Mexico? Well, the answer is not as complicated. The fire and especially the different color strokes that characterize this image may be seen as a representation of the development of a variety of human emotions. For example, it may represent the prohibited love between the daughter-in-law (Michelina) and the father-in-law (Don Leonardo Barroso) who will eventually have an affair. This can be associated with the red hue, which it has already been discussed to symbolize “passion and love.” Furthermore, the fire can also be seen as a symbol of the homosexual relationship that is evident in the short story “Pain.” Therefore, I will relate the green color with this idea, since green can

represent “growth.” In this case, Juan Zamora grows as a human being by discovering his homosexuality.

The image of the sun can be considered as the hope that all Mexicans have for a better future. It can also be perceived as the finding and rediscovering of identity. For that reason, these views can be related with the short story “Río Grande, Río Bravo” and especially with the personage of José Francisco and his search for his roots and identity. As a result, wouldn’t be wonderful if we all could relate to José Francisco’s words? In particular when he states, “I’m not a Mexican. I’m not a gringo. I’m a Chicano. I’m not a gringo in the USA and a Mexican in Mexico. I’m Chicano everywhere. I don’t have to assimilate into anything. I have my own history” (252). His annotations emphasize the importance of possessing a self-identity.

Finally, I believe that once the reader gets to read Carlos Fuentes’s novel, he/she is going to get a better understanding of the book cover. As a result, he/she will gain a wider idea of the frontier that separates Mexico and the United States. A frontier that has become more interlocking and over-lapping as more and more Mexicans go, legally or illegally to the United States and as more Americans establish contacts with Mexico. As a result, the border between the two cultures is now almost anywhere in time and space.

In conclusion, Carlos Fuentes’s novel *The Crystal Frontier* is a literary masterpiece composed of nine stories that help the reader to transport into the writer’s world, a world that he described as the relationship between the people of different cultures and social status that journey across the border. As a result, the book cover design that the artist Lisa Peters created to illustrate this novel, is highly symbolic and it really complements Fuentes’s perspectives about the frontier. A crystal frontier that has been fragmented into two mutually and reciprocally joined cities but at the same time, divided borders that form the United States and Mexico. Therefore, Peters implemented a wide assortment of hues that lively give some harmony and balance to the whole art piece that represents the controversial situations that Carlos Fuentes depicts to his readers through his narrative in *The Crystal Frontier*.



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CARLOS FUENTES

THE CRYSTAL

A Los Angeles Times Best Book of the Year

FRONTIER

A New York Times Notable Book of the Year

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Carlos Fuentes's *The Crystal Frontier*.
Book cover designed by artist Lisa Peters.

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