

Geocriticism and the exploration of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán in Carlos Fuentes' *Where the Air is Clear*

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ABSTRACT

Where the Air is Clear, or *La región más transparente* (1958) in its original version, is an urban fiction of Mexico City structured from a postcolonial perspective by Carlos Fuentes, one of Latin American Boom authors. This literary biography of 1950s Mexico's capital is portrayed with a double complexity. On one hand, the modern but chaotic space is presented through a narrative fragmentation composed of a "chorus" of inhabitants from different social classes and neighbourhoods. On the other, the author depicts a total image of the megacity by highlighting its historical particularity: Mexico City was constructed by Spaniards precisely above the ruins of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztecs. This article proposes a study of the Boom's classic text with a novel approach from a geographical focus. The methodology utilized is Bertrand Westphal's Geocriticism (2007) that aims to explore a space's fictionalization from a multidisciplinary approach, in this case, literature, history and geography, and with the use of cartographic representations. This analysis is, thus, "mapped" from the perspective of Ixca Cienfuegos, an indigenous character with supernatural powers who explores the space of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán through two key years: 1951—the Dystopia of Mexico City where modernity cohabitates with antiquity, and prosperity with poverty—and 1519—the Utopian past of Tenochtitlán before the landscape's transformation under Spanish colonization.

Keywords: Geocriticism; Mexico City-Tenochtitlán; Carlos Fuentes; *Where the Air is Clear*; representation

INTRODUCTION

Where the Air is Clear (*La región más transparente*, 1958) is the first novel written by Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012), one of the writers of the "Latin American Boom", and also the first Mexican urban novel in which Mexico City is portrayed not only as a background but also occupies the center of the narrative. This novel, considered to be a starting point of this renowned phenomenon by many critics, presents the chaotic situation in the capital during the presidency of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), when the capital experienced a drastic increase in its area, population, problems of inequality, and, in contrast with the title, polluted air. This novel's uniqueness derives from two important aspects. Firstly, Fuentes depicts a confusing collage of urban zones in Mexico City in the 1950s through a fragmented narrative, constructed by a cast of characters from diverse social classes and neighborhoods, or colonias. The storyline, thus, hops back and forth between stories from the rich and the impoverished and the present and the past. Secondly, the author achieves a portrayal of the capital through historical revision, focusing on two important periods of the city's metamorphoses: the 16th Century, when the lacustrine Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was transformed into the colonial Mexico City, and the 20th Century, when the capital experienced different phases of modernization during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz or El Porfiriato (1877-1880 and 1884-1911) and that of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952).

Where the Air is Clear is an urban fiction that can also be classified as a postcolonial novel. The complex representation of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán is developed through a “clash” of literary discourses on this urban space, considered as the Palimpsest of America: the Dystopia of Mexico City in 1951 from the perspective of its 80 inhabitants, and the Utopia of Tenochtitlán as portrayed by the Spanish Conquerors who first entered the city in 1519. These two contrastive images are connected by *Visión de Anáhuac (1519)*, published by Alfonso Reyes in 1915. This poetic essay serves as a model for Fuentes’ novel, as attested by its original title in Spanish, “La región más transparente”, or “the most transparent region”, which derives from the opening epigraph of *Visión de Anáhuac (1519)*.¹ In this work, Reyes reimagines the idealized Tenochtitlán from the perspective of the Spaniards who published the Aztec capital’s first representation in Spanish. It was an inexplicably fantastic city-island full of canals, situated in lake Texcoco in the Valley of Mexico, or “Anáhuac” in Náhuatl, where the divine symbol of the supreme god Huizilopochtli was most prominent: an eagle devouring a snake on a flourishing cactus. In this respect, Reyes cites the two most renowned chronicles on the Conquest of Mexico: *Letters from Mexico (Cartas de relación, 1522)* by Hernán Cortés, the Conqueror of the Aztec Empire, and *True History of the Conquest of New Spain (Historia verdadera de la Conquista de Nueva España, 1632)* by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier in Cortés’ expedition. *Letters from Mexico* is the first historical and literary representation of this native metropolis in Spanish. According to Víctor Manuel Amat Sanchis, this chronicle is the first European document to portray the city in America as a mythological land of wealth in the Renaissance tradition of “laudes civitatis” (2014, 44). Tenochtitlán was depicted as the “Venice of the New World” in the *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, the most popular Spanish chronicle on the Aztec capital written with the influence of the Chivalric Romance, especially *Amadis of Gaul (Amadís de Gaula, 1508)*.

Since the 1980s, there have been numerous studies written about *Where the Air is Clear*. Noteworthy focuses are, for example, the panoramic research on the novel’s main setting in 1951 with the contrastive images between the rich and the impoverished, and the modernity and the antiquity (Brody & Rossman 1982; Faris 1983; and Boldy 2002); those on the fictionalization of Mexico City based on the history of Mexico City and Aztec mythology (Delgado 2000 and Gaspar 2015); and also the comparative studies of Fuentes’ work with other Mexican contemporary novels on the capital (Puga 2008 and Tovar 2008). However, in recent years, some academic works have presented a new approach as a response to an increasing interest in geographic areas in literary works. They, thus, offer a survey focusing on the capital’s space, such as “Cronotopía en *La región más transparente* de Carlos Fuentes” (Buitrago de Muñoz and Segura 2007), a survey of Mexico City through Mijail Bajtin’s theory of literary chronotope, “El espacio de la Ciudad de México en *La región más transparente* (1958) de Carlos Fuentes” (Guzmán Díaz 2013), a descriptive survey of the megacity’s landscape sharply divided by different social classes, and “Mapas literarios en la narrativa completa de Carlos Fuentes: construcción de una identidad cultural mexicana y escritura de una obra desde la periferia” (Lámbarry & Eissa Osorio 2018), which analyzes Mexican urban spaces in all of Fuentes’s literary works by including maps to enable the reader to visualize some strategic points: the main settings, the dwelling places of the protagonists and those of the beginnings and the ends of such fiction.

“Geocriticism and the exploration of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán in Carlos Fuentes’ *Where the Air is Clear*” is inspired by the last group of research and proposes, as mentioned in the title, an exploration of Mexico City’s fictionalization in this Latin American Boom’s classic text with Bertrand Westphal’s Geocriticism (2007). This novel methodology aims to

¹ “Viajero: has llegado a la región más transparente del aire” (Traveller: you have arrived the most transparent region) was extracted from a *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811) by Alexander De Humboldt, a German naturalist who arrived in the Valley of Mexico in 1803 and observed the extraordinary sunlight’s reflection in a day of clear air.

analyze the literary representation of a particular space from an interdisciplinary approach: in this case, history, literature and, especially, geography. The survey, accompanied by newly elaborated maps, will be conducted through an interplay of three numbers —one, five and nine— in two key years —1951 and 1519— from the perspective of Ixca Cienfuegos. He is an indigenous character who has the ability to disclose, with his supernatural power, the “depth” of the capital. This complex space, thus, will be studied both from the horizontal dimension, through emblematic fragments of the modern cityscape, and the vertical dimension, through the contrastive portrayals of Mexico City in 1951 and Tenochtitlán in 1519.

GEOCRITICISM AND THE ANALYSIS OF A LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF A SPACE

The complex depiction of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán in *Where the Air is Clear* will be studied in this paper through Geocriticism, coined by Bertrand Westphal in *La Géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace* (2007). This methodology belongs to a so-called Spatial Turn in the Humanities area, especially literature, in response to the increasing interest in geography since the 20th Century. Geocriticism proposes to survey the literary representation of a space which is, according to Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991), a lived territory of human communities. This geographical area is located in diverse regions and different types of frontiers and is in dynamic relation to its inhabitants and temporal dimensions (Tally, 2013). This is where history, collective memory, and identity are shaped. Therefore, a space can be considered as a social and political construction (Westphal, 2013; Lukermann, 1964; Raban, 1998). This network of relationships is more challenging in areas that used to be European colonies, like Mexico City-Tenochtitlán, where the colonizers and the colonized cohabited for centuries and created a superposition of cultures and discourses.

Geocriticism and the Spatial Turn propose new ways of reading and writing that are defined as Literary Geography and Literary Cartography. The first term focuses on the object of study: be it a space in literary works or those where a space plays essential roles. The second one highlights the use of maps as an instrument for a study with a double function: to visualize the cartographic description and to open new perspectives, possibly unknown even to the characters themselves (Piatti, 2017). From the end of the 20th Century, there have been increasing studies of literature conducted together with maps, especially in European works. For example, *The Atlas of Literature* (1998) by Malcolm Bradbury presents panoramic relations between authors, geographic spaces and their representations; *The Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (199) by Franco Moretti integrates the detailed data of history and geography to analyze some specific topics, like the characters’ journeys, the diversities in big cities, the Nation-State consciousness and different kinds of frontiers; and the online project “Literary Atlas of Europe” of the Institute of Cartography and Geoinformation (ETH Zürich) uses cartographic technologies to visualize diverse geographic zones and make possible a comparative study in each topic.

The exploration of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán in this article is based on two geocritical concepts: “Referentiality” —the relationship between a “geospace”, or a referent, and its representations constructed through the author’s imagination— and “Spatiotemporality” —a complex connection between space and time that makes possible the perception of diverse temporalities in the same territory (Westphal, 2013, 137). Therefore, on the one hand, *Where the Air is Clear* will be analyzed through a clash between a “Homotopic Consensus”, a realistic image of Mexico City in 1951 from an “endogenous point of view”, or that of its inhabitants, and a “Utopian Excursus”, an idealized Tenochtitlán in 1519 from the “exogenous point of view”, or that of the Spanish Conquerors (Westphal, 2013, 102-108; 128-129). On the other

hand, the Palimpsest of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán will be examined from historical, mythical and cyclical dimensions.

In order to achieve a more comprehensive study of this subject, Geocriticism encourages a survey from diverse disciplines, both literary and not literary —geography, history, anthropology, sociology or architecture— and the possible interactions between them. The analysis of this multicultural space of the capital will be developed from a triple perspective: the history of this urban space, its literary representations and related geographical concepts, which include the use of maps. In this respect, four maps are elaborated for this study, ranging from a panoramic approach to a close-up focus: “Panorama of Mexico City portrayed in *Where the Air is Clear*”, “The Modern and Ancient Zones”, “The Contrary Routes of the Sacrificed and the Sacrificer” and “Ixca’s flight over Mexico City”.

THE LANDSCAPE OF MEXICO CITY-TENOCHTITLÁN IN *WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAR*

Where the Air is Clear is, according to Carlos Fuentes, a “biography” of Mexico City with all its “silhouettes” and “secrets” (Couffon, 1960): it is a landscape of contrasts between poverty and prosperity and, also, modernity and antiquity. Like a cartographer, the author invites the readers to explore the capital in the 1950s through three groups of areas, as can be seen in Figure 1, “Panorama of Mexico City portrayed in *Where the Air is Clear*”: the economic center of the country to the West, the residential zones comprising different social classes in diverse directions, and the Historic Center in the heart of the capital. The first area includes Paseo de la Reforma and Juárez Avenue where the emblematic skyscrapers dominate the landscape. In the residential zones, the neighborhoods or colonias are sharply segregated by the socio-economic status of their inhabitants: the zone of the Aristocracy or the Old Rich located in the center, that of the New Rich to the West and the South, and that of the impoverished group in the East. This last zone embraces the Historic Center, where indigenous and Spanish legacies superposed. This area was the spiritual and political center of Tenochtitlán and, later, that of Mexico City. The emblematic colonial architecture was constructed above the “forgotten” Aztec structures, razed to ground by the Conquerors. Therefore, the Aztec main —surrounded by the Great Pyramid, the most important sanctuary dedicated to Huizilopochtli, the Aztec’s supreme god, the emperor’s palace, and the central market— was replaced by the Constitution Square —or The Zócalo—, Catholic churches and governmental buildings. All the mentioned “fragments” of the capital can connect to each other thanks to three main streets: Paseo de la Reforma, an elegant boulevard constructed in the 19th Century having as its model the Champs-Élysées, Insurgentes Avenue, the longest street at the moment running from North to South connecting the New Rich’s residential zones with the city’s center, and Juárez Avenue that links the old center in The Zócalo with the modern one in Paseo de la Reforma.

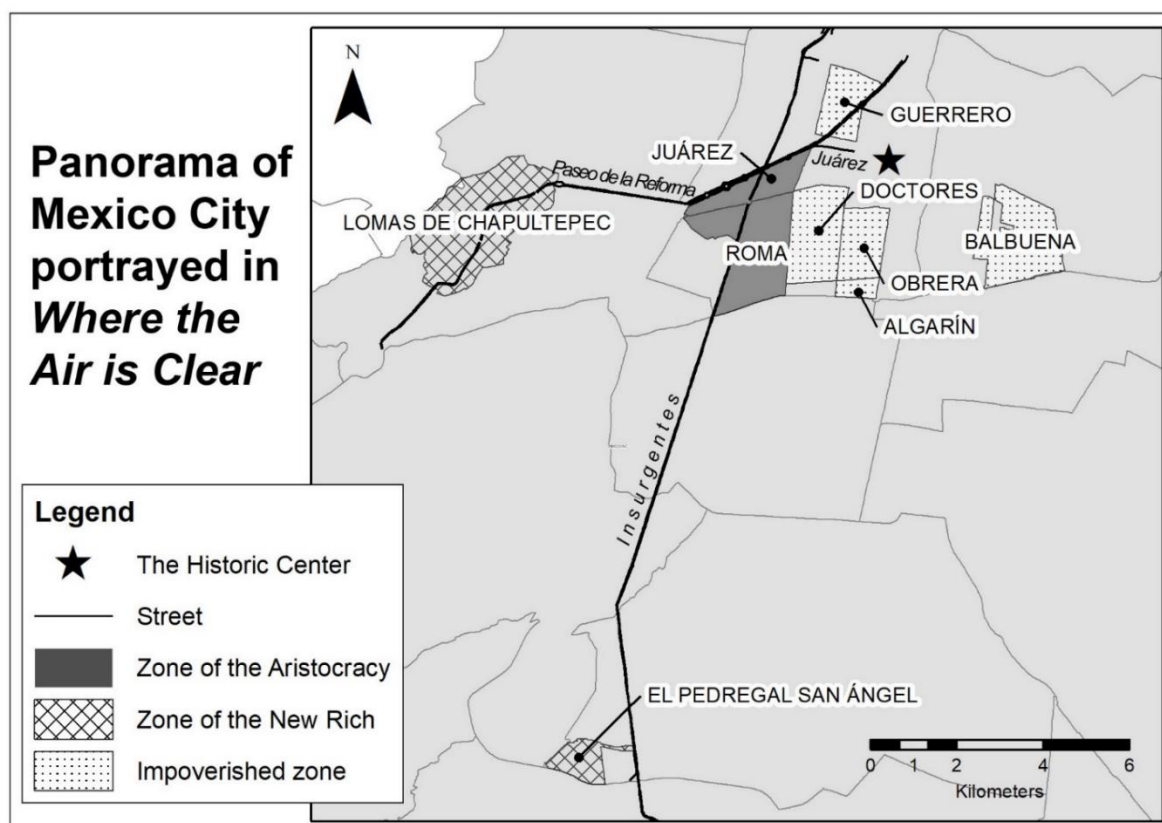


FIGURE 1. “Panorama of Mexico City portrayed in *Where the Air is Clear*”

During the government of Porfirio Díaz or El Porfiriato (1877-1880 and 1884-1911), The Zócalo area, the original center of the city since the Aztec era, began to show signs of decline as it became highly populated and increasingly dangerous. Consequently, a large number of the upper class relocated to live in the novel’s zone of the Aristocracy, where luxurious mansions were modelled on French design and architecture (Caistor, 2000, 28; Kandell, 1988, 387). The interval of almost forty years was the period of the Mexican Revolution (1911-1920) —ignited by El Porfiriato as the first important Latin American revolution in the 20th Century aiming to solve the problem of inequality— and the post-revolutionary governments that focused their attention on the country’s rural zones. Mexico City only recovered its importance with the government of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), whose extensive plans for Mexico City consequently destroyed its centuries-old pattern (Alexander, 2016, 93-94). The new economic center, Paseo de la Reforma and Juárez Avenue, was where the intense process of modernization could be observed. At the same time, thanks to a new network of transportation infrastructure, Mexico City experienced an extraordinary expansion of its territory in every direction. One of the most outstanding examples is the zone of the New Rich in this novel, constructed in the American style, specifically California or Long Island, for those who wanted to escape the contamination and chaos of the city center (Caistor, 2000, 28; Kandell, 1988, 387, 485-487).

However, the masterpiece projects for the capital’s modernization and beautification of these two presidents failed to include impoverished zones, abandoned areas that expanded significantly around The Zócalo in contrast with the genteel Europeanized and Americanized areas of the upper class that gradually moved to the West and the South of the city.

In *Where the Air is Clear*, what happened to the inhabitants of the zone of the Aristocracy is exemplified by Colonia Roma, the empire of the Zubarán, and Colonia Juárez,

that of the Ovando. During the term of El Porfiriato, these families enjoyed exclusive privileges thanks to their cordial relationship with the President and his government. However, all of them were subsequently faced with financial difficulty after the Mexican Revolution.

The zone of the New Rich in this novel comprises two luxurious colonias, Lomas de Chapultepec to the West and El Pedregal de San Ángel in the South. Two couples who live here are opportunists or social climbers who have succeeded in the new professions of Alemán's era. Rodrigo Pola from the Zubarán, a famous screenwriter of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1933-1964), and Pimpinela de Ovando all reside in El Pedregal de San Ángel. They exemplify the Old Rich families who managed to re-establish themselves in the 1950s. In contrast, Federico Robles, a purépecha farmer from Michoacán who rises in stature to become the capital's most successful banker, and Norma Larragoiti, a blonde mestiza from Coahuila, represent the people with indigenous blood from rural zones who are able to settle themselves in the highest positions of the capital's economy.

The last zone consists of the dangerous colonias surrounding The Zócalo: Guerrero, Balbuena, Doctores, Tránsito, Colonia Obrera and Algarín. This landscape is dominated by cheap cabarets, hotels, restaurants and slum dwellings. Balbuena is where the major characters in the story live: Rosa Morales, Norma's maid, Gabriel, an unemployed man, and Teódula Moctezuma, a mysterious shaman. All of these characters, with their indigenous blood, maintain different types of contacts with Robles and Norma, which highlight the problem of extreme disparity and inequality that exist in Mexico City.

In *Where the Air is Clear*, none of the characters from these three zones play an exclusive leading role as protagonists. Nevertheless, Fuentes has created "Ixca Cienfuegos", an indigenous inhabitant of Mexico City whose residential area is unknown, to be, paradoxically, a "guide" for the readers on their explorations through this labyrinthine space. He is, also, the key character who makes it possible to connect the modern capital in 1951 with its mythical origins of Tenochtitlán that dates back to 1519.

IXCA CIENFUEGOS AND THE SPACE OF MEXICO CITY-TENOCHTITLÁN

Born in Mexico City, Ixca Cienfuegos is Teódula's son. This indigenous character is the spiritual and geographical embodiment of the capital and, thus, represents the collective memory and the cultural identity of this space. According to José Manuel Guzmán Díaz, he is not a human being but is used to represent a superior state of consciousness and the essence of the city (2013, 167-168). His double personality corresponds to Fuentes' contrastive representation of the capital: modernity and antiquity. Ixca represents two typical characters of urban fiction who exist to uncover the "insecure" situation of the modern city. Firstly, he is what Walter Benjamin calls a "flâneur", a "stroller" who has an insightful perspective on the city as if he were its cartographer. He can "transgress" every kind of frontier, link the fragments of this urban collage, and understand its inhabitants by observing their experiences or listening to their confessions (1999). At the same time, he is a supernatural being who can transform a modern space into a haunted one (Sierra, 2019). Thanks to his "powers", imagined by Fuentes based on Aztec mythology, Ixca can "see" also all the secrets of Mexico City and its population. He is everywhere, however, no one knows who he is or where he lives. According to a character whose name is not mentioned:

That, dear Prince, is him. He himself. The one and only. Like God, he's everywhere, but no one ever sees him. In and out of government offices, society drawing rooms, the friend of magnates. He's said to be the brain behind a great banker. He's said to be a gigolo and a marijuana addict.
(Fuentes, 2015, p. 22)

Ixca Cienfuegos is the character who opens *Where the Air is Clear* with a long and complex monologue that presents a series of incoherent and contrastive images of the Dystopia of Mexico City in 1951, from Westphal's endogenous point of view, and the Utopian past of Tenochtitlán in 1519, from the exogenous point of view. It, thus, reveals the clear intertextuality between this novel and Reyes' *Visión de Anáhuac (1519)*. In his reflection, this metropolis is a "city witness to all we forget, a city of carnivorous walls, a city of motionless pain" where the inhabitants in every social class have to suffer various tragedies no different from the ancient sacrifices. As an ironic comment on the mythology of Tenochtitlán's foundation, Mexico City now is a "sumptuous villa" and "leper city" where only the "incandescent prickly pear" and an "eagle without wings" can be found (p. 5). For Ixca, Mexico City is not "where the air is clear" but a "crystal city with vapor and alkali frost" or a "city new upon sculptured dust" (p. 4). This character brings the first chapter to a close with a phrase that reemphasizes his satirical message in the novel: "And what are we going to do about it? Where the air is clear" (p. 5).

Ixca, much like an archaeologist, has the predominant mission to unearth the "depth" of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán and, thus, to connect the modern present and the forgotten past. His two emblematic conversations with other indigenous characters in the center of the city reveal singular characteristics of this urban space that embody the geocritical concept of Spatiotemporality: one with Robles in the modern zone and another with Teóduła in the ancient one. As illustrated in Figure 2, "The Modern and Ancient Zones", two contrastive spaces, are located precisely opposite to each other. The first one is situated in Paseo de la Reforma, the emblematic boulevard with 1950s skyscrapers. The second one, in contrast, takes place in the Historic Center where the European buildings are superimposed upon the indigenous structures: the Emperor's Palace being replaced by the National Palace or the government office, The Zócalo being rebuilt above the Aztec's main square and the Cathedral being situated less than 1 kilometer to the West of the Great Pyramid, which remained undiscovered until 1978, or 20 years after the publication of *Where the Air is Clear*. However, Ixca eradicates the superficial difference between them with his divine intervention and the Aztec legacies, buried beneath the city since the Spanish Conquest, start to revendicate their "forgotten" existence.

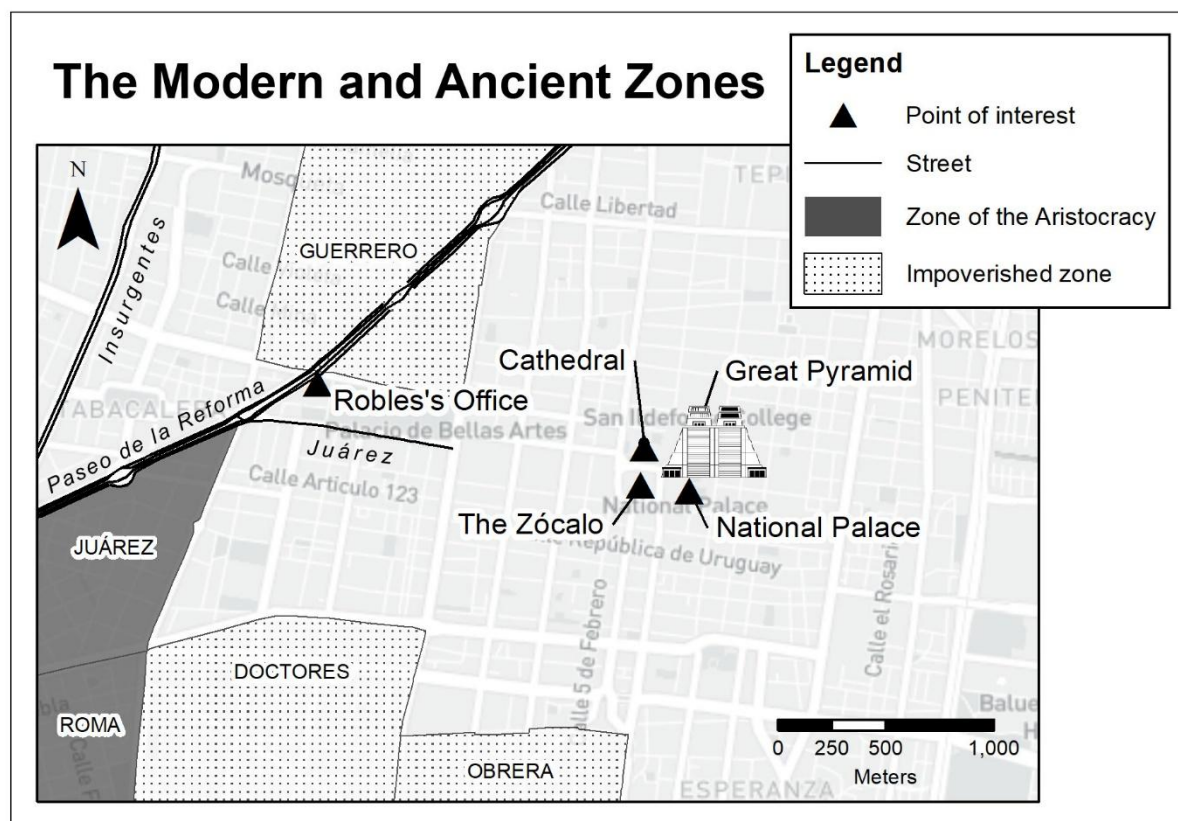


FIGURE 2. “The Modern and Ancient Zones”

The first conversation occurs in Robles’ penthouse on the 9th floor of a luxurious building in Paseo de la Reforma. The “highest point” of Mexico City in 1951, situated in the modern zone in the West of the Figure 2, is where Robles and Ixca, his supposed counsellor, have a long conversation presented as fragments inserted in different parts of the novel. This scene recalls the conversation in 1519, documented in Díaz del Castillo’s *True History of the Conquest of Mexico*, between Emperor Moctezuma, the Conquered, and Hernán Cortés, the Conqueror, precisely at the top of the Great Pyramid, the “highest point” of Tenochtitlán “invisibly” situated in the ancient zone in the East (2005). However, this is different from the spectacular lacustrine city in the perspective of the Spaniards where people travelled around via its network of canals. Before Robles and Ixca, as can be seen in Figure 2, the scenery was an “unsteady city’s pastiche” (Fuentes, 2015, p. 39): a “confusing” combination of the zone of modernity in Paseo de la Reforma and Juárez Avenue, the zone of the Aristocracy like Colonia Roma and Colonia Juárez, and the impoverished zones like Colonia Guerrero, Colonia Doctores and Colonia Obrera. Moreover, this panoramic view of Mexico City in *Where the Air is Clear* is, paradoxically, contaminated with “a whirlwind of dust collected in its brown atoms” at the mountain’s foot in the Valley of Mexico” (p. 40).

Both Robles and Ixca are indigenous people; however, they present opposing points of view on Mexico and its capital city. From the height of the modern building, these two characters offer their contrastive “vertical” perspectives. While Robles’ point of view is expressed from his privileged economic position that marginalizes the impoverished people that he used to belong to, Ixca’s discourse is postcolonial and anti-Alemán that considers the indigenous legacy as the most essential basis of Mexicanismo.

Fuentes has created Robles from an amalgamation of the biographies of the two presidents whose cyclical policies provide the structure of this novel: Díaz, an indigenous

farmer from Michoacán who became the most powerful figure in Mexico, and Alemán, the “businessman president” who gained his wealth from his policies on the capital’s expansion. This banker confesses to Ixca, consequent to the latter’s exercise of magical power, that he has already forgotten his life in the past as a poor purépecha farmer from Michoacán and only looks to the future of the modernized country. For this character, there are “two worlds: clouds and excrement” (Fuentes, 2015, p. 192). He is very proud of his successful career, starting after his accidental participation in the battle of Celaya, Guanajuato State, in 1915, the same year of the publication of *Visión de Anáhuac (1519)*. This important turning point of the Mexican Revolution has given the purépecha farmer “useful” opportunities and, later, a series of tricky businesses which “inverted” his life. According to Robles, “In Mexico no one is more admired than a perfect son of a bitch” (p. 88).

In contrast, the portrayal of modern Mexico City from Ixca’s perspective only serves to reflect his nostalgia for Tenochtitlán. He looks towards Juárez Avenue and experiences a flashback from the “present” in 1951 through different periods of Mexican history until the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519, which resulted in the defeat of the Aztecs. For Ixca, since that moment, the sacred space has been eclipsed and Mexico City has become a space for the superimposition of two cultures, the dominant and the dominated: “there have been two symbols, that of the beginning and that of destiny, both planted on the same Avenida, whether it is water street or pavement; from Yei Calli to 1951. Always two, the impeached Eagle, the nocturnal sun.” (p. 210)

Ixca’s role in defense of the Aztec roots of Mexico City is more evident in his second conversation with his mother, Teódula Moctezuma, in the Historic Center. This area is presented as the capital’s center of supernatural powers much like in Fuentes’ other literary works: *The Masked Days* (Los días enmascarados, 1954), *Aura* (1962), *Our land* (Terra Nostra, 1975), *The Hydra Head* (La Cabeza de la Hidra, 1978) or *Burnt Water* (Agua quemada, 1983) (Lámbarry & Eissa Osorio, 2018). Ixca and Teódula have arranged to meet in the Cathedral, first built as a modest church by Cortés in 1524 on top of the ruins of the Sun God’s temple and continuously reconstructed until 1813 to emerge as the biggest Cathedral in the Americas (Caistor, 2000, pp. 45-53). These two characters are guardians of indigenous legacies. Teódula believes that all the gods still preside over the underground ruins, waiting for their moment to be resurrected. In this emblematic place of the superposition between Spanish and Aztec beliefs, Teódula asks Ixca to find victims for ancient human sacrifices.

From this moment, Ixca starts his “hunt”, a mission that he accomplishes on September 15, 1951, or 15/09/1951, the eve of Independence Day, which, paradoxically, never brought about any real liberation for the indigenous people subjugated to poverty. On this date, five people are “sacrificed” in different ways, including Robles and Norma, in their case as a supposed form of punishment for being traitors to their own identity. While Robles becomes bankrupt, Norma dies in a strange accidental fire similar to an ancient ritual. As can be seen in Figure 3, “The Contrary Routes of the Sacrificed and the Sacrificer”, both cases represent the inverse routes from Loma de Chapultepec, the richest zone in the West, to Balbuena, the poorest one in the East, of the inhabitants of these contrastive colonias who are supposedly involved in the ancient “sacrifices” in a modern space.

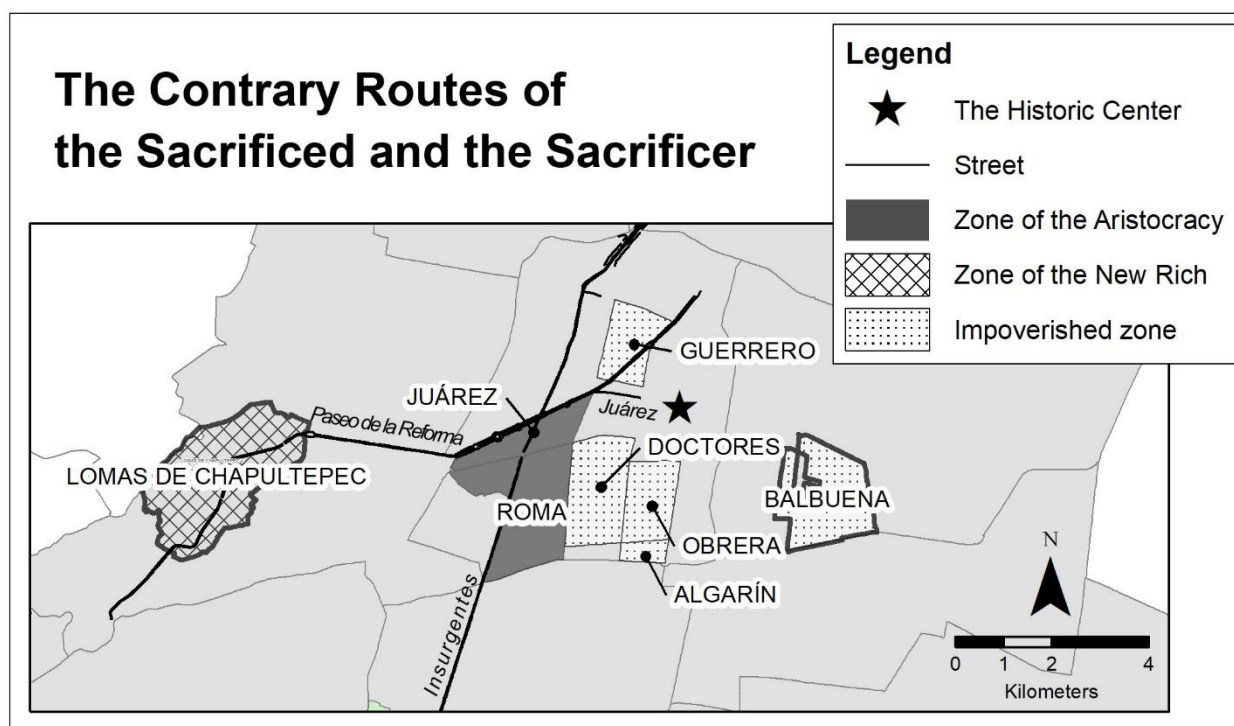


FIGURE 3. "The Contrary Routes of the Sacrificed and the Sacrificer"

Amidst the festive ambiance in The Zócalo, in preparation for Independence Day, this couple receive the worst of news possible: the bankruptcy of Robles. In the chapter "The Eagle fallen", Robles, after realizing his fate, starts to wander the cityscape. He travels from his office in Paseo de la Reforma to his mansion in Colonia Lomas de Chapultepec only to discover that Norma refuses to help him with her jewelry and is prepared to escape alone. Robles furiously abandons this luxurious residential zone located in the West of the city, crosses important main streets and walks desperately towards the unknown impoverished zone in the East. Along this route he perceives big changes in the cityscape. In this chapter, Fuentes uses the mythology of Tenochtitlán's foundation to portray Robles' declining period: he is like a great eagle that has become a snake slithering through the most hidden corners of the slums:

Unpainted walls closed him in. Light and telephone posts formed an impenetrable forest of wire (...). A straight street where the toneless pavement color was also the color of walls and sky (...). The smells of steam and trolley wheels, escaping gas, flowers being carried to market, damp urine against walls, wrapped in a transparent weightless air. Streets had neither name nor face. They rolled and twisted beneath his steps like a gray serpent. (Fuentes, 2015, p. 337)

The climax of this scene occurs in Colonia Balbuena when Robles arrives at Gabriel's funeral. The latter has died in an absurd fight in a bar on the same day as the announcement of Robles' misfortune. Everybody in that house thinks that Robles, in his old and dirty clothes, is Gabriel's friend and they invite him to enter. A big difference between the unemployed and the billionaire is dissolved. The banker is now part of the "losers" he has never wanted to mingle with.

On the other hand, after Robles leaves Norma alone, the mansion is mysteriously set on fire and she is burned to death inside together with her jewelry which she had refused to give to Robles. Teódula "senses" that her son has accomplished his promised mission. In this case, Ixca acts like an ancient priest who has maintained the cycle of the world through human

sacrifice, as indicated in his names: “Ixca” meaning “to burn” in Náhuatl and “Cienfuegos” meaning a “hundred fires” in Spanish (Delgado, 2000, 169). Teódula, thus, travels by local bus from Balbuena to Lomas de Chapultepec, the opposite route to that which Robles took to Gabriel’s house in the chapter entitled “Eagle falls”. When she arrives at Robles’ mansion, she secretly celebrates by organizing her own ceremony, throwing all her ritual jewelry collected throughout her life into the fire and pointing her finger at the rising Sun as a sign of the beginning of a new cycle. This scene reveals the close relationship of this sacrifice in a modern space to the Sun God who still “resides” in the ruins beneath the Cathedral where Teódula and Ixca meet. Following the incident, Robles disappears from the capital. According to some rumors, to close his life’s cycle, he moves to the North and becomes a farmer, the same occupation he had more than forty years before.

Where the Air is Clear ends with a scene that occurs three years later, in 1954. After having completed his secret mission, Ixca integrates his divine dimension into the celestial area of the capital’s territory. His sacred state, which links him intimately with Mexico City, reflects the Aztec mythology of Tenochtitlán’s foundation. When Ixca arrives alone at the Convent of Carmen, he flies with his transparent hybrid body of a mythical eagle and snake, and soars above the megapolis. His umbilical cord bonds with The Zócalo, the city’s spiritual center, and his figure marks the territory of Mexico City in the 1950s. As shown in Figure 4, “Ixca’s Flight over Mexico City”, his left elbow is above Copilco; his right elbow, the monument of Los Indios Verdes; his left leg, El Peñón de los Baños and his right leg, the bull ring Cuatro Caminos (Fuentes, 2015, pp. 359-360).

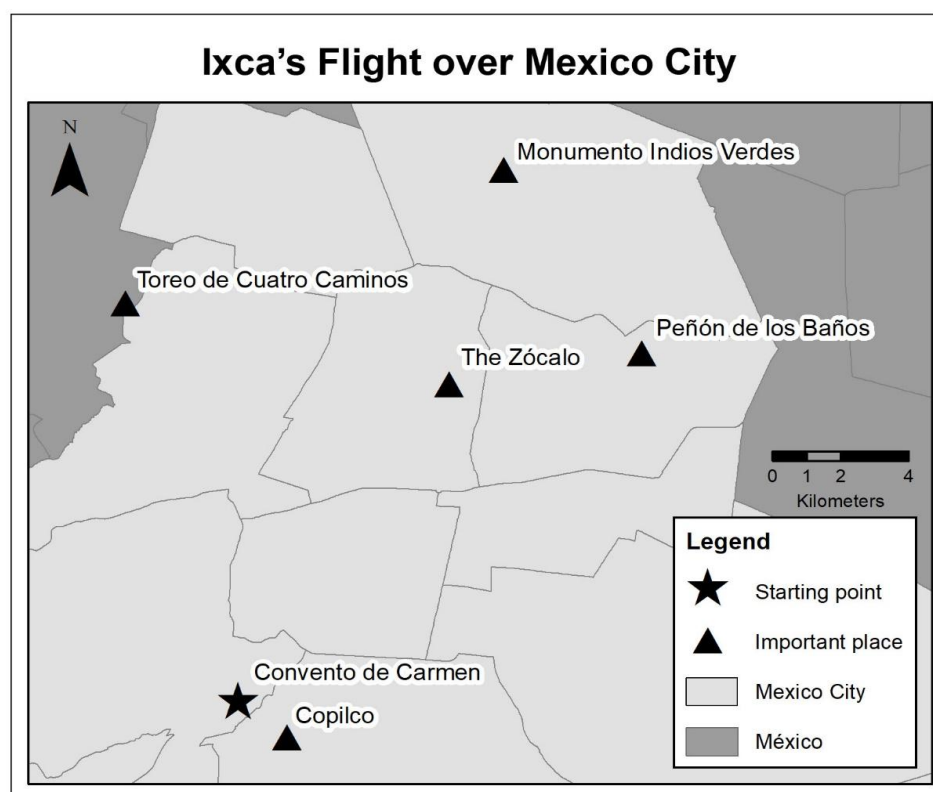


FIGURE 4. “Ixca’s flight over Mexico City”

CONCLUSION

This article studies the portrayal of Mexico City-Tenochtitlán in Carlos Fuentes' *Where the Air is Clear* through the lens of Geocriticism. This methodology proposes a novel perspective on the survey of literature with regard to geography. It analyzes the literary representation of a geospace, an area in deep relations with human communities and historical time, especially complex ones which used to be European colonies, like that in Fuentes's novel. Therefore, Geocriticism encourages an exploration through diverse disciplines, which present coherent or contrastive treatments to achieve the space's global analysis, and the use of maps, characteristic instruments of geography to visualize the result of the study.

Where the Air is Clear is analyzed, primarily, through a triple approach: geography, history and literature. This novel's main setting is Mexico's capital in the 1950s during the process of modernization that significantly modified the cityscape and, thus, revealed its particular characteristics: that modernity coexists intrinsically with antiquity, and prosperity with poverty. Thus, in this research, the city's history is explored, especially that of its radical transformation from Tenochtitlán to Mexico City during the Spanish colonization in the 16th Century and its extraordinary expansion during the 20th Century. In parallel, its literary representations in works that portrayed the conquerors' impression on the Aztec capital are studied comparatively with Fuentes' novel. In addition, the textual analysis of *Where the Air is Clear* is accompanied by four maps that are newly elaborated in this research, ranging from a panoramic overview to a closed-up approach. Superficially, all of them seem to illustrate 1951 Mexico City's scenery in the novel's main setting. However, these maps represent both an interaction between three mentioned disciplines of the studies on the capital —geography, history and literature— and a confrontation-communication between the most conflictive zones: the modern Paseo de la Reforma and Juárez Avenue and the Historic Center, and the prosperous Colonia Loma de Chapultepec and the impoverished Colonia Balbuena.

In conclusion, Geocriticism is an innovative methodology that provides the researchers new concepts and instruments to analyze a literary work, in which a geographical space is not only a background but plays an important role in the storyline. In this way, the complex geospace portrayed in *Where the Air is Clear* can be explored on a profound level, both in the horizontal direction through the actual chaotic panorama and in the vertical direction that reveals the depth of this urban space that can trace back to its history, collective memory, mythology and other processes of the social construction.

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