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Border Biomes

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*Ecological*

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*Mexico's Edges*

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## **Border Biomes**



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# **Border Biomes**

Ecological Imaginaries  
of Mexico's Edges

**Emily Celeste Vázquez Enríquez**

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*Nashville, Tennessee*

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For migrants, whose hope and dignity rise above every border.





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# Fractured Environments

In 2016, I had the privilege of meeting various migrants, most of them women, at Mexico's southern border. Many were Mexicans preparing for their journey to the United States for the first, second, or third time. There were also numerous transnational domestic workers from Guatemala who earned their livelihoods by caring for the children of middle-class Mexican families. I met them mostly at public places, in parks, churches, and convenience stores. Our conversations were always informal, initiated by my interest in learning about the migration dynamics of the region and fully shaped by their stories. They spoke about their desire to go to the United States, their past attempts to make the journey, or their reluctance to leave. Sometimes brief and other times fleshed out with detail, the environmental features of borders often haunted their narratives.

In some accounts, migrants highlighted their unexpected interactions with wildlife, such as a couple who recounted their harrowing encounter with a snake in the vast expanse of a border forest. Other stories were marked by imageries of landscapes, underscoring fear and bravery at the thought of crossing certain border spaces, particularly the desert. These mixed feelings arose either from the uncertainty of never having been there before or from vivid, lingering memories of the land's impact on their bodies. Several narratives of refusal also emerged, told by people who did not want to leave the familiar land to venture into an unknown one despite feeling compelled to make the journey. At that time, I was more focused on listening than documenting, and I rarely carried a notebook (most migrant women wouldn't have spoken openly to me if I had). Consequently, I don't have a verbatim account of their stories, and they are not a part of the formal analysis I offer here. However, these stories remain present in other ways. While not conveyed as direct quotations, they are the guiding coordinates

that shape the direction of *Border Biomes*, echoing throughout the structure and purpose of this book.

After these conversations, I started viewing border regions through an ecological lens. In the south of Mexico, the biomes that operate as borders unequivocally disputed commonly held ideas about the permanent, immovable, and well-defined material nature of national boundaries. The forceful water movement of the Suchiate River, the busiest border river in the area, quickly challenged anthropocentric categorizations of geopolitical limits and common notions of territorial fixity. Gazing down at a binational rainforest from an official checkpoint bridge brought into focus a fundamental incompatibility between human-imposed boundaries and the vast, expansive wooded ecosystem. At the Mexico-US divide, the desert's vibrant animal, plant, and human life dispelled notions of an empty, desolate landscape while its climatic features swiftly exposed its inherent dangers. These scenarios underscore the centrality of nonhuman entities in border and migration contexts. Moreover, they highlight the pressing need to consider the ecological consequences of the intersection between human-made boundaries and the ecosystems that connect and sustain life on the planet. For this reason, this book's title incorporates the name of a nation-state actively engaged in artificial frameworks of fragmentation. *Border Biomes* examines the consequences of the confluence of biomes and borders within the geopolitical expanse currently operating as Mexico. In doing so, it explicitly draws attention to the environmental damage caused by the ongoing mechanisms of the borders that sever the ecosystems that predate them. In that sense, the term *edges* in the subtitle extends beyond the expansive, liminal points of convergence and transition between nation-states. It marks the sites where biomes and borders intersect. Rather than denoting only the inner or outer limits of settler territoriality, "edges" conceptually signal the shifting encounters between ecological and political realms.

Rooted in literary analysis, each chapter threads through diverse impacts resulting from the tension between geopolitical limits and the ecosystems they traverse, particularly within the Mexican context. Given its significant influence on the environmental degradation of many of the biomes discussed here, the role of the United States arises as a critical concern. Central to this book is the harm inflicted on migrants' bodies by the harsh conditions of deserts, the unpredictability of rivers, and the challenges of dense forests, alongside a critical focus on the environmental damage border regimes impose on these very biomes. Key examples of this damage include habitat destruction caused by border management practices and

physical structures, including the construction of walls, fences, and patrol roads. These built features disrupt wildlife migration corridors, alter breeding and nesting patterns, force shifts in animal behavior, and limit access to water sources and foraging grounds. The environmental impact of borders also involves the overexploitation of shared natural resources such as rivers and aquifers due to binational competition, and widespread land dispossession that affects both human and nonhuman inhabitants. Borders aggravate ecological degradation by diverting water resources to build and sustain infrastructure. They invite the expansion of agribusinesses that endanger ecosystems through excessive water use, soil degradation, and the heavy application of pesticides. The presence of geopolitical limits transforms biomes into zones where environmental laws are frequently bypassed to accelerate security infrastructure projects.<sup>1</sup> All these effects are further magnified by climate change. By addressing the environmental consequences of border regimes on terrestrial and aquatic biomes, this book argues that borders do not just facilitate or exacerbate ecosystem damage but that they are, by their very nature, environmental crimes.

#### SEEING THE ECOLOGIES OF BORDERS THROUGH LITERATURE

Migrant justice activist and writer Harsha Walia utilizes the term “border imperialism” to describe border regimes as processes “by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained, including through imperial subjugation, criminalization of migration, racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-mediated exploitation of labor.”<sup>2</sup> This book follows Walia’s conceptualization of borders, recognizing them as imperial formations that have operated as genocidal artifacts and racialized methods of exploitation and mass displacement. Building on those premises, I contend that the state-sanctioned racial violence reproduced through these artificial constructs is inseparable from the damage that borders cause to the environment. In the North American context, environmental inquiries about borders frequently center on the ecological harm associated with the construction and presence of the US wall. *Border Biomes* adopts a broader approach. Expanding its scope beyond the physical structures used to militarize the Mexico-US region, this book posits that—regardless of the mechanisms used to fortify them—borders are not only intrinsically racist, violent, and deadly but also inherently harmful to the environment. To support this claim, I address the ecological damage caused across different border topographies, including deserts, rivers, and forests.

Understanding borders as more than human-made constructs, *Border Biomes* foregrounds the environmental dimensions of geopolitical divides. Throughout this book, I examine how aquatic and terrestrial biomes interact with national limits, drawing attention to the harm caused by the settler-imperial logics that shape these interactions. Adopting an ecologically oriented framework, I emphasize that borders are not only socially and politically active but also ecologically and geologically vibrant. Through this theoretical reframing, I situate transnational boundaries in a direct dialogue with major concerns of the Anthropocene, particularly habitat loss, climate change, land degradation, species extinction, human/nonhuman environmental migration, and environmental racism. Most studies of border literature focus on the social conflicts and cultural configurations that occur in border zones and transcend into national imaginaries and practices, often manifesting as anti-immigrant, racial violence. While this approach is fundamental in recognizing the harm to migrants caused by borders and is also a central element of my work, it tends to underemphasize their material complexities. Building on human-centered concerns, this book expands its focus to examine the environmental impacts of border formations. To this end, I analyze and bring into dialogue cultural productions that contest the normalization of a global system governed by anthropocentric demarcations, underscoring the often-overlooked ecologies that configure some of the most prominent geopolitical boundaries in the Americas.

Drawing on literary studies, *Border Biomes* is fundamentally an ecocritical work. Because ecocriticism is characterized by interdisciplinarity, in addition to literary studies, I turn to history, anthropology, natural sciences, journalism, cultural studies, and diverse Indigenous epistemologies to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate effects of the interactions between border formations and biomes. This broad approach provides a nuanced lens for interpreting, framing, and contextualizing the dynamics shaped by these overlapping forces. In this sense, my theoretical framework dissolves rigid boundaries between fields, a fitting method for a study that challenges the normalization and dominance of border formations.

While I engage with multiple disciplines, literature holds a central role, bearing witness to the environmental harm wrought by border governance, making that damage visible, and bringing it into sharper focus. By exposing these harms, literary works disrupt normalized perceptions of borders, offering a pathway to rethink the extent of their impact. Such reimaginations are crucial for identifying, halting, and potentially reversing their consequences. As repair is impossible without recognition, this book contends



that by making visible the violent effects of borders on the environment, literature becomes an avenue for envisioning ecological healing and for affirming the possibility of a future freed from the violence of the present. The works I study stimulate us to view geopolitical demarcations not merely as social creations but as ecological realities encompassing both human and nonhuman worlds. This is one of the elements that exemplify the centrality of literature in these pages, as it conveys the bridges between those inseparable realms. By focusing on texts that account for the entanglements between human and nonhuman dimensions within border contexts, the literary works I study push past the limits of mediums with narrower scopes or possibilities. *Border Biomes* leverages this literary potential. In doing so, it foregrounds literature as a core road for understanding the ecological lives—and deaths—of border spaces.

Grounding my analysis in poetry and novels, I assert that the mere presence of a national boundary inevitably brings about environmental degradation. Whether the border takes a hyper-visible form, as in the case of the US wall, or exerts a more understated presence, as it does in southern Mexico, the effects remain the same. The formation of borders invariably harms the ecosystems that interact with them. Some of the environmental damage caused by geopolitical barriers, such as the wall, is often readily identifiable: habitat fragmentation, flooding, altered river courses, wildlife entrapment during fires, and water depletion in desert regions. However, national limits without such physical infrastructures also contribute to distinct forms of deterioration. In southern Mexico, a wall-less border has fostered competition over shared forest resources among Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Intermittent and flawed transboundary cooperation has allowed unchecked timber harvesting, agricultural expansion, and cattle ranching.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, both south and north of Mexican territory, shared water sources suffer varying degrees of damage directly attributable to the border's presence. The Suchiate River, which serves as a boundary section between Mexico and Guatemala, is one of the most polluted rivers in Central America. Limited usable water is a major point of contention between both governments, who, to the detriment of the stream, have struggled to establish conflict resolution strategies for sharing, cleaning, and managing this transboundary resource.<sup>4</sup> In the Mexico-US region, the Rio Grande / Río Bravo has been a source of binational disputes since the border's establishment and remains contentious today. Water levels have significantly diminished, making it increasingly difficult to meet the quotas stipulated in international water agreements. Ironically, one of the reasons for the depletion of the Mexico-US shared rivers is overexploitation driven by binational

rivalry. The relationships between political boundaries and ecological harm are central to the literary works I analyze, which, through diverse perspectives, expose how ecological damage is not merely a byproduct of border formations but one of their defining features.

In examining such dynamics, this book engages with works written by Mexican and Latinx authors—mainly the individual Latinx identities Mexican American and Chicanx—alongside works by Indigenous authors from southern Mexico and Native American writers based in the United States, whose familial and cultural ties to Mexico intersect with their distinct tribal identities.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, this corpus aims to traverse long-standing boundaries upheld within Mexican literary studies, which often marginalize Indigenous voices—especially those situated outside Mexico’s geopolitical peripheries, despite their complex linkages to this settler construct. Such an approach draws attention to the broad spectrum of perspectives that inform border and environmental knowledge. Steering clear of assimilation and the assumption that these traditions are homogeneous, my approach affirms the cultural connections between the Native American authors I study and Mexico, refusing their erasure from this cultural space, much like the growing recognition of Mexican American and Chicanx literary production. This book thus embraces a broad understanding of the vast and complicated landscape of Mexican culture—its frictions and possibilities—by identifying how borders are viewed through an ecocentric lens across different yet interconnected literary lineages and aesthetic forms. With this in mind, *Border Biomes* is underpinned by what Aymara/Bolivian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui identifies as a *ch’ixi* epistemology, a framework that challenges hierarchical and binary thinking.<sup>6</sup> Such a decolonizing gesture foregrounds that the world is shaped by coexisting, oftentimes contradictory ways of knowing that can complement one another, fostering productive engagement between perspectives that may not align and often remain separate. Indeed, the literary works included here are framed by distinct positionalities. For example, the works by Native authors articulate the threats that the presence of borders has posed to their relationships with the territory, drawing attention to land-back claims, while other authors are more oriented toward appealing for the rights of migrants or other types of environmental justice. These concerns are of course not exclusionary and sometimes intersect and overlap, to varying degrees, in many of the works studied here. But the most notable commonality among them lies in their shared rejection of extant border regimes and their intrinsic appeal for transforming normative ways of coexisting within and alongside Earth’s biomes. This book thus emphasizes the diverse environmental arguments that distinct literary

works mobilize against geopolitical boundaries, bringing attention to different ecosystems and different types of harm. Taken together, the works I analyze facilitate a nuanced and ample visualization of the extensive damage in which borders participate, challenging the normalization, homogeneous understandings, and colonial framings of these spaces.

#### LITERARY CARTOGRAPHIES OF BORDERS BEYOND THE EDGES OF MEXICO

This book challenges nationally confined interpretations of Mexican culture that privilege non-Indigenous perspectives and narrowly focus on creators born within Mexico, advocating for the inclusion of voices often marginalized by dominant narratives of this cultural imaginary. I rely on a diverse archive of literary works by writers from both within and beyond the margins of this territory, many of whom are part of literary genealogies that have been understudied and oftentimes dismissed as irrelevant within traditional frameworks of Mexican cultural studies. In dialogue with a more ample vision of Mexican culture that surpasses national boundaries and following the Greater Mexico notion proposed by Américo Paredes that urges us to think of this country from a cultural perspective and not from a geopolitical one, I study works by Chicanx and Mexican American writers. In addition, the primary corpus also incorporates Indigenous cultural productions from both sides of the border, mindful and respectful of their self-determining nature while recognizing their intricate interconnections with the Mexican cultural landscape. This inclusion is particularly significant as this book asserts that, to understand the conflictual coexistence between borders and biomes, we must consider how the dispossession of Native people underwrites the establishment of imperial geographies and how borders compound the necropolitical deployment of settler practices with wide-ranging, historical, social, and ecological consequences.

Through the study of literary works by Indigenous, Latinx, and Mexican writers, I draw on different and specific yet enmeshed intellectual lineages that, in conjunction, contest a unified conception of borders and an exclusionary notion of Mexican culture. This perspective has already started to reconfigure with the work of border studies scholars such as Debra Castillo, Socorro Tabuenca, Robert McKee Irwin, Ramón Saldivar, Amy Sara Carroll, and Rafael Acosta, who have incorporated the voices of Mexican American and Chicanx authors into a broader vision of the border studies field within Mexicanist scholarships. Yet, significant challenges persist. Mexican literature is still mainly analyzed through the restrictive lens of the nation's

territorial boundaries, with logics of exclusion even extending to authors based within its territorial confines.<sup>7</sup> These omissions have markedly affected Indigenous writers, working to erase the legacy of their ways of knowing and exposing the racialized structures that maintain the dominance of Eurocentric or settler-colonial knowledge production. Decades ago, Carlos Montemayor emphasized the marginalization of Indigenous literature from the diverse mapping of Mexico's cultural spheres, underscoring the need to recognize its place within this frame.<sup>8</sup> His observation is still relevant today, as he flagged an enduring underestimation of Indigenous languages and a pervasive lack of recognition of the complexities of Native art. Although, as Maya Ch'orti' author Gloria Chacón contends, Indigenous writers have asserted their own autonomous literary traditions, at the same time, "they do not exist in isolation," and framing their relationships with Western societies through reductive binary oppositions overrides Indigenous lived experiences, reproducing racialized dynamics that place Indigenous perspectives as inherently subordinate or marginal to dominant Western paradigms.<sup>9</sup> *Border Biomes* brings attention to the complexities and interconnections that impact Indigenous knowledge production, particularly in relation to the political and cultural fabric of Mexico. This perspective extends beyond Indigenous authors based in the national territory to include Native American writers in the United States with self-proclaimed Mexican identities and/or cultural and familial ties to this country, specifically those writing about the US-Mexico border region. Including these authors further challenges rigid interpretations of Mexico's cultural currents, forefronting a vision of Mexican culture as inherently transnational and shaped by differences, containing and being contained by those differences. Moreover, in highlighting the historical and cultural entanglements of Native voices with what is currently understood as Mexico, this book references the enduring legacy of colonial violence deeply embedded in its history, drawing attention to its role in the dispossession of Native American peoples in the borderlands—an often silenced aspect of its social and cultural memory, both past and present. The text at hand foregrounds the erasures intertwined with this memory and the violent roots underlying those erasures, which continue to outline Mexico's cultural and ecological panoramas.

My approach is in conversation with recent scholarship in Indigenous studies, which emphasizes the capacity of the diverse range of Indigenous cultural production to simultaneously inhabit and traverse Western and tribal-specific worlds, decentering the former. Gloria Chacón's concept of *cosmolectics* further illustrates this dynamic, drawing on the Mesoamerican philosophy of *kab'awil*, a term meaning "a vision that duplicates."<sup>10</sup>

According to this philosophy, instead of adhering to polarizing distinctions, Indigenous cultural practices maintain a “double gaze” that undoes binarism without disregarding the material and cultural differences in contemporary Indigenous writing or the mixed heritage of any author.<sup>11</sup> Rather, this double gaze affirms their intellectual legacy by recognizing that these expressions are not fixed but rather constantly moving and deeply interconnected with both Indigenous and other cultural registers.<sup>12</sup> This framework allows for the recognition of diverse intellectual traditions that defy both assimilation and erasure into/from dominant paradigms.<sup>13</sup> Engaging with Indigenous literature in relation to both tribal and Mexican frameworks, this book contributes to the undoing of its marginalization within this social and cultural space.

My approach is also in dialogue with Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s proposal to challenge a specific, already-finished idea of Mexicanness to attend to “the possibilities of an infinite number of potential Mexican identities.”<sup>14</sup> The attempt to undo a long history of exclusionary practices inside and beyond the geopolitical margins of this settler nation requires prioritizing the vast cartography of identities that challenge and redefine it, which coexist in reinvigorating possibilities and violent frictions. A parallel concern arises within the field of Latinx studies. Afro-Latino scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant observes that while progress has been made in incorporating Afro-Latinx literature into the broader mapping of Latinx culture, efforts to expand cultural recovery must continue, particularly by including the work of Indigenous peoples. This gap exposes the erasure of the shared pan-ethnicity between Latinx and Native peoples also colonized by Spain, and draws attention to how Latinx communities have been complicit in colonial efforts to dispossess Native Americans.<sup>15</sup> The Chicano Movement marked a turning point, invoking Indigeneity through foundational imagery such as the mythical Aztlán to reconnect with a lost heritage, but as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo notes, this invocation figuratively appropriated Indigenous territoriality, engaging with a romanticized past rather than present-day Indigenous communities.<sup>16</sup> This dynamic, coupled with the legacy of a mestizaje-based identity that seeks to hide its violent inception, has resulted in the overshadowing of the Indigenous past and present of the US-Mexico border region.

*Border Biomes* suggests that any understanding of the socioecological damage created by border formations is fundamentally flawed without Native perspectives on these geographies. Because of this, it emphasizes Indigenous relationships with what is at present considered Mexican and US land, enabling us to underscore embodied, land-based knowledge that challenges

the colonial dynamics that have historically targeted Indigenous territories and communities across *Abya Yala*. In doing so, this book contributes to broader intellectual efforts to decolonize knowledge in the Americas, challenging entrenched colonial narratives and advocating for the inclusion of perspectives that have long been overlooked. Centering Indigenous agency, the Native authors I study refuse settler historical discourse about border spaces through ancestral forms of place-knowing that become central to diagnosing the extent of the ecological damage inflicted on border zones. Alongside literary works by Valeria Luiselli, Dolores Dorantes, Emiliano Monge, Rafael Ramírez Heredia, and Emmy Pérez, I study cultural production by Tohono O'odham linguist and poet Ofelia Zepeda, Mojave/Latinx poet Natalie Diaz, and Binnizá/Zapotec author Irma Pineda. This corpus underscores Indigenous claims for land sovereignty, foregrounds the illegitimacy of borders both north and south of Mexico, and rejects fixed understandings of borders and the biomes that interact with them.

Needless to say, this book does not claim to offer an exhaustive approach to the literary perspectives that, intersecting with the cultural mappings of Mexican culture, have engaged with the environmental consequences of borders. Rather, it emphasizes the complex heterogeneity of literary approaches to border ecologies entwined with this cultural genealogy. Afro-Mexican and queer/cuir perspectives remain beyond the scope of this work, signaling pathways for future research to expand and enhance our understanding of the impacts arising from the confluence of borders and biomes. Additionally, as this book's primary focus is on literary production that foregrounds Mexican culture's open-ended nature, it leaves the question open about how Central American authors engage the intersections of contemporary border regimes and the ecologies that frame them.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it narrows its scope to Mexico and the United States, offering a concentrated effort to sharpen the understanding of the transnational, extensive, and layered natures of Mexican culture and its colonial imprints. This narrower lens enables a more direct illumination of the exclusions embedded within Mexico's national imaginaries, bringing attention to how its cultural landscape remains shaped by colonial dynamics that thrive on enduring erasures. The primary corpus presented here underscores the urgent need to confront and rectify those erasures, advocating not only for the undoing of political borders but also for breaking down the cultural and institutional barriers that perpetuate colonial hierarchies of knowledge and legitimize contemporary geopolitical realities.

Hence, while it might initially seem counterintuitive for a book that

explicitly challenges borders to engage with a corpus grounded in a national cultural imaginary—even as it critiques and interrogates that construct—this decision forefronts a critical point. To transcend and dismantle existing border regimes, we must also confront the borders within, those that, in this context, obscure the vast expanse of Mexican cultures and identities, often masking the past and present influence of colonial legacies and the persistent threat of their extension into the future. Given the continuing effects of the settler violence enacted in the Southwest desert, the long history of migration from Mexico to the United States, and the establishment of the Mexico-US border and its impact on Mexican and Native American people in annexed territories, some of the most persistent exclusions are found north of its geographical edges. While Chicana and Mexican American authors have gradually gained recognition within Mexican studies, considerable work remains. Moreover, as previously discussed, critical gaps endure, notably in the representation of Native and Indigenous writers. This book draws focus to such overlooked perspectives while encouraging engagement with literary voices and traditions beyond its corpus, inviting the exploration of a broader range of biomes.<sup>18</sup> Charting more avenues for discussion rather than closing them, this book seeks to ignite further inquiries into the interplay of borders, biomes, and the systems of harm sustained by their convergence. By broadening our exploration of the diverse voices that illuminate the mounting intersections of human and nonhuman harm caused by geopolitical borders, we can move closer to a future where these boundaries are not just questioned but abolished altogether.

#### ECOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR BORDER ABOLITION

This book coincides with the political vision of no borders, which Harsha Walia contends “is grounded in the material and lived impacts of our world, scarred by warfare and warming.”<sup>19</sup> Since borders perpetuate racial violence, dispossession, and ecological devastation, the politics of no borders becomes one of resistance, transformation, and repair.<sup>20</sup> Angela Davis’s stance against systemic and structural state violence is particularly significant as well, as she emphasizes that abolitionist approaches are vital in showing how our aspirations for the future can break away from the realities of the present.<sup>21</sup> While outlining abolitionist methods, campaigns, and practices is outside the purview of this book, the literary works I examine provide compelling environmental arguments that urge us to imagine land disentangled from current border formations. By underscoring the sustained environmental

damage they create, *Border Biomes* denaturalizes border regimes, inducing us to envision a world where repair remains possible, and border imperialism is dismantled. In this vein, I draw on Ayuujk (Mixe) linguist and translator Yásnaya Elena Aguilar's critique of the current normalization of borders, which she describes as young and arbitrary constructs that have insidiously colonized our imagination, making it nearly impossible to conceive of a world without them.<sup>22</sup> Aligned with abolitionist perspectives, this book envisions a world unbound by borders, advocating for a radical reimagination of dominant relationships with the land.

The calls for border abolition have social and environmental rationales. Here, I underscore the latter while ensuring that the former is not relegated to the background. However, my overarching argument does not long for a return to an ahistorical, idyllic state of the biomes that now serve as borders. Such a proposition is fraught with inherent issues, including the romanticization of a precolonial natural order, the oversimplification of intricate ecological dynamics, and the reinforcement of hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman existence, stances that participate in colonial practices.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the abolitionist environmental reasoning I put forth is rooted in a different argument: that borders are inherently tied to ecosystem harm and that any vision of a livable and sustainable future must reckon with their contribution to planetary ecological degradation.

Moving beyond human-centric conceptualizations of geopolitical limits, this work interrogates borders through the lens of the damage they inflict on the land they divide. While they are often analyzed as cultural, social, and political constructs, I shift focus to see them as agents of ecological damage, contributing to the gradual degradation of both human and nonhuman habitats and exacerbating the existential threats already posed by climate change and other environmental predicaments. Whereas dismantling border regimes requires undoing all the infrastructures that sustain them (ranging from carceral, military, and surveillance systems to legal, logistical, and technological apparatuses), my focus is specifically on their most readily identifiable physical manifestation: the border itself. Such an approach aligns with the growing interest of the humanities and arts in exploring the environmental impacts of geopolitical boundaries, an area that, within Western ranges of vision, was once predominantly addressed in mainstream conservationist circles.

My approach aligns with the expanding field of ecocritical work examining the role of cultural production in an era of escalating environmental pressures. Within the Mexican context, one of the most recent noteworthy contributions is Carolyn Fornoff's *Subjunctive Aesthetics*. Fornoff examines



how Mexican writers, artists, and filmmakers use speculative and hypothetical approaches to imagine alternative relationships with the environment, focusing on the potential for renewal. Although *Border Biomes* shares many of these interests, it takes a different direction, engaging with a transnational corpus that interrogates how the very borders contextualizing cultural responses to ecological challenges also fuel environmental decline. Building on Aguilar Gil's assertion regarding the current normalization of borders, this book asserts that literature is a medium that can unravel such ingrained perception, as it emphasizes the artificial nature of borders and exposes the different ways in which they endanger the human and nonhuman world(s).

While this book centers on the environmental deterioration caused by border formations, it equally underscores their impact on human lives. This layered focus is particularly significant, as ecological decay caused by borders is often evaluated through mainstream conservationist practices that typically overlook the experiences of racialized migrants, sometimes even portraying them as contributors to pollution in the borderlands.<sup>24</sup> Such narratives uphold anti-immigrant sentiment by glorifying colonial ideals of pristine landscapes, scapegoating migrant people, and obscuring the state's role in creating the conditions for environmental degradation in border regions. Moreover, dominant conservation movements often disregard the continuing claims for sovereignty led by Indigenous nations, discounting their rights to land and resources and undermining their continuing efforts to protect these territories from ecosystem collapse and colonial encroachment. This book contends that an ecologically grounded perspective on borders cannot be decoupled from the imperative to advocate for migrant and Indigenous rights.

Border-induced threats to human lives encompass the weaponization of border environments, where climatic conditions and terrain elements are manipulated to endanger marginalized migrants, especially Black, Indigenous, and Brown people. Expanding on Walia's argument that border formations are grounded in racial exclusion, I posit that borders are a form of environmental racism, with their geographic features systematically exploited by the state to target non-white migrants.<sup>25</sup> Building on Jason de León's study of the Sonoran Desert as a site of state-sanctioned violence, I signal the harm facilitated by other ecosystems used as geopolitical divides, such as forests and rivers. This expansive approach accentuates that physical harm to migrants is not solely produced within the context of the Southwest desert but by the very presence and existence of geopolitical borders, irrespective of the features shaping them.

To examine the heterogeneous formation of border biomes and the

contexts of violence in which they participate, I shift focus beyond the US-Mexico region and the Southwestern desert borderlands to include rivers both north and south of Mexico, as well as the forests to the south. Although crucial in contemporary transnational migration dynamics, the southern Mexican area once remained on the periphery of cultural and social awareness and used to be dubbed “Mexico’s forgotten border.” While that has changed and this region has gained more attention, it is often described as an extension of the US border regime, primarily due to its role in deterring undocumented migrants from reaching United States soil. Conversely, I emphasize the specific characteristics of the Mexican southern border as a migration corridor, which includes forest and water biomes, illustrating the distinct forms of environmental violence that this region unveils and its defining features as a geopolitical boundary. Thereby, *Border Biomes* considers the varied nature of national limits that, across different geographies and biophysical spaces, produce human and nonhuman harm.<sup>26</sup> This book postulates that to consolidate an abolitionist future, it is necessary to make visible the violence borders perpetuate against humans, simultaneously emphasizing that dismantling existing border regimes depends on transcending purely anthropocentric frameworks.

#### A NONHUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH TO BORDERS

As borders disrupt the land by breaking apart habitats, igniting disputes over resources, and complicating ecosystem management, the notion of interconnectedness emerges as a compelling counterpoint to their effects. Moreover, because border systems are artificial constructs through which nation-states regulate human movement by exerting control over the territory and its natural components, the most effective arguments for challenging them are those that adopt non-anthropocentric ethics. While I engage with Western theoretical lenses that defy human exceptionalism, much of my work centrally draws from Indigenous epistemologies. The prominence of these frameworks stems from three key considerations. First, they are often nonhuman-centric and grounded in principles of interconnection. Second, I include analyses of literary works by Indigenous authors, which mandate non-Western interpretive approaches. Third, this focus represents a deliberate effort to contribute to decentering Western knowledge systems.

Understanding the diverse ways in which borders impact biomes, such as by shaping their interactions with other beings and increasing the vulnerability of their ecosystems, is especially crucial in an era when escalating ecological challenges not only amplify the dangers associated with borders

but also drive an increasing number of people to migrate. Viewing geopolitical limits through nonhuman-centric epistemologies directs us to better identify such a complex web of challenges, revealing borders as more-than-human formations that, while participating in violent dynamics of exclusion, are also in need of care and restoration. The research presented here draws on Indigenous systems of knowing to confront such layers of ecological harm and envision alternative ways of thinking that offer possibilities for repair.

Indigenous epistemologies are as multifaceted, vast, and diverse as the cultures in which they originate, yet they share certain underlying paradigms. Saskatchewan and Pasqua First Nation scholar Margaret Kovach underscores this shared foundation, pointing to core identity markers that persist across Indigenous modes of thought in the Americas and beyond.<sup>27</sup> According to Kovach, these epistemologies are rooted in interdependence, characterized by intellectual models that are “non-fragmented, nonhuman-centric” and which foreground holistic, interconnected ways of understanding the world.<sup>28</sup> Another thinker who signals a common foundation shared by diverse Indigenous modes of knowing is Yásnaya Elena Aguilar, when she asserts that one of the main differences between Western and Indigenous thought is that the former is marked by a fundamental violence that separates and fractures what was once a unified whole, positioning the human world as distinct from nature.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding these shared principles, these forms of knowledge remain place-based, shaped by specific interactions with the lands and environments from which they arise.<sup>30</sup> This connection to place not only sets Indigenous knowledge systems apart from more dominant epistemologies but also distinguishes them from one another, making homogenization impossible while maintaining shared relational values. Foregrounding the reciprocal, interconnected, and interdependent relationships between human and nonhuman worlds, these frameworks are central to the arguments presented here. They provide critical alternatives to prevailing Western constructs, offering a critical basis for challenging the human-centric foundations of borders.<sup>31</sup>

Among the Indigenous knowledge systems discussed in this book is Amerindian Perspectivism, introduced by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. This concept encapsulates the Amerindian notion of a state of non-differentiation between human and nonhuman entities, in which both possess subjectivity and apprehend the world from embodied points of view.<sup>32</sup> Such a premise contrasts with Western notions of an inherent divide between beings based on the nature/culture binary. Equally significant is the Maya concept of *winaq*, which exemplifies a central tenet

of Maya knowledge systems: the principle that everything possesses life. As Maya authors Ajbée Jiménez and Hector Aj Xol Ch'ok explain, *winaq* entails acquiring and giving life, a process that prioritizes relationality and the interconnectedness that binds all entities in a collective web of existence.<sup>33</sup> Decentering the human, the *winaq* emphasizes the uniqueness of each being while advocating for more horizontal relationships between them. Also relevant to this book is the Ayuujk (Mixe) assertion that views human and nonhuman entities as socionatural beings, united in their role of working to sustain the cycles of life, as articulated by Mixe author Rafael Cardoso Jiménez.<sup>34</sup> This perspective affirms mutual dependency and respect between people and the land.<sup>35</sup> In constituting a departure from Western epistemological monopoly, engaging Indigenous knowledge systems such as these entails a critical re-envisioning. They allow us to recognize the rivers, deserts, and forests functioning as borders as entities in their own right.

By engaging with Indigenous epistemological perspectives in a book emerging from Western academia, I am aware of the complexities highlighted in *Proceed with Caution* by Doris Sommer, who underscores how even well-intentioned efforts can inadvertently sustain unequal power dynamics. As the author states, despite their “ardent interest and best intentions,” advocates may unintentionally overlook the colonial legacies entwined with Indigenous knowledge, thereby perpetuating asymmetrical relationships.<sup>36</sup> *Border Biomes* takes this caution seriously by calling attention to the colonial structures that have historically marginalized Indigenous epistemologies, engaging with their specific ways of knowing rather than filtering them through Western academic frameworks. The chapters that follow emphasize the potentiality of Indigenous knowledge systems to reorient us toward reimagining, re-establishing, and repairing dominant modes of relating to the land, illustrating the pressing need for nonhuman-centric paradigms in the face of worsening environmental challenges. In rejecting their marginalization, these intellectual lenses are integral not only to the chapters focusing on Indigenous authors but to some others engaging with non-Indigenous literary works. This approach emphasizes their expansive intellectual depth and reach.

While this book insists on the fundamental significance of Indigenous intellectual craft to challenge the bordering structures and practices that endanger the ecosystems upon which they are established, non-Indigenous epistemological perspectives are also integral to its composition. For instance, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality asserts that human bodies are naturally permeable and inherently intertwined with the non-human physical world.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, damage to the environment inevitably

translates to damage to humans and vice versa. Bearing in mind the harm that border policies and structures inflict on migrants, particularly Indigenous, Black, and Brown, the trans-corporeality concept spotlights the environmental racism inherent in border formations. The ample range of epistemologies presented here turns into a productive path to challenge dominant human-nonhuman relations, which, in one of their most socially and environmentally harmful forms, have taken the shape of borders.

#### BOOK ORGANIZATION

This book is organized into four main sections, encompassing seven chapters. The first section examines literary representations of border rivers and the second focuses on border deserts. The third section examines forests as transnational boundaries, while the final part broadens the scope to various biomes, signaling the rising importance of the oceanic border corridor in southern Mexico. Together, they underscore the growing diversification of the ecosystems that serve as migration corridors, revealing the ramifications that the confluence between borders and biomes creates. This approach emphasizes that, notwithstanding the material features of geopolitical divides, they unequivocally exert damage on the land. As conveyed by the texts I study, with or without built physical structures, the mere usage of any given ecosystem as a border will have detrimental ecological consequences. Most chapters focus on a distinct biome, allowing for both independent and combined readings. While this structure is designed to showcase the unique environmental characteristics of each biome, they resist being treated in isolation. Much like in the physical world, their literary representations transcend imposed boundaries, emphasizing interconnectedness and challenging the constraints assigned to them.

The opening section includes three chapters dedicated to some of the most significant border-making streams in the Americas, starting with Chapter One, which centers on the Rio Grande / Río Bravo. I examine the poetry books *El Río / The River* (2018), by Mexican/Latinx author Dolores Dorantes and Anglo-American photographer Zoe Leonard, translated by Robin Myers, and *With the River on Our Face* (2016) by Chicana poet Emmy Pérez. In *El Río / The River*, I study the photographs taken by Leonard alongside the poems written by Dorantes and Myers's intentionally imprecise translations, arguing that this multimedial representation of an aquatic body reflects its relentless dynamism, which is in and of itself a challenge to the presumably fixed borderline embedded in it. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian Perspectivism is a central element in this chapter, as

it allows me to study the river's portrayal in terms of its perceived wants. Through this epistemological stance, which maintains that nonhuman entities are subjects who see and understand themselves and others from embodied points of view, this chapter speculates on the relationship that the river seems to want to establish with the world and how the presence of the border interferes with that desire. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to *With the River on Our Face*, contending that its depiction of large-scale agricultural industries permeating a newly established border landscape draws attention to the indirect damage the border inflicts on the land. In Pérez's work, such damage is signaled through the depiction of a booming transnational extractive industry, which has burdened the territory with strong water demands.

Chapter Two focuses on the Colorado River, a body of water so severely damaged that it no longer completes its journey to meet the Pacific Ocean, drying up several miles before even getting close to the sea. Through the reading of *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) by Mojave/Latinx poet Natalie Diaz, I examine how the river's depletion is exacerbated by binational water disputes, implicating both the United States and Mexico. As I observe in this chapter, the establishment of the border intensified the competing interests of multiple US states and two settler nations to secure vast quantities of water for agricultural needs and other domestic uses, thereby jeopardizing the river and the tribal nations that not only depend on it but also regard it as their kin, as conveyed in Diaz's book. Furthermore, this chapter proposes that by situating the Colorado River as a major figure in her writing, the author forefronts its role in memorializing histories of imperial violence and dispossession, gesturing to the devastating effects of the border on human and nonhuman bodies alike. Central to this chapter is Mohawk scholar and political anthropologist Audra Simpson's understanding of how Native writings interrupt the sanctioned histories of success told by settler states, as they expose the permanence of Indigenous worldviews, relations, and practices.

The third chapter analyzes Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia's *La Mara* (The Gang, 2004), asserting that the Suchiate River illustrates the role of borders in perpetuating environmental racism. By emphasizing the extent of the vulnerability of migrants, who face not only the threat of bodily harm from underground groups that prey on them but also the dangers posed by various contaminants, I contend that the novel underscores the need for environmental justice within these geopolitical contexts. To address this portrayal, I turn to the *winaq* Maya notion, broadly understood as the articulation of a collectivity based on processes of an emergent relational aliveness and interconnection between what is commonly considered

human and nonhuman. Following this line of thought, I also draw on Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which emphasizes how the substance of the human is fundamentally interlocked with its surrounding environment, demonstrating their inseparability and thus raising questions about the repercussions of this interaction in situations of exacerbated exposure and exclusion, such as those created in and by border settings.

After these initial chapters on riverine border systems, I shift my attention to the Southwest desert. The literary works studied in this section articulate the complex and robust characteristics of desert environments, refuting the prevalent notion that they are devoid of life. Additionally, I build on Jason de León's focus on the deserts' most lethal features to expand on how, while used as weapons, the driest biomes of the planet are paradoxically subjected to various levels of harm. The opening chapter of this section examines poetry by Tohono O'odham author Ofelia Zepeda, arguing that her culturally specific depiction of the desert—rooted in embodied ancestral knowledge—challenges the constraints of the colonial imagination that has sought to erase its environmental significance. In doing so, Zepeda actively defends the arid region by repositioning its cultural and environmental significance through a decolonial lens. A central way in which the author enacts this land defense, I propose, lies in revealing the desert's interconnectedness with other biomes, particularly the ocean. This approach confronts common misconceptions about deserts, which have enabled their instrumentalization, not only as violent borderlands but also as sites of unrestrained resource exploitation.

The fifth chapter turns to Mexican/Latinx author Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019). Here, I examine how sound produced by human and nonhuman entities emerges as a primary narrative tool, able to reflect the political, historical, and ecological dimensions of a complex biome that doubles as a border area. My analysis focuses on the projects undertaken by two characters: an inventory of echoes and a sound documentary. The former seeks to capture remnants of the soundscape that once surrounded the Chiricahua Apache rebellion, while the latter aims to document the arrival of refugee children at the Mexico-US border. I contend that by drawing attention to echoes, sound, and silence, the novel illustrates the intersection of historical and ongoing violence in the desert, showcasing the persistent colonial forces that continue to affect the region and directing attention to the current environmental crises confronting the Sonoran Desert.

Shifting focus from the arid desert environment, the second to last chapter looks at a literary representation of a border forest. In the context of transnational migration in the Americas, the *Selva Maya* (Maya Forest),



particularly the *Selva El Petén* (Petén Forest), materialized as a central migration corridor for South–North journeys. One pivotal moment in establishing this centrality can be traced back to 2014, when the *Programa Frontera Sur* (Southern Border Program) was first implemented. This initiative was a response to pressure from the United States on the Mexican government to control Central American migration. By expanding Border Patrol units and checkpoints in southern Mexico, this program led to a significant increase in deportations, surpassing even those of the United States in a single fiscal year. In efforts to evade this barrier, migrants have adopted various strategies, such as forming migrant caravans or navigating more remote terrains, including the forested areas along the border. This latter strategy is the focus of this chapter. *Las tierras arrasadas* (The Devastated Lands, 2015) by Mexican author Emiliano Monge, depicts the experience of undocumented migrants crossing a binational forest. I analyze the representation of multispecies relationships within the forested area, arguing that the shared vulnerability of the various species interacting with this ecosystem blurs the human-nonhuman divide.

The seventh and final chapter reflects on the poetry book *Xilase qui rié di' sicasí rié nisa guigu'* / *La nostalgia no se marcha como el agua de los ríos* (Nostalgia Doesn't Flow Away Like River Water, 2007) by Binnizá / Isthmus Zapotec poet and translator Irma Pineda, proposing that the animals portrayed in this book operate as conduits that reconceptualize migration as a multispecies endeavor. Moreover, this chapter asserts that the depiction of nonhuman species unveils the magnitude, historical context, and global scope of the dynamics surrounding the often-hidden connections between human and nonhuman environmental migration while signaling geographic, temporal, and species-specific nuances. Moving beyond animal life, I also consider the portrayal of plant life to propose that through the metaphorical expression of flora, the book accounts for migrant agency and refusal. Because this poetry collection incorporates imaginaries of border deserts, forests, and the sea, it references the growing diversification of diasporic routes, predominantly traversed by racialized people, who, at the same time, are more vulnerable to the increasing effects of climate change and other environmental pressures.

Through the lens of what I conceptualize as border biomes—territories that are both Indigenous ancestral homelands and complex ecological systems traversed by colonial histories and geopolitical boundaries—this book examines the environmental disjunctures inherent in contemporary border formations. In the chapters that follow, I consider the role of national boundaries in enacting racialized imperial violence in both Mexico and the United



States, foregrounding that, alongside the damage inflicted on humans, there are escalating degrees of environmental harm. *Border Biomes* reframes the study of borders by focusing on their ecological dimensions, engaging with literary representations that render these territories as active ecosystems imbricated with a diverse array of histories and cosmologies impacted by colonial dynamics. Emphasizing the environmental realities of borders, the following pages suggest that understanding border territories not just as mere geopolitical fabrications but as ecological sites where human and nonhuman stories intersect helps denaturalize their violent articulations, reorienting us to envisage an abolitionist future more clearly.



# The (Dis)Embodied Border

While it is common to think of national borders as homogeneous and stable entities, no other border configuration challenges such an assumption as rivers do. Six major bodies of water demarcate a large part of Mexico's national limits. Northward, the Rio Grande / Río Bravo defines more than half of the boundary with the United States, and a significant fraction of the Colorado River also separates both countries. In the south, the Suchiate, Chixoy, Usumacinta, and Hondo rivers delimit most of the geopolitical margins shared with Guatemala and Belize. On a map, the view of these borders seems uncomplicated. Even satellite imagery, which shows the twists and turns taken by the rivers, falls short of portraying the complexities entailed by the ever-changing water boundaries. Moreover, besides the main waterways drawing the border lines, a multitude of transnational tributaries and underground aquifers also crisscross territorial limits, further highlighting the inherent incompatibility between the fluid movements of water and the rigid constructs of political boundaries. Due to their intrinsic dynamism, Rebeca Hey-Colón characterizes fluvial borders as defiant of hegemonic power, observing that they “resist control, unleashing their potential to become sites and metaphors for territorial, ideological, and spiritual contestation.”<sup>1</sup> While rivers actively resist and contradict the mandates of settler nations, they remain vulnerable to visible and hidden layers of harm caused by these imposed structures. Such harm is reflected in various forms of environmental degradation and the exploitation and manipulation of fluvial bodies' features and dynamics. This chapter attends to these impacts as they materialize in the liquid corporeality of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo.

One of the primary concerns surrounding the confluence of this river and the border is the danger it poses to undocumented migrants, a risk common to all aquatic bodies that serve as migration corridors. According

to the Missing Migrants Project, drowning has been the leading cause of death for migrants worldwide since record-keeping began in 2014, accounting for 60 percent of all documented fatalities between 2014 and 2023. The Mediterranean has claimed the highest number of lives, with 28,000 deaths recorded in that period. Other perilous bodies of water include the Atlantic Ocean, where 4,126 people were reported missing or presumed dead; the Caribbean route to the United States, with 539 fatalities; and the Gulf of Aden, with 1,031 reported deaths.<sup>2</sup> These figures represent only the minimum estimates, as countless losses remain unaccounted for due to the remoteness of these regions, lack of proper documentation, or failure to recover bodies. The US-Mexico border also compounds these dynamics, with at least 5,213 drowning fatalities documented, a region where the Rio Grande / Río Bravo is the most heavily crossed aquatic body.<sup>3</sup>

Although the largest riverine boundary between Mexico and the United States is a key site of harm, it is not a stretch to say that producing death does not constitute a part of what rivers aim to do. All rivers are different, but they have some commonalities, certain corporeal behaviors that can help us understand how they engineer their existence. In their many-sided journeys, rivers are the architects of multiple spaces that go from valleys and deltas to flood plains and canyons, all of which, in turn, become home to a myriad of human and nonhuman species. The Rio Grande / Río Bravo builds and sustains worlds, yet when intertwined with a political boundary, it has been repurposed as a death-defying force. Consequently, the border demarcation has subverted its most visible worldmaking intents. This drastic transformation stands as one of the most harrowing consequences of its confluence with the border, but it is far from being the only one. Much of the endangerment and ongoing deterioration of this vast freshwater body are also direct outcomes of this convergence.

One example of the environmental decline of the river caused by the border's presence dates back to its establishment in the mid-nineteenth century, which brought economic opportunities for Anglo-American settlers and developers in the borderlands, especially within the agricultural sector. The rapid expansion of agriculture in the Southwest led to the construction of extensive infrastructure, including dams, canals, and channels, placing immense water demands on the region. As I outline later in this chapter, although the Mexico-US new geopolitical arrangement fueled the escalating decline of the river, its alteration had already been set in motion with the arrival of the Spanish, who modified the predominant human-river relationships of the territory. The colonization processes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marked the onset of the transition from less disruptive methods of engagement with the river to increasingly more intrusive

ones. As Fred Phillips puts it, in 1598, when Juan de Oñate embarked on an expedition to the Southwest that ignited the consolidation of permanent Spanish settlements throughout the region, he “gazed on a Rio Grande that [would] not be seen again in the contemporary world.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter underscores that the river’s endangerment was initiated by the implementation of Spanish colonizing practices along its banks, and it was solidified by the establishment of the Mexico-US border demarcation, which led to the emergence of large-scale commercial agricultural enterprises.

To better understand the effects of the border on the river, which opens channels for the disruption of its ecosystem while endangering the lives of migrants who traverse it, I analyze *El Río / The River* (2018) by Mexican author Dolores Dorantes and Anglo-American photographer Zoe Leonard, alongside *With the River on Our Face* (2016) by Chicanx poet Emmy Pérez. From different perspectives, these literary works illuminate some of the main tensions created by the prolonged encounter of a geopolitical demarcation and a rich and dynamic body of water. Following the Rio Grande / Río Bravo on its way toward the Gulf of Mexico, *With the River on Our Face* accounts for the political, cultural, and environmental lives of a river that never stops moving, transforming, and being transformed by everything it touches. Central to these transformations are the dynamics that took place during the first decades of the Mexico-US territorial rearrangement, when the geological formation of the area was disregarded to design “the valley myth,” an economic strategy that marketed a delta as a valley to attract agricultural investment. Through this approach, Pérez points to the early stages of the river’s environmental decline, revealing how these initial changes laid the groundwork for its ongoing overexploitation, and featuring the pivotal role played by the newly established geopolitical delimitation. Meanwhile, through a blend of visual and linguistic codes, Dorantes’s poetry collection points toward the transformation of the river into a deadly force against migrants. As I contend, by focusing on the corporeal movements of the water, this collection signals that it is possible to grasp its most pressing purposes and how the border’s presence interferes with them. To think of the river’s drive, I anchor my analysis of Dorantes’s work in an epistemological shift, which I adopt from Aymara/Bolivian thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s *ch’ixi* gesture.

Rivera Cusicanqui argues that hegemonic modes of thinking have obscured pathways toward embracing alternative epistemologies. In light of contemporary climate and social crises, she asserts that adopting these frameworks is not only possible but imperative. One of the key reasons she emphasizes the need to adopt Indigenous modes of knowing is their recognition of nonhuman subjectivity: “Es necesario retomar el paradigma

epistemológico indígena . . . Tenemos que pensar en una episteme que reconozca la condición del sujeto a lo que comúnmente se llama objetos, ya sea plantas, animales o entidades materiales inconmensurables, como las estrellas” (it is necessary to reclaim the Indigenous epistemological paradigm . . . We must conceive of an episteme that recognizes the subjecthood of what is commonly referred to as objects, whether they are plants, animals, or immeasurable material entities, such as the stars).<sup>5</sup> By adopting such epistemological stances, we can reframe our understanding of nonhuman entities, recognizing that they hold intrinsic experiences and perspectives independent of humans. This shift is essential for confronting the anthropocentric practices that have led to the planet’s current ecological pressures, including the consequences brought about by the impositions of border structures on biomes.

Building on such premise, I turn to Amerindian Perspectivism, a notion held by Amazonian Indigenous peoples. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, this intellectual framework affirms that the world is inhabited by various entities, both human and nonhuman, who perceive reality from distinct viewpoints.<sup>6</sup> Amerindian Perspectivism situates corporeality as the vehicle through which all entities apprehend reality and generate different points of view. Since this chapter analyzes a poetry collection that emphasizes the river’s corporeal movements, portraying them through both photography and text, perspectivism is a fitting avenue to envisioning its worldview, interrogating the different ways in which the border affects it. For Viveiros de Castro, this approach becomes possible not by identifying physiological differences, but by the specific affects, dispositions, and capacities that frame the uniqueness of each body, reflecting the Amerindian emphasis on how “the body is the subject’s fundamental expressive instrument,” a premise that, within the context of this book, guides us to look closely at the incessant bodily movements of the border river.<sup>7</sup> In the following pages, I propose that through the portrayal of its corporeal behavior, Dorantes’s book makes it possible to grasp how the river *seeks* to exist in the world, signaling that its most visible *wants* are contrary to the deadly tasks that the presence of the border creates. In this context, employing the terms “seeks” and “wants” to describe a body of water reflects the underpinning of this Indigenous epistemology.

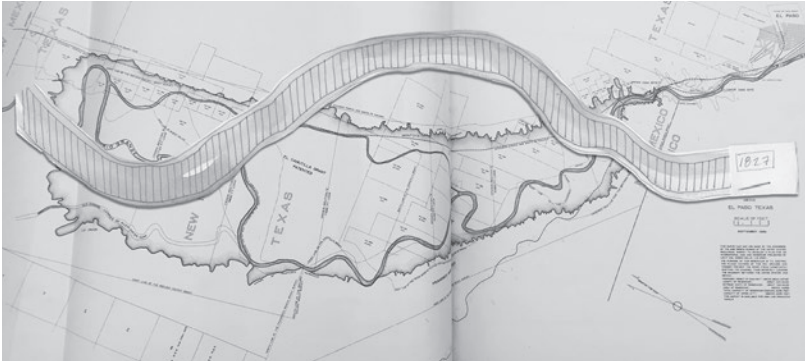
Speculating on the worldview of the nonhuman, such as the river in this instance, carries the potential risk, as Gabriel Horowitz suggests, of framing “the value of nature/wilderness in opposition to the human,” a posture that, in turn, can perpetuate ideological conceptions of nature’s purity and intrinsic goodness.<sup>8</sup> This ideology reinforces the nature/culture divide,

perpetuating colonial dynamics that, under the guise of preserving pristine landscapes, may justify displacement, particularly of Indigenous peoples, by framing them as ecological threats. While such risks are more pronounced within ecocritical approaches aligned with mainstream conservation ideas, my perspective is grounded in a different interest, as it seeks to emphasize the ecological imperatives for the abolition of borders. Although a glance at border rivers, particularly at the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, might unveil the damage that the border inflicts on it (by walling it off, causing floods, changing its course, and producing soil erosion, for instance), thinking of its worldview offers a deeper insight into the fundamental incompatibility, and indeed opposition, between the current arrangement and deadly functioning of the border and the river it forcibly inhabits. As emphasized in the poetry books I examine here, the effects of the conflicting coexistence between the waterway and the geopolitical limit mainly manifest in embodied ways, whether through the agricultural industry's exploitation of the waters shaping its corporeal form, the profound impact the border river often has on migrants' bodies, or its relentless flow, which forms and deforms the boundaries attempting to contain it.

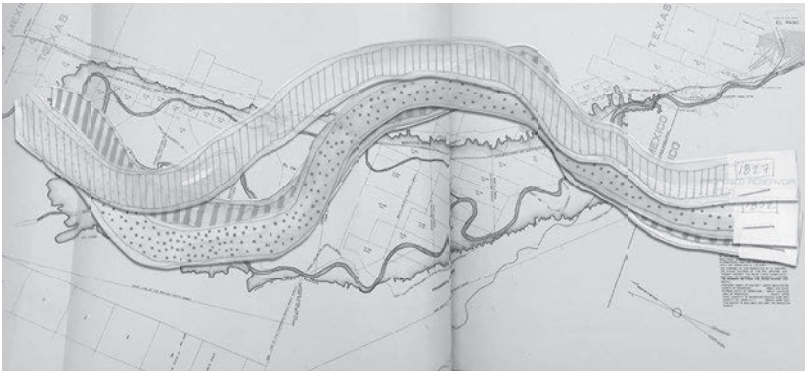
#### **BORDER-INDUCED FLUVIAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

In 2019, the visual artist Nicole Antebi developed an animation that traces the mobility of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo at the intersection of Texas, New Mexico, and northern Mexico from 1827 through 1960. The result is an assemblage of sinuous, colorful curves that wind freely across the surface of a motionless map. Drawn by hand, the meandering river highlights the impossibility of fitting bodies of water within an anthropocentric geographic framework. Because waterway movements occur not only in the form of territorial shifts but also as part of internal processes that affect the chemistry and composition of water, the different lines and dots that Antebi draws inside each channel can be seen as those internal transformations. While these ideas can be gathered just from looking at the last image of the animation, the final product, where the process of putting one curvature over another in chronological order is made visible, accentuates the temporal discontinuity between the map and the river. Whereas the latter does not stop moving, the former remains stable in every area except where the river movements touch it.

Through various channel patterns, which not only meander but also braid, go straight, or connect into a complicated network of large branches, rivers follow the natural cycle of water, constantly rushing to get to another



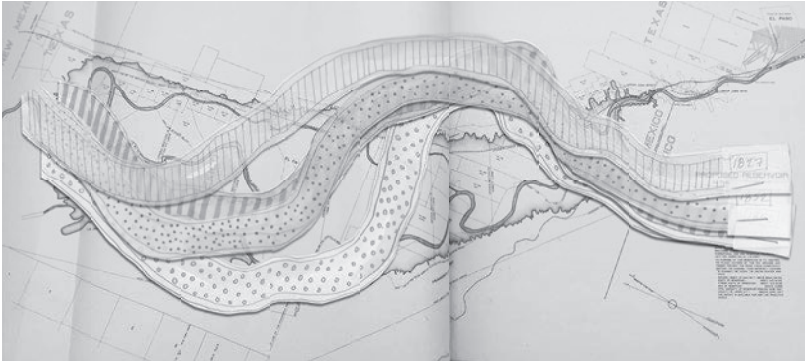
**FIGURE 1.** A still from Nicole Antebi's animation depicting the Rio Grande's movements that shows the river's dynamic flow; the background map is a survey map from 1896, and Antebi's first meander shows the path of the river in 1827. ©Nicole Antebi. For more information, see Nicole Antebi, "Between Texas and Mexico, a Restless Border Defies the Map," Bloomberg, August 16, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-16/mapping-a-restless-river-at-the-u-s-mexico-border>.



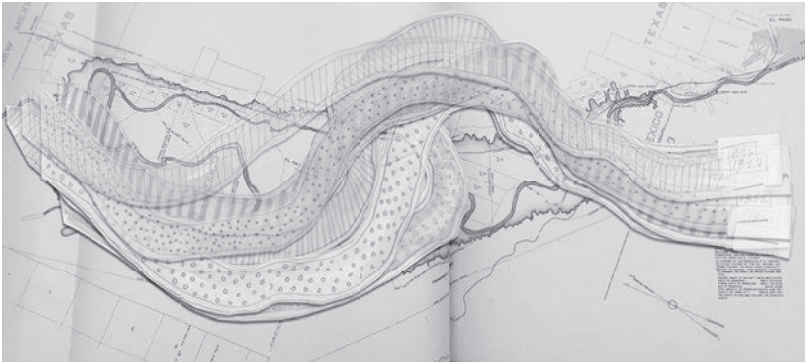
**FIGURE 2.** A still from Nicole Antebi's animation showing three distinct meanders of the Rio Grande—1827 with narrow stripes, 1852 with dots, and 1853 with wider stripes—illustrating the river's constant movement and ever-changing course. ©Nicole Antebi

aquatic body. Throughout their journey, they accommodate sediments in different areas to find a balance between the erosive power of the liquid they carry and the resistance of land, in this way shaping the territories they traverse and, in the process, creating and sustaining different terrestrial and aquatic habitats. That does not mean that their existence can be reduced to their most identifiable functions, and it does not imply that because they nourish, nourishing is then their only purpose. Sustaining such a thought would essentialize them, reducing complex bodies of water to a one-sided





**FIGURE 3.** A still from Nicole Antebi's animation showing four overlapping meanders of the Rio Grande, representing the river's transformation across four different years. ©Nicole Antebi



**FIGURE 4.** A still from Nicole Antebi's animation showing six overlapping, decorated meanders of the Rio Grande on a muted map, representing the river's movements across different years. ©Nicole Antebi

anthropocentric understanding. However, the corporeal behavior of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo does offer a glimpse into what it pursues, as Antebi's work suggests. Speaking about her project, she states: "No river wants to be stationary. Its singular desire is to reach its destination—an ocean, a sea, a lake, or another river."<sup>9</sup> Antebi's work resonates with Rebeca Hey-Colón's concept of "rippling borders," which refers to border spaces made of water that reveal the futility of framing borders as static, given that bodies of water, and particularly rivers, "[are] constantly moving and sometimes even

violently changing.”<sup>10</sup> Although aquatic bodies inherently challenge the political boundaries imposed on them, they don’t remain unscarred. One of the most pressing consequences resulting from the imposition of geopolitical artificial constructs on water is exemplified by the manifold transformations of the Río Grande / Río Bravo, some of which are central to the poetry books *El Río / The River* and *With the River on Our Face*.

*El Río / The River* features a carefully crafted form that serves as a major component for the overall depiction of the waterway. Lacking page numbers and printed in a grayscale palette, the book includes photographs of the Río Grande / Río Bravo taken by Zoe Leonard, fragments of poems written in Spanish by Dolores Dorantes, and intentionally imprecise English translations by Robin Myers. In addition, unlike common bilingual poetry books where original versions tend to be immediately followed by their translations, in *El Río / The River* each version is randomly placed, an arrangement not made by the authors but by the editor, León Muñiz Santini. Added to this, the collaboration was published by Gato Negro Ediciones, a Mexico City-based independent publishing house that employed a risograph machine to print a very small press run, making the books difficult to find.<sup>11</sup> As Andrea Beltran puts it, regarding this book, “nothing is linear, everything is disrupted, everything is migrating, everything is exiled.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, to the smallest of details, every part of the book speaks to the mutability, complexity, and inapprehensible nature of the border river it portrays, destabilizing its usage as a steady border marker and situating it as a vivid, dynamic entity. In emphasizing this dynamism, the book evinces the artificiality of the anthropocentric arrangements that have been placed on the river. By centering images and text that revolve around its body, the poetry and photographic collection invites a dialogue with Amerindian Perspectivism, an epistemology, “according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artifacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

Within this framework, nonhuman entities are regarded as subjects or persons because they also perceive and engage with reality, each from a unique perspective shaped by their specific physical form. When thinking of the body, Viveiros de Castro does not refer to physiological characteristics, but to the set of affects and habits that are expressed through a corporeal structure: “What I call ‘body’ is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*,” an assemblage then, of material and affective behaviors that generate a complex values system that does not need to be human.<sup>14</sup> In *El Río*

/ *The River*, Leonard's photographs display the river's corporeality, hinting at the core elements of its way of being. The river's flowing matter, unstable pace, and fast-evolving shape draw attention to its dynamic nature. Furthermore, its overwhelming movements make the changing aquatic body difficult to capture. Leonard's photographs underscore the diversity of layers and figures created by the stream. One after the other, the images continuously change, always contraposing light and shadows, dissipation and accumulation, liquid textures, and a multiform variation of swinging waves. With the turn of each page, the book mediates between past shots of the river and the printed articulations of its evasive body, which can be seen in the present time. This characteristic recalls Barthes' fourth reflection on photography: "[The] thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum . . . which I should like to call the Spectrum of Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."<sup>15</sup>

If, as Timothy Morton suggests, the term "specter" could mean apparition, horrifying object, illusion, or the shadow of a thing, the spectrality in Leonard's snapshots becomes evident.<sup>16</sup> The artist seizes passing movements in the pulsating life of the river, which die as the images are taken. Left in the photographs is a spectral glistening where ghostly pieces of the river's body can be seen. Nonetheless, these sudden deaths announce the arrival of new movements, spirals, and curvatures, thus attesting to the endless movement and creativity of its stream. Since the images convey relentless, original readjustments of the flowing body, a sense of futurity is manifest. The river will continue moving, generating a new liquid mosaic with every passing second. Its body thus tells us that it *wants* to move, it *desires* to flow, it *seeks* to carve its path. Dorantes's poems, along with Myers's translations, also evoke these qualities: "Coursing, this you / is also / the wall's containment."<sup>17</sup> In this poem, the speaker talks to the river, making prominent its dynamic force as it meanders through the land, while also reminding it that, due to the presence of the border, it has been transformed into something else. Because the waterway is also acting as a border, it is fitting that Leonard's pictures do not show stable continuity, but a separation composed of fragmentary and yet, interconnected bits. At the same time, the linguistic articulations in the book transmit a strong sense of disorientation, disjuncture, and fragmentation: "Estoy aquí / ¿cuál de los dos países valida esa afirmación?" This poem is translated by Robin Myers as: "It's me / . . . / which of the two stories validates that statement?"<sup>18</sup> In a symbiotic interplay, the poems, translations, and photographs cultivate a sense of disorientation, mirroring the destabilization wrought by the border's presence—an entity legitimized by Mexico and the

United States. Myers's choice to use the word "stories" instead of "countries" in the translated, modified version alludes to the constructed and artificial nature of these settler frameworks. The constraints imposed by the political boundary on the river become evident in the preceding verses, which can be read as the river itself speaking, struggling to assert its place in a world now shaped by the presence of a fabricated dividing line.

Such a sense of confusion permeates the entire book, creating a lyrical puzzle made of incessant movements, transformations, and dissociations. Central to this tone is the verbal expression of the collection. Some poems are translated, others are not; some blend English and Spanish, and many are translated with artfully designed imprecision, sometimes mixing verses from different poems. In addition, continual images of the river are followed and preceded by short pieces without titles that sometimes appear to be disconnected from each other. This visual and linguistic configuration mimics the corporeal form of the border river, which in the book makes itself manifest through the portrayal of a transmuting force deployed in a visual and grammatical polyvalent pattern. The morphing composition of *El Río / The River* then, on the one hand, mirrors the shifting shape through which the hydraulic entity experiences and participates in the world, that is, in the unrelenting and evolving meandering that replenishes it with water. On the other hand, it communicates a sense of unending rupture and decomposition that can be attributed to its forced association with a brutal transnational limit, which modifies the river's functions: "Cuerpo en descomposición. / Dar la vida, quitar la vida. / En cumplimiento del deber" (Decomposing body. / Giving life, taking life. / In the line of duty).<sup>19</sup> That modification results in the extraction of the stream's worldmaking embodied sense, and as hinted in the poem, of its primary "duty" and intent.

In *With the River on Our Face*, Emmy Pérez also explores various key transformations the Rio Grande / Río Bravo undergoes as it converges with the border. One such alteration relates to the very territories the river helps shape. The collection unfolds across multiple sites, all within border territories, with the Rio Grande Valley as its most prominent setting. Grounded in this terrain, Pérez foregrounds a profound concern for the diverse ecological and social ruptures brought about by the border. In the opening pages of the collection, the speaker references one of Gloria Anzaldúa's most famous poems: "el río Grande / flowing down to the flatlands of the Magic Valley of South Texas / its mouth emptying into the Gulf."<sup>20</sup> The Magic Valley, as Gloria Anzaldúa calls it and as it's commonly known, is not a valley. That area is actually a delta formed in geological time through the long and elaborate process of sediment deposition that resulted from the river's

ages-long deceleration in getting closer to the bay, and that, at the onset of the border demarcation, was marketed as a valley to attract investment in the agricultural sector. At the heart of many of Pérez's poems are the transformations shaped by the establishment of the Mexico-US border in 1848, which ushered in a boom of large-scale, Anglo-owned agribusinesses across the Southwest and led to the deliberate misclassification of the delta region.

The lineage of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo and its surrounding landscapes can be conceived in deep time terms, a model used to accentuate the immensity of planet formation's timescale, which, up until the Anthropocene, eluded human-dimension measurement. The stream we recognize today as part of tense, harrowing discussions on the dangers associated with undocumented migration went through a complicated and lengthy process to exist, surpassing twenty million years. As C. J. Alvarez describes in a catalog for an exhibition of Leonard's photographs:

The river evolved as the landscape and climate evolved. Mountains that today are so closely associated with the headwaters of the river would have been unrecognizable to us in the days of the ancestral waterway. Volcanic eruptions created peaks, craters, and entire mountain ranges. They pushed up the earth to make gigantic natural dams that held water in. Tectonic shifts opened up rifts hundreds of miles long, and the unimaginable force of plate against plate crushed mountain ranges upward toward the sky. Ice ages came and went, recalibrating water on the land with each cycle. Finally, the river took to the channel it runs in today around 430,000 years ago. Tributaries found one another, and lakes overran their volcanic dams. One giant watershed emerged, beginning in southern Colorado and ending in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>21</sup>

The mixture of different ecological forces across vast and diverse sceneries gave rise to the basin where the Rio Grande / Río Bravo's water is collected and flows. Running down from its headwaters in the San Juan Mountains, the river first made its way into the territory that is now known as New Mexico, slowly carving its path to finally reach the sea. One of Pérez's poems asserts "water has no age," a brief but telling verse that encapsulates the immeasurable span of time that was required for intricate geological events to shape present-day aquatic bodies and their surrounding landscapes.<sup>22</sup> The speaker draws attention to this dynamic when she addresses the river, writing: "You are earth, and the earth is nothing more than you."<sup>23</sup> This view challenges the tendency to see natural features as historically isolated or self-contained, instead recognizing their mutual evolutionary dependency and shared identities. The author thus conceptualizes the river

not merely as a natural formation but as a living embodiment of the earth's geological processes and, consequently, of the earth itself.

Evolving in close interaction with neighboring ecosystems, what is now known as the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, has established elaborate relations with various water sources, shaping a complex hydraulic system that both predates and surpasses contemporary imperial structures. In the poem titled "The Valley Myth," Emmy Pérez's writing evokes these engagements, highlighting their foundational role in shaping the myth, as the different water sources of the area became the need and focus of extractive interests: "The myth needs el Río Grande~Bravo—which needs el Río Conchos and el Río Salado—its channels, canals, irrigation ditches, inner tubes, and interludes, its rafts cutting straight across currents during patrol shift changes."<sup>24</sup> These verses describe the complicated network of natural and unnatural relations that crisscross the delta, where hydraulic forces, extractive activities, and border-making processes converge. As signaled in the book, such dynamics gave rise to the calculated misrepresentation of the area: "Where did it begin? Beauty. Intentionally buried."<sup>25</sup> The river probably does not care what we call it, and the delta either. But the ways in which we name nonhuman entities do have an impact on the relationships we establish with them. Known as the Rio Grande in the United States and the Río Bravo in Mexico, the river is recognized by Native nations under other names. For example, the Pueblo Tewa refer to it as *P'osoge* (Big River), while the Navajo (Diné) call it *Tó Ba'áadi* (Female River).<sup>26</sup> The act of renaming has long served as a colonizing strategy, and in the case of the misidentification of the delta region, it functions similarly: not only erasing the area's geological history but doing so with the explicit intent to invite the exploitation of its land and water resources to the detriment of environmental health and Indigenous sovereignty. This dynamic began with the early colonization efforts of what is now understood as the Southwest borderlands.

Emmy Pérez's poem "The History of Silence," speaks to the violent efforts of imperial powers to efface the river's enmeshment with Native histories:

To scrape  
 More at rodent to gnaw  
*Silentium*  
 Absence  
 Of mention  
 Oblivion  
 . . .  
 Utterance. History  
 Of Indigenous.<sup>27</sup>

These genocidal processes brought about a profound transformation of the river, which in turn facilitated the establishment of settlements and triggered a widespread shift toward large-scale agriculture across the region. For millennia, a large part of the Native peoples of the Southwest survived mainly by hunting or gathering, leaving the major river of the region mostly alone and utilizing minor streams, as P'osoge was seen as far too powerful to be tamed. Even when corn was introduced to the area, the early societies of the Southwest turned to dryland farms, relying on resources such as rainfalls and floodwater to nourish their crops, and the people who did engage with larger irrigation systems used smaller streams.<sup>28</sup> This premise does not suggest that the Native people inhabiting the banks of the river did not impact the ecosystem. William Denevan contends that the idea of the existence of pristine landscapes before European colonization was an invention of nineteenth-century romanticist writers and primitivists, who propagated the myth of the "good savage," even though historical records of different landscapes pre-Spanish invasion indicate erosion, disruption of wildlife habitats, establishment of sizable settlements, agricultural practices involving clearing and burning, and land degradation.<sup>29</sup> However, as Denevan suggests, the issue is not whether Native peoples impacted the environment, but rather the form and scale of this impact, especially when considering the rapid escalation of environmental harm caused by settler systems.<sup>30</sup> In a similar tone, Ayuujk (Mixe) scholar Yásnaya Elena Aguilar asserts that while many Indigenous peoples of the Americas did indeed alter the ecosystems they dwelled in, these transformations were profoundly different from those caused by the colonialist extractive practices that sustain capitalist schemes.<sup>31</sup> In the specific case of the Rio Grande / Rio Bravo, the border demarcation resulting from the Mexico-US War triggered a prolonged period of uncertainty and volatility and ignited the intensification of diverse forms of exploitation fueled by capitalist, extractive-based ambitions within the area.

The verses that open the poem "The Valley Myth" identify the gradual creation of the myth as one of the most environmentally violent processes that have shaped the borderlands: "The myth begins with hiring local workers to uproot anacahuítas, huizaches, mesquites."<sup>32</sup> These stanzas allude to the destruction of flora required for clearing land for large-scale agricultural ventures while also invoking plant life of great significance to Native cultures. The summoned plants were part of the daily lives of the Coahuiltecos, for example, who relied on them for food, medicine, and tools.<sup>33</sup> Invoking these plants situates Indigenous histories within the land's temporal fabric, countering the notion that uprooting them can sever these histories. In doing so, Pérez's poem illuminates how the treatment of nonhuman entities exposes



enduring colonial dynamics, refusing the erasure of Indigenous presence and historical continuity in the region. The poem continues naming other nonhuman entities that had to be cleared: “The myth begins with no more nopales, víboras, and sacred hierbas. The rare eagle not immune, a consumer, desexed like acres,” thus further underscoring that the valley myth was established through an anthropocentric worldview.<sup>34</sup> This worldview exerted varying degrees of pressure on the river, driven not only by the agricultural industries that began populating the area but also by the expanding settlements that accompanied them during the arrival of the Spaniards.

Plagued by difficulties and failures, Spanish settlements across the Southwest attempted to consolidate throughout the late sixteenth century and onward, until they finally solidified by the end of the eighteenth. As settler communities spread across the region, a social system emerged that was heavily reliant on the Rio Grande / Río Bravo. While the initial large-scale settlements were established by the Spanish, the early nineteenth century saw a profound transformation of the landscape with the arrival of Anglo-Americans, who were attracted by affordable land and the possibility that the United States would annex eastern Texas.<sup>35</sup> Highlighting the effects of this process, Pérez writes: “The Magic Valley of disappearances, men marrying into land grants.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, under Spanish rule, land grants were extended to Anglos willing to convert to Catholicism, work the land, and become Spanish citizens. As Margaret Henson contends, although this practice was initiated in 1820, even shortly before the Mexican Independence, the government persisted in extending this opportunity to qualified arrivals.<sup>37</sup> However, following the Mexico-US War and the resulting border delineation, Mexicans living north of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo faced a series of dispossessions with lasting consequences. Despite being granted full citizenship and assurances of the preservation of their land grants, Anglo-American developers, squatters, and speculators took advantage of the moment’s instability to file multiple claims, many times unlawfully, that left Mexican American farmers who could not afford legal aid without recourse. When these formal schemes did not work, Mexican owners of small ranches were forcefully displaced from the land by Anglo ranchers who resorted to violent tactics.<sup>38</sup> Rooted in the racist ideologies that fueled the displacement and genocide of Indigenous communities, the newly established border became yet another conduit for this violence—now targeting not only Native peoples but also Mexican American border residents, some of whom had paradoxically participated in or benefited from Indigenous dispossession.

Owning vast extensions of parcels, developers needed to draw settlers



and investors to make profits. To accomplish this, the delta lands were marketed as part of a “Magic Valley,” a central farming region in the process of becoming a paradise for Anglo-based investment. The poem “Rio Grande-Bravo,” encapsulates this social configuration:

“The Magic Valley” of Texas  
 Ads lured more  
 Northern settlers and land thefts  
 In the huddle with Texas Rangers . . . the soil magic, the day  
 Laborers, canals appear like a manna of new rivers.<sup>39</sup>

Having once been Mexican ranchers, many of the former inhabitants of the borderlands who turned into Mexican-Americans were now left working for Anglo-owned farms. As indicated in Pérez’s poem, the valley myth promises were not only dependent on dispossession and social segregation but also on overexploitation practices. In addition, on the Mexican side of the border, the north was emerging as a major cotton-cultivating region, contributing to the severe transformation of the river and its surrounding ecosystems. The strain of the continual demands on the land soon became apparent.

Prolonged unsustainable use, combined with the global effects of climate change, has put the Rio Grande / Río Bravo “on a trajectory to disappear,” experiencing intense periods of drought that have led to the endangerment of entire towns and ecosystems.<sup>40</sup> Whereas the region is vast, and the impacts of land and water use have been diverse across the territory, one of the most visible environmental effects is in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where the majority of native wildlife was cleared to open the path for agribusinesses.<sup>41</sup> Within this context, the valley myth is tied to a capitalist scheme based on ongoing land and water exploitation sustained by environmental and racialized violence. Considering this dynamic, the speaker contends: “The valley myth speaks English, insecticides, pesticides,” emphasizing the intrinsic connection between the colonization of land and people.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, the push to reshape the delta into an agricultural stronghold, driven by anthropocentric and capitalist motives, has resulted in lasting social and economic inequalities. Meanwhile, the river’s existence is threatened, underscoring that the same systems of exploitation impact land and people. Dorantes and Pérez’s works thus put forth major threats to the waterway, accentuating the fundamental incompatibility between the border and the river’s most visible worldmaking intents, and registering the centrality of the border for its decline. These are not the only transformations the river

undergoes; as its worldmaking purpose is altered, the border imposes a violent role upon it, enlisting it as a key player in the mechanisms of contemporary border regimes.

### CORPOREAL ENCOUNTERS

In the context of migration in the Americas, the Rio Grande / Río Bravo has been a focus of interest at least since the first decades of the twentieth century. During this period, Mexico was in the midst of a social turmoil that resulted from the Mexican Revolution, which was a response to decades-long processes of land dispossession, an undemocratic and centralized political regime, and economic disparity.<sup>43</sup> The upheaval in Mexico, combined with the burgeoning success of agribusinesses in the United States and their growing demand for low-cost labor, catalyzed a significant wave of Mexican migration during the first decades of the twentieth century. Even though at the time, border control enforcement was far less rigorous compared to today, the borderline was already being militarized.<sup>44</sup> In addition to the deployment of thousands of soldiers to border towns that began in 1911, Mexicans who wanted to cross faced other forms of barriers. As Kelly Lytle Hernández underscores, with the Immigration Act of 1917, “prospective immigrants had to submit themselves to official inspection prior to entry, pay eighteen dollars for head taxes and a visa fee, and pass a literacy test and health examination.”<sup>45</sup> Many Mexicans crossed through unauthorized access points to avoid the prohibitively high fees, invasive physical scrutiny, and exclusionary tests, to the extent that, although it is not possible to know how many people crossed in an unsanctioned manner, there are estimates that suggest that around one million border crossings occurred.<sup>46</sup> Throughout this mass movement, the river assumed a pivotal role.

The recurrence with which the Rio Grande / Río Bravo was traversed is closely tied to the dissemination of the derogatory word “wetback,” which finds its Spanish parallel in the term *mojado* (wet). This word can be traced back to the early 1920s, when *The New York Times* employed it to describe the waves of undocumented migrants who, within the context of worker shortages resulting from the US military service caused by World War I, swam across the river to do industrial, agricultural, and mining work.<sup>47</sup> During the Great Depression, Mexican migration dropped, but World War II reignited a frame of workforce shortages that gave rise to the Bracero Program, a binational labor agreement that sent temporary workers to the United States. Given the limitations of this initiative, which made ineligible Mexicans “who were too young, too old, or too sick, along with rural landholders,

urban dwellers, or women,” illegal border crossings grew.<sup>48</sup> Such dynamics underscore the selective nature of the border, which fluctuates in its openness based on national need, permitting only desired individuals and rejecting others. Exclusionary eligibility bracero policies sustained the center stage of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, which in the 1940s and 1950s was a common route of passage for women and children crossing into the United States. This journey produced an estimated death toll by drowning of at least one person a day.<sup>49</sup> Once the demand for inexpensive labor waned, there was an uptick in undocumented border crossings, indicating a tightening of border control and the malleability of the border to respond to specific social processes.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the derogatory term was institutionalized by the US government through the Border Patrol’s Operation Wetback (1953–1954), which aimed to carry out mass deportations of Mexican nationals.<sup>50</sup> This continued to cement the term into the national lexicon in both its English and Spanish versions, emphasizing the ongoing encounters between water and migrants. That same emphasis was also placed on the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, which at the time was compared to cross-border Mexican workers, who were often framed as dangerous, wandering, and perpetually in unpredictable motion.<sup>51</sup> The increasing policing of the border river was significantly influenced by these connections, which remain current. In June 2023, the governor of Texas announced the installation of buoys along a one-thousand-foot stretch of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo near Eagle Pass, effectively creating a fluvial wall that bisects the river. This intervention poses significant long-term ecological risks, including slowing down the river’s natural flow, leading to increased sediment accumulation.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, such tactics render the river an even more dangerous expanse for those attempting to cross it. Despite these layered consequences, the initiative was further expanded in early 2025 with the addition of more buoys.<sup>53</sup> As evidenced by unsettling data, the decades-long use of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo as a route for undocumented migration has resulted in the unrelenting deaths of thousands of people. These crossings have been characterized by terminology that has a twofold effect: it dehumanizes migrants on the one hand, while on the other, it encapsulates the long history of violent immigration policies rooted in racialized hierarchies.

While the derogatory label *wetback* has been commonly employed across various anti-immigrant discourses and is widely known, there exists another more obscure term that is also used to describe the physical effects of encounters between migrants and border water. The less generally known word *floaters* is more commonly utilized by Border Patrol agents to refer to people who have drowned while trying to reach US soil. Regarding this

concept, in the poetry book *Floaters*, Martín Espada writes: “Like a beer bottle thrown into the river by a boy too drunk to cry, / like the shard of a Styrofoam cup drained of coffee brown as the river, / like the plank of a fishing boat broken in half by the river, the dead float. / And the dead have a name: floaters, say the men of the Border Patrol.”<sup>54</sup> This poem was inspired by a 2019 photograph that took over international mass media and by a subsequent conversation about it held by Border Patrol officers in a private Facebook group with nearly 9,500 members. In the now-banned group, an anonymous member used it while referring to the people portrayed in the photograph.<sup>55</sup> The picture depicts Salvadoran Óscar Martínez Ramírez and his almost two-year-old daughter, Valeria, who were found lying lifeless on the bank of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo. In the image, a calm river quietly covers part of the father’s body while he and his daughter hold each other for the last time.

Depicted in the photograph are people of color, specifically a father and daughter from El Salvador whose bodies were “both fac[ing] down in the weeds, back on the Mexican side of the river,” as Martín Espada’s poem describes.<sup>56</sup> That they were found back on the Mexican side of the waterway exemplifies the forceful brutality of the systemic racial violence enacted at the border. As Harsha Walia contends, restricting immigration policies construct “national identity through race and racial difference,” and are designed to keep non-white migrants out of the geographic limits of the state, in this case, facilitated by the weaponization of the river.<sup>57</sup> This dynamic not only alters human relationships with the body of water, but the other way around as well, destabilizing the place the river seeks to hold in the world, which, as I signaled earlier in this chapter, can be grasped in the careful observation of its incessant, life-upholding movements. Indeed, considering the ecological dynamics that have characterized the river’s relentless movements throughout its long existence, it becomes evident that its lethal connection with the border undermines the role that, for so long, it methodically maintained.

Recognizing the need to establish relationships with rivers that move beyond the prevailing anthropocentric practices that govern them, Macarena Gómez-Barris proposes a shift in perspective termed “a fish-eye episteme,” described as a way to “change how we might relate to [rivers] as sentient being[s] rather than as an extractible commodity.”<sup>58</sup> Within the context of the Mexico-US border, the river functions as a commodity, not only due to its central role in regional industries but also because it has been instrumentalized to further political agendas. As Gómez-Barris argues, achieving a transformative relationship with fluvial entities, one that addresses the global endangerment of these aquatic bodies and, in the context of this

chapter, the specific threats posed to both the river and migrants, requires shifting away from human-centered, dominant perspectives. Instead, we must adopt an “underwater perspective that sees into the muck of what has usually been rendered in linear and transparent visualities.”<sup>59</sup> Such a transformative perspective can be attained by embracing the principles of Amerindian Perspectivism, focusing on the river’s fluid, ever-changing form, which holds insights about the place it seeks to hold in the world beyond the limits of anthropocentric awareness. *El Río / The River* exemplifies this possibility, forcing readers to engage with the corporeal dynamism of a waterway that can be accessed from an external point of view.

By focusing solely on the surface of the river, Leonard’s photographs reveal the muddy and turbid nature of its waters, hinting at a hidden reality that eludes human perception. In relation to this elusive nature, one of the photographs seems to find its reflection in a poem, which appears to translate what the aquatic body might be saying: “Lo que yo quiero / no se puede decir. / Lo que yo sé / no se puede decir” (What I want / cannot be said. / What I know / cannot be said).<sup>60</sup> Although the river’s innermost reality cannot be communicated and is inaccessible to humans, even from a distance, it is possible to see the core method employed by the stream for expressing its existence and claiming its position in the world. Thus, in the enactment of a fish-eye-episteme, it becomes plausible to conceive that the stream understands, and wants to be on the planet, in specific ways. In the words of Rivera Cusicanqui, “una mirada periférica, consciente del entorno, puede también llegar a ser comprensiva y surgir de ella una capacidad de relacionarse con unx mismx y con todo lo demás, rebasando incluso el marco antropocéntrico” (A peripheral gaze, aware of its surroundings, can also become insightful, fostering an ability to connect with oneself and everything else, even surpassing the anthropocentric framework).<sup>61</sup> Through a distant outlook carefully placed on a complicated representation of the border river’s corporeality, Dorantes’s poetry book centers on the river’s worldmaking mechanics, envisioning its self-determining aspirations and exposing how the border breaks them. The linguistic articulations in *El Río / The River* explore this breakage through the incorporation of grammatically explicit enunciations.

The poems in Dorantes’s collection contain different perspectives, which can be discerned either by the language they use, the pronoun, or the selected format. Even though the linguistic elements are entirely human, at times, they appear to describe what the river might be experiencing due to its confluence with the border: “It lives like an animal /or a room ousted / from its place. / To lose one’s place.”<sup>62</sup> The image of the river is placed alongside this poem, a deliberate arrangement that, in this instance, seems to imply that the words are referencing the liquid body, whose role in the

world has been profoundly disrupted. Besides the expressions that might be alluding to the river's transformation, many poems include a multiplicity of voices telling fragmented stories of migration from varying points of view. This polyphonic amalgamation resonates with Leonard's photographs in the sense of multiplicity and dynamism they convey. However, that resonance is not harmonious but dissonant and painful. Different verbal accounts seem to be speaking from the perspective of people who are getting, or have gotten lost in the water: "We were power or we / were once. *The water / isn't an attribute of your circumstances. Crossing over / isn't an attribute of your circumstances.*"<sup>63</sup> Framed within the context of South–North migration patterns, Dorantes's poems portray the daunting relationship between migrants and border rivers. When the migrants' collective voice enunciates the word "power," it conveys a sense of autonomy, agency, and independence. Although migrating may be forced or compelled, there is empowerment in the movement that allows for the crossing of borders. The irruption of the river quickly interrupts this self-description to emphasize that, regardless of said empowerment, the pace of the water will not change, remaining unresponsive to any human circumstances. Journeys through hydraulic bodies will always be unpredictable. No matter your circumstances, the speaker describes, the river will continue to be a river and will keep on following its path, meandering and braiding at different speeds, and through various depths. Within the context of the book, notwithstanding the obstacles, the act of crossing over is an immutable necessity too. Just as the river needs to keep on following its course, migrant people must continue to move forward.

Although the river's movement will never change based on human hardships, this does not mean that it remains unaffected. Alongside poems that reference the physical struggles undertaken by migrants, the photographs raise questions about how their bodies might have affected the movement of the water and about which waves might still bear the echoes of their unspeakable fights for survival. This elucidation is in dialogue with Macarena Gómez-Barris's premise about how "the river possesses its own form of memory," one that, in the case of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, is deployed in reactionary movements that produce a change in the current's pace, form, and texture.<sup>64</sup> The memory of life and death is contained in the river's curvatures, which are moved, shaped, and transformed in their encounters with other corporeal forms.

Among the most recurrent images in *El Río / The River* are body parts, which serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, in creating an intense sense of fragmentation and disconnection, they echo the effects of the border demarcation over the river. On the other hand, that portrayal directly addresses

the deaths of migrants who have perished in the stream: “una mano gris detenida / sobre el cuerpo del agua / *Di que eres una piedra.* / Un torso sin concluir” (A gray hand halted / over the body of water. / *Say you are a stone.* / A torso unfinished).<sup>65</sup> Two are the images that transmit the extent of the sudden deaths being depicted in this poem, a gray hand, and a torso, both suspended in the water. The fragmented tone conveyed by the photographs and the overall structure of the book is reflected in the scattered and disjointed imagery of bodies that is so central to the composition of many of the poems. This characteristic results in the lyrical representation of a scenario that has taken place for decades in the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, an effect of the violent encounters between the humans and the border river that meet at this intersection. Upon contact with each other, they get severed and transformed.

The agonizing coalescence of water and flesh is also addressed in the poem: “A fleshy manifestation. / Water taking shape.”<sup>66</sup> A human body has been filled with river water, ending the life of the former and giving the liquid element a material, anthropomorphous shape, forging a destructive connection. While the human being is the one who endures the most lethal consequences, the river does not go through this encounter unscathed. Just as the amount of water filling the human body is anomalous and deadly, for the river water, being inside a person in that capacity is also unnatural. At the same time as the migrant’s passage is curtailed, a fraction of the river also stops its movement and consequently, its way toward the Gulf: “Te estás borrando / Todos hemos tenido / esa experiencia. / To lose. To lose water.” (You are disappearing / We have all had / that experience.)<sup>67</sup> In this process, the river’s worldmaking purpose is also being erased: “This is you. / This is me: / the calm water.”<sup>68</sup> The river water that, in Leonard’s photographs is presented as relentless, creative, and dynamic, in this poem is described simply as calm, a characteristic contradictory to the water’s corporeal behavior. Such a characterization is further intensified in the verse: “lungs / swollen with devastation.” The water is calm because fragments of its body are detonating one, and multiple deaths. If, as Viveiros de Castro contends, “the body [is] a bundle of affects and capacities,” that image encapsulates the deadly connections that have corrupted the worldmaking episteme of the Rio Grande / Río Bravo, which stands in stark contrast to the border’s deadly logics.<sup>69</sup>

#### HEALING AND REPAIR

The Rio Grande / Río Bravo faces profound and urgent social and ecological pressures deeply intertwined with the anthropocentric configuration of the Mexico-US geopolitical boundary. This border arrangement prioritizes

human imperial agendas over the river's ecological integrity, driving the relentless loss of migrant lives, perpetuating the dispossession of Native communities, and contributing to the endangerment of the river's very survival. *El Río / The River*, through its visual and linguistic form, underscores the deadly ways in which the border transforms and disrupts the watercourse's life-sustaining rhythms. Similarly, *With the River on Our Face* critiques the devastating, human-centered dynamics imposed by this forced intersection:

The certainty of laws  
the ambiguity of laws  
Río Grande~Bravo has an invisible line down its center  
an invisible caesura  
on water  
where I want to apply stitches  
like skin healing  
border  
into water  
again.<sup>70</sup>

Both poetry books understand the border as an ambiguous yet certain presence that, although unseen, manifests itself in the damage it creates. If, as Rivera Cusicanqui contends, to unsettle prevalent social and ecological crises it is imperative to acknowledge, recognize, and mobilize alternate forms of knowledge, this premise becomes particularly pertinent in the context of the Mexico-US borderlands, where much of the social and ecological devastation stems from a sweeping disfiguration of the river's most identifiable intentions and its most obvious needs, a dynamic underpinned by the anthropocentric frameworks inherent in the border's existence.

The emergence of agribusinesses following the establishment of the border has been a pivotal factor in the river's gradual decline, facilitating the overexploitation of its waters. Beyond the environmental degradation caused by the border's political imposition, the river has undergone further transformations, having been repurposed as a deadly apparatus, a profound divergence from its world-building episteme. While it is true that rivers often pose natural threats to humans, the danger the Río Grande / Río Bravo presents to migrants is fundamentally different, shaped by the systemic ways in which a settler state instrumentalizes it. Still, this body of water continues to cling to its more visible core purposes, which, as expressed in one of Pérez's poems, overlap with the artificial undercurrents imposed upon it:



With el río grande~bravo  
 in our face  
 This river  
 at its mouth  
 at its source  
 . . . The young border patrol officer  
 flashes sirens daily  
 lifts his gun  
 with the river on his face  
 . . . I shower daily  
 with el valle  
 river water on my face  
 . . . pigs and piglets jumping  
 from banks  
 with the river on their face  
 . . . in this place with el río grande~bravo  
 in its pipes  
 in its lungs  
 in our face.<sup>71</sup>

This poem identifies seemingly disconnected parts of the articulations of a river that, through continuous movements, resists both permanency and erasure. A habitat, a source of water for human and nonhuman use, a geographical marker, and a migration route, the river's existence acquires manifold roles. Considering the multiscalar expressions of the river, the poem includes its dual denomination, which attests to the inapprehensible nature of a body of water that seeks to reach its destination regardless of the name imposed on it. Although the weaving of images that speak to the diverse functions of the river, such as a Border Patrol officer, the speaker in the shower, and pigs and piglets jumping into the stream, might seem random and disengaged, these various figures are connected in their chaos. The river's overwhelming presence is interlacing them together in an unharmonious tone. In this sense, as signaled in Pérez's poetry, the river can still be recognized in the different ways in which it continues to participate in various life-sustaining patterns. Yet, this does not erase its confluence with the border's effects, a tension that underscores the river's layered existence as an energetic participant in networks of life and an agent in state-sanctioned cycles of death. In Dorantes's collection, the aquatic entity assumes the speaker's voice, appearing acutely aware

of the effects of such a confluence: “I’m the sick skin / of this world.”<sup>72</sup> The amalgamation of environmental decline and anti-immigrant violence has made the river ill, leaving it in need of healing. As the speaker in Pérez’s book states:

Río Bravo, Río Grande, when we are the ones  
certain  
that home is north or south or east or west of you, when  
Mexican black bears swim-walk across into the Chisos  
and froglets the size of sand flies pop up and down on river mud  
. . . and you, río, are real, in a canyon, not a metaphor,  
and not divided as objects are divided.<sup>73</sup>

Meandering through the individual and collective histories of the surrounding landscape, the border river, though endangered and diminished by the imperial frameworks that traverse it, compellingly adheres to the remaining threads of life that it has left. Emanuele Coccia maintains that the zoocentric perspectives that dominate the defiance of the human-nonhuman divide tend to assume that non-anthropomorphic beings “seem to [not] deserve any spontaneous empathy.”<sup>74</sup> While Coccia focuses on plant life, this premise can also extend to other nonhuman entities normally considered non-sentient or lifeless. Rivera Cusicanqui makes a related argument by emphasizing the need to recognize nonhuman subjectivity deriving not just from plants and animals but also from non-commensurable entities such as stars, mountains, and the land.<sup>75</sup> This expanded perspective resonates in Dorantes and Pérez’s works, where the river emerges as an entity yearning for care. The waterway is scarred by a violent line that relentlessly produces varying degrees of harm, including the damage it is made to generate, as it is described in *With the River on Our Face*:

There is no invisible, shifting line when an unarmed man is on  
the San Ysidro asphalt, agents with batons and electric shocks—  
all the clarity of his saying  
*Ayúdenme,*  
*Por favor*  
*Señores*  
The invisible line as utterance in one breath.<sup>76</sup>

The river needs repair. Yet, as Pérez’s collection reminds us, “liquid cannot be stitched.”<sup>77</sup> The loss and agony wrought by its entanglement with a

suffocating line can never be undone. But if we push ourselves to see the river on its own terms, that agony and violence might one day end.



# Writing and Caring for the Colorado River

The Colorado River no longer reaches the sea. Originating in what is now known as the Rocky Mountains and flowing down for 1,450 miles, the river reached the Gulf of California in northern Mexico to then meet the Pacific Ocean for nearly six million years. Since the early 1960s, this journey has rarely been completed. Impounded by fifteen dams in the major stream, including the Hoover Dam, which is the largest one in North America, and by hundreds more in its tributaries, every drop of the river water has been diverted to satisfy human needs and wants, leaving almost nothing to the river itself. Nearly 80 percent of the Colorado waters are used to support the agricultural life of seven states in the United States and of another two in Mexico, with 52 percent employed for irrigated agriculture, most of which goes to cattle-fed crops.<sup>1</sup> In addition, 12 percent is destined for the domestic use of forty million people in two different countries, and the rest is to generate thermoelectrical power and to fulfill other industry-based necessities.<sup>2</sup> The water scarcity instigated by the over-use of the river is exacerbated by the effects of climate change, which continues to diminish water runoff.<sup>3</sup> These dynamics have led to the endangerment of the river and put Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the first and second largest water reserves in the United States, respectively, at risk of reaching a dead pool status. Severely threatened by destructive water management practices such as damming, by damaging usages such as irrigation of cattle-fed crops, and by climate change, the Colorado River is also a transboundary stream, a factor that has impacted its management efforts, thereby contributing to its current imperiled state.

Whereas the endangerment of the Colorado River has garnered much scholarly and media attention due to its economic, ecological, and societal

importance to the Southwestern US and northern Mexico, in the border context, it has often been overshadowed by its counterpart. The overemphasis on the Rio Grande / Río Bravo and the near silence around the Colorado River speak to the human-centered approach that has dominated the understanding of borders. Marking most of the separation between Mexico and the United States, the Rio Grande / Río Bravo is one of the longest transboundary rivers in the Americas, an amplitude that, coupled with the centrality it has garnered in the context of twentieth and twenty-first-century migration patterns, situates it as one of the most prominent border rivers in the planet, as seen in the previous chapter. This notoriety has resulted in a vast array of border scholarship that considers its past and present prominence as a crossing point. The same cannot be said of the Colorado River, which, as a transboundary waterway, lacks a similar level of attention.

The previous premises do not imply that migration-oriented approaches are no longer necessary. On the contrary, they seek to strengthen the argument for a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted interplay between human and nonhuman entities framed by border regimes. Furthermore, while one of these two rivers may hold greater significance in the context of migration movements than the other, both have served as passageways, presenting comparable levels of danger. Additionally, both river ecosystems have been permanently altered due to their entanglement with the border delimitation, often because of similar dynamics responding to the competing interests of two nation-states. For instance, as we will see, the river's border status, coupled with water management policies based on a "first come, first served" principle, fueled decades of competition among neighboring states and countries, each racing to claim and exploit the Colorado River's resources. Therefore, while the environmental damage caused by the border is more easily identifiable in the Rio Grande / Río Bravo—since its entire course acts as a boundary—the Colorado River has also experienced profound and far-reaching impacts resulting from its connection to the political boundary. Drying up for miles before reaching the Gulf, this waterway has been significantly altered by its entanglement in an intricate and expansive web of binational demands.

In the following pages, I study *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) by Indigenous/Latinx poet Natalie Diaz. A self-identified queer Mojave / Akimel O'odham / Latinx / Mexican author, Diaz's Pulitzer-winning work foregrounds the Colorado River and its ancestral relationships with the Mojave (Aha Makav) people.<sup>4</sup> In this poetry collection, the author forefronts the role of the river in memorializing histories of imperial violence and dispossession. Although Diaz might not directly address the Lower Colorado River

Basin, which is the section that serves as the boundary between Mexico and the United States, the environmental degradation she references remains inherently tied to the river's border status, as is signaled in some of the poems studied here. This characteristic holds particular significance, showcasing how the environmental repercussions of the Colorado River's geopolitical classification filter through the collection. Diaz's lyrical engagement with the river evinces that even if just a fraction of its body is deemed a border, that small fragment can have profound ramifications for the entirety of the aquatic entity. Indeed, any alteration occurring in any section of the river generates a ripple effect that extends across its whole expanse, encompassing various physical spaces and temporalities. These effects manifest in the vivid nature of the diverse ecosystems nurtured by the river and its accelerated deterioration, exposing the multiple ways in which environmental issues transcend human-made boundaries.

At the center of Diaz's book lies an anti-anthropocentric position, made evident through a nonhierarchical relationality between a Mojave speaker and the river asserted in, for instance, these lines: "If I say *my river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?* / How can I translate—not in words but in belief—that a river is a body, as alive as you or I, that there can be no life without it?"<sup>5</sup> Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson contends that, while culturally based, relationality is a central aspect of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Discussing Indigenous relationships with the world, Wilson asserts, "rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold."<sup>6</sup> This perspective underscores the significance of Diaz's verses, where the speaker suggests that the river's disappearance would also mean the disappearance of the Mojave people who have lived along its banks. Furthermore, and relevant to Diaz's work, Wilson emphasizes that there is no distinction between the relationships formed with other people and those with the environment, as both "are equally sacred."<sup>7</sup> In a parallel vein, discussing Indigenous relations to land, Pasqua First Nation scholar Margaret Kovach emphasizes that to understand them, "non-Indigenous people must suspend disbelief. This means engaging with the once invisible and excluded . . . Indigenous people have a special relationship with land."<sup>8</sup> Diaz's poem embodies this relational approach to the river, highlighting a form of interdependence and mutual care that transcends the confines of settler conceptions of the nonhuman.

Breaking away from anthropocentric interpretations of rivers, *Postcolonial Love Poem* challenges dominant frameworks of human-land relations while foregrounding environmental harm. This dual focus is conveyed when

the speaker asks, “If I say *my river is disappearing*, do I also mean, *My people are disappearing?*”<sup>9</sup> Through this pointed interrogation, the poem urges us to consider that the river’s future is inseparable from the fate of the Mojave people. Moreover, through the use of the word “my,” the speaker not only evokes a sense of mutual belonging with the fluvial body but also asserts Indigenous sovereignty claims. These assertions, rooted in the ongoing context of colonialism, are informed by contemporary perspectives on environmental degradation and its direct impact on Indigenous communities. Such a stance connects Diaz’s poetry to that of other Indigenous women writers across the Americas. For example, in her analysis of Maya poets from Guatemala, Maya Ch’orti’ author Gloria Chacón highlights how they frequently write the body-as-territory, transforming their poetry into “a project of autonomy, not just in the intellectual and aesthetic realms but also in the poets’ political relationship to land.”<sup>10</sup> Diaz’s stance also aligns with Bianet Castellanos, Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera, and Arturo Aldama’s assertion that “the desire to maintain and protect land links Indigenous claims for sovereignty and autonomy across the Américas.”<sup>11</sup> While connected, these claims are shaped by the land relations and environmental dynamics specific to each territory. Within Diaz’s book, the Colorado River takes on a central role, interwoven with a cultural and political sovereignty agenda deep-seated in a more-than-human perspective.

As I examine in this chapter, much of the river’s degradation stems from its role as a border. Considering Diaz’s previous verses, it becomes clear that the environmental threat posed by the political boundary critically extends beyond the fluvial entity itself. By endangering the river, the border also jeopardizes the ancestral relationships it sustains and the people who embody those connections. Building on this colonial backdrop, Diaz’s book affirms the enduring nature of Native relationships with the land, which persist despite ongoing attempts to erase them. Moreover, beyond preserving it, her work actively affirms a system of knowledge often omitted from dominant narratives. In this sense, as Chacón asserts, while “the process of colonialism brutally attempted to sever Indigenous people from their means of knowledge,” including writing and literature, it has ultimately failed, as Indigenous literary traditions continue to thrive.<sup>12</sup> *Postcolonial Love Poem* challenges the settler discourse that has shaped anthropocentric understandings and exploitative uses of the river. In dialogue with Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson’s notion of the “fundamentally interrupted and interruption capacity” of Indigenous writings, Diaz’s poetry disrupts settler-colonial histories of conquest and success.<sup>13</sup> Through its portrayal of the enduring relationships between the Mojave people and the Colorado



River, the poetry book exposes a form of relationality that persists despite colonial interventions and the geopolitical border that signifies them. In this sense, Diaz's work operates as both a politically and environmentally engaged work that foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems and reinforces sovereignty claims. In doing so, it advances a vision of Indigenous futurity—one that, as the speaker suggests, is upheld by the Mojave people's reciprocal bonds to the Colorado River.

### EARLY COLONIAL IMPRINTS

The inception of the international boundary between Mexico and the United States cemented the Colorado River as a palimpsest where multiple interests, contradicting ambitions, and forms of knowledge converged. Above all, the border formation placed the river at the center of extractive goals, manifesting in agricultural and mining enterprises. Whereas these colonial processes were shaped after the establishment of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the Spanish rule also played a pivotal role in marking the past, present, and future state of the river and its surrounding landscapes. Therefore, even though it was within the newfound border context that the damage exerted upon the river gained a force not seen before, the Spanish settlements played a key role in charting a significant portion of the trajectory that both the United States and Mexico would later pursue in their quests to dominate it. This took place even though the banks of the Colorado River, particularly the segment nestled within the Sonoran Desert, persisted in a state of relative seclusion from significant Spanish involvement for an approximate span of two centuries.

While Spanish explorer Álar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca is believed to have reached northern Sonora in 1536, coming close to the river, it wasn't until 1617 that the region saw the establishment of its first settlements in the form of Jesuit missions.<sup>14</sup> This prolonged process was not due to indifference. After Cabeza de Vaca sparked the interest of the Crown in the Septentrional land, many expeditions went into the region, but most failed. The remoteness of the territory, its intimidating physical and climatic features, multiple acts of resistance of its Indigenous inhabitants, and their active strategies of opposition against settler force made a colonization process akin to the one that unfolded in other regions impossible. Regarding this dynamic, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz describes:

Desde 1521, los españoles celebraban la adquisición de un inmenso territorio continental. . . . Sin embargo, los mapas solo muestran un reino virtual hecho

de mentiras: más cartografía que realidad. Más deseo que sustancia. . . . Allí, en pleno desierto, en planicies, cañones, costas y montañas, las tribus nativas, llámense comanches, apaches, ópatas, yumas o mojaves, vagan a su antojo, viven a su modo.

Since 1521, the Spanish had celebrated the acquisition of a vast continental territory. . . . However, the maps only depict a virtual kingdom built on lies—more cartography than reality. More desire than substance. . . . There, in the heart of the desert, across plains, canyons, coasts, and mountains, the Native tribes—be they Comanches, Apaches, Ópatas, Yumas, or Mojaves—roam freely, living on their own terms.<sup>15</sup>

Trujillo Muñoz's analysis resonates with historian Pekka Hämäläinen's argument, which challenges the idea that the Southwest was inhabited by passive peoples—easily subdued or merely reacting to colonial aggression. Instead, both authors note how the region has come to be increasingly recognized as “a vigorous world enduring social subversion,” where various Indigenous groups actively shaped their own histories through resistance and strategic engagement.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the tactics employed by certain tribes to advance their own interests or counter those of the settlers, their attitudes often dictated the course of Spanish action.<sup>17</sup> For example, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo defies the notion that Spaniards were the sole architects of the region's social landscape. She argues that even during the establishment of missions and *presidios* (small military outposts designed to support colonial expansion), Native peoples were the key reference points for Spanish settlement. Their allegiance or resistance ultimately shaped the trajectory of colonial ventures.<sup>18</sup> The Spaniards struggled to reach the southern latitudes of California, taking a long time before any significant mapping of the Colorado River occurred. The presence of Europeans in the territory led to the renaming of the river, a moment that marked the beginning of new relationships that would be established with it. Natalie Diaz references this moment: “*Colorado*, the name they gave our river because it was slit-red-thick.”<sup>19</sup> Following its renaming, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino's mission in the late 1600s led to a more thorough exploration of the area, as he describes:

He penetrado al norte y al poniente y al nordeste, y especialmente a lo más incógnito del noroeste, hasta el paso por tierra a la California, que los años de 1698 y 1699 lo descubrí en altura de 35 grados, adonde justamente descubrí el caudalosisimo, fértilisimo y pobladísimo río Colorado.

I have ventured north, west, and northeast, and especially into the most uncharted areas of the northwest, reaching the land passage to California, which I discovered in the years 1698 and 1699 at a latitude of 35 degrees, where I also came upon the mighty, fertile, and densely populated Colorado River.<sup>20</sup>

In his account, the missionary portrays the river region as densely populated, identifying the Mojave—Natalie Diaz’s people—among the communities inhabiting its vast expanse. The Mojave people self-identify as Pipa ‘Aha Makav, as the speaker asserts: “‘Aha Makav is the true name of our people, given to us by our Creator who loosed the river from the earth and built it into our living bodies. / Translated into English, *‘Aha Makav* means *the river runs through the middle of our body, the same way it runs through the middle of our land*.”<sup>21</sup> The alteration of their original name closely parallels the renaming of the river, underscoring the intertwined processes of colonialism that impacted both the people and the stream that, as the speaker emphasizes, inhabits them. This deep entanglement between the ‘Aha Makav people and the river, disrupted by colonial renaming, was only one facet of a broader process of dispossession. Kino’s account points to the region’s high population density, yet extensive research has shown that the settlement system imposed by Jesuit and Franciscan missions introduced waves of disease that decimated Indigenous communities. Even the Comanches, who maintained a nomadic lifestyle suffered devastating losses, with smallpox alone claiming over sixteen thousand lives.<sup>22</sup> By the late seventeenth century, 86 percent of Native American populations had perished due to disease, famine, and other forms of colonial violence.<sup>23</sup> In *American Arithmetic*, Natalie Diaz distills the lasting impact of this devastation, which began with Spanish missionization and persisted under US and Mexican directives: “Native Americans make up less than / 1 percent of the population of America. / 0.8 percent of 100 percent.”<sup>24</sup> Intersecting with this population decline were factors contributing to the emerging degradation of the Colorado River and the profound transformation of entire landscapes.

The ecological damage wrought upon the recently colonized territories of *Abya Yala* was as wide-ranging and varied as its vast geographies. Recent archaeological surveys have found that the decimation of the Native population on the continent led to the desertion of fifty-six million hectares of land.<sup>25</sup> This unfolded through a series of large-scale, heterogeneous events that resulted in various ecological shifts. Research even suggests that the drastic depopulation of Indigenous peoples in the Americas had a human-driven global impact on Earth systems. Once managed by Indigenous communities through controlled burning or agricultural monocultures, land

regrew vegetation, leading to a significant “carbon uptake of the abandoned anthropogenic landscapes” that produced climate cooling and changed carbon cycles.<sup>26</sup> This does not mean, however, that Indigenous communities dwelled in landscapes unmarked by human presence or practice.

Ayuujk (Mixe) Yásnaya Elena Aguilar posits that, although pre-Spanish contact Indigenous populations did transform and impact their environments, “el aprovechamiento de las materias de la naturaleza es un fenómeno decididamente distinto de lo que se ha bautizado como extractivismo” (the utilization of natural materials is a phenomenon decidedly different from what has been labeled as extractivism).<sup>27</sup> In this way, Aguilar emphasizes that pre-Columbian use of natural resources fundamentally differed from the settler extractive practices that have shaped dominant human-nonhuman relations across the planet in scale and intent. Even in the case of the Comanche success, which was largely economically driven, “the idea of land as a form of private, revenue-producing property was absent.”<sup>28</sup> While binary oppositions are far too simplistic when thinking about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships to the environment, as these relations are dependent upon specific contexts, processes, and cultures, these authors bring into focus the extractive-based economy as a key differentiator, as it turns nature into products for economic gain outside of the region from where they were taken, a practice that differs from common uses of land resources by pre-Spanish contact Indigenous peoples.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Spaniards “discovered and re-discovered” the Colorado River for over three centuries, they never established prolonged contact with it.<sup>30</sup> But they did pave the way for its imminent exploitation. In *Postcolonial Love Poem*, the speaker asserts: “A river is a body of water. It has a foot, an elbow, a mouth. It runs. It lies in a bed. It can make you good. It has a head. It remembers everything.”<sup>31</sup> The long-drawn processes of colonization that began with the arrival of Europeans are remembered by the river as their effects continue to reverberate through its body. Through the enactment of colonial relations and settlements, the Spanish presence laid the groundwork for the extractive industries that would later serve the economic ambitions of both Mexico and the United States. These colonial imprints materialized in full under US governance, first through the gold rush of the early nineteenth century and later through the large-scale hydraulic projects that shaped the US-Mexico border, fundamentally altering the river’s course.

## DISASSEMBLING THE RIVER

The water that had remained largely inaccessible to settlers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became a focal point in the first half of

the 1800s, as shifting colonial dynamics brought new waves of European and Anglo people into the region. While Spanish and later Mexican authorities had maintained control over the Colorado River basin, US expansionism increasingly encroached upon the area, leading to new inquiries into the river's potential as a navigable route for both domestic and transnational commerce. This growing control over the river reflects a broader pattern of settler relationships with water, where colonial interests dictate access and ownership. As Natalie Diaz's writing underscores: "The US headquarters companies announce, / with armed guards, *You can't drink from this lake / anymore.* The Natives gather rain instead . . . / The companies say, *Read these documents,—we bought the rain too.*"<sup>32</sup> This assertion of ownership over water mirrors the ways in which settler expansion redefined access to natural resources. In the early encounters between the Colorado River and burgeoning settler groups, this process of commodification escalated with the California Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century, transforming the river into a site of exploitation, a process further intensified by the formalization of the US-Mexico border.

After the discovery of gold in Northern California, which occurred just a few days before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a massive wave of tens of thousands of people arrived in the region in 1849, and in the span of a few years, dozens of towns were founded.<sup>33</sup> These rapid changes heightened the river's significance in the social and economic life of newly arrived settlers, transforming it into a crucial conduit for prospecting precious metals, facilitating their export, and supporting the demands of the extractive industry. Steam-powered navigation on the Colorado River marked a turning point, solidifying the river's role as a vital artery for transportation and commerce, and attracting more settlements.<sup>34</sup> Initially, Indigenous river communities such as the Mojave and Chemehuevi welcomed and engaged with steamboat expeditions. However, within a year, those same vessels returned—this time carrying soldiers tasked with subduing them.<sup>35</sup> María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo describes these shifting dynamics, stating: "Unlike their Anglo-American counterparts for whom Indian savagery came to signify an inevitable vanishing from the scene/seen of empire and nation, for the Spaniards the *indios bárbaros* filled the landscape with the promise of colonial mission."<sup>36</sup> The transition to the Anglo-American quest for control did not mark the end of Indigenous displacement but rather intensified the attempts to erase Native presence along the river. Diaz calls attention to the inherent brutality of this process, in which colonization operates as a force seeking physical, cultural, linguistic, and historical erasure:

The first violence against any body of water  
is to forget the name its creator first called it.

Worse: forget the bodies who spoke that name.  
An American way of forgetting Natives: Discover them with  
City. Crumble them by City.  
Erase them into Cities named for their bones, until  
you are the new Natives of your new Cities.<sup>37</sup>

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico adopted a largely incorporative approach, seeking to integrate Indigenous peoples into the nation if they were willing to assimilate, while the United States pursued an exclusionary strategy marked by explicit violence.<sup>38</sup> Yet, despite these seemingly opposing stances, both nations converged in their efforts to eliminate tribes labeled as “savages,” carrying out genocidal campaigns through bounty hunts and scalping wars, a process described by Saldaña-Portillo as “a transnational economy of death.”<sup>39</sup> This economy was not only fueled by violence against Native peoples but also by a concerted effort to control land and resources, as seen in the gold rush and the rise of the steamboat industry. As significant as they were in shaping the social and environmental equations that defined the area, the gold rush was remarkably short-lived, lasting less than a decade, and the steamboat industry could not withstand the challenges posed by the need to navigate shallow channels and the subsequent flooding that arose from these attempts.<sup>40</sup> What endured was a legacy of dispossession and disavowal inflicted upon the Native American inhabitants of the riverbanks, fortified by the very document that yielded to the United States more than 525,000 square miles of land, along with a wealth of gold and water. This legacy not only sought to erase Indigenous claims to the river but also codified a new way of seeing it, one shaped by notions of ownership and control. The maps drawn in the wake of this acquisition did more than delineate borders; they charted coordinates for conquest, inscribing the river into the logic of capitalist expansion. The speaker in Natalie Diaz’s poem emphasizes: “What is the United States? If not a clot / of clouds? If not spilled milk? Or blood? / If not the place we once were / in the millions? America is ‘Maps.’”<sup>41</sup> These maps, rather than merely documenting space, became instruments of erasure, aiding in the efforts of turning ancestral lands into sites of resource manipulation. As metal-driven navigation systems waned, a new economic paradigm emerged, which framed the river as an engine of agricultural promise.

Because the Colorado River flows through seven US states before reaching Mexico, its management has been shaped by a distinct set of political and legal conflicts, differing from those surrounding the Rio Grande / Río Bravo. Natalie Diaz references the result of the economic and political ambitions

placed upon the river when she writes: “The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the US.”<sup>42</sup> However, the speaker immediately decenters this image by emphasizing that the river is not solely defined by the impacts of nation-states: “—also, it is a part of my body. I carry a river. It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. This is not a metaphor.”<sup>43</sup> Through this assertion, the poem demonstrates that the river is not merely subjected to settler-colonial uses or interpretations. While it is endangered by these dynamics, it is equally defined by its relationality with the ‘Aha Makav, as they are one: “*We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.* I do not mean to invoke the Droste effect—this is not a picture of a river within a picture of a river. / I mean *river* as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now.”<sup>44</sup> By affirming this inseparability, which manifests as ongoing, embodied actions, Diaz’s poetry collection disrupts settler-colonial narratives. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson argues, colonial discourses often presume “that they are new; they are beneficent; they have successfully ‘settled’ all issues prior to their beginnings.”<sup>45</sup> The gold rush in annexed lands, the successful but fleeting control of the river by steamboats, and the rapid growth of agriculture across the Southwest all played significant roles in framing the triumphant tale of US territorial expansion and the successful story of the emergence of its imperial dominance. However, by articulating that the river, so central to this foundational narrative, possesses an embodied past, present, and future independent of this colonial gaze and understanding, Diaz disrupts, or as Simpson would put it, interrupts the settler chronicle of flawless and conclusive victory:

The river is my sister—I am its daughter.  
It is my hands when I drink from it,  
my own eye when I am weeping,  
and my desire when I ache like a yucca bell  
in the night. The river says. *Open your mouth to me,*  
*and I will make you more.*  
Because even a river can be lonely. *Even a river will die of thirst.*  
I am both. The river and its vessel.<sup>46</sup>

Settler groups that, at various moments, turned their attention to the Colorado River acknowledged its deep ties to the Native tribes of the region. Yet this recognition was filtered through racist frameworks. For instance, during the early surveys that mapped the US-Mexico boundary, expeditions on both sides described the harshness of the border’s environment and projected that perceived hostility onto its Indigenous inhabitants. In doing

so, they reinforced an enduring practice of collapsing Native peoples into menacing landscapes and reducing them to harmful stereotypes:<sup>47</sup> “Americans prefer a magical red Indian, or a shaman, or a fake Indian in a red dress, over a real Native. Even a real Native carrying the dangerous and heavy blues of a river in her body. . . . I have never been real in America.”<sup>48</sup> In this assertion, the speaker exposes the settlers’ refusal to acknowledge the deep ties between the river and Native peoples, showing how both were distorted through colonial hierarchies of representation. Indeed, because the Colorado River “was particularly infamous for its remoteness” and given that this prejudice was connected to cultural and racial perceptions of Indigenous peoples, it led to a long-standing violent desire, and intent, to tame and dominate both.<sup>49</sup> Natalie Diaz disrupts the damaging logic behind these associations by offering an account that not only predates such perspectives but also transcends them. By centering a Native lens to depict the relationship between the Mojave people and the river, Diaz affirms their right to self-determination. The affirmation of the ongoing existence of a set of complex modes of understanding, knowing, and being with the river interferes with the settler imaginaries that have long justified and perpetuated dispossession.

The description of the ‘Aha Makav’s relationality with the Colorado River recalls Robin Wall Kimmerer’s assertion regarding the need for a more widespread usage of what she calls a “grammar of animacy,” a lexicon that can be found in many Indigenous languages, such as the Potawatomi, Hopi, and Seminole.<sup>50</sup> The need for this lexicon reflects a core principle of Indigenous worldviews, which, as Margaret Kovach argues, are “based upon an animistic philosophy that views the human entity as but one entity within the relational family.”<sup>51</sup> In the animistic vocabulary, verbs are more predominant than nouns, a linguistic characteristic that opens a clear path to recognize the autonomous existences of the nonhuman, thus opening a path to hinder its ceaseless exploitation: “To be a hill, to be a sandy beach . . . all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive.”<sup>52</sup> *Postcolonial Love Poem* conveys a form of kinship and shared understanding with the river that eludes classification within the confines of the English language. Through poetry, the author employs detailed and careful descriptions that transgress the normative usages of verbs and nouns, thereby destabilizing both hegemonic views of the river and the settler grammar that has been used to dispossess it. With syntactic constructions such as “the river is my sister . . . it is my hands when I drink from it, my own eye when I am weeping,” the speaker makes evident the incompatibility between Native worldviews and the ontological hierarchy of the nation-state.<sup>53</sup> This conflict becomes discernible through



something as fundamental as language use and the absence of words to articulate Indigenous cosmologies. Wall Kimmerer discusses this limitation, noting that English forces a binary distinction between humans and things, reducing nonhuman beings to an impersonal “it,” thus questioning where the language is for recognizing the mere existence of other beings.<sup>54</sup> As flagged in Diaz’s poetry, English fails to capture the depth of the relationships she describes. Only through linguistic transgression can she convey them. Hence, the author is once again interrupting a narrative told by settler colonialism, this time through grammatical technique. By reclaiming the word “it” and assigning it to the river as a sister, a hand, and eyes, the speaker disrupts the syntax traditionally used to diminish Indigenous ways of knowing. If, as Wall Kimmerer asserts, “*it* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing,” through linguistic practice, Diaz refuses such a reductionist view and makes *it* tell a different story than the one it has been relentlessly made to enunciate.<sup>55</sup> This grammatical manipulation, in turn, exposes, as Audra Simpson observes, “colonialism’s ongoing existence and simultaneous failure. . . . It fails at what it is supposed to do: eliminate Indigenous people; take all their land; absorb them into a white, property-owning body politic.”<sup>56</sup> Through both the form and content of her poems, Diaz displays the settler regime’s unsuccessful attempts to annihilate Mojave’s ways of relating with the river:

I am fluent in water. Water is fluent in my body  
it spoke my body into existence.  
If a river spoke English it might say: *What begins in water*  
*will end without it.*  
Or:  
*I remember you*  
*I cannot forget*  
*my own body.*<sup>57</sup>

The speaker expresses the defeat of the regulating mission undertaken by settler states to control and erase difference and Native self-determination, and at the same time demystifies the narrative of conquest and success often portrayed in official accounts of nineteenth-century US territorial expansion. Parallel to the gold rush, the steamboat industry, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the rise of agricultural expansion, and other settler milestones, endured the ancestral connections of Indigenous peoples with the river, which came before every single one of them and have outlived them all. If, as Simpson contends: “Indians, or Native people, are not imagined to

flourish, let alone push or interrupt the stories that are being told,” Diaz’s book showcases a lyrical account that not only interrupts the nationstate-sanctioned stories of settler glory but does so at multiple temporal levels.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, as the collection suggests, colonial forces can never sever Mojave ties to the river, as they are constitutive of each other. Indeed, the previous poem implies that if the river had a widely recognized voice, it would use it to affirm that the ‘Aha Makav people are an indelible component of both its body and memory. While this relationality transcends time, the speaker elucidates the river’s vulnerability, emphasizing that it can—and might—die. However, this demise would not signify triumph for the settler state; rather, it would mark its defeat: “*What begins in water / will end without it.*”<sup>59</sup>

The territories lost by Mexico and annexed by the United States, specifically those traversed by the Colorado River, quickly established an economic life revolving around its waters. While the gold rush was brief, the region’s agricultural expansion and the cities it sustains became indelibly ingrained into its geographies, with consequences that persist to this day and are poised to determine the river’s future—or the lack of it. For this transformation to take place, the forceful river first had to be brought under control, a process that has unfolded over centuries, requiring staggering financial investments, damming, diversion, and national and transnational legal frameworks. *Post-colonial Love Poem* synthesizes the ongoing consequences of this mixture:

[the river] is shattered by fifteen dams  
 over one thousand four hundred and fifty miles,  
 pipes and pumps filling  
 swimming pools and sprinklers  
 in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.<sup>60</sup>

While the Colorado River does not flow through these two cities, its waters are heavily siphoned to sustain them, further straining an already overburdened river system. These pressures on the aquatic body trace back to the very moment the border was drawn when two major waterways were designated as natural dividers—what Alvarez terms “arcifinious frontiers.”<sup>61</sup> In the wake of this designation, the United States and Mexico launched relentless efforts to control border waters, driven by political interests and extractive capitalism, a pursuit that has mutilated the river’s meandering path, disrupted its natural rhythms, and obstructed the completion of its journey.

In the United States, the endeavors undertaken to reshape the borderlands were often justified by a nineteenth-century doctrine termed Manifest Destiny. This belief, first articulated in John L. Sullivan’s famous magazine article, encapsulates the assertion that US expansion was mandated by God,

becoming “of signal importance in the way the United States came to understand itself in the world and still does.”<sup>62</sup> In the western regions, this expansionist vision hinged on the transformation of arid landscapes into fertile agricultural zones, a process that required extensive water use. As the Colorado River coursed through seven different state jurisdictions, conflicts over water rights intensified in tandem with the forced displacement of ethnic minorities living in the borderlands. Diaz engages with these entanglements, writing: “America is the condition—of the blood and of the rivers, / of what we can spill and who we can spill it from. *A dream* they call it.”<sup>63</sup> The dream to fulfill destiny’s precepts placed the Colorado River at the center of the competing interests of seven Western US states, initiating a race to establish ownership of water rights through a legal framework known as the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation. As historian Stephen Mumme explains, by the 1870s, this system had already been widely adopted across most Western states as the primary method for allocating water rights, reinforcing a model that prioritized early claims and economic development over ecological sustainability.<sup>64</sup> Following a “first in time, first in right” logic, this guideline permitted the initial user of a certain amount of water allocated for industrial, agricultural, or domestic necessities to retain the entitlement to continue using it for fulfilling identical needs. In this way, the doctrine established the legal basis to give priority to the first users of water over subsequent demands, thus encouraging competition to exploit the river and claim water rights between states that, to the river’s detriment, would last for decades.<sup>65</sup>

Although opportunities and incentives to claim river water emerged with the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and persisted throughout the nineteenth century, it was at the start of the twentieth century that these directives were formally codified into federal law. Motivated by principles akin to Manifest Destiny, the Reclamation Act of 1902 granted the US Secretary of the Interior the authority to “study, locate, and construct irrigation works.”<sup>66</sup> This legislation became the driving force behind the systematic fragmentation of the river, a process echoed in Diaz’s poetry. Beyond enabling large-scale irrigation and dam construction, reclamation policies accelerated the ongoing dispossession of ethnic minorities. Embedded within hydro-resource governance infrastructure, this federal law quickly became instrumental in both the appropriation of the Colorado River and the violent marginalization of racialized communities. Under this legal framework, the river’s fragmentation unfolded through the relentless degradation brought by the construction of massive dams and irrigation systems. Though this process was firmly rooted in US legal and political structures, it also shaped Mexico’s own extractive relationship with the river, entrenching patterns of exploitation that extended beyond national borders.

The “first come, first served” reasoning prompted a domestic rivalry in utilizing river water, with California’s Imperial Valley winning the battle, as well as other areas in the south of that same state well situated to claim even more of the liquid resource, which alarmed the upper basin states.<sup>67</sup> This situation made clear the necessity for the regulation of water distribution. The first attempt at regulating the rights to the Colorado River water came in 1922, with the Colorado River Compact, the first and most significant interstate river agreement in the United States at that point, which divided the river’s water equally between the upper basin states (Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Utah) and the lower basin states (Arizona, California, and Nevada). Whereas this treaty acknowledged Mexico’s future claims without making any concessions yet, it disastrously overestimated the actual annual runoff of the river.<sup>68</sup>

The first agreement for the shared governance of Colorado River water might have soothed the competition between the two basins, but did so at the expense of overallocation, thus assuring the yearly overexploitation of the river and setting the basis for future conflicts. In addition, it did not solve the tension between states from a single basin, with notable decades-long disputes between Arizona and California.<sup>69</sup> With every drop of the Colorado River measured, divided, claimed, promised, and distributed, its constitution has been forever changed. Moreover, the overpromising of its waters, far beyond what the river could sustainably provide, has cast an unavoidable shadow over its future. Under the oversight of the Bureau of Reclamation, the compact allowed for the construction of the Boulder Dam, now known as the Hoover Dam, the largest one in the entire US territory, which prompted unprecedented levels of regulation over the river.<sup>70</sup> Framed within this setting of water dissection and control, Diaz writes: “My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red— / fast flood. Able to take / anything it could wet—in wild rush— / all the way to Mexico.”<sup>71</sup> Underscoring the disjointed state and truncated path of the Colorado River, the speaker mourns its crumbling. Moreover, while the river’s fragmentation was not solely driven by interstate water disputes, these conflicts laid the foundation for binational competition. As stipulated in the interstate compact, Mexico quickly asserted its claim to a portion of the river, accentuating its status as a border waterway, an aspect that has only deepened its susceptibility.

#### BORDER WATER

*Postcolonial Love Poem* weaves in just a few yet significant references to Mexico, not only underscoring the country’s lasting impact on the Colorado

River's material history but also echoing the author's own positionality. This layered connection extends to the multilingual nature of many of the poems, which seamlessly integrate Mojave, Spanish, and English, exposing the tensions that shape the speaker's intertwined identities:

Mi Tío Facundo was from Zacatecas,  
and skinned a rattlesnake in our backyard.  
Fried it in el disco. He gave me the rattle  
tied on a cord I wore around my neck.  
Until my Mojave great grandmother saw it,  
said *Take it off*. I asked, *Why?* She said,  
*Would you wear my foot around your neck?*  
I said, *You don't have feet*. She said, *Take it off*.  
She said, We don't eat snakes. They are our sisters.<sup>72</sup>

Portraying the divergent worldviews of her Mexican uncle and Mojave great-grandmother, the speaker brings attention to the complex dynamics of her upbringing and stresses how incompatible perspectives intersect in both the figure of the rattlesnake and her. Although an initial reading of the fragment may suggest a dichotomic interpretation of the characters and their relationship with the nonhuman, in this way risking a romanticized understanding of Indigenous worldviews, Diaz's depiction is far more complex. Whereas the grandmother's care for the rattlesnake transcends human/nonhuman binaries, reducing this encounter to an idealized view of the connection between Native people and more-than-human entities comes too close to perpetuating racialized expectations. Based on violent stereotypes, these expectations can often create doubt about the Indigeneity of those who do not meet them and even lead to different forms of dispossession. As Mark Rifkin observes, "Indigenous people often are expected to perform this sort of ideal . . . in order to be intelligible as Indigenous."<sup>73</sup> While Diaz accentuates the great-grandmother's kinship with the snake, showcasing her stewardship of the nonhuman world, such a characterization exceeds both essentialist ideas about Native people and the specific instance that she portrays. If, as Rifkin asserts, "attributions of environmental consciousness, then, regularly substitute for engagement with the politics of Indigenous self-determination," through the incorporation of the uncle's figure and a reference to her great-grandmother's disability, the speaker does not allow for the making of such a substitution.<sup>74</sup>

The poem's mention of the uncle's act of both cooking and skinning the snake creates an antagonistic depiction of the character that, however, is

not deprived of nuances. Although the uncle's actions are uncaring toward the nonhuman, he displays care toward his niece. Through the nourishing act of cooking, he mobilizes a bonding strategy within the domestic setting. This is accomplished through the utilization of a *disco* (disc), a sizable round skillet entrenched in the traditions of Mexican and various Latin American homes to cook for family in the outdoors. In this context, not just cooking but also giving his niece the rattle to wear as jewelry operates as a way of trying to establish a relationship with the child, though such an attempt is rife with complications. While the uncle's actions within the family setting may acquire a nuanced connotation, when situated in the larger historical context from which they cannot be disconnected, their inherent violence shines through. In the voice of the great-grandmother, this violence emerges with an evident prominence. As explicitly stated in the poem, the uncle's treatment of the rattlesnake goes directly against Mojave's worldviews. Furthermore, the uncle not only killed the rattlesnake but did so in the backyard of the Native family, a dynamic that carries the imprint of settler colonialism's most enduring practices.

The uncle, a Mexican national, carries a history shaped by racial divisions rooted in a colonial logic centered on *mestizaje*, which, as Saldaña-Portillo notes, represents "the racial embodiment of a Mexican political citizenship that obscures Indigenous specificity."<sup>75</sup> More precisely, as Wendy Treviño argues, *mestizaje* in Mexico has functioned as an ideology aimed at "the homogenization of all ethnicities," at the cost, for instance, of Black and Indigenous difference.<sup>76</sup> Due to his ignorance or disregard for his relatives' cosmologies, the uncle adheres to this framework, revealing how it has erased Indigenous perspectives from his own consciousness. While the uncle's actions epitomize the reproduction of these ongoing attempts at erasure, Diaz's poem highlights their failure: "[My great-grandmother] said, *I gave you my name—I called you.* / And I watched her tongue like a whip of ink / write my name in the air."<sup>77</sup> However, the speaker underscores that while the great-grandmother resists yielding her self-determination, thereby disrupting colonial legacies, at the same time, the marks of their violence are clear and robust.

The imprints of settler colonialism are made evident not just through the rattlesnake's figure, but also in the elderly woman's physical composition. By noting the way in which the body of the great-grandmother has been marked, left without feet—a more recurrent theme in Diaz's previous book *My Brother was an Aztec* (2012)—the author brings attention to one of the parallels between the colonization of land and the bodily effects that this process had on its dwellers, as Audra Simpson frames it:

As with the territorial body . . . the content of the corporeal bodies that inhabit and care for that place are also crossed by markers and other histories of intent. With settler colonialism came “reservationization” and a radical shift in Indigenous diets and their bodies. As a result, their blood is excessively “sweet” and has a high prevalence of diabetes—a bodily indicator of these spatial and dietary transitions.<sup>78</sup>

The fragmentation between Indigenous people and their ancestral land reverberates in the mutilation of the great-grandmother’s corporeal form. Therefore, while the poem exposes the settler state’s inability to erase Indigenous worldviews and affirms their continuity by depicting the transmission of knowledge from the woman to the child, it also underscores a seen and unseen embodied legacy of violence. This complicated portrayal is interwoven with the death of the Mojave’s sister, the snake whose body was turned to pieces. The amalgam of these images of fragmented bodies resonates with the state of one of the most prominent figures in the book, which is also present in “Snake Light”: “I watched a rattlesnake swim across the Colorado River, / down near the Devil’s Elbow, where the sea monster, / whose name I cannot tell you, turned the mountain to sand.”<sup>79</sup> These verses not only signal the vibrancy, wholeness, and autonomy of the depicted entities but also evoke a sense of intimacy and shared knowledge, expressed through the sea monster’s undisclosed name, which remains inaccessible to the outside gaze. Intercalated with this affirming account is the shadow of two settler states. One of them is named in relation to the uncle’s figure, and the other appears in the description of what in the poetry book is called a *classic American font*: “Americans celebrate the rattlesnake in rattlesnake rodeos—/ round them up, kill them, sell them. Cash prizes / for the heaviest and longest rattlesnake, more cash / for the most dead rattlesnakes.”<sup>80</sup> As Diaz illustrates both the overt and insidious ways in which the United States contributes to the fragmentation of human and nonhuman bodies, this is the first time that she explicitly references Mexico’s role.

Even though the book implicitly alludes to Mexico as a settler force through the specific portrayal of a dead rattlesnake, the parallelisms drawn between the reptile and the river also extend to the ways the Mexican state has both contributed to and profited from the colonization of this waterway. Whereas the uncle’s figure cannot encapsulate the full scope of dispossession produced by Mexico’s colonial mechanisms, his engagement with the nonhuman is reminiscent of the relations that the country has sustained with the Colorado River. While the first conversations between the United States and Mexico about that stream took place in 1906, the arrival of the

Mexican Revolution made it impossible to finalize any potential bilateral agreement.<sup>81</sup> Even when the country had achieved a silver of political stability, it still took decades to complete the first water treaty between the two nations. Shortly after the 1922 Compact was enacted, Mexico's concerns over upstream Colorado River water usage reignited binational discussions about water claims and rights.<sup>82</sup> Finally, in 1944, a landmark agreement laid the foundation for managing the shared border waters of both boundary-defining rivers.<sup>83</sup> Simultaneously, and with particular significance in the case of the Colorado River, it became the driving force behind a scenario that induced its depletion.

As Stephen Mumme recounts, before the 1944 water accord, previous US agreements largely sidelined the Mexican region. The 1906 Rio Grande convention left Mexico feeling coerced into accepting limited water allocations, while the 1922 Compact ignored the country entirely.<sup>84</sup> Mexico found an opportunity to reopen negotiations when large-scale irrigation projects on its side of the Lower Rio Grande threatened Texas' downstream water supply. Alarmed, Texas farmers sought congressional funding for new water intakes. Using this as leverage, the Mexican government urged the United States to negotiate an agreement.<sup>85</sup> Both countries entered years of negotiations entangled in complex water politics. While agreeing on Rio Grande water-sharing was relatively straightforward, the Colorado River sparked greater contention. Most basin states opposed concessions, particularly California, which argued that Mexico sought more water than it had used before the Hoover Dam's construction, viewing any new allocation as a loss.<sup>86</sup> Despite this resistance, a deal was reached in 1944.

Although the Colorado River had long been a source of greed, its complete partitioning was ultimately driven by competing binational ambitions.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, both countries pursued this agreement not only to support large-scale irrigation projects but also for broader political reasons. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States viewed a water treaty as a strategic tool to signal a new era of "peace and stability" in international relations.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, regarding the Colorado River, the US upstream position conferred a geographical advantage that would be solidified by a binational agreement bestowing it official authority to control the diversions of water supply. For Mexico, the agreement was viewed as a triumph that not only secured water for a variety of projects, but also as a testament to its equal standing in relation to its influential neighbor.<sup>89</sup> While this historic accord might have alleviated certain anxieties within state and federal governments, it did so at the expense of intensifying the burden on the river, surpassing the strain already imposed by the conflicting agendas of every interested



settler entity within the context of prior appropriation schemes.

Echoing the segmented body of the rattlesnake, the Colorado River was coveted, seized, carved up, and apportioned between two settler nations. To implement the newly established agreements, border water required extensive diversion projects and additional storage infrastructure. Compounded with climate change, meeting each nation's demands has driven the Colorado River toward its current imperiled state. In dividing the waterway, policymakers dismissed Indigenous land and water rights, leaving reservations without a guaranteed share. Yet, when it comes to the Mojave, efforts to sever their connection to the river have ultimately failed. Diaz conveys:

In Mojave language body and land are the same. . . . Unless you know the context of a conversation, you might not know if we are speaking about our body or our land. You might not know which has been injured, which is remembering, which is alive, which was daydreamed, which needs care. You might not know we mean both.”<sup>90</sup>

These verses affirm that, despite the relentless force of two settler states and the violent imposition of an international boundary, the bond between the Mojave and the river endures. Meanwhile, the border itself remains in a state of illegality, openly violating the historical, environmental, and cultural integrity of tribal lands. Further, the speaker describes the Mojave relationship with the Colorado River in the present tense, asserting the ongoing nature of the mutual and embodied constitution between them. In this sense, Diaz turns her poetry into a site where she enacts a “political life” that cuts through two settler states’ histories of conquest.<sup>91</sup> In the previous poem, the parallelism between the territorial body and the fleshy corporeality of the inhabitants of that territory is highlighted once again. Whereas in “Snake Light,” through the portrayal of the physical consequences of settler colonialism experienced by her great-grandmother and the vivid depiction of dismembered rattlesnakes, the speaker emphasizes the lived effects of colonial dynamics, in this poem, she asserts that despite the relentless fragmentation of the river, her relationship with it remains. In the constant repetition of the nature of this bond, the speaker rejects erasure and assimilation, sheltering it from past and present threats. Framing the endangerment of the river, Diaz writes:

When a Mojave says, *Inyech ‘Aha Makavch ithuum*, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. The river runs through the river of my body.

So far, I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water.  
I must preserve the river in my body.<sup>92</sup>

Two of the main words attached to images revolving around the stream, specifically, “waste” and “preserve,” serve as reminders that the colonization of the river was not completed with the implementation of the 1944 water treaty or the events that preceded it. It remains current and does not have an end in sight. The ceaseless deployment of diversion and containment mechanisms keeps the river under the constant threat of extinction. The most endangered body of water in the United States, the Colorado River stopped flowing into the sea just over five decades after the agreement was established, coinciding with the intensifying effects of climate change. Instead of reaching the Gulf of California, the river regularly dies nearly fifty miles away from where it is trying to go. A hydraulic entity formed through a geological process spanning over six million years suffered mutilating and death-defying damage in only a tiny fraction of that time, which can be traced back to the early colonial settlements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaching a critical point in the twentieth century.

Considering the gradual but readily identifiable endangerment of the watercourse, the speaker enunciates her need and desire to preserve it, an action she must undertake in a bodily way: “We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.”<sup>93</sup> The vigor of the past is not solely visible in the enduring wounds etched upon the river; it also finds a solid anchoring in the present time through the permanence of the embodied ancestral connection between the Mojave people and the stream. The severely fragmented Colorado River might not reach the sea anymore, but its existence does not begin or end only where the settler eye can see it. In light of this corporeal dynamic, the speaker wonders: “If I was created to hold the Colorado River, to carry its rushing inside me, if the very shape of my throat, of my thighs is for wetness, how can I say who I am if the river is gone? . . . If the river is ghost, am I?”<sup>94</sup> The answer is clear: “We cannot live good, we cannot live at all, without water.”<sup>95</sup> This assertion extends to the fundamental needs of settler groups. The annihilation of the river would not only affect Native people: “The word for *drought* is different across many languages and lands. The ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths—the tongue, the throat, the kidneys. No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin.”<sup>96</sup> The poem warns that in killing the river, the settler regimes inevitably kill themselves too. But the effects would affect Native people in particular ways:

If your builder could place a small red bird in your chest to beat as your heart, is it so hard for you to picture the blue river hurtling inside the slow muscled curves of my long body? . . . If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?<sup>97</sup>

To cement the present and future postcolonial world envisioned by the author, where, as stated in the poetry book, the river is loved, she doesn't advocate for its preservation solely based on the vital needs it fulfills for both settler and Native communities. Of more importance is the emphasis on the corporeal, undivided existence shared by the Colorado River and the Mojave people. As the river is fragmented and allocated to its very last drop, the author not only rejects any notion of a divide between the Aha Makav and the body of water but firmly and constantly asserts the impossibility of such a separation. Caring for the stream is inseparable from caring for the people who *are* in their relation to it. This affirmation turns into a disruption of settler histories that echoes Audra Simpson's assertion about how Native interruptions challenge "the structure of settlement that strangles their political form and tries to take their land and their selves from them."<sup>98</sup> By affirming that there exists a manifestation of the river that will forever elude fragmentation, the author unveils the feebleness of sanctioned narratives that underpin settler claims to river ownership. At the same time, it illuminates a space that the geopolitical border, despite the extensive harm it has inflicted on the river, cannot contain.



## Permeable Bodies at the Suchiate River

The often deadly and commonly unavoidable entanglement between migrant people and the material worlds they traverse raises questions regarding the environmental injustices woven into the anti-immigration policies that shape many of the South–North journeys experienced by migrants. These injustices extend beyond the environmental damage caused by border structures, patrolling practices, and other intrusive forms of surveillance; they also manifest in the harmful ways in which border environments affect the biological bodies they touch. Such dynamics have become increasingly urgent as the human-made and natural systems encountered by migrants continue to diversify and expand. The embodied dynamics that result from this conglomeration can be identified in southern Mexico, where diverse land and aquatic ecosystems intersect migration journeys.<sup>1</sup> Within this context, the Suchiate River serves as one of the most frequently traversed informal entry points along Mexico's southern border, with most migrants crossing on makeshift rafts while others wade through its muddy waters.<sup>2</sup> This permeability has led to the broader characterization of the entire border region as porous, with the Suchiate standing out as one of its most permeable crossing points. Consequently, enforcement efforts have concentrated on Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo, two cities adjacent to the Suchiate River and major migration hubs, resulting in heightened militarization that exposes migrants to both systemic violence and bureaucratic dread.<sup>3</sup> Despite amplified enforcement by the Mexican and US governments, which has further deteriorated conditions at the border, the Suchiate River remains a primary access point for migrants, most of whom are often seeking asylum.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the Suchiate River tends to be described as a highly permeable crossing point, a notion reinforced by the intense media coverage surrounding migrant caravans. This permeability extends beyond human movement. While discussions about this area frequently focus on migrant crossings, the river's porosity is further illustrated by a wide array of substances and entities (wildlife, commercial goods, trash, microorganisms like viruses and bacteria, and various toxins) that also flow through its waters. River crossings exemplify the continuous encounters between migrants and the elements residing in border environments. As these elements traverse the river's currents, they interact with human bodies, often crossing biological boundaries in potentially harmful ways. Though subtle, these crossings reveal the border's inability to completely divide, isolate, or separate, as natural processes and nonhuman entities unveil the deep interconnections between ecosystems and human-made structures of territorial control. The porosity of borders is thus illuminated through the movements of both human and nonhuman entities that cross them. For humans, this permeability is not confined to informal crossings but also manifests through immigration policies of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, the border's porosity does not lessen its exclusionary function; rather, it highlights the necessity for migrants to take both visible and invisible bodily risks to cross. As border enforcement escalates, so too do these dangers—a process made even more urgent by rising diasporic movements across the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

Before reaching the forested and aquatic border regions of the Guatemala-Mexico divide, migrants traveling by land from South America must first navigate the inhospitable Darien Gap, a mountainous rainforest spanning Colombia and Panamá, and the only terrestrial route into Central America.<sup>6</sup> This is a heavily racialized migration corridor, where the vast majority of migrants are Black, Brown, and Indigenous, bringing to the forefront the discriminatory dynamics of borders and the expanding role of different biomes in shaping migration routes.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, as border environments impose distinct forms of state-sanctioned harm on migrant bodies, the entanglement between border control policies and environmental racism becomes increasingly apparent. Laura Pulido defines environmental racism as encompassing “several distinct forms of discrimination and oppression which target people of color” and are enacted through the environment.<sup>8</sup> Common forms of environmental racism include disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to harmful chemicals, the disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities in resource-related decision-making, and the failure to enforce environmental protections for racialized groups. In border regions, these dynamics materialize through the militarization of natural landscapes,

the exposure of migrants to extreme environmental hazards, and the deliberate structuring of policies that, within a frame of racial hierarchies, render certain populations more vulnerable to ecological harm.

Centering on the Suchiate River, this chapter analyzes *La Mara* (The Gang, 2004) by Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia, one of the first Mexican writers to depict the country's southern border and Central American migration. I contend that, through the portrayal of undocumented border crossings in southern Mexico, the narrative renders the environmental racism that accompanies the border more perceptible. The material entanglements between border environments and migrants demonstrate not just the deadly scheme I considered in the first chapter, which focused on the dangerous effects of the encounter between water and migrants, but also the effects of the entanglement between the substances carried by border water and the bodies of those who enter it. Because of the importance that human corporeality has in this approach, there is a risk of veering into an anthropocentric focus. However, this chapter bridges anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns placed against the backdrop of border demarcations, thereby emphasizing the pressing need for environmental ethics that consider all the ecological beings embedded in border systems.

Literary portrayals of the Suchiate River are scarce, which is why the centrality it holds in *La Mara* turns the novel into a crucial referent to think about cultural approaches to this liquid entity. In the story, the border river is at the center of the multiple plots that permeate the narrative, manifesting as an aquatic presence that marks the bodies that circulate and pass through it. The Suchiate River starts its life on the southeastern foothills of the *Volcán Tacaná* (Tacaná Volcano), one of the two highest summits in Central America and a volcanic mountain sacred to the Maya-Mam people. Like the river that originates and flows from its slopes, this volcano straddles the same binational territory, encompassing the geopolitical border between two countries. In this intersection lies a region known as El Soconusco, which extends into Tapachula, the busiest border city in southern Mexico. El Soconusco is then curtailed by the contemporary geopolitical arrangement defining southern Mexico and northern Guatemala; this division is demarcated primarily by the border river, but also presents itself across the geological structure of a binational volcanic peak, and ultimately is marked through one of the most prevailing human activities in the region: migration. These three elements are central to the narrative development of *La Mara*, where human and nonhuman bodies are enmeshed in material networks that take place on the southernmost border of Mexico.

Although heavily marked by the effects of artificial attempts to separate it,

El Soconusco remains connected not just by natural features such as a river and a volcano, but also by many of the cultural ties of its original inhabitants. Though it is now mainly affiliated with Mexico, before the colonization of the region, it extended into Guatemalan soil, where Mesoamerican tribes established strong cultural and economic connections across the river, many of which endure until today.<sup>9</sup> As the journalist Isabel Vericat Núñez observes, in El Soconusco reside “dos pueblos que antiguamente fueron sólo uno” (two communities that were once a single one).<sup>10</sup> Pointing out these connections is important not just to acknowledge the Indigenous past and present of the region, but also to demonstrate its ongoing permeability, as evidenced by the cultural relations of its original inhabitants. While *La Mara* does not explicitly address these historical ties, it makes evident other relationships that feature the diverse material and nonmaterial crossings that characterize this border region.

Intended to create separation, the permeable border river and the main elements of its surrounding ecological architecture become intertwined with the bodies that traverse it. This generates a conflicting mixture of human and nonhuman corporeality, a dynamic that becomes apparent mainly through two narrative spheres. The first one is the portrayal of a dual nomenclature used on the river, which in the novel is known either as *Suchiate* or *Satanachia*. As I argue, this dual denomination serves as a mechanism by which the novel accentuates the primary perspectives through which the river is interpreted, utilized, and manipulated. This analytical approach underscores the river's openness to intangible elements, namely, varied interpretations that subsequently impact the physical world. The concluding sections of this chapter focus on the tangible repercussions of the border's presence on the river, underscoring one aspect in particular: the infiltration of toxic particles that traverse borders, exemplified by the depiction of *La Bestia* (The Beast), the train that migrants ride atop on their northward journey.

Just as the histories and stories of the Colorado River and the Rio Grande / Rio Bravo are connected to the deserts, oceans, and other hydraulic and terrestrial bodies that are situated either near or far from them, those of the *Suchiate* are attached to other large-scale ecological communities, one of them being the adjacent rainforests. For this reason, throughout the second section of this chapter, much of the focus is placed on those forests. Furthermore, given the significance of *La Bestia* in the context of migration in southern Mexico, this chapter examines its ecological impact, as it is signaled in the novel. Hence, in the following paragraphs, I examine how the river's permeability is featured through its dual nomenclature, which reflects the diverse ways its spatiality is understood and navigated, as well as



through the presence of microorganisms that traverse and interact with its waters. When these two elements are considered within the broader context of migration, *La Mara* offers a lens through which borders can be analyzed within the frameworks of environmental justice.

I build my analysis on two Indigenous epistemes. The first revolves around what Mixe (Ayuujk) author Rafael Cardoso Jiménez identifies as *entidades socio-naturales* Ayuujk (socionatural entities Ayuujk). For Cardoso Jiménez, this notion encapsulates a philosophical principle of the Ayuujk people, that every entity inhabiting the world and cosmos is alive and participates in the continuous weaving of life. This means that they work to make life and existence possible: “no hay forma alguna de concebir la vida de la gente sin la presencia y el trabajo de las entidades de la Naturaleza” (There is no way to conceive of people’s lives without the presence and work of Nature’s entities).<sup>11</sup> According to this principle, even though each entity has specific qualities, their existence is not understood as separate or independent.<sup>12</sup> This aligns with the Mixe understanding of the universe, which Ana Rendón describes as a spiral with no definite beginning or end. According to Mixe worldviews, this spiral is composed of “una unidad diferenciada y diversificada” (a differentiated and diversified whole), inevitably connected as branches in the trunk of a tree.<sup>13</sup>

I also turn to the Maya concept of *winaq*, which Maya authors Ajbée Jiménez and Hector Aj Xol Ch’òk describe as foundational to Maya knowledge systems.<sup>14</sup> Here, I follow what they identify as the most specific meaning of the *winaq*, which they assert, references “procesos de dar y paralelamente adquirir vida, transformarse en vida o transformar la vida, hacer vida y formar colectividad” (processes of giving and simultaneously acquiring life, transforming into life or transforming life, creating life, and forming collectivity).<sup>15</sup> This collectivity includes what Jiménez and Xol Ch’òk define as *nuestros otros nosotros* (our other selves), those entities that, from a Western perspective, are typically understood as nonhuman. The authors argue that the *winaq* concept is necessary for deepening relationships with what is typically perceived as the nonhuman world. Thus, while Maya worldviews acknowledge that all entities possess their own form of life, not everything qualifies as *winaq*.<sup>16</sup> To become *winaq* it is necessary to recognize that one participates in a multidimensional community composed of human and nonhuman beings. To be part of this collectivity, it is necessary to accept the commitments and responsibilities it entails, including existing in a non-hierarchical way.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Ayuujk socionatural entities emphasize interdependence, *winaq* highlights the process of becoming in an inclusive collective. From their own

perspectives, both epistemes foreground the integral role of the nonhuman in the continuous creation and re-creation of life, in this way decentering the human. Given that the ecological damage caused by borders stems from their human-centric nature, these ethical and intellectual frameworks offer a way to illuminate alternative modes of coexistence with the ecosystems they intersect. By framing geopolitical limits as issues of environmental justice that affect both human and nonhuman worlds, it becomes possible to recognize the possibility of engaging with the biomes that operate as borders as spaces of generative abundance rather than zones of deprivation and loss.

Stacy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality is also relevant to this chapter, as it "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment."<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Alaimo identifies the importance of interconnectedness among all beings, though from a different perspective. While the Indigenous epistemes discussed here accentuate the role of nonhuman entities in contributing to the creation, sustenance, and transformation of life, Alaimo, by contrast, examines how toxic elements entangle both human and nonhuman bodies. Trans-corporeality foregrounds the body as a site of environmental inquiry. By addressing the polymorphic entanglement between migrants and the environmental forces shaping the border region depicted in *La Mara*, Alaimo's framework helps illuminate how the material and corporeal dimensions of migration intersect with broader issues of environmental justice, state-sanctioned harm, and the permeability of border ecosystems. Together, these intellectual postures create a diverse and constructive space to address current concerns related to environmental justice for human and nonhuman beings produced by/at border settings.

#### SUCHIATE/SATANACHIA

Regarding the narrative thread of the novel, Elisa Cairati states, "[la] novela no tiene una evolución lineal, y no existe ni siquiera una trama" ([The] novel does not follow a linear progression, nor does it even have a plot).<sup>19</sup> Along the same lines, Jaime Galgani describes the narrative as a diverse scenery showcasing the various cultural realities of the region.<sup>20</sup> *La Mara* comprises a multitude of voices and stories that shape the social and ecological architecture of the border territory. This polyphonic universe is populated by multiple characters whose lives are crisscrossed by the Suchiate River. Embedded in this space are two key characters for this chapter, the *balseiro* (boatman) Tata Añorve, who ferries people across the Suchiate River on a makeshift raft, and Ximenu Fidalgo, a mysterious powerful figure with

extensive knowledge of the border region and its permanent and temporary occupants. Whereas these human characters drive much of the plot, the natural and built components of the border area, particularly the Suchiate River, the adjacent rainforests, the train that migrants seek to board, and, to a lesser extent, the Volcán Tacaná, are also active participants in the articulation of both their own stories and those that spiral around and thread inside them. This dynamic is particularly clear in the representation of the permeable natures of the Suchiate River.

Throughout the narrative, the border river is a constant presence entwined with the different stories of almost every character, establishing unique relationships with each one of them. The nature of these relationships, and the way the human characters see and understand the river, are determined by the name they employ to address it, which can be either *Suchiate* or *Satanachia*, two denominations with very different connotations. The changing vocabulary used to refer to the body of water operates as a central element that emphasizes the diverse nature of the permeability of its body, as the qualities conferred on the river depend on the preferred coinage used to address it. The first time that the Suchiate is called *Satanachia* occurs when the narrator describes a scene where Ximenus Fidalgo, a character with strong ties to the criminal networks that operate in the region, is looking at a group of migrants while they wait for the train: “Ximenus . . . sabe que durante el trayecto el tren se detendrá tantas veces como estaciones existan, o como la policía migratoria lo decida, o como los tatuados lo ordenen para atajar a los que no conocen el poder de las aguas del río llamado *Satanachia*” (Ximenus . . . knows that along the journey, the train will stop as many times as there are stations, as often as immigration authorities decide, or whenever the tattooed men command it to intercept those unaware of the power of the waters of the river called *Satanachia*).<sup>21</sup> The first half of the word directly alludes to a diabolical figure, thus imbuing the river with menacing power. Later in the narration, Ximenus states: “*Satanachia* da y quita —que jamás lo olvidara nadie” (*Satanachia* gives and takes—may no one ever forget it).<sup>22</sup> With this assertion, the character acknowledges the powerful attributes of the waterway. Thinking of the context of migration that operates in the region, Ximenus describes: “[los migrantes] deben pagar una ofrenda al *Satanachia* . . . para que una noche el río plante la voz en sus ojos y sin decirles por su nombre, sin mencionar el apelativo del sur, les permita el paso” ([migrants] must offer a tribute to *Satanachia* . . . so that one night the river may seed its voice in their eyes and, without calling them by name, without mentioning the south, allow them to pass).<sup>23</sup> To grant the desired favor, the threatening *Satanachia* demands anguish and devotion.

In contrast, when the river is called Suchiate, “es el calor, los peces, las aves, los pueblos frente a frente y las balsas iguales atadas a hombres semi-desnudos jalándolas sin detenerse nunca” (it is the heat, the fish, the birds, the villages facing each other, and the identical rafts tied to half-naked men pulling them without ever stopping).<sup>24</sup> This classification illustrates the multiple networks of life that depend on the river. The description of the Suchiate aligns with the Ayuujk understanding, as articulated by Cardoso Jiménez, of an interdependent network formed by human and nonhuman beings that work in and for the reproduction of life. About the specific contributions of bodies of water, Cardoso Jiménez writes: “el agua es la que trabaja humedeciendo el suelo para que germinen las semillas, para que crezcan, floreen y fructifiquen las plantas. El agua despierta a la gente, limpia a la gente, cura a la gente” (water works by moistening the soil so that the seeds can germinate, grow, bloom, and bear fruit. Water awakens people, cleanses people, heals people).<sup>25</sup> In the description of the Suchiate the river provides life support for animals and humans, who, in turn, participate in various activities that nurture and uphold interconnected cycles of existence.

The Suchiate denomination also echoes the Maya *winaq*, in the sense that, as described by Ajb'ee Jiménez and Hector Aj Xol Ch'òk “hace referencia a una identidad colectiva e histórica que se construye en relación con y en diálogo entre nuestras otras nosotras / nuestros otros nosotros o sea, las otras vidas como el agua, las montañas, los cerros, las casas, los animales, etc.” (references a collective and historical identity that is built in relation to and in dialogue with our other selves / our other us, that is, the other lives such as water, mountains, hills, houses, animals, etc.).<sup>26</sup> The description of the Suchiate signals the articulation of a collectivity based on processes of an emergent relational aliveness and interconnection. Given that the *winaq* refers to processes of giving and simultaneously receiving life in collectivity, the Suchiate denomination is closely intertwined with this elucidation.<sup>27</sup> In the novel, the narrator is very clear in specifying that he is not describing what is occurring around the river but rather, what the river is, which encompasses not just the body of water itself, but also the heat, birds, fish, people, and territories that are closely interacting with each other, thus emerging as a collectivity that decenters the human. In the words of Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch'òk, this conjoined flourishing of the entities that participate in specific but at the same time interconnected processes “muestra que somos parte integral de la vida y participamos del cosmos *winaq* y de la *winaq-ización* del cosmos” (it shows that we are an integral part of life and participate in the *winaq* and the *winaq-ización* of the cosmos).<sup>28</sup> By *winaq-ización*, the authors refer to the unending processes of forging relationships that

sustain a community forged of human and nonhuman interconnections, co-existing in a differential yet nonhierarchical relation.<sup>29</sup> In the depiction of the Suchiate, the narrator situates the human as one entity among many, each engaged in horizontal relationships that are both specific to their being and generative of life and transformation. Maya Kaqchiquel author Aura Cumes explains the *winaq* as something that “representa la pluralidad y se explica por la interrelación” (represents plurality and is defined by interrelation).<sup>30</sup> In the novel, the Suchiate is portrayed as embodying and being that plurality:

Baila el río con la brisa. Ondeá el perfil de los matorrales. Alivia apenas el sudor en las cervecerías ruidosas de la ribera. Mueve los débiles brillos de los focos en las calles de los dos pueblos. Arroja flores y hojas al agua. Mueve los árboles de ambos lados, que son tan iguales y a su vez resaltan en cada orilla. La del sur, los sauces de ramas hacia el suelo. La del norte, las palmas reales de hojas asoleadas. El aire riza el agua. Cubre y descubre sus minúsculas islas.

The river dances with the breeze. It ripples along the silhouette of the shrubs. It barely soothes the sweat in the noisy riverside bars. It sways the faint glimmers of streetlights in both towns. It tosses flowers and leaves into the water. It moves the trees on both sides, so alike yet distinct on each shore. To the south, willows with branches reaching the ground. To the north, royal palms with sunlit fronds. The air ripples the water, covering and uncovering its tiny islands.<sup>31</sup>

Here, the narrator observes the mutual, co-constitutive relationship between the breeze, plants, people, and wind that not only inhabit but make up the border region. In this sense, as shown in the passage, the *winaq* is activated or materialized through the incessant repetition of an ecological genesis. At the same time, this depiction of the Suchiate reflects the Ayuujk concept of interdependence, where various entities collaborate to sustain existing networks of life. However, in the novel, that same river operates as Satanachia, whose antagonistic personality prompts the narrator to interrogate: “¿El Satanachia corta naciones? ¿Las une como cordón de muerte?” (Does the Satanachia divide nations? Does it bind them like a cord of death?)<sup>32</sup> The river’s transformation into Satanachia stands out as one of the most recurrent manifestations of its permeable nature throughout the entire narrative.

While these two denominations exhibit contradictory characteristics, they are occasionally employed interchangeably to refer to the border river: “los pitidos finales [son] la señal del último momento posible para trepar al tren o quedarse de nuevo junto al Suchiate-Satanachia en espera de otros

intentos” (the final whistles [are] the signal of the last possible moment to climb onto the train or remain once again by the Suchiate-Satanachia, waiting for another attempt).<sup>33</sup> The opposing meanings given to these designations speak to the different worlds that the body of water can be. This characteristic illuminates the extent of the porousness of the waterway, which is traversed by the mutable nature of the different relationships that each character establishes with it, or that they witness in others. For instance, the vivid descriptions of the Satanachia/Suchiate River(s) unfold within specific scenes and are intertwined with particular characters. Notably, the Satanachia first appears through the contemplation of Ximenu Fidalgo, who works with a gang and other criminal groups exploiting migrant people near the river. In contrast, the Suchiate is most clearly depicted through the relationship Tata Añorve, a *balsero* who relies on the river for his livelihood, establishes with it. Ximenu and Añorve offer differing perspectives on the border river, revealing its permeability to multiple viewpoints, all of which bear material effects.

On various occasions, Añorve recounts the experience of wading through the stream, the water enveloping almost half of his body. Immersed in the river’s depths, the character participates in the networks of life intersecting with the aquatic environment. These visual encounters contribute significantly to shaping his comprehension of and connection with the river, embodying a co-constitutive relationship among multiple entities. Conversely, Ximenu remains concealed within the shadows, particularly at night. Taking cover in darkness, Ximenu furtively observes the river as it meets distressed migrants and predatory gang members. As a central figure who fuels migrants’ fear of the river, working with criminal groups to profit from their vulnerability, he projects ideas of what the river is and should do in ways that are human-centered and hierarchical. This perspective illustrates Jiménez and Aj Xol Ch’ok assertion about how “nuestros otros nosotros (la sagrada tierra, las aguas, los cerros, valles, plantas, árboles, piedras, etc.) son considerados objetos materiales a disposición del ‘hombre androcéntrico’ quien tiene la potestad de manipularlos, dominarlos, comercializarlos y explotarlos” (Our other selves [the sacred earth, waters, hills, valleys, plants, trees, stones, etc.] are regarded as material objects at the disposal of the ‘androcentric man,’ who holds the power to manipulate, dominate, commercialize, and exploit them.)<sup>34</sup> Ximenu exemplifies this logic by instrumentalizing the river to trap and kidnap migrants. On the other hand, Añorve is immersed in the river, part of a collective that mirrors the interconnected nature expressed by the *winaq*. As one of the *balseros*, the narrator describes him as a vital force within the river’s ecosystem. When the unity of the *winaq* is

fractured or fails to coalesce, it inevitably opens the door for the manipulation of the river and its inhabitants. As emphasized by the Satanachia denomination, the border's presence facilitates the ideological management of the river, drawn through the deployment of a framework of violence enacted against migrant people, in this way hindering its *winaq-ización*. This articulation turns into an environmental justice issue as the material environment of Satanachia becomes central in perpetuating bodily harm. While migrants crossing the Suchiate River exhibit its physical porousness, the river is also traversed through a human-centered logic that not only transforms it into a menacing entity but, as I examine in the following section, also poses a threat to its environmental health, an element that becomes deeply perceptible through the portrayal of La Bestia.

### TOXIC ENCOUNTERS

The first paragraph of *La Mara* incorporates clear allusions to the ways in which some of the nonhuman beings that permeate the border region materially intersect with the bodies of migrants. At the beginning, the voice in the text conveys: "Con la oscuridad cayendo desde las alturas del Tacaná . . . es noche de viaje y cuando el ferrocarril parte, ese viaje agita las aguas del río y trastoca la vida en la frontera" (With the darkness falling from the heights of Tacaná . . . this is a night of travel, and when the train departs, its journey stirs the waters of the river and disrupts life at the border).<sup>35</sup> This description addresses some of the key components that comprise the border scenery. By acknowledging the presence of the Tacaná, an Earth-bound existence that spans Mexico and Guatemala, the narrator fully discloses the story's location. Moreover, the fragment makes a clear reference to La Bestia, the dangerous train that, for decades, many migrants have ridden on their journey toward the United States.<sup>36</sup> The defining characteristics of the area include undocumented migration, clandestine and unsafe traveling mediums, and the forceful presence of two binational entities: a volcano and a border-conforming hydraulic body. The atmosphere woven into the initial description of the area is eminently harrowing, with the text accentuating the depth of darkness and the palpable agitation experienced at the border, made manifest through the depiction of a frenzied river. This atmosphere is the result of the conglomeration of a very specific network of material and social elements, the latter articulated through the clear sign of an imminent migration journey. The effects of the train's movement on the river, and how a deceptively external element transforms the velocity of its currents, operate as a preamble to the portrayal of an inescapably interconnected border

topography. The opening scenes of the novel emphasize this interconnect-  
edness by focusing on the train that traverses the region and that serves as  
one of the main mediums for undocumented migration, passing through  
several states along the way:

Los migrantes sólo saben de lo largas que serán las noches. Ruegan por tener  
la suficiente fortaleza para seguir aferrados a su reducto, que defenderán con  
malévola fibra. Como lo hacen al atardecer las aves en los árboles, temen  
a todo aquello que altere el orden establecido. Durante la espera terrestre  
aprendieron los apelativos de algunas de las estaciones donde el tren se de-  
tendrá. Han repetido la fama de los trechos que habrán de cruzar: nombres  
que antes, salvo el de Chiapas, les eran ajenos: Oaxaca, y por fin Veracruz, al  
amparo de la cruz.

The migrants know nights will be long. They pray for enough strength to  
remain clinging to their refuge, which they will defend with malevolent re-  
solve. Just as the birds do at dusk in the trees, they fear anything that might  
disturb the established order. While waiting on the land, they learned the  
names of some of the stations where the train will stop. They have repeated  
the reputation of the stretches they will cross: names that, except for Chiapas,  
were previously unfamiliar to them: Oaxaca, and finally Veracruz, under the  
protection of the cross.<sup>37</sup>

As implied in this fragment, every state and territory migrants pass through  
introduces new dangers. They frequently fall prey to various criminal net-  
works where multiple forces partake, including law enforcement and orga-  
nized crime. In addition to what Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez has  
described as “un viaje aterrador, nocturno, y veloz” (a terrifying, nocturnal,  
and rapid journey) produced by the web of criminality that permeates the re-  
gion and in which the train is a central element, there exists an environmental  
aspect that is frequently overshadowed by the more immediate and visible  
human violence faced by migrants.<sup>38</sup> This aspect also plays a central role in  
the descriptions of the journey, evident from the first description of *La Bestia*:

en un viaje humoso iniciado en esta frontera . . . las sombras que ahora cercan  
al ferrocarril esperan el momento necesario para abordarlo mientras zig-  
zaguean entre los desperdicios, sobre zacate y piedras, librando el mordisco  
de las ramas, afirmando la largueza del tranco en las cercanías del ferro-  
carril humoso, rojizo, largo, en sus decenas de carros que transportaron natas  
químicas, polvos de cemento gris, harina cuyos residuos se desparraman en  
oleadas de viento, litros de aceite oscuro metido en cilindros plateados.



In a smoky journey that began at this border . . . the shadows that now surround the train wait for the right moment to board it, weaving through debris, over grass and stones, dodging the bite of branches, steadying their long stride near the smoky, reddish, long train, with its dozens of cars that transported chemical foams, gray cement powder, flour whose residue scatters in waves of wind, and liters of dark oil packed in silver cylinders.<sup>39</sup>

By emphasizing the various toxic substances emitted from the train's metallic structure, the novel raises an ecological concern, which resonates with the impact that the rail network's operations have on the environment. La Bestia is not a single train but the major conglomerate of freight trains in Mexico that operates across a vast territorial expanse, going from the southern Mexican border to the northern one, using various routes. This system is a part of Ferromex, a subsidiary of Grupo México, the fourth-largest company in the country, owned by Germán Larrea, the second-richest person in the Mexican territory and Latin America as a whole.<sup>40</sup>

While freight railroads are among the most sustainable modes of transportation, with data consistently showing that rail has a lower carbon footprint than cars, their indirect and cumulative contributions to greenhouse gas emissions remain significant. Ferromex, for instance, claims on its website that freight transport by rail contaminates 3.5 times less than regular vehicles, yet, La Bestia's revenue is reliant on a wide range of goods obtained through extractive industries that have been responsible for the widespread and enduring exploitation of both land and people.<sup>41</sup> The railway network moves 1.9 million train cars every year, carrying 70 percent of the production in Mexico for US automotive plants, as well as metals, minerals, cement, chemicals, and other industrial and agricultural products. In addition, Ferromex lists steel, coke, diesel, oils, asphalt, and liquefied petroleum gas among its main freight.<sup>42</sup> Thus, as Robinson Meyer asserts regarding their US railway counterparts, "their indirect carbon footprint may be gargantuan."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, there have been numerous instances of chemical spills involving tens of thousands of liters of fuel across various states in Mexico, and some of these incidents have resulted in irreparable damage to the affected land.<sup>44</sup> The novel addresses this scheme, emphasizing that La Bestia transports liters of crude oil. This portrayal positions the train as a central element in the distribution and sustainment of the fossil fuels industry, a key aspect of the environmental framework in which the train that has been ridden by thousands of migrants for decades is embedded.

Emphasizing that the train allows for the incessant movement of toxic matter, the early scenes of *La Mara* allude to the pervasive ecological damage produced by the entire system in which La Bestia operates. And, whereas

crude oil and other fuels are essential to the environmental setting in which the cargo train participates, the most prevalent toxic presence in the initial descriptions of La Bestia is that of the smoke lingering in the air. Although the remnant particles escaping from the train are important to think about the permeability of the bodies at/of the border, it is through the representation of the curtain of smoke that emanates from the train that this permeability is more immediately identifiable. Furthermore, because the depicted smoke is a byproduct of the combustion of fossil fuels, it is closely linked to the framework of the direct and indirect dissemination of CO<sub>2</sub> and other pollutants. Through the deliberate repetition of the term *humareda* (cloud of smoke) twice in the brief depiction of the train, the magnitude of the contamination generated by its presence is underscored. The choice not to use *humo* (smoke), which might suggest a more controlled manifestation of this byproduct, and opting instead for *humareda*, stresses the pervasive and overpowering display of air pollution that blankets the entire border because of the transit of La Bestia. In drawing attention to an array of pollutants that scatter across a wide region—comprising cement specks and other particles along with the smoke—the narrative accentuates these toxic elements’ pervasive and dynamic nature. This underscores their ability to travel beyond the immediate border area and reach other locations. The microscopic elements mentioned by the narrator often end up scattering through the wind, entering the soil, plants, and water of immediate and distant geographies.

Being a freight train, the main source of power for La Bestia is a diesel engine. As such, part of the exhaust that is portrayed as dissipating across the southern Mexican border is the chemical compound known as diesel particulate matter (DPM), which travels in both solid and gaseous forms, containing “over 40 known cancer-causing organic substances.”<sup>45</sup> In the human body, these chemicals can be quickly inhaled, turning into a potential cause for diseases that can lead to premature death. In addition, DPM is the second largest contributor to climate change due to the impact of black carbon on the environment, imperiling the life cycle and existence of ecosystems worldwide.<sup>46</sup> This is why the mention of the lingering incidence of smoke in the air is so significant. Given that it is there because of the presence of a train that travels across multiple geographies, it might appear as though it is a temporary contaminant that comes and goes intermittently. However, while the pollutant might only be perceptible for a short period, its presence and effects endure, not just in the border territory and the bodies that inhabit it but across different latitudes, as Ramírez Heredia describes in the novel: “el tren se detendrá tantas veces como estaciones existan” (the train will stop as many times as there are stations).<sup>47</sup> Carried throughout multiple

areas, diverse chemical particles constantly depart from and return to the border in a cyclical process that disregards borders.

The previous dynamic is, of course, not limited to this specific train or continental region; it occurs at a planetary level, taking many forms, manifesting at various scales, and affecting countless spaces. As Ursula K. Heise observes, local and regional activities are not necessarily confined to their places of origin but are embedded within broader global networks. In this context, everyday life is shaped by structures, processes, and products that emerge from distant locations, illustrating the interconnected nature of globality.<sup>48</sup> In the opening scenes of *La Mara*, this interconnectedness emerges through the depiction of various airborne substances that momentarily settle in one place but, as the narrative states, “se desparraman en oleadas de viento” (they scatter in waves of wind).<sup>49</sup> Carried not only by air but also by the very train itself, these substances are transported across geopolitical divides. Because this process is depicted as occurring in a border region, a space designed to divide and separate, it calls to mind Lawrence Buell’s assertion regarding how “the awareness of air pollution’s power to affect places far remote has reinforced the intuitive sense of atmospheric health as a transborder concern.”<sup>50</sup> Whereas the southern border of Mexico is famous for its permeability, often exposed through images of migrants and migrant caravans crossing the Suchiate River and other ecosystems, *La Mara* engages with another type of crossing and another type of porousness, here made evident by the unmissable presence of a smokescreen that transcends border formations.

Borders function as racialized mechanisms of exclusion while simultaneously remaining highly permeable. Harsha Walia identifies this paradox within the context of neoliberal globalization, which enables the free movement of capital and military forces while severely limiting the mobility of impoverished racialized individuals, who are often only admitted as migrant laborers with diminished rights, lacking both legal protections and social belonging.<sup>51</sup> Hence, borders function within a structure of commodified inclusion, permitting the passage of people and goods when it benefits capital accumulation, sustaining colonial rule. This is a significant manifestation of border porosity, but it is not the only one. The physical landscapes shaped by borders also exhibit permeability, affected by these formations yet not always confined or regulated by them. That reality is demonstrated through the unregulated movement of human and nonhuman forms. In the novel, the substances transported by train exemplify the inherent impossibility of borders to fully and physically separate. Describing some of the nonvisible movements that permeate the border region when the train arrives, Ramírez

Heredia underscores: “los sonidos del tren, su clave de pitidos, sus olores que traspasan lo intrincado de los árboles” (the sounds of the train, its distinct whistle signals, its smells permeating through the dense foliage of the trees), articulating a conglomerate of elements that trespass the imposed, artificial boundary.<sup>52</sup> The volatile molecules released into the air that produce different smells, along with the vibrations created by the train’s movement, regularly traverse the entire territory, passing through the labyrinth of trees and weeds, indiscriminately reaching both nations as well as the river that connects them. When the narrator indicates that the impending journey “agita las aguas del río” (stirs the river’s water), this disturbance can be interpreted not only as the turbulence created in the water by the train’s vibrations but also in terms of the environmental tension caused by the pollutants affecting the hydraulic system.<sup>53</sup> It also recalls the damage inflicted on aquatic bodies by the very corporation associated with this train. Because airborne particulate matter such as DPM can adversely affect ecosystems, the contaminants transported by the vehicle threaten the river.<sup>54</sup> Since, as stated in the novel, “el río no cesa” (the river does not stop), the toxic particles transported by the train and deposited in the border water will in turn be taken by its currents to countless places and bodies.<sup>55</sup> This dynamic foregrounds the planetary connectivity that, in the transit of elements such as airborne pollutants, dust, water matter, and biological and cosmic particles, endures regardless of the presence of borders, becoming more obvious precisely because of them.

The representation of the Suchiate in connection with the toxic particle matter coming from La Bestia echoes the current state of the aquatic entity. The Suchiate is listed by the *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources) as one of the twelve most contaminated rivers in Mexico, occupying the fourth place because of the massive amounts of plastic and other pollutants that are ultimately discharged into the Pacific Ocean.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, as highlighted in the same report, its transnational status contributes to its imperiled state because of the difficulty of establishing management programs involving multiple countries. According to Antonino García and Edith Kauffer, much of the river’s degradation stems from the fact that even after more than a century since the territorial agreements between Mexico and Guatemala were signed in 1882, there remains a pressing need to establish treaties on the shared transnational waters.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Germán Santacruz points out that the Mexico-Guatemala binational region lacks regulations with clear and consistent policies across all levels of government and sectors to ensure coordinated water management.<sup>58</sup> The absence of cooperation between the

two nations hampers the implementation of effective measures to tackle not only the intense pollution of the river but also issues concerning erosion, flooding, and water rights.

*La Mara* references the contamination affecting the river ecosystem not only by depicting the detrimental effects of the train but also through more direct allusions. For instance, when describing the breeze that emanates from the river, the narrator characterizes it as being “descompuesta” (decomposed), blending “con el calor que se desparrama por el pueblo de calles mugrientas” (with the heat that spreads through the town’s dirty streets).<sup>59</sup> The breeze drifting from the river and carrying a decomposed essence signals that the water vapor, particles, moisture, and microorganisms coming from it are tainted by decay and contamination. In addition, the narrator describes the streets as dirty, thus accentuating the environmental neglect that saturates the border region, a portrayal that parallels the current contamination of the river.

The depictions of the Suchiate River and surrounding areas, combined with the focus on the toxins released by *La Bestia*, underscore the multiple ways in which the border ecosystem is materially porous to a vast array of toxic particles and microorganisms. The presence of the border is crucial when considering these crossings. Many elements traverse the river despite it being a border, and in some cases, precisely because of that. Indeed, the contamination of the Suchiate largely stems from the lack of binational cooperation, as each country attempts to shift responsibility onto the other, evading the implementation of essential environmental health measures for the river. Furthermore, through the portrayal of *La Bestia*, the novel references how transnational networks of capital flow and accumulation leave their imprint on local and global ecosystems, highlighting the connections established by the passage of microscopic elements across borders. At the same time, the narration reflects the embodied nature of these bindings, which encompass nonhuman and human corporeality alike, the latter made present through the representation of a group of migrants waiting for *La Bestia*.

In the border region, migrant people are depicted as figures concealed in the night, waiting for an opportunity to board the train, portrayed in a state of physical vulnerability. This is emphasized through the mention of some of the elements that share the space with them. The narrator describes the struggle migrants face walking on stones and weeds while trying to avoid what he calls “el mordisco de las ramas” (the bite of branches), soon explicitly identifying the region in which they are waiting: “las decenas de migrantes esperan el sonido del silbato del tren para abandonar el lindero de la selva donde por horas se refugiaron esperando” (dozens of migrants

wait for the sound of the train whistle to leave the edge of the jungle, where they took refuge for hours, waiting).<sup>60</sup> They are in the forest, where much of the remnants of the pollution transported by the train will disperse and settle. But the ecosystem is not the only element being traversed by the airborne particles that permeate the border landscape. Due to the focus of this initial scene on the exposure of migrant bodies, the interconnection between them and the corporeality of both the forest and the river is highlighted. Whereas the border ecosystem is susceptible to the presence and effects of the elements that emanate from the train and other toxic matter, migrants do not have any shelter and become equally vulnerable to the harm these substances might produce. Just as the ecosystem breathes and absorbs poisonous particles, migrants do too. Their bodies are exposed to the same levels of toxicity, the same smells, and the same vibrations as the forest and the river's corporeal forms.

Employing the air to move, the chemical substances alter the bodies they meet, simultaneously transforming the vessels through which they travel, such as the air and water, and in this way, trespassing into different local, national, and biological spaces. As Cardoso Jiménez asserts, "todo lo que existe está conectado entre sí, lo que le sucede a uno le sucede a los demás" (everything that exists is connected to one another; what happens to one happens to others), describing the unavoidable and unending interconnectedness between the entities that populate the world.<sup>61</sup> While the novel alludes to these far-reaching corporeal networks, at the same time, it brings attention to the particularities of each one of them, underscoring how, even though all bodies are subjected to participating in these ecological arrangements, they participate in them in different ways. This entanglement can be seen through the interrelation between migrants and the ecosystems portrayed in *La Mara*. The narrative does not make a distinction between what is commonly considered human and nonhuman. The toxins and other particles that populate the environment reach every accessible body in the area regardless of the Western-based ontology imposed on them, thus exposing how what affects one of them affects the others too, as Cardoso points out. In the novel, the bodies of the forest, river, and migrants are exposed to the same type of environmental harm, linked in a collective susceptibility that transcends normative understandings of the differences between human and nonhuman beings, here emphasized by the permeability of their physical architecture.

In the novel, the bond between the border ecosystems and migrants intensifies in a material way as they both endure mutual damage posed by the exact same chemical particles. The portrayal of the toxicity that threatens

different entities underscores how they are ensnared in a web of toxic harm, but each one of them, migrants, forests, or rivers, is inserted there because of a specific context. Ajbée Jiménez and Hector Aj Xol Chòk recognize that in Maya worldviews, even though everything is alive, at the same time all things, or all *nuestros otros nosotros* (our other selves) are “diferentemente iguales” (differently equal).<sup>62</sup> Although the novel renders visible how the human and nonhuman entities inhabiting the border region are connected, their circumstances are not homogeneous. Migrants are exposed to toxic harm because of the severe immigration policies that compel them to seek passage through this path. Whereas the ecosystem exists there, bonded to the earth, migrants are exposed to that specific set of toxins because they have nowhere else to wait. Hiding from corrupt authorities and other criminality networks, and with no other path to continue their migration journey, they have to hide in the depths of an unknown space. In contrast, the biotic landscape is attached to the earthly surface upon which it exists, and as such, it is intricately involved in numerous harmful processes caused by neoliberal frameworks, as exemplified by a freight train transporting large quantities of oil.

These material encounters can be examined through Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeality framework, a theoretical model that “reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures [and] acknowledges the unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors.”<sup>63</sup> Given that the novel depicts toxic particles as the agents traversing both human and nonhuman bodies, Alaimo’s framework offers a compelling lens through which to recognize these entanglements. Furthermore, by alluding to the environmental damage inflicted on the border ecosystem through the depiction of La Bestia, the novel calls attention to how, as Alaimo observes, issues of environmentalism, human health, and social justice are inherently interconnected and cannot be considered in isolation.<sup>64</sup> *La Mara* thus draws attention to the interconnectedness of these three issues, underlining a facet that positions borders not only as social and political concerns but also as matters of environmental justice.

The portrayal of the direct and indirect toxicity carried by La Bestia fulfills two main functions. On the one hand, it brings attention to the embodied vulnerability of migrants, who must traverse various ecosystems where they become intensely permeable to recurring and prolonged encounters with harmful material elements. While it is true that the portrayed toxins affect all human and nonhuman beings due to their border-transcending method of travel and general impact on climate change, migrants find themselves

in an especially difficult position. Not only are they exposed in proximity to these and other harmful elements, but they often travel on top of cargo trains that “keep coal burning –and all those tons of carbon flowing into the sky.”<sup>65</sup> As migrant people embark on the train, they find themselves aboard a vehicle that is at the epicenter of considerable environmental harm, simultaneously being materially embraced by much of the pollution that leaks from its cargo and from the smoke that its engine creates. In the novel, migrants riding on top of the train are in direct contact with an incessant *humareda*, which envelops both their external and internal corporeality for as long as their journey lasts:

los que han logrado adherirse y van ya dentro del viaje, sienten el bamboleo que por momentos aumenta haciendo más difícil sostenerse en las grietas del hierro, en las escaleras rasposamente hollinosas, en la angustia retemblante. . . . El olor de los furgones vacíos y el revolotear de los desperdicios recuerdan las mercancías que transportaron.

Those who have managed to cling on and are now part of the journey feel the swaying, which at times intensifies, making it even harder to hold on to the cracks in the iron, the rough, soot-covered ladders, and the trembling anguish. . . . The smell of the empty freight cars and the fluttering debris evoke the goods they once carried.<sup>66</sup>

The bodily risk depicted in this passage epitomizes environmental racism, as it underscores the extreme dangers faced by racialized migrants exposed to heightened environmental hazards. In one of the passages of the novel, Burróna, the driver of a deportation bus, states: “los migrantes eran unos pinches indios cagados llenos de enfermedades cabronas, odiaba verlos con sus carotas siempre de una tristeza terrible, pinches manipuladores” (The migrants were just filthy Indians, full of nasty diseases. I hated seeing them with their faces always carrying a terrible sadness—damn manipulators).<sup>67</sup> By exposing the racist dynamics tethered to the logic of expulsion of migrants and the inherent violence that accompanies their journey, the driver’s treatment of Indigenous migrants, combined with the characteristics of the environments they traverse, sheds light on the environmental racism saturating the border landscape of southern Mexico. These dynamics become evident in a twofold manner. First, the driver echoes the stereotype of perceiving racialized migrants, in this case Indigenous, as both unclean and carriers of disease. This characterization falls within what Sarah



Jaquette Ray calls “poetics of trash” within migration contexts, which, for the author, produce alarmism by dehumanizing migrants, framing them as environmentally harmful and sources of disease.<sup>68</sup> Burróna’s assertion about the Indigenous migrants that he transports in the bus incarnates this degrading framework. Through his racism, which he attempts to mask as ecological consciousness, the bus driver turns the bodies of migrants into sites where “anti-immigrant disgust and [the] construct of ecological others” take place.<sup>69</sup>

When Burróna’s rhetoric is placed alongside the dangerous paths that migrants are forced to take, the narrative features a dimension that foregrounds border delineations as arenas where environmental racism occurs. The lack of immigration policies that guarantee safe journeys for migrant people calls for environmental justice ethics. In the case of the southern border of Mexico, the environmental hazard is, first and foremost, the ecosystems that migrants need to cross. This is not only due to the potential dangers posed by many of the attributes of these ecosystems, like the rapid currents of the river or the unpredictable wildlife that inhabits the forest. It is also because of the unwanted toxicities that enter the bodies of migrants upon their material encounters with these ecosystems. For instance, while in the river, they establish a physically intimate encounter with one of the most polluted aquatic bodies in Mexico and Guatemala. This means that as migrants traverse the Suchiate, the contamination present in its waters goes beyond mere contact with their skin; it has the potential to enter their bodies.

Just as border rivers produce migrant deaths and other types of physical harm, the terrestrial environmental dynamics of the Mexican southern border, heavily shaped by the significance of *La Bestia*, give rise to a distinct form of damage—one that is both immediate and overt, surpassing the visibility of harm caused by air and waterborne contaminants. As a central presence of the built environment of the border, the train is one of the entities that produces a recurring specific type of bodily risk. Thinking of the worst fates that might follow the people riding *La Bestia*, Ximénis Fidalgo states: “cada rejuego está la caída, la pérdida de los brazos, las piernas cortadas, la deportación, la cárcel” (with every jolt comes the risk of falling, the loss of arms, severed legs, deportation, or prison?).<sup>70</sup> Ximénis is clearly referencing the myriad instances of death and mutilation that many migrants have experienced when falling from a moving train that traverses long distances. The number of people who have been maimed by this rail transport is so high that in the span of three years, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other instances in Mexico helped five hundred migrants with prosthetic

devices.<sup>71</sup> The novel once again emphasizes the often-violent material interactions between the racialized bodies of migrants and the built and natural components of the border environment.

As depicted in the novel, contemporary anti-immigration policies compel migrants to traverse ideologically and materially permeable terrains on the southern border of Mexico, including a heavily polluted river and an exposed forest that pose different levels of danger for them. Simultaneously, they frequently board *La Bestia*, which threatens their bodies while posing risks to the environmental well-being of the territories it traverses. Alongside this depiction, the text brings attention to a series of environmental perils that threaten border ecosystems, such as the manipulation of the river that leads to the narrative articulation of the *Satanachia*, a formation that impedes the *winaq-ización* of many of the entities that inhabit the region, as it reinforces human-centric perspectives and violent, hierarchical relations. At the same time, the novel renders visible the intense pollution affecting the *Suchiate*—much of which is the result of the lack of binational cooperation—as well as the unrelenting contamination deposited in border forests that are geographically embedded in current neoliberal transnational frameworks. Because these frameworks produce human and nonhuman harm, the interconnectedness and interdependence of different entities is exposed, recalling Cardoso Jiménez description of *entidades socionaturales*. In centering the smoke and other toxic particles that emanate from *La Bestia* to address human and nonhuman harm, *La Mara* exemplifies Stacy Alaimo's premise that environmental justice emphasizes the tangible links between particular bodies and the specific environments they inhabit.<sup>72</sup> These material interconnections underscore the environmental racism and ecological devastation that inundate the border region. In emphasizing the juncture between human and nonhuman harm at this border setting, the novel foregrounds the need to think of the inextricable interdependence between environmental justice for both migrants and border ecosystems.

## Rain in the Desert

Dominant imaginaries of deserts tend to link them to the absence of life. The convergence of water scarcity and extreme heat in what seems to be boundless expanses of emptiness shapes the perceived ecological insignificance of the driest biomes of the world. This assessment of deserts is compounded by some of the most pressing consequences of climate change, such as drought and land degradation, which are scientifically associated with an ecologically destructive process known as *desertification*. The connotation bestowed upon that term underscores the undesirability of desert sceneries and the implicit widespread rejection of their millennia-old ecologies, which have been the paramount example of what Earth's landscapes should not be.

Amid the ongoing skepticism regarding the ecological worthiness of deserts and concerning the predominant forms of knowledge that designate this ecosystem as the least-valued, Valerie Kuletz contends, "Environmental science discourse often supports the preexisting settler discourse about desert lands as barren wastelands by organizing bioregions within hierarchies of value according to productive capacity. In this scheme, deserts are placed at the bottom of the ladder."<sup>1</sup> Whereas in the context of climate change, the urgency to preserve non-arid environs is evident, the mainstream marginalization of deserts remains environmentally problematic and undue. Furthermore, the rejection of arid biomes has operated as a highly successful channel to dismiss and justify the harm inflicted upon them. As Kuletz argues, equating deserts to wastelands serves as an effective justification to unearth their resources through environmentally harmful practices.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, contrary to common belief, deserts can be rich sources of uranium, coal, oil, gas, gold, and silver, among other prized assets that have fueled extractive economies for decades. The operations through which these resources are

taken have proven to be disastrous, with one of the most earth-shattering examples found in the realms of atomic power, an industry that established a multilocal open-air laboratory on the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, large-scale agricultural practices have also been environmentally devastating for the land. For instance, the desert has proven exceptionally fertile ground for the cotton industry, yielding substantial economic profit within the framework of racial capitalism.<sup>4</sup> Given that cotton is one of the most water-intensive crops, its cultivation in the desert has had a damaging impact on water resources, threatening reservoirs and underground aquifers.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the agricultural and mining industries and the impacts of nuclear testing, the presence of the border is another growing threat to the Southwest deserts, which might be less environmentally ostentatious but nonetheless detrimental.

To construct the border wall between Mexico and the United States, a total of twenty-six US federal laws have been waived, including major environmental statutes such as the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. These waivers have been adding on to the extant context of the rapid deterioration of wildlife habitats, species extinction, and global warming. Just as designating deserts as wastelands operates as a successful scheme to justify their ceaseless exploitation through agriculture and mining, it is difficult not to infer that the low ecological regard for them has also played a central role in facilitating the sweeping obliteration of environmental protections. The fallout of border security measures along the desert has resulted in severe ecological consequences, including obstructing endangered wildlife from accessing water, food, and mates; fragmenting habitat connectivity; increasing light pollution; destroying native plants through bulldozing; causing soil erosion and flooding; and depleting water bodies to support wall construction. Moreover, as stated by conservation advocate Laiken Jordahl, the border wall acts as a deathtrap for desert species, not only obstructing migratory corridors but also preventing any means of escape during flooding or wildfires.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the large scale of the environmental degradation of this biome, its endangerment often receives scant attention. The undervaluation of this ecosystem in mainstream consciousness and settler discourse largely contributes to its decline, but there are alternative viewpoints that open the possibility of seeing the desert and engaging with it in a different light.

In this chapter, I examine *Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert* (1995) and *Where Clouds Are Formed* (2008) by Tohono O'odham author Ofelia Zepeda, two bilingual poetry books that, written in O'odham and English, articulate a decolonial perspective on the Southwest desert.<sup>7</sup> The first book

focuses on the significance of climatic events revolving around water, a presence that shapes much of the relationships between the Native people of the desert and the desert itself. Also revolving around this ecosystem, the second poetry collection addresses O'odham culture in relation to the environmental and social past, present, and future of the biome. For Anna Brígido-Corachán, *Where Clouds Are Formed* functions “like a ceremony or prayer” as it includes cloud songs and ceremonies to invoke rain.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to mainstream perspectives, which tend to privilege settler logics of extraction and fragmentation, these poetry books orient our understanding of this ecosystem toward notions of care and interconnection. Indeed, Zepeda's poetry pushes us to reconsider the lens we use to see and define the desert biome. Mobilizing O'odham forms of knowledge, both poetry books illuminate a complex web of relationships sustained in and by the desertscape. Needless to say, although these literary works are decolonial, they cannot be understood only as counter-colonial. The knowledge they contain is underpinned by autonomous and self-affirming O'odham worldviews, while at the same time being informed by extant frameworks of extractive capitalism and border violence. Thus, because this desert is Tohono O'odham land, Zepeda's writing points to the effects of the territorial severance on tribal spatiality caused by the Mexico-US border.

Known to the Spaniards as Papago but self-identifying as Tohono O'odham—which translates to English as “people from the desert,” this tribe has found itself divided by the territorial boundaries imposed by two countries, resulting in the fragmentation of its geographic and cultural continuity. While this division did not dissolve the Tohono O'odham cultural communication and kinship, it subjected their land and population to the influence of two settler nations, giving rise to a complex web of transnational dynamics. Zepeda describes some of the effects of O'odham binational experiences in one of her autobiographical narratives. Writing about the seasonal journeys undertaken by O'odham community members from the United States to Mexico to engage in traditional customs, the author describes:

The families packed and went home to Sonora, Mexico, back to the traditional villages, where the ceremonies were carried out uninterrupted by the demands of the manual labor of the farms and ranches. These trips to my maternal grandmother's village in Mexico are all part of my childhood memory.<sup>9</sup>

Ofelia Zepeda was born in Stanfield, Arizona, and as she narrates in another one of her writings, her mother was from “a village just inside the Mexican border.”<sup>10</sup> Zepeda's childhood memories are imbued with the experience of

crossing the Mexico-US border to uphold cultural and familial connections. Afro-Latino scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant notes the parallelisms between Tohono O'odham transnational experiences and those of Latinx individuals living in the United States, concluding that there is an "undeniable place that the Tohono O'odham should have culturally and experientially within the cultural heritage of US Hispanic communities."<sup>11</sup> Because of the specific geographic region where Zepeda grew up and given that the place she used to visit as a child was Mexico, the settler nation where her family is from, there is a shared affinity with Mexican American and Chicana people more particularly, who as expressed in Américo Paredes's notion of Greater Mexico, are included in the Mexican cultural territoriality. While part of this connection is grounded in geographic factors, it extends beyond comparable border-crossing experiences and the need to maintain kinship bonds with family in both Mexico and the United States. It encompasses the reality of families and communities forcibly divided by the border and the necessity of crossing it under heavily racialized imperial dynamics to sustain these relationships. Additionally, it involves the complex interplay of diverse identity signifiers and cultural markers from both Mexico and the United States, which are deeply intertwined in these experiences. It goes without saying that these affinities do not erase the specific racial, historical, and cultural backbone of different groups. But not acknowledging that they exist is far riskier as it perpetuates their erasure. This assertion is strengthened by the fact that, even after coming under US jurisdiction in 1848, the Tohono O'odham "continued to associate more with the Indians and mix-descent *mestizos* south of the border than with other US citizens. [And] as late as 1900, there were still enclaves of Papago miles north of the international border who thought of themselves as Mexican," as noted by Gary Paul Nabhan, an Arab American ethnobotanist who resided in the region he recognizes as O'odham country for years.<sup>12</sup>

Further, acknowledging these dynamics does not promote homogenizing or reconciliatory politics. Rather, it is a modest attempt at contributing to reversing the erasure of Indigenous voices when thinking about a territorial expanse that encompasses settler and Indigenous histories. Such an approach affirms the place of Native cultural production in the Mexican cultural landscape, particularly that of the Tohono O'odham. This recognition does not seek to imply that Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds can seamlessly merge together, an idea dangerously close to notions of *mestizaje*. Furthermore, it is not my intention to foster binary thinking, a reductionist approach that would essentialize these epistemologies. However, O'odham views on the desert often directly contradict settler perspectives, particularly

concerning the state-imposed border. This tension cannot be minimized or overlooked and is thus inevitably netted in my analysis. But that is not the overarching purpose of this chapter. Rather, my approach seeks to de-normalize the lack of Indigenous perspectives in discussions about the US-Mexico border and the ecosystems it affects, providing an avenue to upend racialized hierarchies of knowledge. By contributing to the undoing of the erasure of Native voices and experiences from the cultural constructs of Mexico, my approach emphasizes its heterogeneous nature in conflict and reinvigorating possibility, simultaneously aware that these voices have their own autonomous literary traditions, as Maya Ch'orti' scholar Gloria Chacón emphasizes.<sup>13</sup>

Scholarly attention to Indigenous literature in Mexico remains limited, particularly when it comes to works produced beyond the country's periphery. In the specific case of the Tohono O'odham, Southwest historian Bernard L. Fontana characterizes them as "one of the lesser-known groups" of Indigenous peoples in Mexico and the United States, thus observing a binational disregard for their culture.<sup>14</sup> Regarding what pertains to Mexico, it is notable that Ofelia Zepeda's poetry does not have Spanish translations yet, exemplifying a significant lack of accessibility south of the US border. Moreover, in the Mexicanist literary border studies field at large, the academic focus tends to prioritize non-Indigenous authors' portrayals of borders, and in the US context, despite robust scholarly attention to Zepeda's linguistic scholarly work, her poetry, deeply rooted in a border territory and reflective of a culture divided by its presence, is not commonly viewed as emblematic of border literature.<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, I underscore Ofelia Zepeda's contributions to past, present, and future understandings of the Southwest desert, emphasizing Tohono O'odham environmental memory of this territory. I propose that Zepeda's poetry not only complicates conventional perceptions of borders but also challenges entrenched, colonial perspectives of deserts.

Often regarded as the antithesis of life and interpreted as the opposite of biomes considered more vital for Earth's ecological balance, the environmental complexities of deserts defy reductionist perspectives. These complexities are recognized in Zepeda's writings, where the author forefronts their attributes. In *Where Clouds Are Formed*, the speaker describes the desert as follows:

S-ape 'o g t-jewedga.  
 S-ke:kaj 'o, ñia 'an g 'iñeid  
 S-ju:jpig 'o, ñia 'an g 'iñeid  
 Ka: 'ac g ka:cim su:dagĩ t-miabi 'at

Our land is good.  
 The land is beautiful, take a look.  
 There is light rain all around, take a look.  
 We hear the ocean in the distance.<sup>16</sup>

The mention of light rain in the desert conveys the subtle yet profound moments of beauty that emerge within the arid expanse, engaging the senses in unexpected ways. By insisting we “take a look,” this poem asks us to read the desert through a different lens, one that reveals it as a place where life flourishes. To make this argument, the speaker relies on O’odham knowledge, which recognizes the reinvigorating relationships between the desert and the ocean, thereby foregrounding the networks of care and interconnection in which the arid ecosystem participates.

As stated in the title of Zepeda’s first poetry book, which according to Kathleen Danker, “reflect the oral traditions of the Tohono O’odham,” the ocean is a place of power.<sup>17</sup> For the O’odham, the maritime biome is an entity that possesses the prowess to help sustain life in the desert. This can be exemplified by the salt pilgrimage, a hundred-years-long ceremony in which O’odham young men would journey in an initiation ritual across the desert to gather salt from the Gulf of California. In O’odham worldviews salt is sacred, as it has been historically seen as needed to “maintain electrolyte and fluid balance during the scorching summers, to prepare food preserves for the rainless winters, and to heal wounds and trade for goods year-round. [It] was also a time for the O’odham to ensure they were in tune with the unique cycles of their desert ecosystem.”<sup>18</sup> Connecting the arid and maritime biomes, this pilgrimage thus ensured the O’odham preserved the cycles of life in the desert, safeguarding its well-being and that of its inhabitants. The poem “Ka:cim Su:dagi” in *Ocean Power*, alludes to this journey: “Toward [the ocean] we extend kinship / We touched this laying water / and then we left it alone.”<sup>19</sup> A more prominent way in which the ocean is featured in Zepeda’s poetry book is by referencing rain ceremonies, which call upon the ocean to invoke rain through songs and dances performed in the desert. In “Landscape,” a poem in *Where Clouds Are Formed*, the speaker describes the purpose of the ceremonies:

Att ’am si, ’oig ’am si  
 Att o ’i-wai g ju:ki  
 Oig ’am si, ’oig ’am si

We will pull down the clouds  
 We will call the rain  
 Come now, come now.<sup>20</sup>



This same practice also appears in the poem “O’odham Dances,” included in *Ocean Power*, where the centrality of the ocean is rendered more visible, as it is asserted that the O’odham calls for rain are “heard by the oceans, winds, and clouds.”<sup>21</sup> Here, as asserted by Brígido-Corachán, “the poet communicates with the natural elements, asks the clouds, rain, and dust to move and emerge, like songs.”<sup>22</sup> The rain ceremonies, which lasted four days, were traditionally held in the summer alongside a saguaro harvesting and wine feast, leading up to the monsoon storms. These ceremonies, carried out by the O’odham ancestors, continue to this day, a continuity that the speaker highlights by describing them in the present tense, as exemplified in “O’odham Dances”: “The people converge energies.” However, these ceremonies have faced various challenges and transformations.<sup>23</sup>

Journalist Kathy Montgomery notes that the establishment of Saguaro National Park in the early 1930s excluded provisions for the O’odham to harvest saguaro fruit, disrupting their rain ceremonies for years until special use permits were eventually granted.<sup>24</sup> In addition, as elders began to pass away, the younger generations showed little interest. However, once permits to access the park were granted, various O’odham families rekindled the tradition, sparking increased attention from both Native and non-Native people. Workshops on harvesting saguaro fruit subsequently have gained popularity.<sup>25</sup> Within this context, a growing concern is climate change. As Carina Dominguez notes from her interviews with O’odham members, much of their knowledge about the desert is derived from empirical evidence and observation, supported by a technological understanding of climate patterns and nonhuman behavior. Within the context of environmental degradation brought about by shifting climate patterns, “O’odham throughout the desert are noting the saguaro cactus fruit is ripening earlier and more sporadically,” signaling endangerment.<sup>26</sup> The significance of saguaro fruit harvesting for the rain ceremonies is described by Amy Juan, an O’odham member who participates in the annual tradition: “Pulling down the fruit from a 40-foot-tall saguaro is like pulling down the rain from the clouds.”<sup>27</sup> This statement encapsulates the connection between the saguaro fruit, the O’odham people, the rain, and the desert’s life cycle. Despite facing existential challenges and undergoing complex transformations, these ceremonies remain a cornerstone of O’odham culture. The knowledge they convey about the desert, its inhabitants, and the intricate relationships it sustains are an element of Zepeda’s poetry. By referencing the connections between the desert and the ocean in her poetry, which are rendered visible through the presence of rain, Zepeda not only illuminates its ecological interconnectedness but also repositions it as a natural force on a planetary scale.

Zepeda's poetry reflects the co-constitutive nature of knitted planetary ecological networks by addressing the often-unseen interconnections between different biomes, portraying webs of relations between arid landscapes, marine environments, and human beings. In this sense, as Brígido-Corachán argues: "Zepeda's songs resignify local spaces, liberating them from Western meanings."<sup>28</sup> Focused on a desert territory that has been fragmented by two settler borders, Zepeda's posture overwrites colonial environmental paradigms, resisting their continual efforts to erase alternative modes of knowing it. About borders, Ayuujk (Mixe) scholar Yásnaya Elena Aguilar observes:

The establishment of a world divided into nation-states, known as countries, is very recent in the history of humanity. Nevertheless, the existence of these countries as naturally given entities has been so powerful that it has taken over our imaginations and our identity narratives, and even projected itself onto our past.<sup>29</sup>

Outside of the scope of these colonial projections, Zepeda's writing mobilizes imagery of the Southwest desert that challenges standard conceptions about its role as an inert landscape and border. By centering Indigenous worldviews, the author exposes the long-standing illegitimacy of the colonial narratives that have instrumentalized it to delimit settler geographies. Zepeda's poetry underscores how, as Aguilar phrases it, "The very existence of indigenous peoples, and their defense of their territories, calls into question the legitimacy of state borders."<sup>30</sup> The salt pilgrimage, which far precedes the establishment of the US-Mexico border, has been foiled by its presence. For those O'odham members who want to continue with the salt ceremony started by their ancestors, the border is a hurdle, as those living in Mexico face immigration restrictions to complete the pilgrimage, which is also interrupted by biometric checkpoints; in addition, industries such as narcotraffic and salt flat extraction are an obstacle for contemporary salt runners who want to maintain traditional practices, as journalist Samantha Demby discerns.<sup>31</sup>

The border also poses a threat to saguaro harvesting and rain ceremonies. O'odham members on the Mexican side face difficulties in becoming tribal members or obtaining visas, which not only prevents them from accessing services on the US side of O'odham land but also from participating in traditional practices. Just as the salt pilgrimage has compelled O'odham members, as Demby puts it, "to contend, first, with the walls and fences that have cut their homeland to pieces, and second, with the unequal toll this dismemberment has taken on opposite sides of the border," the rain ceremonies

are thus also affected.<sup>32</sup> The O'odham population on the Mexican side is smaller than on the US side, with their native language nearing extinction. If, as Demby asserts, the elders who could help revive it remain inaccessible on the other side of the border, this separation poses a significant threat to the song ceremonies that are conducted in the O'odham language. Under these circumstances, Zepeda's lyrical work affirms the desert's multifaceted ecological and cultural significance, serving as a medium to defend the land and all it encompasses. In "Proclamation," one of the poems in *Where Clouds Are Formed*, the speaker notes: "Rocks, sediment older than life itself / serve as reminders. / It should be unnecessary for sticky notes / to remind us what a desert place is."<sup>33</sup> Rooted in O'odham views, both poetry books remind us of the desert's environmental and cultural meaning, actively defending it.

Zepeda's land defense is crafted through a lyrical articulation that undermines colonial narratives of the desert ecosystem, framing it through the independent expression of Indigenous worldviews. Underscoring the environmental interdependence between the Pacific Ocean and the Southwest desert and centering Tohono O'odham knowledge systems, Zepeda's writing transposes the desert back into the imagery of a cultural and environmental network from which colonial practices and understandings have attempted to displace it. Disrupting imperial hierarchies of ecosystems, Zepeda's poetry books convey decolonial environmental knowledge. This knowledge is contextualized not just through the lens of interconnectedness but also of reciprocity. Both notions are transformative of the dominant narratives of the past and future of the arid biome.

Rita Palacios and Paul Worley note that Indigenous worldviews tend to emphasize the importance of reciprocity for "the continued well-being of the individual, the community, and the cosmos."<sup>34</sup> Aligned with this ethos, *Ocean Power* frames the complex relationship between the ocean and the desert as an act of reciprocity needed for the permanence and reproduction of life, as it is embodied by rain. Regarding the importance of the concept of reciprocity to Tohono O'odham worldviews, ethnohistorian Daniel T. Reff contends that reciprocal acts are viewed as the practice that "binds all creation."<sup>35</sup> Following this premise and considering Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's understanding of reciprocity as a symbiotic weave of giving and taking, this chapter attends to the ecological significance of mutual care between two different biomes.<sup>36</sup> As I contend, through the portrayal of reciprocal acts where human and nonhuman entities participate, Zepeda illuminates how disparate ecosystems adopt planetary belongings. The author repositions the desert in the cultural imagination, opening a path to rethink the parameters we follow to understand and relate to the land. Moreover,

through the transmutation of colonial understandings of the desert, Zepeda is not only writing about the land but defending it through the act of writing. By shifting prevailing understandings of the desert, the poet downturns the binational colonial narratives that have led to its decline. At the same time, by focusing on Indigenous practices, especially on the depiction of rain ceremonies, these books highlight Native agency, as they engage with displays of self-determination and autonomy. Centering O'odham knowledge, Zepeda's poetry deploys a decolonial perspective that challenges settler understandings about the desert, uncovering the ecological complexities that tend to be obscured, damaged, and manipulated by the presence of the border.

### ACTS OF RECIPROCITY

The Southwest desert as a border has been a focal point of analysis in various scholarly works. Jason de León's *The Land of Open Graves* (2015), for example, explores how the desert ecosystem becomes intertwined with anti-immigration policies, leading to grave risks for migrants. Addressing the deliberate use of the desert's natural features, de León underscores the grim reasoning behind Prevention Through Deterrence policies that exploit the arid environment to harm undocumented migrants.<sup>37</sup> In the book *Line in the Sand* (2012), Rachel St. John attends to the historical evolution of border regulations from a mere map delineation to a meticulously controlled and manipulated territory on a transnational scale. St. John's work scrutinizes the creation of a novel landscape within the desert across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, examining the dynamic changes driven by the influence of transnational capitalists, nation-states, and the subsequent emergence of border communities.<sup>38</sup> Another significant aspect of desert studies revolves around examining the environmental damage caused by nuclear activities. In *Wastelanding* (2015), Traci Brynne Voyles observes the complex relationship between the nuclear fission industry and the Southwest region, noting the environmental racism inherent in the uranium industry in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in *The Tainted Desert* (1998), Valerie Kuletz explores the shroud of secrecy surrounding much of this industry's operations and the enduring social and environmental damage it inflicted.<sup>40</sup> The detrimental impacts studied by these authors, spanning from the desert's use as a border and its militarization to the establishment of industries such as nuclearism, are often related to prevailing misconceptions of deserts.

As the aforementioned authors suggest, much of the damage perpetrated against the desert and its inhabitants revolves around its alleged emptiness, lack of value, and the assumed disconnection from other world spaces that

are deemed more significant. Ofelia Zepeda's poetry draws attention to the often-ignored specificities of the desert ecosystems as they are identified in and through Tohono O'odham knowledge. In this sense, her work references the nuances and ecological complexities embedded within this entity. For instance, in "Proclamation," the speaker describes the arid land as a place made of "water memories / . . . / [and] the miracle of desert streams."<sup>41</sup> While prevailing understandings of deserts tend to emphasize their perceived deficiencies, Zepeda's writing illuminates their wealth. Given its significance to this book's theme, my focus is on the desert's connection to the ocean, which exists in a pronounced tension with the geopolitical divisions of the planet.

Regarding Zepeda's first poetry collection, Navajo scholar Laura Tohe observes: "*Ocean Power* centers on the theme of rain and its varied components in [Zepeda's] Sonoran Desert homeland of southern Arizona and northern Mexico."<sup>42</sup> It's unusual that a poetry book centered on the most arid biome prominently features an aquatic body in its title and is infused with water imagery throughout. This apparent contradiction is reframed through O'odham perspectives on this ecosystem. Gary Paul Nabhan recalls a conversation with a young tribal member who, when describing the desert, remarked: "[It] smells like rain."<sup>43</sup> This observation prompted Nabhan to reflect:

How could the desert smell like rain, when deserts are, by definition, places which lack substantial rainfall? . . . Most outsiders are struck by the apparent absence of rain in deserts, feeling that such places lack something vital. Papago, on the other hand, are intrigued by the unpredictability of rainfall—theirs is a dynamic, lively world, responsive to stormy forces.<sup>44</sup>

The title of Zepeda's poetry book, along with the wider narrative implications that stem from it, emphasize the Tohono O'odham embodied and empirical knowledge of the land, foregrounding "perceptions [that] have been filtered through a cultural tradition that has been refined, honed and handed down over centuries of living in arid places," here made visible by sensuous descriptions.<sup>45</sup> Because of this, the title and the centrality that water imagery has throughout the book operate as an act of sovereign land definition. This reading is in dialogue with Northern Arapaho scholar Angelica Lawson's analysis of Zepeda's poetry book. Lawson contends that despite the perception of *Ocean Power* as nonpolitical due to the absence of direct criticism toward the colonial contexts impacting Native communities in the United States, the linguistic characteristics within the collection, which is written in English and O'odham, render it inherently political. Specifically,

Lawson argues that because of the use of the O'odham language, sometimes not offering English translations, the collection resists Native language obliteration.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, much like how the “wrestling and repositioning” of imperial linguistic control through Native language use is an act of resistance, I contend that Zepeda repositions the desert by connecting it to water imagery.<sup>47</sup> She does this, for example, when in *Ocean Power*'s poem “Cewagi,” the speaker describes:

Pi şa:muñim 'ab dahă.  
 'ab dahă kc 'ab beihim g gewkdag.  
 'ab beihim 'amjed g s-ke:g hewel.  
 'I:da gewkdag mo na:nko ma:s.

Summer clouds sit silently.  
 They sit, quietly gathering strength.  
 Gathering strength from the good winds.  
 This strength that becomes the thunder.<sup>48</sup>

This articulation involves recognizing the desert as an active participant within the intricate web of earthly networks, a characteristic achieved through the poetic emphasis on its connection with a maritime biome and the cycle of water. Such an attribute holds particular significance in the context of the Sonoran Desert, as it has been strongly perceived as detached from Earth's valued topography.

Discussions about borders tend to focus on the violent practices and harmful elements employed to generate division, yet the landscapes over which these borders operate insist on clinging to the countless threads that keep them connected to other entities. This framework echoes Gayatri Spivak's perspective on planetarity. Spivak distinguishes between the “planet” and the “globe,” emphasizing that the latter inhabits our computers, making us think that we can control it.<sup>49</sup> In this context, globality refers to capitalist and artificial understandings of the world, where it is perceived as something that can be computed, fully seen, instrumentalized, and ceaselessly exploited. In contrast, the planet alludes to “collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible.”<sup>50</sup> The notion of planetarity refers to the non-homogeneous, specific ecological articulation of the world, one that, in its alterity and all its pluralities, cannot be fully known, possessed, or controlled by humans, as Spivak suggests. National borders are a stark embodiment of the world's global arrangement, but the ecosystems enmeshed with them

refuge planetarity, a dynamic exemplified by the figure of the desert. I identify this enmeshment through the web of reciprocal acts in which the desert participates, as portrayed in Zepeda's poetry.

In the introduction to *Ocean Power*, the author asserts: "Many of the pieces in this collection are about events around rain –rain in the desert and events that result."<sup>51</sup> The recurring presence of figures alluding to rainfall within the desert landscape shifts common portrayals of a desolate, dry environment, imbuing it with the dynamism of moving rainclouds and drop-lets falling to the ground, as described, for instance, in "Wind," where the father of the speaker tells her about the significance of the presence of heavy airstreams: "Just watch when the wind stops, / the rain will fall."<sup>52</sup> Frequent allusions of rain destabilize common images about desert ecologies, particularly those in the Southwest, which are known for their extreme aridity and minimal annual precipitation, with the Sonoran Desert, the specific region Ofelia Zepeda writes about, being the most arid and warmest of all North American deserts.<sup>53</sup> This portrayal does not ignore the prevalent climatic features of the desert biome. Instead, it signals its trivialized vitality. As portrayed in the poetry collection, this vitality is sustained by nonhuman and human reciprocal acts, with the human part embodied in the form of ceremonies.

Anishinaabe scholar Jan Hare says that Indigenous knowledge is embedded in cultural practices, with songs, dances, and symbolic representations serving as vessels for history, genealogies, worldviews, and relationships with the environment.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, Sakewew and Pasqua First Nation author Margaret Kovach tells us that knowledge arises not only from cognitive reasoning but also from the intangible dimensions of human experience, such as that which is unveiled and expressed through ceremonies.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, in *Ocean Power*, much of the Tohono O'odham knowledge about the desert is revealed through the depiction of ceremonial rituals. Furthermore, as Hare points out, ceremonies not only serve as repositories of knowledge but fulfill a multifaceted spectrum of purposes, including the reinforcement of relationships. In Zepeda's first poetry collection, the portrayal of rain ceremonies house relations between human and nonhuman entities, simultaneously providing insight into O'odham knowledge about the desert. Because they invoke rain, these ceremonies play a key role in the reproduction of the life of all the entities inhabiting the arid ecosystem, as they call on water to sustain the cycles of the land. As Zepeda asserts in one of her lectures: "Rain, of course in the desert, is extremely important. So O'odham has lots of songs about rain."<sup>56</sup> Within the ceremonial context, these songs embody knowledge, serve as a means to reinforce relationships

with the desert, and act as a channel to advocate for the well-being of both the desert and the community.

Discussing the importance of songs to invoke rain, the author asserts, “spoken words are central to the rain ceremony. The people believe that in order to bring the rain, they must repeat these words, passed down from one orator to the next over many years.”<sup>57</sup> “O’odham Dances,” one of the poems of *Ocean Power*, details the significance of songs during rain ceremonies: “[the people] call upon the night. / They call upon the stars in darkness. / They call upon the hot breezes. / They call upon the heat coming off the earth.”<sup>58</sup> Continuing with the portrayal of the ceremonial ritual, in “Cloud Song,” the speaker describes the formation that follows the spoken word:

Ce:daghim ’o ’ab wu:şañhim.

To:tahim ’o ’ab wu:şañhim.

Cuckuhim ’o ’ab him.

Wepeghim ’o ’abai him.

Greenly they emerge.

In colors of blue they emerge.

Whitely they emerge.

In colors of black they are coming.

Reddening. They are right here.”<sup>59</sup>

These verses allude to the poetic expression of the oral element of the ceremonies, at the same time emphasizing its pivotal role in engaging with the environmental dynamics of the desert. Ruth Underhill, an anthropologist who did fieldwork with the O’odham, states that within a ceremonial context “[the] describing of a desired event in the magic of beautiful speech [is] the means by which to make that event take place.”<sup>60</sup> As signaled in Zepeda’s poetry, the O’odham participate in the ecological interplay of the desert. This participation extends beyond the oral realm, as is described in the poem “Pulling Down the Clouds,” where the centrality of saguaro harvesting to the rain ceremonies is emphasized: “With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.”<sup>61</sup> In addition to the songs, other forms of engagement are necessary, such as harvesting and, as expressed in “O’odham Dances,” through dance: “It is the time for the ritual. / To dance, to sing so that rain might come, / so that the earth may be fixed one more time.”<sup>62</sup> The speaker describes an embodied experience reliant on community engagement, the performance of ceremonial songs, harvesting, and dance, emphasizing the collaborative commitment of multiple elements essential for sustaining life



in the desert. While Zepeda depicts these actions as integral to a collective ritual, she also emphasizes that each participant not only chooses to be present but desires to partake in this activity: “we want to keep this light with us,” in this way accentuating that this ceremony is a place-specific enactment of agency that is both collective and individual.<sup>63</sup>

Whereas humans have a central role in the described ceremony, “O’odham Dances,” includes many of the more-than-human entities that also participate in the act of attracting rain in the summer:

They implore all animals.  
 . . .  
 They implore them to focus on the moisture.  
 . . .  
 From the dry darkness of the desert,  
 on that night the call of the people is heard.  
 It is heard by the oceans, winds, and clouds.<sup>64</sup>

This practice, which, in the words of the author, brings relief back to the desert, is reminiscent of what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “cultures of reciprocity [where each] person, human or not, is bound to every other.”<sup>65</sup> As signaled in Zepeda’s poems, these acts are undertaken by far and distant entities: “All are dependent / . . . / All respond sympathetically.”<sup>66</sup> In *Ocean Power*, once the Tohono O’odham people call upon various entities to relieve the desert from the tension created by the heat, they respond in sympathy, participating in an endless sequence of reciprocal acts. Because the speaker describes this as an act of “pulling down the clouds and fixing the earth,” she not only refers to the specific act of bringing rain to the desert but also implicitly recognizes the earth’s capacity for renewal.<sup>67</sup> This forward-thinking approach demonstrates a meticulous effort to find possibilities for healing the planet, an endeavor for which decentering the human is necessary.

As noted earlier, Tohono O’odham translates to desert people, a denomination that forefronts the bond between the inhabitants of the Sonoran Desert and the landscape itself. This connection is notably apparent during the rain-making ceremony, where each participant holds equal significance and where humans do not hold a superior position: “With the dawn we face the sunrise / we face it with all our humility / we are mere beings.”<sup>68</sup> As humans aren’t the protagonists of this customary practice, the interconnection between all participants becomes evident. This dynamic is further referenced in this same poem, where echoing the connection between the Tohono O’odham and the morning light that comes during the ceremony,

the speaker articulates: “We rub our hands together . . . / We are complete with this light. / This is the way we begin and end things.”<sup>69</sup> These verses condense an ecological practice rooted in collaboration. In this interconnection, alongside the winds and clouds that sculpt the desert landscape, comes the centrality of the ocean.

Describing an O’odham song about the clouds and rain that bring precipitation, Ofelia Zepeda contends: “[the song is] about all the elements involved with rain, including clouds of course, the wind, water and the ocean.”<sup>70</sup> Even though when it rains the only entities that can be immediately perceived over the desert landscape are the wind, the clouds, and the rainwater itself, Zepeda also gives credit to a distant maritime force. Well aware of the outward incongruity of this incorporation, the author clarifies: “The ocean is important to us because in the summer when our most important rains come, they come from the ocean, from that direction and we know it. And so we acknowledge the ocean in our songs.”<sup>71</sup> Part of the empirical knowledge about the desert is displayed in such acknowledgment, exemplifying Tohe’s assertion regarding how: “*Ocean Power* speaks of the Tohono O’odhams’ intimate relationship with the landscape, a relationship thousands of years old. They listen to the land and know its demands.”<sup>72</sup> They know, for instance, the direction from which the force that feeds the clouds, bringing rain, originates. Zepeda’s writing encompasses the understanding of the environmental phenomena that shape the arid biome.

While the close connection between the desert and other Earth systems tends to be downplayed in the settler discourse that has given rise to the border configuration fragmenting this environment, rooted in Tohono O’odham practices, Zepeda’s writing evinces its misreading. This is accomplished through the prominence held by the long-standing interconnectedness between many disparate entities that participate in the life cycles of the desert. The environmental knowledge displayed in Tohono O’odham ceremonies, part of which is conveyed in Zepeda’s writing, finds some contact zones with the environmental sciences, where the complex linkages between oceans and deserts have been considered from a biogeochemical angle. However, in O’odham worldviews, the interconnection between the desert and the ocean acquires a different form and meaning, as it encompasses human beings, and other entities too.

Whereas, as stated in Zepeda’s poems, the desert benefits from the powerful existence of the ocean, it also pledges reciprocity in the building of a mutual relationship with the maritime entity. If, as *Ocean Power* signals, the ocean directly participates in the rain-making events that relieve the desert from the environmental tension it experiences, at the same time, deserts give

back to all maritime entities across Earth. As Jickells et al. argue, through dust storms and the movement of winds, deserts supply oceans with dust, which carries components such as iron and other minerals that contribute to maintaining the health of oceanic ecosystems and their ability to absorb CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere.<sup>73</sup> Among the key elements that distinguish Zepeda's perspective on that relationship, however, is the embodied, ceremonial nature of the environmental knowledge embraced by the O'odham. Moreover, the O'odham understanding of the relationships between oceans and deserts encompasses the active participation of humans, animals, and a multitude of other entities. In O'odham views, the desert and the ocean are not isolated entities but exist in deep relation with other beings, which not only take part in but are essential to the reciprocity cycles of both biomes. This is rendered visible through the ceremonies that, as Shawn Wilson observes, seek "to build stronger relationships and to bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves," in this case exemplified by the rain-making ceremonial rituals that seek to ensure the well-being of human and nonhuman entities alike.<sup>74</sup> These dynamics, which express a network of mutual care with wide-ranging planetary implications, are reminiscent of Robin Wall Kimmerer's statement about how "the ultimate reciprocity [is] loving and being loved in return."<sup>75</sup> In addition to these ceremonial acts that participate in the intertwinement between the ocean and the desert, the speaker integrates herself within other scenarios where diverse entities engage in networks of care. For instance, in "The South Corner," another one of the poems from *Ocean Power*, the speaker narrates an experience of personal healing, emphasizing the participation of seemingly unrelated beings:

And so I begin another cycle,  
 along with the animals, the plants, the oceans and winds  
 and all that feel this same pull.  
 I come into balance.  
 I begin again.<sup>76</sup>

Zepeda's constant attention to the interrelation of Earth's inhabitants resonates with Anna Brígido-Corachán's premises, when she contends: "Songs and poetry in the Native American and Indigenous traditions of the US and the Mexican southwest present agents in motion and often appear to be moving themselves, thriving in the dynamic spaces that open up between here and there in an all-encompassing world."<sup>77</sup> The protagonists of Zepeda's poems are indeed in constant motion.

During the rain ceremony, as people dance and the invoked earthly

elements exert their force to heed the O'odham songs, numerous dynamic raindrops materialize, falling onto the ground in vibrant movements, as is described in "Pulling Down the Clouds": "the smell of dirt, wet. / For the first time in what seems like months. / The change in the molecules is sudden. / They enter the nasal cavity."<sup>78</sup> Once the rain reaches the desert, it enters every one of the bodies that shape it, including the human ones. Continuing with the portrayal of these fulfilling cycles that find equilibrium through movement, in "Moon Games," the speaker states: "movements of unimaginable quantities of water. / Water just outside our tent flap / and waters thousands of miles away. / Ocean waters newly formed, waters thousands of years old."<sup>79</sup> Through the central role given to the ocean and its understated yet intimate relationship with the desert, these poems highlight the undeniable significance of the most arid earthly biome. Furthermore, in the foregrounding of rainwater as a channel that connects the desert to a wider planetary network, Zepeda's poetry challenges the division that assumes their separation while acknowledging the specificity of each entity. In the unfathomable universe depicted by the author, the ocean can be thousands of miles away, but its presence is felt right in the desert. As reflected in the writing of the rain ceremonies, Zepeda's poetry refers to the environmental interdependence that draws distant entities closer.

### BORDER CROSSINGS

Although *Ocean Power* illuminates reciprocity and interconnection, it also inevitably references the border dividing Mexico and the United States, which in turn fractures Tohono O'odham land. This division has given rise to a binational dynamic in which Indigenous territory is traversed by two settler states. The fragmenting effects of frameworks such as the Mexico-US geopolitical divide have led Yásnaya Elena Aguilar to assert: "It was those in power who oversaw the drawing of borders; arrangements were made between states and their representatives without ever taking into account the territorial dynamics of stateless nations."<sup>80</sup> In an interview with Gary Auerbach, Ofelia Zepeda reflects on the shifts in those territorial dynamics as she has experienced them, emphasizing both the separation imposed by the border and the enduring bonds that resist it:

My grandparents' home was in a small village in Sonora, Mexico. The village like all other O'odham homelands was a desert place. In contrast, I live in mid-town Tucson and all that entails, but at the same time I like to think I have a tether that always connects me to the way they lived. I have memories,

ways of behaving, and ways of speaking that I get from their “worlds.” So in some ways we are close enough to have many things that continue to connect my life to theirs.<sup>81</sup>

Zepeda thinks of the desert as a unifying force for Tohono O’odham land, undeniably affected by the borderline but transcending it through the cultural and familial bonds of its inhabitants. However, as stated earlier, this is increasingly difficult for some O’odham people, as those living in Mexico experience major complications. Factors such as the struggle for O’odham members living on the Mexican side to access tribal services or participate in rain or salt ceremonies due to immigration restrictions, the disruption of salt pilgrimages caused by checkpoints, the threat of the loss of their Native language, and the trouble to access elders on the US side are some of the challenges they face.<sup>82</sup> For all O’odham people, the border imposes a significant threat to their land, with sacred saguaros being bulldozed to expand the wall, bodies of water drained, communities fragmented, and their land sovereignty compromised. However, as attested in Zepeda’s poetry, even though the border has brought significant challenges, their cultural and familial kinship has been damaged but not fully truncated.

While Tohono O’odham ceremonies serve as a means to challenge the imposed national division within the desert, Zepeda also depicts how the nonhuman inhabitants of this landscape actively participate in resisting such divisions. In *Ocean Power*’s poem “People in Wayward Journeys,” which encapsulates the journeys of tumbleweeds across the desertscape, the spherical plants are referenced as people who “know no boundaries [and] journey from village to village,” irrespective of the specific settler state encompassing each village.<sup>83</sup> While commonly associated with desolation, emptiness, and the lack of life in the desert landscape, in Zepeda’s poem, these drifting plants take on an entirely different meaning. The rolling weeds operate not as symbols of the barrenness of the land but as testaments to the liveliness that inhabits it:

On Saturday afternoons  
they roll early into the village dance,  
semi-invited guests.  
At night,  
the meeting place is along horse corrals.  
There most meet their destiny.  
A few lucky ones will have winds  
to set them free.

To continue wayward journeys.  
 Origins unknown.  
 Destinations unclear.<sup>84</sup>

Through the portrayal of dynamic tumbleweeds that traverse multiple distances and interact with every other inhabitant of the desert landscape, the poem foregrounds the life that populates the desert. Instead of seeing roaming shrubs as synonyms for desolation, in these verses, they are recognized as part of the web of dynamic beings that continue to shape and determine their relationship with their land, going against the settler mappings of the territory.

Because tumbleweeds get to different villages regardless of the boundary that might be imposed in front of them, the poem alludes to the incompatibility between the type of motion that takes place in the desert landscape and the border that cuts through it. The journey of tumbleweeds, characterized by Zepeda as wayward or noncompliant, resonates with how the denizens of this biome, whether more-than-human or human, actively antagonize the colonial logic of the border. That is accomplished through both their constant movement and the various connections they guard, an activity made evident not only in the depiction of the desert-human-ocean relationship but also in the preservation of transnational tribal ceremonies and kinship. However, Zepeda's poetry also directly alludes to the detrimental effects of the border's presence on the O'odham. In the poem, "Ocean Power," the speaker tells us:

Grown men with death fear in their throats  
 watch the water come closer and closer,  
 their driver tells them, it's just the ocean,  
 it won't get you, watch it, it will roll away again.  
 Men who had never seen the ocean  
 it was hard not to have this fear that sits in the pit of their  
 stomach.  
 Why did they bring us this way?  
 Other times we crossed the desert floor.  
 That land of hot dry air  
 where the sky ends at the mountains.  
 That land we know.<sup>85</sup>

This poem is describing the deportation of two Tohono O'odham tribal members, who, as the author later states: "came too close to the ocean as

they were being deported back to Mexico from Arizona.”<sup>86</sup> Because the text specifies that they were “sent back to Mexico” we can imply that they were O’odham living in Mexico, reflecting the transnational difficulties noted earlier.<sup>87</sup> Forcibly removed from O’odham land, the men come into exceedingly close contact with the maritime biome, an encounter that, as Angelica Lawson contends, becomes all the more troubling due to “the absence of ritual,” which in O’odham ceremonies mediates that encounter.<sup>88</sup> Whereas, as stated in the previous section, Zepeda’s poems foreground desired encounters between vastly different entities, they do so through the portrayal of intentional acts of care. In contrast, in this instance, the entanglement between the men and the ocean occurs because of the enforcement of an imperial border strategy that violates tribal sovereignty. As Yásnaya Elena Aguilar recalls, “To almost anyone, the shape of a country’s territory looks completely natural, but that image, that figure, symbolizes the enactment of multiple violences.”<sup>89</sup> In *Ocean Power*, the presence of the border tarnishes the intricate cycle of connectivity that sustains the living world. If, as Wall Kimmerer maintains, to achieve a balance between different entities, “The give and take—reciprocity—begins to take hold and the parts begin to become a whole . . . Order and stability emerge out of chaos,” in the framework just described, where the border interferes with the dynamics of the desert, violent chaos creeps in.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the limitation on free movement across the land stands out as just one consequence of the border’s presence echoed in Zepeda’s writing.

In her second poetry book, *Where Clouds Are Formed*, Zepeda continues writing about the complexities of living in the desert, dedicating a few poems to the transformation of the land into a deadly force that operates as a border. In the poem “Lost Prayers,” the speaker describes a scene where:

Empty plastic bottles are collected  
from the desert floor,  
replaced with ones filled with water.  
In another location blue flags are raised in the desert,  
signaling the location of water.  
Signaling a chance for survival.  
Flags recognizable by heat-demented minds.<sup>91</sup>

These verses allude to the need for water that arises from current undocumented migration across the desert. In a clear reference to a life-or-death scenario, the author depicts an act of solidarity from the Tohono O’odham toward migrants. At the same time, Zepeda displays what Laura Tohe

identifies as the prevalence of “the knowledge and wisdom of tribal people living in balance with the rhythm of the earth’s cycles and celebration of those cycles.”<sup>92</sup> That prevalence is depicted in the same poem, where right after alluding to the harrowing journey of migrants across the arid terrain, the speaker describes another way of relating to this environment, not yet shaped by colonial settings:

The O’odham roamed the desert  
with precarious steps.  
Keeping an eye on the horizon, moving,  
seemingly becoming a part of the heat and dryness  
of their landscape . . .  
They knew the trails leading to water.<sup>93</sup>

The concatenation of these two different encounters with the same desertscape encapsulates two conflicting forms of knowing it. The presence of the border did not destroy the ancestral relationship between the O’odham and the territory; but it gave rise to a new dynamic between humans and this land.

In the poem “Ocotillo Memorial,” the speaker recounts a chance encounter while walking across the desert—a site dedicated to a migrant woman who lost her life in the arid landscape: “Her memory marked / by a stand of ocotillo.”<sup>94</sup> In this poem, the author recurs to the image of the ocotillo, a characteristic desert plant native to the US Southwest and northern Mexico that produces bright colorful flowers and participates in the life cycles of multiple species within desert ecosystems: “In spring they will burst / red, orange blossoms. / Branches will bend forward. / Birds, insects will visit.”<sup>95</sup> However, in the episode described by the speaker, the ocotillo operates in an entirely different way, memorializing the death of an undocumented migrant. By imposing an exclusionary border demarcation on the Southwest deserts, Jason de León argues, this biome has become integral to the boundary enforcement system, forcing migrants to traverse increasingly treacherous terrain. De León asserts that this strategy reflects a deliberate effort by entities like the Border Patrol to manipulate the desert’s nonhuman elements into playing an active role in lethal anti-immigration measures.<sup>96</sup> In this way, a settler nation managed to turn this biome into the desolate environment that it so desperately wanted it to be.

If, as Tanana Athabascan academic Dian Million asserts, “Indigenous places are often imagined as isolated empty places, disposable, or usable places subordinate to national need,” Zepeda’s portrayal displaces this preponderant imagination, overwriting it in the pages of her poetry books.<sup>97</sup>



While she does not dismiss the realities the border imposes on the desert, she refuses to let them be the sole defining lens. Coupled with the portrayal of rain ceremonies, walking in the desert, and caring for it in various ways, *Ocean Power* and *Where Clouds Are Formed* operate as recording devices that move inside and outside the written page. Moreover, by affirming both the dangers and virtues of the desert and underscoring the enduring knowledge that the O'odham holds about them, Zepeda actively engages in a form of land defense mobilized through her poetry.

#### POETRY AS LAND DEFENSE

Writing in English and O'odham and through an embodied, empirical, and culturally specific knowledge about the desert, Ofelia Zepeda brings to the fore a lyrical work that, precisely because of those characteristics, operates as a decolonial framework and a land defense recourse. Within the prevailing frameworks that undervalue the desert, the author records a different perspective from that of hegemonic discourses. Articulating a decolonizing standpoint, her work displaces common ideas that situate the arid ecosystem as barren and disconnected from biomes deemed more crucial for sustaining life on the planet, instead accentuating its interconnectedness. In this way, Zepeda's writing overwrites one of the main methods through which settler enterprises have justified the environmental damage enacted against the desert: the belief in its lack of significance. In addition, in centering multiple references to rain-making ceremonies, she overemphasizes the ongoing relationship between the O'odham and the desert, rejecting any notion of emptiness. Recognizing that the desert's wilderness has been used to enact harm by settler states, Zepeda's poetry books emphasize the deadly effects of the presence of the border that cuts across the land. In this context, the territory acquires an entirely new form, operating as a killing machine against undocumented migrants. The presence of the border does not only affect people but produces distinct levels of damage to the desert itself. Discussing the consequences produced by border fencing practices along the Mexico-US limits, Hilary Cunningham states:

There are a whole host of environmental issues for biota along this border: the fragmentation of habitat (particularly for endangered animals like the ocelot and the jaguar, which both require wide open spaces to survive and maintain gene pool diversity); habitat destruction through land filling, extensive service roads and invasive vehicular patrolling; and circadian rhythm disorders for nocturnal animals owing to the widespread use of stadium lighting.<sup>98</sup>

While a fragment of the ecological damage resulting from the presence of the border is readily observable near the wall and other fence constructions, its effects have the potential to reverberate throughout the entire ecosystem. Furthermore, the ecological threats posed by the border compound the environmental harm already inflicted by extractive industries, which have long exploited hegemonic misinterpretations of desert landscapes. One such example, depicted in Zepeda's poetry, is the cotton farming sector. The environmental devastation caused by this industry is also a focal point in the work of Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza, underscoring its transnational impact.

In *Autobiografía del algodón* (Autobiography of Cotton, 2020), Rivera Garza narrates the short-lived success of the Mexican cotton industry in Estación Camarón (Camarón Station) on the northern border of Mexico. The narrative considers a condensed era of an economic upturn that catalyzed significant migration movements from all over Mexico to take advantage of a booming, successful industry.<sup>99</sup> Rivera Garza focuses on the flourishing cotton industry of the early 1930s, a period marked by the Mexican government's commitment to transforming the arid terrain into arable land, and portrays how the realization of this promise culminated in the construction of a mega-dam, which was soon damaged during a catastrophic saltwater flooding event where the dam itself played a contributing role. The aftermath of this event left countless agricultural workers hopeless and poorer than before and a vast expanse of the border desert wounded by salt, rendered unusable for agricultural pursuits: "si el algodón produjo una riqueza sin par en la region; el algodón se la arrebató toda y hasta le pidió más" (if cotton brought unparalleled wealth to the region, it also took it all away, and even demanded more).<sup>100</sup> Rivera Garza's narrative of the disaster that molded the environmental and social fabric of an isolated area in northern Mexico resonates strongly with Ofelia Zepeda's portrayal of the impacts of that same industry on her desert homeland. However, Zepeda's focuses distinctly on a different geographical space—specifically, her native Stanfield, Arizona. Whereas each author foregrounds the specific instances revolving around the cotton industry at different segments of the desert and in different countries (Rivera Garza devotes significant attention to the Mexican labor movement that emerged in response to this agricultural enterprise) they meet each other in the common portrayal of the devastating effects of an ecologically destructive and socially exploitative activity. This transnational commonality highlights the ample reach of the cotton industry, which can be seen across diverse desert landscapes and national contexts. Such an unmissable similarity forefronts the overwhelming pervasiveness of false

conceptions about deserts, which, having been transnationally interpreted as wastelands, were instrumentalized by two settler nations. Within this framework, it has not only been possible to normalize the ecological violence committed on and against North American deserts, but also highly desirable to do so. Moreover, as signaled in both texts, the flourishing of this industry inevitably comes accompanied by human dispossession.

In the poem “Birth Witness” included in *Where Clouds Are Formed*, the speaker recounts the day she was born: “My mother gave birth to me / in an old wooden row house / in the cotton fields.”<sup>101</sup> This poem seizes the significance that these fields hold in O’odham life. Born in the land of her ancestors, she grapples with the necessity of naming her territory according to colonial contexts, describing it as “the cotton fields of Arizona.”<sup>102</sup> When confronted with the need to get a birth certificate from the United States, the speaker is asked to call on witnesses who can corroborate her birth. However, apart from her parents—who do not speak English—she finds herself with no one but the environmental components that encompass the desert landscape: “The stars were there in the sky. / The winds were there. / The sun was there.”<sup>103</sup> The difficulties faced by the speaker to account for her own birth and belonging to the territory, mirror Yásnaya Elena Aguilar assertion about how “the formation of states [has] denied and contested other types of organization, other identities and territories, other languages not used in state administration.”<sup>104</sup> Cleaved by the Mexico-US border, Indigenous connections with the territory are affected by a nation-state whose influence permeates the everyday existence of the desert’s inhabitants from the very moment they are born.

Populated by cotton farming references, Zepeda’s poetry portrays Stanfield as intricately traversed by multilayered levels of exploitation that affect land, family, and community. In “We Walk in Beauty,” Zepeda recalls: “This rural community, like so many others, was at times a difficult place to grow up in. It was a life of extreme poverty and hardship, but despite that, within our own individual communities, there was strength and support.”<sup>105</sup> Cotton cultivation has a deep history in the region, having been introduced to Arizona from Mexico over two thousand years ago, with archaeological findings indicating its use in fabric production and even cuisine as early as 400 BC.<sup>106</sup> While Indigenous communities cultivated and utilized cotton for centuries, the arrival of the Spaniards marked a shift, as the industry was seized from them and transformed into a tool of dispossession. Following its introduction, the cotton industry flourished under successive colonial regimes that transformed the region, steadily advancing throughout the Spanish Colonial, Mexican, Arizona Territorial, and early Arizona

Statehood eras.<sup>107</sup> Today, it remains a key economic driver in the state and a persistent motif in Zepeda's poetry. Thus, alongside the division of the Tohono O'odham territory, which remains split by the borders of Mexico and the United States, the multiscale colonization of the desert resulted in the appropriation and ecologically detrimental expansion of the cotton farming industry.<sup>108</sup> As portrayed in Zepeda's poetry, this agricultural sector perpetuates, reinforces, and ultimately enacts colonial violence, thus underscoring the nexus between the environmental damage inflicted upon the desert and the people who live on it. In the introduction to *Ocean Power*, the author alludes to some of the most hazardous labor conditions arising within the framework of the cotton industry:

The cotton fields held hidden dangers. During sudden cloudbursts and extended rainfalls, the volume of water in irrigation ditches multiplied in minutes. The workers in the fields ran to get across the ditches before the water rose too high or currents ran too swiftly . . . the current ran too quickly for anyone to be safe.<sup>109</sup>

The unsafe working conditions inherent in these fields are made evident. Given that one of the central topics of her writing revolves around rain and rain-making ceremonies, her focus is on the dangers posed by the irrigation ditches required to sustain the cotton crops that demand very large quantities of water for months. In instances where the already water-saturated desert soil receives rainfall, it results in hazardous flooding, swiftly escalating into an imminent threat for the workers and communities in the vicinity of the cotton fields. In the poem "The Man Who Drowned in the Irrigation Ditch," also included in *Ocean Power*, the speaker describes the fear experienced by the wife of an elderly worker who is constantly falling into irrigation ditches, even when they are not completely flooded: "his legs were not strong enough to be straddling ditches."<sup>110</sup> On what the speaker describes as an especially muddy summer day, the worker's routine stumbling results in his drowning. The introduction of large-scale, water-intensive crops transformed the presence of water—something the O'odham yearn for in their ceremonies—into a menace, thereby tainting the relationship not just between water and people but also between water and desert along with all that this territory encompasses.

Remembering the floods that afflicted the desert in Arizona at the end of the twentieth century, in *Ocean Power*, Zepeda includes the poem "The Floods of 1993 and Others," where she draws attention to the environmental destruction created by the amalgamation between irrigation ditches and

heavy rainfall framed by a cotton-producing zone. The poem alludes to all that has been lost in the frame of a racial extractive industry: "Nature's features reshaped, molested by a watery monster."<sup>111</sup> Once again, the speaker references the meaningful transformation of water, which in the poems about rain-making ceremonies is portrayed as a desired presence, here seen as a monster that seems to actively favor the colonial framework: "Touching everything except the US Park Service picnic tables. / Heavy concrete remains steadfast in the midst of nature's war zone."<sup>112</sup> While some of the settler imprints remain intact in the aftermath of the inundations, the ecological entities of the desert are severely affected:

Old trees uprooted.  
Grasses, twigs, and branches,  
all forced  
...  
Barrel cactus,  
hanging in uncactuslike manner  
upside down in between tree trunks and large branches.  
They silently scream.  
"My roots are still good, put me in the rocky soil."  
The screams are inaudible.<sup>113</sup>

Zepeda's poetry compels us to hear and see the desert through a lens of care, exhorting us to recognize it as an entity worthy of love. Indeed, through these poems, Zepeda defends the right of the desert to be cared for. Albeit different, her approach to the arid ecosystem parallels her engagement with the O'odham language. Angelica Lawson contends that given the significance of language eradication to the colonization of Indigenous peoples worldwide, the presence of the author's native language is an unequivocal act of resistance.<sup>114</sup> As writing in the O'odham language is a decolonial articulation for the author to preserve and defend it from erasure, writing the desert environment as the Tohono O'odham people know it fulfills a comparable endeavor. In overwriting colonial imaginaries of the desertscape, Zepeda defends the land. The author highlights the environmental brilliance of the desert not only by depicting its ecological vibrancy but also by emphasizing the connections between the O'odham and the territory, as well as the relationships between the ocean and that same space. In Zepeda's texts, these relationships overlap with the knowledge-loaded ceremonies through which the O'odham strengthen human-nonhuman relations. While the desert bears the impact of border presence and extractive industries, it

remains intertwined and interdependent with both proximate and remote human and nonhuman elements, thus perpetuating reciprocal acts. This approach underscores a web of the often-hidden desert belongings, which stand in contrast to the hegemonic views that have attempted to downplay them. Ofelia Zepeda's cultural production celebrates these belongings by repositioning the arid biome in discursive and material form.

## Listening to an Arid Biome

In cultural works grappling with the implications of using the desert as a border, this biome is typically depicted as an expansive entity that both facilitates defiant acts of transgression and harbors significant dangers. Situated within the context of restricting immigration policies and the militarization of the Mexico-US border, the desert is often referenced as a threatening force at the center of different stories of hope and despair. The life-endangering risks posed by this border ecosystem are central in the novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) by Mexican author Valeria Luiselli, whose specific focus is on refugee children. Addressing the intertwined political, social, and ecological dynamics that intersect at the desertscape, the author forefronts the dynamism and volatility of the socioecological relations that occur within this territory. Through this approach, Luiselli emphasizes many of the human and nonhuman losses that result from the conflicting assemblages that make up the daily dynamics of an arid ecological system that doubles as a border demarcation.

One of the central driving forces of Luiselli's narrative is the harm caused by the convergence of border enforcement strategies and the ecological features of the desert within contemporary migration frameworks. The effects of this convergence have been scrutinized by Jason de León in his ethnographic work *The Land of Open Graves* (2015), where the author examines the impact on migrant bodies of what he terms a "hybrid collectif," which includes desert wildlife, harsh weather conditions, and isolation framed by border enforcement measures such as the wall. As he identifies, this combination not only possesses the capacity to claim lives but also actively contributes to the hiding and obliteration of their remains.<sup>1</sup>

The harm produced by the presence of the border on the desert, central in Luiselli's novel, finds another poignant illustration in the legal proceedings

of the United States of America versus four members of the “No More Deaths / No más muertes” humanitarian organization. Based in southern Arizona and founded in 2004, this group seeks to expose and cease the endangerment faced by undocumented migrants crossing the Mexico-US boundary. As part of their efforts to aid migrants, the members often go to remote areas to leave water, blankets, food, and other life-saving supplies. Because of this, in 2018, a volunteer was charged with two counts of felony harboring unauthorized migrants and one more of conspiracy to harbor and transport them, facing up to ten years in prison.<sup>2</sup> However, US District Judge Rosemary Márquez ruled that the defendant’s acts “were sincere exercises of religion” and barred the prosecution.<sup>3</sup> In her rebuke, Judge Márquez wrote:

The Government seems to rely on a deterrence theory, reasoning that preventing clean water and food from being placed on the [desert] would increase the risk of death or extreme illness for those seeking to cross unlawfully, which in turn would discourage or deter people from attempting to enter without authorization. In other words, the Government claims a compelling interest in preventing Defendants from interfering with a border enforcement strategy of deterrence by death.<sup>4</sup>

This scenario emphasizes that the rationale underlying Prevention Through Deterrence policies is essentially a deadly strategy that exploits the nonhuman elements of the border area to inflict harm upon migrants. According to the International Organization for Migration, the Southwest desert is the deadliest land migration route in the world, with 686 deaths and disappearances reported in 2022 alone, the highest number of fatalities recorded since tracking began in 2014.<sup>5</sup> The report acknowledges that the actual numbers may be higher due to gaps in the data, stemming from the lack of official records and the challenges of accurately tracking those who have gone missing in the region. Regarding the impossibility of accounting for the number of people who have died on this terrain, de León asserts: “the remote locations where people die, the rapid scavenging of corpses, and the destruction of clothes, personal effects, and bones by various processes mean that the current death tally of the desert undercounts the actual number of people who die out there.”<sup>6</sup> This contextual backdrop frames Luiselli’s portrayal of migration, serving as one of the novel’s guiding threads. In *Lost Children Archive*, the portrayal of the desert’s importance amid the pervasive challenges of migration invites an exploration of the additional roles this biome assumes. One such role calls for our attention to its environmental features, not just in terms of their impact on migrants, but also in terms of the toll that the border exacts upon the desert itself. This double approach



to the desert environment emphasizes the extent of the entanglement of human and nonhuman entities influenced by the presence of the border. Furthermore, it underscores that the interest in borders must encompass ecocentric concerns.

Certainly, addressing the increasing magnitude of environmental challenges in the Anthropocene, Hilary Cunningham notes that the field of border studies cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the worsening environmental degradation in which geopolitical boundaries participate. The cultural anthropologist emphasizes that border structures and practices are deeply intertwined with ecological systems, accentuating that environmental and ecological factors should be central to border studies, both in how political boundaries are conceived and enforced, and in the specific environmental challenges that arise in border regions.<sup>7</sup> In line with these concerns, in this chapter, I argue that *Lost Children Archive* addresses the junction between social, political, and environmental realms within the border-desert confluence, and that it does so through the representation of sound.

Mobilizing a multitemporal sonic lens, *Lost Children Archive* denounces the human and environmental toll wrought by the pervasive violence inherent in the border's establishment and ongoing upkeep. The novel points to the damage inflicted upon the desert environment by the practices and structures that shape the border landscape and, at the same time, underscores the usage of the environmental features of this same landscape as a weapon against migrant populations, here framed by the challenges faced by refugee children. Although this is the legal concept most frequently used by Luiselli, and thus the reason I adopt it, I sometimes use the terms "migrant" and "refugee" interchangeably. I do so in agreement with Harsha Walia, who argues that these classifications create a "hierarchy of rights" that does not necessarily serve refugees and instead contributes to the criminalization of those who do not fit the criteria dictated by international institutions for refugee status.<sup>8</sup>

Today, 40 percent of the refugee population worldwide is children.<sup>9</sup> In an all-time high, in the United States-Mexico border, more than 152,000 unaccompanied minors were encountered by immigration authorities in 2022.<sup>10</sup> Most of these children were coming from Central America, fleeing poverty, gang violence, domestic abuse, or corruption, many of them hoping to reunite with their families already living in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Once they arrive at their destination, most children surrender to authorities and are then subjected to legal proceedings, which tend to be backlogged and where attorneys are not guaranteed. This occurs even though kids have to appear in court. During the first administration of Donald Trump, under the "zero tolerance" policy, all adult migrants were arrested and sent to detention

centers instead of being released to wait for an immigration court date. Minors who were with them were held separately, in desert border stations inside cells and cages.<sup>12</sup> In the 2018–2019 period, at least six kids died in the custody of US Customs and Border Protection.<sup>13</sup> Under the administration of Joe Biden, the zero tolerance policy was rescinded, and nearly six hundred children were reunited with their families, but by February 2023, nearly a thousand were still separated from their families.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, according to the ICE Annual Report, in 2022, also under the administration of Biden, deportations nearly tripled compared to 2021, with 111,000 people deported, including children.<sup>15</sup> Unaccompanied refugee children are those who travel without a parent or legal guardian, although they may be accompanied by an adult, such as a smuggler, who guides them through the desert. These are the migration frameworks Luiselli references in *Lost Children Archive*, primarily through sound. The narrative echoes the plight of children lost in the US immigration legal system through the story of two missing sisters, alludes to the ineffability of deportation through radio news and the distant hum of a departing plane, and underscores the perils of desert crossings through a fictional novel that follows a group of lost children navigating an arid landscape. Because the fictional novel is read aloud during the road trip, sound—carried through the waves of voice—plays a central role in its narrative unfolding.

Interwoven with the refugee children's narrative arc is the history of the Chiricahuas, the last Apache group to resist colonization from both sides of the border. The novel references the actions of Native leaders such as Cochise and Geronimo, whose resistance against settler efforts in the nineteenth century stands as one of the most well-known acts of Native American offensive tactics. Geronimo's surrender is widely regarded as the end of the Indian Wars, marking the conclusion of the Apache armed uprising. Through this historical lens, the novel points to the settler harm inflicted upon Native peoples throughout the long history of borderland appropriation. This composite portrayal signals the unavoidable connection between the social dynamics unfolding in a particular ecological terrain used as a geopolitical boundary and the terrain itself. Such an approach to the arid biome connects the cycles of violence embedded in the border environment that, though not often readily visible, become manifest through both sound and silence. Here, I contend that by either depicting sounds or emphasizing acoustic absences, *Lost Children Archive* accentuates a series of social and ecological losses stemming from the ongoing ramifications of the persistent militarized perpetuation of the Mexico-US border. These ramifications affect both human and nonhuman entities, emphasizing the complex intricacies of the Southwest desert's past and present standing. Putting forth a multipart portrayal of the

desert environment, the novel captures its multidimensional manifestations. Thereby, the border desert portrayed in *Lost Children Archive* decries fixed categorizations; it is at once a sonorous and complex ecosystem vulnerable to human manipulation and harm; Native ancestral land where the echoes of long-fought and ongoing battles reverberate; and a critical component in border control strategies that have silenced countless migrant journeys.

As I examine in this chapter, the acoustic ambiance in Luiselli's novel facilitates the rendering of the unavoidable and close-knit encounters between the built and natural components of the border region and the cross-temporal social dynamics that traverse it. Attuning to the sound and silence of the Southwest desert reveals the manifest connection between the human and the nonhuman within the context of contemporary border formations and migration dynamics in North America. Regarding the mediation of sound to underscore human-nonhuman junctures, Ana María Ochoa Gautier suggests:

The presence or absence of sound . . . stands as the very mediator of the presence or absence of life. . . . But the acknowledgment of such a relation, based as it is on admitting the agentive acoustic dimensions of nonhuman entities in the affairs of humans, hinges on an understanding of the relations between humans and nonhumans that unsettle the historically constructed boundaries between nature and culture.<sup>16</sup>

In *Lost Children Archive*, auditory imaginaries operate as a medium to illuminate the ecological network formations that are intertwined with the human-centered political and material designs of the Mexico-US border. This depiction showcases the miscellaneous, defining functions of the environmental features of the desert in connection with the border delimitation. Through the portrayal of sounds, echoes, and silences, Luiselli accounts for the weaponization of the desert's ecological features in contemporary frameworks of migration, the environmental damage inflicted by borders upon the desert, and the Indigenous past and present lineages that accompany this landscape.

## BIODIVERSITY LOSS

The story begins with a New York-based family of four whose names remain undisclosed, referred to simply as the wife, the husband, the boy, and the girl. As they prepare for a journey to the Southwestern deserts, each parent plans to undertake a sound project along that location. While the father aims to document the remnants of the soundscapes that accompanied the

Chiricahuas' battles amid US expansionism across the borderlands, the wife develops an interest in creating a sound documentary about the experiences of migrant children navigating the desert. Yet, the parents' objectives are thwarted as they encounter significant challenges. As has been noted by Valentina Montero, the aspirations held by the parents draw attention "to the silences and elisions of historical memory [highlighting] the myopia of dominant historiography in ways that intersect with archival scholarship."<sup>17</sup> Because of the impossibilities faced in each documentary project to fully apprehend elusive realities, the novel speaks to the absences and erasures inherent in different archival endeavors. Through the pursuit of sounds that appear only in the intangible forms of echoes and reverberations, both projects turn the novel into a ghostly archive of what is missing, ignored, or what cannot be apprehended.

While *Lost Children Archive* denounces the violence generated by the weaponization of the desert in the context of contemporary migration, it brings attention to other events also strongly associated with that territory. Termed an "inventory of echoes," the father's sound documentary revolves around the Chiricahua Apaches in the Southwest during the aftermath of the border's nineteenth-century delineation. By recording an archive of the soundscapes that surrounded the Chiricahuas' fight against settler forces amid US imperialism, the father aims to collect the lingering resonances of their life and struggles. Thus, this project refers to the long genealogy of violence against Native people that has taken place in the same territory being traversed by unaccompanied minors, stressing some of the different stories that dwell in it. Through the projects of the wife and the husband, the novel draws attention to the overlapping soundscapes of violence enacted at the borderlands.

Given that, as sound studies scholar Alamo Farina asserts, a soundscape "is defined as the entire sonic energy produced by a landscape," and considering that the soundscape the father wants to record emanates from the desert, it becomes evident that the nonhuman elements of the biome will have a central role within the framework of the inventory of echoes.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the husband's project inadvertently exposes the loss of biodiversity by addressing the acoustic ecology of the desert, uncovering the absence of various nonhuman sounds that once were there. This process aligns with Ana María Ochoa Gautier's observation that the growing field of sound studies, in conjunction with contemporary ecological crises, has contributed to the emergence of sound collectives worldwide that use audio recordings and music research to expose environmental issues.<sup>19</sup> The inventory of echoes resonates with this framework, demonstrating that sounds can operate as

a medium to assess environmental harm. Because of this, the inventory is closely related to the field of ecoacoustics, which sound studies scholars Barclay and Gifford define as an emerging discipline that “studies the social, cultural, and ecological contexts of our environment through sound.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, while both the father’s and mother’s projects are focused on human struggles, the former unveils environmental degradation, a revelation achieved by its focus on recording the sounds produced by the desert’s environment.

The husband’s project has three central figures: Geronimo, Chief Cochise, and the Chiricahuas, who led the final battles of the Apache Wars in a struggle to maintain their independence from the US government. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz observes the significance of this resistance, stating that the war of the Apache Nation, from 1850 to 1886, was the most prolonged military counterinsurgency in the history of the United States, the final decade of which was led by Goyathlay, known as Geronimo.<sup>21</sup> Despite their prolonged defiance, as the historian emphasizes:

When Geronimo finally surrendered—he was never captured—the group numbered only thirty-eight, most of those women and children, with five thousand soldiers in pursuit, which meant that the insurgents had wide support both north and south of the recently drawn United States-Mexico border.<sup>22</sup>

This is the very reason why the husband is drawn to the arid region, specifically toward the Chiricahua Mountains. As noted in the novel, the husband identifies that territory as the place where “the last free peoples on the entire American continent lived before they had to surrender to the white eyes.”<sup>23</sup> To the husband, this region represents more than just the landscape where the last independent Chiricahua Apaches once dwelled. It embodies an entity that perpetuates the sound that once enveloped them. Because of that, according to the wife, the inventory of echoes “was not a collection of sounds that have been lost—such a thing would, in fact, be impossible—but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost.”<sup>24</sup> Sound artist Brandon LaBelle defines echoes as acoustical manifestations that produce ruptures: “the ruptures performed by the echo unfix the temporality of sound to further the integral displacement sound comes to impart onto the senses. In doing so, the echo disorients and distracts; it wanders and returns in the same moment to confuse.”<sup>25</sup> For LaBelle, whereas sounds maintain a clear temporal linearity that follows an origin point and a horizon of receptors, echoes can create a rupture between the past and the future,

destabilizing the oscillation of time because of their lingering effect. Given this characteristic, it is telling that the husband calls his project an “inventory of echoes” instead of an inventory of sounds even though most of the elements he records are not echoes in a literal sense, but a historical one. Moreover, the temporal disruption that they produce is the main element by which they can be considered echoes in the first place.

When the boy asks his father about the sounds he is trying to record, he replies: “Maybe the rain falling on this tin roof, some birds if we can, or maybe just insects buzzing.”<sup>26</sup> These sounds can be considered echoes because even though they do not replicate the soundscapes that surrounded Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, they repeat acoustic fragments that have survived them. As the wife describes: “his plan is to record the sounds that now, in the present, travel through some of the same spaces where Geronimo and other Apaches, in the past, once moved, walked, spoke, sang.”<sup>27</sup> The reverberations created by wildlife and weather-based phenomena produce a sonorous bond that connects past and present realities. These sounds generate a rupture in the linear temporal logic, or as LaBelle puts it: “The echo diminishes orientation and spatial clarity; it locates us in the threshold of the dead, as a voice without a body.”<sup>28</sup> The lack of clarity is expressed in the novel when the narrator asserts that echoes can be understood “as absence turned into a presence, and, at the same time, as a presence that [makes] an absence audible.”<sup>29</sup> By mapping and recording pieces that were part of the acoustic world of the last independent Chiricahua Apaches, the inventory of echoes turns into an artifact that brings back their presence by underscoring their absence. On this characteristic, the wife states:

He’s somehow trying to capture [Geronimo and his group’s] past presence in the world, and making it audible, despite their current absence, by sampling any echoes that still reverberate of them. When a bird sings or wind blows through the branches of cedars . . . that bird and those branches illuminate an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was.<sup>30</sup>

The father’s project intends to document the sounds of the desert as a method to seize the audible remnants of those at the center of the Chiricahua rebellion. Because the acoustic ecology of the arid biome is fundamental to this endeavor, the aural documentation turns into an ecoacoustics project. During the second part of the novel, when the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy, the latter recalls: “sometimes [the] inventories were just wind blowing and rain falling and cars passing.”<sup>31</sup> Since the narrative makes evident that finding sounds of desert wildlife is not always an easy endeavor, the

boy's recollection can be read in the context of the detrimental effects that climate change has on desert wildlife. Additionally, as previously mentioned, border security measures—particularly the construction of the border wall—have visibly contributed to environmental degradation. Within the novel's broader context, these two issues are interconnected. Thus, though brief, the boy's explanation can be seen as an allusion to some of the most urgent environmental threats facing the arid biome.

In addition to the significance of the desert's biodiversity for the father's project and the boy's observations regarding its decline, a central element emphasizing the desert's ecology is the recurring mention of the word *saguaro*. This term refers to the iconic cacti of the Southwest, which are crucial to the ecosystem as numerous species rely on them for shelter and survival. With the repetitive mention of the cactus's name, the narrative once again gives prominence to the ecological life of the arid terrain. The saguaros become audibly present during the road trip, specifically, when the father asks the children to learn the names of various desert species: "My husband has given the children a catalog of plant species, and they have to memorize names of things, things like saguaro, difficult names like creosote, jojoba, mesquite tree."<sup>32</sup> Even though the children are challenged to learn several names, only one of them fully captures the attention of the girl.

During the road trip, the youngest child points out various plants and different objects she sees through the window's car, repeatedly declaring that everything she sees is called saguaro. When the word emanates from the mouth of the child, it becomes a dominant force within the narrative: "Saguaro! She says the word like she has discovered a new star or planet. But there are no saguaros here, not yet . . . She's not convinced and continues to count saguaros in the wet empty plains, but softly now, to herself."<sup>33</sup> Considering the context of the husband's project, the girl's choice of that word to describe multiple things carries considerable significance. This cactus is profoundly important to the Tohono O'odham, or desert people. Because of that significance, while the recorded reverberations transmit fragments of the soundscape that surrounded the Chiricahua resistance, in this way "remind[ing] us of the ones that are lost," in the narrative, the vocalization of other elements, particularly of the word saguaro, reminds us not just of those who are no longer here but also of the ones who still are.<sup>34</sup>

Saguaros are ancient cacti indigenous to the Sonoran Desert and the Tohono O'odham consider them sacred. Furthermore, in O'odham worldviews, they are far more than just a type of cactus, they are people too. The belief in the inner humanity of saguaros can be found in different creation stories. One of them is described by Tohono O'odham member Susie Ignacio Enos,

who recounts the story of a girl who sank into the desert and was reborn as a saguaro. According to this version, in a prophecy, the father of the girl was told the following: “she will live forever to the end of times. She will be known by races of people from far and near. She will be queen of the Taw haw naw Juwut (desert lands). Generations of Aw’awtam will be saved from starvation because of her and her family.”<sup>35</sup> As Jane Hill and Tohono O’odham author Ofelia Zepeda tell us: “O’odham people do think of saguaros as human beings and strongly object to anyone destroying or transplanting specimens,” in this way observing the significance held by this plant.<sup>36</sup>

Living up to two hundred years and capable of growing almost forty-five feet tall, the saguaro cacti participate in circuits of nourishment that affect both human and nonhuman entities. In an interview, Lois Liston, who is a Tohono O’odham citizen and a saguaro harvester, mentions that the tribe’s calendar begins with the harvest of the saguaro’s fruit.<sup>37</sup> According to Liston, the community collects the fruit only after the animals who need it have eaten enough. In addition, the saguaros’ fruit and seeds participate in complex pollination processes, which is why the cactus is central to the sustenance of the desert ecology.<sup>38</sup> When they die, they are used as building materials and tools, and their remnants feed the nonhuman dwellers of the desert. Given the cultural, historical, and environmental significance of saguaros, the repetition of their name is not gratuitous. However, their name is the extent of their presence in the novel.

Although the girl enunciates the word multiple times, she does so while referring to other objects. The saguaros are never physically present. Consequently, their sounding name is what keeps them in the story. Every time the girl emits the word, the sound she generates takes over the narrative and becomes an overwhelming acoustic manifestation that, however, is not anchored in the material articulation of the cacti. While the child’s imaginative endeavor exhibits the evocative power of sound, which functions as a nonmaterial device that conveys the significance of the plant, it also makes its absence evident. Given the context of the story, the absence of saguaros can be seen as an allusion to the environmental threats posed by the border.

Although saguaros are not classified as an endangered species, their population is in decline.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the adverse effects of climate change, this decrease can also be understood in relation to the environmental destruction caused by border control measures. For example, the construction of the border wall at Organ Pipe, a biosphere reserve situated in southern Arizona, has inflicted significant harm upon the wildlife of the desert. In what concerns to the saguaros, even though they are safeguarded by the Native Plant Protection Act, several have been bulldozed in order to clear the



land to allow for border wall expansion. As emphasized by environmental journalist Maxie Adler, many of the bulldozed saguaros were more than one hundred years old, some even older than the border itself.<sup>40</sup> Within this framework, the Tohono O'odham have fervently rejected the border wall. In 2017, they released a video titled "There is no O'odham Word for Wall," and a few years later, in 2020, they denounced the border wall construction as a desecration.<sup>41</sup> This type of violence is intertwined with the enduring legacy of colonialism, within which the inventory of echoes is situated.

About such a legacy, Chickasaw Nation citizen and English professor Jodi Byrd states: "there is a long line of continuity between the past and the present that has not been disrupted despite the fact that the stories we tell may or may not acknowledge that continuity."<sup>42</sup> In the context of the US-Mexico border demarcation, it is possible to identify at least one example of said continuity. Concerning the historical context in which the inventory of echoes is framed, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asserts: "the Apache resistance was not a military threat to the US but rather a symbol of resistance and freedom. Herein lies the essence of counterinsurgency colonialist warfare: no resistance can be tolerated."<sup>43</sup> Through forced removal and other actions against the Chiricahua resistance, the nation-state attempted to fulfill its overwhelming effort for expansion. Extending this history of violence, the border wall's construction has led to the destruction of key elements that embody the Tohono O'odham people's enduring ties to the desert, including the removal of saguaros and the desecration of sacred burial sites through explosives.<sup>44</sup> As depicted in the novel, these overlapping histories reference the continuity of colonialist practices that have attempted to sever the material connections of Native people to the land, whether through disrupting human habitation or undermining the sacred significance of nonhuman elements.

Given that the novel is framed by extant migration dynamics and the constant shadow of the border on the family's journey, it calls us to see the saguaros in relation to these same frameworks. Viewed in relation to the border's haunting presence, the desecration of the saguaro population to facilitate the construction of the border wall stands out, especially because they are mentioned but not seen. This desecration evinces the ongoing colonial violence that undercuts Native sovereignty, here exemplified by the continuity of the damage of the border wall on sacred cacti and the portrayal of the Chiricahua's battles against settler practices. Seen through an ecoacoustics lens, the father's project signals biodiversity loss in the arid territory, while the incorporation of the name of the sacred cacti into the narrative hints at the damage and endangerment inflicted by extant and

expanding border control strategies. In dialogue with the Chiricahua resistance, the audible presence of saguaros serves as a channel to identify the nexus of continuing colonial practices that attempt to deprive Native people of “home, land, and sovereignty” in an unrelenting cycle that includes past and present temporalities.<sup>45</sup>

#### CHILDREN LOST

In *Lost Children Archive*, the violence that often accompanies undocumented migration, which reaches its most brutal heights when it involves children, is addressed through the portrayal of the desert’s participation in border control strategies. Concerning the biome’s role in hampering migrant journeys, Jason de León asserts: “The best and most lethal weapon the Border Patrol has is nature.”<sup>46</sup> The weaponization of the desert turns into a central element for the wife’s emerging project, a sound documentary about refugee children who have had to face the arid ecosystem. Initially, the wife intended to produce a radio documentary addressing “the children’s crisis at the border,” however, after encountering Manuela in New York, the mother of two undocumented girls who disappeared after being slated for transfer to an Arizona detention center from New Mexico, she discovers a compelling reason to join her husband on the journey to the Southwestern state.<sup>47</sup> Her goal becomes twofold: to conduct interviews with refugee children and to aid in the search for Manuela’s missing daughters. However, confronted with the reality that not all children make it to their final destinations and aware that she will not find the two lost sisters, she soon decides to change the project: “The story I have to record is not the story of children who arrive, those who finally make it to their destinations and can tell their own story. . . . The story I need to tell is the one of the children who are missing.”<sup>48</sup> The stories of the refugee children are brought to the forefront through the emphasis on their absence, a theme that is subtly woven throughout the novel. Rather than being present and interacting directly with other characters, the children are evoked through oral narratives about them. These include radio broadcasts chronicling their journeys and the reading aloud of a fictional novel about a group of children lost in an unnamed desert. All acoustic in nature, these are the primary narrative channels through which the echoes of refugee children, and not direct depictions of the children themselves, are interwoven into the novel. Alongside this tenuous portrayal is the figure of the desert, an entity that haunts the steps of the absent kids.

The idea behind the sound documentary is framed by the waves of refugee children who have arrived at the Mexico-US limits in the last decade.

Reports from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) indicate that for years, 2014 was considered the peak year for undocumented migration of unaccompanied children—those found without any family members—when nearly 70,000 minors were apprehended at the border. However, in the fiscal years of 2022 and 2023, these numbers surged to unprecedented levels, with 152,057 and 137,275 respective encounters reported annually. In 2024, the figure dropped significantly but still surpassed the 2014 report, with 109,998 encounters.<sup>49</sup> In Luiselli's novel, the narrator describes this mass migration:

More than eighty thousand undocumented children from Mexico and the Northern Triangle, but mostly from the latter, had been detained at the US southern border in just the previous six or seven months. All those children were fleeing circumstances of unspeakable abuse and systematic violence.<sup>50</sup>

In an earlier section of the narration, the author condenses some of the reasons behind the significant scales of child migration: “the untamable waves of violence, the army, the gangs, the police, the sudden disappearances of people –mostly young women and girls.”<sup>51</sup> This description aligns with the findings of UNICEF, especially regarding child migration from Central America to the United States. According to the organization, children tend to migrate due to reasons connected with violence, economic hardship, aspirations for educational opportunities, and family reunification.<sup>52</sup> In response to the surge in unaccompanied children encountered in 2014, cases involving children were given priority in immigration courts, leading to prompt deportation proceedings.<sup>53</sup> Subsequently, between 2018 and 2019, thousands of children were detained in cages and tents.<sup>54</sup> During this period, under the zero tolerance policy, both unaccompanied children and those traveling with their parents were detained. To enforce this policy, children were forcibly separated from their parents and held at different facilities. This is the context surrounding the story of Manuela's missing daughters and the social and political frame for the wife's documentary project, for which she seeks to gather information from oral sources.

While waiting in a gas station, the wife overhears that a group of children are about to be deported. Trying to find more information about it, she turns to the radio, where an immigration lawyer with firsthand knowledge about the case is being interviewed. She soon finds a way to contact the lawyer and learns that the kids will be deported from an airport that is not too far from where the family is located. From this point forward, the protagonists focus on getting to the airport before the removal takes place. Once again, sounds are positioned as central elements in developing the story, as the

primary components for collecting and generating information are voices propagated by airwaves. Thus, while the nonhuman elements of the desert serve as the principal source of information for the husband, the radio takes center stage as the main source of information for the wife's project: "We drive onward, southwest-bound, and listen to the news on the radio, news about all the children traveling north."<sup>55</sup> After hearing news with updates on the children, the wife often records memos to catalog what she learns.

It might seem strange that the most important source of information for the family is the radio given that the novel is situated in the present time and that the protagonists should have access to the internet. Regarding this communication practice, Chicana studies scholar Dolores Casillas states: "Radio is generally seen as an archaic medium: communication scholars frequently point to its use in postsocialist or developing countries but do not often address its role within immigrant or communities of color."<sup>56</sup> Casillas refers to Spanish-language radio in the United States, and based on what the wife describes, the family is also listening to this type of radio: "How did you travel to the U.S.? The reporter asks. His voice calm and composed, the boy replies in Spanish, saying that he came in the Bestia. I translate his response to my husband."<sup>57</sup> Additionally, as Casillas observes, Spanish radio programs tend to be dominated by immigration topics and often "rally in solidarity" with immigrants' civil rights.<sup>58</sup> This sense of solidarity, coupled with the medium's immediacy, becomes evident when the wife, recognizing the urgency of the situation, turns to the radio to gather crucial information, specifically, the location of the airport so she can reach it before the children are deported. Indeed, this urgency appears to be the driving force behind her choice to rely on the radio as the primary source of information for her sound documentary.

Because the wife plays local radio stations while the entire family is in the car, she is not the only one listening to the reports about the children. Throughout the road trip, the siblings learn about the kids arriving at the border, as well as about the battles fought by the Chiricahuas against settler forces recounted by their father. At one point, they contend: "What if Geronimo had never surrendered to the white-eyes?—What if he'd won that war?—Then the lost children would be the rulers of Apacheria!"<sup>59</sup> Whereas the adults grapple with their marriage and reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities that lie at the core of their sound projects, the children struggle to make sense of various realities through their imagination, notably, through games that in the novel are identified as reenactments.

Rooted in a sonorous dimension and incorporating an embodied component, the "reenactments" performed by the children, sometimes involving

the parents, serve as another medium through which the narrative addresses absence, loss, and refiguration. These reenactments are often performed by the siblings, who dramatize the stories they hear from their father. However, in the aforementioned example, aware that Geronimo fought in the past, the boy and the girl imagine a different ending to his story, which in their imagination, would affect the story of the refugee children in the present time. Even though they can differentiate between both temporalities, at the same time, possibly because of the sense of immediacy of the radio, they articulate an instant solution for the challenges endured by unaccompanied children. Thinking about these games, the narrator says: "Maybe any understanding, especially historical understanding, requires some kind of reenactment of the past, in its small, outward-branching, and often terrifying possibilities."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the terrifying element that the narrator identifies in the game played by the children is the continuous cycle of cruelty deployed in the borderlands, seen in the conflation of two separate moments. Two elements facilitate this conflation. Sound studies scholars Mark Grimshaw et al. argue that "imagination is typically discussed in terms of image, as is clear from the root of the word itself," and that sonic imagination is often disregarded. Because the siblings can articulate and reimagine both realities based on what they hear, they are constantly displaying and privileging sonic imagination.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, sounds are the starting point for the imaginative conflation process. The other element is the arid biome. Since what the children hear takes place in the desertscape, it is easy for them to situate their sonorous articulations in the same space.

Another reenactment occurs when the siblings imagine and perform what it would be like to be lost in the desert: "The boy says they're both thirsty, lost and walking in the endless desert, says they're both so thirsty and so hungry it feels like hunger is ripping them apart, eating them from the inside, says that hardship and hopelessness are now overtaking them."<sup>62</sup> While up until this point, no character had described the difficult process of traversing the desert, for the siblings, it is enough to know that the desert is the entity being traversed by those they call "the lost children" to imagine the harrowing experiences they endure. Because the siblings are reenacting this narrative from a privileged position, the wife finds it problematic and frivolous. This critique mirrors the instances in which she reflects on the ethical issues behind her own project. For example, thinking about the potential impact of the documentary, the wife states: "It doesn't seem right to turn those children, their lives, into material for media consumption."<sup>63</sup> To that, she adds: "And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else's suffering? . . . No one decides to not go to work and

start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning.”<sup>64</sup> Although this premise is shared in the context of *Lost Children Archive*’s fictional world, they reproduce the concerns of Luiselli about the ethical implications of her work.

Different from what the author does in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017), a chronicle where she includes parts of migrant children’s testimonies, in the novel, Luiselli eludes direct representations.<sup>65</sup> Whereas *Tell Me How It Ends* reproduces the voices of several immigrant kids dealing with trauma and the threat of deportation, in the novel, Luiselli is addressing the ones who cannot be found: “I am still not sure how I’ll do it, but the story I need to tell is the one of the children . . . whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes.”<sup>66</sup> In an interview with Lauren Leblanc, the author states: “[the story of migrant children] is not my story to tell,” which is part of the reason she uses fiction not as a way of documenting the issues that are being addressed or of answering the questions that are being asked, “but [of] at least understanding how to phrase those questions.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps this is why, instead of directly narrating the journey that many children take to get to the border or across the desert, the author references it through narrative echoes.

In the words of Chicana author Stephanie Elizondo Griest, the narrative techniques that Luiselli uses to address the stories of the refugee children turn into “reverberations of their small but brave footsteps.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to resonating through radio waves and reenactments, these reverberations also emerge in the imagined Italian novel *Elegies for Lost Children*, which recounts the odyssey of a group of unaccompanied children navigating vast, uncharted arid landscapes. Written by fictional author Ella Camposanto and loosely based on the 1212 Children’s Crusade, the novel tells the story of a group of children facing challenges strikingly similar to those faced by many migrant children traversing the Southwest desert:

Mouths open to the sky, they sleep. Boys, girls: lips chapped, cheeks cracked, for the wind whips day and night. They occupy the entire space there, stiff but warm, lined up like new corpses along the metal roof of the train gondola. From behind the rim of his blue cap, the man in charge counts them—six children; seven minus one. The train advances slowly along the racks parallel to an iron wall. Beyond, on both sides of the wall, the desert stretches out, identical.<sup>69</sup>

The first elegy portrays the desert as a material and menacing presence waiting for the arrival of the children. The fictional novel does not need to describe the characteristics of this biome to convey the danger it represents.

Considering the context of the story, the looming precarity of the situation the children are about to face becomes unmistakable. Hence, *Elegies for the Lost Children* acts as a conduit amplifying the haunting echoes of the desert. Likewise, the portrayal of the lost children from the *Elegies*, along with the radio news that the family hears about unaccompanied minors, produce intense reverberations of the real-life stories concealed within:

They travel, alone, on trains and on foot. They travel without their fathers, without their mothers, without their suitcases, without passports. Always without maps. They have to cross national borders, rivers, deserts, horrors. And those who finally arrive are placed in limbo, are told to wait.<sup>70</sup>

This quote is one of many examples where the narrative underscores the concomitance of divergent childhood experiences that expose profound social and economic disparities. In the safety of their car, the wife's children hear the stories of the *Elegies* and listen to the news about refugee children. As a result, one of the primary challenges facing the narrator is grappling with how to explain the dangers experienced by the migrant children to the siblings. For example, during the radio interview with the boy who is narrating his journey on top of *La Bestia*, he mentions his little brother, who fell off the train and did not make it to the border. Just as the boy begins to recount the details of this harrowing event, the wife abruptly switches off the radio, shielding the siblings from hearing the distressing account. In another instance, the girl asks her mother to explain the meaning of the word "refugee." In an interior monologue, the narrator describes refugees as people who have already arrived at their destination but remain trapped in the custody of the immigration system. Because of this, she wants to say that "a child refugee is someone who waits."<sup>71</sup> However, she tells her daughter: "a refugee is someone who needs to find a new home."<sup>72</sup> These examples underscore the wife's struggle to reconcile the plight of other children with the task of elucidating it to her own, making evident the inherent impossibility of such an undertaking.

When the family finally gets to the airport, it is too late. The refugee children are boarding the plane. As soon as they see them, the wife contends: "They'll be removed, relocated, erased, because there's no place for them in this vast empty country."<sup>73</sup> Whereas the girl is asleep and does not ask for an explanation, the boy does. Once again confronted with the realization that she cannot hide or explain the extent of what is happening to him, the wife asks him to be the one to describe that pivotal moment himself. The boy narrates: "The spaceship is moving toward the runway. . . . The astronauts

are inside the ship now.”<sup>74</sup> Knowing that it would be impossible to rationalize the deportation process of children, the boy uses his imagination. However, as the wife explains, “he’d listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered,” and hence he is aware of the reality that lingers behind his story.<sup>75</sup>

The preceding scene also emphasizes that, aside from the boy and the girl, the only other children integral to the family’s narrative are either absent or gradually fade away. These include Manuela’s daughters, the boy on the radio, and the group of refugee children encountered at the airport. Mirroring the challenges faced by the characters, the author underscores the daunting task of conveying the hardships endured by the children at the center of the narrative. Because of this, they appear through the reverberations of their stories, which take the form of radio waves, acoustic reenactments, elegies, and the sound and image of an airplane vanishing in the air. Since these reverberations refer to the unspeakable anguish endured by refugee children, in the words of Elizondo Griest, their stories turn into “haunting[s] that will forever echo in our bones.”<sup>76</sup> These hauntings become the main driving force for the siblings’ actions during the last part of the novel and are the reason the desert becomes fully incorporated into the story through its acoustic and material presence.

#### THE DESERT SEEN

After seeing the refugee children being deported on the airplane, the boy decides to help find Manuela’s daughters. At this point, the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy. The temporality is also different. The boy is telling the story in retrospect because he is recording his voice to share it with his sister when she is older. As he recounts, carrying with them a few objects and the book of the Elegies, the siblings left their parents’ side and walked toward the desert to search for the girls:

And south into the heart of light we walked . . . close together and quiet, like the lost children walked somewhere, too. Under the same sun maybe, though I kept feeling all the time that we were walking on the sun’s surface and not under it, and I asked you, don’t you feel like we are walking on the sun.<sup>77</sup>

That last sentence replicates the boy’s words during their reenactment in the car, where he stated: “We’re walking in the desert and it’s like we’re walking on the sun and not under it.”<sup>78</sup> Even though at that point the siblings had not experienced the prolonged effects of the desert on their bodies,



its echoes, which they received via radio airwaves and speech, led them to create a vivid, immediate, intimate, and even painful response to the thought of long exposure to the biome's climatic features. Hence, during the reenactment in the car, the siblings produced a physical and affective register of the desert, which is fully mediated by media coverage. The arid biome emerges as an acoustic specter that haunts the intellect and physical memory of the children.

Writing about haunted landscapes, María del Pilar Blanco states: "Haunting can take many forms: Alongside apparitions of supernatural shapes or beings that otherwise would be imperceptible, it can also mean the disquieting experience of sensing a collision of temporalities or spaces—an experience that is nevertheless riddled with doubt and uncertainty."<sup>79</sup> Following this understanding, the initial manifestations of the desert, which appear through oral stories, the radio, and the reenactments, produce an acoustic collision between the landscape and the siblings' imagination, causing confusion. However, when they finish their reenactments, turn off the radio, or when the projects of the parents are paused, not the acoustic but the material presence of the desert continues to loom over the fictional lost children from the elegies:

They had walked, and swam, and hidden, and run. They had boarded trains and spent nights sleepless atop gondolas, looking up at the barren, godless sky. The trains, like beasts, drilled and scratched their way across jungles, across cities, across places difficult to name. Them, aboard this last train, they had come to this desert, where the incandescent light bent the sky into a full arch, and time had also bent back on itself. Time, in the desert, was an ongoing present tense.<sup>80</sup>

Whereas up until before the family arrived at the airport, the danger associated with the desert had been transmitted through its acoustic shadow, when the siblings start their journey, said manifestation changes. Wandering in the arid land, the boy and his sister get lost. However, they do so while participating in another reenactment, one that this time is not just verbal but also physical. While it is clear that their journey cannot in any way be compared to the ones undertaken by refugee children, what this part of the narrative accomplishes is that it fully draws attention to the weaponization of the biome. About this process, Jason de León contends: "In the Arizona desert nonhumans are major players without which [the] system of boundary enforcement could not exist."<sup>81</sup> This tactic responds to the Prevention Through Deterrence scheme, which was implemented in the nineties to close

all urban access to the passage of undocumented migrants. As a result, the anthropologist argues that it is evident Border Patrol relied on the desert's harsh conditions to endanger migrants.<sup>82</sup> The extreme environment poses life-threatening risks, including dehydration, hypothermia, hyperthermia, sunstroke, and severe exhaustion.

Part of the brutality that accompanies the weaponization of this biome is described by the boy: "The heat always getting heavier and the sun on our foreheads stinging us like a thousand yellow bees."<sup>83</sup> This is one instance where the boy vividly expresses some of the agonizing consequences of experiencing the harsh climate of the desert when traversing it on foot, alone, lost, and unprepared. In addition to the reenactments and the *Elegies*, the novel also considers the dire consequences of the desert's weaponization through the incorporation of a folder that contains "dozens of 'Migrant Mortality Reports' printed from online search engines that locate the missing, which [list] the bodies found on those deserts, the possible cause of death, and their exact location."<sup>84</sup> Right before the siblings' departure, the novel alludes to a set of these reports, which include archival information about migrants whose ages range from zero to fifteen years old. Regarding the archival process surrounding this folder, the wife asserts: "You whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, just sometimes, an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something."<sup>85</sup> The reports serve both as a medium to denounce the framing of the desert as a lethal weapon and as a channel to preserve the lingering echoes of the stories they seek to document. As Jason de León explains, recording migrant mortality rates is particularly challenging due to the presence of scavengers and the desert's harsh climatic conditions, which often contribute to the erasure of human remains.<sup>86</sup> These dynamics are reflected in the boy's account: "Around us we heard too many sounds, strange sounds . . . like animals moving around us . . . and I wondered if we were hearing the sound of the dead in the desert, all the bones there."<sup>87</sup> This quote elucidates the significance of the fictional author's surname, Camposanto, which translates to "cemetery," an attribute that serves to accentuate the desert's integral role in border control's deadly effects.

During his journey through the desert, the boy reads the stories of the lost children while he and his sister are experiencing fear and uncertainty. This leads to the overlap of the fictional worlds: "We looked up at the thick clouds getting ready to burst into rain, and at the eagles above us, which are now flying in a perfect circle . . . under those clouds, and the four children see them too."<sup>88</sup> Toward the end, the siblings are unable to find Manuela's daughters, and instead, when the fictional worlds collide, they find the lost

children that inhabit the pages of Camposanto's book. At the beginning of the novel-within-the-novel, there are seven kids, and when the boy and the girl find them, only four of them are left. The clash of these worlds can be interpreted in various ways. For Glenda Carpio, the elegies themselves are a medium through which Luiselli "[underscores] the suffering of child refugees . . . to underscore colonialism instrumentalization of children as figures that can mobilize sentiment [shielding them] from easy consumption."<sup>89</sup> In the specific instance of the encounter between the lost children and the siblings in the desert, by appearing in two narrative dimensions, the refugee children enact their agency by resisting confinement, challenging narrow understandings of the context they are inhabiting, and rebelling against established forms. The multidimensional reconfiguration of the lost children also underscores both the weaponization of the desert and the extent of the disconnection between the lived experiences that have stumbled upon each other. After spending one night together, the lost children part ways with the siblings: "Where are the other four children I asked, and you said they had left, they'd left right before sunrise."<sup>90</sup> Whereas the boy and the girl are found by their parents, the refugee children leave, and get lost again.

#### OVERLAPPING CONTINUITIES

In an attempt to capture the auditory landscape surrounding the final days of the Apache Wars, the inventory of echoes turns into a channel to identify environmental loss. The husband seeks to capture the sounds emanating from the desert's ecosystem, yet, as the boy notes, he does not find much. This serves as the first example of how the novel alludes to the ecological degradation in this biome but is not the only one. Besides the inventory of echoes, the novel also addresses environmental concerns at various other junctures. For instance, during the road trip across the desert, the wife states: "[this is] a landscape scarred by decades or maybe centuries of systematic agricultural aggression: fields sectioned into quadrangular grids, gang-raped by heavy machinery, bloated with modified seeds and injected with pesticides," thereby alluding to the rampant degradation produced by large-scale agricultural enterprises in the border region, which I have signaled in previous chapters.<sup>91</sup> In addition, as observed earlier, the inclusion of the saguaros' name, which draws attention to the detrimental impacts of the border wall on the desert, is another example of how the novel engages with environmental-based interests.

Because of the damage that the border wall has brought upon the saguaros' population, the constant repetition of their name and, at the same

time, their absence from the described landscape, acts as a reminder of how the entanglement between the biome and a border demarcation has devastated central parts of the ecosystem. Furthermore, the acoustic depiction of saguaros also gives prominence to the fight of the Tohono O'odham Nation against the wall, a reference with a multitemporal reach within the novel, particularly when it is put into dialogue with the husband's project, which is focused on the Chiricahua Apache resistance. Through these accounts, the novel incorporates what Diné scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale describes as "histories of violence . . . that have everything to do with the US as a settler nation whose thirst for Indigenous lands and resources remains unabated."<sup>92</sup> In the case addressed in *Lost Children Archive*, the United States is not the only settler force that has participated in the frameworks of dispossession enacted at the borderlands. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo mandated that both Mexico and the US collaborate in suppressing Apache resistance, reinforcing colonial violence in the region.<sup>93</sup> Hence, the novel brings attention to processes of settler colonialism that have marked the Southwest desert from direct participation coming from both sides of the border. Bringing attention to this collaborative effort, as she ponders the states neighboring the border, the wife states: "Arizona, New Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua [are] all beautiful names, but also names to name a past of injustice, genocide, exodus, war, and blood."<sup>94</sup> In the context of the Mexico-US borderlands, the narrative portrays settler violence through evocative sonorous references, bridging past and present temporalities and dynamics. In addition to several references to the violent tension between Indigenous nations and two settler states, the novel emphasizes the challenges faced by migrants.

In the sound documentary, components such as radio news segments, oral histories, and excerpts from the book *Elegies for the Lost Children*, frequently recited aloud, conjure an auditory presence that carries clear echoes of the desert's weaponization against migrant people. At the center of this project are the stories of unaccompanied refugee children. Although the sound documentary is seemingly detached from the inventory of echoes, they are strongly interrelated. Both underscore different forms of dispossession and practices of colonialism. Moreover, the stories of the child refugees resonate with some of the experiences of Chiricahua Apache children. Similar to the detention of refugee kids, as Fort Sill Apache Tribal chair Jeff Haozous evokes, Chiricahua Apache kids were also imprisoned and violently separated from their families.<sup>95</sup> This connection uncovers the existence of a colonial continuity, a deep-seated lineage of children's incarceration and

family separation staged by settler states and performed at the Southwest border deserts, where their past and present echoes overlap.

*Lost Children Archive* references the pivotal role of the Southwestern Deserts in shaping migration movements and, at the same time, it brings attention to their ecological deterioration. This is achieved primarily through its use of sound. It is not a coincidence that the title of the Spanish version is *Desierto Sonoro* (Sonorous Desert). Through its portrayal of sounds, the novel illuminates the vitality of the ecology of the desert, its vulnerabilities, and its entanglement in dangerous border control strategies. Featuring multiple echoes and acoustic waves, the novel exposes some of the most significant enduring mechanisms of ongoing colonization, deterrence, and dispossession that revolve around this border biome. Even though the archives created by the sound projects cannot recuperate what has been lost, destroyed, or obliterated, they defy silence and erasure by tracing the reverberating echoes of distant and immediate realities.



## Blurred Boundaries

Within the context of the Americas, much of the study of borders tends to revolve around the Mexico-US spatial frameworks. While this focus illuminates the complex dynamics of migration patterns across riverine and desertic ecosystems, it also overemphasizes the Mexico-US geography, thereby obscuring migration experiences outside of these locations. Regarding the potential effects of a perspective restricted to one geographic zone, Marisel Moreno contends: “In addition to homogenizing a two-thousand-mile border, there is also the risk of generalizing borders and borderlands, thus erasing people’s experiences.”<sup>1</sup> The intense focus on the Mexico-US divide not only risks promoting a homogenized view of migration but also marginalizes other border environments from cultural and social imaginaries. Furthermore, a sole focus on this borderland risks framing migration experiences as linear transitions between two points. Making this the standard approach downplays the complex realities of migration, particularly when it takes place from distinct regions in Central and South America to the United States, as these journeys often involve multiple destinations and geographic hurdles. This chapter directs its attention to border forests, encouraging us to recognize the heterogeneous nature of border formations and spotlighting the diverse array of ecologies that may intersect with migrant journeys.

Focusing on forested areas, here I consider the significance of ecosystems that, while often overlooked as borders, actively function as such. Central American border forests exemplify this dynamic—though not traditionally seen as paradigmatic borders, they play a crucial role in contemporary migration routes toward Mexico and the United States. In this context, Thomas Nail explains that borders operate as “mobile devices designed to redirect, recirculate, and bifurcate social motion,” a concept that resonates with the

shifting and porous nature of these forested borderlands.<sup>2</sup> For the author, borders are in constant motion due to the human and nonhuman entities that constitute them, such as the terrain itself and the different interventions of humans in those spaces. As I note in this chapter, the dynamic nature of forests makes border mobility more evident, specifically in what concerns their nonhuman elements. Such dynamism results in distinct patterns of social motion, leading migrants moving through the forest to interact with its specific attributes and the different human actors that operate within this space. This is particularly visible in the rainforests shared between Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize, a vast expanse known as the Selva Maya (Mayan Forest).

The Selva Maya is the second largest rainforest in the Americas, surpassed only by the Amazon. This vast bioregion encompasses more than twenty distinct ecosystems. Stretching 871 kilometers through dense forests, the Guatemala-Mexico border cuts across the ancestral lands of the Maya people. Today, these forests remain home to nearly six hundred thousand Indigenous residents and *campesinos* (peasants).<sup>3</sup> As the largest forested region in Mesoamerica and a cornerstone of global ecosystems, the Selva Maya is inhabited by a diverse array of nonhuman beings, many of whom are endemic to the region and face various forms of endangerment. One of the latest threats to this biome is the creation of the *Tren Maya* (Maya Train), a railroad system built to attract tourism to the region that will traverse the forest, effectively cutting through wildlife corridors and producing habitat loss. As a border region, different from the well-defined infrastructure of the Mexico-US borderland, southern Mexico is characterized by the absence of distinct physical markers. As Birgit Schmook et al. observe: “Being situated mainly within the forest, without built infrastructure, the Selva Maya border between Guatemala and Mexico has little public performance of border-ness.”<sup>4</sup> While the militarization of the Suchiate River near Tapachula has made that particular section more visibly a border, many areas in the region still lack such pronounced differentiation. In these cases, their minimal performance of border-ness is reinforced not only by the absence of physical infrastructure but also by the daily movements of local inhabitants, who often cross various sections of the border without even realizing it.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in places such as Unión Juárez, a border town nestled in the highlands of Chiapas in southern Mexico, people get to Mexico or Guatemala sometimes without knowing when they have left one country and reached another. Furthermore, as Dolores Camacho Velázquez observed during her fieldwork in the region, Guatemalan migrants arriving in this border town for work are not questioned by locals due to the strong familial ties that span



both sides of the geopolitical divide. These connections exist either because the drawing of the borderland divided families between the two countries or because individuals married and settled in either Mexico or Guatemala.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in this specific scenario, the border operates as an invisible bridge that locals traverse without much complication. Yet, for migrants, it takes on a profoundly distinct nature.

This border region began drawing heightened attention in 2014 with the launch of *Plan Frontera Sur* (Southern Border Plan). Implemented under US pressure, the initiative sought to curb the northward flow of Central American migrants, particularly following the arrival of tens of thousands of unaccompanied children at Mexico's southern frontier. Plan Frontera Sur resulted in the rapid increase of border patrol and checkpoints throughout southern Mexico, leading to a dramatic growth in the number of detentions, with more than 107,000 people deported in 2014, a 35 percent increase from the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Amid this surge in detentions and deportations, the region has effectively become an invisible wall. Since 2014, Mexico's bordering regime has only grown more restrictive. Writing about the intensification of the militarization of the southern Mexican border, Robert McKee Irwin states: "As the US government has pressured Mexican authorities to prevent migrants from arriving at the US border, Mexico has increasingly mimicked the US not only in practices of detaining and deporting migrants, but also in treating them callously."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, migrant detentions are widespread throughout Mexico, with a record high of 782,176 undocumented migrants detained in 2023. This figure is nearly double the number of detained people in 2022 within the same country.<sup>9</sup>

Within this context, invisible barriers created by human actors, including police, immigration agents, and criminal networks, pose significant life-threatening dangers to migrants. As Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez observes: "Lo complicado no es cruzar a México, sino avanzar en él sin ser violado, secuestrado, asaltado o extorsionado por narcos, policías, agentes de Migración, asaltantes y violadores comunes" (The difficult part is not crossing into Mexico but moving through it without being raped, kidnapped, assaulted, or extorted by drug cartels, police officers, immigration agents, thieves, and common rapists).<sup>10</sup> However, far from deterring migrants from journeying north, this human wall has led them to adopt different strategies, with one of the more recent approaches being the formation of caravans consisting of thousands of people. This method aims to make the migration journey more visible and safer. However, although "the caravan offers major protection," as Verónica Cárdenas, a photographer who has documented the caravans, asserts, "migrants are still at danger on the road. They can still

get robbed, kidnapped, or raped.”<sup>11</sup> Given the unpredictability of migration, there is no single route that border crossers follow. Instead, they navigate multiple pathways. These include not only traveling in caravans but also alone, as well as relying on smugglers to guide them along their journey.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, in contrast to the visibility of caravans, many migrants seek to remain undetected, especially given the heightened dangers posed by the human wall that permeates southern Mexico. To mitigate these risks, they often choose more remote routes, frequently navigating the dense rainforests that stretch across southern Mexico and northern Guatemala. While the scholarly attention given to the border forest is scant, it has been used at least since 2005, as Germán Martínez asserts:

La ruta de migración indocumentada se desvió del lado guatemalteco: del corredor costero hacia el noroeste de ese país, saliendo por la zona selvática de El Petén guatemalteco y entrando por el municipio de Tenosique, en la vecina entidad mexicana de Tabasco. De ahí que esta entidad se haya convertido desde el 2005 hasta la actualidad en un importante punto de cruce fronterizo.

The route of undocumented migration shifted to the Guatemalan side: from the coastal corridor to the northwest of that country, exiting through the rainforest area of El Petén in Guatemala and entering through the municipality of Tenosique, in the neighboring Mexican state of Tabasco. As a result, this region has become an important border crossing point from 2005 to the present).<sup>13</sup>

In addition to functioning as a migration corridor, the rainforests of El Petén, which extend across Guatemala and Mexico, have been identified by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) since 1998 as a major route for drug trafficking, transforming them into increasingly dangerous passageways.<sup>14</sup> This is the setting of Mexican author Emiliano Monge’s *Las tierras arrasadas* (The Devastated Lands, 2015), a novel that depicts the journey of a group of migrants navigating the border forests of southern Mexico. By focusing on this intersection, the author broadens the border imaginary beyond the national or geographic specifics of the Mexico-US region. This approach emphasizes the diverse realities of migration experiences within the same continental expanse, underscoring the heterogeneity of ecological systems involved in contemporary migration frameworks. Given that this perspective sheds light on a biome distinct from the rivers and deserts more typically featured in writings on borders in the Central and North American

contexts, *Las tierras arrasadas* stands out as one of the few Mexican cultural works that not only addresses the Mexico-Guatemala divide but also focuses on the forested ecosystems that define it. Yet, even while maintaining its specificity, the portrayal of the forest reveals striking similarities with other ecosystems also articulated as borderlands.

Even as it highlights the diversity of contemporary migration routes, the novel points to the commonalities shared between Mexico's southern and northern borders, such as heightened levels of anti-immigrant militarization and the solidification of visible and invisible walls. The various resemblances shared between two distinct geographies speaks to the expansive nature of extant border regimes, accentuating the paradigmatic role held by the Mexico-US border across diverse landscapes and national spheres. At the same time, Monge's novel does not diminish the specificity of the border it depicts. Instead, he underscores it by highlighting the region's ecological features and their intersections with the human migration frameworks that traverse this environment. The distinctive character of this border emerges through the very movements that shape and sustain it. These movements unfold on multiple levels: from the shifting of the soil and the passage of human and nonhuman beings across it, to the operations of criminal networks that exploit it, and even to the ontological destabilizations such dynamics sustain. In particular, *Las tierras arrasadas* foregrounds the intersections of migrants and nonhuman entities within a context of shared vulnerability in the rainforest, revealing the frames of violence that move across distinct ontological boundaries.

The novel underscores motion as central to border-making through its portrayal of the forest's ecological life, encompassing both human and nonhuman existence. In this chapter, I focus on the interspecies relations that unfold within the border forest, revealing the instability of the concept of the human. Sometimes subtle and other times all too evident, the different movements of the various human and nonhuman actors that inhabit and traverse the rainforest, and the effects of the encounters between those actors, are some of the elements through which the border-ness of the territory is displayed. In line with this dynamic, Nail asserts: "The border is not the result of a spatial ordering, but precisely the other way around –the spatial ordering of society is what is produced by a series of divisions and circulations of motion made by the border [which is] a primary process and not a derivative social product."<sup>15</sup> This premise signals the importance of the various representations of the dimensions of mobility in the novel, encompassing not only the motion of the migrants and criminal networks

operating within the border expanse but also the ontological destabilizations unveiled by the social dynamics of the region—a conglomerate that produces the territory as a border.

### UNSTABLE LIMITS

Geopolitical borders are often conceived as stable figures that seamlessly differentiate between two territories. In the Americas, this capability is often exemplified through the section of the Mexico-US border that is divided by a wall. This type of paradigmatic imagery has led to imagining borders “in linear terms,” as Hilary Cunningham contends.<sup>16</sup> Given that spatial linearity supposes fixity, borders are often interpreted as permanent spaces thoroughly grounded in specific territorial expanses. However, these national divides are always in flux, a movement that, as Nail points out is literal, not metaphorical.<sup>17</sup> This physical dynamism encompasses motion across geological, climatic, biotic, and social dimensions. In *Las tierras arrasadas*, Emiliano Monge illustrates key movements within the Guatemala-Mexico border forests, showing how they not only occur within the region but actively constitute it as a border. Challenging the prevailing linear conception of political boundaries, Monge’s novel features the ongoing kinesis that manifests the border in the physical world.

According to Nail, borders are subject to various movements driven by both internal and external factors. As he explains, “the border moves itself” through processes such as the geologic composition of the terrain and the degradation of the land, while also being moved by others through processes such as border management, surveillance, and the movement of migrants.<sup>18</sup> These layered forms of motion are crucial to the portrayal of the border forest in Monge’s literary work. However, the novel goes far beyond the biophysical and political to explore other unseen dynamics at play. In particular, it speaks to how ontological boundaries can shift between beings, influenced by the frameworks of violence within the border territory, ultimately blurring the line between human and nonhuman entities. This shifting motion not only underscores what the border does but also what it entails.

The novel tells the story of a group of migrants who must cross the rainforest. Against this backdrop, the author portrays examples of the animal and vegetal life that not only inhabit but constitute the region. In addition to the wildlife and migrants whose paths intersect in this area, another central presence includes two smugglers—two local siblings known as *los chicos de la selva* (the boys of the forest). These young brothers know the terrain so intimately that their livelihood depends on navigating it. However, their

activities extend well beyond guiding migrants; they are also involved in an organized crime network that profits from their kidnapping. Through these elements, Monge depicts the convergence of various forces that traverse and solidify the forest as a border.

*Las tierras arrasadas* is structured in three sections. The first, titled “El libro de Epitafio” (Epitafio’s book), explores the dynamics of the narcotraficking network. The second section, “El libro de Estela” (Estela’s book), depicts the relationship between Epitafio and Estela, the two central figures leading the criminal enterprise. The third part, “Los chicos de la selva,” centers on the brothers and their interactions with undocumented migrants. Given the prominence of the forest in the first and third sections, they are the primary focus of my analysis. The migration experiences they depict are enriched by real testimonies from Central American migrants who passed through Mexico. This narrative intertwines with the depiction of the nonhuman elements in a migration corridor concealed within the forest.

The border territory in *Las tierras arrasadas* evokes the forests along the Mexico-Guatemala border clearly, a region where the escalation of migratory controls, especially after the implementation of Plan Frontera Sur, forced Central American migrants seeking to reach the US to take treacherous paths through Mexican territory. One such route winds through the dense forest of El Petén in northern Guatemala, while other forest trails weave around major border cities in southern Mexico. In the story, this border territory is described with images such as “[una] muralla vegetal” (a wall of vegetation) and “[un] muro de lianas, troncos leprosos y raíces recostadas” (a wall of vines, leprous trunks, and reclining roots).<sup>19</sup> These descriptions have a twofold effect. First, they emphasize the vegetal attributes of the border region, making evident its environmental liveliness. Second, the inclusion of terms such as “wall” and “barrier” references the most paradigmatic border of the Americas. While the narrative primarily focuses on the Guatemala-Mexico border, it frequently references the Mexico-US region, signaling the interconnectedness of these territories. This connection is evident not only in the obstacles present in each area but also in the expansion of the US border regime into Mexico, as exemplified by Plan Frontera Sur, which furthers the United States’ anti-immigration agenda. However, despite drawing parallels between these borders, the novel also acknowledges the unique elements that define the Mexico-Guatemala borderland.

Challenging the common perception of borders as static entities, the border depicted by the narrator, while invoking imagery reminiscent of a wall, accentuates its inherent dynamism. Indeed, the entire territory is narratively marked by motion. For instance, the novel depicts the borderlands

as consisting of “el salto de una ardilla en una rama, el vuelo de algún ave cuyas plumas de colores no le temen a las gotas, [y] una serpiente anillada que se arrastra, asustada sobre el lodo” (the leap of a squirrel on a branch, the flight of a bird whose colorful feathers are not afraid of the raindrops, [and] a ringed snake slithering, frightened, over the mud).<sup>20</sup> Drawing attention to the presence of wildlife, the description underscores that the border landscape is in a state of perpetual change. This dynamic is not only conveyed through the focus on animal life but also through references to other nonhuman entities, such as the image of “[un] riachuelo que corre más allá del muro de lianas” (a stream that runs beyond the wall of vines), which further emphasizes the active nature of this ever-evolving environment.<sup>21</sup> In employing these images, the text illustrates the border as a territory where distinct biotic systems are intricately intertwined with the geopolitics of the land. Far from being a static corridor, the border is a space where different movements continually redefine its form. Beyond presenting the border forest as scenery, *Las tierras arrasadas* conceives it as an unstable entity shaped by the myriad motions of nonhuman figures. By featuring nonhuman inhabitants, the forest’s liveliness is underscored. At the same time, the novel highlights how different actors exploit aspects of the ecosystem to inflict violence on migrants, revealing a darker dimension of the forest’s ecology.

As seen in previous chapters, Jason de León has examined the Mexico-US border, interrogating the ramifications of the 1990s implementation of the deterrence strategies by the US government, which closed off urban entry points for undocumented migrants, compelling them to navigate through dangerous terrains. De León asserts that this strategy effectively turned the desert into a weapon, with the Border Patrol anticipating that the harsh environment would inflict significant harm on migrants.<sup>22</sup> This assertion is grounded in the well-documented effects of prolonged exposure to the desert biome on humans, especially in the vulnerable conditions often associated with unauthorized migration. While de León primarily focuses on the Mexico-US divide, a parallel process unfolds on the southern Mexican border, where another biome—the rainforest—also poses significant threats to migrants. Although both ecosystems, alongside border regimes, contribute to frameworks that inflict harm on immigrants, their distinct characteristics result in different interactions with those who navigate them. In the following, I first highlight the key commonality between these ecosystems—the isolation they impose on migrant routes—before turning to the unique features of the rainforest corridor portrayed in *Las tierras arrasadas* and their specific impact on migrants.

At the outset of the novel, we encounter a scene where a group of migrants is ensnared in the heart of the forest by those who will soon become their captors. Through a collective voice, the group recounts the moment when, as they traverse the rainforest, a convoy of vehicles suddenly appears in front of them: "*unas luces se prendieron . . . no podíamos ver delante . . . nos pegamos unos a otros . . . puros cuerpos asustados*" (Some lights turned on . . . we couldn't see ahead . . . we pressed ourselves together . . . just frightened bodies).<sup>23</sup> If, as de León contends regarding the Mexico-US divide, the desert operates as "the perfect silent partner in boundary control," in the south, the rainforest is a key ecosystem that also amplifies the dangers faced by migrants.<sup>24</sup> Describing the remoteness of the forest migration routes and recounting the events leading to the abduction of a group of Central American migrants in southern Mexico, Óscar Martínez writes: "[el tren] avanzó, dejó atrás Tenosique y se internó en un camino de selva y rancherías de ganado. Lejos de los pueblos y las carreteras" ([The train] advanced, leaving Tenosique behind, entering a path through the jungle and cattle ranches. Far from the towns and highways.)<sup>25</sup> This account notes the isolation of the forest routes, which create strategic advantages for various criminal factions operating in the region.

In the novel, isolation plays a crucial role in the abduction of migrants, who are forced into a vehicle heading toward an unknown destination. Inside the vehicle, the collective voice describes: "*uno empezó a sacudirse y a hacer ruido . . . unos ruidos cada vez más doloridos que no eran nada como humanos*" (One began to shake and make noise . . . noises that grew increasingly pained, unlike anything human).<sup>26</sup> Later, the same voice states: "*ya ni nos daba pena llorar, éramos perros aullando, animales*" (we were no longer ashamed to cry, we were dogs howling, animals).<sup>27</sup> Through the abduction and confinement that were facilitated by the isolation of the passage routes, migrants recognize the dehumanizing ordeal imposed upon them. This is one of the first methods through which the novel destabilizes the human/nonhuman divide, moving one ontological category to supersede another one. Such a shift illustrates the tension apparent in what Giorgio Agamben calls the anthropological machine, through which the author recognizes that the category of the human solidifies against the animal, remaining "perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision."<sup>28</sup> Building on this biopolitical framework, Agamben claims that because it is possible to animalize humans, the ontological boundary between these categories is inherently political, existing in a constant state of tension. Animality thus serves as the rationale through which harm is justified and permitted. Held captive and subjected

to brutality, the migrants come to realize that they are no longer seen as human beings. This dehumanizing transformation is both a consequence of the border environment and a reflection of it, uncovering how the border itself produces and reinforces such brutality.

During the kidnapping, the collective voice of the migrants describes how they lost their ability to speak as they were shackled. Once confined within the vehicle and stripped of their freedom, they realize they are being treated as less-than-human by the traffickers, Estela and Epitafio. Epitafio asserts his dominance by declaring, “¡Yo soy la patria!” (I am the homeland!)<sup>29</sup> This declaration not only underscores their authority within the rainforest but also highlights how their power is exercised through routine acts of violence. Such frameworks of violence contribute to the cyclical production of the border, simultaneously creating an environment that is particularly conducive to those activities, as seen in “El libro de los chicos de la selva.”

The book opens with a recruitment scene orchestrated by the siblings in Toneé, a fictional border town. This sequence portrays what seems to be a straightforward transaction in a bustling square, where the boys pose as informal vendors and the migrants, acting as customers, prepare to continue their journey north. However, beneath the surface of this seemingly benign exchange, the siblings subtly deceive the migrants. While selling items to them, they also offer to guide them through the forest—an ostensibly helpful gesture that ultimately leads to their abduction. The brothers deceive the migrants into following them into the forest, where Estela and Epitafio await. The goods they peddle in Toneé (initially appearing to be ordinary, harmless items) are revealed to be the personal belongings of earlier victims: “la ropa, los zapatos, las pulseras, los papeles, los cepillos, las imágenes, las fotos, las cadenas, los cortaúñas, los jabones, los aretes y las tarjetas de oración” (clothes, shoes, bracelets, papers, brushes, images, photos, chains, nail clip-pers, soaps, earrings, and prayer cards).<sup>30</sup> In an unending cycle, the boys repeatedly sell new items to successive groups of migrants, each carrying more possessions. This process intertwines human movement with the circulation of goods, as both groups navigate the border territory in relation to one another. Such dynamic exemplifies the primary human activities that shape the human operations that formulate the ambulant latitudes of the border.

In Toneé, migrants maintain their humanity, actively participating in the informal economic market. However, once they enter the rainforest, they are dehumanized and reduced to commodities, with the brothers guiding them toward their captors. After leaving Toneé, the characters head toward a place called El Tiradero (The Dumping Ground). The name of this region



is telling: it directly evokes the way migrants' lives are discarded, enmeshed in layers of dehumanization that reach their most extreme expression in the depths of the border forest. This instance renders visible the process by which, in the narrative, migrants move from the category of the human to that of the animal or the object. A more illustrative instance of the shifting nature of these boundaries emerges in the connection between a pregnant woman and a howler monkey from the border forest.<sup>31</sup>

#### HUMAN/NONHUMAN ENCOUNTERS

In Toneé, one of the customers buying items from the brothers is a woman known as *la mujer embarazada* (the pregnant woman), who is on her migration journey. The younger brother, feigning genuine concern and promising to help her cross the rainforest, convinces her to join a group of migrants he has been recruiting. She accepts, but her presence awakens the anger of the older brother. As soon as he finds out that a pregnant woman is joining the group, he violently confronts his sibling: “¿Cuántas veces tengo que decirte: no debemos traer embarazadas?” (How many times do I have to tell you: we shouldn't bring pregnant women?)<sup>32</sup> Justifying his annoyance, he adds: “sabes bien cuál es la regla . . . una sola puta regla . . . ni viejitos ni amputados ni preñadas” (You know well what the rule is . . . just one damn rule . . . no old people, no amputees, no pregnant women.)<sup>33</sup> The woman is considered part of a group of less-valued migrants because of her pregnancy. Part of the reason is that within the context of the smuggling practice, *los chicos de la selva* need to adhere to very specific schedules to meet Epitafio and Estela in El Tiradero. However, because they are already on their way, there is nothing that the eldest sibling can do, and they have to continue their journey alongside the woman. When they are already in the forest, the narrator seems to confirm the fears of the eldest brother: “de golpe, con la excusa de su vientre, ralentiza sus dos piernas, se acerca al tronco de un enorme matasanos, y, arañando su corteza, encoge las facciones de su rostro ensombrecido y lanza al mundo un quejido hueco” (suddenly, with the excuse of her belly, she slows down her two legs, approaches the trunk of a huge *matasanos* tree, and, scratching its bark, tightens the features of her shadowed face and lets out a hollow groan to the world.)<sup>34</sup> However, even though the narrator centers the perspective of the older boy, the youngest interprets his anger differently: “te da igual a ti que venga embarazada . . . lo que pasa es que algo pasa entre tú y ella” (It doesn't matter to you that she's pregnant . . . what happens is that something happens between you and

her.)<sup>35</sup> In this array of reactions toward the pregnant woman, the text reveals the underlying tensions that amplify the dangers she faces. These tensions quickly escalate into an act of extreme violence—femicide—committed by the older brother.

Because the murder unfolds nearly simultaneously with a scene depicting the last moments of a native forest species, the novel invites us to explore the parallels between these two events. Just before the pregnant woman is brutally murdered, a dying howler monkey makes a haunting entrance. As the group of migrants and the two brothers go deeper into the rainforest, a mysterious groan echoes through the air, startling them all. The unexpected and eerie sound catches both brothers off guard as they had never heard anything like it before: “¿Qué chingados es ese ruido? inquieren el mayor y el menor al mismo tiempo, sintiendo cómo el cuero de sus brazos se enchina” (What the fuck is that noise? Inquire the older and younger brothers simultaneously, feeling the skin on their arms crawl).<sup>36</sup> Scared, the brothers believe that someone might be following them, and ask everyone to stop and wait for them while they investigate the source of the strange sound, which “[los] atrae como atrae la sangre seca a los insectos” (attracts them as dry blood attracts insects).<sup>37</sup> In a suspense-filled scene, deviating from the usual path and carrying flashlights and machetes, the boys get closer and closer to the source of the unknown sound until they finally come upon it: “te lo dije . . . no podía ser humano, lanza el mayor cuando sus risas terminan” (I told you . . . he couldn’t be human, the older brother says when their laughter ends).<sup>38</sup> What the boys encounter is a howler monkey, on the verge of death, emitting a scream of agony: “constreñido por las raíces de la higuera, yace un mono saraguato con las piernas cercenadas, los dos brazos inertes y una herida como un tajo en la barriga” (constrained by the roots of the fig tree, lies a howler monkey with severed legs, both arms limp, and a gash-like wound on its belly).<sup>39</sup> In this moment, at least two key narrative elements emerge. First, the fact that the boys mistake the monkey’s agonized cry for a human scream, a reversal that echoes the earlier scene in the novel where a group of captive migrants describe their own cries as animalistic. Second, the emotional response from the brothers. They share a laugh before their emotions escalate into anger, prompting them to take action against the injured animal: “el mayor . . . levantando su machete hacia la noche insiste: ¡no me gusta que me espanten!” (The older one . . . raising his machete toward the night, insists: “I don’t like being scared!”)<sup>40</sup> The eldest brother kills the nonhuman creature who is already dying a painful death. However, this act is not driven by mercy; instead, it is fueled by vengeance against the animal that instilled fear in him. Because of that, the older brother does not just kill

the monkey, he cuts him into pieces. Finally, he violently yells at the inert body and walks away.

Following the monkey's demise, the brothers rejoin the group of migrants. After dismissing the sound they mistakenly thought was a human threat, the older boy refocuses his attention on the migrant woman. As he had anticipated, she struggles to keep up the pace of the rest: "—La he tenido que venir a ella empujando— dice el menor. [. . .] —Esa idiota . . . la tenías que haber dejado— reclama el mayor" (I've had to come to her, pushing, says the younger one. [. . .] That idiot . . . you should've left her, the older one complains.)<sup>41</sup> For a moment, the monkey had been a nuisance to the boys, its screams disturbing their journey and unsettling them. However, now the pregnant woman becomes the target of their anger. As the siblings have an argument that once again revolves around her, she wanders and stumbles across a cave, where she takes shelter. At night, while the younger brother sleeps, the eldest remains awake. In a suspenseful scene reminiscent of the pursuit of the monkey, the older boy begins to track the woman. But this time, he does not follow an unknown sound. Instead, his movements follow the voices of the migrants, trying to find clues to find the woman. With the same two items in hand that he carried when he pursued the monkey—the flashlight and the machete—the boy meticulously searches for the pregnant migrant. Upon finding the cave, a tense moment ensues between them but he does not hesitate: "el mayor deja caer furioso su machete y con un único tajo corta el cuello de la mujer que pierde así su sombra" (the older brother angrily drops his machete and with a single stroke cuts the woman's neck, causing her to lose her shadow.)<sup>42</sup> Just as he and his brother left the monkey behind, the oldest boy abandons the body of the woman and turns around.

Although the situations of the animal and the pregnant woman differ drastically, they are connected by key similarities. Whereas the monkey was experiencing a slow death, unbeknownst to her, the woman was also following a path toward her own peril, as she was going to be delivered to Estela and Epitafio. This framework of violence, however, does not negate her agency—or that of the other migrants. Human migration remains an unequivocal expression of an agential act. Migrants advocate for themselves and assert their autonomy through their movement, even when outside factors might compel them to migrate. In the specific case of the pregnant woman, an added expression of her agency can also be seen in one of the last moments when she is still alive. Shortly before her death, she walks away from the group, defining her own path toward the cave, and spends her last night in the shelter she found for herself. Though this element constitutes an important difference between both deaths, there are various commonalities.

Both characters die in the forest, at the hands of the same killer, and by the force of the same object. Thus, although they fall within distinct ontological categories, in the depths of the rainforest, the line that separates them slowly fades away, as the human status does not protect the woman. The hierarchy that situates humans over other animals does not apply in the context of the border forest. However, this does not negate the inherent differences, specificities, and contexts that surround each living being. Even though the pregnant woman and the saraguato share a comparable vulnerability when confronted by the elder brother wielding his machete within the border expanse, this similarity does not erase the uniqueness of each situation or individual. While the howler monkey is on the brink of death because he fell off a tree, the pregnant woman faces imminent loss of freedom and death due to the violent frameworks that prey on migrants. Hence, notwithstanding the parallelisms between the dynamics behind each killing, the distinctiveness of each character is honored throughout the narrative, and their context is not erased. Sherryl Vint suggests that one of the main obstacles for the human species to recognize the fragility of the supposed ontological lines that separate the nonhuman animal from the human is that:

We see [animals] in spaces that emphasize the radical disproportion in human-animal social relations: spaces such as zoos where animals are compelled to be visible in circumstances in which everything that would enable them to appear as fellow beings . . . has been stripped away.<sup>43</sup>

In the border forest, particularly in the area known as El Tiradero, where a criminal network systematically deprives individuals of their human rights through practices such as shackling, caging, trading, and objectifying them, the stark disparity noted by Vint begins to dissolve. In this geographic realm, it becomes evident that “humans and animals share embodied being.”<sup>44</sup> Within the context of the border region, both the human and the nonhuman are subjected to the violence enacted by the boys who do not differentiate between one and the other, confusing the cries of an animal for a human and treating humans as animals. Nonetheless, although the parallelism between both deaths distorts ontological distinction, it does not erase specificity. Rather, it emphasizes context. The violence inflicted upon the woman and her dehumanization is enabled by the dynamics of the border and the dangers of clandestine migration. Additionally, this violence is intrinsically gendered.

Even when the nature of the described deaths presents obvious similarities, including the perpetrator, the forest, the weapon, and the procedure,

the older brother's reaction to the killings is different, even if just for a moment. If the monkey's death elicits laughter and relief, that of the woman makes him cry "un largo rato" (for a long time).<sup>45</sup> This occurs not because one is a human and the other one is not; instead, the difference in reaction is rooted in a personal connection with the woman. As the brother attacks her, he shouts: "tenías que haberte tú acordado . . . no me tenías que haber mirado así insegura . . . así dudando . . . me tenías tú que haber reconocido!" (you should have remembered . . . you shouldn't have looked at me like that, unsure . . . like that, doubting . . . you should have recognized me!)<sup>46</sup> The killer's anger comes from the disdain of the woman, who, if she ever knew him, seems to have already forgotten him. The eldest sibling's anger intensifies upon discovering the woman's pregnancy, which he views with hostility. His fury grows when he believes she has forgotten him. The novel does not address why he feels personally slighted by the woman, but his final words to her intensify the gender dynamics underlying this violent confrontation. The shared experience of violence and vulnerability faced by both human and nonhuman characters, materialized in the brother's actions, illustrates how the border fosters a dehumanizing framework.

There are palpable risks involved in drawing parallels between humans and nonhumans, as the novel prompts us to do on different occasions. These risks become exacerbated when the parallels are drawn between a migrant woman, in this case pregnant, and a dying animal, two figures who, in the open space of the rainforest, are at a heightened physical disadvantage. While this parallelism can be easily seen as problematic as it moves through the humanization of the animal and the animalization of the woman, Sherryl Vint suggests that there is much to gain from thinking about these junctures, which are core elements of the intersection of animal and women studies:

There are many parallels between the ways in which women have been constructed, controlled, spoken for and objectified by patriarchal culture, and similar constraints placed on animals by Western culture more generally. Achieving better insights into this overlapping and intersecting oppression is valuable for both feminism and those interested in animal welfare. Rather than fearing a further animalization of women by making common cause with those interested in animal welfare, then, feminists might gain new tools for resisting gender discrimination.<sup>47</sup>

The dialogue between animal studies and women and gender studies does not suggest equivalency but offers a framework for understanding the political and social systems that produce and sustain varying degrees of exclusion

for those marginalized either within hetero-patriarchal or anthropocentric structures. Indeed, although nonhuman life is rarely considered in terms of gender, gendered human life slips more easily into the realms of animalization, a process that emphasizes the need to interrogate the underlying systems that make such reconfigurations possible and the power structures that perpetuate them, to the detriment of both. Only by recognizing these systems can we work toward overturning them, benefiting both nonhuman animals and gendered individuals dehumanized alike. In the context of Monge's novel, the systems that operate against the well-being of the woman are framed by a border setting. Thus, the similarities that draw the woman and the saraguato closer do not erase the specificity of each one; rather, they show how the elements that determine the category of the human can be destroyed under contextual conditions of heightened vulnerability, in this case, materialized through the confluence of undocumented migration, a secluded forest, and criminal networks that prey on migrants.

The need to migrate clandestinely exposes migrants to numerous risks, which are exacerbated by gendered violence. Harsha Walia notes that one of the effects of the militarization of Mexico's southern border, which has placed migrants in a condition of state-sanctioned exposure and vulnerability, is that in the immediate aftermath of the implementation of Plan Frontera Sur, specifically between 2015 and 2018, "eighty percent of Central American women reported sexual extortion and rape."<sup>48</sup> Adding to this framework of gendered-based violence, transgender women are subjected to amplified levels of aggression, "routinely incarcerated in all-male immigration detention facilities and, in 2017, were incarcerated for periods twice as long the average length of detention."<sup>49</sup> Through the portrayal of a femicide, *Las tierras arrasadas* draws our attention to the pervasive gender-targeted violence within border regions.

Not often recognized as a borderland, large sections of the Selva Maya nonetheless operate as such through the various human and nonhuman movements that constitute it. *Las tierras arrasadas* depicts some instances that give rise to the contemporary performance of border-ness of the dynamic forested expanse. One aspect of this process occurs through the portrayal of the movement of Western-based ontological categories within the specific context of the novel, which transit from one entity to another, a transit assisted by the features of the border forest. This transition responds to the influence of organized crime, which takes advantage of the state-sanctioned vulnerability experienced by migrants as they navigate through the forested terrain. Therefore, although the border forest lacks many of the most visible features commonly associated with borders, it is constituted and

fortified through unseen elements, specifically, through the movements of those elements, which are directed by the border's invisible presence in a cyclical process.

### UNSEEN BORDERS

Considering the centrality of border walls, political theorist Wendy Brown cautions: "Walls produce borders as permanent zones of violent conflict and lawlessness, [and they also] incite sophisticated and dangerous underground industries."<sup>50</sup> Granted the impossibility of building a wall in the forest, this border might be considered somewhat separate from the process to which Brown alludes. However, the articulation of an invisible wall made of human actors and the overwhelming presence of illicit industries in and around the border forests extend Brown's premises to this geography. Furthermore, the author argues that border walls fuel the expansion of a highly organized smuggling economy, where the trafficking of drugs and migrants becomes increasingly intertwined.<sup>51</sup> This entanglement is also a defining force in shaping the border dynamics depicted in Monge's novel. In this sense, while in the context of Central and North America, the Mexico-US border wall operates as a paradigmatic symbol to think of border regimes and the licit and illicit frames of dispossession that accompany them, such a built physical structure is not necessary to produce manifestations of border violence against human and nonhuman entities, albeit it adds different layers of complexity and harm, as seen in previous chapters. Rather, the mere presence, and existence of the border is what engenders violence (and vice versa, regardless of its physical attributes). While the violence enacted at the Mexico-US and Guatemala-Mexico borders is unique and specific to their particular geographic, environmental, social, and political contexts, the fact that comparable violent acts are reproduced across such heterogeneous landscapes demonstrates that border regimes are inherent epicenters of brutality. Thus, though walls certainly establish borders as permanent zones of violent conflict and lawlessness, borders naturally remain such zones regardless of the physical structures that worsen the conditions for migrants and the environment alike. This largely occurs because of the many movements that solidify the border's presence.

Nail emphasizes that the border is in constant flux, shaped by various factors, including external forces such as the management practices implemented by different actors.<sup>52</sup> In this context, "management" encompasses the artificial structures and systems designed to monitor, control, and redirect human movement. However, the underground industries that operate

within and even rely on the current configuration of borders are also part of this management. Border administration encompasses more than visible structures such as patrolling practices, checkpoints, surveillance points, and other technologies; it also includes the less visible elements that constitute these regions. Among the entities involved in the underground administration of the colonial formation of borders are, as depicted in the novel, the illicit groups that capitalize on and operate within them. Indeed, in the novel, criminal industries are the primary external factors driving much of the border movement, to the point they are a part of it. In *Las tierras arrasadas*, within the context of state-sanctioned anti-immigrant bordering regimes, the smugglers, the narco-traffickers, and the migrants not only participate in the construction of the border but because of their movement, they reproduce it. Just as this border emerges from distinct cells of external motion, these cells themselves are subject to management as well.

The internal environmental features of the border forest, its plant, animal, and geological elements, are in constant flux, mirroring the human dynamics that shape it. As Nail explains, "Borders regularly change their selection process . . . anyone might be expelled at any moment."<sup>53</sup> This fluidity extends beyond the nonhuman to encompass the ever-shifting movements of those who navigate the border. This assertion applies not only to migrants but also to any other human entities involved in the border's movement. Toward the story's end, Estela and Epitafio fall victim to fellow members of the trafficking network, who are dissatisfied with them and want to usurp their positions in the criminal hierarchy. As this couple was the source of the brothers' power, their downfall results in los chicos de la selva being stripped of the authority they once wielded. This process also occurs within the border forest expanse. While the forest is instrumental in intensifying the dangers associated with the crossings of migrants, it is also the focus of subtle yet significant acts of violence, which narratively overlap with the downfall of the siblings.

In the border forest, rapid and dynamic imagery of wildlife sometimes interrupts human action. As various acts of violence unfold, the forest itself also becomes a target of hostility for the brothers. The siblings are sometimes depicted intentionally damaging the border environment, as seen when the narrator describes them "macheteando una muralla de orquídeas" (macheting through a wall of orchids).<sup>54</sup> At times, the rainforest itself seems to react against the violence enacted within it. For example, while searching for objects recently left by migrants, one of the characters yells, "¡tirate ahora mismo al suelo!" (get on the ground right now!) reacting to a sudden, unannounced swarm of flying insects that attacks them.<sup>55</sup> The narrator



describes the scene: “en el claro El Tiradero entra el enjambre de los tábanos, moscones y langostas que ha [acudido] a hacer presa de las cosas y los hombres” (in the clearing El Tiradero, the swarm of horseflies, blowflies, and locusts enters, having come to prey on things and people).<sup>56</sup> Notably, the insects do not distinguish between “things” and “men,” charging against both indistinctively. Given the novel’s emphasis on the interplay between human and nonhuman life within the border forest, this lack of differentiation is deliberate. The swarm’s force brings the siblings to the ground, placing them on the same level as the objects they collect. Because throughout most of the narrative, the brothers are depicted as the dominant human figures in the border forest, the effect the swarms have on them further exposes the feebleness of this position. In the social architecture of the border forest, organized crime is situated as the dominant authority. Their actions and the dynamics they orchestrate are pivotal in defining the motion of the rainforest as a border region. After Estela and Epitafio have been defeated, the brothers find themselves ambushed by a group of more numerous traffickers. This new iteration of organized crime swiftly strips away all privileges from the brothers, relegating them to the lowest rung of the hierarchy, a position they now share with both migrants and the nonhuman. In this new arrangement, the brothers are promptly murdered.

*Las tierras arrasadas* accounts for the significance of diverse social and environmental movements in producing the forest as a border. The interplay between human and nonhuman entities serves as a defining feature of this geopolitical landscape, illuminating the processes through which migrants are subjected to dehumanization frameworks that demonstrate the malleability of ontological categories. These frameworks enable distinct levels of harm against migrants, particularly intensified by gendered violence. Such violence is evident in episodes of kidnapping and trafficking and is further underscored by the parallels between the killings of a pregnant woman and a saraguato, where specificity and context remain central despite their commonalities. The narrative illustrates Vint’s assertion that “not only are humans not alone in possessing the capacities deemed ‘proper’ to human-kind, but in fact, for the most part, humans do not achieve the qualities they ascribe to themselves with the name ‘human.’”<sup>57</sup> By depicting the dynamic ecological characteristics of the area, the novel draws attention to the cyclical dangers and violent transformations of borders, here portrayed as geopolitical formations engendered in and through manifold human and nonhuman motion.



## Multispecies Migration(s)

Written in Spanish and Diidxazá by Irma Pineda, a Binnizá / Isthmus Zapotec poet from Juchitán Oaxaca, and translated into English by Wendy Call, *La nostalgia no se marcha como el agua de los ríos / Xilase qui rié di' sicasí rié nisa guiigu'* (Nostalgia Doesn't Flow Away like Riverwater, 2007), evokes a migration experience from two points of view.<sup>1</sup> The poetry book portrays the voice of a person compelled to migrate, juxtaposed with that of their partner, who stays home. Interwoven within both perspectives are the anxiety, heartbreak, and hope that accompanies every step of the migration process, from the initial decision to leave to the dreams of eventual return. The book is divided into three sections: section one, “Chupa ladxidua’ / Dos es mi corazón” (My heart in two), revolves around the displacement, fear of transculturation, and profound anguish experienced by the couple in the face of the imminent departure. The second section, “Lu neza / Sobre el camino” (On the path), conveys the effects of the migration journey on both voices, which are marked by sensations of absence, emptiness, and fragmentation. The third and final section, “Zenandá ti dxi / Un día llegará” (The day will come), expresses a blend of sadness, longing, and hopefulness born from the experience of separation and the unwavering yearning for reunification. Various more-than-human figures emerge throughout the poems and operate as anchors that address the meaning, historicity, and context of the portrayed events. Although the migration experience is guided by two human voices, through the inclusion of other entities that also move across different geographies, the collection signals multispecies migration too. Among these figures are different plants and animals, all of which speak to the scale and temporality of the dynamics of unwanted migration and displacement experienced by human and nonhuman beings. Whereas Pineda’s work is geographically specific, it alludes to planetary existence as well. Regarding

how contemporary Indigenous literature exceeds different spatialities and temporalities, Anna Brígido-Corachán observes: “[Indigenous authors] have continued to build ‘place-worlds’ in a relational manner that revises not just Indigenous localities past and present, but other realities, regions, nations, and communities of beings as well.”<sup>2</sup> With an ecological focus on a localized migration experience, Irma Pineda also signals the forces at play within extant backdrops of global planetary interspecies migration.

In the context of compelled migration from Mexico to the United States, Pineda’s poetry provides a substantial insight into the historic and place-based lasting effects of colonialism. Her work is rooted in Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico that connects to the Pacific Ocean through its southernmost regions. The backdrop of Pineda’s poetry centers on the Binnizá, or Isthmus Zapotec people, also known as the *gente de las nubes* (people from the clouds), who primarily speak Diidxazá, referred to as *zapoteco del Istmo* or *lengua nube* (Isthmus Zapotec or cloud language). This linguistic and cultural identity is most prominent in the cities of Tehuantepec and Juchitán. Oaxaca is the most diverse state in Mexico, with seven out of ten people identifying as Indigenous and over a third of the population speaking an Indigenous language.<sup>3</sup> In Juchitán specifically, Binnizá author Víctor de la Cruz notes that Diidxazá speakers outnumber Spanish speakers by more than 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> The region’s proximity to the Pacific Ocean has shaped its economy and way of life, with fishing, alongside agriculture and livestock farming, forming the foundation of local sustenance.<sup>5</sup> Informed by this framework, Pineda’s poetry collection intertwines references to the ramifications of climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, emphasizing their impact on migration patterns. Reflecting on the extent of the state’s diasporic dynamics, cultural anthropologists Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera and Kornita Maldonado have observed that Los Angeles is a city recognized for its large influx of Indigenous migrants, most of whom hail from Oaxaca.<sup>6</sup> This underscores the profound racialized displacement occurring within the state, a phenomenon that, as Gutiérrez Nájera argues, predominantly affects communities from localities such as the Isthmus. It is within this last region that Pineda’s dialogical work takes root. The first pages of the book are marked by pain. In the poem: “Ti guiichi / Espina” (Thorn), just before departing, the migrant says:

Ti guiichi na’zi’ ndaani’ beela  
 nga yuuba’  
 Nuaa guxale’ guidubinaca guidilade’  
 ti gusaani cheri

Una espina adentro de la carne  
 es el dolor  
 Quiero abrir mi piel entera  
 para dejarlo aquí

A thorn deep in my flesh  
 is pain itself  
 I want to tear open my skin  
 to leave it here.<sup>7</sup>

This anguish derives, as Brígido-Corachán contends, “from separation and cultural dislocation.”<sup>8</sup> In the collection, the blend of sorrow and uncertainty that characterizes the migration journey is not solely rooted in leaving loved ones behind, but also in the profound sense of detachment from their homeland. Writing about this detachment, geographer Fátima Velez de Castro emphasizes that when individuals migrate, “there is a loss of the territory where the migrant was inserted, involved, integrated, [which leads] to the disintegration of the initial identity.”<sup>9</sup> Under the profound influence of global labor dynamics, socioeconomic pressures, and environmental crises, the migration journey referenced in the collection articulates the significant risk of such a loss and disintegration. Furthermore, the threat of this experience looms not only over the voice of the migrant but also over the perspective of who is left behind, who must grapple with a newfound reality in which the lived space is emptier. However, to presume that every migration journey results in the weakening of connections between migrants and their homeland and that this experience inevitably results in identity loss overlooks migrant agency. Challenging homogenizing interpretations of the loosening of ties to one’s homeland in contexts of forced migration, Pineda’s poetry orients us toward the strategies employed by the speakers to maintain deep connections with their homeland and oppose the effects of colonialism. These strategies are closely linked to the incorporation of nonhuman figures within the poems, which oftentimes transcend the frameworks of fragmentation in which they are embedded.

As per Brígido-Corachán’s assertion, while numerous poems underscore despair and anxiety, they are counterbalanced by others that illuminate themes of hope and resilience.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although migration may pose a risk of attenuating the migrants’ bond with their homeland, it simultaneously facilitates the uncovering of the historicity and complexity of that bond. In the poems, saltwater, freshwater, and desert biomes appear as central figures of representation through which Pineda alludes to the complexity of

migration experiences, drawing attention to the despair that accompanies the displacement process while emphasizing Indigenous migrant agency. In addition, these biomes are a channel through which the environmental-related events that influence the migrant's decision to leave are signaled. The emphasis placed on various ecosystems inevitably directs attention to the more-than-human species inhabiting them, who share the same environmental contexts as the couple. Moreover, the nonhuman entities within the text assume diverse roles, with some of the most significant serving as anchors that encapsulate the historical and geographical specificities of the migration journey. Because of that, need-based migration is depicted as a more-than-human experience, with the incorporation of human and non-human migrants who are either in the process of leaving or have already gone from their shattered habitats.

In what follows, I examine how Pineda's book foregrounds migration as an interspecies endeavor that, against the backdrop of climate change, occurs at a planetary scale. By focusing on the environmental degradation of the Isthmus, Pineda foregrounds one of the most pressing factors that impact migration movements across species in the contemporary age and, in so doing, reconceptualizes migration movements as an interspecies practice. This practice is heavily linked to the effects of anthropocentric frameworks on various aspects of the biomes depicted in the text, such as the river and the sea. With this in mind, I argue that biomes function as crucial sites of representation through which Pineda not only examines the underlying causes of multispecies migration but also foregrounds migrant agency. The rainforest biomes, which encompass much of the landscape from which one of the lovers departs, serve as key elements through which the migrant asserts control over their journey. These biomes provide a means of navigating migration on their own terms, allowing them to establish a connection to their land despite a hostile social context. The centrality of biomes extends beyond the rainforest, as Pineda's depiction of the sea's environmental degradation underscores its role not only as a catalyst for migration but also as a reflection of shifting migration patterns. The novel's attention to the profound ecological changes affecting the Pacific Ocean gestures toward the increasing reliance on maritime migration routes in southern Mexico, shaped by the growing militarization of land borders.

Building on these concerns, I close this chapter by examining the attention placed on the border desert, which considers the perils of undocumented migration while also revealing how the migrant speaker asserts agency in unknown terrains. Through these layered imageries, the collection

constructs a lyrical planetary imaginary, where unwanted migration is re-framed as a multispecies reality shaped by the ongoing legacies of colonialism at a local level and by environmental devastation on a cosmic scale.

#### MULTISPECIES MOBILITY

Typically, the depiction of animals in cultural production situates them as allegorical figures that operate as affective extensions of the human characters or mediums to emphasize anthropocentric attributes. However, as Gabriel Giorgi suggests, animal life is no longer merely a symbolic device or a figure of speech. Instead, it actively engages in a continuum with human existence, one that is shaped by organic, emotional, material, and political entanglements.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly relevant in a poetry book about migration where animal figures are imbricated in a feared journey. If as Glenda Carpio identifies, “migration needs to be understood as a global phenomenon, one that, much like global warming, is produced by the actions of institutions that permeate every level of society,” in *Nostalgia Doesn’t Flow Away Like Riverwater*, the more-than-human entities are fundamental to uncovering the hidden presence of a set colonial dynamics that compel the migration of different species.<sup>12</sup> As I contend in this section, the incorporation of nonhuman entities has a multiform effect. It underscores Indigenous worldviews, emphasizes the context in which multispecies migration occurs, holds accountable the colonial schemes that motivate much of this context, and helps ground migrant agency in the face of displacement.

The presence of nonhuman figures in the migration journey is disclosed in the poem “Neza/Camino” (This Path), where it is made clear that they are needed, welcomed, and unavoidable:

Gunna xinga zeu’ cherica’  
guidiixi xquendalu’  
ni rapa lii ndaani’ guendanabani di’

No olvides tu misión por esos caminos  
abraza a tu nahual  
el guardian de tu ser en esta vida

Don’t forget why you walk this path  
embrace your nahual  
your earthly guardian.<sup>13</sup>

The *nahual* is a figure present across different Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures and is broadly understood as the coexistence within the same body of a more-than-human being, such as an animal, a plant, or any other natural entity, and a human. As Carolyn Fornoff contends, “because this pair is the same being, the term *nahual* doesn’t just signify the nonhuman alter but also the human herself. The *nahual* describes a unity of being that is also a duality, a self that is also another.”<sup>14</sup> In Pineda’s poem, the *nahual* is the inner source from which the migrant can gather strength and thus is articulated as a presence that will guard their journey. In this sense, a more-than-human presence is not only needed but it is also a given, as the migrant cannot decouple their existence from it. Beyond challenging the Western human/nonhuman divide—where, according to *nahualismo*, “every nonhuman creature might also be a human”—this worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings within a shared planetary existence.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, it accentuates the inextricable entanglement of species, particularly within contemporary contexts of environmental degradation. As Fornoff notes, “*nahualismo* is part of a broader worldview that humans and animals coexist within a shared ecology.”<sup>16</sup> In Pineda’s collection, this perspective comes to life through the figure of the *nahual* and the naming of specific animal species. In the poem “Ni chineu’ / El Equipaje” (Your Suitcase), the lover who remains in their homeland while their partner migrates, counsels:

Huaxa si qui gusiaandu’ chineu’  
 xquenda beedxe’  
 ti gudxii lulu’ ca neza ca  
 xquenda bisia’  
 ti qui gutaguna cabe lii

Mas no olvides llevar  
 el don del tigre  
 para enfrentar los caminos  
 el don del águila  
 para que ninguna mano te detenga

But don’t forget to take  
 the gift of the jaguar  
 to face the long journey  
 the gift of the eagle  
 so you won’t be captured.<sup>17</sup>



The nonhuman once again is situated as a source of strength, and wisdom, for the migrant. In contrast to the *nahual*, which embodies an inner guardian, here one of the lovers advises the other to recognize the attributes they can learn from certain species. Their partner asks them to take the *dones* (gifts) of two animals with them to aid in the process of crossing unknown border regions. In addition to serving as sources of knowledge and inspiration, the inclusion of these figures suggests that migration movements are increasingly becoming an interspecies necessity. When the lover remaining in the homeland requests that the soon-to-be migrant carries with them the cherished attributes of two different animals, a tiger, and an eagle, lyrical imagery full of human and nonhuman mobility is deployed. Placing the image of a human migrant alongside one of a tiger who can face what the journey might bring, and one of an eagle with the power to keep going without being captured, sets the ground to reconceptualize migration as a multispecies endeavor within the collection. Furthermore, this poem is followed by many others that depict the compounded displacement of human and nonhuman entities. For instance, in an untitled poem, describing a town that has been marked by large patterns of migration, the speaker tells us:

Qui guinni xcuidi la guidxi  
ni gubaana qui richesabi íque yoo  
Ca manihuiinica laaca zié ca' . . .

No hay niños en la calle,  
ni siquiera ladrones brincando por los techos.  
Las aves también se marcharon . . .

There are no children in the street,  
not even robbers prowling the roofs  
Even the birds have gone away . . .<sup>18</sup>

The poem suggests that both animals and people migrate for similar reasons, emphasizing that animal migration can respond to the same forces driving human migration. This reinforces what is made evident with the articulation of the *nahual*, which is that, as Fornoff emphasizes, it uncovers that from birth to death, humans exist alongside other creatures, regardless of their awareness of them.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, animal migration is often understood as a natural phenomenon, disconnected from human migration patterns, and rarely framed as forced transposition. This distinction makes Pineda's

approach particularly significant. As Charlotte Blattner observes, the conceptualization of animal migration diverges sharply from that of human migration, uncovering the need to reconsider the ways in which both are perceived and interconnected: "When we think of migrating animals, we often presume that animals migrate voluntarily and that there is something "natural" and "necessary" about their move. People are less likely to think of animals as subjects of displacement."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the incorporation of animal figures within a poetry book informed by contemporary migration patterns draws clear parallels between human and nonhuman forced or compelled migration. Placing one alongside the other calls our attention to the shared frameworks of susceptibility that motivate human and nonhuman beings to migrate, particularly environmental degradation.

In this context, the challenges faced by nonhuman animals mirror those experienced by humans, reinforcing the entangled nature of displacement. On this point, Blattner contends: "Humans have long believed that their own migrations and other animal migrations must be understood separately, but the long-term, sustained trend of change in the earth's climate is ruthlessly testing this notion."<sup>21</sup> Pineda's work foregrounds how migration, in this case driven by the growing impacts of environmental decline, disrupts the lives of both human and nonhuman beings. In writing about human migration, she emphasizes that marginalized communities are most affected by these crises, directly engaging with the concept of climate migrants. However, her focus extends beyond the human experience, drawing attention to the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman migration in the context of ecological deterioration. This approach reveals both the shared and distinct experiences of migration across species, as exemplified in an untitled poem, where one of the lovers explicitly conveys that the need to migrate comes from the relentless onslaught of environmental harm:

Neza guete' biaaxha'  
 bisaana' ti ñaa ma cá neza nabitixi  
 ne ti yuze bidxi ne stobi ma guti  
 Ti balaaga yooxho' bindiibe'  
 guriá nisado'  
 ni guca' nandxó'  
 ni ma xadxi qui rudii laanu benda  
 ne rudxigueta laanu guiiba' cá tini

Partí del sur  
 dejé un campo arado y seco

un buey flaco y uno muerto  
 una barcaza vieja atada  
 a la orilla de la mar  
 que un día fue nuestra gloria  
 la que hace tiempo dejó de parir peces  
 y nos vomita oxidadas latas

I set out from the south  
 left cornfields plowed and parched  
 one ox thin and one dead  
 One old boat tied  
 at the edge of the sea  
 that was once our glory  
 but long ago stopped giving us fish  
 and now vomits us rusted cans.<sup>22</sup>

This poem tackles some of the reasons that prompted the decision to migrate. A parched field, a deceased animal—and another one in its bones, on the brink of death—coupled with a maritime biome so profoundly polluted that it no longer carries fish, are elements that paint the bleak reality faced by the couple. Conveyed by the migrant, each of these images is intricately intertwined with the environmental imperatives highlighted by Blattner. The poem considers the environmental ramifications of climate change, portrayed through descriptions of a field experiencing drought, an abandoned fishing boat, and an ensuing framework of food scarcity, all clear referents to some of the most harrowing effects of the Anthropocene. As has been noted by various scholars, the concept of the Anthropocene implies that all humanity is responsible for the forces that drive climate change and therefore does not account for “the socioeconomic divisions that have made the majority of people throughout human history—in particular, women, indigenous people, and people of color—victims rather than perpetrators of ecological violence against the Earth.”<sup>23</sup> Pineda’s book beckons with this disparity through the portrayal of nonhuman entities that operate as clear mediums alluding to the pressing effects of climate change experienced in an Indigenous community. Imagery revolving around dry fields evokes the rising temperatures and scarcity of rainfall in the region, reflecting geological changes triggered by profound climatic shifts on Earth’s surface. The description of a sea teeming with metal cans underscores the consequences of the massive levels of capitalist production and consumption, highlighting the blatant disregard for the environment inherent in said practices. Thus,

whereas the poetry book is populated with harrowing scenes depicting the anguish and loss stemming from displacement, the author refrains from portraying multispecies migration as solely the outcome of unseen forces that may lurk behind environmental despair. In relation to this, Brígido-Corachán asserts that the collection “subtly criticizes the global economic system and its impact on local economies” through the attention given to planetary harm.<sup>24</sup>

The portrayal of a maritime biome that has ceased to house fish and instead has become the home of metal cans calls to mind the work of Michif-settler scholar Max Liboiron, who identifies the presence of pollution not as an effect or manifestation of colonialism, but as “an enactment of ongoing colonial relations to Land.”<sup>25</sup> According to Liboiron, the presence of pollution points to the colonial relations that make land available for pollution, signaling the ability of settlers and colonizers to utilize stolen land. In this way, the extensive contamination of the ocean, resulting in the inability of fish to survive and leading to their endangerment and potential extinction, represents an enactment of the presence of colonialism in the region. Because the sea operates as a medium for the Binnizá people to survive and maintain their autonomy, its pollution jeopardizes their ability to sustain themselves, producing distinct frameworks of dispossession. In this sense, Pineda’s work is in dialogue with what Glenda Carpio calls “migrant aesthetics,” as it “shift[s] the focus away from the migrant as a sympathetic creature upon whom feelings can be projected and toward migration as a phenomenon that involves us all, albeit from diverging perspectives.”<sup>26</sup> The depiction of the polluted aquatic biome prompts readers to reflect on their complicity with the anthropocentric structures of colonialism, which the collection situates as the source of large levels of dislocation experienced by human and nonhuman species alike. Moreover, the poetry book reveals the ramifications of colonialism on multiple species in the lyrical articulation of migration.

Throughout the book, the couple emphasizes that the existential threat resulting from different forms of environmental degradation is faced at a multispecies level. For example, in the poem, “Ni cudxi’badu / La siembra” (Sowing), the image of a starving ox signifies the physical and affective reality of food insecurity:

Xi ñaca ti nibigueta’ xquídxinu  
 pa xilase ma biiti laa  
 ma gastí’ ndaani’ cadxi dxiñayaaga  
 nusinaxhi guendaribeza di’

Cómo volver a la tierra nuestra  
 si la nostalgia la ha matado  
 no queda en su vientre una gota de miel  
 para endulzar las esperanzas

How can we return to our land  
 if nostalgia has killed it  
 not a drop of honey left in its belly  
 to sweeten our homeplace.<sup>27</sup>

This example, in addition to the reference to the disappearance of fish and the reasons that led one of the protagonists to migrate, points to how environmental degradation results in the endangerment and displacement across species and, in so doing, conceptualizes migration as a multispecies experience. While it might seem obvious that human and nonhuman entities sometimes migrate due to similar factors, this reality is seldom acknowledged. In many academic disciplines today, migration is often studied from an anthropocentric perspective, and when nonhuman beings are taken into account, humans tend to be erased. As Pineda's poetry collection demonstrates, and as Blattner asserts, the traditional compartmentalization between human and animal migration is increasingly untenable in the face of climate change. These large-scale challenges present growing threats that affect both humans and animals in interconnected ways that, however, are individually faced according to the limits and possibilities of each species. The migrant must leave their homeland because of factors such as, for instance, the lack of water to nurture the land, as described in "Sica ti guie' / Como una flor" (Like a flower):

Neca nisa ni ruuna' di' niquiiñe  
 ti nuguu gudxa layú  
 ti ñanda lu sti bieque  
 sica ti guie' guendanabani ñaleru'

Si al menos mis lágrimas sirvieran  
 para humedecer los campos  
 y hacer que de nuevo  
 como una flor se abra la vida

If only my tears could serve  
 to water fields

and coax new life  
to bloom.<sup>28</sup>

In this poem, the speaker expresses a deep desire to restore the land and bring life back to it. In contrast, nonhuman beings, such as the oxen, cannot voice the pain they endure due to a lack of food and water. We only know that they are suffering because of the embodied nature of such experience, which rapidly manifests as physical decline. Similarly, as noted in these poems, species of fish have either gone extinct or embarked on desperate migration journeys in search of cleaner, livable waters. Unlike humans, who, despite their own vulnerabilities, retain the ability to express their sorrow through language, nonhuman beings are forced into silence, rendering their suffering all the more invisible. In this context, humans retain a certain privilege: they can articulate their plight, giving their affliction a form of recognition that nonhumans, often overlooked or ignored, are denied. Although human and nonhuman animal migrants often move for similar reasons, it is easy to overlook or dismiss animal experiences of displacement. Pineda's poems emphasize these connections, rendering visible human and nonhuman survival predicaments and recognizing migration as inherently interspecies.

While emphasizing a transspecies bond, Pineda remains keenly aware of the distinct context of each being throughout the poetry collection, beginning with the human. For example, the detailed portrayal of a rural community inhabited by the Binnizá grounds the impacts of climate change in a specific setting. Given that this community consists of Indigenous people, the book underscores the racial and socioeconomic inequalities exacerbated by climate change. Samoan spoken word poet Terisa Tinei Siagatonu asserts: "Everyone is affected by climate change, but some are affected first."<sup>29</sup> Pineda's poems, told from the perspective of an Indigenous migrant and their lover, foreground the racialized dimension of migration. This focus becomes even more pronounced when considering the socioeconomic realities in Oaxaca, a state that, despite recent reductions in poverty, remained among the top three with the highest poverty rates in Mexico as of 2022.<sup>30</sup> Given that the majority of Oaxaca's population identifies as Indigenous, the book delicately reflects this demographic composition, offering insights into the structural racism that shapes much of the migrant experience:

guiruti' ruyadxi nayaase bezalua'  
guiruti' rucaa diaga riuunda riale ndaani' rua'  
zandaca rididibiaani lu guidilade' nayasegá

nadie mira mis ojos oscuros  
 nadie escucha el canto que brota de mi lengua  
 ¿es acaso transparente mi piel morena?

no one looks into my black eyes  
 no one hears the songs on my tongue  
 is my brown skin transparent?<sup>31</sup>

The speaker's description, along with recent data on the state's poverty levels and the escalating impacts of climate change, underscores that Indigenous communities disproportionately endure severe environmental hardships, often driving them toward migration. In the poem "Chupa neza / Dos caminos" (Two paths), the migrant briefly contemplates remaining in their homeland to shield their loved one from the immense pain of separation. However, they quickly recognize that the threat of hunger and disease might bring even greater suffering.<sup>32</sup> The broad reasons that lie behind the book's perspective on migration are currently experienced at a planetary scale, with the latest data reported by the United Nations recognizing climate change as one of the major catalysts for displacement.<sup>33</sup> While compelled migration affects minoritized communities across the entire planet, Pineda's work is firmly rooted in a distinct temporal and geographical context. This is evident not only in the fact that, as noted earlier, the collection is written in both Diidxazá and Spanish, linking it to the Isthmus, but also in the specific qualities of the nonhuman entities depicted. In addition to the linguistic nature of the poems, the mention of the disappearance of a particular species discloses the exact location of the area:

Cayé xquendaruxidxinu  
 sicasí cayé guendanabani ndaani' guiigu'  
 "guiigu' bi'cu" biree lá ni  
 dxi bi'cu nisa  
 gudxite ndaani' ni  
 Ti dxi gúcanu stale  
 Ne zé ca bi'cu' nisa

Se va nuestra sonrisa  
 como la vida en este río  
 "de las nutrias" le llamaron  
 cuando perros de agua jugueteaban en él  
 Un día fuimos tantos

que las nutrias se marcharon  
como se van ahora nuestros hombres

Our smile floats away  
like the life in this river  
“of the nutrias” they called it  
when the river dogs  
played games in it  
One day there were so many of us  
that the nutrias went away  
like our men leave now.<sup>34</sup>

This poem includes a clear reference to *El Río Las Nutrias* (Las Nutrias River), a geographical marker that situates the events within the specific confines of Juchitán, where this river meets the sea. Beyond serving as a mere location, this reference underscores the way migration driven by necessity spans across species. Moreover, the poetry collection highlights how the challenges posed by environmental degradation manifest differently depending on the species in question. Through the portrayal of a group of river dogs and a person who had to leave the same geographic region to survive, the poem emphasizes that parallels can be drawn between the migration journeys undertaken by human and nonhuman beings. Steering away from a homogenizing approach, it emphasizes significant differences that characterize the specific need of each species. Whereas one of the lovers has to migrate due to food insecurity, river dogs had no alternative but to depart from their aquatic habitat due to the increasing presence of humans. Given that the speaker employs the word *fuimos* (we were), they acknowledge how humans might often participate in the dispossession endured by nonhuman beings. This element is crucial as it offers a nuanced understanding of Indigenous people in the book. Pineda steers clear of romanticizing Indigenous communities, instead presenting them as complex subjects that may endure and exert ecological harm, as exemplified by the deteriorating state of the river.

By foregrounding the specific context of shared coexistence, the poetry collection illuminates how climate change exposes all beings to vulnerability, regardless of species. Pineda, however, emphasizes that marginalized communities experience more acute forms of dispossession. Furthermore, the collection brings our attention to contemporary dynamics framing the migration of nonhuman beings, emphasizing that their movements are not always “natural,” but driven by necessity and, consequently, often entwined



with human migration. In this framework of shared vulnerability, biomes take on a crucial role, serving as markers of planetary migrations.

### THREE BIOMES

Pineda's text depicts multiple animals, many of whom make the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman migration visible, but it does not include many allusions to plants. Moreover, in the rare instances when plants make an appearance, they often function as a vehicle to signal the hopes and desires of the lovers. In contrast to the depicted animals, which frequently embody the vitality, distinctive traits, and challenges of their specific species with clarity, plants tend to be tethered to the emotions and experiences of the speakers. Hence, plant life often appears unnamed and in ambiguity. This literary configuration exemplifies the tendency that Emanuele Coccia puts forward in his study of plant life. Coccia maintains that the zoocentric perspectives that dominate the defiance of the human/nonhuman divide in the life sciences and the Western intellectual world in general, tend to assume that plants are "[beings] without personality and without dignity."<sup>35</sup> However, even though at times plants seem to be constrained to a one-dimensional use, Pineda successfully transcends this zoocentric bias by mobilizing them as one way to articulate the composition of the territory's ecosystem. This function bestows vegetation with a more complex role within the book. Whereas this role might not register the specificity of the plants themselves, it underscores the specific type of ecology in which the poetry develops.

The portrayal of vegetal life identifies the ecological composition of Isthmus as the community of origin of the migrant. According to Pérez García et al., the Isthmus is highly heterogeneous, comprised of seven types of forested vegetation.<sup>36</sup> While these rainforest biomes differ from the others I have studied in this book, as they do not act as geopolitical delimitations, they also function as borders, albeit in a different sense. Encompassing Oaxaca and Veracruz, the Isthmus is the terrestrial, natural territory that separates the Pacific from the Atlantic, marking a bridge and border between two oceanic waters. At the same time and precisely because of that, the north and south sides of this region give rise to the border between land and water. Even though these are natural borders, they are still relevant for the scope of this book because they are closely linked to the transborder migration experience portrayed in the collection, to the point where they motivate, direct, and shape the journey. In addition, the rainforest biomes that make up much of the depicted territory operate as some of the most significant

elements through which the migrant finds a way to assert their agency. For instance, in the poem “Laanu / Nosotros” (Us), the migrant states:

Zadundarunu xtiidxanu  
xiiñi yaga nga laanu  
laaca' gudiica' banda' neza ziuunu

nuestra palabra seguirá siendo canto  
somos hijos de los árboles  
que darán sombra a nuestro camino

Our words will carry on as a song  
we are children of the trees  
who will shade our path.<sup>37</sup>

In this poem, it is possible to identify that far from just describing the emotions of humans, the vegetation of the rainforest biomes of the Isthmus acts as the anchor through which the displaced speaker affirms their connection to their homeland in a material sense. Strengthened by a sense of kinship with the trees that populate their homeland, they find solace in the permanence of these forestry trees, which have remained rooted to the land in a state of balance that the inhabitants of the region have witnessed for generations. The migrant draws strength in recognizing and affirming their connection to the territory through plant imagery, even as they must depart from that territory. This intellectual and affective process exemplifies Coccia's assertion regarding the profound way in which plants embody existence, as they firmly root themselves in the land for as long as possible.<sup>38</sup> The endurance of trees, manifested in their unrelenting attachment to a specific location on Earth, becomes a source of solace for the migrant who perceives their steadfastness as encouraging, allowing them to regain control over their journey and reclaim their relationship to the territory in the face of a stifling social context.

Although the migration movement threading through the collection takes place within a context of environmental degradation brought about by colonial dynamics, this does not mean that a migrant lacks the agency to navigate and shape the course and outcomes of the experiences of their journey. They might undergo displacement due to catastrophic changes in the environment, but this does not rob them of their autonomy, which, as signaled in Pineda's book, they enact in strong acts of refusal to abide by the colonial impositions that they find throughout their journey, which can

be seen from the very act of crossing the borders that nation-states do not want to let them cross. But perhaps their boldest act of agency is their active refusal to let their belonging to the land collapse. These acts are strongly linked to the incorporation of plant imaginaries in the collection.

By stating that the trees will offer shade along the journey, the migrant suggests that the forested landscape of the region will remain a constant companion, casting its comforting, spectral shadows along their path. Through the lingering memory of the trees' spectral presence that the speaker knows will offer them shade, they find a sensuous expression of care that accompanies them on their arduous border-traversing path. In this way, finding inspiration in the permanence of trees and trusting in the knowledge and kinship they draw from/with them, the migrant lessens the effects of displacement from the outset of their journey. In averting the weakening of the ties between them and the territory, which is often seen as an inevitable and almost preordained effect of migration, the speaker draws strength and enacts agency even within a context of profound constraints and sorrow.<sup>39</sup> Through the plants that give rise to the biomes of the Isthmus, the migrant attempts and manages to escape such an inevitability. Pienda's approach to plant life is highly nuanced, as the presence of plants, while often unspecified in terms of species, facilitates the overcoming of some of the most daunting effects of the displacement process. This is made possible because the collection includes one of the key traits shared by trees: their earthly permanence. Whereas plants do move and can migrate through different and complex methods, such as the dispersal of seeds in the case of trees, the speaker focuses on their ability to stay connected to Earth's surface, something that they are able to do through complicated root systems and soil preferences, which at the same time are some of the main elements that differentiate them as species.

In addition to the rainforest biomes of Juchitán, there is another ecosystem of equal importance and significant dimensions: the sea. Shifting the focus from land to water through the portrayal of the disappearance of fish and high levels of pollution, the sea acts as a medium to emphasize the reach of environmental degradation and the ongoing presence of colonialism within the depicted landscape, factors that produce forced migration across species. At the same time, the sea has increasingly operated as a border biome in the Americas. While traditionally maritime biomes have not been integral to the undocumented migration journeys more commonly undertaken in Central and North America, they have historically played a central role in migratory experiences in regions such as the Mediterranean Basin, Palestine, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia.<sup>40</sup> However, as North and Central American

borders become increasingly militarized, the sea has emerged as a more prominent migration route in this continental expanse as well, even though it was once more commonly dominated by land and river crossings. This diversification of migration routes is evident in Oaxaca, where, according to the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (National Institute of Migration), a maritime route has emerged alongside the state's four major land routes, stretching across the Pacific Ocean with at least seven landing points.<sup>41</sup>

The expanded use of the maritime border biome in southern Mexico is a response to the relentless increase in border securitization. This has led to the formation of a heterogeneous network of migration trails, which were previously more geographically differentiated but now encompass more continental territories. Whereas these routes used to be more distinct and specific to certain geographic areas, now they cover a broader planetary range, a process that is accompanied by more danger. As the *Organización Internacional de las Migraciones* (International Organization of Migrations) attests, in southern Mexico, between 2015 and 2017, and up until the emergence of the caravans, there are records of accidents and shipwrecks linked to undocumented migration.<sup>42</sup> Recently, multiple news outlets have reported the deaths and disappearances of various groups of migrants along the Oaxacan coast, among them Ecuadorian, Senegalese, and Chinese nationals.<sup>43</sup> Pineda's portrayal of the sea hints at contemporary articulations of maritime migration along the Pacific coast of southern Mexico. For example, in an untitled poem, the speaker questions:

Tu naa ma cayaca íque'  
galaa bato' ti nisado'  
málasi guca yuxi

¿Quién soy en esta delirante hora  
en medio de un mar  
que se volvió arena?

Who am I in this madness?  
in the middle of a sea  
turned to sand?<sup>44</sup>

While they are facing a border desert, the inclusion of the sea is not merely metaphoric. Considering the contemporary trends of migration in Central and North America, these verses can also be read within the context of the growing diversification of diasporic routes. In this sense, the

superimposition of the desert over the maritime biome not only signifies the speaker's departure from the oceanic landscape of their homeland to an arid space but also serves as a reminder that the sea along the Oaxacan coast is operating as a border corridor with more frequency than ever before. Given that, as Marisel Moreno contends, most Latinx border theory works are inspired by seminal theoretical frameworks such as *Borderlands La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa, which "emerges from, and continues to privilege, terrestrial borders," Pineda's poem captures this hierarchical perspective while simultaneously seeking to challenge it.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, focused on the Caribbean, Moreno contends that maritime migrations "mirror the conditions that undocumented migrants also face along the Mexico-US border," with hypothermia, heatstroke, and thirst being some of the effects experienced by migrants who traverse the maritime biome.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, the shift from sea to sand draws attention to the commonalities of these spaces within the context of border regimes.

The emphasis on the ocean as a migration route evokes the brutal histories of forced displacement within the context of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Although the collection references the Pacific Ocean, oceanic imagery linked to forced migration inevitably evokes the maritime history of the enslavement of African people. Given that forced migration disproportionately affects people of color—particularly Black, Indigenous, and Brown communities—the foregrounding of waterscapes, as Moreno observes, "links past and present."<sup>47</sup> Within this framework, the increasing role of the sea draws attention to overlapping yet historically specific patterns of violent displacement. This amalgamation of distinct temporalities is made possible not just because of the legacy of colonial violence but also because of its ongoing manifestation, which in the text is made evident through some of the reasons that force the speaker to migrate. Thus, considering Moreno's premise that the desert is positioned as the primary paradigm of border corridors, the transformation of the oceanic biome into a desert-like space signals its centrality as a displacement route, linked as it is to a complex and profoundly violent history of forced transoceanic diasporas. In the current framework of Central and North America, depicting water metamorphosing into sand can be seen as the maritime biome's increasing transition into a migration corridor of comparable significance to the border desert. This ecosystem is also central in the lyrical articulation of the migration experience at the center of Pineda's text.

The poem describes the border desert several times, notably in the second and third sections, which detail the migrant's northward journey. These sections address the harsh realities of the arid biome for migrants, and convey

the deep longing for return once the speaker reaches their destination. Whereas, as seen in the previous example, the desert is incorporated in the poem to juxtapose it with the sea, there is another function of this biome within the lyrical account. One of the most recurrent themes associated with the references to the arid territory is its weaponization. Through imagery of the desert, the text exposes the violence that occurs during an unauthorized migration journey. In the poem, “Sica ti guie’ / Como una flor” (Like a flower), the speaker describes:

ca xpine’ ca ni bedaniá’  
 ma qui zabiguetaca’  
 Guirá ni guni’ xcaandacabe  
 guendariatinisa gudiñentaa laaca’  
 lu ca neza bidxi ca

aquellos con los que vine  
 no volverán  
 Todos sus sueños  
 fueron azotados por la sed  
 sobre los áridos caminos

some who came with me  
 will not return  
 All they dreamed  
 was lashed by thirst  
 along the parched path.<sup>48</sup>

Here, the migrant bears witness to the lethal consequences arising from the desert’s weaponization, a theme more thoroughly explored in the fifth chapter of this book. Emphasizing the effects of the climatic features of the desert biome on undocumented migrants, the speaker alludes to the danger that permeates the journey through the unknown terrain. Given that this poem gestures to the deaths of some of the people who migrated with the speaker, they are in a state of mourning. This and the subsequent poems revolve around themes of despair and hopelessness. However, the migrant soon comes to the realization that the only way to honor those who lost their lives during the journey is by staying alive, clinging to the hope of one day returning home. That is one of the most definitive displays of migrant agency within the book, very clearly stated in “Qui zuuyu naa gate’ / No me verás morir” (You will not see me die):

ne qui zuuyu gate'  
 Neca zacuxhou' má guirá tu zé  
 qui zuuyu naa gate'  
 ziuu ti xhuba'  
 ga'chi' lade gui'xhi' nuu lu neza  
 ndaani' guidxi di' zabigueta'

y no me verás morir  
 Aunque creas que todos se han marchado  
 no me verás morir  
 habrá una semilla  
 escondida entre los matorrales del camino  
 que a esta tierra ha de volver

and you will not see me die  
 You may think everyone has gone away but  
 you will not see me die  
 there will be a seed  
 hidden in the scrub by the path  
 that must return to this land.<sup>49</sup>

Binnizá autor Víctor de la Cruz notes that while contemporary Binnizá poetry encompasses a wide range of interests and tends to privilege an individualistic perspective, prior to Spanish contact, this genre (emphasized as a distinct literary form in Diidxazá) was marked by a collective concern, where individual destiny was shaped by the needs of the community.<sup>50</sup> Although “Qui zuuyu naa gate’ / No me verás morir” is told in the first person singular, given the context that surrounds it and that the migrant does not have a name, they can be seen as an evocation of the Binnizá migrants who left home but long to return. Informed by contemporary social and environmental dynamics, Pineda’s text embraces the collective meaning of poetry held by her ancestors. Here, this collectivity conveys not just the despair that accompanies undocumented migration or the migrants’ relations to the land, but the agency that permeates many of their actions, including their very motion. As Moreno contends, when undocumented migrants “decide to migrate, they display their agency of movement.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, in the collection, through their refusal to let their deepest desire dwindle, this is, to return home, the speaker unveils another type of agency, one that also has to do with movement but that is more intimately tied to asserting a sense of futurity, shaped by their will and desires. This display of a sense of futurity

is in dialogue with Mary Louise Pratt's assertion regarding how "Futurity is central because of the unprecedented crisis of futurity that human agency has brought about but is less and less able to imagine or control. This dire predicament offers a fruitful standpoint . . . to become aware that agency and being require a projection into a future that is by definition imaginary."<sup>52</sup> Mimicking their partner's asseveration, the lover waiting at home states:

Cabeza' guedandá ti dxi  
 nisi naga' guuya' ca ñaa nuu cheri'  
 ne caguite bi'cu nisa ndaani' guiigu'  
 ne cachaesa benda ruaa nisado'  
 naa rabe  
 zedandá ti dxi . . .

Espero que llegue el día  
 en que solo verdor miremos en los campos  
 y los juegos de las nutrias en el río  
 y el salto de los peces en la boca del mar  
 yo digo  
 que llegará un día . . .

I hope the day will come  
 when we will see only green fields  
 and the nutrias playing in the river  
 and the fish leaping at the delta  
 I insist  
 that day will come . . .<sup>53</sup>

This forward-looking perspective, expressed by an Indigenous person deeply impacted by environmental degradation, racial structures of discrimination, and a framework of unwanted migration, aligns with Pratt's concept of agency within contexts marked by uncertainty and precarity. Though visionary, the very assertion of this certainty constructs the image of a promising future that, even if imaginary, challenges contemporary expressions of the colonial order.

## PLANETARY MIGRATIONS

Through the depiction of the interconnection of human and nonhuman life expressed by the nahual, and through the portrayal of distinct animal



species, such as fish, tigers, eagles, otters, and birds, Irma Pineda reconceptualizes migration as a multispecies endeavor, an approach often ignored. The recognition of the entanglement of human and nonhuman mobility is intricately tied to the development of planetary thought. If, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, the defining characteristic of the planetary is its emphasis on interconnection and continuity—a perspective that leads to the articulation of “a mind-set that thought that we [live] on, specifically, a planet”—the significance of this mode of thinking within the collection becomes clear.<sup>54</sup> This is especially evident in a story that links human and nonhuman experiences within current contexts of planetary deterioration. As Pratt argues, “Planetaryity shifts the focus toward ecological perspectives that unite the human with the nonhuman, the living with the nonliving,” accounting for the interconnectedness of all beings and entities.<sup>55</sup>

Emphasizing the different ways in which the human and nonhuman entities that inhabit the Isthmus are distinct but interconnected, and given that many of the challenges they face occur at a local and worldwide scale, the author deploys planetary imagination. The significance of these frameworks extends beyond the juxtaposition of the human with the nonhuman; it is rooted in the underlying reasons that make such juxtaposition visible. Given the centrality of *nahualismo* for the Binnizá and other Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures, within their worldviews, need-based, forced migration is inherently nonhuman-centric. However, from a Western-based perspective, the phenomenon of unwanted migration across different species is rarely seen. Because interspecies displacement is often a response to planetary harm such as climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, it is precisely through this articulation that the author renders multispecies migration visible, both within and beyond the context of *nahualismo*, and she does so through planetary thought.

By depicting various biomes connected with contemporary migration dynamics, including the river, the sea, the rainforest, and the desert, the author underscores the scale, historical backdrop, and intricacies surrounding the story told by both speakers. However, while this lyrical account is geographic and historically specific, it also signals planetaryity. Through the depiction of land that is no longer arable, a river as a site from which nonhuman species have been displaced, the sea as both a graveyard for fish and a repository for trash and the desert and ocean as weaponized ecosystems against racialized populations, the poet crafts a palimpsest of earthly ecological catastrophe that results in difficult migration journeys. Regarding the potentiality of the concept of the planetary, Pratt asserts: “Concepts, however, are not solutions to problems. Rather, they enable the search for

solutions by opening up alternatives to the present, by enabling the imagining of possibilities.”<sup>56</sup> By addressing different layers of the crisis of futurity embedded in every biome, the collection envisions the possibility of more livable futures, inviting us to imagine them in a better, perhaps even healed, state. To this end, Pineda’s poems identify the colonial practices that have shaped these harms, pointing at what must be transformed. Indeed, believing in the possibility of regeneration and repair, the speakers subtly exercise agency by imagining a decolonial alternative to the present, where a return to the homeland remains within reach.

## Refusing the Present

As emphasized in the texts I study in this book, the harmful consequences stemming from the anthropocentric, artificial confluence between current border formations and environmental networks seem endless. This convergence wounds human and nonhuman bodies alike, producing physical harm to migrants, fostering transnational competition for resources with room for little or zero cooperation, intensifying the effects of natural disasters and other forms of ecological degradation, destroying habitats, endangering species, dividing cultural and natural landscapes, opening the door wide for environmental racism, giving rise to ceaseless extractive industries inseparable from racial capitalism, participating in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous people, and causing boundless cycles of death.

There cannot be borders without violence. Within the context of the current geopolitical arrangements of the world, nonviolent coexistence is, simply put, impossible. However, as the authors, epistemologies, and theoretical frameworks explored in this book suggest, a different world is thinkable. To bring this vision to life, however, borders must be abolished. As seen in the previous chapters, nonhuman-centric perspectives offer a path to envision a future planetary coexistence removed from the anthropocentric principles that govern dominant, colonial human-nonhuman relations that, in many ways, sustain the imperial logics of border regimes. Given the causes and effects of the Anthropocene, the pressing need for attending to nonhuman-centered knowledge system(s), particularly those spearheaded by Indigenous peoples, is abundantly clear.

Moreover, as the literary depictions of border biomes I have studied demonstrate, literary works offer a wealth of arguments, claims, and strategies for striving toward a world without borders. From diverse perspectives and at varying levels, these works address different aspects of the ecological basis

to justify the urgent need to undo contemporary border formations. Some denounce the interconnected racial, gendered, and environmental crimes perpetuated through political demarcations, while others interrupt settler histories of conquest. Some emphasize the importance of Indigenous sovereignty over land, forefronting land-back claims, and others convey how the shared bonds of vulnerability between human and nonhuman life intensify within border contexts. Placed in dialogue, these distinct voices offer different paths for rethinking dominant relations in/with the world. In doing so, they illuminate multiple reasons to imagine more livable ways to inhabit the planet, emphasizing that the violent realities shaping our present do not have to determine the future. Thinking of a world without borders might seem impossible, especially at a time when the criminalization of migration promoted by far-right ideologies is on the rise. However, this very framework can—and should—ignite the desire and drive for a radical departure from the vicious structures that strive to define our existence. Harsha Walia summarizes this sentiment:

Revolutions stretch our imaginations and manifest our desires. Political struggle is a purpose and a practice. In between utopic romanticism and demobilizing fatalism—both of which foreclose as a process we generate—is our collective commitment to revolutionary struggles blossoming around us and ushering in a different world.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing the layered and inherent damage that borders inflict on human and nonhuman beings compels us to yearn not only for what is possible but, more importantly, for what is necessary. In this realization, we may find the courage to move beyond collective anguish toward the refusal of a present inhabited by border violence. Afro-Indigenous (Zapotec) poet and cultural critic Alan Pelaez Lopez makes a parallel prerogative. Through hybrid literary experimentation, in *Intergalactic Travels: Poems from a Fugitive Alien* (2020), the author recounts their journey as an undocumented, five-year-old migrant going from southern Mexico to the United States, and their life as an undocumented, queer, Black, Indigenous immigrant navigating the excruciating process of getting a green card. However, having achieved that purpose, the author underscores that “legality” is not, and never has been, the way to resolve the hierarchical racial and social relations that maintain different levels of embodied dispossession, exclusion, and harm: “papers will not protect us.”<sup>2</sup> To undo the ongoing damage enacted by an imperial regime built on deadly practices, we must dismantle the systems that sustain and perpetuate it. Although such an emancipatory future might seem

way far out of reach, as Pelaez Lopez proposes, “we have to refuse as hard as we can.”<sup>3</sup> The literary works included in this book compel us to refuse to accept that borders, and the cruel imperatives that inevitably accompany them, will prevail.



# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

1. Laiken Jordahl, "Trump's Wall Is Destroying the Environment We Worked to Protect," *On Spec Podcast*, Jan. 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/onspec/trumps-wall-is-destroying-everything-we-worked-to-protect-65bc687518d1>.
2. Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 14.
3. Hannah Laako et al., "Transboundary Conservation and Nature States in the Maya Forest: International Relations, challenged," *Globalizations* 19, no. 8 (April 2022): 1300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2062844>.
4. Germán Santacruz de León, "Los potenciales conflictos sociales por el uso del agua en la frontera México-Guatemala: La cuenca del Río Suchiate," *Boletín del Archivo Histórico del Agua* 11, no. 33 (2006): 34, <https://biblat.unam.mx/hevila/Boletindelarchivohistoricodelagua/2006/vol11/no33/4.pdf>.
5. Throughout this book, I refer to the knowledge systems and literary traditions of the original peoples of the Americas as Indigenous. I follow the guidance of Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree author from northern Manitoba, who asserts: "No longer are tribally specific or local terms such as Indian, Metis, Inuit, or Native . . . inclusive enough. . . . The term Indigenous is now used to refer to that knowledge system, which is inclusive of all." Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 54. However, when referring specifically to Indigenous authors based in the United States, I use the terms Native or Native Americans to reflect a geographic context, when needed.
6. Furthermore, Rivera Cusicanqui argues that the *ch'ixi* gesture paves the way for engaging with Indigenous epistemologies, thereby opening a path that is otherwise closed for addressing contemporary social and environmental crises on a planetary scale: "es necesario retomar el paradigma epistemológico indígena, una epistemología en la que los seres animados o inanimados son sujetos, tan

- sujetos como los humanos.” (It is necessary to return to an Indigenous epistemological paradigm, one in which both animated and inanimate beings are recognized as subjects, every bit as much as humans). All translations by author except as noted. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2018), 109.
7. An important contribution to challenging these limitations is found in Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Anna M. Nogar, and José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra's *A History of Mexican Literature*, where the authors emphasize the need to move beyond traditional frameworks that confine cultural production to national boundaries. They argue that this shift frees Mexican literature from the constraints of a singular national identity, highlighting its inherent heterogeneity and the productive tensions within it. Ignacio Sánchez Prado et al., introduction to *A History of Mexican Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.
  8. Carlos Montemayor, *La literatura actual en las lenguas indígenas de México* (Ciudad de México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2001), 9.
  9. Gloria Elizabeth Chacón, *Indigenous Cosmolectics: Kab'awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 47.
  10. Chacón, *Indigenous Cosmolectics*, 13.
  11. Chacón, *Indigenous Cosmolectics*, 23.
  12. Chacón mobilizes this philosophy as a medium to undo different forms of binary thinking while advocating for its use in analyzing not only Zapotec literature but also other Indigenous writing systems, as well as non-Indigenous literature. *Kab'awil* serves as a medium that dissolves the contradictions commonly associated with Indigenous cultural production, which according to the author is often reduced through binary thinking that attempts to categorize it, for instance, as modern or traditional, or oral or written.
  13. Relatedly, Paul Worley and Rita Palacios's monograph on Maya *ts'ib* emphasizes Indigenous understandings of texts that encompass the written word—privileged in Western traditions—alongside other forms such as textiles, codices, ceramics, architecture, and natural landscapes. This, coupled with the multilingual nature of many Indigenous literary works, evinces their ability to simultaneously move across and inhabit Indigenous and Western worlds, in this way being “fully both things at once.” Rita Palacios and Paul Worley, *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'ib as Recorded Knowledge* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 6.
  14. Ignacio Sánchez Prado, “Endless Proliferations of Signifiers: Mexican Cultural Studies in the Future Tense,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 100, nos. 9–10 (Sept 2023): 1682.
  15. Silvio Torres-Saillant, “The Indian in the Latino: Genealogies of Ethnicity,” *Latino Studies* 10 (2012): 588–91, <https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2012.42>.
  16. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the US* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 232.



17. A pivotal work for engaging in this discussion is *Solito* (2022) by Salvadoran author Javier Zamora, which chronicles a migration journey from El Salvador to the United States, where biomes such as the desert and the ocean take on a central role. Additionally, as I have argued elsewhere, Guatemalan author Mario Payeras, though writing in the early twentieth century and not directly addressing contemporary border dynamics, provides a prescient perspective on the ecological harm they precipitate.
18. For instance, connecting Central and South America, the Darien Gap embodies the diversification of ecosystems that transform into hazardous passageways for migrants, underscoring the pressing need to address the increasing centrality of environmental systems in the transnational migration dynamics of the continent.
19. Walia, *Border and Rule*, 213.
20. Walia, *Border and Rule*, 213.
21. Angela Davis, “Believe in New Possibilities,” in *Abolition for the People: The Movement for a Future without Policing and Prisons*, ed. Colin Kaepernick (New York: Kaepernick Publishing, 2021), 18.
22. Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, “Snow and Borders,” in *Let’s Talk About Your Wall*, trans. Ellen Jones, ed. Carmen Boullosa and Alberto Quintero (New York: The New Press, 2020), 7–15.
23. In *Nature Fantasies*, Gabriel Horowitz examines the dangers of clinging to fantasies of nature’s pristine purity, advocating instead for a more nuanced understanding of nature and the complex ways in which we perceive and interact with it. Gabriel Horowitz, *Nature Fantasies: Decolonization and Biopolitics in Latin America* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2024).
24. Sarah Jaquette Ray examines how mainstream environmentalist discourses about the US Southwest frequently portray immigrants as contributors to environmental degradation, often citing the trash they leave behind as a primary justification for such claims. Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 139–78.
25. Walia, *Border and Rule*, 31–32.
26. Recent scholarship has explored specific ecosystems as migration corridors. Alongside Jason de León’s focus on desert landscapes, key works on other biomes—particularly aquatic environments—include Marisel Moreno’s *Crossing Waters*, which reconsiders the Caribbean archipelago as a historically charged border zone for undocumented migration, shifting the focus away from South–North migration journeys and foregrounding intra-Caribbean water crossings, and Rebeca Hey-Colón’s *Channeling Knowledges*, which centers Afro-diasporic religions and water as sites of knowledge in Latinx and Caribbean literature and art, addressing issues such as undocumented maritime migration in the Caribbean, notions of fluidity, and water as a healing and transformative force.
27. For Margaret Kovach, the Indigenous epistemological stance is “axiologically embedded [encompassing] an ethical and spiritual base associated with

- relationships between people, nature, and the cosmos.” According to the author, such a stance is woven into the network of relationships that sustain connections between oneself, others, and the planet. Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 67.
28. Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies*, 67.
  29. Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, “Defender la tierra,” *Revista de la Universidad de México*, no. 888 (Sept 2022): 26. <https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/6dada1bd-457e-4815-9440-b559e5d5aobe/defender-la-tierra>.
  30. In articulating what she identifies as identity markers of Indigenous epistemologies that connect them across geographies and traditions, Kovach emphasizes that even though there are clear parallelisms between them, they cannot be homogenized, as they arise from place-based experiences. Kovach, *Indigenous Epistemologies*, 40.
  31. Additionally, as Paul Worley and Rita Palacios emphasize, “Eurocentric modes of literary criticism can only partially account for what happens in [Indigenous] works.” Hence, as a monograph that studies Indigenous literature, other forms of Indigenous epistemologies are fundamental. Worley and Palacios, *Unwriting Maya Literature*, 9.
  32. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (Sept. 1998): 470. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.
  33. Ajb’ee Jiménez and Hector Aj Xol Ch’ok, *Winaq Kynaab’il / Kyna’b’il Qxe’chil / Winaq Fundamentos del Pensamiento Maya* (Guatemala City: Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2011), 41.
  34. Rafael Cardoso Jiménez, “La gente es una entidad socionatural y la vida es un tejido inconcluso,” in *El pensamiento indígena contemporáneo*, ed. Francisco Bárcenas López (México: Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación 2018), 153–54.
  35. Ana María Rendón, *Espacio-tiempo mixe: Pensar a través de la filosofía Ayuuk* (Ciudad de México: Kumay, 2022), 25.
  36. Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 116.
  37. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

## CHAPTER 1

1. Rebeca L. Hey-Colón, *Channeling Knowledges: Water and Afro-Diasporic Spirits in Latinx and Caribbean Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023), 116.
2. International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), *A Decade of Documenting Migrant Deaths: Data Analysis and Reflection on Deaths During Migration Documented by IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, 2014–2023* (Geneva: IOM and GMDAC, 2024),

- [https://missingmigrants.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd16o1/files/publication/file/A%20decade%20of%20documenting%20migrant%20deaths\\_o.pdf](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd16o1/files/publication/file/A%20decade%20of%20documenting%20migrant%20deaths_o.pdf).
3. IOM and GMDAC, *A Decade of Documenting*.
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## CHAPTER 2

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### CHAPTER 3

1. The international boundaries between Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala include the massive Selva Maya, numerous mountains, and three major rivers. The Hondo River accounts for nearly 90 percent of the border between Mexico and Belize, while the Suchiate and Usumacinta together define over half of the geopolitical boundary between Guatemala and Mexico.
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26. Jiménez and Aj Xol Chòk, *Winaq Kynaab'il*, 15.
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#### CHAPTER 4

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## CHAPTER 5

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## CHAPTER 6

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23. Monge, *Las tierras arrasadas*, 13. Throughout the novel, italics are employed to mark passages in which the collective voice of migrants speaks, distinguishing these moments from individual narration.
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28. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 38.
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## CHAPTER 7

A shortened version of Chapter 7 is included in *Plants and Animals in Latin American Cultural Production*, ed. Cristina E. Pardo Porto and Oscar A. Pérez (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2026). Reprinted here with the permission of the University Press of Florida.

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## CONCLUSION

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