

## Reading, Social Control, and the Mexican Soul in *Al filo del agua*\*

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*Al filo del agua* (1947) explora los usos de la lectura y su relación con los mecanismos de control social. Temáticamente, la novela representa el papel de la lectura in 1909-1910 y su potencial subversivo en vísperas de la Revolución Mexicana. En términos de técnicas narrativas, la novela es un artefacto cultural que intenta producir una nueva comprensión de la identidad mexicana en la década de 1940, un "sujeto nacional" imaginado como el ciudadano ideal del país.

Agustín Yáñez's *Al filo del agua* (1947) has been widely cited as a literary landmark. The text occupies a pivotal position in the evolution of the Mexican novel. On the one hand, it marks the culmination and the closure of the early twentieth-century tradition of the novel of the Mexican Revolution. On the other hand, it emphasizes modernist innovation as the direction of development for later novels in Mexico's national literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, *Al filo del agua* makes evident a broader cultural project in the 1940s and 1950s that changes the rhetoric of Mexican nationalism, a shift variously identified as "spiritualization," "essentialization," or "universalization."<sup>2</sup> The novels of the Mexican Revolution

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1. Numerous critics emphasize this innovation, such as Brushwood, *Mexico* 7-18, "Literary Periods" 671-83, *Narrative Innovation* 31-56; Langford; and Sommers 37-68. In contrast, Mignolo and Romano emphasize the vestiges of "traditional" practices in the novel.

2. These keywords come from Dessau (370-92, 446-51) and Brushwood (*Narrative Innovation* 31-56). *Universalization* and its variants are used by virtually all critics at one moment or another, but Sommers (61-68) provides one of the most

in the 1920s and 1930s had followed the deterministic thinking of regional literature that predominated throughout Spanish America, defining national identity as an effect of causal factors, especially geography, race, socioeconomic circumstance, and the recent Revolution. Spiritualization, however, explored a deep psychological essence—variously called *el carácter mexicano*, *la mexicanidad*, or *el alma mexicana*—as the foundation for further images of the nation. Philosophico-anthropological writings about *lo mexicano* and a psychoanalytic model of the self constituted the basis for this novelistic representation of the Mexican soul (Dessau 446–51; Sefchovich 103–40). After centuries of social traumas related to the legacy of the colonial experience, the scrutiny of the collective psyche strived to plumb the depths of Mexican identity and operate a cure, thus bringing into existence a spiritualized version of the “national subject” as the ideal citizen of the future.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the predominant critical concern with stylistic innovation in *Al filo del agua*, I address the importance that Yáñez's novel attributes to reading.<sup>4</sup> Thematically, the novel offers a rereading

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eloquent examples. These terms point toward a common “spirit,” an “essential” or “universal” quality of humanity, that must accomplish a dual explanatory task: make manifest the *differentia specifica* of Mexican identity and reveal its similarity with all human identities.

3. Dessau suggests that spiritualization “neutralizes” earlier revolutionary projects (370–94, 446–52). Oyarzún, in contrast, holds that *Al filo del agua* “materializes” revolutionary impulses through narrative and linguistic innovation (66, 80). In contrast to these positions, I am using Dessau's term to explore the incitements to national imagining that result in a certain kind of construction of the Mexican soul/psyche.

4. Early reviews, in the late 1940s, addressed the technical complexity of *Al filo del agua*, often with reservations or negative appraisals (Martínez, Monterde, Portuondo, Rojas Garcidueñas). The studies and reviews of the 1950s continued to emphasize this technical complexity (Manuel Pedro González 327–38; Vásquez Amaral 245–51). In the 1960s and early 1970s, there arises a veritable boom in the analysis of Yáñez's writings and of *Al filo del agua* in particular: attention is divided between the relation of the novel to an “authentically Mexican” reality and the importance of narrative strategies in producing the “newness” of this novel. The books by Conant, Flasher, Gamiochipi de Liguori, and Rangel Guerra provide broad introductions to Yáñez's literary works, describe general narrative strategies, and discuss the historical reality portrayed in the texts. The brief study by Llamas Jiménez follows the same processes in examining three female characters in *Al filo del agua*. Doudoroff, Haddad, Passafari, Dellapiane, Brushwood (“Arquitectura”), Schade, Sommers, and Souza treat aspects of textual order, structure, organization, and pacing. O'Neill Jr. classifies types of interior monologue. Finally, Souza, Hancock and Davison, Sommers, and Brushwood (“Lyric Style”) have emphasized the importance of linguistic innovation in *Al filo del agua*, attending particularly to the poetic introduction, “Acto Preparatorio.” In the 1980s Menton and Bary have continued this emphasis on style and the importance of the novel's introduction. Rosser addresses both stylistic innovation and the dynamics of social change in rural society. More

of the Revolution, both as an historical event and as a national literary tradition. Technically, the innovations in narrative strategies transform the expected reading experience of its audience, and they challenge accustomed practices of interpretation. Most importantly, the modernist literary strategies in the novel support the psychoanalytic models related to spiritualization. In brief, *Al filo del agua* represents a change in reading practices, and it engages its audience in the process of reading such a change. Not coincidentally, then, the novel includes numerous characters wrestling with problems of reading—especially newspapers and novels—at the same time that they confront rising social tensions. Reading takes place in and contributes to a climate of escalating anxiety: the villagers attempt to resolve the contradictions that emerge as their insular community and its closed system of beliefs become increasingly repressive; simultaneously, they enter into contact with national historical forces, a contact that further exacerbates the repressive atmosphere while it provides increasing incentive for change.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a circular exchange of causality produces mounting urgency since “the town is as clearly the cause of the Revolution as the Revolution is the cause of change in the town” (Brushwood, *Mexico* 10).

In two stages I contend here that questions about change, community, spiritualization, and nationalism all converge in a struggle over the control of reading. In the first part, I consider how the social significance of reading in *Al filo del agua* relates to community standards and the values upheld, implicitly or explicitly, by the

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recent studies of *Al filo del agua* include Faris's analysis of tension between collective public voices and private individual voices, Merrell's semiotic analysis of the mediation between the sacred and the profane in the process of change and revolution, and Oyarzún's psychoanalytical discussion of parricide as a textual model of literary change. The 1992 Colección Archivos edition of the novel includes a selection of reprinted and original essays and a thematic overview of criticism (Díaz Ruiz).

D'Lugo proposes a consideration of *Al filo del agua* most attuned to my concerns here. With a formalist approach to reader response criticism, D'Lugo attends to the conjunction of innovative narrative strategies (especially fragmentation) and the changing role of reader participation. In contrast with D'Lugo's emphasis on the cognitive processing of the text, I explore here the representation of readers in *Al filo del agua*, the social mechanisms that attempt to control reading, and the historical motivations for this literary change in the 1940s.

5. Ceballos Ramírez emphasizes the conservative role of “lecturas católicas” in social control, particularly the 1910 formation of a reading league by the newspaper *El Mensajero del Corazón de Jesús*. The Liga del Sagrado Corazón contra los malos periódicos y las malas lecturas immediately attracted numerous members in Jalisco, the setting for the unidentified village in *Al filo del agua* (183–84). Cosío Villegas also emphasizes the importance of reading and print culture as vehicles for inciting and organizing the start of the Revolution (“De cómo”).

villagers. In this context, reading poses a threat to the soul, a danger that requires the community's circumspect surveillance. An examination of one reader in particular, María, provides insight into the complexities of reading and interpretation in such a situation since reading is a form of behavior that can signify either "belongingness"—membership in the community—or resistance. In a second part, I relate reading to the context of the novel's publication and the use of modernist narrative strategies. The reading of *Al filo del agua* and the Mexican soul represented in the text advance a broader national project, dramatically enacting a psychoanalysis of the repressed forces that gave rise to the Revolution and the repressive forces generated by the Revolution. With the emphasis on reading and its repression in the 1940s, *Al filo del agua* attempts to "cure" the national psyche, the Mexican soul, and thus produce the spiritualized national subject, the spiritualized subject of an emergent style of Mexican nationalism.

### **Representations of Reading: Social Control on the Eve of the Revolution**

*Al filo del agua* traces the events that transpire in an unidentified village in the highlands of Jalisco from March 1909 through November 1910. The novel closes a few days after the outbreak of the Revolution on November 20 when the social movement arrives in this remote, hermetic, and ecclesiastically dominated village. Although certain characters and sequences of events attain prominence, no main character or main story line unifies the text. The novel portrays multiple aspects of the pervasive sense of frustration, especially sexual frustration, that attends the staunch, inflexible Catholicism of the village. Within this closed social system, each event reverberates in collective life and affects all who live there. The internal rhythms of the multiple thematic lines, a monotonous sense of the Catholic liturgical calendar in the first fifteen chapters, and the sudden, catastrophic rush toward revolution in the final and sixteenth chapter articulate the progression of this fragmented and stylistically heterogeneous text.

For the unnamed rural community, a certain kind of reading is dangerous, sinful, and subversive. This reading becomes a site of struggle in the social fabric that attracts stringent measures of control while it simultaneously opens up the possibility of resistance to social norms and the idea of a new style of existence. The second chapter of the novel, "Ejercicios de Encierro," evokes this view of reading in a stark manner, and it places reading in an economy of secrecy much like the illicit sexual deeds and thoughts targeted by the

spiritual exercises. On a Friday night in late March 1909, after a week of rigidly scheduled activities, meditations, and prayers, all designed to instruct the retreatants in the examination and purification of their souls, the married men who have been cloistered away together participate in general confessions:

El señor cura Martínez, el Padre Reyes y los otros cinco sacerdotes de la jurisdicción pasaron la noche confesando; casi todos los ejercitantes fueron movidos a hacer confesión general. (—"Qué, por qué, de qué manera, cuándo, cuántas veces.") Allí estaba el pueblo subterráneo, que podía estallar si los Ejercicios no lo refrenaban.

Los pecados en desfile se parecían unos a otros y la experiencia de los confesores no se sorprendía. Pero esta noche las orejas eclesiásticas escucharon cosas extrañas, alarmantes: —"Acúsome de recibir y propagar periódicos que hablan mal de Dios Nuestro Señor, de la Virgen, del Santo Padre y del clero; también novelas que hablan de amores, que se las he prestado a una prima..." El padre que oyó esto remitió el caso al señor cura. (66)

This anonymous confession and the reactions of the confessor establish the relations that identify the dangers of reading. First, although it is a solitary or individual activity, the confession embeds reading in the community context. The admission recognizes reading as a sinful act, like other possible moral infractions. Perhaps it is even more perverse, given the confessor's surprise. Understood as an act, reading thus falls under the controls and constraints designated by the confessor, according to the standards and beliefs of the community he represents. Second, the transgression in this activity is not reading as such, that is the exercise of literacy; rather, the penitent's guilt derives from selecting improper texts for his perusal: liberal newspapers and novels about love. The newspapers speak against the Church, and the novels possibly encourage illicit excitement. There is a relation, therefore, between the beliefs and values of the community and the thematic content of appropriate texts. Third, and most importantly, this confession suggests that reading directly relates to the soul. It is an activity in which the reader makes vulnerable his eternal self: it has the power to affect, modify, transform, or alter the soul. In other words, reading can give form and structure to the soul, and for this reason texts must be carefully selected to insure spiritual edification and to prevent damnable deviation.

This confessional scene places reading on the boundary between what Michel Foucault designates as "technologies of domination" and "technologies of the self." The institutional function of confession and the role given here to community point toward technologies of domination that "determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends..., an objectivizing of the subject." The

confessional and the community constitute disciplines that produce the effect of individuals as apparently free-willed and autonomous, while at the same time they bind individuals to collective norms and practices of subjection. The technologies of the self, in contrast, "permit individuals to effect...a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" ("Technologies of the Self" 18). The meditations and prayers of the retreatants function in this manner, but so does reading: whereas reading the "proper" text can contribute to the care of the self and purify the soul, reading the "wrong" text can effect undesirable, dangerous, even sinful changes in the soul. Because of the power attributed to reading, the technologies of domination circumspectly attend to its use. Throughout *Al filo del agua* the prohibition of certain texts, such as liberal newspapers and various nineteenth-century novels, especially romantic novels, works less to suppress this execrable practice than to make it visible: the interdictions bring reading under community surveillance and also under the internal observation of those willing to confess their own reprehensible congress with literature and newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

As *Al filo del agua* demonstrates, however, through reading, the disciplinary practices of the confessional and community surveillance also provide the ground for resistance. The act of reading prohibited texts constitutes a tactic for challenging the power of the technologies of domination. Most importantly, however, as a technology of the self, the act of reading can also produce a resisting model of subjectivity: through reading, the reader can fashion a disobedient soul of desire that the community cannot tolerate. At stake in

6. In the third section of *Discipline and Punish* (135-308) and in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, *An Introduction*, Foucault explains how technologies of domination, such as surveillance strategies and the confessional, objectivize individuals as subjects: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" ("Subject and Power" 212). In *Al filo del agua* the "soul" is both the subject under dispute and the effect of the technologies of domination that spread throughout all aspects of community life.

The notion of "technologies of the self" is developed in Foucault's later writings, especially "Sexuality and Solitude," "Technologies of the Self," and the last volumes of the history of sexuality, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. Although Foucault does not develop the idea of reading as a "technology of the self," he suggests as much in a 1983 interview, discussing his plans for *The Care of the Self*, when he alludes to "the role of reading and writing in constituting the self" ("Subject and Power" 231). It is to be noted that Foucault recognizes the overlapping nature of the technologies of domination and self, and designates their intersection as the issue of "governmentality" ("Technologies of the Self" 18-19).

reading, especially the reading of forbidden texts, is the truth of the soul, the possible creation of a new, probably sinful, subjectivity that resists community norms.

The forces in struggle over reading, as encapsulated in this confessional scene, extend their effects throughout the entire novel. After the consternation produced by this confession of "lecturas impías" (69), the parish priest don Dionisio Martínez organizes his assistants, Fathers Reyes and Islas, to begin the tasks of censoring the weekly mail for newspapers and searching homes for prohibited novels (70). This censoring activity escalates to a climax in "Canicas," the eighth and middle chapter of the novel. Here Father Reyes, after having confiscated Spanish translations of novels such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Eugene Sué's *The Wandering Jew*, Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, and Alexandre Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*, enacts the public spectacle of a book burning (169).<sup>7</sup>

*Al filo del agua* also displays the danger of reading through specific characters described on the basis of their reading behavior. In the first chapter, for example, Micaela Rodríguez, a restless young woman, returns from a trip to the national capital with her parents. She brings with her the latest fashions and new ideas that immediately scandalize the village (32-38). She has come from Mexico City with a copy of Dumas's *Three Musketeers*, a novel she secretly loans to her closest friend, María (72). Micaela's increasingly open disobedience of the village's rigid mores leads to her destruction when she pits a widowed father against his own son in a contest over her attention. She dies like an ill-fated heroine from her recalcitrant reading of romantic novels: the day she planned to elope with Damián Limón, the son, and flee from the oppressive village, she surprisingly died at his hands in a confused moment of passion.

In another example, Gabriel, an orphan of unknown origins who works as the church's bell ringer and lives under the tutelage of the parish priest, don Dionisio, also reads novels such as Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's *El final de Norma* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, although he vastly prefers the "dulce placer" of poetry (182). The arrival of an attractive young widow stirs passion in Gabriel, much like the exaggerated rapture of a romantic poet in the presence of

7. In addition to these strategies of domination, the organization Hijas de María functions as a constant disciplinary technology in the lives of women in *Al filo del agua*. Flasher (69-85) provides an excellent summary of the history and ascetic goals of the spiritual exercises in the retreat house, a history that parallels the genealogy of disciplinary mechanisms that Foucault associates with "pastoral power." Bravo-Villarroel, Durand, García, and Lagos center their analyses around the dynamics of religion and repression in the novel.

the sublime, and her abrupt departure prods him to an emotional outburst. As a result, don Dionisio isolates Gabriel in the retreat house until he calms down. Upon his release, Gabriel escapes the hermetic atmosphere of the village and the control of don Dionisio by leaving to pursue a musical education under the patronage of the enigmatic and wealthy widow Victoria.

Finally, the ex-seminarian Luis Gonzaga Pérez also stands out as an avid reader. He finds nineteenth-century Spanish novels absorbing and has read the complete works of Fernán Caballero (Cecilia Böhl von Faber y Larrea) in addition to titles by Padre Luis Coloma and José María de Pereda. He has developed an autodidactic schedule that includes readings in poetry, philosophy, history, and science as well as various sacred writings (90-92). After a dramatic nervous breakdown on Good Friday, he flees the village, also in pursuit of Victoria; later his father apprehends him and places him in an asylum. When news travels back to the village, the inhabitants learn that during Luis's confinement the reading of mythology serves as the basis for deliriums of "desbordamiento libidinoso" (332); because of this, books with representations of women, which exacerbate his delusions, are removed from his presence, and he eventually mutilates his body and begins attempts at suicide (330-32).

Via the readers represented in texts, writes Naomi Schor, "the author is trying to tell the interpreter something *about* interpretation and the interpreter would do well to listen" (170). From the villagers' point of view, the examples of these three readers suggest cautionary tales that would discourage reading among their youth. In each case, a young person, on the threshold of adulthood, succumbs to the deviant behavior of reading forbidden texts and meets with a tragic destiny: violent death for Micaela, exile for Gabriel, and insanity for Luis. For us as readers of *Al filo del agua*, these cautionary tales confirm the volatile response to literary reading in this community. Additionally, these examples suggest that reading against the grain of community standards brought about a new subjectivity in these characters, a subjectivity that manifested itself in modes of conduct not tolerated in the community.

The disappearance of Micaela, Gabriel, and Luis from the village also results in their exit from the text. In the last chapter of *Al filo del agua*, however, the outcome of a principal reader, María, remains to be decided, and it is through the relative convergence of her fate with the movement toward narrative closure that *Al filo del agua* most dramatically depicts the consequences of reading.<sup>8</sup> María stands

8. Gabriel flees from the village in chapter 12, Micaela dies in chapter 13, and, although his exit occurred simultaneous to Gabriel's in chapter 12, the story of Luis's confinement travels back to the village in chapter 14. The sixteenth chapter consists

out because of the quantity of narrative dedicated to representing her actions, especially her reading habits. She repeatedly enters the novelistic action at momentous junctures in the multiple story lines, an indication of both her structural function and her social prominence in the village. María is the energetic twenty-one-year-old niece of don Dionisio, the chief parish priest. Orphaned at an early age, her uncle reared and educated her and her sister, Marta. María dramatizes the possibility of resistance and the difficult task of realizing change.

María, like Micaela, Gabriel, and Luis, embodies the figure of a reader who resists the dominant practices imposed by the social milieu. From her first appearance, she is characterized by an interest in reading: "le gusta leer" (72). Although her appetite for the written word is wide-ranging, her preferences fall into three categories: geography and travel literature, especially works that suggests the world outside the village; nineteenth-century romantic novels, particularly adventure tales, such as *The Three Musketeers*; and sensationalistic newspaper accounts of grisly crimes of passion. Such readings are severely criticized and censored by her uncle. Indeed, since don Dionisio has canceled his subscription to the Catholic newspaper *El País*, María must clandestinely peruse loaned copies, and she secretly finishes reading Micaela's copy of *The Three Musketeers*.<sup>9</sup>

Because María's resistance is strongest and developed in the most detail, and also because she is associated with the local center of power through her uncle, María occupies the point in the social network where community standards become explicit. During Holy

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of thirty-three fast-paced sections, ranging in length from one-half to seven pages. This chapter covers approximately the same quantity of historical time as the preceding fifteen chapters. Most importantly, the fate of three central characters coincides with the problem of resolving the novel's story lines: Lucas Macías, the repository of local memory and history, dies at the end of section 31; María flees the village in section 32; and don Dionisio attempts to officiate mass the morning after the arrival of the Revolution in section 33. D'Lugo emphasizes the importance of Lucas Macías as a model for us as active readers of *Al filo del agua*. Given his inability to interpret the signs of the coming Revolution and his death with its arrival and the novel's closure, however, I believe that it is important to reread the allegorical significance of this character as well as that of all models for our interpretive roles figured in the text.

9. Conant (91), Flasher (98), and Sommers (41) note María's reading as a characterization of her rebelliousness against the way of life and the values in the village, although her literary interests are usually dismissed as escapist dreams. Saldívar emphasizes that she is the positive element of the novel who evolves from a victim of repression to liberation (62, 64), and Llamas Jiménez identifies her as the novel's superior character because of her curiosity and positive change (53-57) and because she is the only character who saves herself (75-76). Dessau criticizes María's liberation as a bourgeois ideal that sidesteps the treatment of social problems (391).

Week, Father Reyes gives María a manuscript that promotes proper values and beliefs. Perhaps with the knowledge of María's interest in geography and travel writing, the texts have been selected because of their concern with travelers:

María,...más por vicio que por interés, lee los pensamientos que le dio el Padre Reyes: "Algunos acaban de corromperse mediante largos viajes y pierden la poca religión que les quedaba; ven de un día a otro nuevo culto, diversas costumbres, diversas ceremonias.—La Bruyère." No quiere seguir leyendo y Marta recoge el manuscrito: "Permanecer; evitar todo cambio, que amenazaría destruir un equilibrio milagroso: este es el deseo de la edad clásica. Son peligrosas las curiosidades que solicitan a un alma inquieta." (Marta lee en voz alta. María la interrumpe:—"A ti no te cansan los sermones." Marta continúa sin inmutarse): "peligrosas y locas, puesto que el viajero que corre hasta el fin del mundo no encuentra nunca más de lo que lleva: su condición humana. Y aun cuando encontrara otra cosa, no por eso habría desmenuzado menos su alma. Que la concentre, al contrario, para aplicarla a los problemas eternos, que no se resuelven disipándose. Séneca lo ha dicho: el primer indicio de un espíritu ordenado es poder detenerse y permanecer consigo mismo; y Pascal ha descubierto que toda la infelicidad de los hombres viene de una sola cosa, que es no saber permanecer quietos en una habitación.—*También es de autor profano.*"

—¿Quién será ese autor?

—No dice.

—Parece cosa de mi tío o de tu santo director espiritual. (88-89)

María resists reading the edifying passages that the young, tolerant pastor has given her, and this resistance emphasizes certain details. First, consistent with her characterization, María reads out of "vicio" rather than genuine interest. Second, Father Reyes has evidently chosen these passages for María's edification and spiritual instruction. The reading of appropriate texts, in this sense, serves as a technology of the self guided by a priest. Moreover, the passages themselves refer to this technology in their discussion of the soul and strategies for developing happiness through permanence. Although Marta, the more "obedient" of the two sisters, seems responsive to the ideas, María rejects this discourse of permanence as the force that fuels repression in the village. In this perspective, it is precisely the discourse of permanence that constitutes change as the possibility for resistance throughout *Al filo del agua*. The village constantly struggles with the inevitable changes brought about as new generations inherit the institutions of their forbears and as a variety of outside influences penetrate static communal life to disrupt the dominant routine of the liturgical calendar.<sup>10</sup> In this context, María's

10. Newspapers and novels are part of larger changes that occur in the village. The return of migrant workers from Northern Mexico and from the United States,

readings foment her growing awareness of frustration within the village and incite her not only to accept change but to yearn for it.

In contrast to this proper reading, María's preferred texts are prohibited and can only be attended in secrecy. Nevertheless, romantic novels and newspapers influence the way she understands the village and allow her to define the sexual and social frustration that rules her life. In short, the forbidden readings, serving as a technology of the self, generate a new subjectivity for María, and they encourage her resisting attitude. For example, journalistic sensationalism promotes new reflections on recent town scandals when María reads a newspaper report of March 27<sup>th</sup>, titled "OTRO MATADOR DE MUJERES SENTENCIADO A MUERTE." The article tells of an ill-fated affair between Antonio López and María Luisa Boyer. After Boyer abandons the relationship "en busca de aventuras y de orgías que no nos ocuparemos en relatar" (74), López finds her, and upon failing to convince her to return to him, "le disparó dos tiros, dejándola moribunda, y a continuación volvió el arma en su contra, y se dio un balazo en la boca" (75). After reading this report, María "pensó en las múltiples hipótesis que se hicieron hace algunos meses, muy en secreto, cuando el cuerpo de una mujer fue hallado con diecisiete puñaladas en el arroyo del Cahuixtle; oyó decir que un hombre la había matado, pero nunca dieron con quién" (75). Later, violent images infiltrate her dreams, provoking nightmares in which she assumes female roles resembling those portrayed in her readings (89).

Beyond these effects, the readings provide María with a cognitive frame for understanding the sequence of events that leads up to the death of Micaela at the hands of Damián (292-93; 364-67). Eventually, the journalism together with the romantic novels serve as her standards for comparison when she accepts the affection of a singularly unattractive student. Upon regarding her chosen suitor, María reflects: "¡Cuán lejos estaba de los héroes que la entusiasmaban en las novelas y de los criminales cuyos hechos registraban los periódicos!" (296). Most importantly, however, the image of romantic love internalized by María determines her reaction when she intercepts a letter to her uncle from exiled Gabriel, a letter in which she discovers that don Dionisio has withheld knowledge of Gabriel's love for her:

Con esta experiencia, María puede formular y formula categóricamente su antes confusa idea—hecha hoy convicción—de que nadie, nunca, en este

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the political appointment of a new local representative for the national government, and students who return home after periods away at school are vehicles for outside influences shattering the village's closure.

pueblo ha sentido pasión de amor—embeleso y locura, entrega sin reservas, dolorosa y dichosa, contra todos los miedos y al impulso de todos los riesgos—; el amor heroico que inflama las páginas de los libros por ella consumidos, consumida por ellos. (312-13)

Thus, María's readings characterize her nonconformity with the mores of the village, her longing for the enchantment of the distant, and the awakening of her desire for passion, heroism, and adventure. They constitute a frame of knowledge for recognizing the harshly repressive nature of her closed environment. Indeed, these readings allow María to understand herself as an individual with desires that have been repressed by the stifling religious monotony in the village. Thus, reading contributes to the construction and emergence of a desiring subjectivity that must seek its liberation from severe constraints.<sup>11</sup> For María, the Revolution represents the arrival of freedom, the release for her fantasies as she flees the village and joins the revolutionary hoards of the *bola*. When she has left, amidst the exclamations of disbelief, the retrospective accusations, and the gossip, an anonymous voice among the chorus of villagers avers: "—Leía libros prohibidos" (381).

Just as the story lines for Micaela, Gabriel, and Luis may function as cautionary tales for the villagers about reading and its dangers, so the outcome of María in the concluding chapter negotiates the terms of closure for *Al filo del agua* and constructs its message about reading for us. A first approximation to this message rests on an allegorical interpretation. María's escape in the penultimate section of the novel embodies the idea that the Revolution is liberation. The resisting reading of forbidden texts allows María to develop a new understanding of her social situation and to identify herself as a desiring subject repressed by community practices. But this new view of herself and the world—this new subjectivity, in short—comes at a high price. Efforts to enact change are not private, individual choices but rather public acts that must be negotiated in the context of the village's collectively enforced standards. While within the village she must deal with the multiple reprobations of her resistance to the prevailing discourse and practices of permanence, and ultimately she must leave, losing home, family, and reputation in order to free herself. The closing scene suggests that change from within the community, however, is either insufficient or impossible. The novel ends with the celebration of a mass, ironically emphasizing permanence and perhaps the impossibility of change within the community. Although the ideal of the resisting

11. Faris confirms my reading; she notes that "Yáñez...associates novel reading with the inability to close oneself off from passion" (6).

reader as a role model for liberation is quite attractive, this allegory collapses under closer scrutiny.

As a behavioral trait, María's reading activity is repetitive and compulsive. She consistently selects the same text for interpretation: romantic novels and sensationalistic newspapers. And this repetition extends to the meaning attributed to these texts: María's romantic vision perceives only repressed love and frustrated heroism. Indeed, the attraction of these texts and the need to interpret them in an unswerving manner is such a compulsion that María cannot behave otherwise. María fails to scrutinize her interpretations, and she repetitively, compulsively arrives at the same reading. Or in the words of Roland Barthes, who equates the necessity of rereading with critical activity, "those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere" (16). Whereas María's resistance to dominant reading practices empowers her to join the Revolution and reject monastic existence in the village, she seeks the refuge of escapism, believing that passion, heroism, and adventure lie beyond the village. By fleeing with the insurrectionary forces, she also naively applies her literary skills to the complexity of the cultural text.<sup>12</sup> In other words, María exercises little critical choice in her reading of the Revolution; she simply repeats her escapist hermeneutics. Her reading practices both enable and yet severely constrain her resistance.

The village as a figure for the national community further vexes the initial allegory. Reading, however individual or idiosyncratic, is defined in relation to the standards, values, and beliefs promulgated

12. The double bind in María's reading resembles the dynamic Radway associates with twentieth-century United States women's reading of "mass-produced" romances. On the one hand, María selects romantic novels based on the patriarchal model of fulfillment that has produced her frustration: the romantic model stereotypically projects an asymmetrical relation between a passive female-as-object desired by an active male subject. On the other hand, the choice to read prohibited texts and the decisive action of breaking with village tradition simultaneously demonstrate how the patriarchal romantic model can be transformed by the reader into material that, at the very least, establishes the basis for acts of self-definition in a world that denies or devalues female autonomy. Indeed, compared to "passive" female "objects of desire" in many romantic novels, María has elected the active male position as the "subject of desire" by choosing to join the Revolution. The villagers themselves address this gender transgression after her departure in two manners. One anonymous voice reports María's desire to behave like a man: "Dicen que anduvo diciendo que cómo no era hombre para poner remedio a las injusticias" (383). Later another anonymous voice suggests that she has probably already been gang raped by the soldiers: "La cabra tira al monte. Ya toda la tropa habrá pasado sobre ella" (383). In this regard, and contrary to María's possible value as a role model for revolutionary liberation, the villagers confirm Jean Franco's contention that in Mexico women cannot successfully fulfill the role of active subjects in a national allegory (*Plotting Women* 129-46).

by the community—the discourse of permanence or “timelessness” (Walker 447–48). In historical terms, the village evokes the Pax Porfiriana, the period of static, controlled rule under Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1911.<sup>13</sup> Liberation for María comes from leaving this world behind, much as the decade of revolutionary conflict supposedly provided closure for the Pax Porfiriana while moving the nation forward into a new epoch. Although María may have achieved personal liberation by joining the Revolution, the novel stops short of treating the issue of collective liberation. Instead, the end of the novel introduces a highly ambivalent attitude toward the collective impact of the Revolution.<sup>14</sup> The closing scene of the novel—the iterative celebration of morning mass with the faithful vigilantly keeping the officiant, don Dionisio, under surveillance—reveals the paradoxical insistence of the villagers to proceed as if nothing had changed.<sup>15</sup> Although it may be human nature to resist all change, viewed from a slightly different angle, this collective insistence on permanence, rather than distinguish the villagers from María, lays bare a fundamental resemblance: just like her, the village also, as a community of readers, repetitively, compulsively reads the same text and always arrives at the same “reading.”

This repetitive, compulsive reading behavior for María and for the villagers in general points toward a predisposition to interpret, literary or cultural texts, in a specific manner. These readers—like all readers, according to Stanley Fish—are predisposed to read in a certain manner on the basis of their “interpretive strategies.” Fish explains that “interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading...; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them” (168). In contrast to the rhetoric of confession that treats the “wrong” texts like

13. Díaz was responsible for considerable change in the form of infrastructural and financial modernization (constructions of railroads, expansion of the banking and mining industries, attraction of foreign investors, and initial development of the petroleum industry). In contrast to these achievements, Díaz’s style of governing depended on rigid class and racial divisions, an active national police program against “banditry,” the programmatic guidance of a group of positivist social advisers (*los científicos*), and his unquestionable “reelection” as president. These latter practices correspond to the discourse of permanence in *Al filo del agua*. Hart (129–186) and Luis González (951–1005) provide insightful analyses of the growth and eventual crisis of Porfirian society.

14. Sommers emphasizes this ambivalence as a key factor that distinguishes *Al filo del agua* from the monolithically disenchanting judgments voiced in the novels of the Mexican Revolution (61).

15. Faris emphasizes this dynamic of surveillance in terms of a Bakhtinian multitude of voices; public disciplinary village gossip remains ever vigilant of expressions from the private voices of repressed, forbidden desire.

material objects capable of exercising pernicious influence over the soul of an individual reader, this view of reading as a predisposition reveals that the villagers are struggling with the contradictions and conflicts among their own strategies for making texts. Thus, opposed interpretive strategies—romantic strategies of rebellion versus religious strategies of permanence—are locked in a struggle over the future of the soul, and until the Revolution, the discourse of permanence has dominated.

The village is a battleground not just for the Revolution, but for the interpretive strategies used to construct and explain social reality. Understood as a “community of readers,” the village in *Al filo del agua* differs sharply from Fish’s depiction of an “interpretive community,” which consists of individuals who share interpretive strategies and who negotiate differences through persuasion within the stability of their shared predispositions. In contrast to Fish’s institutionally defined “interpretive community,” the characters of *Al filo del agua* are related spatially, geographically through their residence in the village. And within the village, the struggle over which interpretive strategies will guide the construction and maintenance of a coherent social reality produces a stratification of hierarchically related readers. The struggle also gives rise to a finely developed web of technologies of domination that coercively attempt to contain any changes. However, since the villagers and the specific readers I have discussed all view texts, both literary and cultural, as objects that impose themselves and their meanings, they never achieve a critical awareness of their role in producing their own repression. In this perspective, these three characters and the villagers in general all demonstrate their alienation, both individual and collective, from the construction of their social reality. They all seem powerless to effect changes that will allow them to participate critically in the construction of a world that might better accommodate their needs and desires. The patterns of resistance, repetition, and failure to change subject María, Lucas, don Dionisio, and the villagers in general to the closure of monolithic interpretive practices. They submit themselves to the disciplinary community gaze as their self-created technology of domination, “the tyrannies men allow themselves to create and suffer” (Brushwood, *Spanish American Novel* 167). In contrast to an allegory of emancipatory reading, *Al filo del agua* reveals the importance of critically rereading to understand the role that we play, individually and collectively, in socially constructing our reality and our subjection. This task involves “spiritualizing” the national subject.

### Reading and the Mexican Soul: The National Subject in the 1940s

Benedict Anderson has proposed that the nation, nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism are "cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (13); they are communities "distinguished...by the style in which they are imagined" (15). By "national subject" I am referring to the individual who is both the precondition for and the effect of these national imaginings. The national subject both imagines the national community and is imagined as the necessary member of such a community. In this respect, "imagining" is shorthand for the production of a kind of subjectivity, and following from Anderson's emphasis on styles of imagining, different subjectivities are at stake here.

Anderson also proposes that print culture plays a fundamental role in disseminating "forms of imagining" the community. The novels and newspapers of the nineteenth century contributed to the emergence of nationalism since "these forms provided the technical means of 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (30). My interpretation of *Al filo del agua* suggests that novels and journalism continue to participate in the metamorphoses of Mexican nationalism throughout the twentieth century. Thematically *Al filo del agua* treats reading as an issue of national import in 1909-10, and technically it reinscribes reading as a strategy for evoking the national soul in 1947. In this regard, *Al filo del agua* participates in a broader trend in the 1940s. Writings about "lo mexicano" and essays in the journal *Cuadernos Americanos* similarly attest to the ongoing importance of print culture in constructing a new style for imagining the national community. These publications and Yáñez's novel spiritualized the national subject by constituting a specific position of omniscience for readers, a place for observing the kind of social network that connects Mexicans. Specifically, the national subject is spiritualized through an intensive process of rereading national history and through a psychoanalytic strategy of constructing the national psyche derived from writings about "lo mexicano."

In terms of national history, this position for readers derives from the retrospective relation to the revolution that emerged in the 1940s. The distance of three decades since the start of the Revolution allowed for a concerted reinterpretation of its significance and achievements, a task that occupied many intellectuals throughout this decade. On the one hand, the state was attempting to institutionalize the Revolution as an ongoing project, a strategy symbolized in 1946 with the renaming of the official state political party from

Partido de la Revolución Mexicana to Partido Revolucionario Institucional.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, many intellectuals were pronouncing the death of the Revolution. The pages of *Cuadernos Americanos*, founded in 1942, staged some of the most dramatic historical rereadings. As early as 1943, Jesús Silva Herzog pointed toward "La revolución mexicana en crisis." In 1947, Cosío Villegas echoed the same rhetoric with "La crisis de México."<sup>17</sup> The same year *Cuadernos Americanos* also published José E. Iturriaga's "México y su crisis histórica." Capping off this broadly sketched bibliography, in 1949 Silva Herzog confirmed that "La revolución mexicana es ya un hecho histórico": "pienso con cierta tristeza y siento con claridad que la Revolución Mexicana ya no existe; dejó de ser, murió calladamente sin que nadie lo advirtiera; sin que nadie, o casi nadie lo advierta todavía" (7). These articles shaped the emerging consensus that, in spite of institutionalization, the revolutionary process begun in 1910 had ended.<sup>18</sup>

The editorial line of *Cuadernos Americanos* in the 1940s and the literary change in *Al filo del agua* also point toward a new understanding of Mexico's place in a world context, constructing a position from which readers can imagine the national community in an international perspective. Similar to the village in *Al filo del agua*, Mexico in the 1940s faced the need to find new explanations for its role and identity in response to outside influences. Global political and economic changes associated with World War II were brought home dramatically when German submarines torpedoed two Mexican tankers and on May 30, 1942, President Manuel Avila Camacho declared war on the Axis powers (Meyer 1337). This event and the ever-present shadow of the United States, with its history

16. This renaming is a historical repetition: in 1938 the populist president Lázaro Cárdenas renamed the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, founded in 1929 by Plutarco Elías Calles, as the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana. The forming, naming, and renaming of the official state party repeatedly attempted to create institutions that fomented nationalist sentiments, based their authority on the Revolution, provided greater stability for the state apparatus, and claimed to be increasingly more authentic through a "truer" commitment to the values of the Revolution. Yáñez's novelistic critique of this process comes full circle when María and Damián Limón reappear in *La vueltas del tiempo* (1973), written between 1948 and 1951, immediately after the publication of *Al filo del agua*. It follows several characters of various social classes throughout the day of the funeral of ex-president Plutarco Elías Calles on October 20, 1945.

17. This article sparked a series of exchanges in the national press. Ross reprints responses by Leopoldo Zea (138-41) and José Revueltas (142-51).

18. Much like the emphasis on a dying or dead revolution, Franco emphasizes that in the difficult encounter with modernization, numerous novelists between the 1940s and 1960s recurrently figure the nation through "the motif of the dying community or the wake around the body" ("Nation" 205-06).

of economic and cultural imperialism in Mexico, encouraged the state campaigns for "Unidad Nacional." One of the most spectacular examples of this campaign occurred when President Avila Camacho gathered all living ex-presidents of Mexico (including Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas—the former had been sent into exile by the latter in 1936) for the national Independence Day celebrations on September 16, 1942 (Brenner, photograph 181). The rereading of the Mexican Revolution in the 1940s, then, takes place in an atmosphere of introversion and extroversion (Brushwood, *Mexico* 17-18, 233-34), turning inward to look at national concerns and the Revolution, turning outward to respond to Mexico's place in a new configuration of global identities. John Brushwood has aptly described the dual focus of this ambience as "the international context of nationalism" (*Narrative Innovation* 31-56).

Philosophico-anthropological essays about "lo mexicano" accompany the historical rereading and theorize the spiritualized projection of the national subject. Although this line of thinking began with intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, Samuel Ramos's *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934) accentuated a psychoanalytic emphasis that diagnosed a national inferiority complex.<sup>19</sup> Octavio Paz's classic essay *El laberinto de la soledad*, first published in 1950, eloquently explored the dynamics of the national psyche and singled out the Mexican Revolution as one of several historical traumas that must be worked through in order to heal the Mexican soul.

The first chapter of Paz's study appeared in 1949, in the same issue of *Cuadernos Americanos* as Silva Herzog's pronouncement that the Revolution had quietly died. In this chapter, "El Pachuco y otros extremos," Paz equated Mexico's current historical juncture with the psychological development of an adolescent awakening to the problems of self-definition, a narcissistic moment of self-examination in the search for identity. In the closing piece of the book in 1950, "Nuestros días,"<sup>20</sup> Paz makes explicit the psychoanalytic role of his writing as a cure for the conflicts of "nuestra querrela interior" (150):

Nuestra situación era semejante a la del neurótico, para quien los principios morales y las ideas abstractas no tienen más función práctica que la defensa

19. Schmidt explores the history of this trend from its beginnings, and Phelan provides an overview of its phenomenal success at midcentury. Bartra elaborates the most incisive critique of writings about the "ontología del mexicano."

20. Johnson (65-68) explains the differences between the 1950 edition of *Laberinto* and the 1959 edition, which circulates today. The penultimate chapter that now bears the title "La 'inteligencia' mexicana" was originally the last chapter of the 1950 edition, then entitled "Nuestros días."

de su intimidad, complicado sistema con el que se engaña, y engaña a los demás, acerca del verdadero significado de sus inclinaciones y la índole de sus conflictos. Pero en el momento en que éstos aparecen a plena luz y tal cual son, el enfermo debe afrontarlos y resolverlos por sí mismo....La reflexión filosófica se vuelve así una tarea salvador y urgente, pues no tendrá nada más por objeto examinar nuestro pasado intelectual, ni describir nuestras actitudes características, sino que deberá ofrecernos una solución concreta, algo que dé sentido a nuestra presencia en la tierra. (150-51)

In this psychoanalytic model, the Mexican subject is cast as a neurotic, and here "philosophical reflection" is the analytic process that will work the cure and heal the spirit. Thus, in addition to readers' retrospective positioning before a dead revolution, this psychoanalytic model displays the national psyche to readers so that they can observe and understand the effects of the invisible, underground forces that have moved throughout Mexican history.

In the exploration of this psychoanalytic model, *Al filo del agua* evokes the Mexican soul, attempts to heal the national psyche, and projects the nation imagined as a community of spiritualized subjects. The modernist narrative strategies deftly employed in *Al filo del agua* move the Mexican soul out of the confessional and place it on the couch, and as readers, we are its psychoanalyst. Joseph Sommers has cogently argued that characterization in *Al filo del agua* derives from the concept of psychological "cases studies" (54), and Manuel Pedro González argues (disparagingly) that more than a novel, it is "un ensayo psicoanalítico" (331). In this perspective, narrative technique in *Al filo del agua* strives to complete for readers the liberation that María only begins at the end of the novel. The innovations in narrative strategy place readers in a position to observe the "pueblo subterráneo," the underground force of repressed desire that reverberates throughout life in the village, affecting both individuals and the collective group.<sup>21</sup> Much like Paz's cure through philosophical reflection, the modernist literary style in *Al filo del agua* proposes to reveal clearly and accurately the historical trauma of the Revolution and the collective psychological conflicts that must be confronted and resolved.<sup>22</sup>

21. Textual organization also involves readers in discerning the effects of repression. D'Lugo brilliantly describes the fragmentation of the story line involving Micaela Rodríguez and Damián Limón, which can also be understood as repression since the key moments of this story line are never narrated and can only be inferred as effects on the textual surface. The character don Dionisio further facilitates the psychoanalytic dimension of the novel. Whereas Connolly argues that he is the main character of the novel, I would argue that his centrality derives from his hierarchical position of knowledge in the confessional listening to the "pueblo subterráneo," a position that we as readers transform into that of the literary psychoanalyst.

22. Gabriel and María reappear in Yáñez's *La creación* (1959). In an attempt

This psychoanalytic reading position contributes greatly to the so-called "universal" aspect of *Al filo del agua* since Freudian concepts had been widely popularized by midcentury. But, this model also has a particular nationalist effect, since if you are a Mexican reader, the novel implies that not only are you the psychoanalyst, but also the analysand. The position for readers constructed through the modernist techniques and narrative strategies of *Al filo del agua*, through the individual tasks of reading and national self-analysis, points toward the roots of identity in a collective history, a collective trauma, and the need for a collective cure. *Al filo del agua* promises to achieve at the aesthetic level what was only the first move toward liberation when María rebels against repression and joins the Revolution. Although readers in the text repetitively, compulsively read everywhere the same story, the stylistic complexity and the narrative fragmentation encourage us as readers to participate actively in this process of national psychoanalysis, to understand the traumatic suffering of repression and through the act of reading to become a part of a "spiritualized national community." *Al filo del agua*, in this regard, serves as a technology of the self that realizes the dual processes for introducing a spiritualized style of imagining the national community. It places readers in the position of imagining a national community, first repressed and then spiritualized through psychoanalytic liberation. But it also includes the task for Mexican readers of imagining themselves as members of this community, healed and spiritualized through reading the novel, understanding national history, and thus confronting and resolving the interior conflicts vexing the nation. Most importantly, through the work of reading, *Al filo del agua* constitutes the aesthetic experience of having overcome alienation from social reality by actively participating in the construction of literary and social meaning.

Michel Foucault has emphasized that the "modern state" is not "an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but on the contrary as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns" ("Subject and Power" 214). *Al filo del agua*, as I have been proposing, sets forth

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to help Gabriel resolve his internal conflicts, María's husband explicitly addresses the usefulness of psychoanalysis: "He leído mucho sobre psicoanálisis; para María, para mí, para ti, para todos los que nacimos y crecimos en un ambiente lleno de prohibiciones y prejuicios, es una necesidad saber liberarnos de nosotros mismos. ¿Conoces lo que María sufrió hasta conseguirlo? Ahora quiere que lo consigas tú" (49).

a specific project that integrates individuals into the imagined national community by spiritualizing them through the literary psychoanalysis of the Mexican soul. But since the novel also emphasizes the imperative to form a critical consciousness through rereading, I think that it is important to reexamine this model of spiritualization, even if only speculatively, with particular attention to limning the "set of very specific patterns" to which such national subjects must be submitted. More precisely, given the utopian goal of individual and collective liberation that motivates *Al filo del agua*, a reconsideration of the spiritualized national community and subject must question the pattern of these liberated states.

The rereading of national history and the collective psychoanalysis carried out in *Al filo del agua*, *Cuadernos Americanos*, and in the writings about "lo mexicano" produce a style of imagining the national community that unites individuals through a therapeutic examination of the national psyche. Although *Al filo del agua* attempts to exorcise the malignant ghosts of history that haunt the Mexican soul, its cohesive style of imagining also projects a homogeneous community, perhaps not unlike the village that María and the Revolution attempt to leave behind, since this model of belongingness excludes the factors that differentiate and stratify socially. The phrase "lo mexicano," an abstract, neuter nominalization, founds community on an egalitarian common denominator, but it also ignores differences of gender, class, and race that constitute the everyday reality of heterogeneous individuals in the nation, especially in a nation like Mexico with roots in a colonial history, with various immigrant populations that have become nationalized over the past centuries, and where numerous indigenous groups, even today, remain at the margins of the national economy, politics, and language. Roger Bartra, in this perspective, critiques the notion of "lo mexicano" for constructing the "jaula de la melancolía" that legitimates state domination of individuals in twentieth-century Mexico. He describes the homogenizing effect of constructing the Mexican soul in this manner as the problem of the *sujeto único*: a modern myth that provides a powerful illusion of national cohesion, describes how the Mexican is dominated rather than liberated, and explains how exploitation is legitimated by the State (22). The spiritualized community of national subjects, then, while imagined as a liberated state also produces another mode of subjection that ignores the competing, hierarchical relations among various constituencies in the nation.

In this respect, *Al filo del agua* returns reading to the boundary between the technologies of the self and of domination. The reading of *Al filo del agua* is, first of all, a technology of the self that

proposes to liberate by spiritualizing readers as subjects of the nation. But at the same time, this reading is a technology of domination since it submits individuals to a set of very specific patterns that repress the multiple subjectivities at work across various lines of social differentiation. And to the degree that this technology of domination can be legitimated as the basis for imagining the community, the dynamics of shared social life reproduce in national territory the same repressive tensions that lead to crisis in the village in *Al filo del agua*. Under the guise of liberation, readers are invited to become the same kind of sadistic, silent disciplinary community that in *Al filo del agua* places others under surveillance to prevent the emergence of threatening, resisting subjectivities that might emphasize the markers of social differentiation. And to the degree that the collective model of the Mexican soul has been internalized, readers are also prompted to observe themselves, to reproduce for themselves the spiritualization that permits a certain style of imagining the national community and that also generates their own subjectivity through this distinct style of imagining. In other words, the spiritualization, although it leads to liberation in one perspective, is at the same time a new strategy of domination.

However, this style of imagining the national community also begs the question of the kind of freedom that it proposes, the exact terms of utopian liberation. The spiritualized community of national subjects is viewed mainly as a liberation from various states: from the repression of desire, from the traumas of national history, and from the alienation of passivity. But such spiritualization is simultaneously liberating individuals to something or some state. How then is freedom from repression/the freedom to desire related to a spiritualized model of nationalism?

Modern liberation understood as the freedom to desire is, I think, a veiled reworking of a historical paradigm that has bound sexuality and nationalism in Latin America. In *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* Doris Sommer develops the notion of an "erotics of politics" as a popular master code. Sommer notes that in many nineteenth-century novels "national ideals are all ostensibly grounded in a 'natural' heterosexual love and in marriages that provided a figure of apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at mid-century. Romantic passion...gave a rhetoric for the hegemonic project of conquering the antagonist through mutual interest, or 'love,' rather than through coercion" (6). Like their counterparts in romances from a previous century, Micaela, Gabriel, Luis, and María, among many other young adults in the village, "must imagine their ideal relationship through an alternative society" (18), since such relationships would never be permitted in

the village. María's reading news reports of crimes of passion and romantic novels awaken her to erotic desire and yearning for a hero, the partner required in this paradigm. But in *Al filo del agua*, unlike the nineteenth-century romances, even the married couples suffer from the repressive atmosphere. Given the setting of *Al filo del agua* on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, the solution to erotic frustration is not posed as the solution to an internecine conflict, as it was a century earlier. Rather, the social revolution proposes to be part of the solution for sexual frustration, just as sexual frustration is part of the causal incitement for revolution.

Yáñez's reworking of the foundational "erotics of politics" does not simply mark the twentieth-century failure of this nineteenth-century master code. Rather, it is a tactical shift that moves the source of erotic frustrations from national strife to conflicts found within the individual. Although María leaves the village because she identifies it as the source of repression and frustration, *Al filo del agua* reveals how the villagers themselves, with their orthodox "interpretive strategies" for constructing social reality, elaborate their own repression. And placing the repressive power within individuals rather than in external institutions reinforces the spiritualizing project of *Al filo del agua*; this placement divides subjects against themselves by requiring self-observation and self-analysis for liberation. In this regard, liberation corresponds to the extreme sexualization of the individual that Foucault traces to the eighteenth century, when the bourgeoisie made sex

identical with its body, or at least subordinated the latter to the former by attributing to it a mysterious and undefined power; it staked its life and death on sex by making it responsible for its future welfare; it placed its hopes for the future on sex by imagining it to have ineluctable effects on generations to come; it subordinated its soul to sex by conceiving of it as what constituted the soul's most secret and determinant part. (*History 1*: 123-24)

The search for a "cure" is much less a liberation than an even more finely developed technology of domination in terms of perpetual spirals of power and pleasure. Liberated sexuality constitutes an energy source for the spiritualization of the national subject. The imagined community produced through the reading of *Al filo del agua* not only promises to cure the traumas of national history but to inscribe individuals in satisfying relations of desire, the natural heterosexual relations that provide the nation with productive families. And since the problem to be solved resides within the self, this style of imagining the community not only provides attractive individual incentives but also guarantees that the divided subject,

capable of self-surveillance, of tracing the movement of desire in the Mexican soul, will continue to produce and reproduce such an imagined community of spiritualized national subjects.

### Conclusion

*Al filo del agua* attributes immense power to reading, both on the eve of the Mexican Revolution and again in the 1940s. In this regard, Yáñez's novel participated in a dominant social discourse in postrevolutionary Mexico about education and literacy; such schooling and reading would "properly" form the souls of the nation's youth for the creation of a productive citizenry (Ruiz, Vásquez de Knauth). Other novels, particularly influential ones like José Revueltas's *El luto humano* (1943) and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), also shared in the project of spiritualizing Mexican readers through the exploration of modernist literary innovation and the rereading of Mexican national history. And at midcentury, abundant writings about "lo mexicano" flourished (Phelan). In spite of the desire for power that motivates these projects, only the context of a broader social history can measure the actual force of these texts in the world, the success of this style of imagining the national community. Alan Knight has argued that dominant political rhetoric, and I would add the literary rhetoric that I have analyzed as spiritualization, did not have the effect on social progress that it pretended. Rather, since the 1940s Mexicans have come to participate in a community because "[a]s never before they share a common popular culture" (262). Rather than a book-reading public united through spiritualization, phenomena such as radio, cinema, television, comics, *fotonovelas*, tabloids, and mass sporting events have homogenized public culture and integrated individuals into a nation. In this perspective, *Al filo del agua* makes visible the force of a desire that valorizes literature and reading. Whether successful or not, *Al filo del agua* reveals the discursive hegemony of literary ideology desirous of greater social power, a postrevolutionary arena where legislators, intellectuals, educators, and writers attempted to craft a community and to heal the souls of the nation.

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