

2012

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Cohn, Deborah (April 2012) "Carlos Fuentes: Fostering Latin American-U.S. Relations during the Boom," *INTI: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 75, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss75/3>

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CARLOS FUENTES: FOSTERING LATIN AMERICAN-U.S. RELATIONS DURING THE BOOM ¹

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Carlos Fuentes was an extremely influential figure in my intellectual development. His novels stimulated my interest in Spanish American literature, and his writings on William Faulkner inspired the work that became my dissertation and, ultimately, my first book. He was likewise a dominant figure in my research on the Mexican intelligentsia, and there is not a single chapter in my latest book, *The Latin American Literary Boom and U.S. Nationalism during the Cold War*, in which he does not play a determining role. Through Julio Ortega, I was fortunate to meet him at Brown as a graduate student and, later, talk to him about my most recent book project, and these interactions were formative for me. This essay focuses on Fuentes's roles as what José Donoso so aptly characterized as “el primer agente activo y consciente de la internacionalización de la novela hispanoamericana de la década de los años sesenta,” and, more generally, as cultural ambassador for the Boom (49). Specifically, I examine two episodes in which Fuentes carried out this role while navigating the fraught political waters of Spanish American-U.S. relations in the decade following the Cuban Revolution.

***“Ridiculous Rather Than Secure”:* Fuentes and the McCarran-Walter Act**

My first case study centers on Fuentes's multiple brushes during the 1960s with Section 212(a)28 of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, otherwise known as the McCarran-Walter Act, which denied U.S. visas on ideological grounds, that is, in effect, on the suspicion of Communist beliefs. The close encounters of Spanish American writers of notably different political stances—

including all of the region's Nobel Prize winners for literature except for Mistral, as well as Jorge Luis Borges and Ángel Rama, among many others—with the ideological exclusion clause began in the early 1950s, but became much more frequent, not surprisingly, in the years following the Cuban Revolution, which many of the Boom writers and their contemporaries supported. Fuentes's case, though, was unique in the sheer number of times that he was affected by the immigration blacklist, the publicity that his case received, and the political machinations to change the law that it inspired. His saga ultimately charted a path between a dock in Puerto Rico, the State Department, the Department of Justice, the floor of the U.S. Senate, and the *Congressional Record*, where Senator J.W. Fulbright himself asked to have the documentation of Fuentes's travails recorded for posterity.

While Fuentes visited the U.S. many times over the years, his troubles with McCarran-Walter seem to have begun, as Ortega has pointed out, after 1961, when he traveled to Havana as a delegate of the Congreso de Solidaridad con Cuba, and after he spoke out strongly against the United States at the Congreso de Intelectuales at the Universidad de Concepción in Chile in early 1962 (108). Soon after these incidents, Fuentes had his first run-in with the Act: in April of 1962, he was invited to participate in a televised debate on Latin American development and the Alliance for Progress with Richard Goodwin, President Kennedy's deputy assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. His visa application, however, was turned down days before the debate because, according to several sources, the State Department had learned that Fuentes might be a Communist and that he had supposedly consulted with Communist leaders in Mexico while preparing for the debate (Schwartz 46; Szulc).

This run-in turned Fuentes, in one critic's words, into "a martyr of the anti-establishment" (Rostagno 121). Over the next few years, Fuentes's visas were sometimes approved, sometimes denied, with no rhyme or reason; one was even pushed through behind the scenes by Robert Kennedy in his capacity as Attorney General (see Schwartz 47-49). The situation infuriated the writer. As he noted, "it is the application of the exclusionary [immigration] clause that endangers the Republic, mocks Democracy, demoralizes the true friends of the United States, and offers undeserved aces to the Soviet Union"—as well as alienating Latin American intellectuals from the United States ("McCarran-Walter Sadomasochism"). On those occasions when he did get visas, he was impressed by what he saw in the U.S., lending credence to immigration reform advocates who argued that an open door policy was key to offering foreign intellectuals a positive image of U.S.-style democracy.

Fuentes's difficulties with U.S. immigration policies reached a very public climax in February of 1969. When returning from Spain to Mexico, the boat in which Fuentes was traveling docked briefly in San Juan. When he tried to disembark, a U.S. immigration official found his name on the INS blacklist and tore up his landing card. As Fuentes later observed, "From the docks, I saw

land that is mine, part of Latin America, but an occupied land I cannot set foot on” (qtd. in Raymont, “Fulbright”). Fuentes returned to his cabin and wrote telegrams to his agent, his publisher, and Norman Mailer, who would soon be speaking to the PEN American Center, asking them to protest on his behalf. Mario Vargas Llosa, who was at this time visiting faculty at the University of Puerto Rico, had been waiting at the dock to meet his friend: he boarded, took the messages, and sent them to their final destinations (Fuentes, “Lecture” 59).

The event triggered a national and international uproar. The *New York Times* published an editorial condemning the episode: “One sure way to tarnish the United States is for some bureaucrat to decide that a writer . . . is an ‘undesirable alien’ because of his work or beliefs. Politicizing literature is a common practice for authoritarian governments; it should not become one for this country” (“The Fuentes Incident”). The editorial further urged Congress to “re-examine and eliminate these purposeless restrictions, which make the United States ridiculous rather than secure. Literary imprimaturs by the Immigration Service or any other Government body are alien to the United States itself” (ibid.). Fuentes’s agent, Carl Brandt, mobilized writers, critics, and others to protest the incident. His publisher, Roger Straus, prepared a resolution condemning the act and urging the repeal of such immigration restrictions that was signed by more than two hundred writers at the National Book Awards ceremonies just days later (“Authors Condemn”).

Fuentes’s supporters also took their protests to the highest levels of the U.S. government, including the State Department and the U.S. Attorney General. William D. Rogers, a former head of the Alliance for Progress and president of the Center for Inter-American Relations (the predecessor to the Americas Society), with which Fuentes was involved, wrote to the Secretary of State that “the notion that Fuentes’s presence among us could in any sense damage our national interest is unworthy of serious discussion. To the contrary, it is his rejection which [sic] will cause us immense harm. It will be interpreted by the youth and intellectual community in Latin America as meaning that our commitment to free expression is superficial and will confirm the impression to some that we are timid and fearful of criticism of Latin-American writers” (qtd. in Raymont, “Fuentes Incident”).

Abba Schwartz, an advocate of more liberal immigration laws who worked in consular affairs at the State Department, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a former foreign policy adviser to President Kennedy and a friend of Fuentes, organized a campaign to lobby Congress to change the immigration law. Schwartz also sent a telegram to Senator Fulbright, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asking the committee to renew efforts to repeal the anticommunist clause of McCarran-Walter. Fulbright responded quickly, seeking an explanation of the visa denial and urging the Nixon administration to ease restrictions and administer the law more flexibly. He registered his concern that “incidents of this kind . . . do nothing to protect the internal security of the United States and

do a great deal to confirm the worst suspicions which [sic] are held about the United States by intellectuals abroad” (qtd. in *Cong. Rec.* 1969, 19895).

Although Fulbright was initially sympathetic to attempts to revise the law, and he was deeply concerned about preventing a recurrence of this type of incident, he ultimately stopped trying to change the law, focusing instead on changing the implementation of the policy in a way that allowed visa denials to be circumvented more easily. Fuentes was deeply grateful to the senator for taking the case to Congress and changing the implementation of the act, if not the terms of the act itself.² But as the experiences of Fuentes and so many others demonstrate, such changes were band-aids rather than solutions. In August of 1969, Senator James Scheuer introduced a bill to repeal the clause. Scheuer invoked Fuentes’s case when he presented the bill, arguing that the “irrationality in the State Department’s treatment of Mr. Fuentes underlines the arbitrariness with which this provision is enforced” (qtd. in *Cong. Rec.* 1969, 22950). His effort, too, failed, and the law remained unchanged until 1990, when, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the expression of so-called subversive ideologies was removed from the law as grounds for excluding foreigners from the country.

After 1969, Fuentes had no further troubles visiting the United States, though he did have to go through hoops when applying for visas.³ When, for example, he considered settling in the United States in the late 1970s, he rightly surmised that having his name on the INS blacklist could jeopardize his application for permanent residence. He was advised by counsel to apply for an H-1 nonimmigrant visa, available to people of “distinguished merit and ability,” because the State Department would be willing to issue a waiver of excludability for this visa.⁴ It was a process that Fuentes characterized as “making the bureaucracy work twice: first, they refuse my application in order to abide by McCarran-Walter; immediately, they waive the undesirability because I am presented as a highly desirable professional worthy of an H-1 visa” (Fuentes, “McCarran-Walter Sadomasochism”).

Fuentes’s experiences with the McCarran-Walter Act, like those of his fellow Latin American writers, were emblematic of the paradoxical nature of official U.S. anti-Communist tactics: the authors’ political orientation—in particular, their support of the Cuban Revolution and their criticism of the U.S.—simultaneously rendered them attractive to the U.S. government as opinion leaders who could foster good will towards the nation among their compatriots at home and, on the other hand, “undesirable” as adherents to “subversive” ideologies. Latin American intellectuals were thus simultaneously courted and excluded in a way that pit U.S. efforts to show intellectuals the benefits of democracy against its own instruments—such as its immigration policy—for containing the spread of Communism. McCarran-Walter’s chipping away at democratic principles such as freedom of expression and the free circulation of ideas in the United States additionally brought about one of the greatest ironies of U.S. Cold War politics: constitutional guarantees thought to be fundamental differences between U.S.

democracy and the Soviet system were undermined in the name of U.S. national security. Thus while official U.S. agencies and many others worked during these years on programs aimed at luring Spanish American authors away from Communism, the denial of visas at the same time provoked hostility towards the United States and sympathy for rival political systems.

And yet, incidents such as those detailed here inspired writers and artists from the U.S. and abroad to uphold the democratic principles that were being eroded. In 1984, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union and several other organizations held a conference focused on “restrictions on the flow of information and ideas across the American border including restrictions on the right of Americans to import and export information, to travel abroad, and to receive foreign visitors” (Benda and Halperin, 691, fn.2). Organizers sought, ultimately, to repeal the ideological exclusion provision of McCarran-Walter (*ibid.*). Two high-profile speakers who had previously been denied visas to enter the U.S. participated in the conference by closed-circuit television from Canada, thereby avoiding the visa question, while Fuentes gave the plenary lecture. Thus, the literal exclusion of writers from the country paradoxically allowed them to inscribe themselves in the nation’s democratic process.

Fuentes and PEN International

My second case centers on Fuentes’s role in the PEN Club conference of 1966, which was held in New York City, and in the congress’s aftermath. The participation of Latin American writers in this conference marked a key moment in their entry “into the mainstream” (to invoke Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann’s phrase) of Western literature, and is thus often noted in the literary histories. Fuentes played multiple roles in and behind (and after) the scenes at the conference, which I see as speaking to the rising international profile of the Boom during this period, as emblematic of contemporary currents in U.S.-Latin American relations, and, additionally, as foreshadowing an incipient breakdown of unity within the Latin American Left.

Committed to promoting understanding and defending free expression, the PEN American Center, which organized the conference, sought to provide authors from all ideological backgrounds with an opportunity to communicate with one another in an environment in which Cold War politics were ostensibly put aside in favor of cultural exchange. Organizers were keenly aware of the significance of holding the conference in the U.S. at a time when Cold War tensions were high. They did their best to facilitate (with both visa and financial assistance) the participation of delegates from Eastern Europe, and they reached out in particular to writers throughout Latin America, twenty-three of whom ultimately attended.⁵ Organizers were motivated by a sincere desire to use the event as a means of stimulating PEN activity worldwide, but their efforts also

spoke to U.S. interest in developing nations that were vulnerable to Communist advances. As a result, the event became a site of competing and conflicting interests that enabled both Latin American writers' designs on Western literary and political scenes and the hemispheric agenda of U.S. Cold War nationalism.

Latin American writers had a high profile in activities throughout the week. Many writers, including Fuentes and Pablo Neruda, who had been unable to enter the U.S. for over 20 years, were granted visas through a special group waiver for participants attending conferences in the U.S. During his stay in New York, Neruda gave his first poetry readings in the U.S.; he presented several anti-U.S. and anti-imperial poems, which were greeted with enthusiastic applause. Latin American writers were well-represented among the literary celebrities participating on the round tables that were the cornerstones of the conference: Haroldo de Campos spoke on a panel with translator Richmond Lattimore, Marshall McLuhan, and Norman Podhoretz; Fuentes participated with Ralph Ellison on another; and João Guimarães Rosa and Victoria Ocampo, a vice president of PEN International, appeared with publisher William Jovanovich and Melvin Lasky of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the panel on "The Writer as Collaborator in Other Men's Purposes."⁶

But for the Latin American writers, as well as many others, the most memorable event at the congress was one that was not in the original program. Despite the rising international prominence of the Boom, many writers from the region had not yet met one another. Thanks to an intervention by Fuentes, whose greatest impact at this conference can be seen not in his literary remarks but in his role as cultural ambassador for Latin American letters, the PEN congress provided them with a unique opportunity to do so. Fuentes knew Arthur Miller, then president of PEN International, and when the two men went out to dinner with Neruda and Homero Aridjis one night, the group proposed a session on Latin American literature, which Miller approved and helped to organize (Fuentes, "El P.E.N.: Entierro," 58). Most of the Latin American writers at the conference spoke at the session, and many others from different regions also attended. The Latin Americans expressed their shared concerns about limited publishing opportunities, underdevelopment, political commitment, and the writer's responsibility to fight injustice.⁷ Miller closed the session by offering PEN's services in attempting to address many of the publishing issues that had been raised, and he praised the impromptu round table as the most significant act of the conference in his closing speech (Rodríguez Monegal, "Diario").

Overall, the congress, while in many ways enabled by the United States' Cold War agenda, marked an extremely important moment in Latin American literary history. It fostered both activism and collaborations, and writers took advantage of the opportunity to network with publishers, and to promote their work to other authors from around the world. The congress received widespread media coverage. The *New York Times* reported on it almost daily, and published a feature story on Neruda the next month that was no doubt prompted by his

high-profile success at the conference (Rodman). The round table devoted to Latin American literature was widely publicized in U.S. media directed at Hispanic readers and in newspapers and journals throughout Latin America, including *Mundo Nuevo* and "*Life*" *en español*. Fuentes published an article in the latter on "El PEN: Entierro de la Guerra Fría en la Literatura" in which he hailed the conference for allowing writers to join in productive dialogue and move towards change and rapprochement.

Not all reactions to the congress were positive, though, and Fuentes's reports of the passing of Cold War tensions were exaggerated, as soon became evident. Most notably, there was a widely-published "Carta abierta de los intelectuales cubanos a Pablo Neruda" in which a number of Cuban writers, including Cuban PEN Center President Alejo Carpentier, Roberto Fernández Retamar, and Nicolás Guillén denounced the presence of Latin American writers at the event, asserting that the writers' participation in the conference could be presented as reflecting an easing up of Cold War tensions and used as a means of neutralizing opposition to U.S. politics. In addition to describing "*Life*" *en español* as an instrument of the U.S. establishment and an "órgano de propaganda imperialista," the letter targeted Neruda and Fuentes in particular with their criticism, accusing the former of betraying the Cuban Revolution by attending the conference and refuting the latter's claim that the Cold War had ended ("Carta abierta" 30-31). A number of these charges were further elaborated on in follow-up features in *Casa de las Américas* and elsewhere.⁸ The letter ultimately precipitated a schism among the Left in Latin America that I view as foreshadowing the Padilla Affair of 1971. Neruda, for example, was subsequently compromised in his ability to support the revolution, and was forever afterwards alienated from some of its supporters. Fuentes, in turn, who still supported the Revolution at this time, was deeply frustrated by the accusations, for he found himself on the one hand accused of selling out the Revolution and, on the other, repeatedly denied visas to enter the United States because of his support of Castro and other leftist causes. The episode marked a turning point for Fuentes, and his support of Cuba subsequently cooled, though he continued to defend the nation's right to self-determination.⁹

The letter and its aftermath mark an important and well-documented moment in Spanish American literary and political history. Less well known is the trajectory of Fuentes's subsequent relationship to PEN, which is worth looking at, for it is, in my view, an interesting road not taken. In 1969, Miller asked Fuentes to consider succeeding him as president of PEN International. After the New York congress, Fuentes had asked Miller on several occasions to intercede on behalf of fellow writers who were imprisoned or under pressure from their governments. Fuentes's activism mirrored Miller's own commitment to defending writers' freedom of expression, and no doubt factored into the latter's choice of successor. But so did Miller's desire to raise the profile of Latin American literature within PEN, and to bring together writers from behind

the Iron Curtain with those from the West, as well as those from Europe and the Americas.¹⁰

Fuentes was profoundly moved by the offer. On the one hand, he was committed to the direction towards which Miller had steered the organization. On the other, he was currently having difficulties with his own government: his opposition to the Mexican administration had recently led to a crack-down on both the publication of his work in Mexico and the production of films based on his novels. Fuentes had also incurred the wrath of both the Soviet Union and the United States: he had been declared *persona non grata* by the Soviet Writer's Union for his denunciation of the Czech invasion and his support for Czech writers, and the incident in which he was barred from entering Puerto Rico under McCarran-Walter had taken place just days before Miller wrote to him. Thus he wondered if he would indeed be in a position to build the bridges that Miller had indicated and otherwise further PEN's interests.¹¹ Fuentes's relationship to Cuba was also a concern. Clearly thinking about the open letter to Neruda, the Mexican shared with Miller his concern about the direction in which Cuba was heading. On the one hand, he believed that the situation should be denounced. On the other, he realized that this would support official U.S. anti-Cuba efforts and additionally put him in a position where he would have to take a public stance against the revolution, which he was reluctant to do.¹²

In the end, Fuentes declined the invitation—not, at least primarily, for political reasons but, rather, in order to focus on his writing.¹³ In his stead, he proposed Vargas Llosa on the grounds of his cosmopolitanism, his multilingualism, and his sensitivity to the concerns of intellectuals in the developing world. Someone else was chosen—another Cold War history in itself¹⁴—but Fuentes's call was prophetic, and Vargas Llosa became president of PEN International, most likely at the instigation of Miller, in 1975.

Miller's looking to Fuentes to champion Latin American writers and bring together those from the developing and developed nations once again brings to mind Donoso's designation of him as "el primer agente activo y consciente de la internacionalización" (49). Fuentes was one of the greatest publicists of the Boom, and as these examples show, he was also inadvertently a lightning rod for the Cold War tensions in Spanish American-U.S. relations, as well as within the Latin American Left. As such, he is for me a paradigmatic figure who speaks to the need for challenging nation-based frameworks for literary history, testifying to the web of cultural connections and political histories that link writers from the south and north, and that demand that we, too, cross borders in order to best understand their writing, their canonization, and their politics.

NOTES

- 1 Much of this essay was previously published in chapters 1 and 2 of my recent book, *The Latin American Literary Boom and U.S. Nationalism during the Cold War* (Vanderbilt UP, 2012). I am grateful to Vanderbilt University Press for granting permission to excerpt from my book here.
- 2 Letter, Fuentes to Donoso, 27 August 1969, José Donoso Papers (C0099), Box 2, Folder 11, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections (henceforth “RBSC”), Princeton University Library.
- 3 Moreover, in the 1980s, his application under the Freedom of Information Act to see his file was denied, deemed “contrary to national interests” (Fuentes, “McCarran-Walter Sadomasochism”).
- 4 Letter, Rogers to Fuentes, 8 March 1977, Carlos Fuentes Papers (CO790; henceforth “Fuentes Papers”), Box 88, Folder 4, RBSC, Princeton University Library.
- 5 “Some Results of the XXXIV International P.E.N. Congress,” n.d. PA0600-0051, Ford Foundation Archives.
- 6 List of round tables and participants, PEN American Center Records (CO760), Box 160, folder 1, RBSC, Princeton University Library.
- 7 See “Papel del escritor en América Latina” for a transcription of the session.
- 8 There was, for example, a round table featuring Fernández Retamar, Edmundo Desnoes, Lisandro Otero, and Ambrosio Fornet that was broadcast by Radio Habana Cuba on 10 August 1966, and later published in *Casa de las Américas* under the title “Sobre la penetración intelectual del imperialismo yanqui en América Latina.” Fornet also addressed these issues in an article, “New World en español,” in *Casa de las Américas*.
- 9 Fuentes, interview by author, and Fuentes, “Chronologie,” 319.
- 10 Letter, Miller to Fuentes, 28 February 1969, Fuentes Papers, Box 116, Folder 11, RBSC, Princeton University Library.
- 11 Letter, Fuentes to Miller, 24 March 1969, Fuentes Papers, Box 116, Folder 11, RBSC, Princeton University Library.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Letter, Fuentes to Miller, 16 June 1969, Fuentes Papers, Box 116, Folder 11, RBSC, Princeton University Library.
- 14 See Cohn (89) for a discussion of this election.

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