

Curating the Desert Southwest: Distortion as a Way of Knowing

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved March 2020 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

The Desert Southwest has no shortage of representations in literature, art, and film. Its aesthetics—open horizons, strange landscapes, and vast wilderness—inform and saturate the early Western films of John Ford, the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, and continue in today’s popular imaginations. My work acknowledges such contributions and then it challenges them: why are those names more widely associated with the Southwest than Luis Alberto Urrea, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, or Pat Mora?

The project intersects the environmental humanities, critical theory, and cultural studies with the Desert Southwest. It explores the fullness of desert places with regard to cultures, borders, and languages, as well as nonhuman forces and intensities like heat, light, and distance. Dispelling the dominant notion of desert as void or wasteland, it sets a stage to suit the polyvocality of desert place. My work is interdisciplinary because the desert demands it. It begins with Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* in order to reorient readers towards the rupture of the US War With Mexico which helped set the national and cultural borders in effect today. I then explore Denis Villeneuve’s film *Sicario* to emphasize the correlation between political hierarchy and verticality; those who can experience the desert from above are exempt from the conditions below, where Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* and Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* take place. The novels expose the immanence and violence of being on the ground in the desert and at the lower end of said hierarchies. Analyzing Yuri Herrera’s *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and Mora’s *Encantado* enables what I term a desert hauntology to produce a desert full of memory, myth, ancestors, and enchantment. Finally, the project puts visual artists James

Turrell and Rafa Esparza in conversation to discover a desert phenomenology. The result is an instigation of how far is too far when decentering the human, and what role does place-based art play in creating and empowering community.

John Ford was from Maine. Georgia O’Keeffe, from Wisconsin. Edward Abbey, Pennsylvania. As someone born and raised in the Desert Southwest, I’ve written the project I have yet to encounter.

To my family, desert pasts, and desert futures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When applying to PhD programs, I was keeping myself warm with a space heater in a Glasgow flat, enduring the winter's darkness while picturing a future in which I could study the Desert Southwest. While living in Phoenix has taught me that there is such a thing as too much sun, and I find myself daydreaming about overcast days, I am endlessly grateful for every opportunity granted to me by being accepted to Arizona State University. For a curious and ambitious learner, ASU's commitment to the humanities and the arts has enabled me to take my life and project in interdisciplinary and intersectional directions I could never have predicted. With sincerest thanks to the Katherine C. Turner Dissertation Completion Fellowship, I was able to devote my final year to writing and researching, which has been invaluable.

I would especially like to acknowledge the guidance and encouragement I have received from my chair, Ron Broglio. For the last several years, Professor Broglio has invested his time, interest, and care in order to help me explore my potential as a graduate researcher and teacher. Importantly, when the burdens of academic life compounded with life outside of my studies, he respected my need for wellness and self-care. I do not take that lightly. One of the most wonderful things about working with Professor Broglio is his compassion; he is keen to remind those of us caught up in an academic grind that we are human. I thank him for trusting my vision and for always being excited to talk desert.

To Kevin McHugh and Matt Bell, my brave committee members, I want to extend my gratitude for every meeting, email, and class where we exchanged ideas. Though I've a long way to go, my writing is better because of your examples of craft and discovery.

The faculty at Arizona State University have been helpful and reassuring throughout, in particular Joni Adamson, Sally Ball, Lee Bebout, Dan Bivona, Daniel Collins, Natalie Diaz, Steve Farmer, Serena Ferrando, Daniel Gilfillan, Devoney Looser, Elenore Long, Mark Lussier, Heather Maring, and Brad Ryner. Each of them has taken time to teach or encourage me through this process in ways that still impact me.

Other graduate students have inspired me tremendously. In 2016, I co-founded a student organization called the Post-Human Network (PHuN) with Jonathan Bratt, Garrett Laroy Johnson, Zach Thomas, and A. Sakrison. Together, we forged red tape and logistics to host conferences in which we engaged with critical theory and projects focused on human-nonhuman relationships. This group of scholars was really brought together by the Director of the Arts, Media and Engineering Department Sha Xin Wei and Professor Adam Nocek, whose seminars gave us ample time to work through our own ideas while establishing a familiarity with critical theory of the 20th century.

In summer of 2019 I attended a residency at the National Humanities Center which put me into conversation with Keitlyn Alcantara, Nayibe Azzad, Sondra Bickham Washington, and Jessica Calvanico among many others. These women are beacons and are doing incredible work in the humanities, and it is an honor to know them.

To Steve Abell, Jada Ach, Victoria Baugh, Jerome Clark, Gregory Curvey, Sebastien Doubinsky, Travis Franks, Jimmy Garcia, Warren Glynn, José Juan Gómez-Becerra, Kelly Jackson, Amilynne Johnston, Shannon Lujan, Arina Melkozernova, Justin Noga, Gary Reger, Emiddio Vasquez, Maria Woodson, I want to thank you each for your advice, your creativity, and support. Fredrick Brown, I know you were only here for two years, but I couldn't be happier to know you. Thanks for constantly reminding me that

my work matters. Marinela Golemi, there are no words; your friendship means everything. And Brian Keen, without you I don't even know what my life would look like, let alone my scholarship. Thank you for your unwavering support and enthusiasm about all things desert and literature.

To Chawa Magaña and her amazing venture Palabras Bilingual Bookstore, which has brought me and so many others a sense of community, including Anna, Belen, Chela, Claudia, Jeff, Lydia, Luname, Luz, Raji, Raquel, Ryan, Shaunte, Vanessa, Vida, and Yolatl. Somos dignxs.

Without my professors at the University of Texas at El Paso I wouldn't be here. To Ruben Espinoza, Robert Gunn, Bruce Lawson, Marion Rohrleitner, and Thomas Schmid, thank you for your passion for your field, your students, and literature. At the University of Strathclyde, Katherine Mitchell and Richard Niland were instrumental in my success. Rune Graulund, you asked what we expected from your Desert Literature course and I answered, "everything." As it turns out, that was the moment I knew what I wanted to pursue.

I'd like to acknowledge my partner, Jesus, for his love, patience, and support. Thank you for seeing more in me than I sometimes see in myself. To my mother, for calling every day and never doubting me, to Doc for your uplifting guarantees, to my father for supporting this previously untrodden path. I will always remember where I come from and hope to continue to make you all proud.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	viii
CHAPTER	
1 (RE)SITUATING THE SOUTHWEST	1
2 DESERT FROM ABOVE	58
3 ON THE GROUND	90
4 FILLING THE VOID	141
5 ATMOSPHERE AND DESERT PHENOMENOLOGY	168
NOTES	193
WORKS CITED	197

INTRODUCTION

The more I try to evoke where I am—the "I" who is writing this text—the more phrases and figures of speech I must employ. I must get involved in a process of writing, the very writing that I am not describing when I evoke the environment in which writing is taking place. The more convincingly I render my surroundings, the more figurative language I end up with. The more I try to show you what lies beyond this page, the more of a page I have. And the more of a fictional "I" I have—splitting "me" into the one who is writing and the one who is being written about—the less convincing I sound.

—Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (p. 30)

The work presented herein is just a scratching at the surface of the nascent field of Desert Humanities. It was in a class in Glasgow, Scotland when I first learned the desert could be a worthy object of study. Before then, I never thought discussing the environment where I come from would mean much to people who were only familiar with it through television, films, and pulp fiction. Several years later and the worthy object of study has really become a hyperobject wielding its own cosmic agency at which I can only grasp in language. Hence, the use of distortion to try and arrest it for the purpose of a dissertation. The title, “Curating the Desert Southwest: Distortion as a Way of Knowing” gestures to the inevitability that all such endeavors necessitate curation. Embracing this, the texts examined here were carefully chosen for the eclectic work they do for modes of knowing the desert differently. Further, I use brief bursts of my own desert encounters as a more personal, though relevant mode.

The first chapter, “(Re)Situating the Southwest,” uses close readings of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Blood Meridian* to introduce the apparatus of distortion as used throughout this dissertation. Desert distortion becomes a way to experience defamiliarization as a way of knowing. In this case, the majority of *Blood Meridian* is set

in the years following the United States War with Mexico, which officially ended in 1848. This is a distortion, or reframing, of American history that shifts attention westward as Mexico loses half of its land to the United States, effectively fueling the split politics of slavery and its expansion within the growing country. The chapter is set up to take readers through the blurred borderlands of the Desert Southwest with McCarthy's help, troubling a singular history in favor of the multiple. It sets the stage for the rest of the project by navigating through each kind of distortion that the remaining chapters employ. From being above the law to being stuck on the ground, the riders navigate the desert as both desolate wasteland and abundant environment. They also experience its vastness as much as its intimacy. The text is compelling because of its countless layers of allusions, language, and attention to human and nonhuman violence, especially desert agency. All of these contribute to a desert atmosphere that lies at the heart of this work's final chapter.

In "Desert From Above," the limits of the law and how they are pushed or erected by those with power are taken up through an analysis of Denis Villeneuve's film *Sicario*. Chapter 2 investigates the correlation between hierarchies of power and the ability to attain verticality. Synoptic, bird's-eye-view shots of the desert and the US-Mexico border are taken from drones, helicopters, and private planes, distorting and influencing the viewer's engagement with the politics of the landscape. Building on Jason De León's *The Land of Open Graves*, in which the anthropologist transforms Giorgio Agamben's state of exception into the border as a space of exception, the chapter breaks down the chain of power from the US federal government to police on both sides of the border and migrants who get caught in the ensuing chaos.

As a drastic shift from being both above the law and above the ground, Chapter 3 emphasizes the immanence of being on the desert ground for certain kinds of bodies. Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* were both published in 2005 and are hyperfocused on violence towards people in the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts respectively. Together they provide an interesting and important delve into the distortions of borders and bodies along those borders. In Urrea's nonfiction book, the Wellton 26 struggle more with the heat and the Growler Mountains than they do with the official US-Mexico Border. The migrants are led astray by their guide, Mendez, and this puts them in an immediate, extreme, and fatal entanglement with desert agency, which De León argues is a structured form of necroviolence on the part of the Border Patrol.

Gaspar de Alba's novel, though fiction, is based on research the author conducted about the femicides that occurred during the 1990s and into the 21st century as a result of NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement). The treaty welcomed the establishment of many large factories, *maquiladoras*, along the border and women from all over Mexico made up the majority of employees. Her concern with the gendered violence of the desert surrounding the El Paso-Juarez area exposes other ways that the desert might be considered an ally for distorting and hiding dead bodies. The environmental conditions in *Desert Blood* are an additional layer, rather than the primary cause, that investigators and family members of the victims must face. That is to say, the murdered women are made to be unrecognizable in death by whoever is killing them, and the vastness and heat of the desert help to further that agenda. Death and the inability to mourn the dead in *The Devil's Highway* and *Desert Blood* invite discussion about a desert

hauntology where the spectral presence of human and nonhuman violence and its victims saturates the land.

Chapter 4, “Filling the Void,” picks up the notion of a desert hauntology and instead offers the Desert Southwest as a place for mythology and enchantment. Yuri Herrera’s novella *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and Pat Mora’s poetry collection *Encantado: Desert Monologues* are fruitful texts for reading the abundance, rather than the void, of the desert landscape. *Signs* is seemingly a text about a woman’s journey north across the border, however, Herrera’s nine chapter structure parallels the nine realms of the Aztec underworld of Mictlán and broadens the scope of the trek to mythic proportions. I incorporate Jane Bennett’s work on enchantment, where objects have an active role in the more-than-human world, to analyze *Encantado*. Each of the poems is from a different speaker, producing a polyvocal assemblage of a made-up desert town that reflects the realities of many real desert towns. Mora’s attention to the local also gives voice to the town’s river and to the dead who still visit their living loved ones. Especially through the power of language, for instance translation and naming, *Signs* and *Encantado* demonstrate the nonexhaustive range of the literary desert, distorting it from large scale to localized abundance and implicating infinite possibilities besides.

Finally, and with desert abundance as a launching off point, Chapter 5 puts visual artists James Turrell and Rafa Esparza in conversation with one another towards understanding a desert phenomenology via what Kathleen Stewart calls “atmospheric attunements.” Specifically, I engage with Turrell’s decades-long earthworks project, Roden Crater, located just north of Flagstaff, Arizona. Even unfinished, Roden Crater is an incredible experiment in attuning with desert atmosphere through its use of light,

space, and earth. In explaining the plans for the work in progress as well as my own experience visiting in spring of 2019, I ask whether or not Turrell's obsession with light, the celestial, and geological runs the risk of decentralizing the human too far. That is, how does a project that is so meticulous that it has taken millions of dollars and nearly fifty years to build contribute to its community, human and nonhuman? A radically different approach to the attunement of human to atmosphere is found through Rafa Esparza's art practices with adobe made from clay, horse dung, and water from the Los Angeles River. Taught by his father, Esparza makes adobe bricks with family or friends and sometimes even travels with them in order to "brown the white cube" of the gallery space and create foundations upon which museums become more inclusive places. The living material of adobe is what he calls "brown matter" and reflects the queer brown artist and his community while generating a desert atmosphere through its look, smell, and feel. Turrell and Esparza each have radically different approaches to their art, speaking to desert distortion as method of encountering the multiple, the unstable, and the more-than-human with which productive relationships are possible.

Ultimately my project is an attempt to establish some groundwork for what I believe will be a fruitful field. The Desert Humanities intersects literature, history, critical theory, cultural studies, and the environmental humanities in order to better understand human and nonhuman life in the desert. As of 2019, Arizona State University's Institute for Humanities Research has launched the Desert Humanities Initiative with which I hope to continue pertinent, meaningful, and community-based conversations about the potentials and realities of dwelling in desert places.

CHAPTER 1

(RE)SITUATING THE SOUTHWEST

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A summer tradition in El Paso is going to McKelligon Canyon with family and friends to watch *Viva! El Paso*. The musical first started in 1978, and carries on today with a script that was updated in 2016. I remember the drive out to McKelligon Canyon, and the bottleneck effect as the road narrows to one lane per direction. Always around dusk. As the sky darkens, the electricity of El Paso-Juárez glows and soon enough fades behind us as we wind deeper into the mountains. Bumper to bumper traffic, and yet it feels like we are all alone in the desert.

The show *Viva! El Paso* didn't make much sense to me as a kid. As I grew older, I started to piece together that it was a performance spanning four centuries of occupation in El Paso del Norte, the pass of the north. It was at that show, with the stars above and the echo of the canyon walls, that I memorized the name Juan de Oñate. It was there that I first saw my heritage played out on a stage. I had received the history lesson so clearly, in fact, that when in San Antonio for a middle school band competition, I made it a point to ask all my friends if they knew the real meaning behind the Six Flags theme park. The short answer is that throughout history Texas has been governed by six different nations.

I tried to name them all on the bus ride there as I counted on my fingers.

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Though recent scholarship¹ is beginning to trouble this, American history is often presented in an oversimplified, linear and dichotomous manner: “antebellum” and “postbellum”. The “-bellum” is the Civil War, and there are obvious and important reasons for marking a before and after according to this upheaval. The capture, sale, and abuse of millions of Africans made into slaves in the antebellum era left millions more in postbellum with the task of demanding reparations and working against oppressive structures that continue to keep African Americans at socioeconomic disadvantages. The legacy of slavery still haunts the U.S., and its journey from the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the ratification Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in 1865 to the end of Jim Crow laws and segregation a century later continues to unfold. The American prison system, as Ava DuVernay’s documentary film *13th* (2016) demonstrates, has transmuted aspects of slavery into indentured servitude through the U.S. penal system.

Stories of the battles between the North and the South, the Blue and the Gray, and Blacks and Whites have been mediated and cemented into national memory through popular culture. Films like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Roots* (1977), *Cold Mountain* (2003), *Lincoln* (2012), and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) span a century of creating clear splits between the North and the South, as well as between “now” and “then.” The antebellum moniker, however, casts a blanketing shadow across the timeline of the US before the Civil War, neglecting the stories and struggles of people in the Desert Southwest who had to contend with a different kind of North and South. As a cultural and historical rupture, the U.S. War With Mexico² has caused damage, including

displacement and generations of casualties that continues to this day. The plights of those affected have been habitually overlooked in discussions of national history, too often relegated to echo in the realm of regional studies. Yet the US War With Mexico, which saw the US gain vast amounts of new territory, contributed directly to the emergence of the Civil War.

These observations, rather than debate which war is more significant, are made to directly acknowledge the multiple immense ruptures throughout North American history, despite a lack of equal retroactive attention. What happened in the Southwest in 1848 carries a weight as tremendous and devastating as that of the Civil War, even for those who don't know it. As a brief and simplified overview, in 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain and by 1846, a mere 25 years later, was already being assaulted by the United States for its land. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, the war ended and Mexico lost "nearly one million square miles of land — almost one-half of its territory. This territory, termed the Mexican Cession, included land that makes up the states of California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, Texas, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming" ("Mexican Cession"). To ease the transition, Mexican people living in land newly acquired by the U.S. were granted a year of Mexican citizen's rights before leaving to Mexico or claiming U.S. citizenship. On paper that means one thing, but on the scale of daily life, these people were immediately made foreign when the border shifted south.

The act of reframing histories of the Desert Southwest in this way, to make the unfamiliar familiar, is an act of distortion as it performs in this project. Rather than connote a negative sense, I use distortion as an apparatus by which one can know the

desert otherwise. That is, distortions of histories, bodies, borders, and languages are informative and important ways of knowing the desert. Further, bodily perceived distortion, that of felt intensities like heat, distance, and light are particularly extreme in a desert environment. The result is an increasing ability to attune, orient, retune, disorient, and reorient to multiple and dynamic understandings of desert place, and really place more broadly.

Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian* begins my project because it exemplifies all of these kinds of distortions and is situated during another American post-bellum. Published in 1985, it is a canonical text that reorients the reader to desert histories and experiences, beginning at the end of the U.S. War with Mexico when the conflict's long-term effects are still unclear and the immediate damages are fresh. The novel demands that national attention drifts westward alongside the kid, beginning with the opening imperative line, "See the child" (3). Once we see the kid, we follow him swiftly from his home in Tennessee, through St. Louis and westward across the plains, until "in the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine he rides up through the latterday republic of Fredonia³ into the town of Nacogdoches," where the novel settles into its present (5). *Blood Meridian* clearly situates itself in chronological and seasonal temporalities and at the same time tracks the protagonist's swift motion westward across great expanses of land and amidst the murkiness of borders, boundaries, and place names in the Borderlands. Simultaneity and multiplicity are key to understanding how McCarthy's West and my approach to the desert operate as its characters ride on through it experiencing how the desert distorts histories, laws, identities, languages, and human perceptions.

Besides the reality that in order to explore representations of the West one has to take on the tropes of a lineage of white male authors who arrive from other terrains, this text allows an exploration of the incredible amounts of research, and therefore historical documents and accounts, that McCarthy deposited into it. Undoubtedly a literary masterpiece for any place or time, it is incredibly vast and particular in its contextual scope and depth. Scholar John Sepich spent years tracking down and compiling many of the materials that McCarthy consorted. In 1993, Sepich originally published his findings as *Notes on Blood Meridian* (heretofore referred to as *Notes*), and in it he groups themes, historical figures, and obsolete words that McCarthy uses throughout the novel to try and contextualize them for readers. Indeed, McCarthy's text intensely confronts the reader with the many complex relationships between individuals, groups, and nations at a time and place when clearly mapped borders were still a novelty.

Blood Meridian tells stories of life in the Borderlands during a total, often violent, clash of cultures, languages, and identities. The kid rides West with some filibusters before joining a ruthless group of scalp hunters. Known as the Glanton Gang, these men are a historically real outfit, fictionalized here by McCarthy, hired by the Mexican territories to collect Comanche scalps for money. Also riding with them is the novel's primary villain, a seven-foot, 300 pound bald albino man named Judge Holden, often simply "the judge," who seems to show his power through the immense amounts of knowledge he dispels, the magic he somehow conjures, and his inferred immortality. Together, the characters in *Blood Meridian* ride through the desert and its countless more-than-human entanglements, including bigotry, storms, and heat.

In scholarship and general reception, *Blood Meridian* is considered on par with *Moby Dick* (Shaviro, Bloom) as one of the greatest American novels, though it is notorious because of its lavish and unabating scenes of violence that continually resist interpretation. According to James Dorson, the violence in *Blood Meridian* “deliberately subverts not just *a* meaning, but meaning itself” while Lee Clark Mitchell argues that while at first it may seem that “the novel’s violence defies narrative progress, occasioning no emotional release and thwarting any plot resolution,” eventually it “becomes apparent that depictions of violence emerge differently, in contrasting registers” (106, 262). Mitchell provides examples of violent acts committed and narrated in “close-up,” far away, and traumatic or haunting registers that press us “from a disparate perspective to contemplate what the body is prone to, as mere animate object a breath away from inanimate” (263). While I agree with Mitchell that McCarthy’s contrasting and multiple registers link the human and nonhuman closely, I propose the human and nonhuman as subjects, not objects. Violence in *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy’s way of showing how meaningful such acts were in forging nationhood and displays how easily some histories are thwarted, distorted, and sustained.

As readers, we aren’t just following the kid in a vacuum of desert space. We follow the kid through the thick atmosphere of McCarthy’s West, into the aftermath of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution; into the consequences of Lewis and Clark’s journey to the Pacific and back; and into the effects of the American Industrial Revolution, which brought with it technologies like steamboats, railroads and the cotton gin. Most importantly, it brushes all of these familiar moments of American history into the background, instead injecting us into the lesser known histories of the

Desert Southwest as some of the region becomes U.S. territory and before the American Civil War. Specifically, he engages the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Gadsden Purchase⁴, both of which saw the U.S. acquire land from Mexico, and both of which shaped the national and geographical boundaries of the two countries we are familiar with today. The novel has an ability to highlight pivotal historical events of the time without ever sounding like a history lesson.

Isolating a nameless teen and his brutal and unforgiving journey across the desert spaces of contested lands, McCarthy, in a writing style often violent towards the reader⁵, corrals our focus and forces us to confront the distortions of that desert and its violence. By highlighting the distortions of histories, laws, borders, bodies, and language in the Borderlands, McCarthy exposes anthropocentric understandings of human relationships. At the same time, he features distortions of environmental intensities like distance, time, light and heat, illuminating a more oblique approach to decentering the human while allowing the desert into the fore. The author engages with the desert represented as an empty environment upon which human activity happens, and more importantly as its own agential set of conditions and forces that can and do interact with human activity. This simultaneity opens up a multiple understanding of desert place which is at the heart of this project.

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When I used to tell people that I'm from El Paso, they mainly recognized it because it is a border city, attached to Ciudad Juárez, which not too many years ago was considered the

most dangerous in the world. Perplexingly, it was during that time that El Paso was ranked the safest city in the U.S.

On August 3, 2019, the world learned a new association. The number of victims reported dead reached 20, but two more would pass before the week was over. Another 24 were injured. We had no names yet, for the shooter or the victims. I was in complete disbelief. My partner told me his mom had almost gone to the WalMart with her boss, but decided not to. My brother was at a work event at Track One on lockdown. I watched my FaceBook feed obsessively for updates from friends and media.

I drove out there the next day. The Interfaith Alliance of the Southwest was going to hold a vigil at Ponder Park for the victims and the community. My stepfather, as the Baha'i representative of the Alliance, was asked to say some prayers in solidarity. Having just arrived in El Paso that afternoon, I felt a quiet singular to my memory — like a blanket of forced peace and confusion had enveloped my hometown. The joy of being back home was muted.

When my mother told me about the vigil, I lit up. I saw her frown. She and my brother were uneasy about being in an open, public space in a large group so soon after the tragedy. I convinced her to drive up Trans Mountain Road with me instead. As we sat there, I felt her mood shift. She was calmer, and I sensed that we could make it to the vigil, afterall.

Hundreds showed up. We sang, we cried, we cheered for local voices, we thanked the families of victims for sharing their stories. We watched as three WalMart employees were recognized for their bravery and praised by local news anchor and El Paso public figure Estela Casas. They were understandably too upset to say anything at all.

Immigration, language and vigilante justice are core border issues in the Southwest, and their contemporary intensities can sometimes be blinding. Understanding what has occurred in this region's past, and really wrapping your mind around for just how long it has gone on, is vital to understanding the present. Had the gunman any sense of Texas's long history, he would have understood that he was the other. Had he not feared people different from him, not feared being replaced by people whose families have been in the region for centuries, he would not have driven over 600 miles just to take innocent lives.

That night hundreds of us held our heads high and our spirits up, despite such hatred. We heard prayers and chants in several languages. At the end of the event, a mariachi band played "Amor Eterno," a beautiful song usually heard at funerals, and gently swayed together. I grabbed my mom and we both said how glad we were that we'd come.

The goal of this chapter is not to simply point out that history is told by the victors, but to help rethink the population of desert places in the Southwest.

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History

In the lead up to the US War with Mexico, the US was pushing to gain California and had just annexed Texas. In 1845, Zachary Taylor endeavored to shift the southern border from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande, a strategy that even at the time was disputed (Chávez 13-14). Officially, the US War with Mexico took place from 1846-1848, and ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a peace treaty between the United States (which at the time was a total of 30 states) and the newly independent Republic of Mexico. The war left Mexico devastated. Unofficially, the war had been bubbling underneath the surface for years as more American settlers headed west. Its repercussions are still being felt into the 21st century, something I will address with greater detail in later chapters.

Signed on February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo went into effect at the end of May that same year. In 1849, a year later, *Blood Meridian*'s the kid is riding through the Southwest Borderlands in the immediate aftermath of the war and the treaty, caught within its multiple histories—for example the US's acquisition of nearly half of Mexico's land and the California Gold Rush—and becomes a witness to things that were never preserved, whether they were lost or destroyed. Liana Andreasen attests that, despite McCarthy's work being rooted in historical and cultural realities, "McCarthy is not interested in rewriting history. His west is not a succession of moments through time but a comprehensive view of the stories, rumors, and causes that history erases" (25). McCarthy emphasizes the multiplicity of experience that often becomes eclipsed in favor of linear, distinct events. The author provides alternative actions and resistance to dominant historical narratives of the West, producing a set of lenses in lieu of a singular

lens with which readers can venture through the desert. This set of lenses is another way to point out that history is always-already distorted, and to explain the dense and profound capabilities of McCarthy's text, which on any given page bring with them the historical, the Biblical, the phenomenological, the geological, the mystical, and on and on.

McCarthy gestures to the existence of many histories in and beyond the novel, most explicitly through the judge. Part of what makes the judge so violent and evil is that readers witness his success deigning what is and isn't worth preserving, and how. I explore this in greater detail later in this chapter, but establish it now because it helps set up what's at stake with history. In a speech to his crew, the judge dictates, "In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories..." (329). In other words, the judge is aware that the history that survives, the "history of all," can never actually account for the multitudes of histories that exist. Part of the thrust of my project is to re-engage with completely devastating histories and actions that fill the Desert Southwest with so much of its tension and entanglement, and the simple way the judge can scrub out fact and flatten complexity reminds the reader of the fact that there are many histories, many Desert Southwests.

Chapter III of *Blood Meridian* begins with a section titled "Sought out to join an army," in which the kid, naked and in no mood for conversation, is woken by a man on a horse who shouts out to him trying to enlist him in their renegade army. The encounter illuminates how histories compete in battles of 'he said-she said' where varying opinions try to override one another as events unfold. It also establishes the concept of vigilante justice, one central to tales and realities of the Wild West, inviting the reader to ride along

with this group of heinous filibusters and upsetting the notion of the morally upright gunslinger (portrayed in many Westerns). Rather we follow the anti-heroes and dark violence of the Southwest in the late 1800s. The man on a horse shouts to the kid:

Was you the feller knocked in that Mexer's head yesterday evenin'? I aint the law.
Who wants to know?
Captain White. He wants to sign that feller up to join the army.
The army?
Yessir.
What army?
Company under Captain White. We goin to whip up on the Mexicans.
The war's over.
He says it aint over. (28-29)

The kid's only question before signing up is, "What do they give ye?" (29). The infantryman responds with grand promise: "Ever man gets a horse and his ammunition. I reckon we might find some clothes in your case. [...] You get to keep ever-thing you can raise. We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company wont come out a big landowner" (29-30). In spite of knowing Captain White is a racist and a holdout with every intention of personalizing the war, the kid's needs are few, and he seizes the opportunity afforded to a young, white man like himself.

Both Captain White's vigilante war and the kid's nonchalance counter the prominent idea that the effects of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, or any treaty really, are total and immediate. Via Captain White's stubbornness and the kid's willingness to ride on, the fact that the war's end could be refuted by any single person is a deviation from traditional historical narratives that survive a century into collective memory. Captain White's fundamental hatred of the Mexican "other" and his penchant for war and violence illustrate that all of the signatures in Washington D.C. could not halt wayward

actions by Americans who felt they had more left to take for themselves and their country. On the other hand, the kid is not particularly passionate about the Captain's cause. His sole concern remains how he can improve the quality of his daily life with basic needs like food, clothing, and transport across the desert vastness.

When the Captain asks directly, "What do you think of the treaty?" the kid tells him he doesn't know what to think about it (33). This gives White a chance to continue condemning the government's limited and slow process of peace and disarmament from atop his soapbox. The Captain has an unsettling response to the kid: "I'm afraid that's the case with a lot of Americans." It is ambiguous whether Captain White believes that Americans don't know what to think about the treaty or if he believes so strongly in his own thoughts about it. This part of their exchange resituates history on account of who gets to narrate it to whom. The novel favors the perspectives of many horrible white men, some modeled after historical individuals, and in doing so provides opposition to myths valorizing whites who filibustered, went out on bounty hunts, and took brutal advantage of the open spaces and inhabitants of the Borderlands.

Through a simultaneously brief and hyper-specific view of this moment in American history, McCarthy speaks to the distortion I define at the beginning of my chapter: history proper is not only told by the victors but it can act as a form of violence against other histories. Just a month before acquiring California from Mexico, the U.S. literally struck gold; this is a history that most are familiar with. The following year saw tens of thousands of people heading from the East to the West for a new start, driven primarily by their quest for wealth. Economic historians Karen Clay and Randall Jones, state, "For the period 1848-1850, lower-bound estimates of overland migration are more

than 101,000” while “For the period 1849-1850, arrivals by sea are conservatively estimated at 75,462” (999-1000). A massive migration in its own right, McCarthy makes sure to rope these forty-niners into *Blood Meridian*’s scope: “They saw patched argonauts from the states driving mules through the streets on their way south through the mountains to the coast. Goldseekers. Itinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague” (78).

The beauty of their inclusion is that readers view the protagonist viewing these goldseekers as they move along. We do not follow them into California; we only get a glimpse, and so too does the kid. They are in motion, in their only direction of promise. Of course, the stories of these goldseekers once they arrive to California are etched firmly into U.S. history curricula, so readers do not need much context to fill in what happens next.

McCarthy pivots away from this common knowledge, describing these goldseekers as a “heliotropic plague.” It redirects the reader’s focus from typical curricula involving national and individual interests, and toward the abject destruction of peoples and landscapes that these people brought with them. One of the underrepresented consequences of the California Gold Rush of 1849 is that it displaced many Indigenous peoples and Mexicans who had called that land their homes for generations. When the goldseekers moved west, they also brought with them disease — literal plagues — that killed masses of Indigenous peoples as a result. Within the first two years of California’s statehood, over 100,000 Native Americans had died by illness and war (Blakemore). By staying so closely stuck to a protagonist who never stays any one place too long, we encounter histories like that of the 49ers in much the same way the kid does — through

rumor, perception, and shared experience. This speaks to the ways that histories as cultures become distorted over time and space, making the predominant historical narrative more like whatever survives a generations-long game of telephone.

Nearer to the end of the novel, the kid grown into middle age, we follow him traversing through the American West alone, with no gang of outlaws, vigilantes, or companions. It is some eighteen years later, and the U.S. has begun to resemble what we know it as today, though of course this did not all happen at once. By McCarthy's design, the kid is a singular presence, and though he has connections between distant towns and peoples, he remains resistant to the assigned role of being a traveler bearing tidings:

They were remote places for news that he traveled in and in those uncertain times men toasted the ascension of rulers already deposed and hailed the coronation of kings murdered and in their graves. Of such corporal histories even as these he bore no tidings and although it was the custom in that wilderness to stop with any traveler and exchange the news he seemed to travel with no news at all, as if the doings of the world were too slanderous for him to truck with, or perhaps too trivial. (312)

With the phrase "uncertain times," McCarthy's narrator briefly adopts a historical and reassuring tone, implying present progress since "those uncertain times" while simultaneously addressing the gaps and interstices that don't usually make it into mainstream discussions about history. Marginalia. Complexities. The irony of the phrase "uncertain times" is that times at any point are always already uncertain, despite the use of historical perspectives which can view past events as fixed. Distortion rears itself again here. In dismantling time from a fixed, linear concept to a rhizomatic one, it becomes easy to see how history and culture can be considered malleable.

The landscape is too vast for information to blanket all at once. Information about rulers and kings is emplaced in and limited by human bodies, "corporal histories" which,

compared to the vastness of the desert, are extremely miniscule. The modifier “corporal” is important. The kid doesn’t bother with the histories tied to the bodies that carry them. The kid disrupts the flow and exchange of information “in that wilderness” by *not* carrying news or tidings. In some strange way, this alleviates him from certain responsibilities and emphasizes the role of the wild environment of the desert. That wilderness has a way of absorbing, disrupting, and making seem small the duties of man. The kid’s indifference is in concert with the distortions of histories taking place across the Borderlands. These remote places gain nothing from him in terms of information, and the kid rides out in much the same manner as he rode in.

We only learn the kid’s history because of the suddenly divulgent narrator. In the very next paragraph, despite the kid’s refusal to carry news of anything he has witnessed, McCarthy’s narrator betrays the silence of the protagonist by telling us everything the kid saw and how and when he saw it:

He saw men killed with guns and with knives and with ropes and he saw women fought over to the death whose value they themselves set at two dollars. He saw ships from the land of China chained in the small harbors and bales of tea and silks and spices broken open with swords by small yellow men with speech like cats. On that lonely coast where the steep rocks cradled a dark and muttersome sea he saw vultures at their soaring whose wingspan so dwarfed all lesser birds that the eagles shrieking underneath were more like terns or plovers. He saw piles of gold a hat would scarcely have covered wagered on the turn of a card and lost and he saw bears and lions turned loose in pits to fight wild bulls to the death and he was twice in the city of San Francisco and twice saw it burn and never went back, riding out on horseback along the road to the south where all night the shape of the city burned against the sky and burned again in the black waters of the sea where dolphins rolled through the flames, fire in the lake, through the fall of burning timbers and the cries of the lost. He never saw the expriest again. Of the judge he heard rumor everywhere. (312-313)

The refrain “he saw” demands the reader’s seeing. As much a distortion as it is an inversion of the novel’s opening imperative line, the passage’s specificity pushes us not

to just “see the child”, but to *see the child see*. At last he reaches the west coast, and when we arrive there with him not only do we see the influx of Chinese immigrants and goods beginning to take place, but we see how the kid sees these immigrants. The violence of the wilderness the kid has borne witness to has shaped the way he sees: his thoughts are racist and serve to other the Chinese, likening them more to animals than people. We see the kid seeing the amounts of gold discovered and trying to make sense of it. We see his understanding of gambling and prostitution. We witness, through the kid’s witnessing, the burning of San Francisco in 1851. But we are also witness to the wildlife of this place — the vultures, eagles, bears, lions, and dolphins. Most importantly, the kid’s eyes veer with special attention toward the entanglement of the human and nonhuman. As the bears and lions are forced by men to fight bulls, and the dolphins “rolled through the flames” of the giant fire, McCarthy reminds us that animals, too, have been witnesses and participants throughout history, and are perhaps as equally traumatized.

The author’s technique of using the kid to show and not tell proves that there are many events that happen in a moment, and only that which is recorded and kept safe prevails. Nowhere in the novel is this point made more clearly than when we learn about the judge’s approach to history and memory, specifically record keeping. After a long day of studying artifacts and other things amidst what the narrator describes as “the ruins of an older culture deep in the stone mountains,” the judge takes up “each piece, flint or potsherd or tool of bone, and deftly sketched it into the book” (139, 140). Once he is pleased with his representations of each item, he destroys them, so that only his drawings exist. When asked his plans with this notebook, “the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man” (140). I will elaborate upon the

repercussions on memory later in the chapter, but for now it is crucial to recognize that the judge is a self-appointed historian who reminds the reader how easily history can be lost or distorted, and the significance of keeping that duty out of the hands of a singular person.

Law

The desert landscape, with all of its horizons, vastness, and openness, has a particular way of distorting the law. It's for this reason that the leap to the concept of the desert as void is well rehearsed. Scholar John Beck explains, "the trope of the desert as without form and void enables the proliferation of all other tropes; the desert becomes the place of infinite metaphorical multiplicity" (63-64). For Beck, this means that the concept of "desert as vacancy" can produce ways of thinking about the desert as chaos. Indeed, thinking about the desert as void has invited endless amounts of violence tied to the law and lawlessness. Think about any John Ford or Sergio Leone Westerns, which often culminate with some desert town shootout. Throw in a battle against some Native Americans and you've got the epitome of the "Wild West" aesthetic. In the introduction, I explored the outlaw cowboy and Wild West tropes present in 21st century popular culture like *Red Dead Redemption* and *Westworld*. Thinking about the desert as void creates a space upon which the law is made to be broken, or distorted, and I push this even further in Chapter 2 with an analysis of the film *Sicario*.

I've already explored how with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans were suddenly made foreign. Spawning directly from that document was the displacement and uprooting of hundreds of thousands peoples in the area who had been

there for generations and generations. The violence wrung out of that treaty was systematized. Not unlike the missionaries and conquistadors before them, the new wave of white American frontiersmen sought to destroy Indigenous identities and cultures, and “by the 1880s, the U.S. operated 60 schools for 6,200 Indian students, including reservation day schools and reservation boarding schools” (“History and Culture: Boarding Schools”). While there, children and adolescents were forced to assimilate by speaking English instead of their native tongue, cutting their long hair short, wearing “civilized” clothes, and participating in Christian practices. It wouldn’t be until 1978, when the Indian Child Welfare Act passed, that “Native American parents gained the legal right to deny their children’s placement in off-reservation schools” (ibid.).

This was a reality in the 19th century and well into the 20th, as so many headed west or north, legally or illegally. Popular culture of the Southwest is contaminated and defined by a few archetypal figures and their depictions: racist portrayals of “uncivilized” Native Americans, righteous white male sherriffs, and all manner of outlaws. The Desert and the West as void, or “no man’s land,” has romanticized and fetishized it as open for the taking; but the situation was and has always been far more complex, especially as early on many laws were dictated in-situ. Federally, the law’s effects were slow to reach from the capital, and even laws that would eventually help native Indigenous peoples in the 20th century, such as the Indian Education Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Bureau of Acknowledgement and Research⁶, had laggard impacts. Certainly, lawlessness in the desert is an aspect of the ever-changing cultural and political landscape in the region. The Wild West wouldn’t be wild without the expanses of what are perceived to be

chartered and unchartered territories, barren wilderness, and especially the figure of the outlaw.

Taking the wild's invitation to violence, the Glanton gang goes particularly rogue when they seize and overtake a ferry that carries travelers across the Colorado River. Glanton has the Yumas agree to attack the ferry, and then pleads for help from the doctor, who is initially in charge of the ferry. When the Yumas do attack, the Glanton gang are ready and kill many of them, eventually taking over the ferry. Instead of charging a dollar a head, they raise it to four, until "Ultimately all pretense was dropped and the immigrants were robbed outright. Travelers were beaten and their arms and goods appropriated and they were sent destitute and beggared into the desert" (262). If anything, the novel shows how the law is readily subverted by those who make it.

One way of making law, as with a treaty or constitution, is through language. With regard to *Blood Meridian*, legal language has very real capabilities, tied to both the tangible and intangible, of distorting power. A few examples include naming, territory, and identity. Like a foreign tongue, legalese presents itself in cognates and contexts you may know from somewhere, but without practice and access to it, one you'll never master. For someone fluent in legal speak, like the novel's Judge Holden, one can harness the power to distort the law's meanings as one sees fit. Even with an appellation like "judge," we are tempted to ask, and the kid does so, *the judge of what?* There is only one passage in the text where we get an answer. The kid is administered ether for a surgery, and for the next few days he hallucinates and dreams about the judge, prefaced with the narrator's ironic question, "Who would come other?" (309):

In the white and empty room he stood in his bespoke suit with his hat in his hand and he peered down with his small and lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps. (310)

A terrifying vision in white, the judge's eyes allow the kid to account for the unaccountable. The judge and his choices are not bound by the law because that would mean that the judge becomes beholden to something other than himself. Through this part of the dream, the kid's name is revealed to him, "as a thing already accomplished." Again the reader must rely on the phrase "he saw," with the kid as the eye of the story. We do not get to see the name directly, but this does confirm his name as a thing being witnessed and acted upon. The dream continues:

In his delirium he ransacked the linens of his pallet for arms but there were none. The judge smiled. The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man he could never see in his entirety but he seemed an artisan and a worker in metal. The judge enshadowed him where he crouched at his trade but he was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men's fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (310)

The language of this passage is par for the course in terms of *Blood Meridian's* dense style. The narrator has stated "of this is the judge judge," and yet it is not quite clear what the 'this' refers to. The scene describes the kid's visions of the judge hunching over a metalworker who "seeks favor with the judge" by trying to make "a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current." The metalworker is trying to cold forge a likeness of the judge for some kind of currency, and yet his task is to create

“some coinage for a dawn that would not be.” The man’s task is impossible; the judge’s likeness cannot be replicated, his image cannot be made into currency; this is what the judge is eternally judging, and why the night does not end. The cold forger fails to distort his metal into money that passes, just like Glanton fails to produce a severed head of “Gomez” who passes — but the judge’s actions, being outside the law, natural and supernatural, do not fail. Even in fever dreams, the judge himself is beyond representation, beyond replication, beyond the law. He is not *a* judge, he is *the* judge, and repetition of the definite article cements the notion that his is the ultimate judgement. Unfortunately, the judge, like so many fictional and nonfictional characters of the Desert Southwest, has a power, through his language and title, to distort the law to suit his privilege and desire. His representations have legal impact upon the fate of one or many.

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What words do you use to describe your neighborhood, what are the names for different sides of your town? What do they convey about the place? If a war between your state and a state next to it took place, and at the end your side of town became part of the other state’s territory, where would you belong? How would you identify? How long would it take for those physical borders to be set, and how would they be concretized and then monitored? Who gets to pass through them, and what will the generations to come remember of the previous ones?

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Culture, Borders, and Bodies

All of this is just one way of provoking thought about what it means to have roots in a place, and then to be uprooted. With a less fixed and more multiple sense of history and of the Desert Southwest, *Blood Meridian* displays an array of cultures that are simultaneously part of the region. The novel reframes cultural divides by blurring racial and ethnic relationships; there is much more to the narrative than whites versus non-whites. Nationhood and tribal affiliation complicate things even further, and McCarthy excels at clarifying just how intertwined white, Mexican, and Indigenous lives are, and at the same time acknowledges the atrocities that proliferated based on particular ethnicities and nationalities. The author deals diligently with the messy entanglements of the Southwest Borderlands, demonstrating how nothing is without distortion. Lines are drawn, place names are given, battles are fought, lines are reimagined and redrawn.

In Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which has become one of the most cited and well known texts about the American Southwest and Mexico, she writes:

The U.S-Mexican border *es una herida abierta*⁷ where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country — a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. (25)

Her distinction between a border and a borderland helps orient one who may only have a clear understanding of the former. In fact, to have a clear understanding of a borderland is to reject fixity and embrace the messy, complex reality of sociocultural entanglement. It also requires acknowledging and working toward a fruitful relationship with the land, by

which I mean its resources, its animals, vegetation, and even climate and atmosphere. The southern border of Texas was officially moved south from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande, both often considered “natural borders,” on December 29, 1845, with the annexation of Texas. When this happened, the 100,000 Mexican citizens native to Texas, or *tejanos*, were immediately made foreign, and “separated from Mexico, the Native Mexican-Texan no longer looked toward Mexico as home” (Anzaldúa 28-29). The displacement they felt and suffered from as a result was mirrored throughout the Southwest and, despite Anzaldúa’s success and poignancy in telling this history, still remains largely blanketed by other histories of the area.

In any text about the Desert Southwest the conditions of borders and the Borderlands have a massive impact, explicitly and implicitly. Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation investigate the transformation from the singular US-Mexico Border to multiple borders, taking into consideration the proliferation of borders that occurs psychologically as much as physically. The Border makes way for borders to continue long after one has migrated across national lines. For now, I will provide two examples from *Blood Meridian* to illustrate the power of fiction to convey complexities in the region at the time with regard to identity and culture along the border, and I will ask the reader to keep in mind how these complexities have evolved to present day. The first is a lengthy polemic by filibuster and blatant bigot Captain White. After asking the kid where he had come from and where he was robbed, White lets loose with racist rhetoric:

The captain leaned back and folded his arms. What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing

themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them.

[...]

Right now they are forming in Washington a commission to come out here and draw up the boundary lines between our country and Mexico. I don't think there's any question that ultimately Sonora will become a United States territory.

Guaymas a U S port. Americans will be able to get to California without having to pass through our benighted sister republic and our citizens will be protected at last from the notorious packs of cutthroats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to travel.

The captain was watching the kid. The kid looked uneasy. Son, said the captain. We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. That's right. We are to spearhead the drive. We have the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California. (34)

There is a lot to parse here, were one to go through each statement, not limited to hate speech, white nationalism, and speculation. The fundamental factors, however, are more demanding of my focus on distorting borders. Captain White believes that those who can't govern themselves essentially mandate others to do it for them. He is also aware of the capital convening to "draw up the boundary lines" between the U.S. and Mexico. As white, American saviors, he believes that, along with California's Governor Burnett, they are going to somehow liberate the land. This rhetoric, and why I include the majority of his speech to the kid, is a pristine example of what Anzaldúa means when she states, "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*." In Captain White's views there is a clear "us and them," and the new borders that are to be drawn solidify this because the old ones couldn't. Captain White's speech also contains bits of information that implicate the U.S. government, be it Washington D.C. or Governor Burnett, as prominent players in the establishment of borders. By doing this, McCarthy highlights the finer details of history come forth for your consideration. The author invokes that there is a politics at work on the land and that haunts people and their

actions. Government, far from impartial, has often been complicit in establishing clearly defined boundaries that its patriots are meant to uphold.

The Gang have flopped in Chihuahua with Governor Trias, a scene I will return to shortly, and then again in the village of Coyame. After initially being welcomed in lieu of Gómez, they further deplete the town of its hospitality and spirit, and the Glanton gang rides on toward Texas:

They wandered the borderland for weeks seeking some sign of the Apache. Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

The shift here is one towards the immanence of the landscape and in their constants, and as “ordained agents of the actual” the riders are “dividing out the world which they encountered” while “leaving what had been” (the past) and “what would never be” (any future other than the one they activate) leveled and “extinguished on the ground behind them.” In some ways the Borderland here is more than just the land controlled and exchanged between countries and states; it is a reference to the being-with that takes place in the desert. Our vision of them as they make this ride is as “spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat.” The spectral, the dust, and the heat are essentials of a desert space, one where these forces are especially abundant.

McCarthy weaves in the nonhuman, and makes these riders anonymous, devoiding them

of their identities, and yet they become “like beings provoked out of the absolute rock...doomed and mute.” This is their becoming-with the desert.

New borders emerge as the elements of spatial and temporal vastness, heat, light, and their intensities engage with distortion in a phenomenological sense, making their embodied experiences across the terrain seem paradoxically central and peripheral. In this scene, for example, their constant motion across the land seems miniscule in comparison to the immense scale of the Borderland they are traversing. This environment brings storms and disease, but also fruits, flowers, animals, and light. The image of them as spectre horseman alludes to the depth of the temporal dimension — deep time — that the desert reveals throughout the novel by way of ruins, bones and stories. It is August and into September that they are wandering the Borderland, and anyone who has spent time in the Southwest during those months knows that the heat during the day is nothing short of intense. When extreme heat is coupled with the blinding amounts of light that a cloudless blue sky and brown or red terrain reflect, even the shortest distances can be antagonizing to walk. The deserts of the Borderlands are full of human and nonhuman borders, and with them nonhuman agencies that distort human perception. A large focus of my project, I will return to this entanglement at the end of this chapter.

In distinguishing “us” from “them,” Anzaldúa’s borders gesture to clear claims to identity. But her “us” is comprised of a *mestiza* identity that is itself compound and complicated because distorting borders distorts identities, and the bodies that carry them. For Anzaldúa the *mestiza* “faces the dilemma of the mixed breed...*la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (100). The Borderlands for Anzaldúa are a place where one is simultaneously conflicted and comfortable, where

“you are the battleground / where enemies are kin to each other; / you are at home, a stranger” (216). The *mestiza* body is itself a battleground because it problematizes ideals of purity which has historically viewed mixed blood as a distortion of racial identity. Even though *Blood Meridian* hardly engages with women’s plights or struggles—and thus more with *mestizo* than *mestiza*—the novel’s Borderlands setting is permeated with such problems of identity and *mestizaje*.

McCarthy performs the blurs and distinctions of race much as he does with history, laws, and borders. The kid is enlisted by Judge Holden and John Joel Glanton in Chihuahua City. John Glanton is the infamous leader of the Glanton gang, whom McCarthy uses as the historical dressing of the novel. According to McCarthy scholar John Sepich, the actual Glanton was heading westward “as an emigrant seeking the gold of California who took a scalp-hunting job with Chihuahua in order to finance the rest of his trip” (22). In the novel, though, the Governor of Chihuahua, Angel Trias, offers the Glanton gang money directly. In their contract, Trias and his state are “to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gomez's head” (79). Though the novel doesn’t spend much time explaining exactly who Gomez is, the context provided is enough for readers to believe it as motivation for the bellicose Glanton.

The Glanton gang, having trouble finding and collecting Native American scalps, decides to start scalping Mexicans and attempts to pass them off for pay, arriving to Chihuahua “haggard and filthy and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted” (185). To the gang of mostly white reprobates, the idea was sound because dark hair and dark skin are features that belong to Native peoples and Mexicans. They take advantage of the fact that people in the Borderlands share physical

traits. Their exploitation is eventually discovered, and a week later there is an 8,000 peso bounty put out for the gang's leader, but the deeds are done and the fact remains that brown bodies are violently distorted to suit the gang's barbaric and monetary goals.

In another example, after raiding a village of sleeping Gileños⁸, "the partisans nineteen in number bearing down upon the encampment where there lay sleeping upward of a thousand souls," and after their subsequent taking of hundreds of scalps, the gang spots the remaining Apache warriors in the distance. Glanton manages to shoot their apparent leader and, thinking it could be Gomez, parades the body's severed head around in gory victory (155). The judge engages with him, simply replying as follows:

It's not him.

What's not?

The judge nodded. That.

Glanton turned the shaft. The head with its long dark locks swung about to face him.

Who do you think it is if it aint him?

The judge shook his head. It's not Gomez. He nodded toward the thing. That gentleman is sangre puro. Gomez is Mexican.

He aint all Mexican.

You cant be all Mexican. It's like being all mongrel. But that's not Gomez because I've seen Gomez and it's not him.

Will it pass for him?

No. (159-60)

An obvious reading of this passage includes paying close attention to the racism exuding from the equation of "Mexican" with "mongrel." This sets up a hierarchy and an economy of violence between the Native peoples, Mexicans, and white Christians, and rests all of cultural identity on appearance. The man whose head Glanton presents on his lance appears to the judge to be "sangre puro" — of pure blood — and therefore cannot be Gomez because Gomez is mixed.

Determining Gomez's identity based on appearance engages with the idea of racial "passing," one that hinges on the tensions between being of pure or mixed blood. Discussions of passing in North American literature are often concerned around African Americans passing or not passing for white. A powerful example, writer Nella Larsen uses the act as both a title and premise in her 1929 novel *Passing*, which has since become a staple in thinking through race relations between Blacks and whites in the early 20th century. The discussion around passing in the Southwest — whether Native, Mexican, or Mexican-American — is equally complex.

It cannot be overstated that Indigenous peoples and their tribes, though amalgamated in the rearview mirror of U.S. history curricula and popular culture, had their own distinct and various ways of life. What's more, the white pioneers of the 1800s were not the first white men to contact Native peoples in the West; some tribes were peaceful and conquered, and others were violent to outsiders and through skill and luck remained independent into the 1860s (for example, the Navajo and some Apaches). Hernán Cortés's colonial expedition into Mexico began in 1519, and cost the Aztecs their empire, which soon got subsumed and destroyed by the Spanish Empire. Other conquistadors, including Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, and Juan de Oñate spent much of the 16th century in search of riches and resources, often settling for the latter. These men and their troops ruled over the Native peoples of North America, forcing them into horrific living conditions, slavery and war. The Spanish missions became epicenters for spreading and enforcing Catholicism, which still has a firm stronghold in the iconography of Southwest to this day.

What gets lost in the conflation of Indigenous, Spanish and Mexican histories is that it was not one moment, but “centuries of subjugation of Indian people by the Spanish had produced the rich cultural and racial amalgamation of the Mexican people” (“Mexican Cession”). This place has layers. *Mestizaje*. Spanish blood had been mixed with Indigenous blood, and subsequent generations would no longer be literal *sangre puros*, like the slain chief in Glanton’s hand, but who, like Gomez, would claim Mexican as their identity. The juxtaposition between the pure and the mixed is yet another way to employ the tactic of distortion that emphasizes or highlights the given in order to show that the given isn’t truly the given. In other words, distorting what it means to be *sangre puro* also illuminates what it means to be mixed.

Interestingly, the only other time the novel mentions *sangre* is also in reference to Gomez. In a cantina near Janos, Chihuahua, the kid and some of the early members of Glanton’s outfit, like Toadvine, Bathcat, and Vandiemerlander are approached by a peculiar old man. The old man asks, “You are Texas?” then laments:

Gomez, Gomez, said the old man. Even Gomez. Who can ride against the Tejanos? They are soldiers. Que soldados tan valientes. La sangre de Gomez, sangre de la gente... He looked up. Blood, he said. This country is give much blood. This Mexico. This is a thirsty country. The blood of a thousand Christs. Nothing. (100, 102)

We don’t get much biographical information on Gomez aside from these two passages, which both mention *sangre* in a work titled *Blood Meridian*. We can infer that he is no *sangre puro*, but that his blood is in fact the blood of the Mexican people, *sangre de la gente*. Also, the use of the word in Spanish separates it from the many uses (146 by my count) of the word in English. McCarthy’s deliberate use of certain words or dialogue in English or Spanish is a tactic I discuss in more detail shortly.

To Glanton, the severed head and body he presents the judge could serve as Gomez's if he can get the judge to approve. That a body of a person of color has to pass, even in death, is indicative of the harsh and continuous scrutiny based on ethnic features like hair, skin color and facial structure that people of color have always undergone from white oppressors. The fact that the judge doesn't approve is the only thing that stops them from taking the severed head back to Governor Trias for their reward.

This exchange between Glanton, the judge and the severed head, as racist and abhorrent as it is, sheds light on identity politics many Latinx peoples with Indigenous descent in the American Southwest still face and grapple with, both in the U.S. and Mexico. As I explore in the remaining chapters of this dissertation, proximity between places, people, and cultures in the desert welcomes the crossing and distorting of borders. Those borders are set up to monitor—keep in or out—certain bodies. As a result, sometimes those bodies must pass racially in order to survive, though, as I investigate, they are often expected to pass after death as well.

When the gang returns from their scalphunt, they are greeted in all their gory glory with “a hero's welcome” by the city of Chihuahua (165). The company are asked to dine at Governor Trias's palace, at which point the narrator paints a more robust, sophisticated picture of the host: “This Angel Trias who was governor had been sent abroad as a young man for his education and was widely read in the classics and was a student of languages. He was also a man among men and the rough warriors he'd hired for the protection of the state seemed to warm something in him” (168). In a novel made infamous by its numerous and meticulous descriptions of Borderland violence, this brief glimpse at a Mexican governor who is worldly, educated and amused by the boorish

Americans he has hired to do his bloody bidding is a moment of destroying the former equation of Mexican to mongrel, and distorting the dominant stereotypical identity of Mexicans in American literature.

Conversely, Glanton's gang, described in the narrative voice as Americans, is presented as an unruly, unabashedly ignorant group: "Patriotic toasts were drunk, the governor's aides raising their glasses to Washington and Franklin and the Americans responding with yet more of their own country's heroes, ignorant alike of diplomacy and any name at all from the pantheon of their sister republic" (169). Granted, Mexico by this time had been through many regime changes, but this specifically shows us two things. First, that the triumphant lore and mythology of those great Americans Washington and Franklin had by 1849 been firmly established within the collective memory of the populace and the international community. Second, that these Americans who fought and sought out war and conflict in the gray areas of land newly acquired or lost — depending on whose history you are reading — had no interest in building solidarity nor learning the lore and mythology of Mexico.

This inverts and distorts a traditional notion of Americans as civilized and Mexicans as savages, rearranging the hierarchy previously described between Native people, Mexicans, and white Christians (here referred to as Americans, but also referred to as Saxons by McCarthy's narrator when they are north of the border (54)). Not only does the narrative flip the script on civilization versus savagery, but the reader learns that the Mexican citizenry come to detest the Americans, who are ravaging their town with their newly acquired wealth and blatant disregard for women and the town's establishments. After a long description of the Glanton Gang's public antics, including

riding horses indoors and public drunkenness, “Charcoal scrawls appeared on the limewashed walls. Mejor los indios” (171). Since their arrival, these Mexican people prefer the Indigenous tribes to the wreckless Americans who had been hired to kill those Natives and welcomed into their town to much fanfare. The reader must translate the Spanish phrase into “Mejor los indios” into “Better the Indians”⁹ in order to understand this, but it is also one of many instances McCarthy places that demand on his readers.

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Growing up in El Paso, Spanish was spoken everywhere I went. It was at school, when parents would come pick up their kids, and it was in the teacher’s mouth when they needed to respond. It was at home when my Tías and my grandma, who we called Guica, were around. It was in stores, restaurants, hospitals, playgrounds. I was three years old when I learned “sientate” as a word in neither English nor Spanish — it simply was a command for me to sit down when the teacher wanted me to. As soon as Guica, my Tías and my father, whose first language is Spanish, got into a room with all us primos, it came out as a way to keep my cousins and I from knowing just exactly what they were talking about.

As I got older, I grew more and more ashamed that I couldn’t speak it fluently. I would enter the gas station to pay and be greeted with Spanish and fluster immediately, hoping that the basics I knew for a short transaction would suffice and that whoever was working the counter didn’t want to chat too much. Working for a cookie and ice cream company in the mall, I learned how to talk to customers in a very food and drink specific

vocabulary. So many times as an undergrad, sitting at my desk waiting for class to begin, I listened to what the students around me laughed about. Catching only intermittent words and the general tone, I felt simultaneously ignored and unable to participate.

It wasn't until nearly a decade later that I learned from colleagues at Arizona State University that I am what is called a "heritage learner." My colleagues encouraged me to keep practicing my Spanish, and to understand the conditions under which my father grew up in order to shed some of my shame. His teachers, Catholic nuns, wouldn't allow Spanish to be spoken in the classroom, and the punishment included hitting. Mine is only one such story, there are any number of combinations of dialects, bi- and trilingualisms, and even silences that remind us of the diversity of the region the Borderlands.

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Language

With the blends and divides of histories, laws, and identities present in the Desert Southwest come its many tongues, as well as many opportunities for misunderstandings attributed to being lost in translation. Though the void may at first seem like the definitive depiction of the desert in the novel, McCarthy's narrator pays much attention to the specificities of the landscape and language, filling the "purgatorial waste" with gemstones, volcanic ash, specific plants like ocotillo, pricklypear, or creosote, and even lots of color (63). Further, the use of Spanish words seems anchored to geographical places, and interestingly mirrors the culture of the area that the riders move through. The

text performs an unfolding of the desert with its varieties of life rather than perpetuating the cliché of the desert as a rigid and monotonous landscape.

Language in *Blood Meridian* distorts human perceptions of the desert while also decentering the human. For example, after eventually purchasing their arms, the riders leave the outskirts of Chihuahua City and head for the town of Corralitos, a three-day ride north. On the second day, the narrator describes how they “rode up through cholla and nopal, a dwarf forest of spined things, through a stone gap in the mountains and down among blooming artemisia and aloe. They crossed a broad plain of desert grass dotted with palmilla” (88). Certainly, the plant names and attention to their blooms combats many readings of this novel as damning the desert to desolation. This is one of numerous instances of the narrator’s knowledge of the local landscape, when it does veer into the botanical as opposed to the barren. In Lee Clark Mitchell’s examination of the violent style of *Blood Meridian*, he argues that McCarthy’s language “tests assumptions by leveling the human to the minimally animate, and animate life to no greater moment than inert rocks and insensate shrubs” and calls this an “apparent challenge to anthropomorphism” (259).

Rather than a challenge to anthropomorphism, the style in *Blood Meridian*, and at least its attention to the nonhuman in lush descriptive passages like the one above, it is a challenge to rampant anthropocentrism, distorting and decentering the human in favor of understanding a fuller set of relationships. Referring to “vacillations” in McCarthy’s style, and sentences that range from unaffected to enraptured, Mitchell states that the “shape-shifting instability of style disorients us, making our experience of the novel as unsettling as the kid’s experience of the West itself” (265-266). The disorientation

Mitchell alludes to is a product of distortion through rhetoric. His observations here are profoundly astute; the narrative voice shifts so often and from such curt, terse phrases about the desert as “shoreless void” or “purgatorial waste” to winding sentences like, “In a night so beclamored with the jackal-yapping of coyotes and the cries of owls the howl of that old dog wolf was the one sound they knew to issue from its right form, a solitary lobo, perhaps gray at the muzzle, hung like a marionette from the moon with his long mouth gibbering” (246, 63, 117). Such descriptions as the latter demonstrate the consideration for life and things beyond the human, challenging an anthropocentric view in favor of a nonhuman phenomenology. It forces us to see outside of ourselves as humans, begging care and speculation about nonhuman relationships in the desert.

McCarthy’s use of Spanish and arcane English contributes to the disruption of a culturally homogenous or devoid Desert Southwest. Just after the riders reach Corralitos, we learn that, “They spent the night in the corral of a hacienda where all night men kept watchfires burning on the azoteas or roofs” (88). The narrator’s use of both the English and Spanish word for roof gestures to the blurring of language present as the riders head north from Chihuahua City into the border regions where Corralitos is located. Importantly, once again the narrator is also using the vocabulary of this particular location, with words like corral and hacienda, both of which have been adopted into contemporary English and are generally used without translation today.

The author distorts his language to suit tone, identity, and place. Sepich’s *Notes* contains a brief addendum about the languages used in *Blood Meridian*, and addresses how its “mid-nineteenth century Southwest landscape is a crossroads for many nationalities” (95). The novel certainly gestures towards this with its inclusion of English,

French, Spanish, and even German, all of which could be found in the region at that time. Perhaps less apparent because McCarthy does not incorporate them, is that there were already many Indigenous languages being spoken as well. Though the Cormac McCarthy Society has provided translations of most of *Blood Meridian*'s dialogue written in Spanish, the definitive translations remain those compiled by Sepich.¹⁰ But even these are limited when it comes to slang, and arcane words used in both Spanish and English like “sereño” and “anchorite”. While *Notes* does a more extensive job with the translations, it also doesn't account for words that name places or plants; an ocotillo is an ocotillo and a rebozo is a rebozo.

Since McCarthy utilizes languages contemporary to the time within the novel, as well as syntax, slang, and vernacular, the list of vocabulary homework for any reader fluent in English and/or Spanish remains quite long. McCarthy forces the reader to parse out language and stories from cultures and times vastly different than we may be familiar with. In terms of translation, it's necessary to keep in mind how translation not only chokes and distorts meaning, but also affect and intent. So much of our knowledge of history and culture is dependent on what language(s) we learn it in. Herein lie the effects of distortion through language, and really of any representational conventions. Language is a representational distortion of things and translation becomes, in fact, a doubled distortion. Through translation we both lose and gain an understanding of the thoughts or things construed into words. Fluency breeds fullness, and yet even for native English speakers, McCarthy's list of English words requires one to either seek out or forego the meanings of words like apostate, fontanel, and slaloming (116, 156, 136).

One character in *Blood Meridian* stands out as an effortless and omniscient polyglot. In contrast to the kid and just about every other character in the novel, the judge is willing and able to speak eloquently and fluently in whatever language is demanded of him by any given geographical or cultural situation. One such scene occurs when Glanton and the judge meet with Speyer, a Jewish man in charge of selling the gang some arms. Glanton's wayward tests of one of the guns results in the killings of a cat, birds, a goat, and alarm from local Sergeant Aguilar. To diffuse the tension, the judge pulls Sergeant Aguilar aside and draws his attention to one of two men in their group named Jackson, the only black man among them. He spins a tale, in Spanish, of Jackson's journey, including "anthropological speculations as to the propagation of the races in their dispersion and isolation through the agency of geological cataclysm and an assessment of racial traits with respect to climatic and geographical influences" (84-85). Jackson, who cannot understand Spanish, asks repeatedly what the judge is saying to the Sergeant. After the fourth time Jackson asks, Judge Holden at last replies in enigmatic English legalese, ultimately conveying that "Words are things. The words [Aguilar] is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning" (85). The judge places importance on language in a way that he does not place importance on any other forms of representation, though his own representations are paramount, as his notebooks attest.

This thread exists at the very start of the novel, too. When we first meet the judge, he arrives at a tent where the Reverend Green is giving a sermon. He calls the attention of all in the tent and proceeds to tell them the Reverend is an outlaw, a fraud, and has had relations with an 11-year-old girl and "congress with a goat" (6-7). The people in the tent

are in a violent uproar, seeking to end the Reverend's life. The judge soon leaves, and goes off to drink at a bar. When someone there asks how he knows all of this, he replies, "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (8). Though entirely false, his words, his personal call to arms, had real and immediate consequences in the world.

Words are things, and names are words with which we world. Names carry historical, cultural, and personal weight to them, and, as Isabelle Stengers warns, "Naming is a serious, that is, a pragmatic business, when it means giving to what is named the power to induce thinking and feeling in a particular way" ("Gaia, the Urgency to Think (and Feel)"). The act of naming produces a representational referent, from which seep out connotations and affect. For instance, Tucson is a distorted rendering of "T^s-iuk-shan," an O'odham phrase for "black base,"¹¹ which refers to "the fact that the base of the mountain is darker than its summit" (Granger 630). Once the Spanish arrived, their pronunciation "yielded Tuqui Son or the current Tucson [sometimes Tucsón]" (ibid.). There are literally thousands of such examples throughout the Desert Southwest — Santa Fe, Albuquerque, San Diego, Las Vegas — and often they reveal information about the spread of Catholicism, colonialism, native species of flora and fauna, and language.

So early on when Captain White asks the kid where he was robbed, and the kid doesn't know, this, too, shows us much about the land and the kid's relationship to it. The kid's reply to the Captain is, "They wasn't no name to it. It was just a wilderness" (32). The wilderness of the desert landscape, its harsh extremities and overwhelming vastness, connects with many classic Wild West tropes, from the classic films of John Ford to the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone. It can also be found in novels like Hunter S.

Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, as that which provokes profound amounts of reflection. Not knowing the name of a place does two things: it establishes a lack of prior knowledge and therefore importance (relating to it as a space more than a place). Yet, it leaves one to experience it for themselves, beyond any forms of linguistic representations.

Through dialogue in other languages, the use of arcane vocabulary or legal speak in English, and specific names of plants and animals and geological formations in the desert that the riders traverse, *Blood Meridian* illustrates the power of language as it performs and distorts ideas of fluency and representation. The multiplicities in the novel do reflect those of the place, and though they may mandate a few trips to the *OED* or *Wikipedia*, Sepich or the McCarthy Society website, they also construct a more robust relationship to desert places than it may seem.

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When I tell people I live in Phoenix, people's faces scrunch up and usually that's accompanied with a solid exhale through rounded lips before they tell me:

"It's hot out there."

My first full summer spent in the Phoenix area was relentless. I had finished my first year in the program, and was looking for a job. I was happy not to be commuting all the way to Tempe everyday, but found myself inescapably indoors and isolated. I made lunch plans with a friend, and made the trek out to campus, which is largely and eerily abandoned during that time of the year. No hoards of skateboarders and undergrads. No

groups of students huddled around tables and benches. No one but me in search of my friend's building, shielding my eyes from the aggressive sunshine above and the bright pavement below. When I remember it now, I remember the light more than the heat, though I know I couldn't believe how much every surface was radiating with it, and how a five-minute walk felt like a twisted marathon across an overstretched landscape.

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The Nonhuman

McCarthy's engagement with histories, laws, borders, bodies, and language in *Blood Meridian* has warranted heaps of scholarship. In truth, there are other themes like numerology, spirituality, religion, and economics that are beyond the scope of my analysis but have produced extensive amounts of academic discourse. The author's exquisite rendering of the complexities of the Desert Southwest in the mid-to-late nineteenth century is unparalleled. An underexplored element, however, remains McCarthy's attention to intensities of distance, heat, and light in the desert. Far from empty, the Desert Southwest has a profound fullness, oblique and opaque to those who cannot or have yet to attune with it. My readings of this fullness in *Blood Meridian* are my contributions to that conversation, and not just within this novel, but in much of desert literature, art, and film. The fullness of the desert, contrary to the desert as void, invites us to consider animals, stones, stars, elements, and forces — all that is nonhuman, all that is more-than-human — as integral agencies with which we share environmental relationships.

The desert fullness includes its atmospheric conditions that distort human perceptions. McCarthy reveals that abundance this by periodically devoting a disproportionate amount of narrative to desert details. This decenters the importance of human experience by maneuvering attentions outside of it, and really to so many things outside of it. Alternately, the author conveys the desert on a phenomenological scale, bringing us back to human experience, but with an increased awareness of more-than-human environs. As the riders are enveloped by this idea, so are the readers:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

Ultimately, this passage reveals the landscape, the desert, the riders, and all other beings and things as each an equal part of an optical democracy, which levels the field so as to deanthropocentrize the desert. Deanthropocentrizing the desert is different from dehumanizing it, though some scholars hold to the dire and desolate desert of *Blood Meridian* as the definitive one. McCarthy puts forth a phenomenologically impossible challenge: to perceive everything in this scene as exactly equally lit and enshadowed. One can imagine it, but it is not the way of the embodied world. By putting the task on the reader and declaring that “All preference is made whimsical,” any Manifest Destiny, any war amongst men or nations, any borders meant to divide us and them are undermined as foolish or playful preferences in the grander scale of relationality. So, too, is the narrator’s preference of focus on the landscape.

Historically, anthropocentric preferences by some humans have a very real and often devastating effect on other humans, as I've demonstrated and will continue to throughout my work here, but the "unguessed kinships" between the human and nonhuman are in desperate need of recognition. Though published three decades after *Blood Meridian*, Donna Haraway's *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* attests to the importance of embracing and understanding kinships: "Kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans...and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word" (103). The eventual acknowledgement of this kind of kinship by *Blood Meridian*'s narrator bonds human and rock, and welcomes an affirmation of the desert as a place where such relationships are not only important, but abundant.

In the field of literature, we focus specifically on how words are used to illustrate these kinships, and fuller description brings things in closer. With McCarthy's narrator shifting from the macro to micro so often, we are able to simultaneously understand the desert through distance as much as proximity. Such a scale includes passages where the riders can "count five separate storms spaced upon the shores of the round earth" or "can hear the drum of rain miles away on the prairie" (175, 186). The scope of human perception in the desert, here through sight and sound, becomes disorientating. Still, it allows for a reorientation. That is what the narrator's attention to the details offers. After a few days alone on a high mountain rim and then down through a gorge and back to the desert, the kid battles the extreme cold. Storms occur, again appealing to sensing the desert, and "the thunder trundled away in the distance and the air was cold and smelled of wet stone" (214). This time, the sensorial engagements are through touch and smell.

Later, the kid spots a fire, unsure whether it signals a camp, and “he could not judge how far it was” (214). Only upon his walking toward it we learn:

It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire. The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he knelt in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegaroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog's, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets. (215)

Beginning with a lone tree and ending with “a constellation of ignited eyes,” we are walked through a cumulative description of animal and insect life in this desert as it interacts with the human “pilgrim” and the burning tree. It is not the pilgrim, nor any human, who started the fire, but a storm. An answer to a different form of the riddle: if a tree lights on fire in the forest, and no one is around to see it, does it produce a sight? Even if the kid hadn't found his way to the burning tree, the ring of creatures would still all be bearing witness. Readings of the novel have been largely inattentive to much of the nonhuman agency that contests the desert as void. Certainly, as discussed earlier, there is plenty of void present, but there are many moments like these where the biodiversity and peculiarity of desert species are accounted for in baffling and multitudinous ways. These descriptions illustrate the simultaneity of being alone in the desert yet never actually being alone. The kid may not have had any human company as he wandered and froze and thawed, but all the while there are creatures and forces from which he can never isolate himself. This is what it means to think about a nonhuman phenomenology:

understanding and paying attention to all that is not human, building empathy and reexamining relationships with our environments.

During this journey, the expanse of the desert utterly dwarfs the kid's human actions. His trek up onto the high mountain rim gives him a verticality quite rare for the novel:

...he saw from that high rimland the collision of armies remote and silent upon the plain below. The dark little horses circled and the landscape shifted in the paling light and the mountains beyond brooded in darkening silhouette. The distant horsemen rode and parried and a faint drift of smoke passed over them and they moved on up the deepening shade of the valley floor leaving behind them the shapes of mortal men who had lost their lives in that place. He watched all this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horsemen were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert (213).

In contrast to the roar of thunder, the sounds of the clashing armies fail to make their way to the kid, remaining "remote and silent." The landscape, the light, and the mountain make the horses and men "little" and "distant." Their smoke is "faint," while the "deepening shade of the valley floor" contours their very mortality. The vertical perspective attained by the kid in this scene lays bare how the human compares to the nonhuman, and reveals a triviality of war and human violence when emplaced within a larger geographical scale. The kid's vertical vantage point also serves as a contrast to the generally horizontal thrust on the novel. The horizontal trekking, from riding on horses to walking across mountains, often stifles an ability to register the expanse and heterogeneity of the desert environment. For all of its infamy regarding accounts of brutal murders and atrocities amongst peoples, *Blood Meridian* is laden with attention to the desert and its immensity as a witness and participant in human and nonhuman relationships. Steven Shaviro notes that the novel is "obsessed with open space," a book

“with an open topography...in which the endless, unobstructed extension of the desert allows for the sudden, violent and fortuitous irruption of the most heterogeneous forces” (146-147). Indeed within and because of the vastness of desert space, the desert itself becomes violent and inextricably linked to mortality. A place of “rock and no water” where the riders “kept watch for any green thing that might tell of water but there was no water,” and where mirages or dust devils are likely to disturb the assurance of survival (62).

Though the riders often struggle with an ability to comprehend and navigate the desert terrain and everything therein, there are ways that the nonhuman confronts them through time as much as space. Both are related to the way the desert distorts the distance of spatial and temporal dimensions, and both are heeded by McCarthy.

With regard to temporal distance, the scattering of bones and ruins consistently reminds the riders and the readers of desert violence and its distortions. Before the introduction of McCarthy’s “optical democracy,” the riders pass many dead animal carcasses (mules, horses, cattle) and objects (chains, packsaddles, saddletrees) indicating humans had left them behind to die from thirst, heat, and hunger (246-247). They also cross a dry lake with dead volcanoes, gesturing to a once-filled lake and the lives those volcanoes once had (247). They ride and see “broken shapes of scoria in a lava bed as far as the eye could see” (247). Eventually, after all of these sights, the narrator hints, “As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience” (247). The dead animals are but bones and frames, and the volcanoes and lake are dead, too. In this desert, these lives were ended and the landscape contains within it a way to look through incredible expanses of nonhuman time. The last description of what the riders see on this

particular journey is a mummified Apache corpse crucified by the Maricopas, “a thing of leather and bone scoured by the pumice winds off the lake” (247). Each dead “thing” encountered reveals a passage of time as well as the ability of the desert to level time, flattening and distorting it through McCarthy’s optical democracy.

While the leveling of desert time¹² provides a proximity, the novel also succeeds in expanding through great distances of time. Bones and ruins speak to the passing of time beyond a generation or two, and emphasize what Shaviro calls “the immanence of the landscape and the imminence of death” (152). Death is a modality of the desert, by its very conditions of vastness. And where there is death there is also hauntology. *Blood Meridian* produces a fuller and inescapable spectral landscape to demonstrate this. Aside from the Glanton Gang creating their own acts of violence against Mexicans and Native tribes, we see how they are constantly confronted by the hauntology of the desert. When the kid, Toadvine and the veteran first join the gang, we learn that “they did not know that they were set forth...in the place of three men slain in the desert” (86). I mentioned earlier in the chapter how they wandered the desert for weeks looking for the Apache, “spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat” (172). It is after this that they come across “a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on the river and slaughter them every soul” (173). As a Tigua woman who had been upriver returns:

All about her the dead lay with their peeled skulls like polyps bluey wet or luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon. In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of a few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

The passage's importance to desert distortion cannot be overstated: vivid descriptions of the scalped dead speak to the heinous nature of the gang's immediate violence, but a focus on the brutal imagery eclipses an acknowledgement that the desert will absorb this awful amount of blood and violence within a few days. Here we are reminded of the desert's role in the novel: it provides a way of emphasizing its expanse and extremity and emplaces the human within its immensity, disclosing that humans have employed their own distortions back upon the land by claiming dominance over it.

In this scene we are told that the Tiguas' life and their destruction will be erased to the point where nor ghost nor scribe could tell about their stories, and yet by writing this McCarthy is actually re-inscribing their lives and deaths into history. By doing so, the author highlights what Christopher Douglas suggests is the "intersection of colonization, violence, and emptiness" (5). I argue that the spectrality of the desert, much like the fullness of nonhuman presences, is a contrast to the emptiness. In *Blood Meridian* it is through the spectrality of the desert that Indigenous relationships to the land are given consideration because these are the only glimpses we get into their attachment to place and each other even after their deaths. Though this problematically feeds into the "vanishing Indian" mythology, it also populates the void with people who considered the desert environs as their home, and not some exotic landscape to be conquered. Such scenes recur throughout the novel and serve as reminders that this desert space was place to groups of people who would not understand the desert as desolate, void, or barren.

McCarthy's prominent villain, the judge, serves as the main provider of such information. In some cliff dwellings deep into the mountain wilderness, after the judge

has spent the day transcribing whatever he deems suitable into his notebook, he tells the men about the place:

The people who once lived here are called the Anasazi. The old ones. They quit these parts, routed by drought or disease or by wandering bands of marauders, quit these parts ages since and of them there is no memory. They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered. The tools, the art, the building – these things stand in judgement on the latter races. Yet there is nothing for them to grapple with. The old ones are gone like phantoms and the savages wander these canyons to the sound of an ancient laughter. In their crude huts they crouch in darkness and listen to the fear seeping out of the rock. All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity. For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us. (146)

For all of the judge's atrocious qualities, he is a proud historian. His distinction between memory and "rumors and ghosts" suggests that in order to have memory, there must be some direct, living connection. We already know that he seeks to serve as that living connection through his knowledge and his notebooks, and to destroy things after he has experienced them and represented them in his books. He also at one point goes so far as to say, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (198). He knows that the stone structures, many of which are cliff dwellings that one can go and see today, haunt the Natives that currently reside in the region, and he endorses their fortitude and longevity in the face of all that they have endured. The truth is that the people once known as the Anasazi¹³ did disappear, and though their stone structures have penetrated the present intact enough for us to learn some things about how they lived, the conditions of how they died remain mysterious. Speculations include problems with the environment, not least of which were drought and a possible overpopulation which

disrupted the balance of how much the cliff dwellings could handle.¹⁴ The judge also addresses disease and marauders as possible harbingers of death for the Ancient Ones. This exposition, beyond giving ever more insight into what knowledge the judge holds, serves to reorient how one might experience a relationship with the Desert Southwest. It has borne witness to the ebbs and flows of people past and present, and forces one to consider how our lives, how what we have done “to alter the structure of the universe” and what it does, reaches into any number of possible futures.

Though ever knowledgeable, the judge is not always so reverent. The gang are at Hueco Tanks, a site just east of El Paso and near the present-day U.S.-Mexico border. A desert oasis of sorts, Hueco Tanks is known to have provided people with shelter and water as long as 10,000 years ago. Today, you can visit the State Park and view its petroglyphs and pictographs¹⁵ and try to reconcile the *what*, *why*, and *how* as the colorful visages stare at your own. When the gang visits, however, the judge takes notices of the hundreds of “ancient paintings...tracing out the very ones which he required” into his notebook (173). After copying the images at Hueco Tanks, “with a piece of broken chert he scapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (173). The judge’s destruction of this one design sets the stage for how easily historical/cultural erasure can and does occur, especially in a place so often considered barren like the desert rocks.

The act demonstrates this white male’s combat against the powerful spectrality of the desert. So long as the judge can keep cataloguing what he finds, he reserves the right to destroy the originals. Though many believe the judge to be immortal and/or supernatural, there is much evidence that the novel’s desert is far too vast, too porous,

and too full to be consumed even by this terrifying being. Again, this an invitation to think about temporal scale. Eventually, the heat, light, and wind of the desert will erode the pictographs at Hueco Tanks just as they do billboard posters that are left facing south for too long. The judge's deliberate erasure is a human violence on a human scale — we witness it take place in a moment and it is done. The desert's conditional erasure, often called erosion, is a nonhuman violence on a scale of geological time. So beyond the spectral, beyond the acts of men, the forces of heat and light play integral roles for human relationships with the desert.

During the day, the desert forces of heat and light can be oppressive in their intensity. While the kid is filibustering with Captain White, their company are attacked by Comanches. This leaves the kid alone in the desert until he finds another survivor named Sproule. They are too far out to head back to Texas, and so must ride on, even though “they were very small and they moved very slowly in the immensity of that landscape” (56). They navigate at night by the stars, “the rind of a moon that had been in the sky all day was gone and they followed the trail through the desert by starlight, the Pleiades straight overhead and very small and the Great Bear walking the mountains to the north” (61). The days, however, are dictated by the presence of shade and water, though there is not much shade or water to alleviate them.

And so the heat presses upon them, the more-than-human landscape and its nonhuman phenomenological insistence relating to human experience. During their journey, they see “the scalloped canyon walls rippled in the heat like drapery folds” (56). The mutability of the landscape really flourishes in this imagery, as something as sure and hard as canyon rock turns to fabric. Heat is a definitive force of the desert, and has a

lethal, unabiding intensity when it comes to humans. It has the power to dehydrate, to produce nausea, visions, dizziness, and stroke. The longer one is exposed, the more likely it is to distort our sense of time and space, not limited to what we might experience phenomenologically.

Atop a mountain at sunset, after a full day of heat and no water:

[They] could see for miles. An immense lake lay below them with the distant blue mountains standing in the windless span of water and the shape of a soaring hawk and trees that shimmered in the heat and a distant city very white against the blue and shaded hills. They sat and watched...they saw the face of the lake darken and the shape of the city dissolve upon it...in the morning when they rose there was no city and no trees and no lake only a barren dusty plain. (62)

Between the heat, the light, and the aridity, the kid and Sproule are defenseless against that optical illusion made famous by 20th century cinema and cartoons, the desert mirage. The combination of heat, light, and the color of the atmosphere allows for the mirage to emerge. An unreal oasis in the desert, much like those that the cities Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Phoenix try to make real, appears before them and then is gone. Sproule asks,

What happened to the lake?
I couldn't tell ye.
We both saw it.
People see what they want to see.
Then how come I aint seein it now? I sure as hell want to. (63)

The conditions of the desert and of their exhausted bodies produce the vision of the lake. After keeping watch “for any green thing that might tell of water but there was no water,” the pair succumb to the distortion of desert heat, light, and distance. [Perhaps this is where I can bring in a little tiny bit on mysticism and the deserts of other places?]

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Camping in the Gila Wilderness as a kid and then as a teenager, I couldn't get enough of those summer night skies, where a whole universe of stars and planets revealed themselves to me in an intimate way so impossible in the city. I would sit, away from the fire, bundled in fleece and layers, and gaze upward. The constant sound of the river's current and the bullfrogs bawling were the only things keeping me grounded as I tried to witness the infinite.

Once, driving from El Paso to Mesa in the middle of a moonless night, my partner and I decided to pull over and just look up. We held each other and our breath as the Milky Way came into blurred focus above. I tried to point out the few constellations I know, but with a night as star-filled as that one, it seemed trivial to single any out.

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On the opening page of the novel, the narrator aligns the kid's birth with the celestial: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove" (3). With a quick bit of research, one can find that the Leonids are a meteor shower that occur every 33 years, and that the shower of 1833 was particularly spectacular. Sepich's *Notes* draw all kinds of connections between the year, the shower, and elements of astrology, Native history, and science. In fact, the Leonids shower of that year is "the greatest shower ever recorded," and even changed how some peoples kept time (Sepich 53). In her article, "Yuman Belief Systems and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," Stacey Peebles

addresses the significance of the Leonid shower for the Yuman peoples by bringing in a study published in 1933 titled *Yuman Tribes of the Gila River*. According to Peebles, the book, written by Leslie Spier, asserts: “for some of the Yuman, the Leonid meteor shower of November 13, 1833, marks the beginning of recorded time. Time reckoning was done with calendar sticks, notched to note the passage of a year, and to act as mnemonic devices to help the owner remember the events of that year” (238). Working with the celestial shaped many of the Indigenous structures of the Desert Southwest, from Chaco Canyon to Wupatki National Monument to Casa Grande. McCarthy’s narrator regularly mentions how full the moon is, what constellations are visible in the sky that night, and necessitates the reader’s awareness of the power of their presence. While desert forces of heat and light can be harmonious and benevolent through the night, they do produce ruptures and demand attention. It is this that I would like to bring forth through my readings of the various texts in this dissertation. The desert allows us to understand distortion as not just disorientation, but also as opportunities for reorientation.

With an emphasis on how histories are easily created or destroyed, this chapter emphasizes the roles of distortion as a tactic for knowing the desert differently, especially through who makes or erases histories and why they wield that power in order to show that histories are always already distorted. Often, the answer is related to political, social, or physical violence. This chapter also serves as an overture to my project as a whole, which puts human and nonhuman phenomenologies of the desert in conversation with one another. The experiences, conditions, and representations of desert places are manifold and complex, yet Latinx studies, Indigenous studies and environmental studies,

and certainly critical theory, have not engaged enough with one another towards creating a Desert Humanities.

CHAPTER 2

DESERT FROM ABOVE

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I'm sitting in the Child Development Lab course, a junior in high school. We are waiting for the teacher to arrive and class to begin. It's early on a Monday morning, and my classmates are catching up with each other about their weekends. They aren't talking to me—I'm a whole grade below them, and I'm far from cool enough to swap stories about parties in Juarez because I wasn't even allowed to go to parties in El Paso. I'm slumped over my desk, my oversized black hoodie the proxy for the blanket at home I wish I was still wrapped up in. My chin is nestled into one elbow crease as I try and keep my eyes open. I listen to these girls talk about drinking, crossing the bridge, and how it's maybe starting to get too dangerous to go over there the way they were used to.

A year later, I'm co-editor in chief at the high school newspaper, the *Coronado Explorer*. It is spring of 2007 and stories are hitting the local news about the brutal cartel violence that is leaving bodies from bridges and severed heads in the streets. In conversation with my co-editors and our journalism teacher, we don't know how to process this information. It's scary, it's close. Even over a decade later I am haunted by the extent of the violence that proliferated near my home town.

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I'd gone to the theatre to see *Sicario* knowing only that it was supposed to be an action film about narco-trafficking. I had imagined something in the vein of *Breaking Bad*

meets *Traffic*. What I didn't expect was the atmospheric intensities of the film—from violent sequences to guttural soundscapes—to evoke grief, distress, and homesickness. I didn't expect a somewhat realistic portrayal of my desert city, where the English and Spanish flow differently, interchangeably, depending on the situation. I'd grown too used to overdramatized and outdated portrayals in classic Westerns or stylized movies like Tarrantino's *Kill Bill*. Too resigned to representations of Mexican actors reduced to rowdy drunken antics, cartel activity, and broken English and drowned out by the dominant white heroes. Not to mention the many cinematic and cartoonish scenes of desert sunsets that highlighted saguaro silhouettes, even though El Paso is not home to the iconic cactus.

Rather than a caricature, *Sicario* provides a contemporary, 21st century depiction of tensions between U.S. government agencies, Mexican authorities, and Mexican drug cartels. It does this through physical and metaphorical verticality, a lens which invites an interrogation of the hierarchies of different authorities of law in the desert. The vertical in *Sicario* is seeing and hearing the desert from above in order to control and patrol what is down below. While traditionally scenes of the Southwest include a wide horizon, the film repeatedly frames the desert by looking directly down upon it. The aerial cinematography of the desert landscape isn't trying to provide the aesthetically pleasing generic desert scene. Projected wall-to-wall in a dark theatre, the expanse of desert projected onto a movie theatre screen at once immerses viewers and gestures to the incredibly vast scale of desert distance. Instead of a horizon(tal) line drawn across the screen, from which humans stand upright and apart, staring the desert dead on has a defamiliarizing capability that demonstrates humans are just some of many moving pieces. The vertical

perspective is a different way of experiencing the legal and international entanglements of the US-Mexico border, as the film aligns the hierarchy of law and power with verticality and uses proximity with the US-Mexico border to distort the law's limits in the desert. *Sicario*'s aerial scenes support its exploration of verticality to the point of decentering human perspectives and perceptions by using technologies like infrared and night vision. The cinematography in these cases incorporates nonhuman interactions within the environment, and challenges traditional Desert Southwest aesthetics.

Released in 2015, and starring Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin, and Benicio del Toro, *Sicario* is a perspectival experiment in storytelling. Blunt's character, Kate Macer, is an FBI agent and head of the Kidnapping Response Team in Phoenix, Arizona. Macer's dedication to her work and unexpected success discovering dozens of dead bodies in the walls of a cartel house hideout during a raid in Chandler produces an opportunity to bring justice upon those responsible. After the raid, Department of Defense contractor Matt Graver (Josh Brolin) offers her an invitation to join a special task force, for which she must volunteer. When Macer accepts and heads to "the El Paso area" with Graver, she meets Alejandro (Benicio del Toro), a mostly silent character who is even more mysterious in motive than Graver. As crucial members of the task force with different skill sets, it is their mission to quell cartel violence. What Macer doesn't know is that they will be traveling back and forth across the US-Mexico border to do so.

The film, arguably without much dialogue between its three protagonists, still manages to give great insight to each's vantage point. Information about what the task force is meant to be doing and why doesn't come easily to Macer, and the audience is largely kept in the dark with her, learning about her objectives as she does. These

characters are entangled with each other through their mutual desire to see some form of justice carried out against key cartel players like Manuel Diaz and Fausto Alarcon. For Macer, that means doing things by the book, for Graver, it means by whatever means necessary, and for Alejandro, well, he's after those responsible for brutally murdering his wife and daughter.

Distortion of Law

“The El Paso Area”

The binational El Paso-Juarez area is completely surrounded, for miles on every side, by the Chihuahuan desert, which creates an interdependent economy and culture. The next closest, large city is Las Cruces, New Mexico, about an hour's drive north, with a population of just 99,665. That figure pales in comparison to El Paso's 683,577 which itself is dwarfed by Juarez's booming 1.5 million. El Paso-Juarez is the second largest metropolitan area along the US-Mexico border after San Diego-Tijuana. Thousands of people cross daily, on foot or in vehicles, to El Paso for work, school, shopping, or visiting. But, as Alana Semuels makes clear, “binational doesn't mean unified—not when it's so difficult to get back and forth between two countries, and when there's such a strong us-versus-them mentality coming from one side.” For residents of El Paso-Juarez, recent policies, like the US Customs and Border Protection “requiring Mexican agents to check cars entering Mexico for guns and money” have manifested longer wait times for crossing the bridge, whether they are entering into the US or Mexico (ibid.).

For authorities, however, the proximity of El Paso-Juarez coupled with a situated, desert isolation invites a bending of the rules and a blurring of legal lines—a distortion of

who is and isn't law. This perpetuates and depends upon notions of the Wild West, which emerge from understanding the desert as unrestricted, chaotic void. To some extent, one could read *Sicario* as an updated version of a Western, in which tropes like the outlaw, the sheriff, and the new kid in town are manifested through Alejandro, Graver, and Macer respectively. However, I'm most interested in how *Sicario* uses vertical perspectives to distort conventions of who is and isn't law in the Borderlands, where that power historically has been assisted by the desert environment. As a result, the desert instigates the tension between law, power, and responsibility.

The film's opening scene follows Macer and her partner Reggie Wayne as their team raids a home in Chandler, Arizona.¹⁶ The house belongs to a prominent member of the Sonoran drug cartel, Manuel Diaz. They discover dozens of bodies hidden in the walls, each with cloudy plastic bags over their heads and covered in dried blood. The stench is so pungent that several officers, including Wayne, are seen retching onto the dirt outside. A shed in the yard explodes, killing two officers. Later the same day, Macer and Wayne are shown waiting in an official-looking building full of screens, American flags, and glass walls, wondering why they're there. Eventually Kate is called into a boardroom full of official-looking men, and Matt Graver is among them. The men grill her immediately for her knowledge of the Mexican cartel activity in the area, specifically about Diaz. When that reaches its limit, Graver switches to a personal question, asking if Kate is married, before they dismiss her from the room.

At this point, like Kate Macer, the audience "have no clue" what's going on or who these men are (10:58). After a while, half of them leave the boardroom, and Macer is invited back in. Her boss tells her that the Department of Justice is interested in "advisors

that focus on cartels involved in pursuing Mr. Diaz. This is Matt Graver, he'll be leading the team" (11:28-11:37). She will be a liason for this team, chosen because of her "tactical experience" and a specialization "in responding to escalated cartel activity" (11:45-11:57). In two days they will go see Diaz's brother, Guillermo. When asked about Guillermo's location, Graver replies, with a dismissive hand-waving gesture and sideways glance at the other men, that he is in "the El Paso area" (12:10-12:13). Macer then asks what the objective of this interagency task force is, and Graver responds with another hand wave and a sort of smile: "to dramatically overreact" (12:18-12:24). The men clarify that Macer must volunteer to be on this force, and her only reservation is that she wants to get those responsible for the events at the raid earlier that day. She does volunteer after Graver tells her, "the men who are *really* responsible for today, yeah" (12:45-12:49).

Thus begins Macer's crash course on how law gets distorted along the US-Mexico border in the name of justice. The rest of the film is a testament to how power is imposed from above, one's superiors or "higher-ups," and how that power is assisted by the desert environment. In fact, her first action as part of the task force is boarding a private jet in order to find Guillermo. The aerial ride is a privilege provided by the Department of Defense. It is on the plane where she first meets Alejandro. Instead of offering his name as an introductory greeting, Alejandro asks Kate if she's "ever been to Juarez before" (16:35-16:40). Confused, she asks Graver to confirm that they are going to El Paso. Graver, lying down in the back, feigns incoherence and then pretends to be asleep. At this point Macer understands what Graver meant earlier when he said Guillermo was in "the El Paso *area*." They are going into Mexico, beyond their legal jurisdiction, but not before

they take flight, and literally ascend over the territory from Arizona to El Paso. Through flight and on their DoD plane, they become authorities from on high dominating the aerial and terrestrial, and empowered to defy laws on the ground.

Loopholes, like calling Juarez “the El Paso area” and the initial meeting where Graver tells the truth by omission, set the stage for how the federal government intends to handle the transborder operations of this interagency task force throughout the rest of the film. The law, in this case the federal law including the Department of Justice and the Department of Defense, exists in what Agamben terms a *state of exception*, or “the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law” (1)¹⁷. Cultural anthropologist Jason De León, in his recent work *The Land of Open Graves*, takes up this idea in order to ground it in geography, and replaces the word “state” with “space:”

The US-Mexico border has long existed as an unspoken space of exception where human and constitutional rights are suspended [by the State] in the name of security. Border crosser deaths are justified by a person’s lack of citizenship (i.e., exceptional status), his or her commission of a civil offense, and the hypocritical desire to protect the United States from the very people we rely on to pick our strawberries, pluck our chickens, and valet-park our cars. Lacking rights and protections when they illegally cross into sovereign territory, undocumented people are killable in the eyes of the state. (68)

For De León, and indeed for my own understanding of how the US-Mexico border complicates or distorts the law, we must understand the geographic area of the borderlands as a *space of exception*. In this space, as in too many others, citizenship outweighs humanity, and national security overrides human rights. De León’s years of research in the field, spending time with Border Patrol agents and migrants, attests to many such situations, such as deportations, robberies, and deaths. He has witnessed the

space of exception on both sides of the border. I want to acknowledge this because though *Sicario* is ultimately a dramatic film informed by narcoviolence¹⁸ and not a documentary, it fuels an expressive engagement with what the space of exception, the US-Mexico border, feels like for those in charge of enforcing it.

Vertical Hierarchy

Verticality in *Sicario* is intimately linked with hierarchical structures of government. At their base in El Paso, Kate and a room full of men, all presumably operating from higher positions of authority than her, are briefed on their objectives to retrieve Guillermo from Juarez. They will receive help from the Mexican federales to do this, but the operation isn't complete until they are back on U.S. soil (21:29-21:38). An aerial image of the Bridge of Americas is on the projector screen. It predominantly displays the asymmetry of access at the US-Mexico border, as one can see bumper to bumper traffic in an inverse bottleneck heading to the U.S. Several lanes disperse into a dozen, while the lanes on the left, heading south into Mexico, require no such proliferation. The picture captures a moment of daily reality for life in the "El Paso area," a heavily populated *space of exception*, where crossing the border is a common activity. At the end of the briefing, Kate gets a moment with Alejandro and learns that he's not an American citizen and that he used to be a Mexican prosecutor. He tells her, "I go where I'm sent," and this time that means from Cartagena, Colombia.

More confused than ever, Kate frustratedly asks Matt if he or Alejandro are CIA. When Matt tries to tell her that Alejandro's a "DoD adviser just like me," she knows better (23:15-23:19). Matt once more employs truth-telling by omission and says, "Look,

just pay attention to Alejandro, and if he says to do somethin' just do it" (23:19-23:22)

Kate tries to take a moral and legal stance: "I'm not authorized to follow orders from Alejandro. Especially in Mexico" (23:22-23:26). Despite her initial protests, Kate craves justice enough to make an exception and join this team on their mission south of the border, understanding her place below the people that are at the helm of the situation. Their federal task force is above the law, distorting its own legal reach.

As they prepare to enter Juarez, the cinematography switches between aerial and on-the-ground perspectives. Alternating from vertical to horizontal contributes to a more robust understanding of the area as well as the relationships between people on either side of the border. First, we follow helicopters as they rise above a sparse piece of natural desert landscape with the synthetic border fence cutting through it. Next, the film cuts to Kate, Matt, and Alejandro in their SUV as they travel along El Paso's Border Highway. They gaze horizontally, through a different part of the border fence, at Juarez and its colorful colonias covering the mountains that reach the top of the screen. Switching back to aerial shots, we see the ease with which their five black SUV's pass through the bridge into Mexico while the traffic the other way is just as congested as the picture from their briefing. Then we are back on the ground, moving along with the official vehicles, sirens blaring. This shot includes glimpses of everyday people playing wallball or hanging out while the team's entourage clang through the streets. During the entire sequence, as the film alternates between synoptic and confined shots, *Sicario*'s signature sound saturates the atmosphere. Low, primal, and driving, more sonic drone than music, the affective intensity of it is piercing. It is commanding, loud, and eerie, like a swooping World War

II plane that's flying too low and too fast, trying to warn you that whatever is about to happen is not good.

With the help of the *Policía Federal*, the crew successfully retrieves a blindfolded Guillermo from a warehouse in Juarez. But they still have to cross the international Bridge of the Americas. This time, they are stuck in traffic with hundreds of others, waiting to cross back into the United States. In a key shift from the aerial, vertical point of view shown at their meeting to an intimate, horizontal one, the tension between these two perspectives is exploited further. They are, at this moment, immersed in the milieu of the space of exception, and confronted with opposition and friction. Despite positioning agents at the border who are ready to wave them through to the U.S., a car up ahead has broken down, and their plans to get back without incident are thwarted. They are temporarily leveled. Surrounded by others awaiting entry to the U.S., violence erupts as several gunmen are shot and killed while trying to get Guillermo back, and Kate is forced to shoot someone to save herself. This scene is the only time that Graver and the interagency task force are not comfortable in their roles above the law, and it's because they are stuck on the ground without much power. Views and sounds from a helicopter zoom out and hover over the bridge, showing the scale of just how stuck the agents are; views from on-the-ground action show the brief instant that separates life from a violent death. Yet, because of all of the narcoviolence that became the norm for the area, news of the men slain in the streets as a result of their mission "won't even make the papers in El Paso" (37:32-36).

Only certain information and authority transcends the border. It's not always the truth, and it's not always what is legal. When the team gets back to the base in El Paso,

Matt waits for Kate then asks her, “Got a little nutty, huh?” to which a vexed Macer says, “Nutty? Yeah, yeah, that was fucking illegal” (38:32-38:36). They get into it once again about what is legal and what is right. Likely, the viewer is having a similar struggle. The camera films their disagreement from a distant angle, from which they become two dwarfed figures surrounded by chain link fence topped with barbed wire. The shot is framed by a black SUV on the left and the military base on the right with humvees and a few unmoving soldiers behind them. The United States Army and American flags wave above them in the larger frame of monsoon wind and clouds. It may seem minimal, but this shot reminds the audience of the desert situatedness of the base, a khaki set of rigid rectangles amidst a beautiful, vast, and expansive landscape. Military usage of the desert has a long and convoluted history, especially in the Desert Southwest, which I will not be able to entirely unpack here. For the scope of this chapter, it is most important to read the militarization of the desert in *Sicario* as an active, contemporary pursuit. The desert dictates what technologies and strategies the characters will use and why, for example, drone footage is used to follow Alejandro into Mexico in his individual pursuit to find Fausto Alarcon in order to maintain vertical perspective and distance. As Matt tries to defend their mission against Kate’s reactions to the violence on the bridge, their voices echo in polyphony with the flags whipping around in the wind. Echoes and wind fill the space and thicken atmosphere, one that bears witness to human activity and entangles it in its desert assemblage—the geopolitics that rubs up against the desert as agent. Matt informs Kate that she is there as a part of the team because her participation gives them “the opportunity to shake the tree and create chaos” (39:04-39:08). Graver and company are using El Paso’s proximity to Juarez and the desert surroundings to obscure what is

lawful in order to further their control. The chaos, which they provoke but cannot control, is made possible and even amplified by the desert, recalling John Beck's notion of the desert as void in which chaos is a condition of the experience (63-64).

Part of shaking the tree occurs when, midway through the film, the team gets the chance to "fuck with Manuel Diaz's wallet" by freezing his bank accounts (57:43-57:47). Set up in a van outside a bank, Graver and others watch live security footage of a woman making a deposit into Diaz's account. They bust her and learn from the bank's documentation that \$9000 is deposited into that account every day, totalling \$17 million. Kate finally feels like they've done something legal that will stick when Matt informs her that "it's a bogus bust" and that their objective is to get Diaz back to Mexico (1:01:11-1:01:23). Once again, a frustrated Kate reminds Matt, "we have no jurisdiction in Mexico!" to which he simply holds his ground (1:01:25-1:01:26).

Kate takes the bank bust to her boss in the FBI, Dave Jennings, hoping for some "semblance of procedure" to follow (1:02:30-33). He responds, almost sympathetically, that the amount of money deposited in cash every day for five years is "suspect, but it isn't illegal" (1:02:22-26). Remembering the initial boardroom scene of which Jennings was a part, viewers may recall how hesitant he was about her volunteering. She is told in so many words that even he has no control over what's happening:

Kate, this isn't something that I dreamed up myself. I don't have the authority to hire advisors, or authorize joint agency missions, or fly agents from Air Force bases. Are you understanding me? These decisions are made far from here, by officials elected to office, not appointed to them. So, if your fear is operating out of bounds, I am telling you, you are not. The boundary's been moved. (1:03:18-53)

To her dismay, her superiors and their superiors have changed the rules. The boundary is not just moved from what is legal to what is supposedly moral or right, but from law to power. The people with the power are able to make otherwise illegal decisions—like sending Matt Graver and Alejandro into Mexico—while they are comfortably distanced from the space of exception along the US-Mexico border. Such officials benefit from a notion of proximity which simultaneously keeps them safe from the region’s violence and enables them to conflate Juarez into the phrase “El Paso area.” The hierarchical structure of the federal government enforces itself through who is at the highest rung, and Kate keeps learning the ladder stretches ever upward.

In 2018, WNYC’s *Radiolab* aired a mini-series of podcast episodes called “The Border Trilogy,” which explains how different methods of patrolling the US-Mexico Border have evolved in the last three decades. The episodes include conversations with Jason De León where he discusses the Border Patrol’s implementation of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), which he defines in his book as a “strategy that since the 1990s has deliberately funneled people into the desert...nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim” (30). As a result, distance from migrant deaths in the desert becomes increasingly common, while paradoxically it was being at the border that set PTD into motion. In the second episode of *Radiolab*’s series, they interview Silvestre Reyes, former Chief Patrol Agent of the El Paso Sector. As it turns out, it was his idea to launch Operation Blockade (later renamed Operation Hold-the-Line) in 1993, lining roughly 400 agents along 20 miles of the US-Mexico border and in essence forcing migration from the urban areas of El-Paso-Juarez

further out into the desert. What Reyes didn't know was how the Operation would, as De León puts it, "evolve into a large-scale policy that would strategically use the natural environment and subsequently become the foundation for border security in a post-9/11 world" (31).

Proximity to the situation in El Paso made widespread implementation of Prevention Through Deterrence possible across the entire US-Mexico border. Operation Blockade was underway and causing a stir just as the Clinton administration was getting ready to sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. Out of apparent concern to quell the controversy at the border, then Attorney General Janet Reno called Chief Reyes to try and get him to end the operation on account of "political consequences, international ramifications" (Reyes qtd. 20:23-26). And it was during that conversation that Reyes asked Reno to observe it for herself. He told her: "Come and visit El Paso...because you are making these statements, with all due respect, without knowing the difference that it's made in El Paso" (Reyes qtd. 20:36-20:49). And so, after a day of meeting with locals and hearing what they had to say about the new strategy, Reno went back to Reyes impressed and determined to have him discuss his efforts with President Clinton.

Being present in the El Paso area had changed Reno's mind and ultimately led to Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, Operation Safeguard in Arizona, and Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas, but the tactics were being created from a great distance. Doris Meissner, former Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) who was in charge of these new plans for patrolling the border, tells *Radiolab* that "the thinking was that it [the desert] would be a natural geographic ally that would take care of

the rest” (26:39-52). In the interview she admits that government measures to push migrants into remote areas of the desert did not completely deter them from trying, and though today she feels “deeply ambivalent” about the thousands of deaths caused as a consequence of Prevention Through Deterrence, her position of power atop the political hierarchy demonstrates the comfort and privilege of her distance (ibid. 43:46-50).

From the Top

Cartels

After going up the wrong tunnel and seeing things she isn't supposed to, Kate hears people call Alejandro Medillín. He is addressed with that name several times throughout the film, but this is the first time Kate has heard it. When she asks Matt what this means, his response is as close to sincere as he ever gets: “Medellín refers to a time when one group controlled every aspect of the drug trade, providing a measure of order that we could control. And until somebody finds a way to convince 20% of the population to stop snorting and smoking that shit, order's the best we can hope for” (1:34:58-1:35:22). The bottom line for Matt Graver and his task force is that the Mexican cartels have become too heterogeneous to control. As long as this is the case, they pose a serious threat to the US government's position atop the hierarchy of the drug trade and the war on drugs. Once more, the film provides an uncomfortable example of how much money and power outweigh the law.

As a creative representation of the law's limits, and especially of who is calling the shots from above the law, *Sicario* forces viewers to witness and reflect on the real border violence at the start of the 21st century at its core, reckoning with the grave truth

that drug cartels were able to cultivate immense amounts of power. Kate is a stand-in for the viewer in many ways. She believes that one can catch a few major criminals and that will be sufficient. Instead, the team she finds herself on operates from a political and power verticality that is meant to match the formidable power systems of the cartel (and parts of the Mexican and American authorities paid by the cartels). In sum, the team has a bigger landscape and larger power map in mind, one that unfolds for viewers as it does for Kate. During her first operation with the team in Juarez, their vehicle drives by a highway overpass with four bloody and mutilated naked bodies hanging upside down from it (28:40-28:50). Dead bodies in the street, often decapitated, is a familiar scene that haunts Juarez and El Paso area residents to this day. The shot cuts back and forth between the dangling bodies and Kate's unsettled visage. A team member has commentary on the grim scene: "It's brilliant what they do. When they mutilate a body like that, they make people think they must have been involved, they must have deserved such a death 'cause they did something" (29:10-24). If the audience believes this, then somehow it's possible to make sense out of the gruesome and flagrant displays of death in the desert. Certainly, showing off a lack of mercy for others is a strong point for a cartel trying to send a message to others, and hanging them on high is no trivial gesture. Though, I'd like to point out that the Juarez femicides open up an instigation to the above observation with regard to gendered violence. Linked to the arrival of *maquiladoras*, or factories, in Juarez, thousands of women in and around Juarez have been murdered since the 1990s and many of them have never been found. Contrary to the brazen presentations of dead male bodies who are the victims of the cartel violence, women's bodies are largely

hidden from public display, often buried underground. I discuss gendered experience of violence along the US-Mexico Border at great length in the next chapter.

Police

State and local police belong to a separate, less extensive hierarchy than the federal governments of the US or Mexico. Though they do not wield the official power of the FBI or DOD, *Sicario*'s portrayal of cops on both sides of the border implies deep corruption of what power they do have. During their venture into Juarez, one of the first things Alejandro tells Kate, as they wait in an SUV while their team is picking up Guillermo, is to "keep an eye out for the State Police. They are not always the good guys" (31:38-47). Two characters, Phoenix cop Ted and Sonora State police officer Silvio, exemplify how easy it is to get in too deep, challenging the good cop-bad cop binary and speaking to the complexity of how law enforcement ends up working for outlaws like Mexican drug cartels who rule from the top.

Kate is picked up in a cowboy bar by a Ted, who coincidentally happens to know Reggie. They drink and dance together before she takes him back to her place. As they get more intimate, Ted pulls his keys and a rubber bracelet out of his pocket and puts them on the table beside them. Kate spots the bracelet; it is identical to the ones wrapped around the cash deposits at the bank bust. As she connects the dots, Ted tries to calm her down with an invitation to just talk about it. Instead, Kate tries to land a blow before grabbing her gun, and they get into a brutal physical fight, his hands squeezing her neck as he tells her, "this is you, you hear me? You did this" (1:10-22). Ted is clearly conflicted about how the situation has escalated, trying to shift blame while he continues

to strangle her on the floor until Alejandro, just in time, appears with a gun pointed at the cop's head.

The next time we see Ted, he's in the backseat of a vehicle, his face swollen, bruised, and bloody. Matt is in the front asking questions, and Alejandro is outside the car, seemingly in charge of the beating. Matt asks, "How many other corrupt motherfuckers you workin' with on this side of the border?" and Ted confesses, "They came to me and they wanted details about our case, and yes, I did it, I gave it to them, but I never wanted anybody to get hurt. I woulda never gotten involved with them pieces of shit if I thought that there was any—" ([timestamp]). His speech is interrupted by Alejandro violently grabbing his wounded head, the implication is that they aren't falling for all of Ted's sob story. Matt asserts his power, reminding him that it's his decision whether Ted's daughter will get federal protection or not. The truth of Ted's story is that the Sonoran cartel and other corrupt cops did get to him, and despite his position as an officer of the law, he used his position to fuel their power.

Silvio's caught in remarkably similar entanglement. Throughout *Sicario* there are glimpses of his story, mainly they are brief scenes where Silvio's son comes to wake him up to eat breakfast and play soccer. It's obvious, from the way Silvio is pouring liquor into his morning coffee and the bucket of cigarette butts next to his bed, that he is going through some tough times, but the vignettes don't give us the answer until late in the film. Coupled with ominous pounding drums, an overhead shot shows bricks of drugs being placed into Silvio's trunk while he watches: he is working with the Sonora State Police and the cartel. Like Ted, Silvio is conflicted. He has a family, and it is clear that he is just trying to get by.

The important difference between Ted and Silvio is that Ted's decision to help the cartel is much more of a choice than Silvio's is. Portraying Latinos as hard gangbangers and cholos has become the norm for films and shows about narcoviolence, but the people who live with it in their daily lives are represented by a character like Silvio, his son, and wife. Actor Maximiliano Hernandez, who plays the character, is proud that Silvio is able "to show the heart of the people who are caught up in this web, in this net, called the war on drugs...many of which have no choice." Even with a uniform and an official car, Silvio is near the bottom of the power hierarchy. His role as mule for the cartel eventually leads him to an even less fortunate role as guide for Alejandro, who kills him once Silvio's purpose is served.

Discussing *Sicario* as a whole and why working on the film appealed to him so much, Hernandez emphasizes, "It's brutal, it's unflinching...It's to make you feel uncomfortable and say look, look how horrible this was—you know, or how horrible this is. And that's what provokes thought" (ibid.). And it is incredibly uncomfortable. It's uncomfortable to watch a mysterious hitman like Alejandro torture one person while somewhat arbitrarily saving another. It's uncomfortable to see that the FBI is overpowered by officials far from the violence affecting the US-Mexico border. It's uncomfortable to see someone like Kate Macer, vigilant as she is about doing things by the book, participate in less-than-legal operations of an interagency task force. Importantly, most of the film's characters are people with some form of legal authority doing things that are typically considered illegal, and this disrupts comfortable alignments of morality with legality. Rather than follow cartel bosses Manuel Diaz or the elusive Fausto Alarcon through their day-to-day operations, *Sicario* instead focuses on

events that showcase the scope of power that the Sonoran cartel has. The bank bust, corrupt cops, and the house filled with dead bodies from the raid in Chandler show how the cartels subvert and exploit law enforcement in the US and Mexico, without giving much screen time to Diaz, Alarcon, or any other cartel member for that matter. I argue that this is because the film is dedicated to telling an underrepresented story: the law has its limits and the narcoviolence that took place, especially from 2007-2012, along the US-Mexico border proved this.

Migrants

Unsurprisingly, migrants are an amalgamated group at the bottom of everyone's hierarchy. If they make it through to the US undetected and able to work, it is often in an undocumented capacity. That term, and the even more dehumanizing "illegal alien," confirms my stance that they are not considered as an integral or important component of the vertical hierarchy of power related to the US-Mexico border as a space of exception—whether in relation to governments or cartels. In the next chapter, my analysis of Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* puts the migrant's horizontal journey through rugged desert terrain at odds with the vertical, imposing authority of the Border Patrol. For now, let's assume that migrants are part of this hierarchy, even if they are in an almost powerless position.

Easily one of the most harrowing scenes in *Sicario* is when Matt Graver, Alejandro, and Kate Macer have stopped several US Immigration and Customs Enforcement buses in the process of driving rounded up migrants back into Mexico. The man in charge of the "transport," is upset that Graver has written him a huge check for

Domino's,¹⁹ presumably as some sort of bribe. It's pitch black outside apart from the border checkpoint's yellow lights. The camera follows behind Kate and as she approaches the lit area, somber strings and vocals signal that we are about to witness something heavy along with her. Before her, and us, are hundreds of migrants, literal huddled masses, all silently sitting on the floor underneath the lights, with armed Customs and Border Protection officers standing over them. A sequence of shots shows the migrants in their diversity; they are men and women, from teenagers to the elderly. The sequence also shows unifying qualities, like their tattered and dirty clothing, their worn expressions, and their despair. Their found condition, a result of the choice to migrate north, provokes consideration for just how dire the conditions they left must be. Taking the alignment of verticality with power, it is clear that the migrants are being portrayed here as powerless.

As it turns out, Alejandro and Matt are interested in migrants who were picked up around Nogales because they might be able to tell them things about the land, specifically the location of a drug-running tunnel, that they wouldn't otherwise know how to find. In other words, they are using migrant experiences as reliable information, something that almost contradicts the initial portrayal of migrants as silent and powerless. The film, echoing the complexity of Silvio's situation, posits a deeper understanding of migrant knowledge and humanity. It shines a light on how the US government, specifically Border Patrol and ICE, treat them—rounding them up and deporting them by the busload—and puts that into conversation with their human stories, ones that are so dire they often include risking their lives to get away from their home situations.

The following day, a handful of the migrants are discussing different border crossing routes with Alejandro as Matt looks on confidently. Congregated in a desert motel, the migrants, all men, are evidently unaware of their real purpose, as one can discern by the cries of “No!” when Alejandro announces, “this is our spot” (56:35-38). Unsure why Alejandro wants to go where it is most dangerous, one of the migrants tries to warn Alejandro:

‘This is drug land. The only people who cross there are mules and pollos. It keeps Border Patrol away. Never cross where there are tunnels.’

(Alejandro:) ‘You know this area?’

(Migrant:) ‘For years it was the best place to cross. Here you can walk easily to Highway 86. There is water and shade.’ (56:42-57:07)

It’s easy to miss upon first watch, but what is going on here is that the migrant is sharing collective migrant memory. He doesn’t respond with how well he personally knows the area; he simply lists how the place has served migrants in the past. The place that was the best and easiest to cross had a highway, water, and shade — all vital factors for successful crossings in the harsh southern Arizona desert. The migrant is also confirming what Matt and Alejandro already know, the drug cartel activity and narcoviolence have pushed migrants from the well known, easier routes, claiming it as their territory and forcing migrants into the periphery.

Staying away from drug land and desert tunnels is a relatively recent change for migrants that strangely mirrors De León’s research on how the Border Patrol has done much the same thing. For De León, the use of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) which began in the 1990s and has only proliferated since, uses the desert as an ally to weaken or kill migrants, often alleviating the Border Patrol from culpability. PTD and a space of exception are portrayed in *Sicario*, which shows different groups of power,

whether federal government, state and local police, or cartel members, distort the law in the borderlands by using its desert landscapes. Further, the film aligns the vertical perspective and the possession of that power in order to perform the impunity allowed by this space of exception.

Desert From Above

The expanse of desert projected onto a movie theatre screen simultaneously immerses viewers and gestures to the impossibility of containing the incredibly vast scale of desert distance. Roger Deakins's cinematography and Denis Villeneuve's directorial vision²⁰ approach the task by incorporating many types of viewing, especially from above. In addition to its deep attention to human power hierarchies and agencies (physical and political), *Sicario* incorporates the more-than-human desert landscape and its relationship to human activity through the use of particular lenses. The vertical points of view that comprise many of the film's most striking sequences are conveyed through aerial footage using drones, satellites, helicopters, and even an infrared camera²¹. Who gets to have the privilege of such synoptic views? Mostly, it's the people operating those technologies, and in the film that means US federal and state agents. The cinematography in these cases incorporates nonhuman interactions and relationships within the environment, and challenges traditional Desert Southwest aesthetics of a lone figure on the wide ground riding through the rough terrain. From above, the desert is mitigated frictionlessly, as a smooth space that those in power can and do take advantage of.

Sights

Sicario's cinematography invites and allows the desert to perform throughout the film, especially because, rather than only gazing out across the landscape and drifting upon its distance, the audience is repeatedly thrown into nonhuman vantage points that meet the desert, for lack of a better term, face-to-face. Such sequences support the film's exploration of verticality to the point of decentering human perspectives and perceptions. This approach to representing such a historically exotic and enticing environment challenges conventional aesthetics of filming the Southwest that tend to use the land as scenic backdrops instead of nonhuman and more-than-human agencies.

Of course, Deakins, the same cinematographer behind *No Country For Old Men*, captures some truly stunning shots where one can gaze into the heart of desert dawns and dusks—but somehow even these are more about movement along a vertical axis than a horizontal one. For instance, Matt Graver's crew are on foot and in search of the drug tunnel as the very last rays of light are vanishing from the sky, which is a stratified gradient from deep indigo to burnt orange. The distant mountains are jagged black edges that look two-dimensional and overlay the bottom third of the screen. As the team navigates the unseeable topography below their feet, they walk away from the camera and toward the horizon; their stark black army soldier silhouettes descend into and are absorbed by its blackness. The shot lingers here even after the last helmet has disappeared, countering the classic Western depictions of cowboys riding off into the sunset, in which human and horse have their silhouettes predominantly imposed upon the screen. Instead, the human is dissolved, downward, into the black, and the hierarchy of geographical time swallows human endeavor in an instant.

However, *Sicario* excels at defamiliarizing the desert. When I watched *Sicario* in the theatre for the first time, I was in awe of seeing my hometown from above in such an unfamiliar way. I recognized the mountains of Juarez and El Paso captured in scenes like the one I've just described. I could almost smell the creosote as I watched Matt and Kate shout at each other with monsoon clouds enveloping the sky promising desert rain. I could feel the time of year it was, and I could place myself there in those moments. I've seen it countless times from various window seats on commercial flights. I was still living there when they started to put up that ugly brown border fence; I've hiked the Franklin Mountains and sped down Border Highway on my way to UTEP; I've visited Juarez and had to wait far too long to get back across the border. But the perspective of the aerial scenes are slower and so much closer to the ground than the view from any aircraft I've been aboard, and they maintain their vertical distance from the ground.

Just before the audience join Kate and the team on their illegal venture into Juarez, there is a montage of different shots of the border fence. The border fence shown was erected as a result of the Secure Fence Act in 2006, joining the Rio Grande and stretches of highway to clearly mark the divide between El Paso and Juarez. The chopping of helicopter rotors and a droning, low sound that is the signature sound of the film indicates foreboding as the perspectives of the fence change from far to near, eventually letting the fence cut from the top to the bottom of the screen in a jagged vertical line. During the last shot of the montage, the helicopters come into view and their tails straddle the line, invisibly drawn in the sky, as the framing emphasizes how this fence cuts through otherwise undemarcated terrain. There is no clear way to tell which "side" is which.

There are a few times that the cinematography adopts a vertical perspective and takes viewers from an aerial view to an overhead view, completely distorting human perception of the desert. The first time this happens is during Kate, Matt, and Alejandro's flight to El Paso. The shot approaches the Franklin Mountain Range, noticeably green from recent monsoon rains, and welcomes them and the audience to El Paso from Arizona. As the Franklins get closer to the camera, the shot cuts to a view from directly above the mountains. A slow, deliberate meditation on the terrain, this perspective—not one that any character could have had from aboard the plane—confronts viewers with a landscape that is almost too close up to make sense of. Mountains, which wield their own vertical dominance over the ground, are suddenly leveled, flattening the desert topography and disrupting otherwise discernible features like ridges, peaks, and valleys. I had never seen the Franklins like this before, and it moved me.

More than just evoke thought and feeling about sweeping desert landscapes, *Sicario* uses an aerial perspective to show how human and nonhuman relationships in the El Paso-Juarez area have shaped each other. One shot looks directly down at suburban sprawl, with dozens of relatively similar houses occupying gridded roads, and begins to pivot, exposing the edge of the sprawl and juxtaposing it with the open, “undeveloped” land that surrounds and used to include metropolitan El Paso. A few shots of Juarez from above display the city's vast population. Houses and buildings cram every contour of the land on which they are built. Such portrayals of El Paso and Juarez give viewers an oddly intimate engagement with their material ecologies as situated next to one another in the desert. From these aerial shots, there is a sense of thickness and entanglement at a scale that is not the hyperobject of the imaginary desert of pop culture nor too individualized;

viewers hover at a distance from which discerning human and geological spatiotemporality simultaneously is made possible.

The bridge scene, where the task force is caught in traffic trying to return to the US, is a reflection on flow and movement in legal ways. Looking straight down at the hundreds of cars stuck in traffic, completely stalled as they wait for what will likely be hours, the sense of tension and friction of movement across the border is presented in a way that is as felt as it is shown. The vantage point from directly above the bridge provides a way of seeing all of these people and their border-crossing infrastructure as they exist within the vastness of the desert. Though the ultimate smooth space is being in the air in some government aircraft, somehow from this distance the cars, curving streets, and dirt roads, resemble an intended flow through smooth space of the horizontal desert. The same scene's more intimate shots place viewers within the reality of being on the ground in the horizontal desert. Close-ups of Kate in the vehicle create a sense of striated space with a friction, which when turned into stoppage, can be fatal. The cars move slowly, and the striation of the border, the law, and the long wait takes over.

Sicario uses an array of nonhuman lenses, including infrared, night vision, satellite, and drone footage, to portray its subjects—people, landscapes, and things. Infrared and night vision are ways of seeing that require technological apparatuses beyond the human eye's interactions with light and space that can represent the otherwise invisible. They are used when Matt Graver's team is approaching and entering the drug tunnel near Sasabe. An aerial view with the infrared camera, which looks much like a film negative, clearly shows the soldiers on one side of the frame and the broken down car marking the tunnel's entrance at the other. What we are seeing is heat—the thickness

of heat and how humans and nonhuman materials conduct heat even without any sunlight. As Kate follows men into the tunnel, there are footprints on the ground marking heat impressions from their feet. These traces show our interaction and becoming-with the desert; we are not separate from it just because we cannot perceive the process. Drone and satellite footage are used often, and keep viewers at a strange distance and in an even stranger stride. The perspectives offered here are synoptic and, much like infrared or night vision, are usually reserved for people with such technologies of power. As the drones and satellites glide over the landscape, the audience is encouraged to look down upon the somewhat diminished human action below. What these views also do is consistently remind us of desert situatedness in a way that the ever expanding horizon line doesn't do. In facing it head on from above, the desert and all of its elements—sky, clouds, light, heat, mountains, dirt, animals, and scrub—is ever-encompassing.

Sounds

The film's striking cinematography of the landscape is intensified by its extraordinary sounds. Composer Jóhann Jóhannsson wrote the score for *Sicario*, though it is hardly what one might typically consider musical. As Jóhannsson explained in an interview, "I was working with a large, 55-piece orchestra, strings, brass, woodwind, but they serve more of a textural function—they're not really melodic. It's more textural, with a lot of extended techniques and spectral, textural writing" (Grobar). His key descriptors, "spectral" and "textural," are helpful ways of arresting the affective dimensions of sound into language. They attest to the layers of intensities that proliferate

through the film, taking viewers above and below the desert environment, an aural dimension to verticality.

When Kate first approaches the seated busloads of silent migrants, mournful vocals, much like desert winds, chime in with the crunch of her footsteps on the gravel. There is a haunting nature to the scene, in sight and sound, because it is a moment that reveals the grim side of realities of border violence without showing the physical violence so often depicted. This is a scene full of people who have likely escaped unthinkable violences, as they sit still, awaiting their fates. The vocals, something like chants, float over the scene in a montage of the different groups of migrants, blinking and looking resolutely at Kate, who is looking down and then away. As soon as Matt and Alejandro start talking with the bus transporter, the soundtrack vocals disappear, a gesture reminiscent of many voices who have dissipated and been lost into the desert.

When it isn't sorrowful, the score creates even more texture with its signature drums and driving sounds from below. As a contrast to the sadder pieces, the other theme for Jóhannsson is the "idea of music coming almost from underground almost, and this sort of warlike, martial rhythm²²" (Grobar). The drums, equally as haunting as the chanting vocals, are the first sounds of the film, and get louder and more intense as we watch Kate and her FBI team surround and then raid Diaz's stash house. They are joined by cello and bass playing, evoking a similar tone and terror of the *Jaws* theme song. As Reggie and Kate discover the walls stuffed with dead bodies, the drums and strings return. The sonic atmosphere is rife with texture. They pulse, like a giant's heartbeat, throughout other tense scenes like the shootout on the bridge, the soldiers sinking below the horizon toward the drug tunnel, and even the takedown of the woman who deposits

Diaz's cash at the bank. One can imagine how these subterranean emanations swell from underneath the desert.

The most formidable sound in *Sicario* is a driving, drone sound that recalls a warplane swooping overhead again and again. The first time, the sound itself is low as Kate reluctantly agrees to join Matt and Alejandro is packing up his gear at the end of the briefing about the operation to retrieve Guillermo. It builds, now layered with percussive helicopter blades, as the scene quickly cuts to the pivoting shot of sprawl and desert previously described. The shot is steady and slow, looking straight down upon the houses until nothing but the land is in the frame. The combination of sight and the sound, in its growth and repetition, evokes deep contemplation about desert dwelling and relationships to place.

And still the sound keeps building. Over and over, the low grinding sound resounds. The sequence cuts to a tracking shot of the border fence, using it as an artificial horizon across the screen, before switching to an extended, aerial shot of the fence now serving as the vertical axis of the screen, splitting the deserts of El Paso and Juarez evenly into the left and right of the frame. The low grinding sound resounds. Over the next few seconds there are aerial views, presumably from the helicopters seen and heard hovering above the fence, that show the fence's futile attempt to restrict the land and the point of view rises above the desert mesas to reveal Juarez. The low grinding sound resounds. Then we are on El Paso's Border Highway, driving in the border fence's shadow and looking through it at Juarez's colonias as one of the team members says "There she is, the beast. Juarez" (25:42-47). The low grinding sound resounds. This sound imbues the landscape with an affective quality that undermines notions of the

desert as barren or void. Its reverberations serve as a sonic complement to the terrain's abundant texture, inviting viewers to perceive the desert differently.

Through disorientating bird's-eye shots, in which the view of the landscape is from directly overhead, and long panning aerial shots, in which the atmosphere becomes palpable, *Sicario*'s cinematography defamiliarizes the cinematic desert in order to present it—as opposed to *represent* it—anew. In fact, *Sicario*'s affinity with filming from above distorts traditional aesthetic conventions of shooting the desert along its measureless horizon. This approach allows audiences, even ones familiar with the desert landscapes of the area, distinctive ways to deconstruct the desert of pop culture and the imagination as a background while reconstructing it as an agential environment. Lastly, it isn't just sights but the sounds of *Sicario* that create important portrayals of the desert's affective intensities. While not a traditional musical soundtrack, the score amplifies the tensions between individuals, humans, and nonhumans in the US-Mexico borderlands. Guttural sounds which seem bred from below envelop the terrestrial and saturate the atmosphere while, alternately, dolorous voices seem to infiltrate it, haunt it, from above. These components combined demonstrate *Sicario*'s contemporary and necessary contribution to 21st century desert aesthetics.

CHAPTER 3

ON THE GROUND

A reminder, dear reader, that national borders are invented. Some may push the thought further and say national borders are imaginary, but that takes away from the many lives lived and lost in the name of any number of borders and their real consequences. Recently, historian Julian Lim posited that “we need not accept the state-centric premise that borders are fixed, constant, or unproblematic...The region straddling the U.S.-Mexico international line has thus always remained both borderlands *and* bordered lands, providing thoroughfares for certain kinds of crossings while shutting out others” (11). As I’ve demonstrated in Chapter 2, proximity is highly influential in making outlaws of law enforcement officials and obscuring the limits of jurisdiction. As a film and text, *Sicario* exemplifies this through its aesthetic of verticality, including a bird’s eye view of the Border and implicating a corrupt, hierarchical system of contemporary borderlands warfare. This chapter challenges the verticality of the stories as told or viewed from above, and echoes Lim’s statements by obligating the reader to encounter the unfolding Desert Southwest through horizontal, immanent engagement.

In doing so, it becomes apparent borders emerge as they are encountered, often distorting sense of place, body, or perception; the Border becomes borders. Both published in 2004, Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* depict two very different yet very real experiences of the deserts of Arizona and El Paso-Juarez, respectively. Each book emphasizes being on the ground of these places, and contributes to ways of thinking about multiple, emergent borders as opposed to a singular, fixed, and official border. Importantly, they pay close attention to

the various bodies that encounter and are impacted by borders in the Desert Southwest. In other words, through their depictions of borders and bodies, the works make space for and highlight complex conditions of being in the Borderlands.

This chapter pairs *The Devil's Highway* with *Desert Blood* because they are strangely complementary. Where *Devil's Highway* tackles the rugged desert terrain of the Sonoran Desert, *Desert Blood* exposes discrepancies between urban and suburban settings amidst the Chihuahuan Desert. *Devil's Highway* is an account of 26 men traversing the desert, while *Desert Blood* focuses almost exclusively on missing and murdered women in Ciudad Juarez. The desert in *Devil's Highway* seemingly has a hand in taking lives, while the desert of *Desert Blood* participates in obscuring deaths.

In tandem, the two books produce a more robust sense of Latinx experiences in the Desert Southwest at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. Contrasted to the Old or Wild West genre often told by white American males — think Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, and Leon Metz — the authors here are voices of the Borderlands²³. They are far from the only two books written by Latinx authors about the Desert Southwest, but their resonances and dissonances illuminate how borders and bodies are distorted through desert conditions and forces. To put it another way, this chapter explores the various borders provided by each text to examine how those borders and the desert interact with and distort human bodies.

The turn of the century preserved a political climate teeming with ways to construct and dissolve the US-Mexico Border — and “the border region is neither country,” in the words of Victor Ortiz, but “a sociopolitical landscape of dramatic historic and economic dynamics defined by a pervasive dislocation, which is experienced very

differently by the individuals and institutions involved” (100). *The Devil’s Highway* and *Desert Blood* are principle works for examining how the changing socioeconomic and political climates of the 1990s affected and still affects Latinx migrants, Mexican-Americans, and Mexican women in the Southwest Borderlands. Like *Sicario*, which I analyze in Chapter 3, these texts bear witness to contemporary desert entanglements and emergences, supplanting antiquated, problematic representations and aesthetics of the desert with much more embodied, fruitful ones.

In 1993, Mexico, Canada, and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), essentially leveling trade barriers between the three countries. Taking effect in 1994, the agreement paved the way for large-scale industrialization and exploitation for corporate profit along the US-Mexico border, especially through the use of *maquiladoras*. Defined as “American-owned transnational factories” by critical legal theorist and feminist Elvia R. Arriola, *maquiladoras* are plants and warehouses where workers assemble and produce goods to be exported (25). In short, NAFTA influenced factories in the US to close down and *maquiladoras* in Mexico to open up. The new factories in Mexico depended upon cheap, exploitative labor, and their workforce was overwhelmingly made up of women. The working conditions in a *maquiladora* are notoriously poor; along with long hours and meager pay, the workers are subjected to poor ventilation, restricted bathroom access, exposure to toxic chemicals, and high risk of injury. In analyzing the language of NAFTA, Arriola argues that its policies privilege “more rights for the investor than for the worker or migrant laborer,” something that became increasingly apparent throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century (40). As more women moved to Ciudad Juarez to try and make a living and

provide for their families at the new plants there, an unprecedented amount of violence towards women in the area started to take place.

The same year NAFTA was enacted, the Border Patrol had established Operation Hold-the-Line, an impressive show of force that fended off many illegal border crossings from Ciudad Juarez and surrounding areas into El Paso “in an effort to bring a level of control to the border” (“Border Patrol History”). Operation Hold-the-Line’s success fed directly into the launch of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, an implementation of the Border Patrol and “a massive undertaking, involving the construction of walls and fences along parts of the border that were easier to cross and dramatically increasing the Border Patrol’s personnel and the technology it uses for border surveillance” (Rios). In sum, the two largest US-Mexico bordertowns were more policed than ever, forcing migrants to use alternative, more remote routes.

In the previous chapter, I showed how proximity to the border affects concepts of law and lawlessness. The aerial or hierarchical distancing enables people with power to pull strings, and the US-Mexico border becomes just one such string. *The Devil’s Highway* and *Desert Blood* also contain elements of proximity, except unlike the synoptic lens of *Sicario* these works perform through people being on the ground in a day-to-day situation. Despite *Devil’s Highway* engaging the male experience in the Sonoran Desert and *Desert Blood* the primarily female experience of the northern Chihuahuan Desert, both texts evoke and contribute to a powerful hauntology of desert place. Contrary to romanticized or mythologized notions of the desert as void, the desert in these accounts is full of sights, sounds, smells, and especially death and dying. There are ways to “reading the land like a text” that these works teach us (Urrea 29). There are traumas and deaths

insurmountable, unmournable. The end of this chapter will take up this desert hauntology and illustrate what it looks and feels like at the turn of the century.

Borders in *The Devil's Highway*

They trotted along the road, Mendez in the lead, the other two gangsters taking up the rear. Nobody told the walkers anything. They thought they were going to jump a big fence and hide in trees as helicopters bore down. But they ran in sand, slipping and struggling, and they dropped into a dry wash and up the three-foot bank on the north side, and they stepped over a dropped and rusted barbed wire fence.

“Los estados unidos, muchachos.”

That's it? That's the border? This is North America? It don't look like much!
(103)

The Devil's Highway is a nonfiction book written by Luis Alberto Urrea that recounts the journeys of a group of men now known as the Wellton 26. Their trek starts south of the US-Mexico border, and unfurls along a stretch of the Sonoran Desert of infamy known as the Devil's Highway, or *Camino del Diablo*²⁴. Most of the men die or go missing during their migration north, woefully guided by a man called Mendez for whom the task was too great. The tension of the text comes from the juxtapositions of Urrea's research and stories of migrants and Border Patrol agents experiencing the harsh desert. The author's straightforward writing style and extensive research weave the stories of the Wellton 26 in such a way that readers can't help but feel like they're present and bearing witness.

As Urrea relays the Wellton 26's journey, the stakes of crossing the Border — the official international border separating southern Arizona and Mexico since the Gadsden Purchase in 1854 — are almost paled in comparison to the many other *borders*, material and metaphorical, that the men also face. Blurred lines abound, as even the group's name

is up for debate. Urrea explains that in Southern Arizona there are only two Border Patrol sectors, so “the confusion comes easy...Walkers are identified by sector, not station, so the Wellton crew was erased from the headlines” because they “just happened to have died in the Yuma sector” as opposed to the Tucson one (18, 33). They are the Wellton 26 or the Yuma 14, depending on who you ask. To explain the discrepancy between the numbers, though there were 14 fatalities, Wellton Border Patrol Officer Friendly tells Urrea there were 26 bodies, and “all of them are victims, even the live ones. And they’re mine” (33). Regardless of which sector claims ownership, for most of the book the walkers are north of the US-Mexico border, trekking the Devil’s Highway.

In fact, they are underwhelmed by the physical presence of the obstacle they’d always envisioned so much grander in their imaginations: “*That’s it? That’s the border? This is North America? It don’t look like much!*” (103). Like the men of the Wellton 26, the reader may think that every illegal border crossing is accompanied with action from Border Patrol, vigilante justice, or fanfare along a very clearly marked, very official border signage. This just isn’t the case. Urrea describes a sign once placed in Sasabe, Sonora²⁵ by the Mexican government warning people about coyotes. Following the description, the author proffers, “There is no real border here, just a tattered barbed wire fence, a dusty plain, and some rattling bushes” (55). In this instance, the Border on its own does not perform. There are conditions imposed upon it, different situations, places, and relationships that enable it to perform. If one must think about the US-Mexico border as a fixed and established line, then one must also remember the border that separates the US and Mexico is the same one that separates the US and all of Latin America. As Urrea

is careful to point out, not all migrants are Mexican citizens, even though they move through Mexico to reach the US (8, 34).

In *The Devil's Highway*, the borders faced by the walkers include geographical barriers and psychological challenges. As Urrea details the group's on-the-ground struggle through the immense Southern Arizona desert, he shifts focus to discuss the border-at-hand, reorienting the reader again and again to suit the conditions that the group finds themselves in. The drags created by the Border Patrol to catch migrants and insurmountable stretches of mountain ridge are two examples of physical border Urrea explores. As opposed to the comparative safety and power of helicopter and drone views in *Sicario*, these geographical borders must be faced head on, in the horizontal — enmeshed in a physicality and a phenomenologically embedded experience of the desert. On the other hand, the book includes less material, more psychological borders as well. The gap between expectation of an experience and the experience itself undoubtedly plagues the walkers throughout their journey. Expectation does not enable attunement with the environment the way experience does, and in this case that lack of attunement is fatal. The border between life and death is important in *The Devil's Highway* because the walkers spend so much time lingering in the liminal space before they perish or are rescued. The US national border and the fact that it is crossed illegally by these men is important, but not the sole emphasis of my analysis. My primary concern is with the distortion of the Border²⁶ as a transcendent, monolithic political entity into borders plural so that it becomes a tactic for thinking about the desert environment differently.

Geographically a US perspective gazes south and looks down at Mexico.. Urrea, who was born in Mexico and moved to the US as a toddler, draws attention to the effects

of this perspective by bringing his binational one to the fore. The author asks the reader to understand the magnetism of the north for Latin American people as a similar draw to that of the west for early Americans by recalling the familiar idea of Manifest Destiny and the irresistibility and grandeur of the open west:

In North America, the myth tends west: the cowboys, the Indians, the frontier, the wild lands, the bears and wolves and gold mines and vast ranches were in the west. But in Mexico, a country narrow at bottom and wide at the top, **the myth ran north**. The Mayas pushed north, and the Aztecs pushed north once they'd formed an empire. Later, the Spaniards pushed north. The wide open spaces lay northward. The cowboys and Indians, the great Pancho Villa outlaws, the frontier, lay north, not west. That's why norteño people are the cowboys of Mexico — not westerners. The Spanish word for "border" is, after all, *frontera*. The frontier.

Along with great adventures in the west, Americans yearned for riches. The Gold Rush and the Land Rush come to mind. For the Mexicans, the Gold Rush lay in those mystical lands up there, above: Orange County, Cicero, Dubuque, Odessa. (48)

As is typical of his concise and poignant style, Urrea provides the lens of the northerly gaze from Mexico over the last few hundred years and boils the mythos down to just two paragraphs. The author equates the United States's lust for the west to Mexico's for the north, and reorients the reader from east-west to south-north. Instead of looking down into or onto Mexico, the reader engages with a gestural looking "up there, above." He also invokes the Spanish word for border, *frontera*, which of course supplies the root for the word frontier. Studies of American literature are steeped in and sometimes bogged down by attention to the orthodox frontier canon, including Jackson's "Frontier Thesis" of 1893 and Anzaldúa's *The Borderlands/La Frontera* of 1987. I suggest that by reorienting US readers, Urrea creates a new opportunity for readers to reimagine the US-Mexico border as less a fixed line and more a porous, magnetic beacon of myth and

promise. What happens when we think about the US-Mexico border in the same way as we do the western frontier? For a start, things immediately become less fixed.

Even as borders and human relationships with them fluctuate, the desert landscapes of the Southwest remain a fairly constant aesthetic. Especially in romanticized views, there is a vastness to the Desert Southwest that goes on for miles unobstructed except by mountains, rivers, the occasional gas station, and a few straight roads. It's all just a steady horizon. It's a vastness that characterizes the freedom of the American West, represented often by a scenic road trip along Route 66 or an excursion to Joshua Tree National Park (or Moab, if you're an Edward Abbey disciple). Despite all of the distance and walking that the Wellton 26 endured, the desert for them becomes claustrophobic through its immediate and unrelenting oppression of human movement. It encloses them, refuting the common equation of openness and freedom. At one point, Urrea describes, with regard to the group's guide Mendez, how "the arroyos and gullies dulled his mind. It was all walls. There was no break" (138). No break, and despite the vast expanse of desert country, Urrea conjures walls. The author's doing so helps directly contrast the built border walls of the US and the manifold other walls of this devastating journey. Without an ability to attune, to understand and work with and through this terrain — not a simple task — the walkers and their guía are boxed in. Solely being on US soil doesn't bestow freedom.

Of course there are human-made barriers out in the desert country, as well. Those Border Patrol agents trained to track walkers across the desert are known as "signcutters." Training and attunement allow them to "read the land like a text" and "search the manuscript of the ground for irregularities in its narration," skills crucial in a place where

every moment away from water or shelter matters (29). Signcutters have a couple of key strategies for tracking down walkers and pinning down which direction they've headed and how long ago they were there: setting up drags and reading signs, such as displaced pebbles and walker footprints.

The drags are essentially the agents' way of wiping the slate of the desert floor clean, like a zen garden for catching walkers. Urrea describes the process:

Drags are created by bundles of five car tires attached to a frame, looking somewhat like the Olympic rings. Every few days, a truck chains a drag to its back end and drives the roads, ironing the sand into a smooth surface. The drags tend to cut east/west. Since the illegals head north, they are forced, sooner or later, to cross a drag. The Devil's Highway itself is the Mother of All Drags. (28)

Creating a smooth space along the roads forces the walkers to inscribe upon it, perpendicularly, in a northward direction. They are bound to this by their being limited to a journey on foot. Both the agents and the walkers leave distinct traces upon the land, but only the agents do so with any authority. The roads, now drags, create new borders more likely to bear consequences for walkers than their stepping across the US-Mexico border itself.

The signcutters aren't the only ones who read the land and its manifold borders like a text, however. *Guías*, Spanish for guides, are trained with different methods for reading the land. Also known as *polleros*, they are responsible for leading groups of walkers, or their *pollos*, from Mexico to safety in the US. Some *guías* are more successful than others. Though Mendez, the *guía* for the Wellton 26, had successfully taken groups north before, his usual route was through southern California, and it was at a much smaller scale than the route in southern Arizona. Mendez does take one group successfully through the Devil's Highway, his newly assigned territory, just a week

before he sets out with the Wellton 26. That walk was successful until they got busted. During the second, failed, and fatal attempt, navigation by unfamiliar landmarks coupled with the inhospitable desert conditions lie at the heart of why the group suffered as long as they did. According to Urrea, the group “didn’t know that Mendez was in uncharted territory. He probably knew it, but seemed to think he could work out the puzzle of the landscape” (112). A puzzle has a finite set of pieces, each fitting together in their different shapes and sizes to create a more coherent whole. Landscape, despite its common association with the picturesque and unending attempts to contain it, is a more-than-human environment that is not so neat and clear cut. There are nonhuman forces, intensities, and agencies in any environment that can and do interact with and enact upon human agencies. Mendez was never going to figure out the puzzle of the landscape because it never was a puzzle.

Eventually, Mendez leads them up into the Growler Mountains, which quickly become the most immediate and prominent border between the walkers and their success, which here means survival. Signcutters were able to determine that due to his left leg having “just a little less thrust than his right,” the *guía* had veered and misled the group (113). Not only was Mendez ignorant of the land he was leading his group through, he was also ignorant of the way his own body interacted with the terrain as he walked it. The *guía* is unable to attune to the land or to his body, and trackers were able to decipher that he “always cut to the left” (113). According to Urrea’s telling:

[Mendez] was clearly aware that Ajo and salvation lay over the unforgiving mountains to his right. He repeatedly tried to climb over the Growlers, dragging the crew up until they foundered, and then fell back, to hit the burning grit and bake as they rested. Then another slog north until a mild-looking slope presented itself, and they tried again, only to be foiled by the heat and the deceptive nature

of these desert mountains. Just when they thought they were topping the summit, a higher ridge or peak appeared. (134)

With their position — exhausted, dehydrated, and unable to escape the heat that had followed them their entire journey — the men are guided more and more by the physical features of the land than by their *guía* Mendez. Drained of energy and morale, Urrea describes how “they followed the land, now tired enough to only want to flow downhill” (138). They are surrounded by mountains, and it is clear that they have mistaken the prominence of the national border for the power of geological ones. The nature of their journey, walking on foot, emphasizes the harshness of horizontality, no matter how high up in the mountains they find themselves.

The geographical border of the Growlers, in tandem with harsh desert conditions like extreme heat and vastness, makes way for the psychological borders between expectation and reality of lived experience. Mendez, incredibly unfamiliar with the Devil’s Highway, led his *pollos* “into a blank map with landmarks etched in transient memory, known by obtuse Coyote descriptions,” that really only help if one has contended with that environment often (108). Again this gestures to the necessity for attunement with and awareness of a specific desert place. Most of the Wellton 26 were from tropical Veracruz and had never even seen a desert before, and it is commonly the case that walkers use *guías* because of their lack of experience with the terrain of the Borderlands (39). Urrea explains how painstakingly near to salvation the group was, if their guide had only known: “he was only about five miles off” (136). To keep his group’s spirits up, Mendez repeatedly and inaccurately assures the group that there were only a few more days, miles, or deserts before they reached their desired destination.

“‘It’s just a few more miles,’ Mendez told them, but they already understood that he was wrong” (137). The sheer scale demanded by place in this instance is difficult to process. He does not know this specific desert land well enough, and the border between what he thinks will be the journey versus what the journey actually entails proves to be fatal for some of his group.

The disorientation that engulfs the walkers blurs and distorts the distinctions between the expected journey, the experienced journey, and even the memories of their journey, dissolving those borders. It announces itself as “their accounts of the following days fade into a strange twilight of pain. Names are forgotten. Locations are nebulous, at best, since none of them, not even the Coyotes, even knew where they were. Nameless mountains loomed over them, nameless stars burned mutely overhead, nameless demons gibbered from the nameless canyons” (108). Namelessness, the lack of familiar representation, creates a psychological barrier between the group’s experiences, expectations, and realities. They are unable to remember any specific names or locations, yet the affectual intensities of that timeframe permeate the pages. Chapter 4 examines how Yuri Herrera’s novella *Signs Preceding the End of the World* uses namelessness intentionally to make readers experience the desert in new ways, but the Wellton 26 are confronted with an immersive interaction with it to a much more extreme extent.

The desert environment of their trek and the thickness of the Sonoran Desert, reverberates with the intensity of immanence, and near certain death: “You are now at the borderline, standing before the abyss. One more step, and you cannot return. Another border crossing” (Urrea 135). Ultimately it is this border, between life and death, that makes walkers who have been out in the desert too long hope that *La Migra* will find

them—no matter the legal consequences. Whatever penal reprimand is in order, it is worth living for. Urrea writes that walkers “often gave themselves up when they realized the western desert had gotten the better of them” (15). The torture, mental and physical, that prolonged exposure to the Devil’s Highway generates is thickly connected with the capabilities and limitations of the human body. The last section of this chapter deals with death as an inescapable aspect of desert dwelling that forms the basis of a desert hauntology. The desert doesn’t dictate death, though it does amplify it.

Borders in *Desert Blood*

Author Alicia Gaspar de Alba, too, explores the ways the border between the US and Mexico is distorted depending on one’s identity, position of power, and the desert environment. Though it is fiction, *Desert Blood* is rooted in heavy doses of research about the hundreds of missing and murdered women—the *femicidios*—that began in the 1990s with far too little attention to their severity and impact. The novel’s epicenter is the El Paso-Juarez area, where many of the women went missing, as well as where Gaspar de Alba is from. It uses protagonist Ivon Villa, a lesbian, Chicana, professor of Women’s Studies, as an entry point to the story to investigate the crimes of the missing women epidemic in Juarez²⁷. Like Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* or Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, *Desert Blood* doesn’t shy away from descriptive passages of harrowing violence and abuse that occurs against female bodies. Specifically, these descriptions include attention to dangerous practices of *maquiladoras*, which, in the novel, include conducting experiments with workers’ reproductive capabilities via rape, insemination, and contraception. Ultimately *Desert Blood* is intent on educating its

readers about ongoing atrocities that don't seem to make much of an impact outside the desert where it's based.

As in *The Devil's Highway*, the environmental borders in *Desert Blood*—like the US-Mexico bridges or the Rio Grande—have a significant influence on bodies and what they can or cannot do and where. What makes Gaspar de Alba's novel so salient is how she highlights these environmental borders and their impacts on women's bodies. This section analyzes the proliferation and power of environmental and built borders to demarcate socioeconomic status, as well as to disorient and reorient sense of place. It also investigates how being in proximity to the Border can evoke or revoke legal jurisdiction or even dissolve the Border to proliferate borders around senses of identity. Crucial to my argument is how the vastness of El Paso-Juarez prevents or allows the spread of information about the femicides beyond the bordertowns.

Desert Blood follows Ivon and her cousin Ximena moving back and forth across the El Paso-Juarez border via the international bridges, which was a relatively casual and commonplace activity for locals with legal documents such as passports, or border crossing cards informally called *micas*²⁸. In the same way the walkers from *The Devil's Highway* are unimpressed by the official Border and more daunted by the journey itself, the people who cross between El Paso and Juarez every day for work, school, or just as a part of their life don't worry as much about the Border itself as they do the chunks of time they will lose waiting on the bridge to get across. The novel's events take place in 1998, five years into the epidemic of missing women, and at the start of when crossing, even legally, began to change from casual to dangerous. When women began going missing, the border—really just a bridge for many El Paso-Juarez citizens—became the

Border, a more material and imposing force than ever. Gaspar de Alba demonstrates this tension through her characters' everyday lives. There are many mentions of crossing by foot or car for things like underage partying, going to school, and shopping, but the novel is capturing the growing unease of crossing into Juarez as the violence transformed the culture (56, 108, 69).

The reader first joins Ivon on an airplane as she heads into El Paso, her hometown. She is visiting from Los Angeles, where she lives with her wife and is a visiting professor. It is on the plane while reading *Ms.* magazine that she first learns about the ongoing crisis of murdered and missing women in Juarez. That she stumbles into the knowledge about her hometown through a magazine instead of learning about it from her family there is significant, and I return to it later in this chapter. Ivon is in town because her cousin, Ximena, knows a woman in Juarez, Cecilia, who is willing to let Ivon and her partner adopt her baby. Initially, Ivon doesn't fully understand the context of why this stranger is willing to give up her child to a random American couple. The reality is that her life as a *maquiladora* worker does not allow for her to be pregnant and will not provide enough for Cecilia to take care of the baby. This is the reality for thousands of women employed by the *maquilas* at this time. Father Francis, founder of the nonprofit organization *Contra el Silencio* and Ximena's friend sketches the general scenario, about how *maquila* workers "can't afford another mouth to feed, they make five dollars a day in those American factories...they have to work eleven hours just to buy a box of diapers and four hours to buy a gallon of milk" (39). He also details children's exposure to gasoline, paint, wild dogs, and their predisposition to dysentery and malnutrition (39).

Cecilia and thousands like her are subjected to an unforgiving and highly oppressive life and death on the south side of the Border.

For Ivon and Ximena, the journey across the Border is just part of daily life, but the space in Juarez between the *maquiladora* and the neighborhood that Cecilia lives in, known as a *colonia*, becomes a new, more powerful border they are not as willing to cross. *Colonias* are an unincorporated section of a town or city with little to no amenities, including electricity and water. Gaspar de Alba describes them in the novel as “houses were made of cinder block, painted in exotic colors like green and lilac...[and] shacks made of wooden pallets and old tires, corrugated tin roofs” (35-36). Volk and Schlotterbeck’s even more sobering definition is “poorly served shantytowns that sprang up in the desert and hills southwest of Juarez” (129). By virtue of living in a *colonia*, *maquiladora* workers are forced to walk through the desert, often in the dark, in order to ride the company bus to and from their shifts. Ivon and Ximena drive to Juarez to pick up Cecilia after her shift, but they do not find her. When Ivon suggests paying Cecilia a house visit, Ximena replies, “she lives in a *colonia* way out in Puerto Anapra. Wild horses couldn’t drag me there at night, *ésa*. No roads, no electricity. Just a black hole of danger, especially for women” (22). Between the *maquiladoras* and the *colonias* emerges a border they are not willing to brave, and one that other women who work at the factories have no choice but to cross, sometimes fatally.

Ultimately, the pair learn that Cecilia was picked up after her shift and murdered, revealing that the violent opening scene of the novel pertains to the moments leading up to Cecilia’s death. Her body is found by “some guy on horseback...inside an abandoned car out by the airport...Stabbed to death with a rope around her neck, like she was

dragged. Still wearing her smock and her nametag” (41). Returning to the gruesome opening passage, now with a name, age, and context in mind, connects the previously incomplete scene with a fuller sense of identity:

The rope tightened around her neck, and she felt her belly drag over sand and rocks, the wound on her breast pricked by sagebrush. She was numb below the waist, and her face ached from the beating...The drug they had given her made her feel like she was under water. She could not feel the blades slicing into her belly...Felt a current of night air deep inside her, belly hanging open. She tried to scream, but someone hit her on the mouth again, and someone else stabbed into the bag of water and bones... (1-2)

Even without any context beyond the full title, *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders*, this passage immediately disorients the reader. It's loaded with abundant details of visceral violence and numbed pain from the point of view of someone readers initially don't know. We are with her, but we don't know her. There is no detail of who this woman is, her age, her name, her nationality. Just a "bag of water and bones." In truth, this mirrors the reality of the femicides; the missing women didn't always come with names and contexts, and so did not initially warrant public outcry and attention. The first time one reads the passage, it's unclear who the woman being murdered is. It's heinous and brutal, but as a reader we don't know this woman, who is nameless. Upon subsequent readings, it's that much worse knowing it is Cecilia, a pregnant, working woman who was going to give her baby up for adoption so that it would have a better life. The specifics demand a renewed, deeper poignancy. The space between the *maquiladoras* and the *colonias* where environmental borders isolate women from safety are crucial. Often these stretches of dangerous desert dictate chances for survival based on time of day or night and how far the women are from someone who can hear or see them and be willing to help.

While Ivon and Ximena are afraid to travel to the *colonia* at night, even the day poses a threat in the throes of the desert. An example of this is when Father Francis, the founder of Contra el Silencio, conducts a *rastreo*²⁹ in Lomas de Poleo in Juarez. Defined in *Desert Blood* as a search for dead bodies, the novel introduces unfamiliar readers to the act through a group like Contra, whose very purpose is to work against the absence of words and deeds dedicated to finding missing women (23). Father Francis explains why he began Contra el Silencio; on top of the FBI's inability to "get involved without evidence...[the] activist groups that run *rastreos* on this side are only looking for the Juarez girls," prompting him to create the nonprofit, "for the friends and relatives of the American girls" (41). This is a reminder that the desert, in all its open expanse, is a great hiding place, erecting borders out of unknown information about bodies that many will never look for, and many more that will never be found.

Not unlike Mendez in *The Devil's Highway*, Father Francis guides a group through tough terrain producing its own set of borders. For Mendez and his *pollos*, there were three different deserts serving as borders they had to make it through to reach their destination (115). For Father Francis and his volunteers, mostly families and friends of the missing and murdered, there are three terrains of Lomas de Poleo and no single destination. Asked to describe the land for viewers of Rubí Reyna's television show, *Mujeres Sin Fronteras*, the priest obliges. He breaks them down into "the sandy terrain," "rock and limestone," and "scrub brush and the thorn bushes" (239-240). Each comes with its increasingly antagonizing elements, for example the hot ground, scorpions, and the harsh glare of the second terrain. He warns of the third terrain: "The whole panorama can change in a matter of minutes, so it's easy to get lost" (240). To someone not used to

Lomas de Poleo, it is a place that can quickly become disorienting, revealing the desert's ability to distort human perception and the processual nature of encountering borders. This distortive quality demonstrates both the environment's power and more-than-human scale. Father Francis is only able to lead these *rastreos* effectively because he has spent time in and given attention to this specific place, which demands much of both. Unlike Mendez, he is attuned to the area, and respects its agency and therefore can discern the borders between the terrains of Lomas de Poleo.

As a contrast to disorientation, Gaspar de Alba repeatedly relies on prominent landmarks of the El Paso-Juarez area as tools for reorientation. A mixture of natural and built features—the Asarco stacks, the Rio Grande, the Franklin Mountains, the Border Highway, and Mount Cristo Rey—aid the characters and the reader to get their bearings amidst all of the transborder action. They are all very familiar geographical markers to anyone who has spent significant time in the El Paso-Juarez area. Even if one is unfamiliar, the recurrent descriptions by the author make them landmarks of the text itself, easily imprinted upon the reader's imagination. The narrative voice sets a scene:

On a clear day in west El Paso, you can see the forty-foot stature of Christ the Redeemer at the top of Mount Cristo Rey. Against the western skyline, the huge white-robed limestone Christ stretches its crucified arms out like a holy bridge between the First World and the Third, like a mirage of faith across the desert. (236)

Here, Mount Cristo Rey is a metaphorical bridge linking the two cities, and, for Gaspar de Alba, it serves as a symbol of hope as much as it serves as true north on a compass. Before Ximena leads her group for the *rastreo*, she tells them, “If you get disoriented, just look for the cross on the hill” (241). The mountain's symbolic and material effects

dissolve the Border while constructing an environmental border by which characters, citizens, and even readers can become attuned to this place.

Proximity also entails nonhuman Border crossings, as, until recently, much of the official US Border did not include a physical geographical barrier where the two nations meet, and even the biggest, most masculine wall cannot account for separating the atmosphere. *Desert Blood* regularly accounts for how people in El Paso-Juarez were forced into detrimental relationships with the American Smelting and Refining Company (Asarco) by setting a lot of the novel's action in and around the plant, which is centrally located between the two cities. "A Toxic Century," John Burnett's NPR article from 2010, explains Asarco's contribution to contaminating the area as he details the settlement agreement, in which Asarco was ordered to "pay a record \$1.79 billion to settle claims for hazardous waste pollution at 80 sites in as many as 20 states" (Burnett). The insignificance of the Border for pollutants is made very clear in Burnett's interview with former El Paso mayor John Cook:

Cook and other longtime El Pasoans remember when the wind would shift to the south, the smelter would crank up production, and the smokestack would gush dirty yellow smoke directly into Juarez. 'They could basically pollute as much as they wanted, because it was going into another country that had no ability to stop us,' Cook says. As a result, sulfur dioxide and heavy metals fell on the colonias and schools and playgrounds of El Paso's sister city, where federal and state regulators had no jurisdiction. (Burnett)

During the last section of this chapter, I explore the environmental injustices that Asarco committed, and their long-lasting impact for many bordertown residents in further detail. For now, the above quote from Mayor Cook might be enough to prove that in the face of billowing toxic yellow smoke, the Border dissolves along with legal accountability.

At the same time, proximity and the metaphorical dissolve of the Border allow for situations like the Juarez femicides that began in the 1990s to perpetuate. Because Ximena and Father Francis are local, they are aware and involved in advocating for the missing women and their families, while Ivon is only just finding out about it through a magazine and then more in depth as she enters the area. It is 1998 when Ivon's sister goes missing, and at that time there were already over 100 missing women and counting. Though Ivon has kept in touch with her family while living in California, it is physical proximity and intimacy with the El Paso-Juarez area that brings the information out of them. Exploring multiple borders as opposed to *the* Border establishes far more barriers—material, psychological, and metaphorical—than the drawn lines that nations agree upon. The Border tends to eclipse the myriad other borders that proliferate the Desert Southwest. Yet even the Border contains multitudes. For example, the Border enables and disables certain authorities such as the Border Patrol, FBI, *judiciales*, and by extension their laws because El Paso and Juarez share such a close proximity. As explored in Chapter 2 of my project, the film *Sicario* demonstrates how US federal agencies can use loopholes because of the Border to conduct otherwise prohibited operations in Mexico. Whether it's covering themselves by calling Juarez "the El Paso area" or using an underground tunnel connecting Arizona and Sonora, the geographical closeness that the two nations share is strategically taken advantage of.

Inversely, local authorities like the El Paso or Juarez Police Department in *Desert Blood* refer to strict regulations that disable them from continuing investigations. Several times Ivon states that when it comes to her missing sister, the "authorities on both sides are washing their hands of this situation" and "acting like it's not their jurisdiction" (168,

263). Transborder entanglements are convenient for police not wanting to take on a case. Issues surrounding the missing women are complicated by the Border because of respect for, but especially a lack of, jurisdiction. As an organizational strategy and coping mechanism, Ivon begins keeping notes about Irene's case. In the 'facts' section, one of her bullet points reads that the El Paso Police can only "call her a 'Missing Person,' and since it happened across the border, they have no jurisdiction over there" (165). Another states counterproductively, "because Irene was last seen sitting on the El Paso riverbank, this is probably a case for the American authorities, not the Juarez police" (166). What both of these facts point to is that neither authority is officially committed to taking the case on, and their proximity to the Border somehow allows them to eschew any legal responsibility.

While authorities use the Border as a boundary to their capabilities, the author suggests that criminals and the government might see it as an invitation. There are rumors from ex-FBI agents, Rubí Reyna, and Detective Pete McCuts about the potential serial killer being an American who is exploiting the unique juxtaposition of El Paso-Juarez. They suggest that maybe it is "a guy from El Paso, crossing over to commit his crimes because he knows there isn't a death penalty in Mexico," or even one of the hundreds of registered sex offenders that has recently been ordered to live in El Paso (85, 234). In fact, through Ivon and Detective McCuts' conversations, the readers are given a unique glimpse into the mechanisms that led El Paso to be used as a "dumping ground for perverts," ending up as a home for more than 600 registered sex offenders (310). When Ivon asks about this, McCuts retorts, "Isn't the border the dumping ground for all forms of pollution?" (310). A nod to Asarco, the arrival of *maquiladoras*, and criminals, his

question emphasizes how the desert environments along the border, because of their proximity to Mexico and hence inferior American status, tempt companies and lawmakers to use the land as an out-of-sight-out-of-mind area of disposal. As I have been demonstrating, this is a corrupted perception of the desert.

The relationship between borders and the law as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation is present here, too. *Desert Blood* hinges on the same kind of corruption by authority figures enabled by the “Wild West” situatedness of El Paso-Juarez. Proximity makes way for messiness when McCuts, following Ivon, knows he isn’t “allowed to cross the border in an official capacity,” while the potential killer can (231). Ultimately, this point is demonstrated by the reveal that the most vicious villain of the novel, known as El Guero or Lone Ranger, is really Captain J.W. Wilcox. Captain Wilcox is a Border Patrol agent and Chief Detention Enforcement Officer, which means he is able to cross the Border at will, wielding the authority of letting people back into the US. He also runs a snuff film business in which kidnapped women, often *maquila* workers, are being raped, tortured, and killed for live, online entertainment. His exploitation of his position of power both protects and enables him to continue without scrutiny, and even after his death he is honored with a twenty-one gun salute while Ivon’s testimony about him is questioned (326).

The Border possesses a power capable of stoking or silencing news media and therefore an ability to fill with or empty this desert place of (hi)stories. In Gaspar de Alba’s novel, as in the real world, the Border tries to contain, erase, or distort unflattering news stories and information about the missing women. Ivon is upset with Ximena for not telling her about the women who have been raped and murdered and that she ““had to

read about it in *Ms.* magazine,” to which Ximena replies, ““Well, it’s about time somebody covered these crimes. Other than those stupid little newsbytes they publish in the *El Paso Times*, nobody’s interested. People think of it as Juarez news, not El Paso news, like the two cities weren’t fucking Siamese twins. Leave it to white women to scoop a good story” (22-23). Ximena is frustrated with how the Border filters information according to what side one is on, despite the fact that El Paso and Juarez are thoroughly interconnected. She continues, ““And some of them, I bet you *this* wasn’t in the article you read, since it’s a big secret—are American girls from El Paso and Las Cruces” (23). Here, the Border is again convenient for separating and hiding the true entangled relationships of the two cities, and even the general region.

To paint a brief picture of their combined expanse, El Paso County and Juarez County cover nearly 3000 square miles, with an estimated total population of over two million people.³⁰ However, the next closest major city is Albuquerque, which is about a four-hour drive north on the interstate. In truth, the cities, isolated together in the northern Chihuahua Desert are economically, culturally, and socially interdependent, and the desert environment that surrounds them for miles in every direction is as good a deterrent as any for slowing or stopping the spread of local information through to the rest of the US. This was especially true for the 1990s, when *Desert Blood* is set, and the internet and smartphones were still a decade away from providing access to constant information from anywhere.

The natural border that lends its shape to how the US and Mexico divide El Paso-Juarez in half is the Rio Grande The last image of Irene, Ivon’s younger sister, before she goes missing is of her drunk at a party in a *colonia*, swimming back and forth across the

Rio Grande: “It occurred to Irene that she had never taken a swim in the Rio Grande before...She breast-stroked and back-stroked back and forth across the river, daring the Border Patrol vans cruising the black bridge to take her in so she could laugh at them and tell them she was an American citizen” (111). At this point, she embodies and is literally swimming in the tension between the US and Mexico. She becomes the hyphen in Mexican-American much as the river is the hyphen connecting El Paso-Juarez. She infiltrates the Border. Most of the people with her at the *colonia* do not join her because they are not US citizens, though they do call her “wetback” and “illegal,” making a game out of it (111). When Ivon visits her ex-lover Raquel, who is the reason Irene was at a *colonia* in the first place, Raquel describes what Irene was doing as “playing wetback...no *mojado* would be swimming like that, back and forth, like it was a swimming pool” (137). The fluid border of the Rio Grande that Irene takes pleasure from being enveloped in speaks to the liquidity of identity that comes with being from a place so liminal as a bordertown. Irene, like many Chicana people of the area, is not either/or, she is both/and. She is a Mexican-American, and while in Mexico this is a privilege that gets her into trouble.

But the liminality and fluidity of identity also come with shame and trauma, just as the reality of the river is that it is notoriously polluted. When Ivon is told that her sister was swimming, she cannot believe it, “the river stunk of sewer. Beer cans and human feces floated in the black water” (141). Irene’s experience in the Rio Grande comes back to haunt her as the freedom she felt while swimming drunk turns into the opportunity for her capture. The Border does not let go. As she is held hostage, naked, terrified, and awaiting her turn to be tortured on camera just like all the others, she falls in and out of

consciousness. The narrative voice exposes Irene's subconscious thoughts, "When she sleeps, she dreams of water. Sometimes she is in the pool at school...Other times the water is black and slimy, and she knows she's swimming in the river again. Only this time, there are hands down there growing up from the bottom, reaching for her, trying to pull her down..." (195). She cannot wash it off. In contrast to the authority figures who are able to wash their hands of her case, she cannot do so with her embodied trauma, which makes itself felt even as she sleeps.

In *Desert Blood* the bordertown setting presents the problems of addressing someone and judging their identity based on appearance. Being entrenched in a border culture like the one in El Paso-Juarez means understanding that there are varying degrees of Mexican, Mexican-American, and white that bring all kinds of heritage baggage. What one can pass for is sometimes more important than what one identifies as. Passing for American, Mexican, or failing to pass dictate very different outcomes. In Irene's case, she is a Mexican-American and a heritage learner of Spanish, but when she meets Myrna, Raquel's niece, at the fair, Myrna warns her, "Just don't say anything. You sound like a *pocha*. I don't want people to think I'm a *pocha* too" (103). Irene's response is solely in her head: "Was it her fault she spoke Spanish with an accent? Could she help it if she was born in El Paso, if the nuns forced her to speak only English at school?" (103). This exchange demonstrates the sometimes fraught dynamics between Mexican, American, and Mexican-American that occur along the border. Locally attuned people can tell one side from the other, and the group Irene meets at the fair certainly can, too (103). The label "pocha," typically used pejoratively by Mexicans towards someone who is Mexican-American and might not be fluent in Spanish, follows her when she is

surrounded by Mexicans at the party later that night; it is part of the reason that the Mexicans calling her a *mojada* is so funny to them.

Internally, Irene struggles because she isn't Mexican enough to be accepted by Myrna and her friends, but externally she is Mexican enough to fit the physical and racial profile of many of the women who have gone missing in the area and warrant kidnapping. She is a perfect catalyst for understanding the consequences of profiling someone based on appearance. El Paso-Juarez is mostly populated by Chicax/Latinx people, so of course there are many women, on both sides of the border, who through their bodily appearance fit the "same profile. Teenagers with dark skin and dark hair, slim and short" of the missing and murdered women (23). Ivon, while looking at what was left of a body they found at the *rastro*, pauses for a moment. She thinks about the people who took Irene, and how they might not know that Irene had never worked at a *maquila*; "all they saw was another thin, dark-skinned, dark-haired young Mexican woman, and didn't realize she was a Mexican with the privilege of U.S. citizenship" (255). Borders sometimes shape how we judge different bodies in certain spaces. Irene fits the physical profile and was in a place where that makes her a target for violence. The Border has no singular meaning—the way one body defines it holds as much truth to the way another defines it. These multiple meanings exist simultaneously. As Gaspar de Alba writes, "For the locals on each side of the river, the border is nothing more than a way to go home. For those nameless women in the sand, those tortured bodies she'd just been reading about in the *Ms.* article, the border had become a deathbed." (7)

Bodies is *The Devil's Highway*

Their arms were too heavy to lift. They couldn't get their watches up to their eyes. The heat was heavy. The sunlight weighed a thousand pounds. Their mouths were as dry as the soles of their feet: their tongues were hard and dense and did not want to bend. They sucked and sucked at the insides of their mouths, but they couldn't raise any spit. (159-160)

Bodies themselves undergo tremendous amounts of strain and change in the desert, and Urrea's myriad portrayals of how bodies experience such distortion are staggering. As a reminder, his accounts primarily incorporate male bodies in the desert, and though this matters in terms of context, the desert heat and harsh conditions for migrants do not discriminate based on gender. The Wellton 26's journey, which is necessarily on foot and through the rough, hot, and dry terrain of southwestern Arizona, demands an extreme sense of physicality. Between life and death and under the group's circumstances, Urrea provides detailed examples of metaphorical and material distortions of bodies. Though the range is inexhaustive, distortions of this sort stem from what walkers are called to how phenomenological effects of movement, heat, and light affect the body and its perceptions, including hallucinations; there is drug usage and violence, the sheer distance of the desert yet to be crossed, and the strange sense of time that comes with it. And of course, there is what happens to the body in death, and even after death. Interestingly, the politics of being a dead body in the desert are fraught with a complexity that nearly matches being a live, "illegal" body in the desert.

Though initially the Wellton 26 might have been underwhelmed by the physical presence of the US-Mexico Border, once the group crosses into the US their bodies become the "bodies" of Border Patrol lingo. As Urrea explains, "[This] didn't necessarily mean collecting corpses. Bodies were living people. 'Bodies' was one of the

many names for them. Illegal aliens, dying of thirst more often than not, are called ‘wets’ by agents” (16). The authority of the Border Patrol enables a semantic distortion of the word “body,” to strip and/or assign an identity to walkers they encounter.

Regarding material distortions of the body, the dishearteningly constant movement the Wellton 26 must produce exhibits how entrenched the walkers are in this battle against an alien environment that offers no reprieve. Their path along the Devil’s Highway reminds them of its inhospitality with each step: “The sand was deep enough that they slid back a half step for every step they climbed and it didn’t take long for their thighs to start burning.” (106) Working twice as hard, the men lose stamina twice as fast in order to move along. Further, they are spending the majority of their journey on the high ground of the Growlers, initially intent on “baffling the Migra’s drag system” before becoming completely lost and disoriented (89). This had previously worked for Mendez, on a different journey, where he led a group up through the Quitobaquito Hills. Evading *La Migra* with this strategy served them well that time because the “ground was so rough and crooked that all you had to do was squat under a paloverde or a mesquite, or hug a creosote. Mexican skin, from the air, is hard to tell apart from the ground” (90). With brown skin as a natural camouflage, their bodies blended into the environment and hiding was reasonable. Their limitation to being on the ground could be exploited to help immerse them in the landscape for anyone peering down with a vertical view. However, movement through a more extreme place like the Growler Mountains in the middle of May makes hugging creosote seem almost wholesome. Tactics to escape the powers that be ultimately highlight the desert’s intense conditions and forces as ever more authoritative powers.

Heat is one such force, and is as inescapable in the text as it was for the men. Numerous references to the heat, different ways of fending it off, and its effects litter the pages. I'd like to focus on the particularly detailed section of the six stages of heat death, or hyperthermia, that the author provides. Urrea uses heat death as a great leveler for understanding human finitude. He reveals that the six stages "are the same for everyone. It doesn't matter what language you speak, or what color your skin" (120). With the first stage, heat stress, "the heat becomes personal," while the next stage, heat fatigue, brings with it the flesh of the world as it tears at your flesh (122). Urrea describes how "the air comes to your lips and pulls water from you. Every breath dries out your nose, your sinuses, your mouth, your throat" (122). In some sort of heat-crazed body scan, the awareness of one's own embodiment is overwhelming, jarring. During heat syncope, your fever makes you cold and turns your skin pale while Desolation³¹—Urrea's own word for and personification of the desert—"has begun to edit you. Erase you" (123). Heat cramps are next, and this is a crucial stage because "eighty percent of lost walkers can still be saved if the Migra spots them" (124). If not, "you've stepped onto the lip of the death spiral" (124). During heat exhaustion, your brain may try and shut your body down to "try and tend to damage control," but eventually you'll experience "tunnel vision...second degree burns from lying too long on the ground" and "your memories are conflated with your dreams" (125). Urrea suggests that this is the stage when people first understand they need to drink their own urine. The last stage is heat stroke, and it is then that blood vessels burst and your body temperature soars. Eventually "your skin gets terribly sensitive" and the author reveals that walkers will sometimes strip nude (128).

During the last few stages of heat death, the changes that happen to someone incorporate hallucinations, which demonstrate the human capacity and limits for coping with bodily distortions. Urrea's depictions are harrowing:

Once they're naked, they're surely hallucinating. They dig burrows in the soil, apparently thinking they'll escape the sun. Once underground, of course, they bake like a pig at a luau. Some dive into sand, thinking it's water, and they swim in it until they pass out. They choke to death, their throats filled with rocks and dirt. Cutters can only assume they think they're drinking water. (128)

These and other descriptions in *The Devil's Highway* are equally baffling and horrifying. What must it be like to mistake sand for water during the last throes of one's life? The book holds a great reverence to how heat affects and interacts with the human body, and spends a great deal of time and attention to its very real agency.

Another nonhuman agent that plays a significant role in distorting the body is light. On its own, light is not enough to cause the fatalities and hardships that the group experienced, but coupled with the unrelenting heat, however, the light of the desert sun, as it reflects off of the mountains and beams through the sky, becomes an adversary. The second morning of their journey, Urrea writes, "The coming sun was white. The Growler Mountains collected the light and poured it on them like lava" (117). The author contends Mendez had made three major mistakes since they started: "First, he'd gotten started too early, and they'd been precooked by extra hours in the sun. Then he'd taken the wrong turn at Bluebird. And now, he started walking in the light" (117). Curiously, it was mysterious lights that panicked the group the night before, causing their missed turn, and Mendez not taking the light seriously contributes to their hardships. Though light is not necessarily an indicator of heat, it still has very intense effects.

For *guías* and Border Patrol, the walkers' bodies are invitations to experimental violence. To counteract or defend against the combined forces of heat and light, *guías* have a few techniques to keep their *pollos* going as long as possible. In order for the *guías* to do their job, they need people strong enough to have a chance at surviving the brutal journey. When the bodies of their *pollos* inevitably start to give out, one of the methods *guías* use to make them dependable again is feeding the walkers drugs and fat-burners. This creates a distorted sense of strength, energy, and capability. Urrea writes,

[...*Guías*] now give their walkers cocaine to make them walk faster and longer. Of course, cocaine helps their hearts explode, too...In 2003, it was reported in the Arizona press that low-rent Coyotes were using a new chemical prod to speed up their walkers. It turns out that ephedra-based diet pills are cheaper, effective, and easily available. The apparent Coyote favorites are over-the-counter 'fat burners.' A dose of eight pills at a time really gets them hustling. (66)

These methods are obviously unhealthy, and they entail engaging already taxed bodies with even more physiological distortions. But they do not get the only claim to walker bodies, at least not according to Urrea, who intermittently holds Border Patrol agents accountable for violence against immigrants. For example, the author describes how Tucson Border Patrol agents would run beside walkers, "grab a hunk of your shirt" and "shove you to one side as you ran, and you'd smash face-first into a saguaro" (83). In either scenario, being attached to the land as one moves across its horizontal axis fuels the nuanced approaches of *guías* and Border Patrol towards walkers' bodies.

As if the extreme heat and foreign landscape weren't enough of a tax on human bodies making their way through it, the desert has its own ways of shaping distance and time. For instance, Urrea writes, "Deceptive stands of mesquite trees must have looked like oases. Ten trees a quarter mile apart can look like a cool grove from a distance. In the

western desert, twenty miles looks like ten. And ten miles can kill” (4). The distortions of perception that result from too long baking in the desert challenges otherwise well-known phenomenological metrics. Miscalculating the amount of ground left to cover can lead to misjudged use of resources like water and energy, and are essentially fatal. Determining distance achieves a visual plasticity and the passage of time congeals to a halt. As the Wellton 26 begin another torturous day, “Six o’clock in the morning took ten hours to become seven o’clock. A week later, it was eight o’clock” (157). The statements nearly read like nonsense, but the contrast between familiar and felt measurements of time convey the confusion and intensity of the journey across the desert when the heat hardly subsides.

So far, each example of bodily distortion maintained that these bodies are living or dying and imposed upon by human and nonhuman agencies. The reality is the environmental conditions of the desert further distort the body after death in unique ways. In a striking example, Urrea reveals, “the nature of desert death is such that forensic evidence is quickly obliterated. The body mummifies. In one of the million ironies of the desert, those who die of thirst become waterproof. Their fingers turn to stiff leather, and the prints are unreadable” (37). This very physical distortion can and does render bodies unrecognizable. Here a body that cannot be identified ends up being billed to Arizona taxpayers while a body that can be identified is paid for by the Mexican government and takes what is often its first airplane ride back to Mexico (37-38).

As a shock to both the author and then the readers, the dead bodies of the Yuma 14 were identified as white. Urrea mentions this as a “final surprise” that the group offered, and “file after file says the same thing...all of them have been listed in death as

WHITE MALE” (220). This recounts the notion of racial passing in death discussed in Chapter 1, where *Blood Meridian*’s villains, the judge and Glanton, are contemplating whether or not a man’s head they’ve just severed could pass for Gomez. When the judge responds “no” because the dead man is *sangre puro*, this demonstrates the scrutiny that Indigenous, Mexican, Latinx bodies undergo while alive is often just as present when they’re dead (McCarthy 159). In the case of the Wellton 26, the group of men are nonwhite while living and those who did die are considered white.

The Devil’s Highway is an interesting and in-depth case study of the adult male immigrant experience in southwestern Arizona facing and creating borders as they engage with a specific desert environment. Urrea even attests to the trials that women immigrants and their children have to face in the desert, albeit briefly. In fact, according to his research with the Border Patrol, “all the agents seem to agree that the worst deaths were women and the children” (20). Toward the book’s end, after imparting no one will ever know if Mendez meant to mislead his group, desert them in the desert, or whether it was just plain stupidity, the author reminds the reader of the many ongoing and unsolved murders of women around Juarez, “still being slaughtered and abandoned in desert lots, rotting and mummifying where their rapists and torturers dropped them” (207). He does this, without holding back in his morbid descriptions, to show the scale and chance by which certain deaths get attention while others do not. Whether named the Yuma 14 or the Wellton 26, that group’s story, as much as it can be, is well known because of Urrea’s book,³² while it has taken many years for the hundreds of missing and murdered women in Juarez to receive the same kind of public attention.

Bodies in *Desert Blood*

The Devil's Highway establishes that “bodies” is a word used by the Border Patrol to mean living, migrant bodies that have crossed the border. In *Desert Blood*, the word most often refers to women who have been ruthlessly killed, and they are hardly even called that because of their incomplete and fragmented state. Ximena describes the findings of her first *rastreo*:

They weren't even bodies, just bones and clothing scattered across a radius of like 300 yards...Someone in the group found a plastic Mervyn's bag that had a trachea and a bra inside it. Someone else spotted a spinal column in some weeds...We found a pelvis, another skull...and a black tennis shoe that still had part of a foot inside it. (25)

What Ximena describes is a powerful list of bodily remains scattered across the desert that emphasize their exposure to human and nonhuman violence. Describing what she finds in pieces also symbolically abolishes any hope of the person being whole again. The force of the desert heat during the summer further distorts these bodies, or what is left of them, and the vast lands make it difficult to find whatever remains to be found. I've already addressed Urrea's examples of bodies gradually mummifying in the desert and their reactions to the different stages of heat death. This is a death that happens gradually over a few days. Gaspar de Alba's novel, on the other hand, deals with the abrupt deaths of healthy, young women, whose bodies are mutilated and discarded. In the case of the femicides, the victims were not migrating and losing their battle against the desert. Their bodies have been raped with glass bottles, garden hoses, and knives; they have had their nipples or breasts torn or bitten off; they have been exploited first by their employers and then by men who sell their death via pornography. As a result of being stuffed into a car trunk for longer than eight hours in the summer heat, Cecilia's skin has

turned green by the time they find her (50). Heat does not discriminate in its violence, whereas other bodies do.

The vastness of deserts of West Texas, Northern Chihuahua, and Southern New Mexico further obscures the bodies and their chances of being found, dead or alive. Such sprawling desert distance is why it's believable that *Breaking Bad's* Walter White and Jesse Pinkman are able to drive their caravan into the middle of the desert to cook meth and meet high profile drug dealers without much interference from locals. The lack of other major cities in the region means there are sometimes miles of desert with little to no people around, containing stretches of land big enough to be makeshift helicopter landing strips, or even burial grounds. Amidst many theories of what's happening to the women of Juarez is that their organs are being harvested for the black market. Ximena mentions to Ivon that "some of the bodies were found with their insides carved out of them...all found near areas in the desert that are used as landing strips" (95). This observation only spurs on rumors and theories that the women are being taken and killed for their healthy organs. It and other theories are believable because there is no way to really know what goes on in the vast, un surveilled desert spaces surrounding El Paso-Juarez, only people trying to piece context clues together.

Whoever is committing these crimes and dumping women's bodies is also distorting the bodies to the point that they are unrecognizable. This way, most of the victims, if found, must be identified by their dental records, which takes months and requires sending the remains to Chihuahua City, which many families can't afford (279). Unfortunately, their decomposition is often aided by the desert conditions of heat and vastness. The men torturing and killing these women are insistent on eradicating any

easily discernible features; they change their clothes, mutilate their faces and burn off fingerprints. This includes Captain J. Wilcox, who gives the following orders regarding Irene's body, which at the time is still awaiting its fate: "You make sure she's fucking melted down when you're through with her...I don't want to see a face, I don't want fingerprints, I want them both fucking turned to bacon with a blowtorch" (198). Taking away their faces and dismantling the victims' bodies distances any opportunity to visualize a human with a life and identity beyond being another dead woman. It also deprives us of the potential to grieve for the dead. It is the reason the opening passage of the novel is so much more powerful and haunting once readers know it is about Cecilia. Luckily for Irene, she is able to overpower the woman in charge of guarding her, and is rescued with the help of her sister.

During Ivon's first *rastreo*, her group finds a body in the sand face down. To make sure it's not Irene, they move it, ignoring pleas from the medical examiner's intern to leave the body as is and challenging her to defend whether or not the *judiciales* really do "collect evidence from the crime scene" (245). They find the woman's ID tag and *maquila* smock nearby, leading Ivon to reflect on "the irony of it: an assembly worker disassembled in the desert" (244, 255). Bodies in the Borderlands are subjected to constant scrutiny associated with passing, privilege, class, and race. They are subjected to inconceivable violences. Historically, those violences are especially ghastly where women's bodies are concerned.

One of the more explicit ways Gaspar de Alba marries the distortion of women's bodies and metaphor is through her use of pennies. *Desert Blood* includes a disclaimer, in lieu of a preface, in which the author explains that as an invented detail, the role played

by pennies adds "a metaphorical dimension to the story" (v). Physically, the pennies are repeatedly found to be a cause of severe sickness or death to the targeted women. Some of them are fed pennies, causing zinc poisoning, but there are also instances where the pennies are placed post-mortem in the mouth, throat, vagina, or rectum as a symbol of their worth and an implication of the *maquilas* (251, 252). Figuratively, the men who kidnap Irene refer to *maquila* workers as pennies and to Irene and another American as a nickel, transforming different women into currency (171, 221). Eventually, Ivon pieces together that J. Wilcox is involved in running a site called *exxtremelylucky.com* that specializes in live streaming the killings, turning pornography into snuff, and extending the penny metaphor (286). In Gaspar de Alba's own words, pennies "signify the value of the victims in the corporate machine; the poor brown women who are the main target of these murders, are, in other words, as expendable as pennies in the border economy" (v). Indeed equating pennies and *maquila* workers conveys their worth. Chapter 1 of this dissertation explored how in *Blood Meridian*, the judge cannot be made into currency, and this was a source of his power. The opposite is true in this situation, as countless women can and are made into currency of the most insignificant value.

The use of pennies incorporates another connection to the El Paso-Juarez area: Asarco. At the time that the novel is set, Asarco was still running,³³ though it was already on its way to being suspended a year later in 1999 due to environmental concerns. Gaspar de Alba integrates its effects to demonstrate yet another way residents are forced to handle violence toward their bodies. For example, readers are brought into that desert reality by imbuing a sense of fear and paranoia in the sense of touch: Father Francis warns people taking part in the *rastreio* not to touch anything in Lomas de Poleo with

their hands because there is likely to be radioactive waste leftover from local industry (240). Located between Border Highway, Mount Cristo Rey and the historical neighborhood called Smelter Town or “La Calavera” (The Skull), the towering chimney stacks of the copper smelting plant were notorious for “contaminating central El Paso with dangerous metals, and for secretly and illegally burning hazardous waste” (Burnett). Juarez, though not mentioned above, was also heavily affected as the air pollution and chemical contamination produced by the company was not subjected to border enforcement. Just as the dual chimney stacks of Asarco, at “828 and 612 feet tall,” serve to orient Ivon or Detective McCuts when they’ve lost their sense of direction, they also serve to remind the readers of how extremely toxic and ever-present they are for generations of people living in El Paso-Juarez throughout the 20th century (Orden). Looming over the desert cities for more than 100 years, Asarco’s damaging imprint contributes to the hauntology of the desert discussed shortly in the last section of this chapter.

I’ve established that Gaspar de Alba does not shy away from descriptive details of the moments before, during, and after some women in the novel are kidnapped, tortured, raped, and killed; explicit passages abound, forcing the reader to witness distortions of female bodies through severe and unflinching violence. Throughout, this violence is especially aimed at women who work for *maquiladoras*, while the men at the factories hold roles of authority. *Desert Blood* exposes how the women workers are subjected to biopolitical violence with specific attention to controlling and monitoring their reproductive capabilities, specifically experimenting with birth control and artificial insemination. The novel reveals some heinous details about this exploitation, in particular

when it comes to Elsa, another worker who has a child she will give to Ivon. Elsa is dying, and Ivon and Ximena visit her and meet her son. When they ask about how she got pregnant, especially knowing that the *maquilas* fire pregnant employees, Elsa is clear that she has never had sex, nor was she raped. In truth, she doesn't know how she conceived her child. She describes two of the tests that the factory doctor made her undergo: the first was a "pelvic exam" in which they "took something out of [her] to make sure [she] wasn't pregnant" and the second was a week later, during which the doctor "put something else inside [her]...sharp, almost like a needle" (91). Ivon and Ximena realize that she was artificially inseminated, throwing forced reproduction into the mix with kidnapping, torture, and murder (91-92).

One of the reasons the undoubtedly gendered crimes were initially disregarded is due to the sexualization of young women. Ivon is increasingly frustrated because everyone thinks her sister ran away for a boyfriend or because she was asking for it. Even one of the pictures of Irene that she wants to use for her missing persons flyer is judged inappropriate by Father Francis because her red lipstick, which looks black in print, "Sends the wrong message" (179). When Ivon challenges saying the photo is helpful because it is what Irene was wearing the night she was kidnapped, he sticks to his point by first informing her that often the killers change the women's clothes and second that if people "see a picture of someone that to them looks like a prostitute, they won't have any sympathy for her" (179). Ivon has no choice but to concede, and the flyers are made with Irene's graduation picture on them instead. Paula del Rio, "founder of an organization that advocated for the protection of women against sex crimes and domestic abuse in Juarez" is a guest on Rubí Reyna's show, *Mujeres Sin Fronteras* (318). Del Rio's

assertion, though she is a fictional character, echoes how many in the El Paso-Juarez area felt about the *feminicidios*. She is adamant that, “were these crimes happening to men, were men being kidnapped, raped, mutilated, and dismembered, no matter what their class, we would already know the answers to the question of ‘Who is killing the women of Juarez?’”(323). It wasn’t until the cartel violence escalated at the start of the 21st century that Juarez became the most dangerous city in the world and millions were aware of the unimaginable horrors that were taking place there daily, and one could argue that in line with what del Rio states, once men’s bodies started turning up, often beheaded or dismembered, international attention was taking criminal activity in the El Paso-Juarez area much more seriously.

Maquilas specifically hire women because they are a biopolitically and sociopolitically vulnerable population. Television host Rubí Reyna has a conversation with Ivon about what power the *maquila* workers have, if any. Reyna points out that “they’re the easiest workers to exploit. They don’t unionize, they don’t complain, they’ll accept whatever wage they get. They have no power, whatsoever,” to which Ivon responds, “Except one...They can have babies” (254). When Reyna answers with the fact that not all of the women murdered were pregnant, Ivon suggests the main issue is “they can *get* pregnant, and that’s the threat they pose when they come this close to the border” (254). The potential to bear children and have them north of the border is enough to subject these women to menstruation monitoring, Norplant insertions via Planned Parenthood, and even to the administration of “amphetamines to speed up their productivity”³⁴ because they can be (90). Gaspar de Alba even suggests that it might be easier to kill these women and replace them once they’re pregnant than to pay for

maternity (254). Women in this story and in the real factories lose agency and protection over their bodies in the name of profit and biopolitics.

Lastly, a note to address the misconception that women at the *maquilas* are all local to the area. Gaspar de Alba informs readers that, on the contrary, they are often “*gente humilde*...humble people from the interior that have been lured to this border by the promise of jobs” (167). The truth is many people are driven north by miserable and oppressive conditions of poverty and violence, and places like the *maquilas* along the border end up being the lesser evil—though no doubt they are still very much evil. Before Irene ever goes missing, her cousin Ximena is explaining the work they do with *Contra el Silencio* to search for missing women in the desert. She tells Irene they are called “*muchachas del sur* because so many of them come from small towns and villages in the south. Their families never even find out they’re missing. Or worse: dead” (24). The bodies of *muchachas del sur* are somehow even more subject to erasure by proximity to the Border.

Desert Hauntology

My heavy metal album.

I like it that the gorgeous cover looks like a Pink Floyd record.

Almost won the Pulitzer.

It weighs heavy on my heart.

Almost impossible to discuss it anymore.

The ghosts of the forgotten enter the room sometimes.

The book has made me many friends—some enemies.

Border Patrol agents sometimes give me gifts.

We all want a fair shake.

We all need a witness.

WWJD: Who Would Jesus Deport?

Luis Alberto Urrea, About *The Devil's Highway*

The Devil's Highway and *Desert Blood* both present the space of the Desert Southwest heavily injected with violence and ever-present trauma. *The Devil's Highway* is set up to showcase the battle between migrant men and the toughest of desert terrains, whereas *Desert Blood* more subtly implicates the desert environment as a sort of siren call for the rape, torture, and murder of hundreds of women. Both of these representations are important because they contribute to a fuller understanding of what constitutes a desert hauntology, where the spectral presence of human and nonhuman violence and its victims saturates the land. Jason De León calls it necroviolence, which is “specifically about corporeal mistreatment and its capacity for violence” (69). In other words, the way that bodies are treated, displayed, or lost as a form of spectral but very real violence. Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux explains a spectre as “A dead person who has not been properly mourned, who haunts us, bothers us, refusing to pass over to the ‘other side,’ where the dearly-departed can accompany us at a distance sufficient for us to live our own lives without forgetting them” (261). The deserts in these texts are teeming with death, and yet there is often an inability to mourn because there are so many bodies and yet a majority of them cannot be found or identified. De León uses clinical psychologist Pauline Boss’s term ambiguous loss to describe such an inability (71). In many of these stories, death is the atmosphere of the desert felt most intensely by being there, on the ground.

Put another way, the desert is a storied landscape of bodies formed and making meaning within a space, and horizontal, immanent engagements with the land help bring that to the fore (Iovino and Opperman 2012). For instance, Urrea gives a great deal of his attention to the militarization of the Desert Southwest, especially near the area of the

Devil's Highway. Gaspar de Alba, on the other hand, pays important attention to the role of the smelter plant Asarco in polluting and contaminating entire communities for over a century in the El Paso-Juarez area. The military uses, past and present, and the environmental contamination detailed in these stories places readers amidst the milieu of the biopolitical Desert Southwest and enables readers alternatives to the dominant representations of an empty, desolate space.

The desert of *The Devil's Highway* points to a place rife with militarization. Urrea is aware of how the landscape is filled with "abandoned army tanks," jet fighters, and an "airplane graveyard" (5, 26, 192). They lay out the dramatis personae of the Border near the Devil's Highway, including everything from "helicopters, jets, bombers [and] UFOs" and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to the Tohono O'odham Reservation (79). A significant site, shared by Marines and Air National Guard, is the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, used as a bombing range (79). Urrea points out the irony of comments about the need to militarize the border: "in a very real way, much of the Devil's Highway region *is* militarized" (78). Militarization of desert ongoing in *Sicario*, while in *The Devil's Highway* it is a thing of the past and the present.

The dozens of documented accounts in *Devil's Highway* and the hundreds of missing women at the heart of *Desert Blood* display all kinds of desert death from dehydration to decay. A physical sensation produced by death and decomposing bodies is how they emanate a thick, pervasive, unmistakable stench. The performance of smell is prevalent in both books, establishing a sensual relationship with the hauntology of the desert.

The smell of death in *The Devil's Highway* and *Desert Blood* is distinct and inescapable. Urrea describes the scent through the women in the consulate, keepers of the files of the Yuma 14/Wellton 26. As one takes out a file, "The stench sneaks from the baggie. The women tell you that they go home with the smell on their skin, in their hair and clothing. Sometimes, when several packets have arrived in their office, they can't wash it off, even hours later. A year after death, files still reek faintly of spoiled flesh" (36). The thickness of the smell lingers. It illustrates a lasting entanglement with the environment and the people who have perished. A similar encounter takes place in *Desert Blood*, when Ivon is in the shower trying to wash off the smell of Cecilia's dead body during the autopsy. Trying to recover and cope with the abrupt and intense deaths of Cecilia and her unborn baby, Ivon "needed to scrub the scent of death off her skin but could not remove the image of Cecilia's body from her mind, a permanent stain on her memory" (77). When Ximena asks her if the shower helped her feel better, Ivon replies, "Cleaner, anyway. I couldn't get that smell out" (77). In both texts death's smell attaches itself to the skin and holds on for much longer than the women or Ivon are comfortable with. Smell requires proximity. One must have been near enough to death for the scent of it to stick. Further, it remains psychologically imprinted with memories of being close to death or a dead body.

On an environmental scale, smell serves as an indicator of what the atmosphere of a place is loaded with. In *The Devil's Highway*, smells help to tell the walkers they are further north in Sonoita, meaning they are getting closer to the Border (97). In an anecdote about one of the survivors who suffered severe nerve damage, Urrea states that the man was working one day, "cooking, and he put his hand on the griddle. He didn't

notice it frying until everybody smelled the stink” (204). Smell provides modes of interacting with the environment that other senses cannot. It fills in gaps of a story about a place. Far from the enchanting aesthetic of the Old West, praised for its clear skies and vast horizon, the environment in *Desert Blood* is fraught with odors imposed upon El Paso-Juarez by governments and corporations like the *maquiladoras* or ASARCO. Her borderland setting includes “night air...laced with diesel fumes...from the Phillips *maquila*” and a Rio Grande that “stunk of sewer” (21, 141). In fact, Asarco’s lasting powers remain through its exuding exhaust: “even though Asarco had shut down operations in January [1998], the air still smelled of refinery soot and chemical fumes” (155). The author’s attentiveness to the olfactory assures readers acknowledge the insidiousness and impact of a lingering toxicity that people of the region, no matter which side of the border, cannot escape.

Gaspar de Alba describes the twin stacks of Asarco as “sentinels of death” (295). Indeed, structurally they lend to this metaphor, signifying many fatal injustices over the course of the 20th century. As they tower over El Paso and Juarez, the stacks haunt the region, dwarfing those who dwell near to them and representing the plant’s detrimental health effects on the local populace over many generations. These vertical beacons of white man’s progress stick out, stark, amidst the horizontal sprawl of symbiosis. When *Desert Blood* was published in 2005, Asarco had already been shut down for six years. Asarco’s use of toxic chemicals and hazardous waste has a lasting impact on the area to this day. Gaspar de Alba includes stories of Ivon’s grandparents, who were forced to live in the impoverished community known as Smelter Town, where they subsequently fell ill and died from cancer and tuberculosis (295).

As I began to explore earlier, these fictions mirror difficult truths about the area. According to NPR's John Burnett, "a landmark study by the Centers for Disease Control in the early 1970s found that more than half of the children living within a mile of the smelter had levels of lead in their blood four times today's acceptable limit. The lead study was so influential that it contributed to the EPA's decision in 1973 to phase lead components out of gasoline." Production was suspended in 1999 and in 2013, the chimney stacks were demolished, leveled to the ground.³⁵ Even with the chimneys gone, for many they remain erect in memory, and their pollution still haunts surrounding residents, unsure if their tumors or their children's reduced motor skills are due to the plant or not (Burnett).

Whether it's the pervasive smell of death, ongoing chemical contamination and pollution, or a government sanctioned commandeering of swathes of land with few inhabitants, out of the Desert Southwest emerges a desert hauntology. It beckons us to pay attention; yet, much like any hyperobject, it eludes our capability to grasp it entirely. These texts provide a few lenses with which to view and digest the damages done through distortions of borders, bodies, and an appreciation for a hauntology of the desert in the 21st century. The fact that the Wellton 26/Yuma 14's story made it onto bestseller lists and that Gaspar de Alba's novel about the Juarez femicides did not is among the many reasons I've paired *The Devil's Highway* with *Desert Blood*. Looking at them in tandem allows one to see extreme and gendered experiences of the Desert Southwest. Where *The Devil's Highway* details the nonfiction account of the Wellton 26 as they migrate north, *Desert Blood* is less reliant on step-by-step movement and instead has more to do with proximity and a woman's place in desert spaces, specifically women

who are Chicana. Both books rely on the lens of horizontal experience of desert places as a way of understanding them.

CHAPTER 4

FILLING THE VOID

Desert Literature is never one thing nor one perspective, and the array of perspectives that the desert produces is what I've been calling *distortion*. The desert as hyperobject actively distorts and makes discernible the coexistence of a vast assemblage of voices and experiences, human and nonhuman. *Blood Meridian* takes readers through a multiracial set of histories at a particularly extreme time in the Southwest, *Sicario* takes on a visual and profound engagement with verticality while *The Devil's Highway* and *Desert Blood* deal with the immanence of horizontal movement. All of these approaches allow the land its agency, embracing it as a key protagonist rather than antagonizing it into the background. Yuri Herrera's novella *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2015) and Pat Mora's poetry collection *Encantado: Desert Monologues* (2018) exemplify two more, totally distinct tactics that help show the nonexhaustive range of the literary desert.

Additionally, these works are 21st century Desert Literature as the way they address contemporary and future concerns is crucial. Herrera's *Signs* is a striking geo- and biopolitical allegory that reimagines the Southwest Borderlands as the nine underworlds of the Aztec afterlife known as Mictlán. Mora's *Encantado*, using Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* as its major influences, fabricates an imaginary town named Encantado that is situated in the Desert Southwest. While their tones and temperaments could not be more different from each other, both of these works use language to change the scale of our relationships to the desert—Herrera by enlarging one woman's journey to mirror a mythological epic that somehow fits into just over one hundred pages and Mora by having each of her forty

poems speak through different voices that contribute to the intimate constellation of community in Encantado. The authors wield language in a way that influences and transforms disparate modes of engaging with the desert. What follows is an analysis of two points on a map that are far-flung from one another even as they overlap.

Desert Odyssey of Signs Preceding the End of the World

Of all of the works I examine in this dissertation, Herrera's novella is the only one that was originally published in Spanish. That is, it is the only totally translated text I engage with. First published in 2009, the book was translated into English in 2015 by Lisa Dillman.³⁶ I note this explicitly because I want readers to understand that the story itself, as I examine the English version, is always-already distorted from the original. This acknowledgement might seem too obvious at first, since all writing is by nature representational and subject to interpretation, but pointing this out here feels like an ethical responsibility; it is the equivalent of taking a moment to recognize colonialism's long lasting impacts on the region, as even Spanish is a language of colonizers—none of the texts I analyze are written in American Indian languages. *Signs* is a very recent work that illustrates a fresh way of seeing the desert through its deliberate use of language. As Marcelo Rioseco attests, “without a doubt, what distinguishes and isolates Herrera from other border writers - or from narco literature in general - are not the subjects he addresses, but rather the language with which he addresses these subjects.” Herrera's use of language distorts the reader's view of the desert, creating new words with which to represent embodied experience and sense of place and defamiliarizing the cultures and landscapes of the US-Mexico borderlands. Ultimately, the language with which the story

is told enables the text to work as an allegory and myth, scaling time and space, and exposing the possibilities of abundance in the literary desert.

The central protagonist of *Signs Preceding the End of the World* is a young woman named Makina, who operates “the switchboard with the only phone for miles and miles around” in a small town, simply named the Village (18). She is trilingual, and so can easily transition between the languages spoken on the other end of the phone lines (19). Her brother, who is unnamed, has migrated to the North seeking land that has supposedly been promised to their family. He has been there for three years with virtually no correspondence, so upon her mother’s request Makina goes to find him. *Signs* follows Makina’s passage from place to place as she seeks out her brother in the face of many barriers, including not just the international Border, but also the political and psychogeographical, which in this case is combined with the mythic. The novella is divided into nine chapters, each titled after a new place she encounters, and containing more than just a journey across the Border. *Signs* is a foray into the underworlds of the area, something I elaborate on later.

As Makina prepares for her journey to “the other side,” she must first meet with each of the three top dogs, presumably drug lords, in the area and request their help (29). The triad figuratively resembles the three headed dog Cerberus, which guards Hades. It is during this sequence that readers initially encounter the verb *to verse* as the English translation for Herrera’s word *jarchar*, what Dillman calls “the novel’s most talked-about neologism” (112). The first of Makina’s meetings is with Mr. Double-U, who is mysteriously indebted to her mother, and who tells the young woman, “Ok, go, and I’ll send word; once you’re there my man will get you across” (14). After thanking him, “Mr.

Double-U said Don't mention it, child, and she versed" (15). The verb *versed* is understood here through context, even if it seems slightly odd. At this point it may just stick out as a rough moment of otherwise smooth translation from Spanish to English. Next up is Mr. Aitch, who asks her to deliver a small package, the contents of which remain unknown to Makina and readers alike, in exchange for helping connect her with someone who can lead her to her brother (17). Finally, Makina meets with Mr. Q, who "looked her in the eye as soon as Makina versed the mirrored hall" and assures her, "once you arrive, there will be people to take care of everything you require" (21). Each of these meetings is successful, yet the action is almost subverted by the telling of the action on account of the neologism; as her meeting with Mr. Q concludes, "Makina thanked him and versed out of there" (22). "Versed" appearing this second time now seems deliberate and as a newly acquired verb for a mode of movement, peppers the book and provides a new way of thinking about being in the world, which I explore further momentarily.

In 2016, *Signs* won the Best Translated Book Award,³⁷ and Herrera was the first Spanish-language author to do so. Dillman's revelatory translator's note comes after the story, rather than preface what one is about to read. This allows readers to grapple with the language and style of the novel without being predisposed to reasons why. In her note, she explains how she read texts spanning from *Alice in Wonderland* and McCarthy's *The Road* to Aztec Mythology in order to build a sense of style and nonstandard language that would suit *Signs*. Among the tasks at hand for Dillman was rendering "*jarchar*" into English. She explains the etymology of Herrera's word and then her decision to use verse:

Within *Signs*, it means, essentially, ‘to leave.’ The word is derived from *jarchas* (from the Arabic *kharja*, meaning exit), which were short Mozarabic verses or couplets tacked on to the end of longer Arabic or Hebrew poems written in Al-Andalus, the region we now call Spain. Written in the vernacular, these lyric compositions served as a sort of bridge between cultures and languages. And on one level *Signs* is just that: a book about bridging cultures and languages...Used in context [to verse] is easily understood, and has the added benefits of also being a noun-turned-verb, a term clearly referring to poetry, and part of several verbs involving motion and communication (traverse, reverse, converse) as well as the ‘end’ of the uni-verse. (112-113)

The explanation unpacks the simultaneous ambiguity and specificity of the English word—ambiguous because there is no singular definition and specific because of its link to poetry. Unlike with *jarchar*, which is not a word in Spanish, English language readers will have some familiarity with the signifier *verse*. Using *to verse*, instead of to exit or to leave, imbues the text with an ever-presence of poetry that suits Makina’s epic journey. Most importantly, *to verse* provides a new mode of understanding leaving or exiting “in a way that explores and expands mental and emotional realms through the tool—or weapon, if the violence of Herrera’s novel is any hint—of language”³⁸ (Richardson 19). Versing changes the scale of human relationship to the more-than-human environment, especially the desert.

Whereas in *Blood Meridian* or *The Devil’s Highway*, the stories revolve around riding or walking through the desert immanence in a constant battle for resources like shade, water, and food, Makina’s story in *Signs* is largely uninhibited by the terrain, even as it is a prominent actant of the text. In fact, once Makina receives the address where her brother might be, she takes on superhuman characteristics to expedite her journey: “Makina flew; she literally felt her feet not touching the ground, as if she could float, scissoring her legs until she found her brother and brought him home without setting foot

on foreign soil again” (76). Her movement, and the way she negotiates and verses from a place, is swift and lyrical, alluding to her heroic nature and the messenger god Hermes, who has wings on his feet and crosses borders.

By the middle of Makina’s journey, the reader becomes familiar with how characters and objects verse from one point to another. Versing becomes a new way to think about motion across the Desert Southwest. It lends a different kind of depth and complexity to narratives of the border obscured by language amalgamating the crossing narratives of “illegal immigrants” or “aliens” into a single, familiar story. Much like the proliferation of borders from the Border, there is a proliferation of stories from history. Makina’s journey is not the story of a tired, desperate immigrant who heads north for the chance at a better life; she is a strong, successful, and respected woman who is making the trek at her mother’s request. After the short list of things she’s packed in her rucksack, including a picture, a bar of soap, and some peanut brittle, the narrator reassures readers, “she was coming right back, that’s why that was all she took” (52). This is not to say that stories of crossing in hopes of a better life, like those found in *The Devil’s Highway*, *The Land of Open Graves*, or (so many more) are unimportant—far from it. Inevitably, biopolitics, necropolitics, and geopolitics are inextricably woven into the fabric of the region. The beauty of *Signs*, and the reason for its inclusion in my project, is not that it negates such interrelations or histories, but that it takes them into account while contributing another kind of advantageous narrative to desert literature, filling and therefore dispelling desert as void. It presents the desert as full of layers of myths, using the structure and cosmology of Mictlán and incorporating Greek mythology and present day mythic journeys in the Borderlands.

Signs and its way of telling Makina's story produces an additional method of thinking and moving through the Desert Southwest. This is Makina's desert Odyssey, a tale of transformation and translation, that requires new language. *To verse*, by meaning something different than it did before, is an effective way to disorientate readers from what they know while slowly reorienting them. It illustrates how Chucho, Mr. Double-U's man, helps Makina cross the river and is "warm even though he'd only just versed from the water" and how, when Makina is shot as part of an altercation, "the bullet had entered and versed between two ribs" (38, 50). Any time something or someone verses, the action is layered with an epic poetry that opens this book into the scale of allegory and myth. Chucho isn't just some man coming out of the water to take Makina across the river, he "versed from the water," like a gatekeeper between two worlds, the North and the South. Makina not only survives the bullet wound, but she hardly feels any pain at all—a true heroine. Translator Dillman states that Makina "is the character who most often 'verses,' as well as the woman who serves as a bridge between cultures, languages, and worlds" (113). In this way, versing is a translation of *jarchar* that is also an insightful interpretation and helpful distortion because it helps capture the new mode of movement through an environment as it evokes the complexities of identity.

All versing is layered, and it is Makina's ability to write verse that helps get her and others out of trouble with a cop. The others, "all were or looked homegrown" are lined up on their knees next to one another (97). As the policeman taunts them, he spots that one of the men has a notebook. He grabs it before announcing to the group, "Poetry. Lookie here at the educated worker, comes with no money, no papers, but hey, poems" (98). He then tells the homegrown man to "write why you think you're up the creek, why

you think your ass is in the hands of this patriotic officer” (98). The man is too nervous to write anything, and Makina, sensing this, grabs the pencil and paper and begins writing her own poetry. The cop grabs it and begins reading it aloud in one of the most poignant passages of the book:

We are to blame for this destruction, we who don't speak your tongue and don't know how to keep quiet either. We who didn't come by boat, who dirty up your doorsteps with our dust, who break your barbed wire. We who came to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours. We who fill your shiny clean streets with the smell of food, who brought you violence you'd never known, who deliver your dope, who deserve to be chained by neck and feet. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do? We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians. (99)

Her words—her verses—are so effective that the policeman finishes reading and just walks away from the whole scene, leaving Makina and the men to go free. She disarms his temperament and hatred with her vivid imagery that in no uncertain terms demonstrates that she understands exactly what people like that policeman in the North think of her and other “homegrown” people from the South. Rather than have the cop spew this dialogue, Herrera has Makina do it for him, defamiliarizing the exchange and ultimately collapsing racist rhetoric that is unfortunately commonplace in public discussions³⁹ of the borderlands.

An especially striking example of defamiliarization that Herrera uses to highlight the porousness of representation is a deconstructive description of baseball. While in the North, Makina finds an old man who is supposed to guide her to a baseball stadium, where she will hand over Mr. Aitch's package to Mr. P. When she inquires about what the stadium is used for, he replies:

They play, said the old man. Every week the anglos play a game to celebrate who they are. He stopped, raised his cane and fanned the air. One of them whacks it, then sets off like it was a trip around the world, to every one of the bases out there, you know the anglos have bases all over the world, right? Well the one who whacks it runs from one to the next while the others keep taking swings to distract their enemies, and if he doesn't get caught he makes it home and his people welcome him with open arms and cheering. (59-60)

When explained like this, baseball becomes much more than America's favorite pastime; the game becomes a metaphor for US identity, war, and imperialism. The playing field is enlarged from a local to a global scale, and the bases don't need to be called anything else to suggest military stations. America's actual pastime is war, and the desert has historically been the training ground.⁴⁰ Sites like the Barry M. Goldwater bombing range in Arizona, the Trinity Atomic Bomb Site in New Mexico, and Kennecott Copper Mine in Utah are all saturated, metaphorically and literally with the lasting environmental impacts of radioactive and chemical contamination.

What's more, Makina's trilingualism enables her to embody a connection between different languages and cultures. She is successful as a switchboard operator in the Village because of her ability to speak and "keep quiet" in each of the three languages (19). In chapter five, "The Place Where the Wind Cuts Like A Knife," she observes people in the North speaking "an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it's like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls...More than the midpoint between homegrown and anglo their tongue is a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born" (65). A moment in which Makina sees and hears her own liminality in the world, the above description is an homage to relationality and a confutation of fixity. Language, like Makina's identity and sense of place, is always being negotiated. Herrera drives this point home when his

narrator, in parentheses, describes the “latin-anglo dictionary” that Makina has packed: “(those things were by old men and for old men, outdated the second they left the press, true, but they still helped, like people who don’t really know where a street is and yet point you in the right direction)” (52). Herrera is well aware of the limits of language, and instead of insisting on this he has much more interest in exploring the boundaries of those limits.

Specifically, the tension and malleability between “homegrown” and “anglo” tongues reflects a reality that many people in the Borderlands embody and makes the case for new ways of telling and listening to their stories. Makina’s observations continue:

Using in one tongue the word for a thing in the other makes the attributes of both resound; if you say Give me fire when they say Give me light, what is not to be learned about fire, light, and the act of giving? It’s not another way of saying things; these are new things. The world happening anew, Makina realizes: promising other things, signifying other things, producing different objects. (66)

The above reads like a passage from Wittgenstein about language games. It also connects with the term “verse,” where poetry bends words and meanings into new configurations. Indeed, the power of languages, and the people speaking them, to contribute to each other breeds the possibility for the “world happening anew.” Herrera’s desert world is one where the potential for abundance and collaboration outweighs the existence of dearth or desolation. The people Makina witnesses have come to the North and navigated it with a combination of skills, languages, and both “ancient memory and the wonderment of new people” (65). These people work together in a place where their money is hard-earned, and their skills and identities are undervalued. In truth this reflects the reality of many migrant realities and undercuts the opportunities that collaborative efforts between cultures can produce.

Herrera also explores language through the processes of omission and naming, further redefining the desert by leaving overworn designations behind. You'll have noticed that thus far in this chapter, I've mostly avoided using the explicit names of countries or languages. This is because *Signs* does much the same thing. There is enough context to know that the North means the US and the South, including the Big Chilango, the Little Town, and the Village, is Mexico. One infers that when the narrator mentions Makina speaking "latin," "anglo," and "native," that those correlate to Spanish, English, and an Indigenous language, respectively. Instead of burdening the pages and the reader with the names of the countries or their tongues, the author defamiliarizes the Desert Southwest and therefore rids it of stigmatic appellations. Without the overt use of "English" or "Spanish" or "the US" or "Mexico,"⁴¹ the story alleviates itself from baggage and judgment that eclipses the possible worlds of the region. Dillman's note elaborates how she was mindful in her translating practice to use "an English that was geographically non-explicit," while at the same time leaving in words that would suffer from being translated and also to remind the reader this is a translated text (111). This way, the cultural traces are present but don't eclipse the story. Not using some language is just as important as using certain other language, just like forgetting is a key component to remembering.

The language that Herrera and Dillman choose to use and not use is what ultimately allows for the fluidity between realism, allegory, and myth throughout *Signs*. This seems to do some justice to the desert which is abundant with and produces all these things. At the start of this chapter I indicated that the novella is a reimagining of the Desert Southwest as the nine underworlds of the Aztec afterlife known as Mictlán.

Though this exploration is far beyond my expertise and the scope of this chapter, it is yet another layer of meaning condensed into just over 100 pages, with each of the nine chapter titles corresponds to the names of the nine underworlds. For an in-depth discussion of Mictlán and Herrera's application of "the pre-Hispanic cosmovision" in *Signs*, I recommend Rioseco's article,⁴² "Myth, Literature, and the Border in *Signs*..." In it, he suggests, "the mythic and initiative journey of Makina...constructs a new space in which the border is not between two distinct geographical areas, between two countries, but rather between reality and myth...Rewriting that is not a copy but a model, a guide; its originality comes from its very antiquity." The use of the underworlds of Mictlán provides an original lens for experiencing the Borderlands in the 21st century—representation as presentation.

This is a desert novella, though the desert that Makina experiences is cold, a stark contrast to texts laden with oppressive heat. The list of items in Makina's rucksack includes a jacket; "people who left took jackets because they'd been told that if there was one thing they could be sure of over there, it was the freezing cold, even if it was desert all the way" (51). The imagery of the frigid desert is somewhat disorienting, as this is not the kind of climate the Southwest is known for in typical representations. Thinking about the desert in this way acquaints readers with another kind of extremity and eliminates a slew of generic representations of the area. For readers who've never experienced how cold parts of the desert can be (even when daytime temperatures are warm) this may very well be the first time they imagine it this way.

As her journey through the North continues, readers witness Makina's first experience with snow. A snowflake lands on her eyelashes and "when it dissolved a few

seconds later she wondered how it was that some things in the world—some countries, some people—could seem eternal when everything was actually like that miniature ice palace: one-of-a-kind, precious, fragile” (55). Similar to the earlier excerpt about baseball, this reflection turns an object into a whole world of possibilities. It, too, changes the scale of human relationships to things, acknowledging the finitude of countries and people, and even environments. Nowhere is the seemingness of eternity more present than in the vast geological stretches of the Desert Southwest. One can go to Arches National Park today and see many of the same stratological structures that Edward Abbey is sure to have marveled at over 50 years ago—not to mention gaze at celestial objects that have held human attention for as long as we have existed—and the reality is that the over 2000 arched rocks for which the park is named “has been rather geologically stable for at least 50,000 years,” and of course the exposed rocks themselves are far older (“Arches”). This is time, though demarcated into the human metric of years, laid out on a completely nonhuman scale that is hard to even comprehend.

Herrera, in true artistic style, oscillates between human and nonhuman scales throughout *Signs*, implicating and respecting the agency of the land. The land is not always slow, but it is patient. At the very start of the book, the earth opens up and though Makina narrowly escapes, “it swallowed the man, and with him a car and a dog, all the oxygen around and even the screams of passers-by” (11). The list of things devoured by the earth includes a person, an animal, an object, atmosphere, and sounds. Immediately readers are made aware that this is no passive or scenic landscape, and all things are leveled by its action. I’ve argued before that this leveling is an effective method for decentering the human that serves to remind us that we are part of countless rhizomatic

relationships with the nonhuman and more-than-human. Thinking this way, especially about the desert, enables the things to be characters who are part of Makina's quest. When Makina crosses the river—which is unnamed but inferred to be the Rio Grande but maybe also the Styx of the underworld—she does so on an innertube with Chucho, “an icy current began to push their feet away like a living thing, relentless,” and an unforgiving quickness fills the moment (39). The pair are overturned by the current and temporarily stranded in the water before reaching the other side, as the tube is “swirling away in the current as if it had urgent business to attend to” (39). Each of these depictions, emphasized by swift motion, respects that the river and the inner tube have their own agendas that temporarily entangle with Makina before they carry on.

Once across the river, more discrete parts of the land begin to reveal themselves to the book's heroine. The chapter, entitled “The Place Where the Hills Meet,” begins:

First there was nothing. Nothing but a frayed strip of cement over the white earth. Then she made out two mountains colliding in the back of beyond; like they'd come from who knows where and were headed to anyone's guess but had come together at that intense point in the nothingness and insisted on crashing noisily against each other, though the oblivious might think they simply stood there in silence. (43)

Makina sees noise where others see silence. Through her vision and attunement, geological and human time scales are condensed. Fiction endows us with something we wouldn't ever see otherwise: the mountains crashing with one another. The process, earth-shattering shifts which take tens of millions of years to occur, is arrested for our consideration within the length of a paragraph. The desert becomes emergent, active, and alive. It's tectonic movement, normally too imperceptible for one to notice, is boisterous.

Just as with the wintery descriptions, the shapeshifting mountains are a refreshing way of discussing the desert that force readers to challenge their sense of desert space and place.

Signs Preceding the World presents the Border anew through many simultaneous levels of defamiliarization with language. Herrera employs neologisms to create new modes of thinking and being in the world, and the words he chooses to use are every bit as important as the words, especially names, that he omits. In fact, the lack of naming generates an enormous depth to this novella. Makina's tale is literally of mythic proportions, as the scale of the story expands to varying allegorical and cosmological degrees. Further, the role that the earth plays is active and transforms the empty, vast desert into a Desert Southwest full of possibilities and personhood.

Intimacy and Enchantment in *Encantado*

Author Pat Mora's *Encantado: Desert Monologues* is a recent poetry collection that exquisitely explores life in an imaginary Southwest town. Encantado, the town that gives the work its name, is situated along a river and brings together the worlds and stories of over forty persons connected to each other through their dwelling in this place, as told in their words. While Yuri Herrera's *Signs* scales up the imaginary Desert Southwest by overlaying the US-Mexico borderlands with the simultaneity of Makina's epic journey, allegory, and Aztec mythology, Mora's *Encantado* scales it down, conjuring great meaning and magic in the desert by exposing the plethora of entangled stories found in this single town. Though Mora's approach is drastically different, its language is equally as effective as Herrera's at challenging readers to leave notions of the void behind in exchange for desert abundance. The author uses the act of naming to

create a strong and intimate sense of community and imbue the land with natural and supernatural agency. The complex human-nonhuman interface and intimacy of the desert is well described by Jane Bennett's work on enchantment, where objects have an active role in the more-than-human world and includes what Jane Bennett describes as "a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity" (5). A significant component of Bennett's enchantment is sonority, and in fact, a major theme of *Encantado* is the language that Mora uses throughout, and I explore this through the rest of the chapter. The sonorous imagery prevalent throughout the collection reveals the enfoldings of time and place—the rhythms—in *Encantado*, and rather than a desert hauntology based upon an inability to mourn and great loss, builds the case for a desert haunted steeped in abundance.

The poems in *Encantado*, though many of them consist of only a page or two, give intimate insight to people and things that carry the burdens and blessings of the Southwest's complicated and multicultural history, amplifying the power and polyvocality of the region that often goes unheard. Each of the poems in *Encantado* is told from a different perspective, and over the course of the text readers are introduced to the community and its milieu. Thus, there is no singular, linear plot, and though some of the speakers reference others occasionally, the ultimate effect is a presentation of this large cast of characters and snapshots of their lives captured into brief verse as a mosaic of language, where every piece is distinct and constitutes its own distinct image, and yet also contributes to the larger image of the whole piece.

Much like meeting people for the first time, the collection doesn't spend too much time with any one person. Yet there are manifold elaborate lives concentrated into lines

of verse that provide deeply personal insight. Also like meeting people for the first time, readers learn each individual's name before reading their story because the poems are monologues named after their speakers. I've said in Chapter 1 that names are words with which we world—they produce containers as well as possibilities—and Mora's imaginary town is no exception. For example, the collection begins with "Señor Ortega," in which the name simply gestures towards an identity before the opening lines declare it outright: "I live in languages, Spanish, English— / and shoes, yes, old *zapatos*, their leather tongues" (3). Just two lines in, the cobbler's words expose his immersive trilingualism, his occupation, and his status as an older man. He explains a bit about his shop, "Seventy years of rhythm, my hammer's *tap-tap-tap*, / the sewing machine's whirr," mostly business as usual, "except for that man / years ago who suggested I change my name / to improve my business. Crazy, some people" (3). The unidentified man is a disruption to Señor Ortega's working rhythm and an outstanding memory.

After the speaker divulges that his wife has passed, and that he is now able to "reluctantly speak the language / of sadness," the fourth and final stanza proceeds:

Gnarled as tree roots, these hands mend
flamenco taps. My name still on my sign.
I speak words of faith—practice, practice.
I pick up the next shoe or boot—like us,
it needs patient attention and repair.

Señor Ortega's story is one of resilience. His body has transformed over time, just as the worn out shoes that he is paid to repair. But his name prevails on his sign, a lasting piece of identity that he refused to be ashamed of. Beginning *Encantado* with a story from a multilingual cobbler who, despite racist budes, refused to change the name—his name—on the store's sign, emphasizes the incredible power that names have. His final lines

implicate an ‘us’ that, like worn shoes, ‘needs patient attention and repair.’ The old man welcomes the challenge of healing and reconstructing, which takes time. In truth, this outlook is radical in its commitment to care, one aligned with my own understanding of life and aesthetics of the Desert Southwest.

Mora, through her attention to naming, extends the sense of care found in “Señor Ortega”—faithful, patient, and attentive—to the very land of Encantado, whose Spanish name can be translated into English as enchanted, charmed, or delighted. I suggest that each of these meanings applies, sometimes simultaneously, throughout the text. As an additional layer of meaning, Spanish-speaking cultures often use the word “encantado” when meeting someone for the first time; in the same way, the author introduces readers to the town with the second poem, a supernatural self-revelation incorporating the more-than-human:

The last nights of the year,
 kind, departed spirits return
to Encantado as stars,
 meander
 down dark streets and hallways,
 peer into windows,
congregate around cribs,
 again leave glowing glints
of themselves;
 intertwine with our dreams,
shine on bare boughs,
 pines, and cactus spines. (5)

The presence of spirits, as stars, illuminates the entire town, and upon their end of the year return to the living land they become increasingly entangled with the physical world of humans and nonhumans alike. That they are kind spirits alleviates fearful concern and transforms the desert into a place of wonder. Encantado is its spirits, its streets and

hallways, cribs, dreams, pines, and cactus spines, a desert assemblage of the human and nonhuman. Instead of a desert hauntology as discussed in Chapter 3 as the inability to grieve or mourn a loss, the desert becomes enchanted. I want to be clear that this is not an either/or proposition. As the entirety of my project strives to demonstrate, the desert can and is both and more simultaneously, always already multiple. The desert convokes spirits, whether hauntologies or kind spirits, the stars and cosmic time echoed in geological time all in which we are enfolded.

Hauntology and enchantment are both important representations that enable thinking on nonhuman scales about the emergent abundance of desert environments, though the former seems grim while the latter pleasant. To demonstrate this, consider Mora's poem "November 2: El Día De Los Muertos," which is told from the collective spirits of the town on the day that Mexican culture celebrates those who have died. It begins with their return, "such pleasure— / occasions without the fuss / of details" (57). They linger over the town's river, "gaze down at our humorous / rippling reflections" before visiting "familiar dusty streets and rooms / our town / through the sounds of the living / patting heads we love / comforting the attentive" (57). The presence of these spirits enlivens the town, as they find pleasure, humor, and compassion there. Once more readers are reminded of the power of attention, which here begets comfort. Being more attentive to embodied experiences of place enables stronger attunement with enchantments of said place.

Enchantment is not limited to the supernatural. Bennett insists that it is a "mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness" (5). Because the spirits of Encantado are revealed to never be too far away, even the speakers who recall great losses also reflect on the

plenitude and liveliness that the town or its river has given them. The diverse dramatic personae of *Encantado* includes men and women, young and old, migrants and town natives, people with different occupations, and people with various relationship statuses. Over the course of the collection, readers become acquainted with the people living there, their relationships to each other and with the land itself. This imaginary Southwest town is a community that exemplifies the many kinds of desert lives that are possible, at the same time alluding to the multicultural and complex past of the people in the region. In her book *Porous Borders*, historian Julian Lim attests: “though traditionally defined in terms of Mexican—Anglo-American relations, the borderlands were in fact traversed by a multiethnic and multiracial population that came together dynamically through work and play, in the streets and in homes, through war and marriage, and in the very act of crossing the border” (2). *Encantado* brings this reality into the 21st century, refreshing the reader’s memory or even educating them about it for the first time; there is no homogeneous Desert Southwest, and its multiracial, multiethnic compilation of voices help reject the Mexican—Anglo-American dichotomy.

To try and exhaustively relay every identity present in *Encantado* would inevitably be unsuccessful, not least because the speakers occupy intersectional positionalities. But to demonstrate the variety of *Encantado*’s community, I provide you with the following list: “Eduardo” was once “A desert boy who always loved the West— / slow tales of cowboys round a fire, the stars” who gets a government job and imagines settlers in wagons crossing the desert from the seat of his car; “Phil” was a kid who was bullied, so he learned how to be a bully and carried this into his adult life where his amorality breeds wealth and he lives “concealed in expensive suits, cars”; “Lupe”

recounts her joyous childhood as she stands working behind a counter, “erased by a uniform”; “Tuan” is an artist from Saigon who had to change from painting canvas to painting women’s nails in order to provide for his family; “Cecilia” poetically describes “the pleasure of resting my hands on the hidden growing that began to precede me” and her journey of pregnancy and motherhood; “Rogelio” is a landscaper who conveys the moment he and his wife found their first home that wasn’t a trailer, “felt its promise, / *para la familia*”; “Lucia” is a “body of Cuban memories” and a writer who relays the time her Papi grabbed a bull by the horns so that her and her mother could run away safely, “Don Arturo” who sits at the river recounting his departed wife before heading home filled with pride that so many people of the town have chosen him to be their English teacher, “They come—grandmothers, uncles, young mothers—carrying notebooks, pencils, babies, hope; their bodies heavy with debts” (9, 15, 19, 25, 75, 73, 39, 69). The intrigue that Mora bestows to the speakers runs the gamut of celebration, imagination, and grief. Every monologue is a brief glimpse at someone’s life that gestures to its most felt and sustained intensities as conveyed through language. Reading their lives through these moments builds a sense of relationship with the characters—their names, families, successes, struggles, losses, childhoods, livelihoods, (dis)placements—and in turn a sense of intimacy. When knowledge becomes intimate, it is less of a challenge to understand intricacies and nuances. To fill the work with so many different kinds of lives and voices is an effective way to people the desert land and discern between people, a poignant reminder that it has long been this way.

The author’s construction of intimacy and abundance especially includes the sonorous. The speakers recount their life’s stories with vivid sound imagery, thickening

the atmosphere of Encantado, the place and text, with a sense of rhythm, noise and lofty silence. To be clear, I use Bennett's definition: "Sonority refers to the aural effectivity that living, moving, snorting, weeping, laughing bodies possess. Sonority does not represent, for it does not operate via images or in the visual mode" (153). When one hears a sound, it may or may not be possible to identify the source that produced it, yet one feels the sonority regardless. That is, there is a textural telling of sound that is nonrepresentational and therefore more immanent. Mora is extraordinary at arresting felt intensities into language, using the "sonorous dimension of language" to convey embodied experiences of place (Bennett 6). A return to Señor Ortega's shoe repair shop emphasizes the importance of sound: "Seventy years of rhythm, my hammer's *tap-tap-tap*, the sewing machine's *whirr*, / quiet *thud*, the screen door—" (Mora 3). His septuagenarian rhythm is eventually disrupted, as we know, but in these lines the ensemble cast of his daily work life is easily pictured and their onomatopoeic performances italicized. Things are a lot quieter at home since Señor Ortega's wife passed away, and he explains "all I hear at home—TV, refrigerator" (3). The sounds of a television and fridge are the only things to keep the cobbler company, suggesting an uneventful hum or buzz in contrast to the lively *whirr* and *tap-tap-tap* of the shop. Such contrast between rhythms is what makes these poems, and the persons in them, work so well together. "Anna," remembers how her "Mother, a widow, a frightened, nervous / woman in her second country, / sits at her kitchen table, begins / her practiced meditation— / her hands rhythmically clean beans, / the familiar easing into her body" (42). Just like Señor Ortega, Anna's mother has an embodied individual rhythm when she uses her hands to practice something familiar. Their distinct rhythms contribute to a

larger sense of rhythm that permeates the text in the form of the river, or *el río*, which I will return to shortly.

The silences of *Encantado* have their own rhythm, and are equally as abounding as the sounds, attesting to the power of absence, especially relevant where the desert is concerned because the empty desert is still a very prominent depiction. In “Rita,” the speaker reminisces about being raised by her grandmother, who she calls Mama. Her memory is of winter mornings when Mama “placed me in a pool of sunlight / on her well-swept dirt floor. / The wood stove and desert sun warmed / our silence” (23). Unlike the hollow hum of Señor Ortega’s television and fridge, the silence between Rita and Mama is warm and fulfilling. Here the desert atmosphere diffuses tension and exchanges it for wordless comfort; they need not speak, only feel. In “Stella,” the speaker is “fretting again about words” and asks readers, “Can the doctor, my patient’s son, hear / the pauses—implications?” (59). Stella hopes that her silences will speak for her and tell the man his mother is dying. The conditions of the circumstances, including the sound of her hesitation, supplant the need for the right words. The silences, whether qualified by warmth or nervousness, are human instances of attuning to the nonhuman forces and intensities that we are always-already interacting with.

In fact, in what one could call the spell of the sonorous⁴³, Mora has created a river whose flow comprises the rhythm of the town as a whole, and who serves as its most ancient storyteller. We already know from “November 2...” that the spirits come and linger to see themselves in its waters, but it is important for the living as well. In “Amy,” the speaker reveals its import: “We listen to the persistent river, / the town’s balm” (54). Confirming its healing characteristics, many of the people of *Encantado* address the river

directly. Don Arturo, in reference to his departed wife, asks, “Remember, old *rio*, how we would picnic here, / holding hands year after year?” and Cecilia, in reference to the baby in her womb says, “My tenant and I strolled by you— / water within—and you, / rippling by carrying sunlight” (69, 75). The speaker of “Becky” is excited by the river’s response to rains, “your noisy celebration / of our celestial blessing / after years of waiting” (37). Rogelio, who has just bought his family’s first house, imagines installing “glass floors with a river—you—flowing, visible / under our feet in every room...Reality is too present—wood, nails, tile— / repairs necessary, but a man needs to imagine / a *rio*’s hum under every room / of his first American home” (73). It’s hard to resist thinking along the lines of Heraclitus’s parable declaring that one cannot step into the same river twice. Encantado’s river is at once the river of the past that bore witness to Don Arturo’s picnics and Cecilia’s pregnancy, the river that assures Amy and Rogelio with its humming rhythm and felt presence, and the river whose constant flow provides a sense of future for the residents.

The poem “The River” acknowledges this multiplicity and in turn unpacks the town’s local abundance through language. The form of the poem has a flow that mimics movement and rhythm through its repetition. The penultimate poem, mirroring the position of “Encantado,” “The River” takes the desert and reveals its proliferation of entanglements.

In the light is a land.
In the land is a river.
In the river is a song.
In a city flows the song.

To the river come the voices.
Stories in the voices.

Sorrows in the stories.
Longings in the sorrows.
Prayers in the longings.
Hope in the prayers.

Prayers in the hope.
Longings in the prayers.
Sorrows in the longings.
Stories in the sorrows.
Song in the stories.

Song in the river.
River in the land.
Land in the light. (81)

The repetitive prepositional phrase “in the” shifts gently from left to middle to right to middle again, and its visual presence mimics the wavy current of a river. The rhythmic deployment of “in the” becomes a refrain that connects light, land, voices, river, city, song, stories, prayers, hope, longings, and sorrows—each of these things connects and is contained with one another even as they are contained within each other. Mora uses languages to enliven human and nonhuman relationships as much as describe them. As Bennett eloquently articulates this idea, “through the various refrains we invent, repeat, and catch from nonhumans, we receive news of the cosmic energies to which we humans are always in close, molecular proximity” (168). Mora’s *Encantado*, whether via human or nonhuman speakers, pulls readers in close to her imaginary desert town. The eponymous poem titles summon the people of Encantado; their own voices tell their stories about place and identity. We learn its people, its river, its histories, its languages, its rhythm, and in turn what its “August Bees” call its “lavish profusion of abundance” and “extravagant desert sagas” (43).

Conclusion

I realize that *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and *Encantado* are two very different works about the Desert Southwest. The former is a macabre journey through the borderlands that expands the scope of the desert into the nine underworlds of Mictlán and the latter takes the borderlands and channels it through a small town bursting with its natural and supernatural enchantment. However, this tension illustrates the value of diversity in writing the desert in the 21st century. In juxtaposing Herrera with Mora, it is evident that they both demonstrate productive approaches to the complexities of names and namelessness, multilingualism and translation, and populating the desert landscape with personhood. The lack of names in *Signs* allows Makina's story to take flight into myth, whereas *Encantado*'s many specific names bring an intimate focus to individual plights. Likewise, neologisms in *Signs* operate much like sound imagery in *Encantado*, confronting readers with new and sensuous ways of being in the world.

Further, their language empowers the desert landscape to demonstrate its agency, contributing to the notion of desert places as alive and abundant, which any desert dweller will tell you, should you take the time to listen. Perhaps this knowledge will haunt you, much like Makina is haunted as she gazes out the bus window on the ride North:

But on contemplating the tense stillness of the night, the darkness dotted here and there with sparks, on sensing that insidious silence, she wondered, vaguely, what the hell might be festering out there: what grows and what rots when you're looking the other way. What's going to appear?...Maybe a whole slew of new things, maybe even some good things; or maybe not. (33)

Then again, maybe to feel the hauntology of desert places is exactly the elixir for overcoming static notions of vastness. Feeling haunted may also prompt you to pay more

attention and care to your ecological milieu, and thus reveal its enchantment. In the age of the Anthropocene, the desert, as much as any other climate, sure could use “the patient attention and repair” of its human inhabitants.

CHAPTER 5

ATMOSPHERE AND DESERT PHENOMENOLOGY

Every attunement is a tuning up to something, a labor that arrives already weighted with what it's living through. The intimacy with a world is every bit about that world's imperative; its atmospheres are always already abuzz with something pressing.

—Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements”

Through this dissertation, I’ve examined texts and their performances of desert distortion as a way of knowing differently. Now I put two artists in conversation with one another because of how they enlist the elemental in order to attune with desert atmosphere. James Turrell and Rafa Esparza have radically disparate approaches. Turrell’s work is obsessed with an individual’s perceptions of light, space, and the celestial, and Esparza’s work is about tending to the earth and his community. Both practices are different ways of defamiliarizing the desert in order to know it anew.

Neither way is the right way of experiencing desert atmosphere, they simply coexist for your experimentation. If there’s anything you take from this project let it be that far from the representation of the desert as desolate, it is alive with infinite possibility. Approaching the desert through the apparatus of distortion means engaging with its histories, borders, bodies, and languages as well as its extreme felt intensities like heat, distance, and atmosphere in as many different, new, and interesting ways as possible. Sometimes this has been too readily done by corporate entities that wish to extract resources or military agencies that want to try out their latest modes of defense and/or destruction. I urge you, however, to experiment with what an ethics of caring for the desert might look like, might feel like. If you’ve never been to a desert, it makes it all

Since the 1960s, artist James Turrell has been working with how light, space, and human perception relate with and constitute one another.⁴⁴ Turrell began with projections using electric light in the darkened room of his California apartment to create striking optical illusions of light and shadow. Before long, he felt that “closing off the studio from outside light...resulted in the needed darkness but also a certain stuffiness,” and decided to begin working with natural light instead of fighting against it (Kim 43). Though some of his works, most notably Ganzfelds and Perceptual Cells,⁴⁵ have continued to use exclusively electric light in order to disorient the viewer’s depth perceptions and generally disrupt the mechanics of seeing, Turrell also began creating structures called Skyspaces, which are “specifically proportioned...with an aperture in the ceiling open to the sky...[and] can be autonomous structures or integrated into existing architecture,” so as to invite the celestial to the viewer’s perception (“Skyspaces”). As per their design, Ganzfelds, and Perceptual Cells can be experienced wherever they are built, and there are currently over 50 Skyspaces installed all over the world. Though it also works with and through light, space, and perception, Roden Crater is deeply embedded in the Desert Southwest, where the artist has been working on it for the nearly five decades since he spotted it from above: one man’s ever-expansive experiment with desert place-making.

In 1974 James Turrell used the money from a Guggenheim fellowship to buy “gasoline for his airplane in order to look for what amounted to a huge alternative outdoor space—a location in the desert of the western United States where he could take his art directly into nature” (Adcock xx). Turrell recalls the journey that took him seven months of systematically flying around the American West: “Each of the places I saw from the air generated thoughts for pieces. It was a process that could have gone on

forever...It was also an important time because I was moving out into territory where I didn't feel too comfortable. In the desert, the work gets lost; it just disappears" (ibid.). The artist eventually caught sight of Roden Crater, a cinder cone volcano situated just north of Flagstaff, Arizona. It drew him in. Michael Govan speaks of Turrell's fascination with the harsh terrain as a "desert obsession," one which Turrell has been able to indulge in from above as on land for the last few decades (23). Turrell's Roden Crater, in all of its site-specificity, evokes attunement to the nonhuman desert atmosphere. The project is designed around intensifying daily celestial events like sunrise and sunset, the position of the north star, and the weather. Simultaneously, it is designed to have a person attune to more intermittent events like equinoxes and eclipses. In all, the massive undertaking is predicated on a very particular set of values as well as conditions with which one can see seeing as well as better understand phenomenological position of being human in the more than human desert world.

Two profound experiences influenced Turrell's work early on: aviation and studying phenomenology. Turrell the pilot, influenced by his father's life as an aviator, began flying small planes at the age of 18. Aviation is crucial to his arts practice, and he has often said that his airplane "has served as his studio," (Govan 26). Flying also exposed Turrell to dramatic shifts in visual perspective required to fly, and especially the phenomenon of sky myopia, where the eyes are unable to focus because there is nothing for them to focus on, and celestial vaulting. In his own words, Turrell has stated that flying has "changed [his] perspective and sense of territory" and "afforded [him] different vantages...But with this vantage came responsibility" (Govan 209). Here I can't help but think about the alignment between verticality and authority as discussed in Chapter 2.

Just as in *Sicario* where the officials are the ones who operate from above and get to call the shots, Turrell spotted this place and decided he would like to own it—and succeeded. Turrell talking about territory actually imbues his outlook as one from a position of power that I'm not sure makes me entirely comfortable.

As a student at Pomona College, Turrell was fascinated by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose pivotal text *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) defines phenomenology as “a study of the *advent* of being to consciousness, instead of presuming the possibility as given in advance” (71). Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the individual's felt embodied experience becomes paramount for Turrell, who is a master of creating a set of conditions by which each experience of a work is highly singular. With a Turrell space, the viewer is confronted with their individual embodied process of visual perception that ultimately defamiliarizes seeing. Turrell's interest in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology stemmed from “concern with the act of perception more than the crafted object” and combines “artistic practice and scientific experiment to create a transformative experience by turning vision back on itself in order to see seeing” (Taylor 104). When studying James Turrell, “to see seeing” becomes the ultimate refrain by which all of his work is measured, precisely because the atmosphere of his works emphasizes perception itself and its process rather than a specific art object.

To elaborate, Turrell uses light and space as materials to intensify what German contemporary philosopher Gernot Böhme has called a “phenomenology of light” (69). For Böhme, who is largely concerned with aesthetics, atmosphere, and architecture, a phenomenology of light means “studying those selfsame laws of nature relative to the sense of the eye. In which case, you soon discover that you cannot stop at colors. You

have to take all the phenomena of light into account—the glow, the brilliance, the flickering, shadow, and lots of other things besides” (69). Because they are designed using only electric light, Turrell’s Ganzfelds depend entirely upon his precise programming of such phenomena. However, Roden Crater is situated in a particular place, evoking the “lots of other things besides” that emerge from its design to incorporate and accentuate celestial and atmospheric elements of light, land, and shadow.

Desert Phenomenology and Roden Crater

Using Böhme’s phenomenology of light and Stewart’s atmospheric attunements as two helpful nodes for thinking with the more-than-human world, I propose Roden Crater is an adventure of desert phenomenology, an embodied experience of distortion to which we can attune that explores and reveals the relationships between humans and the more-than-human landscape of the desert, constituting its own conditions of time, space, atmosphere, and agency. Though it is still a work-in-progress, the massive project has spaces designed to let the sun, moon, and starlight in and it has spaces meant to wrap you deep in the subterranean reverberations of the earth, as some of the spaces will be under water. As a key aspect of his phenomenology of light, Böhme asserts “The space that light creates is the space of distances, extent, remoteness from me,” and the crater as situated in the high desert of Arizona amplifies a sense of distance and remoteness (73). At the same time, proximity is another type of distance that Turrell engages as he “encourages viewers to see in ways that are haptic, as if they could feel light with their eyes, like pressure on the skin of visual perception” (Adcock 2). Importantly, “much of what he is trying to do at the crater involves pulling the visual qualities of the sky down

to the surface,” a collapse of distance that renders the celestial nearly tangible (Adcock 172). For instance, looking up through the eye of the crater as the first stars begin to appear in the sky almost makes one feel like the aperture exposing the night sky is a circular piece of fabric pinned to the middle of the ceiling punctured by tiny dots of flickering lights. Bringing down the celestial to the haptic grasp of the human is vital to Turrell’s design.

What is clear, especially from the finished spaces, is that the spatiotemporal scale of Roden Crater is both immense and immediate: sitting in the Crater’s Eye or walking around the Crater Bowl, one feels at the center of this magnificent desert spectacle while also feeling impossibly far from the center of the solar system, galaxy, or universe. The open desert atmosphere distorts distance and time so that a desert phenomenology means being at once centered and decentered. Being both, one becomes aware of human bodily limits and of the various other bodily limits of light, rock, plant, and animal; one is attuning, orienting and then retuning and reorienting. Through a desert phenomenology, one understands the power of atmosphere: “It is not an effect of other forces but a lived affect—a capacity to affect and to be affected that pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event” (Stewart 452). For Turrell, the sense of potentiality and event just happens to be attuned to celestial events like sun and moon cycles. His concerns seem largely about the continuation of such cycles beyond human temporality, and yet he’s dedicated most of his life trying to construct ways through which humans can see and feel such things for themselves. In his own words, Turrell says, “I feel I’m taking in this space in the Painted Desert, where you see exposed geology—a stage set of geologic time. And in that stage set of geologic time I then want

to make spaces that engage celestial events in light...These pieces are performed by the rotation of the earth and the motion of planets so that they will keep themselves performing long after I'm gone" (Andrews 50).

Writing early on about the project, Ed Krupp, astronomer and director of the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles gave a detailed description of a few spaces in Roden Crater that speaks to its very specific sense of place:

The tunnels, chambers, and apertures Turrell has designed there are intended to sample moments from the sky that will open the mind's eye through optical revelation. In fact, the axis of the roughly elliptical mountain runs intercardinally, from the northeast to the southwest, and accommodates the summer-solstice sunrise, on which Turrell intends to orient the not-yet-built East Space. Each year, in June, when the sun rises out of the Painted Desert, it will shine through nearly nine hundred feet of what is now unexcavated volcano to the Sun and Moon Space, which has been built. There, it will illuminate a massive wedge of black marble, fifteen and a half feet high and thirteen feet wide, in the center of the circular room. (239)

Krupp does an excellent job conveying the various ways that the celestial, terrestrial, and atmospheric are invited to convene at Roden Crater. The Sun | Moon Space has since been completed, along with five other spaces including the Crater's Eye and East Portal, and according to the project's official site, when it is finished it will ultimately consist of "21 viewing spaces and six tunnels" ("About"). Even more daunting than the number of unfinished spaces are the multiple ways in which the spaces (realized or not) engage the celestial from the realm of the terrestrial.

In early 2019, Turrell announced what *The Wall Street Journal* called "a new master plan" for Roden Crater as the artist partnered with Arizona State University to see the project to its completion⁴⁶ (Cheshes). The article is a testament to the work that

Turrell has completed since Krupp was writing about the crater and lists updated and highly specific plans for the crater spaces:

One 8-foot-deep pool will reflect every sunrise. In a light-spa complex, bathers will dive under a barrier, emerging outdoors looking out across the horizon. In the fumarole, the volcano's secondary vent, Turrell imagines a brass bath where transducers hooked to a radio telescope will broadcast the sounds of passing planets and the Milky Way underwater. In another space a visitor will sometimes be able to see his or her shadow with the light of Venus. An amphitheater is on the drawing boards too, as well as a wine cellar. (Cheshes)

Sights and sounds of the celestial abound. Air, earth, water, and light—the elemental—as conveyed above are more integrated into the place than ever. Over the course of time, Turrell's objectives have become so much more than to see seeing and have proceeded full throttle towards atmospheric attunements with the more-than-human. The 21st century has transformed the naked-eye observatory into an enormous apparatus to feel feeling.

While the optics of light and space are still a large focus, all kinds of felt intensities are produced from engaging with water as well as air, which carry sound and light at different frequencies. Such felt intensities constitute a haecceity, or thisness, of a desert phenomenology. In their monumental work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss the idea of haecceity in terms of individuation:

A degree of heat is a perfectly individuated warmth distinct from the substance or the subject that receives it. A degree of heat can enter into composition with a degree of whiteness, or with another degree of heat, to form a third unique individuality distinct from that of the subject. What is the individuality of a day, a season, an event? A shorter day and a longer day are not, strictly speaking, extensions but degrees proper to extension, just as there are degrees proper to heat, color, etc...A degree, an intensity, is an individual, a Haecceity that enters into composition with other degrees, other intensities, to form another individual. (253)

The haecceities individuated in a Turrell work are demonstrated vividly here. When one is standing beneath an aperture at Roden Crater or in a Skyspace, one is also experiencing the amount of daylight, heat, and wind (in short, climate and atmosphere) of that given moment. Turrell has created a built environment, some conditions with a certain criteria—things like aperture size, shape and LED colors and color changes—but it is always-already situated with the world around it. This world can be noisy, rainy, sunny, cold, and the world might even produce ruptures—new individuations—like a plane flying above and leaving a trail within the aperture’s view. However, attuning to the dissipating trail overhead, just like to the clouds that come and go in desert skies, shows how haecceities are constantly changing, individuating and re-individuating. One evening leaving the *Air Apparent* Skyspace on campus I encountered a fox, which had seemingly taken refuge in the cinder and sheltering plants that surround the structure. Desert phenomenology reveals the abundance of the desert atmosphere and ecology.

One of the most challenging aspects of writing about Turrell’s work is not that it is impossible to represent felt experience accurately with language, but that it presences an unrelenting simultaneity of self-awareness that I carry with me long after I’ve left the space. Richard Andrews gets closest to describing it: “walking across the crater and around the rim, one feels the paradox that underlies this work, that human perception conditions our understanding of the universe and allows us to see ourselves as simultaneously dwarfed by the immensity of our surroundings and made vast by our ability to use the crater as an immense oculus” (16). What Andrews calls the paradox of the work I understand as the multiple modes of being in the desert that are at the heart of this dissertation. Desert distortion, meaning defamiliarization as a way of knowing and

feeling differently, is a tactic of desert phenomenology that allows us as humans to engage with the various human, nonhuman and more-than-human assemblages of which we are a part. In the same way that Turrell hopes that viewers will see their own seeing, readers of this work will hopefully become more aware of how they attune or detune with their environments, especially at the current onset of rapid anthropogenic climate change.

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The land, the stone structures that influence Turrell with their celestially aligned design, is storied. I went to Wupatki National Monument on our field lab trip to Roden Crater and I also found places to silently cry. As recently as 2014, 89-year-old Stella Peshlakai Smith, Navajo, was pressured to leave Wupatki, her home, so that it could be turned into a National Monument and groups like my class could take photos and videos and climb in and out of stone structures that once housed people eventually subjected to colonialism and violence.

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I've argued against thinking about the Desert Southwest as distant and remote because that is the kind of thinking that has led to hundreds of years of enslavement, physical and cultural violence, and environmental injustices towards desert peoples. The consequences of the empty desert mentality are still felt in communities near mining sites or sites for dumping hazardous waste. This is why I started with McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and a jump back to the mid-1800s when national and cultural boundaries were present but in flux. Despite the cries of Manifest Destiny across the open, wild, and

pristine land, there were and still are populations of people living in the Desert Southwest whose ancestors lived there for thousands of years before. The desert horizon, its mountain ranges, and atmosphere are beautifully vast and immense, and its aesthetical grandeur can eclipse the stories and values of Indigenous peoples. Attuning to this, detuning from the myth of the American West, makes it clear that inequity and violence based on ethnicity, race, and nationality continue throughout the Borderlands today.

In 1974 Turrell used the money from a Guggenheim fellowship to literally fuel his search for the perfect place to take his art out into the desert landscape. He flew for seven months across the West, from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and from Canada to Mexico. His desired site required “a crater or a butte that rose from a surrounding plain to a height of between 600 and 1000 feet” because he was eager to “engage artistically” the phenomena of “celestial vaulting and its counterpart in the concave earth illusion—visual impressions that are especially evident from the air” (Adcock 154). He acquired Roden Crater in 1977, three years after seeing it for the first time. The story at once amazes and troubles me. Roden Crater was chosen from above by an artist for its relative remoteness to any major cities and its specific geological attributes. Yet at the foot of the volcano are remains of a Hopi settlement, and more than 100 square miles of land Turrell controls is adjacent to the Navajo Nation, which encircles the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona.

For all of its attention to the events of earth and sky, it is still unclear what role Roden Crater or its creator has planned for its surrounding residents, human and nonhuman alike. In addition to specifics about the crater spaces, Cheshes writes about how Turrell has continuously acquired land surrounding the crater, which is mostly made

up of ranchland,⁴⁷ “buying plots 10 to 40 acres at a time, amassing a buffer against development, snapping up fallow tracts from investors who were duped in a big land fraud in the 1950s” and successfully keeping the skies out there dark. Cheshes discusses Turrell’s plans to release a fragrance and even dishware in the near future, and that is all aside from massive other projects like Skyspaces being built in Mexico, Basel, Switzerland, and Philadelphia, yet, separate from the partnership with ASU there is no mention of working with local communities or what they think of this immense endeavour, which has been attracting people to see it even without ever officially opening to the public.

I have found three significant mentions of Roden Crater’s Hopi neighbours being involved in the project as of 1992. The first was in Richard Andrews’s essay of that year, when he states, “Hopi stonemasons will build some of the structures that contain the viewing spaces, reinforcing connections to the history of the place” (16). The second is in an issue of Pitzer College’s student newspaper, *The Other Side*. Also from 1992, author Chris Michno discusses the two week trip that thirteen students took from California to Flagstaff “in order to meet with Turrell, his mentors, associates, and others who could offer information relevant to the Roden Crater Project or to the regional history” (8). In his piece, Michno declares:

the Hopi have offered their support of Turrell. A result of that interaction will be a Hopi Kiva space in Roden Crater designed with the help of the Hopi. Another aspect of that relationship, from which we benefited, was the participation of a Hopi elder in our project. Gene Sekaquaptewa spent a great deal of time with our group explaining Hopi religious and moral philosophy. (9)

The third mention also involves Gene Sekaquaptewa, who was a Hopi Chief of the Eagles Clan briefly captured on film for Carine Asscher’s *Passageways*, released in 1995.

Sekaquaptewa doesn't speak, only chants at the beginning and end of the film, but Turrell does attribute the North Space "which is pretty much Gene's design" to the elder before explaining that the Eastern space "has the physical connection to the Hopi Shrine that Gene goes to and is so important to him because the furthest north sunrise physically connects to that on its alignment" (20:17-52). Of course, that was 25 years ago, and a lot can change in that time. None of the press pieces released in 2019 mention Turrell's current relationship with the Hopi people or any of his neighbors up near Flagstaff.

One of the five ASU field labs that went up to visit Roden Crater was taught by Wanda Dalla Costa, an architect and member of the Saddle Lake First Nation in Alberta, Canada. Dalla Costa's lab, "Indigenous Stories and Sky Science" included a four day trip with visits to "Navajo Technical University, Chaco Canyon, Wupatki National Monument, Sunset Crater and [students] got a full-day experience of the Hopi reservation" ("James Turrell's Roden Crater...") The field lab I participated in was taught by arts professor Daniel Collins, and we also visited Wupatki National Monument and Sunset Crater, though we did not get to speak to any Indigenous people while in the area, and I can't help but feel that we missed context that Dalla Costa's lab was right to include. As a culmination of the end of the field labs, ASU held a Roden Crater Student Showcase complete with exhibitions by students inspired by thinking through Turrell's magnum opus and our respective courses. The artist joined us on campus, spoke with Ed Krupp about his love of light and his practice, shook hands, talked, and took pictures with students as we all tried to process just exactly what was happening around us, what we are forever a part of.

I keep coming back to Dalla Costa's questions about voice and community: "We'll ask ourselves, 'Whose story is this, and how do we make it have value for the community?'" (qtd. by Faller) Undoubtedly the embodied experience of being at Roden Crater was transformative and profound. I've spent years reading about the crater in books and online, and of course I follow its Instagram account hoping for the day they announce its official opening to the public—but being there, walking the tunnel up from the Sun | Moon Space towards the circular aperture and watching it turn more elliptical with every step forward, whispering words of awe to a classmate as we both tried to take it in, there is no way to feel that except to feel it. Our group included Megan Workmon, who drove our SUV and sang opera as dusk turned to night inside the Crater's Eye. Her grand voice's "Ave Maria" joined the already thick desert atmosphere as we were encouraged to walk around the space and notice the changes in acoustics and watch the stars appear above. Certainly this is haecceity, an encounter of desert phenomenology. It attuned us to each other, to the black volcanic cinder arranged in a perfect circle at our feet, and to the arrival of a breezy February evening chill in the high desert. There is value in this for an individual interested in perception and relationships of the human and more-than-human.

As both a shared group experience and a highly individualized experience, our visit to Roden Crater has changed my understanding of light, space, and time; in many ways its yet-to-be spaces still confound me because I'm limited in my ability to visualize them or understand how they will work. And then there are the parts of me that cannot quell the bubbling echoes of Dalla Costa's question: "Whose story is this, and how do we make it have value for the community?" Eventually, I form my own: do the celestial and

terrestrial scales at which Roden Crater operates decentralize the human too far? As someone interested in decentralizing the human in order to better understand the more-than-human world of beings, environment, and phenomena, an affirmative answer is contrary to my usual provocations. But not to instigate the community component of Roden Crater is an incomplete understanding of its significance to desert cultures and stories and would perpetuate the erasure enabled through centuries of bias in favor of written outsider histories of that land as opposed to valuing Indigenous oral and tribal traditions.

One of Edward Abbey's most famous passages from *Desert Solitaire* is a striking description of his yearn to merge with the natural environment in a shift from decentralization to homogenization. In it he asserts his presence in the desert:

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock. (6)

Though his words are carefully chosen and his tone is convincing, to renounce the cultural apparatus in favor of the natural one in this way is to assume that the natural is devoid of its own cultures and that the human is somehow separate from what is natural. Both assumptions are of course false. Further and more importantly, to merge in the destructive way Abbey craves is to lose one's humanity entirely, which actually does

very well but these houses must be worth millions of dollars. She laughs and tells me that can't be because we are out in the sticks. Before long, a sign on the roadside informs us that we are in the Berkshires. Huh.

I let her know and she can't believe it; I'm no better because I didn't even realize the Berkshires were in Massachusetts. We look at each other, laughing at ourselves. "I knew those were rich people houses!" I tell her, as if being able to spot that kind of wealth were a special skill. It's not.

The Northeast was hit with a snowstorm the day before I got there in the first week of December. My friend told me they got nearly two feet where she lives. The entire drive from her town to North Adams three hours away I was mesmerized by the layers of white stuff that made all of the houses look like Christmas card houses. I marveled at the roofs, which were so angular and sloped they resembled the archetypal house I learned to draw in kindergarten. Hanging off of the gutters were icicles that made me realize how strands of electric lights with the same thing were truly designed to mimic their shape. The frozen spikes glimmered as they caught the light and I wondered at how beautiful things can also be dangerous things.

I'm not sure I've ever felt so out of my element.

We pull up to MASS MoCA,⁴⁸ and rush from the parking lot to the warm lobby because we don't want to carry our coats around all day. This is the place I traveled all the way

from Phoenix to visit, and now we are here. The person working at the ticket counter tells us “you pretty much have the museum to yourselves,” which is not surprising considering the snow and the fact that it’s around noon on a school day. I ask him where Rafa Esparza’s exhibit is located, knowing how large the museum is. He says it’s one of the first exhibits, right through those double doors.

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Rafa Esparza and Brown Matter

At a time in his life when he was seeking guidance, Los Angeles artist Rafa Esparza asked his father to show him how to make adobe bricks. Esparza had learned from his mother that his dad had been an adobe brickmaker in his home state Durango, Mexico. It was there he built his first house out of the material. Working together with his father, Esparza experienced a “very rich bonding experience in laboring with the land” (“Artist Lecture Series...” 45:48-53). Since then, Ramon Esparza has been involved in many of his son’s projects that use adobe as an essential, elemental material. In 2014 the father and son team taught other family members how to work with the adobe after a few months they had 1,500 bricks ready for the piece. *Building: A Simulacrum of Power* was commissioned by Clockshop, a nonprofit organization working with California State Parks to turn Bowtie, a former railyard and post-industrial space, into an urban park.⁴⁹ It was the first time that Esparza incorporated the adobe-making process as part of his arts practice.

Where James Turrell mostly left museum spaces because creating giant apertures in the ceilings became less and less practical, Esparza left gallery spaces out of frustration for who their audiences were, and weren't. He started doing site-specific performances, like *Building*, linked to lived experiences of a place, drawing "the art public's gaze to the site *from* the site" (Diehl). The land and understanding one's relationship to it is central to his practice. He eventually returned to gallery spaces, but with the intention of transforming them into spaces that reflect him and other brown, queer artists. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Esparza is deeply invested in his community, their histories, and futures there.

Though not all of his performances, paintings, or installations involve adobe, this chapter focuses exclusively on his recent works that do. Brief engagements with *Figure/Ground: Beyond the White Field* (2017), *Tierra. Sangre. Oro.* (2018), and *Staring at the Sun* (2019) demonstrate his work's ability to work with the agential material in co-creating a desert atmosphere. Here the desert refers less to a specific climate classification—Los Angeles is technically a Mediterranean climate—and more to a shared history, sense of identity, and aesthetic. In his own words, "by building with adobe bricks, making brown bodies present, and collaborating—is a response to entering traditional art spaces and not seeing myself reflected" (Esparza). This has been the case not only physically, in terms of the whiteness of those spaces, but also in terms of the histories of art they uphold. The adobe bricks and structures Esparza creates with the help of his family and friends "reflect the durable, functional form prevalent across Mexico and its former lands in the Southwest...[M]aking the bricks alludes to their community's history" (Hermo). Whether he is installing them in galleries in the Northeast, West Texas,

or his hometown, the process of brickmaking with his community is a special part of his practice. The act and the bricks in Esparza's works, "combine blue-collar drudgery and artistic 'practice' with a sense of *tierra*, a word with poetic reflections of soil, earth, land, and dirt" (Diehl). What's more, the adobe material and his constructions defamiliarize art museum experiences by filling the blank white gallery spaces with the abundance of desert atmosphere.

The recipe changes with the ecology, but as a combination of earth and water adobe has been used as a building material around the world for thousands of years. In the Desert Southwest, adobe-style homes (also known as Pueblo Revival) are prevalent, though many of them are constructed out of materials like stucco, stone, and wood in order to achieve the look of adobe on the outside without its internal mutable properties. Because they are cured by baking under the sun and not fired in a kiln, "adobes are known to contract and expand depending on their surrounding climate and humidity, thus retaining their organic character even when formed into a building" (Guzmán "Part I"). Esparza's adobe bricks are made by mixing clay-rich soil, horse dung, hay, and water from the Los Angeles River; they are made of earth, of place, and as such are understood to have their own agency. The artist says that a large factor in bringing adobe into his art practice is because it is "material that's alive, this material that has the potential to kind of like self-implode...it's never really stable" ("Artist Lecture Series..." 1:06:40). Such a description could easily be applied to the desert at-large and speaks to desert distortion as method of encountering the multiple, the unstable, and the more-than-human with which productive relationships are possible.

Figure / Ground: Beyond the White Field

In 2017, Esparza and sixty-two other artists showed their work for the Whitney Biennial in New York City. *Figure / Ground: Beyond the White Field* turned the John Eckel Foundation Gallery into an adobe rotunda featuring five other artists invited by Esparza.⁵⁰ *Tierra Firme's* Alicia Inez Guzmán describes walking into the space and immediately smelling the adobe earth before noticing how the rotunda “created its own microclimate.” In a longer essay about the piece, Guzmán writes “uneven adobes cover all the walls, making curved lines from hard angles...an undulating surface that deviated from the linearity of the walls that lay beneath.” The fixed nature of gallery walls is emphasized by the adobe’s vulnerability. Sturdy enough to stay in bricks and not completely collapse or crumble underfoot, it is still subject to change in its elemental way. It does produce an earthy scent, it will leave traces of dust under your fingernail and on your shoes, and it completely changes the atmosphere of a museum space by visually browning the traditionally white walls and by keeping the temperature at a certain level.

Guzmán describes how Esparza’s installation “was respite after walking the streets of Chelsea to arrive at the Whitney’s new location in the Meatpacking district...Esparza’s adobe offered the brown and the gritty, dirt remade into building blocks. Walking into *Figure / Ground* is walking into a room where one is immersed in the earth, without being underground. Like Turrell, Esparza’s work is in many ways about creating a set of conditions that evoke a certain atmosphere. Unlike Turrell, this embodied experience is highly sociopolitical, and brings comfort to someone like Guzmán who is visiting New York City from her home in New Mexico.

The very fact that Esparza used the opportunity of showing his work at the world-renowned exhibition at the Whitney to create a platform of inclusion for artists from his community is commendable. To some degree, the move decolonizes an institutionally white space and “the white cube was transformed into a brown, round space that held everyone’s works inside it” (Esparza). As a result, the gallery space becomes productively distorted, defamiliarizing what such a space should look like and presenting an inclusive platform for their futures. Even more extraordinary is the fact that the idea is substantiated by the storied material of adobe, which traveled from Los Angeles to New York City for the show. This idea amused Esparza, who enjoyed the ability to “take a piece of L.A.” with him to New York, especially because he “can’t think of any other time when they’re really surrounded by that much earth” (“Whitney Biennial 2017”). *Figure / Ground* demonstrates the power of the adobe in creating a desert atmosphere that enfolds visitors in its presence and its past.

Tierra. Sangre. Oro.

The bricks from *Figure / Ground* were sent to yet another foreign destination in for an exhibition titled *Tierra. Sangre. Oro. (Earth. Blood. Gold.)* in Marfa, Texas which showed from 2017-18. In addition to Esparza’s piece, *Tierra* featured works by Carmen Argote, Nao Bustamante, Beatriz Cortez, Timo Fahler, Eamon Ore-Giron, Star Montana, Sandro Cánovasm María García, and Ruben Rodriguez. Marfa has recently emerged as a place where the “white international art world” convenes (Esparza). Noting the disparity between who the place attracts and how impoverished the county is, Esparza sought to create a literal foundation—he covered parts of the floor with the adobe bricks— “as a

vehicle for having conversations and for inviting other brown artists and artisans to work with [him] and with each other to consider land and how to create within each other's spaces. There is a performativity to this way of working; it informed what we made" (ibid.). As with *Figure / Ground*, Esparza's opportunity to exhibit his work became one for his community at Ballroom Marfa.

In addition to the sections of floor covered with bricks, Esparza collaborated with Beatriz Cortez to build an archway out of adobe, inspired by Mayan architecture. It was constructed last, but became the entrance through which visitors had to enter the space. The artists had "used it to reorient the way visitors enter the white-turned-brown cube" (ibid.). Obviously browning spaces is central to Esparza's work, particularly in art institutions, but it is always as a co-creator with others and with the live material of adobe. The bricks of *Tierra* fit seamlessly within the desert aesthetic of West Texas as opposed to in a museum in New York. Yet the packed earth still intrigues the visitor, who can't help but focus on the irregular shapes of the material as it supports Esparza and whoever else decides to stand on top of it. It has migrated from Los Angeles to New York, and then Texas, creating its own nonhuman history.

Staring at the Sun

Esparza had started out his career drawing and painting, but he switched abruptly to performance art when he stopped feeling that the canvas could express his frustration with treatment of brown and queer folk in his community. Before long, he began to "experiment with adobe as a surface...brown matter, brown material," and the adobe is now a sort of autograph ("Artist Lecture Series..." 1:19:10). Painting on the brown,

lively surface of the adobe, as opposed to a traditional stretched white canvas, got him excited about the practice again. In 2019, his solo exhibition *Staring at the Sun* opened at MASS MoCA. According to their official website, the exhibit allowed him “to design a brown space and to simultaneously engage, create images, and build narratives intrinsic to his use of land —brown matter—as context, surface, and content” (“Rafa Esparza”). And though it was a solo exhibition, walking into the gallery space one was greeted by Esparza’s portraits of friends, family, and Mexican people.

When my friend and I arrived at the double doors, we saw a brick of adobe hanging on the wall straight ahead with a painting of Mexican laborers being sprayed with DDT. According to the *LA Times*, the painting is based off of a piece of documentary film by photographer Leonard Nadel in 1956 (Miranda). The article sets the scene:

It is 1956. A queue of Mexican immigrants stands at a processing station in Texas, about to be admitted to the United States as part of the bracero guest worker program. They are naked, clothes in hand, waiting for a masked attendant to douse them with DDT, an insecticide whose use would be banned in the U.S. just 16 years later. (ibid.)

This is the image that greets me as I walk into a gallery space lined with adobe, which otherwise had felt inviting, like the place of respite that Guzmán refers to. It is a reminder of the way that brown people, especially in the Desert Southwest, have been systematically subjected to violence for centuries, and still are. It is powerful to witness this story so far from the desert, during a frigid December day in the Northeast; an encounter with a piece of my heritage, in material and image, hanging on the wall of a giant museum.

My friend and I turned to walk further into the space, and saw several more adobe bricks hanging on the wall. The floor was tiled with adobe, too, and I reveled in the fact that I could see how the bricks closest to the walls retained their separation from one another while the ones in the middle of the space had been blended together by visitors walking on them. It felt like the earth because it was the earth. Some of the slabs of adobe had portraits on them. Two of them I recognized as artists San Cha and Sebastián Hernández, who I knew to be Esparza's friends from Los Angeles. Another two were portraits of his family members. The colors, bright red for San Cha's dress and brilliant blue for Hernández's blouse, pop against the brown, emphasize it. The brown is the adobe canvas, the adobe tiles, and the adobe stacks in the middle of the gallery space. Up ahead, four large adobe panels are cut irregularly at the top to make up the canvas for a mural. On it, a figure in green is reaching toward the top of the brick while, grabbing a piece of barbed fence, looking at the viewer. One can assume the person is climbing over, but they might also be destroying it. This is the sort of ambiguity that Esparza's works perform doubly through the materials he uses.

The curator for the exhibition, Marco Antonio Flores, told the *LA Times*, "The interesting thing is that for [Esparza] to create portraits out of material that breaks and cracks, you think, what does that tell us about portraiture?" Tending to his practice means tending to his community, to land, to the earth, and understanding that fixity is merely what you allow to persist. What does it mean to paint a portrait of a loved one on a surface that will likely crumble and fade? What does it mean to embrace and work with dust and dirt? Gwyneth Shanks observes, "Dust and dirt also connote a more broadly defined set of assumptions about poverty, disease, deprivation, lowliness, and mortality.

Meanwhile, its absence connotes not only cleanliness but also morality.” Certainly, Esparza is challenging these connotations. For him, working with dirt and dust is an embodied practice that brings bodies, particularly brown and queer bodies, together in a labor with land. Perhaps this is another point where likening Esparza’s earthworks to Turrell’s massive excavation of Roden Crater troubles me. Even when Esparza is presenting solo work, it is made possible by people in his community that he is seeking to make more visible. He made the bricks with family and friends long before they ever arrived in a museum space; the making is just as important as the final exhibition product.

This project began with histories and now it ends with histories. Rafa Esparza is inspired by history because it allows him to imagine what might have been. He then explores those lost, forgotten, erased though possible pasts present through speculation and artistic expression. In many of his site-specific works in Los Angeles, the contexts of the place’s dominant histories is broadened by his attention to queer and brown histories. Most noted for his performances, he pushes this further by being present and having his own body interact with the earth and place. In her article for *ARTnews*, Carmen Hermo encapsulates, “An insistent rootedness in the histories, land, and life of Los Angeles can be felt in rafa esparza’s performances, installations, and paintings, which are all focused on his brown, queer community.” The rootedness she describes is precisely what makes Esparza’s work so intense. Having branched well beyond Los Angeles, Esparza maintains a connection to the element of earth and the history of the desert by working with adobe and using it in spaces where visitors may not have ever encountered it before.

And encountering adobe in this way, in such contexts, is encountering a large history of brown people in the Desert Southwest. As Diehl astutely asserts, “Such is

Esparza's knack for incorporating violent colonial histories into work that gathers, rather than destroys." Esparza taking hundreds or thousands of adobe bricks to build installations like those I've examined throughout this chapter is desert place-making, it is a chance to gather and confront the past while thinking and performing possible futures.

As Shanks hopes, along with myself and many others, Esparza's work produces

...a new ground from which to imagine a museum predicated upon alternative aesthetic practices, cultural histories, and models of acquisition and display. Such a future might honor art of the global south, minoritarian artists and museumgoers, and challenge museums' practice of claiming ownership over objects, artists, and art movements through conventional acquisition and archival procedures. Esparza's adobe pavers frame a materialized desire for a future different from the now, marking a mode of transformation in which that future is made actual, if only for the duration of a performance.

And indeed, on a near-freezing winter afternoon in Massachusetts, it was in his constructed adobe space where I was so warm. I studied, felt, and smelled the adobe bricks, scattered around the space, hanging on the wall, wearing away below my boots—comforting me.

NOTES

¹Recent publications like *Timelines of American Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press), *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (Temple University Press), and the 1619 Project (*The New York Times*) are also rethinking American history and literature's relationships with identity, place, and time.

²Chávez explains: "I have titled this book *The U.S. War with Mexico* rather than using the more traditional 'Mexican War' or 'Mexican American War' for several reasons. First, the preferred designation shifts the focus to a conflict between two nations, rather than keeping the focus on one nation acting against another or on a conflict between peoples instead of countries. Second, the term 'Mexican War' implies that Mexico was the aggressor, which was not the case. Finally, the new name doesn't include the word *Mexican*, which since the war has taken on a pejorative, racialized meaning. Using the phrase 'U.S. War with Mexico' promotes a concentration on nation building, expansion, and race as the key causes of conflict" (ix).

³A previous name for parts of Texas.

⁴The Gadsden Purchase went into effect in 1854, and the U.S. acquired southern Arizona and parts of southwestern New Mexico.

⁵See Lee Mitchell's "A Book 'Made Out of Books': The Humanizing Violence of Style in *Blood Meridian*" (2015) for an in-depth understanding of McCarthy's violent writing style.

⁶The Indian Education Act of 1972 took three years to pass Congress and "now provides funding to some 1,100 school districts for supplemental funding for Indian education," even though "Indian education is still the worst in the nation" (Chavers). The Bureau of Acknowledgement and Research (BAR), created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1978 "has never had Congressional authorization or approval, but it has assumed the power of life or death over recognizing Indian tribes" (Chavers).

⁷Translation: an open wound.

⁸The Gileños term might be used to refer to the village itself, as the people who the Glanton gang were chased by and post-massacre are chasing are otherwise referred to as Apaches.

⁹Using Sepich's *Notes* for this (p.99).

¹⁰The Official Website of the Cormac McCarthy Society provides a document of translations through their "Resources" tab.

¹¹From a more recent source: According to the Tucson Chamber of Commerce, the name Tucson is derived from the O'odham word, 'Chuk-son,' meaning village of the dark spring at the foot of the mountains" (Hedding).

¹²I can't help but think of Percy Shelley's "Ozymandias" here.

¹³In recent years, the name Anasazi, has been contested because it means "ancient enemy" in Diné (Navajo). They are now more respectfully referred to as Ancestral Puebloans. (Berg)

¹⁴From *The Ancient World* entry: "Because the exodus from the cities was so sudden and complete, many scientists believe that environmental conditions such as droughts may have been a factor. Others believe that religion created the "pull" that drew the Anasazi to leave their cities and migrate across the Southwest, ultimately intermingling with the

Hopi, Zuni, and other culture groups. According to one theory, changes in rainfall patterns led the Anasazi to question the effectiveness of their rain dances and, thus, the power of their gods and religion. It suggests that the Anasazi may have left their old settlements to find new gods that could help them ensure plentiful crops. As evidence of a change in religion, archeologists note that the Anasazi stopped building tower kivas, indicating that perhaps they no longer worshipped the deities they had previously worshipped.”

¹⁵ A petroglyph is carved, inscribed into rock surface, while the pictograph is painted onto the rock.

¹⁶ Just a note: it is Chandler as indicated on the screen, but the scene was shot in Albuquerque.

¹⁷ Jason De León’s definition of state of exception is particularly helpful: “the process whereby sovereign authorities declare emergencies in order to suspend the legal protections afforded to individuals while simultaneously unleashing the power of the state upon them” (27).

¹⁸ Violence relating to cartel activity.

¹⁹ The man angrily asks Graver: “How’s the auditor gonna react to an \$8000 check to fuckin’ Domino’s Pizza?” you think an auditor is going to respond to an \$8000 bill for Domino’s Pizza?” (46:40-46).

²⁰ As a side note, the pair worked together on the 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049* and produced another iconic kind of imagined desert landscape.

²¹ For the technologically inclined, Deakins writes, “We hired an especially sensitive IR camera from a company called FLIR. We initially thought of using only the standard night vision attachment but Denis was keen to have something that was visually different in order to distinguish the perspective of each character.”

²² Jóhannsson gives a very detailed description of his inspiration and creative process: “The percussion is definitely a huge part of the film and that came from our discussion about the film very early on. Denis said that he saw the film as a war film and that he wanted me to write ‘subtle war music.’ That was the phrase that he used, which I found challenging. What is subtle war music? It seems almost a contradiction in terms, but I found that was kind of a phrase that I latched onto and used as some kind of guide. The music is driving and has this sort of pulse that drives the film forward. The percussion was a very important part of that. That was one of the first things that I determined in terms of orchestration” (Grobar).

²³ Urrea was born in Tijuana and moved to San Diego at three years of age. Gaspar de Alba was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. Both authors bring with them their experiences of bordertown life.

²⁴ The name of this route, according to Byrd Howell Granger, “was justly applied because many who followed it suffered the tortures of the damned from heat and thirst. The route meandered from water hole to water hole, and it was always problematic whether such holes would be holding water. Further, at times shifting sands made portions of the trail impassable so that far too often travellers perished before finding their way or water to sustain them (111-112).

²⁵ Incidentally Sasabe is where Matt Graves and Alejandro find the tunnel to the US in *Sicario*.

²⁶ Also the Border of Border Studies.

²⁷ For more extensive scholarship about Ivon's powerful positionality as a lesbian protagonist, see Irene Mata's "Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Industrialization in Alicia Gaspar De Alba's *Desert Blood*" (2010).

²⁸ The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative which began in 2007 as measures by the Department of Homeland Security and President George W. Bush to counteract terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001. Passports became mandatory documents for entrance into the United States from Mexico or Canada, first by air travel in 2007 and then by land or sea in 2009, though "previously, Americans returning from Canada by land had to present a driver's license and birth certificate to prove identification and citizenship" (Radia and Ryan).

²⁹ Etymologically, the word stems from the infinitive, *rastrear*, meaning to track, trail, drag, or trace ("Rastreo").

³⁰ El Paso County's land area is 1012.69 square miles and Juarez County's land area is 1874.06 square miles, which I converted from the given figure of 4853.80 square kilometers ("Quickfacts" and "Demographic Data...").

³¹ Urrea refers to this word in the following passage about the Devil's Highway itself: "In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place" (Urrea 4).

³² *The Devil's Highway* was a national bestseller and a Pulitzer Prize finalist in nonfiction in 2005.

³³ Though Gaspar de Alba sets *Desert Blood* during 1998 and Asarco has already shut down, the plant officially stopped in 1999.

³⁴ Such strategies are akin to the *guías* giving the walkers drugs to keep them from falling behind.

³⁵ "Asarco filed for Chapter 11 protection in 2005, then emerged from bankruptcy in 2009 by signing one of the largest environmental settlements in U.S. history: \$1.79 billion to clean and restore more than 80 locations around the country...The demolition cost about \$2 million and was organized and paid for by the Texas Custodial Trust, which was established as part of Asarco's bankruptcy settlement agreement and was funded with \$52 million to address contamination on the property" (Orden).

³⁶ Lisa Dillman translates from Spanish and Catalan. She currently teaches in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Emory University.

³⁷ The award is presented by Three Percent at the University of Rochester ("2016 Best...").

³⁸ Richardson's article "Jarchar: Reading Makina/Makina Reading in Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*" provides a thorough investigation of the Spanish word and its significance. Highly recommend if this is of further interest.

³⁹ Not just mainstream news cycles that cover hate speech and crimes, but also comment feeds on social media sites and ever darker forays into forums like Reddit and 4chan.

⁴⁰ Though it is beyond the scope of my dissertation, aesthetics of the desert and their relations to the militarization of the Desert Southwest is explored in depth in literary scholar John Beck's *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste* (2009).

⁴¹ There are only two points in which Mexico is mentioned.

⁴² The essay appears in *Latin American Literature Today*, and its full title is “Myth, Literature, and the Border in *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera.”

⁴³ À la David Abram’s popular book “The Spell of the Sensuous” (1996).

⁴⁴ For anyone unfamiliar with Turrell, he emerged as a visual artist around the same time and place as the Light and Space Movement in Los Angeles, in which artists’ works stemmed from minimalism, liberating art “from historical references and subjective ballast,” and taking it “a stage further by using light to dematerialize the work of art” (Helfenstein 12). Turrell arguably pushed even this to its limit, often only using light and the structure of the space as the work.

⁴⁵ From the artist’s official website: “Turrell creates a similar experience of “Ganzfeld”: a German word to describe the phenomenon of the total loss of depth perception as in the experience of a white-out” (“Ganzfelds”). It also defines Perceptual Cells as “enclosed, autonomous spaces built specifically for one person at a time, in which one’s perception of space is challenged by light” (“Perceptual Cells”).

⁴⁶ According to the article, the partnership with ASU “promises to bring his revised master plan to completion in the next five years, building a sprawling creative and scientific community around the crater in the process, with the ASU Foundation and Skystone Foundation (the crater’s nonprofit umbrella) working together to raise the \$200 million or so still needed” (Cheshes).

⁴⁷ Part of the Roden Crater project depends on cattle-ranching because “Turrell’s Walking Cane Ranch supplies prime steaks to purveyors of top restaurants like Keens Steakhouse in New York” (Cheshes).

⁴⁸ Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁴⁹ For context: “The Bowtie Project is a partnership between Clockshop and California State Parks to activate an 18-acre post-industrial lot along the LA River. Since 2014, Clockshop has executed over 90 artist projects, performances, and events at the Bowtie.”

⁵⁰ The five other artists whose works were displayed in the rotunda were Dorian Ulises López Macías, Beatriz Cortez, Gala Porras-Kim, Eamon Ore Girón, and Ramiro Gomez (who used it as a studio space).

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