

BORDER BIOMES: COEXISTENCE AND INTERFERENCE ON AMERICAN
MIGRATION TRAILS

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BORDER BIOMES: COEXISTENCE AND INTERFERENCE ON AMERICAN MIGRATION
TRAILS

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Framed within the fields of Border and Migration Studies and the Environmental Humanities, *Border Biomes: Coexistence and Interference on American Migration Trails*, examines how 21st-century Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicana literature and art depict dynamic, unstable geographies that defy common notions of fixed, inanimate borders and become sites of encounters where ontological limits are questioned. Proposing the concept of border biomes, this project thinks through border forests, rivers, and deserts to argue that they are central figures of representation through which the authors and artists I write about challenge rigid categorizations of territorial boundaries, memorialize and expose the intense entanglement of human and nonhuman entities against the backdrop of border demarcations, and defy and reimagine normative ways of coexistence with nonhuman worlds. I make this argument with the analysis of works by Ana Teresa Fernández, Cristina Rivera Garza, Emiliano Monge, Emmy Pérez, Rafael Ramírez Heredia, and Valeria Luiselli, and with the study of the literary and artistic collaborations between Dolores Dorantes and Zoe Leonard, and between Jenea Sanchez and Lauren Strohacker. I study how these authors address the detrimental consequences of border security measures over both people and the environment, the intimate, conflictive, and often lethal encounters between migrants and border ecologies, and the deep-seated relationships linking these biomes with their inhabitants. Through a coalescence of academic inquiry and field work, this dissertation

foregrounds the multi-layered connections between biomes, geopolitical articulations, migrants, and border communities, thus becoming a contribution for a nascent field that focuses on the mutual entanglements of human and nonhuman agents surrounded by border settings.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Emily Celeste Vázquez Enríquez holds a Licenciatura in Latin American and Spanish Literature from the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, Mexico, and an M.A. in Spanish from The University of Texas at El Paso. Focused on the Guatemala-Mexico and the Mexico-United States borderlands, her research investigates the intersections between border and migration studies and the environmental humanities. Broadly, Emily's interests span queries regarding the weaponization of built and natural environments against migrants, the damage to the environment created by bordering practices and structures, questions of ecopolitics in transnational settings, the conflicting relationships between border communities with border ecologies, and the destabilization of ontological divides that take place against the backdrop of border demarcations. She grounds these questions in 20th and 21st century Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana, and Central American film, art, and literature. In fall 2020, Emily will join the University of California, Davis as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

Para mi mamá y mi hermana

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, I had the opportunity¹ to talk to a Guatemalan woman, Alma, at the Parque Central Miguel Hidalgo in Tapachula, Chiapas. It was a Sunday morning, and she was waiting to meet with her friends, whom, like her, worked as domestic workers in the border city. As soon as I told her I was a student and a volunteer at the Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova, she agreed to have a brief conversation with me. First, we talked about her employment². She worked for a Mexican family that according to her, was kind and hardworking but did not have enough income to give her a good salary. In addition, she had to live with her employers and was given only one day off. I asked her if, given the precarious conditions of her employment, she had ever considered moving to the United States. She said she had already tried but was sent back and did not intend to go back. Alma described her experience at Piedras Negras, Coahuila, the location from where she crossed to the United States, as one of the reasons she did not want to try again. Along with the fear of being seen or kidnapped (there and throughout Mexico), she said she was terrified of drowning in the river.

After this conversation, I talked to more women who were also part of the transnational circuit of domestic workers at the Guatemala-Mexico border. While not all of them had attempted to get to the United States, the few that had gone through that experience frequently included an ecological component in their stories. Because one of them spoke about hiding in the tall canes along the river at the US-Mexico border, I learned about the *Arundo donax*, an introduced perennial cane that grows almost all along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Unwanted by border patrol agents and an enemy of the Department of Homeland Security, this cane, capable of growing up to 30 feet tall, often provides shelter for undocumented migrants when they attempt to hide from the agents'

gaze and enter the United States territory³. In 2019, the Texas senate approved a bill to use 10 million dollars in herbicides to eliminate what they see as an accomplice to undocumented migration⁴. Talking about the inconvenience that this cane presents, in an interview for *Splinter* (2015), a Customs and Border Protection agent said: "It's hard to see what's going on in there, whether it's a person or an animal." These perspectives emphasize how, at the same time as the nonhuman components of the border landscape can function as shelter or diversion, they can also work as elements that destabilize ontological divides, and as silent weapons against migrants. In addition, the perennial cane underscores an instance in which the nonhuman components of the border regions can be damaged or annihilated because of their entanglement with geopolitical schemes.

I define border biomes as ecological communities physically entangled with geopolitical articulations. These communities share geographic, geologic, and climatic features that sustain specific lifeforms, all of which become endangered by their proximity to the systems and structures that uphold territorial demarcations. At the same time, border biomes function as central elements that assist anti-immigrant policies by producing harm against undocumented migrants. This, either because they inflict direct damage on their bodies or because they facilitate criminal enterprises that prey on them. When people migrate from Central America to the United States, they have to face one or more of the following biomes: a river, a jungle, or a desert. In southern Mexico, the borders with Guatemala and Belize traverse six rivers and several jungles. Among the busiest crossing points are the Suchiate River and El Petén, a jungle. Between the two, these biomes constitute almost 100% of Mexico's southern border. Northwards, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, defines more than half of the limit with the United States, and a small segment of the Colorado river also divides these countries. In addition, the vast tracts of the Chihuahuan and the Sonoran

deserts are also a part of these national delimitations.

The damage that border biomes inflict on migrants' bodies can be exemplified through the criminal case of the United States of America vs four members of "No More Deaths/No más muertes." Based in southern Arizona, "No More Deaths/No más muertes" is a humanitarian organization that, among other activities such as documenting abuses that take place at detention centers in Mexico, hopes to prevent migrants from dying in the desert. To do this, since 2004 the group has gone to remote areas in the desert to leave water, blankets, food, and other supplies that might save lives during the migrants' journey. Because of this, in 2018 a group of volunteers from the humanitarian organization were charged with three felony charges, which were two counts of felony harboring undocumented migrants and one more of conspiracy to harbor and transport them⁵. The volunteers faced up to 20 years in prison for their ongoing humanitarian efforts. However, in February 2020, US District Judge Rosemary Márquez ruled that the defendants' acts "were sincere exercises of religion" (1) and barred their prosecution. 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. This gruesome logic is profoundly disturbing. (20)

As stated by the judge, the gruesome logic that lies behind prevention through deterrence policies is, in fact, a prevention through death scheme that instrumentalizes the nonhuman features and

components of the border area to harm migrants. In her rebuke, Judge Márquez echoes anthropologist Jason de León's assertion regarding how the desert is part of a "hybrid collectif" formed by wildlife, extreme weather, and isolation that not only has the ability to kill migrants but that also participates in the erasure of their bodies. Whereas every year U.S. Customs and Border Protection reports hundreds of deaths in the desert (in 2018, it reported 281 deaths⁶), as de León contends: "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" (83). Furthermore, de León's premise does not include the people who get kidnapped in Mexican territory, particularly in the rainforests, and it does not incorporate those who die in the river either.

Regarding the damage that geopolitical delimitations inflict on the environment, when talking about the ecological perils faced during the Anthropocene, Hillary Cunningham asserts that border studies should not remain indifferent to the increasingly severe environmental decay created by borders. According to her, border structures and bordering practices actively participate in the destruction of the environment: "in geopolitical terms, ecological regions do not neatly coincide with international territorial borders, creating a set of signal disjunctures between 'environment' and 'political borders'" (371). As I discuss in chapter 1, environmental damage is a cause of concern for border scholarship because the built environments of borders and the practices that sustain them disturb the ecosystems over which they have been imposed. These effects are not only the consequences of nation-state practices, they also respond to a series of criminal enterprises that take advantage of the border ecologies' features.

Another example of a similar type of environmental damage lies in the Mexico-Guatemala border, where managing the Suchiate river calls for transnational cooperation. Because each

country has different interests and water regulations, as I discuss in chapter 2, in this context there is a historical lack of cooperation and the environmental and social issues revolving around the river remain neglected. In addition, in the Mexico-United States border area, the environmental impacts derived from geopolitical demarcations can be seen in the form of aggravated flooding created by walls and fences that operate as dams when rivers overflow, an operation that sometimes changes the course of rivers. An additional instance of this damage can be exemplified through the effects that the border wall has had over the desert ecologies. In chapter 3, I address the damage produced by the border wall in the breaking off of migratory and survival paths for endangered animals such as the jaguar and the ocelot. Walls, fences, vigilance towers, patrolling activities, and other technologies harm the integrity of border ecosystems, affecting⁷ their physical disposition and dynamics.

The previous examples underscore the dangerous, intimate, and conflictive encounters that often arise between migrants and border ecologies and also work as a point of departure to think about the characteristics of human-nonhuman intersections in border landscapes. These characteristics consist in the dynamism and instability of ecological systems that double as a border demarcations, the damage to the environment created by border securitization, and in the weaponization of the natural environment against migrants. I frame these features within the context of the borders from the Central America-United States corridors, which are geopolitical entities that coexist with a multiplicity of dynamic ecosystems, a factor that originates different forms of ecological and social interference.

I take two of the leading terms of this dissertation, “coexistence” and “interference,” from the field of the biological sciences, where they operate as key elements to study and describe the potential for the survival or demise of a diverse array of components that share the same space in

a given time. The notion of coexistence is at the core of the numerous theoretical debates that stem from the environmental humanities field, which offers no single definition but that, in broad terms, is a cross-disciplinary research approach that aspires to study cultural products in relation to their power to generate ecological awareness and to their ability to expose how societies and individuals engage with the environment.

Political theorist Jane Bennet defines coexistence as the highly conflictual act of being “intimately interconnected [in a] mutual dependency with friction and violence between parts” (23), whereas Latinamericanist Gabriel Giorgi defines it as the possibility to see others “ como un horizonte próximo, íntimo/éxtimo, un terreno que no se puede poner a distancia sino que se revela a la vez interior e impropio” (Kindle). For Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, coexistence often implies “intense physical intimacy” (2015). Finally, Object Oriented Ontologist Timothy Morton and anthropologist Ana Tsing resort to spectral and ghostly figures that trouble linearity by underscoring how humans coexist with not entirely gone, and not fully present ecological entities. Hence, coexistence is considered a critical concept to overcome categorical boundaries, constantly linked to notions of intimacy and violence. By underscoring the environmental conditions that situate border regions as dynamic and unstable systems that coexist with people that traverse and reside in these areas, *Border Biomes Coexistence and Interference on American Migration Trails* interrogates traditional conceptualizations of geopolitical boundaries and examines how the extant connections between the ecological aspects of border regions and the mechanisms and infrastructures of border-making processes intensify human-nonhuman relations.

While conceptual orientations regarding borders tend to focus on human-centered approaches, my lines of inquiry draw on these foundational frameworks to put them into dialogue

with the material reality of border landscapes. By foregrounding the entanglement between borders as both living ecosystems and geopolitical articulations, this dissertation seeks to shed light on the social and ecological disjunctures produced by this conflicting assemblage. My analysis spans queries regarding the damage to the environment created by bordering practices and structures, questions of ecopolitics in transnational settings, the relationships between migrants and border communities with border ecologies, and the destabilization of ontological divides that take place against the backdrop of border demarcations. Because Mexicanist and Latinx scholarship focused on border and migration themes has not fully engaged in studying the centrality of nonhuman elements, my research contributes to filling this gap. *Border Biomes* frames border-related social and cultural concerns with a critical position rooted in the environment and its nonhuman components. With a focus on the Guatemala-Mexico and the Mexico-United States borderlands, I ground these questions in Mexican and Mexican American 20th and 21st-century literature and art.

Border Biomes, Coexistence and Interference on American Migration Trails examines a set of cultural products that, I argue, think through border biomes such as the forest, the river, and the desert to contend that they are key nodes of knowledge to regard border areas as vital ecosystems that contest dominant geopolitical articulations and defy normative ways of conceiving human and nonhuman coexistence. I make this argument with the analysis of works by Mexican authors Valeria Luiselli, Cristina Rivera Garza, Emiliano Monge, Rafael Ramírez Heredia, and Dolores Dorantes; by Mexican American authors and artists Emmy Pérez, Ana Teresa Fernández, and Jenea Sanchez; and by Anglo American artists Zoey Leonard and Lauren Strohacker. I study how they address the detrimental consequences of border security measures over both people and the environment, the intimate, conflictive, and often dangerous encounters between migrants and

border ecologies, and the deep-seated relationships linking these biomes with their inhabitants. This dissertation sustains that border biomes function as vivid elements that dispute normative ways of envisaging border configurations and operate as spaces where the encounters between human and nonhuman entities deepen. This depth becomes manifest through the representation of affective and physical interactions between humans and the built and natural components of borders.

Focused on the Mexican novels *El mal de la Taiga* (2012), by Cristina Rivera Garza and *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) by Emiliano Monge, my first chapter examines representations of forests as border passages. Given that geopolitical borders tend to be envisaged as linear and fixed inanimate containment devices, an understanding that leads to the blurring of the ecological realities surrounding the land over which a territorial limit has been imposed, I study the ways in which Monge's novel presents the border as a dynamic, unstable, and vivid entity. In addition, I focus on analyzing the connection between rainforests from the Guatemala-Mexico border area and the world of criminality that preys on Central American migrants. To do this, I recur to Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez' findings regarding the types of violence that migrants face when they cross the rainforests of the border areas. From Rivera's novel, drawing on Jane Bennet's vital materialism and on Environmental Humanities scholar Ursula K. Heise's sense of planetarity, I analyze the vitalism and global interconnectivity of forests. In this part of the analysis, I contend that the contact between the protagonist of *El mal de la Taiga* and a border forest produce a sense of deterritorialization through which it is possible to attest different types of ecological interconnectivity that take place in spite of geopolitical articulations.

My second chapter focuses on the Suchiate river, which marks the Mexico-Guatemala border, and on the Rio Grande/Río Bravo from the Mexico-U.S. limit. Building on Eduardo

Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism, this section studies how in the novel *La Mara* (2004), Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia portrays the Suchiate as an entity that is both a source of life and the entrance to precarious scenarios faced by migrants. With a critical reading of the poetry book *With the River on our Face* (2016) by Chicana author Emmy Pérez and considering Timothy Morton's nonhuman spectrality, I study the material and spectral presence of the river in border communities, as well as the conflictive coexistence between a fluid body of water and a border demarcation. *El río/The River* (2018) by Mexican poet Dolores Dorantes and American photographer Zoey Leonard is the frame to analyze the depiction of the vulnerability of migrants facing the border river. In this way, in this chapter I argue that these literary works portray rivers as entities that, because of their entanglement with border demarcations, have acquired a dual and complex nature that turns them into both weapons and ecological realities facing challenges independent of their geopolitical functions.

The third and final chapter examines depictions, refigurations, and reimaginations of the desert. To do this, I analyze *Lost Children Archive* (2019) by Mexican author Valeria Luiselli, and the art projects "Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera" (2016) by Mexican American artist Ana Teresa Fernández, and "Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando" (2017) by Mexican American photographer Jenea Sanchez and Anglo American artist Lauren Strohacker. In this section, I study how the characters of *Lost Children Archive* attempt to document the human and nonhuman presences that have gotten lost or perished in the desert. I argue that by stressing their absence, even if momentarily, the narrator makes these human and nonhuman elements present. To achieve this effect, the characters engage in sound projects, and it is through echoes, reenactments, and verbal accounts that the lost presences are refigured. These refigurations speak to the processes of colonization and displacement that have taken place in the desert. On the one hand, they refer to

the indigenous past of the desert lands, on the other hand, they underscore the humanitarian crises revolving around unaccompanied migrant children.

The last two projects I study are focused on opposing the border wall that has been imposed over the desert. Considering “Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera,” I study how Ana Teresa Fernández symbolically restitutes integrity and continuity to what anthropologist Ana Tsing calls a “ruined landscape.” Painting a section of the wall with a blue shade that matches the sky, Fernández is able to manipulate the landscape. The visual effect she accomplishes becomes a reminder of the damage that the border wall has created over the desert. Finally, I analyze the project “Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando,” which through visual and digital manipulation, turns the animals of the desert in political ghosts and agents that participate in a binational gathering where they seem to demand their right to exist. I connect these inquiries with the study of the roles that race and gender play within the development of these artistic projects.

By investigating the intersections between the fields of Border and Migration studies with the Environmental Humanities, *Border Biomes* provides a framework to think about borders as ecological systems entangled with transnational communities and unforgiving immigration policies. Situated in a nascent field that focuses on the mutual entanglements of human and nonhuman agents framed by border settings, the following chapters underscore how, acting as weapons, allies, victims, or ghosts, the nonhuman components of the Central America-Mexico-United States corridors are central for the contemporary configurations of border schemes. Entangled with geopolitical articulations, forests, rivers, and deserts not only influence but often dictate complex modes of coexistence, which can be intimate, violent, and lethal.

CHAPTER 1: THE FOREST

Borders are often perceived as steady containment devices located in bare territories whose sole purpose is not only to delimit but to uphold border-making physical structures and practices. This vision tends to erase the ecological complexities of the territory that is being traversed by a geopolitical limit. In several parts of the world, wildlife and land have been threatened by border schemes such as walling, surveilling, and fencing. In 2016, a study published by *PLOS Biology* noted that the contemporary refugee crisis has produced heightened border fencing construction processes in places such as Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus area, fencing that has tended to be installed with no environmental impact evaluations. The study underscores how these fencing practices quickly became a threat to a diverse array of nonhuman species, mainly because they restrict the access to different resources, trap big mammals that are left to die entangled in the fences' wires and interrupt seasonal migration patterns. While this article is centered on regions that are out of the scope of this dissertation, it is interesting to note that the authors cite the United States-Mexico border area as “[one of] the best documented studies” (2016) on the different ways in which border security structures affect wildlife conservation and endanger biodiversity. In this way, in the Americas, the most examined case of environmental peril framed by a border context can be found in the United-States Mexico borderlands, where in 2008, more than 30 environmental and cultural laws were waived in order to build 670 miles of barriers across the desert that spans both Mexico and the United States. Alongside the human costs, perceiving the desert as an empty space is a burden that continuously endangers the wildlife that depends on it. Whereas in the context of migration patterns in the Americas the border situated in the Sonoran-Chihuahuan deserts is often at the center of political and social debates, the desert is far from being the only biome shared by different countries in the Central America-United States corridor. In southern

Mexico, the borders with Guatemala and Belize traverse six rivers and several rainforests and jungles.

In this chapter I focus on the forest in relation to borderlands. For this purpose, I study *El mal de la taiga* (2012) by Cristina Rivera Garza, and *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) by Emiliano Monge. As I discuss further below, in Rivera Garza's novel it is possible to identify the entanglement between the border, the boreal forest, and their human and nonhuman components as vital materialities not only interconnected but coming into existence precisely because of such interconnections. For the second novel, I focus on the entanglement between rainforests and jungles and the geopolitics of the southern Mexican border, along with informal migration and criminal groups that take advantage of it, and how they aggravate the condition of ecosystems already threatened by illicit hunters, livestock farming, logging, and global warming.

While *El mal de la Taiga* presents a boreal forest in proximity to a border city without a precise geographic location, *Las tierras arrasadas* is grounded in a specific territory, and this specificity is precisely what gives origin to the plot. Studying these different representations of the forest, allows me to underscore both the materiality of this biome as a nonhuman entity in its own right and its cultural and social intertwinement with specific bodies and contexts. As I am about to explore, notwithstanding the distinction in the scope of their referentiality, in these two novels is possible to observe the decentralization of the human in border-related accounts. In these cases, this is achievable because of the prominence of the forest as an agent of human-nonhuman contention and coexistence within both plots. However, although it is true that, at times the human is displaced from the center of the action, ultimately, in both novels the anthropocentric privilege remains. However, in both texts, the nonhuman entities are recognized as dynamic, active, and powerful. This characteristic is more noticeable in *El mal de la taiga*, where the lack of geolocality

allows for the inscription of the forest in a global ecological context, whereas because of the prominence of the social concern in *Las tierras arrasadas*, the jungle is often portrayed as part of such concern.

In the Latin-American literary tradition, the *selva*, or tropical forest, has been at the center of some of its most influential works. *La Vorágine* (1924) by Colombian José Eustasio Rivera is the most well-known novel depicting the jungle. In this case, the Amazon rainforest of Colombia is depicted as a force working against the progress of civilization. However, this trope can be traced back to the colonial archive, where writers from the conquest shift from the portrayal of the rainforest as a marvelous paradise full of resources that could be easily exploited, to the representation of an entity that favors the local indigenous people and conspires against the colonizer system. From works such as *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) by Argentinian Ricardo Güiraldes, *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos, to *La casa verde* (1966) by Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, to varying degrees, the jungle tends to be portrayed as an oppositional actant that resists civilizer efforts. Over time, the approach to these novels has seemingly changed, many times, to address some of the most pressing social and ecological issues concerning the Latin-American forests. In Emiliano Monge's text, the portrayal of the jungle is directly linked to the migratory context in which is embedded. In *Las tierras arrasadas* the narrator exposes the human suffering endured by a group of migrants that coming from Central America and on their way up north, need to cross the tropical forest that is located at the intersection of Mexico and Guatemala. Because of the ecological nature of the forested area, in the narration several nonhuman entities interact with the migrants, thus drawing attention to their alterity. With a story articulated from a different perspective, Cristina Rivera Garza's novel refuses referentiality and highlights the human-nonhuman interconnections that can arise at a planetary scale. As I

explore in the following section, the awareness of such interconnections is directly associated to the experience of the border as a nonhuman, yet vividly material thing.

A Border and a Forest: Global Ecology and Performative Interconnectedness in El mal de la Taiga by Cristina Rivera Garza

“Creepy,” “shape-shifter,” “eerie,” “unhinged” and “radical” are some adjectives⁸ that have been used to describe this short novel. These connotations respond to the phantasmagorical, fantastic, sci-fi-like atmosphere of a plot populated by uncanny human and nonhuman characters. Hybrid to the core, *El mal de la Taiga* oscillates between fantasy, noir novel, and science fiction; in this amalgam, the book includes illustrations by Carlos Maiques and a playlist suggested by the author. The lead character of the novel is an unsuccessful female detective, —maybe the same one from Rivera Garza’s earlier novels *La muerte me da* (2006) and *Verde Shanghai* (2011)—, whom, inspired by her failed cases, becomes a detective novel author. At the request of an abandoned husband, the detective-writer accepts a new case, which consists in finding his run-away wife, who is traveling with her lover. Because of a telegram sent by the fugitive, the detective finds her first lead in la Taiga, a distant forest located near a border town.

Deterritorialization

The exact location of the story is unidentified, the only information available to the reader is that the forest is near a border town, from which the wife sent the telegram. As the narrator explains: “de esa ciudad fronteriza, había salido el telegrama” (ch. VII). The border’s presence is not gratuitous. Cristina Rivera Garza, born in the border town of Matamoros, Mexico, is well known for the border and migration themes at the center of many of her narratives:

I was born in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, right on the other side of Brownsville, Texas, and

have lived a good chunk of my life in between San Diego and Tijuana—one of the most dynamic borders of our contemporary world—so that may explain this fascination. And yet, there is something else. There is this originary out-of-placeness, if you will. (Rivera Garza “The Cristina...”)

By out-of-placeness, Rivera Garza explains, she refers to the feeling of how “your body, your mere presence, complicates things” (“The Cristina...”). Given this fascination, a telegram with the message “NUNCA TAN CERCA LO LEJOS” (ch. VII) sent from a border town, can be interpreted in terms of the geographic context surrounding it. In geopolitical terms, a border tends to divide spaces that, regardless of an artificial separation, remain connected. Ecocritic pioneer Lawrence Buell states: “national borders by no means regularly correspond with ‘natural’ borders” (82). Considering this premise, the message *nunca tan cerca lo lejos* can be read as a reflection of the nation-scale divide from which it is being sent. This separation, along with the impossibility to identify the territory, leads the character to generate a sense of deterritorialization, which in terms of Ursula K. Heise is: “the weakening of the ties between culture and place” (20), a weakening that remains throughout the whole text, producing out-of-placeness affects.

Because deterritorialization implies the erasure of the local and thus, it does not always leave room for a sense of belonging, the detective describes her arrival to the uncharted border city as a frightening memory: “recuerdo la imagen del abismo. Recuerdo, sobre todo, las palabras <<fin del mundo>>” (ch. VII). This description overlaps with Rivera Garza’s own sensation of, because of her constant border crossings, being “a nomadic foreigner [looking] at the world in skewed ways” (“The Cristina...”), and also resonates with Ursula K. Heise’s assertions about the adverse effects of deterritorialization, such as experiences of disenfranchisement (10). Using the word “abyss” to explain her first encounter with an unknown territory, the detective transmits the image

of a human figure that is physically and emotionally lost.

After describing the uneasy feeling of entering an unknown border territory, the detective unveils the telegram was not the only item sent by the transient wife, she also sent a letter with the message: “<<JAMÁS LO LEJOS ARREMETIÓ TAN CERCA>>” (ch. VII). This letter adds another layer of meaning to the deterritorialization process experienced by the detective. At first, the protagonist encounters a border city that pins her to an affective void, also complicating the memories of her own city: “recuerdo [...] las muchas imágenes de mi propia ciudad, ese sitio de espacios oscuros que había, yo también, dejado atrás” (ch. VII). Stating that the memory of her city turned into *dark spaces*, the detective underscores the destabilization of the sense of belonging attached to this place, as the phrase *yo también había dejado atrás* suggests, which is produced by her encounter with an unfamiliar territory.

When in its literal sense, the message *nunca tan cerca lo lejos* states that upon the detective’s arrival to the border, a territory that used to be thousands of miles away is now in front of her, its meaning goes deeper. During her arrival at the border city, the detective meets a translator waiting for her to help with the case; about this encounter, she recalls, “el traductor [...] algo dijo en mi lengua, pero al darse cuenta de que lo entendía sólo con dificultad, optó por usar la lengua en la que hablaríamos durante el trayecto a los bosques boreales: algo que no era estrictamente suyo ni mío, un tercer espacio” (ch. VII). Rivera Garza echoes the concept of the Third Space, which in broad terms, is described by Edward Soja as a flexible, profound openness. This third space is central for the deterritorialization process, insofar as such is the space where the detective realizes that, through the sense of dispossession, her ties to the world have been destabilized.

Here, it is important to remark that destabilizations in the form of deterritorialization are

strategies implemented by colonial forces to exert control over entire populations and territories. As I outlined before, knowing the exact location of the border city is not necessary to conclude how, in correspondence to most geopolitical borders, this one came to be by the power of a nation-state imposed over the land. However, centered on the figure of the detective, the most prominent display of deterritorialization manifests as intimate experiences of loss and contradiction. Ursula K. Heise argues that such a state, although disharmonious, “also implies possibilities for new cultural encounters and a broadening of horizons [that can lead to] encompass the planet as a whole” (10). In a similar affective vein, Timothy Morton believes that the sense of “losing the very ground under our feet” (31) can help dissolve the illusion of boundaries. Both thinkers aim to shift the focus away from anthropocentric views of the world to pay attention to the interconnectedness that brings all beings closer together at a global scale.

Once the detective leaves the border city, she enters even more unfamiliar territory, the Taiga forest. Because this forest makes up the largest biome on the planet, similar to what happens with the border city, it would be difficult to read into the exact location in which the author is placing the story. Addressing this characteristic, Mexicanist scholar Ignacio Sánchez Prado states: “[in the novel] space is present and material, yet vague.” This is, even though it is not possible to locate the narrated territories, their vagueness does not impede recognizing them as vibrant materialities that even in their lack of referentiality maintain certain specificities. The vagueness as a characteristic of the places visited by the detective helps her interpret them as planetary.

One of the first thoughts that comes to the mind of the detective upon her contact with the forest is: “recuerdo la inmovilidad. Recuerdo haber pensado: <<Pero si aquí nunca sale el sol>>. Y la frustración inicial, eso recuerdo” (ch. IX). By voicing feelings of strangeness and disconnection, the detective underscores that the affective abyss she encounters at the border

remains present. However, as her stay in the woods lengthens, the understanding of her surroundings changes:

me llevó días tener una idea más o menos clara de lo que era la taiga. Sus temperaturas, su flora, su fauna. El tono de sus verdes. Los nombres de sus ciudades y, luego, el nombre de sus poblados y comarcas y villorrios. Su lengua o sus lenguas. Sus ríos. Es bueno recordar a veces los confines del planeta. Es bueno recordar que se vive de hecho, en un planeta. (ch. V).

Engaging with the forest, the detective first had to undergo a form of deterritorialization, a state of bewilderment in order to start knowing it. Such were the conditions she experienced before developing a sense of connection to the forest: “interconnectedness isn’t snug and cozy. There is intimacy [...] but not predictable, warm fuzziness” (Morton, 31). After a series of out-of-placeness affects, the detective realizes that even though she is in an alien territory, such a territory is not foreign, to the extent that it allows her to recognize both herself and the forest as two connected entities inasmuch as they form part of the same planet, as the line *es bueno recordar que se vive de hecho en un planeta* indicates.

Human/Nonhuman Global Realities

According to Ursula K. Heise, the sense of planet, at the same time that reveals an attachment to the global also accounts for “how political, economic, technological, social, cultural and ecological networks [...] are now imbricated in larger networks” (55). The text achieves at least two things through the depiction of the forest, it challenges colonial assumptions about the pristine nature of forested areas and it emphasizes the reality of human and nonhuman entanglements shaped by imbalanced associations. In relation to the first point, the forest’s representation resonates with

architect Dan Handel's understanding of these ecosystems as the amalgamation of stories about trees and humans (64). In the detective's words, images of human settlements overlap with evocations of wildlife, nonhuman spaces, and the plural word *lenguas*, thus, pointing out the presence of more than one culture. Thereby, the detective evokes the forest as a strange, not fixed, and vast entity where a multiplicity of beings coexists.

Including cities as part of a verbalized image of the forest speaks to an impossible entanglement between forest and city that yet is made present through the detective's eyes. Focused on the genocide of indigenous peoples committed by the Brazilian state in the Amazon, architect Paulo Tavares asserts: "forest people [...] were said to lack the most remarkable product of civilization —the city. They were non-urban societies" (125). Given this premise, it is possible to grasp the existential conflict between forest and city and how they tend to be seen as opposite, incompatible forces. Imposed by an imperial gaze, this opposition supposes the superiority of certain cultures, views, or practices over others. Thus, it has produced, as with the Amazon, unspeakable demonstrations of colonial violence. In Rivera Garza's novel it is possible to find traces of this violence too; without being explicit, including the city as part of the memory of the forest encompasses it.

While the inclusion of cities in the forest's description might hint not necessarily at their literal settlement inside the forest, it speaks to the fact that because these were established around the premises of the Taiga, they are its cities to the degree they stand on the land that once belonged to the forest. Moreover, when the detective is having one of her conversations with the translator, she states: "estábamos en medio del bosque, sentados sobre las raíces de árboles que, después de crecer por decenas de años, serían derribados sin contemplaciones" (ch. XVI). Addressing this violence, the detective gives a clear, concrete example of how the materiality of the forest can be

wiped out to accomplish human goals, such as collecting wood to sell it, or expanding an urban area. The human-nonhuman contention appears not just as part of a deconstructionist memory process but also as a recurrent theme in present-time descriptions. Perhaps the most striking example of this scheme revolves around a swimming pool:

Bajo los nubarrones de la tarde [...] ahí, la alberca. Un rectángulo, sí. Un rectángulo azul rodeado de un jardín [y luego] los juegos infantiles y, luego, las mesas del patio y las sombrillas [...] Atrás de todo eso, coronándolo todo de hecho, las coníferas. Sus muchos picos. Sus ramas [...] ¿Una alberca en medio de la taiga? En efecto, una alberca en medio de la taiga. Sí. La alberca le pertenecía al hombre mayor que organizaba la producción y la exportación de la madera. (ch. XI)

The presence of a swimming pool inside the Taiga not only addresses the appropriation and further destruction of the forest, but also implicates how globalization produces endless connections in spite of border demarcations. If, as the detective explains, the Taiga is being subjected to lumber industry processes, it can be inferred that traces of the Taiga, a forest the detective had situated *en los confines del planeta*, circulate around the globe through the physicality of its felled trees. The reference to the wood exports market is reminiscent of how territories that are geographically distant, can be “connected [...] through economic exchange and exploitation” (Heise 98). Described as an overlapping of forests, cities, and a swimming pool, the image of the Taiga evokes a contemporary reality where landscapes cannot longer be considered pristine in any way, in the sense that if a swimming pool can be located within a “wild” territory, pieces of that same territory, in this case, a distant forest, can also inhabit “human” domestic spaces. Ultimately, these instances stress earthly connectivity that challenges nation-based border schemes.

Thing-Power

Reflecting on the reasons that encouraged her to take the case, the detective declares: “siempre he sentido una debilidad achacosa por las formas de escritura que ya están en desuso: el radiograma, la taquigrafía, los telegramas” (13). Because the first clue for the investigation are several telegrams, archaic communication devices, the writer returns to her old profession. About this, Mexicanist scholar Maricruz Castro Ricalde argues: “*El mal de la Taiga* [...] se define en sus propios términos: toma del pasado aquellas tecnologías donde la mano, el contacto, el dispositivo como prótesis del ser humano está presente” (57). In terms of temporality, Rivera Garza’s text orbits around the present time, “*The Taiga Syndrome* is a book that fiercely resists referentiality but is not devoid of this sense of the present” (Sánchez Prado), in this way, that the author chooses telegrams to carry out the messages instead of a more conventional digital communication method, underscores the relevance of such a choice. If, as Castro Ricalde suggests, the reason behind this selection is the physical contact that can be established with telegrams, then their materiality plays a central role for the development of the novel.

Although as readers we only get to learn the content of two telegrams and one letter, the husband received an unknown number of them. The first two messages were sent from a border city near the Taiga forest; they traveled the world to reach the abandoned husband’s hands. From there, they went on to be in the detective’s hands and then traveled with her back to the border. As I outlined before, the message *nunca tan cerca lo lejos*, is a reflection of the context from where the wife sent it, that is, the border. After this telegram’s revelation, new content is disclosed, this time a letter with the inscription “JAMÁS LO LEJOS ARREMETIÓ TAN CERCA” (ch. VII), which works as an intensification of the meaning displayed in the previous telegram. As the plot develops and the detective goes deeper into the forest, she draws connections between herself, the

forest, and the planet. These connections are echoed by the telegrams' content. For instance, the last telegram sent by the wife states: "CUANDO DECIMOS ADIÓS ¿QUÉ OTRA COSA SALUDAMOS EN REALIDAD?" (ch. XX). This is the only message remembered by the detective during her final days in the unknown territory, and it encompasses the realization of her interconnectedness with the forest.

The telegram's multiple interventions in the narrative gradually expose them as things with power. As stated by Jane Bennett, objects appear as things in the sense they are "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics" (5). The telegrams' nature further complicates this premise. Because these objects contain messages produced in specific contexts, it becomes difficult to detach them from the words inscribed on them. However, not only the content of the telegrams, but also the matter conforming them becomes central to enlarging the understanding of both border and forest in relation to the sense of planetary interconnectedness displayed in the novel.

If the reason telegrams are the communication devices of choice is their materiality, then this ecology needs to be taken into account. As per the detective's narration, the most blatant human-inflicted wounds in the forest are those occasioned by logging, "el bosque [...] era menos uniforme y menos bosque de lo que pudiera creerse [...] la explotación de la madera había atraído en los últimos años a leñadores y empresarios por igual" (ch. XVI). The product of this activity is the exportation of wood, which generates a form of global connectivity produced by the exploitation of local resources. If telegrams and letters offer physical contact, this is because they are the product of specific forms of exploitation. In this context, the Taiga, or boreal forests are constantly affected by the paper industry, a practice that threatens their biodiversity⁹. In this way, it is fitting that while the detective notices the visible consequences of felling trees, it is precisely

because of the material products manufactured by this practice that she gets to see the dire consequences of environmental destruction in the first place. Furthermore, not only did she take the case because of her fascination with outdated writing forms, but these objects guided her to the Taiga and modified her experiences since the beginning of her journey:

Fue cosa de tocar el papel amarillento y empezar a soñar. Las yemas de los dedos sobre las arrugas de la hoja. El olor a viejo. Algo guardado [...] ¿Desde qué lugar tan lejos en el tiempo, había partido este puñado de mayúsculas? Y, sobre todo, ¿qué habían saludado en realidad? (ch. I)

This quote shows one of the first manifestations of the telegram's thing-power, this defined by Jane Bennett as the "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). If telegrams animate the writer to act as a detective again, the tactile contact with them makes her voice some of the most crucial questions for her investigation. Following this premise, it is also worth noting that in the same quote, the detective first brings attention to the materiality of the devices and then focuses on the content written on them. This relates to the symbiotic relationship between the matter produced by the forest's exploitation and the content written on them; in the end, their conjunction becomes the actant that leads her to action. Such a combination is explicit because of the words written on the telegrams and letters, thereby, the very fact that these objects with an organic origin exist for people's use speaks to the human-nonhuman connection embedded in them.

One of the most important contributions of both letters and telegrams is that they direct the detective's journey. Moreover, it is because of these missives that there is a case to take and a story to tell. However, their activity is not limited to serving as passive guides; they also exist as dynamic, vivid entities: "los telegramas y las cartas me ayudaron a construir su trayecto. Los sellos

postales. Esa tinta a veces diluida por la lluvia y la nieve; otras, compacta y clara a través del espacio, a través del tiempo” (ch. V). The devices are able to affect and to be affected by the other human and nonhuman beings, a factor that permits to identify the nonhuman vitality of the objects. As with the forest, the detective is able to reach the perceptive openness needed to appreciate the vitality of these nonhuman entities: “recuerdo la lección de física que me vino a la mente cuando empecé a leer los telegramas: sin tomar en cuenta la presencia del aire, todas las cosas tardan lo mismo en caer” (ch. V). After her contact with the telegrams, the protagonist’s thoughts lead her to think in a physic similarity shared by all things. Once again, she is able to find a connection between human and nonhuman realities while experiencing the extent and possibilities of their agency. The paradox within these arguments is that the thing-power is narrated through human eyes. However, while the human continues at the top of the ontological ladder, nonhuman figures gain central roles within the plot, exerting their power over human conduct and sensibility.

A Physically Present Border

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Chicana cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa states: “[borders] are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (19). The theorist underscores the physical presence of the border in situations where this occurrence is not possible because of its geographic location. However, as it has been studied, Anzaldúa challenges common assumptions about the border as a mere geographic, fixed reality, switching from an epistemological understanding of the borderlands to an ontological one. The added layer of the border’s flexible physical attributes can be better understood through feminist and physicist theorist Karen Barad’s

term “intra-action.”

Barad’s intra-action framework, thought of within her agential realism theory, seeks to ascertain that human and nonhuman beings reciprocally constitute each other, in such a way that individual agencies don’t exist as separate beings: “to be entangled is not simply to be interwind with another, as the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair” (*Meeting the Universe* ix). Thinking in terms of Barad’s concept brings new light to Anzaldúa’s understanding of the border as a physical entity coming into material existence even when its geographic features are out of the visual scope.

To illustrate this, Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad* is central. For the Chicana feminist theorist, *la facultad* “is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface [...] the one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world” (38). The term “surface phenomena” refers to different materialities that in their primary form, are visible to the human eye. However, Anzaldúa emphasizes the existence of a “deeper reality” hidden underneath such surfaces, which can be identified through the observer’s sensitivity. For Anzaldúa, the potential for this capacity “is latent in all of us” (39), although according to her, the most likely to undergo that understanding are those who do not feel safe in the world (38). This premise resonates with Ursula K. Heise’s theory of deterritorialization, and with Timothy Morton’s claim regarding the ability of human beings to recognize the interconnectedness of things, usually only after experiencing loss. At the center of these claims lies the sense of the possibility to become aware of the ecological, planetary, and earthly connectivity present between the human and the nonhuman, elements that are central in Rivera Garza’s novel.

In light of these philosophies, Barad’s intra-action’s relevance becomes clearer, this, in the

sense that intra-action aims to elucidate how “individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (*Meeting the Universe* ix). For Barad, contrary to the common belief that matter only acquires meaning once it has been observed and apprehended by humans, the difference between the observer and the observed disappears through an act of intra-active performativity. In *El mal de la Taiga* it is possible to identify the intra-active and participant role of matter through the coming into existence of the last telegram, through which it is possible to attest the physicality of the border, even when this has apparently been left behind.

The novel is populated by strange characters, such as miniature women the size of a hand that are the product of the wife and her lover’s relationship, the mysterious presence of a young wolf that creeps over a cabin, and the arrival of men wearing astronaut suits. Another uncanny character is a feral boy (*niño salvaje*). According to the detective, this boy “[no era] un niño en el sentido estricto del término, sino un muchacho [que] vivía en el bosque, pero no muy adentro” (loc. 613). Because the boy does not belong to the dominant societies of the forest, he is constantly persecuted, often captured by the lumberjack men, locked in an old room, and tied up: “se dejaba atrapar con cierta regularidad, sobre todo hacia finales del otoño e inicios del invierno, cuando la temperatura empezaba a bajar drásticamente” (ch. XIII). Trying to understand the boy, the detective realizes that she cannot do so without considering the nonliving/nonhuman objects surrounding him:

¿Quién puede resistirse a observar el cuerpo original, el cuerpo sin contexto social? Y conforme pasaban los minutos, me animaba también, sin duda, la incomprensión [...] Una flecha en el hombro izquierdo, insertada. Un agujero. Y se produjo, justo en ese momento, la ventana. Y la ventana produjo el espectador. Y, juntos, los tres elementos, hicieron

realidad el romance [...] Alguien quería salir y no podía salir, y miraba. (ch. XIII)

The previous scene acquires different complexities when thought of in terms of Barad's intra-activity. By pointing out her inability to understand the boy of the forest when attempting to think of him as a body without context, the detective enacts how "phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" ("Posthumanist Performativity" 815), such components can be human or nonhuman. Through what Anzaldúa calls *la facultad*, it is not until the detective focuses on the arrow inserted in the boy's wounded body, on the only window in the room where he is being held, and on herself as part of the scene, that she is able to obliterate the apparent differences between the observed and the observer, and to identify their deeper meaning, the interconnectedness through which they make sense together. In other words, the detective recognizes the physical entanglement of all those components and the agency of each one of them to perform in a temporally and spatially specific context, producing meaning.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist finds the missing wife; however, she refuses to go back to her husband and stays in the forest. During this scene, the detective gives her back the telegrams and, along with the translator, sets out to leave. However, shortly before leaving, during her last night in the Taiga, someone commits a crime:

Fue hacia el filo del amanecer que aparecieron los leñadores [...] De repente. Sus trazas en medio de la oscuridad. Sus alaridos [...] Cuando el traductor abrió la puerta se quedó un rato en silencio. Iba a seguirlo, pero me pidió que no lo hiciera [...] Se agachó entonces. Supuse, por el esfuerzo que hacía de cargarlo, que el peso del cuerpo del muchacho salvaje era más del que había imaginado. (ch. XX)

This scene marks the narrative point at which the border's materialization inside the forest becomes more noticeable. Right after finding out about the boy's killing, just as it happened when she was

standing in the border city, the detective remembers the words of the telegram: “<<CUANDO DECIMOS ADIÓS, ¿QUÉ OTRA COSA SALUDAMOS EN REALIDAD>>” (ch. XX). If the border seems to be moving along through both the materiality of the telegrams and their content, it is at this point, when neither the border territory, nor the telegrams are in the visual scope, that because of their intra-connectivity with the detective, their materiality gets reproduced. Although they remain separated from the human protagonist, at the same time they are displayed through her embodied affects. This embodiment occurs through the reenactment of the telegram’s content: *cuando decimos adiós ¿a qué saludamos en realidad?*, which underscores the material and affective experience sensed by the detective at the border and brought back into physical existence through a similarly intense, embodied affective occurrence in the forest. Furthermore, this same message also becomes intra-active with the biome, which acts as the answer to the question formulated by it. Saying goodbye to what lies on the other side of the border, her city, led the detective to undergo a deterritorialization process after which she is able to recognize planetary interconnectedness, which comes accompanied by the cruel act of the boy’s murder.

Rejecting the representation of an entirely pristine, social, or wild forest, Rivera Garza presents it as a dynamic materiality formed not only by non-human entities but also by human beings who inhabit it, who pass through it, die on it, or who kill it while using it as economic sustenance. In similarity with other major works depicting forested regions, the novel draws attention to different forms of exploitation, which produce hybrid and devastated landscapes. The lack of referentiality that is at the center of *El mal de la Taiga*, allows the author to underscore the interconnectivity of human and nonhuman beings at a global scale. Challenging human exceptionalism, the novel presents nonhuman, and specifically nonliving things with the power to influence the detective’s actions. After a deterritorialization process that first destabilized her ties

to the world, the protagonist is able to achieve a sense of planet and to recognize the interconnectivity that brings all beings closer together. Rivera Garza's novel challenges traditional conceptualizations of borders through ecological and ontological articulations that defy common conceptions regarding the physical or geographical limits and stability of borders. Ultimately, the text depicts living, dynamic territories conformed by diverse ecosystems and imbricated in environmental, ontological, and planetary connectivity networks.

Sin Tierra y sin Libertad: A Brief Account of the Struggle in the Selva

Before continuing the analysis of *Las tierras arrasadas*, because of the importance of locality for this novel, first I would like to delineate some of the most crucial events that have affected and continue to affect the Mexico-Guatemala rainforest. In the article "It Goes on Like a Forest" Architect Dan Handel states,

[Western societies have had] a belief in linear time and a progressive conception of society constantly advancing towards a better future. In contrast to these modern beliefs, a forest that simply 'goes on' is ubiquitous, lacking both an originating moment and stated objectives. Yet, the histories of forests are a complex of cyclical, spatio-temporal, and material-energetic flows that defy any linear trajectory" (43-44).

The previous quote serves as a starting point to think about the mechanisms of multi-profitability and extraction encompassed throughout the rainforests entangled with the Mexican southern border. This, because the histories and dynamism of this biome have been constantly obscured and denied in favor of social schemes that many times seek to advance the promising future Handel mentions, and other times operate in a framework of illegality that takes advantage of said governmental schemes. In this way, such schemes have included not only economic and political

goals that continue to threaten the forest's wildlife, biodiversity, and human inhabitants, but have also presented opportunities for criminal groups to take advantage of the forest's characteristics in order to exploit it along with, in the specific context of the Central America-United States' corridor, migrants' bodies, which is part of what I analyze in the third section of this chapter.

Shared by Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize, after the Amazon, the Selva Maya is the largest tropical rainforest in the Americas, and spans the Selva Lacandona, the Selva El Petén, and the Selvas de la Península de Yucatán. For Handel it is very common for humans to rationalize forests as “environments that become the loci for irrational longings” (44), meaning that forests tend to be used as the representation of a paradisiac image of nature craved by human beings used to the image and rhythm of cities. This phenomenon can be seen in the depiction of the Selva Lacandona, often promoted as “a place that gifts wonders to the world” (Galdámez Camacho 2017), as a “paradise for ecotourism” (González 2018), or as an “iconic place of natural beauty” (Forbes 2017), to name a few. Along with the Lacandon rainforest, throughout the Selva Maya, biosphere reserves, national parks and forest reserves are some of the most attractive destinations for Mexican and foreign tourists alike. This is the reason one of the high-profile projects of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is the Tren Maya. According to AMLO, the train will travel across more than 932 miles in five states of southern Mexico with the purpose of linking archaeological zones and reserves, carrying both tourists and goods. As several news outlets have reported, even though a large part of railways already exists, at least an additional 300 miles will still have to be built.¹⁰

Agricultural Sciences professor Enrique León Ávila has warned that the new train lines will produce a “destrucción significativa de las selvas en México” (Otros mundos Chiapas 2018), because they are set to be placed in the middle of two rainforest reserves, thus curtailing the free

movement of nonhuman species. Furthermore, shortly after the announcement of the project, hundreds of scholars, activists, environmentalists, and scientists sent a letter to the president asking him to cancel the project, stating: “estamos convencidos de que el verdadero desarrollo y el progreso, no pueden derivar de la destrucción de la naturaleza ni del atropello al respeto elemental de los derechos” (La Jornada 2018). The same article reports that the president quickly dismissed this letter arguing that no damage would be done and that the project will undoubtedly boost economy in some of the poorest states of Mexico.

Something similar happened when, in late 2018, at least ten communities from the Península de Yucatán signed a petition asking the new president to reconsider the project¹¹, citing, “no está planeado para nosotros la gente común, es un proyecto turístico que sólo beneficiará a los pudientes y a los extranjeros; nosotros los dueños de las tierras sólo lo veremos pasar” (Ramos 2018). Such a premise resonates with Tavares’ argument in regard to the elimination of the indigenous people as “a subject of rights” (131). In denying them the possibility to participate in the decision-making process that will directly affect their communities, the new Mexican government deepens the long-established erasure of indigenous’ voices and threatens the communities whose livelihoods depend on the rainforests¹². Furthermore, the refusal on the part of the administration to consider the communities that would be most affected by the enterprise, reminds us of the 1994 Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declarations about the disenfranchisement of indigenous people and the exploitation of the Lacandon forest.

The Zapatistas’ rebel army brought national and international attention to the Selva Maya, particularly to the Lacandon area, when the second largest rainforest in the Americas had remained largely overlooked. As Mexican author Jorge Volpi recounts: “cuando la prensa internacional comenzó a referirse a la revuelta zapatista el 1 de enero de 1994, pocos sabían dónde estaba

Chiapas” (37). On that date, January 1, 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement was set to take effect, prompting the Zapatistas to declare war against the Mexican government. Fearing for their lands and livelihoods, a large group of indigenous farmers left their rural communities, headed to several cities in Chiapas, and occupied them to make their demands be heard. Recognized by the New York Times as “the most powerful political rebels in Mexico in nearly 100 years” (Villegas 2017), for the first time since the Mexican Revolution the Zapatistas were able to bring “the plight of indigenous people and the rural poor back to the center of Mexican politics” (Gollnick 3). Because of the historical figure from which the Zapatistas take their name, and because the central concerns of their demands revolved around the land, in 1994 ecological anthropologist James D. Nations emphasized the fact that the rebels’ uprising was, eminently, an “ecological struggle” (1).

As it is widely known, the Zapatistas took their name from the Mexican Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, who used the slogan “Tierra y Libertad”, or “Land and Liberty”, to characterize his revolutionary claims. Born in a rural town in South-Central Mexico, Zapata organized an army of indigenous farmers and demanded agrarian reforms that would recognize the land’s ownership in favor of indigenous farmers and against wealthy hacendados who had been seizing it for years. More than 100 years after Zapata’s rebellion, and 25 years after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, as the Mayan Train project proves, the indigenous communities of the Selva Maya remain landless and with no freedom.

Because with the beginning of the Spanish conquest indigenous territories and people were easily expunged, one could erroneously imagine that the seizing of the land in the Mayan rainforest also started during the first years of the conquest. However, from the first encounter between the Spaniards, the tropical forest, and its people, in 1511, it took almost two centuries for the colonial

system to defeat the last Maya civilizations still standing, which were the Lacandones, from the Lacandon tropical forest, and the Itzaés, from El Petén. When the Spaniards first arrived into the tropical forest, the indigenous societies were highly fragmented and instead of organizing to fight the colonizers, in the face of each assault they tended to move deeper into the tropical forest, to then attack and defend from the shadows. In this regard, Brian Gollnick recalls: “[they] were infamous from the earliest days of Spanish presence in the region for their resistance to colonial rule and for their belligerence to other Maya communities who accepted Christianity and resettlement” (40). In this way, the tropical forest became the strongest space for resistance in the New World, particularly in the areas now located in Belize, Chiapas, and Guatemala.

The social history of the Mayan rainforest situates it in two main scenarios. On the one hand, it is imagined as an idyllic paradise that needs to be either preserved or exploited, both options usually in detriment of the indigenous communities that inhabit it. On the other hand, it is seen as the concrete and imaginary reality that favors the local people, thus working against the mechanisms of modernization. This last scenario was first unveiled throughout the fight between the Spaniard conquerors and the Mayans, and then, revitalized during the Zapatista uprising. In both cases, the indigenous familiarity with the rainforest operated as an advantage to outsmart threatening foreign forces. Whereas in the Conquest the indigenous people drew on their habituation with the forest to resist colonization, the Zapatistas integrated imagery of the Lacandon rainforest in their declarations to legitimize their claims against NAFTA. As Jorge Volpi contends, the fact that every Zapatista communiqué was signed with the phrase “desde las montañas del sureste mexicano” speaks to the rebellion’s desire to emphasize their bond with their surroundings.

Nowadays, another reason for which the rainforest has attracted attention, is its centrality for the Mexico-United States border context. The perception of Mexico as an extended southern

border for the United States has been prevalent since at least July 2014, when the Mexican government announced the Programa Frontera Sur. As it has been widely reported, this initiative was a response to pressure from the United States in light of the stream of Central American migrant children heading up north across Mexican territory many times with the intention of crossing into the United States. The expansion of border patrols and checkpoints throughout southern Mexico led to an increase in the number of deportations, which in one single fiscal year surpassed the United States' own deportations¹³. Due to the growing number of detentions, media and NGOs have described a “muro invisible” or “invisible wall” that, in the form of exacerbated securitization in the south, has curtailed the passage of thousands of migrants and many times, has forced them to try to evade the new security measures crossing through the forest.

The Border is a Forest: Las tierras arrasadas, by Emiliano Monge

While in the section pertaining to *El mal de la taiga*, it is possible to study the forest without addressing a specific geopolitical context, in *Las tierras arrasadas*' case this is not possible largely because Monge's novel originates precisely because of the particularities of a territory. Another important difference is that while the geopolitical border in Rivera Garza's text appears only at the beginning —this, even though it is materially reproduced through an intra-activity process, as described by Barad—, in Monge's novel, the forest, this time not boreal but tropical, emerges not just as intra-activity, but also as the territory where at least one third of the story takes place. It is worth noting that the aim of this section is not to compare the forest's representation in these novels, this because even though both texts share an interest in border processes and in the depiction of non-human entities, at the same time they are motivated by different tropes. Whereas *El mal de la taiga*'s protagonist is a detective traveling abroad because of her job, notwithstanding

she undergoes a process of deterritorialization, solitude, and loss, her experiences at the border are vastly different from those of Monge's characters, who are undocumented migrants falling into the hands of human traffickers in the tropical forest. It is also in virtue of such differences that in this analysis I resort to a different theoretical framework. This, mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, because in the case of *Las tierras arrasadas* it would be irrelevant to study the forest in relation to the border, since the forest is also the border. On the other hand, because the social context presented within the tropical forest gives rise to connections and relationships different than those depicted in *El mal de la taiga*. However, when needed, I underscore productive connections between both texts, although in general this chapter aims to study these two different forms of approaching both the forest and the border as dynamic non-human entities interacting with human beings at different levels of complexity, rather than comparing them.

In words of anthropologist Hillary Cunningham, borders are usually imaged “in *linear* terms” (373), which is why it is common to think of them as motionless. This is also largely due to the fact that geopolitical borders tend to be intimately related to the concept of a territory, understood as a space presumably fixed. Nonetheless, as philosopher Thomas Nail proposes, even in the exclusive association with space, “the border is not static [...] the movement of the border is not a metaphor; the border is literally and actually in motion in several ways” (5-6). In view of the ecological transformations it sustains, and also because of the social and interspecies relations that take place in it, *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015) depicts the border between Mexico and Guatemala not just as a space of transit, separation, or contact, but also as the amalgam of an active human and non-human entity. Because the border space depicted in the novel is that one of a tropical forest, the narrative explores the specificity of the danger that, in the Guatemala-Mexico borderlands, arises when Central American migrants have to cross through clandestine passage

routes, danger that affects both human and non-human beings. Finally, and as I propose in this section, it is precisely due to the prominence of the forest as part of the geopolitical border, that the narration blurs the ontological categories through which human and non-human beings tend to be interpreted, although it does not completely erase them.

For Thomas Nail, border territories undergo a diverse array of movements originating from internal or physical factors, “the border moves itself” (6), as well as from external or social ones, “the border is moved by others” (7). Among the latter, it is possible to identify the human flow. *Las tierras arrasadas* tells the story of a group of migrants traveling from south to north that need to cross the tropical forest. Because this is a vast and inhospitable terrain, populated by plant and animal life that can be dangerous for humans, the group of migrants hire two local kids, in the story named “los chicos de la selva”, or “the boys from the tropical forest”, to help them navigate the uncharted territory. However, the boys turn out to be human traffickers involved in organized crime networks in Mexico. In this way, Monge presents the border amalgam in which different facets of the migratory human tragedy meet the non-human dynamism of the tropical forest. The novel is divided into three books, “El libro de Epitafio”, who is one of the criminal group’s leaders, “El libro de Estela”, who is Epitafio’s wife and also a leader of the same group, and “El libro de los chicos de la selva”, who are the first point of contact between the criminal organization and the migrants. Because of the centrality of the tropical forest in the third book, in this section I focus mostly on what is narrated there, although my argument also revolves around the first episodes that occur in “El libro de Epitafio” because they also take place in the forest.

Migrants crossing a forested border is an image that presents a clear parallel to the border territory of southern Mexico, where the increase of migration control strategies, which started at least since the early 2000’s and intensified from the implementation of the Plan Frontera Sur in

2014¹⁴, has led migrants who are often trying to get to the United States, to go through Mexico using alternate routes, which have become increasingly more dangerous. Among those routes is selva de El Petén, located in the northernmost Guatemalan region, as well as more forested corridors around some of the major border cities in southern Mexico. In the novel, this kind of border space is often described as, for example, a “muralla vegetal” (15), or as “[un] muro de lianas, troncos leprosos y raíces recostadas” (29), descriptions that produce two effects. On the one hand, the narrator presents the tropical forest as a plant-populated frontier, thus alive and with a specific ecosystem that migrants must traverse; on the other hand, because of the incorporation of terms such as “muralla” and “muro”, the novel evokes one of the most prominent contemporary signifiers of the Mexico-United States borderlands. Although in the text the focus of much of the narrative is clearly the border Guatemala-Mexico, there are also constant nods to the Mexican northern border, therefore, the text seems to expose both entities as inescapably connected.

Through the narrative recognition of the tropical forest borderland as an independent entity composed by both plant and animal life, the novel rejects “the common mental image many people have of borders as static walls” (Nail 7), and to the contrary, depicts a dynamic border in which along with the migrants’ journey, it can also be observed “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” (302), that is to say, the wildlife that comprises the border passage while constantly modifying it. Furthermore, the narrative includes several descriptions of multiple movements and other non-human entities such as “algún fruto ya maduro que se suelta” (260), or “[un] riachuelo que corre más allá del muro de lianas” (29) through which the border is portrayed as an area with “distinctive geophysical processes and ecological systems” (Cunningham 374), alien to the social debacle, though inevitable involved in it. Thus, the border described by

the narrator is not just a passive or stable corridor, but an entity with independent movements that, because of them, constantly transforms its own configurations. In this way, beyond presenting the tropical forest as mere scenery or as a migrant route, *Las tierras arrasadas* depicts the image of a deep vegetal wall shaped by non-human figures that at the same time are vulnerable to the human action, and also detrimental to humans because of the instrumentalization process it is subject to.

Focused on the Mexico-United States border, in *The Land of Open Graves*, while referring to the Prevention Through Deterrence scheme implemented by the Border Patrol in the 90's, anthropologist Jason de León sustains, "it is obvious that Border Patrol expected the desert to inflict harm on migrants" (61). That, because said strategy's main objective was to close all urban access to the passage of undocumented migrants, leading them to traverse perilous routes such as the desert. This last premise stems from the known effects that a prolonged contact with this biome has on human beings, especially when they are in precarious situations such as those ones that often accompany unauthorized migration. Dehydration, hypothermia, sunstroke, and extreme exhaustion are some of the deadly effects the desert has over the clandestine migrants' bodies. Even though de León focuses his argument on the northern border, another process through which an area commonly understood as natural is used to the detriment of migrants' safety also emerges on the southern Mexican border, as it is shown in *Las tierras arrasadas*, this is, the tropical forest. However, even though both ecosystems share elements that make them central for the process of expulsion and exclusion of undocumented migrants, its specificities generate different interactions¹⁵ with the humans walking through them. In the following paragraphs I focus on pointing out one of the main characteristics shared by both ecosystems, this is, the isolation, to then analyze some of the forest's specificities in its capacity as a border corridor. Finally, I address the forested border's relevance in the process of highlighting the artificiality of the ontological

meaning of being human.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes a scene in which a group of migrants is surprised in the middle of the forest by those who will soon be their captors. During the story, the migrants' voices are represented by a collective voice that constantly interrupts the flow of what the narrator evokes. In this first scene, discovering the imminent danger, the collective voice indicates: "*unas luces se prendieron... no podíamos ver delante... nos pegamos unos a otros... puros cuerpos asustados*" (13). If, as de León affirms, in the northern border the desert is "the perfect silent partner in boundary control" (61), in the south, the tropical forest has been a key factor for the criminal network of human trafficking. In 2008, describing the moments before the kidnapping of a group of Central American migrants in Mexico, journalist Óscar Martínez noted: "[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" (*Periodismo Humano*). In this way, Martínez underscores the isolated nature of the forest and rural areas of southern Mexico as a key element for the kidnapping's execution¹⁶. Similar to what has happened in the geopolitical boundary between Mexico and the United States, the securitization increase in the Mexican southern border has caused those who flee from situations of extreme poverty and violence to migrate through ever more dangerous paths. This is not only because migrants encounter inhospitable areas, but because of the advantages they give to numerous criminal groups, such as seclusion and remoteness.

In the narration, said characteristics present an opportunity for traffickers to strip migrants from their freedom, placing them in a vehicle to immediately be transported to an unknown destination. This action produces one of the first destabilizations of the ontological category of the human in the story. Inside the vehicle in motion, the migrants' collective voice states: "*uno empezó a sacudirse y a hacer ruido... unos ruidos cada vez más doloridos que no eran nada como*

humanos” (37), to then add: “*ya ni nos daba pena llorar, éramos perros aullando, animales*” (65). Thus, it is through kidnapping and immobilization, actions assisted by the seclusion of the forest, that migrants identify the process of dehumanization to which they are being subjected. This process relates to what Agamben calls “the anthropological machine,” notion that stems from the radicalization of Foucault’s biopolitics theory.

Through the concept of the anthropological machine, the Italian philosopher argues that life is considered human only when there is a political status attached to it. The sovereign power is the entity capable of granting or denying such status, thus it becomes the entity that dictates the differences between what can and cannot be considered human. Therefore, according to Agamben, the ontological line that separates the categories between the human animal and the nonhuman one is in a constant state of ambiguity and tension. In the novel, the precariousness attached to the figure of the migrant gets worsened by the isolated and wild environment that pervades the story. Having the migrants of *Las tierras arrasadas* placed on a forested border inhabited by nonhuman entities, exacerbates the ambiguity regarding the limits of the human. In the episode of the kidnapping, where migrants are forced to get in the vehicle, the moment in which the collective voice expresses the feeling of losing the faculty to speak, exposes how the group of migrants seems to recognize the shift from their human condition to a nonhuman one. The narration depicts how migrants can be deprived from their freedom and chained inside a vehicle with the same easiness and impunity with which animals of the forest could also be imprisoned and chained. In this way, different from how it happens in Rivera Garza’s novel, in Monge’s text the erasure of human/nonhuman and subject/thing binaries to which explicitly refer Haraway and Barad, is carried out not through intra-connectivity, but through a clear process of dehumanization perpetrated by a criminal group, —although this does not mean that intra-connectivity is not

present in the story—. It is also important to mention that during the same episode of the kidnapping, on several occasions the criminal group leaders, Estela and Epitafio, constantly state, “¡Yo soy la patria!” (26), statement that points out not only to the fact that they identify themselves as the sovereign power in the forested border, but also to the characteristics of the role they perform, where in order to achieve their economic interests, they need to humiliate and inflict pain on the migrants. To broaden this premise, in the following pages I focus on delineating some of the practical interests that prompt the dehumanization process in the story.

“El libro de los chicos de la selva” begins with the episode of recruitment carried out by the two brothers in Toneé, a town that the narrator locates south of the border, reason why within the narrative imaginary, it can be considered to be situated in Guatemala. In this episode, the narrative voice describes something that at a first glance seems to be a common mechanism of buying and selling objects in a town square, where the forest boys assume the role of vendors. As the story develops, it is revealed that the brothers are selling objects previously owned by the group of migrants that had already been handed to their captors. This delivery is the one described in “El libro de Epitafio,” specifically during the scene of the vehicle I discussed above. After the vehicle leaves with the migrants imprisoned inside, the narrator describes how the brothers collect “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” (32) that, in the tragedy, the migrants left behind. That the brothers will use the objects as merchandise is not made explicit by the narrator but unveiled up until the third book. It is worth mentioning that in addition to the economic value found by the brothers in the objects, collecting them also works as a process through which the crime is erased, this, notwithstanding that as one of them states: “siempre hay un arete, un dije, o un anillo que la selva quiere quedarse” (33). Although the act of collecting objects takes place

during the first pages of the novel, it is not until the third and final book that the narrator reveals the purpose of this action, this is, selling them to a new group of migrants who in turn, is also carrying other objects.

Thereby, in Toneé the migrants are still being recognized as humans, this, in part due to their purchasing power. However, once they have entered the forest, they stop being clients to become merchandise, for the forest boys guide them to the place where they will meet their imprisoners. At this point it is worthwhile noting that the place to which the brothers are taking the migrants, is called El Tiradero, or “the garbage dump.” Said denomination is illustrative of the dehumanization process that routinely takes place there. Besides the obvious reference to the objects that end up lying on the forest soil, the name El Tiradero speaks to the process of disposal of the migrants’ bodies, which can be seen during the first pages of the novel. Through these varied processes of buying and selling, the narrative exposes the ease with which monetary value can be attached to migrants’ bodies, who are habitually stripped of their human condition in order to be seen in terms of economic gain. In addition to profiting using migrants as informal trade clients, as the sources of the products for that same trade, and as merchandise, the forest boys also charge for their smugglers’ role, quadrupling the economic exploitation of the migrants and expanding the scope of illicit economic activities. If these examples shed light on the mechanisms by which the migrants are distanced from the category of the human and get closer to that one of the object, the ontological discrepancy also appears in the blurring of the line that separates not only the human from the object, but also the human from the nonhuman animal, separation that in the novel can be identified through the intervention of a pregnant woman and a saraguato monkey.

In the scene that takes place in Toneé, the younger brother recruits a pregnant woman to be part of the group of migrants who are about to get into the forest. When they are on their way,

the eldest abruptly says to his brother: “¿Cuántas veces tengo que decirte: no debemos traer embarazadas?” (257), justifying his anger, he adds: “sabes bien cuál es la regla... una sola puta regla... ni viejitos ni amputados ni preñadas” (304-305). In this way, the older brother seems to assert that his anger at the presence of the pregnant woman is because her body does not have a high capital value. Furthermore, because the boys need to meet specific deadlines to arrive at El Tiradero, the bodies of people with disabilities and elderly people, as well as those of pregnant women, are seen as a threat to meet such deadlines. That is what happens with the woman, who while they are on their way “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” (258), action that arouses the anger of both brothers. However, although the eldest’s arguments in regard to how to discriminate certain bodies make sense within the economic transactions’ framework described above, the younger brother doubts their authenticity: “te da igual a ti que venga embarazada... lo que pasa es que algo pasa entre tú y ella” (304), implying that his brother’s anger is due not to practical interests but to personal feelings. In this cluster of reactions triggered by the pregnant woman, it is possible to see the multiplicity of perspectives that situate her in an even more vulnerable position than the one her migrant status already gives her. This vulnerability culminates with her murder at the hands of the older brother, event that as I address below, brings her closer to another subjectivity, which in the narration is also presented as deeply vulnerable.

Moments before the murder is perpetrated, a dying howler monkey intervenes in the story. After the scene in Toneé, when the group starts getting deeper into the forest, they hear a weeping creature that not even the brothers are able to recognize: “¿Qué chingados es ese ruido?, inquietan el mayor y el menor al mismo tiempo, sintiendo cómo el cuero de sus brazos se enchina” (260).

Despite the fear, the boys order the migrants to stop and wait while they go investigate the wailings' source, which according to the narrator "[los] atrae como atrae la sangre seca a los insectos" (261). In a suspenseful scene, following an unknown path and carrying their lanterns and machetes, the boys get closer to the squeal's origin, until they finally find it: "te lo dije... no podía ser humano, lanza el mayor cuando sus risas terminan" (263). What the boys find is a saraguato monkey on the verge of death. In this passage, at least two narrative elements are worth noting. First, that the painful lament of a dying monkey was almost mistaken for the cry of grief that a human being could have exhaled, element that reminds the initial novel's episode where, in a reverse process, the captive migrants describe their own laments as animal squeals. Secondly, the scene also underscores that both boys laugh at the sight of a devastating image: "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" (263). The laughter produced by the scene is followed by anger and vengeance: "el mayor... levantando su machete hacia la noche insiste: ¡no me gusta que me espanten!" (263). In such a way, the older brother kills the non-human animal who either way was about to die. However, it is neither compassion nor pity what leads the boy to kill the monkey, but hatred for having frightened him. Thus, the older brother not only kills the wounded animal, he also mutilates the lifeless body to finally "[limpiar] su machete en el tronco de la higuera" (264).

After the monkey's death and back with the group of migrants, the pregnant woman draws the boys' attention. As the older brother had thought, the migrant woman cannot keep up with the group's pace: "la he tenido que venir a ella empujando -dice el menor [...] Esa idiota [...] la tenías que haber dejado -reclama el mayor" (304). Whereas the monkey had been an inconvenience because his squeals frightened the boys and slowed them down, now, the pregnant woman is the one causing the delay. When the brothers are arguing about the woman, the narrator changes the

focus of attention to the migrant, who “ha dejado de vagar y se está ahora dirigiendo hacia una cueva” (305). As soon as they are done arguing, the younger sibling prepares himself for sleep, while the older begins to perpetrate his next crime. In an episode strikingly similar to the one with the monkey’s persecution, in another suspenseful atmosphere the boy chases after the woman, although this time instead of following a mysterious sound, he is guided by the voices of some migrants: “luego la vi que se iba al fondo, asevera Elquetodavíausulengua señalando con un brazo” (307). Just like when he was going after the monkey, this time the boy is also carrying his lantern and machete. Upon getting to the cave where the woman is resting, a moment of intense tension where the victim and her perpetrator look at each other, is followed by the sudden description of the crime: “el mayor deja caer furioso su machete y con un único tajo corta el cuello de la mujer que pierde así su sombra” (309). Although it could be argued that the situation of the monkey and the pregnant woman are extremely different because while the wounded animal was laying on the ground and about to die, the woman was not in an immediate life-threatening condition, the truth is that from the moment she paid the younger brother to join the group, she had started to get closer to the loss of her freedom and ultimately, to the time of her death. Hence, although at an ontological level the monkey and the pregnant woman are different, deep inside the forest the line that separates the human from the non-human animal starts to fade away. Thus, both entities can incarnate a similar fate regardless of their ontological adscription.

It is also striking that the non-human animal that allows for this reading is a saraguato monkey, species also known as the Guatemalan black howler. In other words, inside the tropical forest that is being depicted as a biome shared by Mexico and Guatemala, and particularly on the Mexican side, it is a species nominally associated with Central America the one that is brutally murdered. Needless to say, the pregnant woman comes from that same region. This similarity

seems to indicate that in the Mexican border territory, belonging to Central America tends to exacerbate precarious situations. If in the case of the woman, the initial vulnerability comes from unspecified social factors that made her migrate through the forest, in the monkey's case, his vulnerability seems to have been produced by a storm from which the forest could not protect him, element in which lies the importance of the level of brutality depicted in the scene that presents the monkey absolutely exposed, and with his four extremities severed.

For the previous reasons, the specific spaces in which these characters die are highly symbolic. Whereas the hopelessness endured by the monkey occurs in an open space inside the Mexican side of the tropical forest –region where he was not able to find shelter, the pregnant woman is in a cave, which despite of presenting possibilities for refuge and protection, acts as the perfect location for the silent murder. In this case, the lantern, an element created by humans, is the object that defeats the non-human elements –the cave and the darkness of the forest, that could have been able to work in favor of the woman. Moreover, in the case of the monkey's death, it is possible to see how, even though the tropical forest spans different countries as one single entity, in the narration its geopolitical meaning appears to obliterate said unity. Consequently, the notions of citizenship and belonging acquire special relevance for the story.

Although the influence of citizenship status on the migrants' lives is self-evident, in a symbolic level, the text also attributes this status to the monkey, a non-human animal. At this point, it is worth mentioning that on a level that is not just symbolic, the debate in regard to granting different forms of citizenship to non-human animals is nascent in the field of invasive biology¹⁷. However, since the Guatemalan saraguato monkey is not considered an invasive species in this tropical forest¹⁸, in the narration the conflict surrounding the monkey's belonging rather works as an additional element to emphasize the precarious condition attached to Central American bodies

inscribed in the forested Mexican border, which in the text does not distinguish between those who are considered human and those who are not, to the detriment of both.

In *Animal Alterity*, Science Fiction Media Studies scholar Sherryl Vint suggests that one of the main impediments for the human species to recognize the fragility of the assumed ontological lines that separate the nonhuman animal from the human one 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” (9-10). In the forested border, where migrants are almost instantly stripped of freedom and citizenship, the radical disproportion identified by Vint fades away inasmuch as “humans and animals share embodied being” (8). By participating in the tropical forest conglomerate, both human and nonhuman entities are vulnerable to the machete’s violence exerted by the boys, who disregard ontological hierarchical structures, thus rendering them amenable.

While it is true that the similarities between the woman and the monkey’s murder blur the line that separates what is considered human from what it is not, said line does not completely disappear. In the forest, the figure perpetrating both murders is a human being, entity that establishes a domination order in the border apparatus. In the absence of the State to ensure the safety of migrants, and also, in the presence of a wounded animal’s disablement, it is the criminal figure who positions itself as the dominant unit. Because of this, even if it is true that the narrative challenges the human exceptionality through an account of shared vulnerability between human and nonhuman beings, this vulnerability seems not to apply for those who in turn –in this case the brothers, can assume the state’s power and to some extent, the forest’s too.

Additionally, even while the murders share obvious similarities, –notably the weapon, the

violence, and the procedure, nonetheless, for a short moment the perpetrator's reaction to both deaths is different. Whereas the monkey's demise produces him laughter and relief, the woman's death causes that the killer "[llore] un largo rato" (309). Nevertheless, that occurs not necessarily because of an ontological distinction, but because as the younger brother infers, the eldest seems to know the pregnant woman from before, and she does not remember him. For this reason, at the moment of the murder, he exclaims: "¡Tenías que haberte tú acordado... no me tenías que haber mirado así insegura... así dudando... me tenías tú que haber reconocido!" (309). Whether it had been a consensual relationship, a rape, or a casual encounter is not entirely clear in the text. What is evident is that the boy kills her out of anger for having delayed the group, and also as revenge for having forgotten him. While these actions could be understood as components that disconnect both killings, in reality they bring them closer together. In the case of the monkey, anger and revenge are also central motivations for the action, although of course, the second one manifests differently. Whereas the anger comes exactly for the same reason, this is, because the monkey's squeals makes them waste time, the older brother seeks revenge as a form of payback for the frightening feeling the monkey produced on both brothers.

Notwithstanding the older brother cries momentarily because of the woman's death, this display of apparent pain does not diminish the cruelty of the femicide, and it does not interfere with the fact that both the monkey and the woman are killed following the same procedure and with the same weapon. Therefore, in the forest and at the hands of one of the brothers, these similitudes break the apparent hierarchy that tends to situate the human life over the nonhuman. It is not fortuitous that in the text the line separating the limits of the human and the nonhuman is explicitly defied through two physically disadvantaged figures, these are, a migrant, pregnant woman who is almost about to give birth, and a terminally wounded animal. If as I pointed out,

the similarities bringing these two characters closer in no way erase their specificities, this does not prevent the narrative from clearly pointing out that the elements determining the supremacy of an ontological category over another can be demolished given certain conditions. Among them, the text underscores first of all, the social factors. The need to migrate without documents puts migrants in the hands of a group of traffickers that take advantage of the state's absence to make their criminal power effective. Secondly, the narrative highlights the physical characteristics, hyperbolized in the figure of the pregnant woman but also applicable on a smaller scale to the migrants' bodies, who are physically worn out after walking for days in an inhospitable terrain. The third and final condition is composed by the tropical forest itself.

Though it is true that in the narrative migrants are the most vulnerable focus of violence, the forest is another entity that is also subjected to diverse violent actions. Although these actions are not as brutal as those committed against the migrants, in the novel they are also placed as highly destabilizing and destructive forces. Throughout the episodes that take place in this ecosystem, the vivid and dynamic images of wildlife contrast with the slow pace of the migrants and with the subsequent immobility of their imprisonment. While apparently these entities are extremely different, through statements such as “machetean una muralla de orquídeas” (262) that speak about the boys' actions, the narrator exposes how, at the same time that the forest provides seclusion and invisibility for the criminal acts, is also being victimized.

Thus, while in *El mal de la taiga* the forest exploitation occurs primarily due to the logging of trees for the lumber industry, in *Las tierras arrasadas* the exploitation can be seen entangled with the violent network of human trafficking. That does not imply that the forest is being depicted as a passive entity, despite the instrumentalization process that experiments, through the nonhuman figures inhabiting it the forest is capable of displaying different forms of agency, or in words of

Jane Bennett, of thing-power. An example of this appears in the episode of the objects' collection. While the brothers enthusiastically observe a medal lying on the soil, the older brother abruptly says: “¡tírate!¹⁹ ahora mismo al suelo!” this because “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*” (32), insects who immediately attack and sting the boys. At that time, some of the non-human components of the forest seem to take revenge on those who constantly assault them with machetes and other weapons. Once again, nonhuman beings affect humans by provoking physical and affective reactions. That in the previous quote the narrator does not make a distinction between “things” and “men” to talk about the susceptibility of such entities in their encounter with the insects is not accidental. Even when the narrative voice is a human entity that tells and interprets the non-human swarm, in the story, the swarm's force pushes the boys to throw themselves to the ground and in this way, they are placed at the same level of the objects and become similarly vulnerable to the insects' overwhelming presence and power.

But the vulnerability attributed to the brothers in the narration does not come only from their interaction with some of the forest's elements. If most of the narrative presents the brothers as the most powerful figures in the forest, in reality, the organized crime as a structured group is the only political subject that maintains sovereignty over everyone else. Therefore, in the process of instrumentalization of the forested border as a space where crimes can be committed with impunity, the brothers can also be stripped from the apparently superior ontological and political state given to them at the beginning of the story.

When talking about walls that are built as means to delimit border territories, political theorist Wendy Brown asserts, “walls produce borders as permanent zones of violent conflict and lawlessness, [and] incite sophisticated and dangerous underground industries” (113-114). Even

when the forest could be considered somewhat alien to the process described by Brown, —this because it lacks an actual wall and also because *Las tierras arrasadas* depicts a border that is considered natural, the conflicts with regard to clandestine industries clearly extends to the tropical forest in question. In addition, within the context of this premise is important to remember that, in the novel, the narrator repeatedly refers to the forest as a wall made of lianas and other wild figures, perhaps to a great extent, because of the numerous coincidences in regard to the criminal world that looms over it and also because in similarity with a wall, the forest can work as a barrier in the migrants' path, or as an invisible wall as I mention in the previous section. If for Brown walls produce an “ever more sophisticated and Mafia-like smuggling economy, one that increasingly merges drug and migrant smuggling” and these “often compound the problems they putatively address” (112), in the forested border it is also possible to identify the consolidation and intensification of similar industries. While as Brown asserts, the wall's edification on the U.S.-Mexico border has led to the creation of tunnels that facilitate drug and human trafficking, —fact that has made it harder to inspect and identify criminal operations, because of its internal characteristics, the forested border also allows for a high degree of invisibility that helps facilitate the execution of various crimes.

Although there is an obvious difference between these two entities, this is that one is a built structure and the other one is a biome, the fencing and walling sections situated over a deserted territory produce striking similarities in the instrumentalization processes surrounding the desert and the forest spanning the southern and northern Mexican borders. In both spaces, the hostility towards human bodies exerted by uncharted nonhuman entities is exploited in detriment of both migrants and the border territories themselves, and for the benefit of the state and criminal groups. Besides Jason de León's study in regard to the desert's instrumentalization, this is also addressed

by Thomas Nail's when he talks about how borders are moved not only by internal factors, but also by external ones. As I study in the previous pages, in *Las tierras arrasadas* the external factors are evident through the boys' interventions, but the story has more powerful elements influencing these external movements.

For Nail, the border is in constant movement because of internal factors, such as the animals and plants that inhabit it, and also because of external ones, such as those that are carried out due to "[a] continual process of management" (6) of the elements that constitute it. Although it could be thought that this continuous process refers primarily to the maintenance and care of artificial structures such as fences or border checkpoints, and therefore that it would not apply to borders considered to be natural, the author clarifies: "the distinction between natural and artificial borders posed by early border theorists cannot be maintained [because] 'natural' borders [have always been] delimited, disputed, and maintained by 'artificial' human societies" (7). In this way, it is possible to assert that, in the novel's context, boys and migrants not only participate in the border's movement, but that precisely because of it, they are part of the border's composition: "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 ... [the border is] a primary process and not a derivative social product" (9-10). The border, as it is being portrayed in the text, manifests itself not only through its geopolitical construction, but also in its ecological specificities and with the same centrality, in the process of the human participation that traverses it, characteristic that can also be interpreted as an intra-activity process.

Regarding human participation, Nail takes into account an expansion process that is generated "in order to further develop or advance a given form of social motion" (22). By building

this argument on the human movement as part of the border movement premise, the expansion element as a core feature of the border clearly refers not to the spatial, but to the human expansion. In the novel, the foregoing can be exemplified by Mausoleo, the immigrant who Epitafio, one of the smugglers' leaders, chooses and kidnaps to work with him in the business of human trafficking. Through the annexation of this character to the human trafficking network, the border sees an expansion in its human capacity, consolidating its human and non-human composition. However, this expansion does not imply either the maintenance nor the continuity of the individuals who embody it: "borders regularly change their selection process [...] anyone might be expelled at any moment" (7). When it is clear that this assertion alludes to the fact that the characteristics of the border are usually arranged in order to prevent, redirect, or facilitate the migrants' movement, it also refers to the other human and non-human agents that encompass the border.

Towards the final, Estela and Epitafio, the powerful and feared traffickers' leaders, are killed by other members of the group, who expect these killings to help them ascend in the hierarchy of the criminal network. Because Estela and Epitafio were the ones who gave the brothers power over the forest territory, when they die, the boys are left with nothing. In the forest, along with the migrants, the brothers are ambushed by a group of more numerous and violent criminals. The new face of the organized crime removes the boys from their privileged position, lowering it to the hierarchical level already occupied by the migrants and the non-human entities of the forest. In the scene where the brothers are killed by the new criminal group, Monge presents the process through which it is possible to easily grant power and protection to human life, as it is easy to take them away.

While the last premise underscores an element widely discussed by border scholars, *Las tierras arrasadas* complicates and expands the conversation by generating questions about the line

that separates the human from the non-human life in a border context. Through the centrality that the narrator confers to the non-human entities that make up an essential part of the forest's conglomerate, —centrality already conferred from the very title's novel—, the narrative interrogates what it means to be human to show that “not only are humans not alone in possessing the capacities thereby deemed ‘proper’ to humankind, but in fact for the most part humans do not achieve the qualities they ascribe to themselves with the name ‘human’” (Vint 10). Moreover, by exploring the vulnerability shared by human and non-human entities, and at the same time by recognizing the agency and specificity that separates them, the novel highlights some of the most excruciating elements that can destabilize the ontological categories through which each entity is usually interpreted. This highlighting acquires special emphasis when it is considered that both the human and non-human figures depicted in the text are cornered in the inhuman configuration of a border whose external movement never seems to end.

The Border Forest: Two Stories

Although the forest is embedded in the plot of these two novels from different viewpoints, both share the interest in displaying some of the environmental risks affecting these biomes when intertwined with border-related human dynamics. Precisely, one of the major contact points in the representation of these forests, is that both Monge and Rivera Garza present them as dynamic materialities formed not only by non-human entities, but also by human beings who inhabit them, who pass through them, die on them, or who use them as an economic sustenance through various activities, whether lawful or illicit. Therefore, both texts reject a totalitarian representation of an entirely pristine, social, or wild forest.

Whereas because of its lack of referentiality, at the center of Rivera Garza's novel lie the

materiality and interconnectivity of things at a global scale, Monge exposes a border space undetachable from the social context surrounding it. In virtue of these characteristics, in Monge's text the human maintains a privileged place mainly because the narrative voice focuses on telling some of the most precarious conditions that can be faced by migrants in need of crossing the tropical forest. However, there are some episodes, such as that one with the saraguato monkey, or the one with the objects' sale, which seem to displace the centrality of the human by breaking down ontological categories evidently made unstable. Meanwhile, in *El mal de la Taiga*, because the narrator focuses on telling the experience of a detective traveling while in a mission, this experience directs much of the narrative to make evident the agency of both the boreal forest and the non-human actors who inhabit it. Although it is true that, since the formulation of the forest is made through human language, the anthropocentric perspective prevails, this same anthropocentrism is brought into question in both narratives. Finally, studying these two novels in parallel, allows to reframe and rethink the border through ecological and ontological articulations that challenge both ideas about human exceptionalism and common conceptions regarding the border's physical or geographical limits and stability. Ultimately, both texts depict living, dynamic territories conformed by diverse ecosystems and imbricated in social, onto-ecological, and global connectivity networks.

CHAPTER 2: THE RIVER

While it is common to think of national borders as homogeneous and stable entities, no other border configuration challenges such assumption as rivers do. Six dynamic bodies of water demarcate a large part of Mexico's national limits. Northwards, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo defines more than half of the boundary with the United States, and a fraction of the Colorado river also separates both countries. In the south, the Suchiate, Chixoy, Usumacinta, and Hondo rivers delimit most part 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 in portraying the complexities entailed by the ever-changing water boundaries. Besides the main waterways drawing the border lines, a multitude of transnational tributaries and underground aquifers also crisscross these domestic limits. In their own specificity, large sections of this amalgam of waters irrigate land, nurture wildlife, amuse tourists, provide livelihoods for locals, and continue to take part in complicated circuits below and aboveground in both sides of the border. The intrinsic mutability that bodies of water possess continually transforms the landscapes they inhabit. This happens not just in terms of the ecosystems surrounding them but also regarding their own geographic features. As a consequence, the alteration of rivers that work as natural boundary markers also involves the alteration of the borders they delineate. For instance, processes such as riverbank erosion can create wider channels and shift the course of rivers, sometimes effectively altering the size and distribution of the demarcated border territories.

Although abundant streams traverse and delimit borders north and south of Mexico, in this chapter I focus primarily on the Suchiate river and on the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Whereas the latter is the major body of water defining the separation between Mexico and the United States,

the former is at the center of one of the busiest and most complex crossing points in the Americas, between Mexico and Guatemala. While not all border bioregions face the similar conflicts, the intersections I write about are relevant for the overall scope of this chapter because of the notoriety of such waterways in the context of migration processes, filmic and literary representations, and present-day border articulations. Notably known for the existing separations they establish, both rivers have rich histories that can be traced back to their indigenous past.

In the pre-Columbian era, these waterways were at the center of the daily lives of hundreds of societies that learned to irrigate lands and settled near their floodplains. During the Spanish colonization, river communities such as the Tiguas from El Paso, the Coahuiltecs from the Rio Grande valley, and indigenous groups from the Soconusco²⁰ region near the Suchiate were able to resist and maintain their autonomy from the Spanish Crown for decades –or even centuries in the case of the Coahuiltecs. This success was largely due to the disposition of the land they inhabited. While along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo the desert prevented most Spaniards' from exploring it, in the Soconusco region, isolation and cacao production served as deterrents for the Spanish occupation. During the colonial period, the Spanish presence in the Soconusco was formed mostly by merchants who traded cacao, a time at which the industry was still controlled by the native communities (Gasco). By mid-19th century, most of the Soconusco cacao farms had become slavery enterprises, the Coahuiltecs from the Rio Grande Valley had long vanished, the survivor Tiguas had assimilated the Spanish culture, and both rivers started to be considered core border indicators.

The place of these rivers in the border-making conglomerate has been the focus of international media, activism, art, film, and literature. The Suchiate river has drawn attention largely because of its porosity, which grants the permeability of a border that was never meant to

be “an impediment to mobility” (Lurtz 60) but the territorial proof that Mexico was a strong, modern nation with well-defined borders. While permeability persists, the response to transnational mobility has changed. Images of migrants freely crossing the Suchiate overlap with those of their detention at the hands of the Mexican state, which has been pressured by the United States to enforce migration laws²¹.

Whereas the Suchiate has attracted attention in the United States only in recent years, in the framework of migration, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo has been a focus of interest at least since the first decades of the 20th century. The direct entanglement between the border river and migrants can be illustrated by a few derogatory words: “mojado,” “wetback,” and “floaters.” Referring to undocumented workers who swam across the Rio Grande/Río Bravo to do agricultural work, the first two terms have been used since the early 1920s²². In 1954 the word “wetback” was institutionalized with the Border Patrol’s Operation Wetback, which aimed to deport thousands of undocumented laborers²³. Also dehumanizing, the term “floaters” has been used to designate people who drown in the river while trying to reach United States soil. In 2017, almost one quarter of all recorded deaths of migrants in the Mexico-United States border were caused by drowning, surpassing the number of fatalities from the previous year for that same cause²⁴. By mid-2019, two river stretches, one from Eagle Pass, and the other one from El Paso, both in Texas, saw a dramatic increment in the number of migrants trying to cross through water²⁵. Consequently, the number of deaths by drowning has also risen.

Writers from both sides of these borders have depicted the centrality that the rivers have had on border communities and migration patterns. While literary works considering the Suchiate’s importance are less readily circulated, authors Balam Rodrigo, Óscar Palacios, and Rafael Ramírez Heredia have reflected on the cultural and political impact of this body of water.

The name “Suchiate” comes from the Nahuatl words *Xochi* and *atl*, which translates to “agua de flores,” or “water made of flowers.” The poetic roots of the river are recuperated by Chiapan author Balam Rodrigo in the book *Libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018). In his book, the poet depicts the river as an unforgiving passage, the site where conflictive memories of his childhood intersect with images of Central American migrants entering hell-like scenarios through the dynamic waters of the river. Óscar Palacios, another writer from Chiapas, also alludes to the centrality of the Suchiate in migrants’ lives. In *La mitad del infierno* (1990), the author incorporates a character whose multiple attempts to get to the United States always end where they started, at the river. Framed within the context of gang violence, in the novel *La Mara* (2004) Rafael Ramírez Heredia centers his story on both sides of the Suchiate, a liquid presence that throughout the story works as an omnipresent entity with mystical attributes. *La vida precoz y breve de Sabina Rivas* (2012), a film based on Heredia’s novel and directed by Mexican filmmaker Luis Mandoki, follows the story of a Honduran teenager as she tries to leave her life in “El Tijuanita,” a brothel located in Tecún Umán. Although in this film the Suchiate does not have the narrative impact that it possesses in the novel –where it practically acts as another character, Mandoki manages to underscore the centrality of the river for the social life of the Mexico-Guatemala border and its quiet yet long-lasting impact on the protagonist’s journey.

Derived from the indigenous word *P’osoge*, and known as Río Bravo on the Mexican side, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and its intertwinement with border schemes has been addressed by a vast array of film and literary works. In 1948, Mexican author Luis Spota published the novel *Murieron a mitad del río*, which tells the story of a group of men who cross the Rio Grande/Río Bravo to work in the United States. In the narrative, those who do not die trapped in the water encounter a lifelong of hardship that, more often than not, takes them back to where they started,

always empty-handed. This narrative arc has also been explored by Mexican filmmakers. Movies such as *Espaldas Mojadas* (1955), directed by Alejandro Galindo, and *El bracero del año* (1964), by Rafael Baledón, account for the massive movement of undocumented Mexican workers that swam across the river and joined the United States workforce in the agricultural, railroad, or mining sectors during the first half of the 20th century. In both films, the river appears as an untamable force that intensifies the vulnerability of the bodies who transverse it. Images of strong, rapid currents accentuate the slow movement of human figures who are either struggling to remain alive or lifeless and being dragged by the water. A more recent film representation of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo can be found in *La Ilegal* (1979), by Arturo Ripstein. The focus of the story is a woman who, after being deported to Mexico on false charges of prostitution, crosses the Rio Grande/Río Bravo back to the U.S. to get her American-born son back. Unlike the previous films, Ripstein presents a tranquil river with a low water level, which permits the protagonist walk across the stream. In a memorable scene where the woman is caught by the police just feet away from Mexico, she stops in the middle of a calm, peaceful river holding a baby in her arms. For a few minutes, there is no sound but that one of the waters, whose acoustic dynamism contrasts with the stillness of the woman. The film *Sin Nombre* (2009) directed by Japanese American Cari Joji Fukunaga, depicts the journey of a Central American and two Mexican young migrants riding La Bestia. When they reach the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, one of the migrants is shot to death by the members of the gang that he was trying to leave. The character dies in the middle of the river, which at a metaphorical level seems to wash his sins away.

In poetry, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo has been depicted by Latinx poets Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands. La Frontera* (1987), and Emmy Pérez in *With the River on our Face* (2016), and by Mexican authors Dolores Dorantes in *El río/The River, a collaboration* (2018), and Jorge

Humberto Chávez in *Te diría que fuéramos al río Bravo a llorar pero debes saber que ya no hay río ni llanto* (2013). Although seen from different perspectives, these poetic voices underscore the materiality of the border river while incorporating personal experiences entwined with sociopolitical views. In narrative, in the novel *Becky and Her Friends* (1990) Chicano author Rolando Hinojosa addresses the social, economic, and aesthetic ways in which the river has traversed the lives of the Rio Grande Valley inhabitants. This body of water is also central for the narrative development of the novels *Campeón gabacho* (2015) by Mexican Aura Xilonén and *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) by Mexican American Francisco Cantu. While the latter focuses on the history and stories that have surrounded the edification of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo as border, the former describes the river as the central element of a rite of passage that transforms a boy into a man.

In this chapter, I study the novel *La Mara* by Mexican author Rafael Ramírez Heredia, and the poetry books *With the River on Our Face* by Chicana poet Emmy Pérez and *El río/The River*, a collaboration between Mexican writer Dolores Dorantes, American artist Zoe Leonard, and American translator Robin Myers. I discuss how these authors interpret the contradictory relationships that result from the troubling coexistence between the river, human and nonhuman entities, and the presence of an invisible line that renders both rivers liquid borders.

Before delving into the literary analysis, I present an overview of the histories of the Suchiate and the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, which underscore their material and immaterial interconnections with a diverse array of cultures across time. Addressing how the indigenous societies lived with these rivers during the pre-Columbian period provides a better context to examine the different forms of colonization that continue to threaten the integrity of both rivers. After this, I engage with a growing body of scholarship that has focused on the study of rivers in

the Latin American literary tradition. This element is important not just to highlight the intellectual work that has been done in this regard but also to articulate my contribution to the field. Finally, divided into two sections, the literary analysis elucidates the processes through which the conflictive coexistence between the river and a border demarcation has resulted in the destabilization of the body of water. Focused on the novel *La Mara* and following anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian Perspectivism theory, I propose that depending on the embodiment of who is seeing them, the Suchiate river can be multiple worlds, which exist in contradiction but are true at the same time. Then, considering the poetry books by Pérez and Dorantes, I focus on the notions of spectrality, vulnerability, and coexistence to argue that the unavoidable presence of the sense of intimacy that traverses these concepts, can provide an affective frame to think with the border rivers and envision their nonhuman worldviews.

Fluctuating Borders

When in the mid-nineteenth century the Rio Grande/Río Bravo changed its course in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area, the Chamizal tract, originally located on Mexican land, ended up on the American side of the river. Such a change prompted the Mexican government "to question the legality of El Chamizal's belonging to the United States" (Hill 510), a dispute that lasted almost one century. As geographer James E. Hill recalls, this case was notorious because the river altered an urban area; however, "the river has changed its channel many times [in] remote, sparsely populated parts" (510), thus rendering a reliable version of the border unmappable. Another instance of an aquatic border geopolitically modifying adjacent territory takes place alongside the Suchiate river. In 2016, *El Diario del Sur*, one of the most read newspapers in Tapachula, Chiapas, published the story "¡Perdemos territorio!", which translates to: "We are Losing our Territory! The

story reports that over time the river has been moving towards the Mexican side, thus downsizing said national territory and expanding the Guatemalan side. Geography professor Jonathan Alarcón Gómora cites hurricanes Mitch (1998) and Stan (2005) as two of the biggest ecological disasters to produce “la movilidad de la frontera y la pérdida del territorio mexicano” (65), a phenomenon caused by the intensification of erosion and flooding. Because for many families, territorial loss implies losing households and farmlands, the moving border has been a constant point of contention between the affected neighboring communities²⁶. Besides further destabilizing the idea of borders as static entities, these cases also underscore the centrality of transborder water politics in the framework of transboundary water flow and of the geographic demarcation that such a flow creates.

In addition to the transformation of land ownership produced by the movement of rivers, rivers themselves can also be subjected to alteration because of their status as nation-state boundaries. As a direct effect of human-driven endeavors, bordering practices can change the composition of waterways. For example, on the Mexico-United States border, sections of the wall deflect the trans-border flow of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo²⁷, producing heightened levels of flooding that affect urban and nonurban areas. In addition, because of its proximity to the United States, over 3000 maquiladoras²⁸ operate in northern Mexico, most of which produce parts and products for United States-based industries. The environmental effects of the maquiladora industry have caused “the border area to be amongst the most polluted in Mexico” (Bolterstein), and according to the Comisión de Cooperación Ambiental, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo “registra extrema contaminación por el depósito de desechos tóxicos como arsénico, cianuro, mercurio, cadmio y cromo” (González). Besides climate change and additional environmental stressors such as dams, pollution, and water extraction, the border configuration increases both the internal and

external alterations of the river.

While direct environmental consequences of border-related settings can be identified surrounding the Rio Grande/Río Bravo ecosystem, in the Mexico-Guatemala border area, the Suchiate river faces different challenges. According to political scientist Edith Kauffer, the neglect of this river is largely because “después de más de un siglo de haberse firmado los acuerdos de límites territoriales (1882), no se han alcanzado acuerdos en materia de aguas internacionales entre los dos países” (146 2011). Consequently, because Mexico and Guatemala have not been able to reach “[ni] un acuerdo, un tratado, ni cooperación en el tema” (Kauffer 2015) addressing problems such as erosion, pollution, flooding, and water rights, each one of these situations continues to worsen.

Aside from physical transformations, the dynamic essence of rivers is also loaded with symbolic, historic, and cultural connotations. In the case of rivers that serve as border limits, such meanings can connect as much as they can separate one side and the other. In southern Mexico, the most active border crossing points are in the Soconusco region, which is located in the southernmost section of the state of Chiapas, extending from the secluded Unión Juárez municipality to Tapachula, a city that has been recognized as “una de las fronteras más transitadas del mundo” (Reina). The Soconusco is the region that is immediately separated from Guatemalan soil by the Suchiate. This river starts its life on the southern slopes of the Tacaná volcano, from where it continues to flow until it reaches the Pacific Ocean. However, as Historian Abelardo de la Torre recalls, before the Spanish Conquest, the Soconusco did not end at the river, it continued just a bit beyond it, throughout part of what today is consolidated as the Guatemalan region. By 1498, the Soconusco inhabitants paid tribute to the Aztec Empire, who were interested in the main product of the region, cacao beans, which among other benefits, helped their soldiers stay awake

longer. Populated by Chiapanecan, Mayan, and Zoquen people, the Soconusco region had a strong cultural and economic relationship with their southern neighbors, the Mayan Cakchiqueles, who also produced the valued fruit (7-8). This relationship continued long after 1524, the year in which Spanish colonizers first entered Soconuscan land. Since then, as Isabel Vericat puts it: “a las faldas del volcán se amparan pueblos que antiguamente fueron solo uno.” Furthermore, even today many of the residents from the closest areas to the volcano, such as Unión Juárez, identify themselves as people from the Soconusco, instead of from Mexico or Guatemala.

Unlike other regions of southern Mexico, “the Soconusco has been a transitional space for centuries. In the 1820s, the in-betweenness that marked the region’s Aztec and then Spanish colonial experience led to temporary autonomy” (Lurtz). This initial ambiguity led to numerous conflicts between two emerging nations. Because during the Conquest period the Soconusco was annexed to what was then called the Capitanía General de Guatemala, after the territory was incorporated to Mexico in 1821, for decades both countries claimed ownership over it (de la Torre 9-12). This changed in 1840, when “tras una ocupación de tropas mexicanas los pueblos que conformaban la región aceptaron su incorporación al país” (Nájar), an action that left the Soconusco inhabitants longing for their independence and that the Guatemalan government did not fully accept.

After these territorial conflicts, another struggle began, as Mexico and Guatemala had to demarcate their national borders. Following more than 40 years of political conflicts and further disagreements over territory ownership, in 1882 both governments signed a treaty that designated not only the Soconusco region but also the entirety of Chiapas as part of Mexico, thus leaving Guatemala with less than half of the land they once had²⁹. Thereafter, a fluid, unstable border separated communities that used to live as one, some of whom continue to defy geopolitical

constructions. Every year, indigenous people from both countries cross the river in an informal way to celebrate “*El Señor de las tres caídas*,” a more than two-century-old religious festivity that takes place on both sides of the border³⁰. Mayan *romerías* are another type of celebration that occurs regardless of border demarcations. Through music, dance, and commerce, the participants embrace a transnational community that goes through the river to celebrate on both sides³¹. Traditions, family ties, shared ancestry, and commerce, are some of the main characteristics that underscore the porosity of a border that was never intended to be impenetrable, stable, or even static. As historian Abelardo de la Torre recalls, after more than fifteen years of struggle to demarcate the borderline –largely due to the challenges of penetrating the forest, – “siendo presidente de México Porfirio Díaz [in 1902], se determinan las líneas del territorio mexicano, aunque se sabe que [en] la frontera del río Suchiate, a la altura del volcán Tacaná [...] los límites cambian por las continuas modificaciones de agua” (168). From its inception, then, the border was known to be flexible, porous, and fluid, a fact that further highlights the singularity of this region, which besides the Suchiate, has border zones such as the surrounding areas of the Tacaná volcano, in which one can walk for miles without realizing that one has left one country and entered the other one.

Northwards, long before the Rio Grande/Río Bravo became a border, the delta area was inhabited by diverse Coahuiltecan societies. The name Coahuiltecan is used not to designate one single culture but to talk about the different groups of Native Americans that populated the Rio Grande Valley in the sixteenth century, when the Spanish colonizers reached their territory. Anthropologist Thomas Hester emphasizes that the name was created by mid-20th century historians, who utilized it to refer to the now-extinct native groups. This happened due to the lack of consistent archival information on the original names of the early Rio Grande Valley societies.

Rivers were at the center of these civilizations, which coexisted in such proximity that they used similar tools and garments (Moore). Anthropologist Bobby Lovett states that because of the arid composition of what today is known as south Texas and northern Mexico, bodies of water as copious as the Rio Grande/Río Bravo attracted people from different cultures that used to trade, farm, hunt, and collaborate in different ways: “it is not difficult to envision a network of information and goods that stretched along the course of the major rivers and their drainages” (4). Because of this, for the anthropologist, it is likely that as some of the first populations of the region, Coahuiltecan people interacted peacefully with communities such as the Huastecs, a Mesoamerican civilization with clusters established in contemporary northeast Mexico, as well as with other indigenous groups from modern northern Mexico and other areas of Texas.

Because of the inhospitable terrain surrounding the Rio Grande/Río Bravo floodplain, even though the Spaniards claimed part of present-day Texas and nearby territories such as New Mexico and northern Mexico in 1519, it took them more than 200 years to show a real interest in the territory. This is very different from what happens in forested areas such as certain parts of Mesoamerica where the Europeans identified multiple exploitable resources; arid lands did not offer them the treasures they were looking to find in the New World. One of the first expeditions to the Rio Grande/Río Bravo delta was undertaken by explorer Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who traveled throughout the North American southwest for eight years, from 1528 to 1536. The explorer describes his experience through the Rio Grande/Río Bravo area as follows: “[Un grupo de indios] nos guiaron por más de cincuenta leguas de despoblado de muy ásperas sierras, y por ser tan secas no había caza en ellas, y por esto pasamos mucha hambre, y al cabo de un río muy grande, que el agua nos daba hasta los pechos, y desde aquí nos comenzó mucha de la gente que traíamos a adolecer de la mucha hambre y trabajo que por aquellas sierras habían pasado, que por

extremo eran agras y trabajosas” (ch. 30). Because of accounts such as this one, the Spaniards did not send many more expeditions to the area, and the few that did traverse tended to fail, often losing interest in the barren land (Foster ch. 1). Writing about the experience of a European priest near the Rio Grande/Río Bravo in the 18th century, in *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), Francisco Cantu asserts:

[For him the residents] were feeble and ragged, barely surviving on a diet of roots and lizards. But they understood that there was life to be had in the desert, a life worth struggling for. To the Europeans the entire region was a malpaís, a bad country, but those who made their lives there knew it was a place inextricable from the terrain that surrounded it, a single unbroken expanse.” (35)

According to historian William Foster, it was not until 1689 that eleven organized and more successful expeditions took place, an action prompted by a French settlement in Texas that became a threat to Spain (ch. 1). Because of their lack of defenses to resist diseases brought by Europeans to the continent, by the time of these explorations the native population had already been dramatically reduced by more than 80%. As it has been widely studied, one of the deadliest introduced illnesses was smallpox, which is also the cause of the near extinction of several indigenous populations in Mexico. While most of the natives from northern New Spain had not been in direct contact with Europeans, diseases were rapidly spread either by contact with people from tribes closer to Spanish settlements fleeing in fear and reaching northern villages, or by contact with traders (ch. 1). This was one of the main reasons for the extinction of the Coahuiltecan people from the Rio Grande Valley, and it also impacted Native Americans living in another one of the most important areas near the river, the El Paso region.

In the mid-17th century, one of the most prominent Native American societies living in El

Paso was the Tigua Puebloans. Originally from southeast Albuquerque, the Tiguas had to leave their land because of a drought that prevented them from farming, which was their main sustenance method. Looking for a reliable source of water, they settled near the Rio Grande/Río Bravo in the El Paso area, where their crops flourished³². While other communities from the region perished or escaped due to resistance against the Spanish regime, Apache attacks, and disease, these factors contributed to the decimation of the Tiguas, but did not make them vanish. At the end of the 17th century, the remaining Tigua population was forced to convert to Christianity and settled in the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo³³ in El Paso, where they remain until today. However, after having been taken over by the state of Texas, the remaining land they now possess is minimal compared to what the Spanish granted them. Moreover, the river, which is the original reason they ended up in the region, is no longer a dependable source of water in El Paso³⁴. Dams and high levels of contamination have impacted the composition and course of the river. In addition, climate change continues to dry it, to the extent that in 2018 some of the major news outlets reported that the city was going to start drinking treated sewage water, becoming the first major conurbation in the United States to do so³⁵. While ingesting and using reused water for agriculture and other industries might be a viable method to fight its scarcity, it does not directly address the underlying environmental problems faced by the river and also ignores the wildlife that depends on it.

Because the stream is shared by two nations, its deterioration affects both sides of the border. The United States Department of Interior reports that by 2008, El Paso's main sources of water were surface water from the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and underground water from two aquifers, the Hueco and the Mesilla Bolsons. Whereas the river supplied about 40% of the water demand, the Hueco Bolson was satisfying at least another 40%. The remaining resource came mainly from the Mesilla depression. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, by that same year, its water

supply was exclusively from the Hueco Bolson. Because of the weakening of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, as of 2018, almost 90% of water for domestic use for both cities was being taken from the Hueco Bolson³⁶. Almost 9000 feet deep, this over-exploited³⁷ aquifer also provides water for New Mexico. One of the main sources for the natural recharge of the groundwater is the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, which has affected its quality. In words of Sheng et al: “water quality in the shallow part of the aquifer along the Rio Grande in the alluvium has degraded because of leakage of poor-quality irrigation return-flow into the aquifer” (69). This factor highlights the interconnectedness of the streams that traverse a desert area facing the extinction of clean water. While El Paso has developed the technology to prevent water scarcity in the near future, as reported by journalist Aby Piñón, ciudad Juárez is not ready.

Because the Mexico-Belize/Guatemala dividing lines include three major rivers and multiple bioregions, just as I focus mainly on one area to address the transnational challenges of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and some of the most pressing implications of such challenges, to address the Suchiate I center on the Guatemala-Chiapas region. This is the area that has had the biggest impact on border discussions during the last years³⁸. Whereas in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez borderlands the struggle for water derives from its scarcity, in the Guatemalan northern border, water-related conflicts often come from its abundance. Yet, even though the rivers from southern Mexico account for 74% of renewable water sources in the whole country (Kauffer 32 2019), places located on this area, as Chiapas is, are among the states with the biggest problems of potable water scarcity in Mexico. While Chiapas is traversed by the Suchiate and other multiple rivers that supply water for the rest of Mexico, cities such as San Cristóbal de las Casas, which has a high number of indigenous people living in the highlands, are among the places with the biggest deficit of clean water supplies. One of the most affected groups is the Mayan Tzotzil people, who have

easier and cheaper access to Coca-Cola products than to potable water³⁹. At the same time, the Coca-Cola Company has a factory near San Cristóbal, which has a permit to extract a minimum of 300,000 gallons of water each day, exacerbating the problem. Added to this is climate change, which continues to dry the wells and springs upon which entire communities relied for generations (Lopez and Jacobs).

In Guatemala, water inequality also affects disadvantaged populations. As of 2016, almost 70% of extracted water was destined for the agroindustry sector, with more than 50% going to coffee plantations and sugar cane fields⁴⁰. Meanwhile, with about 95% of the national rivers facing different degrees of contamination, often produced by the same industries that overexploit them⁴¹, at least 4 million Guatemalans do not have access to trusted sources of potable water, which amounts to the fourth part of the entire population⁴². Framed within the configuration of the Guatemala-Mexico border, water scarcity acquires more intricacies. Impoverished inhabitants from both sides of the border living in some of the closest areas to transnational rivers have taken upon themselves to fight water insecurity.

One of the most salient examples of these intricacies took place in the Unión Juárez-Chiapas, and San Marcos-Guatemala borderlands. According to Edith Kauffer, when members of the San Marcos community built a piped water system to retrieve water from an underground spring located in Unión Juárez, the local government filed a complaint with the Guatemala. As a result, Guatemala proposed to identify all the other cross-border sources of water from which different communities were taking water either formally or informally. It turned out that 21 communities from Chiapas were getting their water supply from streams located on Guatemalan soil, compared to one in the opposite case. Guatemala tried to charge the Mexican government for the supply, but with the argument that in the cross-border context where they live, water is not

regulated, Mexico refused to pay. As Kauffer recalls, while the inhabitants of these communities were used to sharing non-regulated water supplies, when the two governments intervened, the conflict almost left them with no water sources.

Histories of pre-Columbian civilizations settling alongside abundant bodies of water and narratives of colonization, slavery, and assimilation overlap with the image of border rivers that for the last decades have faced the effects of climate change, overexploitation, and high levels of contamination, elements that occur within the larger dynamics of transnational hydropolitics and environmental racism. Unstable and dynamic, these rivers not only separate nation-states, but have also generated an ambiguous separation between communities that used to live in an undivided cultural proximity. This can be seen not only in the Soconusco region but also alongside the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, where pre-1848 inhabitants of northern Mexico ended up on the American side after the Mexico-United States war, losing one nationality and acquiring another one, which is where the famous phrase “nosotros no cruzamos la frontera, la frontera nos cruzó,” comes from. The Rio Grande/Río Bravo and the Suchiate river not only function as borders, they are part of the most important circuits of water supplies for the communities surrounding them and for the diverse wildlife that relies on them. Often referred to as passages or boundaries, the dynamism of rivers firmly denies steady categorizations.

From South to North: Two Rivers

It might be difficult to think of more proximate encounters between human bodies and nonhuman entities than those that occur between people and water. Nothing else can cover every inch of skin with the same instantaneous touch as water. Not only that, more than 50% of the human body is water. With its nurturing capacity, routinely, water enters humans with ease. This familiar

coexistence underscores the powerful features of water, which can exert dominance over the body either by virtue of its absence or of its overabundance. The constant internal and external contiguity of bodies to water generates a complex form of human-nonhuman intimacy founded over cultural and material grounds. In the case of the latter, when proximity takes place in non-regulated scenarios, intimate interconnectedness can become a contradictory, dangerous, and deadly point of vulnerability. Border and migration frameworks present this dangerous intimacy through the lens of lived hope and desperation in transnational scenarios.

In October 2018, photographs of Central American migrants jumping off the international bridge Rodolfo Robles into the Suchiate river flooded the headlines of the major news outlets of Mexico and the United States⁴³. In the form of a caravan, thousands of migrants gathered at the river bridge, where they stood in line waiting for their turn to file asylum requests at the official border crossing that goes from Tecún Umán, Guatemala, to Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas. A crowded space, high temperatures, and long waiting periods made hundreds of men, women, and children jump into the Suchiate. Once immersed in the river, those who were able to afford it paid for a raft ride to get from water to land, whereas the people who did not have the extra money had to hold on to a rope that helped them circumvent the danger. The following year, in the summer, another image involving migrant bodies and a border river took over the international mass media. Salvadoran Óscar Martínez Ramírez and his two-year-old daughter, Valeria, were found lying lifeless on the bank of the Rio Grande. In the picture, calm waters quietly cover part of the father's body, and both migrants remain immersed in the low, unthreatening water level, where they share one last embrace. Notwithstanding the apparent tranquility of the stream, the picture exposes the cruelty and violence that results from the intersection of rivers, borders, and unforgiving immigration policies. This picture, along with the series of images portraying members of the

migrant caravan rushing into the Suchiate, exhibits the porosity of liquid borders, which through this characteristic, seem to offer an open passage toward the north. While the openness is real, as the images show, the necessary immersion process tends to demand an unrestrained proximity between humans and water. This factor exacerbates the vulnerability of the body, which establishes a material, immediate, and dangerous relationship with water.

These tragedies, in which the extent of the current migratory crisis can be seen with an appalling clarity, highlight the risky faith that thousands of migrants put on border rivers due to the lack of other safer options, and the hostile aspect of an untamable liquid force fully capable of engendering disaster by means of an overpowering intimacy with the body. Subverting common notions of intimacy, environmental historian Brett Walker states that the history of violent intimate encounters between human and nonhuman animals (48) exacerbates the feebleness of ontological divides, exposes familiarity and difference across species, and shows the deadly intersections of intimate violence. Regarding such intersections, border rivers are also at play. Following Timothy Morton, religious and environmental studies scholar Sam Mickey argues that it is through close encounters with nonhuman alterities that “the human remains exposed, vulnerable, different, intimately intertwined with countless others” (172). In the case of rivers that double as national boundaries, this intertwinement acquires fluid, contradictory facets. Considering literary works that portray harmonious, violent, inconsistent, and deadly proximities between humans and border rivers, I examine different forms of cultural and material intimacy that can arise in the context of the migration path from Central America to the United States.

The entanglement between humans and bodies of water has also been studied by other literary scholars focusing on Latinx and Latin American studies. Within the spatial turn⁴⁴ theories, in the introduction to the volume *Troubled Waters: Rivers in Latin American Imagination* (2013),

Latin Americanists Elizabeth Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis argue that in the Latin American literary tradition “rivers serve as a discursive site of scrutiny, debate, and transgression in which disquiet about the political, natural, human, and collective experiences engendered by encounters with new realities can be expressed” (2). Focusing on the representations of rivers in Latin American literature from different periods, the volume includes articles that examine the metaphoric and symbolic meanings of rivers. As Pettinaroli and Mutis point out, the depiction of these bodies of water helps writers articulate social and environmental concerns:

from the regional novels that present rivers as nostalgic reminders of a lost past to the urban fictions that reconfigure rivers as *cloacas* (sewers) to deploy novel landscapes of disquiet, the symbolical significance of flowing waters remains constant in Latin American literature in the twentieth and twenty first century. (13)

My analysis suggests that contemporary fiction and poetry representations of both the Suchiate river and the Rio Grande/Río Bravo continue with this long-standing tradition of emphasizing the symbolical significance of bodies of water to reveal and contest conflictive national realities. In addition, the premise about how cultural imaginaries of fluvial waters tend to undermine “imposed, closed notions of the world” (13) is in direct dialogue with the ways in which the authors I study present multidimensional and often opposing views of rivers. Whereas I agree with the overall argument of the collection, in reading the depictions of fluid waters against the backdrop of migration and current border configurations, my intervention brings into the conversation how literary articulations of border rivers are in conflict with unsubstantiated dominant understandings of borders, particularly of those made of water. Because of these liquid bodies move and alter the physical attributes of the land surrounding them, they cannot offer the geographic inertness upon which the very concept of limits depends. While it might seem that a few meters of instability

might not make a huge impact on the larger scheme of border demarcations, this perspective changes when scaling-down the implications of such dynamism. As mentioned above, in the case of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, the dislocation of the channel changed the national affiliation of the Chamizal area and brought about a political conflict that lasted almost 100 years. Similarly, the mutability of the Suchiate continues to generate conflicts over territory between small communities living near the river, producing economic insecurity and sometimes attracting national attention. The unpredictability of the flowing movements brings yet another layer of complexity to academic discussions revolving around transnational cultural understandings of rivers, borders, and their amalgamation.

Focused on the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, in 2019, animator and filmmaker Nicole Antebi, a native from El Paso, created an animation depicting the mobility of the river's meanders in the intersection between Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico from 1827 through 1960. The result is the assemblage of winding, sinuous curves that unabashed move on the surface of a conventional⁴⁵ map. The colorful design of the swinging river contrasts with the bleak composition of a lifeless document, a feature that underscores both the incompatibility of maps and rivers and more importantly the impossibility of adjusting fluid bodies of water to anthropocentric geographies. Because waterway movements not only occur 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 interpreted as such internal transformations. While these conclusions can be gathered just from looking at the final image of the animation, the actual animated product, where the process of putting one curved form over the other in chronological order is visible, accentuates the temporal discontinuity between the map and the river(s). Whereas the latter does not stop moving, the former remains immune to time in every area except where the

river movements touch it. This feature reminds viewers of bioregional planning consultant Doug Aberley’s understanding of maps, which for that author function mainly as skeletons of hypothetical realities (5). Describing her project, Antebi states: “no river wants to be stationary. Its singular desire is to reach its destination—an ocean, a sea, a lake, or another river,” which is why the Rio Grande/Río Bravo continues to be in open rebellion against borders and their imaginary stability.

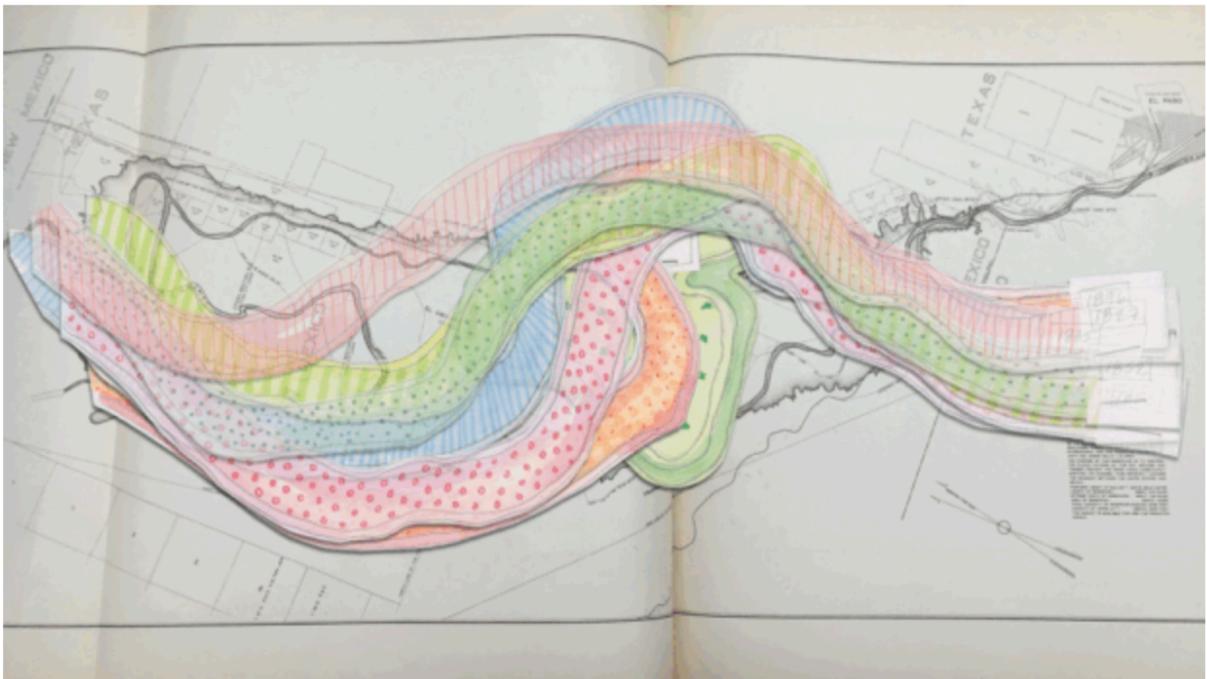


Figure 1. Last image of Nicole Antebi’s animation of meanders. Image is focused on one small section of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo (1820-1960).

Antebi’s work recalls Latinx Studies scholar Rebeca Hey-Colón’s concept of “rippling borders,” defined as “borders that ripple because they are made of water, yet their rippling effect also evinces the unstable, permeable nature of these spaces” (96). For Hey-Colón, border rivers attest to the natural/unnatural dichotomy embedded in bodies of water that double as national boundaries. Whereas naturally establishing the limit between land and water, they are unnaturally policed and manipulated to fulfill a geopolitical role. Because of this, “Rippling Borders” argues that to have

a more holistic understanding of borders, it is necessary to consider them as physical realities and, following border studies scholars Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, as social methods of separation and multiplication. My approach also includes this consideration; however, it differs from Hey-Colón's inasmuch as a significant part of her analysis consists in problematizing land/water and natural/unnatural dichotomies, whereas I am more interested in studying literary articulations of the complex material and immaterial human-river intimacies that arise in the framework of border-making practices. In addition, my approach focuses on the study of contradictory depictions of border rivers. Considering the main concepts from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism, I analyze how polarizing viewpoints of the border river can challenge the dominant unidimensional perspectives that damage both the river and the human and nonhuman alterities that coexist with it.

Suchiate/Satanachia: Perspectivism and Corporeal Affections

In *La Mara* (2006), Rafael Ramírez Heredia narrates the stories of more than a dozen of the residents of the Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Umán region, whose lives are traversed by the Suchiate river. As Elisa Cairati states, “[la] novela no tiene una evolución lineal, y no existe ni siquiera una trama. Es más bien [...] una representación global del entero universo de la migración centroamericana” (268). This universe includes characters such as Jovany, a bisexual gang member of the Mara Salvatrucha, don Nicolás Fuentes, a pedophile Mexican consul living in the Guatemalan side of the border, several corrupt immigration enforcement officers, Calatrava, an indifferent driver of a deportation bus, and doña Lita, a trafficker of young Central American women. Among those who find themselves trapped in the world of criminality are Tata Añorve, a *balseiro* that loses his daughter, Anamar, at the hands of a Mara member, Sabina and Lizbeth,

two migrant women from Central America working in a brothel and trying to gain documents to pass freely through the Mexican territory, and Rosa del Llano and Dimas Berrón, a married couple that gets kidnapped in their first attempt to cross the river together. Another central character is Ximenu Fidalgo, a mysterious figure with extensive knowledge of the border area and its inhabitants. The river actively participates in the social, cultural, spiritual, and economic lives of the characters. In the novel, the Suchiate is portrayed as the site where both the dreams and nightmares of hundreds of migrants develop, as the main medium of sustenance for Mexican and Guatemalan *balseros*, as a channel for informal commerce and for human and drug trafficking, as a geographic parameter, and as a deity-like entity. This multifaceted versions of the Suchiate attest to the destabilizing power that border rivers have over unilateral, absolute, and limited understandings of geopolitical boundaries.

The first paragraph of *La Mara* touches on the elements that will traverse the core narrative arcs: “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.” By incorporating the presence of the Tacaná volcano, a geologic site that demarcates part of the border between Mexico and Guatemala, the narrator discloses the story’s location from the beginning. In addition, the mention of a night train that will disrupt life at the border speaks to the clandestine migration patterns that routinely take place there. The amalgamation between southern Mexico and a moving train quickly transmits the image of La Bestia. This paragraph also introduces Ximenu Fidalgo, a mysterious character with far-reaching knowledge of the perils surrounding the train journey, which appears to be a normal occurrence for both him and the narrator. Because part of the initial narration also indicates how “Ximenu Fidalgo alza el rostro hacia los ojos de los Cristos colgados [...] sabe que hoy es noche de viaje,” the undergoing action acquires a ceremonious and dangerous

tone. The nocturnal atmosphere along with the description of an agitated river and a journey that takes place in the dark, gives the impression that something devious is happening. The introduction of the river is not accidental. The body of water is included among other crucial elements for the narrative, and in the opening words, it is presented as a central figure affecting its surroundings and being affected by the journey. Whereas the description is short, when the narrator states “ese viaje agita las aguas del río,” the image communicates a moment of intense tension. The moving train disturbs the body of water, which responds with violent movements that transform the border landscape with its forceful waters and their characteristic sound, catching the attention of the narrator.

This first manifestation of the river in the novel is not, by any means, the last one. Throughout the narrative, the flowing water is a constant presence entwined with the lives and thoughts of almost every character. However, even though it appears with regularity, following its unpredictable attributes, it does so in a multiform, multilayered way. The first and most salient example that underscores the elusive, yet palpable presence of the river is the name the characters use. Whereas some call it “Suchiate,” another group prefers to call it “Satanachia.” Not only that, but the qualities conferred on the river depend on the preferred denomination. For instance, Ximenu Fidalgo, one of the main characters who uses the term “Satanachia” to talk about the river, sees it as an entity “que da y quita,” and that in similitude with mythological divinities, requires a sacrifice, an offering from those in need of traversing its waters: “[los migrantes] deben pagar una ofrenda al Satanachia quedándose junto a sus arenas, oliendo su rumor, masticando sus aguas, juramentando 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.” Through these descriptions, it is possible to identify the unsympathetic, cold attitude of a body of water that has the unhindered

power to allow people into its body and grant them safe passage or deny it. To grant the desired favor, the threatening godlike river demands anguish and devotion. In contrast, the Suchiate “es el calor, los peces, las aves, los pueblos frente a frente y las balsas iguales atadas a hombres semidesnudos jalándolas sin detenerse nunca.” This version underscores the plurality of human and nonhuman entities that transform the images and meanings of the river, imbuing it with a wide range of denotations. While this second understanding might seem considerably kinder than the former, it is no stranger to sudden agitations: “cuando le sale lo sonusqueño al Suchiate no hay quien pueda con él.” This characteristic emphasizes how, also an inhabitant of the Soconusco region, the Suchiate shares personality traits with the human residents, thus rendering it capable of developing such connections.

At a first glance, these two connotations clash and seem irreconcilable. Presumably, the names Satanachia and Suchiate present dichotomic understandings of the river. However, the story provides several instances that prove such an assumption wrong. This premise can be illustrated with an example taken from the narrator, who constantly switches from one denomination to the other. Sometimes, he even uses both names at the same time: “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.” Whereas the meaning given to these designations appears to be exclusive, they speak not to an opposition but rather to the different worlds that the river can be. This reminds us of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian perspectivism, which is grounded on his ethnographic knowledge of Indigenous thought. In his theoretical approach, Viveiros captures the intellectual system that lies at the center of Amerindian myths, sustaining that all human and nonhuman beings see things in the same way, yet they see different things, a factor that creates “a perspectivist multiplicity intrinsic to the real” (2014 50).

This theory addresses the coexistence of a multitude of perspectives within and across ontologies, which can create dissimilar views of one single thing. For Viveiros, this diverse array of perspectives results from the specific entities' materiality, which is why the anthropologist affirms: "perspectivism is a corporeal mannerism" (2014 73). An important clarification made by the author is that by corporeal he means not physiological characteristics but *habitus*, which he describes as those elements formed by a series of affects and habits expressed by the body. These considerations can guide the understanding of the coexistence of the river's contradictory manifestations.

The descriptions of the Satanachia/Suchiate river(s) are given in very specific scenes and in relation to particular characters. On the one hand, the Satanachia is described extensively when Ximenu Fidalgo, the mysterious character with deep knowledge of the region, contemplates the river while waiting for the arrival of the train. It is important to note that Ximenu waits for the train not because he is trying to jump to it, but because he is the one who will decide which migrants will board it, and when. On the other hand, the Suchiate is described by Tata Añorve, who is the *balsero* and father of Anamar, the femicide victim who is murdered by Jovany, a Mara member. These two characters, Ximenu and Añorve, offer two of the most emblematic perspectives on the border river from the narration. Añorve's work consists in an almost daily immersion in the water, where he is in a direct relation with the heat, wildlife, geography, and economic labor that constitutes his embodied experience of the river. In the meantime, Ximenu Fidalgo, who turns out to be a *brujo* and spiritual counselor for migrants and people from the border region, also perceives the river according to his own *habitus*. Because of the mystic services he offers, Ximenu has the trust of noncriminals and criminals alike. Among his most recurrent "patients" are gang members, who trust him to the extent of making him their hidden leader. Asking for advice and

fortune-telling, migrants also seek Ximenu, and in their private conversations he finds out where they come from, how much money they carry, and where they are going. This information is then passed on to the Maras, who take advantage of it. Because of this, Ximenu is the mysterious presence that controls an important part of the criminality⁴⁶ from the area. The description of the Satanachia, then, responds to Ximenu's lived experiences of the river, the body of water that acts as his accomplice in the nocturnal lurking process. Although these two characters are the ones that offer the most graphic descriptions of the river, other characters share comparable perspectives, often adding more referents.

This duality illustrates one of the manifestations of perspectivism that are at play in the narrative. If, as Viveiros de Castro states: "the indigenous theory of perspectivism emerges from an implicit comparison between the ways the different modes of corporeality 'naturally' experience the world as affective multiplicity" (2014 87), Añorve and Ximenu present clear instances of the affective layers in the border region and give rise to dissimilar points of view on the river. In several occasions, Añorve describes the act of walking in the river while the liquid covers almost half of his body. Working from inside the water, the character bears witness to other lifeforms that intersect with it, and these visualizations originate his perspective on the river, which accounts for multispecies coexistence. For his part, when Ximenu is in close proximity to the river, he is usually hidden in the shadows, at night. Covered by the dark, for his own benefit Ximenu sees how the river coexists with anguished migrants and Mara members ready to prey on them, and in the distance, he hears the engine of the train overlapping with the sound of flowing water. At the center of those interfaces, the *brujo* recognizes the overwhelming presence and power of the deity-like entity he views as Satanachia. This view comes from a similarity he shares with the river: "[se tiende] bajo la mirada luminosa de los Cristos que como Ximenu Fidalgo y el

Satanachia conocen historias que no cesan.” Because of the nature of his daily activities as counselor and fortune-teller, Ximenu is aware of secret stories that no one else knows, except the river, which throughout the narrative acts as an unaffected witness of the atrocities perpetrated against the migrants. When they see the border river, the characters see different worlds, which originate from their specific perspectival, embodied positions.

These perspectives underscore how the river is a buoyant entity upon which human and nonhuman ecologies depend. Besides providing means of sustenance regardless of ontologies, the river is also a body of water that divides two nations, creating a geographic separation that produces uncertainty, desperation, and death. Entangled with this, the river is part of a world of criminality, working as the site where migrants meet and wait while predatory eyes look down on them. According to Amerindian perspectivism, the reality of the river can be apprehended from the coexistence of these distinct points of view (Viveiros 1998, 469) that originates from distinct corporeal gestures and habits. Because of this, polarizing viewpoints are contradictory, but accurate.

While the aforementioned premise might seem relativistic, according to Viveiros de Castro, perspectivism is the opposite of it. Cultural relativism argues that all points of view are equally valid and that every truth is relative to the human being that produces it (Slick), rendering accurate versions of the world nonexistent. On the contrary, perspectivism sustains that “all beings see the world in the same way – what changes is the world they see [...] the point of view is located in the body” (1998 478). Hence, as Viveiros explains, certain nonhuman animals do not see humans as people but as prey, while humans see other animals as prey. Similarly, whereas vultures see dead people as food, humans see them as beings that need be buried in the ground. The different points of view that Añorve and Ximenu have about the river follow this logic. Both characters see the

river in the same way but they use their unique bodies, their specific corporeal accumulation of *habitus*, of precise affects and ways of being to see it, and as a result what they see are different worlds: “what changes is the nature of that which they see, according to the body these referential humans possess” (Viveiros 2013). Through a body that has been in physical contact with the river for decades, working immersed in its waters and participating in a network of transnational labor, Añorve sees a river different from that one of Ximenus, whose body is habituated to experiencing the border river through a corporeal affection substantiated by solitude and night scenarios, where dispossession, indifference, and annihilation are everyday tasks.

Radical Intimacy with Border Rivers

One of the fundamental premises of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s Amerindian Perspectivism, is that all beings see things in the same way. Whereas in the previous section, I studied how two of the main characters of *La Mara* perceive different worlds when they see the river, because “all beings see,” in this segment I focus on the point of view of the nonhuman, or on the nonhuman’s view of the world. If, as Viveiros states: “the ‘perspectivist’ world is a world exhaustively composed of points of view [...] the entities that ‘we see’ are always *seeing beings*” (2013), then, it is possible to make an argument that could support the idea of this nonhuman’s worldview existence. The obvious complication for this approach is that whereas human perspectives tend to be easily located in literary works, the same cannot be said of the nonhuman ones. In relation to this complication, studying Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo’s film *YUMA Land of Friends* (2014), cultural studies scholar Macarena Gómez Barris maintains that by seeing and listening to the narrations made by riverbank communities alongside long shots of the Magdalena river that tell a visual story of degradation, it is possible to experience “a submerged perspective that one

might imagine could emanate from the river” (95). This “one might imagine” can be easily understood as a form of speculation. Building on the combination of human stories describing the Magdalena’s ecosystem destruction and images that illustrate the progression of this destruction, Gómez Barris’ analysis challenges human exceptionalism and speculates on the potentiality to envisage the point of view of nonhuman beings. Following Barris’ premise, I propose that this envision can be also made possible by analyzing the literary portrayal of intimate encounters that take place between border rivers and the multiplicity of beings that interact with them.

In *Formas Comunes* (2015), Hispanic Studies scholar Gabriel Giorgi studies texts that he identifies as central for the change in nonhuman animal’s literary representations in the Latin American tradition. Giorgi discusses how early depictions of animals as symbol and metaphor became untenable from the 1960s onwards, a period in which Latin American authors started to reflect on human contiguities and connections with animal life. According to Giorgi, this mode of thinking led writers to portray animals as affective, material, political, and organic continuums with the human: “[el] animal se vuelve interior, próximo, contiguo, la instancia de una cercanía [...] que disloca mecanismos ordenadores de cuerpos y de sentidos.” What the author is describing is an array of potential occurrences that can give rise to intimate connections between humans and animals. Ideas about closeness and proximity underscore the importance of intimacy across species for the new ordering of bodies that, according to Giorgi, exposes forms of violence in biopolitical contexts and problematizes the ontology of the human. Although the author only focuses on the categories of the human and the animal, his premise can serve as one of the points of departure for this analysis.

Because of the depiction of sweeping co-existentialist manifestations of intimacy, exposure and vulnerability that are carried out in close interconnection with the river, here I study the poetry

books *With the River on our Face* (2016) by Emmy Pérez, and *El río/The River, a collaboration* (2018) by Zoe Leonard and Dolores Dorantes, translated by Robin Myers. Focused on the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, these authors portray the material and immaterial aspects of a river whose enthralling alterity compels them to think about contradictory and transgressive worldviews and modes of existence. Stressing the dynamic essence of the river, *El río/The River*, includes photographs of the stream taken by Zoe Leonard, fragments of poems written in Spanish by Dolores Dorantes, and English translations by Robin Myers. In addition, unlike conventional 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 Muñoz Santini. Added to this, the collaboration was published by Gato Negro Ediciones, a Mexico City-based independent publishing house that uses a risograph machine to print a very small press run, making the books difficult to find. As Andrea Beltran puts it, regarding this book, “nothing is linear, everything is disrupted, everything is migrating, everything is exiled” (2018). Meanwhile, *With the River on our Face* follows the river on its way towards the Rio Grande Valley. During this journey, the poetic voice accounts for the political, cultural and ecological lives of a river that never stops moving, transforming and being transformed by everything it touches. A source of life and death, the river appears as forceful autonomy, meandering through the personal and collective stories of the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the border area. References to a ruthless immigration system that benefits from the powerful presence of the stream, contrast with striking images that feature the beauty of that same river as it traverses the desert landscape. Concerning these characteristics, fiction writer Minerval Laveaga Luna states: “[the collection] points to what exists and should be named, both the unjust and the beautiful, the artificial lines designed to divide, and the natural world that binds us” (2016).

Among that which exists is the worldview of the river, constantly unfolding from embodied, disembodied, conflicting, and intimate connections.

The next analysis is divided into three sub-sections. First, considering Leonard's photographs, I study the visual representations of the river, which I argue challenge metaphorical-based understandings of the river and expose a level of creativity often ignored or unrecognized. Then, following Morton's notion of "the intrinsic shimmering of being," I read Emmy Pérez' poems as elements that communicate both the ambiguous and the clear ways in which, although unseen, the border makes itself manifest through a series of haunting, continual, and contradictory forms of coexistence with the river and other surrounding human and nonhuman beings. Finally, considering the previous ideas and attending to Dorantes' poems and Myers' translations, I delve into the overall sense of intimacy and interconnectedness that these poems convey, which is key for the envisioning of the border river's worldview.

In the introduction to *Troubled Waters*, Elizabeth Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis describe changes in the representation of rivers that are comparable to the ones Giorgi identifies about animals. The authors think about how theoretical approaches such as the spatial turn and ecocriticism have progressively weakened the long-standing binaries that defined questions of race, identity, belonging, and general understandings of the nation in Latin American literature (5). As they recall, the civilization/barbarism, urban/rural, and human/nonhuman oppositions that were at the center of social and cultural debates have been deeply problematized by the increment of gender and postcolonial approaches, the scrutiny of modernity, and environmental concerns (5-6). One of the clearest examples of this change can be seen by remembering colonial chronicles in which "the humidity emerging from the rivers and environment of tropical America served as evidence of the presumably degenerate character of the indigenous and even of the *criollo* (creole)

inhabitants” (7). Although, as the authors argue, this type of representation continues to be challenged, the conception of rivers as non-living entities lacking a vital multidimensionality presumably inherent to humans still prevails. Zoe Leonard’s photographs offer visual examples that contest these notions when applied to bodies of water.

Most of the Amerindian perspectivism is based on thinking about how and why different points of view on things emerge when comparing animals to humans, animals to animals, and humans to humans. However, Viveiros de Castro acknowledges that this theory can also encompass other nonhuman beings beyond the animal, which he denominates “nonhuman cosmic existents” or “other cosmic constituents” (2014 57) whose self-awareness is thoroughly different from the way in which humans perceive them. Because of the centrality that the notion of an affective corporeality has for this theory, thinking about river’s worldviews presents a particular challenge. Their liquid, flowing materiality, unstable pace, fast-evolving encounters with human and nonhuman entities, and the overwhelming presence of dynamic movements, make these ever-changing aquatic bodies difficult to apprehend. In *El río/The River* artist Zoe Leonard defies this difficulty by incorporating into the book a series of photographs that showcases the slippery nature of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and communicates its never-ending mutability:

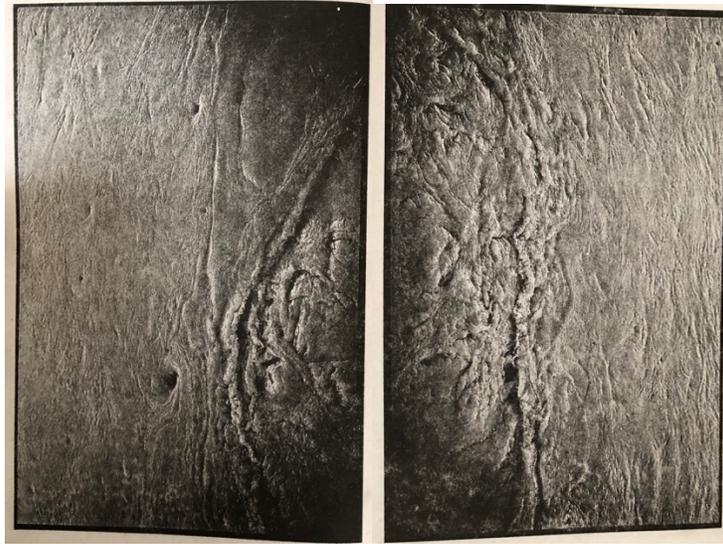


Figure 2. Zoe Leonard's photographs of the Rio Grandel/Río Bravo, included in El Río/The River, a collaboration.

The 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 printed articulations of its evasive body, which can be seen in 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. (9)

If, as Timothy Morton suggests, the term "specter" could mean apparition, horrifying object, illusion, or the shadow of a thing (2017 55), the spectrality in Leonard's photographs becomes evident. The artist seizes passing movements in the pulsating life of the river, which exist embodied in its material configurations. These movements 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 creativity of the river. Since the images convey relentless, original readjustments of the flowing body, a sense of futurity is on display. Because the photographed river is also a border, it is fitting that Leonard's pictures do not show stable continuity, but a separation composed by fragmentary yet interconnected bits.

In *With the River on our Face*, Emmy Pérez speaks to these convoluted separations and interconnections. The poem "The River on Our Face," describes different geographic points and lifeforms that enter in contact with the river as it traverses the Rio Grande Valley on its way towards the Gulf:

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. (2016)

While Leonard's shots depict the fluctuating matter of the river in a photographic disjunction that reproduces the ability of the liquid border to transform itself, Pérez' poem portrays this same capacity, but this time emerging in the specific context of the Rio Grande Valley. To do this, the poetic voice starts by highlighting the dual nature of the watercourse, known as Río Bravo in Mexico and Rio Grande in the United States. Regardless of these denominations, the stream starts its journey in a specific origin, a headwater that leads it towards where it needs to go. Comparable to the partial shots presented by Leonard, the poem portrays the river through lyric shots, fragmentary visualizations of its presence in the valley. Although the weave of images depicting a

border patrol officer, a woman in the shower, and pigs and piglets might seem random and disengaged, the poem clearly voices that they are interconnected through the river's overwhelming presence. The final verses emphasize how this companionship is not only visual or metaphoric but also tangible and unavoidable. The river water runs through the pipes of the valley, touching and entering the bodies of its human and nonhuman inhabitants. At the same time, the air these same entities breathe is filled with the fragrance and steam of the water. Both cases, the photographs and the poem, expose seemingly disconnected parts of the material and immaterial presence of a river that throughout its journey resists both permanency and erasure.

If, as Viveiros maintains: “every ‘object’ is always a ‘subject’” (2013), the vibrancy captured in Leonard's photographs together with the diverse interactions portrayed in Pérez' poem show that while the border river can be object of inquiry and contemplation, it can also be a specific, creative presence that uncontrollably engages with the human and nonhuman elements that come into its path. The turn from object to subject theorized by Viveiros recalls Morton's Object-Oriented Ontology. Within this framework, the river's indocility is a characteristic that, according to Morton's understanding of life, could imbue the river with this attribute: “a lifeform is exactly this non-orientable entity [...] shimmer[ing] without mechanical input” (49). For Morton, to debilitate the life-nonlife boundary, it is necessary to think of ecological beings such as the river, as spectral, undead entities that through explicit sensuousness, haunt and are haunted by other beings. Central for this symbiotic haunting is the constant influence of an intrinsic shimmering. As defined by this theory, a shimmering entity is one that through constant resonance with other beings, makes itself present and absent at the same time, acting and being acted upon in ambiguity and unpredictability.

Pérez' poems illustrate this mutual resonance. The periodic repetition of a verse that also

works as the collection's title accommodates different possessives to denote the reverberating presence of the river: "with the river on its/his/my/their/our face." Spectral in the sense it appears as a shadow, image, or reflection, the river shimmers across the sensorial experiences of the valley inhabitants. Even when it does so in the form of potable water, the stream is simultaneously present and far away. Habitually affected by the river, the inhabitants also exert their influence over it. Either by immersion or contemplation, for Macarena Gómez-Barris: "the river itself is enlivened by human activity that does not merely extract from its ecological life" (95). This enlivenment is portrayed in the poem "The Same Kind of Huecos," where the poetic voice 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." This fragment underscores the lively impact that different lifeforms can have over the river, whose materiality intersects with the formation and conservation of human and nonhuman communities. An orientation point, a passage, and a habitat, the river's existence acquires manifold configurations, constantly changing and being changed by these multifaceted ecologies. Another example of this shimmering symbiosis can be seen in the opening lines of both poems, where the poetic voice names the river in its dual capacity: "rio grande~río bravo." Besides the cultural and political claims of ownership that these denominations entail, which among other things involve the manipulation of water circulation and damming, the stanza speaks to the haunting presence of the border looming on the river water. The poem "Río Grande~Bravo" best describes this concatenation:

The ambiguity of life / the ambiguity of moments, the certainty / of moments, the certainty
of laws, the ambiguity of laws el / 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.

An ambiguous yet certain presence, the border shimmers with an anthropocentric excess placed upon the river, drawing an invisible line that Gloria Anzaldúa once called *una herida abierta*. Pérez revisits this image by conceiving less an open wound than a caesura residing in the depths of hurting water. Alluding to the immeasurable influence that border-making practices have over the river, the poetic voice casts doubt on the integrity of its waters. Compromised by a virtually unrestrainable association with an imaginary line that produces very real consequences, in the poem, the river is depicted as an entity that has been forced to become something that is in need of healing. Bearing witness to this disarticulation, the poetic voice expresses her desire to help restore the river, only to recognize that this endeavor is an impossibility: “liquid cannot be stitched.” This stanza can be understood as the poetic voice’s realization that the real-life costs of the amalgamation between river and border cannot be undone, which is why later on the poem, the poetic voice states:

All the ambiguity~clarity of trying to cross again. / 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.

This fragment underscores how the haunting presence of an invisible line that looms inside the river remains invisible but loses all ambiguity. The border line makes itself manifest with a violent shimmer that is no longer subtle nor elusive. This poem’s fragment shows how, without haziness, the ghostly presence of the line impacts human bodies. From inciting them to movement, to pushing them to the ground, to traversing them with all the strength of its invisibility, the border line coexists with them just as it coexists with the river and other nonhuman entities that inhabit

and make up the border region.

Through the lens of the “shimmering spectrality” rises the elucidation of a series of examples that help identify the conflictive and continual coexistence between a creative, fast-moving river, the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the river region, and a border demarcation. The closeness that Giorgi describes as necessary to defy the hierarchical ordinance of bodies acquires new complexities when thought of in the context of a liquid entity normatively seen as inert matter. In *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2019), philosopher Emanuele Coccia maintains that the zoocentric perspectives that dominate the defiance of the human/nonhuman divide in the life sciences and the intellectual world in general, tend to assume that “[beings] without personality and without dignity, [do] not seem to deserve any spontaneous empathy” (4). Although Coccia focuses on plant life, this premise can also be applied to other nonhuman entities normally considered lifeless. By highlighting the intricate coexistence between river and other “ecological beings” (Morton), or “cosmic existents” (Viveiros), Zoe Leonard’s photographs and Emmy Pérez’ poems challenge this consideration and offer new paths of analysis to think of, and with the river. The poem “Río Grande~Bravo” offers a clear example of this possibility. The text describes the river water as a wounded body, thus appealing to the affective and sensorial responses of the reader. In addition, by inserting herself into the lyrical description, the poetic voice brings about questions of interconnectedness and coexistence, which are present throughout the entire collection and that are also central in the poems included in *El río/The River, a collaboration*.

Jane Bennett defines coexistence as the highly conflictual act of being “intimately interconnected [in a] mutual dependency with friction and violence between parts” (2010 23), whereas Sam Mickey understands it as the way in which entities “[exist] irreducibly unique yet intimately interwoven with others” (75). For Donna Haraway, becoming-with each other across

species can only be possible through the “long-lasting intimacy of strangers,” (26) a view of life proposed by radical evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis and that is essential for Haraway’s “staying with the trouble,” as she expresses in the book. Coexistence is also described by Gabriel Giorgi as the possibility to see others as “un horizonte próximo, íntimo/éxtimo, un terreno que no se puede poner a distancia sino que se revela a la vez interior e impropio.” In relation to this same concept, Morton states: “the strange stranger is [...] there, in the most intimate possible sense, for existence is coexistence” (2011 21), and for Viveiros de Castro, coexistence often implies “intense physical intimacy” (2015), which can take place regardless of ontologies. Hence, although from different frameworks and intellectual perspectives, coexistence is seen as a critical concept to overcome categorical boundaries, constantly appearing inevitable linked to notions of intimacy.

Although these notions can also be identified in the poems, it is in “Poesía” where they are most strikingly evident. In this poem, Emmy Pérez presents a series of images that communicate specific instances where coexisting with other entities produces an inescapable sense of intimacy, as well as the particular ways in which this entanglement is framed by the border region of the Rio Grande Valley:

Ah, I still love you, mockingbird of El Valle / summer, Río Grande / green mosquitos biting
/ the limbs down. / And chicharras like terrible lawnmowers / on Sunday mornings,
evenings / announcing each of my deaths/ with the arrival of more / agents and guns. / One
new bridge / and concrete wall / near a river town older / than Texas.

This fragment comprises the array of conflictive responses experienced by the poetic voice when facing the river region. The opening image reveals that the poem is addressing an affective relationship, and the first chosen word to speak about it is love. However, the stanza says: “*I still love you,*” indicating there is a reason why this affection could have disappeared. The depiction of

this cryptic love is followed by images of the beloved border region's inhabitants. Single words such as "mockingbird" and "summer" are used to convey a poetic photograph of the area. The visual images are vivid and precise, and the sensory perception produced by the poem does not end with them. After an amusing portrayal of the region, the poetic voice includes an image that communicates the tactile sensitivity of discomfort. The itching sensation caused by referencing mosquitos that will not stop biting generates instantaneous memories of physical ache. Then the sonorous presence of chicharras takes the poetic spotlight. However, the loudest insect in the Texas southwest also announces the moment in which the appearance of the region is profoundly destabilized. The presence of border patrol agents accompanied by inorganic objects such as their guns, a bridge, and the wall, collide with the lyric manifestation of wildlife. The fragment ends with a brief but effective account of why this confusing overlapping came to be and might also explain the way in which the opening line is phrased.

The poem portrays how, together with the river, in the valley a vast range of contradictory entities coexist, all of which are intimately interrelated. For example, the poetic voice finds herself interwoven with the nonhuman dwellers of the valley, physically and sensory vulnerable to them. At the same time, the residents are vulnerable to her, a strange human presence that consumes them through her senses while they remain exposed in their habitat. This characteristic recalls Mickey's assertion that intimate coexistence implies vulnerability (75), a premise that, when considering the second half of the poetic fragment, adds more complexity to the valley's description. Whereas the first part describes instances of human-nonhuman encounters that could take place in almost every river region, in the final part the specificity of the Rio Grande Valley emerges. If, as Jane Bennett suggests, intimate coexistence comes accompanied by friction, violence, and conflict, "Poesía" shows an amplified version of this premise. The imposition of the

officer, the bridge, and the wall over the valley situates these entities in a contradictory, uninterrupted relationship. This shows how, as Rebecca Hey-Colón describes when thinking of rivers as borders between ecosystems: “a natural and an unnatural border are superimposed on each other” (100). In the poem, “The Valley Myth,” this superimposition brings about environmental concerns:

The myth begins with hiring local workers to uproot anacahuítas, huizaches, mezquites, and in the new millennium, it uproots hundred-year-old sabal palms and plants concrete footings for steel column walls.

To this extent, the poetic voice describes how the imposition of the wall over the valley has produced the displacement and death of diverse and ancient plant life. For Emanuele Coccia, plants exemplify the most extreme way of being in the world because they adhere themselves to the land without any qualms or disconnections (48). Because of this, when the steel wall is installed in the border territory, it supersedes the presence of the plants by taking over the land they inhabited. This process transfers the extreme, intimate, and physical connection that used to exist between the uprooted plants and the borderland to the metallic structure, although clouded with environmental devastation. This jarring coexistence, which encompasses wildlife, border structures, and humans, stimulates the poetic voice to reflect on how it can be possible “to be a silver lizard run over by tires, a swatch of river on asphalt, to be a bolt loosened from the border wall” inhabiting the same space at the same time. This fragment, which is included in the poem “Green Light Go,” highlights the unlikely, vulnerable, and deadly connections that rise through the formulation of intimate forms of violence based on border-making processes, such as walling and patrolling a valley.

Whereas the aforementioned examples speak to different forms of violence generated by

the fusion of border structures with the valley, the poem “Not one more refugee death” addresses another type of agony, this time focused on the river: “half of our bodies / are made of water, and we can’t / sponge rivers through skin / and release them again / like rain clouds.” This poem references the consequences of close encounters between forceful currents and migrant bodies. The image of human figures that are composed by the same element that has the power to annihilate them, resonates with Hey-Colón’s statement about how “unlike land, water encourages the confluence of contradiction” (100). In *El río/The River, a collaboration*, Dolores Dorantes also explores this conflict.

Leonard’s photographs show loose pieces of the river that at first sight communicate disjunction, turmoil, and a strong sense of disorientation. Dorantes’ poems, along with Myers’ translations generate similar responses. Continual images of the river are followed and preceded by small lyrical pieces without titles that sometimes also appear to be disconnected from each other. Lacking page numbers, in a “shimmering” relation, both poems and photographs produce confusion. Although brief, each poem contains different voices, which can be discerned either by the language they are using, the pronoun, or the selected font. Because of this, each one of these voices is seemingly telling the same story but from varying points of view. Notwithstanding this polyphony, one of the most salient characteristics of the poems, and one that brings them even closer to the photographs is the sense of repetition they transmit. Just as the pictures portray multiple and creative variations of the water’s movement, the poems depict various expressive articulations about the potential consequences of migration flows when these come into contact with the river. Images and poems are evidently interconnected and in a constant dialogue; however, this connection is not harmonious but painful and chaotic. This characteristic can be illustrated by the first poem of the collection: “el agua no es / un atributo / de tus circunstancias.” Framed by the

context of migration patterns from Mexico and Central America to the United States, in all their brevity these verses convey the basis upon which the relationship between humans and bodies of water is founded. Regardless of your circumstances, the poetic voice implies, the river will continue to be a river. The following poem, which is one of Myers' intentionally imprecise translations, reads as follows:

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. We were, / or were at once, the
stone / head jutting out from the / water.

This poem tells a story of migration. The "we" of the first verse can be interpreted as a communal voice that represents the countless migrants that have had to cross the river as part of their migration path. That they use the word "power" to describe themselves communicates an image of autonomy, agency, and independence. The stanza implies that the group was powerful when they decided to try to get a better life. However, the subsequent idea complicates this notion by stating that powerful or not, at least they were, they existed. Then, the presence of the river interrupts this self-description. Just as the river divides two countries, the verses in the middle establish similar boundaries within the text. As a part of those boundaries, the first poem of the collection is introduced again, this time in English. The meaning does not change, the poetic voice replaces the migrants' expressions and insists on the fact that the water will not change its properties because of anybody's circumstances. After this and in a repetitive tone, the poetic voice states: "*Crossing over / isn't an attribute of your circumstances,*" implying that, as water, the necessity of crossing over too becomes something that cannot be altered. The migrants need to keep moving, and they do so. Descriptions of this crossing are not included, instead, the migrants' collective voice emerges again to explain the aftermath of their endeavor. In such manner, they

resume their self-description; however, the central word to do it is not “power” anymore but “stone.” That is the word that better serves them to describe the state of their bodies after they drowned, “at once.”

Followed by five pages showcasing nine pictures of the border river, the brevity of the poem contrasts with the overwhelming imagery of water. Whereas the poem does not include any depiction accounting for the moment in which the migrants physically face the river, the photographs offer a visual representation that alludes to the incontrollable effect that the overabundance of dynamic water can exert on human bodies. With the turning of each page, the book presents what Macarena Gómez-Barris denominates “a fish-eye episteme,” this is, the possibility for the “seeing being” to feel immersed in images depicting rivers. The immersion that Leonard’s shots offer is intense enough to convey the overpowering temperament of water. Although, as the poetic voice insistently describes, the river remains indifferent to human hardships, no matter how disadvantageous they may be, this does not mean that it remains unaffected; This, even if the impact occurs at an imperceptible scale and is not even close to being comparable to what the migrants experience in the water. Looking at the photographs after reading the poem, raises the questions of how the humans’ bodies might have influenced the movement of the water, and of which waves might still be echoing intimate and unspeakable fights for survival. This elucidation gives the impression that “the river possesses its own form of memory” (Gómez-Barris 95), one that in this case seems to consist of reactionary movements that produce a change in the current’s pace and texture.

A focal element of *El río/The River*’s collection is the constant inclusion of bodies and body parts. The abovementioned poem exemplifies this characteristic. To speak about drowning, it was not necessary to address the drowned people directly, instead, including the image of an

incomplete body coming back to the surface is enough to depict the sudden deaths. Another of the poems that can also epitomize this characteristic is the one stating: “una mano gris detenida / sobre el cuerpo del agua / *Di que eres una piedra.* / Un torso sin concluir alejado / de la superficie.” Two are the images that transmit the extent of the tragedy being depicted in this poem: a grey hand, and a torso floating on the water. Similar to the overall tone of fragmentation that the photographs and the texts convey, bodies are also depicted through disjointed and scattered images. This coincidence can be read not just as the lyrical representation of an appalling scenario that is all too common in the Rio Grande/Río Bravo border, but also as the element through which the collection references the conflictive coexistence undergone by human and nonhuman entities that meet at this intersection. Upon the contact with each other, they become destabilized, transformed.

Whereas, as Emmy Pérez inquires, the river gets compromised due to its prolonged, constant, and unavoidable relationship with an invisible line, thus ceasing to be just a river and becoming something else, in Dorantes’ poem a similar process can be identified. As the first texts suggest, neither the water-level nor the velocity of the hidden currents is going to change based on human concerns. Regardless of the migrants’ circumstances, the river will not stop being a river. However, at the same time, also because of these circumstances, in addition, the river is something else, a liquid border that needs to be traversed in spite of any dangers associated with this crossing. Both poems speak to this transformation, and to this consideration, Dorantes adds lyric imagery that portrays how bodies also become something else. This element can be seen at the moment in which the poetic voice advises: “*Di que eres una piedra.*” Fluctuating in the water, with a new color attached to their skin, the migrants’ bodies have ceased to be only human entities, and according to the poetic voice, have also become an object of contemplation merged into the river.

This agonizing coalescence is also addressed in the following poem: “A fleshy

manifestation. / Water taking shape. / *It's me. / Prove it. / Here I am. / It's me.*" The central image contained in this poetic account, verbalizes how the migrant body has been filled with river water, ending the life of the former and giving the liquid element a material, human form. The coexistence between entities is taken to the realm of a radical intimacy where an excessive vulnerability dissipates the human-nonhuman boundary in a material articulation. Both the river and the human see their coexistence undivided, amalgamated through a harrowing process that engenders decimation. While the human being is the one who endures the most lethal, totalizing, immediate consequence, 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 human in that capacity is also unnatural and diminishing. While the poems tend to focus on one body, the poetic voice reminds that a multitude of migrants have perished in the river. Because of this, talking to this liquid entity, she voices: "Te estás borrando. / Todos hemos tenido / esa experiencia. / To lose. To lose water." Because the water gets trapped inside one and multiple bodies, the poetic voice interprets this happening as the systematic erasure of the river, an entity that loses water every time someone dies with it. Trapped inside these bodies, the water cannot follow its path towards the Gulf. At the same time as the migrant's passage is curtailed, a fraction of the river also stops its movement. Through the tragedy of their physical union, piece by piece the river loses its characteristic motion.

This perilous merging is further explored in the poem: "This is you. / This is me: / the calm water. / The water of breath." Again, both entities keep being who they are but because of their amalgamation, at the same time, they are something else. Sharing the same corporeality, the water that in the photographs is presented as relentless, creative, dynamic, and terrifying, in the poem is described simply as calm, thus transmitting a sense of stability, which is contradictory to the

water's behavior. Simultaneously, that same water appears as the element that a human body breathes or breathed for the last time: "longs / swollen with devastation." The water is calm because it is inside the flesh of a person, an image that underscores the continual, irreparable loss of human life.

Nonhuman/Inhuman Worldviews

If, as Morton argues, "to be intimate with the strange stranger is to be in various kinds of pain" (2010 94), the poetry books *With the River on Our Face* and *El río/The River*, present several instances in which the intimate coexistence between human and nonhuman beings produces different experiences of pain. For instance, the contradictory entanglement between border structures and the Rio Grande/Río Bravo generates environmental disturbance and a constant state of bewilderment expressed by the poetic voice of Pérez' collection. In the case of *El río/The River*, the poems, along with the photographs, convey a sense of radical intimacy through which two entities involuntarily possess each other to the extent of producing irreparable harm. Images of a deadly proximity between migrants and the river result in the representation of multiple deaths, which are depicted through the disarticulation of both human bodies floating on the water and a river that, going against its own course, also acts as a ruthless border. In addition, as the poetic voice in Dorantes' poems implies, the amount of deaths in the river is so persistent that the body of water seems to disappear with them, little by little. However, more than a literal annihilation of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, the migrants' deaths attest to the erasure of the rivers' essence, which has been irreparably turned into a deadly weapon. In relation to this, as it is presented in Ramírez Heredia's novel, the uninterrupted relationship between the Suchiate and the border demarcation has led the river to become the central element of a world full of violence and desperation. If, as

Viveiros de Castro sustains, “perspectivism is [...] a pragmatic corporeal affection” (2013), through a speculative approach based on the intimate interrelatedness described by these authors, it is possible to envision two rivers that might perceive the invisible border line as a strange, inhuman entity that contradicts their fluidity and does not cease to transform them with a suffocating line.

CHAPTER 3: THE DESERT

The desert is often associated with extreme heat, dust storms, and an endless, quiet extension of emptiness. This aesthetic intensity has stimulated a vast array of literary expressions. In Mexico, imageries of the desert can be traced back to the Mexican Revolution novel, where the arid landscape acted as the dreadful scenery where countless battles were fought. After this, the desert was at the center of the denominated “literatura del desierto,” a literary movement that emerged in the 70s in northern Mexico and that came into full swing in the 80s. Criminals, lost people, lonely people, and migrants tend to be the protagonists of many of these narratives. Authors such as Daniel Sada, Jesús Gardea, and Rosario Sanmiguel, to name a few, are among the main voices associated to this literary movement. In the stories of *Todo y la recompensa* (2002), Daniel Sada tends to portray the desert as a vast and isolated region sparsely populated by peculiar characters that struggle to survive amid the violence and corruption of local and national politics. For Jesús Gardea, in stories such as *Los viernes de Lautaro* (1979), the desert operates as an aesthetic force, a source of beauty and brutality that taints the pervasive solitude of each character. And, for Rosario Sanmiguel, the desert represents a mythic and otherworldly space that holds the secrets of the protagonists’ past, as it happens in the novel *Árboles o apuntes de viaje* (2007).

In the United States, the desert has been portrayed by Anglo and Mexican American writers at least since the beginning of the 20th century. To name one of the most well-known examples from the Anglo-American tradition, in *Blood Meridian* (1985), a novel widely recognized as Cormac McCarthy’s most outstanding work, the desert appears as a massive and open entity that facilitates acts of transgression and regeneration. Empty and inhabited at the same time, the desert landscape works as an interdependent force that maintains a direct connection with multiple stories of violence. And, from the Mexican American tradition, authors such as Rudolfo Anaya, Luis

Alberto Urrea, and Francisco Cantu have also included the desert landscape at the center of their narratives. In the coming-of-age novel *Bless me Ultima* (1972), Rudolfo Anaya portrays a small community whose history, beliefs, and traditions are deeply bound to the New Mexico desert. In this story, Antonio, a young boy, struggles to reconcile his indigenous roots with the sociocultural transformation of the American Southwest. Based on true events, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004) narrates the story of a group of 26 migrants that attempt to get to the United States by crossing one of the most dangerous desert tracts. Out of the 26 men, only 12 survive, and in the novel the narrator tells the story of endurance and desolation that they experienced while traversing the deadly terrain. The lethality of the desert is also at the core of Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), where the author describes the historical development of the border between Mexico and the United States' and the migratory crises that have resulted from the intensification of contemporary border security measures. Writing from the perspective of a former border patrol agent, Cantú emphasizes the vitality of the desert and its nonhuman inhabitants as well as the ways in which this ecosystem participates in the annihilation of migrants and of their bodies.

Studying the weaponization of the desert against migrants, in *The Land of Open Graves* (2015), anthropologist Jason de Leon investigates how long it takes for a body to decompose in the desert. Writing about the development of this investigation, the author describes the way in which he positioned the inert bodies of five pigs on the Mexico-U.S. border soil. The anthropologist was interested in identifying the process through which thousands of migrants' bodies have vanished in the arid land. In order to observe this process, de Leon installed cameras near the bodies and watched them closely for weeks. While describing a scene where a flock of vultures devours one of the corpses, the author writes: "the large wings and hooked beak cast a

long shadow across the desert floor. It looks like the ending of most vampire movies, when the cloaked protagonist raises his arms in terror as he meets the punishing rays of the sun” (75). This horrific scene underscores the participation of the nonhuman inhabitants of the desert in the erasure of the bodies.

While central for de Leon’s description, the vulture is not the only nonhuman entity preying on the human remains. Besides stray dogs and coyotes, flies, ants, worms, and a vast array of other insects colonize the inert bodies and give rise to what the anthropologist calls “miniature biological laboratories.” Regarding the erasure that these nonhuman beings produce, de Leon states: “having your body consumed by wild animals is but one of the many ‘exceptional’ things that happen in the Sonoran Desert as a result of federal immigration policies” (27-28). In *Lost Children Archive* (2019) (or *Desierto sonoro*), Mexican-born author Valeria Luiselli imagines fragments of some of those “exceptional things” that happen in the desert. Specifically, she refigures the stories of the migrant children that have had to traverse the arid biome, and who have gotten lost in it. For this refiguration, the author recurs to a diverse amalgam of narrative resources.

As its title indicates, *Lost Children Archive* acts as a literary archive for what, in the context of the Southwest Desert, is missing or cannot be apprehended. Rooting the story in a road trip, the author puts into dialogue two temporalities that speak to processes of colonization, deterrence, and segregation. On the one hand, the narrative revolves around the indigenous past of the desert. Through an inventory of echoes, or *ecoacoustics*, one of the characters attempts to record the sounds of the desert to document what is left from a Native American past, thus underscoring the human and nonhuman presences that are missing. On the other hand, baffled by the humanitarian crises that affect migrant children at the Mexico-United States border, another character carries out a project focused on documenting the testimonies of children that have had to face the desert

during their journey to the United States. However, because the children that are supposed to be interviewed are lost, hidden, or being sent away, this endeavor turns out to be impossible to achieve. As I argue, in Luiselli's novel the desert acts as the central element for the attempt to create an archive composed by multiple elements, all of which attempt to make present beings and entities that are missing. At the same, the narration stresses how the nonhuman entity works as a silent yet audible weapon against migrants.

After this, I study the art installations "Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera" by Mexican American artist María Teresa Fernández, and "Un/Fragmenting-Des/Fragmentando" by Mexican American photographer Jenea Sanchez and Anglo-American artist Lauren Strohacker. In this section, I argue that these projects seek to symbolically reconstitute the visual and environmental integrity of the desert, which has been ruined and continues to be endangered by the border wall. Furthermore, I explore how at the same time as these projects address environmental-oriented concerns, they do so from settings and perspectives that can be connected to questions of gender and race, thus expanding their scope and complexity. Finally, I contend that the projects carried out by Fernández, Sanchez, and Strohacker are able to challenge and expand common understandings of both the desert and current environmental movements.

Lost Children Archive: The Sounds of the Desert

By underscoring the aesthetic, cultural, social, historic, and ecological facets of a complex biome that doubles as a border area, *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli challenges common assumptions that regard the desert as "simply geography." The story begins with a New York-based family of four getting ready for a road trip: a husband who is a sound documentarian, a wife who is a radio journalist, the husband's 10-year-old son and the wife's 5-year-old-daughter.

Because the narrative revolves around a road trip, as Latin American studies scholar Mariana Zinni states: “la novela nace inscrita en la densa tradición de novela de viaje de literatura norteamericana. Leemos un recorrido con/de mapas, moteles, rutas, paisajes áridos” (2). The reason for this trip is that the father wants to relocate near the Chiricahua mountains in the southeastern corner of Arizona. There, he hopes to capture the echoes of the Chiricahuas, an Apache tribe that resisted colonization from both sides of the border. Fearing that the sudden relocation will mean the end of their family, in the beginning, the wife rejects the idea. However, upon meeting the mother of two undocumented girls that got lost at a detention center in Arizona, she finds a motive to go: trying to find them. At the same time, to create a radio-documentary, she wants to gather first-hand information about the countless migrant children who have vanished in the desert.

The centrality of the arid entity becomes manifest since the origins of the narrative, where beyond its geographic features, the biome acts as a magnetic force that attracts the main characters because of the stories in which it participates. In this way, the narrative starts by highlighting the power of the desert, which operates as both a source of knowledge and an aesthetic substance for creation. The husband wants to document the sounds of the desert as a way to collect the soundscape that the Chiricahuas and their last leader Geronimo once inhabited: “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” (141). Similarly, chasing after the lost girls, the wife sees the desert not just as the scenery where they could be found but as the entity that is likely menacing their lives. The endeavors of the couple are framed by what can be deemed the most critical events that have marked processes of colonization revolving around the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts.

Echoes and Ecoacoustics

The husband is attempting to document echoes that can help him memorialize the sonorous element of the desert's indigenous past. Specifically, his project is aimed at finding and recording the sounds that surrounded the daily lives of the Chiricahuas, one of the last Native American tribes that refused to surrender their independence to the United States and to Mexico. According to the husband, under the leadership of Geronimo and chief Cochise, the Chiricahuas became "the last free people" (26) on the American continent. One of the most important elements that helped them resist colonization was their knowledge of the shape and features of the desert: "in American minds, the mountains represented a formidable barrier to penetrate and wrestle from Chiricahua control" (Lahti 208). Because the desert's highlands were central for the resistance of the tribe's military enterprise, the husband is drawn to follow the path towards those same landforms, nowadays known as the Chiricahua mountains, "the heart of the Apachería" (Luiselli 25). However, although the tribe was able to oppose the invaders during the second half of the 19th century, as historian Janne Lahti states:

The survivors of the people who once dominated the Southwest borderlands either gave up their Apache identity and integrated to Hispanic communities or found themselves restricted to reservations in Arizona and New Mexico [...] As people they adapted, preserved, and survived, but as independent military powers they succumbed to the U.S. empire after contesting it for decades. (241)

Because the desert participated in the battles fought by the last independent Native American societies, the husband recognizes that it can help him "collect sounds that are usually not noticed" (96) and that constituted part of the daily lives of the tribe led by Geronimo. The husband sees the desert not just as the scenery that the tribe inhabited but as the entity that continues to reproduce

the waves of sound that accompanied the Chiricahuas, thus allowing the protagonists to hear fragments of the soundscape that was also heard by the Apache group. Because of this, at the beginning of the narrative, the husband tells the wife that his sound project consists in creating an “inventory of echoes” (21). The historical frame surrounding the husband’s project, coupled with that denomination, resonates with sound artist Brandon LaBelle’s definition of echoes, which he understands 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” (7). For LaBelle, whereas sounds maintain a clear temporal linearity that follows an origin point and a horizon of receptors, because of the lingering effect of echoes, they have the ability to create a rupture between past and future, destabilizing the oscillation of time. Given this characteristic, it is telling that the husband calls his project an “inventory of echoes” instead of an inventory of sounds. However, most of the elements he records are not echoes in a literal sense but in an 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 type of 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,” to which the wife adds: “he wants all the sounds to be raw, subtle suggestions in a constant, homogeneous background” (96). Attending to LaBelle’s assertion, these sounds can be named echoes because by repeating fragments of the soundscape that also surrounded the Chiricahuas, the nonhuman elements of the desertlands create a temporal rupture that refuses linear understandings. The reverberations that come from wildlife and weather-based phenomena do not replicate but mimic fragments of a past soundscape. This is, the long-gone temporality takes over

both the present and the future dimension, thus generating a rupture in the linear temporal logic by virtue of a sonorous bound, 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” (24). This lack of clarity is expressed by the narrator when she 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” (98). Because of this, while the husband’s project cannot entirely recuperate the sonorous scenery of the last independent people of the Southwest, it can refigure it.

By mapping and recording the sounds of the desert, the husband brings back pieces of the acoustic world of Geronimo’s tribe. In this way, the inventory of echoes documents the sonorous frame of the Native American resistance, a factor that turns it into both a memorialization of their struggle and, because this inventory underscores their absence, into a recuperation of their lost presence. Regarding this characteristic, when reflecting on her husband’s project, the wife states:

He’s somehow trying to capture [the Chiricahuas’] 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 illuminates an area of a map, a soundscape, in which Geronimo once was.
(141)

If, as LaBelle suggests, echoes show how “things stand still by also coming back” (14), the husband’s inventory of echoes exemplifies an instance through which it is possible to capture an overlap between the existence and decimation of the desert’s indigenous past. In the narrative, this result can be achieved only with the active intervention of the components of a territory often judged empty or barren. Because of this, the husband’s aural documentation is both an historical and an ecological project. In *Ecoacoustics, the Ecological Role of Sounds*, environmental studies

scholar Alamo Farina argues: “the soundscape in which every organism is embedded provides important information and creates an acoustic spatial dimension or acoustic habitat, that is an acoustic eco-field” (22). Whereas the desert’s topography was central for the endurance of the Chiricahuas, the eco-field or acoustic manifestation of nonhuman elements such as insects, birds, plant life, and weather events are central for the refiguration of that same endurance. At the same time, even though the project is focused on documenting the desert soundscape in relation to the struggles of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, attending to Farina’s understanding of soundscapes, the husband’s project also provokes ecological-based questions.

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” (203). The boy’s recollection can be read in the context of the effects that habitat destruction and loss of biodiversity produce, which the narrative makes evident when instead of the sounds of wild and plant life in the desert lands, the husband finds them missing or displaced. This part of the narrative speaks to the nonhuman entities that, parallel to the human ones, have been lost because of colonization and urbanization processes, an analogy that resonates with social scientist Laura Pulido’s statement regarding how environmentally-related efforts can be linked “to larger issues, including racism, colonization, and economic exploitation” (xi). By making the desert and its components the central element of the inventory of echoes, the project underscores how the desert lacks or displays different levels of nonhuman vitality, and at the same time it reminds and exposes the ways in which that same territory is inhabited by a coexistence of nonlinear temporalities tied to the erasure and recuperation of Native American battles and experiences. In relation to this last characteristic, although throughout the narrative the inventory of echoes is the most evident method for the refiguration of the Apaches’ elusive presence, it is

not the only one; names, oral accounts, and embodied reenactments are also fundamental for this endeavor.

On the road, the father asks the children to learn the names of the floras that inhabit the desert: “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” (153). Throughout the trip, the girl points at various plants and other objects that she sees, and indistinctively, she affirms that the name of all those things is *saguaro*. The fact that the girl chooses that word to describe multiple things is highly significant. In *Tracks that Speak*, Native American Studies scholar Charles Cutler indicates that, being unique to the Sonoran Desert, the word *saguaro* was likely created by the Akimel O’odham, which translates to River People, and was adopted by their neighbors, the Tohono O’odham, or Desert People (38). Similar to what the Chiricahuas experienced, the Akimel O’odham, also known as Pimas, were able to elude conflict with the colonizing forces because of the features of the terrain they occupied, and instead, as Historian James Turner states, they “provided refuge for travelers of many cultures” (345). However, after the Mexican-American war, when Anglo American settlers moved to the Southwest and took over the land and resources of the Native American residents, conflicts and tensions arose. Throughout the 19th century, rebellions and negotiations failed, and ultimately, Anglo cultures “dried up the oasis, and forced the original owners off their once-prosperous land” (375), relegating most of them to distant reservations.

Living up to three hundred years and capable of growing almost 45 feet tall, the saguaro cacti healed and nurtured the original inhabitants of the Sonoran Desert. In addition, as Cutler recalls, since its fruit and seeds participate in pollination processes and feed a vast array of wildlife, the cactus has also been central for the sustenance of the desert ecology (40). Because of this, like

the sounds made by the nonhuman elements of the desert that bring back pieces of the Chiricahuas' former existence, the constant repetition of the term *saguaro* accomplishes a similar result. Every time the girl enunciates it, the word dominates the narrative, becoming an echo that carries remnants from a vanished era: "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, [...] slowly mapping, indeed, the constellation of all her saguaros" (154). While the recorded sounds transmit fragments of the soundscape that surrounded Geronimo's community, "remind[ing] us of the ones that are lost" (141), in form and etymology, the word *saguaro* carries portions of the knowledge and creativity of the first people of the desert lands, and the elusive image of the cactus species.

Whereas the mother notes the material absence of the thing that is being named, the child refuses to let that absence prevail and instead, she creates her own catalogue of saguaros, thus reformulating their presence. The difference in their perspectives is notable. On the one hand, the adult focuses on the separation between what the child enunciates and the thing she is pointing at, on the other hand, the girl does not acknowledge this disjunction and because of that, she continues to voice the Native American-originated name. Consequently, it is sound and not image that keeps the *saguaro*'s significance alive in the narrative. Every time the girl emits the word, the sound she generates takes over the space and becomes an overwhelming acoustic presence. In relation to this, LaBelle writes: "[sound] is intrinsically and unignorablely relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others" (ix). Following that premise, it is fitting that the title of the novel in Spanish is *Desierto Sonoro*. The imaginative exchange between adult and child underscores the evocative power of sound, which works as a nontemporal and nonmaterial connection between the original people of the Southwest, the desert,

and the travelers. Because of this, the mother is the one who yields to the obstinacy of the child.

Still centered on a sonorous dimension but adding an embodied component, the episodes that Luiselli deems “reenactments,” constitute another example through which the novel addresses loss and refiguration. Talking about this concept, 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” (155-156). These reenactments are often performed by the children, who dramatize the histories and stories they hear from their parents. An example of this occurs during one of the first stops of the family, where they pretend to be Apaches: “The children and their father are taking over Texas, defending it from the American army, handing it over to their Apache fellows, and fencing it off, rock, stick, rock” (67). This reenactment is an embodied response to the multiple oral stories that the father has told the children about the fight and defeat of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas. This is, the oral transmission of historic events not only communicates information, it also incites the reader to reimagine the past, and in turn, this reimagination leads the protagonists to reenact events based on that same past, but with a different outcome.

During this episode, the wife takes one of the most recurrent objects of the narration, a Polaroid, and photographs the reenactment. Although sound is the main element to carry out processes of memorialization and refiguration in the narrative, images are another instrument used by the protagonists, particularly by the boy and the wife. However, while the photographs’ main purpose is to apprehend family moments, the sound projects are focused on sociohistorical events, which Mariana Zinni resumes as follows:

[el padre] quiere reconstruir las presencias de los últimos indios a través de ecos y reverberaciones [...] la madre, pugna por averiguar el paradero de las hijas de Manuela,

una mujer que conoce en New York, quienes han cruzado solas la frontera de México y se encuentran en ese momento extraviadas, o desaparecidas, en la vasta geografía norteamericana, a la vez que intenta componer su propio documental sobre migrantes. (2)

In this way, although the photograph taken by the wife during the reenactment is in dialogue with the events that led to the defeat of the last independent Apaches, the inventory of echoes, coupled with the oral stories told by the husband, constitute the major elements for the refiguration and documentation of the Native American war in the desert Southwest. Nonetheless, there are two photographs that speak directly to the events that the wife and the husband are trying to document. The first one is an image that the boy takes when the family visits Fort Still, the army territory where Geronimo and other three hundred Chiricahua Apaches “were buried as prisoners of war after they surrendered to the US Army in 1894” (138), and the second one is the image of an airplane taking off.

Taken in the cemetery, the first photograph displays the tomb of chief Cochise; however, according to the wife, although the monument is clearly visible, the name engraved on it cannot be seen. The husband reads this invisibility as a metaphor to illustrate the ease with which people can get erased from history. Given this interpretation, the lack of clarity can also be read as an example of the impossibilities faced by documentation efforts. For instance, through the notion of ecoacoustics it is possible to assess that the husband’s project will not only be missing the sound of the Chiricahuas’ presence, which is why the project is named an inventory of echoes in the first place, but also the sounds of an unknown amount of forgotten biodiversity from the desert ecosystems. In addition, the erasure of the name on the tomb’s image underscores the unfeasibility of an integral commemoration of past events. Because of this, both approaches linger on the spectrum of what has been lost and what remains, or on the realm of what can be made present

because of its absence. Central for this lingering effect is the desert, whose overwhelming presence dictates the route of the travelers. It is also in the desert where the plane photograph is taken. The wife captures the image at the exact moment in which the aircraft leaves the United States territory, taking with it a large group of migrant children.

Reenactments, Elegies, and a Hyperobject

After meeting Manuela, the mother of the girls that were last seen at a detention center in Arizona, the wife finds a motive to start a new project, which will also be the reason to accompany her husband from New York to Arizona. Besides wanting to find the girls and precisely because they are lost, the wife wants to create a radio documentary addressing the crises of child migration at the Mexico-United States border. To do this, during the road trip she listens to local radio stations that are reporting on the situation of the migrant children, documenting the information she learns from them. Through the radio, she finds out that a large group of children are about to be deported from an airport near New Mexico, a place that is not too far from where the family is located. The wife contacts a local immigration lawyer, and in this way, she is able to learn the exact date on which the deportation will be carried out. After this moment, the family focuses on getting to the airport before the removal takes place.

Whereas the husband's project has a clear sociohistorical background, the wife's task also speaks to a contemporary social urgency. In 2014, over a nine-month period, the number of Mexican and Central American children seeking refuge in the United States surged by almost 80%, with nearly 70, 000 minors apprehended at the Mexico-United States border⁴⁷. The Obama administration made the refugee children's cases a priority for the immigration courts, an action that resulted in the prompt deportation of a majority of those kids⁴⁸. According to the Migration

Policy Institute, in the 2018-2019 period, the number of unaccompanied migrant children exceeded the numbers seen in 2014, and in response, the Trump administration has not only deported but has also detained thousands of children in chain-link cages, many of them located in detention centers on the desert. As it has been widely reported, this system has violated the limit for the amount of time children can be detained, and the conditions under which they are being held are precarious in terms of the education, health, legal, and psychological resources they have. In addition, in 2018 CBP lost track of almost 1,500 children, and by 2019, at least seven kids had died in immigration custody⁴⁹. This is the context surrounding the story of Manuela's missing daughters, and therefore the social and political frame for the wife's documentary project:

We drive onward, southwest-bound, and listen to the news on the radio, news about all the children traveling north. 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. (47)

The main source of information for the wife is the radio. That is how she hears about the many challenges faced by migrant children. After hearing the news, the protagonist and first narrator often records memos to catalogue what she learns. In this way, the main source to collect and generate information is speech, once again situating sound as a central element for the development of the story. For the wife's project, instead of the environmental sounds of the desert, the main source for documentation processes are voices propagated by airwaves. Considering that the novel is situated in the present time, and that the protagonists have immediate access to the Internet, it seems strange that their only source of information is the radio. Regarding this communication practice, in *Sounds of Belonging* Chicana/o studies scholar Dolores Casillas says: "radio is

generally seen as an archaic medium: communication scholars often point to its use in postsocialist or developing countries but do not often address its role within immigrant or communities of color” (Kindle). Casillas is talking about bilingual and Spanish-language radio in the United States, and based on what the narrator describes, this is also the type of radio the family is listening to: “How did you travel to the United States? 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” (73). For Casillas, when discussions revolve around immigration, Spanish and bilingual public broadcasts tend to be acoustic allies who “rally in solidarity” with immigrants’ civil rights.

This solidarity becomes manifest at different times of the narration. One of the clearest examples can be seen in some of the wife’s actions, who seeks to employ the information she hears in the radio to help Manuela’s daughters and to create a sound documentary with “a set of testimonies or oral histories” (96) from the children enduring the humanitarian crisis at the border. However, she acknowledges that this solidarity does not come devoid of ethical issues. When thinking about the impact that her sound documentary could have, she states: “it doesn’t seem right to turn those children, their lives, into material for media consumption” (96). Nonetheless, aware of the fact that the perspectives of children are still missing even though, as Casillas asserts, immigration topics tend to dominate Spanish and bilingual radio programming, the wife proceeds with her project.

Since the female protagonist plays local radio stations while the entire family is in the car, she is not the only one listening to the multiple reports on migrant children. Her daughter and stepson are also paying attention. Because of it, when the conversations reveal some of the most grueling details revolving around child migration, she turns off the transmission. However, in these cases, even though the children are not able to get all the information, they can imagine the hidden

details, refiguring the stories of the migrant children. Furthermore, similar to the reenactment in which they pretend to be Apaches changing the course of history, sometimes they fantasize about being lost children in the desert. For Casillas, an element that is unique to radio shows is the sense of immediacy they transmit, which allows them to broadcast “live impulsive notices, with little to no trace of their existence.” This impulsivity is central for the ways in which the boy and the girl respond to the news they hear, as well as for the centrality that the airplane and the desert acquire in relation to the children’s imagination.

During the interview with the boy who is narrating his journey in the *Bestia*, he starts talking about his little brother, who fell off the train and did not make it to the border. Just before the boy starts sharing the details behind his brother’s demise, the wife turns off the radio. Whereas she expresses feeling nauseous in response to not just the boys’ story but also to how news coverage often profits from tragedy, the kids express their curiosity for what they were not allowed to hear. This curiosity leads them to imagine and reenact the outcomes of the incomplete stories. In addition, because throughout the road trip they are learning about both the Chiricahuas and the migrant children, the boy and the girl sometimes conflate these stories. After their mother interrupts the radio transmission, the children 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!” (75). Aware that Geronimo fought in the past, the boy and the girl once again imagine a different ending to his story, an ending that in their imagination, would also be affecting the story of the migrant children in the present time. This is, even though the siblings are able to differentiate between both temporalities, at the same time, because of the sense of immediacy that the radio produces, they articulate an instant solution for the challenges that the young migrants face.

There are two elements that facilitate this conflation. Sounds 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” (2) and that sonic imagination is often disregarded. Because the boy and the girl are able to verbally articulate and reimagine past and present realities based on what they hear, they are constantly displaying and privileging sonic imagination. In this way, sound is the main source and outcome of the imaginative conflation process. The other element is the arid biome. Since what the children hear takes place in the desertlands, it is easy for them to situate their imaginative articulations in the same space even though they respond to events from different temporalities.

However, as shown when they imagine the Apaches’ victory against the United States Army, their reenactments are not always conflated. Shortly after hearing the news about the wave of migrant children arriving at the border, the boy and the girl start imagining and performing 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” (155). While up until this point, the narrative had not shown any instances of radio commentators or even migrant children describing the excruciating process of traversing the desert, for the boy and the girl, it is enough to know that the desert is the entity being traversed by those they call “the lost children” to imagine the experiences they are enduring. Because the siblings are reenacting this narrative from a privileged position, the wife finds it problematic and frivolous. Nonetheless, recognizing that reenactments are the method through which they can achieve a better understanding of the crisis, she lets them continue.

Given the context surrounding the novel, this reenactment not only underscores the ability of the children’s sonic imagination to refigure the stories they hear on the radio and to better

understand them, it also works as a method to fathom the real-life stories behind it. This characteristic speaks to the ethical implications embedded in the intellectual endeavors that require the portrayal of migrants, and particularly of migrant children. Aware of these implications and reflecting on her sound documentary, the wife states: “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” (96). Although this premise is shared in the context of *Lost Children Archive*’s fictional world, they reproduce the concerns and awareness of the author of the novel regarding this ethical ordeal.

In *The Migrant Image*, historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos interrogates: “How is it possible to represent artistically life severed from representation politically?” (xv). Trying to overcome this impossibility, Luiselli resorts to multiple reverberations for the portrayal of migrant children. Resembling the inventory of echoes, in the novel, the children are made present only by means of their intense absence. Different from what she does in *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017), a chronicle where she describes her time working as a translator for migrant children facing the courts of New York City and in which she actually repeats parts of the children’s testimonies, in the novel, Luiselli eludes direct depictions and instead resorts to shadows and allusions. Whereas in *Tell Me How It Ends* Luiselli reproduces the voices of the kids, who although are dealing with trauma and with the threat of deportation, survived and are speaking for themselves, in the novel she is addressing the ones that 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 who are missing, those whose voices can no longer be heard because they are, possibly forever, lost. Perhaps, like my husband, I am also chasing ghosts and echoes” (145). Just as for the character, for Luiselli herself the only way to tell the story of the lost children is by finding the echoes of their stories, and by refiguring their

struggles in the desert, which is why creating an archive becomes impossible.

In words of Chicana author Stephanie Elizondo Griest, the narrative techniques that Luiselli uses to reimagine the stories of the missing children become “[hauntings] that will forever echo in our bones” (*The Texas Observer* 2019). These hauntings appear in various forms, which include the radio transmissions, the girl and the boy’s reenactments, and an invented Italian novel titled “Elegies for Lost Children,” which narrates the historical crusade of a group of children traveling alone through indeterminate lands. Written by fictional author Ella Camposanto, the novel tells the story of seven children who face challenges strikingly similar to those faced by the migrant children at the Mexico-United States border. For instance, at the hands of a man that acts as a smuggler, Camposanto’s characters travel atop trains and risk their lives in the jungle and in the desert.

Even though “Elegies for Lost Children” is a novel inside a novel, because the wife reads it aloud for the children, sound remains a dominant element for the propagation of the elegies within the plot. Besides the humanitarian crises that the fictitious novel, the reenactments, and the radio are echoing and precisely because of them, these three elements also gravitate around the figure of the desert. In the novel, the presence of the desert intensifies depending on the element through which it is being presented. The first manifestations of the arid biome occur when it is named in the radio as the scenario that the migrant children need to traverse to get to the United States. After this name is propagated through public radio broadcasts in the intimacy of the family car, it is apprehended by the boy and the girl, who then pretend to be lost in it: “soon we will die of thirst and hunger, [the boy] says” (156). After this, it is in the apocryphal novel “Elegies for Lost Children,” where more intense and recurrent apparitions of the desertlands take place:

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. (142)

The first Elegy introduces the desert as a material and menacing presence waiting for the arrival of the children, who getting close to it, are already experiencing extreme temperatures and danger. At first, it is not necessary to underscore the harrowing characteristics of this biome to signal the threat it represents. After learning about its presence and attending to the context of the story, the reader --or listener--can automatically sense the precarious scenario that the children are about to encounter. The ease with which the desert is related to specific threats can be seen as a feature of what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects. For the object oriented ontologist, hyperobjects are “[things] massively distributed in time and space in ways that baffle humans and make interacting with them fascinating, disturbing, problematic” (58). Because from the perspective of humans hyperobjects are massive, this concept operates as a medium to speak about the ecological interconnectedness of all things, which manifests not only through a material presence, but more constantly, through a spectral one.

One of the main concepts that Morton uses to explain this interconnectedness is what he calls “viscosity,” which is described as the ability of hyperobjects to stick to beings and to generate “immediate, intimate symptoms [that] are often vivid and often painful, yet they carry with them a sense of unreality” (28). Beyond the massive scale of the desert, this viscosity is one of the characteristics that illuminates both the notion of the hyperobject and the overwhelming influence of the desert in the novel. An instance through which it is possible to attest the vivid and painful

immediacy produced by the desert, can be identified during the boy and the girl's second reenactment: "We're walking in the desert and it's like we're walking on the sun and not under it" (156). Even though the children are not really experiencing the effects in their bodies, the desert echo, which was brought to them through airwaves and speech, creates a vivid, immediate, intimate, and even painful response from them. This response causes a physical reaction, which is why the hyperobject appears as a "physicality without a beyond, without an outside, without presence" (Morton 195).

The fact that the experience with the desert described by the children is unreal but still transmits what can be considered an accurate physical and affective register, speaks to its viscous nature, which allows it to act as a massive object that reveals itself without being factually present. This revelation is possible because of the viscosity of a vast entity that through sound and context becomes a spectral materiality that is able to adhere itself to the intellect and physical imagination of the children. These occurrences resonate with Morton's premise regarding how "like a nightmare that brings news of some real psychic intensity, the shadow of the hyperobject announces the existence of the hyperobject" (32). Even though during the children's reenactment the desert is crucial to their verbal performance, the arid biome is not actually there. However, its overwhelming influence is being asserted through various sound expressions and, in the context of the novel, that is the method through which its material presence is announced.

Regarding this sonority, Morton asserts: "real nonhuman entities appear to humans at first as blips [...] But they are not those blips. The sound of hyperobjects [...] echoes and reverberates, repeating glissandos; then, suddenly, it's over" (109). Once the children are done with the reenactment, the echoes of the desert produced by them disappear. However, the desert is still there, waiting at the end of the road trip, ready to manifest again as shadow or material presence.

Moreover, when the radio or the children are silent, or when the projects of the parents are paused, the desert continues to be an element that threatens the lost children, as it is imagined by 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. (312)

Once again, the desert appears as a presence ready to weaken the potential for survival of the infant migrants. However, because the “Elegies for the Lost Children” are introduced as a fictional tale within the narrative universe of the novel, similar to what happens with the echoes, this apparition takes the form of the hyperobject’s shadow. Nonetheless, as Morton suggests, while this sonorous shadow can transmit the physic, affective, and even the physical responses that the actual entity generates, because contrary to the entity itself they are prone to disappear, the shadow’s main function consists in announcing the material existence of the thing.

The point at which the presence of the desert changes from sound and shadow to a material entity, occurs shortly after the photograph of the airplane is taken. At the same time, this is the moment in which the narrative voice shifts from the wife to the boy. As mentioned earlier, the plane is transporting a group of migrant children who are being deported from the United States. Up until this point, the major sources of information were the wife and the husband, who not only controlled what the children could hear from the radio, but also what parts to hide or highlight from the stories they used to tell them. When the family finally arrives to the airport, it is too late.

The children are boarding the plane and they are about to leave. Seeing this, the wife recognizes that she will not be able to explain to her children the extent of what is happening. Confronted with this realization, she asks the boy to be the one to explain it. Looking at the plane through his binoculars, he narrates: “The spaceship is moving toward the runway [...] The astronauts are inside the ship now” (184). Even though he knows that the kids boarding the plane are migrants, the boy recurs to his imagination. For the wife, his answer shows how “he’d understood everything much better than [she] had” (185). This understanding leads him to make a decision that changes the course of the narrative and that fully incorporates the desert into it.

After seeing the migrant kids leave on the airplane, the boy decides to help his mom find Manuela’s daughters. In this section, it is not only the narrative voices that have changed, the temporality of the narration is also different. Whereas the wife was narrating the story in the present tense, the boy is telling events in the conditional. This happens because, as he explains, he is recording that part of the story to share it with his sister when she is older. Since she is a small child, it is likely that she will forget what happened during their road trip together. Recounting his plan, he describes: “the next morning, before Ma and Pa woke up, you and I would leave. We’d walk for as long as we could, like the lost children had walked, even if we might get lost” (237). Carrying with them a few objects and the Elegies, the children leave their parents’ side and walk towards the open desert:

And south into the heart of light we walked, Memphis, you and me, 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. (319)

If during the verbal reenactment, the boy was able to convey the potential effects of the biome

over his body, during this new reenactment, one that is not only verbal but physical, he experiments the same sensation that he described before having been to the desert. This similarity speaks to the *viscosity* of the biome, which creates a specter of the material entity, a “symptom of reality,” in Morton’s terms, that manifests through psychic effects, all of which were detonated by echoes and speech. For the object oriented ontologist, the ease with which a hyperobject can be felt or sensed without being actually there evidences the intense levels of coexistence and interconnectedness between human and nonhuman entities (127-128). However, as shown in the reenactment that the children performed inside the car, where they were still far from the open desert, this interconnection can be painful. In the novel, this happens not just because of the extreme features of the desert but mostly because of how it is being contextualized.

Morton argues that when “ecological coexistence is with ghosts, strangers, and specters, [it is] because of reality, not in spite of it” (195). Given this affirmation, the ecological connection to the desert that the children display during their reenactment inside the car, responds to the awareness of the social realities surrounding it. Furthermore, it is this same awareness, intensified by the sight of the group of kids being deported, that convinces the boy to walk through the desert with the hope of finding the missing girls. Lost in the arid land, the boy and his sister endure the some of the same precariousities of the lost children they seek. However, even though the risks they are encountering are real, their journey through the desert is also a reenactment, an embodied refiguration through which the narrative underscores the weaponization of the biome against migrants.

In *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason de Leon contends: “in the Arizona desert nonhumans are major players without which [the] system of boundary enforcement could not exist [...] the Border Patrol has intentionally set the stage so that other actants can do most of the brutal work”

(61). In *Lost Children Archive*, this brutality, which reaches its highest points when it is perpetrated against children, is depicted through infant eyes: “the heat always getting heavier and the sun on our foreheads stinging us like a thousand yellow bees even though it was a bit lower now and making small shadows around everything, stones, bushes, cacti, and on and on we went” (325). However, because the story revolves around lost children, consistent with some of the major narrative tools in the novel, Luiselli recurs to echoes and refigurations to portray the challenges they face. Besides the reenactment that the boy and the girl carry out throughout the desert, the “Elegies for the Lost Children” is another major refiguration method for illustrating the desert’s brutality, in conjunction with current immigration policies.

Before running away, the boy takes the “Elegies” and puts them in his backpack. Because of this, during his journey through the desert, he reads the stories of the lost children while he and his sister are also experiencing fear and uncertainty. This similarity 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” (329). Towards the end of the novel, the boy and the girl are unable to find the missing girls and instead, when the fictional worlds collide, they find the lost children of the “Elegies.” While at the beginning of the apocryphal book there were seven kids, when the boy and the girl find them, only four of them are left.

The collision of these two worlds can be interpreted in various ways. Perhaps the boy was hallucinating because of the heat and dehydration, or maybe he actually found migrant children in the arid lands and confused them with the protagonists of the “Elegies.” Regardless of any sense of veracity that could be imbued into the children’s experience, the real noteworthy element of the encounter is that the direct contact with the desert makes possible an embodied refiguration of the

lost children. At the same time, this encounter underscores the extent of the disconnection between the 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” (336). Whereas the siblings are found by their parents, the four children leave and get lost again.

The Archive

Thinking about the sounds that his parents had been able to record during the road trip, the boy remembers a moment in which they recorded him and the girl talking in the backseat of the car. Reflecting on his reaction when he heard their voices, he states: “it was strange to listen to our own voices around us, like we were there and also not there. [I] thought, what if we are not actually sitting back here but only being remembered by them?” (205). This sentence conveys some of the key characteristics of Luiselli’s novel. The story puts into dialogue two different stories, which also take place at different times. On the one hand, the battle of Geronimo and the Chiricahuas, the last independent Apache group in the Southwest; on the other hand, the story of the wave of migrant children, many of whom have gotten lost in the U.S. immigration system and in the desert.

Whereas the husband wants to create an inventory of echoes to document the sounds of the desert that are left from the time of the Chiricahua war, the wife aspires to produce a sound documentary composed by oral testimonies told by migrant children; however, since the only children that she is able to see are the ones who are being deported, her endeavor turns into an impossibility. In this way, because both projects are aimed at collecting the sounds of those who are lost or already gone, they become documentations of echoes and reverberations. In other words, they turn into archives of what is missing. Challenging linear temporalities and underscoring the

absences of human and even of nonhuman presences, these projects, along with a collection of photographs, a number of reenactments, and a literary refiguration, are able to bring back those lost or missing people, even if only in the form of echoes and shadows.

The most influential nonhuman entity in the archive is the desert. It acts not only as the space in which the stories of the Chiricahuas, of the migrant children, and of the family coalesce, it also operates as an active agent that produces psychic and physical effects on the characters, even without being actually present. This capability can be understood through the concept of the hyperobjects, which according to Morton, are massive and viscous entities with the ability to “stick” to beings. One of the main episodes in which this viscosity can be seen is when the boy and the girl imagine what it would be like to walk on the desert. When they do this, they conceive a merciless nonhuman entity. The way in which they imagine, sense, and understand the biome speaks to the immediate context through which they learn about it: that one of the many migrant children have gone missing in the vast, arid land. For Morton, a close examination of the elements that stick from a given nonhuman entity can reveal “how humans think about themselves and their relationship with hyperobjects” (121). In a similar way, *Lost Children Archive* underscore the merciless weaponization of the desert against migrants, while also presenting it as a vivid entity that, as the inventory of echoes show, is also vulnerable to human action.

Ruined Landscapes: Borrando la Frontera/Erasing the Border

Focused on the emblematic site Playas de Tijuana, with a huge ladder, a bucket of paint, a generator, and a spray gun, in 2011 Mexican American painter, sculptor, and performance artist Ana Teresa Fernández carried out the project “Borrando la Frontera/Erasing the Border” which consisted in painting a section of the border wall that separates Playas de Tijuana from San Diego’s

Border Field State Park to create the illusion that a section of the wall had disappeared. From a distance and from a certain angle, it seems that a section of the rusty wall is no longer there: “I was delighted when, late in the afternoon, a jogger came running from far down the beach and told us that he thought for a moment that part of the wall had come down” (Holslin):



Figure 3. “Borrando la Frontera/Erasing the Border” by Ana Teresa Fernández.

To erase a section of the border, which extends into the sea, the artist drew on the color scheme of the landscape. By using a pale powdery blue color, she managed to merge the synthetic substance with the natural visual composition of the sky, the Pacific Ocean, and the sand. Challenging an apparent normality, the end result is both a reminder of the hypervisible fracture that the border wall produces over the land and a reimagination of the area that restores its lost continuity through an optical illusion.

When put in conversation with political theorist Jane Bennett’s vibrant materialism, this outcome acquires another level of complexity. Bennet argues that objects are alive in their

entanglements and have the ability “to animate, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). In other words, the agency of objects comes from their capacity to shape the web of meanings and realities of which they are a part. In consequence, the agency of humans is never fully independent from that one of the vibrant bodies and materials that surround them on a daily basis. However, although objects actively participate in complex interconnections and interdependences, they also exist as entities separate from these entanglements.

In the case of Fernández’ project, the objects that participate in the symbolic erasure of the wall display their agency through the process of modifying and transforming the landscape and through the effects that this transformation produces. For instance, Friendship Park in Playas de Tijuana is a notable a place where families from both sides of the border meet while remaining separated by the border wall. In 2016, when Fernández replicated “Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera,” this time in the desert, she stressed how her project symbolically erases “a long-standing physical barrier that separates families and causes widespread misery” (Fernández 2016). Thus, it could be argued that the agency of the wall comes from the political opposition and from the moral and ecological rejection that it provokes:



Figure 4. "Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera," by Ana Teresa Fernández.

Furthermore, because of the wall’s material composition and physical features, the symbolic

erasure is possible. While the paint adheres smoothly to the metal, the separation between the bars and the height of the structure are central for the success of the optical illusion. This success produces a second effect. As can be inferred from the jogger's perception, because of the agency of a newly painted wall, the distinction between object and subject weakens. Contrary to being stable or passive, the erased section of the barrier enacts its agency by enticing the jogger to feel surprised and by urging him to talk with the artist. Although as a result of the combination between the generator, the spray can, the paint, the wall, and Fernández herself the project acquires a specific meaning, each object maintains an agency separated from it. At the same time as the wall works as an agent of the artistic endeavor, it continues to be the object that separates families, divides ecosystems, and deters migrants.

Between 2016 and 2017 Fernández took her project to three other sections of the nearly 700 miles of barriers that exist between Mexico and the United States, where she made a case “against increasing violence and oppression of human rights along the border” (2017). Once again, the finished product gives the illusion of partial openness and fragmented restoration. Situated in the desert landscape, the contrast between the section covered by the art project and the sections that remain in their original state is staggering. While “Erasing the border/Borrando la Frontera” participates in a conceptual restitution of human and nonhuman worlds, the discolored wall continues to be both a reminder and the physical manifestation of unforgiving immigration policies. As a result, this concatenation presents an opposition between what something is, and what it could be.

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway introduces the concept *naturecultures* to describe the unavoidable and multiple entanglements between the natural and the cultural, the bodily and the mind, or between the material and the semiotic, to name a few

examples. Keeping this concept in mind, it is important to note that while natural environments are not completely “integral,” “wild,” “pristine,” or “untouched” by humans, the visual effect produced by “Erasing the border/Borrando la Frontera” offers a multitemporal representation of the intricate coexistence between the metal structure and the ecological system upon which it has been imposed. While the effect of human action over the Mexico-United States borderlands would come into existence regardless of the border wall, for example, in the form of global warming, Fernández’ work underscores how the coexistence between wall and nature can be quickly, easily, and effectively create an illusion for contemplation. This is the characteristic that saturates “Erasing the border” with multiple temporalities.

The blue sections of the wall create an amalgam of past, present, and potential future versions of the landscapes. Whereas Fernández’ optical erasure echoes what the areas looked like before the construction of the wall, the illusion of its partial collapse creates a sense of futurity that although hopeful, remains dubious. In addition, the concatenation of images that create or recreate past and future times, also incite viewers to see the current state of the landscape more clearly. In relation to this, in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Ana Tsing sustains:

As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the “shifting baseline syndrome.” Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality [...] Forgetting in itself, remakes the landscapes [...] Yet, ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting.”

For Tsing, ghosts are those elements that can produce a “return to multiple pasts, human and nonhuman,” following this line of thought, the ghostly articulation of the past in “Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera” becomes manifest through an artificial and fragmentary echo of openness and transparency in the desert landscape. Thus, the illusion of the past, and the possibility

of the future that this illusion affirms or denies, turns into a haunted quality of the border fence, producing a confusing, ghostly reminder of the extent of the disjuncture that has been produced over the desert, or to put it in Chicana feminist author Gloria Anzaldúa's words, of the gravity of the open wound that the border creates.

Another characteristic that is central to Fernández' project consists in the way in which she inserts herself into the process of carrying out her work. To paint the wall, she wears a black cocktail dress that helps her perform a specific gender stereotype. This performance is one of the main methods through which Fernández navigates encounters with law enforcement on the Mexican side. In one of the images that documents the process of painting a section of the wall in Playas de Tijuana, she can be seen talking to a group of men that seem to be patrolling the beach. In this scenario, her femininity is an ally to completing the project. At the same time, underscoring her gender operates as a counternarrative for one of the main arguments behind the construction of the wall:



Figure 5. "Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera," by Ana Teresa Fernández.



Figure 6. "Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera," by Ana Teresa Fernández.

In *Farmworker Futurism*, Ethnic Studies scholar Curtis Marez describes how between the 1930s and 1960s, the International Harvester Company, which manufactures agricultural equipment, presented a series of exhibits in state fairs. These exhibits showcased agricultural technology for the future. Among the displayed objects were a series of automatons denominated “future farm workers,” robots that would replace farm workers across the United States fields. Marez states that one of the reasons why these robots became highly popular was that “[they were showcased] in historical contexts where working-class men of color had often been constructed as sexual threats” (15). Even though this exhibit is from the mid 20th century, decades later the idea that men of color are sexual predators is still prevailing in certain sectors.

In 2015, when Donald Trump launched his presidential campaign, he did so by promising to wall off the United States from Mexico in order to prevent a wave of criminal crossings. Among other things, he blamed men from Mexico for being rapists. Under this logic, the wall would function as a physical monument to protect women from the sexual threat posed by Mexicans. That is, the monument would not only be fulfilling the goal of walling off a territory, it would also be walling off women’s bodies. Because of this, it is noteworthy that Fernández overemphasizes her gender to symbolically bring down sections of a wall surrounded not just by a geopolitical but also by a sexual-based component. In “Ecofeminism: A Latin-American Perspective,” feminist theologian Ivone Gebara states that “women [suffer] daily from the consequences of a patriarchal society with a capitalist dominion of nature and human relationship in a global system” (95).

“Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera” is an artistic project restitutes continuity and integrity to the desert landscape. Because of the relevance that the gender of the artist has for the overall articulation of the installation, an ecofeminist reading can also be made. Given that a main argument for one of the major political discourses that has justified the need for a wall considers

women's bodies, it is clear that the logic behind the physical barrier is not only racial or geopolitical, it also has a gender and sexual-based element. Ultimately, this installation underscores how, through a performance of gender and a manipulation of color schemes, Fernández is able to challenge the permanency of the wall and the validity of the far-reaching implications of a racist and patriarchal discourse.

Nonhuman Life: Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando

Whereas “Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera” focuses on the implications that the wall has over the desert landscape and, to some extent, over gender relations, another installation that also situates the border wall at its center focuses on the nonhuman inhabitants of the area. In response to the 93 endangered species threatened by the border wall, in 2017, Mexican American photographer Jenea Sanchez and American ecological artist Lauren Strohacker developed the project “Un/fragmenting-des/fragmentando.” Located on both sides of the border wall that divides Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora, the artists projected images of the wildlife that is being severely threatened. Making this a binational event, while Jenea projected the images on the Mexican side of the wall, Lauren remained on the American side. In addition, this was a public event, a factor that changed the overall makeup of the project.

The first image features the northern jaguar, an endangered species with a breeding cycle that takes them from Mexico to the United States, and back. Because of this, the wall not only curtails their migration corridor, it also blocks their access to water resources and shelter. While the wall is the element that has the power to produce either the destabilization of the modes of survival of the jaguar and of other species, or their death, “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando,” reverses this role:

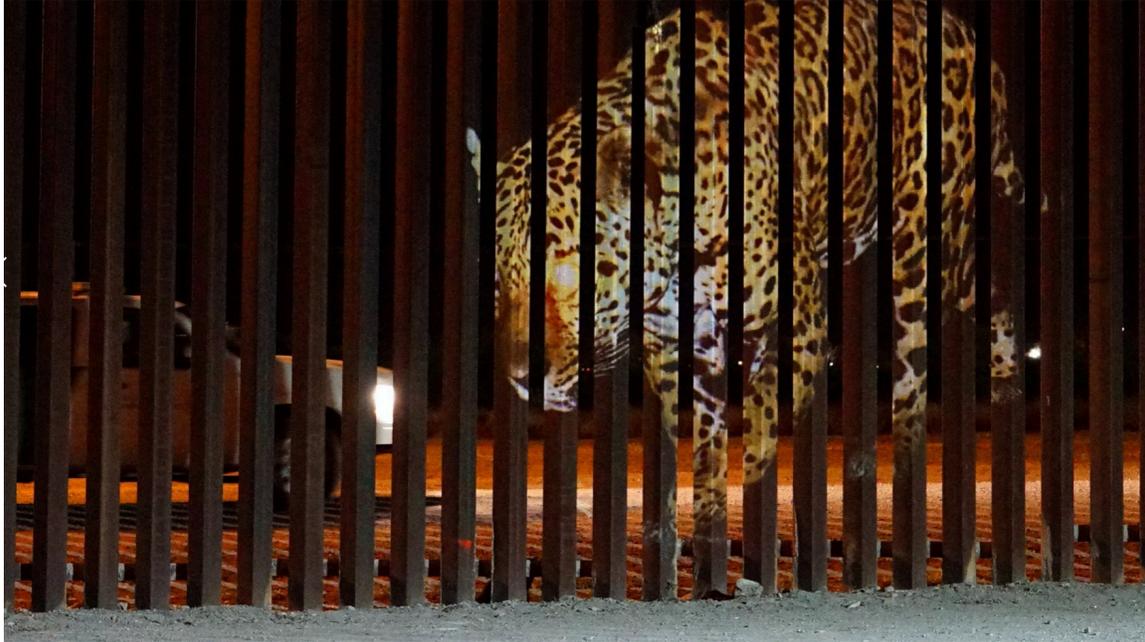


Figure 7. “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando,” by Jenea Sanchez and Lauren Strohacker.

Just as the wall radically occupies the jaguar’s natural habitat, through digital manipulation, the nonhuman animal also becomes an inhabitant of the wall, in which the vitality and colorful dynamism of the ghostly figure contrasts with the dim appearance of the rusted iron. In this way, destabilized, the wall becomes the background upon which multiple images of a vibrant jaguar are showcased. For a moment, the metal structure is the element that seems to be subjugated to the spectral presence of the animal. Because of this, the digital images projected over the wall can be read as the echoes, shadows, or as the uncanny apparitions of hurting wildlife. If as Gabriel Giorgi argues in *Formas Comunes*, nonhuman animals have started to operate not just as symbols but also as political emblems, entangled with the wall, the virtual jaguar becomes an immobile but active political sign. Present through a ghostly articulation, the jaguar seems to be asking for recognition, free mobility, and the right to exist.

Simultaneously present and absent, the shadow interacts with a binational audience that bears witness to the reenactment of the jaguars’ freedom. Given that several scientists have argued

that the planet will lose the majority of all species by the end of this century, it is not difficult to imagine a future scenario in which the audience is bearing witness not to the reenactment of the jaguars' freedom, but to the reenactment of their very existence. As Tsing puts it: "Ghost remind us that we live in an impossible present -a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction:"



Figure 8. "Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando," by Jenea Sanchez and Lauren Strohacker.

It is worth noting that in order to compel a binational public to care about the ecological damage that the wall produces, the artists recur to images of what is known as charismatic megafauna or flagship species. While the jaguar is the main figure showcased during the presentation, this image is followed by digital depictions of a desert rabbit, a fox, a cougar, and a desert racoon. This is, the art project only displays images of large mammals that because their aesthetic charm attracts public interest easily, an element that creates hierarchies between them and the rest of the endangered species that might be perceived as aesthetically unappealing. In a parallel note, the public-facing characteristic of this artistic task also begs the question of whether a project focused not just on the nonhuman world but also on human mobility, particularly on undocumented migration, would have garnered the same binational support. This, especially considering that to execute the digital installation, the artists got the approval of local agencies from both countries. In fact, one of the

photographs of the project shows what appears to be a border patrol truck parked near the installation.

While every attempt to prevent a further expansion of the wall should be welcomed, because of the context in which “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando” is taking place, linking it to related issues can enlarge our understanding of its purpose. For instance, because of the spotlight that this project gives to the charismatic species of the desert, the art installation provokes inquiries regarding its dialogue with mainstream environmentalisms. Environmental Humanities scholar Rob Nixon argues that in the United States, mainstream environmentalism tends to be focused on “wilderness preservation, on wielding the Endangered Species Act against developers, and on saving old-growth forests” (252), a priority that remains “indifferent to international relationships between social inequities, environmental practices, and the cultures of nature espoused by the poor” (253). For Nixon, the most common interests of mainstream movements often ignore people of color and their relationships to the environment. Because “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando” revolves around some of the key issues that dominant environmentalism movements address-- that is, wilderness preservation and wildlife protection--its affiliation to that movement could seem clear.

However, while this project resonates with the mainstream approach to conservation ecology, its scope is more complex and nuanced. The main elements that complicate Sanchez’ and Strohacker’s installation are the location of the project and the setting in which the event takes place. In words of human geography and ethnic studies scholar Laura Pulido, environmental values are “based on an ideology of exclusion that preserves beautiful landscapes for certain communities deemed to be desirable citizens” (Kindle). With Pulido’s premise in mind and considering the location of the project, the fact that “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando” aims at protecting and

preserving the desert and its nonhuman inhabitants, already constitutes a break with said values. Taking into account that the desert is often considered empty, barren, and a “no man’s land”-- that is, since the desert tends to be considered the antithesis of the old-growth forests Nixon talks about--it is notable that an artistic project is trying to promote the well-being of the arid land. In this way, this installation is in direct conversation with organizations such as Defenders of Wildlife, The National Butterfly Center, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and over 170 environmental groups⁵⁰ that have opposed to the border wall, many of them formed by Native and Mexican American people fighting for their land and its nonhuman components.

Another element that expands the reach of “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando,” is the means through which the installation incorporates and at the same time rejects questions of race and privilege. If, as Pulido contends, mainstream environmentalism includes certain communities and excludes others, Sanchez and Strohacker’s installation seeks the engagement of Latinx communities for the development of a decolonial imagination based on the premise of environmental justice. Paying attention to the areas in which the event takes place, this element becomes especially relevant. In “Hidrogeología de Sonora, México,” Geology studies scholars Eva Lourdes Vega Granillo et al describe the problems of water scarcity faced by Sonora, the state in which the event takes place. Along with the rivers Yaqui and Fuerte, the Río Bravo/Rio Grande is one of the most important aquifers for the state. In Sonora, Agua Prieta has a high poverty index, and during recent years, the population has been challenged with a growing amount of contaminated water⁵¹. On the other side of the border, in Douglas, Arizona, in 2018 the United States Census Bureau reported that nearly a third of the population lives below the poverty limit, and just as in Agua Prieta, the residents have been facing shortages of potable water⁵².

In addition, Douglas, Arizona is home to several colonias, which scholars Jorge Chapa and

David Eaton described as “rural desert settlements with inadequate infrastructure and unsafe housing stock.” Not only in Arizona, but within 150 miles of the borderline between Mexico and the United States it is possible to find around 2000 colonias, which house approximately 840,000 people (Esquinca and Jaramillo). An important percentage of these colonias lacks at least one of the following services: drinking water, electricity, paved roads, waste disposal and drainage. Some of the elements shared as informal housing solutions by colonias’ residents are generators, wells, water tanks, and septic tanks. However, some of these solutions tend to be very expensive, unhealthy, and environmentally unsustainable. When in 2018 I interviewed some of the inhabitants of Sparks, one of the colonias near El Paso, Texas, they described how for a long time their biggest problem was water scarcity. One of the women I talked to shared: “hubo un tiempo en el que ni siquiera podía bañarme y eso me trajo muchos problemas en el trabajo, no nomás porque llegara tarde, también porque a veces no estaba presentable.” In the area where “Un/fragmenting-Des/fragmentando” takes place, in 2004, the Department of Housing and Urban Development along with the U.S. Geological Survey found that “the City of Douglas, Ariz., and its Mexican sister-city Agua Prieta, Sonora, [had seen] an uncontrolled spread of colonias.” Because of this, the case of the colonias underscores why, in words of Laura Pulido, Latinx people tend to be seen “as victims of environmental degradation.” However, as environmental studies scholar Sarah Jacquette Ray states, according to anti-immigrant rhetoric, they are also portrayed as sources of disease and contamination. This is, to paraphrase Pulido, in terms of environmental-related issues, Latinx people is often encapsulated either as victims or perpetrators.

Given the instances described above, the fact that Sanchez and Strohacker carried out their project in this desert region is highly significant. In addition to being able to garner binational support, not just from local agencies but more importantly, from a cross-border public, they

showed how diverse Latinx communities can also be environmentally engaged as agents interested in projects with an ecofriendly agenda independent of their own struggles. For Latinx Studies scholar Ralph E. Rodriguez, Latinx communities are often subjected to ethnic expectations that assume that their only interests revolve around questions of race, class, and immigration. “Un/Fragmenting-Des/Fragmentando” challenges this imposed expectation because, even though the project can be put in dialogue with the aforementioned questions, its main point of focus is on endangered animals.

Knowing that, as seen in the colonias, the Agua Prieta-Douglas area is severely affected by different forms of environmental racism, that the binational communities showed interest and became engaged with a project focused on the nonhuman resonates with Rodríguez’ premise. In addition, the project exhorts us to “reconceive the subject position of those deemed peripheral or hostile to the environment” (Pulido). In this way, while through the involvement of the community this digital installation generates questions related to race and privilege, at the same time it rejects making these issues the central element of the project, a characteristic that amplifies its scope and complexity. If, as Mexican American studies scholars Priscila Solis Ybarra et al state: “Environmentalism in the United States is most often associated with a middle-to upper class white demographic, working on behalf of human nature for the preservation of wilderness or the conservation of species” (Kindle), Jenea Sanchez and Lauren Strohacker add social and racial nuance to contemporary environmental movements.

The Desert: A Vulnerable Weapon

The projects “Erasing the Border” and “Un/Fragmenting-Des/Fragmentando,” as well as the novel *Lost Children Archive*, expose instances in which the conflictive coexistence between human-

made border structures and nonhuman entities generate different forms of pain. The contradictory entanglement between the wall and the desert not only produces “widespread misery,” but precisely because of the painful divisions it creates, it also generates “dramatic and subtle” counternarrative literary and artistic projects. Through the amalgamation of echoes of what cannot be found, of ghostly visions, and of ruined landscapes, these projects evoke multiple dimensions and temporalities, a quality that turns them into reminders of the size and scope of the consequences created by harsh anti-immigration policies.

Whereas Luiselli’s novel refigures and reenacts the presences of those who are still missing and cannot be recuperated, María Teresa Fernández, Jenea Sanchez and Lauren Strohacker seek to symbolically reconstitute a broken ecosystem. Through social and ecological engagement, these examples present the levels of vulnerability that can be both produced and experienced by the desert in the context of the heightened security measures implemented at the Mexico-United States border, particularly in relation to the border wall. Ultimately, these artistic projects reframe and rethink the border through environmental articulations that interrogate if, in the context of border demarcations, non-violent coexistence is possible.

BORDER BIOMES

In the last few years, I visited some of the busiest and most emblematic border areas between the Guatemala-Mexico, and the Mexico-United States limits. Meeting migrants and transnational workers, talking to the residents of the regions, and seeing diverse border sceneries shaped the scope of this dissertation. In the limits between Mexico-Guatemala, a first sight of the Suchiate river quickly exposed a forceful boundary that challenged steady categorizations of borders. Conversations with migrants who had traversed the forest highlighted intense interactions with wildlife. Assisted interviews with Central American migrants on their way towards the United States, revealed fear and bravery at the thought of the desert. Northwards, in the Mexico-U.S. border, the inhabitants of the arid landscape emphasized a precarious relationship based on lack of resources and extreme weather, and at the same time, they conveyed a sense of belonging to an inhospitable place. These scenarios underscore the centrality of nonhuman entities in border and migration-related contexts.



Figure 9. Ciudad Hidalgo, in Tapachula, Chiapas.

This picture, taken in Ciudad Hidalgo in Tapachula, Chiapas, showcases one of the busiest crossing points in the region, and in it, the significance of the aquatic nonhuman entity is evident.

Participating in migration processes and circuits of transnational labor, the Suchiate River is traversed by foot and atop of “cámaras,” or rafts. In this informal crossing point, a group of binational carabineros charges people to cross them to one side or the other. Whereas before 2014 this was one of the main sites traversed by migrants, because of the heightened securitization levels of the area, nowadays most people coming from Guatemala and crossing through this section do so with the intention of selling or shopping. Although, in one conversation, a group of carabineros said that sometimes migrants pretend to be shoppers in order to avoid immediate detection. Similar to some of the features of the previous image, the river is at the center of the social and economic processes of the area.

Not too far from Ciudad Hidalgo is Puente Talismán, a crossing point composed by both a formal and an informal point of entry. Whereas the formal method to cross the border is through a bridge, the informal method consists of walking through the river. The first time I visited this crossing point I saw a man walking inside the river to get to the Mexican side of it. Because the water level was low, traversing the river by foot was possible. However, rapid and unexpected currents could have made the man fall, which is why he was walking very slowly, showing certainty about each step but also a bit of fear. This is an informal crossing point that requires direct contact with the water. Once the man arrived at his destination, with half of his body marked by the river, he had to traverse another border biome, this time a section of the forest. A site for contemplation and a territorial division, these scenarios show the fluidity of the Suchiate’s functions, which can be economically productive and physically hazardous.

Images of this nature, coupled with conversations I had with people who lived or were transiting through the area, gave rise to some of the main queries I have explored in this dissertation. However, although imagery and conversations have been central for the development

of my work, there is another element that has also been fundamental, this is the local and international media. It was through a local newspaper in Tapachula that I learned about the binational conflict for water rights revolving around the Suchiate, and through the same medium, I got to know the gruesome aspects of some of the networks of criminality that operate in the binational rainforests. Regarding the Mexico-United States border, the desert and the Rio Grande/Río Bravo have occupied a large part of the international journalism that has covered the migratory crises that have taken place at this border. Often, these stories attempt to document the harrowing consequences of Prevention through Deterrence schemes and other measures implemented in the name of border security. In relation to the consequences of the Prevention through Deterrence logic, in *The Land of Open Graves*, Jason de León studies the destructive power of the desert, an entity that operates as a silent and effective weapon against migrants. Once having identified the focus of my analysis, de León's work, along with the scholarship on the overlapping of human and nonhuman elements at border regions done by Rebecca Hey Colón and Hillary Cunningham, worked as points of departure to think about the centrality of the nonhuman in the configuration of borders and migration patterns.

In this way, *Border Biomes: Coexistence and Interference on American Migration Trails*, studies the intense entanglement that exists between geopolitical divisions and the ecosystems upon which they occur. To closely examine this entanglement, I have recurred to the analysis of Mexican, Mexican American and Chicana literature and art that have memorialized, challenged, or responded to the complicated coexistence of ecological systems and human-made delimitations. The set of cultural products I chose are from the 21st century, which is why they tend to communicate the contemporary effects of the convoluted coexistence that has produced border biomes in Central and North America. While each product has shed light on the intricacies of a

forced amalgamation between border delimitations and entire ecosystems, the context in which every one of them has been created influences the angle that the artists and authors have employed to approach border biomes.

In this last section, I look broadly at some of the more relevant features that are incorporated into the set of literary and artistic projects I have studied. These projects have situated border biomes and their nonhuman components at the core of their creative endeavors, although from different perspectives and therefore, with different results. For instance, in the literary works I analyze in the first chapter, the representations of forests fluctuate between the local and the nonlocal. In Cristina Rivera Garza's novel *El mal de la Taiga*, the portrayal of a distant forest that lacks referentiality, was fundamental to narrate a story that exposes the feebleness of geopolitical borders and the dynamism of the ecological systems bonded to them. By situating the protagonist in a territory that she does not know, the narrative generates, in words of Ursula K. Heise, a sense of deterritorialization. In turn, this sense evolves into a realization of the intense ties that the protagonist has not with a nation-state but with an entire planet. Furthermore, by incorporating the material effects of globalization processes, which make it possible for fragments of the forest to travel across borders, the narrator establishes the flexible features of border demarcations.

Contrary to the representation made by Rivera Garza, Emiliano Monge situates his story in a fully identifiable location, a section of the jungle shared by Guatemala and Mexico. Echoing the crimes committed in the seclusion of the forest, many of which have been documented by Óscar Martínez, Monge narrates the story of a group of migrants that get kidnapped in the border territory. The proximity to wildlife along with the type of vicissitudes endured by migrants, allows for the representation of an instance in which the ontological divides between humans and animals get destabilized, as I exemplify with the case of the saraguato monkey. In addition, the amount of

violence perpetrated in the forest serves to indicate the position of vulnerability that border biomes can assume when confronted with factors produced by the geopolitical delimitations that divide them.

Following the route taken by many Central American migrants on their way towards the United States, after analyzing representations of the forest in the first chapter, the second section focuses on depictions of border rivers, particularly of the Suchiate river and of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo. Through the study of a novel and two poetry books that emphasize the conflictive coexistence of rivers with migration processes and geopolitical delimitations, I identify some of the main characteristics that impact both the understanding and behavior of rivers as borders. In *La Mara*, Rafael Ramírez Heredia presents the dichotomic force of the Suchiate river, which can act as the entrance to a world of violence and criminality, or as a beautiful site that sustains the ecological and economic life of the region. In the poetry book *With the River on our Face*, Emmy Pérez depicts a border river that has been irreparably harmed by an invisible line that traverses it. Paradoxically, this harm is produced by the weaponization of the river, a liquid entity that has participated in the annihilation of many of the people that has attempted to cross it to find a better life. In addition, for Pérez, the river is loaded with an affective charge. As a staple of the Rio Grande Valley, the Rio Grande/Río Bravo is attached to the memories of the poetic voice, which become dislocated because of the seemingly irreversible imposition of a border demarcation and a border wall. Finally, in this chapter I also study *El río/The River* a collaboration by Dolores Dorantes and Zoe Leonard. Through a coalescence of photographs and poems, the authors underscore the materiality of the river. By stressing the liquid materiality of this nonhuman border, Dolores Dorantes and Zoey Leonard portray the dynamic, unstable, and deadly nature of this body of water.

My third and final chapter revolves around representations of the desert. With a critical reading of *Lost Children Archive*, by Valeria Luiselli, I study how this narrative is centered on the question of the possibility, or of the impossibility, to document the effects that violent processes enacted on and by the desert have produced. The novel attempts to recuperate the echoes of the Native American past of the desert along with the voices of the migrant kids that have gotten lost in it. In this way, the story underscores the limits of memorialization activities and archival efforts. Because of these limits, the protagonists often need to recur to refigurations and reenactments, which are the methods that help them generate archives of ghostly presences that document the specters of inenarrable acts of violence and dispossession. In this chapter, I also study two artistic projects that make hypervisible the damage that the border wall has created over the desert ecologies. “Erasing the Border/Borrando la Frontera” by Ana Teresa Fernández focuses on the disjuncture that the wall produces over the environment. Through the implementation of an optical illusion, the artist interrogates the normalization of the wall. Finally, through digital manipulation, “Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando” focuses on showcasing the ways in which the border wall participates in the extinction of the desert’s species.

Informed by a coalescence of community engagement and academic inquiry, *Border Biomes: Coexistence and Interference on American Migration Trails* underscores the dynamism, vitality, vulnerability, and the destructive power of the ecosystems that are intertwined with geopolitical borders in the Guatemala-Mexico, and Mexico-United States contexts. This amalgamation gives rise to border biomes, which are ecological communities composed by nonhuman features that through unregulated and secluded exposures, tend to create hostile conditions for migrants. At the same time, because of the invasive and destructive nature of border upholding measures, the ecological systems intertwined with them become severely threatened. In

response to this problematic coexistence, thinking with and through border biomes, the authors and artists I have studied, question traditional understandings of borders and expose the different levels of physical and affective intimacy that they create. In addition, through the refiguration of ghostly presences and images, these artistic and literary works turn into a reminder of the extent of the contemporary social and environmental upheavals surrounding border biomes, and in a hopeful attempt to defy them.

ENDNOTES

¹ I did this thanks to the recommendation of Dr. Ailsa Winton, a professor at El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, who told me that many women from Guatemala meet at this park every Sunday.

² Because this was a conversation and not an interview, with her authorization I took brief notes and not direct quotes.

³ Several news websites have reported the ongoing battle between border patrol agents and the carrizo cane. Among them, Fox News (2007), Splinter News (2015), and *The New Yorker* (2017).

⁴ This information was conveyed by Jeremy Wallace in *Houston Chronicle*.

⁵ As reported by Jasmine Aguilera in *Time*.

⁶ Anne Flaherty reports this information in *ABC News*.

⁷ In the case of the Mexico-United States borderland, anti-immigrant militants have dedicated a great deal of attention to the trash left by migrants (Ray).

⁸ These adjectives appear in the Editorial Reviews, made particularly to the English version by Lina Meruane, Jonathan Woollen, and Mark Haber.

⁹ This is explored by Jon Moen et al in “Eye on the Taiga: Removing Global Policy Impediments to Safeguard the Boreal Forest” (2014).

¹⁰ As reported by different media outlets, among them *Diario de Yucatan* (2018).

¹¹ As stated in “Nadie nos ha consultado nada: comunidades indígenas rechazan la construcción del Tren Maya” published on *Animal Político*.

¹² As it is reported in the article “Se remata la selva maya” published by *Aristegui Noticias*.

¹³ As reported by *Animal Político*.

¹⁴ According to the report *U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond*, published by the U.S. Congress Research Service in June 2017. For this plan, the US government had already granted about 100 million dollars. As part of this amount, 12 naval bases were established at the Mexican fluvial borders, the number of drones was increased to identify and intercept migrants, the migratory checkpoints were expanded, and armed forces were displaced, such as The Federal police and the army.

¹⁵ While in the desert the main causes of death are dehydration and insolation, in the tropical forest some of the main threats include being dragged by bodies of water or attacked by animals. In both cases, migrants face the risk of being abandoned or even killed by traffickers and guides, also known as coyotes.

¹⁶ This element is central but not isolated. As Martínez denounces in the same article, and as Monge also exhibits in the novel, the corruption of official institutions, such as the army and the police, also has a great impact on the prolongation of these crimes.

¹⁷ For more information on this topic, see the discussion that makes Tao Orion in *Beyond the War on Invasive Species*.

¹⁸ The Saraguato monkey's habitat is the tropical forest that spans Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize.

¹⁹ My emphasis.

²⁰ The Soconusco is the region that encompasses southwestern Chiapas and part of southeastern Mexico. The area starts in the southernmost Chiapas-Guatemala border and ends in the Tacaná Volcano.

²¹ In 2014, the United States committed at least 100 million dollars to help Mexico detain migrants on the southern border (Matalon 2016).

²² Marisa Gerber refers to the history behind these words in an article for *Los Angeles Times* published in 2014.

²³ According to Kelly Hernandez, through Operation Wetback the Border Patrol apprehended more than thirty thousand workers during the first 20 days of enforcement in 1954.

²⁴ This number was provided by the International Organization for Migration and reported by *The Guardian* in 2018.

²⁵ This information was reported on June 2019 by *El Paso Times* and *The New York Times*. Both sources focus on the increment of migrants trying to get to the United States by crossing the river that seemingly calm, hides violent currents underneath the surface.

²⁶ During my research trip in 2016 I was able to talk to some of the inhabitants of Suchiate, and as I discuss in the introduction, they have had conflicts over water and territory for decades with their Guatemalan neighbors.

²⁷ As reported by John Burnett for *NPR*.

²⁸ More information on this subject can be found on “Maquiladoras: Mexican Factory Assembly Plants for the U.S. Market,” which describes some of the entanglements between the maquiladora industry and the Mexico-U.S. borders.

²⁹ According to Edith Kauffer, this fact influences the lack of communication between the two nations to legislate over the river

³⁰ As reported by *El Universal*.

³¹ The local newspaper *Oye Chiapas* has an extensive report about the “Romerías” tradition.

³² The history of the Tigua civilization is compiled on the *Texas Beyond History* archive.

³³ Also known as the Tigua Indian Reservation.

³⁴ On *Quartz*, environment reporter Zoë Schlanger writes extensively about the potential solution

that the city of El Paso has found to counter the dire effects of water scarcity.

³⁵ This fact is studied by Jennifer Hermes on *Environmental Leader*.

³⁶ This estimate is reported by *El Paso Water* and *Talon LPE*.

³⁷ Daniel Sabet explores this overexploitation on *Noprofits and Their Networks: Cleaning the Waters Along Mexico's Northern Border*.

³⁸ For instance, the Plan Frontera Sur (2014) was implemented mainly on the Suchiate river.

³⁹ As reported by *Sin Embargo* and *The New York Times*, both sources also cite the dire health effects for the inhabitants of the region.

⁴⁰ Information provided by María del Mar Leal in *Brujula*.

⁴¹ This has been reported by multiple Guatemalan news outlets, including *El puerto informa*.

⁴² This information was provided by the local newspaper *Soy 502* in 2016.

⁴³ For example, *El Universal* in Mexico, and *The Guardian US edition*.

⁴⁴ The spatial turn is an intellectual movement in the humanities and social sciences that situates spaces and built environments at the center of the study of historical and cultural processes. Edward Soja defines this critical approach as “a response to a longstanding ontological and epistemological bias that privileged time over space in all the human sciences, including spatial disciplines like geography and architecture” (11).

⁴⁵ Whereas the map version utilized by Antebi is part of the western dominant tradition of mapping, as Doug Aberley recalls in *Boundaries of Home*, creative mapping strategies such as the one proposed by Antebi can also depict challenging visions of present and future times, act as strategies of resistance, and even be forces of social change. To illustrate his case, the author provides examples of Native American forms of mapping and of community engagement with bioregional maps.

⁴⁶ Although Jovany kills Anamar, the narrator suggests that Ximenuis is the character that commissioned the murder.

⁴⁷ As reported by Dara Lind in *Vox*.

⁴⁸ This operation was known as “Priority Juvenile Docket.”

⁴⁹ In an article for *The New York Times*, Ron Nixon describes how, after moving them out of detention centers and shelters, CBP lost track of 1,475 migrant children after placing them with sponsors.

⁵⁰ By the end of 2018, more than 170 environmental groups sent a letter to Kristen Nieljzen, who at the time was the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, to repudiate the construction of a border wall along the protected areas of the Southwest Desert and other parts of Texas.

⁵¹ *Proyecto Puente*, a local newspaper describes this challenge.

⁵² This information was reported by Rocki Baier in *Tucson.com*

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