

Bodies on the Border: (Re)materializing and Decolonizing Ecologies of Mobility in the Mexico-US Borderlands

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Abstract

Current human migrations and nonhuman extinctions on massive scales compel us to more carefully apply interspecies concepts of mobility to understanding the roles played by geopolitical borders, as well as the various, ongoing forms of colonialism that have produced and continue to perpetuate these borders. This essay applies bioregional, material, decolonial, and borderlands ecocriticisms to historicize prevention through deterrence enforcement measures in the Mexico-US border region, and discusses several significant entanglements of interspecies actors in migratory contexts, exploring a range of ways that nonhuman nature has been and continues to be deployed materially against migrants. In historicizing US enforcement tactics, the essay tracks the distribution of human agency from settler colonial, ethnonationalist, and neoliberal US policy makers, to armed paramilitary human bodies, then into structures of the built environment, and, finally, to the ways that agency is further diffused across complex webs of multiple kinds of human and nonhuman actors—plants, animals, landforms, watercourses, climate and weather conditions, and so on. While in some instances, nonhuman animals are deployed against migrant and other indigenous and mestizo people, in other multispecies entanglements, animals participate in the revelation and denunciation of state sponsored violence, leading to larger questions of the status of other nonhuman animals in the borderlands. The essay's primary focus is on illustrating the practical untenability of, and the severe harm done in, continuing to regard the borderlands from settler colonialist or human exceptionalist positionalities.

Keywords: Bioregion, border, decolonial, material ecocriticism, Mexico, migration.

Resumen

Las migraciones humanas actuales y las extinciones a escala masiva de seres no-humanos nos obligan a aplicar de forma más cuidadosa conceptos interespecie de movilidad para entender los papeles que juegan las fronteras geopolíticas, así como las diversas formas de colonialismo en desarrollo que han producido y que continúan perpetuando estas fronteras. Este ensayo aplica las ecocríticas bioregional, material, descolonial y de frontera para historizar la prevención por medio de la puesta en práctica de medidas disuasorias en la región fronteriza entre México y Estados Unidos, y debate las diversas implicaciones significativas de los actores interespecies en los contextos migratorios, explorando las varias maneras en las que la naturaleza no humana continua desplegándose materialmente contra los inmigrantes. Al historizar las tácticas de imposición de los Estados Unidos, este ensayo rastrea la distribución de la agencia humana desde los legisladores coloniales, etnonacionalistas y neoliberales estadounidenses, pasando por los cuerpos humanos paramilitares, por las estructuras del entorno construido, hasta, finalmente, las maneras en las que la agencia se difumina aún más a través de las complejas redes de los diversos tipos de actores humanos y no-humanos—plantas, animales, accidentes geográficos, cauces de agua, condiciones climáticas y metereológicas, etcétera. Mientras que en algunos ejemplos los animales no-humanos se despliegan contra los inmigrantes y otros pueblos indígenas y mestizos, en otras implicaciones interespecies, los animales participan en la revelación y denuncia de la violencia patrocinada por el estado, llevando a cuestiones más amplias sobre el estatus de otros animales no-humanos en las zonas fronterizas. El principal centro de atención del ensayo es ilustrar lo prácticamente insostenible que es, y el daño severo

que se hace al seguir contemplando la frontera desde las posiciones del colonizador o de la excepcionalidad humana.

Palabras clave: Biorregión, frontera, descolonial, ecocrítica material, México, migración.

“The border ‘fence,’ irrespective of the complex indigeneity of peoples from the region it occupies, is a very long filter of bodies and goods — a mediator of imperialism, violence, market systems, and violence capitalism . . . [against] the historical stewards of the land, and those who are following ancient indigenous trade routes in search of economic opportunity.” (Postcommodity, interdisciplinary art collective; Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez; Kade L. Twist, 2016)

“The ongoing separations and misunderstandings between decolonial thinking and projects and biodiversity thinking and projects is a tragedy for people, peoples, and other critters alike.” (Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 218)

Returning from a 2011 visit to the border wall separating Arizona from Sonora, Mexico, Los Angeles-based journalist Rubén Martínez describes an uncanny scene. Martínez had gone to see a newly constructed length of metal fence along an area near the San Pedro River. He looked up along the top of the fence, where perforations had been made to allow the wind to pass through. Around these wind holes, Martínez noticed a strange shimmering, and soon realized the effect was caused by the movement of hundreds of grasshoppers, passing through these holes in the fence to the other side. I find this deceptively ordinary occurrence suggestive in several ways. Of the selective, and often arbitrary, permeability of an increasingly hardening geopolitical border; of this border’s inevitable and ongoing failure as a barrier to the kinds of migrations it is intended to prevent; and, perhaps most strikingly, of its uneven consequences for wide-ranging varieties of migrant (human and otherwise) bodies, objects, and flows. While the mere existence of perforations in the fence clearly indicate the intentionally selective permeability of the structure’s design, the passage of these insects through the holes materializes as a minor revelation, rendering such phenomena visible. This single instance of the innumerable migration corridors transected by the Mexico-US border invites one to further extrapolate such phenomena over its entire roughly-two-thousand-mile length. While it reveals the differing impacts and forms of mobility produced by the border (walled or not) for different migrant bodies (human, nonhuman animal, etc.) through the border’s selective permeability/impenetrability, it equally illustrates the kinds of common, shared impacts this particular border entails (as do so many other borders, more generally) for a wide range of actors in and through the region. To recognize the ecology of the border as *oikos*, as a “house” divided, we find an otherwise whole and complete place across which space is artificially demarcated, fragmented, and disrupted. This fragmentation also reveals relationships of mutual dependency and alliance that would otherwise remain less visible, but are brought into sharper relief when viewed through the construct of borders.

If this mirage of migrant grasshoppers is legible as a revelation, I would also like to offer it as one example of a site-specific juncture of intervention. In this article, I hope

to illustrate that in such border sites, conventionally human, cultural/historical, and/or geopolitical approaches to place (such as decolonial and postcolonial studies, border and area studies, and anthropology) might be brought into more vigorous and thoroughgoing conversation with more-than-human/environmental inquiry (such as bioregionalism, material ecocriticism, and movement ecology). Experimental as these conversations may still seem, the stakes for attempting them could scarcely be higher. Current human migrations and nonhuman extinctions on massive, unprecedented scales,¹ as well as the intensely heightened visibility of epidemic phenomena, compel us to more carefully apply interspecies concepts of mobility to considering the roles played by geopolitical borders and border enforcement, as well as various, ongoing forms of colonialism and imperialism that have produced and continue to perpetuate and determine the meaning of these borders.

For roughly two decades, scholars have been working toward developing a more direct, explicit, and coherent conversation between decolonial and postcolonial thought and praxis, and those of ecocriticism and environmental humanities. Over this period, these mutual efforts toward engagement have included a variety of different theoretical lenses and areas of focus, ranging from animal studies and bioethics, to area studies, (bio)regionalisms, environmental justice, and narratology, just to name a few. Issues of foodways, sovereignty, spirituality, resource development and extraction, risk and natural v. anthropogenic disaster, and other material relations have often featured prevalently in such discussions. Indeed, the struggle to clearly define what constitutes “material” characterizes many of the tensions involved in seeking to reconcile postcolonial and ecocritical thought and discussion. Gurminder K Bhambra notes, for example, that “While much work in the area of postcolonial studies has directly addressed issues of the material, of the socio-economic, there has also been a tendency for it to remain firmly in the realm of the cultural” (115). Here we may recognize the trouble as twofold: first, the hierarchy of critical priorities usefully observed by Bhambra. And second, that her framing of “the material” also remains, consistent with that of so much postcolonial and other social theory, always already human, or social. David Bello similarly observes that “Critical studies of western colonialism have often been predicated on such anthropocentric, if politically understandable, premises” (6-7). In such ways, one might understand the gaps too often remaining between most varieties of environmental and postcolonial thought as recapitulating conventional western cultural divisions maintained between the more-than-human and the strictly human worlds. In

¹ For over a decade, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued an annual report on “Global Trends in Forced Displacement.” The 2020 findings report the global forced displacement of a record 82.4 million people, more than “one per cent of the world’s population – or 1 in 95 people,” and more than double the rate of 2011. The report specifies that the “dynamics of poverty, food insecurity, climate change, conflict and displacement are increasingly interconnected and mutually reinforcing, driving more and more people to search for safety and security.” Additionally, extinction rates are currently accelerating to a thousand times higher than prehuman levels (De Vos), and according to a 2019 report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, at current rates, we are now poised to lose a million more species in the coming decades.

this sense, a more thorough decolonization of both postcolonial and ecocritical thought and practice requires stronger engagement between the two.

There are many junctures that both invite and compel us to apply decolonial and ecocritical approaches to the above-mentioned and other current questions and crises. In the essay “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes various “disjunctive” views or “images of the human,” from that of the Enlightenment, to that of the Anthropocene, concluding that the “wall of separation between natural and human histories that was erected in early modernity and reinforced in the nineteenth century as the human sciences and their disciplines consolidated themselves has some serious and long-running cracks in it” (10). I would like to propose that certain (actual, material) walls, and the geopolitical boundaries these have been erected to reinforce, also lend themselves as sites necessary to and productive for bringing decolonial and environmental criticism into conversation. Here I should note that, although I have so far referred to postcolonial and decolonial concepts somewhat interchangeably, my emphasis in this essay will tend toward the decolonial, for three reasons. First, as noted above, I propose that the need to better reconcile our understanding of the human with the nonhuman, dispelling modern western anthropocentric humanism, is itself a decolonial imperative. Second, as applied in border studies in the Americas, postcolonial approaches are often beset with contested notions of the temporality of “post” as applied to indigenous lands and other issues in an ongoing settler-colonial context. And third, the particular origins of decolonial movements—as coming from predominantly indigenous and mestizo inter-American historical, geographical, and critical positions (Bhambra 115)—are more consistent with the borderlands regions I wish to consider here.²

Rematerializing and Decolonizing Bodies on the Border

In applying material ecocriticism and decolonial studies to the Mexico-US borderlands, I would like to begin with the body. So often posited as ground zero for arbitrating our “wicked problems” and essential questions—gender and identity, race and

² This is certainly not to categorically dismiss postcolonial studies as any less suitable for bringing to bear on other aspects of empire and coloniality in the Americas. In an incisive and ranging 2004 review of several edited collections seeking to articulate various frameworks for “Postcolonial American Studies,” Malini Johar Schueller discussed their promise and tensions in terms of application to certain texts, unique forms of coloniality and resistance, periodization, race and ethnicity, etc. (172). While many of these tensions remain at play, we have also seen much evidence to support Schueller’s projection that “Postcolonial studies can intervene to suggest how US cultural history has always been a contradictory set of narratives with an endless entanglement of imperial and colonial experiences, and native resistances” (171). James Sidaway additionally notes that even many aspects of US economic liberalism and participation in globalization have resulted in these having “been resituated as entwined with empire and in particular, with settler colonialism (arguably the defining historical feature of the United States)” (271). Finally, even recent popular attention to the neocolonial aspects of US foreign policy, as discussed in works like Danial Immerwahr’s recent book *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (2019) remind us of the need to keep current US expansionist, imperialist, militarist, and cultural/racial supremacist tendencies open to similar scrutiny. All of the above demonstrate the continuing relevance of applying postcolonial studies to the US, and to the Americas, more generally.

ethnicity, class and citizenship, labor and economics—the human body, as a unitary concept, is regularly tasked with containing multitudes, from the discursive to the material. While ecocriticism has generally been characterized by attending carefully to our material, corporeal relationships with the nonhuman world, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe two primary emphases of the material turn in the environmental humanities, in terms of its implications for the body.

The first of these points is the need to retrieve the body from the dimension of discourse, and to focus attention on bodily experiences and bodily practices (where “body” refers not only to the human body but to the concrete entanglements of plural “natures,” in both human and more-than-human realms). The second point is the need to respond to the linguistic turn with practical-theoretical strategies that attempt to overcome the chasm between cultural constructionism and the materiality of natures and bodies. (76)

Note that, contrary to occasional perfunctory mischaracterizations otherwise, such ecocritical inquiry is not dismissive of constructionism, but takes seriously the dialectical relationships between matter and meaning. Similarly productive tensions are present in decolonial conversations about both the social construction of bodies, and their material relations with places.

For example, when Walter Mignolo—referring to indigenous and other nonwestern peoples who have been colonized, in part, by western epistemologies and languages—says “we write with our bodies on the border,” he is referring to bodies primarily in the somatic, physical sense, and borders in the epistemological sense (“Geopolitics” 137). In other words, as he emphasizes, these are actual physical, sensing, knowing, speaking bodies, deterritorialized through historical processes of epistemic violence and colonialism, navigating a modernity wherein they inhabit plural identities and speak in a plurality of voices and registers. In this case, while the border is discursive, the bodies are material. And they are human.³ Elsewhere, however, Mignolo proposes more broadly, “I will take body to be ‘living organisms.’ . . . It is the materiality of the living that constitutes the body” (*On Decoloniality* 162). In this context, he considers how the “colonial matrix of power” has applied racist, sexist, and speciesist designations to define and rank which bodies matter. Mignolo explains, “Western imperial subjects secured themselves and their descendant as the superior subspecies. They invented also the idea of nature to separate their bodies from all living (and the very life-energy of the biosphere) organisms on the planet” (152-53). From here, he reminds us that “not only

³ To be clear, although in such instances Mignolo is using border in necessarily deterritorialized ways, as in his concept of “border thinking,” this is not to suggest his work is entirely removed from or not invested in actual places. On the contrary, one aspect of Mignolo’s project that ecocritics may find most compelling is its commitment, in identifying and naming certain founding premises of Western thought and claims to modernity, to then assiduously tracking down and locating these in their particular historical and geographical places of origin. Doing so demonstrates that Western forms of knowing and being are neither inevitable nor universal (as they have for centuries asserted themselves to be), and that the provincial origins of their propagation still have, as it were, names and addresses. We might also recognize certain aspects of this project as strikingly bioregional, in which local or vernacular human cultures (languages and thought patterns, knowledge and wisdom, ways of being in and knowing the world, etc.) are understood as emerging in response and relation to specific places, including their larger biotic communities.

Man/Human has a body: plants have bodies, fish have bodies, birds have bodies, vegetables have bodies, fruit have bodies,” gesturing toward certain transcorporeal relations these various bodies share (162).

When we recognize that it is the same Western colonial regard for nonhuman organisms and for land, that produces, discursively, both the hierarchical boundary between human and nonhuman, and also produces and reinforces modern geopolitical boundaries, the need to rematerialize—and thus, decolonize—both bodies and borderlands becomes more clearly evident. Here I must also qualify my use the terms “border” and “borderlands.” Any discussion of “the border” as a single place or phenomenon spanning the entire width of a continent is necessarily reductive. For this reason, I generally (except as otherwise noted) use “border” to refer to the construct (the idea, expressed and enforced as geopolitical fact, and the material realities of mobility that it has come to entail), and the word “borderlands” to refer broadly to the wide range of individual border communities and bioregions that, in being split apart (longitudinally), have been drawn together (latitudinally), however “naturally” or arbitrarily, by this construct. Tom Lynch cautions us that “bioregional analysis suggests that the search for universal meanings as the principal function of literary criticism colludes with the homogenizing tendencies of colonialism, and disempowers a [literary, artistic, or cultural] work from its vital function of granting us a politicized and particularized storied resistance in a specific local landscape” (61). In this way, the term “border studies,” in accepting a totalizing geopolitical thought, or subordinating additional realities to this thought, may at times risk obscuring more nuanced bioregional attention to specific places.

On the other hand, one benefit border studies can bring to bioregionalism is a stronger appreciation for various forms of mobility (in contrast to a conventionally valued rootedness) by rendering these mobilities more visible and available to ecocritical attention. In an essay about Inuit and Sámi people in the circumpolar north, for example, Pavel Cenkľ closely attends to such issues of human and nonhuman mobility in relation to practices of hunting and transhumance. In addition to the particular biotic, climatic, topographic, and other natural features addressed in work like Cenkľ’s, structures of the built borderlands environment (fences, roads, trenches, walls, etc.) also result in certain ecologies of mobility along and across these regions. When they have been considered in human and humanities contexts, ecologies of mobility have typically been approached through questions such as (un)sustainabilities in human travel practices, urban planning and other transportation infrastructure, or of wild lands access vs preservation. These are productive and relevant areas of inquiry, and not unrelated to this project. However, rather than examining “the different ecologies that are created or destabilized by our various modes of mobility,” here my interest is, conversely, more in the particular mobilities (human and otherwise) that result from the natural and built environment of the Mexico-US borderlands (Withers 72).

In the essay “Permeabilities, Ecology and Geopolitical Boundaries,” anthropologist Hilary Cunningham discusses the above issues in relation to a range of different international borders, noting that these are “never simply or uniformly permeable but . . .

are differentially ‘open and closed,’” at which point she poses “the question of *permeable for whom*” (373-74). Cunningham observes that, because “such borders have also been implemented within a complex set of relations with ‘nature,’” the resulting ecological systems “are also made up of complex kinds of boundaries, territorializations and agencies, and as such, entail many different . . . patterns of mobility” for “both human and nonhuman” biota (374-75). These patterns bear some closer consideration and historicizing here.

Mobilities and Permeabilities: Death and Taxa

In mapping its uneven impacts on the embodied lives it transects, I wish to illustrate the border as an ever-more physical embodiment of certain political agencies that have taken form by accretion since the nineteenth century. Alex Hunt notes how, in the US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers’ 1857 “Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey,” William H. Emory, was tasked with projecting and inscribing the “absolute space of the state . . . onto the territory,” representing and asserting the border as a line “both culturally and naturally proper” (129, 131). For the first half-century of its invention, the border’s initial physical presence on the land began softly from these first surveys as a series of widely-spaced stone and concrete pyramids and monuments (Hunt 139). However, in the book *Border Land, Border Water*, environmental and border historian J.C. Alvarez points to the early twentieth century, “before the advent of the US Border Patrol,” as the period in which “the border region was first converted into a modern militarized police zone” (55). While many Mexicans fled to the US as refugees from the Mexican Revolution, the US temporarily militarized the border, to the point that at the height of deployment in 1917, “there were 160,000 American troops on the line” (53). Although their primary stated purpose was initially “to enforce neutrality laws” (53), Alvarez establishes that these deployments’ actual goal was an extension of US power (80). Alvarez demonstrates how “variations on these tactics persist to the present day, accompanied by a more durable built environment of policing” (55).

Perhaps of greatest interest to this discussion, however, is Alvarez’s observations on the emergence at this moment of what he refers to as “a hybrid patrol network of both animals and machines” (83). In this early military “transition from animal power to machine power,” the latter included preexisting rail lines, tractors, trucks and other “[r]ecently invented motor vehicles and airplanes,” operating concurrently alongside “mule trains and cavalry units” (75). In such instances, Alvarez argues that “[t]he mules themselves were a type of infrastructure, . . . monetized and standardized” through a system of anatomical and “technological knowledge” about the working “component parts” and “details of their bodies” (77, 79). Although this particular animal, human, machine hybrid military assemblage was largely dissolved when American forces were redeployed to World War II, Alvarez observes that “the accumulated work of building transportation infrastructure, mapping, surveying, and demarcating the border region [which] was all brought to bear in the context of a military invasion” would articulate a “landscape of coercive force . . . in the built world of the border region,” thus defining “US

federal border policing during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.” (83, 92). In this period, decades before mass arrests and deportations like 1954’s “Operation Wetback,” and nearly a century before the actual placement of physical barriers and walls, we recognize the kinds of bodies (and kinds and character of assemblages of bodies) that were initially deployed on exceptional and provisional military terms, but which have now become normalized as a permanently installed presence in the borderlands.

One recent aspect of this revolution-era hybrid paramilitary apparatus remaining in use gained widespread attention in September 2021. When the now infamous photos and video of Border Patrol officers on horseback, charging, whipping, chasing, and grabbing Haitian asylum seekers crossing the Rio Grande between Coahuila and Texas circulated in news and social media, public denunciation of these tactics was strong and widespread. The political and public response to this incident—particularly to the cavalry/men-on-horses imagery—revealed latent guilt and anxiety in US national consciousness for legacies and ongoing practices of lynching and vigilantism in the region, and more generally, of deploying nonhuman animals such as horses and dogs against brown and black people as a means of imposing upon them a status of less-than-human. This unease was cynically underscored by the Biden administration’s response of cross-species deflection; in order to placate national anxieties about the optics of US border enforcement, while still maintaining its prevention through deterrence and mass deportation policies, they merely placed a moratorium on the Border Patrol’s use of horses in the Del Rio area.

Similar patterns of settler colonial and neoliberal deployment of violent multispecies assemblages against colonized groups is visible in other border regions. For instance, in September 2016, when indigenous water and land protectors intervened nonviolently to prevent Dakota Access pipeline bulldozers from cutting through tribal burial grounds and cultural sites on unceded Sioux lands, private security guards weaponized animal and botanical/chemical agents (German shepherds and pepper spray/oleoresin capsicum) against them. The former species is of Eurasian origin, the latter domesticated and cultivated in the Americas thousands of years prior to European colonization; each have long participated historically as weaponized agents, of colonial incursion, and of indigenous defense, respectively. Of the numerous cruelties attending the violent suppression of Native and other local opposition to the pipeline over the following year, the most salient to this discussion include the use of dog kennels by local law enforcement to detain protestors in mass arrest; the eventual deployment of US Border Patrol agents to ancestral Sioux lands on the northern boundary of the Standing Rock Reservation in November 2016; and, later that month, North Dakota police’s use of water cannons against water protectors in subfreezing temperatures. The appalling irony of weaponizing water—against people protecting water as sacred—is certainly not lost on those targeted. And it disturbingly illustrates the material and spiritual contours of Western instrumentalism in this quintessentially twenty-first century instance of militarized complicity between settler colonial and neoliberal interests, seeking to expedite the extraction and channeling of petroleum (and its entailed risks) through native lands. The use of such tactics against colonized indigenous and mestizo

communities, along both its internal and its outer borders, also demonstrates the US's character as a settler state, and its ongoing disposition toward black and brown bodies, especially in these various borderlands.

Although the US's southern border began taking the form of fenced boundaries later into the 1990s (Haddal 2), linear, physical barriers to the passage of bodies across sections of the border began, themselves, as lines of human bodies when, "in 1993, 'Operation Blockade' was deployed in the El Paso area [and] 450 agents working overtime covered a twenty mile stretch of the border" (Eschbach et al. 448). Timothy Dunn describes how this "mass posting of agents created an imposing line, if not virtual wall, of agents along the river" (60). Ensuing early nineties border security operations, such as "'Hold the Line' in El Paso, 'Gatekeeper' in San Diego, 'Lower Rio Grande' in South Texas, and later, 'Safeguard' in southern Arizona . . . positioned Border Patrol agents *en masse* along historically used migrant corridors" (Rosas 338). And Edward Williams and Irasema Coronado refer to these mid-nineties deployment operations as deploying "massive numbers of Border Patrol officers, national guardsmen, and other paramilitary" personnel (72). The overwhelming impression left by such accounts is of the immense material presence of militarized human bodies physically walling off passage to other migrant human bodies along these sections of the border. Through the mid-90s, before the escalation of built walls and fences, the walls and fences were human.

But as these actual bodies were eventually replaced, in many cases, by steel walls and concrete barricades, the agency of erstwhile human blockades was distributed into and over the length of these barriers built into the landscape. While such imposing structures are outstandingly visible, the "funneling," "channeling," or "balloon" effects these structures have had, forcing migrants across "killing deserts" and other forms of extreme risk and exposure have been less immediately observable (De León 6; Madsen; Rosas 334, 338). Hunt notes that, since the earliest boundary surveys, the borderlands deserts' aridity was conceived as a "buffer zone" of "racial separation," and an implicit deterrent to crossing (144-45). And Patrick Ettinger shows how, at least as far back as the Chinese exclusion acts of 1882, US authorities have consciously and deliberately understood and exploited the rough terrain and extreme climate conditions of remote borderlands mountains and deserts in early instances of what would officially become a prevention through deterrence (PTD) policy in the early nineties (256-57).

However, it was not until several years after the placement of these first barriers, human and structural, through more prominent migration corridors, that the thousands of "environmental deaths" by factors such as falls, drowning, "hyperthermia, hypothermia and dehydration" began to gain the attention of researchers (Eschbach et al. 430, 442) and scholars recognizing the ways in which "Border Patrol's strategy . . . wields the environment itself as a weapon" "against immigrants in the name of national security" (Adamson 234; Ray 2010, 726, 728). In historicizing this arc of PTD enforcement tactics, we witness the distribution of human agency from settler colonial, ethnonationalist, and neoliberal US policy makers, to armed paramilitary human bodies, then into structures of the built environment, and, finally, as that agency is further diffused across complex webs

of multiple kinds of human and nonhuman actors—plants, animals, landforms, watercourses, climate and weather conditions, and so on.

In his 2015 book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Jason De León applies a holistic “four-field anthropology—that is ethnography, archaeology, forensic science, and linguistics” to study the impacts of prevention through deterrence on human migrants, in order to better “understand the structure of a wall of deterrence that is equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown” (14, 39). Framing this as a form of “structural violence,” De León documents the “cunning way that nature has been conscripted by the Border Patrol to act as an enforcer while simultaneously providing this federal agency with plausible deniability regarding blame for any victims the desert may claim” (16, 29-30). He argues that although “this violence has been outsourced” to environmental factors and agents, this “does not mean these fatalities should be characterized as ‘unintended consequences’ or natural events” (67-68). Going on to detail the full, morbid extent of this phenomenon, which he terms “necroviolence,” De León contends “that the unique deaths that border crossers experience and the way nature affects their bodies are a form of postmortem violence that developed out of the underlying logic of” PTD, wherein “American necropolitics are pecked onto the bones of those we deem excludable” (69, 72, 84). Such state-sanctioned deployment of “remote *deathscape(s)*” (deserts, jungles, oceans, etc.) for the illicit mass “disappearing” of human bodies is a tactic long practiced against and understood by indigenous, politically vulnerable, female and queer, dissident, and other marginalized people in Mexico and across Latin America generally (De León 84). In such instances, these *desaparecidos*—and their survivors—increasingly participate in “political imaginaries” of “transnational solidarity” with those of Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and across much of Central and South America (Rosas 336, 343; Brooks 129-135).

Due to the unavailability of a human cadaver farm in or near the Sonoran Desert, De León applies what he calls “multispecies ethnography,” using the bodies of domestic pigs to study the dismemberment, decomposition, weathering, animal scavenging (coyotes, dogs, vultures, insects), and dispersal of the bodies of people who die and remain missing in the course of their migration across the region (64, 75-80). He defines this approach as “an ethnography that focuses on how the lives and deaths of humans and nonhumans are closely intertwined and jointly shaped by cultural, economic, and political forces,” in order to “better document the demise of people the federal government has constructed as nonsubjects; people whose lives have no political or social value,” or, in other words, are considered less-than-fully-human (64). In recognizing the implicit and dark irony in the fact that “these animals are now tasked with humanizing death,” De León states that his purpose here is “to bear witness to animal suffering but also to demonstrate how pigs can do the social work of providing humans with access to the largely invisible suffering and violence associated with the postmortem lives of migrants” (64-65).

In contrast to earlier-noted instances in which nonhuman animals are deployed against migrant and other indigenous and mestizo people, in these multispecies entanglements, animals participate in the revelation and denunciation of state sponsored violence. Such cross-species witnessing can take many forms. For example, in the print

“Denounce the complicity of the Mexican government,” revolutionary artist collective ASARO depicts a scavenging dog uncovering the remains of a female human body. The call for denunciation is situated within a growing public recognition of what has increasingly been referred to as an “epidemic” of femicides in Mexico, both internally as well as in the borderlands. This national crisis is compounded by a negligent state that routinely fails or refuses to do its diligence in investigating femicides, especially in instances where public security and legal systems are known to collude with other parties, such as cartels, human traffickers, and US agencies who negotiate and enact coercive binational policies that expose refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants to deadly risks. Here the denunciation is twofold. The title appeals directly to viewers to participate in demands for accountability, while the scavenging dog’s act constitutes the investigation of a femicide and is itself an act of denunciation.



fig. 1: “Denunciar la complicidad del gobierno de México,” ASARO (Asamblea de Artistas Revolucionarios de Oaxaca), 2006, wood engraving print.

These cross- and multispecies examples of witnessing, authenticating, and thus rehumanizing the deaths of those often regarded as less than fully human gestures inevitably toward larger questions about the status of other nonhuman animals in the borderlands. Over the past two decades of post-9/11 securitization, as sections along the Mexico-US border have been increasingly hardened, ecologists have studied the new (im)permeabilities and uneven mobilities emerging for nonhuman migrants through these regions. For example, in 2008, US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) completed construction on twelve new contiguous miles of barrier fencing in the Malpai Borderlands region of Arizona, New Mexico, Chihuahua, and Sonora. An analysis published shortly thereafter in *Conservation Biology* notes that

The construction was part of the U.S. Secure Fence Act of 2006, which mandated installation of fences, barriers, roads, and surveillance technology on five segments of the United States-Mexican border, totaling approximately 1120 km [700 miles] (or 35% of the entire border) by December 2008. To expedite implementation of the act, Congress authorized the secretary of Homeland Security to waive all or parts of 37 federal statutes pertaining to the conservation of cultural and environmental resources, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, and the Antiquities Act. (Sayre and Knight 345)

The authors explain how this particular stretch of the DHS project also disrupts “cultural sites and artifacts” across a region that “harbors an estimated 4000 species of plants, 104 species of mammals, 327 species of birds, 136 species of reptiles and amphibians, and the greatest known richness of bee species in the world . . . [in part] due to its location at the intersection of five continental biomes” (345). And, placing this region within the larger context of the borderlands generally, they note that

there are more species of plants and animals in the borderlands than in any other place of comparable size in the United States. . . . Indeed, it is precisely the relative lack of human impacts that has allowed the biological and cultural resources along the border to persist in situ, and it is for this reason that hardening the border may represent a threat of such great proportions. (345-46)

The threat noted above is not one of human migration and its potential or supposed impacts in the region—which has been recognized in “green anti-immigration discourse” and critically problematized for its “misdirected, uninformed, and dangerous” xenophobia and racism (Ray 2010, 729). Rather, the authors raise concerns primarily about environmental impacts of infrastructure associated with the building project, and, secondarily, about its impacts on the region’s prehistoric and historic “[c]ultural sites and artifacts” (345). The authors go on to discuss, more specifically, various species (mule deer, pronghorn antelope, javelina, coyote, mountain lion, etc.) who “can and do pass under or over this type of [Normandy] barrier, albeit after a period of cautious familiarization or hesitation” while newly constructed cattle guards “are effectively lethal pit-fall traps” for other, smaller species of mammals, amphibians, and reptiles (346-47).

Likewise, in 2009, in response to these same DHS border-hardening developments, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology partnered with the International League of Conservation Photographers to travel the entire length of the border to produce the short

twelve-minute documentary “Borderlands, Continental Divide.” The film’s stated purpose was “to raise awareness of the peril that border infrastructure places on the long-term survival of myriad species that live in the borderlands,” and it depicts a suite of wildlife impacted by various stretches of metal fencing, concrete walls, and other barriers, along with the erosion and other habitat degradation their construction entails. Foxes, jackrabbits, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, bobcats, ocelots, bison, porcupines, badgers, geese, grebes, Gila monsters, desert tortoises, toads, and other animals are specifically discussed and shown, in many cases, blocked by or bumping up against the fence, unable to pass through. And a study from the same period to those above, focusing more specifically on Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls and desert bighorn sheep, notes the ways in which “security infrastructure along international boundaries threatens to degrade [landscape] connectivity” and the “transboundary movements” of wildlife in these “highly fragmented environments” (Flesch et al. 171-72). These authors examine and compare the various body shapes and sizes (relative to gaps in or under certain fencing), and mobilities (terrestrial/pedestrian, flying heights, etc.) of “many Neotropical and Nearctic taxa” (desert tortoise, turkey, quail, black bear, jaguar, bats, etc.) whose ranges converge in the borderlands, concluding, in part, that “in regions with continuous impermeable fencing, wildlife crossing structures should be considered” (172, 180).

A consistent observation in these and other such studies is that the border’s “impacts are . . . uneven across different types of organisms, communities, and processes; and causal interactions are complex and difficult to disentangle” (Sayre and Knight 346). For example, they note how DHS enforcement roads may act as corridors for “invasive or nonnative plant species” (347), language that is often mirrored in nativist and other dehumanizing US rhetoric that has long marked the bodies of human migrants and immigrants as less-than-human (Ray 2010, 713-14; Santa Ana 314; Zavisca; Brooks). And because border fencing and walls are built with the explicit intention of blocking the movement of a single species—humans—that measures might be taken to offer better “transboundary connectivity” for other nonhuman animals (Flesch et al. 172). A noteworthy exception to this single-species-based exclusion has been the “search and destroy” missions directed toward “the invasion of Africanized ‘killer’ bees” when they crossed into the US from the south in the early 1990s (Williams and Coronado 70). One parallel between the crossing of these insects and of people over this national border that should strike us as unsettlingly familiar, is the siege mentality and rhetoric of panic and menace directed toward the former that currently persists toward the latter in public discourse. In the mid-90s, Hachiro Shimanuki, then national coordinator of USDA Agricultural Research Service’s Africanized Honey Bee Program, noted that “Africanized honey bees are actually a far cry from the image of the fearsome marauders constantly hunting for human victims that the media hype has created” (2). However, today a Google search for “killer bee” still brings in over two million results, compared to just over fifty thousand for “Africanized bee.” The close correspondence between the kinds of inflammatory epithets applied to “killer” bees nearly three decades ago, and those of “criminal,” “rapist,” and “murderer,” contemptuously applied to human migrants by the US’s forty-fifth president, should not escape our attention. Although measures taken

against these insects' entry into the US coincided roughly with the escalation of other such enforcement measures against human migrants, a key difference here is that the traplines and other monitoring practices undertaken with the bees were generally binational collaborations of Mexican and US researchers (Kaplan 6), as opposed to the unilateral actions taken by the US against human migrants.

Aside from the rhetorical and political parallels these studies in borderlands movement ecology illustrate, they should also remind us of the various layers of disastrous impacts such walls and other barriers entail for local ecosystems, as well as for the nonhuman biota that require passage through them as they move between sometimes distant seasonal ranges. Also, although, it is not my interest here to suggest that wildlife conservation is necessarily or in these cases misanthropic or racist, I do wish to draw greater attention to the complex interspecies and other material entanglements, the uneven contours of which I believe these studies help describe. Certain nonhuman animals participate in (certain kinds of) mobility, while (certain kinds of) humans do not. Certain material "human" and "natural" "resources" and substances, often asymmetrically commodified through "free trade" arrangements, participate unevenly in cross-border movement and traffic (Galemba 716, 729). And certain humans, and their "borderless" deterritorialized flows of capital, enjoy free passage, while others carry heavy material burdens and risks.

For example, in the hardening of the border since the mid 1990s, and its swollen militarization and securitization along many stretches of the boundary post-9/11, human migrants are increasingly compelled to throw in their lot with botanical partners or passengers like cannabis, cocaine, or heroin (Dunn 283). Javier Durán notes that, with "the increased number of actors involved," these "actors are part of full networks of very violent and competitive agendas in a context where the distinction between authorities and criminals is constantly blurred," and "that the human trafficking networks have close ties with drug traffickers, making the issue even more complex and dangerous for migrants" (206). As one migrant man explains in Francisco Cantú's 2018 memoir-exposé, "I don't want to carry drugs across the desert, I don't want to get myself into more problems, but sometimes it's not a choice. The same people who control the drug smuggling control the human trafficking, so in some places if you want to get across, you have to carry a load" (239). In such instances, we see how transnational human appetites for certain controlled botanical substances merge with northern demands for labor-ready human bodies, to dehumanize and recast certain people as "mules" and *pollos*, and others as "coyotes" and *polleros*.

Conclusion

Although elsewhere I and others have explored some of the more transformative, liberatory, and frankly, encouraging transnational interspecies alliances and solidarities that are emerging in response to uneven and dehumanizing valuations of life in the borderlands detailed here (Brooks; Ray "Environmental Justice"; Wald 207-220), I have primarily focused this essay's attention on these ongoing tragedies in the borderlands.

However, in order to clarify their structure and shape in conclusion, and to briefly indicate some directions toward progress, I wish to turn to a final set of examples. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned the 2009 partnership between Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the International League of Conservation Photographers to create a short video called “Borderlands, Continental Divide.” One of the video’s central arguments is that the conservationist priorities to “respect the needs of wildlife” by leaving corridors open for nonhuman animals (many of which are critically endangered) “to move through the landscape” are compatible with a model of “national security . . . [that] depends on the ability to seal off our borders.” Amid a montage of scenic border-region landscape photos interspersed with jarring images of sections of new border wall, and a soft audio backdrop of birdsong, wind, and camera shutter clicks, the video makes its closing appeal: “We can protect both our borders and our wildlife. Doing so is not only important but necessary” (9:00). Strategically understandable as this rhetorical framing may have been in its moment—and whether or not the above claim is actually true in practice—what I wish to underscore here is the *positionality* of such claims. As it applies to both wildlife and borders, the “our” of this final couplet remains a settler colonial one, framing the needs for protecting both evenly and above the needs of migrant, indigenous, mestizo, and other humans rendered vulnerable by colonialist and neoliberal economic and political structures. What I hope this and the above interspecies examples unmistakably indicate is the practical untenability of, and the severe harm done in continuing to pursue borderlands solutions from Western colonialist or human exceptionalist positionalities.

However, there have been significant shifts in the decade or so since the above and other aforementioned studies suggested possibilities for securing the border against human migrants while “enhanc[ing] connectivity” for “wildlife movement” (Flesch et al. 180). Human rights advocates, transnational indigenous sovereignty movements, and conservation organizations have increasingly rejected or simply bypassed arguments dependent on speciesism, human exceptionalism, individual rights, and limited wildlife protections, in favor of more profoundly holistic, interspecies, and decolonial claims to migrancy, human and otherwise. Such shifts are apparent, for instance, in a seventy-page report released in September 2018 by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), in partnership with the Center for Biological Diversity, the Southwest Environmental Center, the Sierra Club, and the Southern Border Communities Coalition. Titled “Death, Damage, and Failure: Past, Present, and Future Impacts of Walls on U.S.-Mexico Border,” the report details “the wide-ranging damages that existing walls have inflicted upon border communities, the environment, and the lives of border crossers” (2). In framing the harm and risk entailed in a hardened, militarized, and increasingly walled border as mutually shared among human and larger biotic communities, the ACLU report is in many ways encouragingly representative of the more-than-human turn that our attention must take in order to address these and other human rights, environmental justice, and conservation crises, including migrancy, displacement, refugeeism, and extinction.

In her popular and quite excellent 2020 book *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move*, journalist Sonia Shah makes a ranging and often lyrical case for, among other things, naturalizing human migration. The book does so largely by

locating human migration within the global context of other nonhuman migrations, and by historicizing the normalization of hardened international borders as a recent and unnecessary development, to which there exist many alternatives. In the book's closing section, Shah invites readers to

envision a world in which people, too, safely move across the landscape. People seeking to move as the climate changes or as their livelihoods dry up don't have to risk being hunted down by Border Patrol agents or drowning in the sea or dying in the desert. International borders that now bristle with armed guards, razor wire, and border walls could be made softer and more permeable. (315)

The solutions she discusses in this concluding appeal for making "migration safe, dignified, and humane" include countries creating "legal pathways for migrants in search of new livelihoods . . . to collect and share [their] data . . . and provide them with proof of their identity, so that migration can become more regular and orderly," as well as "measures to make it easier for migrants to send funds and other support to the places they've left behind" (315-16). Shah concludes by suggesting how we "can turn migration from a crisis into its opposite: the solution" (316). Given the current status of the Mexico-US borderlands, such alternatives are, of course, tremendously appealing as comparatively compassionate and reasonable models for modest progress. And it is genuinely encouraging to see the prospect of these appeals reaching wider audiences. However, such arguments are still fraught with elisions of ongoing harm, as they remain contained within vestiges of colonialist, neoliberal, and globalist geopolitical paradigms that also assume as natural the economic and political causes—and the environmental factors these produce—that increasingly compel certain migrants (human and nonhuman) to leave their homes in order to survive.⁴ In removing built walls that violently divide both human and nonhuman communities and kin, we cannot then be satisfied with leaving in place colonial power systems, political structures, and patterns of thought. Just and viable solutions to the migratory circumstances produced by colonialism and environmental degradation must be prepared to engage more honestly and creatively with models other than Western humanist and speciesist ones. Our work as scholars, teachers, and human beings includes seeking to better identify, explore, understand, and practice such models.

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⁴ Just as many communities around the world are asserting their right to migrate as a matter of survival, others facing environmental and economic factors making survival in their home regions more precarious are asserting their right to not have to be forced to migrate. For example, labor journalist David Bacon's 2013 *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*, details *derecho de no migrar* movements in Oaxaca and elsewhere across Mexico, as they respond to global trade liberalization factors that are forcing people to leave lands where they have lived for thousands of years. Bacon argues that "protecting Mexico's environment, and the rights of migrants displaced by environmental and economic causes, requires making the connection between trade reform, environmental protection, and immigrant and labor rights" (4). Rob Nixon's concept of "displacement without moving" is especially operative in such instances (19).

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