Fuentes the Young

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Carlos Fuentes was a dapper man. His physical bearing, his way of dressing, and his manners were all exquisite. He favored tailored Italian suits, supple loafers, pocket squares. He liked tony international places: he once said he owed the idea for *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962; *The Death of Artemio Cruz*), perhaps the most "Mexican" of his novels, "to the North Sea and a beach in Holland" (Interview). But his cosmopolitanism got him into trouble, such as when a well-intentioned but off-key televised public-service announcement resulted in late-night TV parodies. Addressing the pollution problem in Mexico City, Fuentes pleaded for the public to save his "beloved" city—all while standing in an idyllic spot in Cambridge, England.

Fuentes used his charisma to collect people. He was associated with, among many others, Jean Seberg, sundry French filmmakers, and, especially after the mid-1970s, Hollywood figures like Shirley MacLaine, Jane Fonda, and the "salsa king," Rubén Blades. He cultivated the world's political elites, including the United States set that converged on Martha's Vineyard and whom he accessed through his Harvard connections and his close friend William Styron. Stephen Greenblatt recalls having been asked to pick up Nadine Gordimer and Fuentes, who promptly got into the backseat of his car, treating him like a chauffeur or an "impudent waiter" and intimidating him with their banter about a recent soiree with Bill Clinton (49).

Fuentes was proud to be on a first-name basis with the important people, and as a writer he was likewise comfortable with erudite sources. He would have made a fantastic academic. Of his many voices, one of his most compelling was the learned essayist who elevated name-dropping beyond the pedantic, the passing acquaintance, or the reflected glow: some of his essays, such as the ones gathered in *Casa con dos puertas* (1970; "The House with Two Doors"), *Myself with Others* (1988), and *Valiente mundo nuevo* (1990; "Brave New World") are astounding. Here he not only rubs shoulders with Luis Buñuel, Alfonso Reyes, and Milan Kundera, all of whom he knew personally, but also conveys a sincere sense of intimacy with Denis Diderot, William Faulkner, Stendahl, Miguel de Cervantes, and James Joyce, whom he did not, as well as with the luminaries of the Latin American and Mexican canon, always with the same lively vigor.

To his credit Fuentes put his energy, his charm, and his gifts for connecting to productive use: arguably he and the Spanish literary agent Carmen Balcells were the galvanizing forces behind the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s, generating collective momentum for writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar (a phenomenon recalled in José Donoso's memoir *Historia personal del Boom* [1972; "Personal Account of the Boom"]). And predictably he was accused of being a *malinchista*, an internationalizing bad Mexican who was selling all the national treasures and catering to foreign interests ("everybody's favorite Mexican," in Enrique Krauze's words ["Guerrilla Dandy"]); of being an effete imitator; and of being a mandarin gatekeeper at the door of a nightclub he both created and made exclusive and thus desirable (Piazza).

Elena Poniatowska aimed some friendly jabs at his reputation for jet-setting pretension, and she recounts how in an interview the hippie-ish Mexican writer Parménides García Saldaña sings an *épate-bourgeois* song of the late 1960s and 1970s: "la gente fresa

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cuando platica quiere hacer de mucho estilo, pero en nada les quita que sea pura pinche gente analfabeta" ("when they talk, upper-crust people want to show off style, but that doesn't hide the fact that they are just a fucking bunch of illiterates"; qtd. in Poniatowska 182).[1] That is illustrated with a party photo of some well-put-together "upper-crust" people, all crowding around a dapper Fuentes, drink in hand.

As Poniatowska's prod suggests, Fuentes's habitus was partly due to, or is at least explainable by, his class origins. His father was a diplomat who traveled widely, and Fuentes's early life was one of international cosmopolitanism. He studied Mexico while in school in Chile, Argentina, and Washington, DC. This meant that from an early age Fuentes learned to reinvent places that already existed, but he also absorbed the value of social codes and well-maintained connections.

As with many long-lived writers it is difficult to speak of a single Fuentes. Fuentes remained visible, important, and productive almost continuously from the 1950s until his death in 2012. It is impossible to point to a fallow or thin period in his writing. He was first associated with the Mexican "generación de medio siglo" ("mid-century generation"); in the 1960s he wrote novels—such as the pop novel *Cambio de piel* (1967; *A Change of Skin*)—that claimed the same ground as the youth-culture-oriented "Onda" ("Wave") generation then on the ascendancy. The 1970s and 1980s were the decades of international Fuentes—of his Joycean magnum opus, *Terra nostra* (1975); of the Hollywood adaptation of *Old Gringo* (1985); and of his Pynchonesque, dystopian epic, *Cristobal nonato* (1987; *Christopher Unborn*).

Terra nostra is a compendium of most of the politico-historical events of the last five hundred years, the years surrounding the Spanish Empire and its aftermath: it is a difficult book, overflowing with names and recondite allusions, all meticulously researched. A common witticism about this novel, proudly repeated by Fuentes himself, was that one needed a fellowship to read it ("Aquellos" 101–02). This book brims with energy, and it requires it of the reader.

In any of these reincarnations Fuentes could have easily become an exhausted, unintentional parody of himself, but he never did. And, admirably, even when he moved on, he held on to his friends. He stayed loyal to people who did not rise to his level, which was almost everybody; he didn't discard early friends simply because they didn't reinvent themselves as he did—his friendship with Fernando Benítez lasted from the 1950s until Benítez died, in 2000; in his memoir he gives credit to a Chilean friend, Roberto Torretti, for cowriting his first novel (*Myself* 11).

Despite the radical reinventions, the core was consistent. First, Fuentes remained loyal to leftist-just-short-of-revolutionary politics. The well-documented break with Octavio Paz can be interpreted in many ways, but in my opinion it occurred for two reasons: because Mexico, they decided, wasn't big enough for two international figures vying for the Nobel Prize; and, more important, because Paz's politics crept toward libertarianism and away from Fuentes's classic Latin American left-of-center positions. Most likely the second became the excuse for the first.[2]

Fuentes's second, deepest fidelity throughout his long career, in many ways related to his impeccable physical appearance, was to the notion of youth, to its ideals and perspectives. One of his best-known early works is the gothic novella *Aura* (1962), a rearticulation of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*. In it the ancient widow-witch Consuelo is assisted by a mysterious and beautiful "niece," Aura, a conjuration of Consuelo's younger self. Consuelo has found a way of summoning Aura through a process that increasingly drains her own energies; each time Aura appears, she is slightly older than the previous incarnation. Like Consuelo, Fuentes reinvented himself

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with every generation. Youth was his strength, his being.

La muerte de Artemio Cruz, published when Fuentes was thirty-one, is remarkable for many reasons, one being its representation of an old man's physical sensation of death. This is a young man's bravura performance, defying old age to scare him, upstaging it by imagining old age precisely. In his own middle age, in the 1960s, Fuentes boasted that he was in great physical shape despite his lack of activity: "sin hacer un solo deporte, una sola actividad física salvo el amor" ("without practicing a single sport or any physical activity whatsoever except for making love"; Poniatowska 39).

Youthful energy became part of his ingrained image: the Argentine novelist César Aira (b. 1949) wrote a novel in 1997 in which a mad scientist plans to create an army of Carlos Fuentes clones to take over the world. And youth did not always return the favor: according to Raymond L. Williams, in the 1990s Fuentes advised the young Mexican *generación del crack* on how to become a generation like the Boom (Telephone interview). Jorge Volpi, its main figure, reciprocated in a book about the events of 1968—the year of Volpi's birth—by suggesting that Fuentes's relation to the political winds of the time was a stage-managed calculation (69).

The powers of aging are unstoppable. Naturally, Aura-like efforts to conjure lost youth are fated to weaken with each reinvention. They are perhaps the reason behind the most embarrassing blot in Fuentes's late career, when he was accused of plagiarizing the work of a much younger writer (Couto and Amezcua Maturano). Likewise, his later political writings in defense of the Zapatista rebellion and his anti-Bush screeds of the 2000s are sincere, heartfelt, and true Fuentes showmanship, but they feel pious and disconnected (*Contra Bush*). Fuentes eventually got tired, like Consuelo, as he had the right to do, but his exhaustion rubbed against his carefully crafted commitment to the perpetuity of youth. And, ultimately, his idealistic struggle to stay young forever is an admirable example of how not to forget.

Notes

1. This and all other unattributed translations are mine.

2. Enrique Krauze, Paz's handpicked successor, wrote a critique that in 1988 appeared simultaneously in Paz's magazine, *Vuelta*, and in the *New Republic*. Krauze, a noted historian, claimed that Fuentes manipulated history for his personal gain. For details about the rift between Paz and Fuentes, see Williams, *Writings* 42–43, and Paz's obituary in the *New York Times* (Kandell).

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