



Latin American Literary Review

VOLUME 48 / NUMBER 96 • *Border environments special issue* • SUMMER 2021

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS: Anindita Banerjee, Gail Bulman, Beth Jorgensen, and Oscar A. Pérez

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Border Environments: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT: “Border Environments” is deeply informed by a rich body of recent studies, which has not only exposed the overlaps between geopolitics, biopolitics, and ecopolitics of migration but also laid open the concept of borders themselves as sites in which political economy and political ecology collide, intersect, and shape each other. Over the course of a global pandemic that simultaneously upended all notions of border control and continues to have a devastatingly disproportionate effect on migrant populations and border communities not just in the Americas but across the world, “Border Environments” coalesced into a multidisciplinary, multilocal, and multidimensional investigation of the space, place, and concept conspicuously and persistently absent from existing macrostructural analyses of climate change and migration: the border itself. Each contributor engages in rich, site-specific explorations of borders as interfaces; the scope of their work extends far beyond the southern border of the United States. Iconologies, narratives, aesthetic forms and performative practices examined in this issue put the heterogeneous landscapes of Latin America in generative dialogue with other distant and proximate, intra- and inter-national border environments: the Marcellus Shale that connects New York and Pennsylvania, the Gangetic delta straddling India and Bangladesh, the sandy straits of the South China Sea.

KEYWORDS: Border, environment, migration, geopolitics, biopolitics, ecopolitics.

On August 3, 2019, a man drove more than two hundred miles across Texas to the border town of El Paso with the express purpose of “killing some Mexicans” (Attanasio). Preceded by Charleston in 2015, Charlottesville in 2017, Pittsburgh in 2018, and Christchurch, New Zealand, just four months earlier in March 2019, the shooting spree that left twenty-three dead and an equal number grievously wounded in the parking lot of a Walmart near a pedestrian bridge spanning the US-Mexico border seemed numbingly familiar amid the accelerating paroxysms of deadly violence perpetrated by individuals against immigrant and minority communities across the United States and around the world. It was not the *modus operandi* of the perpetrator, however—a paradigmatic example of what sociologist Cynthia Miller-Idriss has termed “post-organizational extremism,” fueled and sustained by dispersed on- and offline communities rather than unified ideologies or hierarchical chains of command—but its rationale that made this particular act a paradoxically powerful point of departure for launching the project we came to call “Border Environments” in the fall of 2019.

Tellingly titled *An Inconvenient Truth*, the manifesto circulated online in anticipation of the massacre appropriated not only the title but also the dire warnings about global warming, toxic pollution, and species extinction, subsequently shorthanded as climate change, that Al Gore voiced in a landmark documentary released in 2006. The coincidence attracted no attention from journalists and scholars at the time and remains unmentioned in recent recollections of the event in the wake of the Capitol insurrection and the

Atlanta killings in January and March of this year. Yet despite the repugnant genocidal solution of “ecofascism”—advocated both by the El Paso shooter and his predecessor in Christchurch (Anson)—the foundational premise of the manifesto revealed a striking convergence with a growing consensus among scholars, policymakers, journalists, and activists over the last decade.

Long studied as a purely human phenomenon predicated on political, economic, and socio-cultural indices, migration is increasingly viewed in conjunction with the rapidly accelerating degradation of the planet’s geo-bio-physical systems. As the figure of the “climate refugee” leaves the realm of neologisms to enter the mainstream vocabulary of demographic displacement in both local and global contexts (Lustgarten), this emerging research has illuminated the ways in which climate change inextricably affects human flows, both as an accretive agent of slow violence as Rob Nixon famously put it and in the form of increasingly frequent and more devastating natural disasters (Garcia).

While the Pentagon in 2010 identified climate change as a comprehensive national security threat (Gjeltzen), its unequal impacts on current and prospective migrants have become the cynosure of a rich body of data-driven work by social scientists and legal scholars (“Climate Change, Displacement and Labour Migration”). Historians, meanwhile, have not only expanded the scale and scope of studying climate aberrations on migration across national territories and communities, but also illuminated that the epistemic armature of the El Paso manifesto was hardly unprecedented: environ-

mental conservation and ecological restoration have long served as weapons of political violence against geographic and ethno-racial others in North America (Hultgren; Anson).

The incendiary prospect of literally walling Mexico off from the United States in the Trump era has made the border itself a newly visible zone for reframing migration in socio-environmental terms. In addition to a symbolic and corporeal repository of state sovereignty, enforced through material infrastructures of security, surveillance, and incarceration, the built environments of the border brought public attention to bear on yet another nexus of human and non-human entanglements that was formerly relegated to a select subset of biologists, geologists, farmers, and conservationists. "Nature is fluid; walls are not," warned the geographer Margaret Wild in the *Scientific American*, highlighting the ways in which human flows were deeply embedded in the multispecies movements of ocelots and elf owls, butterflies and flood plains, riparian forests and grazing horses.

"Border Environments" is deeply informed by this rich body of recent studies, which has not only exposed the overlaps between geopolitics, biopolitics, and ecopolitics of migration but also laid open the concept of borders themselves as sites in which political economy and political ecology collide, intersect, and shape each other. But it is the inextricably twinned dystopian visions hypostasized by El Paso and the Wall that ultimately served to focalize our collaborative project. Over the course of a global pandemic that simultaneously upended all notions of border control and continues to have a devastatingly disproportionate effect on migrant populations and border communities not just in the Americas but across the world, "Border Environments" coalesced into a multidisciplinary, multilocal, and multidimensional investigation of the space, place, and concept that was conspicuously and persistently absent from the macrostructural analyses of climate change and migration. This missing link was the border itself, not as an object of study or a source of data, but as a vibrant confluence of the two key terms in our title.

By zooming in on the border as *oikos*, the etymological glue between economy and ecology whose roots lie in the places and practices of everyday life, that "Border Environments" ventures out

into the terrain where metaphors rub up against materiality and data turns into stories and images imbued with the power of death and life. Environments, concomitantly, do not merely signify non-human objects or multispecies differences. Taken together, the two terms rethink borders not in abstract terms of environmental and human objects of study, but rather as lived, embodied, and agential *interfaces* of flesh and place.

Even as each contributor engages in rich, site-specific explorations of such interfaces, the scope of their work extends far beyond the southern border of the United States. Iconologies, narratives, aesthetic forms and performative practices examined in this issue put the heterogeneous landscapes of Latin America in generative dialogue with other distant and proximate, intra- and inter-national border environments: the Marcellus Shale that connects New York and Pennsylvania, the Gangetic delta straddling India and Bangladesh, the sandy straits of the South China Sea.

We wish to thank the Central New York Corridor Initiative, funded by the Mellon Foundation, for providing the seed resources for bringing together the diverse collective represented in this issue, and for the collaboration of Gail Bulman (Syracuse University), Oscar Pérez Hernández (Skidmore College), and Beth Jorgensen (University of Rochester) as project co-coordinators along with Debra Castillo and myself. These earlier stages of the research collaboration represented here may be found in the archives of an online symposium convened between September and December of 2020, www.borderenvironments.com, and in an event series of the same name between January and April 2021 whose recordings may be accessed at the web site of the Latin American Studies Program at Cornell University. We wish to thank Matias Borg Oviedo for creating and managing the aforementioned symposium archive, and the staff at the Latin American Studies Program who helped coordinate and record the spring 2021 events, especially Bill Phelan. Our gratitude also goes to the marvelously engaged students of the advanced seminar "Border Environments," taught collaboratively by Debra Castillo and myself at Cornell in 2019 and 2021. Some of their professional work, as well as that of several guest speakers in these seminars, appears in this issue.

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Becoming Seres Puentes: Teresa Leal, the Toxic Tour, and Five Decades of Capacity-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines capacity building on the U.S. - Mexico Border by indigenous, Latino/a/x and People of Color activists working for social and environmental justice, from the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The essay begins with a description of a toxic tour offered at the 1999 American Society of Environmental Historians (ASEH) Annual Conference and ends with insights gathered in a panel discussion with Teresa Leal (Opata) at the 2011 ASEH twelve years later. The essay focuses on Leal's five-decade legacy of empowering women, her community, her fellow activists, and her academic colleagues to 'become seres puentes or bridge-beings' who work for equity and intergenerational justice by engaging in performative collective actions such as the toxic tour.

KEYWORDS: environmental justice, toxic tour, U.S. - Mexico border, performative collective action, intergenerational justice

On April 29, 2016, Teresa Leal, a beloved, social and environmental justice activist, took part in a "Border Seder," or lunch beginning the Jewish Passover holiday, performed on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. She seemed as vibrant as ever, but it was the last time that people in Nogales—a city that stretches on both sides of the border from the states of Arizona in the United States to Sonora in Mexico—would see her in public. A few days later, she unexpectedly passed away of natural causes (Boran).¹

According to her friend and fellow activist Richard Boran, Leal chose to participate in the Seder on the Mexican side of *Ambos Nogales*, which means "both Nogales" in Spanish. Most residents see their community not as separate municipalities, but as a home to indigenous peoples who inhabited it long before two modern nations divided it. Leal sat only inches from the steel barrier for the Seder organized by the Border Patrol Victims Network. She sat with the family of sixteen-year-old José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, who was shot ten times in the back by a Border Patrol agent for throwing rocks in 2012. Their seats were close to the exact place he lost his life. The Passover ceremony, which invokes a longing for freedom, called upon Nogales community members and the world to reflect on the suffering caused by the border wall. The tables suggested sitting down for dialogue about actions that might ensure justice for the next generation.

As Boran writes in a celebration of life published on the Border Patrol Victims Network blog, "The impact of Teresa's life transcended the border." She had witnessed what was an "imaginary line in the sand" when she was a young girl become a political divide enforced by a 14-foot-high steel fence (Boran). Although she may not have been as internationally recognized as the Kenyan Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement (2003) or the American activist Grace Lee Boggs (2012), she was as dedicated to

achieving social and environmental justice as they. Leal sought to make the often imperceptible, yet material impacts of catastrophic environmental change (and its connections to the steel fence and to the steady stream of migrants coming from the South) visible to people living on the border and beyond. She worked from her early teens for border health, native and women's rights, the environment, and immigration justice.

Leal was born in Navajoa, Sonora, Mexico in 1946. Her grandparents were descendants of the Opata and Mayo indigenous peoples who, before contact with the Spanish and the introduction of European diseases, were the most numerous inhabitants of Sonora, living in the river valleys between the Tumacácori, Parajito, and Santa Cruz Mountains nestled around Nogales, which was known as the "place where the black walnut trees grow."² The Opata were "story keepers," Leal would often say in presentations to community or academic audiences. They were renowned for remembering and recounting the stories and traditions of the indigenous groups living in the Sonoran region.³ Over her lifetime, Leal felt responsible for telling the stories of Sonoran Desert inhabitants, human and nonhuman, on both sides of the border.

Because she crossed the border so frequently with her mother who worked as a housekeeper on the U.S. side, she was already speaking fluent English and Spanish by the time she was three years old. Her language skills, her Opata relationship to "story-keeping," and later, her permanent resident green card, would become powerful tools in what she called her toolbox of strategies for achieving a lasting social and environmental justice for Ambos Nogales and the greater Sonoran Desert region.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, she was witness to the Mexican side of Ambos Nogales exploding into a city of 350,000 that became home to over 100 *maquiladoras*, or foreign-owned assembly

plants (Di Chiro "Living" 116). The exponential proliferation of these factories, especially after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, led to a steadily growing flow of migrants from the interior of Mexico and other Latin American countries into Nogales. In the first few months after taking their jobs, they were usually homeless. Building on her experiences in the 1960s working with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union (UFWU), and specifically her work educating women in the fields about the dangers of toxins,⁴ Leal recognized the need to go beyond witnessing of injustices to taking action.⁵ With women working in the maquilas, she co-organized Comadres (co-mothers), whose primary goal was to empower women to stand up for their rights and exchange information about the chemical toxicity of the materials they were handling in the workplace; Comadres also worked to locate places for workers to build homes, gain access to potable water, and develop "income-generating strategies, such as weaving and sewing co-ops, to supplement their poverty-level wages" (Di Chiro "Living," 118).

In what follows, I focus on the ground-shifting work of Comadres from 1999 to 2011, with an eye towards the use of the "toxic tour" to build an activist and academic network throughout the region. As cultural geographer and environmental justice scholar Giovanna Di Chiro explains in an article more detailed than I have space for here, toxic tours deliberately play with notions of tourism and ecotourism ("Bearing" 277-279). By the 1990s, these tours had become an educational and political tool offering community organizations a way to tell their stories by offering "brief snapshots into the lived realities of people struggling with the devastation of toxic pollution" while also inviting "tourists" to see some of the more positive features of the community (Di Chiro "Bearing" 291). This essay begins with a description of a toxic tour taken by Giovanna Di Chiro at the 1999 American Society of Environmental Historians (ASEH) Annual Conference where she met Teresa Leal. I then briefly describe a "mini-toxic-tour" offered to Di Chiro and myself in 2000, and end with some of the insights gathered in a panel discussion with Teresa Leal at the 2011. The essay looks back at Leal's five-decade-legacy of empowering women, her community, her fellow activists, and her academic colleagues to "become *seres puentes*, 'bridge-beings'" who work for equity and intergenerational justice by engaging in performative collective actions, such as the toxic tour and the Border Seder.⁶

Coalitional Activism, Environmental Justice Critical Studies, and a Training

Like other environmental justice organizations in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, Leal and her Comadres began leading "toxic tours" for city and state officials, church councils, Environmental Protection Agency officials, and others. As Giovanna Di Chiro explains in "Bearing Witness or Taking Action? Toxic Tourism

and Environmental Justice" (2000), these tours were a kind of performance piece involving "tourists" in a work of cultural production that could creatively contradict notions of what was becoming known popularly in the 1980s and 90s as "the ecotour" ("Bearing" 277-279). The notion of a "toxic tour" plays with the conception of an ecotour, which take tourists to a threatened ecosystem to help preserve and conserve wild species. The toxic tour, in contrast, would take tourists to the places and neighborhoods where groups of people are burdened inequitably with the toxic byproducts of industrial society. When she wrote this essay, Di Chiro was no stranger to the toxic tour. She had already participated in several. In 1999, she had been on the plush, air-conditioned bus that transported a group of academics attending the ASEH Annual Conference in Tucson, Arizona, on an "environmental justice" toxic tour. Led by Nogales Comadre Teresa Leal and her fellow Tucsonans for a Clean Environment activists Rose Augustine and Anne Montaña, the tour traveled first to downtown Tucson Barrio El Agujero and the Connie Chambers Public Housing Project—both neighborhoods that were dealing with toxic assaults from nearby polluting facilities. The group then traveled to Nogales. Speaking in clear, commanding voices into the bus's P.A. system, recalls Di Chiro, Leal, Augustine and Montaña recounted painful stories and appalling statistics of unusually high incidences of neurological disease, miscarriage, and birth defects suffered by the low-income, indigenous, and Latino residents of these two sister communities. This ASEH tour was among the first offered by Comadres to members of an academic organization. Going forward, they would also offer tours for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the American Studies Association (ASA).

One year before Di Chiro's ASEH tour, in 1998, I met Teresa Leal at an Environmental Justice community training in Tucson, Arizona. I was finishing *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism* (2001), a book that would become the first ecocritical study of the environmental justice (EJ) movement and an emerging canon I called 'the literature of environmental justice' (129-130). I was researching the ways that novelists were beginning to fictionalize the work of environmental justice activists and represent an emerging movement that was building on the activism of Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, Feminist, and People of Color groups who were building on the shoulders of their Abolitionist, women's suffrage, Civil Rights and Farm Worker movement forebears (Adams *American Indian Literature*, 47, 29). I wanted to better understand the fictional environmental justice characters I was reading about in novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993).

Castillo, for instance, does not specifically call her fictional characters' actions "environmental justice activism." However, on her acknowledgement page, she thanks members of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). This real-world environmental justice group seeks to empower New Mexican communities to realize racial and gender equality and social and economic justice.⁷ In

the early 90s, SWOP aimed to educate community members about the role that multinational corporations were playing in undermining the sovereignty and health of indigenous and Latino/a/x communities. They organized educational initiatives aimed at building community capacity to protect local cultures, lifeways, and ecological systems from outside political forces exerted by high-tech and extraction-type industries. There are clear connections in the novel to the issues and organizing activities of SWOP—and to similar issues around which Comadres in Nogales were organizing. Sofia, the main female character is mother to four daughters, and decides to run for mayor and organize a group of comadres that will work on behalf of her impoverished New Mexican community. Sophia and her fictional comadres are not only providing their community with opportunities for education; they are raising questions about the toxic contamination caused by the “high-tech” industries located in nearby urban areas where their children are moving to take jobs and escape the high unemployment in their own communities. The concern over toxins links Castillo’s fictional comadres to the real-world efforts of the Comadres organization to assist maquila workers, who are mostly poor women of indigenous and Latino/a/x decent. Castillo depicts labor exploitation and toxic contamination when one of Sophia’s daughters, Fe, takes a job in a factory where she is exposed to chemicals used in the process of building weapons for the Pentagon. Shortly thereafter, Fe miscarries a baby, and her family begins smelling chemicals on her breath. Her ghastly death clearly alludes to the kind of chemical handling and dumping which workers employed by multinational industrial plants are routinely required to perform.

At the training in Tucson, I will never forget the electrifying energy Leal exuded in her presentation on the fight against toxins, but also how clear it was that Ana Castillo was inspired by the women of Comadres, SWOP, and also the cohosts of the training, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment (TCE). Historically, this grassroots group has been one of the very few environmental justice groups to win a lawsuit against a multinational corporation. TCE sued Hughes Aircraft Company on behalf of hundreds of mostly Latino/a/x and indigenous Southside Tucson residents who had been exposed to trichloroethylene-contaminated water. Trichloroethylene, an industrial solvent used to clean aircraft parts, had been dumped into the area’s sewage system by Hughes from the late 1940s. By the 1980s, this chemical had seeped into the aquifer from which drinking water was drawn and triggered massive illnesses, including cancer, lupus, central nervous disorders, and birth defects. In June 1991, they won their case, with Hughes settling out of court for \$84.5 million dollars, a sum that the community used to fund a neighborhood center and health clinics (Adamson *American Indian Literature*, 183). This case involving Hughes Aircraft likely contributes some details to Castillo’s description of the factory where character Fe works.

Leal’s command of toxics issues in real-world communities in the Southwest was clear in every presentation she gave but she also studied anthropology at the National Autonomous University

in Mexico City after high school. After becoming a mother, her passion turned towards reading history, which she did voraciously. This explains why, as an adult, she would become a widely recognized historian and curator at Pimeria Alta Historical Society on the U.S. side of the border. Known to university professors and students throughout the region, her encyclopedic knowledge of Mexican heritage and history, combined with her linguistic genius, allowed her to take, at different times in her life, part-time work as an editor, a reporter for several newspapers, and a translator for high-profile visitors to the border, including National Public Radio reporters and U.S. Presidential Cabinet Secretaries. She ran a bilingual radio call-in program for several years that reached both sides of the border and provided a forum for public education on many regional social justice and immigration issues. She also worked with Sonoran Environment Research Institute, Inc. (SERI),⁸ which partners with low-income and minority communities to protect the environment and improve community health, especially among native and Latino/a/x women living along the border.

During the years in which the Tucson lawsuit proceeded through the courts, Comadres began networking with Tucsonans for a Clean Environment and other EJ groups. Teresa and other Comadres could see the neon green and rust-colored effluent being discharged from one or another maquila – Sony, Canon, General Motors, Guess, Samsonite – directly into the sewage systems or into the dry riverbed of the Santa Cruz River. Leal learned how to gather water samples from the springs and rivers in Nogales and submit them to Grupo Ecologista Independiente, a group of scientists and activists, for chemical analysis (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader*, 45-46; Di Chiro “Living,” 121). By the 1990s, Leal recalled, it was clear that there was “a need for a broader network of community based and independent trade union groups at the US-Mexico border.”⁹ Comadres, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, SWOP, and over 80 other grassroots indigenous and labor groups came together in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to form the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). The aim of SNEEJ was to teach people about the law and about strategies that could help them defend and protect their cultures, identities, lifestyles, and environments. Workshops were held to network communities and strategize about fund-raising (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader*, 51).

Leal was invited to join SNEEJ “along with other activists from [Mexico].” However, she “happened to be the only one from the Nogales area” with a green card and therefore the only woman who could travel to Albuquerque.¹⁰ Within a short time, she was elected to serve SNEEJ as cochair of the Coordinating Council. In this capacity, she helped organize campaigns at the local, national, and international levels. This work also took her to meetings around the world including, in 1991, the First Annual People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. This defining moment in the environmental justice movement’s organization brought over 300 community leaders from the United States, Canada, Central and South America, and the Marshall Islands together

to draft a set of 17 *Principles of Environmental Justice* that would guide an emerging political process to pursue environmental justice in all the places people “live, work, play, and worship” (EJnet.org). The winning outcome of the Tucson lawsuit was another defining moment, and at the training I attended, Leal, as a “keeper of the stories,” recounted this movement history. One year later, Leal met Di Chiro at the 1999 ASEH Conference. In communication with us both, she suggested that we join her for a private “mini-toxic-tour” of Tucson, Nogales, and the Santa Cruz River watershed.

Mini-Toxic Tour: Traversing the Santa Cruz River Watershed

After picking up Di Chiro at the Tucson airport, spending time with Rose Augustine, then leaving Tucson to head south to Nogales, we picked up Leal at the Pimeria Alta Historical Society and headed across the international border. To reach Nogales’ industrial park district, I drove through streets teeming with midday shoppers, school children lugging heavy backpacks, and North American tourists seeking bargains. Leal was keen for us to see the parts of the Santa Cruz River watershed that were still clean, because they were upstream from the maquiladoras. We followed the river south on eroded, washboard roads so rough that the oil cap on my Geo Prizm shook off! For several miles, unbeknownst to us, the oil was splattering under the hood, and spilling out on the dirt road. By the time we noticed, the oil was completely drained. We stopped the car, wondering if we should wait for another driver to come along on the completely isolated road or risk driving several miles to the next *ejido* (communal farm) with an empty oil pan. Before long, a military cargo truck full of armed Mexican troopers stopped and asked if we needed help. Teresa explained our situation, and in a moment that I later thought foreshadowed a future in which water will be the most precious natural resource, we traded three big plastic bottles of water for enough oil to get us back to the *colonias* we planned to visit. I have thought of that moment often, especially when I remember how Leal was fighting on two fronts at once: to find accessible sources of potable water for people living in the *colonias* with no public services, and to keep the Santa Cruz watershed free of toxins and healthy for future generations of humans and nonhumans.

I tell this anecdote because it is so important to note that Leal’s concern for the place she lived was not focused solely on the human. She understood that “nature” could not be defined outside the parameters of human activities and that human and nonhuman health were inextricably entwined. She explained to us that the Santa Cruz River originated in the Canelo Hills on the Mexican side of Nogales, then flowed north to Tucson, then to Phoenix, where it joined the Salt and Gila Rivers, and eventually flowed into the Colorado River. Thus, chemicals dumped into the Santa Cruz in Mexico would eventually reach the most critical watersheds of North America, killing fish and birds along the way. As Leal said at the environmental justice training where I first met her, “pollution does

not need a passport to cross the border.” Like her Opata ancestors, she had appointed herself the keeper of the river’s story, and determined that she would tell it to as many people as possible, whether on toxic tours, at academic conferences, or in community trainings. She worked closely with the Audubon Society and joined with the Sierra Club to sue the Environmental Protection Agency for allowing toxins to flow into the river and kill birds and fish. By working with activists such as Leal, the Sierra Club—and other mainstream environmental groups—that had previously focused on wilderness conservation and preservation but consistently failed to address the issues that concerned people of color, such as corporate contamination of their neighborhoods or uranium mining in sovereign Indian nations, began to temper their definitions of “nature” to include the places that diverse peoples live, work, play and worship.

On our private tour, Di Chiro and I had witnessed the ways in which Leal traversed multiple borders— political, geographic, cultural, epistemic – on a daily basis to produce an engaged environmental expertise that articulated diverse indigenous and scientific knowledge systems, both professional and lay, as she built a transnational advocacy network devoted to environmental justice on the border (Di Chiro “Living” 113).¹¹ Over the next twelve years, we would continue our conversations, collaborations, and border crossings with Leal as we sought to bridge the gap between academia and activist communities in support of the environmental justice movement. Together, we organized toxic tours, symposia, and panel presentations at major conferences. For each, we leveraged the resources of our universities to find funding and honoraria for activists from communities such as Ambos Nogales to attend academic conferences, since most lack resources for travel and because we determined that they should be compensated for their valuable time. In this way, we began “building bridges” between activists and academics that typically did not meet in the same places.

Out of some of these meetings and related research, new fields, including Environmental Justice Critical Studies and the Environmental Humanities began emerging. Today these fields have produced a vast literature of case studies, demographies, and statistics proving that globalization and development are contributing to toxic dumps, species extinctions, deforestation, erosion, and acidifying oceans (e.g., Adamson et al.; Pellow et al.) Engaging in intersectional analysis that focuses on these problems, and which borrows from women’s studies, gender studies, ecofeminist studies, critical race studies, ecocriticism and ethnic studies, scholars who focus on environmental justice are concerned not only with public policy, but also with culture, ideology and representation. They see the expressive arts—novels, films, community gardens, street theater—as effective means through which to offer individuals and communities creative ways to “uncover problems” that often are connected, such as sexual and gender discrimination, poverty, and environmental degradation in both urban and non-urban places. Castillo’s novel, *So Far from God*, is only one example of this important work in the realm of the arts and humanities.

Importantly, at academic conferences strengthening environmental justice critical studies and the environmental humanities, self-taught intellectual/activists such as Leal illustrated that theory was not something that only academics could generate. Activists such as Leal were engaging in what we might call an “intersectional activism,” reflective of the “intersectional analysis” that, today, is revealing the unevenness of inequality across diverse individuals and groups. Leal’s grasp of the ways that human-nonhuman injustices were rooted in racism, militarism, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, land theft of Native peoples, and gender violence was nothing short of extensive and inspiring. She was equally committed to teaching women working in the maquiladoras and academics at conferences to understand these intersections and build a network capable of innovating new tools for raising the quality of life in border *colonias*.

In conference sessions over the years at the ASEH, ASLE and ASA, we began discussing the roles and relationships of activists and academics in the movement. Di Chiro proposed eloquently in “Living is for Everyone” that the role of the academic was twofold: to “provide crucial insight into the intransigence of political, economic, and cultural systems” and to “trace the persistence of alternative worldviews and lifeways envisioned by communities that suffer the negative consequences, but receive few of the benefits, of modern industrial society” (Di Chiro “Living,” 113). While pointing out the reasons systems were not working, academics would also do work that was more optimistic: they would bring into critical conversation the innovative ideas, voices, perspectives, and hope-filled network-building practices of environmental justice activists who are “materializing the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change” (Di Chiro “Living,” 113). One of those practices is the toxic tour and in the next section, I examine how this hope-filled action builds networks and encourages people to become what Leal calls “*seres puentes*” or “bridge beings.”

Bridging Activism and Academia for Environmental Justice

In 2003, I was funded by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) to organize “The Globalism and Environmental Justice Symposium” which would explore how to bridge the gap between environmental justice studies and activism. Teresa Leal, Margo Tamez (Lipan Apache), and Lori Thomas-Riddle (Akimel O’odham)—indigenous women activists and scholars with first-hand experience fighting for environmental justice communities in the Sonoran Desert borderlands—joined me as co-organizers. The symposium, held in Tucson, focused on urban nature, native lands, and grassroots activism, and examined the effects of globalism, corporate capitalism, and the selective, disproportionate distribution of toxic waste at native sacred sites and in the environments of low-income communities and people of color. The goal was specifically to push academic conversations about environmental justice beyond a focus on problems and towards proactive networking and

successful actions that generate ideas for sustainable and hopeful futures.

Based on our experience of “building bridges” by funding activists to attend academic conferences, the symposium was unusual for convening not just academics, but writers, activists, artists, politicians, factory managers, workers, graduate students, seasoned community leaders, young rising stars in the people-of-color environmental justice movement, and tribal community members from the Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Tohono O’odham and Akimel O’odham Nations of Arizona and Mexico. To be inclusive of everyone who wished to attend, housing and registration costs were kept low or free and food was provided for activists and graduate students by Food Not Bombs. Spanish translation was provided at every event so that people from both sides of the border could attend.

Unlike previous conferences that added a “toxic tour” as a peripheral field trip, we organized the ASLE Symposium to make the toxic tour the only scheduled event on the first day. As a result, over 90 of the symposium’s 250 participants elected to take the trip across the U.S.-Mexico border to Nogales, Sonora, and the experience became central to most discussions that took place over the next two days. Once across the border, Leal guided those on the tour through three *colonias*. At one of the more progressive maquilas we heard from a factory manager and an environmental engineer who were working to make conditions in the factory better for the employees. We heard from artists who paint murals on the border fence to catalyze critical thinking and hope and from community leaders who were working to provide municipal services to the *colonias*. Throughout the tour, Leal discussed the struggle of social justice and environmental groups who are dealing with complicated issues caused by international trade agreements and corporate capitalist practices that do not take account of the social, cultural, and environmental impacts that will occur in border communities.



Teresa Leal at 2004 EJ Symposium

Back in Tucson for more conventional panel discussions, we addressed the role of the writers fictionalizing not only the problems associated with environmental injustices, but characters who are engaging in actions to build networks and find solutions. In my own presentation, I drew connections between Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and the toxic tour we had just experienced. When put into a context with the activities of SWOP, Comadres, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, SNEEJ, and the EJ Summit, Fe's miscarriage and death illustrates why grass-roots groups must do more than raise awareness about problems if they hope to save their children and communities. Contemplative reflection, by itself, cannot lead to a clear understanding of the processes at work in a world where corporations allow persistent organic pollutants (POPs) to escape into the environment and find their way into body fats and breast milk, damage reproductive systems, cause birth defects, and literally threaten a community's health and survival. Fe's exposure to unseen chemicals helps to illustrate why place-based environmental justice groups focus not only on local community issues, but also challenge transnational corporate rhetoric about the benefits of free trade by gaining a broad understanding of global politics, civil rights legislation, toxics issues, and multinational trade agreement law which are affecting their communities.

Wrapping up the conference, Leal invited attendees to become *seres puentes*, "bridge beings" or bridge builders. "It is rare for an individual," she said, "to bring about substantial change alone, so people must build bridges that allow people to move from awareness of an injustice to action to address and find solutions to the injustice."¹² She challenged both academics and activists attending the symposium to contribute meaningfully to social and environmental justice by telling stories, teaching about artworks and fiction, and engaging in performative actions such as toxic tours. Build bridges between the vast numbers of people suffering inequities, she said, and your students, communities and networks. Tell them we are being poisoned and dying. Become *seres puentes* and help us build our capacity to achieve a better, more equitable and just future in our border communities. Her reference to the 'poisoned and dying' strongly invoked a scene in *So Far from God*. Main character Sophia and her fellow comadres who have lost children to toxic exposure hang pictures of their loved ones around their necks. In an alternative performance of the Catholic "Way of the Cross" ritual, they stop at 12 stations along a path. At each station, they discuss the "things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species" (Castillo 241–2). They declare, "we, as a people, are being eliminated from the ecosystem, too... Don't anybody care about that?" (242). The Way of the Cross ritual, like the toxic tour, becomes a series of performative opportunities for the participants to become 'beings' who bridge ideas, voices, and perspectives, with network-building practices that materialize "the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change" (Di Chiro "Living" 113).

Assessing a Decade of Collaboration

To prepare for the 2011 ASEH Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, I invited Teresa Leal and Giovanna Di Chiro to stay at my house for three days before the meeting. Held twelve years after the first ASEH toxic tour in 1999, this gathering offered us the opportunity to meet again and assess the toxic tour as a coalition building tool. We prepared slides, wrote our talks, and invited some of the activists we had worked with at the 2004 Symposium to attend our session to think about the outcomes of the social change opportunities that activists and academics had built together over the course of more than a decade.

When asked at the session if she thought the toxic tour had been an effective tool, Teresa Leal said that around 1991, after the EJ Summit and the attention-grabbing win by Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, she began to be contacted by concerned "politicians, academics, and solidarity groups" who wanted to visit Nogales and learn more about "the issues." They wanted me to "show them around and bring them in contact with the people and places affected.... I gladly began to do so because it was a blessedly natural way of getting the word out (emphasis Leal's)."¹³ Di Chiro recalled that at the conclusion of the first ASEH toxic tour, she had asked Leal and Augustine for their thoughts about the commitment, time and energy it takes to lead a tour. Both confessed to being exhausted from having to relive the memory of a child's death or their own or a relative's experience with cancer. However, they agreed that although the toxic tours were fatiguing and labor-intensive actions to organize, "this is a history that has to be told, and we decided that since this was a group of historians who might tell the story, it was worth it."¹⁴ Leal also emphasized a point that she often made, "Events are good to prove a point, but it's not the everyday work we do" (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader* 53). The most important work was community training, like the meeting she led when I first met her. Movements "do not exist if there isn't... rotation of information and leadership.... [This is why] our biggest endeavor is training. We don't do politicking or lobbying; we do training and teach people to organize" (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader* 51).

In an update on the conditions at the border that continued to make individual and collective action so important, Leal told the ASEH audience about the worsening situation with immigration, border health, and the environment, all exacerbated by continued U.S. government efforts to build taller and longer fences.

The material wall continues to grow more solid and psychotic as time goes on. I get up every morning [and]... prepare to travel 4 blocks North, wait in line, cross the border, then walk 2 blocks to get to work at the museum. My average is about a 1.5 hour wait. As I stand in line, I also see the ICE [Immigration Control and Enforcement] buses arrive by the fence and more deported people deboarding. Many limping because they are recovering

from many days of walking in the hot desert sun with no food or water until they realize that all they want to do is get caught by the Migra (Border Patrol) and avoid dying like others they have had to leave behind in their death marches that initially began as a path to a new beginning or at least an end to poverty and slavery.... I watch their sad faces as they get off the bus, pick up their belongings bunched up in a plastic bag with their name on a tag. As a result of standing and feeling their frustration and terrible impotence, and being the creative or stubborn person I am, I have now added another move to [my morning routine]. I charge both my cellphones -Mexican and U.S.- so that if I detect desolation in their eyes, I can at least break that disconnect by offering my cellphones. THANK GOD FOR CRICKET UNLIMITED CALLS AND TEXT MESSAGES [Emphasis Leal's]. I... shamelessly offer them my U.S. cellphone in order for them to reconnect with the life they suddenly left behind in the states when they got picked up by ICE.

The wall dampens people's dreams and pride.... But it has not stopped... our right to topple those walls and turn them into bridges.¹⁵

Here Leal illustrates how she bridges witnessing with action on a daily basis in her own life to become *seres puentes* in support of justice, equity and dignity.

Conclusion: Five Decades of Capacity-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Woman around the world, from Africa to North America—including Wangari Maathai, Grace Lee Boggs, and Teresa Leal—have played a major role in the EJ movement as they have worked to reveal the often imperceptible, yet material impacts of toxic spills and climate change in ways that allow their communities to imagine how to fight back and become *seres puentes*.

They face terrible odds that were illustrated by her seat, at the 2016 Border Seder, next to the family of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez. Leal had participated in many events calling attention to Rodríguez's murder, usually acting as the English-Spanish translator bridging the languages and communities in her beloved Nogales. To use the words of Di Chiro, she embodied a "hope-filled activism" that materialized "the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change" (Di Chiro "Living," 113).

It is my hope that in the process of writing this essay, long overdue, I have made transparent how Teresa Leal's work, and now her memory, have created a model for others to follow as they seek to become *seres puentes*.

NOTES

¹ My deepest thanks to José R. Soto, PhD, the youngest son of Teresa Leal, for reading this article and granting permission to write about his mother. Personal email to me dated June 14, 2021. I also thank my friend and colleague Giovanna Di Chiro for reading this essay for accuracy and for granting permission to print photos from her field research.

² In Spanish *nogales* means walnuts.

³ See Joni Adamson, "Teresa Leal." *Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States (ELLUS)*. Revised 2nd Edition. Suzanne Oboler and Deena Gonzales, eds. London: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴ Leal attended high school in Sahuarita and Tucson, Arizona. After school let out in the afternoons, she would go to the cotton fields and distribute flyers warning agricultural workers about the dangers of chemicals and alerting them to the schedules of the planes spraying herbicides and pesticides (Adamson 2002, 46-47).

⁵ See Giovanna Di Chiro, "Bearing Witness or Taking Action?: Toxic Tourism and Environmental Justice," a study of the toxic tour which explains why environmental justice groups emphasize action over 'seeing' although seeing/witnessing is recognized as an important first step towards concrete action.

⁶ After the 2011 ASEH Conference, Leal, Di Chiro and I began exchanging emails as we prepared to co-write an article assessing the toxic tour. Because of busy schedules, that essay was unfortunately never written. This essay attempts to right that missed opportunity.

⁷ See SWOP's homepage, <https://www.swop.net/>.

⁸ See SERI's homepage, <https://www.seria.org/>.

⁹ Personal email from Teresa Leal to Joni Adamson, dated August 31, 2010.

¹⁰ Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated August 31, 2010.

¹¹ Di Chiro's "Living is for Everyone" narrates our private toxic tour experiences in much more analytical depth than I can go into in this short essay; I encourage those with interest to read the essay closely.

¹² Joni Adamson's personal notes from Leal's conference talk at the ASLE EJ Symposium, September 25, 2004.

¹³ Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated August 31, 2010.

¹⁴ In a personal email to the author dated December 2, 2011, Giovanna Di Chiro told me that she recorded these words while on our 1999 "mini-tour" of the Santa Cruz River corridor. They originated in her interviews with Teresa Leal and Rose Marie Augustine and took place in Tucson, Arizona, on April 16, 1999.

¹⁵ Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated December 2, 2011, written for the essay we planned to write but did not finish. I have edited this statement for brevity, punctuation and clarity.

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On the Nature of the Border: Trash Thresholds in Luis Alberto Urrea's *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I undertake an analysis of Luis Alberto Urrea's non-fiction book *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996), which portrays a community of trash pickers and orphans in Tijuana at a moment in which the effects of NAFTA and an increasingly militarized approach to policing the US-Mexico border were taking shape. My engagement with the text combines close reading with concepts from both ecocriticism and biopolitics in order to tease out the way in which Urrea's vignettes trouble received notions of progress, freedom, and containment. By considering the book's deployment of two descriptive techniques for rendering the garbage dump and other spaces—one, a technique I call "time-lapse description" and the other, the insistent use of lists—I propose that the border zone that Urrea depicts is a space from which to think through the troubling and mutually-imbricated environmental, political, and economic crises that are paradoxically exceptional and exemplary of the current order of things.

KEYWORDS: Luis Alberto Urrea, border, trash, discard studies, ecocriticism

Luis Alberto Urrea's 1996 non-fiction book *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* chronicles the writer's time spent working with communities in and around Tijuana throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, a moment in which the NAFTA-era conceptualization of the US-Mexico border was taking shape.¹ In broad terms, the view of the border that emerges in this moment is undergirded by a central paradox: on the one hand, it is a conceptualization of the border as a space of unlimited freedom from economic and environmental regulatory restraints; on the other, it becomes an increasingly regimented, militarized space designed to curtail human freedom through the harsh regulation of the movement of racialized bodies (bodies that, it is important to note, move in pursuit of various forms of freedom that do not seem to be covered by the "free" in "free trade," like freedom from violence, oppression, and poverty).² Urrea approaches this space from an equally paradoxical position that highlights the intersection of a number of thresholds. As a Mexican-American, his approach to writing about the border and the community of people from Tijuana he portrays constantly negotiates the difference between being Mexican and being American, speaking Spanish and speaking English, observing a community and its space from a distance and immersing himself in that community and its space. He writes from an unstable position that is simultaneously apart from his object of representation and a part of it. In this sense, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* is both a meditation on many different instantiations of the threshold and a text that comes into being at the point at which those thresholds converge.

Many of the episodes that comprise Urrea's book are centered on a community of trash pickers in a dump (or *dompe*, as Urrea calls it throughout the book) in Tijuana, and in this essay, I would like

to reflect on various moments in these vignettes that allow us to think through the troubling and mutually-imbricated environmental, political, and economic crises that are paradoxically exceptional and exemplary of the current order of things. First, I will elaborate on the notion of the threshold and its relationship to trash in order to consider the way that Urrea posits the border and the *dompe* as threshold spaces whose logic is inscribed in his writing through descriptive techniques that simultaneously suggest convergence and divergence, containment and overflow. From there, I will consider a few of Urrea's descriptive passages as a way of teasing out the material implications of the trash and trash spaces he portrays in his book. In the end, Urrea's mindfulness of materiality and space allows us to see the border area he portrays not as a site of underdevelopment striving to catch up to the economic, social, and ecological standards of the global North, but rather as an environment that is perfectly natural given the neoliberal logic applied to manage it.

Trash and the Threshold

At a basic level, the production of trash is a function of the decision to include material objects in or exclude them from socially-constructed categories of usefulness and value. All individuals and social groups produce trash, but the specific quality and quantity of a given society's garbage, along with its waste management practices, depend on complex social, economic, affective, and material factors. In his classic study *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson notes as much, framing trash as a conceptual device for mediating our understanding of the back-and-forth journeys that all objects

are susceptible to making between states of high and low (or no) value. In effect, whether or not something is trash can only be determined by examining the socio-material processes that underlie the way individuals and groups relate to the material objects that surround them. What is more, the relationships between humans and material objects are prone to shift over time and space. Our conviction that one man's trash is another man's treasure is clichéd but nonetheless true. But notions of shifting value are not sufficient to understand trash. Questions of space and social structure are critical to appreciating the true import of the conceptual and material weight of trash in our world. Where do we put trash and what are the social and environmental effects of the siting of waste? What concepts can help us appreciate the stakes at play for human and nonhuman bodies that live in constant contact with trash?

Such questions have no simple answers, but thinking through them is key to understanding the interwoven environmental, economic, and social problems to which contemporary waste management practices contribute and that Urrea attempts to capture in his book. For at least the last twenty-five years, scholars from fields ranging from history and philosophy to environmental science and anthropology have paid increasing attention to what societies do with their waste and how waste and waste management affect specific communities. In addition to Thompson's aforementioned study of waste through notions of economic value, approaches to these questions over the last few decades include both wide-ranging ones, like Greg Kennedy's theorization of trash as an ontological problem arising from human beings' unsettled relationship with nature or Gay Hawkins's treatment of waste practices as central to constructing new ethical and political frameworks, and more granular analyses of specific contexts, such as Kathleen Miller's ethnography of a Brazilian dump that uses the work people do with trash to call into question normative notions of garbage, wage labor, and informality.³ At the same time, cultural texts like *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* that tackle the representation of waste and waste management have become increasingly common and have generated a great deal of critical attention from scholars who bring to bear the analytical and theoretical tools of their disciplines in a number of exciting, illuminating approaches that can be seen as part of the recent push to widen the scope of ecocriticism beyond nature writing and schematic dualisms, like nature/culture or city/country.⁴ Given the way that Urrea highlights the problem of trash as equal parts ecological and social and frames it within issues related to the border, I see great value in contributing to those considerations of the cultural valences of waste by reading his book alongside the concept of the threshold, in particular as it is developed in the thought of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

For Agamben, the threshold is a fundamental textual and conceptual device that points toward both the positive and negative potential of limits (McLoughlin 189). In works like *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *The Open*, he thinks through the threshold in a way that makes apparent the connection between the logic of

exclusion and the materialization of power in and through the body. While he does not address issues of waste and disposal in his work, his thinking sheds light on the way trash is produced and people are rendered as trash because it underscores the ease with which bodies—human and nonhuman alike—can be transferred between states of value. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben considers the import of the threshold more explicitly: "The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access" (67). In underscoring linkage, not division, as the fundamental feature of the threshold, that space, which seems to mark the limit between two things is not "another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself" (68). And the gesture of exclusion, exception, or disposal is essential to establishing the link between what occupies the space on either side of the threshold; that gesture is, in a sense, the very thing that constitutes the threshold as such. As Daniel McLoughlin puts it, for Agamben, the logic of the threshold "is not one of opposition, but of abandonment, in which the outside is included through its exclusion. This means that the threshold is a space where inside and outside enter into a zone of indistinction" (191).

I am struck by the resonance between the logic underlying Agamben's conceptualization of the threshold and the schema we employ to distinguish between useful and useless material objects, or rather, things worth keeping and things that are trash. Even the lexical choices he makes in naming the actions that constitute the threshold—he speaks of abandonment and exclusion—call to mind the act of disposal, the gesture that turns a thing into trash. More to the point, the threshold shows us how things that are opposed to one another, and therefore seem to be disconnected, are in fact inextricably connected via the act of exclusion itself. In other words, the concept of the threshold reminds us that things do not belong to a given category thanks to some inherent quality; rather, the categories in which they are included (or from which they are excluded) are a function of the ceaselessly updated mechanism of exclusion. In much the same way, the production and naming of trash is an effect of systems of classification that are dynamic and open-ended (Hawkins 2-3). It is important to recall that, for Agamben, the threshold is a zone of indistinction, a space in which the precise difference or border between things (inside and outside or political life and bare life, for example) is impossible to identify (McLoughlin 191). This type of indeterminacy is also a basic characteristic of trash. On a purely material level, the decay processes to which trash is prone often obscure the previous identity of a discarded object, a difficulty that is only compounded by garbage dumps, where discards are grouped into a "mountain of indistinguishable stuff that is in its own way affirmed by a resolute dismissal" (Scanlan 14). Trash is the material manifestation of the indistinction of the threshold, the in-between that signals the experience of the limit itself. As John Scanlan puts it, "Between something and nothing; between whole and part; between the body as source of unique being and

the universal matter of the garbaged self. This stateless condition of being one thing and then another (or even being at any time *neither one thing nor another*) symbolizes garbage" (53, emphasis in the original).

From the outset of *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, Urrea posits his own split identity (as a Mexican, as an American, as a Mexican-American) and his childhood in Tijuana and San Diego as occurring in liminal zones or thresholds between different cultural, affective, and geographic categories. For him, the border is a barbed-wire fence that neatly bisects his heart (4), a phenomenon that simultaneously gathers him into and excludes him from multiple political and social categories and serves as the basis for the voice he cultivates in his writing. Beyond grounding his own subjectivity in this sort of in-between space, he continually highlights the tension between Tijuana's supposed location on a series of cultural, geographical, economic, and temporal peripheries and its centrality in his own life and the lives of the people he portrays in his book and, most importantly, as a key space for understanding the way the world works under the sway of neoliberalism. These tensions and contradictions are neatly translated into temporal terms, as in when Urrea declares, "It is still 1896 in Tijuana. And it is also 2025" (6). This kind of hyperbolic impossibility—a moment simply cannot pertain to both the 19th and 21st centuries—gives expression to an unsettling truth: the present, which is the threshold between the past and future, contains both within it. Such a notion sheds light on Urrea's observations from what he calls the "*basura* fault line," another instantiation of the threshold (41). A passage describing the evolution of the *dompe* reads:

Once a gaping Grand Canyon, it gradually filled with the endless glacier of trash until it rose, rose, swelling like a filling belly. The canyon filled and formed a flat plain, and the plain began to grow in bulldozed ramps, layers, sections, battlements. New American Garbology affected the basic Mexican nature of the place. From a disorderly sprawl of *basura* to a kind of Tower of Babel of refuse.

Still, the poor Mexicans, transformed now by NAFTA into a kind of squadron of human tractors, made their way through the dump, lifting, sifting, bagging, hauling, carting, plucking, cutting, recycling. The original *dompe* rules, a set of ordinances that sprang up organically from the people who have to work in the garbage, prevailed. (40-41)

The dump is a liminal space of encounter for a number of opposing notions: the hollow canyon meets the swollen mountain of garbage, horizontality entwines with verticality, neoliberal technification confronts working human bodies that use age-old techniques, Spanish and English and the waste they name meld into a discursive Tower of Babel and a material tower of trash.

The conjunction of space and time that Urrea depicts is an attempt to capture the impossible: to pin down the in-betweenness of the threshold, the liminal quality of both the border environment in general and the trash dump to which he constantly returns throughout the book. In addition to approaching this task through the themes of the border, trash, and trash work, his efforts to think in and with the threshold are inscribed in the formal elements of which he makes use. Two such formal elements strike me as especially apt at inscribing the logic of the threshold in Urrea's text: first, the way he tends to depict spaces by contrasting their past and present states, a mode that I call time-lapse description; and second, the proliferation of lists throughout the book, a type of recurring compulsion to enumerate that opens up a space for reflecting on the way the book enacts the discursive and material significance of trash. We glimpse both elements in the passage cited above. The dump's present state is inscribed in a longer timeline: the mounds of trash used to be a canyon in the distant past. This difference over time sets the stage for the rest of the description, which unfolds as a series of contrasting elements that exist in a state of ambiguous tension in the material and social practices of the landfill. And those practices are presented in clipped fashion, as a list of activities that proliferate much like the detritus that fills the space.

Approaching the Threshold: Time-Lapse Description

In order to unpack the way that the book's descriptions of space engage with the passage of time and induce reflection on the threshold, I would like to focus on three descriptive passages, all of which I will quote at length to give a clear idea of the elements at play in Urrea's prose: first, the area surrounding his boyhood home; second, some of Tijuana's *maquiladoras* and their environs; and third, the *dompe*. All of them exemplify the discursive move that I am calling time-lapse description and signal the threshold nature of the spaces Urrea portrays.

In the first few pages of the book, Urrea gives the following description of his childhood home:

My first home, where I stumbled into life and first greeted that astonishment of daylight, was on a hill above Tijuana. The house to the east was already giving way to gravity on the day I was born: it slumped downhill, a wooden trapezoid rushing slowly into the dry arroyo beneath our yards. In the shadow of this woozy building, bananas and pomegranates grew. The poor boys and I scabbled in the dirt and grit of our street throwing wooden tops to spin in the dust, herding amazingly huge red ants and pillbugs back and forth between the stones, and ambushing each other with bright pink and yellow squirt guns bought at the corner *botica* for the change left over from the kilo of tortillas we were sent to buy each afternoon.

And today, these many years later, the house next door has settled like a deck of weathered cards. The banana trees are dead and gone. Little boys like me, however, still play on the hillside. These boys have seen things that we did not even dream of. They have watched Desert Storm, Waco, Beirut, Panama, Rwanda, Bosnia, Colosio, the assassination of the Mexican bishop, Israel's *intifada*, Rodney King, the L.A. riots, Oklahoma City, the Chiapas revolt, the Million Man March, the white Ford Bronco, even the autopsy of a reported UFO pilot—all on *gringo* television, spilling south over the edges of the border as Tijuana's sewage rushes north. (4-5)

The area of Tijuana where the author grew up functions, in this description, as a metonymy of the border itself, and Urrea uses the effects on that space wrought by the passage of time along with his own position as an observer seemingly caught between past and present to signal some of the cultural, material, and environmental implications of the border's liminal position.

The clear visual analog to the shift from one paragraph of this passage to the next—the ground covered between “where I stumbled into life” and “these many years later”—is time-lapse photography, a technique that collapses different moments in time into one act of perception. This is precisely what Urrea manages to do with narrative prose in this passage. And he uses his discursive position on the threshold between past and present to foreground other fractures that structure the experience of the border. The house that shifts from being a rickety trapezoid to a jumbled mess of boards underscores the precarity of the built environment. And just as this image suggests the transience of human shelters, the fate of the fruit trees (“dead and gone”) and the disappearance of insect life from one paragraph to the next raises the specter of environmental degradation that is much more explicit elsewhere in the book. Even the main element of similitude that manifests itself on either side of the “before” and “after” that structure Urrea's description—the neighborhood boys playing on the hillside—is subject to the fracture brought about by the passage of time. The change in forms of social relations and technology that is condensed into the shift from playing with wooden tops and plastic squirt guns to receiving the incessant barrage of television airwaves does more than signal the outsized importance of *gringo* media in a globalized world. It also underscores the tension between the neoliberal imperative to generate homogenized experiences and points of reference and the particular experience of living in an economically and environmentally precarious situation on the US-Mexico border in the 1990s. In this sense, the final image of the description is especially potent. The place Urrea evokes is located at the crossroads of two different pipelines of waste: the waves of decontextualized news stories (note how the list format unmoors the events from specific historical contexts, rendering them akin to white noise) that flow south and the sewage that flows north.

If Urrea uses the routines and spaces of childhood to consider the role of media in shaping the experience of life on the border, he turns to the *maquiladora* in his contemplation of the impact of neoliberalism on the environment and the lives of workers. In a key passage, he writes:

All around the former dump [...] are the empty shells of future *maquiladoras* [...] The *maquis* are waiting for NAFTA to get rolling. So far, the most obvious NAFTA action in Tijuana—still hidden from plain sight—is the purchase of the new *dompe* by Americans. The *San Diego Reader* reports the amazing news that the Texans who now run the dump plan to make \$9 million a year. This figure would be so unbelievable to the garbage-pickers wandering through the heaps like droids, recycling bottles, aluminum, plastic, copper, glass, that they would laugh in your face if you told them [...]

Maquis, of course, are binational or multinational factories, they sit on their bulldozed hills like raw-concrete forts, and the huts of the peasants ring their walls. Some of them have Japanese names on them, some of them have American names. All along Tijuana's new high-tech highway, el Periférico, you can see them up there, receding into the hazy distance. Headstones for the graveyard of American union labor.

Negra [one of the main people Urrea follows in the book] had a job at Imperial Toys for a while. It was a thrill—no more toil in the trash. Besides, her huge pregnant belly limited her severely in her ability to do stoop-work [...] At Imperial, she was earning a few cents an hour, but all she had to do was stand in one place on the assembly line. Fourteen hours a day. She was allowed two bathroom breaks, she says. She had to eat lunch standing up. When she tired, eight months pregnant now, and sat down after becoming dizzy, she was fired and thrown out.

Interestingly enough, in its rush to prepare for great profits and an industrial rebirth, Tijuana wildly bulldozed and built, scraped hilltops into canyons and threw roads and factories and warehouses and living quarters together. The utopian workers' condos at the foot of Negra's hill are now, a few years down the line, collapsing. Floors come apart and pancake down on each other. Squatters live in them, their laundry flapping out the windows like curtains. And the raw hills, left unlandscaped and unplanted, came down in the floods and swept into the city, carrying off victims, burying streets and neighborhoods, and costing unreported fortunes to clean up. (25-26)

Compared to the description of Urrea's childhood home, this one approaches the passage of time in a less orderly but perhaps more suggestive way, especially in light of the notion of the threshold.

The anecdote about Negra's stint in a toy factory aside, the paragraphs that attempt to evoke an image of *maquiladoras* in the reader's mind seem designed to obscure any neat delineation of temporality. Grammatically speaking, the generalized use of verbs in the present tense make it seem clear that Urrea is describing these factories and their environs as he sees them in his present moment: the empty shells *are* found around the former dump, they *are* binational factories that *sit* on bulldozed hills from where you *can see* the new highway, some of them *are now collapsing*. However, other elements destabilize that perspective from the present by gesturing toward both the past and the future. At certain moments, all three temporal planes appear at once, as is the case in the opening sentence of the description: the building project Urrea is looking at portends what is to come ("empty shells of future *maquiladoras*"), but it is centered around the *former* dump, a vestige from the past that will never really go away. The future and past also collapse into the present in the way Urrea describes the Periférico as a high-tech highway that we could imagine is supposed to pave the border region's way into the 21st century and whose landscape of hulking factories memorializes the now-defunct clout of union labor in the United States.

Besides these sentence-level moves that blur the temporal framework of the description, the way the passage is structured as a whole manages to highlight the threshold quality of this zone of the border by turning time on its head. As I have already noted, the *maquiladoras* themselves are patently being described as they are in the present, but that present is inflected in a way that orients it first toward the future, then toward the past. The first two paragraphs look toward the future: newly-constructed *maquiladoras* wait for NAFTA to ramp up, the owners of the new dump anticipate multimillion-dollar profits, Tijuana's industrial belt seems poised for technological development, and even trash pickers are portrayed as droids, robots from the future. The next paragraph is a jarring shift into the past tense that begins as a *maquiladora* success story and ends with the inhumane but predictable disposal of Urrea's friend Negra from the workforce, precipitated in part by the company's desire to increase efficiency through the regulation of the waste human bodies produce. Then, as the description of the zone for Tijuana's *maquiladoras* snaps back into focus in the passage's final paragraph, the image of squatters occupying collapsing housing for workers seems to suggest that the *maquiladoras* are the ruins of a past civilization. At the same time, this scene is redolent of a version of the future that fans of post-apocalyptic narratives easily recognize. But, on whole, this passage is not a description of the past or the future. It is a portrait of the present that, both formally and thematically, reflects the in-between, threshold quality of life under neoliberalism. In Urrea's telling, it is a present stuck between the ruins of the past and an increasingly uncertain future. By showing us the *maquiladora* in this way, he manages to critique the way the neoliberal present erodes the wellbeing of humans and the environment. The economic order that the *ma-*

quiladora represents does not solve the problems of underdevelopment; instead, it lays waste to workers like Negra who cannot keep up with the unreasonable demands it makes on their bodies and leaves the landscape scarred in a way that augurs ever more precarious futures for those who live there.

The final time-lapse description I would like to consider shares more of a structural affinity with the descriptions of the dump and Urrea's old neighborhood that I cite above in the sense that it moves more clearly from past to present, transmitting the passage from one timeframe to another in a way that allows the reader to experience it in one act of perception. However, its portrayal of environmental degradation also chimes with the closing image of the passage on *maquiladoras*, which notes how the modifications made to the landscape so it could accommodate the presence of new factories and workers and the movement of consumer goods led to erosion and flooding. In line with such an appreciation of the ecological consequences of development, Urrea describes the *dompe* as follows:

One end of the dump had been closed off by the new trash mountain. A small valley had been sealed at one end, where the runoff would have originally formed a nostalgic little waterfall into the little Edward Abbey desert canyon and run on to the sea. Deer would have frolicked at its base; jackrabbits, coyotes, foxes, hawks, owls, rattlesnakes, tarantulas, three kinds of daisies, locoweed, gourds, raccoons, lizards, tortoises, skunks, wild goats, cottonwoods, berries, grapes, small fish, crawdads, butterflies, pottery shards, arrowheads, lions, morning glories, corn, Queen Anne's lace, would have flourished along this glittering little creek. Now, however, the northern arm of the landfill had cut off the vale and the small bed of the waterway. The canyon itself, as we know, was long gone. Kotex, Keds, Kalimán comic books, and ketchup bottles frolicked there now. (44)

Here, Urrea writes a description of a key space in a way that invites the reader to stand beside him and take in a panorama of that space as it exists in the present. He begins by emphasizing how a natural feature of the landscape, the concavity of a valley through which a stream once ran, is now a depository of waste. Here culture and nature are interfaced with one another, and in this threshold zone waste management becomes a procedure for transforming one type of natural feature (an idyllic valley) into another (a mountain of trash).

In casting the erstwhile valley and the new mountain as "natural" features, I do not mean to suggest that they are not different from one another in ontological terms or with regard to the moral and ethical questions they raise. Rather, following the grain of Urrea's prose, it strikes me that both of the features that dominated this landscape at different moments were the result of a complex

series of material processes and networks. On balance, one of these series tended to perpetuate an abundance of life forms, while the other foreclosed most of them.

So while Urrea uses the same formal feature to evoke the material reality of both valley and mountain—the list, a feature whose deployment I consider further below—there is an important difference in tone between the two lists that underscores this gap in the potential for sustaining life. While contemplating the dump, Urrea begins to invoke the imagined pre-dump past of the space with a dose of ironic detachment. The preciousness of his adjectives (the “nostalgic” waterfall and the “Edward Abbey” canyon) and the almost saccharine-sweet verb “frolic” seem to be to a sort of defense mechanism for dealing with the overwhelming nature of the dump. But as the list of what Urrea imagines as the space’s former inhabitants wears on, any sense of detachment fades under the sheer abundance and beauty of the biotic community that would have made a home there. And the return to the present reality of the dump snaps us out of this reverie, reinstating the previous ironic distance through the repetition of the verb “frolic” and the alliterative list of crass consumer products that have squeezed out other forms of life.

Like the other descriptive passages I analyze above, this description of the dump does more than round out a particular setting with details that help the reader imagine it. It also takes into account the temporal dimension of space, opening the present to the past in a consideration of what is lost and gained in the passage of time. All of these time-lapse descriptions operate under a similar logic: they collapse different moments in time into relatively brief descriptions of a given space in the present in order to highlight the way the past (and even the future) inhabits the present. In other words, the present, as Urrea portrays it, is a threshold, a zone that is, by definition, *not* the past and *not* the future but, paradoxically, is always intervened by both. Such a presentation of the threshold quality of the experience of time is especially significant given the equally notable threshold quality of the spaces Urrea describes: his old neighborhood, a space in between the domestic and public spheres; the *maquiladora*, an industrial space that blurs the lines between nation-states; and the garbage dump, a threshold between the useful and the useless, nature and culture, and a social limit zone.

Proliferating Thresholds: Lists

In order to round out this reflection on the way that the concept of the threshold is inscribed at a formal level in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, I would like to turn briefly to another feature of Urrea’s prose that suffuses the text from beginning to end: the list. A cursory search of the book would yield at least a couple dozen examples of sentences shifting from relatively complex structures to the rote syntactical arrangement of nouns (or phrases functioning as nouns) following one after another in sequences of varying lengths (all of

the time-lapse descriptions I quote above, for instance, have lists in them).

Why does Urrea turn to lists so readily throughout his book? More to the point, what interpretive possibilities does this reliance on lists open up? One answer has to do with the material reality that Urrea attempts to represent in his prose: trash itself. If trash can be thought of as a bunch of miscellaneous items gathered together and stored in a specific place (like a waste bin or a garbage dump), then the list offers itself as a useful linguistic analog for trying to capture in prose the experience of the spaces trash occupies. It comes as no surprise, then, that several of the book’s lists can be found in passages related to the *dompe*. There are straightforward lists that rattle off the kinds of work that goes on there, noting how groups of trash pickers go “through the dump, lifting, sifting, bagging, hauling, carting, plucking, cutting, recycling” (40-41). Likewise, there are lists woven into passages that convey the glut of material in the dump and its troubling vitality, as when Urrea describes what he sees upon arriving at the dump on a windy day:

And from the hill of trash, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of plastic bags—tan bags, blue bags, white supermarket bags, black trash bags, yellow bread wrappers and video store bags—along with long streamers of computer paper, sheets of notebook paper, newspapers open like wings, ribbons of toilet paper, tissues like dancing moths, even half-dead balloons, are caught in a backdraft and are rising and falling in vast slow waves behind the hill, slow motion, a ballet in the air of this parti-colored landscape, looking like special effects, like some art department’s million-dollar creation, Lucifer’s lava lamp, silent, ghostly, stately, for half a mile, turning in the air, rolling, looping. (49-50)

This single sentence extends the clipped rhythm of the easy-to-follow enumeration of types of bags and paper in the landfill into a more figurative, chaotic register that evokes an experience approaching the sublime in its melding of the aesthetic and the horrific. In this sense, the list is an ideal rhetorical tool for representing garbage. Beyond its potentially infinite capacity for growth through the accumulation of one element after another, a list’s grammatical simplicity belies a tension between order and disorder, containment and overflow, that is strikingly similar to the anxieties and challenges that waste management raises. Urrea’s description of the windswept landfill shows how easily order (both syntactical and material) can tip over into disorder.

However useful the list is as a way to approach representing spaces where trash accumulates, its importance in Urrea’s portrayal of the “secret life of the Mexican Border”—as he puts it in the book’s subtitle—goes beyond its mimetic function. Aside from cataloging trash and scavenging practices, lists appear throughout the book in passages related to economics, politics, agricultural products and

practices, consumer goods, news and other media, social practices, and more. For example, an extended reflection on Tijuana (and the border in general) toward the beginning of the book includes a vertiginous list of recent events of note. It begins with "NAFTA, for example; the astonishing Proposition 187; the rise of PAN and breakaway political movements; the surge in drug cartel shenanigans; the advent of Tijuana's spit-and-polish border cops, the Beta Group; various executions and shootouts; border closings, new fences, interdiction programs; amazing floods that ravaged downtown Tijuana," and continues with allusions to drought, economic and political woes, and racist tourists (8-9). Lines below this passage, the geography of the border itself is presented in the form of a list of cities: "Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa, Matamoros, and their various sister cities" (9). This is followed by a series of enumerations of the cultural and material practices and products that proliferate on the other side of the border, ranging from pop culture figures—"Starsky and Hutch, Mickey Mouse, Madonna, those buff lifeguards on *Baywatch*, Michael Jackson, Sharon Stone" (10)—to places to go and ways to get there—"elevators, escalators, sidewalks, bays, beaches, parks, buses, bicycles, cars, jets" (10)—and, finally, what we could call various and sundry items—"Kotex, sprinklers, floors, canned frijoles, Twinkies, Hulk Hogan, *Playboy*, three-ply scented toilet paper, rich motels, low riders" (10).

This portrayal of the cultural, political, and material reality of the border as a series of lists is overwhelming. Each element, whether it be a noteworthy news event, an icon of popular culture, or a disposable consumer good, troubles the reader by suggesting a network of referents that should provide explanation while simultaneously withholding that context. This is not to say that the lists do not make sense because they do; instead, what I am suggesting is that the sense they make relies on intuition instead of explanation. The very format of the list, with its flattening of grammatical complexity, refuses to make distinctions among the elements that constitute it and gives the impression that all those elements are interchangeable. What is more, the lists Urrea crafts in this extensive passage could conceivably stretch on interminably, but the exigencies of writing the story he wants to tell put a limit on such proliferation. The rhetorical effect of these lists, then, is to signal a series of thresholds: the limit space between allusion and explanation, specificity and homogeneity, proliferation and containment.

Elsewhere, Urrea narrates the arrival of a van full of charitable donations for the community of people living around the dump sent from the US side of the border. The van is full of canned food. As Urrea notes, "It's a strange mixture, and some of it will have to go to the pigs because nobody knows what to do with it" (173). The overwhelming constellation of cultural practices and objects that exemplify US culture and constitute its perverse allure is reduced to a mishmash of unwanted canned goods, castoffs sent south of the border like so much trash: "Veg-All. Creamed corn. Pear halves. Pumpkin pie filling. Pickled beets. Spam. Corned beef hash. Beef-

aroni. Tuna. Sauerkraut. Carnation condensed milk. Smoked oysters. Something without a label, flecked with rust. Alpo" (173). These goods, donated as an afterthought, as a way of disposing of useless pantry items, stand in sharp contrast with the contributions Mexican migrants make to the United States, which, once again, Urrea presents in a series of lists, noting that immigrants are the financial backbone of companies like "Dole, Green Giant, McDonald's, Stouffers, Burger King, the Octopus Car wash chain, Del Monte, Chicken of the Sea," and that their work includes "midnight shifts, front lawn raking, pool scrubbing, gas station back rooms, blue-jean stitching, TV assembly, athletic-shoe sole gluing, shit-taking, shit-scrubbing, shit-eating" (18). What is more, immigrants' financial contributions are enumerated in list fashion: "Gasoline, food, medicine, speeding tickets, alcohol, clothes, shoes, aspirin, used cars, English classes, community college textbooks, toothpaste, movies, used furniture, televisions, pets, pet food, underwear, pencils, gym clothes, school lunches, tampons, tobacco, bus fares, postage, hamburgers, Coca-Cola, bank accounts, credit cards, interest" (20). In addition to the rhetorical effects considered above, these lists throw into relief the social and material manifestations of the threshold that is the US-Mexico border. Instead of portraying the two nations as separate entities that happen to butt up against each other, they underscore the ways in which the United States' political, ideological, and discursive investment in constituting itself through the exclusion of Mexico and Mexicans betrays the essential role played by the latter in that process: not only does Mexico absorb material goods that are unwanted in the US, but it also plays a key role in building and maintaining the material conditions that make it possible for certain people in the US to decide to send their unwanted canned goods south of the border.

This rehashing of the lists that pop up across Urrea's book could continue, but the examples I give suffice to show that their function goes beyond an attempt to represent trash with language—although they certainly do just that. By using the same formal device to write about trash and trash dumps, current and historical events, popular culture, labor, food, the economy, and more, Urrea creates a rhetorical echo that resounds throughout the book. Given the centrality of the dump in the stories that Urrea tells and how well-suited the list is to representing the trash that fills that space, all of the other lists cannot help but remind the reader of the *dompe*. And this resonance is only strengthened when we take into account the list's formal ability to enact the concept of the threshold by highlighting its location between proliferation and containment, order and disorder, grammatical lack and referential excess. The result is an aesthetically and rhetorically effective rendering of the threshold quality of life on the border, both in and out of the dump.

In emphasizing the formal techniques that Urrea deploys, I hope not to have lost sight of what is at stake in his attempt to capture the ex-

perience of life on the US-Mexico border at the dawn of the NAFTA era. It is, I think, a book that is more concerned with focusing the reader's attention on the ethical, political, economic, and ecological questions that the border region poses than foregrounding its own writerly qualities or rhetorical strategies. However, it is precisely those formal techniques that generate and sustain Urrea's complex approach to that experience of life. His time-lapse descriptions and proliferating lists compel us to reconsider the notion that the passage of time inevitably brings progress and show us how garbage and the way we deal with it are necessarily linked to other social, economic, cultural, and political phenomena. By thinking with the threshold, approaching the spaces of the border in a way that emphasizes their temporal in-betweenness, and suggesting that the limit quality of the garbage dump manifests itself in many other areas of life, Urrea does more than denounce the injustice that neoliberalism visits upon human communities. In a way that anticipates notions of capitalism as a strategy for organizing nature that have been developed in the quarter century since its publication, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* portrays the advent of neoliberal economic policies as techniques for extracting value from the biotic communities that inhabit the border region until there is no value left and they can be cast aside like so much trash.⁵

The complex environmental stakes underlined in the book always seem to lead back to the dump, that ultimate threshold

space that exists ambiguously in between past and future, nature and culture, life and death. In an especially horrific sequence, Urrea recounts how recent flooding had unearthed the remains of a number of children who had been buried next to the dump, creating a lake of sorts (this is the "lake of sleeping children" that gives the book its title). Such a scene is hard to stomach, but Urrea forces the reader to confront it and consider his or her own part in bringing it about when he says, "Swim in this lake for a minute [...] Jump in—you own it: it's Lake NAFTA" (46). A subsequent vignette in which he tells a story about the dump, opens with "Imagine this," (49), a command that invites us as readers to activate our imaginations; at the end of the episode, he concludes with the rhetorical question "Can you imagine such a scene?" (51) as a way of underscoring the generalized inability to imagine, understand, or identify with what has been told. This command and this question ("Imagine this..."; "Can you imagine such a scene?") are key rhetorical elements for framing all of the book's scenes of the *dompe* and its role in the life, economy, and nature of the border. In this sense, by simultaneously commanding us to enact our imaginative faculties and calling them into question, Urrea signals the representational limits of the scenes he narrates, his ability to narrate them, and our ability to perceive them. By the same token, however, it is only through attempting to tell the story (and listen to it) that we can glimpse the thresholds that bind us.

NOTES

¹ Born in Tijuana in 1955 and raised in both Mexico and the United States, Urrea is one of the most visible Mexican-American writers in the US literary sphere. The experience of the border and living between cultures that he portrays in *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* is a through line in all of his work, which is comprised of some 16 books of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and memoir.

² Suffice it to say that the US-Mexico border has received a great deal of attention from academics, the media, and cultural agents; giving an adequate summary limited even to recent academic studies of the border is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I would direct readers' attention to two books that delve into the border's many paradoxes and tensions with great critical intelligence and explanatory aplomb. First, Claire F. Fox's *The Fence and the River* is a study that was undertaken in the years leading up to and just following implementation of NAFTA and therefore offers an analysis of border culture and politics from roughly the same moment as Urrea's book. Fox highlights contradictory discourses on freedom as they are registered in literature, cinema, photography, video, and performance art (including brief mentions of *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*) in order to show that "the border [...] must be understood as polyvalent, as a place where urban and rural, national and international spaces simultaneously coexist, often in complex and contradictory ways" (2-3). Additionally, in her analysis of the discourses evident in cultural production on the border, she does not lose sight of "the materiality of this 'constructed space' and the power it has to affect and structure the lives of those crossing it and divided by it" (14). A more recent book, Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border*, underscores the tension between globalization's ideal of unfettered movement and the material constraints that border infrastructure—fences, walls, checkpoints, detention centers, biometric tools—places on bodies (1). Of particular relevance to the arguments I make in this essay is Nail's theorization of the "in-betweenness" of the border: it is a division that both separates and joins, a conceptual and physical space that simultaneously includes and excludes, and a geopolitical zone of relatively seamless continuity for some and stark division for others (2-5). The border is, in other words, a threshold.

³ This is just to name a very few of the book-length studies on waste that have been published recently. Two excellent resources for tracking emerging developments on the study of waste are the Discard Studies website (Liboiron et al.) and the online interdisciplinary academic journal *Worldwide Waste*.

⁴ The number of worthwhile contributions in this vein is far too great even to be able to give a representative sample here. Considering only book-length studies that focus on the representation of waste in the cultures of Spain and Latin America, interested readers should consult Gisela Heffes's *Políticas de la destrucción / Poéticas de la preservación*, Maite Zubiaurre's *Talking Trash: Cultural Uses of Waste*, and Samuel Amago's *Basura: Cultures of Waste in Contemporary Spain*. All of these works are exemplary of what Lawrence Buell calls the third wave of ecocriticism in that the discourses they engage with have clearly left behind the debates about the nature of nature that characterized early works of ecocriticism and instead take up the task of examining both human and nonhuman experience in environmental terms (21-22).

⁵Here I am thinking of the notion of the Capitalocene that environmental historian and historical geographer Jason W. Moore has advanced over the last several years. In particular, the arguments he sets forth in *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (co-written with Raj Patel) about how capitalism depends on a cheap supply of nature, money, work, care, food, and lives, ring true in Urrea's portrayal of the way that the life of the border region is captured and put to work generating capital.

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Art as Advocacy: Protecting the US-Mexico Border Environment in Amanda Keller Konya's "Specimens"

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ABSTRACT: Amanda Keller-Konya's multilayered photographic image construction in "'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River" helps the viewer perceive the magnitude of the damage sustained by US-Mexico's border region residents in California's Imperial Valley and the effort necessary to clean the area's New River. The river originates in Mexicali city, Baja California, northwestern Mexico, crosses the border, flows north through California's Imperial Valley, and empties into the Salton Sea, the state's largest and most contaminated lake. A sustainable environment is crucial to the health of the valley's residents and surrounding farms that supply most of the nation's winter produce. Recovery of the area's ecosystem includes solving the impact of agricultural runoff and toxic dust as less water flows into the Salton Sea, a body of water vital for the wellbeing of Southern Californians, the fish, and the migratory birds that depend on it for survival.

KEYWORDS: Border ecology, Ecosystem, Ekphrasis; Imperial Valley farmlands; Imperial Irrigation District's Quantification Settlement Agreement; Mexico-US Border, New River, Salton Sea.

Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If you, not just you in this room tonight, but in all the thousands of other rooms like his one...will do this... you will change the earth.

William Faulkner

"The U. S.-Mexican *border es una herida abierta* where the third world grates against the first and bleeds" (25). Gloria Anzaldúa's often-quoted description of border culture provides the context to analyze the materials and images Amanda Keller-Konya, a Southern California photographer, used to create "Specimens" from North America's Most Polluted River.¹ In "Specimens," the viewer sees the landscape photographs through the river water samples collected in 10 jars. A label attached to each bottle with an appropriate quote from various media sources helps the observer grasp and further explore the sociopolitical issues embedded in the intersecting visual and verbal representation modes. The project's multifaceted design captures the suffering/ bleeding at the border rooted in social injustice through environmental degradation. By underscoring the United States' long-standing approach to border ecology, Keller-Konya, hopefully, contributes to healing the violent environmental toll and the deep hurt area residents carry.

Border area residents treat the contaminated New River as an open wound on the landscape and a health hazard to be avoided

The New River area residents in California's Imperial County treat the contaminated waterway as an "open wound on the landscape and a health hazard to be avoided" ("Poisoned Cities"). Luis Olmedo of the Comité Civico del Valle, a long-time activist for cleaner air in Imperial Valley, highlights the impact of border politics on the water and air quality in the region. "Is it because we're over 85% Latinos?" Olmedo asks. "People of color, living in poverty that are not worth that investment?" (Anderson). As Arturo Rodriguez, president of the United Farm Workers, affirms, "[t]he wealth of the agricultural industry has been built on the suffering of generations of farmworkers, from direct abuses in the fields to degradation of the land and environment" ("The Salton Sea is Dying").

New River Committee member Pablo Orozco's "Specimens" bottle-label account underscores the area residents' lack of political clout to effect change:

A lot of people have the attitude that it is not going to change for us. We don't have the economic or the political clout to demand a better quality of life, a better environmental quality. If this river was running through San Diego or San Francisco Bay, there would have been mitigation long ago perhaps even penalties or reparations to those affected.

Untreated sewage and industrial waste, teeming with contaminants and viruses that cause encephalitis, cholera, typhus, asthma, e-coli, and other illnesses, course down the river engulfing surrounding communities in lethal fumes and creating surreal effects.

The earth's neon-like orange color seen through the river sample water in one of Keller-Konya's "Specimens" is as unsettling as a hunter's observations on the bottle's label: "[...] One morning we saw green fog hanging over the river. If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. The whole river smells like a shithouse [...]."



Amanda Keller-Konya



Amanda Keller-Konya

Mexico and the US have recognized the river as a toxic danger for decades. Imperial Valley consistently has the highest rates of asthma associated hospitalization among California counties. The *Imperial County Public Health Status Report* 2015-2016 estimates the 2014 asthma emergency visits in Imperial County at 149.6 in comparison to California State's at 80.7 per 10,000 residents among children aged 0-17, and asthma hospitalization rates at 17.8 per 10,000 in that age group as significantly higher than the statewide 10.9. (69)

Despite binational agreements and cleanup efforts, the river continues to be the most polluted and lethal in the United States.

In the past two decades, the U.S. and Mexican governments have spent more than \$91 million on jointly funded upgrades of Mexicali's sewer system. ("Toxic River") In 1993, Governor Pete Wilson officially declared the New River a disaster. In fact, this was just another in a series of similar pronouncements that date back at least to the 1940s, when the New River first began to attract attention as a major source of pollution and disease. At the same time Wilson was speaking out on the New River, commissioners of the International Boundary and Water Commission —Narendra Gunaji from the United States and J. Arturo Herrera Solis of Mexico— signed Minute 288, called by some the most ambitious and comprehensive binational New River cleanup resolution to date. (McNeese et al)

Mexicali's rapid growth and the proliferation of maquiladoras [assembly plants south of the Mexican border that promote job-seeker immigration to the area], have outpaced the sewer infrastructure. "Government funding for wastewater projects has declined during the past decade" (Toxic River) and the New River continues to function as raw sewage and industrial wastewater disposal system. McNeese estimated Mexicali's sewage load in 1993 to be over 35 million gallons a day.



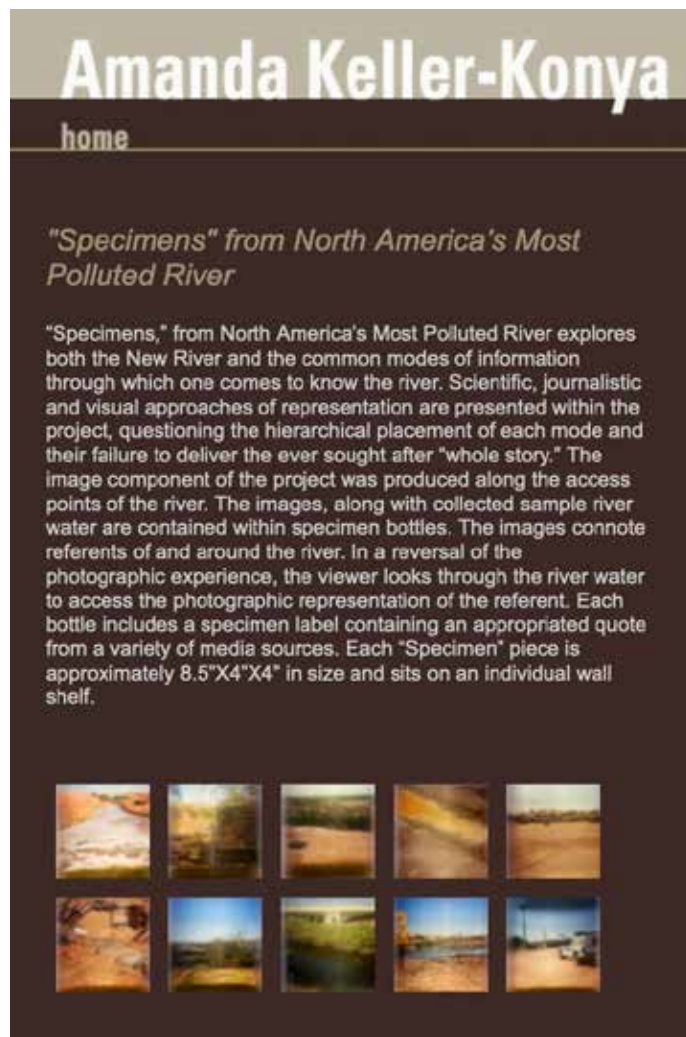
Amanda Keller-Konya



Amanda Keller-Konya

Keller-Konya's multilayered approach to image construction

Keller-Konya's website displays the 10 photographs. The image components of "Specimens" consist of photographs taken at various US access points of the New River, considered one the most polluted rivers within the United States (Xu 131). "Each bottle is approximately 8.5" X 4" X 4" in size and sits on an individual wall shelf" (" 'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River.").



By mousing over the picture, the bottle label narrative appears at the bottom of the page, and so does the photographic image within the specimen bottle on the right side.

"Specimens" is ekphrastic in the best sense of the term. The remarks printed on the tags attached to each bottle serve as verbal representations of the landscape's visual representations. As J. Heffernan reminds us, narratives connected to images "begin the work of interpreting the picture for us." At the same time, "picture titles and any kind of writing that is explicitly concerned with a work of art can express precisely what ekphrasis so often delivers: a radical critique of representation" (303-304). Keller Konya's multilayered approach to image construction "explores both the New River and the common modes of information through which one comes to know the river." The label comments present "scientific, journalistic, and visual approaches to representation, questioning the hierarchical placement of each mode and their failure to deliver the ever sought after 'whole story'" (" 'Specimens' from North America's Most Polluted River."). Furthermore, the bottle label narratives record "the thoughts and experiences from police officers, border patrol agents, immigrants, hunters, activists, and community leaders" ("Art and Text"), helping the viewer grasp the magnitude of the New River's environmental degradation, which runs through California's Imperial Valley, jeopardizing human beings, fish, wildlife, and "crops grown and eaten every day by Americans nationwide" (Art and Text).

The interface among the various materials in "Specimens" stages the sociopolitical issues in Keller Konya's work as her intent is "to provoke new questions and dialogs, offering viewers the opportunity to contemplate further the world we live in" ("Art and Text"). The tag narratives express concerns and offer

solutions. Sgt. Gonzalo Gerardo from the Calexico Police Department explains: "[...] I am not going to go into the water other than to save somebody's life [...] but not to catch somebody." Another tag speaks for the immigrants who gain access to the US through the toxic waters. The New River Sanitation Improvement Project spokesperson proposes "[e]nclosing the River along Highway 96 for about three miles [and building structures at the beginning and end of the enclosed river] that would function as a natural water pretreatment." John Ridley, California Councilman, observes, "that crazy as it sounds, dirty as the river is, somebody is making a power grab for it. The L.A. metropolitan water district wants a piece of the New River betting in can be someday cleaned up enough to use."

The New River-Salton Sea Connection

"Specimens'" image/text combinations inspire the viewer to investigate further and seek to understand Imperial County's catastrophic environmental conditions. For example, another bottle label quote from California's Environmental Agency's spokesperson reveals the close connection between the New River and the Salton Sea. "The present day channel of the New River was created in 1905-1907 when the Colorado River washed out diversionary works and the entire Colorado River flow coursed into the Salton Sea Basin creating the New and Alamo River channels and the present Salton Sea, thus the name 'new' river."

The New River flows north from Mexicali Valley, Baja California, northwestern Mexico across California's Imperial Valley, and empties into the Salton Sea, the state's largest and most contaminated lake.

The New River and the Salton Sea are impacted by agricultural wastewater rich in nitrates, as well as pesticides, selenium, and four million tons of salt discharged from the soil every year (Boyle) from more than 500,000 acres of heavily irrigated Imperial Valley farmlands surrounding the two bodies of water. The health of the valley's residents, wildlife, and



Mapquest. Distance between Mexicali and the Salton Sea



Mapquest. Baja California, Southern California's Salton Sea and surrounding areas.



Aerial view of the Salton Sea and Calipatria CA

©2013, Dennis R. Dimick

California's most productive agricultural region, whose crops yield "over 80% of the nation's winter produce" (About Us), depends on a sustainable environment.

The neglect and decay captured in Keller-Konya's New River photographs echo the surreal deterioration at the Salton Sea; the remains of wildlife that succumb to the lake's hyper-salinity dot the increasingly drying seabed, as does the multitude of dead fish and birds floating along the receding shorelines. However, the sight of discolored signs and discarded property do not ultimately

mar nature's beauty. One of the photographs captures a view of the New River from the vantage point of a folding patio chair surrounded by a canopy of golden foliage. It is easy to imagine the region's former natural magnificence and the urgency of protecting Imperial Valley's ecosystem and the crops surrounding the two bodies of water.



Amanda Keller-Konya



Amanda Keller-Konya

The Salton Sea's former grandeur is still evident. The lake's geographic splendor and diversity still attract photographers and desert art communities. Noteworthy desert art sites have established themselves in Slab City's East Jesus and Bombay Beach. Motivated by the sea's

climate change impending catastrophe and the urgency of averting a public health disaster, the artists transformed the area into open-air museums and recital venues. Their off-beat and often ironic creations and performances in various media are designed to advocate saving and restoring the Salton Sea to a live sea for enjoyment and recreation.

Fifteen times larger than the Island of Manhattan (Goodyear), the Salton Sea has no outlet and cannot cleanse itself. Runoff from farms has made the sea twice as salty as the ocean. Algae blooms from fertilizer phosphates and nitrates deplete oxygen and kill wildlife. Mitigation efforts for correcting the toxicity of the New River and the Salton Sea have been unsuccessful. As less water flows into the lake, the seabed is increasingly drying. The progressively receding shoreline exposes toxic dust that threatens all Southern California and Mexicali across the Border. Without effective mitigation, it is estimated that one hundred tons of dust will be air-born every day ("Toxic Dust and Asthma Plague Salton Sea Communities"). "In 2012, the terrible stench from the fish killed by one such bloom smothered Los Angeles for days, demonstrating the distance that toxic dust might travel" ("The Salton Sea is Dying").

The Audubon Society, environmental activists, and Anthropocene scholars urge exercising caution when referring to the Salton Sea as an accidental lake because it ignores the harm done to area residents. The Colorado River created the Salton Sink. Lying approximately 230 feet below sea level, it is in Boyle's estimation one of the hottest and driest sinks in the world. Since its inception, the Colorado River, depending on natural desert weather cycles, filled the dry seabed with freshwater or returned it to a dry basin. To consider the Salton Sea the product of an engineering accident justified government agencies from taking action to protect the lake and designated it as a repository for agricultural runoff. Ironically, building irrigation canals to create unnatural farmlands in the desert is responsible for the sea's increased salinity and pollution. Since 2003 the lake has been entirely fed by irrigation runoff and industrial/wastewater discharge from its two tributaries—the New and Alamo Rivers. Freshwater supply to the sea ended in 2003 when the Imperial Irrigation District's Quantification Settlement Agreement initiated the transfer of Colorado River water from Imperial Valley to San Diego. John Ridley's "Specimens" tag narrative explains California's "bloody battles" over water: "[...] this is California, a state born out of bloody battles over water [...]." The same bottle's photograph displays a sizeable yellow sign warning people to keep out of the New River's contaminated soil and water.



Amanda Keller-Konya



Amanda Keller-Konya

Safeguarding wildlife and biodiversity in the New River and the Salton Sea area is vital to the United States. "Despite being hyper-saline and growing saltier all the time, the sea provides habitat to some four hundred and thirty species of birds, some of them endangered, and is one of the last significant wetlands remaining on the migratory path between Alaska and Central America" (Goodyear). "During the summer of 1999, more than 8 million tilapia died in a single day, leaving them to wash along the shore in a band that was about three miles wide and 10 miles long. A variety of species no longer exist in the lake—only tilapia and the desert puff fish, which is an endangered species, remain, [...]." (Graham).

An old idea has acquired new momentum per Ian James and Sammy Roth's *USA Today*'s article titled "Two Paths for Long-Term Fixes at California's Shrinking Sea." The idea, which has high costs and could reach billions of dollars, transfers water from Mexico's Sea of Cortez into the lake and desalinates it through the area's plentiful geothermal power. According to the article, a subsidiary of Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, which owns 10 operational geothermal plants near the lake's southern shore, sent a desalination proposal to the state legislature.

In March 2017, California released a draft of a 10-year plan for the sea with a total of 30,000-acre restoration of the exposed seabed at an estimated cost of more than 400 million ("The Salton Sea: In Search of a Sustainable Future"). James and Roth voice concerns that the state's proposal will leave more than half the lakebed exposed, and there are no plans beyond 2028. State officials are considering building a "perimeter lake" stretching 60 miles around the lake's shoreline. The project would exclude seawater transfer as the process is complicated

and costly. According to James and Roth, the perimeter lake would require a levee, and the price of the levee alone would reach more than 627 million. California is still far from a solution to the Salton Sea crisis. The 10-year plan remains severely underfunded, and community members are frustrated with officials who have ignored their exposure to lung-damaging dust and "done little to protect the region's vulnerable residents from impending health emergency." ("California Far from Solutions")

Without a more aggressive long-term dust suppression plan, hazardous air pollution will make more people sick. "Specimens" New River photographs help the viewer grasp Gloria Anzaldua's reference to wounds at a precise US border location. The suffering and hardships Latino communities of farmers and their families endure as "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" in California's Imperial Valley is illustrated in Christian Garza's testimonial:

I was born with asthma. Last year there was a dust storm over a couple of days. I had an asthma attack, and I went to school, but the steroids I had with me wouldn't make it better. My mom picked me up and rushed me to the hospital. They called a code blue and told me I had a partially collapsed lung. If I'd been out there 10 minutes longer, my whole lung would have collapsed, and I'd have suffocated.

The attacks used to be once a month—now it's every couple of days. I'm only 19. What am I going to do when I'm 25? And I'm not the only kid with asthma here; there are so many kids with worse asthma than I have [...]. Every time I'd have an asthma attack, it would cost \$200 for medication because I didn't have proper insurance. Then I would have to go down to the food bank because we couldn't afford food after that. I always felt a huge burden—as a little kid, I would lie to my mom and tell her I didn't have an asthma attack because I knew there was not going to be food on the table after that ("Code Blue for the Salton Sea").

Conclusion

The observer learns the magnitude of the damage sustained by border area residents and the effort necessary to clean Imperial Valley's New River through Amanda Keller-Konya's "Specimens" multilayered photographic image construction. A sustainable environment is crucial to the health of the valley's residents and the California farms that supply most of the nation's winter produce. Recovery of the area's ecosystem includes solving the impact of agricultural runoff and toxic dust as less water flows into the Salton Sea, a body of water vital for the wellbeing of Southern Californians, the fish, and the migratory birds that depend on it for survival.

NOTES

¹ Southern California native Amanda Keller Konya received an MFA in photography from Otis College of Art and Design, a BFA in photography from California Institute of the Arts and an MA in art education from California State University, Northridge. Keller Konya's photographic practice is multifaceted. Her clients have included: CBS, Clear Channel, the Consulate General of France in Los Angeles, Google's Intersection, and Herrera MediaWorks. Keller Konya's personal work is mindful of the continuing state of flux in photographic media and addresses sociopolitical issues including: toxicity, school closures, foodstuff, land use and public/private space. Keller Konya's work has been exhibited at a variety of cultural institutions including: The University of Texas Centennial Museum, The Annenberg Space for Photography, the Studio for Southern California History and the Angkor Photography Festival in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Her images have been included in publications such as: Orion Magazine, Ornamental Others, and The Story of O exhibition catalogue. In addition to her Los Angeles based studio practice, Keller Konya heads the Photography and Imaging Program at Citrus College. As a photographic educator, her major goal is to provide students a positive and safe environment in which they can learn to use technological tools as a means of mindful communication. She is motivated to encourage students to engage in the analysis and production of images through personal projects and portfolio development for the students' desired industry workplace.

² Dennis Dimick is an American journalist, photographer, presenter, educator, and citizen of the Anthropocene. He served for years as executive environment editor for National Geographic magazine, and was a picture editor for the National Geographic Society for more than 35 years until retiring in December 2015.

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The Sublime and The Sewer

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ABSTRACT: *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk* (2017) follows a solitary male adventurer's six-day hike around California's Salton Sea as both a personal test of his own strength and perseverance as well as an opportunity to document and promote awareness of the sea's receding shoreline and the ecological disaster that would result from its complete disappearance. This documentary derives and draws from a legacy of the sublime imaginary and landscape photography that helped shape the contemporary, Western view of nature. *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk* relies on three kinds of images to represent the landscape: the overhead drone shot, satellite images and a handheld camera. These images directly inherit, as technics, the aesthetic ideology of the sublime upon which colonial, imperial and other extractivist projects have relied. They depend on human technological power to capture and enclose the image from the outside. The natural landscape is fashioned into an object of the human gaze and desire, but of a very particular kind: an object that lives and speaks on the condition of its always imminent disappearance. The film seems to suggest that only through more technical and human intervention can the Salton Sea return, however paradoxically, to its pristine and pure, although constructed, natural state.

KEYWORDS: sublime, landscape, extraction, Salton Sea, documentary

Introduction: Technics of the Solitary Walker

SOS: The Salton Sea Walk (2017) follows a solitary male adventurer who puts himself through physical and mental challenges in order to bring attention to a specific landscape and its accelerating precarity. Randy Brown, the film's protagonist, takes a six-day hike around the Salton Sea's 116-mile periphery. His goal is two-fold: a personal test of his own strength and perseverance as he attempts to become the first person to walk around the sea, as well as an opportunity to document and promote awareness of the sea's receding shoreline and the ecological disaster that would come from its complete disappearance. The film thus immediately announces its affiliation with a complex legacy of performances both physical and aesthetic. These include the solitary, philosophical-literary walks characteristic of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (Rousseau, Wordsworth, Thoreau, *et al.*), the more modern, filmic variations of these walks (*Paris, Texas*, *Into the Wild*, *etc.*), and the perhaps more banal, philanthropical walks devoted to "causes" (Cancer, ALS, *etc.*) that take place on any weekend. The documentary thus recruits its viewer as someone who moves, who thinks, who feels, and who cares, whether or not that viewer is aware of this legacy.

In both form and content, *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk* draws from the legacy of the sublime imaginary and landscape photography that has contributed to the shape of that same spectator's view of nature. The sublime, with its emphasis on enormity, on excess and disproportion, unlike the pacifying harmonies of the beautiful, inspires a mixture of pleasure and pain, awe and fear, diminishment

and transcendence. In the case of landscape photography like that of Carleton Watkins in the western United States, sublime aesthetics were activated through images of natural structures—mountains, glaciers, waterfalls, *etc.* While the human viewer feels small, perhaps even menaced, besides and below these natural monuments, she is also separated from them through her ability to capture, through reason and technology (the camera), the object of her gaze. A transcendental, indeed exceptional subject, becomes the correlative of a sublime object. Nature is put on a pedestal to be admired and protected by an invisible force. In order to exalt and protect nature, it must be simultaneously emptied of human presence. Empty space, however, lends itself to colonization, the extraction of resources and depositing of wastes. In *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk*, by following a solitary white man, nature is symbolically emptied out through the use of sublime imagery, which allows for the visual re-colonization of the space. Thus, although its heart is sublimely in the right place, the documentary, as informative or even inspirational as it may be, unintentionally highlights the need for alternative forms of visibility in the response to environmental crisis.

SOS: The Salton Sea Walk relies on three kinds of images to represent the landscape and the accelerating ecological disaster: the overhead drone shot, satellite images and a handheld camera. These images directly inherit, as technics, the aesthetic ideology of the sublime upon which colonial, imperial and other, subsequent extractivist projects have relied. They depend on human technological power to capture and enclose the image from the outside. Through optical technics, the earth is visually externalized as landscape and thus transformed into an object. This object of the human gaze

and desire is disappearing; and the film seems to suggest that only through more technical and human intervention can this extinction event be avoided, and the sea returned to its pristine and pure natural state. Nevertheless, the restoration process remains highly ambiguous. The sea is in many ways a testament to three ages of the extractivist project and the processes of its visual or aesthetic occlusion. Initially created from the byproducts of fertilizer-nutrient extraction and industrial-scale agriculture, it was then re-purposed as a leisure and vacation destination. Finally, plans for its remediation include transforming the sea into a lithium mining operation. Thus, the sea is the (in)visible sign of the early industrial colonization and transformation of a landscape, upon which rests an age of consumerist re-colonization, and potentially succeeded by a third age of renewed extraction supporting globalist fantasies of technocapitalist sustainability. The shimmering surface of the sea reflects and deflects this stratified history. The film's images, then, can be considered the technical, visual correlatives of the site's geo-engineering.

I. Imperial City, Imperial Valley

Both the sublime and extraction require the emptying out of the landscape and the erasure or invisibility of its inhabitants, both physically and symbolically. The act of emptying requires a multidirectional flow of both materials and images. In "The Urban Intentions of Geontopower," Elizabeth Povinelli discusses these dynamics of flow in the context of the European colonial project in the Congo. Water, she argues, is one of the "unseen infrastructures" of the colonial world:

These water infrastructures were built from industrial trade that had a mediated relationship to colonial worlds [...] Under the auspices of scientific inquiry and civilizational uplift, Leopold II would extract the countless fortunes that built Brussels into a wonder of the world and later the capital of Europe, on the backs of ravaged Congolese people and lands. (n.p.)

The violence required for the design, materials and construction of the colonial metropolis, is hidden in faraway places and excused in the name of progress; simultaneously, the toxic residue of the process, human waste, is also hidden, encased and moved underground in the form of a sewer. In addition to the physical removal, there is an aesthetics at play that enables and also dissimulates the project of building the colonial or imperial city. The visual dynamics include emptying the colony in order to extract resources and submerging infrastructure in order to waste or secrete, thus maintaining a clean and proper distance from the colonial violence and an aesthetic and psychological distance from the human body as organism. Without the acknowledged presence of the human bodies ravaged by the

process, seemingly unoccupied land is then colonized and used for the extraction of resources and depositing of wastes. Meanwhile, the imperial subject is placed at a distance from the extraction of wealth and from its own toxicity, waste.

The physical engineering of the imperial city with its invisible sewers corresponds to the aesthetic engineering of empty landscapes by artists and explorers through photography and language. Inhabitants are disappeared from the image's frame and thus the spectator understands the ideal image of nature to be empty. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon argues:

Through the invention of emptiness—emptiness being the wrong kind of presence—'underdeveloped' people on 'underdeveloped' land can be rendered spectral uninhabitants whose territory may be cleared to stage the national theatrics of megadams and nuclear explosions, those certifiable acts that mark the 'developing' nation's ascent into modernity's pantheon. Emptiness is an industry that needs constant rhetorical replenishment: the promotion of megadams depends on such emptying out, on actively administered invisibility. Within the dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility, the myths of emptiness generate unimagined—or at the very least, underimagined—communities. (165)

Empty land, then, requires labor and lends itself to the extraction of materials, which flow from symbolically emptied spaces to service city or colonial centers. What returns, hidden from view is the waste.

In the United States, landscape photography was one of the motors of this kind of work. The use of the sublime in landscape photography helped to separate faraway viewers and consumers of images from their extraction and the actual violence inherent in that extraction. Photography performed the work of replenishing the myth of emptiness that Nixon discusses. However, as Povinelli points out, the consequences of extraction are no longer hidden: "this idea that toxicity could be kept at a distance was always a fantasy. This fantasy has now been punctured. The toxic waterways they sealed far away from their view or right below their own feet are now overflowing" ("Urban Intentions"). The waste has overflowed the sewer. In our contemporary epoch, the so-called age of the human³, the landscape image that portrays nature as pristine and empty of human presence and impact seems to have exhausted its symbolic power. Instead, what is captured are images of ruin and waste.

The Salton Sea is a kind of North American variation on the imperial city as described by Povinelli. Here too, flows and distributions of water and waste are inextricably linked to forms and technics of visibility and invisibility. A landlocked sea in California's Imperial Valley, the Salton Sea was created through the flooding of

the Colorado River and is sustained by water from agricultural run-off. As a result, the sea is extremely nutrient rich, which causes massive algae blooms that suck the oxygen out of the water, leading to biota destruction including large amounts of fish death. In addition, the Salton Sea is drying up and as the shoreline recedes, more area of dry playa is exposed. The chemicals from the agricultural run-off, which are neutralized when wet, stick to the sand and dirt of the dry playa and are picked up by the wind. These particles can travel as far south as Mexico and east to Arizona, and when inhaled cause respiratory diseases. The blowback, then, overflows national borders.

II. Sublime Extraction

The Salton Sea is a site of both extraction and waste, and it is represented in the documentary through the aesthetic and performative practice of the sublime. In their reading of the Kantian sublime, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller explain that “the sublime is an experience of being overwhelmed by the object of contemplation” and that these objects are generally natural phenomena. What is essential to the experience of the sublime, they continue, “is the reflexive distancing performed by the viewer [...] The sublime overpowers the senses, but it is mastered and contained by reason” (100). I would add too, that it is also captured by the technology of images, in photography and film. An aesthetics of the Anthropocene, Horn and Bergthaller continue, should move away from the Kantian sublime and the notion of nature as other (101). What we see in *SOS* is at once a mourning of a loss of nature and a nostalgia to return it to its pristine state—which perhaps coincides with the experience of being overwhelmed—and a technology of capture—the human capacity and superiority over nature. In the technological, we can both return nature to its pure state and separate ourselves from it as object. The film’s project then, is one of double restoration through the sublime: to restore a *constructed* nature—to engineer nature as natural—and to restore a model of the human over and against, as well as a kind of reflection of, that constructed nature. In the “Imperial” Valley, man is also restored as sovereign, maybe even the subliminal force. The film’s rhetoric of restoration reflects the colonial rhetoric discussed by Povinelli. It is out of destruction, violence, and extraction that colonial cities and colonial power are restored:

Great cities rose from the smolder; and within these cities new topologies of glistening paving stones and stinking alleyways. As human and nonhuman worlds were ripped from one place to produce wealth in another, the great harvester would return, digging deeper into previously ravaged spaces, this time with imperial and corporate armies. (“Urban Intensions”)

The glistening surface of the sea once corresponded to the “glistening paving stones” of the imperial city, although in the different

context of American consumerism. But the same dynamics undermining the integrity of the urban fabric have undermined the vacation paradise. The distance from the bath to the toilet becomes indistinct.

The photographic sublime that constituted the image of the American West has its roots in the great gold mining projects of the 1850s. Again, like the colonial projects analyzed by Povinelli, there was a crucial aesthetic component that invariably worked alongside the brutal extractivist component. In the early 1850’s, Carleton Watkins, whose photography helped influence the preservation of Yosemite National Park, went to California as part of the Gold Rush. Prior to his famous images of Yosemite, he captured images of hydraulic mines that were used to help defend mining interests and raise capital investments (Scott 189). In “Photographing Mining Pollution in Gold Rush: California,” Conohar Scott argues that “Watkins’ aesthetic approach to photographing the hydraulic mine was calculated to elicit a sense of power and awe in the minds of a contemporary audience, who might not previously have encountered a photographic representation of industrial transformation on such a vast scale” (191). Watkins also composed his images of the mine so that the industrial infrastructure harmonized with the landscape, naturalizing the relationship between extraction and its environment (193). Watkins’ photographs were awe-inspiring because they portrayed industrial progress and human exceptionalism. However, today images of mines produce a very different kind of reaction. As the Gold Rush is replaced by the “white gold rush” of lithium, these kinds of images disgust the viewer rather than defend mining interests. The corporate armies arriving in the Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea today are looking for lithium. Lithium extraction, whether through mining or geoengineering, is supposed to lead humans into a “greener” future, technologically restoring the world and visually restoring the landscape.

As *SOS* points out, the Salton Sea contains significant amounts of lithium stored in the salt brines. Lithium has recently been termed “white gold” because of its importance in battery and electric car manufacturing. Extraction of lithium from the sea provides an alternative to traditional lithium mining, the kind performed by the company Lithium Americas, which at the moment is preparing to start blasting and digging a new mine on top of a dormant volcano in Nevada. This form of traditional mining, even when its goal is to produce materials for renewable energy, conforms to the usual extractivist paradigm. Lithium Americas’ proposed project would consume 3,224 gallons of water per minute and create 354 million cubic yards of waste, including radioactive uranium. Projects in lithium extraction are ramping up because of the demands for “clean” energy. The United States has some of the world’s largest lithium reserves but imports most of its supply from Latin America and Australia, which is then processed in China. However, as the electric vehicle industry grows, so does the demand for lithium. There is an international race for lithium extraction and processing and the United States, unsurprisingly, wants to be at the forefront.

Currently, the United States only has one large-scale mine, so the country must find new places for its extraction, like Lithium Americas' project (Penn and Lipton, "The Lithium Gold Rush"). However, images of lithium extraction endanger the sublime. Outsourcing this dirty industry allows for, as Povinelli argued, the relegating of "the monstrosities of colonial capitalism to places far away" and the continued obstruction of waste ("Urban Intensions"). The lithium-green economy avails itself of the same aesthetic procedures as the mining of the 1850s: dissimulating both extraction and waste. Local consumers of "green" energy can then congratulate themselves for combatting climate change by simply buying more electric cars while actively ignoring the brutality of extraction.

III. SOS and Photography

Landscape photography and its use of the sublime has evolved alongside technology and has continued to shape our view of nature. Early landscape photography was funded by surveying projects and national expansion goals, like Watkins' photographs of the hydraulic mines and even those of Yosemite. As the nation expanded westward, images of the land returned to the east that represented the land in specific ways. These photographs depicted nature from below and placed the viewer besides and below the awe-inspiring natural structures. In later years, war making moved the camera and the viewer upwards to view the landscape from the air. Jeremy Adelman explains that "Instead of looking up at the peaks, or off into the distance, the viewer increasingly found herself looking down at a more enclosed space" (60). From above, the viewer feels herself as existing outside the image, with the potential to escape whatever wreckage has been left behind. At the same time, looking down on nature gives the viewer a sense of power over the space and over the image.

SOS utilizes three types of images to represent the landscape: the drone shot, satellite images, and the handheld camera. The most prevalent way we see the landscape is through the first type: sweeping overhead drone shots. Many of these shots move slowly across the landscape and show the blue sea in contrast with the desert and the mountains. The film starts with these images combined with dramatic music and a voiceover that says: "water is the driving force of all nature." It is unclear if this "nature" includes humans. These images either move laterally from sea to desert and back or split the screen in half with sea on one side and desert on the other. The camera moves slowly overhead and Brown's figure walking below is almost imperceptible. The camera flies above and slightly behind him as we watch him walk into the distance between these two contrasting landscapes. These images portray the human as small and insignificant in comparison to nature but at the same time are captured by human-made technology. These images elicit both a sense of awe in the presence of nature and power over nature.

Another contrast shown from above is again the beautiful pris-

tine and glass-like image of the sea with the sun reflecting off it and the dilapidated structures that litter the beach. Similar contrasts are shown between large patches of green from the surrounding agriculture and the desert, the dead fish and dried up playa and the immense amount of bird life. These overhead shots provide striking contrasts between life and the lack thereof. The images of waste and emptiness can be understood as what Iyko Day calls ruin porn. Day describes it as a "twenty-first-century reprisal of the nineteenth-century pictorial landscape, [in which] ruin porn commingles the themes of manifest destiny and imperialist nostalgia" (129). These themes are also reflected in Brown's own nostalgia to return to the sea of his childhood, which is again, a constructed natural environment.

The film also takes advantage of various satellite and time lapse images in which we see the drying up of lakes like the Salton Sea and a computerized image of what looks like an explosion, meant to represent the potential dust storm that would occur if the sea disappeared. These images move the viewer even farther away from the ecological site and historical moment as they show what these places used to look like and what they will look like if nothing is done. This follows Day's argument that "ruin porn aestheticizes the loss of historical reference as a form of 'colonial unknowing'" (129). Day uses this term from Vimalassery et al.'s introduction to *On Colonial Unknowing* in which they outline different articulations from postcolonial and feminist scholars on ways in which epistemologies of unknowing "endeavors to render unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and dispossession" (1). They argue that this is not just a forgotten past made invisible through the passive act of forgetting but is an "act of ignoring" that is "aggressively made and reproduced" (1). The aesthetics of the sublime and the infrastructure of the sewers perform this act of ignoring through invisibility and the emptying out of space. With satellite images, the viewer is completely removed from the physical space, placed so high above and far away that these entanglements and historical structures are ignored. As T.J. Demos argues, these images offer "'whole earth' perspectives of the planet as not only devoid of social conflict but also safely in the grips of an emergent scientific mastery" ("To Save a World").

Google Earth images are also used to follow Brown's journey from outside, again separating the viewer from the specific site of the walk, while a handheld camera shakily follows Brown closely, spending a lot of time capturing his moving feet. We are at once removed and brought outside the Earth to witness the walk and then brought back down into the close and personal space of the protagonist. As the camera plays with scale, we understand the forthcoming ecological disaster to be multi-scalar as well, affecting humans and nonhumans across the hemisphere, but still controlled by the individual and his technology. This is a feature of the film that deserves praise although I would argue it is still inadequate. A more

adequate multi-scalar response might be through a more collective performance.

While aerial images of ecological ruin can illustrate the consequences of extractionist projects and perhaps mobilize a defense, Demos argues that they “tend to grant viewers a sense of control over the represented object of their gaze, even if that control is far from reality” (*Against the Anthropocene* 28). In his critique of geoengineering and what he terms the “good” Anthropocene—the idea that there are technological fixes to climate change—he argues that these kinds of aerial images as well as images of Earth from space, promote human exceptionalism:

Anthropocene visibility tends to reinforce the technoutopian position that ‘we’ have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging—and in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined [...] the Anthropocene places technocrats and scientists in the role of bringing about a great awakening regarding climate change and then conveniently puts those same figures in the position of being the only ones that can fix the problem—via geoengineering. (28)

Along with the aerial and satellite images of the sea, the film, through both images and narrative, proposes geoengineering fixes to the Salton Sea’s problem. With the technology of the drone, the film captures the geothermal power plants that surround the sea as well as the steam coming out of the natural mud pots. Brown explains that there is a lot of geothermal power in the area that needs to be taken advantage of. The proposed solution to the sea’s disappearance is a sea-to-sea canal that would bring a constant flow of water by way of the Pacific Ocean and Mexico. This is presumably quite expensive and would require binational cooperation. To pay for this fix, some suggest taking advantage of the sea’s lithium stores. The geoengineering of lithium extraction from the sea is a possible solution. These suggestions do not so much save the sea as put into place a new geoengineering project that would restore the aesthetics, but like the sewers of colonial Europe described by Povinelli, just move the waste through the construction of new flows and extractions.

Conclusion: Alternative forms of visibility

Sublime imagery has the dual effect of producing awe and wonder and placing the viewer in a position of power over the very object of awe that might otherwise threaten to negate it. Historically, the sublime has been used in landscape photography in efforts to symbolically empty out a space; human presence is generally rendered invisible in these types of images. Nixon describes the wilderness sublime as “a discourse that enfolded elements of eulogy and el-

egy. The wilderness sublime became inseparable from a contest over the rhetoric of the monumental: a clash between transcendent engineering and transcendent geology invested with awe and grandeur” (155). Landscape photography, such as that of Watkins, worked to both hide the “transcendent engineering” of the natural structures by extractive mining in order to portray a nature in need of protection by means of “awe and grandeur.” Both cases, symbolically and physically, depended on extraction and a multidirectional flow of image and material. Properly and honestly tracing these flows, which would also include the minerals constitutive of the photographic process itself (silver, for example, for Watkins, lithium for Brown), requires alternative or counter forms of visibility.

One of these alternative forms of visibility come from another physical and aesthetic performance of a walk: the Fort McDermitt tribe’s 273-mile prayer run to protest the construction of the Lithium Americas’ mining project. The run was organized to raise awareness of the potential water contamination and accumulation of waste from a mine “which sits in an area historically controlled by the tribe before it was taken by the United States in 1863” (Penn and Lipton). It is interesting to compare this prayer run with Brown’s solitary walk around the Salton Sea as both actions are meant to raise awareness of environmental degradation. Brown’s walk is individual, and he is driven by his memories of vacations at the sea, a place of his childhood that he does not want to lose. As he walks, he remembers what the shoreline used to look like, the people that crowded some of the beaches and surrounding businesses, and the time spent with his family. At the end of the walk, however, Brown will leave. Perhaps he will continue to try and bring attention to the sea, but its future will not substantially affect his livelihood. This is quite different from the Fort McDermitt residents. Their run is one of collective action. One person does not run the entire 273-miles but it is completed as a community. This is also the land on which they live and of which they have already been dispossessed. This is not to say that Brown’s walk is insincere; indeed, it is its profound sincerity that sutures it to the sublime imaginary. But it is a different kind of performance. Towards the end of the film and the end of Brown’s walk, he starts to talk about the “finish line” and the end point of his challenge. He poses the question of “then what?” as if his personal race ends here. In many ways, this walk is portrayed as Brown’s individual challenge that has a finish line or end point. Visually, this finish line is represented from above with a drone shot. Brown crosses the finish line as if winning a race and is congratulated by his family and supporters and in this image, we don’t even see the sea, but the yacht club, a general site of wealth and exclusion. For the members of the Fort McDermitt tribe, like many other Native American land defenders, this is not a race to a specific finish line but a way of sustaining and fighting for their lives. Thus, aesthetics is displaced by ethics, sublimity by the demand for justice. The images of the prayer run in the *New York Times* show a group of people with protest signs linked arm and arm. The still photograph captures the Nevada landscape in the background but is focused on

the faces and bodies of the protesters. While the overhead images of *SOS* separate the spectators from the performance of Brown's walk, the *Times* photograph puts the viewer at eye level and side by side with the protesters.

The deadlock of the environmental documentary is that it invariably encounters the limits of visibility as politically effective. In correlation with the physical efforts to restore the Salton Sea for renewed extraction, the documentary attempts to perform the

aesthetic work of visually restoring the landscape through the use of the sublime. However, this double restoration project never successfully contests or otherwise diverts the invisible flows required to sustain neocolonial/techno-capitalist imaginaries. Perhaps the eye level view of the Lithium Americas protesters performs less an aesthetic than directly political contestation to the faceless nature of the sublime which may have to be given up to do justice to the planet.

NOTES

¹The Anthropocene was coined by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to name the geological period following the Holocene, identifying humans as a geological force (Horn and Bergthaller 1).

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Breadfruit in the Wake: Imagining Vegetal Mutiny in Derek Walcott's "The Bounty"

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Abstract: This essay focuses on Derek Walcott's depiction of the historical journey of the breadfruit across the Pacific. The British Empire collected breadfruit plants from Tahiti in the eighteenth century to provide a staple food for enslaved Caribbean laborers, and, by extension, to bolster the system of plantation slavery. Yet in Walcott's poem "The Bounty," the breadfruit plants engage in a Glissantian act of *détour* in the Pacific Ocean. They collaborate with the human mutineers aboard the ship to subvert the imperial transplantation project. While the poem dilates this moment of vegetal agency, it also references the breadfruit's ultimate arrival in Saint Lucia. Christina Sharpe's notion of "wake work" sheds light on the symbolic status of the breadfruit plants that eventually landed in the Caribbean, which continue to live in the wake of plantation slavery, the wake of the *Bounty*, and the wake of their own vegetal mutiny in the Pacific.

Keywords: Breadfruit, Walcott, the *Bounty*, transplantation, *détour*, wake, Glissant, Sharpe, Caribbean studies, ecocriticism

In Caribbean history, oceans have always been critical border environments mediating the migration of people and plants to island soils. While the Atlantic was the avenue for European settler colonization and the notorious Triangle Trade, many Caribbean food crops actually hail from the Pacific, their transit a result of imperial transplantation. This article examines Derek Walcott's literary imaginary of one such plant, the breadfruit tree, which made an unplanned stop on its way to the Caribbean when the ship carrying the plants, the *Bounty*, erupted in a bloodless mutiny. Focusing on the breadfruit plants in this moment of rupture between continents provides a way of seeing how border environments can make space for botanical agency and resistance. The movement of the breadfruit plants in the interstitial space of the ocean disrupts a determinist narrative of their transplantation while also shedding light on breadfruit's resonance in the Caribbean today.

Examinations of the 1789 mutiny on the *Bounty* have mostly centered on the dramatic confrontation between the disgruntled crewmen and the stubborn captain William Bligh that resulted in the latter being set adrift in the Pacific Ocean along with eighteen loyalists. The fate of the breadfruit plants aboard the ship, which were being imported from Tahiti (known at that time as Otaheite) to Jamaica as a source of food for the enslaved people of the Caribbean colonies, is often swept aside (Powell 387). Yet Derek Walcott's poetic account of the mutiny reveals how the breadfruit trees themselves participated in the act of insubordination that delayed their importation to the British West Indies for four years. As the ship makes a detour away from its intended path, the breadfruit plants become symbolically engaged in an act of Glissantian *détour* that defers their incorporation into the plantation system.

The improbable drama of the *Bounty* has captured the popular imagination for generations, inspiring a novel and five feature

film adaptations including major blockbusters starring the likes of Marlon Brando and Mel Gibson. The details of this heavily mythologized journey bear rehearsing, as they offer insight into Walcott's poetic re-envisioning of the voyage as well as the place of breadfruit in the popular imagination at large. Joseph Banks, the President of the British Royal Society and the scientific director of Kew Gardens, advocated for the transplantation of breadfruit trees to the West Indies in the eighteenth century after encountering them on the island of Tahiti, where he surmised that their plentiful fruit afforded the local people a life of leisure and ease (O'Brian 232). The project met with great support among members of Parliament, many of whom had their own indigo and sugar interests in the West Indies. The transplantation was also the product of intensive lobbying on the part of West Indian planters, who argued that their slaves were facing a food crisis due to the trade embargo triggered by the American Revolution. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has convincingly disputed this narrative, arguing that the high rates of slave mortality during the period were actually the result of the brutal conditions workers faced on the plantations rather than the alleged lack of local food sources (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 14). Nonetheless, Captain William Bligh was ordered by the British Admiralty to personally observe the collection of the "desirable vegetable" in Tahiti, where his crew amassed some 1,015 plants and loaded them aboard the ship (Wilder 6). Once asea, Bligh's poor leadership precipitated his expulsion in a bloodless mutiny, during which he was ejected to a small launch while the mutineers steered the ship back to Tahiti and tossed the precious botanical specimens to sea. It was not until four years later that Bligh succeeded in bringing the plants to the West Indies, where the enslaved people ironically refused to eat the fruit that had been imported at such extravagant expense (O'Brian 239).

Today, breadfruit continues to resonate culturally across the Caribbean archipelago as a vegetal legacy of enslavement. Jamaica Kincaid writes, "in a place like Antigua the breadfruit is not a food, it is a weapon" (Kincaid 137). Her rebuke speaks not to its prickly rind nor to its controversial texture, but rather to the fruit's role as a botanical projection of colonial power. Because breadfruit plants were historically meant to provide a cheap food source for enslaved Africans, and, by extension, to prop up the system of Caribbean plantation slavery, their ongoing presence on the islands of the British West Indies is a potent reminder of the dehumanizing conditions of enslavement (Braun 644). In general, the planters who lobbied for the breadfruit's importation viewed the problem of providing nutrition for their slaves in much the same manner as that of providing fodder for livestock (Zilberstein 507). Therefore, a reconsideration of the fruit's importation is one way of thinking about how the plantation structure placed Afro-Caribbean people into "forced intimacy with the inhuman" (Yusoff 10). The transplantation of the breadfruit was an effort to discipline the Melanesian tree into the system of "multispecies forced labor" that extracted the labor of people and plants alike (Haraway and Tsing 5).

Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott's "The Bounty" intertwines the history of the Tahitian tree with an elegy for the poet's own mother. Walcott, the 1992 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, is known for his evocative depictions of Antillean landscapes and histories in the colonial and postcolonial eras. In its portrayal of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, Walcott's poem opens up a moment of deferral in the plants' path from Tahiti to the Caribbean when they are cast asea. Invoking Christina Sharpe's notion of "wake work," I argue that the breadfruit specimens are aligned with the kidnapped Africans whom they were brought to feed; people and plants alike are located in the wake of colonial transplantation efforts. In centering the jettisoned plants in Walcott's poem rather than the crew or captain of the *Bounty*, I explore how the interpretation of the event might change if we imagined the flora themselves to be agentive participants alongside humans in the mutiny on the ship. This reading focuses on the interstitial zone of the Pacific Ocean where the mutiny occurs rather than the terrestrial endpoints of the *Bounty*'s journey. Dwelling in this oceanic border environment is one way of registering the fact that the breadfruit's journey to the Caribbean was not inevitable; instead, its transplantation was marked by rupture and indeterminacy.

I am not the first to read "The Bounty" through an ecocritical lens; George Handley has interpreted the poem in the context of progress recovery narratives of nature, as well as narratives of nature's inevitable decline, to argue that Walcott offers a third, cyclical model for the relation between human history and natural history (Handley 213). Likewise, Elaine Savory has explored the ecopoetic impulse behind Walcott's verse, claiming that the centrality of plants in his writing and in "The Bounty" in particular fulfills a vital need to highlight the environmental diversity and degradation of the Caribbean by presenting "a sense of eclectic and diasporic wil-

derness" (Savory 89). These critics have discussed the breadfruit as one plant among many in Walcott's characteristically rich botanical tapestry, treating it as a component of nature at large rather than a protagonist in its own right. By isolating the unique place of *Artocarpus altilis* in the poem, I want to show how this plant's history of routing and rooting has altered its material and metonymic content in Walcott's native island of Saint Lucia, where its graceful palms continue to denote the afterlives of plantation slavery with its legacies of interspecies violence and intercontinental dislocation (DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots* 3).

For Walcott, the notion of breadfruit as afterlife is deeply personal; its glossy leaves and spiky fruits mark the site of absence of his beloved mother, Alix. Indeed, he so closely associates her with the plants aboard the vessel piloted by Captain Bligh that his retelling of the infamous mutiny on its decks becomes a way of thinking the possible detours that her soul might have taken on its cosmic trajectory. Thus, when the breadfruit appears as a rooted tree in the poem, these moments, though joyful, are indications of her ultimate arrival in the port of death. The plant, in this configuration, becomes a form of life that is always necessarily an afterlife, a thriving organism that ironically requires loss as one of its essential nutrients. It is not accidental that Walcott gives the French Creole term "*bois-pain*" for the tree; the bilingual pun suggests that in its material grammar on Saint Lucia, the breadfruit is a tree of pain (Walcott 3).

Walcott's retelling of the breadfruit's notorious journey is closely linked to his agnosticism about the fate of his mother's soul. In a passage that begins, "But can she or can she not read this? Can you read this, / Mamma, or hear it?" he muses:

Snails move into harbour, the breadfruit plants on the *Bounty*
will be heaved aboard, and the white God is Captain Bligh.

Across white feathery grave-grass the shadow of the soul
passes, the canvas cracks open on the cross-trees of the *Bounty*,
and the Trades lift the shrouds of the resurrected sail.

All move in their passage to the same mother-country,
the dirt-clawing weasel, the blank owl or sunning seal.
Faith grows mutinous. The ribbed body with its cargo

stalls in its doldrums, the God-captain is cast adrift
by a mutinous Christian, in the wake of the turning *Argo*
plants bob in the ocean's furrows, their shoots dip and lift,

and the soul's Australia is like the New Testament
after the Old World, the code of an eye for an eye;
the horizon spins slowly and Authority's argument

diminishes in power, in the longboat with Captain Bligh.
(Walcott 9–10)

In this densely allusive passage, the passage of Alix's soul from life to death is linked to the historical journey of the *Bounty* with its botanical cargo. At first, the arrival of the ship to its destined port, like the death of Walcott's mother, would appear to be an inexorable destiny set out for it by the British Crown. Indeed, his use of the future tense ("the breadfruit plants on the *Bounty* / will be heaved aboard") implies the sense of linear time enforced by the domineering Captain Bligh. Likewise, "All move in their passage to the same mother-country" recalls the certainty of death as an ultimate telos for all beings, be they weasels, owls, seals, or human beings. Thus, the ship is rendered as a floating grave, transporting plants and soul alike toward their predestined termini. He imagines that her soul might take refuge among the Tahitian trees, entering through the cracks in the canvas meant to protect the saplings from the cold air of the quarter-deck (O'Brian 235).¹

Yet the historical mutiny on the *Bounty's* decks allows Walcott to imagine a detour in the seemingly inexorable trajectory of his mother's spirit. What if, he wonders, she might have landed in the faraway realm of the "soul's Australia" rather than proceeding directly to her destination? In other words, he envisions a diversion in the seemingly linear journey toward death in the same way that Fletcher Christian's rebellion causes a swerve in the historical trajectory of the breadfruit to the West Indies. Walcott's fantasy of deviation from the path of death recalls Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's theorization of *détour* as a set of linguistic and cultural practices developed by enslaved people to evade and manipulate the structures of plantation life while appearing to submit to their demands (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 20–26). *Détour* can be a subtly anticolonial act, a swerve away from the pressures of production through small acts of sabotage that are somewhere in between rebellion and acquiescence. To think the mutiny on the *Bounty* as *détour* means to conceive of the revolt as a divergence from the path of imperial "progress," a shift that is also, for Walcott, a way of deferring the exigency of death.

In the spirit of tracing the specific itinerary of the breadfruit in the poem, I want to focus not on the mutineers who sailed back to Tahiti nor on Bligh and his loyalists who alighted some 6,500 nautical miles away in Indonesia, but rather on the precious plants that landed in the open waters of the Pacific Ocean. Consider Walcott's telegraphic account of their fate: "in the wake of the turning *Argo* / plants bob in the ocean's furrows, their shoots dip and lift." These would-be transplants never attain their intended port; instead, they try futilely to take root in the sea whose furrows resemble the form of a plowed field, bobbing vertically in its stagnant doldrums rather than progressing laterally across its waters.

The reference to the *Argo* recalls the ancient hero's quest to deliver the golden fleece to King Pelias, a mission to restore his rightful throne by delivering a precious good. Like the transplantation of the breadfruit, which was intended to secure the authority of the slaveholding planters in the West Indies against the threat of possible rebellion, Jason's journey on the *Argo* to attain the fleece is

ultimately futile. He is deposed from the throne and exiled from his kingdom, left to die alone beneath the hull of his rotting ship (Euripides and Murray 96). Likewise, the importation of the breadfruit is now considered an expensive failure, as the enslaved Africans for whom it was intended rejected its tasteless flesh in favor of the local staples of their small provision grounds.² Thus, not only does the allusion to the Greek hero communicate the epic scale of the *Bounty's* voyage; it also refers to the irony of its mission by likening the *Bounty* to the ancient vessel and its pointless quest.

Returning to the poem, I want to stress that the plants are caught "*in the wake* of the turning *Argo*" (emphasis mine); that is, as the mutineers turn around to return to the shores of Tahiti, the plants float in its trail of disturbed water. Christina Sharpe has theorized the wake in its multiple definitions (a vigil for the dead, a path left by a ship, an act of waking up, etc.) to argue that the metaphor of being in the wake is the primary condition of Black being and consciousness (Sharpe 17–18). Specifically, "to be *in the wake* is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe 13–14). Sharpe proposes an analytic of "wake work," a practice of writing from within the wake of slavery while attempting to imagine alternative possibilities to its epistemic condition, as a means of negotiating the ways in which the Middle Passage continues to endure as captivity and antiblackness today.

Taken thus, for the breadfruit plants to bob "*in the wake*" of the ship, which indexes both the *Bounty* and the *Argo*, makes them a figure for Walcott's own consciousness as a poet writing in the wake of slavery on Saint Lucia, himself a descendant of enslaved and European people alike (Als). These floating specimens exist in a state of temporal and spatial dislocation, creating their own bobbing rhythm that is out of time with the pace of colonial transplantation yet still in the sway of its waves. Their jettisoning itself performs a kind of wake for those who have died of malnutrition and abuse on the plantations, the enslaved people for whom their fruits had been intended. Indeed, I cannot help but read in this brief elegy for the abandoned fruit an echo of Glissant's requiem for those drowned in the abyss of the sea during the Atlantic slave trade, ghostly hauntings marked by "balls and chains gone green" (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 6). The Pacific Ocean, like the Atlantic, becomes a receptacle for these traces of kidnapping and murder, where the matter of the dead becomes part of the ocean's "vegetal fury" (Walcott 13).

In answer to Sharpe's incitement to "wake work," which ruptures the form of the wake while inhabiting its space, I want to make space here for a more hopeful reimagining of this passage in Walcott's poem and in the mythologized history of the *Bounty* by reading the breadfruit as *waking up* to its own commodification in the very same gesture by which it stages a vegetal wake for the dead. This provocation requires an intentional misreading of the historical events on the ship to foreground the possibility of botanical agency. What happens when we reframe the jettisoning prompted by the mutiny on the *Bounty* as a moment of vegetal resistance in the

poem, a diversion away from the logics of linearity and economic efficiency toward some alternate mode of being suggested by the bobbing of the waves? In other words, what if we expand the notion of mutiny to encompass not only the disgruntled sailors led by Fletcher Christian to betray their captain, but also these bobbing shoots refusing their own commodification, and, in their very dying, betraying the British Empire? This vision is no less farfetched than the fantasy that Walcott himself advances: the dream of his mother's soul taking a detour through Australia to find pause on the way to her eventual death. Consider that this moment disrupts the monetization of the breadfruit, preventing its transformation into a colonial commodity via its importation to a distant land. Thus, the image of the floating saplings suggests a sort of economic subversion, one that rhymes with the long-standing tradition of sabotage by enslaved laborers on plantations. The breadfruit specimens maroon themselves at sea as if in homage to the defiant maroons of the Caribbean hillsides.

Yet we should recall that this moment of deferral is only an interlude; the breadfruit has long since arrived in the Caribbean by the time of the poem's writing, the lull of the detour a distant memory. In fact, the breadfruit was eventually imported to St. Vincent in 1791, where the specimens arrived in "flourishing state" (Powell 400). (This knowledge is compounded by the ironic truth that the species had already been introduced by the French years before, a fact of which Banks had been informed a full six months prior to the voyage of the *Bounty*) (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 32). Thus, there is a quality of belatedness to Walcott's hopeful dilation of the detour on the breadfruit's (and, by extension, his mother's) voyage toward its destination; the reader knows that the plant has already arrived in the Caribbean, because it appears on the very first page of the elegy, where it "opens its palms in praise of the bounty" (Walcott 3). Thus, the breadfruit must have taken root on the island of Saint Lucia, meaning that it, and Alix, have already arrived at their respective ports of call before the elegy begins. In Glissant's idiom, this moment marks the complementary *retour* to the breadfruit's *détour* in the Pacific Ocean. The description of the living tree in Saint Lucia brings the poem back from the possibilities afforded by the sea to the terrestrial "point of entanglement" where people and plants became entwined in the system of colonial plantation slavery (*Caribbean Discourse* 26).

In this sense, the lovely image of the breadfruit opening its palms in praise that announces the start of the poem is taking place in the wake of the *Bounty*, in the wake of Captain Bligh, in the wake of plantation slavery, and in the wake of the death of Alix Walcott. Indeed, the plant and its contemporaries appear to draw their very nutrients from the remains of the corpses that lie buried in the ground:

Nothing is trite
once the beloved have vanished; empty clothes in a row,

but perhaps our sadness tires them who cherished delight;

not only are they relieved of our customary sorrow,
they are without hunger, without any appetite,
but are part of earth's vegetal fury; their veins grow

with the wild mammy-apple, the open-handed breadfruit,
their heart in the open pomegranate, in the sliced avocado;
ground-doves pick from their palms; ants carry the freight

of their sweetness, their absence in all that we eat,
their savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices,
their faith that we break and chew in a wedge of cassava,

and here at first is the astonishment: that earth rejoices
in the middle of our agony, earth will have her
for good: wind shines white stones and the shallow's voices.
(Walcott 13–14)

More than being cruelly indifferent to Walcott's loss, the plants actually feed upon Alix's body and transfigure her matter into edible fruit, suggesting a continuum between human and nonhuman materiality. It bears note that the breadfruit appears among the wild mammy-apple, the pomegranate, and the avocado, a medley of imported and native species that take root together in the creolized Saint Lucian soil. Apparently, tasting the fruit of the island entails a sort of intergenerational cannibalism, since its bounty is formed out of the physical and spiritual matter of the dead. Each nourishing bite imbricates the eater within this cycle of organic salvage; "you are what you eat." In other words, although Alix no longer has an appetite, she feeds the appetites of others with her "savour that sweetens all of our multiple juices." Recognizing this continuity between plants and people offers solace to Walcott in his grief, who realizes that the "earth will have her for good." Even out of his pain, the island ecosystem can find resources for renewal.

Thus, the breadfruit trees in the present tense of the poem reincarnate the forms of their perished human and nonhuman predecessors, becoming signs of a vibrant vegetal afterlife to the structures of colonial importation and plantation slavery. Consider the fact that most breadfruit plants are propagated by cuttings rather than by seeds, so they are exact genetic replicas of their ancestors that reproduce the botanical forms of bygone eras (Roberts-Nkrumah 6). When we recall that the story of the *Bounty* and the importation of the breadfruit is widely known across the Caribbean, it becomes apparent that the tree continues to act as a metonym for the story of its imperial transplantation as it spreads its clones across the island landscapes. It is always located in the wake of the detour, its meaning so overdetermined by its multiple histories of trans-Pacific transplantation that it has never become wholly naturalized in the Caribbean imaginaries in which it now

participates. Put differently, the breadfruit tree today still references the border environment of the ocean, the rupture between continents, even now that it is planted in the Caribbean soil. Its meaning is rendered irreducibly ambivalent: while one can rejoice

in the exuberance of its growth and find sweetness in its juices, its fruits derive their nutrients from a painful past, their mutiny a distant, echoing memory.

NOTES

¹It should be noted that the botanical specimens were given this privileged place on the boat to allow them access to the sea air, while slave ships routinely crowded kidnapped Africans into the unwholesome conditions of the lower steerage.

²Elizabeth DeLoughrey speculates about the reasons for their refusal, contrasting the breadfruit importation with the thriving market economy by which enslaved people could acquire a degree of autonomy by cultivating and selling their crops. She conjectures, "I'd like to think that the slaves of the Caribbean plantation complex recognized that this food contract [the breadfruit] was bought at the price of their own freedom." (DeLoughrey, "Globalizing the Routes of Breadfruit and Other Bounties" 38)

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Borders and Butterflies in José Manuel Prieto's *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire*

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ABSTRACT: In Cuban novelist José Manuel Prieto's 'Russian Trilogy', and in particular, in the novel *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire* (1997), the experience of crossing borders and the reflection on how to pass safely, and often secretly, is vital. The geographical borders that take center stage are those of the former Soviet Union of the 1990s and adjacent Northern and Eastern countries as well as the Black Sea. In a first step, this essay examines the portrayals of changing borders, changing concepts of the border, as well as the protagonist's main strategies of border-crossing in the novel. In a second step, it explores the impact of a seemingly lighthearted metaphor, that of the butterfly to elucidate what I see as Prieto's protagonist's innovative approach of reacting to the experience of the border and his previous hyper-individualist attitudes when facing it. This experience is intrinsically linked to the role of writing and reading. Both hold a transcending potential for the narrator, as it is through acts of reading and reiterated attempts at writing that he begins to engage in a process of care for himself and others and devise transformative forms of being with others, even virtually, when a spatial or temporal separation prevents real encounters. His pondering on his previous restless crisscrossing of national confines may thus help, in the most fortunate moments, transcend spatial and conceptual confines, move from a geopolitical to an ecopolitical conceptualization of fugitive crossings, and broaden what he calls the notion of an 'imaginación aduanal.'

KEYWORDS: José Manuel Prieto, border-crossing, Livadia, butterfly

In Cuban novelist José Manuel Prieto's 'Russian Trilogy'—*Enciclopedia de una vida en Rusia/Encyclopedia of a Life in Russia* (1997), *Livadia/Nocturnal Butterflies of the Russian Empire* (1999), and *Rex* (2007)—, the experience of crossing borders and the reflection on how to pass safely, and often secretly, is vital (Newman "Negotiating Borders" 153). The geographical borders that take center stage in the fictional spaces of the novels are those of the former Soviet Union of the early 1990s and its surrounding states. Prieto's protagonist J. experiences the collapse of the Soviet bloc of communist countries and shifting of national boundaries in, or on his way to or away from, Novosibirsk, St. Petersburg, Helsinki, Istanbul, Odessa and Livadia, and, in the case of *Rex*, the Spanish coastal city Marbella.¹ He is a restless traveler and muser (*Enciclopedia*), a smuggler of night vision goggles, hunter of rare butterflies and love letters (*Livadia*), and finally the private tutor of the son of a fabulously wealthy Russian diamond forger (*Rex*). The narrative style of Prieto's novels is non-chronological, marked by digressions and parenthesis. His prose is metafictional and references a variety of discursive models: *Enciclopedia* emulates encyclopedia entries, *Livadia* refers to the model of the letter, and includes manifold allusions to the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, and finally *Rex* adapts the 'Art of the Pastiche' in Anke Birkenmaier's coining (123), being both a pastiche of the genre of the commentary (Newman "Negotiating Borders" 155) and homage to Marcel Proust's writing. All these strategies result in the

telling of their narratives in fragments, drafts and comments, hence inviting us to engage in combinatory and associative readings.

This essay examines in a first step the portrayals of changing borders, changing concepts of the border, as well as the protagonist's main strategies of border-crossing in *Livadia*.² The geographical borders that are described refer mainly to the borders of the former Soviet bloc with Northern and Eastern countries as well as the Black Sea, the shores of which were shared by the Soviet Union and Turkey and today by Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey. Here, J.'s deep loneliness, distrust of others, and radical attitude of fending for himself reference the experience of a reality in flux that was moving from a one-party system and state-regulated economy towards strong separatist endeavors and a surge in rough, including rogue, capitalist practices. In a second step, I will explore the impact of a seemingly lighthearted metaphor that is repeated at several instances in the narrative and becomes the title of the novel's English translation—that of the butterfly and in particular its wings, to elucidate what I see as Prieto's protagonist's innovative approach of reacting to the experience of the border and his previous hyper-individualist attitudes when facing it. In the novel, this experience is intrinsically linked to the role of writing and reading. Both hold a transcending potential for the solitary narrator-protagonist J., as it is through acts of reading and reiterated attempts at writing that he begins to engage in a process of care for

himself and others and devise alternative forms of being with others, even virtually, when a spatial or temporal separation prevents real encounters. His pondering on his previous restless crisscrossing of national confines may thus help, in the most fortunate moments, transcend spatial and conceptual confines. The butterfly as a figure of migration, mimicry and the subversion of mimesis becomes a catalyst to move from a geopolitical to an ecopolitical conceptualization of crossings.

Prieto's narrator J. observes his surroundings with a singular acuity, yet he himself reveals very little of his fictional biography and avoids the slightest reference to the space of his adolescence.³ It is only indirectly that we find out that our narrator-guide, with his intrinsic knowledge of the Russian language, dialects and culture is a foreigner hailing from Latin America, more precisely Cuba.⁴ Unlike in other literary works that center on the experience of migration, J. is not yearning for a past space or coping with places of belonging. For years, he has rejoiced being on the road and non-belonging: 'atravesar las fronteras, hacer trabajar a mi favor el gradiente de precios entre una formación celular—un estado—y otra, saliendo cargado de oxígeno, de días enteros sin hacer nada, porque las ganancias, en un primer momento, habían sido fabulosas, y los gastos de nervios mínimos' (*Livadia* 229). During those years, he defines himself through movement, he travels to overcome distance and get rich, yet often gets lost in speed and finds himself trapped in mechanical and virtual motion.

J. is initially portrayed as a Virilian 'dromomaniac'⁵ par excellence: an international commuter that oftentimes either attempts to escape from someone or something (the border control, the mafia, painful memories, etc.) or catch someone or something (goods, another smuggler, a lost lover, a butterfly, a false diamond, or the most perfect epistolary novel ever written). He states that: 'Me interesaba mucho el problema de la frontera, desde un punto de vista práctico, claro está' (28). For this partially or entirely illegal crosser, aiming to outsmart others and make money on the black market, the border is initially the site of an adrenaline kick and source for a potentially good story to be told. He marvels at the story of an Estonian-Russian border crossing he had heard told, during which,

habían pasado por la frontera con Estonia cientos de personas, cientos de contrabandistas. Un sueño. Los diarios no publicaron nada sobre aquel incidente, su relevancia política.... meses después, en Varsovia o en Berlín, uno podía encontrarse a personas que contaban sobre aquella noche sin luna en la que, desde las profundidades de Rusia, como un ejército de lémures, echaron a andar las primeras divisiones de contrabandistas y se pudo pasar de todo.... Yo viajé a Ivangorod cuando el recuerdo de aquella noche todavía alentaba historias contadas durante horas en el restaurante de la estación ferroviaria...[Ahora] pasar exigía presencia de ánimo, la posibilidad de tener que

arrojar la carga y correr. Rusia había traído a militares sin práctica alguna desde guarniciones muy lejanas, en los Urales o Bashkiria, con escasa imaginación aduanal, dispuestos a confiscarte un reloj pulsera para detener la expoliación del país (28-29).

A combination of keen observation, luck, and quick wits are fundamental for a successful passing and financial gain. Prieto's 'imaginación aduanal'⁶ points at the jointure of creativity and resourcefulness that is needed at the threshold of the border (both for the illegal crosser and the border agent). In addition to this imagination, it takes an exercised coolness, acquired during countless customs inspections.⁷

His initial strategy to surpass spatial limitations is to be in sync with an outside speed or even attempt to beat it. He describes this yearning in a passage in parenthesis about an observation of a farm-worker:

(...con la cara tiznada de trabajar en el campo, [a quien vi] saltar desde la cama de un camión en marcha a otro que viajaba a la misma velocidad. Yo observaba la escena desde un tren también en marcha como en uno de esos problemas mentales que sirven para explicar la relatividad del movimiento. El hombre aterrizó sobre sus pies, se tambaleó un momento recuperando el equilibrio y se aferró a la baranda del segundo camión, riendo.) (181)

When reading the passage above, it is hard not to be reminded of Paul Virilio's now classical description of a passenger looking out of the window of a train and seeing a landscape in motion, included in his *Essai sur l'insécurité du territoire*, published in 1976. In his study, Virilio elucidates what he terms to be the conquest of the newest continent, that of velocity and its relation to visual perception (256-7).⁸ While J. admires the man's ability to cope with the fast mechanical speed, and even play with relativity, he himself is not as successful a commuter on this new Virilian continent. He miscalculates movement, repeatedly misses his trains, and instead of being in charge of, he feels to be at the mercy of an external motion and inscrutable capricious will that decides whether or not he can advance and cross a border. J.'s yearned-for dominance of space turns into a sensation of spatial and moreover existential insecurity. In a passage when he escapes Istanbul together with V., a young woman whom he had helped getting away from a bordello, the two of them illegally embark on a container ship towards the Ukrainian port city Odessa. J. has bribed the captain who allows both stowaways to hide in the motor room of the vessel. In deep darkness, the two are anxiously waiting for the engines to be turned on. Finally,

[I]ejos, en algún punto de la oscuridad, oíamos trabajar por fin el motor a toda máquina. Los pistones del diesel

entrando y saliendo, chorreando aceite, dos tiempos arriba y dos tiempos abajo, holgadamente, deslizándose dentro de la cámara de ignición, que los había estado esperando—quería creerlo así—desde hacía mucho tiempo, convirtiéndose aquel abrazo en un motor o causa primaria de algo, de una historia que echaría a andar en la costa norte del Mar Negro, en Livadia (268).

Besides the eulogizing tone of the mechanical accomplishment of the motor and partially sexual innuendo of the passage (V. and J. do have sex during their passage, yet she will leave him as soon as she reaches her country), J. notices his utter dependency on a suborned captain and the external speed of a diesel machine. He realizes that his idea of being in charge of motion has been an illusion. To return to Virilio, in his *L'horizon négatif* and the essay 'The Third Interval: A Critical Transition', the theorist similarly highlights the potential of an individual's sense of non-belonging and related existential disquiet. The anthropologist Marc Augé adds to this an exploration of solitude as a consequence of the passing of a momentary space of passage. In *Non-Lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la sur-modernité*, Augé examines the logic of excessive circulation through places in late capitalist, western, urban environments that do not allow for individual inscription. Examples of those locations are airports, trains, numbered hotel rooms, malls, and subway corridors. According to Augé, in such formal surroundings, human beings undergo an intense isolation that creates a peculiar form of solitude (117). Prieto's fictional spaces differ in part from Virilio's and Augé's, as they are less 'high tech' and less often created within a late but rather within a sudden capitalist framework. Nevertheless, in *Livadia*, too, the feeling of inertia during instances of external high speed oftentimes results in a profound lonesomeness for J.. In the passage quoted above, J.'s awareness of his inability to influence external movement parallels his sensing of the illusory nature of the projected love story with V.. Once they arrive in her home country, V. abandons him, and all that remains to him are the letters from her that suddenly reach him from a nowhere place, while he is staying in a guesthouse in Livadia attempting to catch a rare butterfly for a client, and write the perfect response letter to V..⁹ He will fail in both endeavors.

Related to speed, a second strategy of border-crossing that J. admires initially is that of being barely visible or entirely invisible. He dreams of traveling not only at the speed of light, but also of being too small or too large for others to perceive him. Yet this yearned-for state that he invokes on many occasions also proves to be unattainable. He recognizes that not being perceived by others and not partaking in a shared chronotopos ultimately excludes the invisible being from understanding that very environment. Also, he realizes spacetime does not pause when an individual leaves it, but alters and thus excludes an invisible or super-fast traveller from partaking in it in a 'future' by not recognizing it and being recognized by it anymore. *Livadia* describes this in a parable about a man who

passes through space with the same ease as that of 'la hoja de un cuchillo caliente [que] hunde la mantequilla' (51). After his jubilant travel to the past and in invisibility, the world he returns to is not his world any more: 'Ha regresado a un mundo distinto, que gira muy lejos de su órbita anterior' (51). These speculative travels cause an increasing bewilderment in J., who realizes that 'cada vez, con mayor frecuencia, yo estaba desordenando mi vida' (51). The traveler, who finds out that he is not able to return to and recognize a world he has left before, is trapped in an alternate space-time that again accentuates his existential solitude.

In this context, it is noteworthy that prior to attempting to catch the rare butterfly in Crimea, J. had made his money by selling night vision goggles fabricated for the Soviet military; his sales pitch being the promise to potential buyers that they would see everything and everybody without being seen themselves. Yet his own obsession with the perfect night vision and temporary annulment of one's own corporeity in order to control a surrounding space turns out to be yet another, now optical, illusion that even impacts his perception during daytime. One of the instances J. obsessively returns to in his musing is the moment when V. abandoned him. He saw her running to catch a train, yet did not recognize her: '¿Cómo pude no reconocerla? ¿Cómo pude no darme cuenta de que me abandonaría en Odessa?' (103). Awareness comes belatedly; a future with V. has slipped through J.'s fingers. This he only realizes once he starts drafting the beginning of his response to V.'s letters that reach him in Livadia.

Prieto's postmodern, metafictional universe ultimately portrays speed and invisibility as not so secure and powerful modes of controlling a shared space and crossing porous border environments. Instead, it proposes lingering and deceleration as forms of disturbance and resistance to a pre-determined external, systemic pace or utter stasis. It is only when he comes to rest at the guest house in Crimea at a great distance away from his previous life of hustle and bustle carrying goods from one point to another that J. becomes aware of his previous lack of agency and blind acceptance of concepts such as border, success, or belonging. In this recognition, and during a short exchange of greetings with the townspeople, he discovers a new consciousness and even a home beyond his prior obsessive restlessness and lack of self-reliance: 'Uno va descansando en la cara roja del quiosquero,.. la bata jamás blanca de la mujer que vende kvas, el asirio limpiabotas' (290). The townspeople become 'jalones puestos aquí para que no equivoquemos el camino, nos deslicemos rápidamente a casa' (290). The stay at the guesthouse is the only time where J. experiences a feeling of being at place and at home, and this, despite his landlady's obsessive interfering in his day-to-day life, or his neighbor's repeated spying on him and even breaking into his room and stealing one of V.'s letters, which J. later retrieves by intruding into his neighbor's room to get it back.

The location of J.'s profound reflection, the town of Livadia in the Republic of Crimea, is yet another multi-layered allusion to

the importance of the topic of changing national borders, changing concepts of the border and belonging, as well as vastly different strategies to deal with the experience of crossing, and also in the case of Livadia dwelling at the threshold of a border. The splendid summer residence of the last Russian Tsar Nicholas II, Livadia, is situated on the southern tip of the Crimean peninsula, which was part of the Russian Empire from 1783 to the Revolution in 1917 and again the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1991. Among the most momentous encounters of the 20th century that took place there was the Yalta Conference at the end of World War II, in February of 1945, during which the post-war reorganization of Europe and Germany were defined. In the Russian and Ukrainian historic imagination, Crimea has held a special status (not unlike Cuba in the context of the Spanish colonies). The former easternmost tip of the Russian Empire, still partially associated with the late Tsarist splendor, became a tourist figurehead of the Soviet Union. In the novel, this is referenced via J.'s residing in a run-down summer vacation residence for former party members.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing Ukrainian independence, Crimea remained part of Ukraine. Yet in 2014, it was annexed by the Russian Federation that staged a 'referendum denounced as illegitimate by 100 countries in an UN vote' (Dobrokhotova 'Pro-Russian Activist...'). Vladimir Putin's response to the international criticism was the essentialist statement that Crimea was "'sacred" Russian land' (Dobrokhotova 'Pro-Russian Activist...'). While *Livadia* was written prior to the recent Russian annexation of Crimea, Prieto is acutely aware of the symbolism of the space. The fact that his protagonist reflects on his many past border-crossings at this specific site that belonged to different nations and was the location of the establishment of the post-war borders, highlights the centrality of the theme and in particular the relativity and volatility of concepts of the border. J.'s initial motivation to visit Livadia, however, is not to write a meditation on the concept of the border, but to catch a butterfly that may or may not be extinct.

The nocturnal butterflies in Prieto's novel are first a reference to the women at the nightclub, and to the ever elusive and tempting V. as their epitome (297). It is furthermore the quest for a butterfly that brings J. to Crimea: his client Stockis, an avid collector and trader, asks him to catch a rare butterfly, 'el yazikus [*euxinius*], mariposa del emperador' (230), which for some unexplained reason J. holds to still exist on the peninsula. Prieto's butterfly is of course an entirely literary creature: *yazikus*, from the Russian *yazyk*, and *yazik* in Ukrainian is the east Slavic lexeme for 'tongue' or 'language', while *euxinius* refers to the Greek name for the Black Sea, 'Pontos Euxinos.' In addition to the geographical reference, the adjective *euxinus* means 'hospitable' in everyday Greek.²⁰ Moreover, it is a clear homage to Vladimir Nabokov. While *Livadia* contains a wealth of allusions to the Russian-American writer, the multifold references to the butterfly might well be its most obvious one.

Nabokov's lifelong love for butterflies is well documented.

Alan Levy summarizes it at the beginning of his *Vladimir Nabokov. The Velvet Butterfly*:

Some of his discoveries have been named after him – and his memory speaks with rapture of "that blessed black night in the Wasatch Range" when he boxed one of them, now classified as Nabokov's Pug [*Eupithecia nabokovi*]... From 1942 to 1948, while lecturing on literature at Wellesley, Nabokov was also a Harvard Research Fellow in lepidoptera at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Toward the end of any Nabokov novel, when its artistic "circle" is complete, a butterfly or moth will make a fleeting, incidental appearance (Levy 6).

Butterflies are connected to the artifact of the book, and to the act of writing in many of Nabokov's narratives. In the early novel *The Gift*, published in 1939, the narrator Fyodor, an emigre author from Russia living in Berlin, marvels over 'his father's astonishing lepidopterological library' (Boyd 56). He is a particularly avid reader of 'the first tomes of his father's *The Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire*' (Boyd 56), a title too close to the English translation of Prieto's novel to be coincidental. Nabokov's experience of cultural and linguistic uprooting, the knowledge of the difficulties of an author to write against the backdrop state censorship (his *Lolita* was only published in Russia in 1989), and his firm rejection of social realism as the sole prescribed form of literary expression in the USSR resonates well with Prieto's experiences and worldview. Prieto's linguistic butterfly is a fleeting object of obsessions and desires. Its well-nigh weightlessness, 'de poco menos que un gramo de peso podía costar... vendida para la colección de un jeque petrolero, diez mil petrodólares' (230) gives it an almost virtual quality.

Like the 'linguistic' butterfly, V., the human equivalent of the elusive insect that will ultimately escape, and return in the form of pages written from a nowhere place and sent to Livadia, builds her spell over J. on language, too. During their first stroll through Istanbul, both are visiting the Hagia Sophia. On the stairway, V.

dijo algo que no logré entender, algo en turco, pensé buscando con la vista el próximo escalón. Pero al momento alcé la vista porque mi cerebro había comenzado a descifrar, identificándola al fin como una frase en ruso: *Ty takoi joroshi... Ya by tebe i tak dale* ("Eres tan bueno"²¹ ... Me acostaría contigo gratis"), y cuando enfoqué sus ojos húmedos, entendí por fin lo que acababa de decir y quedé perplejo. Ella comprendió su error, palideció, pareció hundirse en la piedra del muro, diluirse en ella... (111).

V.'s cunning use of language, first spoken and later written, initially perplexes J., who thinks she speaks Turkish but then realizes that the sentence was said in Russian. Like a butterfly, she is well-versed

in mimicry and blends in with the surroundings as in the quote above. Once she realizes that she might have offended J., she turns pale and seems to melt into the stone wall, or at least this is the very subjective impression of her reaction rendered by J. our sole witness of the scene. He later revisits and starts to question the cited impression, describing V.'s sentence as a joke or even part of a stratagem to test and later abuse him to get out of Istanbul (111-112). In other passages, V. accentuates her appearance with striking colors to distinguish herself from her environment, as when she and J. are walking through a bazaar surrounded by women wearing black long kaftans, V. similar to a brimstone butterfly, opted for a 'blusa amarillo canario' (295). That same night when J. sees her at the nightclub, he initially does not recognize her. Instead, he is mesmerized with her and her colleagues' colorful saris that remind him of the images of butterflies in an illustrated book (99). He then observes her dancing and the rainbow-colored nail polish that has an alluring visual effect in the darkness. It is this strategic characteristic of adjusting to the surrounding bedazzling the observer's senses via a blending into different environments or a contrasting striking differentiation of her body from these environments that ultimately help V. escape from the brothel, and after having arrived in Odessa, leave the unsuspecting narrator-protagonist and epistler-to-be.

In most mimetic situations, deception by the mimic is key. The aim is to be taken for the model (for instance a poisonous or inedible conspecific), and thus escape a hunter's hunger. In the specific case of the butterfly, a species well-versed in mimicry, the wings themselves provide an added layer of security. A butterfly wing is covered with thousands of minute scales and hairs. These are overlapping outgrowths of the body that can be regenerated, such as in the case of a predator's attack, where scales are rubbed off and thus may allow the butterfly to escape.¹² In addition, many butterflies show different patterns on the front and back of their wings, hence the opening and closing of their wings may confound an onlooker, and in a precarious situation, might allow for an escape.

The butterfly as mimic, keen observer of its surroundings, master of camouflage as well as escape artist that can even rebuild body parts that may have been left behind incarnates many of the characteristics that J., the former illegal border-crosser, highly cherishes. All these strategies contribute to a quality of immunity during moments of threshold experience, such as the moment when a passing from one country to another is decided by an agent looking alternately at a document and the individual in front of them. The list of affinities expands if we take into account the specific linguistic being of the mesmerizing *yazikus euxinius* that captures the lonely epistler at the shores of the Black Sea. On his way back to his residence, J. catches sight of a butterfly and ponders: 'Jamás tendría la paciencia necesaria de cazar mariposas' (300). In the next sentence, somewhat abruptly, he adds that 'Nabokov había donado su colección de mariposas al museo de Lausana, en Suiza, envueltas.... en sobrecitos de fino papel caligrafiados' (300). The dead bodies of the butterflies, caught by the author-hunter were put into labeled en-

velopes. Thus, they resemble letters similar to those from V. that, as the narrator describes admiringly are written on 'un fino papel de arroz, agradable al tacto, con vetas blanquecinas y los grupos de una producción artesanal...' and put in simple and elegant white envelopes (13). The novel is structured according to the receipt of V.'s letters: the seven chapter titles of *Livadia* are labeled 'Primera Carta' to 'Séptima Carta.' Yet while many other letters that J. consults in the process of drafting his response to V. are cited at length in the text, the letters by V., the traveling artifacts that are the motivation of the writing of the text of *Livadia* as a future response to her, are absent from the novel.

After V.'s disappearance, all that remains to him is to contemplate at which instance she might have transformed from a caterpillar to a pupa, both carrying the imago of the butterfly, into an actual butterfly (298). Unlike the yearned-for woman, the *yazikus euxinus* gains a different presence for J. as the novel concludes. During one of his final strolls, the protagonist suddenly thinks, 'con espantosa certeza' (301) that he has just caught sight of a *yazikus*. At first, 'so-speché, que se trataba de una proyección mental... El patrón del *yazikus* que dormía en mí se habría interpuesto entre una simple mariposa y la fuente de luz de mis ojos, proyectado la imagen de aquel insecto inexistente, que había sido capturado por última vez en 1914, en vísperas de la guerra' (301). After a second pondering, during which he becomes convinced that he did actually see the species he had come to catch, he initially concludes that it must have been dormant since 1914 and had just hatched for him to see it at this specific moment. His final conclusion is altogether different: He speculates about the experience of having passed through so many cities, and to now be in Livadia in order to 'descubrirme sentido apaciblemente en aquel banco con dos botellas del mejor vino de Masandra' (301). Only at that moment he becomes aware of the fact that 'cualquier mariposa podía ser el *yazikus*; las descripciones divagaban' (302). After a final, fruitless halfhearted chase of the butterfly that is now any butterfly, J. returns to his bench and bottles of wine, 'alegre por haber dejado escapar la mariposa' (308). While this could have well been the fitting end of a postmodern novel with its conclusion of the inescapable fortuity of natural phenomena and the limitation of human will, Prieto proposes one more ironic twist and material transformation in line with Nabokov's fascination for metamorphosis (Nabokov, 'On Transformation' in Boyd 53). J. closes his eyes and suddenly possesses the power to fly. He raises up in the air and:

[S]in abrir los ojos y sin mover un músculo comencé a bajar con el pensamiento en rápido planeo, sobrevolando los bosques helados de Laponia, las doradas cúpulas de los templos de Petersburgo, el azul oscuro de las coníferas, las flores de los prados del sur, los trigales maduros, los picos nevados del Cáucaso, el pequeño pueblo, Livadia... [luego] me posé silencioso, como un pájaro o un ángel, bajo la ventana de mi cuarto. (308)

Thanks to the reading of V.'s seven letters, J. is able to elevate and leave his bodily reality behind in a fleeting, quasi-mystical state of consciousness that transcends geographical confines. While this moment could have been the end of a mystically inspired novel, Prieto adds a few more pages to his speculative lepidopteral examination. Once J. returns to his room, he encounters his double, reading the draft of his response letter to V.. He then falls asleep and has a wonderful dream, not about becoming a butterfly, which as he himself notes, 'hubiera sido lógico después de tantos meses intentando atrapar una; como en la parábola del hombre que sueña que es una mariposa y al despertar no sabe si es el hombre que se soñó mariposa o si es la mariposa que ahora sueña ser hombre' (313). Instead, in a more prosaic fashion, he dreams of being inspired and of writing pages and pages of a captivating response letter to V.. In its final image, *Livadia* invokes once again an elevation, now not of the human body but of the drafted letter, the manuscript of the novel we have supposedly been reading, which is now being transformed by fire. After reading V.'s letters and all his notes and quotes from other correspondences, J. throws all sheets of paper into a fire:

... las arrojé [las cartas] todas, después de leerlas, al fuego. Leí también, de punta a cabo, este borrador, todos mis apuntes, los fragmentos de cartas ajenas, que fui lanzando al fuego. Algunas se elevaban propulsadas por el aire caliente, las llamas lamiendo sus bordes, rojas como mariposas. Esa imagen, ¿por qué no? Subían hasta muy arriba y caían luego y desaparecían en un segundo... (318).

After this purifying act, in the final paragraph, he sets out to write (yet again). The last two words of the novel that include for the first time V.'s name, are the beginning of the yearned-for letter to her: 'Querida Varia:' (318, emphasis in original). The novel ends with a salutation to an absent conversant. Its final punctuation mark, a colon, marks an ultimate pause and intake of air prior to a statement to come. Varia (not Véra, as readers of Nabokov might have guessed), this literary creature invites one final time for associations, playing

with variations, welcoming inconsistency, and evoking a draft of loose notes and the notion of a pluralization of authorship (definitions of 'vario, -ria' according to *DRAE*). In the final transformation of the text, the ashes disperse, some elevate, fly and then disappear like variegated and capricious butterflies.

At the end of his initially restless crisscrossing of countries and cities, J. does not try to calculate speed and control contingencies, but simply observes ashes dancing in the air. Some of these may stay, while others may transcend human-made barriers, transform and may become the beginnings of new forms of correspondence. The time in *Livadia* and the reflection on Varia's letters reaching him from a nowhere place helped him revisit his own past instances of border crossing and become flexible facing chance encounters and contingency in his (fictional) existence. The butterfly-letters that were initially described as the search for the perfect word, have become a practice of a pluri-language in an extended sense. This expanded philology (Hamilton 258) thus provides J. the opportunity to ponder, mimic, play, and transform, which he only now sees as a gift and form of self-affirmation. It allows him to build a form of versatile and strong agency when confronted with a seemingly immutable exterior separation.

Which *yazikus* 'language' is the *euxinus*, the 'hospitable' one for J.? It is likely the one that he can seize and actively expand that allows for the revisiting of established meanings and definitions, such as that of a geographical separation between nations. Like a letter reaching us from a nowhere place, a casual conversation that brings surprising insight or a quote that resonates and changes meaning, the language where Prieto's border-crosser and sedentary epistler-to-be feels most welcome is the one that challenges him to conceptually grasp his world, but that at the same time escapes 'de-finition' and 'de-limitation.' It is a *yazikus* that requires him to continually modify and rework his and others' conceptualizations, observations, and movements. Thus, *Livadia* invites us to be read, among other things, as a move away from a geopolitical to an ecological conceptualization of crossings, and an exercise of a broadening and more inclusive conceptualizing of the initial 'imaginación aduanal' (28).¹³

NOTES

¹ Similarly to his protagonist, the author José Manuel Prieto (*1962), has a deep familiarity with the Russian culture and language, he had studied and lived in the country for 13 years, witnessed Mikhail Gorbachev's resignation on December 25, 1991, and Boris Yeltsin's taking over the presidency of the newly independent Russian state. Prieto left Cuba in 1980 to study Computer Engineering in Novosibirsk, USSR. He briefly returned to Havana, where he stayed from 1987-88, prior to settling in Leningrad, where he lived until 1993. From 1993-2003, he lived in Mexico, where he earned his doctorate in History at the UNAM, and since 2003, in New York City, where he was a 2004-2005 fellow at the Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Before that, he was a Guggenheim fellow (2002) and a recipient of grants from the Mexican Sistema Nacional de Creadores (2003-2005). He currently teaches literature at Seaton Hall University in New Jersey. In addition to being an author, Prieto is an accomplished translator from Russian to Spanish of poems by Vladimir Maiakovski, Anna Ajmátova, Joseph Brodsky, and Osip Mandelstam, among others.

² While *Enciclopedia* and *Rex* are also including many instances of border crossing, it is in *Livadia*, where we find the most elaborated practices and reflections on the border.

³The company J. enjoys the most is that of the book seller Vladimir Vladimirovich (an obvious reference to Nabokov), who precisely never inquires about J.'s whereabouts or origins. 'Vladimir Vladimirovich jamás me preguntó como, por ejemplo, los policías: "Y usted joven, ¿de qué país es?"' Era un asunto absolutamente transparente e irrelevante para él' (72).

⁴Britton W. Newman examines that the words Cuba o Cuban, 'appear[] only three times in the trilogy, and only twice in connection with the narrator's identity' ("Internal Censorship", no pag.). In his review of the novel, Rafael Rojas describes Prieto as 'el primer autor cubano que se empeña en no escribir ni una sola novela sobre Cuba' ('Las dos mitades' 233, cited in Newman "Internal Censorship", no pag.). Since the publication of this book review in 2000, Prieto published one piece centered on Cuba, the short autobiographical essay 'La Revolución Cubana explicada a los taxistas' (2008), translated into German that same year. In his "Negotiating Borders of Identity in the Fiction of José Manuel Prieto", Newmann interprets this 'careful elision of Cuba . . . as a method of sidestepping the restrictive expectations placed on authors of Cuban origin—the obligation to discuss the country's political situations, its waves of exiles, etc.' (168).

⁵See Virilio's *Vitesse et politique: Essai de dromologie*.

⁶The literal translation of 'imaginación aduanal' is 'border imagination' or 'imagination of the border.' The 'real sense of customs' (*Nocturnal Butterflies* 21) in Carol and Thomas Christensen's otherwise excellent translation captures the polysemy and partial paradox of the term only in part.

⁷In a later scene, he describes his practice of acquiring such an 'estudiada calma' during countless customs inspections where he learned to 'desconect[ar] una a una mis terminaciones nerviosas' (222).

⁸'La conquête du nouveau au dernier continent, celui de la vitesse . . . Tout le mouvement de la physique moderne est esquissé ici [in the image of a train in motion] pour aboutir en 1916 à la théorie de la relativité généralisée, la désintégration du milieu . . . Si la lucarne du train est bien une lanterne magique, elle fait apparaître les ombres de la science... la voiture est aussi une chambre noire où les éléments de notre habitat quotidien deviennent particules en mouvement' (*Essai sur l'insécurité du territoire* 256-257). / The conquest of that new and last continent, that of velocity... All the movement of modern physics is outlined in this image [a train moving through a landscape] and will, in 1916, lead towards the theory of general relativity, the environmental disintegration... If the train's hatch is a laterna magica, it makes visible the shadows of science... The car is also a darkroom, where the elements of our everyday habits become particles in motion (my translation).

⁹Moreover, in retrospect, he notices that V. might have selected him as her travel companion not only as a result of his experience and astuteness related to the crossing of borders, but also because she sensed his loneliness and yearning to break free of it. Her belly dance at the night club was thus exclusively dedicated to J., with the aim to to enthrall him: 'A mi paso por Estambul V. descubrió mi soledad y yo fui el salvado, el atrapado por la pesada masa de una mujer que proyectó hacia mí toda la fuerza gravitatoria del baile del vientre...' (*Livadia* 52).

¹⁰I thank my colleague in Russian Studies, Dr. Timothy Sergay, for his help with possible avenues in translating Prieto's new literary creation (email 4/2/21).

¹¹The Russian sentence gives J. a name, calling him Joroshia, similar to José, yet the narrator omits this in the Spanish rendering.

¹²Linden Glendhill's close-ups of *Butterfly Scales* are compelling examples of the wings' characteristics. They were one of the inspirations for this examination.

¹³I thank Anindita Barnerjee and Debra Castillo for organizing the online *Border Environments* Conference at Cornell University in 2020; our meetings and discussions were among my personal intellectual highlights during a semester otherwise marked by covid-19-related restrictions. Many thanks to the two anonymous proofreaders of my essay for their illuminating comments and suggestions, and to my Research Assistant Caitlin Fanning for her painstaking editorial help.

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The Bee Lecture: How Amerindian Perspectivism Psychoanalyzed the Western Symbolic Order and its Historicity and Set a Precedent for a New Kind of Politics.

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ABSTRACT: “The Bee Lecture” is an essay/performance that attempts to make a consistent representation or sketch of Viveiros de Castro’s anthropological description of Amerindian cosmology, which he calls perspectivism, through the persona of ‘the Bee.’ Perspectivism serves as a jumping board for an exploration of performance and some of the implications that perspectivism has for our historical moment of crisis vis-à-vis climate change, mass extinction, and the violent appropriation of nature in the capitalocene (Jason Moore). Walter Benjamin’s critique of modern historicity and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of the Real allow for a theoretical staging of the non-human gaze as a performative challenge to the Western symbolic order. I pinpoint an equivalence, between perspectivist equivocation and the experience of transference in psychoanalysis, to argue for the need and possibility of a cure from the Western denial of nature’s gaze. I begin by locating in the language driven culture/nature duality the sign of a repression. Following Benjamin, I suggest that the avoidance of nature’s gaze is tantamount to a delusional game, called progress and/or historicity, that is disconnected from species life and a redemptive History. The theoretical conflation of the non-human, the Real, and History allows me to compare Western and Amerindian metaphysics and contrast their approach to the (Lacanian) Real. I conclude that a perspectivist metaphysics of becoming *with* the Other as one approaches the Real, is a radical political alternative that can end the impasse of the Western political and historicist transcendence of nature.

KEYWORDS: Animism, perspectivism, performance, anthropocentrism, non-human, nature, Viveiros de Castro, Lacan, the Real, symbolic order, ontology, political ecology, sociality.

Our abortive actions are actions which succeed, those of our words which come to grief are words which own up.

—Jacques Lacan, *Les écrits*.¹

La ventura va guiando nuestras cosas mejor de lo que acertáramos a desear.

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote*.²

The Bee lecture attempts to make a consistent representation or sketch of Viveiros de Castro’s anthropology, and use it as a jumping board for an exploration of performance and some of the implications that perspectivism has for our historical moment of crisis vis-à-vis climate change, mass extinction, and the violent appropriation of nature in the capitalocene (Moore). The persona of the Bee, implicated in these issues, takes advantage of the possibilities that perspectivism opens for interspecies communication, and uses it as a theoretical tool to expose the flaws of our epoch. The Bee is not concerned with the problem of our human empathy towards non-humans, nor seeks to imagine a utopia of ecological human to non-human relationships (Cull Ó Maoilearca; Haraway). It wants instead

to modify paradigms that affect our understanding of sociality. It is therefore concerned with political philosophy. At issue is the question of how a radical political ecology would depend on interspecies sociality and how sociality in general expresses an order of perception of the (human and non-human) Other. Viveiros de Castro’s account of perspectivism puts us at the center of this conversation.

The Relative Native

Viveiros de Castro arrives to his description of perspectivism through an effort to break with the anthropologist advantage vis-à-vis whom she considers the Other. The native’s alterity separates the anthropologist from her ‘object’ of study and, in her willingness to be ‘true,’ the anthropologist ends up knowing “much too much about the native before the game even starts; she predefines and circumscribes the possible worlds expressed by this other’ and her participant observation ends up falsifying primitive participation” (*The Relative Native* 47). Viveiros de Castro’s proposed solution may seem counterintuitive: to engage in a descriptive practice that

translates another's vision in one's own terms, however mundane that description ends up being. This he finds preferable to an exotification that separates the Other from an implied universal and/or scientific subject. Description thus establishes a relationality that can serve as foundation to intercultural mutations, and our own alteration as well. An anthropological description, and that is what perspectivism is, is itself an expression of our relationality to animist and Amazonian cosmovision.

Perspectivism can therefore be conceived as a performative act of encounter and reciprocity. The terms of this encounter are not managed through a logic of correspondence, which would always privilege one's own views and prejudices, but under the umbrella of equivalence. For example, Viveiros de Castro suggests that the "the Amazonian perspective is just as interesting a philosophical challenge as comprehending the system of Leibniz" (50). In this context perspectivism needs to be performed in order to assert and affirm this quality of being taken seriously—only in performance, it seems, can we have proof of its relationality and existence. Viveiros de Castro frames this need within a discussion of the relationship of theory with practice (in his field, anthropology) and the imperative to "think of theoretical activity in a radical continuity with practice, that is, as an immanent [...] dimension of the intellect embodied in action" (51). It is through a communicative practice that theory can circulate. My first performative act will therefore be a citation of the author's own summary of perspectivism's "ideas and practices:"

This cosmology imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities. The possession of a similar soul implies the possession of similar concepts, which determine that all subjects see things in the same way. In particular individuals of the same species see each other (and each other only) as humans see themselves, that is, as beings endowed with human figure and habits, seeing their bodily and behavioral aspects in the form of human culture. What changes when passing from one species of subject to another is the 'objective correlative,' the referent of these concepts: what jaguars see as 'manioc beer' (the proper drink of people, jaguar-type or otherwise), humans see as 'blood.' Where we see a muddy salt-lick on a river bank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house, and so on. Such difference of perspective [...] is located in the bodily differences between species, for the body and its affections [...] is the site and instrument of ontological differentiation and referential disjunction (*Relative Native* 58-59).

Through description the anthropologist becomes a "relative native" who can affirm an affinity with the Amerindian cosmology, if only to conceive of perspectivism as a possible World view for the non-native Westerner as well. The Bee performance joins the anthropologist in the perspectivist attempts to solve a contradiction and challenge that anthropology has historically run into: to describe, as 'not other,' societies who appear to western societies as 'other.'

The procedure of this essay/performance is to work with various objects: a) a performance titled "The Bee Lecture," which I first enacted via Zoom in the context of the Border Environment Conference with the help of comic strip slides, and appearing here in their new version (Loayza); b) an anthropological concept, that is, perspectivism, and; c) my own theoretical expansion which draws from Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts and Benjamin's critique of historicity. The Bee Lecture performs an encounter between a bee and anthropocentric humans, represented by an American academic audience gathered at a conference titled Border Environments. I enact the bee, not to tell my 'natural history' or story, nor to induce a suspension of disbelief in favor of a framed reality within a shared ontology of beings, be they human or non-humans. Rather, I take the perspectivist approach of drawing from a shared epistemology to make the audience the subject of my interaction through a "semiotics of 'invention' and 'convention'" (Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* 45). In a sort of "reverse anthropology," I subject my audience to what would be a perspectivist gaze (45). What is at issue in this gaze is what is the social relation that it represents, in the sense of actualization in the instance of encounter. That gaze remains invisible within our lived ontologies, since we know of no 'social' relationship with bees. I will argue that the anthropocentric gaze has somehow invented nature as that which can be seen while being unable to see us.

I would like to emphasize that this essay never ceases to be a performance, in the sense that it talks at you and refers back to the presence of that Bee who appeared at the conference to 'lecture' its academic audience and took the functions of psychoanalyst and shaman. The practice of putting words in quotation marks are integral to a modality of discourse where some meanings are already becoming something else. The quixotic title of this essay/performance adds another layer of characterization to the bee as it argues and challenges our Western imaginary and demands to be taken seriously. The figure of the Quixote may exist at a liminal space of interchanging gazes between the Bee and its audience. The Quixote may function as a "transitional object," or persona mediating the failure and/or success of this attempt at human/non-human intersubjectivity. The choice of the Quixote as a transitional object, as defined by Winnicott, will become clearer as I advance my argument, and the Quixote is subliminally used by us, for being "part of a shared reality" (118). In the spirit of performance, I declare it opportune to introduce the Bee, with its Brechtian song (figure 1).



Figure 1: *Song of The Migrant Bee.*

The Song of the Migrant Bee presents the Bee, not in a context of encounter with humans, but of its own life of forced migration by commercial beekeepers and the almond cultivation industry. Bees sent to pollinate almonds in California are suffering massive deaths due to pesticides and monoculture while affecting the ecosystem of local bees. These European bees die through the process of mechanization of agriculture, where the activity of being a bee is being deployed and exploited ("Like Sending Bees to War"). The bees do not go on strike, and humans count on the bees' continuous agreement to continue to be bees, wherever they are, in order to incorporate them into a human agricultural activity. Bees do take part in a social relationship with humans, but that sociality is invisible and ignored. The Brechtian aspect of the song lies in the presentation of being a 'good' bee as not 'good' for the bee. The critique extends to the contradictions between means and ends of society. The bees contribute through pollination to the survival of the human species, but if the death of bees is provoked by their pollinating activity, then their bee activity is also threatening the human species. Bees are no different than humans: human migrant workers are forced to come work temporarily in U.S. fields, because they want to provide for their families and are willing to sacrifice with hard work and unfair conditions if it means sustenance and hope for the family's future. Like with the bee, agri-business counts on the migrant workers to be human and make sacrifices, even unfair ones, for their family—it is their perceived human behavior, in the first place, that allows for their exploitation and dehumanization (they are not allowed to strike). The bee allows me as a performer to present the issue of interspecies communication as relevant to 'human' social and political issues, including violence and exploitation.

Setting the scene: challenging the Western dichotomy of culture-nature.

The concept of nature is derivative of an anthropocentric perspective, that separates the human (culture) from the non-human (nature). Once we undo this separation, we may encounter a perspectivist world made of forms of life, each an expression of a particular vitality at their core that creates a world in their own modality. In order to conceive of this "other" cosmology, Viveiros de Castro cautions against an epistemologic understanding of native worldviews which would leave our own ontological traditions and frameworks intact, placing the natives in a different epistemological relation to nature. The modality of being in the world is best perceived from within, as an ontology that potentially destabilizes (as it should) "an absolute ontological monarchy where the referential unity of nature is imposed" (*Cannibal Metaphysics* 54). The Bee lecture-performance attempts to place itself within this ontology of modalities of beings, which can see modalities of being in the Western human, the native, and the non-human modality (of the bee). It is useful to conceive the performance itself as being at the intersection of modalities, while projecting an ontology that challenges Western views.

Nature is an ontological category that corresponds to a belief that human and non-human interiorities are different. This ontology is not universal, as anthropologist Phillipe Descola makes clear in his distinction of naturalism and analogism from animism and totemism. The first two are based on the belief of dissimilar interiorities between beings, while the last two are founded on the premise of similar interiorities between beings (122). The dissimilar interiority of the non-human, proper to the naturalist perspective, erases the gaze of the non-human towards the human and founds a phenomenology of nature as primarily endowed with physicality, as something with no eyes or soul. In the Bee Lecture, nature's gaze must therefore be enacted, or performed by me by seeking a reciprocation of my gaze. The performance qua academic lecture presentation becomes an analogical tool to direct your attention to me, while I introduce myself as... a bee. But I shall not regard this as a performance per se, but an opportunity to have my appearance translate the 'real' that you see as a new kind

of relation. The procedure is an equivocation, that anthropologists like Viveiros de Castro cast as a mode of controlled translation leaning towards the native's perspective— here, the bee wants to be seen as 'human,' not 'a bee' by his audience, because it *is* human (*The Relative Native* 57). Therefore I interpellate my audience as my fellow humans, while appearing recognizably human, with no mask (no apparent contradiction here)— and, as a 'human,' I proceed to 'assent' to my identity of bee for this lecture—I agree that I am indeed a bee, and by putting on a mask, I suggest that it is (the humanity of) the bee that 'my fellow humans' have refused to see. Like in Baudelaire poetic address to his hypocrite readers, I say that there is no need to introduce myself or any Other if I appear to you as your kin, in the most intimate way: "*mon semblable, –mon frère*" [my twin, –my kin] (5). There is agreement because our presence and reciprocal gaze speaks for itself. Once the equivocation performs a discrepancy within a unified perception, I can deconstruct the semantic scaffold that created the illusion of "real" perception and present a truer perception.

The imaginary and symbolic orders

I implied above that the Bee Lecture is not about the Bee but about my audience's naturalistic gaze and phenomenological blindness to the non-human gaze. This intention draws me away from the framing of performance as representation and its appeal to the 'real,' and leads me instead towards the symbolic and imaginary order. In Lacanian terms, we move away from psychology and towards psychoanalysis, that is, the realm of an intervention. How does an analysis progress? asks Lacan, "if not by the interventions that push the subject to objectivize itself, to take himself as object" (*Les écrits* 230). The formation of the subject occurs as a process of developmental interventions like that of the mirror stage, where the subject identifies with their mirror image, and thus objectifies itself in relation to the Other (realm of intersubjectivity) and the world surrounding them. The subject's narcissistic gaze forms an image of an ideal self or imaginary that will inform their incorporation into a language-driven symbolic order. Whereas the narcissistic self will first demand satisfaction from the Other as an extension of itself, language intervenes to impose an intersubjective order and limitations to our desires. The Lacanian concept of the Real refers to what remains unrepresentable within the imaginary and symbolic realms but remains constitutive in the function of our desires and drives (Johnston; Felluga). The absence of a bee gaze in the imaginary and symbolic orders of my staged encounter is what informs my intervention, presenting the Bee in a human image first, and calling myself human, engaging in this way the audience's imaginary.

As I proceed to expose my credentials of being a 'Bee' lecturer, invited to participate in the conference, I recur to the symbolic order of intellectual and institutional exchange in the university system to sustain my presence. My scientific species name and my bee mask are then donned as objects of equivocation, introducing my bee gaze as legitimate or intrusive at best, or as fraud or laughingstock at worst. The performance's success would be measured according to higher instability or wavering of the equivocation, in which case the interaction of the three realms in the "borromean knot" of the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real could be sensed or detected (Johnston; Felluga). Another measure taken from a psychoanalytic context would be the realization of an instance of transference on the part of the audience—a consciousness that results, according to Lacan, from a release of its resistance in realizing "suddenly the fact of [the bee's or the analyst's] presence" (*Les écrits* 51). It is not a matter of objective presence but of the presence of intersubjectivity, and all the mysteries that this phenomenology might entail. The presence of the actor, in this case, mediates between a readily accepted performer audience transaction and a repressed truth potentially revealed in recognition of the presence of a 'bee' as a *human* Other (figure 2).



Figure 2: *Invitation Accepted*.³

I am hinting that recognition, in the psychoanalytic process, is a step towards a cure. In this hypothesis, we are treating a symptom affecting all of modern humanity, and therefore related to a dysfunctional symbolic order, and the need to go “beyond nature and culture” (Descola). In his book, Descola delves into anthropological and philosophical suggestions towards a redescription of nature and culture and the continuities between the two that could undermine their distinctions. I decide to rather expand on my framing of a Western symbolic order as in need of psychoanalytic intervention and a cure.

A symbolic order without nature

Western ontology does not *recognize* the non-human because its imaginary symbolic order has a built-in blind-spot. We understand this blindness as an inability to see an Other of the subject beyond the human species. This occurs in the realm of a symbolic order that names an entity with no gaze towards the human species; this eyeless entity is ‘nature.’ Much like in the scopical drive described by Laura Mulvey’s account of the male gaze towards women in film narrative, the concept of nature *screens* our perception of the non-human Other to allow for a privileged contemplation of the world as an infinite physical remainder, a leftover or debris of what would be its actual presence in a perspectivist ontology. The wasteland of ‘nature’ leads, for example, to a belief that nature can absorb the waste of our modern industries. Nature is a mythical depository of matter and animality from which humans can feed their demand much like in the narcissistic imaginary during the subject’s development. Nature as leftover, or surplus physicality, is ultimately responsible for our demands. If we look at how thinkers of the Enlightenment conceived human nature, we can define some of the modern demands on nature accordingly. Following Corning’s summary: human nature is imagined as selfish and power-hungry by Hobbes, as individualistic yet cooperative by Locke, and as benign and community-oriented by Rousseau (23-24). These differences do not alter their anthropocentric imaginary. Nature is a necessary myth for the anthropocentric view, because it creates an essence of the human as having the property of a ‘natural freedom’ which is a precondition for the articulation and measure of freedom in modern societies. Nature is therefore the realm of the not-yet-social human being whose freedom is incomplete or disordered before he adapts to the sociality of an exclusively human political State. In this context, the Western symbolic order walls up nature as an alternate or fake Other with no presence that could justify intersubjectivity between this ‘nature’ and ‘humanity.’

The anthropocentric freedom that this nature allows is the mythical foundation of the freedom of the modern State. This freedom may thus be considered primordial in modern identity formation, and in the discourse, language, and sociality that sustains it. The semantic opposition between culture and nature serves as the matrix of modern sociality, founded on a multiplication of exclusions of alternate Others who are dehumanized, which is equivalent to being semantically ‘naturalized.’ The signifier ‘nature’ institutes culture (and, I would argue, science as its subset) as the privileged signifier that multiplies a position of advantage or freedom in relation to more passive and objectified Others. Descola remarks that Montaigne was a rare dissident from the consensus among philosophers of the Enlightenment about the superiority of human agency. Montaigne asserts that “there is [...] no rational likelihood that beasts are forced to do by natural inclination the selfsame things which we do by choice and ingenuity. From similar effects we should conclude that there are similar faculties” (Montaigne 29; Descola 175). The argument rests on the extent that humans and non-humans are free from instinctual or automatic responses, and on the old question of conscience and soul. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one may turn the question around and make it an argument about the rationalization of sociality and its protection from human instincts. The modern symbolic order builds its own protection against a feared human nature, “that old Western oxymoron” (Descola 178). The very sign of ‘nature’ is the mark of a repression, the exchange of a freedom imagined as uncontrollable, because instinctual, for a new kind of freedom. This new freedom deploys power structures (which should not be confused with authority) based on who controls an expanded field of resources (nature) amassed by individuals, classes, or states. In this symbolic order, the language of power and exclusion proliferates (figure 3).



Figure 3: *The Question of Signs.*

The Falling of the masks

The dualities and oppositions that constitute our discourse carry today the symptoms of a historical crisis since the opposing terms already provoke a reaction of shame, anger, defensiveness, or sadness. The narrative and struggle for the rights of forgotten humans and non-humans are as much an expression of shame as a desire for change and a more 'just' society. What a Lacanian psychoanalysis explores is what is on the other side of these emotions and the way to name or characterize what we find there without falling into a subjective reification of affections and moral imperatives (*Les écrits* 238-239). In figure 3 the opposing terms are presented within a sign of interdiction, as if saying 'do not be the master of a slave' or 'do not be the citizen that dehumanizes the alien.' This allows me to locate shame in the term at the top of each opposition: shame or defensiveness at being a master, a citizen, a human subject, as opposed to the non-human 'subject.' I propose that this is not a moral or existential shame but a confrontation with the gaze of these 'Others' who have seen our masks of 'culture' and 'citizenship.' What lies on the other side of shame (or of a reactionary scandal) is the sketching of another imaginary, a different form of identity where I can see myself without a mask, the way that the 'Other' already recognizes me, and under a different name. The performance must engage language in order to gage the limits of our symbolic order in a time of crisis. The semiotic display of oppositions allows us to stage the shameful masks (like two scandalized Ensor masks) that will have to be dropped for our interspecies encounter to occur, and to reveal the gaze lurking behind them. In that desire to remove our masks, we may say that we are all animists (figure 4).

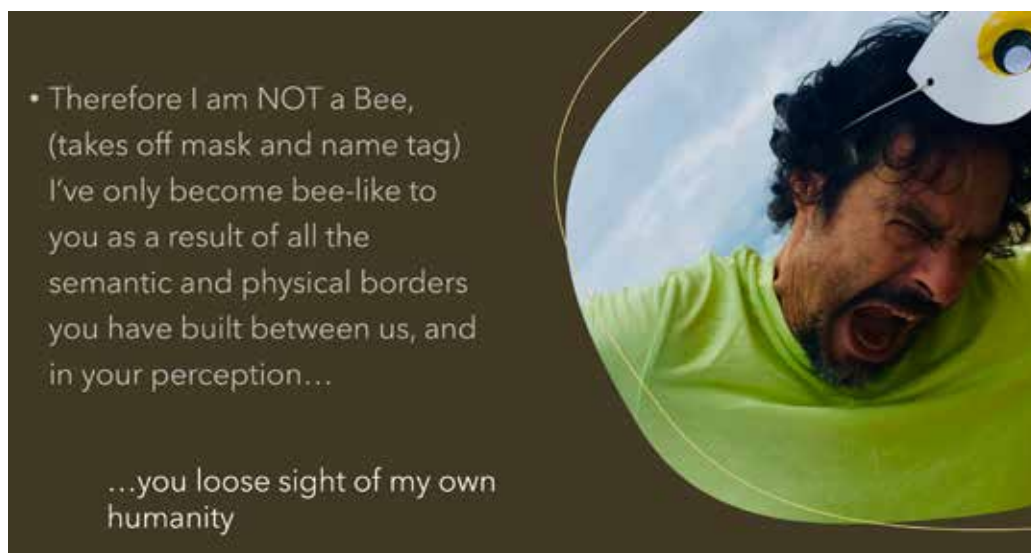


Figure 4: *Removing the Mask.*

History and historicity

The encounter of masks and the recognition of shame results in a need to quiet our language, because language has been seen to build the symbolic order that masks us, to form the imaginary wall that separates humans from non-humans and from human 'Others.' With the masks down we are left with the underside of the oppositions, become multiple and pointing to our shame: a multi-others world, or a multi-slaves world, or multi-natural world, only for lack of a better word. The sociality repressed by the symbolic order returns with inadequate and painful language. What or who was considered non or anti-social multiplies now and socializes itself under the sign of survival, still clamoring for a place as subjects in a society that objectifies them. 'For lack of a better word' in the existing symbolic order translates into 'for lack of a better world' or the inadequacy of the symbolic order itself. To lack a world, or to have the rug of words taken from under our feet means first that we seize to be masters, citizens—and we do not have a culture. Donna Haraway's 'Camille Stories' are an example of the liminality of this moment of mask dropping leading to:

a genre fiction committed to [...] possible futures, and implausibles but real nows. Every Camille Story that [she writes] will make terrible political and ecological mistakes; and every story asks readers to practice generous suspicion by joining in the fray of inventing a bumptious crop of Children of Compost (136).

In spite of a break in our imaginary, we struggle to re-invent our image and re-establish words and language in the linearity of time and history, in order to connect our past mistakes with our present and future healing. There is a persistent anthropocentrism in considering that it is *our* history that is at stake, even while, as in Camille's example, there is a communal impulse to "work with human and non-human partners to heal these [ruined] places [...] and] reshape terran life for an epoch that could follow the deadly discontinuities of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Plantationocene" (137). Such narrative betrays a persistent prejudice, that it is the Human who is at the helm of his history, and that he must continue to colonize and expand the field of his 'responsibility.' What I want to propose here is that the non-human can interpellate the human because they were the first to know about the human. Humans need to *perceive* that they are being seen and known by the non-human. What if the non-human bee really sees through the human, and can tell us that the Homo Sapiens' 'instinct' is to make itself a history, like a dwelling in time?

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin would name this dwelling (in time) historicity, which encloses itself in a mythical totality of a linear progress, and an identity with the 'victors.' This historicity, that Benjamin associates with social democracy and fascism, has a discriminatory perspective on the past,

taking only what fits its narrative, which results in a "weak" messianic power: the only happiness or 'progress' history ultimately celebrates is the one lived in the present. Historicity gives an illusion of the future but is blind to what actually connects humans to their destiny. Counter to this 'history' Benjamin proposes a messianic conception, aligned with the oppressed and described with his own view of historical materialism, that is, one that does away with its false teleological impulses. This effort is an attempt to deconstruct the symbolic dualism of history/barbarism, which parallels the culture/nature opposition shared even by a vulgar Marxism, which fails to recognize the exploitation implied in "the mastery of nature" (258-259). What interests us in relation to our discussion of perspectivism, is where, in Benjamin's view, does a redemptive history originate? Redemptive history cannot have its source in a positivist conscience because it does not have the power to grasp the "infinite complexity" of past and present species life (Schwebel 52). Our perception is further weakened by a conformist dwelling in the continuum of space-time, and a faith that the horrors of history will come and pass. Counter to this sad indolence (acedia), Benjamin proposes the image of a gaze coming from the "angel of history" who, as he looks into our past, perceives the image of "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (257). Still, this encounter is accompanied by misrecognition. Both catastrophe and misrecognition are elements of our state of emergency which Benjamin wants us to grasp with the figure of a storm: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm [...] irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (258). The storm corresponds to the symbolic order that pushes our appointment with a redemptive history towards an indefinite future which we mistakenly and tragically await from our idea of progress. The implication is that an encounter with our actual History will occur only if we can meet the gaze of the angel without the distraction of expectant 'future' given by the ideology of progress.

The meeting of gazes is what arrests the continuum of time and enables a different perception of our destiny. Benjamin would like us to exercise a monadist discipline of grasping the human condition in a fleeting image that is imprinted in our senses and body as by a meeting with this angel of history. The fleeting image, I propose, points to something beyond representation. This something corresponds to the Lacanian Real, while the fleeting image produces a sensation akin to a tragic, perhaps cathartic experience of human life. Lacan observes that from the point of view of species life we as individuals and societies are already dead, and beyond signification (*Les formations* 464). In this context, progress and its fascisms are a symbolic game, a way of not being seen forging a future without regard for the space-time of species life. The ruse of progress is to treat 'nature' as what is only 'past-perfect,' (what has been) and in that sense without history. In this symbolic order, we are hiding from view hoping to not be found in our game (*Les écrits*

248-251). Perspectivism can or would restore at least an acknowledgment of the game humans are playing with themselves and, at best, engage in new forms of intersubjectivity and symbolic order where the gaze of nature, who can 'see' our game, can modify the stakes of our society. In the grander scheme of life in general, what *has* a future is the non-human, and there lies the human condition, its ultimate historicity, which it only escapes in moments of perceptions of a gaze that reminds us of the traps of the symbolic order.

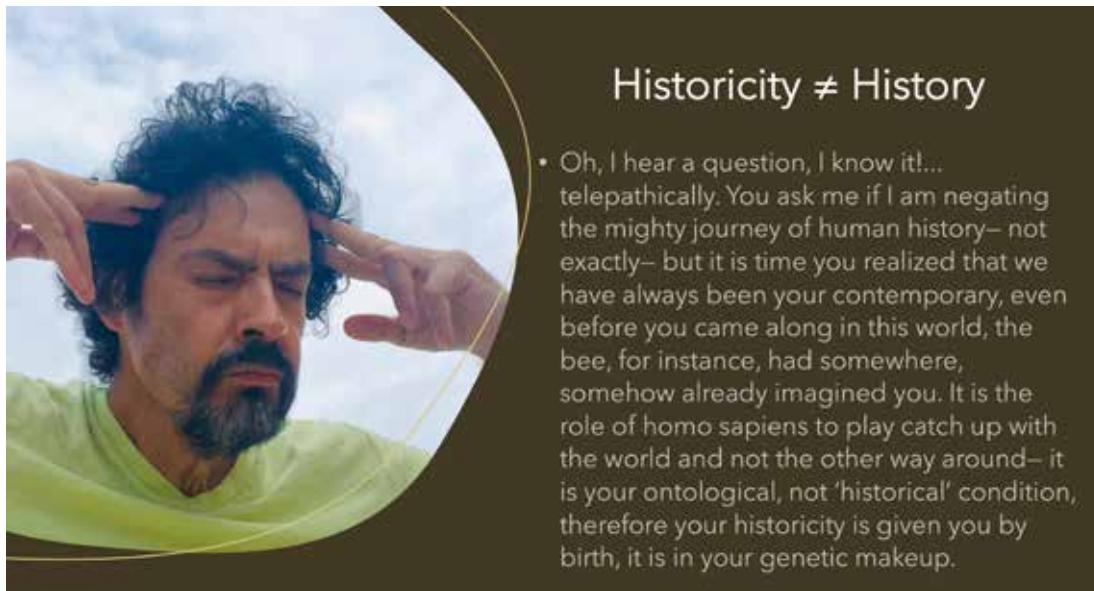


Figure 5: *Historicity ≠ History*

The imaginary of Amazonian perspectivism helps humans engage in intersubjective relations with what we call non-human, and in this way avoid certain traps of the symbolic. According to Amazonian genesis, "in that time there was nothing, but people already existed" (Viveiros de Castro, *Relative Native* 175). This anthropomorphism serves as a reminder that we cannot hide from 'nature' and that 'nature' is engaged in a similar symbolic order with similar rules of the game: we have been known by 'nature' from the beginning, and for that reason it is in our advantage to know 'nature' as well. In fact, it is 'nature' only that can grasp our human condition.

The Lacanian Real and the Real in Perspectivism

In the current state of climate crisis, mass extinction, and fear that our modernity may not continue 'the way it was' and be sustainable, there is a tension between a desire to engage with the "deep world" of nature/culture cooperation and a wish to maintain the privileges of our modernity where we feel 'protected' from 'nature' (Harvey). That tension cannot be released without a reciprocal gaze and a dropping of the masks. A reciprocal unmasking is not a mundane event, for it implies an encounter with the Real, which is not representable yet presents itself as a limit of what can be represented. I borrow Lacan's concept of the Real which he defines as what lies beyond language and the symbolic yet has a role in subjectivation: the Real provokes the lack that makes the subject to be supposed by the Other (symbolic order and regime of sexual difference), and reciprocally makes the subject suppose the Other, as supplement for his lack. In this process the subject finds objects for his (death) drives and search for knowledge (imaginary realm).⁴ Colette Soler indicates that the Real outside of the symbolic ex-sists "on the side of the living being. This is a living being about which we have no idea, which cannot be imagined and about which the symbolic knows nothing—despite the life sciences" (4). We do encounter the Real in the form of trauma or *Tuché*, described by Lacan as a missed encounter with an indescribable intemporal sufferance that constitutes our awaken state, as if still haunted by a dream (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 52-56). The missed encounter is related by Lacan to the human drive to repetition (registered by language), considered an anti-vital phenomenon connected to the perception of death as destiny. Furthermore, repetition is a sign or factor of maladaptation of the human species to its environment resulting in an automation that contrasts with the harmonious relationship of animals to their environment. Jacques Alain Miller, referencing Lacan, remarks:

For instance the way the fly owns a world to itself by apprehending from the environment significant spaces to which it appears gloriously adapted. Adaptation culminates there in harmony. Therefore adaptation, fitting, or, as Lacan argues in "L'étourdit," trait by trait rapport between the Umwelt and the Innenwelt, between the exterior world and the animal's interior world. Thus, a perfect inside/out between the organism and its milieu.

The dropping of masks may be seen as a miss-encounter with the terror of this difference between humans and non-humans. The “perfect inside/out” cannot fit in the Western symbolic order. Experiences of the uncanny, described and observed by Freud, may be related to both the terror of this difference and the human sense of maladaptation that humans must conceal from themselves. Within perspectivism the terror of this difference is not repressed but mitigated by the existence of a mythical event from which the body/soul instabilities of speciation originate. The perspectivist myth leans on the side of the Real by bringing it into the actuality of the present state of things rather than inventing a space-time wall between our ‘natural’ origin and ‘us’ (figure 6).

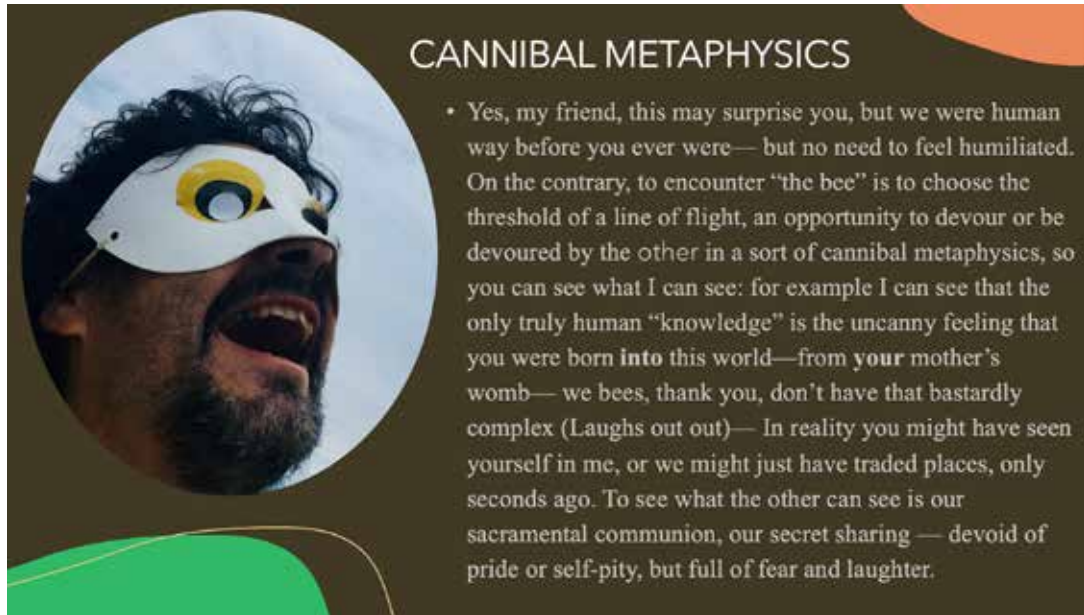


Figure 6: *Cannibal Metaphysics*

Viveiros de Castro specifies that in perspectivism “mythic discourse registers the movement by which the present state of things is actualized from a virtual, precosmological condition that is perfectly transparent—a chaosmos where the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of beings do not yet conceal each other” (*Cannibal Metaphysics* 67). In the myth, difference is internal to events of metamorphosis from one form of being to another arising from the quality of their virtuality, “their being constitutively irreducible to essences or fixed identities, whether generic, specific, or even individual” (67). The version of an original ‘nature’ that perspectivism presents here is one of “intensive difference that places human/nonhuman difference within each existent” (69). In this chaosmos, which I will call a ‘One nature’ of intensive difference, there is no question of adaptability or animal/human difference.⁵ The mythic movement from ‘nature’ to ‘culture’ will have a different symbolic function (than in Western humanity). It goes from a chaotic One nature to a division of the modalities of nature itself in such a way that while “every mode of existent is human for itself, none of them are human to each other” (69). The resulting ‘one culture’ affirms the humanity or human soul of ‘nature’ in its virtual multiplicity while making humans *relatively* more animal, therefore more adapted. For instance, in this multinatural world, one can conceive of *one* culture consisting in navigating the equivocations of perception and knowledge, where one sees (or knows?) that there is a “mud puddle” and knows (or sees?) that same puddle to be a “grand ceremonial house when viewed by tapirs” (71). Equivocation does not point towards the relativity of perception but towards the weight that our (social) affects and habitus have on our (human) identity. There is no independent self or (self) conscience that can guarantee or confirm our humanity, there is only a conscience of what the body perceives as pertaining to our human sensibility and sociality. The body gives a point of view, but this perception does not represent a difference between humans and non-humans, it is only a difference that lies “in the specificity of the body” (72).⁶ Our own sociality is objectified as a relation of ‘specific bodies’ when (our) bodies are virtually perceived as Other by our own perception or knowledge. For instance, “there is no X that would be blood to one species and beer to another; just a ‘blood/beer’ that from the very start is one of the characteristic singularities or affections of the human/jaguar” (73). In perspectivism, then, the Real, what escapes the symbolic order, is internalized by our own gaze, and is inherent to what the body sees and does, precisely because of what equivocation in our perception says and does not say about our humanity.

In the perspectivist world “appearances deceive because one can never be sure whose or which is the dominant point of view. One can never be sure, that is, which world is in force when one interacts with the Other” (*Relative Native* 182). The Real, therefore, is immanent within the body and is the source of our becoming in a multinatural world. As in the Lacanian Real, the perspectivist Real is signaled by a terrifying limit to the symbolic order, in a missed encounter signaled by the mythical image of the chaosmos of One nature. The missed

encounter is part of our becoming which produces, in our imaginary, the virtual possibility of an *irreversible* becoming non-human (109-110). Since we are always already human, we do not need walls or masks. The world reveals the humanity of our life because we have a body, but, who knows—perhaps our bodies and affects are not human anymore and the world loses its human soul?

The human condition carries a metaphysical stake, for in our being and body we either continue becoming the world or what we become is a dead 'human' world. This stake is shared by a multinatural culture since all beings identify themselves as human while perceiving 'other' species beings as non-human bodies. What is at stake is the maintenance of the reciprocal gaze between beings, whether the interchange of gazes occurs externally, or it is internalized by equivocation, transformation and/or becoming. Survival within the perspectivist symbolic order depends on this metaphysics. Unlike life in the Western symbolic order where survival puts culture against and away from nature—"Good fences make good neighbors" (Frost)—in perspectivism, survival counts on the cultivated affinities between multiple natures. Therefore "every difference is political (because every relation is 'social')" (*Cannibal Metaphysics* 63)-- (figure 7).

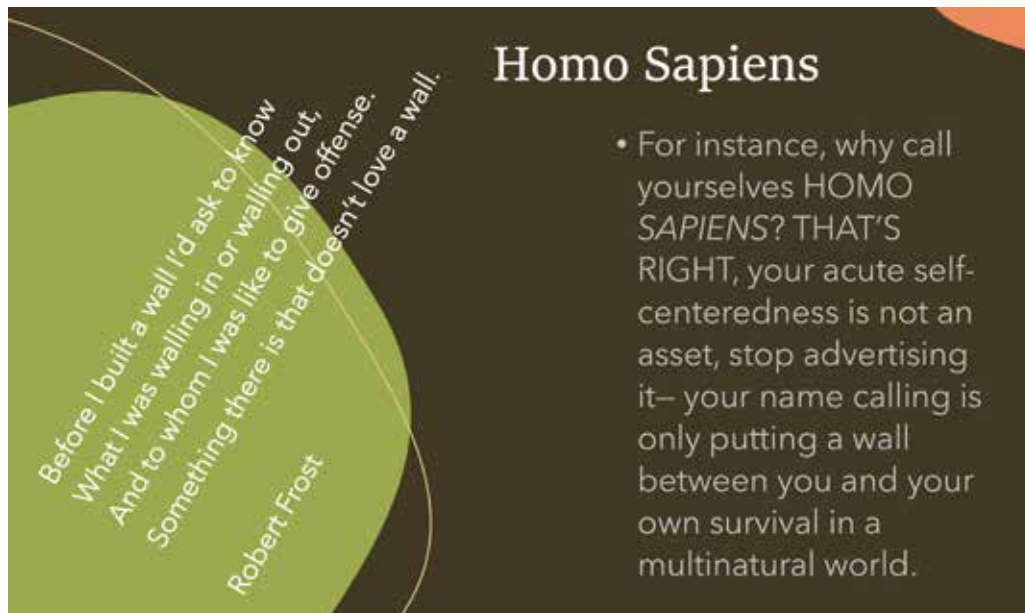


Figure 7: *Homo Sapiens*

One can see, in this Lacanian account, how the perspectivist symbolic order stays close to the Real and works with an intimate difference lurking within and outside. This explains also a reliance on the singularity of ritual and performance to stage and buffer an encounter with the Real and actualize the metaphysics of that symbolic order (figure 8).



Figure 8: *How Do I See You Right Now*

Cannibal metaphysics in parallax

An articulation of the Western symbolic order and the symbolic order of perspectivism through the concept of the Real confirms Lacan's affirmation that the Real cannot be represented. In the Western symbolic order we find an approximation in the impossible inside-and-out symbiosis of the animal and its environment. Perspectivist myth provides the image of chaotic transformations in the chaosmos of 'One nature.' Both images are suggestive of reversible cooptation of one part by the other, in a sort of devouring that is also potentially reciprocal. Whereas the Western order decides to transcend animality as well as its immanence, perspectivism maintains the immanence of potential becoming 'other' in its metaphysics. Viveiros de Castro describes the fear that permeates this metaphysics by comparing the limit case of the Jaguar for the Piro people, who cannot trust the Jaguar because it will kill with disregard for its kinship with humans. This logic of predation, which arises in all encounters with the other, makes fear part of the immanence of being in perspectivism. Interestingly, Viveiros de Castro compares this fear to the one felt by interpellation (in the Althusserian sense) by the police or the State (*Relative Native* 182-184). This leads him to argue that for the Westerner the State is the absence of kinship and is the one that threatens the most, with its gaze of surveillance and laws, to de-humanize him. Practices of ritual and/or symbolic cannibalism by Amazonian groups are ways to control potentially dangerous encounters or reversals of point of view by incorporating the potential antagonist perspective in one's body. It is a form of becoming and appeasement of the Other by creating affinity between bodies: one becomes what one eats. The State and its various molar structures, be they legal, economic, bureaucratic, or mediatic, may limit experience to what is defined in the giant confinement of molar aggregates (Deleuze and Guattari 198). On the other hand, the practice of politics and democracy may be seen as a cannibal practice within the Western symbolic order, where nature has been exiled to an apolitical and non-human realm. In politics one assimilates the State and is able to alter it as well. It is not difficult to see from this analogy how the Western State threatens to dehumanize us whether we are devoured by it or attempt to make it more akin to humanity, since politics lead us to become more like the State itself! Both utopias and dystopias, not to speak of the dreams of conspiracy theories, or post-apocalyptic futures reflect this contradiction, and therefore become nightmarish and soulless—images coming today from climate alarmists themselves (Wallace-Wells 204-16)! If the State has swallowed our nature, we need to take it back, that is, take our bodies back from the State. By way of a culture-nature divide, the Western symbolic order has erected a diminished approach to the Real, mediated by the State. It is the State that comes to haunt us, like an uncanny automaton or a ghostly return of the repressed Real. This demands a different form of politics, one that seeks to be exposed to the gaze of 'nature,' to the Real, with a gaze that can alter the symbolic order sustained by the State (figure 9).

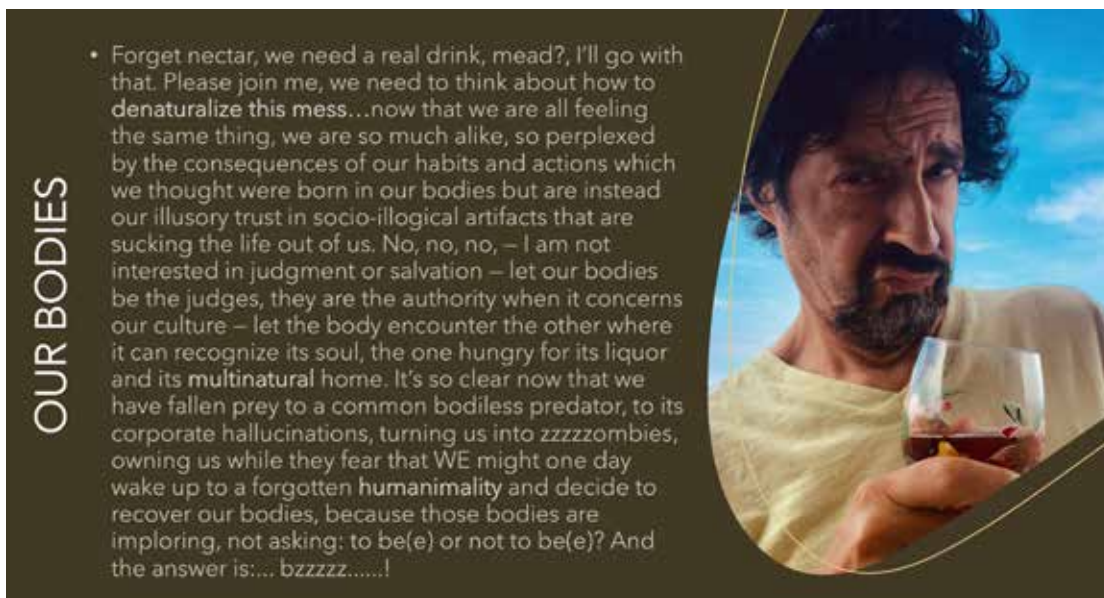


Figure 9: *Our Bodies*.

Conclusion

The Bee Lecture concerns the need for a new politics and therefore stages a human and non-human encounter in search for re-negotiation of sociality. It invokes perspectivism by staging various forms of a gaze that can suspend, if for a fleeting moment, the habits of self-concealment from, and blindness to that same gaze, within the Western symbolic order. Viveiros de Castro's anthropology of descriptive equivocations provides an avenue to relate perspectivist intersubjectivities to the present need to engage the non-human differently as we face climate change and the ravages of the capitalocene. Equivocation gives the Bee performer a performative method to make the audience reciprocate the non-human gaze, and engage in semiotic invention and convention, particularly regarding the culture-nature divide.

The gaze of Benjamin's angel of history helped to establish a link between the historicist ideology of progress, and a Western avoidance of the Real. The Lacanian concept of the Real, as what is unrepresentable, that is, what is sensed as a terrific unknowable 'nature' in the symbolic and imaginary realms, serves to locate the possible approaches or signs of the Real in Western and Amerindian cosmologies. The mode of approach to the Real is identified as crucial to the different ontologies governing the symbolic orders in Perspectivism and the West. A sketch of the mythical origins of na-

ture/culture and human/non-human ontologies reveals a Western illusion of transcendence in relation to the Real that contrasts with an Amerindian internalization of the Real. Western symbolic order seeks to transcend nature as non-human, and establish an alternative dwelling safe from animality, represented by the State. The metaphysics of 'freedom' that pervades life within the State have a weak redemptive power, as noted by Benjamin, because it sets humanity in a historicist and hence entropic race with himself. Viveiros de Castro recognizes in Amerindian cannibal metaphysics a more intimate fear of the Other while opening paths of becoming while looking towards the Real. This approach to the Real, represented in the mythical image of an original chaosmos, frames a different politics with the high stakes of encounters with the Other. Perspectivism, if it were to affect a Western political practice, could begin by recognizing the existing cannibal metaphysics of democratic politics and its performative elements, and then raise the stakes of encounters with the Other beyond the walls of the State. It would be a performative politics akin to "a theatre of insecurity," as proposed by Alain Badiou, that contradicts our epoch's lack of courage and "existential miserliness" (Badiou 107). The Bee as psychoanalyst, as shaman, as Don Quixote, not only addresses us, it looks back at us with a challenging gaze. Politics cannot be less than a radical psychoanalysis capable of altering our cosmovision and ontology on a path to become a being more in tune with our multi-species destiny.

NOTES

¹ See *Écrits* 292. Translation of quote is by Bennet Schaber (1).

² [Luck appears to guide our interests better than the objects of our wishes.]

³ Photo credits for all images are Sasha Loayza

⁴ In Lacan, the concept of Other has a different meaning than the usual acception related to the perception of difference or alterity in intersubjective relations. The Other in Lacan is the one who we feel interpellated by through language and the law. This big Other is thus related to the symbolic order.

⁵ I name this chaosmos 'One nature' in anticipation of its becoming a multinatural world in the genesis of the Amerindian myth.

⁶ Viveiros de Castro warns that the point of view "agencied" by the specificity of the body does not amount to "Cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism, [and] presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation. Amerindians propose the inverse: on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit—the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as 'activated' or 'agencied' by a point of view—and, on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism, since a perspective is not a representation" (*Relative Native* 72).

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Framing a Decolonial Future: Hurricane María in Independent Puerto Rican Comics

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Abstract: This article examines graphic narratives of Hurricane María in independent comics published both in Puerto Rico and its US diaspora. Focusing on *María* (Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez 2018), *Temporada* (Rosaura Rodríguez 2019), and *La Borinqueña* (Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez 2016, 2018), it analyzes the ways these works bear witness to the ‘foreshocks and aftershocks’ of the hurricane while delineating a decolonial future for Puerto Rico (Bonilla and LeBrón). The analysis begins by reflecting on the comics’ form, such as frames, text, and the space of the gutter, to explore the interactions between their structure and content and the ways in which they situate the reader in a generative process of memorializing. It then turns to questions of sustainability, particularly Rosaura Rodríguez’s use of watercolors, and how these titles seek to overcome the current environmental and political crises the archipelago is facing by foregrounding a close, community-oriented relationship with the natural environment. In Miranda-Rodriguez’s comics, this is framed within Indigenous and Afrodiasporic spiritualities and the need to reexamine Puerto Rican history in order to interrogate its experience of coloniality. Though distinct in their form and genre, these comics—alongside complementary short comics from Puerto Rico and the diaspora—critique the extractivist, colonial relationship with the US and invite readers to imagine sustainable futures drawn through a Boricua-centered, decolonial lens.

Keywords: environment, sustainability, extractivism, resistance, decoloniality, trauma

In the introduction to *Disaster Drawn*, comics scholar Hillary Chute reflects on the particularities of comics as a mode of bearing witness to trauma. As she notes, ‘there are many examples of the visual-verbal form of comics, drawn by hand, operating as documentary and addressing history, witness, and testimony’ (2). While her book focuses on narratives of war, her observations regarding the immediacy, urgency, and intimacy of the comics form and the way that it ‘juxtapose[s] time and space, [...] the concomitant presence and absence of memory, consciousness, agency, and affect’ find an echo in the representations of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico (262). Numerous comics and anthologies explore the experience and aftermath of the September 2017 hurricane, voicing the many testimonies of destruction, the daily struggle to survive, the precarity of post-María life, and the ways that community solidarity and activist networks stepped in after the widespread failure of local and federal government services, agencies, and emergency assistance programs. Some, like *Nublado: Escombros de María* (2018), were locally published digital anthologies that brought together short works from creators throughout Puerto Rico, while others were published in the United States as fundraising endeavors for hurricane relief, like Marco Lopez et al.’s *Puerto Rico Strong* (2018) and Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez’s *Ricanstruction* (2018). Within this context, this article turns to four Boricua comics creators’ representations of both the experience of the hurricane and what Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón have termed ‘María’s aftershocks and its

foreshocks—the sociohistorical context of debt crisis, migration, and coloniality in which the storm took place’ (3). As they bear witness to the weather event and the disaster surrounding it, these works by Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, Rosaura Rodríguez, and Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez serve as a direct critique of the extractivist, colonial relationship maintained by the United States over Puerto Rico while laying bare the personal, political, and environmental ‘aftershocks and foreshocks’ María thrust onto the world stage. In spite of their distinct styles and genres, comics like *María* (2018), *Temporada* (2019), and *La Borinqueña* (2016, 2018) invite readers to engage directly with contemporary Puerto Rican realities as they imagine alternative, sustainable futures for the archipelago, drawn through a Boricua-centered, decolonial lens.

Before examining these titles, it is necessary to consider briefly the ways that comics, in their form and structure, directly engage with the construction of memory, time, and physical and geographic space. In her discussion of Mexican American creator Gilbert Hernandez’s work, Jennifer Glaser situates comics ‘in an aesthetic “borderlands” of sorts’ given their position ‘between visual art and literature, as well as between elite and mainstream cultural production.’ Issues of ‘populism and prestige,’ to borrow Marc Singer’s words from the subtitle of his book *Breaking the Frames*, have long been a concern in comics studies, one that Jorge Catalá Carrasco, Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer articulate in their introduction to *Comics and Memory in Latin America*. One among many such reflec-

tions, the authors point to comics 'as material (and, when in cyber form, immaterial) [...] mediums or technologies of memory, similar to but also distinct from other memory devices such as photographs, memorials, or museums, which have received far more attention from scholars of memory' (Catalá Carrasco, Drinot and Scorer 5). Reading comics is an active and generative process on the part of the reader who, immersed in its form and structure, is positioned within the narrative as a participant in the processes of memorializing. As Scott McCloud demonstrates in *Understanding Comics*, the structure of panels separated by the gutter fractures time and space, requiring closure on the part of the reader as they narrativize this break (67). To this end, Frederick Luis Aldama writes that the gutter is the '*sine qua non* shaping device of comics, [...] the space for us to imagine movement, thought, and feeling' ("ReDrawing" 2). Drawing on Chute's observation that comics 'spatialize memory' and so 'allow for a multiplicity of temporal moments,' Catalá Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer conclude they 'thus constitute sites of memory that elicit and mobilize memories of the past, a politics of the present, and a project for the future' (16-17). Such considerations of structure and form, albeit brief, are important for understanding the ways that the comics analyzed below negotiate time and genre to invoke the reader and serve as sites of activism in their depictions of the past, present, and future.

María: Framing digital narratives of colonial trauma

Founded in 2007 by Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, Soda Pop Comics is the first female-run comics studio in Puerto Rico. It has published comics, zines, and webcomics on a number of topics pertaining to contemporary life in Puerto Rico, including the archipelago's status as a US colony and the effects this has had, both before Hurricane María and since. In her studies of their work, María Fernanda Díaz-Basteris observes that, as a feminist and queer-inclusive studio, Soda Pop Comics' orientation towards the local creator community fosters deep connections between individuals and encourages 'a la audiencia internacional a la reflexión y a la empatía anticolonial' ("Webcomics" 3). Through her in-depth analysis of this studio's and other Puerto Rican creators' webcomics, Díaz-Basteris demonstrates their decolonial nature, born of the comics' virtual materiality, personal narrative, and immediate distribution which refutes colonial and reductive narratives of Puerto Rico. 'Escribir, ilustrar y publicar testimonios sobre el desastre, siendo ciudadana norteamericana y viviendo en la colonia, descoloniza la formalidad de la noticia y del estudio del desastre,' she writes of webcomics depicting Hurricane María, continuing to underscore that the digital format allows for the testimony these graphic narratives contain to challenge hegemonic discourses about the colony without being censored nor restricted in their geographical reach ("Webcomics" 7).¹

María, written and illustrated by Rosa Colón with colors by Carla Rodríguez, was published in 2018 and distributed as a PDF through Soda Pop Comics' Gumroad online store. In addition to disseminating her work through the studio's and her own websites, Colón has been published in print anthologies such as *Puerto Rico Strong*, mentioned above, and is a regular contributor to other digital sequential art platforms such as *The Nib*. Written in English like the vast majority of her work—a decision Colón has discussed with Díaz-Basteris ("Webcomics" 6)—*María* both details Colón and Rodríguez's own experiences during and after the hurricane and connects this narrative to the broader personal and political aftershocks at the individual, community, and national levels. The comic opens with María's landfall depicted in three full-width panels which move from the sea and the breach of the coastal defenses on the east of the island (figure 1), to the mountains and forest a little further inland, before showing Colón and Rodríguez's apartment building where they waited out the storm. On the first four pages, the format, size, and placement of panels, as well as the positioning of the text, reinforce the simultaneous themes of physical destruction and confinement, the perception of time and its deconstruction, and the ways in which external forces—both physical and political—penetrate the borders of Puerto Rico in a destructive way. The uniformity of the panels on the first page and the placement of text above and below each one converge to indicate the slow passage of time as residents awaited the storm. This is achieved by directing the reader to repeat the experience of viewing single snapshots of different locales—each with the same grey clouds at a similar point in the storm—juxtaposed with text that details the previous experience of Hurricane Irma, preparations for securing the apartment, and eeriness of the neighborhood as the storm approached.

Figure 1: Panel from page 1 of *María*. Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, ©2018, sodapopcomics.com. Reproduced with permission of Soda Pop Comics.



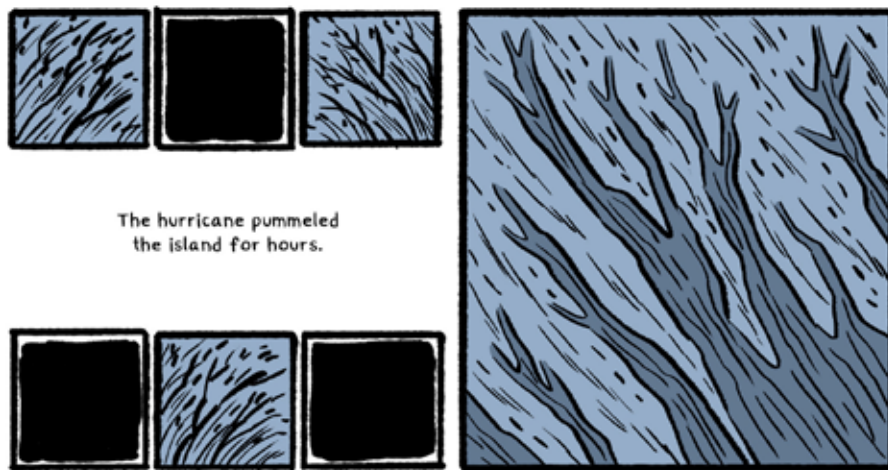


Figure 2: Panels from page 2 of *María*. Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, ©2018, sodapopcomics.com. Reproduced with permission of Soda Pop Comics.

The second page repeats the tripartite structure, but each tier is now divided into one large and six smaller panels, replicating each component in reverse within each tier (that is, the larger panel we see on the right in tier one [figure 2] then appears on the left in the second tier, while the six smaller panels, here on the left, appear on the right; this is then reversed again in the third tier which replicates the format of the first). Here, the wind batters each of the three distinct components

seen on page one but in a different order and the colors reduced to monochromatic shades of blue-grey: the trees are stripped of their leaves; Colón, Rodríguez, and their dogs shelter in the bathroom of their apartment; the footpath/roadway along the coastal defenses is now shown with a broken telegraph pole. The repetition in form and order—yet with significant modifications—once again communicates the interminable passage of time and its concomitant elasticity, while the alternation between the battered trees and the pitch black in the smaller panels indicates the incessant penetration and destabilization of the scenes in the larger panels that abut them. Similarly, the text continues to occupy space outside of the frames; however, that the captions are enclosed on three sides by multiple panels is suggestive of the increasing pressure being placed on the verbal narrative while it is still set apart in a sense from the visual narrative that surrounds it.² Page three again replicates the tiers and similar elements from the previous pages—the trees, the neighborhood, a roadway with similar broken telegraph poles—yet here, the ever-larger panels as the reader moves down the page subsume the written text at the top and bottom of the page and depict the stark, bright sky juxtaposed against the debris-strewn ground (figure 3). Turning to page four, the narrative of daily life in the aftermath of the hurricane becomes constrained by and reduced to waiting, where the captions occupy the space in the middle of the page, circumscribed by the panels. In the surrounding images, the individuality that is often denoted by faces is replaced by footwear and rough outlines, all in shades of the same stark yellow (figure 4). The mundanity and inescapable repetition of daily survival continues as the comic progresses, most notably with two full pages on which a sequence of six panels organized in two tiers is repeated three times; the only modification in the sequence marking the passage of time is the color of Colón's shirt in each, while the text speaks of the trauma and guilt alongside the repetitive nature of daily life (8-9).



We drove to our family's homes, picking a path between fallen branches and cables. Debris and rubble were everywhere. Our parents were shaken but coping. Helping them gave us a sense of control in the chaos.

Figure 3: Panel from page 3 of *María*. Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, ©2018, sodapopcomics.com. Reproduced with permission of Soda Pop Comics.



Figure 4: Panel from page 4 of *María*. Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, ©2018, sodapopcomics.com. Reproduced with permission of Soda Pop Comics.

Throughout *María*, the creators bear witness to both their personal and the collective experience of the initial aftershocks of the hurricane. Having represented the physical breach of the island at the outset and then exemplified the deadly consequences of Puerto Rico's continued status as a US colony over the subsequent weeks

and months, the comic finishes with a simultaneous message of loss and fracture alongside hope and potential.³ Returning to the full-width panel format of the comic's opening, the penultimate page comprises four tiers over which the Puerto Rican flag gradually deteriorates before lying faded and disintegrated on the ground like the post-María debris of the earlier pages. On the one hand, this speaks to the loss and fragmentation that Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican society have suffered; on the other, the faded red, white, and blue represent the long-term and ongoing broken dependency on the colonial US metropolis. The message of hope, then, is found in the comic's final panel (figure 5), comprising an image of unity, collaboration, and sustainability from within the nation's borders and the symbolic removal of the colonial colors from the flag to be rendered in black and white. As Bonilla, among others, has observed, this change to black and white 'for some [...] represented a symbol of mourning, while for others it was a sign of a new era of resistance' (Bonilla and Klein 26).

Figure 5: Panel from page 12 of *María*. Rosa Colón and Carla Rodríguez, ©2018, sodapopcomics.com. Reproduced with permission of Soda Pop Comics.

If earlier those who queued in an act of survival were reduced to footwear and the rough outlines of human bodies, then this final panel is the only moment that faces of individuals are depicted who are not either the comic's creators or political figures.⁴ On a page where the text is consistently integrated into the visual narrative rather than placed outside the frame, gesturing towards a resolution of sorts, we read that 'Puerto Rico will be rebuilt from the inside out not by corrupt politicians taking advantage of this disaster but by Puerto Ricans' (12). Serving as testimony to personal and collective experiences of the hurricane and its aftermath framed within the ongoing narrative of colonial trauma, the comic thus looks to the future in an act of resistance and potential communicated through both its form and word-drawn narrative. To this end, the community-oriented recovery will be carried out by the 'People who dealt with the tragedy with ingenuity, resilience and more importantly, empathy' (12). Or perhaps, to quote Díaz-Basteris from above, 'anticolonial empathy.'



Webcomics to watercolors: Visualizing sustainability

Nublado: Escombros de María, published collectively by Soda Pop Comics, Castorillo, and Taller Secreto Press, comprises a series of comics by 13 Puerto Rican artists, issued as a 31-page anthology in black and white and initially distributed as a PDF through Soda Pop Comics' Gumroad online store. Printed and sold at the Chicago Alternative Comics Expo a month later, it constitutes 'the counter-memorial of a non-existent official archive denying death and denationalization of Puerto Rican lives' and presents 'the displacement experience [...] as an apocalyptic visual expression that Hurricane Maria left behind' (Díaz-Basteris, "Traumatic Displacement" 470). Included in the anthology is Rosaura Rodríguez's "Cómo se dibuja el ruido: Huracán María," a three-page comic in which the relative absence of words forces the reader to recreate the auditory experience of the hurricane almost exclusively from images.⁵ In contrast to Colón's overwhelmingly digital process, Rodríguez works mainly in inks and watercolors. The comic opens with a full-width panorama of the amassing clouds, which is then obscured from view when the shutters are closed. The vista of the tree-covered hills reappears intermittently, punctuated by a series of small panels that replicate the repetition and experience of time in *María*.⁶ While these full-width panels depict the scenes of increasing destruction outside, the 24 smaller panels that fill the comic's second page seek to visualize the overwhelming sound of the hurricane (figure 6). Unrelentless in their repetition, the irregular and imprecise square-shaped frames contain the abstract yet persistent forms in ink and watercolors that the sound takes in the mind's eye. As noted above, the gutter is a space of closure, and here the experience for the reader is one of overwhelming disorientation; the reader seeks to navigate the ordered yet uneven panels while unable to escape in that irregular blank space between them the modulations in noise that the inked lines and watercolor shading invoke. At the same time, the fact that the watercolors bleed into the gutters then questions the very integrity of the structure. In turning to the final page, the four full-width panels reveal the chaos and destruction before a final opening of the shutters presents a denuded landscape once the storm has passed.

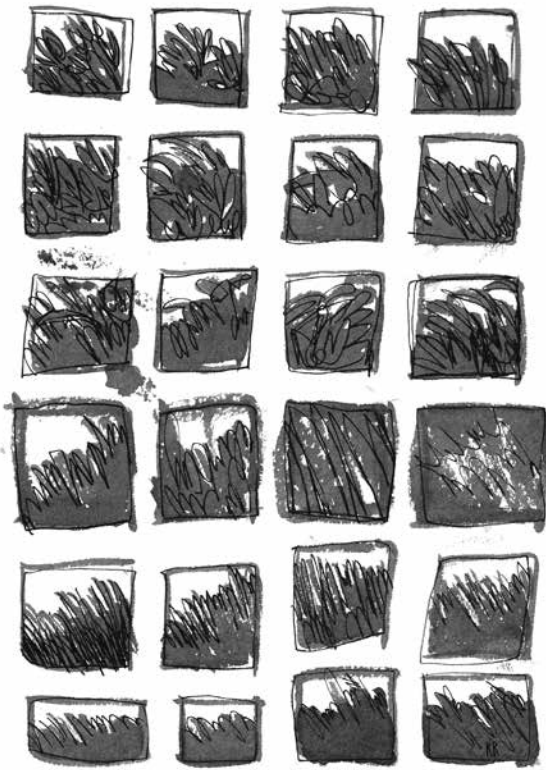


Figure 6: Page from "Cómo se dibuja el ruido: Huracán María." *Nublado: Escombros de María*, Rosaura Rodríguez, ©2018, www.cosasrosaura.com. Reproduced with permission of the artist and Soda Pop Comics.

Although this comic was disseminated as part of a digital anthology, the form and materiality of Rodríguez's work as art produced using paper and water-based inks and paints is central to her practice. As curator Sabrina Ramos Rubén writes in the catalogue for Rodríguez's 2019 exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (MACPR), 'Rodríguez utiliza la acuarela y los pigmentos con conciencia plena de las capacidades del medio y con un interés de expandirlo hacia la experimentación técnica, logrando hacer una de las intersecciones más innovadoras entre los medios acuosos, el cómic y el paisaje en tiempos recientes.' Although painted using commercial watercolors rather than the natural pigments used in her current project, Rodríguez's comic *Temporada*—first published in March 2019—exemplifies this innovative intersection between medium and subject that Ramos Rubén notes, combining narratives regarding sustainability, community empowerment and autonomy, and the rejection of capitalist and (neo)colonial projects that have long subjugated residents of Puerto Rico and the archipelago itself.

Rodríguez began painting the images that appear in *Temporada* immediately after the hurricane. Through its title, translated by Marianne Ramírez-Aponte—executive director and chief curator at MACPR—as '[Hurricane] Season' but which we could also translate as a 'spell of time,' the artist references both the immediacy of the hurricane and its effects as well as the longer, ongoing pe-

riod of which the storm is a part (166). In so doing, Rodríguez not only situates María within the annual Caribbean hurricane season and points to the fact that this storm came on the heels of its predecessor Irma, she also makes direct reference to the longstanding 'aftershocks and foreshocks' invoked by Bonilla and LeBrón above. Consonant with her focus on depicting quotidian occurrences, as she does in *Días*, her earlier collaboration with Omar Banuchi, Rodríguez paints somewhat light-hearted scenes of her cat, for whom 'todo sigue igual,' or more jarring yet still mildly humorous images that capture her befuddlement when her neighbor uses a leaf blower to clean the sodden pavement two days after the storm against a backdrop of broken trees (figure 7). As the comic progresses, however, what might have seemed nonchalant observations of her immediate vicinity are then juxtaposed with scenes of these 'aftershocks,' such as the January 2018 announcement that 283 schools would close due to a lack of funding or that, the following August, 200 rented shipping containers would serve as classrooms and offices for the schools receiving them. Budget cuts had been ongoing in Puerto Rico long before María, precipitated by the federally appointed yet locally funded Fiscal Control Board—colloquially known as 'la junta'—imposed on Puerto Rico in 2016 by the US Congress 'to restructure Puerto Rico's public debt, dismantle its public sphere, and advance an aggressive privatization and austerity agenda' (Prados-Rodríguez 250).⁷ Following these two pages, Rodríguez depicts the July 2018 revelation that similar containers continued to serve as makeshift morgues almost a year after the storm (figure 8), both shocking yet unsurprising given the longstanding healthcare crisis in Puerto Rico exacerbated by this same colonial 'junta.' As Jeniffer Wiscovitch Padilla writes in her article for the San Juan-based Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, 'no fue hasta que comenzaron a apestar los cadáveres a mediados de julio que las autoridades comenzaron a movilizarse para atender el problema, que al menos lleva tres meses en aumento exponencial.'

Figure 7: Page from *Temporada*. Rosaura Rodríguez, ©2019, www.cosasrosaura.com. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



Figure 8: Page from *Temporada*. Rosaura Rodríguez, ©2019, www.cosasrosaura.com. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



Placing the very personal experience of the banal repetitiveness of daily life alongside the personal and collective narratives of trauma and tragedy sees Rodríguez 'lose the thread' in a comic she had intended to follow a more narrative arc.⁸ This is particularly notable in this second section of *Temporada*, where the clearly delineated—though unframed—panels and distinct dialogue balloons seen in sections one and three, accompanied by captions almost exclusively placed outside the panels, give way to unbounded panels where the white background extends into the gutter and which incorporate captions as integral components of each image (exemplified in figures 7, 8, and 9). Depicting snapshots in time that appear to bleed one into the next, the format of these panels evokes a sense of chaos and intrusion, disquiet interspersed with brief moments of humor and the potential for relief. More specifically, the way that the personal and political are interwoven directly invokes the longstanding structures of domination and oppression that continue to be employed in Puerto Rico. For example, there is an element of dark humor to celebrating that María washed away then-Governor Rosselló's campaign signs, given that—as will be discussed below—he had sought to privatize Puerto Rico's indebted and subsequently collapsed power grid as a solution to the months-long power outages many Puerto Ricans suffered. However, similarly to *María*, the comic notes in section three that those from outside will quantify the 'disaster' in terms of the death toll, but when this is read in conjunction with the closing panel, depicting the quotidian normalcy of the yellow school bus traveling along an unrepaired road surrounded by leafless trees, the reader again perceives the political commentary that resonates throughout the comic. For Rodríguez, the solution is not the capitalist and neocolonial project of auctioning Puerto Rico's national assets through a process Klein has termed 'disaster capitalism' and 'the shock doctrine,' and which Bonilla has reframed as 'a trauma doctrine' (Bonilla and Klein 22, 26; see also Klein's *The Battle for Paradise*). Rather, in a section that depicts both trauma and possibility, by turning to 'el ingenio caribeño' that Rodríguez depicts as 'life' (figure 9), it is possible to create a more sustainable and autonomous future directly connected to the land and the environment around them.

Figure 9: Page from *Temporada*. Rosaura Rodríguez, ©2019, www.cosasrosaura.com. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



If Rosa Colón's use of technology and the format of the webcomic is political in its use of the virtual space as a mode of anticolonial discourse that rejects US hegemony over the island, then Rodríguez's use of watercolors reflects her stated objective to seek sustainable and organic ways to promote autonomy and independence for Puerto Rico and its residents. In a short documentary about her practice, the artist explains: 'trabajo con acuarelas porque son transparentes, son fluidas, capturan bien el movimiento o sensación de un espacio' (Contrabando PR). Given these weather events' inherent link to water, the significance of painting Hurricane María using watercolors is not lost on the reader. Moreover, their use indicates a divestment from the omnipresence of technology in daily life and the governor's scheme to privatize the power grid, in addition to the extractivist policies to be examined below, such as incentivizing Puerto Ricans' extraction to the United States while courting blockchain billionaires as settlers in a wave of 'crypto-colonialism' (Klein, *Battle* 20). For her current project, *Trabajo de Campo*, Rodríguez produces pigments from natural materials collected on Tabonuco farm, located in Jayuya in Puerto Rico's mountainous central region, where she lives and offers creative workshops as part of the Camp Tabonuco ecological education program. This 'field work'—that is, the creation of both the pigments and the resultant artworks, which include a short comic produced using coffee charcoal ink—sees Rodríguez explore a deeper connection between the topic and medium of her art (personal correspondence with the artist). To this end, and as Ramos Rubén concludes, 'a través de la permanencia del recuerdo ligado a la documentación de la naturaleza, el trabajo de Rosaura Rodríguez rememora y renueva los vínculos telúricos ancestrales y presentes.' Such an invocation of the ancestors and their direct connection to the earth leads us to the final comic to be examined here, Edgardo Miranda-Rodríguez's *La Borinqueña*.

Narratives of resistance through Indigenous and Afrodiasporic spiritualities

In contrast to Rosa Colón, Carla Rodríguez, and Rosaura Rodríguez, all resident in Puerto Rico, Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez is a Brooklyn-based Nuyorican creator. He has written for Marvel Comics' *Guardians of the Galaxy: Tales of the Cosmos* series, collaborating here with Darryl 'DMC' McDaniels, co-founder of their jointly owned Darryl Makes Comics imprint, and publishes *La Borinqueña* through his independent studio, Somos Arte. At the time of writing, two issues of *La Borinqueña* have been published, with the third scheduled for release in May 2021, and the title's eponymous superhero also appears in many of the 68 contributions to Somos Arte's *Ricanstruction* anthology, in which she is joined by a range of DC Comics characters in this effort to raise funds for post-hurricane relief in Puerto Rico. Like the character he created, Miranda-Rodriguez was born and grew up in the Puerto Rican diaspora, and the Nuyorican experience is a strong influence throughout the comic. This is the only title analyzed here that fits into the superhero genre, with environmental studies student and activist Marisol Ríos de la Luz gaining the powers to control the wind, water, and land from the close relationship she develops with the Indigenous Taíno spirits and people of Borikén (the Indigenous name for the island). Although the hurricane depicted in issue one does not directly reference María since it was published nine months beforehand, the first issue examines a number of the foreshocks preceding the storm while the second, from May 2018, explores several aftershocks that did manifest post-María, as we will see below.

From the source of her powers to the provenance of her outfit, *La Borinqueña* is directly situated within multiple and overlapping narratives of resistance. These range from training herself to overcome in part the barriers caused by childhood and adolescent asthma, thereby questioning the broad limitations society often places on individuals with such conditions, to her status as the first Afro-Boricua female superhero of her kind. With regard to her outfit and powers, *La Borinqueña* corresponds to Aldama's assertion in *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* that 'Latino superheroes tend to accessorize in ways that root them in pre-Columbian histories and the Latino community' (8). If, for Colón and Rodríguez above, resistance and community is symbolized in *María* by the Puerto Rican flag rendered in black and white—as we also see in *La Borinqueña* #2—then here, the spirit of resistance is exemplified by a red, white, and blue outfit formed not in the image of the current Puerto Rican flag but out of material from the 1868 revolutionary flag of Lares, sewn by Mariana Bracetti, member of the Puerto Rican independence movement against Spanish colonial rule.⁹ Further indicative of the importance of these colors to the aesthetics of Marisol's representation is that, when not in her outfit as *La Borinqueña*, she is almost always wearing an item of clothing that is a shade of purple or magenta in color. Drawing on the red, white, and blue, or the white and black, of the flag, these signature colors are made as a

combination of red and blue, which—in simple and symbolic terms—then can be lightened or darkened with white or black. In a similar vein, *La Borinqueña*'s name, derived from the Taíno Borikén, also references the Puerto Rican national anthem; yet, again, this points not to its current version devoid of revolutionary fervor but rather to the original anthem that set the words of Lola Rodríguez de Tió's 1868 poem calling for independence to music. Beyond these revolutionary independence movements, however, Miranda-Rodriguez situates his narrative in a much longer narrative arc of anticolonial resistance, connecting Marisol with her Taíno ancestors and their spirituality. As Enrique García observes in his analysis of indigeneity in the comic, which he reads alongside Ricardo Álvarez-Rivón's earlier *Turey El Taíno*, 'La Borinqueña is empowered by the island [...] to protect its people, but this power is built on the foundation of Taíno culture, and does not stem from the two oppressive Eurocentric traditions' (226).

Marisol cements her connection with Taíno spirituality in the course of her senior thesis research, during which she unwittingly discovers the five crystal tears of the Taíno mother spirit Atabex (figure 10). These tears combine to form the elusive 'Estrella del Camino,' about which Marisol learned as a child and that her thesis advisor has long sought, and the star affixes itself to the chest of her outfit, as if sewn in the same position occupied by the star in the top left corner of the handmade flag of Lares. Accorded the powers of Yucahú—'spirit of the sea and mountains' (figure 11)—and Huracán—'spirit of the storms' (figure 12)—Atabex reiterates for the reader the manifold ties *La Borinqueña* already holds with these natural elements through her studies, environmental activism, and the name given to her by her parents. 'Mar y sol, my sea and sun,' Atabex states, and so reminds us of the superhero's own translation of her name on the comic's second page: 'Sea and sun [...] rivers of light' (Miranda-Rodriguez, *La Borinqueña* #1). Such a direct connection to the geography, topography, and ecology of Puerto Rico replicates in a spiritual plane those foregrounded through community in the final panel of *María* and in the form and materiality of Rosaura Rodríguez's work. Indeed, instructed by Huracán to feel the winds at her command because 'humanity's ways have altered the natural order,' *La Borinqueña* is able to mitigate the effects of the storm barreling towards Aguadilla caused by what the spirits have framed as the unnatural relationship humans now maintain with the environment. Tying politics together with environmental activism, the one-shot included at the end of the issue shows *La Borinqueña*'s successful actions to prevent the dumping of toxic waste in unregulated landfill sites in Peñuelas. This is a direct reference to the protests against AES Puerto Rico's disposal of toxic coal ash in landfills across the island, an illegal practice until the 2015 agreement with Puerto Rico's national power authority and the Environmental Protection Agency that permitted these activities to continue (see, for example, Omar Alfonso's article for the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo examining this issue). Such 'provocative use of the Taíno as foundational figures of ideological

resistance' seen in issue one continues through issue two, in which La Borinqueña travels back in time to witness Cacique Mabodamaca lead his people into battle against the Spanish colonists and uses her powers in other activist protests (E. García 223).



Figure 10: (right) Panel from *La Borinqueña* #1. Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ©2016, www.la-borinquena.com. Reproduced with permission of Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

Figure 11: (left) Panel from *La Borinqueña* #1. Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ©2016, www.la-borinquena.com. Reproduced with permission of Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.



Figure 12: Panels from *La Borinqueña* #1. Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ©2016, www.la-borinquena.com. Reproduced with permission of Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

As an Afro-Boricua superhero, La Borinqueña serves as the conduit for both Taíno and Afrodiasporic spiritualities, histories, and epistemologies of Puerto Rico, the latter of which comes to the fore at the opening of issue two. Her ability to manipulate water sees her associated with Yemayá, the Santería orisha (spirit) of motherhood and the sea, when she appears to Pedro and Julio as they attempt to escape homophobic and racist abuse walking under New York's Williamsburg Bridge after having been relocated to the city by FEMA (figure 13).¹⁰ Santería—or Regla de Ocha as it is also known—is an African Caribbean religion and spiritual practice derived from West African and particularly Yoruba religiosities, closely associated with anticolonial resistance and practiced in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and their diasporas, among other places. In addition to his invocation of Yemayá upon seeing La Borinqueña, Julio's own association with the orisha is indicated by the blue color of his eleke, a ritual beaded necklace that indicates his initiation as a child of, or at least his service to, Yemayá. An explicit association between La Borinqueña and the orisha here in issue two is unsurprising, not least since it is the water that leads Marisol to Atabex's tears in issue one. However, perhaps this is a preordained path given the revelation in the first issue that her father's name is Changó, who in the patakí or myths of Santería is Yemayá's son.



Figure 13: Panel from *La Borinqueña* #2. Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ©2018, www.la-borinquena.com. Reproduced with permission of Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

This interwoven spiritual tapestry is exemplified further as the opening chapter of issue two progresses. Following *La Borinqueña*'s invocation as Yemayá, the reader encounters a flashback of Marisol in a shirt with the Taíno symbol for the coquí frog accompanied by her father wearing the red color of Changó, before the waters that 'replenish my body, mind, and spirit' lead her to place a living coquí she finds by the river at the base of a ceiba tree (Miranda-Rodriguez, *La Borinqueña* #2). The ceiba is the sacred tree for both the Taíno and practitioners of Santería and is a means through which spirits of the ancestors and the orishas can manifest themselves, as the ancestral spirits do here. Turning to just one example from *Ricanstruction*, in "Bohío Girasol 2050" towards the anthology's close, Julianna, an elderly Afro-Boricua matriarch, has led the Bohío Girasol community to return to a direct and sustainable relationship with the land in order to build a future out of the devastation of 2017 (Yeampierre et al. 164). Wearing the yellow and green eleke and idé (bracelet) of Orula, orisha of divination, Julianna greets *La Borinqueña* and they both turn to watch The Berta Cáceres ship in the bay (figure 14). Named after the assassinated environmental and Indigenous rights activist, member of the Lenca people in Honduras, The Berta Cáceres not only gestures towards a network of solidarity and deep-seated concern for the environment among Indigenous peoples and their descendants that reaches beyond the shores of the Caribbean Sea, but also reiterates a timeframe and connections that predate colonization and extend to the present day. In this vein, therefore, in the imagined future of 2050, the ancestral and embodied knowledges of Afrodiasporic and Indigenous spiritualities serve to forge the close, respectful relationship with the environment necessary for a decolonial future—or 'beginning'—to be found (169).

Figure 14: Panel from page 169 of "Bohío Girasol 2050." *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing and Rebuilding Puerto Rico*, Elizabeth Yeampierre (writer), Eryn Williams (artist) et al., ©2018, www.la-borinquena.com. Reproduced with permission of Somos Arte and Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

Of power and politics: A decolonial future

To return briefly to Pedro and Julio from *La Borinqueña* #2, their very presence in New York City is presented most immediately as a result of FEMA's program of relocating Puerto Ricans to the US in the months after the storm, but it is directly tied to the long history of migration from Puerto Rico to urban centers of the colonial power. In September 2018, Centro: the Center for Puerto Rican Studies reported that nearly 160,000 Puerto Ricans were estimated to have relocated to the US since María (Hinojosa and Meléndez). For many, as Julio observes, this relocation constituted being displaced and abandoned in these new surroundings. For her part, Marisol is unabashedly Nuyorican; in chapter two of the first issue, she cycles a route that passes through neigh-



borhoods long associated with Puerto Rican and Latinx migration, from Williamsburg through Loisaída, El Barrio, and Harlem before arriving at Columbia University, where she studies. On the other hand, in issue two, Marisol is forced to defend both her Puerto Ricanness and her diasporic identity when being Nuyorican marks her as 'other' in a heated discussion with Brismar, one of the organizers of the protest against the (neo)colonialist and capitalist strategies employed by international companies and local and federal governments. For Ivonne García, in her examination of the first issue of *La Borinqueña* alongside Wilfred Santiago's 21: *The Story of Roberto Clemente*, 'these two works deploy what I call "diasporic intersectionality" that not only acknowledges but actually privileges the Puerto Rican migrant experience' (72).¹¹ This intersectional and self-conscious approach to representations of the diaspora is, she contends, 'a source of (super)power(s)' and 'balances the losses of the migratory push and pull by building on the gains of experiencing in-betweenness' (81).¹²

This is a useful tool for formulating an understanding of Marisol's complex identity and, as readers, we see tangible benefits to her powers derived from a direct connection to her Taíno and Afro-diasporic ancestors and associated spiritualities. In one particularly practical sense, at the beginning of issue two, *La Borinqueña* is able to bypass commercial air travel between Puerto Rico and New York since she 'can open wormholes to get me from la Isla to Nueva York to check in on Mami y Papi' (Miranda-Rodríguez, *La Borinqueña* #2). A clear reference to the way that Puerto Ricans' movements have been severely restricted after María, *La Borinqueña*'s mobility is not curtailed in this regard, a stark contrast to Pedro and Julio's experience above. At the same time, symbolically this sees her divest, temporarily at least, from the capitalist and extractivist framework whereby travel to and from the island is mediated by profit-seeking and fossil fuel-burning airlines, who enjoy the support of local and federal governments. Marisol does return to the island by plane, accompanied by her best friend and classmate Lauren 'La La' Liu. However, by refusing to leave in the way that Pedro and Julio were relocated and then returning in the way that they have not been able to—all the while maintaining this connection to the environment and natural elements of the archipelago—*La Borinqueña* rejects the state-sponsored notion of the 'emptying island,' to quote Frances Negrón-Muntaner's framing of the 'colonial-capitalist practice of expulsion that is foundational, recurrent, and coterminous with the island's [...] colonial-capitalist modernity.' This is a topic that numerous post-María comics have examined, from Rosa Colón's and William González's contributions to *Nublado* to Ronnie García's "Here" in *Puerto Rico Strong*, to name a few titles from the anthologies already mentioned here.¹³

Such 'colonial-capitalist extraction' that the 'emptying island' typifies is central to the narrative surrounding la Estrella del Camino, physical representation of the source of *La Borinqueña*'s superpowers (Negrón-Muntaner). Comprising five of Atabex's tears shed due to the colonial suffering of the mother spirit's children,

the star is then rendered an 'asset,' sought by those attempting to profit from Borikén's continued subjugation. As noted above, Bonilla has reframed Klein's 'shock doctrine' in the particular case of Puerto Rico as 'a trauma doctrine,' which she explains as 'not a case of economic and political interests taking advantage of a moment of shock, but rather of corporate and political interests taking advantage of deep-seated colonial traumas that have left the population vulnerable to exploitation' (Bonilla and Klein 26-27). On the one hand, this disaster capitalism takes the form of closing schools, as we see in Rodríguez's *Temporada*, an issue that Klein analyzed in post-Katrina New Orleans in *The Shock Doctrine* and that Brusi and Godreau examine in reference to la junta's fiscal policy both pre- and post-María. In *La Borinqueña* #2, the deleterious consequences of this are symbolized by the near demise of all the students on an overcrowded school bus whose deaths are only averted by the superhero's intimate connection with the land (figure 15). At the close of the same issue, we see the board of the Dulcinea company manipulate students and faculty members directly affected by the aftershocks of María through scholarships and research grants with strings attached. Notably, having diversified its interests beyond the colonial sugar industry, Dulcinea engages in property development in Puerto Rico and Brooklyn (fictionalizing here the fate of the Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg) and has developed a lucrative line in automated machinery emblazoned with 'CAÑA,' thereby connecting technology, extractivism, and colonial-capitalist oppression under the banner of 'sugarcane' exploitation.¹⁴ Persuading one of the students involved in the protest movement to instigate conflict with the police, Dulcinea then mobilizes its private militia transported by CAÑA helicopters in a move to extract and monetize the very source of Puerto Rico's post-disaster recovery, *La Borinqueña* herself.



Figure 15:
Panel from *La Borinqueña* #2.
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permission of
Edgardo Miranda-Rodríguez.



Figure 16: Panel from *La Borinqueña* #2. Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, ©2018, www.la-borinqueña.com. Reproduced with permission of Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez.

At the same moment that La Borinqueña attempts to unite the protestors and the police after having dissipated the tear gas the latter had fired into the crowd, Dulcinea instructs the militia, 'Deploy aerial forces! Move in immediately and acquire asset at all costs!' (Miranda-Rodriguez, *La Borinqueña* #2). They side-step any interaction with representatives of the police and act directly as a colonizing force, using vast amounts of electricity first to detain La Borinqueña (figure 16) and again to capture la Estrella del Camino in a process that sees the superhero incarcerated within the star. The use of such quantities of power by a mercenary force whose employers were motivated by the huge potential profits from monetizing the star directly critiques then-Governor Rosselló's plan to privatize Puerto Rico's power grid after the hurricane, not least since—at the time of publication—electricity service had not been restored to the whole archipelago. In *The Battle for Paradise*, Klein outlines the Puerto Rican government's incentives aimed at "'high-net-worth individuals" from Europe, Asia, and the U.S. mainland, lured to permanently relocate [to Puerto Rico] by a cornucopia of tax breaks and the promise of living a five-star resort lifestyle inside fully privatized enclaves, year-round' (14). As Klein later underscores, this cannot be divorced from the analysis of 'the emptying island' we saw above, constituting an 'exodus [...] first presented as a temporary emergency measure' but now 'intended to be permanent,' with the government projecting a 20 percent 'cumulative decline' in Puerto Rico's population over five years (*Battle* 24). The reader sees this replicated symbolically through La Borinqueña, too, who at the close of issue two both disappears from view and is incarcerated as a result of her electrocution.

Particularly notable among these 'Puertopians' moving to the

island are cryptocurrency millionaires. 'Mining cryptocurrencies is one of the fastest growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet,' Klein observes, due to the amount of electricity it consumes, and while most companies would likely continue their mining ventures elsewhere, 'the idea of turning an island that cannot keep the lights on for its own people into "the epicenter of this multi-trillion-dollar market" [...] is raising mounting concerns of "crypto-colonialism"' (*Battle* 20). As such, La Borinqueña's imprisonment using this resource unavailable to many Puerto Ricans after the hurricane to then 'mine' the star—that is, the tears Atabex shed during the colonization of Borikén which combine the power of the archipelago's spirits, natural elements, and ancestors—speaks directly to the ongoing colonial and extractivist project to which Puerto Rico is being subjected. Indeed, while 'scouting locations for Crypto Land,' crypto-entrepreneur Brock Pierce 'reportedly

crawled into the "bosom" of a Ceiba tree,' an act that resonates deeply with the settler-colonialist project of appropriating the land to be refashioned and monetized as the colonizer sees fit and which contrasts with La Borinqueña's experience with the ceiba presented above (Klein, *Battle* 22).

In their introduction to *Aftershocks of Disaster*, Bonilla and LeBrón underscore both the 'coloniality of disaster' and 'the need for decolonization to serve as the centerpiece of a just recovery for Puerto Rico and the Caribbean as a whole' (11, 16). In a similar vein, filmmaker Cecilia Aldarondo juxtaposes narratives of collective, community-oriented activism and a direct engagement with the environment and the sea against ongoing US colonial politics and individuals like Brock Pierce engaging in crypto-colonialism in her 2020 documentary *Landfall*, where she examines 'what's in the wake' of the hurricane—to borrow her words—with all the multivalence of the term 'wake' as Christina Sharpe has employed it (Aldarondo "Friday"). Framed in Klein's terms, we can view this as 'two dueling versions of utopia': 'a very thin idea of sovereignty, where sovereignty means hyperindividualism' in contrast to 'a vision of deep sovereignty [...] which is not just political sovereignty but also energy sovereignty, food sovereignty, and water sovereignty' (Bonilla and Klein 29-30). Such issues of sovereignty are central concerns in the comics examined here: Colón and Rodríguez's *María* focuses on the very personal narrative of confinement and inescapability that, juxtaposed with the ongoing deterioration of Puerto Rico in physical and conceptual terms, leads to a broad opening towards reconstruction from the inside out; for her part, the materiality of Rodríguez's *Temporada* and *Trabajo de Campo* speaks directly to concerns of sustainability and the disconnect between the narrative

espoused at national and federal levels and the experience of those who suffered—and continue to suffer—the aftershocks of María. After all, towards the end of *Temporada*, Rodríguez reflects on nonconsecutive pages, 'Cuándo harán saber el conteo de muertes. La cifra real' and, later, 'Dirán que el desastre ya acabó,' the latter of these with a school bus travelling through a stark landscape surrounded by broken trees. In so doing, she asks the reader how long Puerto Rico's current trajectory is sustainable. At the same time, along with Colón and Rodríguez's *María*, her larger oeuvre asks us to consider the generative space of the gutter, be it in evoking the auditory experience of the hurricane or in the unbounded watercolors that are not restricted by frames but rather bleed into the blank space that surrounds them. Miranda-Rodríguez's work can be read as presenting a more complicated relationship with the processes of coloniality and decolonization, both through the complexities of his own and his titular character's diasporic experience as Nuyoricans and his collaborations with such large capitalist enterprises in comics as Marvel and DC Comics, as noted above. With such considerations in mind, however, a central concern throughout his independently published *La Borinqueña* comic is a critical examination of Puerto Rico's colonial realities, one that is engaged on multiple levels and through which he situates his narrative of resistance both within

and as an extension of the experiences of his superhero's Taíno and Afro-Boricua ancestors.¹⁵

If decoloniality is characterized in part by 're-existence,' as Walter Mignolo writes (41), then each of the comics examined here engages with this process, be it through digital webcomics, painted watercolors, or travel in space and time powered by Taíno and Afro-diasporic spiritualities, to name just three modes of engagement. In her recent analysis of hurricane narratives in Caribbean literature, Margaret Shrimpton Masson draws on George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, and John Berger to conclude that 'Los huracanes proporcionan "a way of seeing", "a way of speaking" y "a way of telling", un lenguaje propio para narrar el fenómeno en y de la sociedad' (187). Perhaps we can think of these comics in similar terms, which, by virtue of their nature, require that the reader engage in 'active co-creation (albeit guided) of the story-world' (Aldama, *Latinx* xix). As testimonies to individual and collective experiences of Hurricane María, they bear witness to the very real ways that colonialism persists in Puerto Rico and yet demonstrate in their content and varying forms the need for a Boricua-centered, decolonial narrative that rejects colonial ways of being and knowing to focus on collective action and stewardship of the archipelago.

NOTES

¹ These are issues that Díaz-Basteris also examines in "Traumatic Displacement in Puerto Rican Digital Graphic Narratives."

² This again references the formulation above that comics are 'visual-verbal narrative documentary form' (Chute 14). Another useful formulation is used by Aldama in his introduction to *Graphic Indigeneity*, where he describes comics both as 'visual-verbal narrative' and 'word-drawn narrative' ("Graphic" xi, xvi).

³ As noted below, Colón engages with this theme in her contributions to *The Nib*, such as "How the U.S. Cashed in on Puerto Rico" and "Puerto Rico's Long History of Separatists," among others, in addition to her abovementioned contribution to *Puerto Rico Strong*, "A Broken P.R.O.M.E.S.A."

⁴ The political figures depicted are: Carmen Yulín Cruz, mayor of San Juan at the time of the hurricane; Barack Obama and former Puerto Rican senator Alejandro García Padilla breakfasting during the former president's four-hour visit to Puerto Rico in June 2011; and Donald Trump, Melania Trump, then Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Rosselló, and Jeniffer González, Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico, during the Trumps' equally brief visit to the island in October 2017 (Colón and Rodríguez 6-7).

⁵ The only words that appear in the comic apart from its title are 'Dibujando a ciegas,' 'Dónde está el globo,' and 'Again?' (6).

⁶ Such repetition and/or uniformity is integral to the visual rhetoric in other comics about Hurricane María and its aftermath, not least Ivelisse Rivera, Francisco Javier Rodríguez, Eliana Falcón, and Adrian Martínez's "Living in the Dark for 144 Days," published in *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing and Rebuilding Puerto Rico*.

⁷ For further discussion of the direct effect on education in particular, see Brusi and Godreau with its useful list of journalistic and academic sources.

⁸ At the time of writing in mid-2021, such a sensation of 'losing the thread' is one with which some contemporary readers who did not experience María might identify, given the particular circumstances and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁹ The Grito de Lares, or Lares Uprising, is depicted in the top right panel of the comic's center splash page, which juxtaposes five moments from Puerto Rican history (in clockwise order from top left): Spanish colonization; the 1868 Grito de Lares; the Ponce massacre of March 21, 1937; the participation of the 65th Infantry Regiment—known as the 'Borinqueneers'—in both World Wars and the Korean War; and the memorial to the Puerto Rican and other Latinx victims of the June 12, 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida.

¹⁰ The characters' names here reference Puerto Rican LGBTQ+ rights and social justice advocate, Pedro Julio Serrano.

¹¹ In her formulation of diasporic intersectionality, García proposes 'that we understand intersectionality—here defined as the deployment of multiple and simultaneous identities to represent the experience of marginalized subjects—as a foundational characteristic of diasporic subjectivity in the Puerto Rican context.' As she continues, drawing on Jennifer Nash's "Rethinking Intersectionality," 'the intersection of identities becomes "an epistemic advantage" for its protagonists; and, arguably the source (and resource) of their heroism (Nash 2008: 2)' (I. García 74).

¹² As Ivonne García notes, this 'in-betweenness' is also exemplified through the way Spanish and English are employed in *La Borinqueña*, a topic that goes beyond the scope of this article. However, this question of language also evokes Ivonne García's discussion of translationality in 21: *The Story of Roberto Clemente*, where the default white word balloons represent Spanish translated into English whereas words spoken directly in English are marked by bright orange balloons (75). A similar process occurs in *La Borinqueña #2*, where 'the original Taíno language' is translated into English in purple balloons, while the Spanish of the colonial soldiers appears in bright orange and Marisol's normative switching between English and Spanish appears in white balloons.

¹³ In reference to the longstanding project of the 'emptying island,' there are also numerous comics examining this topic before María, such as Rodríguez and Colón's *Goodbye, For Now* and Crystal Velasquez, Manuel Preitano, and Deron Bennett's "Guillermina," as well as numerous contributions to *Puerto Rico Strong*.

¹⁴ Rosa Colón examines the effects of the colonial sugar industry in Puerto Rico in her webcomic "How the U.S. Cashed in on Puerto Rico." It is also notable that Rosaura Rodríguez's 'El ingenio caribeño es vida' above is not only a reformulation of 'water is life,' but also a reference to the Caribbean sugar industry through its use of the term 'ingenio,' meaning both 'ingenuity' and 'sugar factory' (figure 9). The connections between Dulcinea's automated CAÑA machines, its militia, the interest in technological development, and human exploitation are developed further in *La Borinqueña #3* (2021).

¹⁵ It should be noted that Miranda-Rodríguez's collaborations with Marvel Comics and DC Comics have continued to center marginalized narratives of resistance and decolonial 're-existence' (to use Mignolo's formulation), as seen in the way he writes the storyline of Groot and Abuela Estela in "Guardians of the Lower East Side" (with Darryl 'DMC' McDaniels, *Guardians of Infinity* #3) and through many of the contributions to the *Ricanstruction* anthology he produced in which DC characters feature. However, this does not negate the influence exerted through these works of such large capitalist enterprises and criticisms thereof.

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The Individual at the End of Time, and Paths Beyond

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ABSTRACT: Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel set in the Dominican Republic which follows the lives of multiple generations of women, constantly moves between and outside of borders, whether they be geopolitical, temporal, or in narrative form. Just as well, Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, a speculative novel also set in the Dominican Republic, challenges borders through the story of its main protagonist and his struggles with spirits, queerness, and the politics of a dying world. Both novels utilize the environment as a grounding force that provides insight into the respective trials the characters face, both within the scope of the orishas' continued presence as both spirits and representatives of the land and water which informs much of the narratives, and the spatiotemporal politics of the Dominican Republic. Through the machinations of the spirits who guide the characters in both novels, and the consistent engagement with questions of family, queer lifeworlds, and time, Lara and Indiana demonstrate the interconnectedness of borders, environments, and time to varying ends. By providing narratives which begin to map out worlds beyond death, be they ends or beginnings, the authors contend with the violences of the past in ways that point to the potentialities of the future. What these futures look like, as *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* tell us, ultimately rely on the limitations or unboundedness of our imaginations.

KEYWORDS: Rita Indiana, Ana-Maurine Lara, *Erzulie's Skirt*, *Tentacle*, Temporality

Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel set in the Dominican Republic which follows the lives of multiple generations of women, constantly moves between and outside of borders, whether they be geopolitical, temporal, or in narrative form. Just as well, Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, a speculative novel also set in the Dominican Republic, challenges borders through the story of its main protagonist and his struggles with spirits, queerness, and the politics of a dying world. Both novels utilize the environment as a grounding force that provides insight into the respective trials the characters face, both within the scope of the orishas' continued presence as both spirits and representatives of the land and water which informs much of the narratives, and the spatiotemporal politics of the Dominican Republic. Through the machinations of the spirits who guide the characters in both novels, and the consistent engagement with questions of family, queer lifeworlds, and time, Lara and Indiana demonstrate the interconnectedness of borders, environments, and time to varying ends. By providing narratives which begin to map out worlds beyond death, be they ends or beginnings, the authors contend with the violences of the past in ways that point to the potentialities of the future. What these futures look like, as *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* tell us, ultimately rely on the limitations or unboundedness of our imaginations.

In the beginning after the beginning, the orisha Erzulie appears to Chavel and states, "She will have a hard life, but she will find freedom" (12). This future, a time outside of the now and possibilities endless toward freedom, animates much of Ana-Maurine Lara's

Erzulie's Skirt and the lives contained within the book. In this same way, Giorgio, at the end of book and at the beginning of time within Rita Indiana's *Tentacle*, states, "He feels that someone very dear to him is dying and discovers tears in his eyes" (124). Whether at the beginning or the end, Ana-Maurine Lara's *Erzulie's Skirt* and Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* constantly engage with time, whether through the lens of its unboundedness or its cessation. In analyzing the ruptures, or reinscriptions, of linear time as they appear within the two texts, both Indiana and Lara provide a view into the possibilities, or finitudes, of lives lived beyond the scope of linearity. By tracking the instances where temporality informs the futures of the characters and the futurities imagined outside the pages of the books, this paper seeks to provide its own imagined horizon, where a book becomes a map toward that beyond.

Tentacle, a speculative fiction novel which introduces spiritual vehicles as conduits for time travel, places its protagonist in a future where environmental devastation has already occurred. *Erzulie's Skirt*, a contemporary novel that follows generations of women as they contend with life, family, love, and orishas, places its protagonists at their deaths. Both novels, located in the Dominican Republic yet covering a broad scale of times, histories, and futures, nevertheless bring forward these questions of the way time – whether linear or not – works to narrate both national and personal engagements with the environments and people around us. This notion of a beyond stems from Caribbean scholar and theorist Sylvia Wynter's delineation of what a beyond could look like, which she articulates

in the article, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument." Partially in conversation with Aimé Césaire's work on the natural sciences, she states:

The natural sciences (Césaire had argued in a talk given in Haiti, entitled "poetry and Knowledge") are, in spite of all their dazzling triumphs with respect to knowledge of the natural world, half-starved. They are half-starved because they remain incapable of giving us any knowledge of our uniquely human domain, and have had nothing to say to the urgent problems that beleaguer humankind. Only the elaboration of a new science, *beyond* the limits of the natural sciences (he then proposed), will offer us our last chance to avoid the large-scale dilemmas that we must now confront as a species. This would be a science in which the "study of the Word" – of our narratively inscribed, governing sociogenic principles, descriptive statement, or code of symbolic life/death, together with the overall symbolic, representational processes to which they give rise – will condition the "study of nature" (328, emphasis my own).

Wynter's conception of a beyond is specifically located in the narrative surrounding many of the conversations around ontological being, "Western Man" and the confines imposed on any articulation of a beyond that does not grapple with the language which defines it. The sort of narrative which Wynter describes, goes beyond the confines of one book or one narrative, and instead encompasses the language with which nations are bordered, time is made linear, and the natural sciences fail to give word to the structural failings which constitute environmental devastation. By posing these interventions as a *beyond*, Wynter allows for the consideration of a potential found in the Word as a future-oriented and future-making project. By positing "Western Man" as overrepresented within any articulation of the study of nature, Wynter opens the way for alternate considerations beyond that overrepresentation. The large-scale dilemmas that she describes, then, require both a reimagining of the governing principles which encapsulate the over-symbolic, as well as a serious consideration of the language which speaks it.

Un/Bordering the Spatiotemporal

The specters that haunt Giorgio and the coast of the Dominican Republic are Venezuela and China. *Tentacle's* framing of environmental destruction at the hands of China and Venezuela often reads as a condemnation of capitalism, and yet directs its focus on communist countries. Acilde's description of Said Bona as having "[a] voice like Balaguer's and face like Malcolm X" (76), immediately raises questions of the sort of parallels being drawn between fascism and com-

munist. With little regard to the differences between Balaguer's racism which characterized much of his tenure as president of the Dominican Republic and Malcolm X's revolutionary politics, here too we see a discomfiting inability on the part of *Tentacle's* characters to draw clear distinctions between problems of the state (or perhaps, more specifically, capitalism) to individuals who might otherwise embody politics that Giorgio ultimately fails to either differentiate or, in essence, win against. The anti-communism seen throughout *Tentacle* inevitably leads us back to the beginning (or ending) question of, where does the individual hero leave us when climate disaster is at our door? Giorgio leaves us nowhere but at that exact doorway. In framing the discussion of Giorgio, a potential savior, versus his antagonist, Said Bono, as the only possible timeline to imagine, there is no condemnation to be had, for this suspended future of individual against individual would always follow the linear time which capitalism dictates.

At the end of the book, and the beginning of the story, *Tentacle* offers us a view into time: "The victory odes Giorgio had been singing to himself came to a dead halt. He was terrified. The flashes from the disco ball made everything move in slow motion. Here was the person responsible for the deplorable state of the sea a few decades from now. Here was the reason for his initiation. All that for this" (121). *Tentacle*, a speculative tale of possible salvation through the powers of the spiritual, the mystic, and the temporal, all culminate in this one instance of deep reflection. Giorgio, at both the beginning and end of time, asks himself the question of whether saving his home from environmental catastrophe is worth self-sacrifice. He says, "He felt the intense pulse of his three lives at the same time and the weight of the sacrifice his little game was demanding of him now" (121). In the end, we are left with his decision: "He could sacrifice everything except this life" (125). Perhaps, in this ending at the beginning of time, the question to ask is not so much the price paid by an individual, as it is the question of the individual at all.

Regarding both the question of the individual, as well as the way a beyond requires a reimagining of the Word, Lorgia García-Peña articulates this need to both question and establish different narratives than previously imagined within a Dominican national narrative. She states, "Dominican blacks have continued to shatter the silences, questioning and challenging the racist norms that sustain the borders of dominicanidad at home and abroad. Producing an archive of *contradictions* that has begun to dismantle xenophobia and marginality within political, literary, and historical discourse as well as in the public sphere, *dominicanos* – particularly, I argue, those in the diaspora – place their racialized bodies at the center of history, *contradicting* Hispanophile ideologies that insist on erasing them" (57). García-Peña begins this process across multiple mediums throughout *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, a process which, I argue, continues within the pages of both *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt*. Just as much as the argument here lies in the futures imagined by the authors and characters, these processes of *beyond*, still grapple with that which came

before. The notion that a future is necessary, demanded, lies in the silences afforded by the crafted national narratives surrounding normative dominicanidad. Lara herself posits this intervention in relation to her poetry manuscript, *Kohnjehr Woman*: "Let us dare to be haunted. Let us awaken the specters of the sacred [Afro][Latinx][Queer] dead and make them present to our existence. Let them be healed. And let them guide us forward into all we have imagined and all we cannot" (13). Indeed, many of Lara's articles and writings are engaged with the way Black or Afro-descendant people are absent from the archive, and as such, require a reimagination of the archive in order to engage with Black life and lifeworlds. Lara's engagement with Afro-Caribbean religions throughout her works also reflects this same need to interrupt the violences of linear time. As she states in her meditations on Afro-Caribbean spirituality, "Within Vodoun, resurrections are the conceptual mapping of time and space onto material bodies for the reperformance of history, in the present, as the present... History is the present-future-past, and its enactment in the material realm reinscribes space with new possibilities and meanings" (348). By questioning these narratives inscribed within the archives, linearities, and narratives of the state and its attendant governing principles, the fictional novels examined here allow for the sort of contradiction that García-Peña delineates. For, as Yomaira Figueroa-Vasquez states in *Decolonizing Diasporas*, "Imagining worlds/otherwise entails engaging the apocalyptic, the ends of worlds birthed by the non-ethics of modernity, coloniality, and settler colonialism" (148).

Imagination as both tool for reinscription of linearity, and tool for its potential rupture, ultimately relies on the frame provided by the narrative engagement with temporality. In discussing speculative fiction as a sort of tool for imagination, we may look to Elizabeth Povinelli's *Economies of Abandonment*: "Not this makes a difference even if it does not immediately produce a propositional otherwise" (191, emphasis my own). Here too we might consider Anindita Bannerjee's article "Fiction," where she queries, "What happens to the *what if*, as the indigenous author and critic Grace Dillon reminds us, when for the majority of the planet the apocalyptic future has not just arrived a while ago but is here to stay for the long term: within, without, around, and across what used to be neatly divided in literary studies into our selves, our texts, and our world" (188)? Although *Tentacle's* inability to reckon with timelines beyond the individual proves a hard site to craft an answer to the question posed by Bannerjee, perhaps we may look to the negation of an answer instead, as Povinelli suggests. If the individual has failed, we are required to look beyond the one. Capitalism's temporal investment in ensuring that all that was, is, and will be, are inevitable – a concept that Kara Keeling calls "Capital's predictable futures" (xi) – effectively disallows any form of imaginative conception outside of that circular loop. By reinforcing the idea of the individual "losing" at the hands of forces greater than one, despite the questions raised about attributing environmental disaster in the Caribbean or Latin America not to capitalist nations in the global north but to communist coun-

tries, *Tentacle* nevertheless allows for the notion that world-making is impossible at the individual scale.

If a *not this* is necessary in this project of imagination, looking to an otherwise outside the linear temporality to nowhere provides an avenue outside of impending catastrophe. In the beginning, or perhaps the end, of *Erzulie's Skirt* by Ana-Maurine Lara, the orishas Agwe and Erzulie tell us a story. This story makes up the bulk of the novel, and as such, leads us to question where we are located temporally. Just as Erzulie makes us believe that the story that she will tell Agwe has already occurred, the only other temporal signifier is the subsequent title, "Now." Much like in *Tentacle*, the temporal dislocations, ruptures, and interruptions are all possible through the presence and intercession of the orishas in the lives of the novels' characters. *Erzulie's Skirt* continues the temporal dislocation into the first chapter of the book – we start at the end. Despite Erzulie framing the telling of this story as one that has happened and therefore will be told linearly in her time with Agwe, we start with the main characters' deaths. As the woman, presumably Erzulie, who brings the news to Miriam that Micaela has died states: "Micaela has left. She has asked me to fetch you" (7). Miriam responds: "We lived so much, Micaela. Is it true you have asked for me?" (7). This end at the beginning, only possible through the oral conveyance offered by Erzulie to Agwe, ruptures any sort of temporal situatedness that orients the reader toward a linear temporality. This rupture is continuously reinscribed throughout *Erzulie's Skirt*, whether in the form of memories, metanarrative recipes, chapters titled "Now" which begin not now, or the end of the book that in all actuality, offers us a beginning. In a stark departure from the impending, and seemingly inevitable end that *Tentacle* provides, *Erzulie's Skirt* rests comfortably in the rupture of a bordered linearity, and beyond death, gives us the possibility for more.

Futures Beyond

The sort of potentialities that are offered within *Erzulie's Skirt* are constantly reiterated not just through the narrative, but in the metanarrative established by Lara within the novel. The final page of the novel and Yealidá's position as the bearer of Miriam and Micaela's lessons allows for a beginning at the end. As stated, "Miriam and Micaela had shown her in their final moment, had shown her with every story that had graced her ear and every medicine they had taught her. They had shown her how to walk, how to breathe and how to believe" (242). The past participle ("had shown her") brings to mind the memories that are central to this final conversation; however, there is the ability to imagine a beyond. Just as they had shown her how to walk, she will continue walking; just as they had shown her how to breathe and believe, she will carry those lessons into the future beyond that final sentence. Lara's inclusion at the beginning of every chapter, "Recetas para los vivos," not only suggests the temporal – who, at that moment, is alive? – but also

the fictional/spatial, continuing this idea presented through Yealid that the possibilities found within the book through ruptured time, includes those beyond its pages. If we are to imagine that the living includes us, the readers, then we can also begin to imagine the time after the last punctuation mark. In comparing *Tentacle* and *Erzulie's Skirt* the idea of the *beyond* is one that is central not only to the beginning endings, but the ending beginnings, respectively. In the questions of temporal possibilities, futurities, the ability to imagine that beyond becomes central to the idea of an engagement with the temporal within the confines of the books.

Kara Keeling, in the preface of *Queer Times, Black Futures* gets to the heart of this question of horizon: "We become or we are unbecoming... When something happens differently than it has before, when something affects us, we reforge ourselves in response. Every *now* harbors chaos and, therefore, a capacity for change. When survival is posed as enduring *as such*, we miss how that task calls for its own undoing in time. None of us survives as such; indeed, perhaps, freedom requires we give way to other things. Now. And perhaps again" (ix). The backwards and forwards motion of Keeling's "we become or we are unbecoming" is a dynamic one. *Erzulie's Skirt's* continuous engagement with policing forces within and outside the Dominican Republic highlights the precarity of being Black and queer within the hegemonic structures at large, Miriam and Micaela's insistence on their shared living, their survivance and love outside state forces which would otherwise separate them, and their continued presence beside Yealid and her life beyond their deaths, the notion of becoming, now and again and again, points toward a horizon that, in its dynamism, allow for the possibilities of

a beyond. In contrast, the possibilities that could have provided a horizon, or a continued dynamic change in order to actualize those possibilities, for Giorgio and every other person within *Tentacle* affected by his choices are ultimately left finite exactly because of the static adherence to linearity. His "becoming" is not a litany for survival, as Keeling's reference to Audre Lorde suggests, it is instead an end.

In closing her chapter "Apocalypso," Figueroa-Vasquez states, "Decolonial love as future work envisaged though our pasts is necessarily a technology for social transformation, and is a method through which we can reimagine human ontogeny and sociogeny... It can be imagined as looking into the 'vast and insoluble' sea to make visible what was disappeared, and make futurities beyond coloniality perceptible" (179). Future work, as she states, is an act of temporal disruption. It is an act of reckoning with the past, the violences of its linearity, and imagining a future beyond the confines of capitalist time's borderings. Just as Figueroa-Vasquez draws the connection of the water and the sea to these new imaginaries, the horizon beyond what we have seen can also work to inform the work that goes into that sort of decolonial love. In offering us a way to articulate a *not this* as *Tentacle* does, and the imperative to take the lessons beyond the confines of a book as seen in *Erzulie's Skirt*, both Rita Indiana and Ana-Maurine Lara offer potentialities and horizons outside of the times we have been confined to. Just as the characters of the book give us a way to imagine the ends or beginnings of time, the novels allow us to begin the project of writing our own narratives and future potentialities.

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Escaping the Visual Trap of the Agricultural Frontier: Fernando Solanas's *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*

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ABSTRACT: In this work, I describe how the film *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, directed by Fernando Solanas, help us escape what I call the “visual trap” of the agricultural frontier. The agricultural frontier, sometimes called the farming frontier, is often defined as the division zone between the ranching and farming lands and those that have never been cultivated before. Images of the agricultural frontier, with their symmetric forms and stark color contrasts, form a “visual trap” that prevents us from grasping the numerous processes that take place in these spaces and ecosystems, as well as the effects of human activity on living and nonliving beings. I propose that Solanas’s film gives us tools to break away from such a trap, as it allows us to follow the invisible paths of agrochemicals and realize that they are material agents not bounded by this artificial border. I pay particular attention to how representations of sickness are used to convey the unbounded nature of agrochemicals. An essential notion in this respect is that of “agrosickness narratives,” representations of sick bodies that challenge us to examine how we engage with images of environmental degradation.

KEYWORDS: ecocriticism, Fernando Solanas, environmental documentary film, agricultural frontier, toxic chemicals.

The “agricultural frontier,” sometimes called the “farming frontier,” or *frontera agrícola* in Spanish, is a concept that regularly appears in discussions, debates, and controversies related to the expansion of ranching and farming lands. As Germán Rosati reminds us, there are significant differences in how this concept is defined, each with distinct implications. According to Rosati, there are at least three common ways of thinking about the expansion of the agricultural frontier, each of which has an underlying definition of the concept (97). First, its growth can be defined as incorporating new areas—forests or other unexploited ecosystems—into agricultural production. Under this conceptualization, the agricultural frontier would be the limit that separates farming lands from those that have never been cultivated before. This perspective emphasizes the dichotomy between agricultural production and environmental conservation, evoking notions often associated with untouched environments and the wilderness. The second one refers to the adoption of capitalist forms of agricultural production—commonly known as agribusiness¹—in areas that could have been under other production regimes, like communal farming and subsistence agriculture. This characterization moves away from the wilderness imaginary and implies a definition of the agricultural frontier as a dynamic environment where the change in land use and farming practices transforms human and nonhuman lives. A third conceptualization describes a situation when a particular agricultural activity—for example, large-scale soybean farming—begins to displace other economic activities already taking place in the same land. In this last case, the agricultural frontier would be a transitional space where human agency takes prominence, lead-

ing us to think about the transformations it signals in economic, cultural, and social terms.

The ways we represent the agricultural frontier, whether in words or images, both portray a particular understanding of the concept and shape how others think about it. In recent years, images of the agricultural frontier have become more prevalent in newspapers, tv shows, films, websites, and social media. These images tend to be aerial shots taken with cameras positioned at high and top angles that emphasize clear-cut divisions between cultivated and uncultivated land through regular geometric forms and color juxtaposition. Such depictions seek to highlight how human action has radically transformed the environment and, as a result, they have become part of the iconography tied to environmental issues such as deforestation. The popularity of these pictures can be explained in part due to how easily they can attract our eyes’ attention: they are full of symmetric forms, consistent patterns, stark color contrasts, precise lines, and perfectly defined angles. The power of attraction of such images is precisely at the center of what I call a “visual trap,” that is, overwhelming visual stimulation that makes us think of the separation between adjacent ecosystems in these zones as absolute and impenetrable.

The consequences of “falling” into this trap might seem innocuous at first, but thinking about the agricultural frontier in these terms can significantly affect how we perceive the mobility of human and nonhuman beings in these areas. As is the case with most borders, the agricultural frontier is changeable, porous, and even illusory. Contrary to images of machinery making way for new farmable land, the most common agroindustrial strategies to keep

nature at bay are not mechanical but chemical (Schiesari et al. 2). Agrochemicals are so widespread and used in such large quantities that they are among the fastest-growing global change agents (Bernhardt et al. 88). A large proportion of chemicals used in agriculture are pesticides and herbicides intended to act as watchdogs tasked with protecting crops from various plants, insects, snails, slugs, birds, bacteria, and fungi, among other living beings, which can be considered a threat to agricultural production. However, like human-created borders elsewhere, the agricultural frontier is a very porous one. In this sense, agricultural frontier dynamics at times seem to mirror those of other border environments. Animal, plant, fungal, and bacterial species, along with nonliving matter, cross such a border regularly, challenging the farmers, machinery, and chemical agents that try to stop them. Conversely, biological and chemical agents originated in the crops travel to uncultivated areas, transported by air and water currents, among other ways. The most familiar images of the agricultural frontier invisibilize this mobility and prevent us from grasping the complexity of the numerous processes that take place in these spaces and ecosystems, as well as the effects of human activity on living and nonliving beings.

Like other artistic expressions, film can provide invaluable tools to break away from the visual trap of the agricultural frontier. It allows us to see beyond symmetric patterns and clearly defined lines to understand their artificiality. When it follows the invisible paths of toxic chemicals, it can also make us realize that thinking about such substances as watchdogs, the metaphor I previously mentioned, is not only incorrect but dangerous. Toxic chemicals are themselves material agents that could not care less about this artificial border. They spread beyond its apparent limits with ease, both within and outside, on the surface and underground, attached to the crops they are supposed to protect and transported by neighboring water currents, popping up in the most inconspicuous places.

In this article, I examine how Fernando "Pino" Solanas's documentary film *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* (2018), or *A Journey to the Fumigated Towns*², helps us overcome the visual trap of agricultural frontier images. Although this film examines the social, political, economic, and historical circumstances that have promoted the use of massive quantities of agrochemicals in Argentina, I pay particular attention to representations of border environments and the mobility of pesticides. *Viaje* pushes us to interrogate how we engage with images of environmental degradation and, at the same time, reveals the intricate connections between representational, environmental, and health issues. It does so by juxtaposing aerial shots and representations at ground level of humans, nonhuman animals, and plants that inhabit the ecosystems transformed by the clearing of woods and forests. Thus, the film explicitly resists the "flattening" of the land, a neoliberal impulse that disregards the ecologies of the areas portrayed. Moreover, it makes evident the artificiality of the human-made boundary by highlighting the unrestrained nature of the agrochemicals used to keep the frontier in place.

A Technosocial Perspective

In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of a significant number of Latin American films that look at the effects of pesticide use in agriculture, with a large percentage of them coming from Argentina. The list is long and includes fiction films like *La tierra roja* (*The Red Land*; Dir. Diego Martínez Vignatti, 2015), *El rocío* (Dew; Dir. Emiliano Griego, 2018), and *Respira: Transgénesis* (Breathe: Transgenesis; Dir. Gabriel Grieco, 2019). However, the documentary genre is perhaps the most prolific in this area. We could mention, to name a few, *Desierto verde* (Green Desert; Dir. Ulises de la Orden, 2013), *Pueblo verde* (Green Town; Dir. Sebastián Rodrigo Jauris, 2015), *Andrés Carrasco: ciencia disruptiva* (Andrés Carrasco: Disruptive Science; Dir. Valeria Tucci, 2019), and Colectivo Documental Semillas's web series *El agronegocio letal* (Lethal Agribusiness), directed by Juan Pablo Lepore, which includes *La jugada del peón* (The Pawn Move; 2015), *Dique Chico: fumigación impune* (Dique Chico: Unpunished Fumigation; 2018), and *Arroyo Leyes: la frutilla del postre* (Arroyo Leyes: The Icing on the Cake; 2019). Many of these films feature images of the agricultural frontier, depictions that allow us to study how it is represented and what effects such representations have on our understanding of the concept. In this article, however, I focus only on one of them: the documentary film *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, by Fernando "Pino" Solanas.

Solanas was a very productive Argentinian filmmaker, directing more than twenty films, including fiction and documentary feature and short films. Some of his works have received significant critical attention and recognition, including *Tangos, el exilio de Gardel* (*Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*; 1985), *Sur* (*The South*; 1988), and *El viaje* (*The Journey*; 1992), as well as the documentary film *Memoria del saqueo* (*Social Genocide*; 2004). His work as a filmmaker is devoted to examining historical, political, social, economic, and cultural issues related to his home country. When it comes to his documentary films, critics have noted the presence of a national political project against the dehumanizing effects of globalization (Levit Koldorf 333), a personal style influenced by his political militancy that resembles a reporter's search for answers (Tavares 18), and his reflective use of voice-over to build arguments that highlight neoliberalism's incongruities (Bonano and Sánchez). Indeed, his film production is deeply concerned with exploring the effects of decisions taken by those in power on the lives of Argentinians, especially the most vulnerable, being at the same time an integral part of social and political struggles.³ One notable aspect of Solanas's production is its analysis of how interwoven politics and technology have been in Argentina's recent history. Although this concern emerges in many of his works, it is central in what I call his *technosocial* films, that is, those that center on issues at the convergence of science, technology, politics, and society. Such films include *Argentina latente* (*Latent Argentina*; 2007), *La próxima estación* (*The Next Station*; 2008), *Tierra sublevada: Oro impuro* (*Riotous Land: Impure Gold*; 2009), *Tierra sublevada: Oro negro* (*Riotous Land: Black Gold*;

2011), *La guerra del fracking* (The Fracking War; 2013), and *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*.

Viaje is part of the long and deep-rooted tradition of social documentary films in Latin America, that is, "documentaries with a human subject and a descriptive or transformative concern" (Burton 3). However, it is also a film in dialogue with global trends, a characteristic of contemporary documentary filmmaking in the region (Arenillas and Lazzara 7). The film also continues Solanas's overall project, characterized by the inseparability of politics and aesthetics, as many critics have noticed. Solanas is a leading figure of Third Cinema, or *Tercer Cine*, a movement originated in the 1960s that sought to push audiences to take action in social issues by positioning itself as an alternative to Hollywood film productions and European art cinema. Scholars such as Soledad Fernández Bouzo and Patricio Bruno Besana see a connection between Third Cinema and contemporary networks of *cine comunitario ambientalista*, or environmentalist community cinema, locating *Viaje* at this convergence (90).

The film brings together many recurrent concerns, themes, techniques, and perspectives found in Solanas's work. While aesthetically and discursively the film is shaped by Solanas's unique style, it is also informed by conventions and iconography associated with the environmental documentary film, a genre that exhibits the tensions and complex negotiations at the intersection of raising environmental awareness and contemporary documentary filmmaking (Hughes 10). In *Viaje*, Solanas's primary concern is to reveal what Amalia Leguizamón has called the "synergies of power" in Argentina's agrarian transformation, that is, the "structural and symbolic dimensions of domination that operate simultaneously and across time to create, compound, and legitimate environmental injustice" (15). It does so by traveling across *la Argentina fumigada*, or "the fumigated Argentina," a term Fernanda Sánchez has used to describe the widespread presence of agrochemicals across Argentinian towns and cities. Even though this film's scope is much more ambitious, I believe it provides a good example of how the agricultural frontier is visually constructed and how such construction is then challenged.

Unflattening the Land

Before we see any footage and while the opening credits of *Viaje* are being shown on a solid black background, we can hear whirling helicopter rotors. The non-diegetic sound prepares the audience for the opening sequence. When the dark background gives way to the first images, we are in the air, flying above northern Argentina, as indicated through on-screen text. A series of aerial shots comprises this first sequence. We notice a similar composition of the frame in each of them: an individual bulldozer at the center tearing down trees. The sound of the whirling rotors is drowned out by diegetic sounds of roaring bulldozers and falling trees, directing our com-

plete attention to the scenes. The percentage of cleared land on the screen increases in each shot, from a single lane created by a machine as it goes through the forest to a site in which no tree is left standing. New agricultural frontiers are emerging before our eyes. The 40-second sequence fulfills a variety of goals. Discursively, it shows the amount of destruction that one piece of machinery can do in what seems to be an incredibly short amount of time, bringing attention to how urgent this issue is. This is an example of what Gabriela Merlinsky and Paula Serafini have called *estética de urgencia*, or "urgency aesthetics," which seeks to convey the magnitude of environmental devastation by visibilizing the violence exerted on the land and the communities that inhabit it (82). Structurally, the sequence works as a succession of establishing shots to locate us at the origin—and end—of the problems that emerge with the use of large amounts of agrochemicals. Soon after, the camera at ground level is traveling with a group of people through cleared woodland, which could very well be one of the areas we saw from the air. Rhetorically, it establishes a contrast between two perspectives on the issue: one that witnesses the devastation from afar, and another one, which the film favors, that is interested in exploring what is behind those images and hearing the stories of those affected. As a result, this sequence also juxtaposes distinct conceptualizations of the agricultural frontier.

The opening sequence reproduces some iconographic images of the agricultural frontier: aerial shots of heavy machinery clearing uncultivated land to give way to future crops, symmetric deforestation patterns, and large brownish sections of dusty cleared land contrasting with an adjacent green wooded area. However, we are immediately transported to ground level, accompanying a group of local residents who travel to cleared areas to remove fallen trees before they get burned. This time, the camera shows us scenes with little in common with the flatness and homogeneity we saw from the air. We now witness a group of young people climbing mountains of fallen trees that take the bottom half of the screen, walking between the trunks as if it was an irregular maze of wood that frequently rises above their heads, at times making them indistinguishable from branches and trunks. The composition of the frames defies the "flattening" of the land that is common in aerial shots of the agricultural frontier. In this case, we have a tridimensional space that challenges the symmetry, unwavering lines, and defined patterns portrayed from the sky, a space in which human and nonhuman beings blend. Aerial shots, particularly those from a top angle, tend to evoke human efforts to discipline the land, such as those we find in maps. If maps—the expression of "flatten" land par excellence—represent symbolic possession and support colonizing enterprises, Solanas's "unflattening" of the land, that is, his intentional effort to move away from bidimensional representations of complex ecosystems, becomes even more significant: it defies neoliberal claims of ownership.

Solanas then visits a Wichí community surrounded by *desmontes*, as the zones of recently cleared land—or in the process of

being cleared—are known in Spanish. The camera focuses on an elder member of the Wichí, identified as Cacique Don Juan. He walks through an area where the soil still shows the marks of machinery, and in the background, we can see many fallen trees mixed with a few still standing. An agricultural frontier is being created. He walks towards a wrecked mistol, describes how the tree used to provide food for his community, and explains how destroying it is a direct attack against his community's survival. The camera takes a step back to give us a better idea of the tree's size, which almost doubles Don Juan's height. As he carefully touches the leaves and fruits of the smashed tree, a lump grows in his throat, overwhelmed by the devastation. We, the viewers, can feel some of Don Juan's pain and become enraged by the situation. Here, Solanas appeals to our affective response to denounce how erecting the agricultural frontier is an act of violence that affects human and nonhuman beings alike. It will not be the only time the director asks for our empathy. Throughout the film, he relies on various affective processes to mobilize our anger, disgust, and indignation into action.

Agrosickness Narratives

While visiting the Wichí, the film's attention changes from the physical destruction of habitats caused by *desmontes* to the chemical assaults against this community. The seamless transition announces one of the main arguments in this film: these two acts of violence are inextricable. Using an inductive technique common in the director's work, Solanas takes the Wichí experience as a starting point to discuss the effects of toxic chemicals on farmworkers and rural and urban populations more generally.

In this part, we begin to see the deployment of what I call "agrosickness narratives," which are present in many contemporary works that look at agribusiness's social, cultural, and environmental effects. My definition of this concept is informed by what Heather Houser calls *ecosickness fiction*. Houser uses this term to identify a group of contemporary novels and memoirs that, through the deployment of affect in representations of sick bodies, bring readers to environmental consciousness (2). Houser revisits the notion of sickness, warning us that she does not use it as a synonym of either "disease" or "illness." Instead, she sees sickness as a relational concept that "cannot be confined to a single system and links up the biomedical, environmental, social, and ethico-political; and it shows the imbrication of human and environment" (11). *Ecosickness fiction*, according to the critic, makes us realize that dilemmas in the environmental and biomedical domains pose representational dilemmas that no single literary movement or genre can fully resolve (4). I find Houser's concept stimulating and helpful to analyze recent Latin American literary and film works that interrogate the effects of large-scale global agricultural production.

Thinking of the notion of *ecosickness* as it relates to the particular context of agribusiness and at the same time beyond the realm

of literary fiction, I consider agrosickness narratives as a sort of trope, a set of discursive and aesthetic motifs that characterize the representations of sick bodies in works that intend to raise awareness about the negative effects of modern agriculture and foster environmental consciousness more generally. Sickness is commonly triggered by pesticides, herbicides, and other toxic chemicals commonly used in intensive farming, and it affects human and nonhuman living beings alike. Moreover, sick bodies work as a metonymy of a more extensive system of environmental degradation, one that extends to not only the physical health of human and nonhuman beings but has boundless ramifications over many other domains. Agrosickness narratives can be found in various novels, graphic novels, short stories, fictional films, and documentary films, among others. In many of these works, agrosickness narratives are often a starting point in a quest to examine the decisions, actions, processes, and systems causing environmental degradation, of which sickness becomes a visible symptom. Such narratives are central in *Viaje*, as they trigger an examination of the Argentinian agricultural industry's profound changes during the last decades. For our purposes, agrosickness narratives draw attention to the artificiality of the agricultural frontier and help us think about the unbounded nature of agrochemicals.

Agrochemicals Unbounded

The majority of the film is devoted to exposing how agrochemicals cannot be contained. After leaving the north of Argentina, Solanas travels to Mar del Plata, where we find him in the kitchen of a middle-class home. While washing some leafy plants in the sink, his host explains that most vegetables are contaminated with pesticides and herbicides. Shots of fields been treated with agrochemicals are introduced to remind us about the connection visually. In the next scene, Solanas and his host sit at a dining table next to a field cultivated with organic techniques. The host explains the origins of the organic farm by describing how they went to the market to buy vegetables, took them to a laboratory to analyze them, and found agrochemicals in them. Then they had an analysis performed on themselves and found some of the same agrochemicals present in the vegetables. Solanas wonders about the presence of agrochemicals in his body, and the host encourages Solanas to get an analysis. This brief encounter speaks to what Stacy Alaimo describes as a "material memoir," a text that "epitomizes life in risk society [...] as it dramatizes the compulsion to undertake 'scientific' investigations of one's daily life" (95). When Solanas visits the laboratory and then gets the analysis results, we see a convergence of the self and the social, a diffusion of the limits between the external and the internal, and a recognition of the material continuity between the human and the other-than-human world.

In a sequence of about two minutes, Solanas presents a series of shots that seem to follow the path of agrochemicals. First, im-

ages of planes, tractors, and other machinery spreading agrochemicals in fields are presented while Solanas, in a voice-over, describes the widespread use of toxic chemicals in Argentinian fields. Next, we see shots of metallic silos that characterize storage facilities, followed by trucks transporting agricultural products. Solanas tells us how agrochemicals are also used at this stage to combat certain plagues, a use that had resulted in the death of many truck drivers. A shot of a drain dropping water into a water current closes the sequence. By following the invisible path of agrochemicals, the director is explicitly describing their unbounded nature. The voice-over reminds us by example that not seeing something does not mean it does not exist.

As in many agrosickness narratives, the testimonies of experts play a significant role in *Viaje*. Solanas visits many experts, including physicians, veterinarians, biologists, and agricultural engineers. A common theme in his conversations with these experts is how there is significant scientific evidence that connects the use of pesticides and herbicides with certain health conditions, but such evidence does not receive the attention it deserves. Solanas's journey attempts to bring more attention to this matter and, as agrosickness narratives commonly do, uses the human body as evidence of the negative health effects of agrochemicals. An important portion of the film is devoted to providing such evidence. At some point, a doctor describes a high incidence of physical malformations among inhabitants of fumigated neighborhoods and towns, while the camera focuses on newborns whose bodies visibly depart from the norm. In another instance, human bodies in glass jars are shown as evidence of the kind of effects toxic chemicals can have. Solanas also visits some of the communities affected, where the camera visually documents the cases they find. Through agrosickness narratives, the film establishes how toxic agrochemicals cannot be contained, much less restricted to zones adjacent to the agricultural frontier, by relying on the trope of overlooked scientific expertise. Moreover, just as the disregarded experts commonly found in disaster movies, we ignore their warnings at our peril.

Relying on agrosickness narratives to promote environmental consciousness, as *Viaje* does, certainly comes with ethical problems. Scholars in disability studies have been particularly vocal about how disabled bodies, including those affected by disease, should not be used as signs to represent a departure from normalcy and the idea that things can be "really bad." Indeed, one can raise these concerns regarding the ethics of representation of sickness in the film. *Viaje*, nonetheless, deploys other mechanisms to dismantle the visual trap of mainstream agricultural frontier images.

Unstable Borders

Close to the end of the film, the camera returns to the agricultural frontier. New aerial footage shows us images that parallel the sequence at the beginning. There are, however, important distinc-

tions. Although the symmetric patterns and contrasting tones are still present, we now see a shot in which the frontier has been established. Different shades of green indicate the presence of crops growing in the claimed land as if suggesting an irreversible process. Nevertheless, the camera does not give us enough time to fall into this visual trap. In the next shot, the frame is filled with a mixture of irregular shapes of land and water. Solanas tells us that we are before the results of flooding. Water has destroyed the agricultural frontier and drawn its own border at its will. We can see irregular patterns that extend through cultivated and uncultivated lands. The sequence continues with more footage of water roaming through urban spaces, destroying houses, eroding land, and covering streets. In these images, water becomes a material agent that highlights the instability of human-made divisions. It is no longer possible to think about the agricultural frontier as an impenetrable barrier.

The camera then follows Solanas back to the area where the documentary began. Through voice-over, the director describes the continuous advances of heavy machinery that push the agricultural frontier further and displace the Wichí from their lands. At some point, a member of the Wichí points to a wire fence and describes how it passes through an area that serves as the community's cemetery, leaving their buried ancestors on both sides. The camera is located on the side of uncleared land, next to the man, literary positioning us on his side. The underlying notion of the agricultural frontier that Solanas seems to favor is one in which agribusiness modes of production are not taming the wilderness but destroying existing modes of life in which humans relate to their environment through more sustainable practices. This position is supported by images of Wichí communities displaced by previous *desmontes*. Barefoot Wichí children in dirty old clothes push us to empathize by indignation.

The previous sequence is essential in dismantling the visual trap of agricultural frontier images. It refuses to portray uncultivated land as untouched by humans. As the group walks through the forest, we become aware that the Wichí have long-lasting roots in these lands. This scene points to the continuity between human and nonhuman bodies in the material world, particularly by emphasizing the connections between the Wichí and their environment. As spectators, we realize the frontier is a neoliberal construction and, by acknowledging its nature, we begin to understand its contradictions.

Final Remarks

Even though Solanas's documentary film *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* focuses on issues that go beyond thinking about the agricultural frontier, it is important to analyze how this film, like many other visual culture texts, represent this concept given that it is through the cumulative effect of these images that we make sense of it. Simi-

larly, agrosickness narratives—a term I proposed to characterize the recurrent representations of sick bodies in works concerned with the negative effects of agribusiness practices—are not limited to areas close to the agricultural frontier or where it is being created. Many of them take place in areas traditionally devoted to agriculture that have been transformed by the expansion of large-scale, intensive, monoculture farming. Moreover, agrosickness narratives stretch across numerous other film and literary genres, from horror and science fiction to biographies.

Understanding the agricultural frontier as a dynamic environment is crucial when it comes to examining the effects of pesticides and herbicides—and toxic chemical substances more generally. In this sense, literary and cinematic representations allow us to go beyond what we see at first sight. This is the case of *Viaje*, which urges us to interrogate how we engage with images of environmental degradation and reflect on the connections between representa-

tional, environmental, and health issues. The film's critical potential, however, presents some limitations. Although it thoroughly examines the paths followed by agrochemicals into rural and urban communities, it tells us very little about how those agrochemicals travel and affect the ecosystems beyond the border, where humans are no longer at the center. Nonetheless, it gives us some much-needed tools to be able to grasp the intricacies of how globalized agribusiness practices are changing our world. As I have described, the film explicitly resists the "flattening" of the land by highlighting its multiple and complex dimensions, for example, juxtaposing aerial shots and representations at ground level of humans, nonhuman animals, and plants that inhabit the ecosystems transformed by the clearing of woods and forests. Furthermore, it makes evident the artificiality of the human-made boundary by showing us the unrestrained nature of the agrochemicals used to keep the frontier in place.

NOTES

¹By "agribusiness" I understand the system that enables large-scale industrial agriculture. Although agribusiness encompasses many areas related to agriculture (e.g., financing, distribution, marketing, etc.), in this article, I use the term to refer to industrial agricultural production and the set of practices that characterize it, like intensive farming, large areas of land dedicated to monocultures, the marginalization of small-scale farmers in favor of corporations, and its reliance on a wide range of proprietary technologies controlled by multinationals that include heavy machinery, biotechnology and genetic engineering of crops, and the use of large amounts of agrochemicals for pest control.

²Throughout this article, when the Spanish title of a film is mentioned, I provide in italics the English title if one is available. If there is no official English title for the film, I include an English translation of the Spanish title without using italics.

³The enthusiastic adoption of neoliberalism in Argentina, from the 1970s by the military junta and later by democratic governments in the 1980s and 1990s, affected all areas of life in the country, including agricultural production. The neoliberal model had a significant impact on agricultural policies and priorities. During the 1990s, the government promoted the transformation of the Argentine countryside, with a spectacular expansion of land devoted to large-scale industrial agriculture based on monocultures, such as soybeans (Leguizamón 49). This model had significant environmental consequences, including the destruction of habitats (i.e., the expansion of the agricultural frontier) and the toxic effects of using large amounts of agrochemicals.

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Disposable Bodies: Undocumented Migrants and *La jaula de oro's* Poetics of Austerity

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ABSTRACT: The film *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013), by Mexican-Spanish director Diego Quemada-Díez, begins in a landfill in Guatemala City and ends with one of its main characters, Juan, gathering waste in a meat processing plant, somewhere in the northern United States. Having crossed two borders, survived riding *La Bestia* across Mexico, and lost Sara, Chauk and Samuel on the way, Juan's transnational journey comes full circle to end pretty much where it started: at the very bottom of the consumption cycle. A strength of *La jaula* is its ability to make visible that main condition of undocumented migrant bodies: their disposability, the banality of their disappearance and/or death. In this paper I take this line of thought further and explore the ways in which, through its documentary-like style and neorealistic use of non-professional actors and real locations, Quemada-Díez's storytelling develops what I will call a *poetics of austerity*. On one hand, the film tells a story about four teenagers whose lives have been made redundant by the effects of neoliberal austerity recipes—states' disengagement from social investment and wealth redistribution—; on the other hand, its austere style counters excess by relying on the moving image and conspicuously avoiding dialogue or other non-visual ways of creating meaning—such as non-diegetic music, for instance. Weaved together, these two approaches make up a revealing poetics, capable of baring the structural verticality hidden in globalization's DNA.

KEYWORDS: Diego Quemada-Díez, austerity, waste, migration, border, neorealism, neoliberalism, globalization

The film *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*, 2013), by Mexican-Spanish director Diego Quemada-Díez,¹ begins in a landfill in Guatemala City and ends with one of its main characters, Juan, gathering waste in a meat processing plant, somewhere in the northern United States. Having crossed two borders and survived riding *La Bestia* across Mexico, Juan's transnational journey comes full circle to end—this road movie seems to suggest—pretty much where it started: at the very bottom of the consumption cycle.

Juan is not alone in this passage—at least, not at the beginning. He leaves Guatemala with Samuel, who works collecting recyclables at the landfill, and Sara, who, in preparation for a trip known to be extra dangerous for women, takes contraceptive pills, cuts her hair short, and flattens her chest with a bandage to pass as Osvaldo. Soon after crossing the border with Mexico, the three mestizo friends run into Chauk, a young Maya-Tzotzil who does not speak Spanish. Like Sara/Osvaldo, Samuel and Juan, the non-Tzotzil speaking audience encounters a communication barrier with Chauk, as the film does not provide translation when he speaks. Despite this obstacle, and notwithstanding Juan's initial racist rejection of Chauk, the four adolescents head north together by way of the Mexican freight-train system known as *La Bestia*. According to Valeria Luiselli, "as many as half a million Central American immigrants" ride these trains every year, "atop the railcars or in the recesses between them" (19). Frequent derailments and falls, as well as the fact that not carrying documents makes these travelers

defenseless against criminals and corrupt authorities, account for thousands of deaths and grave injuries.

As in most road movies, the protagonists of *La jaula* bond and evolve over experiences lived during the trip. In a film based on the testimonies of more than 600 undocumented immigrants (whose names appear in the final credits), many of those experiences happen to be life or death situations that reveal the characters' extreme vulnerability. Thus, early in the journey the four youngsters get robbed by Mexican police agents who deport them back to Guatemala—Samuel decides then to stay while the other three head toward Mexico again. The three remaining travelers escape a raid of the Mexican *migra*, get temporary jobs cutting cane in a plantation, and have just begun developing a love triangle when robbers stop the train and take Sara away—along with all the other women traveling in that group. Now alone against thieves, kidnappers, and drug smugglers, Chauk and Juan save each other's lives and manage to cross the US-Mexican border together, but as they walk through the desert a sniper shoots Chauk down and forces Juan to run away. Soon after, we encounter Juan again, working at the meat processing plant.

The dump left behind in Guatemala, as well as the bloody spoils that Juan must deal with at his job in the US, stand for the place that the protagonists of the film occupy in society and highlight their kinship with waste. As *La jaula* makes clear, Juan could have just as easily become waste himself—like Chauk (certainly)

and Sara (most likely) did. Although, perhaps, the more subtle implication is not that death or disappearance will turn someone into waste, but that someone becomes waste at the very moment when they are seen as disposable. Zygmunt Bauman addresses the production of "wasted humans" (the excessive, the redundant) as an "inevitable outcome of modernization" (5). If we apply to this story his definition of redundancy as a concept "that shares its semantic space with 'rejects', 'wastrels', 'garbage', 'refuse'—with waste" (12, emphasis in the original), we cannot but conclude that even though Juan survives the passage to the US, his life and those of the friends lost on the way have been redundant, wasted lives, long before the journey started.

According to the Migration Data Portal, between 1996 and 2020 "more than 75,000 migrant deaths" were recorded globally. This number, the portal warns, represents "only a minimum estimate because the majority of migrant deaths around the world go unrecorded." As they navigate an underworld where they are "excluded from the law and therefore 'not its concern'" (Bauman 32), undocumented migrants and refugees fall in one of the deepest of the "zonas de exclusión" generated by neoliberal capitalism, "donde las personas son, y saben que son, completamente superfluas al orden histórico global" (Pratt 15). It seems safe to say that it is this awareness of their redundancy—this knowing in the gut that no state or multinational corporation is out there fighting to prevent their fall—that is pushing people to head toward the Global North and, with luck, recover scraps of the wealth extracted from their land.

Bauman affirms that, when it comes to disposing of leftovers, we do it "in the most radical and effective" manner: "we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking" (27). Making wasted lives visible and, therefore, thinkable, may be then among the most radical and effective ways of disrupting the current global order of excess and waste. Like Nadia Lie, I find that a strength of *La jaula de oro* is, precisely, its ability to make visible that main condition of undocumented migrant bodies: their disposability, the banality of their disappearance and/or death (143–146). In this paper I take this line of thought further and explore the ways in which, through its documentary-like style and neorealist use of non-professional actors and real locations, Quemada-Diez's storytelling develops what I will call a *poetics of austerity*. On one hand, the film tells a story about four teenagers whose lives have been made redundant by the effects of neoliberal austerity prescriptions—states' disengagement from social investment and wealth redistribution—; on the other hand, its austere style counters excess by relying on the moving image and conspicuously avoiding dialogue or other non-visual ways of creating meaning—such as non-diegetic music, for instance. Weaved together, these two approaches make up a revealing poetics, capable of baring the structural verticality (read inequality) hidden in globalization's DNA.

By proposing the concept of poetics of austerity, I am making a direct reference to Italian neorealism and the filmic tradition that it

helped shape in Latin America. Through its rejection of Hollywood's stylistic and thematic establishment, as well as its commitment to telling urgent stories—of poverty, of social struggle—ignored by the mainstream studio system, in the 1940s and early 50s Italian neorealism developed storytelling strategies that bypassed that system and empowered filmmakers around the world—in particular in the Global South. In the wake of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution (1959) and throughout the 1960s, filmmakers such as the Brazilian Glauber Rocha ("An Esthetic of Hunger," 1965) and the Cuban Julio García Espinosa ("Por un cine imperfecto," 1969), as well as the Argentinians Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas ("Hacia un tercer cine," 1969), regarded Italian neorealism as a trailhead for their political cinema. Through films and the aforementioned manifestos, they articulated a poetics that found in cinema not just a form of art apt for denouncing a reality of poverty, hunger, and violence, but an instrument, a "weapon" (Getino and Solanas 49) that, in the hands of the oppressed, could not only represent but incite and celebrate the revolution against a colonialist and capitalist status quo.

Half a century later, *La jaula de oro* honors this Latin American neorealist tradition by filming in location; casting non-professional actors; telling a story of poverty, oppression and injustice, and following a storyline that emulates a real-time chronological order. However, not surprisingly, the revolutionary ambitions of the 60s are gone. In that sense, Quemada-Diez's opera prima dialogues more fluidly with neorealist films of the 1980s and 90s, such as Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (Brazil, 1981) and Víctor Gaviria's *Rodrigo D: No futuro* (Colombia, 1990) or *La vendedora de rosas* (*The Rose Seller*, 1998), whose young protagonists are non-professional actors enacting stories pretty similar to their own struggles for survival in the streets and slums of Sao Paulo and Medellín. Another relevant antecedent is Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (1998), less purely neorealist—it pairs a non-professional child actor with a Brazilian star as protagonists—but also a film about youth at risk, and the first of a wave of Latin American road movies to which *La jaula* belongs.

While these direct predecessors of *La jaula* are already bringing to the fore the economic and social effects of neoliberal austerity among vulnerable youth in Latin America, Quemada-Diez's film, released in 2013, takes this pursuit to the road and the national borders that block it. Then again, *La jaula de oro* is not the first film to tell a story about contemporary transnational migration from Central America to the United States; its genealogy goes as far as Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (USA, 1983) and, more recently, Rebecca Cammisa's documentary *Which Way Home* (USA, 2009) and Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* (USA, 2009). The film is not unique either in approaching this subject matter as a neorealist road movie—in fact, Quemada-Diez's has recognized its indebtedness to Michael Winterbottom's *In this World* (UK, 2002), the story of two Afghan cousins who leave a refugee camp in Pakistan and must travel through Iran, Turkey, Italy, and France as undocumented immigrants on their way to London (Democracy Now). What I find unique and

particularly haunting about *La jaula de oro* is the way in which its stylistic and narrative austerity—its reliance on what moving images can convey by themselves; its littered real locations; its voids and absences—seems to fit the representation of lives made redundant by the effects of neoliberalism and its belt-tightening policies. As a neorealist road movie, *La jaula* affords itself a cinematic language capable enough for exposing the transnational impact of neoliberalism; for making visible the thread that ties consumerist excess—and its uncontrollable production of waste and redundant population—with massive labor migration from south to north, and for baring the contemporary role of national borders—where human mobility is granted or denied—as the sites where *flow*, 'the preferred metaphor of globalization' (Pratt 241), uncloaks itself as a fallacy.

In the first minute and a half of *La jaula de oro* we meet Juan. A shaky hand-held camera follows him around, revealing a noisy labyrinth of makeshift homes and dusty alleyways as he walks by fast, ignoring a couple of soldiers in uniform who cross his path, as well as two children playing gangsters—who "shoot" him with toy guns. After taking a couple of minutes to introduce Sara (and her transformation into Osvaldo), the film then returns to Juan, now inside one of those precarious dwellings. A wide shot finds him in a room enclosed by walls made up of repurposed corrugated zinc sheets and flattened carton boxes. Sitting on one of two beds haphazardly put together, he hides a few rolled dollar bills inside the waist band of his jeans, and then leaves the room wearing those pants and a pair of old cowboy boots. Outside, the camera does not follow him anymore. We see him walk away, passing neighbors who go about their business amidst the improvised housing, as the diegetic sound of loud music, dogs barking, and babies crying makes this environment feel increasingly crowded and claustrophobic.

This is basically all the contextual information that we will get about Juan (Brandon López), and it is in fact more than what the film reveals when it comes to its other three protagonists: Sara (Karen Martínez), Samuel (Carlos Chajon), and Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez). Some scholarship dwells in this lack of explicit and specific information about the personal stories as well as the economic, political, and social circumstances that would explain why the four adolescents undertake the dangerous journey toward the US. Alicia Estrada, for instance, has criticized this void in the particular case of Chauk, pointing out that the film's "ambiguity around the Maya protagonist's immigration further highlights his Otherness" (182). Other critics, meanwhile, seem to suggest that Quemada-Díez's movie makes up for these "gaps" by invoking intertextual connections with other "US border genre" films—like *El Norte* and *Sin Nombre*—that have already told similar stories (Curry 50). Above all, this scholarship points to the direct intermedial reference to the corrido "*La jaula de oro*,"² which establishes the film's critical stance toward the "American Dream" (Archer 91, Curry 49-50).

In my view, however, these voids are not narrative gaps that the film must make up for in some way or another, but narrative

devices that are intrinsic to *La jaula de oro*'s poetics of austerity and its effect on the viewer. For all we will not learn about Juan's individual story, for instance, the initial scene is telling us, with plenty of visual detail and not a single word, about the big picture that is expelling him from home. We will not find out until much later that he comes from "Guatemala, Zona 3" (1:11:52-1:14:33), but the neighborhood that we experience with him in location, through diegetic sound—or, rather, noise—and shaky camera work that reminds the viewer of documentaries, does not need further introduction as a shantytown. The young man who walks fast through those dusty alleyways—and whose name we don't know yet—runs into men in uniform and children playing with toy guns, which hints toward the violence reigning in that quarter. We finally learn that he is not a visitor: he lives in the area and his precarious dwelling looks cramped and made up of random, old-looking, and repurposed objects. In this way, *La jaula* manages to introduce life at the margins of neoliberal capitalism—and to make clear why one would want to escape from it. Right off the bat, the film also establishes a certain symbiosis between human (wasted lives) and non-human waste. As Luis I. Prádanos puts it, "there is a clear correlation between global economic growth spurred by the planetary expansion of capitalist modernity and the massive proliferation of both unmanageable waste production and surplus population" (194). Throughout the duration of the story, *La jaula* will continue stepping out of a purely anthropocentric portrayal and bringing to the fore this culture-nature continuum, this kinship between debris and "surplus" human lives.

A slum is not a casual place to begin a story about migration. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, poverty belts (favelas, villas miseria, chabolas, invasiones, etc.) formed in the outskirts of big Latin American cities, populated by poor peasants just arrived from the countryside. Lured by the promise of a better life in the urban space—which had come to represent modernity's ideals of progress—these migrants settled in improvised neighborhoods that now stand for the failure of that main narrative: progress. As Mary Louise Pratt put it, back in 2007, "the idea of a world in which all will at some point be equally 'developed' has been so thoroughly abandoned that we have to be reminded that this was recently a globally shared expectation" (238). The policies of neoliberalism ensured that equal levels of development would not be reached. Upholding the principles of individual freedom, private property, and free market, the neoliberal doctrine began to spread in the 1970s, when the ruling elites around the world saw their income dramatically reduced by the global economic crisis (Harvey 5-38). It consolidated in the 1990s and has now acquired a global reach. In terms of concrete policy, its main principles have been implemented as "deregulation of financial and trade markets, privatization of public assets and institutions, social service cuts, protection of private property and corporate profits, an ideology of individualism and competition, and enhanced enforcement to coerce labor while policing impoverishment" (Walia 42). And yet, according to David Harvey, this neoliberalization of economies has not been very effective

tive in revitalizing global capital accumulation; however, "it has succeeded remarkably well in restoring (...) the power of an economic elite" (19). In fact, the indelible mark left by neoliberalism in Latin America (and throughout the world) is the increase of poverty and inequality, as proved by the expansion of poverty belts in urban areas (Romero).

In Guatemala City, for instance, it is estimated that about 20 percent of the population lives in slums (Volume). Zona 3, the shanty town that Juan leaves behind in *La jaula* is made up of the city's main landfill and 22 quarters with a population of about 30,000 people (Pérez) who, like Samuel and perhaps Sara and Juan too, live off the garbage dump.³ According to Prádanos, "immigration may be understood as people displaced by (or escaping the toxicity generated by) the flows of material, labor, and energy mobilized by economic modernization to facilitate its consumerist, predatory, and wasteful practices" (194). While shantytowns are literally the garbage dump where twentieth century capitalism deposited its surplus population, in the globalized-neoliberal-twenty first century capitalist era the dump is, fittingly, transnational: those whose lives have been made redundant may try and escape from the slum (or skip it, like Chauk), just to end up chewed up and spit out by La Bestia; buried in mass graves; drowned at sea or dehydrated to death in the desert; shot and killed at the border; left to languish in camps right at the doors of the developed world, or, if lucky, let into that world through the back door, just to continue a life-long relationship with waste (like Juan).

Rather than lecturing on these details, though, *La jaula* trusts the viewer to connect the dots; it moves away from pedagogy and toward an economy of language that might remind one of poetry. In fact, Quemada-Diez's description of his film as an "epic poem" (Democracy Now) turns out quite accurate not only because it is a story about unsung heroes, as the director explains, but also because of its economy of (filmic) language—one of several strategies that the film deploys as part of its poetics of austerity. Previous scholarship has pointed to "the overall absence of dialogue" in *La jaula* and how it emphasizes "the primacy of the visual image to tell the story" (Curry 48). Indeed, we don't hear any spoken word until over seven minutes into the story, when Sara, Samuel, and Juan are crossing by boat the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Once Chauk joins the group, the fact that he does not speak Spanish and that the other three protagonists do not know his language, Tzotzil, becomes a natural limitation for dialogue.

At the level of spoken language, by not providing translation when Chauk talks the film aligns the non-Tzotzil speaking audience with the other three mestizo protagonists—who get to know him through his actions and get attached to him despite not being able to understand his words. Of the four main characters, Chauk is also the one about whom we do not learn any personal context, since he simply shows up while the Guatemalan friends are waiting for the train, near a nondescript pond. For Estrada, Chauk is represented as having "no personal history, nor clearly articulated dreams and de-

sires" (182). In her view, this is one of several ways in which *La jaula* would be contributing to a tradition of filmic representations that reproduce "colonial legacies" and their "stereotyped construction of Maya culture and identity" (179-180). The film certainly provides a little more "personal history" about the mestizo protagonists, but none of them gets to clearly articulate their dreams and desires. In fact, the only dream that we get to see and, toward the end, to understand, is Chauk's recurrent dream of snow falling against a dark night sky.

This dream is perhaps the best illustration of *La jaula's* economy of language—a main feature of its poetics of austerity. It's always the same long take (over 10 seconds long) in which a fixed camera shows snowflakes falling from a night sky. While the film uses very little non-diegetic music, the three times that this scene plays it comes accompanied by the same soft piano theme. The first snow scene (00:15:36-00:15:59) may leave the viewer a bit disoriented, as the irruption of this element—which clearly does not belong to the otherwise neorealist narrative—will not become clear until later, when thanks to its second and third iterations we realize that this long take always comes associated with moments when Chauk has fallen asleep. Dreams have been used in neorealist films as a way of letting the viewer into the psychology of the characters, through sequences that often abandon constrictions of the neorealist style such as natural lighting or slice-of-life storytelling, for instance. Pedro's nightmare of guilt and hunger for affection, in Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*, Mexico, 1950), and Mónica's drug-induced dreams of a happier time with her dead grandmother in Gaviria's *La vendedora de rosas*, come to mind. Quemada-Diez's film acknowledges this tradition and even seems to break its own rules by introducing music but, sticking to its austere ways, it condenses the dream down to one shot, one tune, and one concept: snow.

Chauk, then, dreams of snow but he never gets to relate his dream to the other characters. A couple of times, he attempts to tell his fellow travelers about *taiv*, but only toward the end of the film, as the two surviving boys contemplate through the glass a miniature train installation, Juan—and, with him, the non-Tzotzil speaking viewers—understands what his friend has been saying all along.⁴ Chauk points to the fake snow falling on the display and remarks: "taiv." To which Juan replies: "Ah, 'taiv' es nieve, va" (1:22:50-1:23:36). Nothing else is ever said about snow, but in the final scene, when Juan has lost Chauk too and walks alone on a snowy road, he looks up and a POV shot reveals that what he is seeing looks exactly like Chauk's recurring dream: snow falling against a dark night sky. This image becomes then a multilayered concept. Snow, which at the most basic level could be read as a symbol of the north and of everything it might offer that cannot be found in the Global South, now represents Chauk too, as well as a naïve dream that—as the film suggests by having Juan seeing exactly the same shot of Chauk's dreams—is not only his but rather a collective hope, shared by the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Central and South

American migrants that attempt to reach and cross the US-Mexico border every year.⁵

Yet another layer of meaning could be inferred from this image of falling snow, if we think of the uncountable snowflakes as representing the anonymous and fragile lives of those riding La Bestia along with the protagonists of the film. Addressing the link between the increasing migration toward the US and livelihoods destroyed by free trade agreements, a hallmark of globalization, Harsha Walia explains that about 1.3 million Mexican farmers were pushed into bankruptcy during the first decade of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), inaugurated in January 1994 (50). Among those left without their primary source of subsistence are Indigenous Maya, Mixtec, and Zapotec, who contributed to the near triplication of Mexican migration to the US in two decades—from 4.5 million migrants in 1990 to 12.67 million in 2008. "Before NAFTA, Indigenous people made up 7 percent of migrants from Mexico, but a decade later they constituted 29 percent" (51). While *La jaula* does not inform the viewer about the particular circumstances that cause Chauk to migrate, his centrality to the story—as well as his role as the bearer of the collective dream—makes visible the ever-growing presence of Indigenous people among the population of undocumented migrants headed to the United States.

In this way Chauk and the other three protagonists of Quemada-Díez's film perform as archetypes, as composites of the people they represent. They also function as an expression of the kinship between these archetypes and waste. The film conveys these two fundamental premises, I argue, through a second main strategy of *La jaula*'s poetics of austerity. This strategy entails, on one hand, a narrative structure and visual style that tend to fuse the journey of its main characters with that of the collective of undocumented migrants traveling with them. On the other hand, and mainly through its visual style, this strategy also fuses the protagonists with the ruins and the debris that surround them practically wherever they go.

At the narrative level, Sara, Juan, Chauk and Samuel's personal stories are austere in the sense that, as mentioned earlier, they do not abound in specifics. Having been introduced with minimal or no individual context, the protagonists of the film are meant not to stick out but to merge with the crowd of migrants and peasant workers that travel with them most of the time. These characters have not been made special or different by their backgrounds like, for instance, the gangster fleeing from his own *mara* in Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre*. Even Sara's transformation into Osvaldo, which invests her story with a narratively powerful twist, is based on the well-known fact that "eighty percent of the women and girls who cross Mexico to the to the U.S. border are raped on the way" (Luiselli 25-26). While trying to ride La Bestia disguised as a man may not be a common resort, taking contraceptive precautions before heading north makes Sara representative of all young women appearing in the film. In the slice-of-life and on-the-move structure of this neorealist road movie, its protagonists are never alone in their struggles—until, perhaps, when Juan and Chauk finally get to the

US-Mexico border and encounter the wall. The story moves along with the train, and every new obstacle (the Mexican *migra*, the robbers that take Sara away, the kidnappers that threaten to kill Chauk) hits the travelling collective and not just the main characters.

This fusion of the protagonists with the migrant crowd is reinforced by the film's austere neorealist style, in particular through its *mise-en-scène*. *La jaula de oro* was filmed on (key) locations such as Zona 3 in Guatemala City, the shelter in Arriaga (Mexico) where Chauk and Juan recover after having lost Sara, and, most importantly, on top of the moving trains of La Bestia. In that sense, it follows the steps of what the documentary *Which Way Home* and the feature *Sin Nombre* had done already. However, it is the casting of non-professional actors who come from areas and backgrounds that typically feed La Bestia that seals the film's convincing insertion of its main characters in the migrant collective. Quemada-Díez has explained that it took months to find Rodolfo Domínguez (Chauk) in his community in Chiapas, and that Karen Martínez (Sara), Brandon López (Juan) and Carlos Chajon (Samuel) all come from impoverished neighborhoods in Guatemala. Moreover, most of the sparse dialogue that characterizes the film is, according to the director, the language that the actors proposed for loosely scripted scenes (Democracy Now).

This believable sense of belonging gets strengthened by a cinematography and editing designed to have the main characters appear often with the migrant collective as a backdrop, or within a series of close-ups that include shots of individual migrants mixed with the familiar images of the protagonists. Not by chance, in these scenes the close-ups of the anonymous migrants are left on the screen for as long as those of the main characters: about eight seconds each. *La jaula* tends to use these montages to portray the rides on top of La Bestia, in combination with landscape shots—which road movies typically rely on to represent movement across a geography and, therefore, the progression of the story. At this level, a sequence that clearly illustrates the film's kinship with the genre comes when Juan and Chauk, having survived a band of kidnappers in an indistinct town, enter the desert lands of northern Mexico riding a train. As in the case of Chauk's dream scenes, the film allows itself to abandon its commitment to mostly diegetic sound, but for this one time it does so through a song with lyrics about the resilience of undocumented migrants trying to cross the border: "La caña," by Son del Centro, plays as multiple shots of the tracks, of the train cutting the landscape, and of the people traveling on top of it are edited together (1:19:51-1:23:10).

As mentioned above, through its austere visual style *La jaula* is also highlighting the symbiotic relationship, the continuum between human beings (the main characters, and with them the collective of undocumented migrants) and the non-human environments that mark their journey (real locations characterized by the omnipresence of waste). Such an approach invites reading through the lens of what Stacy Alaimo calls "trans-corporeality," or a conception of the human that sees it as "always intermeshed with the

more-than-human world" (2). Litter, debris, and discarded industrial objects populate *La jaula*'s mise-en-scène with an understated persistence; this key feature of the film's trans-corporeal vision is subtly registered by the camera and never remarked on by the characters. By portraying the ubiquity of garbage while avoiding big gestures—verbal or cinematographic—to acknowledge it, the film points to how "intermeshed" the characters are with waste. Previous scholarship on the treatment of trash in *La jaula de oro* has focused on both the shantytown/landfill and the meat processing plant sequences that bookend the story. Prádanos, for instance, points out that "waste materials and surplus population converge in the shantytown, acquiring agency and refusing to accept the disposable, passive, and invisible place assigned to them by the economic system that produced them" (203). He reviews *La jaula* as one of several contemporary cultural artifacts that, in his view, succeed at making visible the political ecology of waste. While I agree with this perspective, I would like to complement it by displacing the focus of my reading from those two sequences to other moments in which *La jaula*'s austere (and trans-corporeal) visual style suggests the kinship between its protagonists and waste in a more subtle way.

According to Jane Bennet, all matter is "vibrant," and waste is not an exception given that "a vital materiality can never really be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity" (6). In *La jaula de oro*, discarded commodities are presented as "active" beginning with the initial scene in Juan's shantytown, where, as Prádanos points out, people live off the vibrant landfill, which provides income (through recycling) and takes care of many of their immediate needs, ranging from walls and roofs for their makeshift houses to improvised furniture and even appliances. Once they leave the shantytown behind, and when they are not riding on top of freight trains, Sara and Juan (as well as Chauk) find a sort of home in abandoned rail cars. The first time they choose a boxcar to spend the night, the film introduces the viewer to a real location that looks decrepit in the outside while empty and dusty in the inside. For the three teenagers, however, this out-of-commission rail car is a reliable refuge. A close-up of Chauk's hand touching the rusted and flaky surface of the boxcar seals this trans-corporeal moment, evoking for a few seconds the symbiosis between the young travelers and the debris that La Bestia discards. Then Chauk looks up and the scene cuts to a shot of snow falling against a dark sky (his dream), in a juxtaposition that emphasizes the contrast between reality and hope (00:31:37-00:32:00). Later in the journey, after Sara's abduction, Juan and Chauk must come to terms with the fact that they may never see her again: because of the language barrier, the two boys cannot really talk to each other but, in a scene in which the location choice is key, they are sitting in a passenger car whose ruinous condition seems to reflect neatly their equally devastated emotional state. *La jaula* creates, in this way, another distinct moment of trans-corporeality, a scene in which the kinship between the surviving protagonists and discarded pieces of the rail system becomes visible (1:01:32-1:03:06). This symbiosis

between human beings and waste, however, is neither restricted to the film's main characters nor limited to rail debris. While litter seems ubiquitous in the small urban centers where the protagonists of the film stop to switch trains, the accumulation of garbage along the train tracks reaches an overwhelming level in the generic town where Chauk, Juan, and several other migrants get kidnapped by criminals seeking ransom. If in Juan's shantytown waste appears repurposed with practical intent, here the characters move among pieces of trash and piles of rubble that seem to have been randomly placed and then abandoned. In fact, the understated emphasis that a series of establishing and wide shots put in portraying the overpowering and chaotic presence of trash in this town make the viewer know, long before the characters find out, that this place is bad news (1:11:40-1:12:20). The continuum between human beings and non-human environments is, in this case as in the previous ones, effectively conveyed through an austere filmic style that relies heavily on real locations and the image in movement.

Finally, a third strategy that *La jaula de oro* deploys as part of its poetics of austerity is the use of voids and absences as narrative tools. I have discussed earlier how the voids surrounding the personal histories of the main characters explain, in part, their ability to fuse themselves with the undocumented migrant collective. In this section, I would like to address how Quemada-Diez's film, in its own austere way, uses absence and loss to represent violence and thus reject its treatment as a spectacle. Previous scholarship on the topic has pointed out that "the motif of the disappeared" (Lie 45), is introduced early in the film through a shot of a wall covered with poster pictures of disappeared people. These could be photos of disappeared migrants, as Nadia Lie suggests, but because of the emblematic way in which the old-looking pictures have been arranged on the wall I believe that this is rather a subtle reference to the twentieth-century history of political repression and disappearances in Guatemala and Latin America in general. About 200,000 people died and other 45,000 disappeared during the 36 years (1960-1996) of civil war in Guatemala; a vast majority of those victims were Maya civilians (Amnesty International). *La jaula* might even be nodding to its direct predecessor, Nava's *El Norte*, a movie about two Maya siblings who must flee Guatemala in the early 1980s to escape the violence directed against Indigenous peoples.

In any case, by evoking the weight of absences that are ever present, *La jaula* is priming the viewer for its own take on loss and violence. Midway into the film, a band of robbers attacks the train and Sara, her disguise uncovered, is kidnapped along with all the other women in the group. As the robbers drive away, Sara can be heard calling: "Juan...Chauk... Juan... Chauk..." while they both lay on the ground, injured and unconscious (00:54:27-00:58:02). Critical work on *La jaula* revisits this scene as the moment in which the viewer gets acquainted with loss and the particular kind of trauma caused by disappearance, as Sara will not be seen again (Curry 62-65, Lie 144). From the point of view of the film's poetics of austerity, this scene is key also because of the way in which the trauma is nar-

ratively constructed. Since *La jaula* uses a restricted narration that sticks exclusively to the point of view of those who remain in the migrant collective, the viewer, like Juan and Chauk, never gets to find out what happened to Sara. Although road movies often adopt this narrative approach, it is not always the case—once again, *Sin Nombre* comes to mind. In a more traditionally constructed film, the camera could have detached itself momentarily from Chauk and Juan to show the viewer how things looked from Sara's perspective, but not in *La jaula*. Austerity, in this case, takes the shape of absence, of everything that is not said and, above all, neither shown nor seen.

Another notable absence in *La jaula* is that of blood or, to be more exact, of bleeding human bodies. In a film whose protagonists—and the collective of undocumented migrants with them—are constantly exposed to violent robberies, kidnappings, and even a shooting, such absence is not the product of lack of opportunities: *La jaula* gets out of its way to avoid gore. Thus, for instance, when Juan gets badly wounded with a machete while trying to stop Sara's abduction, the camera remains, in the scenes that follow, distant from his body, focusing instead on Chauk and his attentive expression as he dresses his companion's wound (00:58:09–00:59:25). A similar approach applies to the scene in which an anonymous sniper shoots Chauk down. Once the relentless sniper forces Juan to run away, silence returns to the scene. A medium shot shows Chauk's motionless body lying on the ground; the camera is close, but he is partially hidden behind—and surrounded by—the golden desert brush. No wound in sight, just a boy who looks like he is sleeping. The camera then switches to Juan, as he becomes a moving speck in the immensity of the desert (1:34:15–1:36:10). Like in the scene when Sara is taken away, this shocking moment is not artificially intensified by non-diegetic music; the shock comes instead from its unadorned banality.

Comparing *La jaula* to *Sin Nombre*, a road movie that also focuses on undocumented youth migration from Central America (Honduras) but from the angle of gang feuds, Curry finds that in Quemada-Diez's film, violence, "if timid by comparison, seems to serve more melodramatic ends" (51). This may be true but, in my view, *La jaula*'s choice to have the viewer "experience" violence through absence and loss rather than visual display has less to do with melodrama than with a deliberate rejection of the spectacular bloodshed. In this way, Quemada-Diez's film resists representing the ubiquitous violence associated with La Bestia and the US-Mexico border as an object of voyeuristic pleasure (the spectacle of disposable bodies killing each other), and seeks instead to generate empathy by placing the viewer in the shoes of the undocumented migrant.

Borders, in particular those that separate rich countries from impoverished former colonies, like the US-Mexico border, have become the stage where the increasing tension between Global South and Global North gets resolved, for lack of a better word, by force. As Pratt explains, although "the imperial character of the new

global order was obscured for a time by a legitimating language of free trade, flow, open markets, a global ecumene," it has become clear that globalization has meant the "restructuring of planetary relations by an imperially designed neoliberalism" (238). The growing number of undocumented labor migrants and refugees pressing at the seams of the walled developed world is not an unintended consequence, but a logical response. Since the 1980s, the most vulnerable sectors in developing countries have been made redundant by the one-fits-all structural adjustment prescriptions handed to their governments by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF): resources that should have gone to health, education, and housing have been, in most cases, obediently redirected to debt service (Harvey 28–31, Stiglitz 3–52). Then right before the turn of the century free trade agreements added even more citizens in the Global South to the legions of the redundant. "The critics of globalization accuse Western countries of hypocrisy, and the critics are right," affirms Joseph E. Stiglitz, referring to the fact that these agreements have forced developing countries to eliminate trade barriers while the developed countries have kept their own barriers intact, which has prevented poor nations from obtaining much needed income from agricultural exports (6). The hypocrisy does not stop there. "As Clinton was signing NAFTA to ensure the movement of capital and goods, the US Army Corps of Engineers was fencing the border to interdict the movement of people," affirms Harsha Walia, for whom the displacement crisis currently experienced throughout the world was, in fact, "foreseen" (51–52).

Released in the US in 2015, *La jaula de oro* seemed timed to offer a way of making sense of the migration crisis of 2014, when an unusually high number of unaccompanied minors (69,000 in total, according to the Migration Data Portal) crossed the US-Mexico border. Four years later, as the Trump administration enforced the "family separation policy" and undocumented migrant children were separated from their parents and put in facilities that resembled cages, the film's original title in Spanish—which translates literally as 'The Golden Cage'—became somewhat prescient, only the cages in question were anything but golden. The waves of undocumented migrant children crossing the border unaccompanied have now become seasonal and, after having been retained in camps in Mexico since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of minors crossing the border alone in 2021 promise to break records. Quemada-Diez's road movie is, therefore, a film that has gained relevance since its release, not only because of the numbing statistics, but also—and perhaps above all—because of the kind of critical impact on the viewer that its poetics of austerity is capable of provoking.

Two decades ago, Mary Louise Pratt made a call to find ways to expose the profound inequities generated by globalization through forms of representation that strive to escape the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism (26). In *La jaula de oro*'s poetics of austerity I find a response to that call. Through its austere narrative structure, which avoids dwelling on the personal histories of the main charac-

ters, and a visual style (real locations, casting of non-professional actors, etc.) that fuses them with the undocumented migrant crowd as well as with environments that evoke the wasteful practices of contemporary capitalism, Quemada Díez's film resists neoliberal individualism, humanizes the migrant collective, and makes visible the thread that connects consumerist excess with lives made superflu-

ous. Similarly, by banning gore from its storytelling, *La jaula* takes a stand against representations of border violence as a spectacle for consumption; in this way, the film refuses to compete in a visual market that naturalizes the perception of undocumented migrants as redundant and of their bodies as disposable.

NOTES

¹ Several sources, including the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), have published the director's name with an accent on his last name (Quemada-Díez). However, the name Diego Quemada-Díez appears without an accent in *La jaula de oro*'s credits. Throughout this article, whenever referring to the director I will use the latter version of his name.

² Released in 1984, the corrido "La jaula de oro" is one of the most popular songs recorded by the group Los Tigres del Norte. It tells the story of a Mexican immigrant who, having crossed the border as a *mojado*, is still 'illegal' after ten years in the US. The corrido's male narrator lives in fear of deportation and cannot travel back to Mexico, thus he describes his situation as living in a golden cage:

¿De qué me sirve el dinero
si estoy como un prisionero
dentro de esta gran nación?
Cuando me acuerdo hasta lloro,
y aunque la jaula sea de oro
no deja de ser prisión.

³ In Latin America's "peripheral modernity" (Dussel 338, Pratt 225), the state never really achieved a strong hold of income redistribution and a welfare system. Any hope that this could happen before the end of the twentieth century got crushed in the early 1980s, when the debt crisis exploded. For the whole previous decade, hungry for building that elusive modernity, developing countries around the world had borrowed heavily from New York banks at rates convenient for the bankers. In 1981, a dramatic rise in the U.S. interest rates pushed these vulnerable economies into default, beginning with Mexico in 1982 (Harvey 28-31). By the end of the 1980s a total of 16 Latin American countries had renegotiated their debts (Sims and Romero), in exchange for applying "structural adjustment" recipes handed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As Harvey explains, this process demonstrated a fundamental difference between liberal and neoliberal practice:

under the former, lenders take the losses that arise from bad investment decisions, while under the latter the borrowers are forced by state and international powers to take on board the cost of debt repayment *no matter what the consequences for the livelihood and well-being of the local population*. (29, the emphasis is mine)

Invariably, the structural adjustments required governments to cut social and welfare investments (health, education), while privatizing state-owned companies and making labor laws more flexible. Imposed as necessary *austerity* measures, the recipes facilitated that the "free market ideology" take hold of the region—and the developing world in general (Stiglitz 13). According to data compiled by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, this "lost decade" meant a significant increase of poverty and inequality, thus widening the gap between rich and poor in Latin America (Ocampo).

⁴ Chauk's first attempt to talk about snow occurs during a stop in a small Mexican town. In a scene meant to reveal their media-influenced ideas about the US, the four youngsters decide to spend the little money they have on pictures taken with fake backgrounds that supposedly represent the United States. They are looking at a photo album, trying to choose the backgrounds for their own photos, when Chauk sees something (hidden for the viewer) and says "taiv," but no one pays attention. Soon after, we see Sara and Samuel pose for their shot smiling and holding a little US flag over a backdrop of skyscrapers; conversely, for his photo Juan rides a fake horse and is dressed up with a jacket, hat, and pistol that match his cowboy boots. As for Chauk, he smiles for his shot wearing a Native American head dress and cane—an ironic hint at stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples, given that throughout the whole film he wears a black t-shirt with what looks like a rock band print—against the backdrop of a forest covered in snow (00:21:21-00:22:20).

⁵ According to information disseminated by US Customs and Border Protection, between October 2020 and March 2021, the number of "southwest land border encounters" reached a total of 569,879 individuals, among them 48,587 unaccompanied minors.

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Refoulement as Necropolitical Praxis: Mobility, Ethnography, and Ethics at the Mexico-Guatemala Border

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the Mexico-Guatemala border through the lens of the author's sensory ethnographic engagement there. It also uses oral history interviews and collaboration undertaken with refugees, migrants, and deportees. It argues for the contravention of human rights and refugee rights under the Trump Administration as an aspect of a longer history of biopolitics enacted in border regions and beyond them. It draws on border studies and notions of immunity in biopolitics to develop this argument, and its uses collaborative visual ethnographic practices as a way to consider the border.

KEYWORDS: Borders, Guatemala, Mexico, Migration, Refoulement, Biopolitics

Introduction

Saidiya Hartman asks: "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (4). This question asks us to consider how one engages with archives and their contents without reinscribing their histories. From this question, which hinges on a self-reflective praxis, I turn to contemporary Central American migration to pose another: how does biopower inform ethnography during anthropogenic states of exception? Biopower describes the material conditions of subjugation and the control of demography as the limit of a state; ethnography is a historied process of reflection and writing of others concurrent with imperial and anthropological developments. It is not in the purview of this essay to engage with these familiar terms individually. Rather, this essay examines how, taken together, biopower and ethnography might serve to engender an ethical reflection on the state of border studies and migration studies. Hartman's question, which underscores an ethical prolepsis, might have an answer in Emmanuel Levinas' concept of being "face to face" with the Other (98). Briefly, this Other, which can be distinguished from later references to the "other" as in Donna Haraway through ethics, can inform how we engage with intersubjective processes in the world: how we subject ourselves to one other in love without eros and of engagement with mutuality. From Levinas' ethical supposition, I have sought to engage others in community-building that offers up ethnography when literary and cultural texts are either non-existent or rarified. In this essay, I turn to a negative definition of praxis, understood as the self-reflective modality of the state, driven by Achille Mbembe's concept of the necropolitical to expand thought on the refoulement of Central American asylum seekers in recent years.

This essay proceeds from the notion that the subjection (*asujetissement*) of Central Americans is part and parcel of a necropo-

litical praxis authored by a compendium of figures on behalf of US governmentality and its racial ideology. By considering the engagement with Central Americans historically, I consider the violent removal of refugees not only in terms of a transnational migrant passage but also in terms of the atemporal elements constituted by deportation which continue to inform it through recursion: indebtedness, domestic and gendered forms of violence, and climate change, alongside gang violence. In this way, I turn to my fieldwork at the Mexico-Guatemala border to consider how the interviews I conducted with approximately thirty interlocutors (interviewed by myself and a production team for a documentary film in formal and informal terms) might speak to the archival silence in which Central American migrant stories are told. That is, migration is often relegated to a visual field and even more commonly to the taxonomies of anthropology and sociology. Only a handful of novels, novellas, and memoirs precisely speak to the Central American migrant experience from within the isthmian communities. There are more anthropological papers on borders, remittances, biospheres, artisanry, and post-war violence than there are first-person popular accounts of departures from Central America, though there are some exceptions in the narratives of contemporary Latinx and Garifuna poetry and hip-hop. From this knowledge, I listened against the grain of those readings to a number of stories where resistance and hope elided with apprehension and trauma, alongside the broader polity of the Trump administration's policies. And I listened with the intention of understanding how border securitization protocols and necropolitics were lived experiences for refugees and migrants.

In this paper, which draws on these interviews in terms of my reflections and experiences, I examine the contravention of the principle of non-refoulement under international law through the securitization of the Mexican-Guatemalan border. I argue that it represents an evolving mechanism for the necropolitical manage-

ment of populations in the US. That is, I argue that Central American lives are necessarily linked to “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (92). Alongside Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics and Michel Foucault’s biopolitics, which he famously described in his eponymous lectures on the subject as the entanglement of life and politics for the purposes of the productive management of life under sovereign power in Europe from the 17th century on. In this paper, however, I consider Achille Mbembe’s expansion on biopower in terms of necropolitics.

Alongside Mbembe’s necropolitics, I consider the interpellation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s notion of a social contract within the writing of the American Revolution to reflect upon, as Charles W. Mills has, the long-standing tradition in the United States of a “Racial Contract,” or rather a selective subdivision of the abstract, ambiguous universalism present in Rousseau’s social contract that may actually be thought of as “several contracts in one,” each an axis of a structure that codifies principles along certain planes that subrogate empirical claims with theoretical ones (9). By regarding Rousseau’s social contract as a theorem that has worked for the advancement of white supremacy, without impugning the relative political meaning it has held, it is possible to consider the violation of the principle of non-refoulement, which I explain below, as a phenomenon bound up with the celebration of Enlightenment ideals in a plane of their discursive contradiction. In other words, only certain racial groups are privileged through what Anne McNevin calls “regular citizenship.” In this way, we can consider the amended forms of the Immigration and Nationality Act (1952), which provides for the notion of a third-safe country for asylum seekers, alongside the violation of the principle of non-refoulement as constructs of a biopolitical praxis that empowers restricted forms of gender, race, class, and subjecthood.

Alongside the contravention of the principle of non-refoulement, I cite a US Senate report that detailed how US agents in January of 2020 arrested and returned Honduran refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Guatemala to the Guatemala-Honduras border (The Hill). This is but one example of a longer history of the externalization of US borders to enact the preliminary removal of refugees. Annexed from public view, this directive reveals a self-reflective biopolitical praxis, one chiefly authored by Trump administration official Stephen Miller and former Attorney General Jeffrey Sessions, as noted in journalistic work by Jean Guerre amongst others. In my ethnographic work at the Mexico-Guatemala border in 2019, I reflected on how this necropolitical praxis was furthered by the militarization of the State of Chiapas in addition to the Mexico-Guatemala border rivers; interlocutors spoke at length of a nearly inevitable encounter with death regardless of where they resided or where they went.

National and International Law

Regarding the safe petition and transit of people, the US codified Article 33(1) of the Refugee Convention into Section 208(a)(2)(A) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) which provides that it will not return an asylum seeker to his or her country of origin, but may, at the determination of the Attorney General, remove the asylum seeker to a “safe third country... where the [asylum seeker] would have access to a full and fair procedure for determining a claim to asylum or equivalent temporary protection” (INA). Interviews with Mexican and Central American migrants clarify that procedural accommodations and processes necessarily contravene the safety of asylum seekers. Indeed, one transgender woman in Tapachula, Mexico spoke clearly about the broad, discriminatory nature inherent to refugee and migrant protocols in terms of the bureaucratic complexities she faced. Indeed, she spoke of the dozen offices that she needed to visit to obtain transit papers in Tapachula, Mexico, the safehouse in Tijuana where she later resided, and the unwarranted arrested she experienced, leading to a traumatic carceral experience, even as the reasons for her departure from El Salvador might have once constituted asylum clemency.

During the first term of the Trump Administration, litigation was brought to bear upon the notion common to international asylum law of non-refoulement, or the principle of the non-removal of refugees from the nation receiving them. Legal scholar Jaya Ramji-Nogales notes the evolution of the contravention of this principle through legal maneuvers in domestic courts made possible by three issuances of the Trump administration:

The administration’s bar on asylum applications from migrants who cross the border between ports of entry; its policy requiring asylum seekers to remain in Mexico pending their asylum hearing; and its asylum ban for applicants at the southwest border who have passed through a third country without lodging an asylum claim. (Nogales)

These litigious efforts, which nominally engage with the principle of non-refoulement through cherry-picked assessments of procedural accordance with Mexican law, protocol and migrant safety, culminated in the creation of the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) at the end of 2018. Further subsequent issuances by the Trump Administration continued to denigrate the subject position of Central American refugees by restricting their claims for asylum on the basis of a criterion set nominally designed to eliminate any reasonable form of clemency, further culminating in their near statistical erasure from asylum processes during the pandemic per the biopolitical usage of Title 42. Regarding the encounter of space and law, Mbembe cites Frantz Fanon who reminds us “colonial occupation entails a division of space into compartments,” which in the case of Central America entails the extant occupation of indigenous lands

where the causal factors of out-migration relate to a colonial past and present (79). From barracks and plantations to formal and informal border zones like expanding deserts and deportation facilities, the accountment of coloniality encounters a system of necropolitics that engenders the capitalization of migrant and refugee lives as seen in private detention facilities, gray and black market financial services in Central America, and the multiple relationships between remittances and governmentality in the Northern Triangle.

Conjunctural Analysis

In this essay, I draw on with the principles and techniques associated with and designed by Stuart Hall in his conceptualization of a conjuncture in conjunctural analysis. Lawrence Grosserg, a student of Stuart Hall's, writes that conjunctural analysis

tells a more complicated story, articulating the structural and the phenomenological, the material and the affective, in order to understand how social and political relations, forms of domination and resistance, are constituted as a war of positions. (8)

In this way, proceeding from the distance between absolute theory and descriptive ethnography, I have considered the litigious efforts of the Trump Administration to restrict migrant and refugee flows both before and during the pandemic. I posit that they are part of a prosopically designed to revalue life in accordance with a long-standing biopolitical rationale, one informed by the desires of a *Herrenvolk* potential state, or even more historically a country that ignored Abigail Adam's warnings on the perils of coverture and slavery. In terms of 20th and 21st century migration, however, the removal of Central American migrants to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, depending on their country of departure during the Trump administration, reveals a praxis unfolding in time concurrent with white supremacist politics. The authors of these policies, e.g. Stephen Miller, were plainly aware of the limits of absolute removal, thereby choosing to revisit legalistic language through economic pressure in order to limit the entry of refugees whose conditions for escape resonate with the history of US-Central American interventionism. While this is not a polemical point, the notion of a negative praxis helps to suggest that the authorship of these protocols and litigious efforts are discrete individuals with a collective ideology.

Following the enactment of the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), the Mexican side of the Guatemala-Mexico borderlands has become a place of informal and formal refolement and militarization, as Mexican President López Obrador ceded to tariff threats upon the Mexican economy by enlisting the Guardia Nacional to effectively police migration in Southern Mexico (Justice in Mexico). With the arrival of several thousand soldiers in the summer of 2019, the MPP extended the logic of American border policies to a place

with limited humanitarian and governmental capacity for the assistance of refugees and migrants. As I proceed in this essay, I resist the categorical imputation of a division between refugee and migrant by noting both the financialization of migrant economies and the attendant, increasing multifactorial nature of migration in the Northern Triangle. There, climate change can line up with deportation; deportation can line up with debt; and debt can line up with migration—each to varying degrees surface in the decision-making processes people make or in the immediacy of the need to escape; further, violence can appear with a literal knock at the door.

During fieldwork in Huehuetenango in 2018, I spoke with a number of individuals who had spent many years or decades working on farms or in factories in the United States and who had been deported. Their stories contained the contours of their past lives, the shapes of past moments. Some people like to exaggerate in stories, and this was also manifest in our conversations. But it was incontrovertible that the truth was told in one way or another about their time abroad. These truths conveyed questions to which I assume they felt strongly in terms of their own wishes and desires. A man wanted to pay off debt, another wanted to be with his family, a woman escaped Nicaragua and political persecution, and kids deliberated on the prospects of their futures. Yet another person fled gang-related violence.

During fieldwork in the neighboring department of San Marcos in the summer of 2019, I spoke with several individuals who witnessed the arrival of the Mexican military to the Guatemala-Mexico border. These individuals related how novel Mexican border securitization made passage north more difficult; others noted how expenses had increased in terms of crossing the Suchiate river. Still others pointed to blind spots in the border, and others mentioned the hard-soft dynamics present in border policies: one could bicycle, as though on errands, into Ciudad Hidalgo, one point of border crossing for the caravans and many migrants.

Downriver, not far from the bridge connecting Guatemalan Tecún Uman with Mexican Ciudad Hidalgo, one could see the presence of drones over the banana plantations, not readily identifiable in terms of sovereign provenance but most likely military grade. Farther down river it would be reasonable to assume that migrants cross clandestinely, as the nature of border securitization privileges gaps and fissures in its liminal, nominal forms. These necessarily foster conditions of violence and precarity, black market trafficking, and more.

Documenting other people's lives and stories about liminal time, a time of detention and waiting, a time of trauma is an ethically dubious undertaking. Writers, sociologists, anthropologists, and many others do this all the time. Journalists have the cover of massive readership widely distributed, which can, and sometimes does, make a difference in the lives of migrants. But what about humanities scholars? What gives us license in a planet consumed by anthropogenic processes to linger over someone else's trauma, especially when our privilege reflects a communal grief and perhaps

even fault? By returning to Levinas' ethics of *panim el panim*, of being face to face on the most literal level of human interchange and experience, one can make a claim for narrative digression and experience through the lens of encounter. This encounter in the frame of humanities' work, beyond anthropological definitions of ethnography, might suggest an opening in the theoretical and practical engagements of the broad, disciplinary forms that construe the humanities. For this reason, engaging in dialogue, beyond any notion of "deep hanging out," might bring us closer, in terms of reducing rarified space and affect, to those texts and media objects that attempt to document the world in transition. More aptly, by listening to the stories people have without judgement or the interpellation of affective frames, wherever that is possible, we can find common resonance and the breaking open of the intersubjective commons, or shared spaces, of being. In this way, gender, race, and ethnicity might, if only in the engagement of listening, become merged in a multidirectional affective act caught up in the art of listening and asking. Questioning empathy's directionality and intersubjective frames leaves one with a multitude of possibilities: a photograph, a documentary film, a script of texts, friendships, the lingering directives and concerns, the content of collaboration, the ethos of learning differently through affective events.



A raft crosses the Suchiate at dawn where people line up for passage on the bridge. Photo: Rene Soza

With these considerations in mind as a theoretical concern underscored by my privilege in being able to engage in my own positive praxis, I listened to Central American stories about migration. One Guatemalan described how a loan of ten thousand dollars had gotten him all the way to the U.S.-Mexico border before he was apprehended and returned to Guatemala; in the summer of 2019, he resided in Tecún Úman in a state of precarity and stress. His hair turned white in some places, he joked; he described with regret the loss of his money in his outmigration journey attempt and how it was no longer quite so easy to even get into Mexico, a common reality described by many, even as many others sought passage.

In this way, the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands supplants or reaffirms those realities present for some, if not many, at the US-Mexico border: indefinite bureaucratic processes, gendered vio-

lence, conditions of indefinite waiting in refugee camps, beleaguered conditions of precarity and longing, and immense uncertainty but also resiliency in diffuse conditions, the meaning people make under duress of their lives. By subverting the principle of non-refoulement, the Trump administration precisely reduced the capacity for refugees to seek asylum while increasing the conditions of precarity which undocumented migrants experience.

Rhetoric and Metaphor

Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson explain that border security techniques "increasingly use technologies of temporal management" including those that seek "to slow and even block border passages through such techniques as detention, interceptions, or "preemptive refoulement" in order to delay migrant passage and control flows of human labor and capital (133). Where Mezzadra and Neilson assert the multiplicative power of a border, I acknowledge the rhetorical and communal function, by order of its emplacement in media, it has within a logic of immunity, and I turn to Donna Haraway who reminds us that "the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of western biopolitics" (Haraway 204). In this way, I see refoulement as informing a process of racialized insularity: Brown and Black people are subjected to alienization and a carceral politics of immobility to structure labor and race relations within the US, not only in relation to hegemonic ethnic groups but also within minoritarian distinctions informed by immunity within and to the body biopolitic.

The biopolitical metaphor of an immune system depends upon complex processes that synchronize conceptual and ideological frames for sovereignty and citizenship. If a self and its other do exist, they do so within a historical lineage of exclusion and racial and colonial violence. This dialectics of Western necropolitics depends upon, crucially, the immunological homeostasis defined, in part, by Westphalian conceptions of the state. The disruption to homeostasis, or a biosocial perception of normativity within the *jus publicum*, draws out processes that are reactive to "foreign" actants. Plainly said, refoulement "pathologizes the foreigner," a process that Roberto Esposito notes has roots "in the European imaginary of the last century" (Esposito 4). Alongside Haraway's discussion of the processes invoked by the metaphor and analogy of an immune system, Esposito's reference to a social imaginary and his work illustrates how the recognition of the self and the other, most commonly white and non-white people in terms of a *Herrenvolk* state, guides refoulement and deportation. Refoulement is strictly, even statistically, then the removal of unwanted people whose genetic condition under histories of violence become a marker for the white self and its racial, expulsive immunology. In terms of Central American migration the disruption to a homeostatic American public sphere led to the enactment of Title 42 to overturn asylum processes on the

basis of contamination, even as the public record reveals the United States to have been a major source of the pandemic. The dissonance of this logic is part and parcel of the immunological form of the border towards the Central American person: they signify what is already true of the state but through an act that pushes them out to preserve that racist rationale.

While a claim, however erroneous, can be made for the logic of deportation as a mechanism for *jus publicum*, the broader question of refolement is how it operates axiomatically within racial necropolitics. That is, deporting Central Americans, which as a group could necessarily include other peoples moving through and getting stuck in Central America, is frequently at a number of levels (individual, communal, and national) a recursive process: it simply reifies further deportation as sociological and anthropological study evinces (Heidbrink 2019; Lee Johnson 2019). The circularity points us back to the figurative biopolitical concept of immunity for the state in fairly literal terms: not only are Central Americans pathologized and made to represent an intrusion or a contamination, but the spillover reaches Latinx groups already in the United States in terms of whiteness and its discontents and maladies, as evidenced by the shooting in El Paso, Texas, in which the shooter left an anti-Hispanic and anti-immigrant manifesto (NBC News). In it, U.S. Congressional Representative Joaquin Castro noted the racist language of immigrants as “invaders.” Concurrent to the necropolitical dimensions of Central America in which gang violence and anthropogenic climate change destroy lives is a rhetoric of whiteness that further reifies the necropolitics of refolement.

Similarly, the biopolitical dimensions of sovereignty depend upon necropolitical mechanisms present in the dispositif of the desert, the migrant corridor in Mexico where women are targeted and children trafficked, and detention facilities, as each of these utilize intentionally designed processes of death to exclude. Ana Raquel Minian has studied this history in which Mexico is a buffer zone for Central Americans with necropolitical implications, writing that

Notions of national sovereignty are often regarded as responsible for the exclusion of foreign “others,” as those residing within particular nation-states seek to achieve ethnic exclusivity within their territories. But the erosion of Mexico’s sovereign immigration control worked to further exclude and oppress Guatemalans within Mexico. In part, this occurred because the sociopolitical logic by which territoriality was the dominant way of establishing belonging remained intact. (110)

Clearly, the intervention of the US under a variety of geopolitical mechanisms has utilized the space of the Mexican state, its topography and geography, as a way to enforce a vision of immunological, necropolitical expulsion and, in more familiar terms, prevention through deterrence.

Time After Refolement

Mezzadra and Nieslon write that “we seek to demonstrate how subjective experiences of border crossing and border struggles have temporalizing effects that cannot be contained by chronological forms of measure or progressive models of history” (133). In other words, the border as mechanism and migration as lived-in affect share in existences that do not have readily available quantitative dimensions but do share in qualitatively similar terms. Moreover, Mezzadra and Neilson clarify how passive and active forms of refolement are an extension of border security practices, if not also an externalization of borders. Referring to interviews I conducted one interlocutor¹ from Guatemala suggested that “migration will never cease, so long as there are problems in one’s home country” [translation mine]. Another stipulated that he was gauging or waiting for a momentary break in the Mexican border security apparatus to attempt to cross the river and go into Mexico to escape narco-violence and extortion in El Salvador. Another individual described his repeated attempts and plans to cross into Mexico while acknowledging how difficult it had been for him personally to be deported from the United States and detained. Each of their stories informed how the militarization of southern Mexico operates through a negative biopolitics tethered to a necropolitics in and out the United States and Mexico, each partially responsible for the Central American necropolitical scheme: a politics in which death is often associated with the maintenance of industrial labor at the behest and interdiction of the state. As Mbembe writes, “sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (80). Statistical evidence on border deaths, which congruously point to the enlargement of fatal schemes, only evince what interlocutors revealed: crossing the border is difficult, fatal, and treacherous by design.



A young man points to the Mexico-Guatemala tributary border and horizon, speaking about renewed Mexican border surveillance.

NOTES

¹ All interlocutor text was freely given with informed, repeated consent and authorized for use; all translations are mine.

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Lines in the Sand(bar): Collective Perspectives and Shifting Temporalities in *Char... The No Man's Island*

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ABSTRACT: The tasks of documenting and narrating stories of climate change and border environments have become increasingly urgent in recent years, and discussions around effective approaches to environmental storytelling have intensified accordingly. The film *Char... The No Man's Island* (2012), directed by Sourav Sarangi, is a noteworthy example of a work that seeks to represent one such unstable environment that exists on the border between India and Bangladesh and to explore the daily lives of the beings who inhabit it. Although the documentary has a specific regional focus, its scope is far from limited, as the film examines various dimensions of life in this border environment as well as the historical and political factors that have led to the current realities of the space and the communities established there. In this paper, I examine how Sarangi's inclusion of a multitude of distinct human and non-human perspectives throughout the film signals a move towards a form of environmental storytelling grounded in the notion of a collective, wherein narrative agency is distributed amongst multiple entities rather than invested in a single individual. Moreover, the paper argues that the usage of these various perspectives also enables *Char* to depict alternate temporalities and experiences of time which contrast heavily with ideas of linear time and progress and invites audiences to consider the multifaceted temporal and spatial realities of life in a precarious border environment.

KEYWORDS: South Asia, Bangladesh, India, borders, environmental humanities, documentary filmmaking, climate change, temporality, bodies of water, perspective

Introduction

Before we ever see the mighty river that shapes Sourav Sarangi's 2012 documentary *Char... The No Man's Island*, we hear water coursing through the planet's largest delta: the borderlands and borderwaters of India and Bangladesh, where the Ganges drains into the Indian Ocean system. The rising noise of the river beckons the audience into the film's field of vision. As a nebulous illustrated map of the area unfolds, the camera shifts onto a tranquil scene of someone rowing a boat across a sun-streaked expanse of water; the forceful, dynamic noise washes away. Immediately thereafter, Sarangi firmly places his viewer within the region his film is concerned with through another diegetic auditory device, a radio news station dispassionately reporting the details of an impending cyclone approaching the Bay of Bengal, all while the person rowing the boat continues to move on the water and the cries of a bird overhead mingle with the voice of the news anchor. For a moment, the prophecy of disaster hangs over this serene landscape. It is quickly replaced, however, by the increasing urgency of the newscaster's tone as the river's waves pick up in speed and height. The camera shifts again to show us a billowing stream of smoke emerging from a factory on the horizon, and unidentified sirens blare out and shatter the peace entirely. Disaster, it seems, has not only caught up, but

embedded itself into a scene that had begun in static timelessness.

It is precisely by pitting sight against sound and constantly mediating the dynamic, textured lines between land and water that the film approaches its titular space and the subjects who inhabit it. *Char* in Bangla refers to a sandbar that straddles the geopolitical border between Bangladesh and India, its own boundaries shifting constantly even as it serves as home to thousands of people displaced by flooding. Sarangi's environmental storytelling is as deeply embedded in the geology of this "no man's island" as it is in the stories of its inhabitants, who support their families by smuggling livestock and goods across the border. The only constant in their lives is instability and impermanence, both in terms of the physical precariousness of their home and the way they are at once keenly surveilled and abandoned by the respective governments on either side. Cutting between conversations with *Char*'s inhabitants is the director's narration of the historical and current events of the island. Much like the sandbar itself, fluid scenes capturing the daily lives of its subjects are at once deeply intimate and expansive in their breadth.

In what follows, I propose to examine Sarangi's *Char* as a compelling project involving borders and bodies shaped by environmental change. This essay ponders the ways in which narrative agency is distributed amongst a combination of human and non-human entities throughout *Char* by way of shifts in perspective and focus,

and how these shifts in turn enable the film to represent the altered and mutable temporalities of the border environment it is centered upon. To further elaborate upon the significance of the film's mode of environmental storytelling, I draw from critic Amitav Ghosh's idea of the "collective," as delineated in *The Great Derangement* (2016), wherein he contends that mimetic realism, centered on individual protagonists and enshrined in the conventions of literary fiction, is woefully inadequate for grappling with human interactions with the immense scales of climate change. The time has come for another kind of storytelling, Ghosh urges, which would abandon the modernist fixation on individual narrative forms and create new possibilities for collective meaning-making of events that confound human measures of space and time. Although Ghosh's work is concerned with literary fiction, I would like to argue for the importance of the collective in other forms of storytelling, including documentary filmmaking. If narratives that center an individual are founded upon a notion of linear time and capitalist progress, the inclusion of a multitude of perspectives which experience time differently may thus make it possible to represent multiple modes of organizing and relating to time as well. The multiplicity present in *Char* thus enables a transition beyond a singular, one-note perception of its subjects, and towards an understanding of how the beings, times, and spaces within this environment are neither isolated nor in stasis, but perpetually interlinked and influencing one another.

The Environmental Documentary and Styles of Narration

The task of representing and narrating environmental change is one that seems to have grown increasingly urgent over the past few years, as increasing swathes of the earth's population experience its effects and climate crises grow in number and severity. Much of the discussion on how to go about fulfilling this task centers on the effectiveness of a given piece of media, or the possibility of offering a narrative centering on an environment and its inhabitants that encourages audiences to connect with these spaces in ways which heighten social awareness and perhaps even inspire tangible, organized action. As K. Hedemann discusses in "Ecological Citizens with a Movie Camera: Communitarian and Agonistic Environmental Documentaries" environmental documentaries which seek to be effective generally assume a standpoint that is either accusatory, grounded in pointing out the political, cultural, and various other fault lines with the help of expert testimony to tell stories of changing or destroyed environments, or constructive, utilizing activism and community participation to depict possibilities for future-building. Hedemann goes on to draw a parallel between these filmmaking styles and the two forms of ecological citizenship which Anneleen Kenis had previously identified: agonistic and communitarian, and writes that agonistic ecological citizenship

refers to implacable protest activism that opposes exist-

ing power structures in discourses and actions, while its communitarian counterpart practices and spreads the word about attractive alternative modes of living, consumption and production [...] the distinction between agonistic and communitarian citizenship seems to correspond with findings about a shift from accusatory to constructive styles of environmental documentaries in recent years (Hughes 2014, pp. 123–24). Against this backdrop, documentary shouldn't be understood as a value-free image of reality but as an audio-visual rhetoric through which movie-makers perform politically. I suggest to call this communicative performance: ecological citizens with a movie camera. (Hedemann 1)

Although there are certainly threads of optimism and future-building drawn present in *Char*, the film additionally offers a striking critique of the systems whose function and/or dysfunction render its subjects' existences and livelihoods unstable and illegal. Moreover, unlike many environmental documentaries, *Char* does not seek out "expert" testimony to verify what its subjects, the inhabitants of the island, recount about their lives. Nor do community activists have a presence in the film, if indeed any concerned specifically with the issues the film ponders existed during the time frame of its production. In this framework then, *Char* seems to exist between these stylistic binaries without feeling the need to commit to one, occupied with tracing the root causes and realities of the environmental issues it presents while retaining a sense of potential for the island's inhabitants if not for the unstable sandbar itself. Moreover, Hedemann's conception of "ecological citizens with a movie camera" is an interesting element of the environmental documentary form with regards to *Char*, considering much of the film is shaped by Sarangi's voice as narrator, providing important exposition and making conversation with his subjects, although he himself never appears onscreen. In fact, during these moments where Sarangi speaks, the viewer nearly seems to share in his perspective as his voice sounds from behind the camera and the viewfinder swings to the direction and focus of Sarangi's vision. In this way, the film invites audiences to identify themselves with the filmmaker, imagining themselves into the role of the "ecological citizen with a movie camera" for which Sarangi serves as a model and placeholder.

There is another character whose perspective frames much of *Char*, although with a far more visual presence: a fourteen-year-old boy named Rubel who lives on Char and is forced to support his family by smuggling rice and other goods across the India-Bangladesh border. Yet while Rubel provides the viewer with a way in to perceiving and understanding the lives of the people who inhabit Char, his is certainly not the only perspective at play here—the other members of his family, the young boys who do similar work, various members of the community, the police force, and even non-human beings such as the cattle being smuggled and the birds who live on the island are often depicted in a way that makes their autonomy

and distinct perspectives clear. The film benefits from not being beholden to a linear narrative which traces only Rubel's development throughout the film, an organizational mode which would have highlighted other experiences, beings, and natural phenomena solely within the context of how they relate to him. Instead, *Char* jumps through time and space, moving freely in and out of Rubel's perspective to bring other people and non-human entities into conversation.

Non-Human Temporalities and Agency

Ömür Harmanşah, in his essay "Deep Time and Landscape History," one of several thought-provoking pieces included in the anthology *Timescales: Thinking Across Ecological Temporalities*, writes of how the notion of an Anthropocene brings with it a new understanding of temporality which enables a mode of thinking deeply both into the past and the future. Drawing from Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*, an approach to the study of history that relies upon the assumption of gradual, cyclical geological movement, Harmanşah writes: "We are in need of an understanding of landscapes and ecologies that are by no means static backdrops or dependable environments upon which cultural practice is inscribed, but are themselves agents that take part in the constitution of the world" (Wiggin 41). If indeed there is such a "need" to seek out and understand environments which visibly shift and change rather than serving as silent and immobile scenic backdrops to active human life, Sarangi seems to be attempting to fill it through his film's depiction of the river and the islands which form, crumble, and reform within it. Interspersed between images of human interaction amongst themselves or with other creatures are moments where the environment itself is centered as a momentary protagonist.

One of these moments occurs towards the beginning of the film, as the camera stills and captures the process of erosion taking place in real time. During this scene, swatches of long reeds and large chunks of dirt sway and break off from the island, before falling into the river and beginning the process of transforming into mud. After a few moments of this, the film cuts to Sarangi's older footage, depicting entire trees falling into the water as people look on. In a similar scene towards the end of the film, humans and animals retain a presence—we hear birds chirping in the background and the scene cuts to a single bird on the ground letting out a mournful cry—yet when the camera fixates on capturing the movement of erosion, they are not foregrounded. Although the viewer can see a few people fishing or performing other labor on another end of the island's shore, their movements are indistinct and fade into the background as our gaze remains with the rapidly changing boundary between land and water in the center of the shot. For a few minutes, we watch the repetitive motion of the chunks of dirt dissolving into the water, and yet when it comes to the last of these

unstable portions, the camera pauses, perhaps to make the viewer wonder if this sandbank will somehow escape gravity's compulsion. After several moments of suspense, however, it too falls into the water, and the attention that the film pays to the image of the displaced dirt merging with the river forces audiences to reckon with the speed of the changes occurring. An urgency thus seems to take root as one realizes that the river erosion the film has been explaining to us has been materially taking place all this time, and thus our perception of it is fundamentally delayed. Between the moment of filming and the moment of viewing exists a gap made even more difficult to breach by the knowledge that these processes have apparently been taking place the entire time. Elizabeth Cowie writes in *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* of the incommensurable loss that exists in the documentary's attempt to depict a "true" reality: "documentary is concerned with the transformation of the ephemeral and the transitory into the significant through re-presentation, and it, too, anxiously commemorates as loss what is not preserved, recorded, and remembered" (Cowie 135). Loss is thus enfolded both into the images we see upon the screen and the documentary's attempts to capture these moments in all their ephemerality. *Char* is a film which I would argue is deeply concerned with this quality of loss—there appears to be an awareness that no "complete" representation of the island's degradation can ever be transmitted to the viewer. Yet by honing in on these transient moments and shifting between footage recorded at different times, the film asks us to dwell in a partially recreated temporal instability which might make a deeper, more involved connection between the audience and the depicted environment possible.

Moreover, the notion of "agency" with regards to the ecologies represented in *Char* is something the film's narration seems to evoke, particularly in the description given of the Ganges. Over the course of a sequence depicting the Farakka Dam, the barrage developed by India to control the flow of the Ganges into Bangladesh, the narration characterizes the river as a living, forceful entity with desires and goals of its own:

The real snake doesn't scare us, we are scared of the river. The mythical, heavenly, three eyed river, mother Ganga is now a snake. And the snake was strangled at Farakka Dam by humans. They [the villagers] told me. In order to survive, with all its might, the snake strikes its tail in vengeance once over upstream areas of Farakka. Goes Malda District. Once more it strikes, downstream of Farakka Dam... goes Murshidabad" (Sarangi).

The "real snake" referenced here is seen only briefly in the moments leading up to this new information given about the river, during a scene in which the village elders employ rituals to treat a man bitten by a snake during a nighttime boat journey, turning to spirituality rather than medical care due to the lack of an actual hospital in the vicinity. As the film moves away from this scene of suspended pain

into an explanation of the way the inhabitants of Char see the river, a link is drawn between the singular creature of the snake whose venom poses a present, temporary threat and the immense power of the river, whose presence surrounds these people and perpetually threatens their homes and lives. Yet the narrator, and by proxy the villagers, also make it clear that the destruction caused by the river is not entirely chaotic and unexplainable—instead, state power enabling the creation of the Farakka Dam is provided as the basis for the river's fury. Enfolded into this comparison as well are the spiritual implications of both the figure of the snake and the Ganges river in this localized context—across a variety of Hindu traditions in Bengal, people worship a snake goddess known as Manasa Devi and view the river itself as a mother goddess, often referring to it as Ganga Ma. In establishing the snake and the river as mirrors of one another, Sarangi thus evokes the complex spiritual bonds that the inhabitants of the sandbar have long had with the natural entities with whom they share this space.

It is telling that the film begins with a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru, the first elected leader of the newly democratized Indian state after the British Raj ended, in which he lauds the importance of dams: "Dams are the new temples of modern India" (Sarangi). As Veena Hariharan writes in "Death by Water: Environmental Documentaries, a Brief Overview," the building of dams across India was heralded as an important development drawing the nation into modernity after gaining independence, and many environmental documentaries produced in India during this time period took an idealizing stance regarding dams, serving as tributes to "concrete, steel, gigantism, scientific modernity and hydroelectric power" (Hariharan). In characterizing the river as a living creature who has been displaced and throttled by human machinations, and the flooding that heretofore takes place as its desperate attempts to survive and enact vengeance, the river is granted a brand of agency within this narrative that argues against such depictions of dams as productive, even sacred projects. Moreover, the river is not demonized—just as the film emphasizes that the issue caused by the "real snake" might have been successfully mitigated if the residents of Char simply had reliable access to healthcare, the issues caused by river flooding and erosion are deepened and made acute by the Indian state's desire to control the river, and by both states' abandonment of the people who are subjected to the impact of these attempts at reshaping the environment in which they live. Interestingly, in the scene with the real snake, the waters of the Ganges are sprinkled as part of the rituals performed upon the man suffering from the snakebite, thus indicating the continued role of the river in this community as spiritual caregiver and resource, even as it wields the capacity to obliterate their existence. The rooted presence of the river in these people's lives is therefore in direct contrast with the inaccessible "temples" of the dams, which function as lofty state structures and have no such spiritual, embedded connection with the people whose lives they affect so deeply. Thus, the film casts the river as an agential being in its own right, one whose relationship with human beings is rich

with emotion and spirituality, and always rather tenuous. Moreover, the interplay between the human and non-human perspectives rendered throughout this scene asks us to consider these subjects as a collective, in which no singular understanding of the environment dominates, and the subjects and viewers alike contend with diverse yet interconnected modes of temporal engagement.

The Varied Human Subjectivities of *Char*

This complex connection with the river and the temporalities enfolded in living in such a changeable environment thus perpetually shape and reshape the contours of existence for human and animal subjects who inhabit the island. As Sarangi makes clear to us by interspersing older footage with more recent recordings, the human population here is one which has consistently suffered displacement. Sarangi originally interacted with several members of this community ten years prior to the primary timeline of the film, during which time he recorded the refugee camps which formed as a result of devastating floods that completely engulfed entire villages across Bengal. In the years since the destruction of their homes, these environmental refugees migrated to Char and began to rely on smuggling to survive. One of the narrative methods that Sarangi frequently makes use of to provide an apparently honest depiction of the perspectives of these people who live on the outskirts of legality is conversation, as described in a 2013 article in *The Hindu*: "His [Sarangi's] methodology is marked by a conscious rejection of the interview in favour of the conversation. 'In interviews you create a line between the director, camera and character. But in conversations you create a zone where the characters can move freely'" (Bhattacharya). Certainly, there is an element of informality and even intimacy to the way that Sarangi as a storyteller interacts with the subjects of the documentary. Touching upon everything from deeply personal details of their day-to-day lives to broader discussions about the island and histories of the border, Sarangi alternates between giving his subjects space and time to tell their own stories and guiding certain, often one-on-one conversations with what might be argued a rather heavy hand on occasion. In fact, during the moments in which Sarangi seems to commit to the notion of Rubel as protagonist and representative of life on the island, Rubel appears to push back against this characterization of himself and insist on opacity. One such moment occurs during a sequence that starts out lighthearted, with the pair joking about Rubel's love life, and then takes a darker tone as Rubel recites a common adage about living well and then says that he tries to do so, but is made into a "bad guy." In response, Sarangi asks "Who makes you a bad guy? The river erosion? Or your family pressure?" causing Rubel to abruptly retreat from this line of questioning (Sarangi). While viewers can only guess at the reasons Rubel refuses to provide an answer, among them perhaps a desire for privacy or a refusal to make a statement that might be construed as either harshly political or

overly critical of his family situation, the scene makes it clear that the representation of Rubel which Sarangi provides and we can access is limited—unlike the fictional protagonist of a novel, there are features of Rubel's life that cannot be made visible. It also belies the necessity for the inclusion of other perspectives and methods besides the conversation, which offer forms of knowledge about life on the island beyond what Rubel alone would be capable of transmitting to the audience.

Throughout the film, some of the most striking scenes occur when Sarangi shifts from engaging the subjects in conversation to recording their strenuous and highly surveilled activities in real time. As a viewer, I found myself particularly drawn to the scenes which take place as the women of the island, including the mothers of Rubel and many of the boys who smuggle rice and cattle across the border, attempt to evade the police as they smuggle sachets of a brand of cough syrup banned by the Bangladeshi government due to its alcoholic content. Often taking place at nighttime, the gray-green night vision allows viewers into both the furtive, unpredictable reality of these illicit activities as well as the surveillance technologies used to track and observe the women. These female smugglers are set apart from the other people who perform such activities by nature of the fact that they are transporting illegal and traced substances, and that they do so by hiding them inside their clothing and relying upon the hope that societal norms surrounding male officers searching women might make it difficult for the police to arrest them. In *Women, Mobility and Incarceration: Love and Recasting of Self across the Bangladesh-India Border*, Rimple Mehta describes how female subjects who cross the political border between India and Bangladesh find themselves in the position of also having “transgressed the given social norms of expected behaviour” (Mehta 26). What these women face after having “transgressed” in such a manner is the threat of retribution from political authorities, discarding any social norms that may have protected them from direct confrontations and physical violence up to a point, if not the state violence on a broader scale which drove them to this work in the first place. As the film progresses, we watch the police increasingly become aware of the women's activities and develop plans to cut off the pathways they use to cross the border and find tangible evidence of smuggled goods. Evidently, no timeline of progression and development exists in an accessible way for these women, who are simultaneously deemed irrelevant and criminalized in the capitalist state. Rather, the temporality they experience is fraught and often dependent on chance and the weighing of deadly risk against their families' survival. The women's perspectives as people who cross the border consistently are therefore key to understanding the specifically gendered experience of life on Char, and the precipice they find themselves on as surveilled and hunted subjects driven to risk their lives to support their families in a contradictory and perpetually shifting environment. Yet, even as they live within such an unstable framework, some of the women of *Char* also appear to find true value and a sense of liberation in being inhabitants of this

border environment, distanced in certain ways from the political structures and social expectations of the mainland. During the final minutes of the film, Sarangi highlights a snippet of a conversation between a family that takes place as they perch outside their home, floodwaters having risen to their door. An older man speaks of the need for elected representation of Char that might actually “take care” of the people who inhabit the island, yet the young women of his family offer a swift rebuttal: “You live in the past and always talk the same,” one woman states, while another adds “Now we live free in this no-man's island, papa!” (Sarangi). Despite the lack of aid and protection offered to the people of Char due to the island being configured as a border space to be regulated and not represented, these young women vocally reject their older male relative's hopes of incorporation into either country's political formation as a sentiment of the “past.” In doing so, they locate a concept of freedom in living as part of an abandoned environment, and thus conceptualize a future for Char and the people who live there that is positively dissociated from the project of the nation-state.

Conclusion

As a work of environmental storytelling, *Char... the No Man's Island* is difficult to summarize or categorize in a meaningful way—although many reviewers and commentators portray the film to be Rubel's coming-of-age story as an inhabitant of Char, the scope of the film is far more expansive and multifaceted than might be feasibly contained in one linear story bound to an individual protagonist. In foregrounding non-human entities such as the Ganges and capturing the erosion of the island in real time, as well as depicting a multitude of human inhabitants with distinct experiences, Sourav Sarangi provides a representation of Char that is as mutable as the island itself. He does, however, return to Rubel as a touchstone in the film's conclusion, as the two discuss the possibility of a future whilst Rubel rows a boat, propelling them forward across the river's waters. The island, Rubel says, has no future, but he himself does. As the camera lingers on the earth of the island for a few final moments, *Char* leaves its viewers to grapple with the possibility that this land may soon cease to exist in the form depicted.

Yet it would be an error, in my view, to consider this a wholly defeatist ending or an inevitable return to the notion of an individual's persistence against a backdrop of environmental loss. Rather, Sarangi's immensely rich and multifaceted depiction of the entities which exist upon, around, and in tandem with Char throughout this film gestures at the importance of Ghosh's collective as a mode of organizing narratives of environmental change. Despite the potential of the island as a physical space eventually being lost, the film's own existence as a complex record of this environment and the various, interconnected realities of its inhabitants works against the looming threat of systemic erasure with regards to any of its many subjects and the community they have endeavored to form.

Furthermore, *Char's* layered engagement with the scale and time of the island as a perpetually transforming environment suggests an array of possibilities for how documentary films may engage with

the question of constructing narratives of environmental change that are capable of reaching and resonating with a variety of audiences across disciplinary boundaries and international borders.

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Won't You be My Neighbor? Corporate Discourse, Formations of Community, and Fracking Above the Marcellus Shale

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Earthjustice's short documentary film 'Dryden – The Small Town that Changed the Fracking Game' and the efforts of the activists it depicts in order to analyze how a key figure in corporate discourse—the neighbor—was redeployed as part of a successful effort to prevent natural gas drilling within the eponymous community. This figure, a common trope used by the gas industry to insinuate itself into the areas it aims to exploit, was repurposed by activists as they worked to promote a collective sense of responsibility and foster feelings of solidarity. Though much of the discourse around fracking currently seems stuck in irresolvable debates that reduce the issue to merely scientific or economic terms, 'Dryden' foregrounds the social dimensions of this particular crisis. In reconsidering fracking as a crisis of community, Earthjustice's documentary and the activists in Dryden not only establish a groundbreaking legal precedent for imposing de facto bans on fracking, but also explore ways of breaking out of the discursive gridlock. The deployment of the figure of the neighbor illuminates new potentialities for being and knowing, compelling novel understandings of extrafamilial relationships and collectivity in the face of corporate exploitation.

KEYWORDS: fracking, documentary, Dryden, discourse, community, sociality

The current discourse around fracking in the United States has largely reached a stalemate as activists and natural gas corporations become increasingly ensnared in irresolvable debates that limit discussion to scientific or economic terms. Yet, as fracking continues to cause social, environmental, and legal crises that throw conventional forms of community into disarray, new ways of thinking about collectivity and belonging have begun to take shape. By examining the social dimensions of the crises incurred by fracking, I aim to think through and out of what has become a stultifying debate, one that Barbara Hurd has described elsewhere as "the I'm right, you're wrong" screech or mind-numbing data dumps we too often call conversations' (Hurd, et al. x). Instead, I attend to the ways in which communities' and individuals' choices to embrace or reject the expansion of the natural gas industry closely relate to their sense of responsibility to a larger collective and their relationship to nature—whether figuring it as an important part of the fabric of the community that must be preserved, or a resource for use and extraction. It is through analyzing corporate discourse, the tropes it deploys, and the rhetorical strategies that it uses that I discover an avenue towards imagining new and better ways of belonging.

To this end, I turn to the community of Dryden, New York, and the work of its anti-fracking activists. The town serves as a useful case study not just because its residents were able to establish a new legal precedent in their successful effort to prevent drilling, uncovering a way that communities across the nation might protect themselves from exploitation at the hands of natural gas compa-

nies, but also because the work of the activists there illuminated a novel way of imagining otherwise in the face of the catastrophic environmental and social crises caused by fracking. Their actions resulted in more than just a legal victory; Dryden's residents also found new and powerful ways of repurposing and (re)deploying the figure of the neighbor, perhaps the most commonly used trope in corporate discourse and policy. As detailed in the sole documentary film about their efforts, 'Dryden – The Small Town that Changed the Fracking Game,' produced by Earthjustice, the actions of the residents show the power of and potentialities latent in rethinking community relations. In turning corporate discourse back on itself, the residents uncover a novel way of repurposing the very terms of the propaganda used in companies' efforts to exploit rural communities. In this way, the figure of the neighbor becomes a site of contradiction and emergence, caught between inclusion and exclusion, the collective and the individual, the private and the public. Though fraught, it comes to serve as a site at which challenges to corporate rhetoric and exploitation find promising footing. Thus, the seemingly small-scale events in Dryden take on national significance, their ramifications extending far beyond the private property lines of the residents and the borders of the town itself, helping to reshape the national debate on natural gas drilling.

Though the fossil fuel industry's exploitation of rural communities is hardly new, corporations' interest in extracting natural gas in the northeastern United States is a recent phenomenon. Until approximately 2008, the Marcellus Shale's subterranean reserves of

methane were written off as prohibitively expensive to extract—if extraction were possible at all. By 2011, however, the immense value of the shale finally came to light. After finishing their assessment of its resources, the United States Geological Survey concluded that around 84,198 billion cubic feet of recoverable gas are trapped within the formation. 96% of that gas is believed to reside in the sub-region known as the Interior Marcellus assessment unit (AU), which spans from the northeastern half of West Virginia, through the bulk of Pennsylvania, and into the southern half of New York (Coleman, et al.). Improvements in drilling methods and fracturing techniques (the combination of which is known as 'fracking') have enabled companies to profitably mine the Marcellus's reserves, spawning a rush on the part of corporations to lease land within this AU.

In response, activists have raised concerns about drilling's environmental impact, ranging from worries about water contamination to noise pollution. Corporations, in turn, have worked tirelessly to influence the discourse around natural gas development, often by insinuating themselves into the very communities that they aim to exploit. In doing so, corporations appropriate and deploy conventional working-class themes, yoking drilling to patriotism and situating themselves as parental figures and other stakeholders within the community—most notably as 'neighbors.' Natural gas companies regularly propagate the idea that they are major forces of community building and, through economic trickle-down, serve as benefactors whose presence helps preserve the hallmarks of small-town life.

For economically depressed communities whose increasingly tenuous futures depend on agriculture, such rhetoric promises not only the return of stability and a sense of hope for the future, but also renewed importance: given the United States' reliance on imported oil, rural communities that welcome natural gas extraction become seen as fighters on the frontlines, preventing America from becoming too reliant on other nations' resources and thus subject to extortion by foreign powers. As Arlie Hochschild argues, Donald Trump's movement to 'Make America Great Again,' a nostalgic appeal to a now-gone but still-recoverable past, evokes a shared sense of lost prosperity—especially that historically enjoyed by white men working as manual laborers. As these men struggle to find a sense of dignity, purpose, or meaning in labor—a situation exacerbated as jobs increasingly move off-shore and extractive industries wane—patriotism has come to serve as a new foundation for a specifically white, working-class identity. Hochschild further observes that '[such men] are starved for a sense of heroism....Their source of heroism, of status, is humming; it's fragile' (qtd. in Khazan). The figure of the patriot, then, connects resource extraction to this now-recoverable sense of heroism and significance, the source of which is the fulfillment of one's patriotic duty to protect the sovereignty and well-being of the nation.

In addition to appealing to white, working-class men's feelings of irrelevance or disenfranchisement, fracking companies also aim to capitalize on rural communities' long histories of resource

extraction, promising the return of familiar, respected, and meaningful jobs. As Jessica L. Rich notes, such propaganda 'romanticizes labor identities...binding people and place to extraction and erasing alternative possibilities for working, living, and being without fossil fuel industries' (292). In seeking to forge a bond between workers' identities and the labor of extraction, corporations are ultimately trying to position resource extraction as an integral, inextricable part of the working-class imaginary. Here, Rich adopts the term as defined by Dilip P. Goankar, using it to describe the 'symbolic and material practices that build social life, 'the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world' (qtd. in Rich 293).

As an example of this particular rhetorical strategy, Jessica L. Rich cites Range Resource's televised advertising campaign 'Drilling is Just the Beginning.' Each of its eight commercials feature the same narrator, who always addresses the audience using plural first-person pronouns. Such deictic language situates the speaker among the working-class communities that the advertisements target and also works to position the natural gas company such that it 'enters the narrative as a paternal figure' (299). One especially notable commercial, titled 'Hockey,' opens with a father and his children playing street hockey. The narrator then observes, 'Children never seem to run out of energy. At Range Resources, we're working hard so that our nation can say the same.' Moments later, a car passes and briefly disrupts the game. As the camera cuts to a view of the boys from within the vehicle, the narrator makes a final remark: 'Natural gas drilling here is helping America become less dependent on foreign oil, and with that, comes a little piece of freedom we can pass along to our kids' (qtd. in Rich 299). The use of 'our' in this instance explicitly inserts the company within a generational, reproductive narrative in which the drillers serve as protectors and enablers of the nuclear family, its futurity, and the patriotic ideals to which this family structure is yoked. By extension, corporations ensure the futurity of the larger community, fostering and nurturing a new generation of citizens and laborers who can go on to enjoy liberty and prosperity while adhering to and protecting corporate values.

A company's paternal role is also reflected in and complemented by its supposed position as a 'neighbor,' a rhetorical figure almost invariably evoked when drilling is alleged to have caused environmental contamination or otherwise negatively impacted an area. As detailed in the widely influential film *Gasland* (Josh Fox, 2010), Colorado residents Amee and Jesse Ellsworth were provided with drinking water after their well became tainted—likely by the fracking done nearby. Noble Energy, Inc., which drilled and fractured the gas wells, did not frame their response as recompense, but rather provided the couple with water in the interest of being a 'good neighbor' (26:12). Similar rhetoric was used following the Chesapeake Energy ATGAS Blowout, during which over 10,000 gallons of flowback were discharged from a well in Bradford, Pennsylvania, on April 11th, 2011. After the water quality in a nearby residen-

tial well deteriorated, the company spent \$25,000 to seal a fracture in the well and install a reverse osmosis filtration system for those affected. Denying any complicity in the affair during a subsequent press conference, Stephanie Timmermeyer of Chesapeake Energy described the company's actions as undertaken merely 'to be a good neighbor' ('Chesapeake Energy').

The use of this language occurs not only when companies are paying lip service in the interest of public relations, but also appears in official industry literature. For example, the American Petroleum Institute issued 'Bulletin 100-3' in July of 2014, laying out best practices (or 'Community Engagement Guidelines') in accordance with the industry's 'commitment to being a good neighbor throughout the full project life cycle' (American Petroleum Institute). Besides situating companies such that they appear to have a vested interest in the wellbeing of a community, this move also helps to discourage particular forms of redress. In 2012, for instance, when Glacier Sands was denied a mining permit in Buffalo County, the company's attorney lamented the decision and expressed that '[i]t is Glacier's hope to resolve this matter voluntarily without the need for litigation, which should always be a last resort between neighbors and friends' (qtd. in Pearson 149).

Despite the claims that they lay to neighborliness, much of the corporations' day-to-day work consists of undermining the very social structures of which they assert they are a part. As Melissa Troutman details in the documentary film *Triple Divide [Redacted]* (Joshua Pribanic and Melissa Troutman, 2013), gas companies pressure potential leaseholders into signing contracts by fostering a sense of competition among residents. It is true, in fact, that a landowner's ability to reap the financial benefits of natural gas drilling can easily be threatened by those living nearby. If landholders adjacent to unleased land sign contracts, the gas under a dissenter's property can be extracted anyway. Consequently, there is strong incentive for one to sign as soon as possible so as to avoid forfeiting the benefits others might acquire first. In acting in this fashion, gas companies exploit two legal principles for their own gain: the 'rule of capture' and 'forced pooling,' both of which allow corporations to circumvent conventional property rights and particular American ideals of land ownership.

The 'rule of capture' is a legal principle by which a landholder may claim ownership of a given natural resource, specifically the category known as *ferae naturae*. This term refers to those resources, whether living or not, that travel freely and do not respect the boundaries of privately-held property (Robertson). It is insufficient that *ferae naturae* merely be present or pursued for a landowner to claim them; rather, as the rule of capture specifies, the resources must be contained or held in custody. Given that oil, gas, and similar energy sources have an 'often-migratory nature'—in other words, they move of their own accord—they, too, are classified as *ferae naturae* and are subject to this specific principle. Prior legal cases have not specified whether the movement of fossil fuels must be naturally occurring or may be artificially induced, however. Drilling

companies have capitalized on this omission, and as of this writing, it is currently legal to extract gas from beneath unleased property by inducing its flow. Even if such practices were to be outlawed, it is prohibitively expensive—if it is possible at all—to image, trace, and document the induced flow of gas deep underground in order to mount a legal case.

Though companies can extract gas from underneath unleased land, doing so is often not necessary. Current laws in the United States provide few protections for dissenting landowners, and someone unwilling to lease their land might be forced to allowing drilling on their property via 'mandatory pooling.'² Joseph Todd, a resident of Big Flatts, New York, and a landowner whose half-acre property was integrated into a drilling unit against his wishes, describes the principle as 'eminent domain for gas drillers' (qtd. in Baca). In fact, very little property must be secured before a corporation can force dissenters into a pool and expand its operations. In New York (which currently has a moratorium on fracking), only 60% of the land needed for drilling must be leased before the state will consider a petition for mandatory pooling. In Virginia, a mere 25% must be leased before a permit may be granted (Baca). As of this writing, 39 states have laws allowing companies to force landowners into signing leases.

Despite incessantly asserting that they are good neighbors, a conspicuous tension emerges between corporations' rhetoric and actions. In capitalizing on the figure of the neighbor, the natural gas industry destabilizes and disrupts a specifically American conception of what a 'neighbor' is even as it lays claim to this role. Given the figure's rhetorical power and ubiquity in corporate discourse, it is worth pausing for a moment to explore 'the neighbor' in more depth. At its simplest, the neighbor is a member of a neighborhood, which Amie M. Schuck and Dennis P. Rosenbaum define as follows:

Neighborhood is generally defined spatially as a specific geographic area and functionally as a set of social networks. Neighborhoods, then, are the spatial units in which face-to-face social interactions occur—the personal settings and situations where residents seek to realize common values, socialize youth, and maintain effective social control. (62)

Neighborhoods as spaces and collective social units espouse 'a common understanding of identity, a set of interaction patterns, and a sense of belonging' and inspire 'neighboring behavior, in which people care for one another and protect each other from harm' (67). In the context of Dryden, as I will discuss, neighbors are specifically property-owning figures who participate in town life and also live in close proximity to each other.

The sheer significance of the figure's meaning and impact is the product of the United States' idiosyncratic culture of property ownership and its historical links to American political ideals. Since the nation's inception, private property has been figured as 'cen-

tral to democratic political structures' (Jacobs 53). As Harvey M. Jacobs notes, the United States began forming while Europe was still operating under feudal principles. There, land was largely held by an elite ruling class, and the average person's prospects of owning property were slim to none. In comparison, 'America offered an alternative. It was a place where any white male immigrant could get ownership of land and, with that land as capital, make a future for himself' (54). This ideal reaches its apotheosis in Thomas Jefferson's glorification of the figure of the yeoman farmer, which for him 'linked the individual's right to own and control property with the very existence and viability of democracy' (54). In possessing his own land, a farmer could be self-sufficient, indebted to or reliant on no one else, and thus able to think and act freely. Consequently, Jefferson believed that the yeoman farmer was the ideal democratic subject and an integral part of the American political project.

Following the end of the United States' westward expansion in the 1890s³, federal policy shifted its primary focus from land acquisition to resource management. This change eventually led to a 'literal explosion of laws, policies, and regulations at the national, state, and local levels that affected private property,' including a vast number of laws protecting air and water from pollution. The growing interference of the state fostered the 'so-called property rights movement,' which, in following a conservative interpretation of the founders' principles, asserts that '[t]hrough ownership and control of property, the owner has the material conditions that allow him to be literally free.' Extending Jefferson's figure of the yeoman farmer, such groups argue that '[w]ithout the availability of property, liberty and democracy in the American configuration are not feasible.' Yet, as Jacobs notes, 'legislatures and the Court seem to continuously affirm the rights of government over the property rights of individuals' (59). Such a shift, then, would seem to create rifts and tensions in a particularly American culture of property ownership and the privileges associated therewith.

Given the incompatibility of the interests of corporations, states, and private citizens, the erosion of a specifically American ideal of property ownership, the incursion of mining and drilling interests into vulnerable communities, and the manipulation of residents through coercive leasing practices, what is the status of neighborliness under such conditions? Has the figure of the neighbor been exposed as a tired and fantastical component of the equally fantastical American Dream, a romanticized ideal of community based on the precondition of contiguous property ownership? Given that the possession of property is the foundation of this particular relational form, what other types of connection are precluded, and how does the 'neighbor' inherently exclude—especially given the settler-colonial state's theft and ongoing appropriation of Indigenous lands? In pursuit of these questions, I examine the efforts of organizers in Dryden, New York, and 'Dryden – The Small Town that Changed the Fracking Game,' the sole documentary film that details the work of the activists who made a de facto ban on fracking a reality.

The short film, produced by the nonprofit environmentalist law group Earthjustice, consists primarily of interviews with the residents who spearheaded a petition drive. After concerted efforts to educate other members of the community about the environmental risks posed by fracking and collect their signatures, the organizers successfully persuaded their local representatives to adopt a novel legal strategy: the town council voted unanimously to use zoning laws to prohibit drilling on leased land, effectively outlawing fracking within town limits. While seemingly an event only of local importance, Dryden came to national attention for being the first community to discover a way of imposing a de facto ban despite the fact that towns lack the authority to regulate an industry. In addition to setting a legal precedent that could empower small communities across the United States, the events that occurred in Dryden warrant closer examination for a second, equally important reason: in conducting their campaign to inform and mobilize their fellow residents, the town's activists also discovered an important avenue for thinking through and out of corporations' propaganda. The organizers (re)deployed the figure of the neighbor, a trope regularly evoked throughout the documentary and ever-present at the heart of their effort to foster a sense of solidarity among their fellow citizens. In this particular instance, the figure's rhetorical force works in service of inspiring greater participation—and, consequently, greater faith—in extant democratic institutions, those same political bodies that widely cited documentaries like *Gasland* depict as ubiquitously corrupt or corruptible.

The film opens with an interview with resident Marie McRae, who recounts how she was manipulated into signing a lease. While standing out in the middle of her field, she declares, 'I never get tired of looking at this valley. It took me about 10 years to stop having the hair raise on my arm when I came over the hill and would catch sight of the farm. It's just so gorgeous. And this is what we'd lose, of course' (0:11-0:33). After repeated in-person visits, letters, and phone calls, the unnamed company's representative resorted to outright coercion. He warned McRae that all of her neighbors had signed leases, and if she did not follow suit, the company could—and would—proceed to drill regardless. Worn down and intimidated, McRae finally signed a contract, only to regret her decision after discovering how little she really knew. 'Dryden' fades from black to a shot of the area's striking fall foliage, cuts away to an American flag mounted above a local home's porch and waving gently in a light breeze, cuts away again to a cat sitting on a welcome mat outside of the house just a moment before the animal playfully bounds away, and finally settles on West Main Street. In short, the camera highlights what McRae, struggling to hold back tears at the end of her interview, could not bring herself to name: the various hallmarks of peaceful and quaint small-town life that she realizes she has endangered, perhaps irrevocably.

The film then proceeds to catalog the possible consequences of natural gas drilling in the area. The narrator declares: '[Fracking] also produces pollution, industrial explosions, earthquakes, and

changed communities' (2:11-2:19). As he finishes his sentence, the image of a man gesturing toward a cracked wall dissolves into another shot of West Main Street in Dryden. The camera looks down the street from the sidewalk, a row of businesses visible on the right, a flapping 'Open' flag waving on the left, and the United Methodist Church visible in the distance. This shot then dissolves into a close-up shot of Deborah and Joanne Cipolla-Dennis's clasped hands, their wedding rings visible. For a brief moment, the flag, church, shops, and hands overlap as the film presents a poignant collage of life in Dryden and, by extension, small towns more generally: independent businesses, religion and its associated moral sensibilities, committed and conventional relationships (including normative gay relationships, at least here), family, natural splendor, and stability. The implied juxtaposition is with urban life and its supposed trappings: large business enterprises, fast-paced daily life, instability, hedonism, pollution, and self-centeredness.

In featuring Deborah and Joanne so conspicuously, the families threatened include more than just the conventional heterosexual nuclear family; rather, the rural space that enabled a childless queer couple to (literally) make a home stands in danger of ruination. In this instance, the small-town way of life and the independent businesses that line West Main Street signify something different, something more deeply tied to a particularly American vision of democracy, self-realization, and independence. The yeoman farmer readily comes to mind, upon whom it has been suggested that America's democracy depends. Given the independence that accompanies landownership and the self-actualization it enables, it comes as little surprise that the efficacy of existing political structures—and the faith that residents ought to put in them—serve as major focuses of the documentary as it proceeds.

In response to the industry's incursion, the town engaged in grassroots organizing, here made uniquely effective by the features of small-town life. Taking advantage of their social connections and the tightly-knit nature of the community, the residents ran a successful petition drive. The process fomented neighborly solidarity and inspired the mobilization of a significant number of residents, as described by Marie McRae: 'We went door-to-door, talking to our neighbors, talking to people we'd never met' (6:10-6:16). At the heart of the operation was an unlikely figure: Martha Ferger, an 88-year-old retired scientist. As Deborah Cipolla-Dennis remarks, '[S]he knows everybody! What she did was sit at her table with the phone and called everybody she knew and told them they had to come to her house and sign [our] petition. And it's amazing! She got the most number of signatures' (6:25-6:39). When the residents finally presented their petition to the town council, one out of every ten people in Dryden had signed. The residents' success in their endeavor was ultimately the product of their faith in representative government and the efficacy of the democratic process. Here, their efforts were not even remotely disruptive—unlike, say, direct action—but rather took the form of an appeal to the incumbent town leaders, the people who ultimately hold the authority to make a

'democratic' decision.

Such faith in elected leadership contrasts sharply with the doubt, fearmongering, and paranoia of earlier documentaries like *Gasland*, which are rife with distrust and suspicion of governmental organizations running the gamut from the Environmental Protection Agency to Congress in its entirety. The opening image of Fox's film, for example, is a picture of Dick Cheney, who Fox goes on to accuse of playing a pivotal role in allowing lobbyists to ingratiate themselves with lawmakers and exert undue influence. Consequently, convenient legal loopholes freed natural gas companies from the restrictive environmental protections put in place throughout the 1970s. The federal government was left powerless to act and corrupted by deep ties to the industry it ought to be regulating. Instead of adopting a similarly suspicious mode, 'Dryden' instead focuses on a renewed belief in the American Dream. Joanne initially describes the gas company as intimidating and coercive: '[T]he industry kept telling us, "We have the power. You have none. We are coming. Get out of the way, or leave"' (3:53-3:59). Yet, when reflecting on their successful petition, McRae remarks that 'My voice by itself carries very little weight, but when I join my voice with my immediate neighbors, with the larger community that I live in, we all—together—have a voice that's loud enough for our elected officials to hear' (8:50-9:13). Joanne follows McRae's remarks with a concluding sentiment that epitomizes the central theme of the short film: 'Every community across this nation can do exactly what Dryden did. You have to care about each other. That is the American Dream, right? Yeah. That's the American Dream. You count on your neighbor' (9:14-9:29).

The underground breaking of rock finds its above-ground analog in the landman, who works to fracture a community, pitting neighbor against neighbor, so that natural gas companies can expand their operations and increase their profits. Yet, the very discursive figures that such corporations deploy also come to serve as sites of resistance. As seen in Dryden, the neighbor becomes a kind of leveling figure: to have a neighbor means that one is also a neighbor. A citizen's accountability does not end at their property lines; rather, the residents of Dryden developed a sense of collective responsibility, understanding that they all depend on the wellbeing of their surrounding environment. The danger of place-loss and its effects on community compel new understandings of the relationship between the individual and the whole, imbuing such figures as the neighbor with renewed possibility. Despite corporations' attempts to appropriate and exploit 'the neighbor,' the residents of Dryden are able to transform it into a site from which new forms of sociality and belonging might emerge.

Even so, I also wish to think critically about the ramifications of the deployment of such figures and social forms. As an inherently exclusive formation, community necessitates a consideration of what strikes me as a glaring omission in the film: those residents who might have supported fracking and the rationale for their position—especially in light of the ever-increasing precarity faced by

small farming operations. Furthermore, the activists depicted are overwhelmingly white women, calling into question why the work of organizing and community-building is seemingly the purview of a specific gendered demographic. Though a leveling figure, 'the neighbor' does not inherently bring about an equitable distribution of the labor. Above all, however, I wish to highlight that the neighbor is specifically a property-holding figure, one also associated with white flight, the rise of the suburbs, and the past and present exclusivity of neighborhoods along class and racial lines.

In this way, the figure serves to illuminate the specific contours of the debate around fracking, revealing the power and limits of social networks in mobilizing rural communities. Even as the neighbor is able to generate and appeal to a sense of collectivity, forging 'a common understanding of identity...and a sense of belonging' (Schuck and Rosenbaum 67), it does so in order to reinforce residents' faith in the government's current institutions. The neighbor ultimately works to promote the defining values of American democracy, encouraging and even compelling participation in established government as *the* mode of redress for incursions by corpo-

rate interests. In doing so, the figure also illuminates the bounds of what the current activist discourse imagines to be possible: as Fredric Jameson insightfully observes in *Seeds of Time*, 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations' (xii). Despite its relationship to property and ownership, I argue that the neighbor still serves as an important waypoint in considering the relationship between crises of capital and community and is a figure that works to mediate between the relational dynamics at play on the level of the local, national, and international. The events in Dryden and the documentary film produced about them provide an illustrative example of the potentialities inherent in reimagining forms of community and repurposing discursive figures. Though it may not illuminate an alternative to the profit-driven economic system at the heart of the crisis of resource extraction, the neighbor still provides a way of thinking through and out of the gridlock in which the discourse around fracking is currently stuck.

NOTES

¹In addition to winning the Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010, it was also nominated for four Primetime Emmy awards, receiving one. The film cemented Fox's place as a major environmental activist and brought national attention to the issue of fracking. Robert Koehler of *Variety* went so far as to declare that "Gasland" may become to the dangers of natural gas drilling what 'Silent Spring' was to DDT' (Koehler).

²There is, however, a significant environmental benefit to the practice of mandatory pooling. Hydraulic fracturing's use of unconventional (horizontal) drilling enables multiple wells to be drilled from a single site—often four to six. Conventional drilling, i.e. drilling done perpendicularly to the earth's surface, limits any given pad to a single well. Consequently, a new pad must be built for each well. This is not only costly but also incurs widespread environmental damage. Mandatory pooling, then, reduces the density of well pads, keeps operating costs to a minimum, and mitigates environmental impact.

³For more information, see historian Frederick J. Turner's seminal essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' for an analysis of the 1890 census data and his thesis about the importance of the frontier to American democracy.

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Geological Afterlives of Sand in the Taiwan Strait

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ABSTRACT: This essay foregrounds the processes and ramifications of sand's extraction, displacement, and reassembly as critical material and political junctures to unfold the cross-strait geo-political impasse between the "two Chinas." These processes, termed "geological afterlives of sand," brought the gulf of waters between Xiamen and Kinmen to the fore. In this fluid space where border is ideologically fraught, sand has become a critical bordering entity that enables the encounter between geology and cross-strait politics. By focusing on sand's mobile and malleable agency in rearranging geo-political order in this region, this essay draws on cartographic technology and documentary depiction of sand's multifaceted metamorphoses to present and negotiate what it means for human and nonhuman actors to live through sand's afterlives of displacement.

KEYWORDS: sand, extraction, border, political ecology, Taiwan Strait

In searching for a geophysical metaphor for same-sex desire and gender transgression in the Caribbean, the anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones turns to sand. Agard-Jones (2012) asks what it means "to pay close attention to sand, this object that exists at the point of nature's hesitation between land and sea" (326). "Hesitation" here refers to a paradox, one that captures the liminality of sand as the shifting border substance between the definable elements of land and sea, even while it proves to be peculiarly tenacious across space and time. Resisting geological assimilation into either concreteness or fluidity, the material durability of sand builds up precisely at the rupture where land and water rub up against each other. It is at this point of "nature's hesitation" that sand accumulates and accretes, generating energy from geological interplays.

For Agard-Jones, therefore, sand never fully submits its own agency to either side. It only polishes geological time while enduring through its flux. Birthed through nature's hesitation, sand embeds a deep deliberation over its bordering capacity, one that is malleable and mobile, always embodying the tendency to move, shapeshift, and self-redefine. Sand lets itself be soaked through and sedimented while retaining its own geological integrity.

This essay reaches beyond Agard-Jones's naturalistic framework to explore a different set of material and metaphorical coordinates that I term "the geological afterlives of sand." Catalyzed by extraction, transportation, and reassembly, the afterlives of sand follow the multifaceted metamorphoses of an elemental frontier, intrinsic to the landscape, into a resource for human intervention on geophysical, socio-economic, and ecopolitical systems. The following sections proffer one such story of sand's re-materialization from a coastal archipelagic region quite unlike the Caribbean islands: the west point of the Taiwan Strait, a region that encompasses mainland China's southeastern coast and extends into Kinmen, a county

that stretches across the water into two offshore islands administered by the Republic of China (ROC). The metamorphosis of sand across this border space provides a rich vantage point from which to critique the term "geo-politics" itself by unfolding the "geo-" along the grain of the symmetry and mutuality between geology and politics (Bobette & Donovan 2019). Dwelling on and beyond "nature's hesitation," I propose an ecological reading of this regional geopolitics. In the sections that follow, the material afterlives of sand simultaneously expose and allow us to explore a new dimensionality of borders that stretch across land and water, one that leaves behind the dominant geopolitical imaginary of horizontal territoriality to delve into a vertical axis of substrates.

If the naturalist framework allows us to sit comfortably within the ecological and geological emplacement of sand, being attentive to sand's geological afterlives requires the reimagining of dwelling through active reflection over sand's displacement. Even as sand becomes more visible as one of the planet's dwindling resources, it remains curiously invisible in environmental analyses of local and regional contexts. The subsumption of what I call the "rootedness" of sand in abstract frameworks of political economy, in which it is reduced to a commodifiable resource subject only to market forces of supply and demand, occludes the critical socio-political role of its material afterlives. What has happened to sand and sand-related actors in the Taiwan Strait presents a rich case study for challenging the monologic geopolitical framework of regional development with a multidimensional geo-logic counternarrative of its post-extraction afterlives.

Mapping the Afterlives of Sand



Image 1: Xiamen, Kinmen, Dadeng & Xiaodeng Islets, 2020. Source: Google Earth

The gulf of waters between Kinmen and Xiamen has been plagued with different geo-political conflicts for decades. Located in close geographic proximity, the twin islets have served as wartime frontiers and remain bisected by ideological divergences between the ROC-led democratic regime and the People's Republic of China-led communist regime, both powers claiming to be the legitimate government of China *de jure*. Sand, meanwhile, has emerged as a potent embodiment of the struggle for primacy over these contested waters: sand-dredging vessels, with simplified Chinese sprayed across their bodies, populate the gulf in unprecedented numbers, the sheer magnitude of their presence conveying an everyday message of geopolitical intimidation for the inhabitants on the shore. Judging by islanders' testimonies, however, sand-dredging implies a host of less-visible but no less existential threats for people living inseparably from the waters on Kinmen.

What differentiates this story of sand from narratives of general scarcity on a "world" or "global" scale is its deep geological and ecological rootedness—and conversely, the impacts of its material displacement from the seabed and the shoreline. The recent congregation of sand extraction vessels can be traced back to an airport construction project in Xiamen, located across the broader waters close to the mainland China, that began in 2013. This airport is itself sited offshore on two of Xiamen's neighboring islets, Dadeng and Xiaodeng, as well as their nearby waters connecting Kinmen. Over the past eight years, the municipal government of Xiamen has managed to reclaim six square miles of land out of the sea, broadening Dadeng Islet to such an extent that Xiaodeng Islet will soon be conjoined spatially with Dadeng and itself cease to be an island. As a vital element of the massive geoengineering project, sand has been granted an afterlife in a new geological process, one that displaces it onto a fundamentally different elemental foundation. The migrancy of sand foretells a future of infrastructure development and economic growth.

The geological afterlives of sand thus foreground a nature in formation, its vitality most manifest below the visible landscape. Between land and sea arises sand's massive re-materialization into firm land, as attested by satellite images.



Image 2: Diachronic Images of Kinmen-Xiamen gulf, in 2013, 2016 and 2020; Source: Google Earth

Comparing images 1 and 2 above, it is easy to track the stages in which sand is extracted, reengineered, and reborn. Slowly emerging out of the gulf waters, it metamorphoses into a distinct geological reality far from its place of origin, in the process perpetuating a political project of territorialization by the Chinese state. If the naturalist framework posits a horizontal orientation of sand's bordering capacity by bringing up its geological rationale of spreading across the coastland and sea floor, then, in its afterlives, sand has perpetuated such an expansionist logic but through accreting vertically from the unseen to the seen, across the interface of fluidity and concreteness.

It is sand's rematerialization in this particular borderscape (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2017) that transforms the act of dredging into a profound force of political ecology. Sand extracted from the water between Kinmen and Xiamen literally add land to the other

side of the shore. Adding to this semiotic-material complexity is the fact that sand-dredging is deemed illegal by both sides of the political conflict; nevertheless, the Xiamen government chose to purchase sand extracted from the gulf (Hao 2015). The resulting future airport, though distant from the twin islands on the gulf, would therefore perpetuate a borderless borderscape by the very material poured into its foundations. Sand thus becomes not just a negotiating resource but an active force for not just perpetuating, but actualizing China's decade-long rhetoric of unification, staking its geopolitical claim over the land and waters across the Taiwan Strait.

Afterlives of Mobility and Malleability

On the other side of the gulf extending from Kinmen to mainland Taiwan, however—where dredging is seen as an act of resource theft and an encroachment on Taiwan's precarious sovereignty and territorial integrity—the story of sand is quite different. Here, the particles so necessary for the constitution of concrete acquire an almost-human quality as people debate whether the "theft of sand" is a border-crossing activity. Just like many other contested border regions, lines on this gulf have never been confidently drawn or erased, but remain permanently shelved. In this fluid space where borders remain ideologically fraught, sand itself has become the measure of identity and power.

On October 19th, 2020, the Taiwan Public Television Service released the 1077th episode of *Our Island*, a special docuseries project focusing solely on the environmental issues in Taiwan since 1998. Titled "Who Stole Our Sand," this episode, along with two others focusing on different offshore spaces centered specifically on the increasing anxiety over sand loss in Kinmen. It featured local oceanologists, environmental scientists, wildlife preservers, and aquaculture farmers in Kinmen, all of whose lives have been profoundly altered by the "theft of sand." Beyond the transformations sand loss has wrought on human lives and livelihoods, the documentary highlights its impact on existing knowledge about human-nature collaborations, ranging from beach retrogradation to habitat loss for endangered species. Paradoxically, it is through depletion that sand becomes a catalyst for collective environmental awareness among and across the diverse communities of farmers, scientists, and activists, as well as their everyday practices of scientific and practical knowledge. Sand loss also engenders questions about who should be liable for the large-scale environmental changes overwhelming the region.

Sand existentially demands geological knowledge to explain its ecological emplacement and displacement, enabling social relationalities to emerge and to afford scientific and political speculation. "The sand-dredging boats do not even need to overstep the border. The deep ocean is itself a naturally interconnected world with no national boundary." This keynote of the documentary takes us away from the visible landscape, where sand's withdrawal cap-

tured from the aerial perspective is only a tiny part of the picture. Neither the cameras nor the cartographic technologies can fully capture the depths across which sand—and its lack—can shape the unseen seascape. These are the unseen depths in which sand ceases to remain an inert assemblage of particulates in the solely human sphere of developmental activities. Rather, the afterlives through which it moves and travels as a result of anthropogenic interventions actively displaces it from human conceptions of its “natural” place and order.

It is precisely sand’s agential, unstable, and unpredictable mobility that “Who Stole Our Sand” foregrounds through the voice of Professor Chung-Pan Lee, a retired oceanologist. An expert on coastline changes and wave geomechanics, Lee excludes the interplay between meteorological and oceanological factors as sole explanatory frameworks for sand loss on Kinmen’s coastland. Turning instead to ocean geophysics and politics, Lee attributes ecological degradation to the increasing sand-dredging happening between Xiamen and Kinmen. Sand extraction has significantly altered the topography of the gulf floor, Lee infers, contributing to the deterioration of coastline conditions in Kinmen. From the oceanologist’s point of view, the material ecology of shifting sands under the water’s surface constitutes a literal manipulation and transcendence of cartography. On the one hand, while sand dredging embodies the process through which geology intersects with politics to co-produce the “geo-politics” of cross-straits relations, knowledge dredged from deep below the ocean serves to both expose and interrogate it. Sand’s perpetual mobility, in turn, compels humans to ponder the murky vicissitudes of its itinerary between land and sea, shifting the gaze from cartographically-oriented geo-political conflict towards the ecological and geological ramifications of its extraction, transportation, and reassembly.

One of the most astonishing examples of sand’s geological afterlives depicted in the documentary is an interview conducted with a councilor of Kinmen on the beach. In the background, an old burial ground lies exposed. Human bones as well as funeral urns are visible in the frame, scattered across the beach in the wake of their exhumation by retreating sand. Human remains here serve as material evidence of sand’s harsh withdrawal, a grotesque reminder of unprecedented landscapes made visible by a missing element that had sheltered the departed for decades. The episode’s apocalyptic imagination weaves together the afterlives of humans with those of sand.

Existentially malleable, sand not only moves across space and time but also redefines its own materiality. The extraction of sand from the sea floor has converted the beach into sticky mud, creating a felt structure of change shared by humans and nonhumans alike. The collapse of the shoreline due to a sand-deprived seabed jeopardizes not just memorial sites but also the very survival of species that depend on sand’s ability to nourish, cultivate, and serve as a resilient foundation for a variety of life forms. As a farmer in the documentary reminisced about the already-muddy coastland

where she has been collecting sea oysters, “it was once full of sand, ...(and) easy to walk on, but now there’s no way to step on it.” Sand has not only contested her knowledge about human-nature collaboration, but also challenged her assumption about the geological time of sand as unchanging and permanent. The critical issue for those who are native to these shores is no longer about how to fix their broken relationship with sand, but about how to imagine a future without it.

Nonhuman actors are also enmeshed in sand’s changing felt structure, as their lives have been unprecedentedly endangered with sand’s material redefinition. The documentary sheds light on one such species, the horseshoe crab, whose genealogy can be traced back to the late Ordovician period roughly around 450 million years ago. Indigenous to this gulf, horseshoe crabs, which prey on benthos dwelling in the sandy bottom of shallow waters, are living witnesses of the changing geological realities of sand in the region. The metamorphosis of sand to mud has silted up the habitat of horseshoe crabs and suffocated the benthos on which they feed; the crabs themselves lack oxygen as aerated pockets of sand are replaced by dense clay.

Withdrawing from the shoal, morphing into sticky mud, carried away by the dredging ships, sand has enabled the emergence of evidentiary ecologies (Lyons 2019) to further negotiate the question about liability and environmental justice. Its role in the co-production of geological and ecological knowledge involving human and nonhuman actors is exemplified in another case study from the documentary: aquaculture farmers working closely with the near-sea ecosystem. Constantly facing the sea prickling with dredging vessels, these farmers understand only too well the causal relationship between sand extraction and soil degradation as they became used to walking into the sticky shoals that are no longer sandy. “After the (sand-dredging) boats sailed by, everything has changed,” lamented a Kinmen resident who was seeking fish bait materials in the muddy coastland. But the question remains: “Who stole our sand?”

Concluding Thoughts

“Who stole our sand?” The question concerns not just the physical whereabouts of sand, but also suggests that sand extraction is synonymous with political aggression and moral transgression. Against the developmental rationale for sand extraction, Lee offered a different framing for the retrogradation of coastal sand: a “loss of territory (*kuo tu*)”. Literally translatable as “national soil,” *kuo tu* imputes both ecological and geo-political meaning to sand, a resource that nourishes and cultivates life while demarcating the sovereign boundaries of a nation. Its displacement, consequently, becomes a bordering technology that amplifies the structural tensions between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them.”

In its geological afterlives, sand becomes a node of vital rela-

tions that extend far beyond its material environments. It becomes visible as an index of belonging to the local ecosystem and a symbol of the struggle of Kinmen, as well as Taiwan, for their respective claims to territoriality. To be sure, the figuration of sand as property is a construct of ownership, contested by the geo-political conditions in which it is materially and affectively embedded. Yet it is precisely at this juncture, where competition for territory is aggravated by horizontally-oriented geo-political disputes, that sand offers insight into the verticality of conflicts. The afterlives of sand re-negotiate its dwelling upon "nature's hesitation" by enabling a *deep* engagement with geologically-mediated ecological changes.

Beyond geo-political dispute over territory qua property, however, lies the reality of sand being a highly agential, mobile, and malleable entity that constantly contests the statist projects of

defining its propertiedness. The treatment of sand as either tradable commodity or preservable resource seems to fall back to the anthropocentric diagnosis of sand as an inert built environment. While many political actors in and beyond Kinmen have been actively seeking sand repatriation from mainland China, sand itself has demanded ecological justice in its own way. As presented in the previous sections, sand has mobilized itself as a powerful geological force to deteriorate and destabilize life itself.

What does it mean, then, when sand can no longer be taken for granted? Ultimately, this essay seeks to challenge anthropocentric notions of sand as an inert, fixed, and apolitical entity, even though it is constantly altered by humans. Sand does not merely function but lives its geological afterlives in flux, rearranging the geo-political order through its mobile and malleable agency.

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Review Essay: Centering Climate Disaster: A Labor Immigration Driving Force

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Abstract: Labor migration is predominately studied through anthropocentric modes of analysis. This review essay explores, demonstrates, and argues that the environment and climate disaster can be driving forces of labor migration. While the scholarship explored as part of this essay, including text, a documentary, and photographs, demonstrate how non-human assemblages, climate and the environment, impact labor and subsequently the family unit and migration, they also call attention to the Anthropocene, the current moment that we occupy as humans as the dominant influence on climate and the environment. Given the impact of climate disaster on labor migration, it is important to decenter past anthropocentric modes of analysis focused on socioeconomic disparities.

Keywords: Labor, migration, environment, climate disaster, Anthropocene

Introduction

I am a labor immigration historian who utilizes anthropocentric modes of analysis. I study the generational and racial legacies of U.S. agricultural guestworker programs. I first came to this topic at my southern California undergraduate institution as a Psychology and Chicana/o Studies double-major, arguably anthropocentric majors. However, scholars of the latter, such as Stevie Ruiz, Federico Castillo, and Devon G. Peña, are charting new intersections in the field concerning the environment. As a grandchild of a former Bracero (Mexican guestworker), I instinctively approach my research through centering the human and personal experience. While I have thought of border phenomena and practices in relation to globalization and the treatment that guestworkers face, I previously neglected to examine labor immigration from an environmental perspective. As I will demonstrate and argue through the following analysis, the environment is a key factor of labor immigration that can no longer be overlooked. While all the selected scholarship demonstrate how non-human assemblages, climate and the environment, impact labor and subsequently the family unit and migration, they also call attention to the Anthropocene, the current moment that we occupy as humans as the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

Labor migration is predominately studied through anthropocentric modes of analysis. Sociologists like Douglas S. Massey have theorized the causes of international labor migration by highlighting economic disparities between sending and receiving countries, what many refer to as 'push and pull factors'. Historians, such as Mae Ngai, have detailed how U.S. preferences for docile guestworkers have exponentially increased labor immigration to the U.S. While immigration scholars, like Maria Cristina García, who through her forthcoming book, *Climate Refugees: The Environmental Origins*

of Refugee Migrations, are beginning to study climate refugee migration, few have considered the role of climate disaster as a driving force of labor migration. Though the secondary scholarship on this topic is in its early stages in academia, non-governmental organizations and think tanks have explored the subject. Given the impact of climate disaster on labor migration, it is important to decenter past anthropocentric modes of analysis focused on socioeconomic disparities.

Environment and Immigration

In an exploration of the nexus of environment and immigration, Jon Hultgren's 2015 book, *Border Walls Gone Green: Nature and Anti-Immigrant Politics in America*, traces how environmental protection became a mechanism to enforce U.S. borders and anti-immigrant rhetoric. While the environment is centered against the human, blaming environmental degradation on immigrants remains an anthropocentric mode of analysis. In the introduction, Hultgren explains how a nativist organization utilized Earth Day to call for immigration restriction: "In celebration of Earth Day, the immigration-reduction organization Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS) had launched a national advertising campaign aimed at persuading the American left that immigration is a driving force behind the contemporary global ecological crisis" (1). This flawed anthropocentric argument reveals the organization's ignorance to consider the causes of immigration that could be influenced by environmental degradation in immigrants' home areas, most likely brought on by human forces who in most cases are not those forced to migrate. CAPS' claim echoes the scholarly literature's teleological tendencies that prioritize anthropocentric modes of analysis by focusing on economic disparities. The existing labor immigration

scholarship and environmental protection immigration reduction organizations like CAPS have failed to consider the reverse, the global ecological crisis as a driving force of labor immigration.

Climate Refugees and Labor

While María Cristina García's book, *Climate Refugees: The Environmental Origins of Refugee Migrations*, is forthcoming, she spoke about it in a recent interview as part of a *Cornell Research* article titled, "Migration, Forced by Climate Change" by Jackie Swift. In the interview, García explains that "People have been displaced by climate for millennia, but we are now at a particular historical moment, facing a new type of environmentally driven migration that will be more fast and furious. It will require incredible adaptability and political will to keep up with the changes that are forecasted to happen." García's call for adaptability and political will also call on the academy to join her in seriously considering environmentally driven migration, specifically refugees of climate change, but who are not formally recognized as refugees. The lack of international recognition and protection that García states climate refugees face reveals the academy's lack of attention to this group and subsequent factors, such as labor immigration. The more attention the group is given within the academy, the stronger the force will be to call for and provide international attention and protection to climate refugees.

García then explains that her book examines "case studies of people in the Americas who have been displaced because of environmental factors, especially populations from Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and the Caribbean island of Montserrat." García's focus on Haiti, Mexico, and the Caribbean is particularly interesting when considering that these locations have historically contributed a large portion of agricultural guestworkers to the U.S. Given their historical labor migration to the U.S., when prompted by climate change, these groups will likely view the U.S. as a refuge and subsequently become integrated into the labor economy—making climate a key factor in labor immigration.

When asked about answers to climate problems, "García points to Vietnam where the government is experimenting with different forms of water, crop, and soil management as an answer to the salinization of the Mekong Delta." García's response regarding nations' creative answers to climate problems begs the question of how such governmental reactions and presumed solutions subsequently impact local labor economies. Although these governmental solutions are in reaction to climate change and the environment, we must acknowledge the Anthropocene, human beings as the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

The Anthropocene and Labor

Kasia Paprocki's 2019 article, "All that Is Solid Melts into the Bay: Anticipatory Ruination on Bangladesh's Climate Frontier," demonstrates how government-sanctioned ruination in anticipation of and preparation for a climate disaster both erases and creates labor. This transaction of labor destroys livelihoods, disturbs family units, and ultimately engenders migration. Paprocki considers the repercussions of a local Bangladesh government's decision to replace rice farming with shrimp aquaculture in preparation for rising sea levels:

Anticipatory ruination works not only through the claims to possible futures through shrimp production but also through the destruction of imaginations of alternative futures, such as the persistence of agriculture and the communities in Khulna that depend on it. The sense of inevitable crisis thus dialectically anticipates and produces ruination (28).

Anticipatory ruination inevitably impacts labor as it simultaneously destroys Khulna's predominant labor economy, agriculture, and creates another, shrimp aquaculture. As Paprocki argues, anticipatory ruination can be devastating for a community that will consequently face labor opportunity reduction due to less intensive labor requirements and the necessity to learn new labor practices. Such devastating labor reduction will inevitably engender migration as a means of survival. This labor devastation calls attention to the fact that as the International Labour Organization states, "The sectors that employ the majority of workers are also some of the most vulnerable to climate change." As agricultural laborers, Khulna's rice farmers comprised the largest group of laborers and as demonstrated, they were most vulnerable to the ruination in anticipation of climate disaster. Khulna's rice farmers are not an isolated case, rather they represent the larger issue that agricultural laborers are inevitably and arguably the largest group of laborers most impacted by climate disaster.

Climate and Geographic Disasters Create Gendered Labor Division

Paprocki also sheds light on anticipatory ruinations' impact on the gendered and economic division of labor: "These impacts have been felt most acutely by women as well as the majority landless populations who have historically worked as sharecroppers and agricultural day labourers in the region" (35). While human assemblages impose this form of labor devastation in preparation for the effects of a non-human assemblage, a climate disaster, we must also consider when human assemblages cannot intervene in anticipation and legal labor alternatives are not put forth by local governments.

Sourav Sarangi's 2012 film, *Char: No Man's Land*, documents

the livelihood of the inhabitants of Char, a fragile island created when the river Ganga rapidly changed course following the construction of Farakka Dam in 1975. Victims of a geographic catastrophe brought on by human assemblages who sought to create the dam, families engage in gendered labor economies that require daily migration. Men and boys engage in the rice black market, smuggling rice to Bangladesh. Women smuggle Phensedyl Cough Syrup from India into Char. As a means of survival, this labor requires a young boy to forfeit his education, and his sister's marriage is commodified for the groom's family's financial gain. Both issues demonstrate how geographic catastrophes require a change in human priorities and labor practices. A mother who is frequently stopped and apprehended by the Border Patrol for smuggling Phensedyl states, "No work is sinful, it is between need and greed." This mother combats border policing practices by condemning the imposed morality on their forced livelihood. The act of labor that constructed the dam, which brought ecological devastation that resulted in gendered labor division and illegal smuggling as a means of survival, demands that we turn to the Anthropocene again, human labor's impact on the natural environment and subsequently, the local labor economy. As I have proven, this is a cycle driven by the Anthropocene.

Full Circle: Human Labor's Impact on the Natural Environment

Kirstyn M. Andrews' 2019 photo essay, "Borderwaters: Conversing with Fluidity at the Dominican Border," not only further emphasizes how climate and geography as non-human assemblages can create and dismantle labor opportunities but also documents human labor's impact on the natural environment. Andrews demonstrates how non-human assemblages overpower the border practices enforced by human assemblages: "While political whims and tensions spark increased militarization or heavy press coverage of the bor-

der from the Dominican side, the Artibonite has a logic of its own, canceling market days with heavy rains and flooding, or facilitating trade in the dry season when one can wade across the border" (7). The Artibonite's power to create and erase labor daily is another example of why we must consider labor immigration from an environmental and climate perspective. Though Andrews simultaneously prompts us to consider the reverse, the impacts of human labor on the environment: "The bank is steep and often muddy from constant foot traffic on market days" (11). Recognizing the impact of human assemblages on climate and the global ecological crisis, we must anticipate how human assemblages and forms of labor can cause climate catastrophes that will, in return, impact labor—as is the case with Char and Khulna.

Conclusion

Labor history is essentially humancentric and has been traditionally examined in terms of immigrant labor. As a scholar, I am a product of this process. However, through this piece I have focused on the impact of non-human assemblages, climate and environment, on human assemblages and their labor economies. In doing so, I also call attention to the role of the Anthropocene in this cycle of climate and environment impacting labor, and human labor impacting climate and environment. The groups that are most often targeted in anti-immigration and nativist sentiments are agricultural laborers. Agricultural laborers are especially vulnerable to climate and environmental disasters. By calling attention to this feedback loop, I demonstrate that we, the academic assemblage, can no longer ignore climate and environment as part of labor migration and immigration. Contemporary rapid climate change demands an interdisciplinary engagement from labor scholars, a political-ecological labor history that is socioenvironmental.

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Reviews

How Borges Wrote by Daniel Balderston. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2018. 375 páginas.

De Daniel Balderston, investigador de vasta trayectoria en el campo de los estudios literarios, puede decirse sin asomo de dudas que es el mayor animador de los estudios borgeanos desde hace mucho, como director del Borges Center, director de *Variaciones Borges* y autor de algunos de los libros más originales sobre la obra del maestro argentino. Testimonio de la longevidad de su interés en Borges son sus libros *El precursor velado: R.L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges* (1985) y el diccionario de referencias borgeanas *The Literary Universe of Jorge Luis Borges* (1986), a los que siguieron el clásico *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (1993), *Borges: realidades y simulacros* (2000) e *Innumerables relaciones: cómo leer con Borges* (2010).

Esa genealogía suya de intereses borgeanos —ha zigzagueado entre las lecturas formales, las que observan el contexto sociocultural en el que Borges produjo su obra, las que establecen la arqueología de los textos, las que buscan sus fuentes ideológicas, e incluso las que, con un pie en el otro interés de Balderston, rastrean los sustratos de la sexualidad, la homosocialidad y la homosexualidad en la obra de Borges— se ve coronada con la publicación de *How Borges Wrote* (2018). Este libro parece la consecuencia lógica de los anteriores y añade una dimensión ausente en aquellos: la crítica textual, la que hurga en los manuscritos en busca de variantes, enmiendas, versiones, substituciones, no con la intención de establecer los “textos definitivos”, como es práctica común de la crítica textual —esto lo han hecho ya, por ejemplo, Elena del Río Parra y Julio Ortega, en una cuidadosa edición crítica y anotada de “El Aleph”, en 2008—. Con un interés dinámico, Balderston no busca fijar sino leer los textos en movimiento y dejarlos en movimiento, como habría querido Borges, quien descreía de la idea de que una obra literaria tuviera una versión última, en vez de un desarrollo constante y muchos posibles avatares a lo largo del tiempo.

A Balderston le importa descubrir, en los manuscritos y mecanoscritos de Borges, el proceso de composición, la metamorfosis de cada texto desde sus primeros intentos hasta las versiones avanzadas. Así halla en dichas versiones varias cosas: cómo es que el método de Borges se adecúa a su poética y la refleja, cómo es que esa poética influye en su modo de escritura (en el sentido material), y cómo, al revisar los documentos originales, es posible descubrir los momentos en que Borges parece escapar del plan prefijado para ingresar en campos que no debieron ser parte de la idea original (o lo contrario: cómo es que meticulosamente corrige hasta obtener la perfecta ambigüedad o esconder la más oscura alusión). Es un esfuerzo titánico —de allí que Balderston haya invertido una década en esta labor: el capítulo sobre “El Aleph” apareció ya en una versión preliminar, en 2012—, entre otras cosas porque los manu-

scritos borgeanos, que unas veces parecen escritos con sobria intencionalidad y redactados de un tirón de principio a fin, en otras ocasiones son laberintos tan herméticos como los que poblaban la imaginación del autor: papeles colmados de signos idiosincrásicos, señales que solo él podía comprender, diagramas, dibujos, interpolaciones de unos textos en otros, citas inconclusas, breves memorándums cuyos referentes quedan en el aire, líneas en lenguas diversas, ideas sueltas que parecen no integrarse a ningún texto mayor, páginas donde la minúscula caligrafía borgeana no sigue las líneas y las cuadrículas de sus papeles y cuadernos, sino que se trazan sobre la hoja en curvas, en espirales, a veces incluso con párrafos escritos de lado o de cabeza.

El libro está organizado en ocho secciones, todas con hallazgos encomiables. Una de ellas estudia la materialidad de la escritura; por ejemplo, descubre la proteica maravilla de la caligrafía de Borges, que en ocasiones, por manía o por juego, usa grafías que aluden al contenido de los textos, escribiendo en letras góticas cuando el gótico está en juego, o imita la tipografía de carteles de películas cuando parece aludir a ellas, o cambia el trazo de su firma para reflejar el ánimo del texto que suscribe. Hay una sección dedicada a la interacción de Borges con sus cuadernos, la forma en que se apropia de ellos y los integra en la arquitectura de la narración, permitiendo que incluso las palabras impresas en las cubiertas parezcan epígrafes de su texto y cubriendo los cuadernos enteros, de la tapa a la contratapa (una costumbre que sin duda pesó, por ejemplo, en “La biblioteca de Babel”, cuando imaginó esos libros en cuyas cubiertas los bibliotecarios anotan letras y palabras). Uno no puede sino imaginar que Borges habría preferido publicar los manuscritos en vez de darlos a la imprenta, dado que ellos son en sí mismos obras de un arte diferente, que por momentos linda con la poesía concreta y por momentos con el cómic de vanguardia: imágenes que solo después de ser vistas pueden ser, además, leídas.

Varias secciones estudian el tránsito de los borradores a las primeras versiones completas o casi completas de ciertos cuentos y ensayos; la manera en que Borges depura o complica un texto cada vez que trabaja en una nueva copia; la forma en que los manuscritos suelen diferir de los mecanoscritos, y los mecanoscritos de las versiones impresas en revistas, y estas de las versiones publicadas en libro. Nunca ha sido tan claro como en *How Borges Wrote* que el escritor era plenamente fiel a su idea, tantas veces declarada, de que una ficción, en un cierto momento, no es sino el fragmento “revelado” a él, hasta ese instante, de una historia mayor y metamórfica que muchas otras formas pudo haber tenido y muchas otras deberá tener, unas veces sobre el papel y otras veces solo en esa suerte de gran libro colectivo y universal que era, para él, el cielo platónico donde todas las ideas estaban ya y solo había que esperar recordarlas y que, a través de la memoria, descendieran a la tierra.

La segunda sección (“Jottings”) y las páginas dedicadas a “El Aleph” (152-68) son tal vez los momentos más deslumbrantes del libro. Todo aquel que ha visto manuscritos de Borges (y este volu-

men recoge unas setenta páginas facsimilares de ellos) sabe que en ocasiones pueden ser maniáticos y exudar una obsesión por la arquitectura textual, pero en el libro de Balderston se entiende, con transparencia, algo más: que Borges, al escribir una ficción, escribía muchas. Lo vemos (y Balderston lo hace notar) en esas páginas plagadas de párrafos que parecen compuestos sobre ejes diferentes: un eje horizontal que lo lleva del principio al final de la frase, y varios ejes verticales que atraviesan la frase con variantes posibles para nombres, adjetivos, adverbios, verbos, con lo cual una oración se convierte en muchas distintas (un ejemplo notable es el manuscrito de la célebre "enumeración caótica de "El Aleph"). Los formados en la vieja filología germánica y en la lingüística de Jakobson reconocerán esto como la todavía vigente definición saussuriana de "sintagma" y "paradigma": el eje horizontal, que combina unas palabras con otras, *in praesentia*, para formar frases, y el eje horizontal que substituye unas por otras, *in absentia*, con todo un campo semántico como menú del cual tomar las variantes. Pero en Borges, como Balderston permite intuir, no se trata solo de eso. Es, más bien, un mecanismo reminiscente de aquel de la novela in-

finita de "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan": cada frase puede formarse de dos o tres o cuatro maneras distintas, cada una de las cuales llevará a una frase subsiguiente, condicionada por la anterior, y por tanto, en los manuscritos, a diferencia de lo que ocurre con los textos en los libros ya impresos, el lector puede colegir las muchas direcciones que una misma narración podría haber seguido, hasta el vértigo de lo inacabable.

Pocas veces un estudioso de la literatura se impone una tarea tan ardua y la corona con tanta enjundia y tan esmerada prolijidad: mostrarnos, en toda el espesor de la idea, cómo escribía Borges. Pero quizás la mejor manera de hacerle justicia a *How Borges Wrote* sea decir que este volumen le da una dimensión muy contemporánea a la varias veces centenaria labor de la crítica textual, que aquí no es un ejercicio normativo, sino uno de interpretación e incluso de recreación: crítica que, lejos de encapsular el texto o forzarlo a decir algo, lo libera y le permite hablar.

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Juliet of the Tropics: A Bilingual Edition of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's La cuarterona (1867). Tr. John Maddox. Cambria Press, 2016.

At first glance, the relevance of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's Romantic tragedy about race and class in the Caribbean, *La cuarterona* (1867), for twenty-first century readers or spectators may seem questionable. How can a classically-structured nineteenth-century play that takes place in interior spaces and has, at least initially, the ambiance of a drawing-room comedy, speak to readers or spectators who still struggle with the poisonous legacy of slavery and racist violence today in the Americas? As the author of this elegant and lively translation, John Maddox, argues in his thoughtful introduction:

Tapia was a man of his times and a man beyond his times. Though Tapia was not an advocate for unconditional political independence, nor Antillean federation or annexation by the United States, like some thinkers of the time, he wanted the same political autonomy for Puerto Rico as the mainland Spanish provinces had, and he wanted liberal government reforms, based in part on the Constitution of Cádiz.... Few national literatures can say their founding father was an outspoken feminist, but Tapia portrayed women's rights as central to his interpretation of the Rights of Man. In his best moments, he was driven by an urge to understand the Other: women and the enslaved. Reason and democracy did not coincide with what he saw in the Caribbean, and he scoffed at spurious theories of tropical inferiority when he first performed this play in 1863. (4-5)

A foundational figure of Puerto Rican literature, Tapia's politically moderate liberal stance paradoxically also led him to question patriarchal and racist attitudes that were all-too-common even among other more radical political and cultural leaders, in Spain as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus, despite its genteel appearance and language, *Juliet in the Tropics* enacts a serious debate on issues that have continued to bedevil societies in both North and South America, long after slavery was abolished in both continents.

It should also be remembered that open discussion of slavery was severely censored by the Spanish authorities both in Cuba and in Puerto Rico, although not in the Spanish Metropolis itself. Tapia was already a prominent writer when he published *Juliet in the Tropics* in Madrid in 1867, and was keenly aware that his expression of abolitionist views could have produced retaliation from the Spanish colonial authorities of Puerto Rico, since he had supported other abolitionist members of the Puerto Rican intellectual community when they insisted at the Junta Informativa of Madrid in 1866 that abolition should proceed in Cuba and Puerto Rico with or without compensation to the slaveholders.

In the current times of Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and their attendant social movements calling for greater racial and class eq-

uity, one can still find eerie echoes of the same interplay between private and public spaces and discourses visible in *Juliet in the Tropics*; echoes of critiques and debates that necessarily take place in low voices and in enclosed spaces, as private events lead individuals to reckon with the violent and horrifying personal and collective consequences of racial injustice.

Professor Maddox cogently proposes his new version in English of the play's title, *Juliet in the Tropics*, as a more accessible version of the original *La cuarterona*, which could be roughly translated to "The Mulatta" or "The Quadroon"—both terms that today would require lengthy historical contextualization. Maddox's new English title also underscores Tapia's contacts with the English language and with the works of Shakespeare (who by the mid-nineteenth-century had already been elevated to hyper-canonic stature), particularly with *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Like Shakespeare's tragedy about young and doomed lovers in a hierarchical society torn apart by sectarian divisions, Tapia's plot moves inexorably from the protagonist Carlos's hopeful wish to fulfill his love for Julia, the orphaned mulatto girl who was brought up by Carlos's mother, the Countess, as his adoptive sister, to a tragic ending than ensues when Julia realizes that her own and Carlos's illusions of happiness face insurmountable odds.

Twenty-first century readers may find familiar not just the Shakespearian subtext but also the Countess's authoritarian use of strategies of manipulation by means of insistent lies (now commonly known as "gaslighting") as well as by the invocation of absolute societal norms, such as the incest prohibition. The latter occurs when the Countess brings down Carlos's resistance to the arranged marriage with the wealthy Emilia by telling him that Julia is actually his half-sister on his father's side—a not unlikely scenario, although one that is false, as the play makes clear in one of the Countess's asides: "Just the idea!... If I must. Wait. Time is of the essence. Why hold back? It is a forgivable solution. Necessary." (76).

The incest taboo is "weaponized" (to use current parlance) by the Countess by virtue of its ambivalent significance: the very same (adoptive) sibling status that brings Julia and Carlos together is used as an instrument to keep them apart when their love grows stronger. It should be recalled that incest was a recurrent trope in the social discourse of slave societies in both North and South America (regarding North America, see Connolly) and is particularly visible in Cuban antislavery narratives, from Tanco y Bosmeniel's "Petrona y Rosalía" (1838) to Suárez y Romero's *Francisco, o las delicias del ingenio* (1839) and Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882).

John Maddox's supple translation ably captures the shifting moods of Tapia's play, from hopeful expectation to shocking tragedy. Almost without anachronism, it brings Tapia's play into the English language and to the twenty-first century, where its grim message still resonates.

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