

The River Runs Red! Is it a Miracle, Is it an Ecological Disaster? Ito Romo's *El Puente/The Bridge*

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The implementation of the NAFTA agreement in 1994 precipitated unrestrained industrial growth on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border, massive overpopulation, and the subsequent militarization of the area. The *maquiladoras* which now comprise part of the “natural landscape” of the border zone, determine the lives and destinies of those who work in/for them, and have brought about the severe environmental degradation of the region. Ito Romo's *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000), a “minor story of major environmental protest,” provides a resounding denunciation of this situation and gives voice to the polluted Rio Grande and the inhabitants of the *maquiladora* zone. The effective use of simple language, simple people, and simple facts and acts assembled around a bizarre event provides the novel with a very effective vindicatory tone, turning it into the voice of a dying society which is gradually being ravaged, in the name of progress, by the vast industrial machinery of the *maquiladora* industry.

Keywords: US-Mexico border; ecology; Mexican/Chicana women; *maquiladoras*; militarization; violence

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¿El río está rojo! ¿Es un milagro, es un desastre ecológico? *El Puente/The Bridge*, de Ito Romo

La implementación del acuerdo NAFTA en 1994 provocó el crecimiento incontrolado de la industria en la frontera mejicano-americana, su superpoblación, y la militarización de la zona. Las *maquiladoras* se han convertido hoy en día en parte del “paisaje natural” de la frontera, marcan las vidas de sus trabajadores, y producen un enorme deterioro medioambiental en la zona. La novela de Ito Romo *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000), “una pequeña historia con una gran denuncia medioambiental,” trata de dar voz al contaminado Río Grande, así como a los habitantes del área de influencia de las *maquiladoras*. El uso de un lenguaje sencillo, gentes sencillas y hechos sencillos, que se reúnen en torno a un hecho extraordinario, proporciona a la novela un tono reivindicativo muy efectivo y la convierte en la voz de una sociedad tocada de muerte por la influencia de la gran maquinaria industrial y el progreso.

Palabras clave: frontera mejicano-americana; ecología; mujeres mejicanas/chicanas; *maquiladoras*; militarización; violencia

1. THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 precipitated unlimited industrial growth in the US-Mexican borderland, massive overpopulation and the subsequent militarization of the area.¹ The *maquiladoras* are today part of the “natural landscape” of the border zone.² They determine the lives and destinies of those who work in/for them and induce unprecedented levels of environmental damage in the region. Consequently, for nearly two decades, many Chicana/o artists have endeavored to denounce the miseries and hardships in the lives of border inhabitants which are brought about by these megafactories as well as the impacts on the environmental and political realities of this area. Romo’s *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000), an excellent documentary on life on the contemporary border, giftedly addresses this issue. The novel targets major issues of political justice through the narration of the “simple facts” of the lives of “simple people”; it denounces the hypocrisy of the political and economic agenda of the border zone, whereby industrial profitability is more highly valued than the subsistence of its residents and the environmental health of the natural landscape.

In Anzaldúa’s words, “The US-Mexico border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country, a border culture” (1997, 3). As a conceptual space, the US-Mexico borderland defines a sociocultural and geographical terrain, an abstraction which marks the “state of mind” of the borderlanders. Furthermore, and most importantly, the US-Mexico border is the homeland of its inhabitants, the space that determines the existence of its residents, both in a negative and a positive way. Mary Pat Brady (2008) defines the creation of space as an act that also “involves the processes that shape how these places are understood, envisioned, defined, and variously experienced. . . . Interactions with space are not merely schematic but also highly affective; places are felt and experienced, and the processes producing space therefore also shape feelings and experiences” (7-8).

The origins of this particular space, an open wound in a perpetual and constant process of healing and re-opening, date back to the nineteenth century, when the divisionary nature of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) became a tangible reality and “manufactured” line that separated the United States from Mexico. This line divided the terrain into *un lado* and *el otro lado*, concomitantly classifying its inhabitants in terms of us/them, north/south, rich/poor, hosts/immigrants, forever.

The subsequent history of the US-Mexican border is the history of the industrialization, overpopulation and militarization of the zone. The noticeably tense institutional

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² According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a maquiladora is “a foreign-owned factory in Mexico at which imported parts are assembled by lower-paid workers into products for export.”

relationship between the two countries, with its resulting manifest tensions and conflicts, are today symbolized by the building of a 1,951-mile wall at the border, constructed under the Secure Fence Act in 2006. Prior to the act, the emergence of the *maquiladoras* in the 60s and their proliferation after the signing of the NAFTA agreement in 1994, which aimed to blur the commercial borders between the USA, Canada, and Mexico, had turned this area into a highly industrialized zone. Thus,

Since 1985, the number of *maquiladoras* has increased 17 percent per year, from 785 plants employing 218,000 employees to over 2,400 plants employing 650,000 employees in 1996. In 1991 the *maquiladoras* generated over \$1.5 billion a year in exports and in 1996 that figure rose to over \$31 billion. *Maquiladoras* located across the US-Mexico border, add substantially to the business activity on the U.S. side of the border. In the McAllen–Edinburg–Mission area it is estimated that the *maquiladora* facilities contribute 14,000 jobs, generating \$283.4 million in annual retail sales and \$1.3 billion in annual total expenditures. About 1 of every 10 area jobs can be linked to *maquiladora* operations. (Coronado de Anda 2005)

Similar data collected during the major industrial growth of the 1990s prove the obvious positive socioeconomic impact of the *maquiladoras* but fail to reveal the negative environmental and health effects of this industrial phenomenon on the border landscape in general and its inhabitants in particular. In this sense, Professor Solis Ybarra (2009) posits that “considering the bioregional, ecological aspects of the US-Mexico borderlands expands our understanding on how colonization, exploitation, and racism impact the land and its people” (176). The history of the *maquiladora* industry is intertwined with the physical and conceptual nature of the US-Mexican *frontera*. The end of the *Bracero Program*, which provided the US agricultural industry with cheap labor, provoked an uncontrolled rise in unemployment in the border zone. The ensuing urge of the Mexican government to industrialize the border area favored the implementation of the *Programa Industrial Fronterizo* (Border Industrialization Program, PIF), which encouraged companies to settle there, in obviously *easy* conditions, as “the *maquiladora* regime allows the importation of these goods, free of value added tax and in many cases, free of duty taxes. The exportation of the final products manufactured in Mexico, is almost free of taxes” (Mejía 2013).

The expansion and development of these megafactories on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border have resulted in uncontrollable levels of population growth in the area, and according to Political Science Professor Edward Williams, “population has burgeoned in the binational Borderlands, particularly on the Mexican side. While Mexico’s rate of growth equaled 22 percent in the 1980-1990 *decenio*, the eight most important Borderlands cities almost doubled that rate at 43 percent. Tijuana may well be the world’s most rapidly burgeoning large city, having grown 61 percent in the 1980-90 period” (1995).

This has resulted in the non-articulated, unplanned creation of working-class quarters, *colonias*, where even the most basic human living conditions are nonexistent, where wooden shacks with no running water, electricity, and/or other basic facilities

have become home for many of the *maquila* workers. What is more, the majority of the *maquiladora* workforce is made up of young, single women who are forced to work in harsh conditions for long hours at minimum wage and who “may find their work situation unrewarding. The heavy competition for these positions tends to drive wages down to the federally mandated minimum which is barely sufficient for subsistence” (Tiano 1984, 366). In fact, the obvious “genderization” and “racialization” of the target workforce of the *maquiladoras*, together with the hazardous effects of the massive industrialization of the zone, driven by neoliberal economic interests which pay no heed to environmental and human justice rights issues, turn the *maquiladora* phenomenon into what Bullard describes as “toxic colonialism” (1993, 18) and in Westfall’s words, “neo-slavery” (2009).

Similarly, the ecological degradation, threat and waste generated by the factories is ever-present in the lives of the inhabitants of the area; pollution, water contamination and other kinds of environmental hazards have become part of the natural landscape of the border zone, turning it into one of the most polluted areas in Mexico (Bolterstein 1999). In 1979, long before the beginning of the *maquiladora* boom of the 1990s, Dr Herbert Abrams, Emeritus Professor of Radiology at the Stanford School of Medicine, expressed his concern at a US-Mexico Border Health Association meeting in Reynosa, stating that “It is not difficult to see problems developing. In Nogales, the sewage system is inadequate. Some *maquiladoras*, otherwise new and attractive, are discharging their waste into the open ground. We already know of at least one asbestos textile plant which last year was reported to have gross exposures not only to the workers within the plant but to those living in the neighborhood of the plant” (qtd. in Moure-Eraso et al. 1994, 314).

This process of mass industrialization, furthermore, has precipitated the progressive, and seemingly unstoppable, militarization of the borderland. A place where, for many, *dangerous illegal crossers* and drug-smugglers find refuge, the border is being gradually and violently occupied by diverse military and police forces, such as the Border Patrol and the army. In the last two decades, the evident and ostensibly uncontrollable levels of unpunished crime in the area (e.g., the Juárez femicides which Chicana scholar, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, openly names the “Maquiladora Murders” [2003, 1], or the violence provoked by the *narcotráfico* and its protagonists) have transformed this space into a violent, militarized zone, as highlighted in the following figures:

In 1984, elite Border Patrol squads known as Border Patrol Tactical Teams (BORTACS) began receiving special paramilitary training, and by 1989 Congress had authorized 5,000 federal troops for border duty. Fences and walls have gone up, as has the number of Border Patrol agents and the institution’s budget. In San Diego County, for example, the number of agents patrolling the county’s 66-mile strip of border has risen from 890 in 1993 to 2,350 in 1998. . . . The military continues to provide assistance to immigration authorities in the areas of aerial reconnaissance, personnel training, engineering and document analysis. Some 600 U.S. Marines and army troops, moreover, are building and upgrading helicopter pads and roads, making them suitable for “enhanced operations.” These troops are also involved in the

construction of miles of steel and concrete walls that may one day extend from San Diego to Brownsville. (Nagengast 1998, 38)

The situation today is no better. Under the pretense of maintaining peace and order in an intrinsically “convulsive” zone, unstoppable military presence on the border has declared a covert and subtle “low-intensity warfare against immigrants” (Palafox 2006). In this same light, institutional measures, such as the recently signed controversial Arizona SB 1070 Immigration Bill (2010), are also reinforcing the military occupation of the area and putting some of the most basic human rights of the residents of the area at risk.

2. ITO ROMO'S *EL PUENTE/THE BRIDGE*

Chicana/o literature, conceived and developed in the context of the *Movimiento Chicano*, has, from its origins, conveyed high doses of protest, vindication and defense of the culturally rich and complex identity of the group and, therefore, a strong commitment to the concerns affecting the Chicano collectivity. Within these, environmental justice issues have long been part of both the Chicano political agenda and its artistic and literary production. For example, the California farm workers' strikes—led by César Chávez and the United Farm Workers Union, source and origin of the *Movimiento Chicano*—were accompanied by extensive theatrical productions, such as those in Luis Valdez's *Teatro Campesino*. The contrast between the traditional *campesino* lifestyle and the impact of urban life on communities and individuals, the physical and spiritual attachment to the *tierra* (land) and the public denunciation of environmental justice issues, such as the effects of pesticides upon the *braceros* (farm laborers) or the ecological hazards associated with the *maquiladoras*, have been portrayed in the literary productions of Chicana/o authors, such as Rudolfo Anaya, Ana Castillo, Helena María Viramontes and Ito Romo, among others. Romo's first novel, *El Puente/The Bridge* follows this tradition and tells the story of a border town where the river suddenly flows crimson red. This event is used by the author to expose the life-story of fourteen women who gather at the river to observe this unexpected, miraculous phenomenon. Moreover, the novel gives voice to the bridge that connects the US and Mexico spanning the sick, polluted Rio Grande. By so doing, the novel attempts to *popularly* denounce the high level of environmental damage in the area and the intense, inhuman militarization of the border zone. The inexplicable, menacing red taint of the Rio Grande provokes diverse interpretations by the residents of the area, the media and each of the fourteen women who are the voice of the borderlanders and their precarious living situations. These “common” women are drawn to the bridge, which becomes a place of reunion and prayer, of life and death, of friendship and violence, and a symbol of life in its purest, most humane form. The series of short stories, which recount each protagonist's approach to the bridge, gradually reveals the source of the tainting of the river: the mulberry powder that Tomasita, the central character, has thrown into the river.

The novel, written in a simple, yet intricate style, with a cast of simple characters, serves as an emphatic denunciation of the living and working conditions of its protagonists, of the appalling environmental damage caused by the *maquiladoras* and of the military occupation of the region in the name of peace and order, which provokes the subsequent “violentization” of the area and of the lives of its inhabitants.

Romo’s choice of intermingling “common” people, whose lives and actions are seemingly irrelevant, with an almost miraculous event provides the novel with a strength that many critics have considered extraordinary. The apparent day-to-dayness of the acts performed by the women who gather at the river is narrated with a language and style that, according to Julia Alvarez, are “deceptively simple” “funny as a fotonovela, triste as a telenovela and wild as any Fellini” in Sandra Cisneros’ words, and “with (a) mix of closely observed reality imbued with deep spirituality” (Good Reads 2014).

The novel as a whole, its setting, characters, as well as its style and language, indeed continuously cross and challenge definitions of simplicity and extraordinariness, and symbolically represent the permeability of boundaries (both real and metaphorical). None of the lives of the characters is as ordinary and simple as they seem, the women being as they are the direct products and victims of an unordinary, transnational and transcultural space. The setting of the stories is probably not as simple as “just a bridge.” It is the bridge that connects the first and third worlds; it is Gloria Anzaldúa’s “open wound;” it is “a passage, plain and simple, from one country to another” (Romo, qtd. in Sadowski-Smith 2008, 36). The reminiscences of magical realism in the novel are finally counterbalanced by an ordinary act because “as in much magical realism, . . . the river’s transformation is also attributable to realistic events” (Sadowski-Smith 2008, 36). In sum, the author’s choice of these simple characters, setting and relevant theme imbues the novel with a superb aesthetic and contextual quality.

2.1. Life in this border town is harsh

Tomasita is cleaning her burnt pot in the river. This opening image provides the reader with an immediate awareness of the woman’s despair; recently widowed, her husband has died of a cancer that originated from the dreadful working conditions in the *maquiladora*. This hazardous health environment was already accounted for in the decade of the 1990s, when “noncommunicable diseases are also a growing concern among border populations. Mortality from all cancers combined was 62.9 per 100,000 population in the Mexican border zone in 1990, compared with 50.8 in the country as a whole; mortality due to cancers of the trachea, bronchi, and lung was 70 percent higher in the border municipalities” (“1994 Health Conditions in the Americas”).

In this same way, the other characters featured in the novel exemplify everyday situations on the border; they portray the sadness and harshness of life in a terrain that has become a no-man’s land and a source of sorrow for and alienation of women. With a vignette-like structure reminiscent of Cisneros’ highly-acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1989), *El Puente/The Bridge* maps out the lives of these fourteen

women who become the voice of the voiceless, the spokeswomen of a dying land and a tainted river, symbolic of the human destruction of nature. The narrative thus paints a picture of an inhumanly industrialized society that crushes its weakest members and uses them as a means to acquire progress and wealth in a highly Machiavellian way. The quotidian and completely non-extraordinary lives of these fourteen women and their natural assimilation of their living conditions and existence gives the novel a decidedly vindictory tone which impacts strongly on the reader, provoking deep reflection on the consequences of “progress.”

The second chapter establishes the conflict of the novel with the inclusion of an extraordinary fact that is evocative of magic realism (Sadowski-Smith 2006, 275) when the Rio Grande, the core and living, moving heart of the city, suddenly flows a deep red color. The bizarre, though stunning sight gives way to diverse interpretations by the different characters/protagonists; some interpret it as a miracle, others as a political conspiracy. Interestingly, almost no one sees it as a warning of the contamination and impending death of the river and human life provoked by the proliferation of *maquiladoras* in the border area. The urgent call of the river draws each of the characters, each of them from a different “common,” quotidian space (a workplace, home, a convent, a dental surgery, etc.), to the bridge, the embodiment of Anzaldúa’s bleeding wound. Thus, the author delineates a multifaceted picture of female life and the social and personal impact of the growing industrialization on the US-Mexico border.

In particular, the central protagonist of the novel and the symbol of the destruction of human dignity in the name of progress, Tomasita, personifies the terrible effects of this unbridled industrialization and its consequent degradation of human life through the inhuman working conditions at the *maquiladoras*, the sociocultural and economic poverty they induce and the irreparable environmental damage they cause. The novel addresses the factories’ symbolic and factual ownership of the lives and destinies of their workers, mirrored in the fact that, once Tomasita’s husband dies, she has to abandon the house the factory rented to him. Widowed and homeless, she suddenly finds herself in the position of having to “return to nature” in search of shelter and is forced to move to a wooden shack her friends build for her next to the river, which lacks the most basic infrastructure, such as electricity and running water.

She finished washing her dishes and emptied her washtub into the Rio Grande, far to the west of the city, where the houses were barely houses, close to the small stream that came from the huge American factory.

She was alone. . . . When he died, she had lost the small cinder-block house that the factory had rented to them. Her friends had built her a two-room home by the river. She cooked a pot of beans for them the day they came to build it; a pot of beans was the only gift she had to say thanks for the wooden planks, cardboard, and green corrugated fiberglass sheets that were her home, right there by the river. The river was her backyard, her toilet, and her bath. (Romo 2000, 128)

The description of Tomasita's loneliness, sorrow, poverty, humbleness and yet her grateful offering of "just a pot of beans" depicts the severity of the living conditions of the *colonias* that surround the *maquiladoras*; inhabitants wholly depend both economically and personally on the big factories. In this same respect, member of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice Teresa Leal, interviewed by Joni Adamson, explains that "colonias are a phenomenon that developed simultaneously all along the US-Mexico border. When the maquilas came in, they did not have a social agenda; maquila officials didn't give a hoot about the influx of people or where they were going to live" (2002, 49). The cruelty of the *maquiladora* in depriving Tomasita of a *decent* place to live after her husband's death exposes the reality of the factories' total possession of not only the labor of their employees, but of their lives as a whole. The border region is defined as a completely disorganized area in terms of urban planning, environmental hazard control, and human-safe living conditions. Indeed, Tomasita's new "home" is built next to the river without any kind of institutional control and/or health regulations being met. As US economist Khosrow Fatemi argues, "Poverty is the defining feature of life for the new industrial masses living in the colonias around the *maquiladoras*. . . . Colonias resemble vast temporary camps. Families cram into single-room, wooden shacks. Some lack roofs and dirt floors are extremely common. Homes lack indoor plumbing and electricity; there is no running water and no toilets. The hot dusty communities are comprised of dirt roads that lack garbage disposal and sewer services" (qtd. in Martínez 2004, 6-7).

2.2. Life in this border town is highly industrialized

Romo's work, which follows the tradition of his predecessors regarding the indispensable social role of literature, vehemently condemns the impact of the *maquiladoras* on the lives and destinies of the border dwellers. He exposes a territory ruled by the very pulse of the industrial economy, the source of all the wealth and, ironically, the poverty and environmental damage of the area. The novel never provides the reader with a direct description of the ever-present *maquilas* or even the actual pollution of the air, river and the nature around them; instead, it ingeniously uses the "miraculous" fact of the tainting of the river as an excuse to gather fourteen women around the river, whose life stories subtly but clearly expose the dirtiness of the area. The source of the conflict presented in the novel is the death of Tomasita's husband. Its cause is not discovered until the closing chapter, but develops into the underlying denunciating message of Romo's work: "Her husband had begun to complain about a pain on either side of his face right under his ears during that cold, cold January, two years after he had started working as a waste disposal superintendent for six dollars a day for the new factory. Two purple bulbs kept growing, as if he had the plague" (2000, 128)

Once again, these apparently simple words powerfully depict the working and living conditions of the *maquila* workers. Furthermore, this extreme example of the negative impact of the presence of *maquiladoras* is supported throughout the novel as the author introduces short, almost unnoticeable statements that provide the final picture of a

damaged, polluted, and inhuman city. For example, Carlota, who “every night, . . . sat in her rocking chair in her living room and stared at the long line of honking cars, trucks, and eighteen-wheelers in front of her house, all of them heading for the bridge two blocks away” (6); or Cindy’s dentist who “poured a cup of purified water for Cindy from a plastic jug (she did not feel that it was safe to use the water from the faucet since infection might set in)” (33); or Perla who “really did not care about her own drinking problem, but if what they said was true, then she had to get some water for her little granddaughter who was born with a spinal defect. . . . One of the doctors, the one from the American side, said that it was probably because Perla’s daughter had drunk water from the tap during her pregnancy instead of the water from the plastic jugs” (62-63).

The present but unnoticed and unconsciously accepted hazardous quotidianity is, however, immediately observed and broadcast by the journalists who gather at the bridge and publicize the “potential environmental disaster of catastrophic proportions” which “is still unraveling in South Texas as a joint team of scientists from the Centers for Disease Control, and the Environmental Protection Agency continued its investigation” (27-28). Remarkably, the interpretation of many border residents that the color of the river is a spiritual message, a miracle, is simultaneously advanced with the portrayal of the bridge as the place where the most innate human activities, such as dying and being born, occur simultaneously with the loud, aggressive honk of an eighteen-wheeler (symbolic of industrial growth and the crossing of goods at the *frontera*). Thus, some of them are startled and forced to move by the violently speeding truck, others fall, and, in Pura’s case, “the shock made her heart beat even faster, intensifying the pain. . . . Suddenly the pain stopped, her legs went weak, she slid down slowly, almost gently, against the rail, down the cement sidewalk, closed her eyes, took one last deep breath of mulberries, and died” (94). At the same time as Pura is dying, Soledad “stepped onto the bridge, she felt a sudden pain, like a blow. Someone was helping her. She was so grateful. She squatted immediately, naturally, instinctively. As she looked down, over her belly, between her legs, the skin tore as if it were a piece of paper, her dark pubic hair was soaked in blood, and she saw her child’s head break through” (120).

2.3. Life in this border town is highly militarized

The conclusion of Romo’s novel confirms Nagengast’s previously quoted words on the militarization of the border, as well as the inhumanity of the relationships that prevail as a result of the patent tensions in the area. The military and the police, upon discovering that the source of the “miracle” is the dried mulberry powder that Tomasita has thrown into the river, initiate her prosecution as a dangerous criminal and, ironically, an environmental terrorist who needs to be apprehended.

When the helicopter finally flew away, in the distance she saw Mexican soldiers dressed in protective clothing poking at the stream with long, shiny steel poles that had little, stainless steel buckets attached to their ends. They carried shiny black machine guns too. . . . The Mexican

government boarded up Tomasita's house, sealed the door and windows with adhesive notices expressing the gravity of breaking in, placed a soldier on twenty-four-hour guard, and sealed off the area with orange ropes, cardboard signs warning of contaminations hanging from them. (131-32)

The irony of this description and the moment itself are evident. On the one hand, Romo's words carry a manifestly sarcastic tone as he describes and even ridicules the military in its quest to deal with the supposedly (for them) most dangerous terrorist attack ever, yet they are simply persecuting a poor, humble widow who has just emptied "the sorrow in her soul" (3) into the river, in a beautiful, metaphorical way. On the other hand, the conceptual source of the novel itself, the tainting of the river with mulberry powder, is paradoxical in its attempts to highlight the gradual but devastating effect of the industrial activity on the US-Mexico border, which remains unaffected and uncontrolled, produces wealth only for a few and causes death and maims the health of the vast majority who sacrifice their lives in order to maintain its inequitable *status quo*.

Consequently, the dramatic conclusion of the narration, where Tomasita, aware of her fatal end, is killed by a nervous young soldier, is an act that symbolizes the death of the people in this soiled, violent, and hostile environment. The novel states it thus:

Tomasita slowly turned around to face her destiny. Just as she turned around to face him, his sweaty, nervous finger slipped, and a shot rang out. The gunfire exploded in a flash. Tomasita followed the slow motion of the bullet, like a comet on fire, coming toward her.

When the police and the soldier arrived to try and control the crowd from further rioting, and the siren of the coming ambulance parted the throng down the middle, and the newspaper, reporters, TV cameras, and helicopters surrounded Tomasita, the young soldier knelt next to her and cried. (147)

3. CONCLUSION

The subtle but reverberating political essence of Ito Romo's *El Puente/The Bridge* turns the novel into a minor story of major environmental protest. Its characters, ordinary, normal, working-class women, with whom the reader immediately empathizes, are the involuntary victims of the harsh living conditions at the US-Mexico border where tension itself becomes the protagonist, together with monumental levels of environmental damage and violence, both personal and institutional. The effective use of simple language, simple people, and simple facts and acts assembled around a bizarre event, which becomes even more extraordinary because of its live broadcast by the mass media (producers and transmitters of ideology and interpretation of reality in our modern times), infuses the novel with an incredibly successful vindicatory tone, turning it into the voice of a dying society that is being gradually ravaged, in the name of progress, annihilated by the colossal industrial machinery of the *maquiladoras*.

The novel and its clever and incredibly effective denouncing tone are thus reminiscent of the works of the first Chicano authors who endeavored to fight against the harsh circumstances of farm workers, the indiscriminate use of pesticides, and the terrible working conditions in the fields of the Southwest, among other environmental issues, because, as stated by Flys Junquera, “Nature, *la tierra*, is central to the Chicano worldview and is found in virtually all its literature” (2002, 120). In this sense, Romo’s work epitomizes the evolution of a people’s exploitation and represents a despairing documentary on the gradual, negative evolution of human development. The use of progress for the benefit of a small minority, the inhuman utilization of human labor, the excessive military and police control of an area that has become a violent site, the institutional obscurity concerning the border and its dwellers, and the overall environmental, socioeconomic and cultural damage that the big factories and the system that supports them exert on the lives of common people are thus at the core of a novel that exposes our allegedly modern, progressive life and makes visible “the conditions under which neoliberal globalization is emerging” (Sadowski-Smith 2006, 720). Moreover, the novel highlights the clear gender, ethnic, and class-specific environmental exploitation occurring in the US-Mexico borderland, which has become a “pollution haven” (Daly 1993), favored by the NAFTA agreement, thereby confirming the idea that “placing environmental burdens in the social spaces of the poor and people of color communities is an expression of the ways in which the inhabitants are valued by the more powerful decision-makers in our society” (Figueroa 2002, 317). The inhabitants of Tomasita’s border town, however, acquire value and dignity through Romo’s words as “each is finally portrayed, fully explained, lovingly rendered” (Tim Carvalho, *Tucson Weekly*, 4 January 2001) and serve the author’s purpose of celebrating life and community in the border, regardless of its dirt and violence.

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