THE UNDERSIDE OF BORDERS: READING CHICAN@ AND NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

“The Underside of Borders: Reading Chican@ and Native American Literature at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” focuses on Chican@ and Native American novels published from 1990 to the present. Teasing out the common denominators of different methodologies grouped under the umbrella term “border theory,” my project expands the material and discursive range of the field, creating a critical platform that puts Native American and Chican@ concerns in conversation. Finding common ground between these two bodies of literature in overlapping histories of colonialism, violence, and oppression, this comparative project takes on the literary representation of borders both as geopolitical lines and metaphorical constructs. The analysis in it draws connections between the ideologies that shape the discourse around borders in the cultural imaginary and the pervasive violence that mires Indigenous and Chican@ histories in the US. In doing so, I reveal discursive spaces where issues relevant to Chican@ and American Indian Studies converge, overlap, and stand at odds. Using literary examples from Chican@ and Native American writers my project expands our understanding of how borders affect the way we read each other culturally and socially. To this end, I draw a connection between the ideological premises underlying processes of Americanization and the violence inflicted on non-dominant histories and lived experiences that disrupt a homogeneous and sanitized version of national genealogy. Overall, I argue for a critical perspective attuned to the implications of borders, a perspective that gives voice to peoples and historical narratives often willfully erased by master narratives of the nation.
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Introduction

Reading contemporary Chican@ and Native American literature through borders

This project analyzes contemporary Chican@\(^1\) and Native American novels using a critical approach grounded in the study of borders both as geopolitical lines of demarcation and as ideological and metaphorical constructs. Teasing out the common denominators of different methodologies grouped under the umbrella term “border theory,” my project expands the material and discursive range of the field, creating a critical platform that puts Native American and Chican@ concerns in conversation. Through the study of borders and the ideologies that give them shape, I reveal discursive spaces where issues relevant to Chican@ and American Indian Studies converge, overlap, and stand at odds. Using literary examples from Chican@ and Native American writers my project expands our understanding of how borders affect the way we read each other culturally and socially. To this end, I draw a connection between the ideological premises underlying processes of Americanization and the violence inflicted on non-dominant histories and lived experiences that disrupt a homogeneous and sanitized version of national genealogy. Overall, I argue for a critical perspective attuned to the implications of borders, a perspective that gives voice to peoples and historical narratives often willfully erased by master narratives of the nation.

To set up the project, this introduction briefly situates Native American and Chican@ literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. It furthermore presents the idea of borders as a productive starting point to establish a conversation between Chican@ and American Indian

\(^1\) I use the ending -@ as it is used in Spanish to signify simultaneously masculine (-o) and feminine (-a) grammatical gender in a word, in this case Chicana/Chicano.
literature\textsuperscript{2}, giving a brief overview of the stakes in the US-Mexico border, the US-Canada border, and what I identify as reservation borders.

Since the rise of the Civil Rights movement and the emergence of Ethnic Studies departments in institutions of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a notable increase in the literary production by Chican@ and Native American writers, among other ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{3} The struggle of minorities for recognition, participation, and representation in the public arena that drove the Civil Rights movement in its different manifestations (Black Power, Movimiento, American Indian Movement, Women’s Liberation, and Gay Liberation) opened up a space for literary expression to thrive and vice versa. Together with the proliferation of Ethnic Studies departments and the progressive expansion of the American literary canon, Indian and Chican@ writers found a market trampoline that contributed to making them visible and accessible to a broader public. The production of literary works by Native American and Chican@ authors (among others) in the last quarter of the twentieth century has contributed to questioning the comprehensiveness of a received literary canon of American literature, resulting in the inclusion of representative texts in these traditions in major literary anthologies.

The move towards more extensive representation of cultural voices in literary anthologies has resulted not only in the inclusion of contemporary works by Native American and Chican@ writers but also in the oftentimes questionable incorporation of earlier texts representing both literary traditions. Since the current growth of these two bodies of literature creates a critical mass that demands recognition as part of the canon of US literature, editors and publishers have strived to incorporate earlier Hispanic/Mexican American and American Indian writing in their

\textsuperscript{2} In this project I refer to Native peoples by their tribal affiliations when possible. When talking about Native peoples with different tribal affiliations I use Native American, American Indian, Native, Indian, and Indigenous people interchangeably, even though I recognize the highly charged historical uses of some of these terms.

\textsuperscript{3} The University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco State University, for example, were among the first institutions of higher education in the US to establish Ethnic Studies departments in 1969.
anthologies. The Heath Anthology of American Literature, edited by Paul Lauter, for example, includes texts by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Fray Marcos de Niza in its “Colonial Period to 1700” section, and it also includes a “Native American Oral Tradition” section in the same time period. Some anthologies of Native American literature, such as Kilcup’s, or Littlefield’s, also include the work of authors dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Similarly to The Heath Anthology, Kanellos’ Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literature of the United States brings its recovery project back to the colonial period and the work of Spanish conquistadores such as Cabeza de Vaca and de Niza. These apparent pioneers of literary expression in both fields, however, find a small place in most anthologies of Mexican American/Chican@/Latin@ and Native American literature since most of them focus predominantly on twentieth century literature. The effort to incorporate texts that date back to colonial periods to create a seeming genealogical continuum that validates the historiographical presence of these two bodies of literature in the trajectory of US literature results in troubling ideological conflicts: on the one hand, the inclusion of writings by Spanish conquistadores as part of the genealogy of Mexican American and Chican@ literature in the US works to validate colonial endeavors and to anchor Mexican American experience in the colonizer’s intellectual tradition. In the same vein, the transcription of Native chants and prayers into poetic form without acknowledging their cultural tradition or the Indigenous peoples that helped translate them erases American Indian

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4 In this project I use the term Chican@ to refer to people of Mexican descent in the US in a contemporary setting. The term Chican@ was adopted in the 1960s by the Chicano Movement or Movimiento to refer to an idiosyncratic and politicized collective identity different from a larger Latin@ community in the US. It expresses an awareness of the way the history of conquest and colonization has affected and continues to affect the lives of this minority group in the US (see Allatson, pg. 61). Since it would be anachronistic to refer to earlier literature as Chican@ literature, I will use the term Mexican American to refer to pre-1960s literary production.


6 The incorporation of Spanish colonial accounts as part of a Chican@ genealogy creates quite a bit of controversy in the field in terms of cultural and ideological difference, even though important critics such as Juan Bruce-Novoa or Alfred Arteaga support a case for their incorporation. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldivar, on the other hand, fervently disagree with Bruce-Novoa and Arteaga. In The Latino Body, Lázaro Lima presents a compelling analysis of the genealogy of the Latino subject in American cultural and literary history.
agency while forcing Native expression into a form that is recognizable by a mainstream Anglo readership: poetry.\(^7\) While the inclusion of cultural and literary production as an expansion of a representative canon makes available works that would otherwise not be accessible, the ideological premises behind the choices of what to include in literary anthologies and how to present it always need to be examined.

Since early literary production by Native writers and writers of Spanish origin is not readily accessible, its inclusion in literary anthologies and academic curricula has to wait patiently for the work of committed scholars who undertake the monumental task of combing the archives in search of not-yet-found literary texts. Fortunately, recent efforts to recover literary works from the archival trove have yielded success. On the Hispanic front, for example, we find the Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, a national program led by the founder and director of Arte Público Press Nicolás Kanellos. Launched in 1992, the Recovery Project endeavors to find obscure and/or ignored literary works by writers of Hispanic origin and to make them accessible to the reading public.\(^8\) The Recovery Project has made available works such as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1885, 1992) and *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872, 1995). For Native American literature, on the other hand, individual efforts by scholars such as Robert Dale Parker have contributed to the recovery of early Native American writing. Parker’s edition and biography *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky. The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft* (2007) presents the writings of Ojibwe Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800-1842), salvaging her writing from under the thumb of white

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\(^7\) The inclusion of Native American prayers and chants as part of the literary history of Native peoples raises questions about the essentialization of indigenous cultural difference and the manipulation of native cultural expression to fit hegemonic notions of literature and cultural development. For a lucid articulation of the problematic reshaping of Native cultural traditions see Robert Dale Parker’s *The Invention of Native American Literature*, xii-xiii.

\(^8\) The Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Project focuses on work produced by authors of Hispanic origin from colonial times to the 1960s in what today is the US territory.
patriarchal authority and offering it in an annotated scholarly edition to the broader reading public. The individual and collective efforts to recover literary works contribute to filling in the gaps in cultural and literary trajectories that can slowly become genealogical lines linked to future literary productions.

While some literary anthologies include texts by Native authors and authors of Hispanic origin that date back to colonial periods, the weight of this early literary production has at best a cursory bearing on the canon formation of these two bodies of literature so far, let alone in the imagining of a canon of US literature. Contemporary Chican@ and Native American literary production, in contrast, starts to occupy a more grounded seat in the space of US literature and in the formation of a US literary history. The critical clout that American Indian and Chican@ literary texts are slowly accruing, even if sometimes only to fulfill an imagined multicultural dream, awakens the reading public’s interest and the ways scholars engage with and understand earlier literary texts in both fields. Thus, while older texts in these two literary traditions may not be easily available or present in the commonplace US cultural imaginary, contemporary Chican@ and Native American literary expression has become a force to contend with in contemporary renditions of US literary history. Compared to the dearth of novels by Mexican American and Indian writers before the 1960s, for example, the proliferation of novels by Native authors since the so-called Native American Renaissance and of Chican@ authors since the heyday of the Movimiento is notable and fares much better in today’s market. While commercial and scholarly publishing houses champion a handful of Chican@ and Native authors to the detriment of wider and more inclusive publishing practices,9 one can only hope that the current market exposure of Native American and Chican@ authors is creating, on the one hand, a

9 See the Preface to Parker’s The Invention of Native American Literature (2003) for a discussion about the recent popularity of Native American writers or Tey Diana Rebolledo’s The Chronicles of Panchita Villa and Other Guerrilleras for a similar argument with respect to Chican@ and Latin@ literature.
responsive reading audience that creates a lucrative market niche (that in turn opens the possibility of publishing for lesser-known authors), and, on the other hand, the inclusion of Chican@ and Native American literary production into academic curricula and educational settings (that in turn benefits the publishing houses and renders the market for these bodies of literature more profitable). The current growth of literary production by Native American and Chican@ writers allows for a view of issues, contemporary and historical, that both enable and constitute the ground for the study I am undertaking in this project.

This study offers an analysis of contemporary Chican@ and Native American literary texts to assess a variety of issues at the heart of these two literary traditions. Scholars in both these areas have produced a critical body of work that engages Chican@ and American Indian literature individually. In the field of Native American literature, for example, Louis Owens, Craig S. Womack, Greg Sarris, and Jayce Weaver among others have published critical works engaging Native American literature in general and offering different frameworks for the analysis and the study of Native literary production.\(^\text{10}\) In regard to Chican@ literature, José David Saldivar, Héctor Calderón, Sonia Saldivar-Hull, and Mary Pat Brady among others have written critical volumes addressing the idiosyncrasies of Chican@ literature.\(^\text{11}\) Although many scholars have devoted their critical attention to the analysis of Native American and Chican@ literature, literary scholars do not often put Chican@ and Native American literature in conversation.\(^\text{12}\)

Even though the thematic overlap (coming of age stories, negotiating home and mainstream life,


struggles over assimilation, claiming a space of recognition in a white-dominated public sphere, etc.) and the parallels in marginal subject positions between Chican@ and American Indian fictional characters suggest a productive ground for comparative study, literary critics engage with these two bodies of literature independently from each other for the most part. The analysis of Indian and Chican@ novels in conversation, however, helps trouble the creation of a homogeneous national genealogy in the US: it does so by revealing under-recognized perspectives about national belonging and by highlighting a multiplicity of alternative historical genealogies that stand at odds with master narratives of the nation. At the same time, recognizing the idiosyncratic differences in both literary traditions breaks the easy mold of monolithic racial or ethnic otherness and opens up the possibility of a multi-focal vantage point for the analysis of historical, cultural, and literary representations.

Oftentimes, critical analyses of Chican@ and Native American literary works raise concerns about the position that Indian and Chican@ subjects occupy in the broader fabric of US social and cultural life. Some analyses pivot around questions of access or lack of access to social, cultural, and economic power. They focus on issues of social justice and the friction between homogenizing narratives of national belonging, organized along axes of racial and ideological sameness, and the bodies that such narratives necessarily exclude to create the illusion of a core of sameness and homogeneity. At the same time, the critical engagement with Native and Chican@ literary works usually centers on lived realities that differ from and coexist with mainstream US social life, realities often negated and erased by projects of national identity-creation and nation building precisely because they put into question the generally accepted framework used to articulate the nation.
While the tension between mainstream American-ness (deemed in the national imaginary as mostly white, protestant, economically stable, and sharing a common history of US exceptionalism) and those other groups that fall out of the all-American paradigm can be readily found in critical studies of Chican@ and Native American literature, it is rare to find scholarly works that establish a connection between Indians and Chican@s as groups marginal to US national narratives. Since Native American and Chican@ literary texts articulate national genealogies that differ from and challenge narratives of US exceptionalism, looking at these literary representations side by side throws into relief the many ways that projects of nation building inflict violence on those bodies deemed undesirable for that very purpose. Thus, a comparative study of Chican@ and Native American literary representations contributes to the dismantling of a Manichean model of literary and cultural analysis (white vs. other/other vs. white) and shows the interconnection, overlapping, and friction of multiple cultural and literary manifestations within the fabric of the US. Therein lies the goal of this project: to analyze contemporary Native American and Chican@ novels and show the mobilization of ideological forces designed to discipline and contain these two social groups. In doing so, this project examines the inclusion and exclusion of Chican@s and Indians from the national fold. Thus, it gains perspective over processes of nation building deployed in imagining the US social and cultural geography as a coherent space.

Since borders constitute one of the most powerful ways of imagining and enforcing national geographies, my project therefore takes borders as its organizing principle. Borders function as the legal and ideological boundaries that give shape to the nation, the containment lines that determine inclusion and exclusion into its body politic, and the control mechanisms that determine access along the lines of citizenship status. At the same time, the ideology that
constructs borders as such plays a crucial role in organizing social structures and social relations as well as genealogical narratives that present a coherent and cohesive history of the nation. Inasmuch as the restructuring of demarcation lines stands at the heart of the histories of colonialism that I take as the primal common ground between Chican@ and American Indian experiences, borders can frame a conversation these two literary traditions. Taking borders as the nexus bringing together Native American and Chican@ literature, then, opens up the opportunity to establish a social and historical dialogue to interpret cultural representations of Indians and Chican@s in literary works. Doing so breaks the traditional borders between these two bodies of literature, when they are considered in isolation, to capitalize on the interplay of shared historical dynamics between them. While in many Chican@ novels such as Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo*, Norma Cantú’s *Canícula*, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Alburquerque*, Denise Chávez’s *Face of an Angel*, Emma Pérez’s *Gulf Dreams* and *Forgetting the Alamo* or *Blood Memory* the border occupies a position of primacy in the development of the plot or the characters, in American Indian literature borders are always implicitly central. In Chican@ literary works, the border shapes the experience of the characters (whether by crossing it or by living on either side of it) and in constructing the social positions available to them in the US. In novels by Indian writers, borders play a central role inasmuch as reservations are always delimited space within the US and many characters define their journey either by going home to the reservation, going away from it, or juggling the different worlds they occupy while within the reservation boundaries and without. In either literary tradition, borders bring to the forefront issues of land base, national geographies, histories of colonization, and access to citizenship and social participation. While these aspects play differently in Native and Chican@ novels, they offer a common ground to explore the social representation and cultural recognition of both
Chican@s and Indians in the US. The literary analyses in this project reflect on how borders shape social relations, how they contribute to socially recognizable subject positions, and how we can use borders as a critical lens to expose social, cultural, and historical erasure in the construction of a national master narrative.

The international boundaries between the US, Mexico, and Canada represent multiple axes in an intricate hemispheric web of social and economic forces. Not only do these borders play a key part in the ideological structuring of national identity in the US but also they carry weight for the supple workings of social and economic infrastructures in this era of globalization. The National Security Strategy briefing made available by the White House in May 2010 affirms that the strategic partnerships and unique relationships we maintain with Canada and Mexico are critical to U.S. national security and have a direct effect on the security of our homeland. With billions of dollars in trade, shared critical infrastructure, and millions of our citizens moving across our common borders, no two countries are more directly connected to our daily lives. We must change the way we think about our shared borders, in order to secure and expedite the lawful and legitimate flow of people and goods while interdicting transnational threat [sic] that threaten our open societies. (United States 42)

As this excerpt of the briefing makes clear, borders take shape in relation to the movement of capital, people and goods, as well as in relation to the control and containment of elements designed to disrupt national security. While the US maintains vigorous economic and social relationships with Mexico and Canada, the heavy flow of people and goods through these national borders attracts careful control of movement in the name of national stability and security.

The surveillance and control of borders in the US demand a great allocation of personnel and resources from the federal government. Some 20,000 Border Patrol agents control and inspect more than 7,500 miles of national borders (Pfeiffer), and the federal budget for fiscal year 2011 projected $43.5 billion channeled to the Department of Homeland Security, $4.6 billion of it to
“support 20,000 Border Patrol agents and complete the first segment of the Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) virtual border fence” (Office of Management and Budget). In addition, another $9.4 billion were allocated to pay for 300 new CBP Officers for passenger and cargo screening at ports of entry. The allocation of budget and personnel is divided between the US-Mexico border and the US-Canada border, with approximately 87% of the border agents deployed to the southern border. As the distribution in the allocation of agents and resources confirms, even though the southern border roughly represents 26% of the border space in the US it receives much more attention from the federal government than the 49th parallel.

The southern border presents a high stakes national boundary. The nearly 2,000 miles designating the national limits between the US and Mexico form an increasingly militarized zone, or what historian Timothy Dunn refers to as a zone of low-intensity militarized conflict amplified during the last few decades (148). During the fiscal year 2009 approximately 17,400 Border Patrol agents were deployed to the southern border in an effort to put 697 miles under what CBP defines as “effective control,” meaning areas in which the detection of illegal border crossers by Border Patrol agents is likely to result in the apprehension of the border crosser, leaving some 1,300 miles of border space lacking productive surveillance (Jeffrey). The southern border is the largest drug corridor in the US, and the borderlands are riddled with violence as drug cartels settle scores and fight for territorial control. At the same time, the borderlands also represent a crucial center of industrial production for the US as factories are outsourced south of the border in search of lower overhead costs and cheap labor. The flow of goods and people through the US-Mexico border proves central to the economic stability of the US service economy. In response to the escalation of border violence in the last decade, the Obama administration announced in June 2009 the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics
Strategy, a plan to curtail the illegal flow of narcotics across the US-Mexico border and to help reduce the crime and violence that afflicts the borderlands (Lee). As a primary piece of the political, social and labor economy of the US, the southern border represents a highly visible national boundary that has direct consequences in the nation’s social and economic structure.

In the same way that the US-Mexico border receives a great deal of attention from the federal government, it also occupies a central position in popular discourses about borders in the national imaginary. From popular culture portrayals, to media exposure, to politics, representations of the US-Mexico border shape mainstream conceptions about border spaces. As “the most frequently screened landscap[e] of North America” (Dell’Agnese 204), the US-Mexico border region has become a staple of US films: in innumerable westerns of different eras including *The Magnificent Seven* (1960, dir. John Sturges), *The Wild Bunch* (1969, dir. Sam Peckinpah), or *All the Pretty Horses* (2000, dir. Billy Bob Thorton) the border provides the backdrop for rugged lives, outlaws, tests of strength and bravery, the righting of wrongs and the defense of honor, often sprinkled by troubled interracial romances and love stories. In contrast to the westerns and their representation of space as the landscape for dramas of man vs. nature or man vs. man, other popular movies such as *Men in Black* (1997, dir. Barry Sonnenfeld), *Traffic* (2000, dir. Steven Soderbergh), or *Fast & Furious* (2009, dir. Justin Lin) use the border as the ideological and material background for their story lines. In these action films the border appears as a space of violence, mayhem, death, drug trafficking, illegal crossings, and movement regulation, helping create the commonplace discourse of the border space as a dangerous environment that needs to be policed and controlled. *Men in Black*, for example, echoes the material reality of the US-Mexico border and uses the discourse about illegal immigrants, border crossings, citizenship and legal paperwork to situate the audience’s framework of reference and
help them make sense of the alien invasion/alien movement control that constitutes the plot of
the film. In Traffic and Fast & Furious the world of drug cartels and cross-border trafficking
takes center stage, adding to the idea of the border as a space plagued with undesirable subjects
that need to be kept at bay from the nation’s doors. In yet other films such as Lone Star (1996,
dir. John Sayles), the border serves as the spinal cord that holds past and present events in place:
it becomes the constitutive element of histories of violence, racialization, Americanization, and
family ties that shape the experiences of border dwellers.

In addition to the use of the borderlands in movies, the US-Mexico border appears
prominently in news stories and in political discourses. The news coverage of the boundary line,
as the analysis of the National Public Radio’s series in Chapter 2 shows, and the use of the
border as part of political campaigns emphasize the US-Mexico border as a space that requires
attention and control, as a space where the safety of the nation is stake and where the
decisiveness of national leadership determines success in the war on terror. All in all,
descriptions of the border as a troubled space that needs to be carefully monitored give shape to
the currency of borders in the national imaginary.

In contrast to the ideological turmoil and anxiety that characterizes the US-Mexico border,
the northern national boundary with Canada seems to enjoy a much more peaceful space in the
nation’s social and political imagination. The idea of the 49th parallel does not conjure up danger,
hostility, and a need for militarization in the way that the southern border does; instead, it evokes
notions of business relations and even friendship. In a joint declaration by President Obama and
Prime Minister Harper of Canada, for example, the relation between the two nations appears as a
productive partnership that leads not only to economic profit but also to social and political
stability:
The United States and Canada are staunch allies, vital economic partners, and steadfast friends. We share common values, deep links among our citizens, and deeply rooted ties. The extensive mobility of people, goods, capital, and information between our two countries has helped ensure that our societies remain open, democratic, and prosperous. (Office of the Press Secretary)

The joint declaration titled “Beyond the Border: A Shared Vision for Perimeter Security and Economic Competitiveness” presents the US and Canada as two peas of a pod, as nations that share not only boundaries but also ideological convictions and social structures. While commonplace discourses about the US-Mexico border emphasize active control and a rigid barrier between the nations (a sense of division reified by the border fence being built at the boundary line), the social and political discourse about the 49th parallel emphasizes business connections and fluid cross-border relationships. As the White House’s National Security Strategy briefing states,

Canada is our closest trading partner, a steadfast security ally, and an important partner in regional and global efforts. Our mutual prosperity is closely interconnected, including through our trade relationship with Mexico through NAFTA. With Canada, our security cooperation includes our defense of North America and our efforts through NATO overseas. And our cooperation is critical to the success of international efforts on issues ranging from international climate negotiations to economic cooperation through the G-20. (United States 42)

The briefing portrays Canada as a partner, as a nation sharing a political, economic, and military alliance in a global sense. In this way, the federal government envisions the Canadian neighbors as allies able to stand on their own ground without needing assistance from the US, as equal peers invested in international matters, and as important players in the global stage. The sense of familiarity emanating from the 5,525 miles of border stands in sharp contrast to the foreignness of the almost 2,000 miles of southern border. The International Boundary, as the northern border is also known, is the longest undefended border in the world. In the fiscal year

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13 Nowhere is this more apparent than in the reference to the G-20 in the White House National Security Strategy briefing—only Canada is mentioned in relation to the G-20 when Mexico is also one of the G-20 members.
2010 there were 2,212 Border Agents deployed there (of the nearly 20,000 total Border Agents) keeping 32 miles of border under effective control (Jeffrey). As the discourse of camaraderie and the limited resources mobilized to control the border show, the mostly economic and recreational aura of the northern border seems to pose little threat to the social structure of the US in the social imagination. With its sparse militarization and the limited presence of law enforcement agents, the International Boundary represents a very permeable border.

While popular culture representations of the US-Mexico border carry with them the burden of violence and of defending national security, the International Boundary enjoys a reputation based on business and pleasure. One can follow the camaraderie drive behind the White House’s briefings above and think about the privately owned Ambassador Bridge that connects Detroit, MI, on the US side and Windsor, Ontario, on the Canadian side, for example, to recognize the intense commercial and commuter traffic crossing it everyday.14 The four-lane bridge carries an average of 7,400 commercial vehicles a day (http://www.ambassadorbridge) and has in place different “trusted traveler programs” (commercial, commuter) for pre-screened border crossers such as the NEXUS program for bridge commuters (Customs and Border Patrol). Established in 2002, the NEXUS program already has 650,000 members screened to go from the US to Canada and vice versa in 19 border crossing locations (NEXUS Fact Sheet). This fast pass to cross the International Boundary speaks to the volume of regular border crossers connecting the two nations economically and through family ties. As the joint briefing mentioned above puts forth, over $250 billion of direct investment by each country in the other, and bilateral trade of more than half-a-trillion dollars a year in goods and services, create and sustain millions of jobs in both our countries. At the US-Canada border, nearly one million dollars in goods and services cross every minute, as well as 300,000 people every day, who cross for business, pleasure, or to maintain family ties. (Office of the Press Secretary)

14 Billionaire Manuel Moroun owns the Ambassador Bridge, and the high traffic flow crossing the bridge every day makes it a lucrative business.
The high volume in the daily traffic of goods and people shows strong economic and social ties linking both nations together. In addition to the business aspect of the cross-border relationship, the International Boundary evokes something else in the US cultural imaginary: Niagara Falls, the most famous tourist location along the border between Ontario and New York. The geographic location has been used as cinematographic background in movies such as *Niagara* (1953, dir. Henry Hathaway) starring Marilyn Monroe, and it constitutes a popular tourist destination that caters especially to honeymooners and lovebirds such as the ones in the film. The atmosphere of work and play associated with the US-Canada border feels qualitatively different from the echoes of the US-Mexico border as a dangerous space fraught with crime in films and political discourse.

The film *Frozen River* (2008, dir. Courtney Hunt) troubles the notion of the US-Canada border as an easy border that fosters amicability and economic prosperity. The film is set on both sides of the border between Upstate New York and the Akwesasne St. Regis Mohawk Reservation that straddles the 49th parallel. It brings together two women struggling to make a living, a Mohawk bingo-parlor employee on the reservation and a discount-store clerk in Upstate New York. They make an uneasy alliance smuggling people into the US across the St. Lawrence river—trafficking undocumented immigrants across the Akwesasne reserve on the Canadian side of the border and the reservation on the US side. *Frozen River* brings to the forefront issues that shatter the happy romance of the US-Canada border as a low stakes national border. The smuggling of immigrants across the Akwesasne nation to avoid border surveillance and checkpoints brings this tale of border life closer to the stories of *coyotes* and other traffickers commonly associated with the US-Mexico border. The impoverished lives of Indians and Anglos, inside the reservation and outside of it, shift romanticized notions of the US and Canada
as economically prosperous places to a reality of social inequality and heartache. At the same time, the portrayal of the Akwesasne nation and its land base straddling the 49th parallel brings attention to the reality of Indian reservations in the American northern hemisphere while also calling into question the idea of the International Boundary as a dividing line between only two nations, the US and Canada. The inclusion of Indian reservations in a discussion of border spaces complicates the clear-cut idea of national borders as separating sovereign nations and providing internal cohesion within those nations. The existence of reservations, of nations within nations, explodes the concept of simple national borders and opens up questions about the apparent contradiction in the actuality of so many borders within the national boundaries of the US and of Canada for that matter.

If the northern border provides an example of a softer and more permeable national boundary than the southern one, the total lack of surveillance of reservation borders renders them almost non-existent to the national imaginary. Even though the 55.7 million acres of federally recognized Indigenous land within the US constitute 2.3% of its area (Pevar 2-3) and the equivalent to roughly 87,000 square miles of unsupervised internal borders, reservation boundaries do not attract national attention: there are no checkpoints or customs declarations; there are no fences, no border patrol, and no federal forces marking the space as the dividing line between the US and a sovereign nation. The internal character of these borders ranks them low on the national threat hierarchy that motivates the national surveillance apparatus.15 The 315 Indian reservations within the boundaries of the US do not share the same social and economic

15 The history of the American Indian Movement proves how native resistance and opposition to the federal government (as the taking of Alcatraz island in 1969, the occupation of the BIA building by the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan in 1972, and the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 exemplify) are subsumed into domestic disputes that do not threaten the stability of the nation. See Smith and Warrior (1996) for more on AIM and native resistance.
vincula that the US shares with Canada and Mexico. The US, Canada, and Mexico recognize the mutually profitable flow of goods and manufacturing opportunities between them, their economic relationships leading them to sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992. These same economic ties do not quite apply to relations between the US and multiple Native American nations because as a group Indians are the most disadvantaged people in our society. They have the lowest life expectancy, living only two-thirds as long as whites. Indians also suffer from an unemployment rate of nearly 45 percent, about ten times the national average…. Nearly one-third of Indian households live below the poverty level, a number twice as high as the white population, and on some reservations, the poverty rate approaches 65 percent. Many Indian households lack basic necessities that other Americans take for granted, such as running water and electricity. (Pevar 3)

The dire economic conditions on many reservations do not position Indian nations as valuable trading partners for the US. The poverty index on most reservations together with their lack of exploitable natural resources place American Indians in precarious economic circumstances. Even though some tribes such as the Seminoles, the Mississippi Band of Choctaws, or the Mashantucket Pequot tribe, for example, operate high-stakes bingo and casinos that have proven lucrative enterprises, the percentage of Native people living in utter poverty remains very high. Fortunately, some tribes use gaming revenue for communal goals, and “gaming on reservations is providing some Native Americans with the resources they need to fight enduring forms of discrimination and racism against indigenous peoples” (Darian-Smith 109).

Indian nations occupy the legal standing of “dependent domestic nations” with the right to self-determination. This legal articulation of the status of Indian tribes comes from the Supreme Court decision in Cherokee Nation v. Georgia (1831), a case forming part of what is known as the Cherokee Cases or the Marshall Trilogy together with Johnson v. M’Intosh (1823) and Worcester v. Georgia (1832), where Chief Justice John Marshall’s court opinions laid the basis
for the legal and political standing of Indian nations. Starting with *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, Marshall crafted a model of Indian rights based on four organizing principles:

First and foremost, the Marshall Model of Indian Rights recognizes the exclusive right of the United States to exercise supremacy over Indian tribes on the basis of the Indians’ presumed racial and cultural inferiority. The Marshall model then applies the European colonial-era doctrine of discovery as a regulative legal principle to define the scope and content of that right to white privilege as covering the entire continent of North America. Additionally, the model perpetuates a long-established language of racism to justify the specific set of rights and prerogatives of conquest and privilege under the discovery doctrine. Finally, it absolves the justices for perpetuating the discovery doctrine as part of US law by viewing it as “indispensable” to the European-derived “system” of colonial governmentality “under which the country had been settled.” (Williams *Like a Loaded Weapon* 58)

The principles established by the court opinion in *Johnson v. M'Intosh* provide the basis for Federal Indian Policy from that moment on, policy directed to the control of Indian tribes under the weight of the doctrine of discovery. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, a case involving the relationship of tribes to the federal government, the court’s decision declares the impossibility of considering Indian nations as foreign nations and instead declares them domestic dependent nations under the tutelage of the federal government—the relation between the two reflecting that of a ward and its guardian.

Through this majority decision, however, “tribes retained sufficient sovereignty to protect themselves and their lands from state intrusion, since the relationship between tribes and the United States was rooted in tribal sovereignty, international law, ratified treaties, and the US Constitution” (Wilkins and Lomawaima 61). Thus, the Marshall Trilogy recognizes that Indian tribes retain a degree of self-determination while at the same time being part of a guardian-ward

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16 For a concise explanation of how *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* determined the legal status of Indian nations as “domestic dependent nations” and of Indians as living in a “state of pupilage” in a relationship to the “United States resemble[ing] that of a ward to his guardian” see Robert A. Williams Jr., *Like a Loaded Weapon*, 60-61. For a detailed explanation of the case see Harring, *Crow Dog’s Case*.

17 For a careful explanation of the principles underlying the doctrine of discovery see Robert A. Williams Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought*, pp. 99, 204, 221.
relationship known since then as the “trust doctrine” in Indian law. Williams explains how “under the Marshall model, the trust doctrine is supposed to function as a primary protective principle of Indian rights under US law” (Williams Like a Loaded Weapon 61). The trust doctrine, however, appears as a double-edged sword: while it “requires the federal government to support and encourage tribal self-government and economic prosperity, duties that stem from the government’s treaty guarantees to ‘protect’ Indian tribes and respect their sovereignty” it also places “most tribal land and other property under the control of federal agencies, depriving tribes of the ability to manage these resources on their own” (Pevar 33). Such is the tortured logic of Federal Indian Policy in the US, policy largely designed to contain Indigenous nations and force them to assimilate to mainstream culture by separating the tribes from the means to sustain themselves and uphold their right to self-determination.

Federal Indian policy, indeed, has always taken shape as policymakers addressed what they perceived as an Indian problem that they hoped would disappear in the short term. As Andrew Jackson became the President of the United States in 1828, the way of thinking about the relation between Anglo colonial settlers and Indian tribes changed substantially: the good faith that seemingly spurred the signing of treaties with Indian nations recognizing their sovereignty and their right to the land morphed into a desire for expansion that justified the removal of Indian tribes. Since at this point the United States was stronger militarily and did not need Native American support to fight the French settlers in the north, Jackson’s administration actively pursued the removal of Indian tribes to west of the Mississippi River. As Pevar explains it, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 “authorized the President to ‘negotiate’ with eastern tribes for their

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18 The language relating Native peoples to a national problem is nowhere more evident than in Francis E. Leupp’s The Indian and His Problem (1910). Leupp was commissioner of Indian affairs from 1904 to 1909.
19 Robert A. Williams presents a compelling study of American Indian diplomacy and the legal history of the contact between Native and European Americans in the pre-Revolutionary period in Linking Arms Together (1999).
relocation west” (7), reducing their land base in the east considerably or forcing their relocation westward in penurious journeys, the most famous of which is the Cherokee Trail of Tears where fifteen thousand Indians died in their forced march to the Oklahoma Indian Territory (Pevar 304). The relentless Anglo pursuit of land and opportunity, together with ideas about American exceptionalism, rationalized the creation of Indian reservations to contain Indian nations and ideologically constructed Native peoples as an obstacle blocking the path of modernization and progress, an obstacle in the expansion of national borders from coast to coast. The disenfranchisement and physical control on Native peoples on reservations in once-distant lands multiplied borders inside the nation: the nations within.20

The vast majority of Indian nations and their land bases do not represent social or economic centers in a position to establish market relations with the federal government. Understood as having a relationship of dependence with the US, Indian reservations do not seem to present a threat to national security in the social imagination and thus do not call forth the mobilization of technologies of control to secure these internal borders. The status of the different national boundaries in the US, then, remains actively tied to the economic stakes they represent and to the perceived danger they pose as an entry port for undesirable subjects to the nation. Thus, the visible amount of border surveillance and control of borderlines appears to have a direct relationship to the level of anxiety the border produces in relation to discourses of national security and the war against terror. In the same way, the type of border one encounters (whether hard, permeable, or invisible) has an intimate relationship to the kind of national subjects that its presence produces and regulates. Taking borders as the organizing principle for the analysis of Chican@ and Native American fiction, then, proves a productive endeavor not only in finding

20 Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford M. Lyttle The Nations Within focuses on the structuring of reservations and offers a careful study of the New Deal for Native tribes that Indian commissioner John Collier developed in the middle of the twentieth century and its relationship to issues of sovereignty and self-determination.
the overlap of issues affecting both Native peoples and Chican@s but also in complicating received notions about borders, sovereignty, cultural geographies, and national genealogies.

**Project overview**

The project opens up by exploring various genealogical accounts of the fields that come together under the umbrella term of border theory. After considering common goals in the field that create a productive critical lens and presenting my own understanding of the usefulness of this critical perspective in the analysis of Chican@ and Native American literature, the organization of the project initially follows a geographical structure. First it focuses on the most prominent and indelible border in the US imaginary: the US-Mexico border. The analysis of the representation of this border in different cultural products reveals how narratives of nation building and projects of Americanization help shape the social and cultural imaginings of what the border represents. At the same time, the analysis of the literary texts challenges traditional understandings of immigration and shows the effects of mainstream ideologies on the lives of the people they interpellate. Following the chapter on the US-Mexico border, the project moves on to the northern International Border, a border that flies under the anxiety radar of the US as a nation. Focusing on the lack of border surveillance and the border crossing practices of Native peoples to the north of the US, this chapter makes a case for the recognition of overlapping geographies in the same time and space—a case for the recognition of the continuity of Native geographies, sovereignty, and Indigenous rights.

After exploring these two geopolitical lines, the project focuses on borders as sites that engender violence regardless of their geographical location—be it a commonly recognized national boundary such as the US-Mexico border, or generally overlooked national boundaries such as reservation borders. The final chapter examines how the social and economic forces that
converge in border spaces engender violence to exploit and regulate the vulnerability of border subjects, how violence appears as a regulating mechanism of border zones in the service of capitalist exploitation, and how the creation of vulnerable subjects comes hand in hand with the material and social construction of border economies.

Chapter 1, “Border Theories: finding a critical lens,” lays out a series of critical perspectives loosely grouped under the rubric of border theory. It also shows my project’s investment in a movement to recover perspectives traditionally erased from genealogical narratives in the US. I contend that border spaces bring to the forefront parallel and overlapping histories of colonization, issues of cultural sovereignty, legal status, citizenship, indigeneity, cultural representation, access to structures of knowledge production, inclusion into the national fold in the US (or lack thereof), and participation in narratives of nation-building and Americanization that are relevant to Native Americans and Chican@s alike.

The following chapter, “From Sinaloa to East LA: the US-Mexico border, nativism, and patriotic quests,” focuses on the geographical area most commonly associated with the idea of the border in the US cultural imagination: the US-Mexico border. Starting with an analysis of a National Public Radio (NPR) series on the US-Mexico border aired in 2008, this chapter examines commonly held understandings of the border in the cultural imagination of the nation and their relationship to narratives of nation building and Americanization. The NPR series offers a critical platform for understanding the stereotypes and the cultural investments that give shape to the border in the national imaginary. The depiction of the border in this media exposure opens the door to an analysis of different and coexisting national genealogies that reflect social tensions currently at play in the US.
Together with the NPR series, I analyze Helena María Viramontes’s novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and its reflection of the structures of feeling that pervade southern California towards the end of the twentieth century. Offered through the perspective of the teenage protagonist Estrella, the novel follows the lives of migrant workers in California and their constant struggle for survival in a society that puts the burden of proof permanently on their shoulders. In the shadow of Proposition 187 in California (1994), I read *Under the Feet of Jesus* as speaking to the role of migrant workers in the US economy, to the erasure of labor from the cultural imaginary, and to the rise of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment following the implementation of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. In this sense, Viramontes’s novel provides a north-of-the-border perspective on the US-Mexico border and its implicit and explicit effects on a disenfranchised section of the US population. In contrast to this reading of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, I offer a reading of Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), a novel that presents a south-of-the-border perspective on northward immigration and Mexico’s own nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment. *Into the Beautiful North* follows a young girl’s quest for capable Mexican men who have immigrated to the US and that she intends to bring back home to repopulate and defend the village. Living in Tres Camarones, a small town in Sinaloa, teenage Nayeli reflects on the impact that northward migration has on rural Mexico—how the promise of a better life and financial possibility in the States has emptied rural Mexico of men, except for corrupt federal officials and good-for-nothing criminals. The need to envision a future for her people sends Nayeli in a quest that takes her from her small town in Sinaloa to the US and back. This organizing principle for the novel presents a counter-narrative to commonly held assumptions about northward migration, thus complicating the easy circulation of nativist ideas in the US cultural imaginary.
This chapter, then, brings to the forefront the ideological premises that fuel nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, and shows how the border plays a vital role in the creation of such discourses. Once the commonly held assumptions about the border are established, the analysis of literary works seeks to destabilize clear-cut understandings of the border and to question the received assumptions about what the border represents. Using the novels to give voice to the victims of nation-building narratives, this chapter shows the effects of mainstream ideologies on disenfranchised people, both north and south of the 2,000 mile border that separates Mexico and the US.

As Chapter 2 focuses on the indelible presence of the US-Mexico border in the US cultural imagination, Chapter 3, “The International border: border crossings, surveillance, and overlapping national geographies,” turns further north to the International border running along the 49th parallel, the longest undefended border in the world. While the US-Mexico border evokes all kinds of cultural and social anxiety in the US, the US-Canada border flies under the national anxiety radar. Following this seeming contradiction, the organizing idea for this chapter circles around the International border and the lack of surveillance of vast portions of its length. Through the reading of two novels by Native American writers, Truth and Bright Water (1999) by Thomas King, Cherokee and German-Greek, and Solar Storms (1995) by Linda Hogan, Chickasaw, this chapter brings attention to the coexistence of overlapping geographies competing in the same time and space.

Truth and Bright Water follows the everyday adventures of its teenage protagonist Tecumseh and his dog Soldier during the summer time that leads to the Indian Days Festival on the Bright Water reserve. Set in the border between the US and Canada, the novel focuses on the fact that Tecumseh’s family straddles the International Boundary. While he and his parents live in the
town of Truth on the US side of the border, his grandmother and his cousin Lum live on the
Bright Water reserve in Alberta, across the river on the Canadian side. Focalized through Lum’s
teenage perspective, the novel presents a picture of the realities, the struggles, and the dreams of
the inhabitants of this Native geography crossed by the 49th parallel. The characters in the novel
cross the International Border on a daily basis without state supervision: they just cross the river
on an old ferry without surveillance. Crossing the border in the novel, then, loses its
“international” meaning and reclaims an Indigenous geography that takes primacy over colonial
impositions.

In the same way, Hogan’s novel also focuses on US-Canada border crossings. The central
plot hinges on four generations of women in the same family as they prepare for and undertake a
journey north to the sacred lands of their people. Set in the 1970s, the action takes place initially
in the Boundary Waters region between Minnesota and Canada as the women plan their journey
to the arctic islands of northern Canada. The seventeen-year-old protagonist, Angel, together
with her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother figure, set on a journey north to the land
of the Fat-Eaters. The purpose of their trip is to rally and organize a protest against the flooding
of their ancestral lands to build a dam. Since they know that the government and the private
interests behind the dam would stop them from getting there to organize a protest if they
travelled by car or by train, they decide to canoe their way back home through the waterways so
they can go undetected by the powers that be. The knowledge of home and territory of the eldest
woman in the family allows them to navigate the waterways and to arrive safely at their
destination. In this novel, as well, the women cross the International border without detection
and away from state surveillance, following a national geography (a knowledge of home) that
predates Anglo European presence in the continent and that responds to principles of Native sovereignty and Indigenous rights.

Through the analysis of non-monitored border crossings in *Truth and Bright Water* and *Solar Storms*, the chapter reveals how overlapping colonial and Indigenous geographies compete in the same time and space. Contrasting the conceptualization of place in Indigenous cosmogonies to Euroamerican mapmaking, the analysis of border crossings in these novels reaffirms the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge production as an expression of Native sovereignty. The close readings of different border crossings in the novels emphasize continuous Native geographies that are ignored and erased from dominant national accounts and narratives of nation building. Attention to these geographical palimpsests can reveal concepts of Native sovereignty and Indigenous rights that narratives of nation building work hard to mask and deflect.

While Chapters 2 and 3 approach national boundaries in a geographical sense, the final chapter, “Border byproducts: vulnerability, violence, and historical erasure,” focuses on borders as sites that engender violence regardless of their geographical location. It presents an analysis of two novels that offer fictionalized accounts of historical violence: Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* (1990), a novel that exposes what is known as the Osage Reign of Terror—the murders of Osage people at the beginning of the twentieth century as oil is discovered underneath their reservation lands, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* (2005), a novel that exposes the feminicidios in Ciudad Juárez in 1990s (the killings and mutilations of poor brown women around the maquilas). This chapter explores how the social and economic forces that converge in border spaces (reservation borders, US-Mexico border) engender violence to exploit and regulate the vulnerability of border subjects.
Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit*, set in the 1920s in Oklahoma, provides a fictionalized account of the Osage Reign of Terror that ensues from the discovery of oil on the Osage reservation. The presence of oil underneath Native lands drives Anglo Americans to launch a murderous campaign to acquire the mineral wealth that belongs to Native peoples. In addition to the onslaught of murders of Native men and women during the first part of the twentieth century, the novel also depicts various forms of colonial erosion of tribal sovereignty such as the federal provision that allows officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to declare Native people incompetent to manage their land and resources. *Mean Spirit* also shows how an elevated number of Anglo men marry Osage women as a point of entry into the reservation and as the key to accessing natural and economic tribal resources. By marrying Native women, white men gain access to the oil wells in Oklahoma. At the same time, they also enact a continuation of the national imperative to shift borders that is the doctrine of Manifest Destiny by expanding white dominance over tribal lands. Thus, Hogan’s novel brings to the forefront the way borders participate in the creation of vulnerable subjects that are the targets of physical and economic violence.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* presents a grueling tale of female exploitation in the border town of Ciudad Juárez. In the form of a murder mystery, *Desert Blood* exposes the epidemic of killings in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s: the murders and brutal mutilations of *muchachas del sur*, young women from rural Mexico and beyond that arrive in border towns to work in the maquilas. The vulnerable position that these women occupy in the ring of capitalist exploitation (no family, no support group, no economic resources, no representation, no voice) makes them an easy target for all kinds of predators that go unpunished thanks to the interconnectedness of all social strata in the pursuit of profit in that economic system. The
fictionalized events of the novel, much like Hogan’s, show how violence appears as a mechanism to enforce the border, how crimes are used to mark territory, and how the vulnerability that the border creates provides a breeding ground for exploitation and abuse. The analysis in this chapter, then, zeroes in on the spaces of violence created by borders in the geographical spaces they cross or enclose, whether at the US-Mexico border or inside the reservation, on the way violence appears as a regulating mechanism of border spaces in the service of capitalist exploitation, and on the creation of vulnerable subjects that comes hand in hand with the material and social construction of border economies.

In essence, the argument I present in my project is that the border does not stop at the end of the boundary line—it is a mobile construct that shapes human interaction in unexpected places, an ideological process that is absorbed into the national imaginary until it appears as common sense, unquestioned and inherently true. As a social construct, the ideology reified by borders might change over time according to the general political climate of the nation—yet it consistently works to empower some people at the expense of others. As the representation of a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, of containment and access, of enfranchisement and dispossession, borders organize Chican@ and American Indian experiences with settler colonialist practices. Thus, analyzing the historical intersections between Chican@ and Indian experiences provides a common ground to explore the cultural representation and available subject positions for Natives and Chican@s in the US literary landscape.
Chapter 1

Border theories: finding a critical lens

To carry out the comparative analysis mentioned above, I use the idea of the border (both literal and metaphorical) as the organizing principle for this project. The idea of the border, both as a concrete notion (as in a geopolitical line dividing two nations) and as a metaphor (as in social and psychological borders that regulate everyday social interaction), together with the mobilization of border theory create a fruitful platform for developing an intersectional and interdisciplinary interpretive lens. The critical issues that the idea of the border bring front stage offer common ground for establishing a conversation between Native American and Chican@ literary representations. Border spaces bring to the forefront issues of nation, land rights, language rights, citizenship, indigeneity, and social and political participation in the realm of the national that are relevant to Native Americans and Chican@s alike. The border as a shifting geopolitical line also opens up a space for examining parallel and overlapping histories of colonization and imperial expansion in the US. In this sense, Chican@ and Native American literary representations of borders call into question master narratives of the formation of the US as a nation and provide new perspectives for the revision and expansion of historical documentation and national consciousness.

In addition to literal borders, the analysis of metaphorical borders that condition social interactions provides a stage for examining the tug-of-war between social, cultural, and political forces struggling for dominance in our everyday lives. The points in common between Native American and Chican@ subject positions, as reflected in contemporary novels, allow for coalitions between these groups. The similarities between their politics of location provide a space for constructing bridges between them that help us put into perspective their experience
vis-à-vis normative ideas of US social life. Such bridges and potential coalitions help construct louder and more powerful voices for the border dwellers, for the inhabitants of communities at the fringe of the US imaginary. In this project, however, the similarities between these two groups do not outshine the many points where their literary representations differ. The differences between Native American and Chican@ subject positions, on the contrary, become crucial in counterbalancing the easy oppressor/oppressed dynamic that a social and cultural analysis between dominant and non-dominant groups in the US can yield. Paying attention to the particulars in the process of understanding general trends helps us obtain a more complicated vision of the social fabric. It draws attention to many different social and cultural strands that weave together to create the tapestry of the nation—a tapestry at times harmonious and oftentimes dissonant, encompassing multiple strands that clash and yet somehow coexist in the same space.

In addition to using borders as a critical lens, this project also takes shape in conversation with the work that comes together under the rubric of border theory. Border theory, as will be teased out later, is a rather loose signifier that brings together many and varied critical studies following as many methodological principles. Far from being anchored in a specific academic discipline, border theory straddles many academic fields and houses a wide range of critical inquiries. From anthropology, economics, and history to education, cultural studies, and literary studies, border theory acts as an umbrella term that brings together critical analyses that have one thing in common: the study of the US-Mexico border, for the most part, and its effects on the people it crosses. As such, border theory becomes a critical framework that brings together an intersectional analysis of the issues relevant to border communities—both in the literal and the metaphorical sense. It provides a backdrop to the use of the idea of the border as an interpretive
lens and it shows the space of this tool of inquiry in the ongoing critical debate about cultural and literary productions.

The use of the notion of the border as the focus for this project moves the common conceptualization of the border away from its definition as a line that clearly demarcates two different parts or coherent wholes. Instead, the border as an interpretive lens highlights the space in-between, the blurriness created precisely by lived experiences that resist homogenization and scripted coherence. The border signifies a space of messiness where competing narratives of national and cultural identity carry out their battles and sign their truces. In this complicated space the nation takes its shape and loses its form: it is the site of reification and disavowal of national discourse, the necessary element against which master narratives of the nation can exist—without a border, there is no nation.²¹ Using the border as a critical lens, then, this study looks at the ways Chican@ and Native American novels published from the 1990s to the present portray and address the idea of the border in this period deeply marked by anxieties about national belonging, national security, and the monitoring and militarization of national borders.

1. Time frame: the 1990s and border troubles

While most of the novels examined here use contemporary settings, some of them set their accounts earlier in the twentieth century. All of them, however, are the product of a cultural climate in which US anxieties about the need to monitor and control national borders (first and foremost the US-Mexico border) are boiling up. The focus of most national angst about border matters stems from a variety of sources: on the one hand, we have the economic crisis in Mexico in the 1990s that exacerbates the human flow north in search of employment. On the other hand,

²¹ Russ Castronovo reflects on the symbolic power of the border in the creation of national narratives and explains how "nationalism—a force that consolidates, demarcates, and hierarchizes—is . . . the response to the permeability and fluidity of border culture. As the site of difference, the border becomes strategic in promoting a desire for sameness" (197). This desire for sameness derived from the existence/threat of the border is one of the key elements in understanding the symbolic importance of borders in narratives of national belonging.
the 1994 NAFTA agreement eliminating most tariffs between the US, Canada, and Mexico results in a manufacturing pull towards the south end of the border in search of lower overhead costs. The increase in the flow of people willing to cross the border, especially in the numbers of people coming from Mexico and other central and south American countries into the US in search of jobs, triggers the national panic button and invariably allows for nativist discourses to rise to the top of the national agenda.\textsuperscript{22} The passing of Proposition 187 in California (1994), a ballot initiative that aimed to bar undocumented workers from access to social services, health care, and public education in the state of California, shows the effects that nativist discourse can have on the social climate of the nation. While the federal court found the initiative unconstitutional, the ballot in California left a deep imprint in the social consciousness of migrant workers (in the country both legally and illegally)\textsuperscript{23} and it speaks loudly to the social and cultural attitude towards immigrants on the part of many US nationals.

The increased mobility of workers described above shows how the 1990s were deeply affected by globalization. The economic and social re-alignments that take place at the time shake the seemingly solid foundation of the US as a nation. The fluidity of the movement across national borders blurs national boundaries and creates a social unease that finally congeals in an intensification of the national concern with the border. On the economic front, the 1990s undergo big transformations: the emergence of all-powerful multi-national corporations, the de-

\textsuperscript{22} While the numbers of Mexican nationals and Canadian nationals that cross into the US are rather similar, and even though there is a comparable number of US nationals that cross over to Canada and Mexico, the numbers that catch onto the US social discourse are the numbers of Mexican nationals and their families that are coming into the US. Canadians seem to appear less “other” and less threatening to the social fabric of the US. The fact that as many US nationals are crossing the borders in both directions never makes an imprint in the discourse over immigration and the flow of people over national borders.

\textsuperscript{23} As we will see in the literary analysis in later chapters, the actual legal status of people that are deemed phenotypically foreign has little bearing on the general attitude towards them displayed by some US nationals. People phenotypically ‘Mexican’ (used in the derogatory way that some Anglo Americans refer to any person of Spanish descent, whether linked to Mexico or not) are always already illegal in the eyes of many US nationals.
industrialization of the north and the economic agony of inner cities, the industrialization of the south, and the outsourcing drive in contemporary markets that move capital and resources south of the border. These economic shifts in the 1990s join forces with the nationalist sentiments that the 9/11 terrorist attacks elicit from a US population no longer “untouchable.” The turn of the twentieth century carries the seal of the “war on terror” launched by the late Bush administration and the state of war fuels a new surge of national pride in the US that invariably brings with it yet another wave of anti-immigrant sentiment.

From California’s Proposition 187 to the anti-immigration reform proposed by the George W. Bush administration, anti-immigration policy in the US speaks to the desire to control access to the nation via the militarization of the national borders (especially the US-Mexico border), and to the renewed efforts to identify who belongs to the nation and who is deemed an undesirable subject that needs to be excised from it. This is a moment where redefinition of what it means to be American takes place: the desire to regroup and construct national coherence after being thrown out of balance turns the limelight onto borders, onto spaces that need to be strictly monitored under the threat of potential terrorist invasion. In this climate when borders are highly contested, my project examines how contemporary Native American and Chican@ fiction reflects the ideological premises that underlie the rhetoric of national inclusion and exclusion in the US. At the same time, it questions the tunnel vision that the US cultural imaginary displays in relation to borders by focusing not only on the US-Mexico border but also directing its critical attention to intersecting borders: the geographical borders of Indian reservations and the social and psychological borders of today’s cultural imaginary. By reading the anti-immigration debate together with the continuous struggle for self-government and sovereignty waged by indigenous
peoples in the US, I expose the logic of colonialism that keeps shaping the legal and cultural imaginary of the nation.

1.1. The literal border: lines, divisions, and starting points

Literally, a border is a geopolitical line separating two geographical or political areas as well as a boundary, a limit, or an edge. When mobilizing the border in its geopolitical sense we can establish a strong correlation between the relationship that both Native Americans and Chican@s have towards national limits and geographical boundaries. On the one hand, Native Americans have at best a vexed relationship with geographical borders given how the US colonial project has dispossessed them of their original land bases and circumscribed their current national geography. On the other hand, Chican@s also live a troubled relationship with the US in terms of claims to a geographical space (given the extent of Mexico’s territory prior to its land cessions to the US in 1848 and 1853-4 and given its ties to an indigenous past) and also in terms of the political and economic climate of the current border zones along the US-Mexico border and the violence of precarious border crossings. Focusing on the literal sense of the border, then, we can pinpoint ideological overlaps where the interests and concerns of Chican@s and American Indians meet and sometimes stand at odds. This space of encounter and friction provides a ripe common ground for launching a literary analysis using borders to direct our critical inquiries.

Using literal borders as a common ground for the examination of Native American and Chican@ literary representations offers more than an organizational starting point for this project. It highlights how different histories of colonization often overlap and sometimes coexist in the same time and space. When we direct our critical attention to the different national genealogies that come together through a lens of borders we access historical accounts that destabilize hegemonic narratives of US nation building. It challenges the traditional
understanding of US national narrative as an expression of the country’s exceptionalism and as the result of a divine mandate to expand further west. Patricia Nelson Limerick’s analysis of the persistence of frontier ideology in the twentieth century’s US cultural imagination, highlights how “the idea of the frontier runs almost entirely on as east-to-west track” and that “to most of its users, the term ‘frontier’ has been a synonym for the American nation’s westward movement” and does not account for south-north or east-west migratory patterns in the construction of a national narrative (73). Thus, paying attention to different national genealogies in the same geographical space helps us shake pervading monolithic constructions of nationality and citizenship. The focus on the historical permutations of geopolitical lines shows different genealogical narratives in the space now understood as the US. Analyzing the different genealogical narratives in the same space shakes monolithic conceptions of nationhood and opens up the possibility of multiple genealogical narratives based on varied social and cultural perspectives. Releasing the ignored and/ or suppressed histories and narratives of belonging of different groups in the US breaks the conception of a linear and coherent historical account. Instead of a story of linear development, the study of Chican@ and Native American literary works reveals multiple historical arches that crisscross and run parallel to each other. Reading these different historical arches side by side allows for more analysis of the social formations and the ideologies that shape our everyday lives.

The use of borders as a focal point for the comparative study of Chican@ and Native American literary representations proves productive, then, in that it highlights thematic spaces of commonality between these two bodies of literature. The border understood literally as a geopolitical line that demarcates the boundary between two nations throws into relief issues of sovereignty, nationality, citizenship, language rights, and civic participation in the realm of the
national. Many of these issues occupy a central space in the intellectual debates in American Indian and Chican@ literary production. While different authors may address these issues from different perspectives, their concerns often overlap and sometimes antagonize as they speak to the lived realities that different groups in the US undergo in relation to the nation, the law, and to the grand historical narrative of what constitutes the US. Analyzing Chican@ and Native Indian literary perspectives side by side shows how master narratives of US nation-building shape the possibilities of self-understanding and self-realization for different groups within the national whole. At the same time, it also reveals patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the making of imaginative geographies that codify cultural understandings of nation and identity.

In addition to the relation between the people and the legal apparatus that governs them, the border also signals a given territorial limit and division. Understood as either the end or the beginning of national territory, the border offers a series of points of entry and departure from national domains that require the attention of the national security machine. As such, the border becomes an instrument of state policy and a site of diplomacy between nations. The border, in this sense, becomes a core element of notions of national belonging and citizenship. It represents the beginning of “that which is not” that gives meaning to “that which is,” the place that allows the relational definition of national identity to exist in the first place. Citizenship, thus, gains amplitude in the border space because it becomes the legal marker of national belonging—it becomes a determinant of one’s relationship with the state apparatus and the legal structure of the nation. In addition to determining how easily or not one can cross a border space, citizenship also opens up a broad range of assumptions about the subject it describes: it connotes a given nationality, a given language proficiency, a given national allegiance, and a given recognition of the subject’s civic participation and civic duties. In this way, citizenship becomes the nexus that
joins many issues together, a shared historical concern for both Chican@s and Native peoples, and a concept one needs to contend with when thinking about literal borders and the way they structure life and possibility around them.

Borders in the literal sense of the word appear strangely solid and stable in the US cultural imaginary. Even though the geographical dimensions of the space they divide change over time (consider, for example, the many permutations of US borders from its colonial inception to its contemporary geopolitical location), national borders somehow feel immutable and permanent to most people, and the popular imagination always already conceives the US as a coast to coast unified block… that has always been such. The historical instability of borders, the fact that the bounded geography of the US has varied enormously in the last two hundred years, seems to fall into the dark pits of shared historical amnesia—into a historical space with a faint relationship to the present. In this way, the space of History (with capital “H”) becomes a space that can be studied and catalogued in a time that has irremediably passed. In the popular sense, History is something that is always in the past and never in the present, let alone the future. While in the popular imaginary, for example, the US typically constitutes a coast-to-coast homogeneous whole that “has been so since the beginning of time” (a situation fuzzily related to Plymouth Rock), the grand historical total adds to a scarce 160 years since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853-4. 160 years in historical terms is yesterday rather than some remote time in a distant past. Thus, the national imaginary seems to suffer from the “end of history” syndrome, afflicted by the notion that human development has reached its last stage and that nothing will change anymore (that borders changed in the past, through an era of becoming, but that countries and nations now are settled and will not change shape
This idea renders History as something to be displayed in the museum rather than something we all participate in creating in our everyday lives. And this is the notion that freezes borders in time and space as something solid and immutable.

While national borders seem solid and stable in the national imaginary, they are nonetheless a powerful source of national anxiety and preoccupation. Since borders determine the geographical limits of the nation they seem like a tangible certainty that helps articulate narratives of national identity and belonging. The concept of national borders in the cultural imagination, then, appears more intimately related to ever-evolving narratives of national identity than to historically determined fact. A coherent sense of national identity demands unmovable borders that keep “that which is other” out of the national circle. In addition to working as a barrier against foreign penetration, national narratives also need borders to put into practice the legal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that will ensure the coherence of the national project. In this sense, literal borders become metaphorical pillars for the construction of national narratives in synchrony with given ideological climates—when ideology shifts, national narratives adjust accordingly. Borders, however, remain in place to serve whatever regulatory function the body politic requires of them to ensure the coherence of the national space.

The ironic thing about literal borders, however, is their lack of physical stability. While they are perceived as immutable under the weight of the law, literal borders often are determined by physical accidents (mountains, rivers, lakes…) that do not obey the laws of men. Take for example the US-Mexico border: the border takes physical manifestation in the shape of the Rio Grande and the river determines the physical limits of both countries. While the idea of the border speaks to stability in space, the river rebels against the wishes of men by changing the

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24 Francis Fukuyama engages in depth the notion of the ‘end of history’ as “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (107).
physical layout of the land. The meandering of the river changes over time and creates more space on one side of the border and takes away space on the other side. These physical changes of the river periodically cause the US and Mexico to negotiate and redistribute national space, since parts of one country become parts of the other. The untamable will of the river captures the way I look at literal borders in this project: that is, considering them in all their shiftiness and paradoxical glory.

1.2. Metaphorical borders: social and cultural barriers

As we have seen, the perspective provided by the literal manifestation of borders offers tools for analyzing the issues raised by contemporary Chican@ and Native American writers. In addition to looking at borders as geopolitical lines that separate two nations this project also takes into account their more elusive metaphorical counterparts. I use the concept of metaphorical borders to signify the social and cultural lines or barriers that organize social exchanges within the nation. In this sense, I deploy metaphorical borders to talk about the (often) unarticulated rules of social interaction imprinted in the nation’s cultural imaginary. Given codes of behavior (often linked to ideas about national identity) can be mapped as mobile borders that do not need the immediate presence of a geopolitical line to take effect. Cloaked under the safety of common sense and under the naturalization of social behavior, metaphorical borders permeate our everyday lives and constantly become a site for reenacting battles over cultural sovereignty and national hegemony.

These deterritorialized borders stem from the very processes of nation building that shape the history of the US. They also appear as the driving force behind the national impulse to make sense of its subjects and cultural geography in a coherent and homogenous way. Sometimes no

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25 For more on the discrepancies of the shifting border established by the Gadsden Treaty and the rectification of legal jurisdiction over changing bancos caused by the meandering Rio Grande see Oscar J. Martínez’s Troublesome Border (2006).
longer recognizable as mechanisms of Americanization, these metaphorical borders spring from different historical genealogies of national belonging. One such genealogy, for example, can be found in Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” and his exposition of historical development and the creation of the nation at the turn of the nineteenth century.\footnote{I analyze the rhetoric and the ideological impetus behind Turner’s “frontier thesis” in more depth in Chapter 3 when I examine an NPR series on the US-Mexico border.} According to Turner’s conceptualization of national becoming, the process of Americanization in US imperial expansion lends legitimacy to people of British origin who confront the wilderness and its challenges to be reborn as Americans. While roughing it in the frontier seems to be the only way of \emph{becoming} an American, the only subjects fit for such transformation follow the white-protestant-heterosexual-male formula.

At the same time that Turner reveals the magic formula for the making of Americans, he also declares the closing of the frontier, thus closing the door to the possibility of \emph{becoming}. From that point forward, Americans can only \emph{be born} from the limited genetic pool of the chosen few who braved the elements (read a conflation of nature and Indian resistance) and prevailed. In this way, the process of Americanization, the process of creating a citizenry for a new nation, becomes intrinsically marked by race, gender, and religion. This particular genealogy of national belonging, as we will see in a different chapter, comes to seem like an inalienable truth of nationality and citizenship as it is naturalized in shared narratives of origins. This national tale organizes the cultural imaginary for the nation for the US by establishing a national standard, a social and cultural dynamic whereby some need not question their belonging to the national core while others have the burden of proof perennially on their shoulders.

The fact that the closing of the frontier takes the possibility of \emph{intrinsic becoming} off the table of national identity affects the genealogy of the nation by opening up the possibility of
other sorts of becoming being available in the social arena as it moves the genealogical focus from what Werner Sollors calls descent into the nation (from a lineage of brave men roughing it in the frontier) to addition to the national arena via what Sollors calls consent and the acceptance of the ideological and political premises that create the nation (5-6). On the other hand, the closing of the frontier also creates an implicit demarcation between those who are legitimate members of the social fabric and those who are seemingly accepted into the national fold. The possibility of citizenry by consent creates a competing genealogy for the US that also takes a strong hold in the national imaginary: the idea that the US is a nation of immigrants seems to be a truth universally acknowledged that appears side by side with ideas of social and cultural legitimacy. 27 While not always in sync in terms of creating a cohesive national landscape, the tug-of-war between legitimacy and the multiculturalism of consent appears as two sides of the same coin in the formation of a national narrative. The people who access citizenry through means other than original descent, however, need to prove themselves worthy and legitimate, and the shadow of doubt always seems to follow them when nativist discourses flourish.

To the uncritical eye, the impact on our everyday lives of these metaphorical borders that organize cultural landscapes and social exchanges may seem minimal and the mere idea farfetched. However, the rhetoric in projects of nation building in the US and the anti-immigration and nativist rhetoric that gains fervor in moments of national crisis can suggest otherwise. 28 The core values that surface in nativist exhortations in moments of national identity

27 The notion that the US is a “nation of immigrants” is often readily deployed to establish a common ground that binds the nation together and that justifies access to civil rights for all members of the national population. One recent example of this kind of deployment can be found in the anti-immigration reform rallies held nationwide during the final moments of the last Bush administration. In those rallies, one of the most common articulation of solidarity appeared in the form of “we are all immigrants” signs. These assertions of common genealogical trajectories once again erase the history of colonialism and imperial expansion in the US. In addition, they further the obliteration of Native peoples from the cultural imaginary of the US.

28 A careful analysis of the trajectory of nativist rhetoric in the US and its development over time is one of the projects that did not make it into this work.
crisis make it plain that there are some people in the US that belong here more than others.

Nativist and anti-immigration discourse makes a clear-cut distinction between those who have a legitimate claim to the national landscape and those who are “free-loaders” and “parasites” that do not belong here and are only taking undeserved advantage of the great things this nation has to offer. Proponents of nativism often advocate for the legitimacy of access to civil rights and social resources for “real Americans” and feel strongly about those who allegedly have unclear national allegiances and who they deem forever “foreign” to the body of the national. In this way, the metaphorical borders activated by nativist discourses can be understood as racial formations that shape our social exchanges: the idea that white protestant heterosexuals have more intrinsic rights informs not only nativist articulations but also, in an insidious and pervasive yet nearly invisible way, it informs most social structures that determine the way one can participate in the realm of the social: it permeates public and educational policy, it shapes the legal principles of the judicial apparatus, it affects the production of knowledge, it molds scientific research and, worst of all, it affects our own perception of self and identity through a thorough process of structural socialization. The common sense social structures that we inherit and accept as natural are inherently marked by distinctions of race, gender, class, labor, sexual orientation, citizenship, individual rights, and ethnicity among other aspects. Thus, all these implicit social distinctions that organize life and social interaction within the nation can be critically imagined as a web of metaphorical borders that crisscross our everyday encounters with others.

29 Michael Omi and Howard Winant present a compelling argument about the structural effects of racial formations in everyday life. They show how “race becomes ‘common sense’—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. A vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other” (60).
One of the first thinkers to give voice to the psychological consequences of the wars waged in the metaphorical borderlands is Chicana lesbian writer and poet Gloria Anzaldúa. In her *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza* she presents what could be understood as a counter-narrative to Turner’s frontier thesis. Anzaldúa presents in her work a sketch of the geographical borderlands or *la frontera* and offers a new national genealogy that follows a south-north track. The *frontera*, in Anzaldúa’s rendition of a narrative on becoming, is not the place where brave men turn into Americans. Instead, the geographical boundary represents a line that literally crosses a people and a landscape as it arbitrarily declares each side of the border different from the other. It represents first and foremost a site of violence, a space occupied by competing discourses of legitimacy and belonging. She writes how

"cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision. (100)"

The cultural collision Anzaldúa recognizes as part and parcel of *la frontera* causes an inner war that is waged through the deployment of metaphorical borders. The simultaneous existence of naturalized and competing discourses that structure socialization and claim primacy in the formation of a national hierarchy cause a cultural and ideological standoff in the *frontera.*

The meeting place of different frames of reference, be it geographical or metaphorical, always becomes a space where the ideology of the nation needs to be reinforced culturally and politically. Since the close proximity of otherness threatens the stability and the coherence of the national whole, it magnifies the discourses of national legitimacy and belonging. The current climate of homeland security in the US, for example, exacerbates the structural racism and class
distinction that already organize every day life. The need to declare a strong sense of patriotism
and devotion to a single nation casts everyone that has declared or alleged ties to a different
country under a shadow of suspicion. Cultural and/or racial hybridity in the metaphorical
borderlands blurs the clear-cut distinction between the domestic and the foreign and generates
suspicion regarding social loyalty and national allegiance. The need to measure and legitimize a
patriotic spirit often leads to sharper distinctions between “us” and “them,” and this affects the
degree to which certain groups are allowed to participate in the civic life of the nation and their
degree of access to structures of power. The blurred space of the borderlands, however, also
provides us with a platform from which to launch a challenge to the seeming coherence and the
supposed homogeneity of the idea of what counts as the nation and who counts as a citizen. It
allows us to question the cohesiveness of identity discourses and provides the battleground
where the fight for the adaptation and the disintegration of national identity takes place on a
regular basis.

The use of metaphorical borders as a lens that allows for a conversation between
Native American and Chican@ novels proves useful on many fronts. On the one hand, the
analysis of the social deployment of metaphorical borders shows how the creation of a sense of
otherness and social illegitimacy is not intrinsic to difference but intrinsic to the development of
varying processes of nation building and Americanization. It allows us to understand
metaphorical borders as side effects, if you will, of larger processes of nation building. In
addition, this critical lens can be used as a tool for examining the relation between assumed
notions of social legitimacy and the location and spatial distribution of people in the realm of the
national. It can also help us tease out the relation between spatial distribution of people and their
visibility. And, most importantly, it can be useful in thinking about the relations between
people’s visibility and their access (or lack of thereof) to civic participation and to a discourse of inalienable rights.

2. **Border theory as an interdisciplinary field of study**

The use of borders (in their more or less tangible permutations) as a key concept for the literary analysis in this project places this work in conversation with a broader field of critical inquiry loosely termed border theory. As we will see in the genealogy of border theory that follows, the umbrella term “border theory” houses work in a broad array of disciplines and serves as shorthand for multiple scholarly projects with varying goals and objectives. The multifariousness of the scholarly work that comes together under the rubric of border theory makes a concise definition of border theory as a field of study elusive. This section of the chapter attempts, however, a genealogical overview of the field that shows how different scholars in an array of disciplines have approached the study of borders and border zones.

One of the most popular understandings of borders in the US national imaginary rests on the idea of the border as a geopolitical line that divides two nation-states. This common understanding of the border as a physical marker that serves to regulate the social, cultural, political, and economic relations between two countries structures much of the contemporary literature on border matters. The US-Mexico border occupies a central space in the body of work concerned with the morphology and materiality of border spaces. As anthropologist Robert R. Álvarez Jr. argues, even though borders constitute a political reality all over the world the concept of “borderlands” as an area of scholarly inquiry stems from the work of social scientists focusing on the US-Mexico border (449). Álvarez shows how the border between the US and Mexico has become “the icon and model for research into other borders” (449), and how it
serves as a framework for the study of international borders in other parts of the world. In the context of the US, a proliferation of scholarly studies focuses on the US-Mexico border or its borderland area, a body of work that can be grouped under the general rubric of border theory. This body of work spans a variety of academic fields from anthropology, history, and sociology to literary and cultural studies, linguistics, and legal studies. While the approaches differ in terms of methodological principles and pedagogical frameworks, the work they produce hinges around a common denominator: the effects that borders have on the people they cross. Border theory as a field brings together, then, an eclectic body of work that sometimes stands at odds with itself.

Cultural anthropology and ethnography can provide a way of understanding the “birth” of the border as it is conceptualized today. Following this section, I present a sketch of the development of critical perspectives in the field of history. This segment offers an insight into the construction of nationalist accounts/historical narratives that reflect the consequences that changes in ideological perspectives bring to the field of border theory. Finally, I focus on the work produced in literary and cultural studies to tease out the key critical moves that different border theorists have in common. In this way, I present a common denominator that can be used to ideologically ground the field of border theory.

2.1. Cultural anthropology: the role of the border

Although the term “border theory” has been loosely applied to different approaches in many disciplinary fields, I propose here a genealogy that poses studies in cultural anthropology as one of its plausible beginnings. Anthropologists, however, have not always been concerned with the study of borders per se; as Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson argue “early anthropological concern with society as a functioning organic whole meant that anthropologists

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Álvarez refers here to two studies that use the border as their theoretical framework: Asiwaju and Asiwaju and Adenyl.
were interested in boundaries chiefly as a device to define and delimit the ‘edges’ of their subject matter” (20). In this sense, the border for early ethnographic and anthropological work did not constitute a site of scholarly or investigative inquiry so much as a tool for the spatial and geographical delimitation of an area of study. The most remarkable example of the use of borders as spatial limits to bind a geographical space of analysis appears in the disciplinary design of Area Studies. Mark Tessler, Jodi Nachtwey, and Anne Banda explain how "area studies is said to be a product of the Cold War, developed with federal funds in the 1950s and 1960s in order to ensure that the United States would possess the knowledge about Third World countries needed to compete effectively with the Soviet Union” (x). The authors argue that most area studies scholars in the 1950s and 1960s did not consider their work as part of the nation’s intelligence generating machine, although they were funded by the US government and other private philanthropic associations such as the Ford Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation that “saw strategic value in the collection of detailed information about Third World societies” (x). In the case of Area Studies, as Álvarez indicates, “the actual border seemed at least inadvertently to frame the culture areas, [and] it was neither a factor in analysis nor a variable in social interpretation” (453). Even though the border was not examined as a locus of anthropological interest, the Area Studies of the 1950s and 1960s certainly contributed to the development of Latin American Studies “as an academic field that was privileged by the university because of generous funding from the national security state” (Cabán 26) and as a catalyst of what would become Latin@ Studies and ultimately border theory. Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda remark how the National Defense Education Act passed by the US Congress in 1958 was central to the development of studies on Second World countries and how “the graduate fellowships it provided for advanced training in foreign languages and area studies laid a
foundation for the entry into American universities of a large new corps of regional specialists" (x). The production of scholarly work on Second and Third World countries provides a stepping-stone for the later development of cross-regional studies that engage hemispheric globalization.

The obviation of the border space as a site of social, economic and cross-cultural analysis as a byproduct of Area Studies in the 1950s and 1960s gradually starts to change by the late 1960s as a result of the revolutionary movements for colonial emancipation in the Américas. The successful hemispheric movement for decolonization resulted in the “increasing mobility of peoples whom anthropologists had hitherto studied as cultural isolates, and who were now gradually being released from the colonial grip and were experiencing industrialization and urbanization” (Donnan and Wilson 20). The heightened mobility of decolonized peoples put into question the notion of borders as impenetrable barriers that helped enclose peoples and cultures and called attention to the border regions as zones of cultural contact and social accommodation deserving of scholarly examination and analysis.31 At the same time, the emergence and institutionalization of academic disciplines such as Women’s Studies and Latin@ and Ethnic Studies also contributed to the more integrated hemispheric reformulation of Area Studies (Acosta-Belén 250). As Juan Poblete maintains in his introduction to the volume Critical Latin American and Latino Studies, Latin@ Studies is “a field in the borders of ethnic and area studies [and] posits itself as the analytical space where borders themselves can be investigated and with them all kinds of transnational, translingual, and transcultural phenomena” (xv). In his view, Latin@ Studies can “perform the very healthy job of criticizing the nation-centered limitations of area and ethnic paradigms” (xv). The changes in mobility in a population undergoing

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31 The contemporary shift from regional studies to scholarly work that focuses on global and cross-regional issues is also reflected in the funding practices of the Ford Foundation, Mellon Foundation, MacArthur Foundation as they channel their philanthropic efforts in a more cross-cultural direction (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banan xi).
decolonization and the emergence of new academic disciplines collude in creating alternative critical platforms of study within the field of anthropology. These platforms direct scholarly attention to transnational socio-cultural systems and to the study of contemporary labor policies and practices in an era of globalization.

The cultural turn in ethnographic and traditional anthropological studies led to a branch of socio-cultural anthropology in the US that relies heavily on ethnography as a method for the study of different social groups.\textsuperscript{32} The methodological use of ethnography itself has moved from an approach that focused on the study of peoples and cultures as bounded and isolated entities to an approach that questions the principle of anthropological objectivity and static, monolithic notions of culture and social structures. One of the major proponents of these methodological changes in the context of an incipient field of border theory is cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo. In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989) Rosaldo reflects on the changes that the field of anthropology has undergone since the late 1960s as a result of “decolonization, the civil rights movement, the fuller emergence of a global economy, and the massive interventions of development” (xvii). He observes an emergent shift in ethnography-based programs that move towards the central inclusion of history and politics “in contexts of inequality and oppression based on such factors as Westernization, media imperialism, invasions of commodity culture, and differences of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation” (xvii) as their framework of social analysis. Rosaldo advocates a critical anthropology and interdisciplinary cultural studies that subverts the traditional boundaries established by

ethnography to open up spaces for the inclusion of historically subordinated perspectives that support the revalorization of alternative forms of knowledge. His study puts forth a critique of the ideas of objectivity and truth that dominate previous ethnographic work and calls for the engagement of ethnographic subjects as social actors rather than as neutral objects of study.

Rosaldo concludes his analysis by reflecting on what he terms people with culture and people without culture (196-202). He argues that the people without culture are those that occupy a space of privilege and are aligned with the status quo (= full access to citizenship) while the people with culture are those marked by difference that occupy a subordinate position in the social hierarchy—the people with culture are not quite citizens: exotic, different, worthy of study because of that difference—and have become the traditional objects of ethnological study. The revision and re-articulation of the ethnographic method that Rosaldo proposes brings to the forefront of social analyses geographical and spatial zones that have been deemed “culturally invisible” in normative ethnographic work, what he calls the “culture in the borderlands.” As he contends,

more often than we usually care to think, our daily lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets and eruptions of all kinds. Social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste. Along with “our” supposedly transparent cultural selves, such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation. (207-208)

In this presentation of the “culture in the borderlands,” Rosaldo identifies as border zones the spaces of social difference that create distinct cultural zones (often subordinated and marginalized) in relation to the idea of the cultural homogeneity of a dominant social group. This idea of cultural and social borders, as we have discussed previously, becomes one of the central tenets of border theory in its development at the turn of the twentieth century.
Following the path of disciplinary questioning and critique that Rosaldo presents in *Culture and Truth*, Cuban-American anthropologist Ruth Behar produced a meta-ethnographical account that further destabilizes the understanding of ethnography as an objective and contained science. Her *Translated Woman, Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* offers the *historias* (both histories and stories) of Esperanza Hernández, a woman living in Mexquitic, Mexico, earning a living as a street peddler. Behar translates the *historias* that Esperanza tells her and brings them to the *other side*, to the US. The process of crossing the border linguistically, culturally, and physically, gives place to the meta-ethnographic aspect of Behar’s study. This reflexivity calls into question the role of the ethnographer and the personal implication of the scholar in the presentation of the *historias* bequeathed to her. Border crossing, then, becomes a process that awakens a new critical perspective from which for examining the interaction of cultures and languages and the material effects this interaction has in the lives of people. In her introduction, Behar reflects that "from their position straddling selfhood and otherhood, Spanish and English, Mexican identity and *agringado* identity, power and resistance, Chicano and Chicana writers have so radically shifted the terms of cultural analysis that it now seems impossible to imagine doing any kind of ethnography without a concept of the borderlands or of border crossing" (15). By bringing to light the multiple layers that come together in their social representation (both self-representation and the representation by others), Chican@ writers and scholars direct attention to the border space as a palimpsestic site where the coalescence of cultures and languages creates new subject positions. Behar, talking both metaphorically and literally, concludes her ethnographic account by reflecting that "when I am done cutting out her [Esperanza’s] tongue [both language and tongue in Spanish], I will patch together a new tongue for her, an odd tongue that is neither English nor Spanish, but the language of a translated
woman. Esperanza will talk in this book in a way she never talked before" (19). Esperanza as a “translated woman” becomes a border subject, a new iteration of her old self that is neither Spanish nor English but both—the social and historical actor of the borderlands.

Behar’s attention to language, translation, and the role of language in shaping subjectivity and social position from a cultural anthropologist’s perspective finds an echo in Alfred Arteaga’s 1994 *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, a collection approached from a cultural studies vantage point. In this edited volume, Arteaga presents numerous contributions from different disciplinary persuasions that “concern themselves with [a] specific moment and particular place, with the spatial site and temporal juncture where discourse is articulated, the chronotope where one *is*, when one is subject” (2). The focus of the essays in Arteaga’s collection lies in language as a tool of social containment and cultural marginalization, a tool of subject formation. While analyzing the wars over discursive power that emerge in Chicano writing Arteaga contends that “being for Chicanos occurs in the interface between Anglo and Latin America, on the border that is not so much a river from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso and a wire fence from there to the Pacific but, rather, a much broader area where human interchange goes beyond the simple ‘American or no’ of the border check” (10). Thus, the linguistic borderlands in Arteaga’s conceptualization occupy a much broader social and geographical space than the actual geopolitical border between the US and Mexico. The borderlands for Arteaga are the “space[s] where English and Spanish compete for presence and authority. [They are] not the site of mere either/or linguistic choice but one of quotidian linguistic conflict where the utterance is borne at home in English and Spanish and in caló” (11). As a space of “simultaneous cultural fission and fusion” (10), the borderlands become a site of linguistic disciplining, a site of contested knowledge, a battlefield where the fight over inclusion
and exclusion from the idea of the nation is fought with accents and translations as its primary weapons. Arteaga’s conceptualization of the linguistic borderlands presents them as a traveling space that materializes wherever the Chican@ tongue meets the ear of the monolingual Anglo-American. This theorization of border space as a mobile space that appears when prompted by ideological violence also becomes a tenet of border theory as a methodological lens, as we have seen in the discussion about metaphorical borders.

In contrast to the conceptualization of the borderlands as a mobile space that is linguistically determined, the work of anthropologist Alejandro Lugo focuses on the US-Mexico border in its geographical specificity. In *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the US-Mexico Border* (2008), Lugo undertakes an exhaustive analysis of the socio-cultural and economic reality of the workers that earn their living in border *maquiladoras* along the Mexican side of the US-Mexico border. He compares the lived experiences of border dwellers and *maquila* workers and puts them in conversation with the lives of the peoples undergoing the Spanish colonization of the northern frontier in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (2). To undertake this comparative analysis, Lugo deploys both ethnographic methods and historical analysis to trace the links between Spanish conquest and Anglo-American imperialist expansion, highlighting the processes that “have culminated in the material and cultural subjugation, or present conquest, of economically vulnerable populations in the U.S.-Mexico border region” (2). Lugo contends that the socio-economic and political subjugation of the Mexican border population and the Mexican-American population in the US (especially noticeable in the marginalization of indigenous and *mestizo* working poor) comes from their continuous colonial status under imperial forces—first under Spanish rule and now under Anglo-American rule. Lugo’s conceptualization of border theory hinges on an understanding of the
effects that living in the borderlands have in the subject formation of border dwellers and border crossers. Thus, his scholarly practice underscores the role that power relations, systemic racism, and capitalist structures of dominance play in the representation of border peoples.

This overview of changes in cultural and linguistic anthropology provides a picture of the developing tenets that give shape to border theory. It shows the political and pedagogical changes that led to the transformation of the border from a containment mechanism to a site of critical inquiry. In addition, it examines the cultural turn and the rise of ethnography as a scholarly method that places the borderlands in the limelight of academic curiosity. Moreover, it captures two key moves in the analysis of borderlands and border matters: an engagement with the borderlands anchored in their geographical specificity and an expansion of the geographical borderlands into social and cultural phenomena even away from the geographical specificity of the area.

2.2. History: from frontier to borderlands

Following a different genealogical route from that of cultural and linguistic anthropology, Paul Allatson in his *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies* (2007) identifies the origins of border theory in frontier historiography, particularly in the “work on the Spanish borderlands by Eugene Bolton (1921) and his successors (Truett and Young 2004), and in the post World War II period, the ethnographic work done by Américo Paredes” (44). In 1921 Herbert E. Bolton published *The Spanish Borderlands, a Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest*, a volume detailing the history of the Spanish conquest of Florida and Mexico. Bolton, historian and disciple of Frederick Jackson Turner, endeavored to “forge a Hispanic counterpart to Frederick Jackson Turner’s foundational narrative of the US frontier, while challenging a deep legacy of black legend-inspired thought that pushed Spanish America to the margins of early US
history” (Truett and Young 3). Bolton advocated for a holistic understanding of history and devoted much of his career to the study of the Spanish colonial trials. In his historiographic endeavors, building on the work of Hubert Howe Bancroft and others, he translated many of the journals of Spanish soldiers and priests. The greatest groundwork laid by Bolton for the later field of border theory rests in his radical reconceptualization of the methodological approach to history in the US. He is the proponent of what has come to be known as the “Bolton Theory,” a theory showing that

there is need of a broader treatment of American history, to supplement the purely nationalistic presentation to which we are accustomed. European history cannot be learned from books dealing alone with England, or France, or Germany, or Italy, or Russia; nor can American history be adequately presented if confined to Brazil, or Chile, or Mexico, or Canada, or the United States. In my own country the study of thirteen English colonies and the United States in isolation has obscured many of the larger factors in their development, and helped to raise up a nation of chauvinists. Similar distortion has resulted from the teaching and writing of national history in other American countries. (1-2)

Bolton thus proposes a transnational and hemispheric study of American history, arguing for the impossibility of understanding such history without understanding its relation to the often hidden colonial history of the Americas. Even though Bolton erred on the side of a white/ Spanish colonial history to the detriment of the Indian and mestizo side, we could consider his hemispheric and transnational methodological approach to be in line with the contemporary scholarly projects undertaken under the rubric of border theory.

While Bolton’s work acts as a catalyst for the reframing of scholarly approaches to national histories, his contemporaries in the 1930s also deserve special attention as precursors to border theory. For example, historians Carlos E. Castañeda and George I. Sánchez began producing work in the 1930s that focused on Mexican American culture and identity in the Southwest.

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33 Bolton directed 104 PhDs and 323 MAs and his students went on to become leading scholars in US and Latin American history (Truett and Young 3)
Following their intellectual lead, Carey Williams and Américo Paredes also generated work on borderland histories in the 1950s that focused on the history and folklore of ethnic Mexican communities (Truett and Young 3). The work of Américo Paredes, in particular, continues to be perceived as one of the major stepping-stones for the field of Chican@ Studies and later for border theory. Paredes’s *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958) presents an interdisciplinary account that brings together ethnography, literary study, history, folklore, cultural studies, and musicology. Through the examination of “*El corrido de Gregorio Cortés*,” a popular ballad that portrays the socio-historical reality of the Mexico-Texas border at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Paredes advocates for an understanding of this folk medium as a form of literacy that captures an alternative socio-cultural history to that in official histories of that period and geographical space. Paredes’s project of historical recovery and rewriting points to one of the major concerns for the field of border theory, the voices and experiences that fall through the cracks of official US history and social representation.

The work of these early historians on the borderlands and on the socio-cultural condition of Mexican Americans in the US finds a strong continuation in the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights movement of the 1960s opened the door to higher education for a new cohort of students of Mexican descent. The access to institutions of higher learning during the height of the Chicano Movement enabled the emergence of a new generation of Chican@ scholars that produced work with stronger political leanings. The work of Juan Gómez-Quiñones, Rodolfo Acuña, Mario Barrera, Albert Camarillo and others reflected a marked shift toward the demand for social justice as they produced scholarship that highlights the structures of institutionalized
racism, the unequal distribution of resources, and the classed and raced exploitation of labor in the US (Truett and Young 3-4).

In the 1980s and 1990s we also find numerous scholars that direct their inquiries towards the borderlands: Ramón Gutiérrez, Rosaura Sánchez, and Antonia Castañeda represent a group of Chican@ scholars that revisit the study of the colonial borderlands through a lens of race, gender, and the creation of an ethnic identity (Truett and Young 5). Other scholars such as Oscar J. Martínez produce scholarship that takes into account both sides of the border. He presents a thorough picture of the lived experience on both sides of the border through topics such as violence and cross-cultural social interaction. The 1980s and 1990s also see the proliferation of New Western historians like Patricia Nelson Limerick that began to deconstruct Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis as the official narrative of Anglo-American westward expansion. Limerick’s work, among other things, questions the east-west migratory imperative of traditional historical accounts about the West and opens up a space for understanding other migratory tracts that enable the writing of different lived experiences.

The field of history as an alternative genealogical route also yields productive results in understanding the cornerstones of border theory as a field. The gradual changes in perspective behind the creation of historical narratives weigh heavily in the conceptualization of border theory. The emphasis on the inclusion of hidden or erased histories, the recovery projects that concentrate on a rewriting of alternative histories to official history in the US, the application of a social justice framework that highlights structures of institutionalized racism and class exploitation, and the deployment of an intersectional lens that pays attention to the intersection

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34 In the Introduction to *Continental Crossroads: Remapping US-Mexico Borderlands History* (2004), Truett and Young provide an exhaustive historiographic account of the scholarly production focusing on the US-Mexico border and the borderlands in general.
of race, gender, class, and ethnic identity formation both today and in the colonial borderlands create the basis of the new historical, social, and cultural analysis.

2.3. Literary and cultural studies

The field of literary and cultural studies also offers a space for critical work that focuses on the specificity of the borderlands as a geographical space and also on the theorization of the role(s) and effect(s) of the border. Many critics agree that the publication of Anzaldúa’s 1987 *Borderlands/ La Frontera* constitutes a determining landmark in the development of border thinking and border theorization. Anzaldúa’s introspective journey takes the reader into the battleground of Chicana and *mestiza* identity formation: the social and cultural borderlands surrounding the US-Mexico border. She presents this specific geographical space as a place where different cultural matrices face and confront each other, as a space where national histories tilt and fall out of balance, as a place that reveals naturalized heteronormativity as a cultural imposition. The borderlands in Anzaldúa’s text appear as a space of violence resulting from the tug-of-war between classed, gendered, and national discourses competing for social and cultural primacy over processes of identity formation. At the same time, the borderlands also appear as a site of possibility and hybridity: as a space where creative and destructive forces release a dangerous amount of energy that needs to be channeled productively rather than let loose into a destructive vortex. By exposing the contradictions that come together in the creation of a racialized, feminist, and queer Chicana identity, Anzaldúa disrupts both Anglo-centric nationalist histories and Chicano nationalist discourses. Her work provides a genealogy for *mestiz@s* as a hybrid people that are linked to an indigenous past in the *Américas*. In the process, she actively rewrites Chican@ and *mestiz@* iconography and recuperates it from a feminist perspective.
Anzaldúa draws a distinction between the geographical borderlands and the psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and the spiritual borderlands. While the US-Mexico border provides the local, concrete, tangible example of the consequences of the clashing of various cultural frameworks, she contends that the warring effect of the borderlands need not have geographical proximity to the actual border. Thus, Anzaldúa lays out the basis for much of the theorization of the border that is to come: the specificity of a geopolitical locale, the rewriting and reclaiming of erased histories, and the conceptualization of the metaphorical borderlands as ubiquitous phenomena in the US social and cultural imaginary.\(^{35}\)

With her groundbreaking work, Anzaldúa opened the path for the production of scholarly work that addresses the idiosyncrasies of the border space and its multiple ramifications as a critical and theoretical tool. The collection of essays edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar in 1991, *Criticism in the Borderlands*, offers one of the first examples of this kind of academic work. In this volume, the authors set out to identify Chican@ culture and literature as a cultural phenomenon intrinsically tied to a specific geographical locale: the borderlands of the American West and Southwest. Following long established academic precepts for the legitimation of a field of study, they proceed to identify an alternative historical chronology that shows Chican@ history as following a different route from official US history. They identify, for example, the Texas-American war (1836) and the US-Mexican war (1846-1848) as landmark moments in the formation of Chican@ culture and history. At the same time, they also recuperate the weight of the *mestizo* roots of Mexican society in the racial, social, and cultural composition

\(^{35}\) In a piece entitled “The Fungibility of Borders” (2000), Mary Pat Brady offers an insightful reflection about the use of “the border” in contemporary cultural theory and criticism that speaks to the deterritorialization of borders that Anzaldúa first presents in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. She addresses the ways the border as a concept is anchored in a particular geographical space (the US-Mexico border) and yet becomes despatialized in most of its current critical deployments, thus universalizing the initially specific space. Brady presents an analysis of the relation between time and space in the critical use of borders and emphasizes the need to grasp the interrelation between these concepts if one is to understand the function that the border performs.
of the Chican@ ethnic identity. While the authors gesture towards the inclusion and prominence of mestizo roots in the formation of the Chican@ ethnic identity, they nevertheless do not seem interested in recognizing the overlapping histories of colonialism (Spaniards and Mexicans over American Indians/ Anglos over American Indians and Mexicans) in the same geographical space. Instead, they mention the importance of an indigenous past but choose to focus only on the Spanish/ Mexican side of the equation. This seems to be a pervasive affliction in the field of Chican@ studies and one that I seek to redress through my work.

The goal of Calderón and Saldívar’s collection is to present Chican@ theory and theorists in the global borderlands, to bring together a variety of ideological and critical approaches (ethnographic, post-modernist, Marxist, feminist, cultural materialist, and New Historicist) so as to “construct and elicit allegiances outside the immediate sphere of Chicano studies” (6). In presenting a wide array of critical perspectives and in creating interdisciplinary connections, the authors aim to reflect how “ideology itself involves networks of meaning and borders through which society is knitted together” (6) and therefore how the field of Chican@ studies needs to be understood in conversation with other fields of study. In addition, their recovery project is invested in (by focusing on neglected authors and texts) opening up “new perspectives on American literary history, ethnicity, gender, culture, and the literary process itself” (6) that will move Chican@ literary and cultural expression away from its marginal position in the US cultural imaginary and will place Chican@ literature and culture squarely within revised American literary histories. Calderón and Saldívar highlight how this collection voices an “important cultural perspective that is absent to an international scholarly community” and “view this volume as a Chicana and Chicano contribution to a new awareness of the historical and cultural interdependence of both northern and southern American hemispheres” (7). Thus, the
authors place the work of borderland theorists and theories about the border on the interdisciplinary and hemispheric plane that characterizes the field.

The work of one of the contributors to the volume, Ramón Saldívar, presents a useful example of the kind of approach to literary and cultural production that the field of border theory in Chican@ studies exercises. He argues that Chican@ writing uses to its advantage the liminal space it occupies in the field of American literature since its marginality allows it to expose the workings of ideology and notions of common sense. According to Saldívar, “these narrative fictions represent that what appears as ‘natural’ in the ways individuals live their lives in society is the result of identifiable cultural matrices” (12) and that the importance of the analysis of Chican@ cultural production resides in its ability to expose the way social constructions become naturalized and passed as common sense. As he writes, “Chicano narrative fiction presents subjects acting according to variant and competing ideologies, ideologies in opposition to existing material apparatus of American society. These narratives thus produce clashes or textual aporias that demarcate the limits of ideology itself” (16-17). The ability of Chican@ literature to present a counter-hegemonic stance becomes one of the central features that shapes the field of border theory.

Another contributor to the volume, Angie Chabram, also presents compelling arguments about the emergent field of Chican@ studies through her overview of the emergent phase of Chican@ criticism. While she identifies the different circles that give shape to the field of Chican@ studies (the Yale, Austin, Santa Barbara and La Jolla circles) and contemplates the rise in the professionalization of Chican@ critical discourse (through the publication of critical books and the proliferation of scholarly journals), she also recognizes a gap between the production of literary criticism and the production of critical studies about it. Chabram calls for the production
of Chican@ metacritical studies as a necessary step in the reaffirmation of Chican@ studies. According to Chabram, this next step in the critical arena would determine the move of Chican@ studies from the margins of academic production into the midst of more established critical traditions.

The same year that Calderón and Saldívar published *Criticism in the Borderlands*, Emily Hicks also published *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text*, which conceptualizes what constitutes “border writing” and “border texts.” Hicks identifies border writing and border texts as writing that emphasizes the “difference in reference codes between two or more cultures” (xxv). She contends that border writing reflects the lives of border crossers in terms of bilingualism, biculturalism, and “biconceptual reality” (xxv). Hicks’s approach, however, differs markedly from Calderón and Saldívar’s in the sense that she undoes the link between border texts and the geographical specificity of the borderlands. Border experiences, according to Hicks, need not be tied to a geopolitical line but can happen anywhere. She explains that “I am speaking of cultural, not physical, borders: the sensibility that informs border literature can exist among guest workers anywhere, including European countries in which the country of origin does not share a physical border with the host country” (xxv). In this sense, Hicks’ work presents a conceptual shift that will also inform the critical framework of border theory: the possibility of understanding border sensibilities even when distanced from a specific geopolitical locale.36

Following the blueprint laid out in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, José David Saldívar published *Border Matters* half a decade later (1997). Saldívar endeavors to broaden the scope of the sources he uses as archive for his cultural analysis (he includes *corridos*, poems, paintings,

36 Debra A. Castillo in “Border Theory and the Canon” (1999) cautions readers about the dangers of abstract theorizing about borders, of reducing the border “to a mere floating functionality” as in, she believes, the work of Walter Mignolo, García Canclini, and Octavio Paz (184). She highlights the need for border theorists not to lose sight of the specificity of the border.
conjunto/ punk/ hip-hop songs, travel writing and ethnography) to theorize issues of Chican@ borderscapes in his project to map a new model for US cultural studies. Saldívar’s new model focuses on oppositional thought and expressions that challenge received notions of homogeneity in US nationalism and popular culture. He aims to combine US and British models of cultural studies with a model of cultural studies based in the borderlands to examine issues of modernity, postmodernity, and postcoloniality. Saldívar actively fosters the production of intercultural research and of theoretical work that has the ability to bridge the fragmentation he sees in contemporary disciplinary endeavors. Overall, he stresses the need to understand the overlap of multiple cognitive maps to tease out their effect in the formation of cultural identity. In addition, Saldívar presents a Foucauldian genealogical drive to map the discourse of US-Mexico borderlands as originating in the historical experience of American western expansion. Finally, he theorizes border discourse as a site that allows both the reinforcement and the subversion of power, as a site where the cultures of US empire can be exposed in their attempts to naturalize a homogeneous notion of American culture. Thus, Saldívar presents a road map for the development of a border theory approach to literature and culture.

The same year Border Matters was published, the field also witnessed the publication of Scott Michaelsen and David Johnson’s Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics. In this edited volume, Michaelsen and Johnson present pieces that “not only theoriz[e] the idea of the ‘border,’ but also explor[e] the philosophico-political limits of border theory work” (Johnson 3). The work collected in the book does not take for granted the border “either as an object of study and analytic tool or as a privileged site for progressive political work” (Johnson 3) and starts from the notion that “for all of border studies’ attempts to produce a cultural politics of diversity and inclusion, this work literally can be produced only by means of—can be founded on—
exclusions” (3). While launching a critique of Chicano studies and its seeming sense of proprietorship over the field of border theory, Michaelsen and Johnson argue that their book “inscribes itself neither simply within Chicano studies nor simply without it: neither inclusive nor exclusive, it traces the limit (of the border) of disciplinary and discursive identity” (22). The book focuses on different manifestations of borders: from “hard” borders created in militarized border zones such as the US-Mexico border to “the ‘soft’ borders produced within broadly liberal discourse: benevolent nationalisms, cultural essentialisms, multiculturalisms, and the like” (1) so as to explore the “state of ‘border studies’” (1). Thus, the volume compiles an eclectic collection of essays that mobilize a wide variety of theoretical approaches in the study of borders.

In addition to the edited volumes devoted to metacritical analyses of the function and purpose of the border as a tool of critical inquiry, other scholars have engaged with the border and the borderlands. Sonia Saldívar-Hull offers a re-articulation of feminist practice that stems from the lived experiences of people in a specific geographical area: the borderlands of Texas. Border feminism, Saldívar-Hull contends, entails a political stance that confronts and undermines patriarchy in its intersection with forms of disempowerment and the silencing of women in border regions. As such, it addresses issues of racism, homophobia, class inequality, and nationalism. Saldívar-Hull argues that border feminism creates a space for the development of an oppositional consciousness and that it focuses on organizing resistance around struggles for social justice. To do so, border feminism deploys a transnational analytical framework that allows for the examination of the convergence and collision of cultural, political, and economic disparities across borders. By building a coalition of women of color and Third World women, Saldívar-Hull brings together the Chicana struggle and the struggle of other Hispanic groups in
the Américas, as well as the struggle of other racial and ethnic minorities in the US such as Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans. At the same time, border feminism also establishes connections with the struggle of Third World countries that share similar social and economic conditions. Saldívar-Hull recognizes the need to recuperate the lost and/or silenced histories/stories of oppressed groups as well as the need to imagine and create counter-histories that help change the social and economic conditions of the groups living in the borderlands. She identifies the site for this kind of theoretical production in non-traditional places such as “the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts (the cuentos), and, if we are fortunate enough to have access to a good library, in the essays published in marginalized journals not widely distributed by the dominant institutions” (46). The border feminist occupies then a marginal position in the academic arena as it “exists in the interstices of national borders” (55).

Similarly, Rosa Linda Fregoso’s Mexicana Encounters, the Making of Social Identities in the Borderlands (2003) undertakes an analysis of the representation of Mexicanas and Chicanas in the US cultural landscape. Through the analysis of varied cultural expressions and phenomena (ranging from movies, the Chican@ familial structure, the murders of brown women in Ciudad Juárez, to the genealogy of Chicana and Latina Hollywood actresses), she sees the role of popular culture as a formative site and as a force that shapes processes of identity formation in the US. Fregoso’s examination of the creation of social identity in the borderlands and its connection to historical narratives and memory reveals an ironic paradox: it draws attention to the seeming visibility of meXicanas (the interface between Mexicana and Chicana) in cultural representations while at the same time highlighting their invisibility in historical narratives of the nation. Her use of the term “meXicana,” she argues, “draws attention to the historical, material,
and discursive effects of contact zones and exchanges among various communities on the Mexico-US border, living in the shadows of more than 150 years of conflict, interactions, and tensions” (xiv). As such, the term evokes “processes of transculturation, hybridity, and cultural exchanges—the social and economic interdependency and power relations structuring the lives of inhabitants on the borderlands” (xiv). Fregoso uses “meXicana” to signal, on the one hand, a link to the geographical specificity of the border and, on the other hand, the mobility of Chicana social identity and representation to other geographical locales. As a border and cultural theorist then, Fregoso invests her scholarly energies in the analysis of narrative, history, and representation, and their relation to structured dominance and the deployment of hegemonic power and social hierarchy. Through her analysis, she reveals the workings of racism, classism, sexism, and gender normativity and recuperates counternarratives that provide a space for representing new social realities and collectives and affirm “the production of new cultural citizens in the borderlands” (xv).

2.4. Borders in American Indian Studies

While scholars of Chican@ Studies often ground their literary, social, and cultural analyses in the US-Mexico borderlands and eagerly contemplate notions of hybridity, mestizaje, and indigeneity, the Indigenous identity strand they tend to champion disavows ties to contemporary Indian populations—both in the US and in Mexico. As Josefina Saldaña-Portillo elaborates in “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón,” the Chicano movement in the early 1970s appropriated the discourse of mestizaje and anchored its identity politics in the mythical Aztlán in the US Southwest, a place of origin for the Aztecs who would later move south to build their empire: “Aztlán constituted a space outside the US nation, prior to the US nation, from which to launch a critique of a hegemonic
and racist system of representation” (413). The constitution of this mythical place of origin historically outside of the US nation-state, however, seeks primacy for Aztecs over the presence of other Native peoples in the space now occupied by the US, in turn replicating the logic of settler colonialism over the historical and contemporary Indigenous population in the US. Saldaña-Portillo aptly points out that the Chicano movement’s embrace of Aztlán reduces Indigenous ancestry to a biological genealogy, to a “biologicist representation that, in discursive and political terms, always already places the Indian under erasure” (413). To avoid this unfortunate yet recurrent erasure of Native histories and present lived-realities, we need to mobilize thorough critiques of settler colonialism and its deployment of ideological and legal strategies; we need to be aware of the insidiousness of the logic of colonialism and of the shapes it takes, even when it appears in unsuspecting spaces. The work of scholars of American Indian Studies provides a productive starting point to carry out such critiques and to understand the intersection of processes of identity formation, colonialist structures, and the borders that enforce them.

The work of American Indian Studies’ scholars rarely appears connected to border theory or recognized as akin to it. However, the kind of work many scholars in the field engage in ties directly or implicitly to borders, geographical and cultural mappings, and the effects of the displacement imposed by settler colonialism in the lives of Native peoples. Paula Gunn Allen’s (Laguna Pueblo) *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Canons* (1998) makes apparent the connection between American Indians and borders as it connects the lived experiences of the latest generations of Laguna Pueblo people to the dislocation caused by the Spanish colonial forces. Her collection of essays maps the histories of migration that she identifies as characterizing the Keres Pueblo peoples in their post-Columbian
time: “I choose [the title of the book] because if anything defines the American Indian peoples’ post-Columbian situation, it is the freedom to leave and return to the reservation or local communities” (6). Rather than understanding reservation borders as a mechanism of containment and control, Allen recasts borders as signifying freedom of movement for Native peoples. Regaining agency from the colonial imposition of reservation borders, she sets out to explore the ways American Indians will retain their “‘indianness’ while participating in global society” (6) through a collection of essays, poetry, fiction, musings, and renderings from the oral tradition that defies the boundaries of genre and fiction.

Other scholars of American Indian Studies concentrate their efforts in understanding the implications of the notion of sovereignty as a concept coming from European discourses later imposed on Native peoples through colonialism. Both Joanne Barker (Lenni-Lenape) and Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk), among others, examine the usefulness of using the concept of sovereignty as a cultural construct that does not stem from Indigenous forms of social and political organization. Barker offers a genealogy of the term “sovereignty” and its different iterations in American Indian history, from the signing of treaties to the United Nations’ signing of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, arguing that sovereignty needs to be understood as a term that is historically contingent (21) rather than as an immutable concept. Similarly, Alfred firmly roots sovereignty doctrines on notions of dominion, on European discourses that frame conditions of internal colonization for American Indians. He argues that the discourse of sovereignty limits the ways “we are able to think, suggesting always a conceptual and definitional problem centered on the accommodation of indigenous peoples within a ‘legitimate’ framework of settler governance” (Sovereignty 34-35). The imposition of European frameworks as organizing principles for Native political and social structures creates a
fundamental barrier for Alfred: in *Power, Peace, and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (1999), he champions the development of intellectual frameworks anchored in the recovery of Indigenous political traditions to find political platforms for contemporary Native societies. Despite their differences, Barker’s and Alfred’s theorizations of sovereignty and frameworks of Indigenous self-determination implicitly speak to the creation and maintenance of borders as the geopolitical constructs that determine the reach of Indigenous self-determination.

In the same way that Barker’s and Alfred’s studies of sovereignty center on the legal jurisdiction of American Indian self-determination, Andrea Smith examines issues of jurisdiction in relation to gendered violence on reservations. In *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Smith exposes the vulnerable position that Native women occupy on the reservation given the jurisdictional grey area that befalls sexual crimes. Given the passing of the Major Crimes Act in 1885, even though reservations are ruled by Indian law enforcement and tribal courts, any major crime that takes place on reservation land needs to be adjudicated through federal justice systems (31). The inability to enforce tribal law in cases of sexual violence and murder, for example, creates a no-man’s-land juridical space that does nothing to deter these terrible acts. Moreover, since federal courts are already overburdened, they do not pay much attention to whatever happens on Indian land, thus exacerbating the abuse that takes place outside tribal jurisdiction. The issue of jurisdiction that Smith’s work puts front and center in understanding gendered violence on the reservation cannot be separated from the idea of borders, both literal and metaphorical: the literal borders of the reservation determine the jurisdictional reach of tribal law enforcement, and the metaphorical borders (or ideological constructs) determine the scope of the legal matters tribal courts can manage. In this sense,
borders appear as the organizing principle behind the stories of gender violence and genocide in Smith’s study.

In addition to examining matters of jurisdiction and legal enforcement in Native lands, other American Indian Studies’ scholars focus their critical eye on mapping practices and the geographical distribution of space in colonial settings. Shari M. Huhndorf (Yupik), Mark Rifkin, and Mishuana Goeman (Seneca) among others, focus their intellectual efforts on teasing out the implications of transnationalism for the analysis of colonization and the consequences of official narratives of US jurisdiction. In *Mapping the Americas: The Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, Huhndorf argues that transnational movement and transnational perspectives allow for critical analyses of the ways colonization has reshaped Native cultures. Underscoring the blind eye that American Studies traditionally has turned to the history of colonialism in the US, Huhndorf contends that a cross-border analysis helps to expand the range of Native Studies while making impossible the deflection of conquest typical of American Studies. Thus, she focuses on how the nations within nations contest the sovereignty of states by looking at the US-Canada border and the Arctic circle. In sync with Huhndorf’s analyses, Mark Rifkin’s *Manifesting America: The Imperial Construction of US National Space* explores the ways official narratives of US jurisdiction have precluded the possibility of alternative mappings of sovereignties and of geographical space. He sets out to trace “the conditions of possibility for political self-representation and sovereignty on lands narrated as domestic, foregrounding the persistence of alternative mappings and political principles to those institutionalized by the United States” (7). The drive to make visible alternative political and geographical organizations of space, to give a voice to those muted by master narratives of the US, aligns Rifkin’s work with some of the core premises of border theory, as we will see in the next section. Joining forces with
Huhndorf’s and Rifkin’s work, Mishuana Goeman offers a feminist intervention in the analysis of colonial spatial restructuring of Native lands and bodies in the twentieth century. She theorizes colonialism as the reification of gendered spatial violence and questions how notions of border, nation, reservations, and urban spaces take shape through the restructuring of space brought about by settler nation-states. Huhndorf, Rifkin, and Goeman, then, generate various theorizations grounded on the imposition of borders by genealogies of the US that evacuate Indigenous presence from the national space.

In a way not so anchored in physical geopolitical lines, scholars such as Philip J. Deloria (Lakota), Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/ Dakota), and Audra Simpson (Mohawk) mobilize border crossings in their analyses of the processes of identity formation in Indians and non-Indian peoples. In Playing Indian, for example, Deloria investigates the boundaries of identity formation by focusing on how non-Indians in different periods of US history dress as Indians to explore their own evolving identities in post-revolutionary and post-industrial times. He continues his exploration of mechanisms of identity building in Indians in Unexpected Places where he sets out to “consider the ways non-Indians came to reframe their understandings of Indians in the wake of what seemed the final confinement of western Indian people to reservations” while putting “the making of non-Indian expectations into a dialogue with the lived experiences of certain Native people, those whose actions were, at that very moment, being defined as unexpected” (7). Thus, Deloria puts in conversation two sets of social perceptions organized thorough the axis of reservation borders. In a similar fashion, Lyons addresses the complex negotiation of tribalism, traditionalism, and nationalism in the construction of contemporary American Indian identities. Exploding the cultural spaces made available by settler colonialism, Lyons claims a space for today’s Native identity that is not determined by notions of
authenticity tied to colonial articulations of American Indian identity. He repurposes the “x” mark used to sign treaties into a metaphor that stands for Indigenous agency and the right of fashioning one’s path. Audra Simpson’s work speaks to Lyons’s in the sense that she exposes the intersections between processes of identity formation, access to citizenship, Mohawk political recognition, and the creation of nationhood. Her ethnographic studies examine these intersections outside the boundaries of state power and colonial sanction.

As Simpson’s work explores the processes outside the boundaries or the purview of the nation-state, Jodi A. Byrd focuses her attention on the movement of empire across boundaries, on the ways indigenous identity becomes a tool for the expansion and the circulation of settler colonialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She uses the idea of transit to signify both the literal movement of imperial expansion and the metaphorical deployment and mutation of Native identity in the service of colonialist projects. Byrd contrasts the Indian subject that empire anchors to an irretrievable past to the presence of American Indian peoples in a very real present to show how “as a system dependent upon difference and differentiation to enact the governmentality of biopolitics, the deferred ‘Indian’ that transits US empire over continents and oceans is recycled and reproduced so that empire might cohere and consolidate subject and object, self and other, within those transits” (221). In this sense, the circulated notion of Indianness that enables movement as it serves as a static reference point for the construction of colonial identities functions in a way similar to national borders: they allow access and transnational movement while providing the referential other against which settler colonial nations imagine their internal cohesion and coherence.

As a counterpoint to the transnational movement analyzed by Jodi A. Byrd, Donald L. Fixico (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek, and Seminole) and Renya K. Ramírez
(Winnebago/Ojibwe) set their sights on the negotiation of Indian transnational existence in urban spaces. Fixico in *The Urban Indian Experience in America* presents an ethnohistory of Native peoples in urban centers. Grounded on his own experience as an urban Native, Fixico compares the experience of those American Indians that were relocated to urban spaces by the federal relocation legislation of the 1950s and 1960s to the experience of those Indians born in urban spaces in the last three decades. While Fixico presents a historical account of the survival of Indian peoples in urban spaces against the odds, Ramírez offers an empowering ethnographic account of the negotiation of Indian identity in urban settings. Presenting the concept of the “hub” as a connecting point that allows for the creation of a sense of belonging away from land bases, Ramírez’s *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond* focuses on the challenges that urban Natives and tribes without land base face in getting state and federal recognition. Ramírez argues that through the creation of Indigenous hubs in urban areas, city Natives create spaces of connection that allow them to maintain contact with the reservation and with other Indigenous peoples. As a geographical concept, the hub is a mobile space that can be assembled in any public forum. Moreover, the negotiation of transnational Indian identity in the hubs is a two-way street that establishes a connection to reservations through visitors and travelers: “indeed, the hub suggests how landless Native Americans maintain a sense of connection to their tribal homelands and urban spaces through participation in cultural circuits and maintenance of social networks, as well as shared activity with other Native American in the city and on the reservation” (2). As Fixico’s and Ramírez’s ethnographies show, the borders between reservation life and urban existence can be bridged through the social and cultural hubs that allow what Ramírez identifies as cross-border Indigenous rights activism.
Borders and boundaries, then, remain an intrinsic part of the work that American Indian Studies scholars carry out—even though borders might not be the organizing principle of their projects or they might not articulate borders as such. Indeed, when engaging with the histories of colonialism and imperial expansion in the Americas one inevitably bumps into borders: they define, control, and manage geographical spaces while at the same time working metaphorically as the colonial engineering of difference and relational identity.

3. **Border theory as a critical perspective**

This overview of scholarship in literary and cultural analysis and American Indian Studies throws into relief the key elements that can define border theory as a field of study: the concern with border zones and the effects that borders have on the people they cross, the interest in the recuperation and the rewriting of histories and perspectives traditionally erased from national historical narratives in the US, and the examination of narratives of nation-building and their impact in the processes of identity formation in the US social and cultural imaginary. In addition, border theory concerns itself with the expansion of the idea of borderlands and metaphorical borders to sites not geographically connected to the US-Mexico border and with the recognition of their ubiquitousness in the social imaginary. It also shows an interest in the application of a social justice framework that highlights structures of institutionalized racism and class exploitation and deploys an intersectional approach to the impact of race, class, and gender in processes of identity formation. Border theorists show as well an inclination towards interdisciplinary and hemispheric work and towards the production of intercultural research. Their work creates a space for oppositional consciousness and for the presentation of counter-hegemonic stances. Moreover, the field investigates different processes of identity formation and the possibility of reconciliation or coexistence of differing cognitive frameworks. At the same
time, border theory conceptualizes the construction of border spaces as potential platforms of subversion and questioning of hegemonic power structures. Finally, the field exposes the development of a transnational/ transborder feminist approach that strives to regain power over representational practices. The most productive way for me to understand the possibilities of border theory as a critical platform for the study of literary and cultural artifacts, then, is to consider it in terms of perspective: border theory then becomes a way of looking, a way of asking questions, a critical lens rather than a methodological principle that can account for the experiences and lived realities of groups other than those living in the US-Mexico borderlands.

While border theory as a critical lens could be applied to any number of borderland spaces, and to any type of borders, most of the current literature on the subject takes the US-Mexico border as its analytical playfield. In my work, however, I am inspired by scholars of American Indian Studies to question this need for geographical specificity. I am more interested in understanding the type of cultural and power dynamics that a border between two nations sets into motion and in using this understanding as a way to look at other spaces that are not necessarily tied to that specific geopolitical space. In this sense, I understand the friction and the violence generated in the borderlands to be a product of the collision of state or national powers, different racial formations and processes of racialization, structural gender stratification, and, at its very core, a drive towards the organization of the national and a sense of belonging to the body politic. I recognize the rootedness of most border tensions in the various implementations of technologies of inclusion and exclusion into the idea of citizenship, and in the acceptance or rejection of subject positions into a fantasy of national coherence and homogeneity.

I believe border theory can be productive as an interdisciplinary and intersectional theoretical approach, as the work of scholars of American Indian Studies makes patent. In this project, I use
it to analyze Native American and Chican@ literature side by side. This coterminous analysis facilitates the examination of both parallel and overlapping histories of colonization, and it brings to the forefront issues of nation, land rights, language rights, citizenship, indigeneity, and social and political participation that are relevant both to Native Americans and Chican@s. Border theory, then, offers an engaging lens to focus an analysis of western colonialism, of the violence inherent in cultural contact zones, and of the ways the legal system articulates and perpetuates inequality through the regulation of identity and of the right to self-definition. The use of borders as an organizing principle for textual analysis puts emphasis on the representation of spaces of friction—both geographical and social—caused by unequal power relations. The intersectional analysis that border theory offers opens up a space in the text where we can find the voices of those who fall through the cracks of normative historical accounts and narratives. Attention to the textual representation of borders helps us tease out the narrative complexity of different processes of colonialism and nation building.

Agreeing on an understanding of border theory as a critical lens for carrying on an intersectional analysis does not solve all the difficulties posed by a comparative examination of two different bodies of literature. While studying Chican@ and Native American literature side by side might seem an intuitive move, given their shared history of colonialism, not a lot of people seem to be invested in this kind of academic pursuit. I can identify many commonalities between these two literary fields: while Chican@’s and Native Americans’ experience is obviously not interchangeable, the issues that they face as peoples (noted before: the parallel and overlapping histories of colonization, and issues of nation, land rights, language rights, citizenship, indigeneity, and social and political participation) resonate loudly, thus aligning these two fields along a shared social and cultural axis.
The difficulty in establishing a conversation between these two bodies of literature lies, I believe, in the need to articulate one’s identity politics above all else. The academic drive towards the mobilization of identity politics, necessary for the creation and maintenance of ethnic studies programs in a university setting, many times results in the strict policing of disciplinary boundaries. The attempt to cross disciplinary borders and to engage in conversation with “other” disciplines is often perceived as an attempt to destabilize the alleged coherence of the field, or as a way to criticize a field in a way that runs counter to narratives of disciplinary integrity. The sense of possessiveness of subject matter that people in certain fields display oftentimes renders efforts in establishing a productive dialogue mute—for example, using border theory as a critical tool rooted in US-Mexican relations to look at Native American literature is considered by some as another form of colonialism or, when talking about the glorification of the figure of the Indian in Chican@ literature as celebrating an indigenous past disconnected from an indigenous present, some people sense disrespect of an important cultural pillar.

The perspective that a comparative analysis of Chican@ and Native American literature facilitates often brings to light the messiness inherent in any attempt to define subjectivity and literature in coherent and cohesive identity terms. I believe that the dialogue between these two bodies of literature enriches the understanding of the social as a fluid category that is constantly undergoing a process of re-imagination and that contains irreconcilable contradictions. Accepting the coexistence of contradictions within a strong social formation moves us away from the divide and conquer model and brings us a step closer to an inter-group coalition that may acquire a stronger political presence.
Chapter 2

**From Sinaloa to East LA: the US-Mexico border, nativism, and patriotic quests**

As we have seen, whenever one invokes the “border” in the US cultural imagination one geopolitical space claims representational primacy: the US-Mexico border. While there are many other political borders in the US (such as the US-Canada border and multiple reservation borders that I will examine in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), the southern national boundary occupies a central position in the social imaginary, if only because it remains paramount to the formation of genealogical narratives of the nation and it generates a great deal of social anxiety given discourses of immigration, the current war on drugs, and the so-called war on terror. This chapter focuses on this concrete geographical space to examine the role that the idea of the border has in the construction of social narratives of Americanization and racialized belonging that circulate socially under the guise of common sense.

The chapter starts with an analysis of a National Public Radio (NPR) series on the US-Mexico border aired in 2008, “The US-Mexico Border: A Changing Frontier.” The NPR series offers a productive platform for understanding the stereotypes and the cultural investments that shape the idea of the border in the national imaginary. The depiction of the border in this media exposure opens the door to analyzing different and coexisting national genealogies that reflect current social tensions in the US: from narratives of Manifest Destiny that justify American exceptionalism and westward expansion and coalesce into national truth to alternative genealogies that do not follow an east-west ideological tract and that expose a history of imperial expansion and colonialism.

Together with analyzing the NPR series, I examine Helena María Viramontes’s novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and its reflection of the structures of feeling that pervade southern
California towards the end of the twentieth century. Offered through the perspective of the teenage protagonist Estrella, the novel follows the lives of migrant workers in California and their struggle for survival in a society that puts the burden of proof permanently on their shoulders, forcing them to prove their legitimacy as national subjects at every turn. Following the passing of Proposition 187 in California (1994), I read *Under the Feet of Jesus* as speaking to the role of migrant workers in the US economy, to the erasure of labor from the cultural imaginary, and to the rise of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. In this sense, Viramontes’s novel provides a north-of-the-border perspective on the US-Mexico border and its implicit and explicit effects on a disenfranchised section of the US population.

In conversation with *Under the Feet of Jesus* and the NPR series, I read Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), a novel that presents a south-of-the-border perspective on northward immigration and Mexico’s own nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment. *Into the Beautiful North* follows a young girl’s quest for capable Mexican men who have migrated to the US and that she intends to bring back home to repopulate and defend her village. Living in Tres Camarones, a small town in Sinaloa, teenage Nayeli reflects on the impact that the economies of globalization and northward migration have on rural Mexico—how the promise of a better life and financial possibility in the States has emptied rural Mexico of men, except for corrupt federal officials and good-for-nothing criminals. The need to envision a future for her people sends Nayeli on a quest from her small town in Sinaloa to the US and back. This driving force in the

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37 Raymond Williams, in his revision of the use of Marxist theories for the study of literature and culture, directs critical attention to the analysis of social structures as formations in process. Refusing the idea of describing the social as a fixed form, he proposes the study of the instabilities and contradictions in any process of social formation, the analysis of what he terms “structures of feeling.” This type of analysis that Williams presents proves useful for the analysis of literary and cultural artifacts. He urges us to consider literary expressions as more than mere reflections of the reality from which they spring; he asks us to consider the ways they intervene in the process of cultural and social formation that circumscribes them.
novel presents a counter-narrative to commonly held assumptions about northward migration and border spaces in the US, thus complicating the easy circulation of nativist ideas in the US cultural imaginary.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to bring to the forefront the ideological premises that fuel nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, and to show how the border plays a vital role in the creation of such discourses. Once it establishes the commonly held assumptions about the border, the analyses of the literary works seek to destabilize clear-cut understandings of the border’s impact and to question the received assumptions about what the border represents. Using the novels to give a voice to the discarded victims of nation building narratives, the analyses in this chapter show the effects that mainstream ideologies have on the lives of disenfranchised people, both north and south of the 2,000 mile border that separates Mexico and the US.


For the first week of December in 2008 I woke up to a series aired by NPR’s Morning Edition entitled “The US-Mexican Border: A Changing Frontier.” Apart from nudging me out of bed with the painful reminder that my work was not writing itself, it reaffirmed my belief that writing about borders is not only interesting and important but also timely and urgent since the idea of the border is very much present in contemporary US social life. “The US-Mexican Border: A Changing Frontier” is a five-part series authored by Jason Beaubien aiming to “explor[e] the border from Tijuana to the Texas coast” to see how “most of the 2,000 mile frontier is infused with tension. Some of that tension comes from poverty. Some comes from the drug gangs. Some comes from the new fence and the Border Patrol agents in armored SUVs”
(Series Overview). This description of the goal of the series offered in the “Series Overview: Examining a Relationship in Flux” provides a road map of the issues that the series will tackle: the mesh of social, economic, cultural and familial relationships in border cities as well as the violence in the border generated by poverty, drugs, and the US policing of the border space. The five-part series helps tease out the contours that the idea of the border evokes in the US popular imagination.

1.1. The frontier: historical echoes of a common national genealogy

In the subtitle “A Changing Frontier,” the word frontier evokes “common sense” notions of US history and genealogy: it summons tales of brave cowboys and wicked Indians, stirs up memories about the noble achievements of “civilization” in conquering the wilderness, and kindles warm and soothing thoughts about American exceptionalism. The notion of the frontier as the westward moving line that demarcates the limits of tamed space and the beginning of unnamable promise is strongly ingrained in the US collective consciousness. The frontier constitutes an important part of the national folklore and is intimately linked to notions of historical development and nation building.

Along with tales of national origin, the word “frontier” also conjures up the historical congress that convened with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where Frederick Jackson Turner presented his famous paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” In his lecture, the University of Wisconsin history professor presented Anglo American westward expansion as proof of American exceptionalism, as the “story of the peaceful settlement of ‘free’ land, framed as a sweeping explanation of the evolution of a uniquely democratic, individualistic, and progressive American character” (Grossman 1). Turner’s turn-of-the-century construction of US expansionist history affirmed a tale of settlement
rather than conquest as he identified the hero of such great pioneering endeavor in the figure of the farmer, battling the wilderness armed with his ax and plow (White 9). In his paper, Turner reaffirmed notions of American exceptionalism and development that had been circulating for over half a century since the use of the concept of Manifest Destiny by John L. O’Sullivan in an article called “Annexation” that appeared in the July/August 1845 issue of the United States Magazine and Democratic Review. Turner’s account of Anglo American westward expansion hinges on the idea of taming the wilderness in favor of “civilization,” an idea of wilderness that unified as one the elements, the land, and the Native peoples that occupied that land. In direct opposition to the Spanish conquistadores and their genocidal ways, the “Americans (gendered as male)” in the Turnerian thesis “were practical, egalitarian, and democratic because the successive Wests of this country’s formative years had provided the ‘free’ land on which equality and democracy could flourish as integral aspects of progress” (White 12). The fact that the fulfillment of the American moral imperative of development and progress needed to happen at the expense of human lives and cultural erasure never ruptured the Turnerian thesis as it made its way into the nation’s history books and became a staple of American educational programs and a steppingstone for American Studies. The history of US westward expansion, entangled with notions of the frontier and American coming of age, provides a space of commonality for Native American and Mexican-American and Chicano@ histories: while the experiences of colonialism take different and at times contradictory shapes in Indian and Mexican-American histories, they nonetheless create a common experiential nexus.

Turner’s historical account of settlement and “civilization” not only built a notion of shared national pride based on a protestant ethic of hard work and dedication, but also established a common memory of origins exempt from the guilt of conquest. According to Turner, the frontier
represented the birthplace of Americans, the originative point of the US as a nation, for “in the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (Turner 23). Finally liberated from the British colonial hold, immigrants became a new “race” in the frontier—they emancipated and created a space of progress that could accommodate the growth of a new nation. To give consistency to his narrative of development, Turner banked on the already circulating iconography of the West: the log cabin, the relentless pioneer, and finally the successful farm (White 12) and on genetic memory to reify a sense of historical truth and national genealogy. Drawing on popular culture to legitimize scholarly historical accounts, Turner transformed familiar experience into common-sense notions about national development and genealogy that would shape and linger in the understanding of US history until the present day.

Patricia Nelson Limerick attests to the pervasiveness of ideas about the frontier in the formation of cultural homogeneity and national consensus in US collective memory:

> The term “frontier” blurs the fact of conquest and throws a veil over the similarities between the story of American westward expansion and the planetary story of the expansion of European empires. Whatever meanings historians give the term, in popular culture it carries a persistently happy affect, a tone of adventure, heroism, and even fun very much in contrast with the tough, complicated, and sometimes bloody and brutal realities of conquest. Under these conditions, the word ‘frontier’ uses historians before historians can use it. (Adventures 75)

Limerick highlights the ways frontier mythology has carved a space for itself into the US collective psyche. The frontier in popular culture takes a life of its own that disavows the history of conquest, imperial expansion and genocide, at the same time that “the concept works as a cultural glue—a mental and emotional fastener that, in some very curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together” (Limerick 94). Thus, the concept of the frontier acts as a subtle
psychic agglutination that provides a homogeneous ground for the formation of a national identity.

Turner’s use of frontier mythology in his reconstruction of American westward expansion as a story of hard work, resilience, and bravery found a willing and receptive audience in the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, the Chicago’s World Fair that commemorated the 400th anniversary of Columbus arrival in the new world and celebrated American industrial and cultural optimism. According to Richard White, the themes he used to construct this narrative of the nation in front of a Midwestern audience (and in front of an international audience as well) “would resonate with readers because he gave sophisticated form to what they already believed. His story of the country mimicked and validated their stories of their own lives and collective accomplishments. Their story became the American story” (26). At the same time that he offered a sense of continuity and national cohesiveness, Turner also declared the final closing of the frontier (38), making the source of American-ness unreachable and irretrievable except through biological reproduction. From that moment on, American-ness could not be “earned”—one could not become an American but must be born one. The children of pioneers, then, inherited an American identity. What their parents had secured through experience, they secured as an inheritance; descent from true Americans had replaced the pioneers’ consenting to undergo the quintessential American frontier experience. New immigrants, to whom this frontier experience was foreclosed, seemed like dangerous, exotic, and unassimilable aliens to many native-born Americans. (White 47)

The distinction between those that became Americans by virtue of facing death and adventure in the Wild West and those that did not/ could not tap into American-ness by participating in the nation’s westward expansion seems particularly poignant when examining narratives of national
inclusion and exclusion throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty first century.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, this genealogical model of American-ness not only denies a space for Native Americans within the social structure of the US but it casts Indigenous peoples as the relational other in the process of becoming American: they are the “wilderness” that the pioneers face in their particular process of identity generation. In a similar way, Mexican-Americans and by extension Chican@s represent the last bastion resisting US westward expansion, and, in this sense, their social position aligns with that of Native peoples. In addition, and especially after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 granting American citizenship to the population occupying the former Mexican territory, the newly minted Mexican-Americans can only claim a space within the social structure of the US through inclusion—through a legal contract that leaves them ideologically outside the inner circle of “authentic” American-ness.

1.2. The frontier vs. la frontera: the imaginary past and the stark reality of border spaces

In Turner’s late-nineteenth-century reconstruction of genealogical narratives of the nation, the experience of the frontier and its transformative powers act as a safe conduct to national belonging that is accessible only to those Anglo/Euro-centric men that bravely encounter the wilderness in the West. It gives primacy to an east-west migratory track to the exclusion and erasure of the Native inhabitants of the land and of any other migratory movement—be it west-east, south-north, or north-south. In this way, the frontier used as “the place where white settlers

\textsuperscript{38} This dynamic of inclusion and exclusion and the difference between \textit{becoming} and \textit{being} American is a contentious and productive tension that informs contemporary critical discussions in the field of literature and cultural studies. Werner Sollors in \textit{Beyond Ethnicity, Consent and Descent in American Culture} (1986), for example, uses the tension between the idea of a contractual (consent) and hereditary (descent) relationship to national identity to analyze the evolution of US ethnic literature and the creation of US culture. In “Racial Naturalization” (2005), Devon W. Carbado takes the ideas of national inclusion and exclusion further by exposing what he calls the disaggregation between the idea of citizenship and the idea of national identity in the US (meaning that citizenship does not ensure national identity and that national identity does not require citizenship). For more on how official stories shape narratives of nation-building see Priscilla Wald’s \textit{Constituting Americans} (1995).
encountered a zone of ‘free’ land and opportunity” (Limerick 90) in an east to west (and north to south at best) migratory track stands in critical juxtaposition to the idea of la frontera between the US and its Southern neighbor Mexico, understood from a south to north perspective. The Spanish counterpart to the frontier has more realistic and material connotations than the one invoked by Turner at the end of the nineteenth century. La frontera differs from the originative construct of national cohesiveness in that it does not present a space populated by Anglos in their encounter with “free land” (and eventually Mexico) but a space populated by Native peoples in their clash with Mexicans and Anglos, a space where “trade, violence, conquest, and cultural exchange punctuated and shaped life in the borderlands” (Limerick 90). The happy and nostalgic thoughts the frontier elicits sober up when one thinks about la frontera, and, as Limerick puts it, “any temptation to romanticize la frontera—as a place of cultural syncretism, a place where the Spanish and English languages have learned to cohabit and even merge—runs aground on the bare misery of poverty in the border towns” (90). On one hand, the social, economic, and linguistic reality of border spaces shares, in the national imaginary, the hopeful and idealistic notion of conviviality and cultural enrichment that echoes the feelings evoked by the frontier. On the other, the same reality simultaneously highlights a dearth of social and economical stability as well as reveals a space of violence and exploitation that thwarts any romanticized notion of the border space or la frontera. The invocation of la frontera as an alternative perspective for the analysis of historical constructions, as José David Saldivar contends in Border Matters, breaks the constriction of the frontier as a scholarly paradigm and contributes to the infusion of a “new transnational literacy in the US academy” (xiii).
The coexistence of these divergent understandings of the same reality depends on the politics of location of the observer.\textsuperscript{39} The tension between a celebratory mood (the frontier) and a sense of tragic reality (\textit{la frontera}) shifts as the cultural perspective that informs the individual changes. From an Anglocentric perspective, the border takes shape as the port of entry to the nation that needs to be controlled and monitored, especially given the heightened threats to national security that ground the “war on terror” of the second Bush administration and the discourse of “broken borders” that dominates the US narratives of immigration. In this sense, the border becomes almost anthropomorphic as it seems to collude with the enemy in an attempt to disintegrate the cohesiveness of the US, thus justifying the need for strict measures to keep it in check. At the same time, the border from this perspective is also a site of business and capitalist opportunity. In this permutation, the border becomes an ally that enables the growth of capital and collaborates in the maintenance of US currency in a global market economy. In addition to these two iterations of the border, this perspective also constructs this space as the gateway to an exotic world of pleasure and leisure that is accessible to those legitimate citizens of the US coming from the north.

If the observer does not occupy the space of Anglo privilege, however, the shape that the border takes can be very different. From the northern perspective of those who have little access to power, the border constitutes the line that often separates them from part of their families. In this case, the border is almost a personal enemy that keeps the desire to visit family and the need to maintain certain conditions of work at irreconcilable odds. For the southern observer, the border becomes a place rife with contradictions. In a way, it represents the possibility of work in the many factories that pepper the border landscape. Hand in hand with the possibility of

\textsuperscript{39} Here I invoke poet and essayist Adrienne Rich and her “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” (1984) where she stresses the importance of taking into account the different factors that collide in creating our own positionality and how it affects the ways we understand the world around us.
improving one’s working conditions in an economically depressed country, the border also appears as a high-risk zone. Together with the possibility of work and earning a living comes the possibility of death in a space riddled with violence of many kinds, from the gendered violence of the feminicidios in border towns that claim the lives of many young women every year to the violence that accompanies the areas affected by the traffic of illegal narcotics. While the border represents a high risk to one’s life, it also provides reasons that justify the stakes.

Crossing the border to the US holds the promise of a better life and more opportunities to sustain one’s family there and abroad through remittances. In addition, it presents the opportunity of reuniting with part of one’s family on the other side.

From the perspective of the people living in border towns, the border is increasingly a nuisance that artificially divides the way of life in that particular space, a line that makes daily life more complicated by bureaucratic proceedings that are more and more disconnected from the organic workings of the borderlands. For Indigenous peoples, yet, the border represents the mapping of a foreign law onto a terrain that has been taken away from their families. From this perspective, the border becomes a geopolitical line that bears no import on the originative history of the people but that has great impact on its recent history and their modern reality (and sometimes no impact at all). As we can see, the border is far from being a single phenomenon that can be easily described. On the contrary, the idea of the border contains multiple manifestations that often stand in contradiction. The multiplicity of tensions in border spaces are

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40 Critics such as Rosa Linda Fregoso, Georgina Guzmán, Alicia Schmidt Camacho, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Cynthia Bejarano have examined and conceptualized the gendered violence of Border towns in different ways. Rosa Linda Fregoso focuses on the analysis of patriarchal prerogative as the social justification for the killings of young and poor racialized women in Ciudad Juarez. Using a similar lens, Alicia Schmidt-Camacho conceptualizes how the prevailing discourse about feminicidio evacuates subjectivity from bodies that serve as vessels for the reproduction of the nation within a patriarchal national discourse. While the work of these critics is more carefully introduced later in the chapter, a more in-depth analysis of the feminicidios can be found in Chapter 4.
an inescapable feature of any discussion of the border, as the analysis of the NPR series that follows shows.

1.3. La frontera: a hydra-headed creature in today’s global economy

The NPR series on the US-Mexican border presents an all-encompassing snapshot of common conceptualizations of border dwellers and border spaces in the US social imaginary. In the opening piece of the series, Jason Beaubien offers a quick sketch of the range of inhabitants of la frontera. Starting with the gruesome image of “bodies [that] turn up in piles” due to the violence generated by drug wars on the Mexican side of the border (Series Overview), Beaubien proceeds to identify workers, US-born teenage deportees, businessmen, migrants, drug smugglers, and tourists among the common inhabitants of the border space. In this opening piece, he swiftly moves from one side of the border to the other: on the south side, he sees “dreamers, drug addicts and migrants” as they are “lit with the adrenaline rush that comes just before attempting to cross to a new life” (Series Overview). On the north side of the border he identifies their counterparts as businessmen and tourists looking for “lower overhead costs” and for “cheap goods and possibly some seedy entertainment” when crossing the border southward (Series Overview). The contrast between the different stakes in crossing the border for people coming from the north or people coming from the south is highlighted by the juxtaposition of life-altering changes on the one hand (access to job opportunities and a potential improvement of quality of life) and economic profit and leisure (access to cheap labor force and to cheap goods and “entertainment”) on the other. At the same time, this pairing presents a stark contrast in social and economic hierarchy between the hopeful southerners that range from brown collar/migrant workers and social outcasts to dubious “dreamers” (this enumeration makes one wonder, how are these dreamers different from the migrant workers? What do they dream of? What social
space do they occupy?) and the northern capitalist entrepreneurs and leisure-seekers that approach *la frontera* from the land of opportunity. With this initial sketch, the series’ introduction to the social and economic issues of the US-Mexico borderlands establishes the basic premises for understanding *la frontera*: it is a space riddled with violence and criminal activity that at the same time presents many opportunities for lucrative business and leisurely endeavors. Once this shared understanding of the border roots the narrative at the start, Beaubien closes the frame by invoking images of everyday life on both sides of the border, showing how “families on the Mexican side fish” and “kids splash in the water” and “on the north bank in Texas, men race all-terrain vehicles across the sand” and “couples walk barefoot” (Series Overview), all of them seemingly oblivious to the stresses of violence and capitalism. The description of everyday life on both sides of the border establishes a stark contrast between life centered around family and biological reproduction for the impoverished and less developed southern neighbor (“families on the Mexican side fish” and “kids splash in the water”) and life as individual male exercise (“on the north bank in Texas, men race all-terrain vehicles across the sand”) or ideal capitalist unit (“couples walk barefoot”) for the wealthy northern nation.

The radio series imprints in the mind of the listeners the border as a space of violence populated by a variety of criminal agents. The contrast between the different personal stakes mentioned above stands out when Beaubien establishes a crude parallel between the US and its southern neighbor: as he puts it, “in parts of San Diego, barefoot, shirtless surfers pedal one-speed bikes to the beach. In Tijuana, barefoot, headless bodies turn up jammed into garbage cans” (Part One). The presentation of leisurely and free-spirited youth in relation to disposable bodies speaks to the sharp cultural and economic abyss between these two countries: while surfers can peacefully ride their bikes to the beach on the US side, enjoying their leisure, the
reign of violence on the Mexican side dumps its collateral damage into garbage cans. The juxtaposition of agents (healthy and able surfer bodies) and objects (decapitated bodies, victims of a war over the US drug market) gives rise to a binary construction of subjectivity that pervades the radio series. The sense of violence and imminent threat that the headless and discarded bodies conjure up in “Part One: Drug Deaths, Violence Plague Border in Tijuana” carry over throughout the rest of the series. For instance, when NPR’s *Morning Edition* host Steve Inskeep introduces the Ciudad Juárez/ El Paso border zone in “Part Four: Economy, Drug Wars Hurt Cross-Border Business,” he presents Ciudad Juárez as “the deadliest city in Mexico” where “a drug war has killed about 1,400 people in Juárez this year alone.” If one follows this strand of representation in the series, the US-Mexico border vividly emerges as a war zone populated by smugglers, corrupt policemen, criminals, and collateral casualties (Part One).

The radio series’ construction of violence as a border-space narrative capitalizes on the drug traffic from Latin American countries and the fight over the US drug market. It frames the border space as a war zone with high casualties, as a no-man’s-land where the law has little bearing on preserving the peace of the people, where the people indeed seem non-existent. The radio series’ rendition of the wars between drug lords constructs the area as a place in flux, as a transit zone that seems temporarily settled by undesirable criminals, as a space devoid of rooted citizens. Indeed, the representation of border dwellers in the radio series (as we will continue to see below) evokes strong feelings of ephemerality and transitoriness that define border peoples and their material experience.41

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41 Alicia Schmidt Camacho shows how migrant communities and Latin@ communities in the US are denied access to the rights of citizenship under the premise that they form ‘migrant’ communities in permanent transit to somewhere else, thus never requiring their full incorporation to the national imaginary. I present these ideas in more detail later on in the chapter in the analysis of Helena Maria Viramontes’s novel.
Apart from the construction of the borderlands as a war zone of drug operations, the NPR series contributes to the ideological criminalization of the border and its inhabitants through its representation of the plight of deportees in Mexican border towns. In “Part Two: Deported Immigrants Struggle to Re-Enter US,” Beaubien remarks how “the streets of Nogales Sonora, just across from Arizona’s southern border, are crawling with deportees.” The use of the verb to crawl to refer to border peoples suggests a strong dislike of the population he refers to, as the verb evokes images of slow-moving animals that may present a threat to the health of the nation. The fact that “some of them are covered in prison and gang tattoos” and “others are down-on-their-luck men who used to do construction work in California or wash dishes in Chicago” (Part Two) adds a class discourse to the description that amplifies the sense of dislike in the narrative. These deportees arrive south of the border courtesy of the US government that “deports hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants back to Mexico each year” and “drops most of them just south of the border” (Part Two) whether they are Mexican nationals or not. As Beaubien explains, “last year [2007] the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, ICE, deported 350,000 illegal immigrants. This was a 20 percent increase from the year before, and most were deported just across the border from Mexico” (Part Two). This part of the radio series, after presenting a general picture of the number of deportations taking place on a regular basis, reflects that because “migrants face heightened security along the border” and given the “economic downturn in the US… an increasing number [of migrants] are no longer trying to return [to the US]” (Part Two).

While the general premise of Part Two seems to focus on the fate of the thousands of deportees the ICE routinely places south of the border and their disillusionment with the US economy, the piece is focalized through two interviews of recent deportees. The first, Roberto
Reyes, is a forty-year-old Honduran man hailing from Miami. The second unidentified deportee is a forty-five-year-old man raised in California. The interviewees share their willingness to attempt a new crossing into the US—Reyes to re-unite with his wife and two young daughters in Miami and “unidentified man #1” to join his wife and five children in California where he grew up from the age of five. While Reyes, after freshly failed efforts to cross the border, decides to find a job to raise money for his trip back “home” to Honduras, “unidentified man #1” has no home to go back to except for California. These “human interest” stories are both framed in terms of criminal activity and less-than-desirable conduct: the listener is informed that Reyes, the Honduran deportee, has been “working for five years in a restaurant in Miami … until he got arrested for drunk driving,” while “unidentified man #1” “used to paint houses in San Bernardino, east of Los Angeles” and “got deported … after police came over to his house over a domestic dispute” (Part Two). The justification of their deportations on the grounds of criminal behavior thwarts the potential sympathy that the description of the numbers of deportees might elicit from the radio audience, thus contributing to the criminalization of Latin@ bodies in general in the US collective imagination.

The pervasive idea of the criminalization of Latin@ bodies presented in Part Two of the series prepares the ground for the introduction of the Border Patrol and their efforts of containment in “Part Three: Agents Use High-Tech and Low-Tech Tracking at Border.” This part includes an inevitable addition to the smugglers, criminals, and corrupt (Mexican) agents of the law: the Border Patrol, the US agency in charge of border security. Part Three reflects the efforts of the Department of Homeland Security in attempting to “lock down the southern border,” and shows how the “number of Border Patrol agents on the boundary has nearly doubled” in the last four years. Set in Nogales, Arizona, this segment undergoes an
anthropomorphic transformation and we hear how “up close the terrain is menacing. Dry, waist-high grasses grab at your clothes. Thorny bushes scratch at your skin. The dusty soil gives way under your ankles” (Part Three). The border space here becomes a national enemy that plots with criminals against the law enforcement agents. But the opposition does not deter the Border Patrol: they use night vision telescopes, “walkie-talkies, remote cameras, ground sensors, radar systems, dogs, floodlights, night vision goggles, and just about anything else they can think of to catch people sneaking over the border” (Part Three). The work of the enforcement agency results in a large number of arrests, adding up to “more than 300,000 illegal migrants” in 2007. The presence of the Border Patrol agents as part of the population of border dwellers depicted in the radio series provides yet a new mutation of the understanding of the border space. Under the gaze of the enforcement agents, the border zone becomes a hunting ground, a space that is monitored and disciplined, a space of state sanctioned violence that contributes to the reinforcement of ideas about national identity and national cohesiveness in the US social imaginary.

The sum of drug wars and deported criminals in the depiction of la frontera equals the construction of the US-Mexican border as a lawless geography that creates a pocket of violence between two nations. The imagining of the borderlands as a violent buffer zone populated by criminals has two immediate consequences: first, it solidifies the commonly held notion that the border is a space of transit inhabited by all sorts of migrants on their way to somewhere else that need to be monitored and disciplined—an assumption that erases from the picture the people who live permanently there. Secondly, it feeds into common notions that fuel anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US by adding to and reinforcing the widespread criminalization of brown bodies in the US context.
In addition to the smugglers, the criminals, the drug lords, the corrupt police agents, and the illegal immigrants, the series also presents another type of border dweller: the *maquila* worker (the term *maquila* workers or *maquiladoras* refers to people who work in assembly plants—or *maquilas*—along the border). The world of the *maquiladoras* acquires an eerie sense of peace and quiet in relation to the tumultuous war zone described above. Inscribed in “Part Four: Drug Wars Hurt Cross-Border Business” and its identification of Ciudad Juárez as the “deadliest city in Mexico,” the presence of female *maquila* stands in relation to the economic downturn prompted by the US stock market’s October 2008 collapse. As Beaubien explains, “in a scene that was rare just a year ago, women had been standing all day outside a Juarez maquiladora trying to get jobs.” Through the attention to the female workers and their efforts to find jobs, the series exposes the effects of the downturn of US economy in particular (and the global economy in general) on the subsistence economies of the border towns. As Beaubien explains, “all along the border from Tijuana to Mexicali to Matamoros on the Gulf Coast, maquiladoras are the economic backbone of border cities. They crank out auto parts, television sets, and medical supplies destined almost exclusively for the US” (Part Four). These assembly plants that cater to the US market and are scattered throughout the landscape between the US and Mexico provide jobs for many (mostly) female workers from Mexico and many other Latin American countries. Lured by jobs in a depressed economy and also by the possibility of stepping into the other side of the border where one can make $50 to $60 a day instead of the $60 a week in Juárez (Part Four), many female workers move to the border towns to work in the *maquilas*. Recently, however, since the border labor market has “far fewer labor regulations” than the US market the factories “began laying people off at the first signs that the American economy was sliding into recession.”
To talk about the state of the economy in border towns during the economic recession, Beaubien interviews Alan Russell, the Co-Founder and President of the TECMA group in El Paso, Texas, a “shelter company … that helps US companies set up manufacturing and assembly operations in Juarez” (Part Four). Russell manages plants south of the border that produce products for 35 US companies by assembling raw materials and shipping them back to the US, and he attests that the violence generated by drug wars in Juarez, “murder capital of Mexico,” have not affected his business, for the “killings seem confined to the drug trade” (Part Four). Russell’s take on the scope of violence in this border town echoes Quijano Sosa’s (President of Coparmex, Tijuana) assertion in Part One that “maquiladoras have not really been affected by security.” Reiterating the notion that the labor market in Juarez is a safe zone for workers, Beaubien states “the cartels have appeared to stay away from the maquiladoras except for a rash of ATM robberies earlier this year in which gang members were ripping off the cash dispensers straight out of the factory floors” (Part Four).

Russell and Beaubien’s rendition of the scope of violence in border towns, specifically in Juarez, stands in sharp contrast to the work that critics such as Rosa Linda Fregoso, Alicia Schmidt Camacho, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and others have produced regarding the widespread gender violence against young females in Ciudad Juarez. Rosa Linda Fregoso examines the wave of murders and disappearances of young brown women in Ciudad Juarez, a phenomenon that she conceptualizes as feminicidios, as “a form of state-sanctioned terrorism, a tool of political repression sanctioned by an undemocratic patriarchal state in its crusade against poor and racialized citizens” (20). In a similar fashion, Alicia Schmidt Camacho reflects on the ways feminicidio has been constructed as a narrative about “women [who] are made for killing” and how this narrative evacuates subjectivity from the bodies it seeks to portray (24-25). The object
of study of these two critics stands in sharp relief when compared to the narrative of “business as usual” that the NPR series presents in relation to the labor market in this border town.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition to the female factory workers featured in Part Four of the radio series, Beaubien also presents other female workers outside the \textit{maquilas}. He shows that “at the Gallery Printshop, Monica Ramos and four other women are assembling party invitations. She says the majority of their invites are for customers who live on the other side of border in El Paso.” The presence of these other women workers as part of the border economy highlights a distinction that runs throughout the series between female and male workers. While female workers are always presented in relation to \textit{maquila} jobs and other assembly jobs where the use of their “nimble fingers” makes them ideal workers, the male workers in the series are always presented under the frame of illegality, as migrant (read agricultural) workers that intend to pursue an illicit participation in the national economy of the US. Thus, the conceptualization of the border zone as a labor market is patently gendered female south of the border in the same way that the conceptualization of the border as a war zone or a criminal space is also gendered male.

The only happy presence in the border towns that the series presents (other than the economic satisfaction drawn by the business gurus) takes shape in the figure of the tourist. As noted above, the Series Overview presents southbound tourists as those that “seek cheap goods and possibly some seedy entertainment.” As the President of Coparmex, Tijuana, Quijano Sosa contends in Part One “Tijuana should be a paradise. It’s got beaches, great weather. It’s practically a low-cost Southern California.” The Mexican border town offers restaurants, nightclubs, gentlemen’s clubs, knickknack shops, stores, and pharmacies (Part One) that open their doors to US tourists in search of an escape. The jolly narrative of the tourist, however, is

\textsuperscript{42} The analysis of \textit{feminicidios} and violence against women in border spaces is presented in much more depth in Chapter 4.
promptly truncated by the shadow that the drug wars cast on the tourist industry. The heightened security in the ports of entry to the US that results in long hours of waiting to cross the border and the violence of the border towns keeps the visitors away from these tourist destinations, contributing to the further decline of border economies. Thus, the narrative that the radio series constructs practically evacuates the only type of border dweller not directly tied to criminal activities or the labor market in the border towns. The great stress the series places on the thwarting of the tourist industry, mentioned in practically every part of the series, adds to the construction of border towns as fearful and lawless places that can only attract less than desirable subjects.

In contrast to the narrative of undesirability that permeates most of the radio stories, the last part of the series focuses on the lives of the people that live in border towns. Centered in Eagle Pass, Texas, and Piedras Negras, Coahuila, “Part Five: Fence Affects Border Town Culture, Relationships” looks at the ways border towns from both sides of the border are linked by more than economic relationships: by family ties and friendship. Ominously enough, Renee Montagne (host of NPR’s Morning Edition) opens the last part of the series noting how “in this country [the US], the government is rushing to finish building the 670 miles of fence along the border with Mexico before President Bush leaves office,” a fence that will physically divide the towns of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. Immediately after this statement, however, we hear Jason Beaubien exclaim that “Eagle Pass bills itself as the place where yeehaw mets ole,” a cheerful description of a border town compared to the sinister portraits that abound to this point. He then explains that Major Chad Forster of Eagle Pass “has a sign in his office declaring: Don’t build walls between amigos” (Part Five) as a way of setting the mood for this last piece in his series that launches a critique of the federal initiative to build a fence between the US and Mexico, a
security measure designed to keep potential terrorists and undocumented migrants at bay. As Beaubien explains, “the new fence will separate the park and the municipal golf course from the rest of the city” although “the border patrol plans to put in gates so that people will still have access to the park from 6 a.m. to 10 at night” (Part Five). Some of the residents of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras oppose the building of the wall separating this border community, affirming that “the ambiance is going to be affected” and that “the whole feel of the waterfront is being hurt by the barrier” (Part Five). Some of the residents on the US side of the border, like Carmen Hernandez, “feel that it’s a protection for the people of Eagle Pass” since it will deter the activity of smugglers, the drug-related operations, and the transit of undocumented migrants. Other residents like Refungio Ramirez believe that the fence “is not going to do anything good” and that it will only interfere in the organic workings of the border communities. Beaubien explains that Piedras Negras is “a relatively quaint industrial city as far as border towns go. There’s a cobblestone square with a Spanish colonial cathedral just after you cross the bridge. Once a week, there’s a flea market in Eagle Pass, and people from Piedras Negras cross the bridge on foot to poke through the merchandise” (Part Five). Guillermo Birchenhall, a resident of Piedras Negras, affirms the longstanding familial and community relationships between these two towns for “we’ve lived together and intermarried between the two communities” and that the building of the wall represents an offense to both communities, since “we don’t think that’s nice between neighbors, especially between neighbors that have seen each other as family all their lives” (Part Five). The rupture of the community the building of the fence signifies has already been gestured in previous parts of the series: in Part One we see families talking through the fence between San Diego and Tijuana, in Part Three we see the fence cutting across residential neighborhoods, and in Part Four we hear Bob Cook, the president of the Regional Economic Development Corp. in
El Paso, affirm that “El Paso and other border cities are being hurt by disjointed—and what he sees as misguided—federal policies on immigration and security.” All in all, the series’ tenuous representation of border residents shows the lives of border towns under a process of fragmentation, disjuncture, and erosion of community relationships. This presentation of the material realities of border residents as undergoing a disintegration also contributes to the pervading argument about border zones as spaces of transit, as places that lack the rootedness of citizenship and the stability of community ties.

Overall, the NPR series presents a picture of the US-Mexico border that echoes commonly held assumptions about borders in the US social imaginary. On the one hand and in relation to the border dwellers of the region, the series capitalizes on the presence of criminal types and drug related undesirables—a process of criminalization that heavily shapes the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US. In addition to the criminals and the drug lords, but still in the same category of undesirability, the series presents the figure of the undocumented migrant worker that translates into the collective imagination as a potential gang member and a liability for the nation as a public charge. The representation of these border dwellers rests on the unspoken assumption that they are transient beings that happen to be in the border zone on their way to somewhere else, either to the north or to the south. Aside from these negative representations of border subjects, the series also puts forth the inextricable presence of business managers, factory workers, and tourists, an odd mix that responds to the same capitalist principle. Finally, the series draws a picture of resident communities affected by the building of a dividing fence between two nations, since the theoretical idea of two separate, distinct, and impermeable nations does not translate into a practical reality. In relation to the conceptualization of the geographical space, the series offers a wide range of understandings of the border: starting with the image of the war
zone, it then moves through its representation as a disciplining space, into the border zone as a production site, and finally into the representation of the geographical space as a community.

While the NPR series attempts a rounded portrayal of the border, the social and political forces driving its depiction do not allow the journalists to question the rather one-dimensional sketch they present. By contrast Helena María Viramontes’s novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Luís Alberto Urrea’s novel *Into the Beautiful North* complicate the NPR’s take on the US-Mexico border and bring to light the ways the border invariably shapes the lives of people living close to it and far from it as well.

2. **Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*: migrant workers and the struggle for social space**

Helena María Viramontes’s first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1994), voices the struggles for subsistence of a migrant-worker family in California. Focalized through the thirteen-year-old protagonist Estrella, the novel follows the labor tides that guide the movement of a family of *piscadores* (of migrant agricultural workers, or harvesters). Estrella’s mother, Petra, and her companion Perfecto Flores, follow the harvest with Estrella’s youngest siblings in tow: Arnulfo, Ricky, and the twins Perla, and Cuca/ Cookie. Thirty-six year old Petra works the fields from dawn until dusk, despite her varicose veins, to feed her young family while the US-born children’s biological father is an absent figure, allegedly “gone to Mexico … to bury an uncle” (13), never to reappear, having “the nerve to disappear as if his life belonged to no one but him” (17). Perfecto Flores, on the other hand, occupies the role model category: a seventy-three year old agricultural worker that knows how to use his hands to make and repair things, he teaches Estrella practical skills and contributes to the overall welfare of the migrant family. As it follows the lives of this family of laborers, the novel speaks back to the language of nativism and
xenophobia gaining social momentum at that time, exemplified by the passing of Proposition 187, and it provides a first-hand account of the consequences of such rhetoric and social hatred in the everyday lives of people working hard to make a living.

2.1. Closing the frontier and opening the nation: competing narratives of belonging as historical context

The rhetoric of nativism and xenophobia provides an essential entry point into the ideological backdrop to Viramontes’s novel. The rhetoric that shapes the social intelligibility of the migrant worker at the end of the twentieth century finds its roots in various narratives of nation building and in dominant genealogies of the US as a nation. As I mentioned earlier when discussing the formational narratives of the frontier in relation to the NPR series, competing discourses of national belonging coexist in the US social imaginary. One discourse stems from the chance of becoming American by roughing it in the Wild West and fulfilling the nation’s Manifest Destiny, a process that Frederick Jackson Turner described in the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago as coming to an end. While westward expansion allowed Euro-American settlers to prove their tenacity and to live according to the ideological premises of building a new nation, the spell of American exceptionalism could only be central in the making of Americans for a limited time. By announcing the closing of the frontier at the World’s Fair, Turner sought to foreclose the possibility of “becoming” American through a personal achievement and experience that is contingent and time specific—from that moment on, the road to American-ness became of biological inheritance. With the supposed fulfillment of Manifest Destiny and the expansion of the nation from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific shores, the process of “becoming”
American gives way to national belonging via cultural and genetic inheritance, a national narrative that has strong staying power in the national imaginary.\textsuperscript{43}

The notion of biological descent from the colonial settlers that secured the coast-to-coast boundaries of the nation coexists with a different kind of inclusion into the social fold of the US: the admission into the nation through a social or legal contract. This form of national inclusion becomes poignantly relevant in the periods of mass migration to the US following the World’s Fair in Chicago.\textsuperscript{44} As Dorothee Schneider observes, the US national consciousness in periods of mass migration has always struggled between welcoming immigrants and maintaining an American sense of self for “on the one hand it was an important part of American national identity to show that citizenship for immigrants was accessible and easy, while on the other hand, large scale naturalizations of diverse immigrant groups also raised fears about the quality of new citizens and the nature of their commitment to the nation” (50). The nearly ubiquitous celebration of the US as a nation of immigrants appears thus as the flipside of the coin that portrays the “kind” of immigrants that have a more direct claim to American-ness in the social imaginary: the British Protestant settlers that founded the thirteen colonies along the eastern seabord.\textsuperscript{45}

As we have seen, Werner Sollors conceptualized the tension of national becoming, the tension between legal contracts and hereditary lines, between the self-made and the ancestral, as the crucible of American identity. He argues that mobilizing the concepts of consent and descent

\textsuperscript{43} This genealogical link to American-ness, as I mention in Chapter 1, is inherently classed and raced since the descendants of the colonial settlers would tend to be white, protestant, and of Anglo-European descent.

\textsuperscript{44} Dorothee Schneider identifies the periods from 1894-1930 and 1965-2000 as the two most recent periods of mass migration in American constitutional and immigration history, periods marked by the increase in the volume of citizens and by the desire to control the processes of naturalization as a filter of social value, “in the name of creating better citizens” (50).

\textsuperscript{45} The common understanding of the US as a nation of immigrants, as noted in Chapter 1, contributes to the construction of the US as a genealogically homogeneous space that erases the presence of Indigenous peoples from its historical core. African Americans received citizenship following the ratification of the 14\textsuperscript{th} amendment in 1868. Native Americans, however, did not receive citizenship until the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.
into American citizenship for the examination of American culture and literature capitalizes on a productive tension that reveals the ideological underpinnings in the construction of ethnicity and culture in the US. According to Sollors, “descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, our political systems” (6). This anxiety between entitlement and merit, between links to European ancestry and the cult to self-made personhood, mobilizes the rhetoric of xenophobia that fuels nativist discourses in the US. The lack of a single dominant narrative of American-ness brings to the forefront racial anxieties about the legitimacy of one’s claim to national identity. Using the double-edged sword of descent and consent as a lens to analyze cultural and literary expressions, however, can only maintain its neat-working duality when we erase other genealogical narratives from the ideological playing field: when we obviate Indigenous peoples in the continent before the arrival of the colonial settlers, and when we fail to recognize that national boundaries are not static and have changed considerably in the last two-hundred years. As noted in Chapter 1, dominant narratives of national belonging work best when the US can be imagined as always already stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast.

The mainstream tension between these two modes of codifying belonging to the nation implicitly underlies the experiences of the characters in Under the Feet of Jesus. While the ideas of consent and descent are not articulated as such in the novel, the lives of its migrant workers are caught in a social web of nativism and xenophobia that marks them as suspect in terms of national belonging. Born in the US to parents of Mexican origin, Estrella and her siblings cannot claim a direct genealogical line of descent as national subjects since they are born Americans to parents who are American through a legal contract. The claim to authenticity in relation to
national identity lies at the heart of the passing of Proposition 187, a legislative action that cast
the shadow that engulfs the lives of Viramontes’s protagonists.

2.2. Social backlash and Proposition 187: living life under the veiled threat of
ideological violence

Set in southern California in the late 1980s or early 1990s, Viramontes’s novel gives voice to
the migrant worker’s everyday life in the era of late capitalism. By following the quotidian
challenges for survival of a family of migrant workers, the novel presents the precarious social
and economical position of agricultural workers in the predominantly service economy of the
contemporary US. Positioned against anti-immigrant sentiments and the pervasiveness of nativist
discourses in the social life of the nation, Under the Feet of Jesus subtly exposes the lack of
access to social resources for migrant workers, be they US nationals or not. From the treatment
that migrant children receive in public schools, to the lack of access to medical care, to the
difficulty in purchasing fresh produce and keeping a healthy diet, the novel presents the
unspoken counternarrative to the social concerns that gave rise to Proposition 187 in California
in 1994, a ballot initiative aimed to deny access to medical care, education, and other social
services to undocumented workers and their children.

Proposition 187 is a ballot initiative that needs to be understood in relation to the widespread
US economic recession of the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the Reagan and first Bush
administrations witnessed and brought about, among other things, the rise of neoconservatism,
the dismantling of what was left of the Keynesian welfare state, the deindustrialization of urban
centers following a politics of globalization and economic outsourcing, the rise of prison
economies, the resegregation of urban spaces, and the increase of police presence and militarism
(Lee, Urban Triage 19-20). When the economic recession hit California more strongly in the
early 1990s it took the form of federal and state cuts most prominently to education, welfare, and social services at a time when the numbers of Asian and Latino migration to California increased substantially (Cacho 390). The increase in the number of migrants provided a much needed escape valve to the social anxieties created by the economic crisis, anxieties that found expression in the passing of this particular ballot initiative. As Lisa Cacho argues, “suffering from the diminution of state and federal investment, Californians conflated their growing economic insecurities with their heightening racial anxieties, passing Proposition 187 as an attempt to suppress the economic and social crises of the state” (390). The mobilization of racial anxieties as a diversion from economic instabilities implicates the political apparatus of the state in the creation and maintenance of racialized social relations. As Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop put it, “Proposition 187 is a contemporary example of a popular public policy issue that produced a sustained rhetoric of nativism and xenophobia” (3). Even though the ballot initiative was deemed unconstitutional and it was never enacted, the passing of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996 by the Clinton administration duplicates many of the provisions in Proposition 187 at a federal level. Proposition 187 produced a “chilling effect” among the migrant population, increasing its sense of being under constant surveillance and heightening anxieties about deportation (Park 1162). This climate of social hatred, economic instability, and xenophobia provides the historical context against which I read Under the Feet of Jesus.

The main characters in Under the Feet of Jesus occupy various social spaces in relation to these narratives of national belonging. As Chican@s, that is, as US-born subjects of Mexican descent, some migrant workers in the novel should occupy a social place legitimized by

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46 The 2008 economic crisis in the US has rendered a similar conflation of economic instability and racial anxiety, as attested by the anti-immigrant initiatives and the banning of ethnic studies in Arizona and elsewhere.
birthright (this is the case for Estrella and her four siblings). In the same vein, legal Mexican immigrant characters would occupy a space of naturalized citizenship (like Petra and Perfecto). As US nationals born to successive generations of Tejanos, other workers should be considered an intrinsic part of the national fabric (like Alejo and Gumecindo). Most migrant workers, however, are socially identified with an ethnic community that includes undocumented workers that have no legal claim to national identity and that fuel nativist anxieties, especially in times of economic crisis. Sadly enough, and resulting from a racialized social structure profoundly ingrained in the national imaginary, people who are read phenotypically as Indigenous or “Spanish” always already occupy a foreign place in the national structure of the US, the maligned slot of the “illegal alien.” This social position, as Mae M. Ngai argues, stems from the immigration restrictions that the national origins quota system enacted until its abolition in 1965, restrictions that “produced the illegal alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility—a subject barred from citizenship and without rights” (4). The creation of a subject position that can be readily recognized yet never included as a constituting part of the national whole invariably opens the door to social and economic exploitation. As Alicia Schmidt Camacho contends, in the case of Mexican laborers “this peculiar form of statelessness emerged with the contradiction between market demands for mobile labor and consumable goods and the immobility of civil rights beyond the bounds of the nation-state” (30). In her study of the cultural politics of transnational labor circuits that link the US and Mexico, Schmidt Camacho argues that the “migrant presence … indelibly mark[s] ethnic Mexicans in opposition to the ideal citizen-subject of the US nation”

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47 Tejanos are people of Mexican and Indigenous descent living for generations in Texas as the region undergoes changes in political and national status.
(7). And this is, indeed, the space that the characters in Viramontes’s novel occupy: a subject position read by default as outside the legitimate social makeup of the US.

2.3. *La frontera viaja conmigo:*\(^\text{48}\) **politics of location and the burden of proof**

Feminist essayist and poet Adrienne Rich brought to our critical attention the idiosyncratic place we occupy as social subjects and historical agents in her “Notes Towards a Politics of Location.” Understanding who we are, how we come to be, where we come from, and what position we occupy in our social structure enables us to see the social and cultural forces that shape our understanding of the world. Rich captured the emphasis on the initial determinism of one’s politics location when she observed, “a place on the map is a place in history” (64). And indeed, migrant workers occupy a concrete space in the social map of the US, if not a specific place in terms of geographical location. The inherent mobility of the migrant workers’ lives (paired with their linguistic, cultural, and religious differences from mainstream populations) has historically been used as evidence of their lack of allegiance to the nation and therefore used to justify conceptualizing them as transitory communities that have no intention of settling in the US. Imagining migrant communities as transient collectives with no investment in the nation has also been historically useful in dismissing the exploitation of those communities and in deeming them “temporary workers ineligible for naturalization” (Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries* 9), thus voiding mainstream society from social accountability for them. In her diachronic study of the racialization of migrant workers, Schmidt Camacho explains that “labor contractors saw the proximity of Mexico as a means to regulate the labor supply, and the racial perception of Mexicans as foreigners made it easy for employers to treat them as a temporary workforce, whatever their actual claim to residency in the United States” (*Migrant Imaginaries* 27). Migrant workers, then, have always been positioned outside the boundaries of social legitimization, even

\(^{48}\) The border travels with me.
when the changes in migration patterns at the end of the twentieth century provide evidence of “a transformation from a predominantly sojourner or cyclical pattern of Mexican migration to the widespread establishment of Mexican immigrant families and communities throughout California” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 169-170). As the analysis of the NPR series above reflects, the correlation of migrant workers with ideas of transitoriness and temporariness has a strong hold on the US social imaginary.

If we follow Rich’s premise connecting a place in the map with a place in history, we can infer that not occupying a specific geographical place in the cultural map of the US has meant that migrant workers occupy, at best, a blurry historical space in mainstream national narratives. Indeed, the difficulty in finding traces of their historical contribution to the development of the US in mainstream narratives reveals a multilayered sedimentation of socially accepted reasoning turned “common sense.” On the one hand, we find the widespread sense that people of Mexican descent in the US belong to a group of conquered people. As Schmidt Camacho points out, “Mexicans, according to US national lore, had lost the Southwestern territories in 1848 because of their innate inferiority to Anglo-American society” (Migrant Imaginaries 10). The conceptualization of people of Mexican descent in terms of historical defeat goes hand in hand with imagining this population as always ideologically foreign. Schmidt Camacho’s analysis of the congressional debates in the 1920s and 1930s about the Mexican presence in the US shows that Mexicans are depicted in the public discourse as “neither fully alien nor prone to settle in the United States.” Rather, they are cast as “foreign in a domestic sense” just like the inhabitants of the then unincorporated territories of Puerto Rico and the Philippines (Migrant Imaginaries 11). 49 The social imagining of migrant populations as always foreign, together with their

49 The phrase “foreign in a domestic sense” first appears in an opinion of the United States Supreme Court written by Justice Edward Douglass White in one of the so-called Insular Cases, Downes v. Bidwell (1901), that determined
seemingly physiological visibility, forces them to carry the burden of proof perennially on their shoulders; whenever they are hailed to do so, they must provide proof of their legal status to the powers that be. Thus, the social intelligibility of their politics of location is always suspect and migrant workers are perpetually forced to prove their legal legitimacy.

The most compelling evidence in Under the Feet of Jesus that Estrella’s family is always already read as “illegal” in the social framework of the national imaginary lies in the way they carry all their legal documents everywhere they go. The documents are neatly stashed away in a manila envelope under the altar that Petra sets up wherever they set camp. It consists of plaster statues of “Jesucristo, La Virgen María y José” (8), a holy family portrait meant to protect and guide the migrant workers’ family. Whenever they pick up everything to move to a new camp “the mother would remove the hands of Jesucristo and wrap them in socks and then wrap the statues in flour sack cloth and place them atop the dishes and pans in the zinc basin, after which, the mother would roll the doily scarf and place it in the glove compartment with the envelope of documents” (37). As essential to their survival as the pans and the dishes they carry with them, the manila envelope contains legal documents:

Black ink feet on the birth certificates, five perfect circular toes on each foot, a topography print of her children recorded, dated, legal, for future use to establish age to enter school, when applying for working papers, establish legal age for rights of franchise, for jury or military service, to prove citizenship, to obtain passports, to prove right to inheritance of property. (166 emphasis in the original)

The papers Petra keeps under the plaster statue of Jesucristo contain the promise of inclusion into the fabric of the nation: they certify the right to citizenship and the social privileges that go along with it; they symbolize a future outside of the pisca, outside the nomad life of the migrant worker

the constitutional status of the unincorporated territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, and sanctioned the colonization of the islands. For a careful analysis of this issue see Burnett and Marshall.
and into a stabilized notion of citizenship. Petra transfers the almost mystical aura of the birth certificates to other official papers, keeping also

Certificado de Bautismos—five of them; a torn and mended Social Security card; Identification card—NOT A LICENSE—She had walked fourteen blocks to the DMV, and her picture looked flat and dull and pale as concrete, but the ID was a great relief. Petra often feared that she would die and no one would know who she was. (66)

For Petra, this collection of official documents is not only necessary to prove their citizenship when required to do so by whatever branch of the national surveillance machine; they are also essential to inscribe their lives and their existence officially in the social narrative of the US as historical agents. The state ID that Petra carries represents for her an antidote against the anonymity and social erasure of their lives, enforcing her subjectivity as it inscribes her as an idiosyncratic part of society. For a subject that unjustly lives outside the privileges of citizenship, being able to show proof of citizenship or residency becomes a must. While it represents a legitimate claim to space and resources, having to show proof of citizenship or residency also reifies the status of outsider the subject is forced to occupy in the social imaginary.

2.4. A life of labor: the erasure of social agency from the national consciousness

A far cry from the imagined new life north of the border that lights with adrenaline migrant workers and dreamers in the NPR’s “Series Overview,” the life of Estrella and her family revolves around a never-ending cycle of physical labor. The very beginning of the novel affirms that “it was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing” (4). All the variables that make “work” possible point to the centrality of labor in the lived experience of migrant workers. In fact, labor is not only central to migrant life: in the novel “life” and “labor” become interchangeable concepts. Since “the vast
field of grapevines was monotonous—without beginning, without ending—always the same to
the piscadores and then to their children” (50), we can sense how the perennial cycle of labor
generation after generation defines migrant workers and makes them intelligible in a social
context.

Viramontes’s novel can be read as a form of social activism that consciously highlights the
role that migrant workers play in the national economy while showing the degree to which that
role is erased from the collective consciousness of the US. Under the Feet of Jesus illustrates the
invisibility of migrant labor through the use of a variety of images. One of them, for example, is
the image of the La Brea Tar Pits and the creation of fossil fuel. A recurring motif throughout the
novel, the Tar Pits come into focus at the end when Estrella understands the importance of oil in
running the social and economic machine and realizes that “the oil was made from their bones,
and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway. … It was their
bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long
dotted line on the map. Their bones” (148). At this point in the novel, Estrella understands her
intimate relationship to the Tar Pits: she realizes that the Tar Pits produce oil by fossilizing
biological matter and recognizes, for the first time, that she and the other migrant workers have
become the fuel that keeps the motor of the agricultural machine running—the fossilized matter
necessary for the economy to function.

At the same time, the fossilization evokes the way the workers themselves metaphorically
dissolve into the fruit of their labor and disappear from the social consciousness. One sharp
example of this kind of social erasure of labor emerges in Estrella’s train of thought as she picks
up grapes:

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin
boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing the fluffy bonnet,
holding out grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper. She did not remove the frame, straighten her creaking knees, the bend of her back, set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun. The woman’s bonnet would be as useless as Estrella’s own straw hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins. (49-50)

As Estrella compares the hard work of picking grapes to the idyllic image of the raisin girl in the Sun Maid commercial products, she brings our attention to the sanitation of labor in the process of commercialization of the packaged goods. The good-natured smile of the Sun Maid girl that offers a bunch of freshly picked grapes to the consumer from the idyllic calmness of the rolling hills clashes loudly with the reality of thirteen year-old Estrella, “her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again. Don’t cry” (53). The commercial product not only disguises the real life experience of the harvesters but it also erases them as historical agents. By presenting a young, relaxed, rose-cheeked white person as the Sun Maid girl, the company erases both the labor that producing the product entails and the markedly ethnic background of the laborers that carry out the harvest in the US.

The contrast between the thirteen-year-old brown girl that picks up grapes under the scorching California sun and the socially approachable one-dimensional image of the Sun Maid girl in her fluffy bonnet reinforces the line that demarcates legitimate subjects from alleged trespassers. The conflation of agricultural workers’ lives with labor in the novel together with the

50 The representation and racialization of the Sun Maid girl has changed over the years. Even though her smile and the debonair does not quite change, the physique of the girl transforms from a pale and plump rose-cheeked young lady to a much thinner and tanner version of herself—all without losing her whiteness. This is a project I would like to undertake in the future. As a counter-discourse to the Sun Maid girl, Chicana artist Ester Hernández created the now iconic “Sun Mad” poster (1982) mimicking the Sun Maid raisin box image but substituting a skeleton for the girl. Denouncing the deadly impact of pesticides on farm workers, the poster reads “Sun Mad Raisins, Unnaturally Grown With Insecticides, Miticides, Herbicides, Fungicides.”
erasure of labor from the social consciousness renders migrant lives invisible and highlights the social intelligibility of the workers. The conflation of labor with life itself and the erasure of the agents of labor from the national landscape eliminates the social space available to migrant workers. Thus, the lack of a socially intelligible space that Estrella and her family can occupy reinforces mainstream “common sense” notions of migrant workers as foreigners and as people that have no legitimate claim to citizenship and to inclusion in the national fold.

2.5. Living under surveillance: unshakable borders and spaces of violence

In addition to underscoring the lack of recognizable social space available for migrant workers in the national imaginary, Viramontes’s novel brings to our attention the stress and anxiety that the national surveillance machine forces on brown bodies. Throughout the novel, the characters feel the inescapable presence of la Migra (the Border Patrol). Regardless of their legal status in the US, the characters in the novel feel the threat of violence and deportation and identify it as a very real consequence of being brown and poor. In addition to being passively excluded from the national fold in ideological terms, then, the workers in Viramontes’s novel also endure the active intimidation of the mechanisms of national security.

One of the most poignant examples of this constant sense of being under surveillance appears early in the novel when Estrella walks home after a hard day of work. Rather than going in one of the trucks that shuttles workers between the fields and the camps, the trucks where “the piscadores bum[p] into one another like loose change in a pocket” and are “herded out of the corralled flatbed[s]” like cattle (67), Estrella decides to walk home following the railroad tracks. Even though she is so tired after a day’s work that she is “almost regretful she had not taken the ride” (58), she walks home because of the playing field where “two Little League teams pla[y] on the green of the lawn, behind the tall wire mesh fence” (58). Sitting on the railroad tracks,
Estrella momentarily becomes one the spectators together with the parents and other folks that sit “on lawn chairs behind the batter’s bench or [are] scattered about on the bleachers, ice chests at arm’s reach” (58). As she sits by the baseball diamond the line that divides leisure time from her life in the fields blurs for a moment: she looks at the little players waiting to catch a fly ball and in their mitts she sees the empty-toothed mouth of Mr. Kawamoto earlier that day as he smiled when he caught a peach that Estrella threw to him in the fields. At that moment, the lives of migrant workers and those of the middle-class momentarily share the same space, blurring the boundaries that social conventions work hard to maintain. And precisely at that moment of social chaos, if you will, the lights of the park come on and Estrella

startled when the sheets of high-powered lights beamed on the playing field like headlights of cars, blinding her. The round, sharp white lights burned her eyes and she made a feeble attempt to shield them with an arm. The border patrol, she thought, and she tried to remember which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in. The floodlights aimed at the phantoms in the field. Or were they directed at her? Could the spectators see her from where they stood? Where was home? (59)

Estrella’s reaction when the floodlights light up breaks the spell of shared space and reestablishes the social order. Confusing the park lights with the floodlights of the Border Patrol, the thirteen-year-old piscadora’s response reifies the social atmosphere of fear and rejection that riddles the lives of migrant workers in the novel. When she runs home and tells her mother “someone’s trying to get me,” Petra tells her that “it’s La Migra. Everyone’s feeling it” (61). The pervasive effects of the anti-immigrant atmosphere that the novel echoes in its structures of feeling have all the characters on edge. To Estrella’s assertion that “yo ya no voy a correr. No puedo más” (I’m not going to run anymore. I can’t do it anymore) her mother tells her that there is “no sense telling La Migra you’ve lived here all your life … / Do we carry proof around like belly buttons?” (62). Understanding her position in the social hierarchy and the need to carry their
documents as “belly buttons” to weather the violent storm the surveillance machine unleashes,

Petra rebels and tells Estrella:

Don’t run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don’t let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they’ll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them. … / Tell them que tienes una madre aquí [that you have a mother here]. You are not an orphan, and she pointed her red finger to the earth, Aquí [Here]. (63)

Affirming her claim to the land and her right to be considered part of the social makeup of the nation, Petra makes a stand against borders as mobile spaces that depend on social legibility and mainstream ideas of national belonging rather than on geopolitical location.

This sense of social surveillance and rejection also appears in one of the final episodes, a scene where Estrella and her family bring teenage Alejo to a trailer clinic seeking medical attention. Alejo, poisoned by the pesticide mist of a biplane fumigating the field where he was stealing peaches, needs urgent medical care as he suffers from what the workers call “el daño of the fields” (93), the illness of the fields. Too sick to work, too weak to catch the bus back home to Texas to start high school, and too poor to do anything about his sickness and inability to move, Alejo is finally taken in by Estrella’s mother because “if we don’t take care of each other, who would take care of us?” (96). When Estrella’s family enter the medical clinic with Alejo and encounter the Anglo nurse that is about to close the clinic for the day, the narrative brings to the forefront a form of surveillance and social discrimination deeply ingrained in the social imaginary: the construction of brown bodies as public charges, the ideologically spread notion that “illegal” immigrants benefit from social services that should only be accessible to US nationals.

This sort of social surveillance forms part of the ideological premises mobilized to support nativist rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment that led to ballot initiatives such as Proposition
187 in California. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo argues, the nativist rhetoric mobilized through Proposition 187 “focuses on public resource usage and targets immigrant women, relying on both racist and misogynist imagery” (169). Mining the idea of the uncontrollable sexuality and exuberant reproduction of women of color, part of the ideological legacy of slavery, anti-immigrant rhetoric constructs women of color as a threat to the nation due to their reproductive powers. Lisa Sun-Hee Park, in her analysis of the exploitation of the idea of “public charge” in the construction of anti-immigrant laws, contends “that the social contexts that helped garner support for … anti-immigration legislative measures created an environment that essentially criminalized motherhood for low-income immigrant women—whether they be undocumented or documented” (1161). The “displace[ment] [of] very real economic crisis onto the bodies of immigrant workers and their children” (Cacho 392) that the implicit criminalization of motherhood of Proposition 187 enacts builds on the notion that national economic crises are caused by the high cost of public spending in medical attention and educational resources for immigrant children and their mothers. In that way, the racist fear of incorporation imagines an economic basis that makes it palatable and legitimate for mainstream society.

In Viramontes’s novel the criminalization of motherhood appears most clearly in the episode with the nurse. The juxtaposition in this episode between Estrella’s family and the nurse’s family speaks to the racial ideologies that back up Proposition 187: Estrella is there with Petra, Perfecto Flores, the twins Perla and Cookie, and the boys Arnulfo and Ricky, carrying Alejo—who is young enough to be part of the family. The plethora of children, together with the feeling of constant movement one senses in the description of their activities, contrasts starkly with the immobility of the framed pictures of the nurse’s children, waiting to be “pick[ed] up […] in Daisyfield at six” (146). While on the one hand we have a family of migrant workers covered in
mud (after struggling to move the car out of a mud hole on the unpaved road), the nurse at the medical clinic appears with “a fresh coat of red lipstick, and the thick scent of carnation perfume” (137), and her sons stand still and clean in their picture frames. Thus, the novel subliminally differentiates between the reproductive uncontrollability of the migrant woman and the structured reproductive logic of the white woman that fuels the widespread social criminalization of migrant motherhood.

As Lisa Sun-Hee Park explains, “the vagueness of its definition [of public charge] and the standards with which this measure is applied generated considerable confusion regarding who is eligible for certain federal, state, or local public benefits and whether non-citizens may face adverse immigration consequences as a public charge for having received public benefits” (1161). The conflation of “Spanish physiognomy” with non-citizen status, together with the vague idea of public charge, places the migrant population in an even more precarious position in the US social landscape. Viramontes carefully sets a contrast between seeking assistance for Alejo (who is, after all, a US citizen) when he is about to die and Petra’s endurance and treatment of varicose veins with natural remedies throughout the novel, even though she is a green card holder. The fact that we never see Petra seeking medical assistance for her or her children (who are US citizens) shows the pervasive effect that anti-immigrant sentiment has on the migrant population and implicitly contradicts the logic of public charge that rhetorically justifies Proposition 187.

The episode with the nurse in the medical clinic provides a useful example to appreciate how socially constructed notions of migrant labor play out in terms of social relations. The underlying sense of inadequacy established by the contrast between the “excess” reproduction of the migrant worker and the “precise” reproduction of the nurse sets the bottom line of personal interaction in
the scene. While the nurse reluctantly examines Alejo after muttering “some people have all the luck” (137) and locking her purse in the desk after checking her Timex wristwatch, her attitude throughout the examination betrays how she feels put upon by the latecomers. She punctuates her cursory check up of Alejo with suppositions about where the workers come from and their ability to speak English, with intimations of their lack of responsibility for having taken too long to seek medical attention, and with careless assumptions about their language proficiency and their perceived lack of intelligence vis-à-vis health care procedures. After telling them that the doctor will not be in until the following week and that Alejo needs serious medical attention from the hospital twenty miles away, the nurse tells them that “the clinic visit is fifteen dollars, but I’ll charge you only ten because… she paused and glanced at Estrella, then added, because I know times are hard these days” (144). Her seeming charitable action becomes an empty echo when she is unable to see that the $9.07 the family pulls together represents all the money they have. With an empty tank of gas and away from the camp, they try to barter with the nurse: they offer their services in repairing several things that need upkeep in the clinic. The nurse, however, makes it clear that in the era of late capitalism a bartering system cannot even be recognized as a valid alternative, that she “only works here” and has no authority on the matter (145), and that she will take their money for “a few pennies short don’t mean much” (145). Her inability to see how the lives of the migrant workers in front of her are indeed determined by differences in pennies voids that space from the possibility of humanity and social solidarity. Indeed, her sense of civic duty is determined by capitalist rules (she just works there) rather than social responsibility (it is not her job to help the helpless). Having exhausted all the civil possibilities she can imagine, Estrella knows that those $9.07 equal survival for them and that they need the money back. This realization makes her go to the car, grab the crowbar and return to the clinic
trailer. She asks for their money back and after the nurse refuses her request she slams the desk with the crowbar and cracks the picture frames of the nurse’s children. The terrified nurse opens the moneybox and Estrella counts their $9.07 and leaves the rest of the money untouched. Back in the car, she thinks how “they make you that way, … sigh[ing] with resignation. She tried to understand what happened herself. You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast” (151). Estrella thus believes that the only social space available for her is a space of violence. The conflation of her life with labor, the erasure of labor from the processes of production, and the social deafness to her plight pushes Estrella into the only space that the nurse can recognize and interpret as legitimate: the space of violence that all “foreigners,” as threats to national security and to social and cultural stability, must occupy.

Viramontes’s novel, then, presents a stark counterpoint to the wide-eyed hope that the NPR Series dons on the “dreamers … and migrants” that are “lit with the adrenaline rush that comes just before attempting to cross to a new life” (Series Overview). Chances are that the “new life” they can participate in on the other side of the border translates into a life of labor, invisibility, and criminalization. The analysis of Under the Feet of Jesus shows that the discourse about the border and its inhabitants does not dissolve when removed from a geopolitical line. Rather, the ideological premises that shape popular imaginings of the border and the people socially associated with it have strong currency in different geographical locations. Furthermore, the notion of the border as a space of violence that the NPR series presents becomes the only available space for migrant workers. The popular discourse about the border, then, does not only shape the cultural imaginary and its received notions of genealogical origins, but it also actively determines the reification of social hierarchies and the terms of culturally intelligible social
interactions. At the same time, it works hard to maintain the border in place and contributes to the stabilization of the demarcation line as a rigid structure that separates “them” from “us.”

3. *Into the Beautiful North*: experiencing globalization from the Mexican countryside

Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Into the Beautiful North* (2009) presents a different perspective from Viramontes’s novel. While *Under the Feet of Jesus* follows the lives of migrant workers north of the border, Urrea sets his novel in contemporary Tres Camarones: a small town in rural Mexico straddling the county borders of Sinaloa and Nayarit. *Into the Beautiful North* presents the quest of nineteen-year-old Nayeli, as she sets out on a journey north to the US to bring back strong Mexican men to Tres Camarones. A town depleted of men that have “traded [their] famil[ies] for a job” (9) north of the border, Tres Camarones offers Nayeli and her friends no hope for the future and a precarious present. The poverty-stricken town no longer sustained by its agricultural and fishing economies hardly subsists in a twenty-first century capitalist structure, so much so that its presence does not make a mark in the geographical structure of the country, or “at any rate, nobody … ever worried about maps—on the official Pemex highway guides, Tres Camarones didn’t even exist” (13). The economic-driven exodus of the male population from the Mexican countryside leaves little places like Tres Camarones without a security force to defend the town, at the mercy of corrupt state officials on a drug cartel’s payroll and of dissatisfied bottom-level drug dealers exploiting a hardly profitable market (5).

Urrea’s portrait of Tres Camarones offers a glimpse into the effects of globalization on rural Mexican economies. Nowhere in the novel are these effects more visible than in the episode when Tía Irma (soon-to-be-elected Municipal President of Tres Camarones and former bowling champion), Nayeli and her girlfriends Yoloxochitl (Yolo) and Verónica (la Vampi), go to Villaunión to the market. Outraged at the price of beans, Tía Irma launches a tirade about the
ever-rising prices of essential items like corn and beans and how the “good working people of Mexico” cannot afford these diet staples in today’s economy, saying “¡Es una infamia! … ¡Es un robo!” [This is criminal! It’s a robbery]” (38). She explains to the market vendor “‘We are Mexicans.’ Irma informed the fruit seller—needlessly, he felt. ‘Mexicans eat corn and beans. Did you notice? The Aztec culture gave corn to the world, you little man. We invented it! Mexicans grow beans. How is it, then, that Mexicans cannot afford to buy and eat the corn and beans they grow?’” (38-39). Tía Irma’s outrage at the price of such basic foods goes hand in hand with a sense of cultural disenfranchisement, and her outrage grows as she notices that “the burlap sacks full of 100 pounds each of pinto beans” (39) come from California. In an effort to deflect her anger, the vendor tells her

‘These beans are grown here in Sinaloa,’ he said proudly. ‘The best frijoles in the world! Right near Culiacán. Then they’re sold to the United States. Then they sell them back to us.’ He shrugged at the mysterious ways of the world. ‘It gets expensive.’

‘That,’ she finally proclaimed, ‘is the stupidest thing anyone has ever said to me.’

He smiled, hoping she would not strike him with that purse.

‘NAFTA,’ he said. (39)

Even though the logic of globalization escapes common sense, the vendor accepts it as a fact of life that shapes his life and over which he has no control. Tía Irma the politician and avid nationalist, however, sees the absurdity and understands the consequences that globalization and free market structures have for the average Mexican population. She has a strong sense of the way national economic policies such as NAFTA benefit capital investors at the expense of sinking the common people into unsustainable poverty. The town of Tres Camarones, indeed, becomes a prime example of the effects of globalization: an idyllic space emptied of economic or social prospects because, as Nayeli’s mother says, “you cannot eat beauty” (28) and the men are “‘All gone,’ Irma said, making a puff with her lips. ‘Blown away. Off to the beautiful north’”
in search of economic opportunities, leaving the town to women, old men, and little children.

The biggest attraction Tres Camarones has to offer its citizens comes in the shape of the Cine Pedro Infante, a movie theater owned by García-García, previous Municipal President and the only rich man in town. García-García’s commercial goal is to “maintain a steady flow of double features” for he couldn’t afford to let a movie run for a week—in two day’s time, everyone who could pay to see it would have passed through his doors. The movies were an essential lure so he could collect inflated prices for beer, soda, and ham-and-chile tortas at the little stand behind the screen. So what if it turned out the films were of poor quality, whole reels mysteriously spliced out, Chinese subtitles, cat-scratched frames, and underwater sound tracks—a fresh set of titles on the theater marquee meant a lucrative night at the torta stand.

As the center of public entertainment, the Cine Pedro Infante provides a connection to the larger world, a window into different historical narratives, and a place of social interaction for all the citizens of Tres Camarones. The movie theater plays a central role in the novel, since one of the feature films provides the inspiration that fuels Nayeli’s quest. Everything happens after the election of Tía Irma to Municipal President and her first act as a public official to ensure that a woman is trained as projectionist since the last man to hold that post departed to Michigan to pick apples. Irma intends to reopen the movie theater and wants “to see the cinema reborn with a film festival of [her] favorite Mexican superstar.” Yul Brynner (she is convinced that Yul Brynner is Mexican after watching movies dubbed into Spanish). Since García-García is an avid fan of Steve McQueen, he reconciles his wishes and Irma’s demands by choosing a film starring both actors: *The Magnificent Seven*. The film, a 1960 American western directed by John Sturges, is a remake of Akira Kurosawa’s 1954 film *Seven Samurai*. Set in rural Mexico and starring Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, James Coburn, Robert Vaughn, Brad
Dexter, Horst Buchholz, and Eli Wallach, the film presents a small Mexican village that suffers the periodic attack of a band of bandits led by Calavera (Eli Wallach). Unable to protect the village, the peasants seek help from gunmen for hire and manage to recruit seven men. The seven men train the villagers and prepare them to defend their town; after trials of force, valor, and developing a sense of community and pride, the peasants prevail over the bandits while only three out of the seven gunmen survive.

While watching the movie, Nayeli has a revelation: she needs to go north to the US to find seven Mexican men to bring back to defend her town from the attacks of the drug dealers and corrupt police officers. She tells her friends that “‘We have to go to Los Yunaites [the United States phonetically] and get them’ … ‘We have to stop the bandits before they come and destroy the village. Don’t you see? They’re coming’” (61). They decide they will go north and interview men to bring back—they will only accept soldiers or policemen, men trained to defend the town and uphold the law. Nayeli and her friends assure each other that they are “‘only going there to bring the men back home.’ … ‘We will only be there for as long as it takes to get the men to come’” (62). Convinced that “‘the Americanos will be happy we’re there! Even if we’re caught!’ because they will be “‘relieving’ the US from unwanted immigrants, Nayeli feels that she is on a mission from God (62) to bring back hope to the town—to bring protection and prosperity to Tres Camarones. She imagines the result of her quest, how there will be “‘Dances,’ Nayeli whispered. ‘Boyfriends. Husbands. Babies. Police—law and order. No bandidos’ … ‘Maybe, you know, we could get one gay boy,’ Nayeli said. ‘For poor Tacho’ … ‘Tacho needs love too’” (62). Breaking the markedly heteronormative narrative of the novel, Nayeli recognizes the needs of the non-normative citizenry of Tres Camarones: her boss Tacho, the owner of La Mano Caída
Taquería e Internet—the only gay man in town.\(^{51}\) They decide that Tacho should accompany them (Nayeli, Yolo, and la Vampi—the only Goth girl in Tres Camarones) and they present their plan to Irma, the town’s President, who is immediately taken by the grand gesture and the epic nature of their quest. With the full support of the townspeople, they set out on their voyage north to the States.

The proposition of Urrea’s novel (the travel north to bring back Mexican men to Mexico) presents a counter-narrative to the typically held assumptions about northward movement from south of the border. As we have seen before, the NPR series casts the northward migration from Mexico as a step towards improving one’s life conditions, a way of escaping poverty and despondence south of the border and providing for family back home through remittances. The reality of life north of the border as Viramontes’s novel exposes it, however, proves less of an escape from poverty than one would imagine through the NPR’s depiction of those “dreamers … and migrants” waiting with wide sparkling eyes to cross the border into “a new life” (Series Overview). While in a way Into the Beautiful North articulates a narrative of survival akin to Under the Feet of Jesus, the survival in Urrea’s novel takes a more ideological slant: even though it begins in material conditions of subsistence that match those in Under the Feet of Jesus, Into the Beautiful North quickly transforms the material struggle of the protagonists into an ontological one, since the future of the people of Tres Camarones as a people hinges on Nayeli’s success. Starting from the material conditions that bring into question the viability of survival in the little Mexican town, the novel then shifts its focus to the spiritual survival of the people. This spiritual force ultimately drives Nayeli’s larger-than-life quest.

\(^{51}\) Tacho is the owner of The Fallen Hand Taco Shop and Internet Cafe. He names his shop after “the cartoony limp wrist of the gay man in the common pantomime” (20) to claim his space in town and assert his sense of self. By doing so he wants to show the more macho men in town that he is not limp-wristed at all and that he is “wittier than they were, and because of this, somehow more macho” (20) a fact appreciated by all as “even the more macho men in town had embraced him immediately” (20) and he becomes the most cherished character in town.
3.1. Mexican nativism and the widespread plight of the undocumented migrant

The novels of Viramontes and Urrea share reflections on another aspect intimately linked to transnational movements: the display of nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment. While, as we have seen above, *Under the Feet of Jesus* echoes anti-immigrant sentiments in the US that fuel pieces of legislation such as Proposition 187 in California, *Into the Beautiful North* presents their Mexican ideological counterpart: Mexican nativism that lashes out against other Latin American migrants crossing the country on their way north to the land of opportunity.

Early in the novel, following the heated exchange between Tía Irma and the market vendor, Urrea offers the first of several moments that bring to life the animosity some Mexican people feel against northbound migrants crossing their country. As Tía Irma “stormed out of the stall” after the scene with the market vendor and the reflection on the economic effects of NAFTA for local people, she “spied a Guatemalan woman picking through the spoiled fruit”:

> ‘What are you doing?’ she snapped.
> ‘Provisions. For the journey north,’ the woman replied. She made the mistake of extending her hand and saying, ‘I have come so far, but I have so far to go. Alms, señora. Have mercy.’
> ‘Go back to where you came from!’ Irma bellowed. ‘Mexico is for Mexicans.’
> The girlfriends were appalled.
> ‘Do you think anyone ever showed mercy to me?’

As the girlfriends followed Aunt Irma, she told them, ‘These illegals come to Mexico expecting a free ride! Don’t tell me you didn’t have Salvadoreans and Hondurans in your school, getting the best education in the world! They take our jobs, too.’ She muttered on in her own steamy cloud of indignation. They tuned her out as they marched to the candy seller’s. ‘What we need is a wall on the southern border.’ (39-40)

Tía Irma’s tirade about the damage foreigners inflict on the country’s population (draining social resources, stealing jobs, taking advantage of the taxpayer’s money) echoes the discourse of nativism in the US that serves as the ideological backdrop for anti-immigrant legislation. In the context of the novel, Urrea shows the link between nativism and economic difficulties:
globalization and transnational economic policies (as Irma discusses previously) jumpstart the xenophobia and nationalism that converge in nativist discourse. Tía Irma’s wish for a wall on the southern border also echoes the construction of a wall on the border between the US and Mexico, a wall that expresses the desire to control the flow of people in a time of transnational fluidity (a wall conspicuously lacking on the northern border with Canada). Through the presentation of nativist discourses in unexpected places, Urrea’s novel complicates the received notions in the US about Mexico and northward migration. While the idea of Mexico as a nation often blurs in the US cultural imaginary with the idea of undocumented immigration, *Into the Beautiful North* renders Mexico as an equal to the US in their preoccupation with immigration and border crossings: not only does Mexico have to contend with being a northward migration corridor, it also has to absorb and confront the numbers of deportees from other Latin American countries that the US deportation services leave at its doors south of the US-Mexico border (as the NPR series attests to with the stories of Honduran Roberto Reyes and the unidentified Californian deported to Nogales, Sonora).

By bringing Mexico’s struggle with immigration to the forefront, *Into the Beautiful North* challenges simplistic notions that equate Mexico with undocumented immigration in the US and that conflate Mexico with the rest of Latin America. Urrea’s novel works to claim Mexican idiosyncrasy and to bring attention to transnational movements of people as an economic problem rather than a human one. It highlights the need for survival that pushes people north to the US in lieu of the alleged desire to exploit social resources while living a life of second-class citizens. A poignant example of the toll that economically driven movement takes on displaced

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52 Other examples of nativist attitudes and the institutional reaction that accompanies them can be found when soldiers search the bus headed for Tijuana for undocumented passengers and arrest the Colombian couple trying to pass for Mexican (78-79) and the radio show that calls for the deportation of Latin American migrants crossing Mexico (84). For an interdisciplinary examination of nativism in its different iterations see Perea.
people appears in the interview scene in San Diego. Once Nayeli and her posse manage to cross the border and find a place to stay in San Diego they call Tía Irma and she flies there to meet them and take charge of the interviews for the ‘magnificent seven.’ After Nayeli and company recruit El Brujo, a darkwave-metal-band-guitarist-turned busboy from León, Guanajuato, and Angel, an ex-Mexican-Navy-officer-turned migrant harvester, Irma decides to take matters into her own hands to ensure the girls do not just recruit the first lost souls they find. She immediately rents the Pelican Room at the Bahía Hotel, Conference Room 1A, to conduct the interviews (321). She places advertisements in the local newspapers and spreads the news by word of mouth, and the call for men to return home to Mexico beckons many more people than they expected: at first only “a small line of nervous men straggled in. Five, six, ten … Twelve. The door opened again. Thirteen … The door opened. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. … A line of men snaked out the door … Men were streaming in, flooding the hotel, clotting its passageways, crowding its corners” (323-324). The number of applicants ready to return to Mexico overwhelms the hotel staff and the search committee equally. The men want to go back to the motherland for “it is too hard” to subsist in el norte, they “want to go home” if only they can have the assurance that their most basic concerns will be met: “we only need jobs” and “maybe a house” and a family (323). The basic needs the men desire to fulfill reflect their dire material conditions north of the border. At the same time, these basic demands provide a poignant explanation of the needs that propelled their move north to the US. In this way, Into the Beautiful North humanizes the migratory experience and presents a counter-narrative to the nativist discourse in the US that conceptualizes migrants as social leeches and undesirable suspects.
3.2. Home is where the heart is free: *la frontera* as a living space

While the analysis presented in the NPR series portrays the physical border as a space of transit defined by the people that cross it and by the form that those crossings take, Urrea’s novel destabilizes that notion and presents an alternative view of the border as a living space that different people claim as home. In this sense, *Into the Beautiful North* portrays a reality that counterbalances the picture that Viramontes puts forth in *Under the Feet of Jesus*: if in her novel the border becomes a psychological construct that haunts brown people regardless of their proximity to a geopolitical line, in Urrea’s novel the border comes alive with its poverty, its despondence, and yet also with the pride that people born to it feel in calling it home.

Urrea’s novel reflects awareness about commonly held conceptions of border spaces as zones of conflict and violence. When Nayeli presents her intended quest to the women of Tres Camarones, the idea of a young posse of teenage girls traveling north without documents turns up the fear dial in them:

No one was willing to let her girl go into the maw of the appalling border. A long journey far from home, predatory men and Mexican police, bandits, injuries, car wrecks, kidnappings, slavers, pimps, drug pushers, illness, jail, *Tijuana*! The word alone speaking volumes about every border-fear they held within them. Coyotes and smugglers. Border Patrol and Minutemen. Rapists, addicts, dogs, robots, demons, ghosts, serial killers, racists, army men, trucks, spotlights. ¡Por Dios! they cried, these were just girls! (65)

The horror the border invokes in the women of Tres Camarones proves justified in the girls’ experiences while traveling north. They indeed face the unsettling appearance of the Mexican Federal police (77-79), the attack of male predators the night before they cross the border (109-110), the harshness of the coyote (152-161), the humiliation of deportation (162-177), and the roughness of the local bottom-feeders waiting for returnees as they step into Tijuana again (181-
At the same time these stereotypical ideas materialize, however, Urrea’s novel also offers insight into the life of people that live on the border zone and proudly call it home.

The character of Atómiko the fierce garbage dump warrior, for example, opens the door to a different understanding of the border space. As Nayeli and company find refuge in Don Porfirio and Doña Araceli’s humble abode in the dompe before crossing north, the novel reveals a different world that does not usually find expression in public discourse.53 The closed trash dump provides a home for a colony of people that scrape together a living by recycling garbage, selling copper and scraps, washing windshields and seeking alms. Once an active source of garbage and opportunity that sustained “three hundred garbage-picking families” (120), the closed dompe now appears as a living space carved out from the mountainside—carved out of the “malodorous volcano of garbage [that] rose two hundred feet or more. It was dark gray, ashen, black, and it was covered in flecks of white paper as if small snowdrifts were on its slopes” (124). Small houses built from recycled materials and fenced-in yards growing rosebushes with “bright vista[s] to the Pacific” (125) give shape to a community that takes pride in making this place a home. As Atómiko explains to Nayeli, “‘We, here, have our lives,’ Atómiko said. ‘Some of us failed to make it across; some of us just wanted to pick the trash. Some of us, like me, were born right here! But this is home. We have houses and families. ¿Qué no, Porfirio?’ ‘Right!’ Porfirio yelled” (142). Even though the dompe looks dismal to Nayeli and the rest, for people like Atómiko living there is a choice: when Nayeli thinks he is talking about going to Tres Camarones with them Atómiko replies “‘I don’t care about your stupid town! I live on the border, esa! This is where it’s all happening! Did I say I wanted to go to your sad little town? What I said was, you need a man like me on your mission’ … ‘I can get you across’ (143).

Indeed, Atómiko turns out to be a free spirit of the borderlands that has connections and knows

53 The dompe is the name for the now closed Fausto González trash dump where they live.
how to navigate the space. Together with his friend Wino they give the southern troupe a tour of Tijuana on their way to Colonia Libertad, the hot spot for border crossings, and Nayeli and her crew “realized to their shock that he loved Tijuana” (148). Above all, Atómiko loves his freedom for he has “never been in a cage, and will never go in a cage” (155); he stands strong as he joins other Tijuana natives in confronting the Border Patrol vehicles on the north side of the border and declaring their presence an “act of war,” while throwing stones at them. “Welcome to Palestine!” (154) he yells at Nayeli and company while enjoying the subversion of authority and the apocalyptic scene that develops as the Border Patrol throw tear gas grenades in their direction (154-155).

While the mayhem in parts of Tijuana shines through as the novel follows Nayeli’s quest, another reality of life on the border emerges as well: the quotidian lives of border dwellers that do not appear to be marked by their geographical location. After their first attempt at crossing the border illegally, Nayeli and the girls land back in Tijuana courtesy of the Border Patrol. As the girls navigate the traffic of deportees and predators, the narrator offers a piece of social commentary that contrasts sharply with their recent experience: “outside the borderlands, Mexicans seemed to believe that every young man in Tijuana was a hustler or a coyote, but most of the citizens of Tijuana had never seen a coyote and wouldn’t know one if they saw him. They didn’t think about the border—they had no time for it. The border was an abstraction to them at best” (183). The idea that the border only matters or becomes a material reality when one is somehow fighting against it provides a sharp contrast in the novel, especially when placed right after the deportation episode. Adding to it, the narrator also explains how many citizens of Tijuana crossed [the border] every day to shop for a better cut of meat in San Ysidro, or to buy polyester underwear and stretch pants in the second hand shops and factory outlet stores. Hundred [sic] of women walked through the Immigration turnstiles and boarded the red trolleys that fed them into the hills and
valleys of San Diego, where they vacuumed and dusted and wiped out toilets and cooked grilled-cheese sandwiches in the homes of other women who could afford to hire people to do their household chores for them. (183)

In this description of the link between quotidian border traffic and market-driven needs, the border becomes an intrinsic part of life—a vehicle as common as the buses that take the women to their workplace. When the need to contend with the border disappears it loses its primacy and becomes part of the landscape, so much so that for many people the border does not even factor in, since “many hundreds of others never went to San Ysidro at all, never even really looked across the river. They did not have time for returnees. They didn’t like all these newcomers who crowded their streets and brought dirt and panic into Tijuana” (183). Thus, the narrator implies that the import of the border is directly proportional to the stakes one has in crossing it.

*Into the Beautiful North*, then, provides a look into border spaces that goes beyond facile understandings of *la frontera* as a space signified only by violence and desperation. By reclaiming border zones as living spaces not necessarily involved with drug trafficking and coyote activities, Urrea opens up the possibility of conceptualizing the borderlands using a broader lens that focuses on the material realities of the people rather than on the geopolitics of the area.

**3.3. “We are on a mission from God”: spiritual quest meets border patrol**

As this reading of Urrea’s novel implies, Nayeli and her crew struggle through various attempts at crossing the US-Mexico border. The first time they try to cross to the north they secure the services of a coyote that promises to take them to the other side at a bargain referral-rate of $150 each (146). The crossing involves going through a cut patch of border fence and running through an arroyo at night in between Border Patrol rounds. While the beginning of the run seems hopeful and they manage to elude a patrolling vehicle, they eventually end up in the
hands of Border officials and live through a process of deportation. Even though Nayeli feels they are on a mission from God that will be welcomed by the American authorities (62), the Border Patrol agents actually receive their spiritual quest with derision and amusement. Unfazed by the patriotic spirit that fuels Nayeli’s larger-than-life quest and amused at the originality of their story, the agents proceed to the routine arrest of the Tres Camarones crew and to process them for deportation.

The depiction of Border Patrol agents in Urrea’s novel opens the door to a multidimensional view of the border security force that counteracts its one-dimensional portrayal in Viramontes’s novel and the NPR series. As seen above, in Under the Feet of Jesus the presence of la migra haunts the lives of the harvesters wherever they are. Even though no concrete enforcement agents appear in the novel, the threat of deportation and the anti-immigrant social climate they live in make the presence of the border agents real in absentia. This depiction of the Border Patrol as a high stakes threat echoes the portrayal of the security force in the NPR series as well. In “Part Three: Agents Use High-Tech and Low-Tech Tracking at Border,” the radio series draws a sketch of the enforcement agency that places the agents in the role of hunters and disciplinarians fighting against the elements in an anthropomorphic space turned national enemy. In Urrea’s novel, however, the character of Agent Davis and his interpretation of the recent expansion in the numbers of US Border Patrol (USBP) agents provide some depth of perception into the makeup of the force and how it reflects the current political climate.

The novel introduces Agent Arnold Davis as a veteran of government service. A USBP senior supervisory agent after twenty years on the force, Davis’s commentary reflects his long experience in the field. While “even now, there were not a lot of black agents in the Border Patrol” (172), Davis’s critical perspective as a minority within the force offers an insider view of
the development of the agency. As a veteran agent he feels that “hell, there were barely any agents at all [in the USBP]. Oh, there were bodies, all right. There were more people in uniform than ever before. Homeland Security had flooded the Border Patrol with gung-ho new Terminators. But they didn’t know squat about the border, not really. How could they? It took a guy ten years to really get it” (172). Davis views the recent influx of new agents, growing from around 2,500 to 3,600 agents in the early nineties (Dunn 77) to approximately 17,700 today (Homeland Security), as an accumulation of bodies rather than agents, an increase in numbers that does not come hand in hand with an increase in expertise or knowledge. While his compassion and his many years of experience allow him to see most deportees for what they are (desperate people trying to make life work), he confesses that

the government knew a secret that the American public didn’t: the numbers of border crossers were down, across the board. Maybe the fence, maybe the harsh new atmosphere in the US, maybe everybody had already fled Mex, like the old guys occasionally joked. But all these new agents were here, pumped, eager for action. The DHS paranoia and training had them searching for terrorists under every desk. Arnie shook his head. They actually believed an atomic bomb would be discovered in one of these backpacks, tucked under underpants. (172-173)

The heightened anxiety caused by a political climate threatened by global terrorism turns agents, in Davis’s mind, into young “Terminators” determined to carry out their orders no matter the means or the cost. Davis comments on the incongruity of the search for inbound terrorists and the makeup of the people caught crossing the border (migrant workers, pregnant women, young girls and children) when he observes that now “the suits and the big dogs came up with a great assignment for the new Terminators—they were being sent out to arrest wets who were leaving the United States for Mexico. Hey, if you can’t catch’em coming in anymore, bust’em when they’re doing you a favor and trying to get back out” (173). Davis’s tongue-in-cheek statement gestures towards the disconnect between spending national resources on border security and the
actual results of that investment, towards the need of monitoring the border and the paranoia created by a constant orange-security-level alert. Tacho’s arrest by border agents constitutes a prime example of the degree of anxiety provoked by the contemporary political climate. As he encourages the girls to find comfort in the idea of home during their deportation process and he yells over the noise for them to think about La Mano Caída (the name of his Taquería and Internet Café in Tres Camarones), a number of agents tackle him and take him to an interrogation room. They understand “Al Qaeda” instead of La Mano Caída (177) and that gives them all the justification they need nowadays to treat him as an enemy combatant. After confirming his identity and the name of the Taquería, however, the Border Patrol releases him in Tijuana with a muttered apology.

In contrast to the recklessness of the new agents in their frenzy to discover terrorist threats, Agent Davis appears as the compassionate side of the force. Amused by Nayeli’s stories about her quest since she “had the most original wet story they’d heard in a week” (174) and flattered by her assertion that his skin is beautiful (he is the “first black man” she has ever seen, even though his skin is only slightly darker than hers) he takes pity on the young girl that is his daughter’s age and buys her a cold Coke and some M&M’s for her friends (175). After processing her so she “can get back to invading the United States in an expeditious manner” (170), Agent Davis appears again at the end of the novel as Nayeli and Tacho make their way back south from Kankakee, Illinois, where they went looking for her father after entering the country illegally. As he boards the bus en route to San Diego at the Border Patrol checkpoint, he finds the familiar faces of Nayeli and Tacho again (356-357). He arrests them and listens to their story once more. This time, instead of processing them and deporting them again he takes them home, feeds them, and drives them back to San Diego where they somehow cross back into
Mexico and head home. Agent Davis’s perspective about the minimal threat they pose to national security and his breaking of protocol shows a compassionate side to law enforcement that rarely appears associated with the Border Patrol. The contrast between his thoughts and actions and the approach the “new Terminators” have to border security creates a more complex portrait of the intricacies of the force: it humanizes the agents and at the same time it offers a critical perspective on the effects the political climate has on the agency at large.

Once again, the different perspectives Urrea’s novel presents allow for a reflection on taken-for-granted ideas about the border, its meanings, its ramifications, and the peoples associated with it. The triangulation of *Into the Beautiful North*, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the NPR series brings to the surface the different ways national narratives and national genealogies can be imagined and willed into being. If the NPR series establishes the ideological common ground of discourses about the border in the US, the novels challenge and destabilize those principles. On the one hand, Viramontes’s novel gives voice to the lives of those disenfranchised by border ideologies in the US and shows how capitalist structures work to erase the historical agency of unwelcome national subjects. Conversely, Urrea’s novel reveals how economic policies and globalization contribute to the disenfranchisement of citizens south of the border. Together, these three different cultural artifacts prompt us to think about the ways we imagine what we know about the border and the role ideology plays in constructing them. They show us that one’s positionality intrinsically affects the way we understand social and cultural phenomena and that in order to be make equitable assessments we need to consider three sides to every story.
Chapter 3

The international border: border crossings, surveillance, and overlapping national geographies

As the previous chapter focuses on the indelible presence of the US-Mexico border in the US cultural imagination, this chapter turns north to the International border running along the 49th parallel, the longest undefended border in the world. While the US-Mexico boundary evokes all kinds of cultural and social anxiety in the US, the US-Canada border flies low on the national anxiety radar despite its 5,526 miles of terrestrial and maritime borderline and the roughly 2,200 agents currently deployed for its surveillance (about 11% of the total Border Patrol agents in the US). In contrast with the high stakes border crossings between the US and Mexico that occupied the previous chapter, the analysis here focuses on the International border, the lack of surveillance of vast portions of its length, and the different possibilities for understanding space that the lack of surveillance opens up. Through the reading of two Native American novels, Truth and Bright Water (1999) by Thomas King, Cherokee and German-Greek, and Solar Storms (1995) by Linda Hogan, Chickasaw, I bring attention to the coexistence of overlapping geographies in the same time and space. Concentrating on different border-crossing moments in the novels, my analysis raises questions about colonial and Indigenous understandings of place, mapmaking, legitimization of knowledge production, and sovereignty.

Truth and Bright Water follows the everyday adventures of its teenage protagonist Tecumseh and his dog Soldier during the summer that leads to the Indian Days Festival on the Bright Water reserve. Set in the border area between the US and Canada, the novel hinges on the way

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54 This number of miles includes the terrestrial and maritime borders, the Great Lakes, and the roughly 1,500 miles of border shared with Alaska according to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It also includes the length of the border that crosses the Akwesasne Nation (Mohawk) as it straddles the US and Canada. For FY2010 there were a total of 20,558 Border Patrol agents in the US. 17,535 were deployed to the Southwest border, 2,263 to the Northern border, and 246 to Coastal sectors (official figures from CBP via Avenel Joseph).
Tecumseh’s family straddles the International Boundary. While he lives with his parents in the town of Truth on the US side of the border, his grandmother and his cousin Lum live in the Bright Water reserve in Alberta, across the river on the Canadian side. Focalized through Tecumseh’s teenage perspective, the novel presents a picture of the economic struggles and the dreams of the inhabitants of this Native geography crossed by the 49th parallel. The characters in the novel cross the International Border on a daily basis without state supervision: they cross the river on an old ferry as a matter of practice, away from state surveillance and control. The act of crossing the border without state intervention and without a sense of breaking the law in the novel, as I argue later, evacuates the “international” meaning of the act and asserts the idea of “intra-national” movement as it recognizes an Indigenous geography that takes primacy over colonial geographical impositions.

In a similar way, Hogan’s novel focuses on border crossings as well. The central plot revolves around four generations of women in the same family as they prepare for and undertake a journey north to the sacred lands of their people. Set in the 1970s, the action takes place somewhere in the northern US as the women characters plan their journey to the arctic islands of northern Canada. The seventeen-year-old protagonist, Angel, together with her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother figure, set out on a journey north to the land of the Fat-Eaters. The purpose of their trip is to rally and organize a protest against the flooding of their ancestral lands from a hydroelectric project to build a dam. Since they know that the government and the private interests behind the creation of the dam would stop them from getting there to

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55 As I will discuss later, King never identifies the People on the Alberta reservation by name. “Reserve” is the Canadian name for what the US calls Indian reservations.
56 Like King in Truth and Bright Water, Hogan does not reveal the setting of the novel by name. Some critics, such as Barbara J. Cook, however, identify the setting of the novel as the Boundary Waters region of Minnesota and Canada (43).
57 As I will discuss later, the Fat-Eaters is an imaginary tribe invented by Hogan. While other characters in the novel are identified as belonging to recognizable tribes in the US, the arctic Fat-Eaters are a fictional tribe.
organize a protest if they travelled by car or by train, they decide to canoe their way back home through the waterways so they can go undetected by the powers that be. The knowledge of home and territory of the eldest woman in the family allows them to navigate the waterways and to arrive safely at their destination. In this novel, as in *Truth and Bright Water*, the women cross the International border without constriction and away from state surveillance, following a national geography (a knowledge of home) that predates Anglo-European presence in the continent and that responds to principles of Native sovereignty and Indigenous rights. It presents a Native geography that remains in place regardless of the colonial geographies superimposed on it.

Both novels present an affirmation of Indigenous knowledge and sense of place that directly or indirectly bring attention to the presence or absence of borders, to the tension between Euro-American mapmaking and Indigenous understandings of place and space, and to the production of Indigenous knowledge and its recognition as a form of Native sovereignty. Since neither of the dividing lines in the geographical spaces of the novels brings with them the national surveillance machine one comes to expect from the circulating social discourses on borders, the geopolitical boundaries in these locales appear as a theoretical concept imposed on the lives of people—a colonial disruption of Native geography. My take on the different border crossings in the novels highlights the presence of continuous Native geographies that are generally ignored and erased from national accounts and narratives of nation building. Attention to these geographical palimpsests brings to the surface questions of Native sovereignty and Indigenous rights that narratives of nation building work hard to mask and deflect. By paying attention to the absence of regularized demarcation lines in the novels, my analysis breaks away from the traditional focus of border theory (the materiality of the US-Mexico border) and expands its
reach to encompass not only what we can see when we pay attention to geopolitical lines but also what we can see when we take them out of the limelight.

Even though *Truth and Bright Water* and *Solar Storms* feature Native peoples in a North American context, the novelists choose to identify their characters in different ways. Thomas King presents the characters in *Truth and Bright Water* as generically Indian, without specifying further tribal affiliation. While the geographical setting of the novel echoes that of King’s first two novels (the border between Montana and Alberta prairies), thus pointing toward the Blackfoot nation as the implied protagonists, the author never identifies the characters as such and the only indication regarding space in the text is that the towns of Truth and Bright Water stand on the US and Canadian sides of the 49th parallel.\(^{58}\) Scholar of Native American Studies Jace Weaver in *That the People Might Live* establishes a connection between the Blood reserve in Alberta as the site of King’s first two novels and the representation of Blackfoot people in his third novel. At the same time, however, he also brings attention to the fact that the tribal affiliation of the characters in *Truth and Bright Water* is absent from the fictional work and quotes King in a private communication explaining that he does so in an attempt to “move away from a culturally specific area completely. The Indians in that piece really aren’t identified by tribe, and they’re not even identified by geographical area much. So I really am trying to move toward a more pan-Indian novel and to try to figure out ways to do that” (Weaver 151).\(^{59}\) King’s move to showcase a generically Indian cast shows his desire to present a pan-Indian landscape, to present a kind of border and cultural crossing that speaks to the similarities in the experience

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\(^{58}\) Critics generally agree that the setting of the novel is the border between Montana and Alberta; some even specify the setting as Sweet Grass, Montana, and Coutts, Alberta. See Sadowski-Smith (2008), Hirsch (2004), Zacharek (2000), Ridington (2000), and Weaver (1997).

\(^{59}\) The pull of literary nationalism in American Indian Studies toward identifying the characters in fiction as belonging to specific tribes is evident that in Weaver’s analysis: while he brings attention to the idea of pan-Indianness that King explores in his third novel, Weaver cannot help establishing a plausible reading of the tribal specificity of the characters in the novel.
of different peoples and that raises awareness about the social realities of contemporary
Indigenous populations in North America. This decision to present a pan-Indian makeup for his
novel creates a further commonality between *Truth and Bright Water* and Linda Hogan’s *Solar
Storms*.

While *Solar Storms* presents readily identifiable North American peoples such as Cree,
Ojibwe, Chickasaw, and Métis people, it also features an imaginary arctic tribe Hogan names the
Fat-Eaters. In bringing a mixture of tribal specificity and creative fiction into the same
geographical and cultural space Hogan strives toward the formation of a pan-Indian atmosphere.
By creating a community in the novel composed of characters with different tribal affiliations
and by featuring people from a fictional artic tribe, Hogan admittedly reacts against “an
unspoken rule that we [Indian writers] have to stay within our own tribe and our own territory in
ways others don’t” (Hogan qtd. in Cook *Historical Narratives* 43). This “unspoken rule” Hogan
mentions points toward the beliefs of American Indian literary nationalists such as Robert
Warrior, Craig S. Womack, Jace Weaver, Daniel Heath Justice, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn.60

Literary nationalists emphasize the need for authenticity, for basing critical work on Indigenous
epistemologies, for the recuperation of Indian systems of knowledge and knowledge production,
and for creating a tribally centered body of criticism. In their battle over representation, literary
nationalists reject the position of writers as “native informants” and consider the role of literature
as critical for the assertion of Indian sovereignty and the defense of Indigenous rights. As Justice
conceptualizes it, the role of cultural and artistic production for Native peoples responds to the
idea of “art for life’s sake” rather than “art for art’s sake” (*Seeing* 109-111), art as a way of
preserving, celebrating, and affirming culture rather than a purely aesthetic pursuit.

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60 For more on literary nationalism see Warrior (1995), Womack (1999), Weaver (1997), Justice (2001, 2004), and
While many of the tenets of literary nationalism align with the work Hogan realizes through her novels, the struggle between being authentic and being a native informant presents a fine balance that is hard to maintain. As Kelli Lyon Johnson succinctly captures this tension, “native critics and writers negotiate an important tension between nation-specific fiction and cultural translation in their interrogation of whether or not Indigenous knowledges can be recovered, valued, preserved, or transmitted in fiction that does not emerge out of the experiences of a particular tribe” (114-15). In this light, while Hogan creates a world of fiction in her works that is based on the experience of indigenes in North America, she does not attempt to produce ethnography, nor does she focus particularly on the Chickasaw people. As she points out, “I’m sensitive to how it feels to be a tribal person and to have the intrusions of others into your intimate connection with your own tribe and land, even if it’s a more pan-Indian native view. So one of the things that I have been doing is fictionalizing the tribes that I’m writing about so nobody feels they’re being invaded again” (Hogan qtd. in Cook, Historical Narratives, 43). Hogan’s decision to fictionalize the Native peoples in her work responds to her desire to raise awareness about issues affecting Indigenous peoples in North America in a hemispheric sense and to direct the reader’s attention to issues facing all Natives while creating work she considers “traditionally centered.” As she puts it, “I pick these events [historical events as the basis of her fiction] and make them stories because only then will people listen. If I carry a sign, I am ignored. So I do it in the work” (Cook, Interview, 12). To carry out the activism underscoring her remarks, Hogan creates stories infused by Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies (as we will see later on) while at the same time opening up access to ideas about sovereignty and cross-cultural identification by using a pan-Indian lens. In this sense, opening up the tribal scope in the cast of her fiction allows her to reach a broader audience (both Native and non-Native). In the
same fashion, Thomas King understands pan-Indianness as a realistic concession to contemporary Native life:

I think a lot of people think of Pan-Indianness as a diminution of “Indian,” but I think of it as simply a reality of contemporary life. Native culture has never been static even though Western literature would like to picture it that way. In Louis l’Amour and Frank Waters, for instance, and others who write about Indians, there is that sense that if Indian culture moves one inch further away from what it really used to be that it’s going to be dead. And there are Indians upon Indians in novels who go off the reservation into the city and are destroyed, who come back to the reserve and can’t make it. I think that’s bullshit myself. In reality there are a lot of Indians who go off the reserve, who come back to the reserve, who work, who go off the reserve again, who keep going back and forth, and they manage. Unfortunately, there are a lot of Indian people who buy into that concept that if they leave the reserve they’ll never get back, and that just isn’t true. (Weaver 150)

The use of a pan-Indian perspective places the works of King and Hogan into a similar wavelength, a similarity further amplified by their treatment of border crossings and the conceptual issues their novels underscore: the palimpsest of cultural and national geographies occupying the same space and time traditionally obviated by national discourses of borders.

1. Thomas King’s Truth and Bright Water

The narration of King’s 1999 novel follows the summertime roaming of its teenage protagonist Tecumseh and his dog Soldier. The young protagonist spends his time walking around town; crossing the river to the Bright Water reserve in Alberta, Canada, to visit grandma and cousin Lum, and supervising Lum’s speed and resistance training for the reserve’s Indian Days Festival long-distance run at the end of the summer. Half-heartedly looking for a job, wishing for adventure, and hoping for reconciliation between his separated parents, Tecumseh often explores the bluffs and the coulees by the river accompanied by Soldier and Lum. Their summer-induced roaming becomes the vehicle that allows the reader to see snapshots of life in this border space: from the mysterious woman that jumps down the Horns into the river one night, the finding of a human skull in the coulees, the entrepreneurial schemes that Elvin
(Tecumseh’s father) and Franklin (Lum’s father and Elvin’s brother) put together, to the homecoming of self-titled “Famous Indian Artist” Monroe Swimmer and his restoration projects, the novel takes the reader on a tour of the events in this geography crossed by the 49th parallel.

The border between the US and Canada cuts through the novel’s Indigenous topography in the form of the Shield River. Flowing between the towns of Truth and Bright Water, some stretches of the Shield River offer non-governmentally patrolled boundary points that become the border crossing spaces of choice for the locals. Since the young cousins have family on both sides of the 49th parallel they cross the border routinely in their summer roaming, moving freely between Truth and Bright Water. To do so, they pull their way across the river using Charlie Ron’s Ferry, an old iron bucket, suspended from a cable known as “the Toilet.” Instead of using the ferry, some motorized characters in the novel take a lengthy detour to find the patrolled bridge to cross the river—a route that places them in the twin town across the border in some forty minutes. The representation of these two modes of border crossing opens a space in the novel to reflect on the meaning and the ideological implications of crossing the International Boundary through different points. While the crossing through the patrolled checkpoint reinforces the border as a colonial construction for Indigenous peoples, the casual ferry crossings bring attention to the continuous Native geography that lies outside colonial understandings of borders and territory.

This first section of this chapter analyzes both patrolled and undetected border crossings in King’s novel and reflects on possibilities for understanding Native national and cultural geographies.61 While crossings using controlled checkpoints recognize colonial organizations of space and represent “international” acts from a Euro-American perspective, the unpatrolled

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61 Since Thomas King purposefully uses pan-Indianness in the novel, I refer to Native peoples generally in my analysis when I reflect on the meaning of border crossings and their relation to Indigenous conceptualizations of place.
The crossings of The Shield transform “international” into “intra-national” from an Indigenous perspective: they become a matter of customary law, an exercise in sovereignty, and an affirmation of continuous Native geographies. The analysis I offer in this part of the chapter shows the different ways the characters in the novel interact with ideas about the border: it focuses on which borders they recognize and which borders do not even register in their cultural understanding of space. In this way, I make room to reflect on the overlap of cultural and national geographies that occupy a given space at a given time, paying attention to competing border spaces that do not usually achieve visual definition under the shadow of the US-Canada border.

After centering on different border-crossing moments I turn to the figure of Monroe Swimmer, “famous Indian artist,” to examine his celebration of Native geographies and his active disruption of colonial geographies. I focus on the various projects of recovery he sets in motion to present a way of understanding resistance to colonial imaginings, the reaffirmation of Indigenous epistemologies, and the role of art as a medium for cultural survival. I read his restoration projects as speaking to the issues central to border theory: a history of colonialism and dispossession, federal campaigns for the assimilation into extinction of Native populations, the transformation of Indigenous cultures into museum exhibits, and the importance of land, Native sovereignty and the right of self-determination.

1.1. Crossing the Shield: borders, nations, lines, and maps

The prologue of *Truth and Bright Water* centers the reader’s attention on the Shield River, the geographical accident doubling up as national boundary separating the twin towns that give the novel its title. The Shield acts as a natural marker for the 49th parallel that separates the US and Canada, aptly naturalizing a political separation between two nations as a division meant to
be and sanctioned by nature itself, following a universal convention in tracing the limits of national geographies. The use of a physical feature in the landscape as a borderline (the Shield in this instance) serves many ideological purposes that align with the principles of Euro-American mapmaking and nation-building: it presents a recognizable dividing line and reference point, it makes for convenient mapping of territory, and it can be easily incorporated into national mythologies as a border that was always already there, contributing to the creation of a national sense of permanence. As Kelli Lyon Johnson observes, “European maps have long been taken as transparent, scientific, objective, and universal—as if they were merely precise representations of actual space in the world” (104). Using geographical accidents to render the domination of landscape on paper, then, reifies the alleged transparency of the cartographic arts and contributes to the understanding of maps as “the epitome of scientific accuracy” (Johnson 104). In this sense, the mapping of territory and the easy visual recognition of borders become crucial in creating national consciousness and coherence since, as scholar of American Indian Studies Mark Rifkin lucidly puts it, “if US borders were never fully fixed nor impermeable to a range of flows across them, the fetishized image of territorial coherence always has been a crucial part of national governance and self-representation” (35). From a Euro-American perspective, then, the Shield River represents a border that helps make sense of space, constitutes a building block of national identity as it separates “ones” from “others,” and becomes a marker or transnational movement.

In contrast to the understanding of natural features as the tools of cartography and the mapping of empire, the opening description of the river in King’s novel stresses its physical nature and presents the river as a character—as a historical agent in the novel. The opening

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62 Most countries trace their territorial limits according to geographical accidents, be it a coastline (as in the largest part of Italy), a river (like the Rio Grande between the US and Mexico), or a mountain range (like the Pyrenees between Spain and France).
description even anthropomorphizes it by remarking how in its birthplace the river “breaks out of the mountains in cataracts and cascades, fierce and alive” while as it makes its way to town “the Shield is fat and lazy, doubling back on itself in long silver loops as it wanders through the coulees” (King 1). In this way, the narration presents the river as a character in the novel as it brings attention to its genealogy and presents it as a force of nature that “begins in ice” and lives different lives, from the laziness of some of its parts to the liveliness it gains as it “comes around the Horns [and] it narrows and drops into the deep chutes beneath the bridge … gathering speed there, swinging in below the old church, and running dark and swift for half a mile until the land tilts and the water slows and drains away towards Prairie View and the morning sun” (1). The narration points out the changes in the river as it grows while emphasizing that “it’s been there since the beginning of time” (52). Thus, the Shield River appears not only as a character in the novel but also as a historical agent that has claims to the land that precede colonial organizations of space and place. In this sense, the presence of the river in the novel follows the representational characteristics of Native maps that “suggest the degree to which relationships among geographical features and locations supersede mere representations of their existence on the ground” (Johnson 107, emphasis in the original). By presenting the river as a live force and a historical agent, as a borderland that is both physical and metaphorical, King brings attention to Indigenous understandings of space and place: it underscores the relationship between places and cultural memory, between space and a sense of history, community, and collective identity. As anthropologist Keith Basso reflects in his study of the Western Apache’s cultural imaginary, “when places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind” (107). The relationship between physical markers such as the river and the sense of self of the people that live with them counteracts Euro-American conceptual
uses of border landscapes as cartographic tools and affirms Native epistemologies as sources of knowledge and cultural identity.

The Shield River in King’s novel provides a constant in different moments of border crossing, especially when Tecumseh, Lum, and Helen (Tecumseh’s mom) use the old ferry to cross the river. As Tecumseh explains, there are only three ways of crossing the river: one can walk along the naked girders of the unfinished bridge that would have joined the two towns (a dangerous practice), one can drive down to Prairie View to cross the river there and then drive back to Truth (assuming one has a car), or one can use Charlie Ron’s ferry, the iron bucket that has “enough room in it for four people and it’s safe enough” (42). Since everyone in Truth has a car except Tecumseh and his mother, they use the ferry to go visit family on the reserve. As they start to cross the river early in the novel, Helen tells Tecumseh that “this is the way everybody used to cross the river” (52) for when she was little “this was the only way to get to Truth” (52). Helen’s inscription of the river as a component of their familial and cultural past helps put into perspective the different conceptualizations of place that overlap in that particular geographic space. For outsiders the Shield River is just a river, a natural accident in a geographical space. For the Indigenous people that live in that place, however, the Shield River is a constitutive part of their genealogy and their understanding of themselves as people. In this sense, the Shield River as lived space and as constitutive of the experience of the people echoes Atómiko’s pride in the borderland as a lived space in Urrea’s novel, as we saw in the previous chapter.

While on the one hand the Shield River signals the unmarked border between the US and Canada from a settler perspective, Helen’s affirmation that the river has “been there since the beginning of time” (52) inscribes the river into the history of her people and in turn establishes a chronological primacy for the Indigenous geography she lives in, since her people’s presence in
the place precedes the appearance of colonial settlers. Her social and cultural understanding of
the geographical area highlights the transformation of space into place: it transforms abstract
notions of space into concrete notions of place. As social and cultural geographer Tim Cresswell
explains, there is a marked difference between space (abstract concept) and place (concrete
experience). He contends that “place, then, needs to be understood as an embodied relationship
with the world. Places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never
‘finished’ but are constantly being performed” (Cresswell 37). By crossing the river using the
ferry and following the practices traditionally repeated by her people, Helen participates in the
re-creation of place as part an organic part of the community’s identity. Cresswell’s
conceptualization of place, in this sense, goes hand in hand with Basso’s argument about the
relation between story (and memory) and specific places (and geographical landmarks) and the
impact of such relations in shaping tribal history and culture. Understanding the distinction
between place (imbued with experiential context) and space (abstract concept) is akin to
understanding the border as a physical location and the border as metaphorical construct. If we
follow Cresswell and Basso’s understanding of place, then, Helen’s assertion in the novel that
“the ferry is a landmark” (51) and that the river has “been here since the beginning of time” (52)
underscores a connection between the geographical markers that organize space and her sense of
place and identity. After Helen stops pulling the ferry and starts reminiscing about the river, she
is transported to another mental space and she starts remembering and humming, thus connecting
the moment of awareness of place to deeper reflection about history and culture. Her
performance while crossing the river in the ferry echoes what humanist geographer David
Seamon calls a “place-ballet”:

When many time-space routines are combined within a particular location a
“place-ballet” emerges which generates … a strong sense of place. The mobilities
of bodies combine in space and time to produce an existential insideness—a feeling of belonging within the rhythm of life in place. … A “place-ballet” is an evocative metaphor for our experience of place. It suggests that places are performed on a daily basis through people living their everyday life. … It is through participating in these daily performances that we get to know a place and feel part of it. (Cresswell 34)

As Helen pulls the ferry, stops to reminisce, involves Tecumseh in their genealogy as a people, and closes her eyes to hum and think about life, she performs such a “place-ballet” that connects their bodily presence and day-to-day activities with the continuation and articulation of a way of being and a sense of belonging to the place they inhabit. Building on Basso’s studies, Native historian Angela Parker affirms that if “‘places gather’—gather things, experiences, histories, languages, and thoughts—then place allows us to begin thinking about how human memories and histories insert meaning into their lived space” and that “the shared understandings of place for human communities contribute to the sense of a community cultural identity” (41). Parker’s argument about the intimate relation between place and cultural identity and between imaginings of space and the creation and maintenance of tribal history sheds light on King’s mobilization of Indigenous epistemologies through Helen’s sense of place. By invoking the genealogy of the river as it relates to her understanding of the space she occupies, Helen claims the Native geography that is always already there—bleeding through the superimposed maps and colonial organizations of space. Sliding across the river with the ferry, then, can be read as an exercise in sovereignty as the characters move across a landscape unified by familial relations, a shared sense of place, and tribal customary associations.

The portrayal of the borderlands as lived space that undermines the sense of geographical boundary in Truth and Bright Water brings to mind Luis Alberto Urrea’s depiction of border dwellers in Into the Beautiful North. As we saw in the previous chapter, Urrea presents a perspective on the borderlands that is hardly ever present in publicly discussed ideas about the
border: he presents the border as home to people, as a place (in Basso’s, Cresswell’s, and Seamon’s sense), and as an organic part in people’s lives and their sense of self. Rather than portraying the border as a place of transit or as a place in need of cultural translation into different national paradigms, the borderlands in Urrea’s and King’s novels underscore the recognition of abstract space as constitutive of the material and concrete lived experience of many people who call it home. In this way, both Into the Beautiful North and Truth and Bright Water push us to think about geographical boundaries in ways that challenge circulating discourses about borders in our cultural imaginary. They make us pause and consider what we can see in that space once the tunnel vision of the border as a place of national control, surveillance, transit, and exclusion dissipates.

In contrast to the moment of affirmation of a Native geography analyzed above, King’s novel presents a counterpoint border-crossing scene that reflects another of Urrea’s takes on the border: the border as a site that filters transnational access. When Tecumseh accompanies his father (Elvin) to Bright Water in one of the latter’s entrepreneurial schemes, they cross into Canada using the bridge with a border patrol checkpoint and have to interact with physical forces of surveillance. This border crossing differs markedly from the ferry crossing and it represents the first transnational movement through a governmentally policed space in the novel. The awareness of the legal system the characters are approaching and its inscription in a broader framework of borders and border surveillance is not lost on Elvin as he tells his son “Canadian jails are worse than Mexican ones” (85). He elaborates, “You know why? … Mexican jails are full of Mexicans … but Canadian jails are full of Indians” (85). While one could argue that Elvin’s logic is flawed since both correction systems he refers to seem to be populated mainly by Indigenous people, we can understand Elvin’s point as centering on the fact that Mexicans are
sent to prisons run by Mexico (a sense of being at home place-wise) and Indians, instead, find themselves in Canadian prisons out of Indian jurisdiction and subject to a penal system other than the one established by Indian Courts. Setting up this act of border crossing in relation to the corrections system in Canada and in the US-Mexico border, Elvin also speaks to the precarious position that Indigenous peoples occupy hemispherically, both past the southern border of the US and near the southern border of Canada. By directing the attention of the reader to the correctional machine that goes ideologically hand in hand with border structures as filtering systems, the novel gestures to the inherent violence of border spaces and to the populations that are more susceptible to it.

The checkpoint on the bridge not only exemplifies state-patrolled spaces but also represents the social dominance of racial and gendered discourses about Native peoples that move Elvin to occupy a stereotypical subject position. As Tecumseh and Elvin approach the checkpoint,

> a couple of guards come out to the truck and ask [them] all about liquor and cigarettes, and [Elvin] shakes his head and smiles and talks like the Indians you see in the Westerns on television. [They] have to stop by the side of the building so the guards can look in the back of the truck, but there’s nothing there, so it’s okay. ‘Welcome to Canada,’ the guard tells us. ‘Have a nice day.’

> As we clear the border, my father looks at me. ‘They love that dumb Indian routine. You see how friendly those assholes were.’ (86)

To pass the border enforcement control, Elvin “shakes his head and smiles and talks like the Indians you see in the Westerns on television” (86). Donning the noble and stoic countenance of the respected “noble savage” of the cinematic world, Elvin steps into the safest subject position he can find to ensure a smooth border crossing. Acculturated by Hollywood westerns to the good character of the stoic Indian and to the cultural superiority of the white man, the checkpoint guards welcome them in without question. This performance of Indigenous docility becomes key for Elvin since his entrepreneurial schemes often involve the transnational transportation of
hazardous substances outside the parameters of the law: by playing along to the cultural stereotypes about Indians, Elvin builds a façade that helps him benefit from the submerged economy that keeps him financially afloat. As culture and media critics Jennifer Andrews and Priscilla L. Walton observe, “the benefits of economic survival gained through the transnational movement and selling of goods outweigh the humiliation of [Elvin’s] border ‘performance’” (606). Since the illegal transportation of goods across the border represents an important part of Elvin’s income, playing a culturally legible part as a noble, archaic, and non-dangerous character allows him to cross without problems. By playing along to the cultural and racial stereotypes about Native peoples in North America Elvin deflects being subject to contemporary cultural anxieties about border crossers and the illegal transportation of unsanctioned goods.

Through this border-crossing vignette, *Truth and Bright Water* presents the spatial and ideological dominance of a colonial geography over an Indigenous geography and also the possibility of resistance to it. The patrolled checkpoint and the social and cultural implications of the exchange between the different characters attest to the ideological premises at work: the dominance and superiority of settler nations over the transnational movement of subjects. At the same time, however, King’s novel also directs the reader’s attention to the mechanisms of resistance deployed by Elvin to manipulate the situation to his advantage. As a character that moves within a national Indigenous geography he understands the towns of Truth and Bright Water as part of the same space. In addition, his willingness to play a stereotypical Native role for the border guards is not so much the result of fear of imprisonment or a desire to avoid a racial confrontation as much as it is about establishing a clear crossing path for his money-making designs.
King’s novel focalizes the awareness and the understanding of border crossings through the learning process of its teenage protagonist Tecumseh. While his mother’s teachings when using the ferry to cross the river imprint a sense of geographical continuity in Tecumseh’s mind, the experience of crossing the border with his father reveals both a recognition of the legal barriers to unrestrained movement in that space and an understanding of the mechanisms to subvert the authority it represents. The novel further complicates the notion of what constitutes a border and how a border is recognized when Tecumseh’s family takes a vacation in yet another border space. At one point, the teenage protagonist remembers how when he was younger and still living on the Bright Water reserve, his mother organized a family vacation in an effort to rescue her marriage and create special memories of family life. Heading away from the prairies and into the Rockies, the family goes on vacation to the Waterton Lake resort area, a place where they can hike the mountains and see the prairies and the border between Canada and the US from higher ground. While the vacation does not quite succeed in affirming Helen’s marriage and in forging indelible memories of family fun, it presents an opportunity to learn more about borders and the organization of space.

After a couple of rainy days playing cards in a leaky tent, Helen convinces the family to hike to Bear Hump—a climb that allows the characters to see the contrast between the mountain and the prairie landscapes. As they make their way back to the campground, Elvin says he needs to go into town for business and abandons the family trip; Helen then decides to take a boat ride on Waterton Lake with her son. The boat ride becomes an educational moment in border realities for Tecumseh since, as he thinks, “if I hadn’t gone, I would never have known that the Canadian/United States border ran right through the middle of the lake” (78). His understanding of the practical manifestations of the border come to life when he reflects that
when the guy driving the boat told us [that the border between the US and Canada runs through the middle of the lake], I expected to see a floating fence or inner tubes with barbed wire and lights, something to keep people from straying from one country into the other. There was a cutline in the trees along with border posts on opposite sides of the shore, and a small border station to mark the line. We floated over to the station and the boat driver rang his bell and we all waved. (78)

Tecumseh’s understanding of the typical accoutrements of a border crossing space (barbed wire, floodlights, surveillance, checkpoints, armed guards) shows his awareness of dominant discourses about borders, nations, and national security (the border as the site of control, space to be defended, space that is a target for attack, a site of affirmation of national identity). The lack of visible border signs in this boat ride baffles him as he comes to terms with the incongruity of a border space without physical reifications of the dividing line. The invisible presence of the border highlights the randomness of geopolitical divisions and also questions the use of geographical accidents as naturalized national boundary markers. While a river or a mountain range may make for more easily apprehensible geographical boundaries by creating physical lines that can be crossed, a lake breaks the illusion of a neat natural division of space since it presents a non-uniform shape with no clear center or dividing line. The lake read as a non-stable borderline brings to mind the use of the Rio Grande as an allegedly stable marker that keeps changing course and needs to be periodically reassessed, as we saw in Chapter 1. The changes in the meandering of the river create the same instability in the borderline we find here in the lake.

Tecumseh’s experience with border markers in the lake becomes even more relevant when compared to his experience crossing the Shield River using the ferry. While he expects to see the deployment of militarized border signs in his boat ride on Waterton Lake (knowing it signals the border between Canada and the US), crossing the Shield River from Truth to Bright Water does not register for him as an act of border crossing (he never expects barbed wire and floodlights when he uses Ron’s ferry). This difference in his expectations in relation to space markings
reaffirms his understanding of Truth and Bright Water as parts of a whole, as part of the same Indigenous geography regardless of the arbitrary demarcations of the colonial machine. The contemporary use of the Shield River as a dividing line between the US and Canada in the novel does not erase ideological and national understandings of the space as part of a Native geography. The acknowledgement of the coexistence of superimposed geographies becomes one of the challenges that King poses to the reading public with this literary piece.

In the same way that Chapter 2 focuses on the different conceptualizations of the US-Mexico border (as threat, obstacle, or home) and the ways they depend on the politics of location of the person experiencing the border (migrant worker, border crosser, border dweller), the present analysis of King’s novel also unpacks different ways of understanding the US-Canada border. When Tecumseh recognizes the border as geopolitical line, he activates popular notions of what the border is and what it stands for: he expects to see the national surveillance machine at play, the barbed wire, the armed guards, the checkpoints, and the regulation of movement. He recognizes the border as such only when he is away from home, however. When he roams about in the geographical space he considers “home” the border that he otherwise recognizes as a transnational marker disappears: when crossing the Shield River in the ferry he does not think about it as the 49th parallel—he understands the river and its crossing as part of the national and cultural geography that informs his sense of identity as a Native person. The different ways Tecumseh recognizes (or does not recognize) geopolitical lines brings to the forefront localized understandings of space as place: the sense of home from an Indigenous perspective trumps the

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63 Here King’s choice of name for the protagonist of the novel becomes markedly poignant, since Tecumseh is the name of the Shawnee war-chief and pan-tribal political leader that created a confederacy of tribes with the Cherokee, Muscogee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole nations to fight for land ownership and sovereignty against colonial rule in the nineteenth centuries. Like the Shawnee chief, the protagonist here has a strong sense of national boundaries, how they are maintained, and how they do not matter when juxtaposed to Indigenous geographies and identities of place.
colonial organizations of space he recognizes when stepping away from his Native geography. The visibility of borders, then, appears tied to a state of mind in the novel; borders become visible when the character buys into the ideology that supports widespread social understandings of borders and they disappear when other ideas about space and place are activated (i.e. recognizing the place as “home” in a Native sense). Following Tecumseh’s musings about boundary lines and their importance or irrelevance, King presents another character in the novel that carries further the ideas about the superimposition of national and cultural geographies, the recognition of continuous indigenous geographies, the affirmation of Native sovereignty, and the reclamation of national space: the self-proclaimed “famous Indian artist” Monroe Swimmer.

1.2. Monroe Swimmer’s restoration drive

Tecumseh’s experiences with borderlines, as presented above, open a door for the reader to reflect with the character about the meaning of borders and border crossings. While the focalization of the narrative through his teenage perspective allows for a candid exploration of the meaning of territorial markers and received notions of space and place, another character in King’s novel presents a more salient portrait about land rights and Indigenous sovereignty; the self-appointed “famous Indian artist” Monroe Swimmer. Through his projects of recuperation of the prairie landscape and his projects of cultural and social restoration, as we will see below, this character plays a central role in the novel’s articulation of a critique of colonialism and the affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty and Native rights to self-determination. In this way, Swimmer represents the figure of the transnational and cosmopolitan artist in the novel who, after discovering the social and political potential of his art in his travels around the world, comes back home to share his artistic gift with the community of Truth and Bright Water.
An eccentric and dramatic character, Swimmer has been everywhere: “Paris, Berlin, New York, London, Moscow, Madrid, Rome” (129) in his career as a painter. According to the forked tongues of the town, his breakthrough into the artistic sphere was the result of a mixture of luck and New Age mysticism since “he couldn’t really paint worth a damn” (27) but moved to Toronto at a time when Indians were popular and Native crafts in demand. Toward the beginning of the novel the old-timers gathered at Railman’s, the town’s diner, think “Monroe got lucky, [since] he landed in Toronto just as being an Indian was becoming chic, and that if he hadn’t been an Indian, he would have been sucking up soup at the Salvation Army” (27). Aware of the part New Age’s fascination with Indigeneity played at the time of his artistic launch, Monroe agrees with the community’s opinions of his limits as a painter and affirms that he “made a bunch of money” but that the “problem was, [Swimmer] was lousy. Stinko. Reactionary. Predictable” (129) as an artist. He acknowledges that his specialty does not lie in the creation of original works of art; instead, he recognizes his talent for the restoration of nineteenth century landscape paintings (129). Coveted by museums worldwide as an art restoration expert, Swimmer has travelled around the globe restoring nineteenth-century landscapes. When he hires Tecumseh as a personal assistant he explains to the youngster how

one day the Smithsonian called me in to handle a particularly difficult painting. It was a painting of a lake at dawn, and everything was fine except that the paint along the shore had begun to fade, and images that weren’t in the original painting were beginning to bleed through … so I worked on the painting until it looked as good as new. (129-130)

This moment represents a turning point in Swimmer’s career because “almost as soon as [Swimmer] had finished, the images began to bleed through again” (130) and he realizes that the figures bleeding through are those of the Indians and the Indian village that rightfully belong in the landscape and have been erased by the colonial eye of the painter. From that moment on,
Swimmer understands both his purpose as an art restorer and the potential of his craft and starts painting Indians back into the nineteenth century landscapes. If landscape painting responds to principles of realism, of depicting the landscape as it is, Swimmer indeed restores realism to the paintings by drawing the Indian presence in the landscapes. In this way, he challenges the painters’ notion of realistic representations that erase a key component of the spaces rendered in the canvases: the real presence of the inhabitants of the land. Once he starts down this road, however, trying to restore Indian presence in as many paintings as he can, museums keep firing him on account that “they [did not] want their Indians restored … they liked their Indians where they couldn’t see them” (247). Through this restoration process, Swimmer understands that his perspective allows him to reclaim the Indigenous presence in Euro-American-crafted landscapes. From this point on, he makes it his life’s mission to contribute to the recognition of the Indigenous geographies that lie hidden under superimposed colonial understandings of place and space.

Swimmer’s historical and cultural restoration project starts with making visible the Native presence erased from nineteenth century landscapes and continues by taking different turns in the novel. For example, when he returns home he buys the abandoned church in Truth, a church that “was built by the Methodists as a mission to the Indians. The Baptists owned it for a while in the forties. They sold it to the Nazarenes, who sold it to the First Assembly of God, who sold it to the Sacred Word Gospel, who left the church standing empty and moved down the river to Prairie View just after construction of the bridge stopped” (1-2). The church stands as a symbol of the attempts at colonization, conversion, and assimilation that European settlers forced onto the Native populations in the hemisphere. At the same time, the series of denominational iterations of the church speak to the failed ideological attempts of conversion in that space: the
abandonment of the proselytizing efforts by the Methodist, Baptist, Nazarene, First Assembly of God, and the Sacred Word Gospel religious groups in the church’s genealogy translate into failed investments, both financially and spiritually, into the community these groups aimed to serve and appropriate. The act of buying the church is, in itself, an affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty as Swimmer is buying back a marker of the colonial machine and reclaiming the place as part of the preexisting Native geography.

After Monroe Swimmer purchases the church and moves in, he sets in motion a project that reclaims the Indigenous geography of the area by taking control over the place. In the same way that he painted the Indians back into the landscape in his previous job as a restoring expert, he starts painting the outside walls of the church as a prairie landscape, making the building literally disappear by painting the prairie onto the church’s exterior. Early in the novel Tecumseh notices that Swimmer has “been at work with his paints and brushes” because “the entire east side of the church is gone. Or at least it looks gone” (43). He does not know how “Monroe has done it, but he’s painted this side so that it blends with the prairies and the sky, and he’s done such a great job that it looks as if part of the church has been chewed off” (43). Indeed, his restoring genius proves powerful enough to make the church disappear completely, so much so that he needs to enlist the help of Soldier, Tecumseh’s dog, to help him find it so he can take his belongings out of it (217).

Critics such as Mark Shackleton have interpreted Swimmer’s project of transforming the church building back into prairie as “returning the land to its pre-contact days” (161). Such a romanticized statement, however, ignores the fact that returning the land to pre-contact days (the impossibility of such a task notwithstanding) would make little sense on the part of Native people that are no longer pre-contact people. Indeed, Monroe Swimmer does not demolish the
church after buying it; instead, he uses his artistic skills to transform the place back into a
renewed version of the prairie, “remov[ing] the colonial past from the perceptual environment” (Ridington 93) yet maintaining its modified presence as a reminder of the history of his people.
As Barbara Bruce puts it, “Monroe’s erasure of a symbol of Western European colonization is
creative rather than destructive; he does not repeat the violence of the colonizing process to undo
it [since] Monroe’s projects are about regeneration and healing, not extinction and further violence” (200). By transforming the church back into prairie Swimmer acknowledges Native
history and past experiences and works to transform them into something new (a metaphorically
new prairie) through his artistic vision. Swimmer shows the regenerative potential of art by not
demolishing the church; he shows that violence and physical erasure are not the solution to the
damage caused by colonialism. Instead, he provides an example of the symbolic healing process
(turning the building back into prairie) that can be achieved through art and imagination. In
addition to restoring the church, Swimmer intends to continue his restoration projects with a
“residential school [that is] for sale over near Medicine River” (248). This future project speaks
to the transformation of the pain and the damage caused by boarding schools in Native history.
This sequence of projects, then, speaks to the possibility of regeneration and healing that can
start with the symbolic transformation of physical space and of emotional borderlines. 64

In addition to inscribing Indian people back into nineteenth century landscapes and
presenting the reconstituted prairie as a symbol of potential healing and of reclamation of

64 Robin Ridington argues that Monroe Swimmer represents the link between the narrator’s family story and Indian
history. Ridington focuses on the group of Cherokees in the Indian Days Festival on the reserve to trace a
connection between the naming of Monroe Swimmer and what Ridington reads as the reversal of Cherokee removal.
Ridington argues that the name of Swimmer invokes King’s heritage and echoes the “Cherokee healer who in 1887
showed anthropologist James Mooney a book of sacred formulas written in the syllabary devised by Sequoyah in
1821” (92) and that Monroe evokes US President James Monroe, “a key figure in the shared American/ Indian
history of Cherokee removal” (93). In this way, Ridington contends that the character Monroe Swimmer, through his
restoration projects, “reverse[s] the painful history of Cherokee removal from their homeland,” thus “transform[ing]
Indians from the subject of removals into agents of their own re-creation” (93).
sovereignty, Monroe Swimmer carries out yet another restoration project by smuggling Native human remains from museums and bringing them back home. During his tenure as expert landscape restorer he takes advantage of his access to museums worldwide and uses the opportunity to take Indian bones out of the storage drawers in the museums’ collections. Echoing the legal mandates of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a US federal law passed in 1990 that requires federal agencies and federally funded institutions to return Native cultural artifacts and human remains to their tribes, Swimmer undertakes the task of returning to Indigenous land the human remains he takes back from museums, becoming what Barbara Bruce calls a de-collector. He shows Tecumseh the carved and painted bentwood box made by the Northeast Coast tribes where he keeps the liberated remains and explains to the teenager that they were “children. … I found them in drawers and boxes and stuck away on dusty shelves. Indian children” (250). Even though Swimmer cannot know which tribe the children belong to, he creates a ceremony to dispose of the bones; he creates a ceremony “to give back to Aboriginal peoples a sense of history and community” by “returning cultural hostages to the land” (Bruce 192, 199). In the same way that he symbolically creates a reimagined prairie, Swimmer forges a new ceremony to honor and give proper sendoff to the youngest victims of colonization. Placing a ribbon through the eye sockets of the last skull that remains in the bentwood box, Monroe and Tecumseh enact a ceremony as they throw the remains into the

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65 This Act became law on November 16, 1990 (Public Law 101-601; 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq.) and has been amended twice. Section 5(a) of the Act states that “Each Federal agency and each museum which has possession or control over holdings or collections of Native American human remains and associated funerary objects shall compile an inventory of such items and, to the extent possible based on information possessed by such museum or Federal agency, identify the geographical and cultural affiliation of such item” and Section 5(d)(1) states that “If the cultural affiliation of any particular Native American human remains or associated funerary objects is determined pursuant to this section, the Federal agency or museum concerned shall, not later than 6 months after the completion of the inventory, notify the affected Indian tribes or Native Hawaiian organizations.”

66 Bruce prefers the term “de-collecting” to “repatriating” as it allows her to “emphasize Monroe’s agency, the illicit nature of the project, and the idea that he is attempting to undo the process of collecting/colonizing” (205). Bruce points out that the collections in museums attempt “to isolate the objects and replace the active culture with a memorial to that culture” (193), placing cultures in the past. In contrast, Monroe Swimmer’s restoration project reinstates Native people in the present; it transforms memorial culture into active culture.
Shield River. By throwing the human remains into the river/border, Monroe also symbolically reclaims the geographic cohesion of the now fragmented Indigenous place.

Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water* asks the reader to reflect on the arbitrariness of borders and to consider the possibilities once we suspend popular notions about borderlines. Following the summer roaming of the young protagonist and exploring received notions about borders and their connections to different ideological apparatuses allows us to consider different ways of understanding borders; it allows for the development of broader views about national demarcations that make discernible the geographical palimpsests in the same space and time. In addition to developing a more complicated sense of space and place, King brings attention to issues of Native sovereignty and resistance to colonial imaginings through the restoration projects of Monroe Swimmer. The reclamation endeavors of the self-appointed “famous Indian artist” present different tools of resistance against colonialism: working to make visible the historical presence of Indigenous peoples in the continent (painting the Indians back into the landscape), rethinking histories of pain and transforming them into regenerating futures (transforming colonial markers into new prairie landscapes), and creating new ceremonies that reaffirm Indigenous presence in the present (de-collecting remains of Native peoples from museums). The development of a sense of place that ties the histories of the people together in the novel works to show King’s strong commitment to Native communities and shows how, as he contends in *All My Relations*,

> a most important relationship in Native cultures is the relationship which humans share with each other, a relationship that is embodied within the idea of community. Community, in a Native sense, is not simply a place or group of people, rather it is, as novelist Louise Erdrich describes it, a place that has been “inhabited for generations,” where “the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history.” (qtd. in Weaver 152)
Such an understanding of the links between space, lived experience, and group identity speaks to the celebration of Indigenous epistemologies that becomes a central part of Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*. In the same way that King proposes alternative ways of reading space and place, Hogan’s novel challenges the reader to think about different configurations of territory that bring to light histories that are commonly negated in mainstream narratives of the nation. Through the use of what Linda Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction,” that is, “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities” (qtd in Korkka 144), both King and Hogan’s novels demand an active engagement on the part of the reader in imagining geographical compositions that challenge received notions of the relation between borders, national mythologies, and cultural genealogies.

2. **Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms***

Hogan’s 1995 novel encapsulates Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction: inspired by what is known as the James Bay Project in northern Canada, a hydroelectric project carried out by state-owned utility company Hydro-Québec that flooded an area the size of the state of New York and affected an ecosystem the size of France (Tarter 138), *Solar Storms* presents a narrative of Native resistance and Indigenous assertion of land rights and sovereignty in the face of ecocide and cultural aggression. The James Bay energy grid, in northwestern Québec, is one of the largest hydroelectric systems in the world. Built in the early 1970s as a road towards Québécois modernization, the project flooded indigenous hunting and trapping areas, and its construction received strong opposition from the James Bay Cree, northern Inuits, and environmentalist groups (Castor 157-158). In an interview, Hogan recalls how the developers of the James Bay project

showed up without warning to tell the people to leave their homes, as they were going to bulldoze them, and the Natives had no paper ownership. Since the people
knew all the plants, animals, and even the purposes of insects, they made a museum exhibition to show people all that was sacred to them, and they won in court. It took twenty years and monumental impact statements. But the land was loved, is loved, is spirit. That is why they wouldn’t sell it. ("From the Center" 11-12)

In fictionalizing the stories surrounding the flooding of James Bay Cree and northern Inuit ancestral lands, the court battles that ensued, and the legal victory after a long-drown-out process, *Solar Storms* testifies to the victims of industrial advancement and state intervention. It also underscores the real-life consequences of the appropriation of native lands on the lives of Indigenous populations while it questions the validity of such ecological and human trauma as collateral damage in the name of modernization and progress. Hogan thinks of her fictionalization of historical events as a form of activism, as a way of moving people into action. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, Hogan explains her activist drive when she says, “I pick these events and make them stories because only then will people listen. If I carry a sign, I am ignored. So I do it in the work” (12). To raise consciousness about the consequences of hydroelectric projects on the ecosystem they distort and the populations they displace, Hogan uses novels as a form of literary activism. As she affirms, *Solar Storms* is about a fictional community [but] the story is really about the truth. It’s about the history of the fur trade, and events taking place at James Bay, between the tribal governments and the Quebec government, which wants to build a dam there. … It’s a form of truth, not a story. It’s in some ways a retelling of history. … It’s the story that’s been repressed. ("An Interview" 122)

Literature provides Hogan with a space to launch a revision of dominant historical accounts and a platform for the vindication of Indigenous knowledges. As Catherine Rainwater interprets it, *Solar Storms* inscribes Native people into recorded history to expand the official history kept in Euro-American historical records (97). In doing so, Hogan creates a cultural site that enables the articulation of Native sovereignty and Indigenous ethos for a general audience. By calling into
question the power of the 49\textsuperscript{th} parallel as a line of demarcation that controls movement, as we will see, Hogan reclaims the borderlands as part of a pre-contact Indigenous geography, as sovereign space that takes shape through the experiences and the stories of the peoples who live there.

Hogan presents a multigenerational cast of women characters that belong to the same family in \textit{Solar Storms}. Focalized through the seventeen-year-old protagonist Angel, a teenager tracing her roots home after spending most of her life in the foster care system, the novel follows four generations of women characters as they undertake a journey north to the sacred land of their people and into their own stories and history. Set in the 1970s in the northern US, the collection of characters coming together as a family spans many different tribes: Crees, Anishnabeg, Métis, white people, and an imaginary tribe that Hogan calls the \textit{Fat-Eaters}.\footnote{Anishnabeg here reflects the spelling used by Hogan. Other spellings include \textit{Anishnaabe}, \textit{Anishinabe}, and \textit{Anishinaabe} (referring to people also known as Ojibway, Ojibwa, and Ojibwe, or Chippewa). Anishnabeg is the plural form (Arnold 302). Métis is the name of the offspring of European immigrants and Native brought together by the fur trade.} News that the sacred land of the Fat-Eaters is scheduled to be flooded in building a dam prompts the group’s journey to the arctic islands of northern Canada. The four women that come together for the journey, Dora Rouge (Angel’s great grandmother who comes from the Fat-Eaters of the north), Agnes Iron (Dora Rouge’s daughter), Bush (a Chickasaw from Oklahoma who cared for Angel as an infant, daughter-in-law to Agnes), and Angel (the daughter of Agnes’ son Harold and Loretta Wing, a descendant of the Elk Islanders), plan to make their way north to rally and organize a protest against the appropriation and destruction of the sacred land of their people. Knowing that if they take land routes they will be stopped by the interests behind the building of the dam, the women decide to make their way home through the waterways. Guided by the knowledge of home of the eldest woman in the family, the women canoe their way north. This mode of transportation
allows them to cross borders undetected, to make their way home without being seen, and to successfully join protesters in organizing against the flooding of their land—a battle that ends up in long, painful, and ultimately victorious court proceedings.

I interpret Hogan’s novel and the journey of the four generations of canoe clad women as representing a challenge to arbitrarily drawn colonial and national lines and as asserting the different geographies that predate Anglo-Americans in the northern hemisphere. The border crossings in the novel imply that when the borderline is not actively controlled and inspected, the national boundary ceases to bear the legal weight of a controlled border. In a sense, if the federal surveillance machine is not actively present, the border ceases to exist in its ideological implications—especially when different national geographies already exist in the same area. Drawing attention to the mutability of borders, Solar Storms opens a space to engage critically with ideas about the relationship among borders, sovereignty, space, and visibility. By pitting Indigenous epistemologies and ways of understanding space and place against Euro-American ideologies and practices of mapmaking, Hogan legitimatizes Indigenous knowledge production and sovereignty. Uncovering the overlap of national geographies in the same space (both Indigenous and colonial), Solar Storms underscores the struggles over representation that Indigenous peoples face in the US as their histories are camouflaged and erased by dominant accounts of Anglo-American history.

Critics have interpreted Hogan’s literary work through a framework of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, that is, they read Hogan’s work by paying attention to the relation between the literary work she produces and the physical environments she presents in the novels and by

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68 For a succinct genealogy of ecocriticism in the US see Glotfelty (Introduction, 1996); for a presentation of the principles of ecocriticism see Howarth (1996); for the intersection of ethnicity and ecocriticism see Adamson and Slovic (2009); and for the connections between ecofeminism and grassroots environmentalism in the US see Epstein (2002). For more on Hogan’s work from an environmental perspective see Cook (Introduction, 2003), Schultermandl (2005), Rainwater (1999), Tarter (2000), and Udel (2007).
focusing on drawing relations between patriarchal structures, ecocide, and genocide. Reading Hogan’s representation of the connection between people and the natural world leads Silvia Schultermandl to assert, for example, that throughout her work Hogan “maintains that the interaction between humans and nonhuman nature, as well as the disruption thereof, has an undeniable influence on a person’s sense of self” and that in Solar Storms Hogan “examines the effects resulting from the dislocation of the individual from her natural and cultural landscape” (67). Indeed, the careful examination of the relation between humans and natural landscapes, between knowledge of nature and understandings of place and space in relation to identity, and between human actions and their effects on the landscape gesture toward a basic tenet of ecocriticism since “despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty xix). For the purpose of the present chapter I analyze the relation between the natural landscapes of the novel and its characters, the understanding of history through the natural world it presents, and the construction of a sense of place so as to engage with the notion of Native geographies in the same space and time with colonial organizations of space.

2.1. Spatial palimpsest: mapping home, mapping history

The focalization of Solar Storms around the journey back home of teenage protagonist Angel allows Hogan to set up a contrast between different ways of understanding cultural and national geographies. Angel’s lack of familiarity with Indigenous epistemologies places her in a similar position to that of a mainstream reader; thus, as she learns about her people and about Indigenous ways of knowing so does the reader. The development of the main character exposes the reader to multiple ways of understanding and making sense of the world. As Ellen L. Arnold notes,
“Angela’s journey moves in many directions at once—inward and outward across the surfaces that separate individual from world and cosmos, backward and forward in time—destabilizing conventional Western divisions between nature and culture, spirit and matter, past and future, time and space” (286). The different ontological approaches and ways of making sense of one’s place in the world in Solar Storms challenge Eurocentric concepts of space and of the relationship between the environment and people’s sense of identity.

Angel’s initial transition from mainstream US culture via the foster care system to the foreign world of her relatives in the Indigenous space of Adam’s Rib (northern US) presents the first glimpse of the cultural and national palimpsest she will learn to recognize. The novel opens as Angel arrives in Adam’s Rib to meet her kin: a physically abused young woman with her face carved with scars, Angel leaves behind a string of foster homes, “a life on paper stored in file cabinets” (26) in Oklahoma, and ventures north into the unknown space of her relatives. Her search for family and community leads her to the place where she was born; the place government officials took her from to put her in the foster care system. Angel’s quest for her story and the stories of her people leads her on an epic journey that ultimately provides her with a more grounded sense of self and purpose. She starts to understand the differences between the two worlds she straddles as she reaches Adam’s Rib and feels that “I was at the end of my life in one America, and a secret part of me knew this end was also a beginning, as if something had shifted right then and there, turned over in me. It was a felt thing, that I was traveling toward myself like rain falling into a lake, going home to a place I’d lived, still inside my mother, returning to people I’d never met” (26). The character’s incipient recognition of the coexistence of various Americas opens the door to a more holistic understanding of national geographies in the northern hemisphere. When she decides to go visit her kin, Angel leaves behind an America
marked by institutionalization and foster care and moves into a space defined by familial associations and sense of place.

When Angel steps from the America she knows into the America that is new to her she must come to terms with different ways of understanding the world: from one world where life is built around individual choices and personal responsibility to a world where life is marked by the relation between the natural world and the people. Her travel north to find the wayward mother that abused her and to understand the map of her own life also involves a shift from narrative as a form of expression to narrative as a form of creation. Soon Angel starts to see that “beginnings were important to my people, as I would one day call them” (37) and that stories carried the weight of creation and thus needed to be crafted carefully. As Agnes starts to tell Angel where her story began, “she searched for words. As in Genesis, the first word shaped what would follow. It was of utmost importance. It determined the kind of world that would be created” (37). Agnes finds it hard to piece together the forces that shape Angel’s story because she needs to weave together the different strands of historical events that converge in making the story so: “Nobody knows where it began, your story. … I’ve thought of it for years, where the beginning was. … What happened to you started long ago. It began around the time of the killing of the wolves. When people were starving” (37). The hardest part about telling Angel’s story for Agnes does not lie in recounting the facts of her birth and the events that led to the map of pain on her face—it lies in tracing the consequences of historical events that intersect in bringing her story to life. Agnes remembers how “there wasn’t a single beaver that year. They’d killed them all. And they’d just logged the last of the pine forests” (37). In this way, Agnes inscribes Angel’s story within a larger context of colonialism, decimation of natural resources, and the disruption of balance between humans and nature that leads to the people’s starvation. Agnes’s narration (act
of creation) of Angel’s story becomes Angel’s initiation into a different cosmology from mainstream America, one that shows her that her “beginning was Hannah’s [her mother’s] beginning, one of broken lives, gone animals, trees felled and kindled. Our beginnings were intricately bound up in the history of the land” (96). Agnes’s piecing together of Angel’s story enables Angel to see the interrelation between humans and the natural world. The introduction of Angel to an Indigenous ontology teaches her the importance of natural harmony, the fragility of ecological balance, and the consequences of breaking the pact between humans and the natural world.

Angel’s initiation into Native understandings of place, space, and the interrelation between humans and nature continues through the character of Dora Rouge and her knowledge of home in the novel. The oldest member of the family, Dora Rouge embodies and brings to life the Native geography in the novel. She is the one that helps the canoeists find their way north to the Fat-Eaters: “the woman going home, [Dora] was going backward in her memory as well, in that way a single life travels a closed circle” (167). She has a blood memory of the land, a knowledge of home ingrained in the collective memory of her people, a “cell-deep memory” (137) of place that stands witness to the physical and ideological violence carried out by Euro-American colonial expansion. While planning the canoe trip north Dora talks about one of the waterways, and her words reflect how her history is enmeshed with the history of European presence in that space: “‘Yes,’ Dora-Rouge said, confirming her own words. ‘It was called the Million-Dollar Trail. We used to travel it. It was an old waterway. It offered hides and skins to the Europeans who never dreamed this land, who had no eyes for it. But I remember it’” (137).

Through Dora Rouge’s memories, Hogan presents the understanding of place in this Native

69 Chadwick Allen discusses Momaday’s development of blood memory as “a trope for continuity across indigenous generations and as a process for contemporary indigenous textual production” (162) a concept that “achieves tropic power by blurring distinctions between racial identity (blood) and narrative (memory)” (1).
geography as intimately related to historical processes such as the fur trade. At the same time, Dora’s recollections teach Angel the difference between Indigenous and Euro-American concepts of space: if the land is part of the people from a Native perspective, the land appears as space to be conquered and catalogued from a conventionally Euro-American perspective. Angel slowly understands that the place they live in “was a defiant land. It had been loved, and even admired, by the government’s surveyors, for its mischief and trickiness and for the way it made it difficult for them to claim title. Its wildness, its stubborn passion to remain outside their sense of order made them want it even more” (123). As a wildness to be tamed, a challenge to be conquered, the Indigenous geography in the novel elicits the colonial desire for cartographic domination of space. Dora’s point of view sheds light on the geographical palimpsest in the novel: it brings attention to the importance of the land in forging the identity of the Indigenous inhabitants as a people and it shows the detachment of Euro-American settlers in making sense of the space in front of them.

2.2. Crossing a line in somebody else’s imagination: maps and border crossings

The superimposed geographies in Hogan’s novel brings maps and border crossings to the center of Solar Storms. References to maps and topographic changes abound in the novel as the women receive news of the impending flooding of their sacred lands and prepare to undertake their canoe trip. Hogan accentuates the discussion about map lines with two instances of unsupervised US-Canada crossings: one as the young men in canoes arrive in Adam’s Rib bearing news about the construction of the dam and the other when the four women canoe their way north to the land of the Fat-Eaters. The analysis of the maps and border crossings in relation

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70 In an interview, Thomas King talks about the US-Canada border thus: “Well, I guess I’m supposed to say that I believe in the line that exists between the US and Canada, but to me it’s an imaginary line. It’s a line from somebody else’s imagination; it’s not my imagination. It divides people like the Mohawk into Canadian Mohawks and US Mohawks. They’re the same people” (Rooke 72).
to issues of visibility, sovereignty, and Indigenous epistemologies can help explore the novel’s critique of colonial expansion and brings to the forefront Hogan’s legitimization of Indigenous knowledge production and her articulation of Native rights to self-determination. At the same time, the discussion about maps and issues of representation reinforces the idea of national and cultural geographies superimposed in the same time and space.

*Solar Storms* explores the ideological underpinnings of maps and the degree of their reliability as sources of knowledge and truth through the mother figure of Bush, a Chickasaw from Oklahoma who cares for Angel as a baby and takes Angel in once she comes back to Adam’s Rib. In her careful preparation for the northbound journey, Bush spends countless hours searching for maps and studying them in an effort to understand the changing topographies of the space they will travel. The narrator shows Bush “obsessed with the faded squares of paper that represented land, [as] she tried to unravel all earth’s secrets” (122). Bush’s struggle with maps stems from an ontological perspective: she pores over Euro-American maps of the region and finds that the myth of scientific accuracy they present (Johnson 105) stands at odds with Indigenous understandings of the topography of the region and the relationship of this topography to history and experience. As Kelli Lyon Johnson points out, for Hogan “maps must be supplemented with … other dimensions, other layers of local knowledge—history, experience, ecology, story” (110). Thus, Bush’s search for answers in Euro-American maps demands deeper understandings of space than the maps provide. At this moment Angel understands that Bush “searched for something not yet charted. Besides, like a compass in this northern place of underground iron, the maps were not reliable” (122). Since Euro-American maps do not take into account the history, the stories, and the lived experiences of the people living in the spaces the maps chart, the accuracy of maps becomes suspect.
The unreliability of Euro-American maps that do not account for Native knowledges nor for “mapping practices that encode the existence and vitality of Native peoples” (Johnson 112) rises to the forefront when Bush examines “a replica of an ancient map” (122). In this old map Bush sees that the waters they need to travel form a connected network, that “the waters were linked together like a string of beads connected by a single thread” (122). She looks for a date in the map but finds none. However, her knowledge of the area and its history allows her to be sure that “this had to be made sometime between 1660 and 1720” (122), much to Angel’s surprise and confusion. “How can you tell?” asks Angel in disbelief, and Bush replies that it is “because those years there were no northern lights. There are stories about it. It tells how the people were deserted by the lights from the sky. At the same time the lights abandoned the people, the tribes came down with the breathing illness, the spotted disease, and were invaded by French fur traders” (122). Bush’s knowledge of the people’s stories and their history allows her to make the connection between the northern lights, the lives of the people, and the maps: her Native knowledge of place and of the relation between humans and the environment makes it possible for her to recognize the forces that converge in creating the landscape captured in the map. The ability to use stories to connect lived experience with cartographic representation shows that stories are maps in themselves, that “space is storied space [and that] Native women writers explicate Indigenous mapping practices, thus participating in knowledge recovery and creation that underpins Native sovereignty through cultural survival” (Johnson 113). In this way, Bush recovers and creates knowledge for Angel: she can pass on Indigenous practices to the younger generation and assert cultural sovereignty by legitimizing Native systems of knowledge production and by challenging the alleged scientific accuracy of colonial mapmaking.
Even though the connection between stories and cartographic representation is initially lost to Angel, Bush’s mentoring gives her a way to understand the world and its representation from a Native perspective. When Angel is at a loss to comprehend how Bush can date the old map only by looking at it, Bush explains to her “Don’t you see? There would have been more thaw without the protection of the solar dust. See the difference in the amount of water? She opened another map to show me the discrepancy” (122). Bush’s ability to read the changing topographies of the space comes from her knowledge of the particular history of the place and her insight to appreciate the connection between historical events and their effect on the ecosystem. Angel finally recognizes the interrelation of history, stories, and maps, affirming that “with my own eyes I saw that none of the maps were the same; they were only as accurate as the minds of their makers and those had been men possessed with the spoils of this land, men who believed California was an island” (122). The idea that maps are only “as accurate as the minds of their makers” points both to the ideological and ontological principles that generate given cultural productions such as maps and the borders they require to be legible. Since colonial settlers did not know the land or its history they could only represent the landscape in the map as they saw it; if the map had been made by Indigenous people it would have showed the markers that relate to stories that explain the relative character of the cartographic representation in its place and time. Bush’s teachings help Angel understand the relation between representation and story, and she becomes intrigued by the fact that history could be told by looking at paper. I’d wondered before what it was about the maps that occupied Bush’s time, and now I, too, became interested. I could see it myself. Just as I saw sleds with frozen animals. A deeper map. At times I would pore over them beside her, the lantern lighting the table in front of us. They were incredible topographies, the territories and the tricks of history. But of course they were not true, they were not the people or animal lives or the clay of land, the water, the carnage. They didn’t tell those parts of the story. What I liked was that the land refused to be shaped by the makers of
Land had its own will. The cartographers thought if they mapped it, everything would remain the same, but it didn’t, and I respected it for that. Change was one thing not accounted for. (122-123)

As Bush and Angel work together to tease out the historical events that converge in creating the landscapes in the maps in front of them, the novel reinforces the notion of overlapping geographies: while the maps make sense of the area from a Western perspective and appear as tools of colonial expansion and domination of space, Bush’s eye reveals a “deeper map” not captured in Western visual renditions of space. Her addition of lived experience and history to the map at hand speaks to the principles of Indigenous mapmaking, and it legitimates Native epistemologies and Native perspectives as sources of knowledge.

Hogan’s portrayal of the tension between Euro American mapmaking as a tool of colonialism and the valorization of Indigenous knowledge as part of claiming Native sovereignty in the novel reflects her active engagement in “linking environmental justice and social justice issues” (Cook, Introduction 1). The novel’s critical stance toward the cultural and historical bias of the mapmakers challenges the claim to scientific accuracy of Western maps. In doing so, Hogan uncovers what Mark Rifkin describes in a different context as “the continuing presence of [Native] countervailing political mappings, those ‘pre-existing’ geographies that defy the vision of national space organizing US hegemony” (28). Showing the pivotal role of Indigenous knowledges for understanding overlapping geographies, Solar Storms rescues Indigenous knowledge production from colonial dismissal and asserts its central place in the exercise of Indian sovereignty and the right for self-determination.

Keeping the notion of geographical palimpsests in mind can help us read the border-crossing moments in Hogan’s novel and in understanding their relationship to issues of visibility, cultural sovereignty, and Native epistemologies. There are two major moments of US-Canada border
crossings in *Solar Storms*: the first occurs as the young men in canoes bring news about the flooding of sacred lands to the north and the second happens as the group of women led by Bush make their canoe journey north to the land of the Fat-Eaters. In both instances Native people cross the 49th parallel without state supervision: they use the waterways to move across the area undetected by the Border Patrol or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Here is where keeping in mind the geographical superimpositions in the area helps understand the challenge in Hogan’s novel: while from one perspective the Indigenous people in the novel cross the US-Canada border illegally without state sanction, from another perspective they do not cross a border at all—they just move within a continuous Native geography and follow the waterways that their people have used customarily. As we saw previously in relation to the border crossings in King’s *Truth and Bright Water*, Hogan’s novel also highlights the randomness of borderlines and questions the meaning of borders once the pressure of surveillance disappears. By focusing on the construction of place in relation to Native identity and on Indigenous knowledges of space and place, Hogan’s novel joins King’s challenge of monolithic colonial organizations of space and affirms Native sovereignty by legitimizing Indigenous ontological principles and knowledge production.

Early in the novel Hogan introduces the ability of Native people to move through the region undetected as two men arrive at Adam’s Rib in their canoe. Angel’s assessment of the new arrivals focuses on the easiness of their movements and their seemingly harmonious relationship with their environment. She recalls, the men “were lean. … They unloaded a few small packs, talking to each other. They seemed foreign here; they had different bodies, not American, not Canadian, but bodies still in touch with themselves and easy. They didn’t rush. They appeared to know their place in the world” (56). These Indigenous men at ease with themselves and their
surroundings, men that “had straight black hair and beautiful eyes slightly slanted” (56), bring news of the ecological devastation taking place in the north. Indeed, the people in Adam’s Rib do not learn about the hydroelectric project through official channels: there is no press conference, no public release of information, no public bulletin informing the public of the plan to build a dam. Instead, they receive the information via a human network, through the men that take it on themselves to spread the word by travelling the land and talking to the people. The men carry with them news of government plans to work with hydroelectric corporations in the construction of several dams and the effects that the first phases of the project have already had on the ecosystem:

In the first flooding, the young man said, they’d killed many thousands of caribou and flooded land that people lived on and revered. Agents of the government insisted the people had no legal right to the land. No agreement had ever been signed, he said, no compensation offered. Even if it had been offered, the people would not have sold their lives. Not one of them. Overnight many of the old ones were forced to move. Dams were already going in. The caribou and geese were affected, as well as the healing plants the people needed. … [The people] had lived there forever, for more than ten thousand years, and had been sustained by these lands that were now being called empty and useless. If the dam project continued, the lives of the people who lived there would cease to be, a way of life would end in yet another act of displacement and betrayal. (57-58)

The men present the ecological devastation brought about so far by the hydroelectric project and link that devastation to the cultural decimation of the populations living in the affected areas, linking ecocide with cultural genocide. Their mission is to inform as many communities and villages as possible about what is happening so they can rally and organize protests against the flooding and the appropriation of Native lands. They hope that as winter approaches and construction comes to a halt up north, protesters will have the time to reach the Fat-Eaters and take the matter to court.
To carry out their organizing campaign, the young men travel from place to place undetected, using the network of waterways that connect the region. Moving through the waterways allows them to reach different communities without being stopped or questioned by the authorities. They cross the 49th parallel and reach different communities to mobilize protesters. At the same time, they just move through a continuous Indigenous geography the inhabitants of which have stakes in what is happening up north. Their ability to move through the territory undetected allows them to promote the flow of information that otherwise would have a hard time reaching interested parties: “if the American Indian Movement got little attention on television,” the narrator in the novel explains, “the dams and diversions of rivers to the north were even more absent. They were a well-kept secret, passed along only by word-of-mouth. We would have known nothing about them if not for the young men who canoed from place to place, telling people what happened” (156). Thus, the international or intra-national mobility of the young men is crucial in order to mobilize people divided by “a line in somebody else’s imagination” (Rooke 72). When corporate and governmental interests clog the flow of information, the organization of oppositional movements can only take place through grassroots mobilization. In this light, the men’s crossing of the random border line represents an assertion of the right to self-determination and a claim of Indigenous sovereignty.

The second example of inconspicuous geographical movement in the novel takes place as Bush, Agnes, Dora Rouge, and Angel undertake their canoe trip home to the Fat-Eaters. Determined to make it north to Two-Town to help organize the resistance against the flooding of ancestral lands, Bush plots a canoe journey that will have them pass the International Boundary and arrive at their destination undetected. The issue of visibility is key to the success of their mission since “there would be roadblocks, we were sure, as police tried to keep all but the local
Indians out of the Two-Town area. That’s what the Fat-Eaters territory was called on maps. And for all we knew, the waterways might also be closed off by the time we reached the Fat-Eaters. Then we’d have to turn back. Or worse yet, they might shoot at us” (160). As this scenario intimates, the stakes of going through undetected are high and the potential consequences of their discovery deadly. Their journey through the waterways keeps them away from any police enforcement detection, given the vastness of the boundary line and the sparse resources that either the US or Canada can mobilize for its surveillance. From a Western perspective, the women cross the US-Canada border in a place where it is neither marked nor controlled. From a Native perspective, though, the women follow a continuous Native geography that does not recognize such a dividing line. This way of understanding space as place, recognizing the land in relation to the lived experience and the stories of the people that are attached to it, also holds true for the southern border: Mexicans and Chicanos living in the borderlands have claims to the land that predate the establishment of the US-Mexico border. In fact, Indigenous people have claim to the borderlands that predate both Anglo presence and Mexican presence. Guided by Dora Rouge’s knowledge of home and the waterways, the multi-generational canoe trip follows customary practices that reinforce claims to the space that precede colonial presence in the territory.

Bush, Angel, and Dora Rouge make it north to the land of the Fat-Eaters and contribute to the rally and organizing efforts that culminate in a long trial and an ultimate victory in court. While living up north, Angel’s interaction with the workers, the police officers, and the corporate representatives exposes her to a monolithic version of history, place, and twentieth-century life that obfuscates the geographical palimpsests Hogan works hard to make visible earlier in the novel. During one of the many confrontations between protesters and corporate interests Angel
realizes that “to the white men who were new here, we were people who had no history, who lived surrounded by what they saw as nothingness. Their history had been emptied of us, and along with us, of truth” (280). The mainstream ideology she confronts when protesting the hydroelectric project has only one place for Native peoples in its worldview: the past. By articulating mainstream’s blatant erasure of Native presence in a contemporary world, Hogan brings into focus the historical disavowal of Native American presence and sovereignty in the northern hemisphere. During the trial, the deep mark that testifying in court leaves in the lives of the Indians that come forth in defense of the land becomes evident: “It wore … on all of them, to be treated with derision and ridicule. To others, we were such insignificant people. In their minds we were only a remnant of a past. They romanticized this part in fantasy, sometimes even wanted to bring it back for themselves, but they despised our real human presence” (343). Speaking against the nostalgic appropriation of Indigenous culture in the US, Hogan sets up Angel to counteract the discourse of the vanishing Indian by speaking the continuous presence of her people and their relentless defense of their national geography.

Angel’s canoe trip with her elders in Solar Storms echoes Tecumseh’s crossing of the Shield River in Truth and Bright Water: both crossings underscore the invisibility of borders when the surveillance machine that enforces them is absent; both crossings illuminate the alternative possibilities for understanding space that the absence of the controlled border enables; and both crossings reinforce the customary practices that inform Indigenous sovereignty and Native rights to self-determination.

3. National and cultural palimpsests

Solar Storms and Truth and Bright Water bring to our attention the historical and ideological construction of place and space in the US. In its own fashion, each novel challenges the reader to
think about the superimposition of national geographies in a given topographical area and to recognize the tension that such national and cultural palimpsests create. Since the geographical superimpositions become more visible when the militarization of the geopolitical border is not present, both novels portray Indigenous customary practices (crossing the Shield River, using the waterways for the canoe journey) that question the monolithic assumptions about space in circulating discourses of the US as a nation (always already stretching coast-to-coast and reaching up to the 49th parallel). Both King and Hogan open a window in their novels that allows for the recognition of preexisting national and cultural geographies: in this way, they make visible alternative configurations of territory and they bring to the light Native histories that are commonly negated in mainstream narratives of the nation.

While the previous chapter analyzes different perspectives regarding the US-Mexico border to provide a more rounded understanding of the way the surveillance of the geopolitical line affects the lives of the people living in it, crossing it, or living in its shadow away from it, this chapter explores the possibilities that open up once the surveillance machine disappears. If, as we saw in relation to the US-Mexico dividing line, the militarization of the border and its active control of the movement of people have lasting effects on the people it touches (causing social alienation, second-class citizenry, nativist discourses, and social anxiety), the lack of surveillance and militarization of the geopolitical line clears the social white noise associated with borders and allows for the recognition of alternative configurations of space. In this context, King and Hogan present their case for the acknowledgement of multiple cultural and national geographies coexisting in the same space and time while legitimizing Native production of knowledge and re-inscribing Indigenous presence in the contemporary social imaginary of the US.
Chapter 4

Border byproducts: vulnerability, violence, and historical erasure

The approach to borders as national boundaries organizing the previous two chapters underscores geopolitical lines as vehicles for the imagination and as willing into being national narratives and genealogies that engage in a struggle over representational primacy. Centering on the US-Mexico border, Chapter 2 explores how border ideologies disenfranchise subjects, erase their historical agency, and foster the rise of nativist discourses north and south of the border. In a similar way, attention to the US-Canada border in Chapter 3 shows how the International Boundary masks the superimposition of national and cultural geographies in the same geographical space while erasing Native histories, dismissing the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge production, and eclipsing Indigenous claims to place and space in the northern hemisphere. Even though each chapter bears a different perspective on national lines and issues of border surveillance, the ideological tensions they examine have one common denominator: violence. Indeed, violence (both physical and metaphorical) appears as a byproduct of borders regardless of their geographical location and the amount of social anxiety they produce.

The previous two chapters focus on Chican@ and American Indian representations of the US-Mexico border and the 49th parallel. They establish a baseline for the understandings of border spaces in the social imaginary and complicate this rather one-dimensional understanding to include other ways of thinking about borders that take into account the impact borders have on the everyday lives of the people they cross. The analyses of Viramontes’s and Urrea’s novels provide a more nuanced vision of the effect that borders, as cultural constructs in addition to physical lines, have on populations structurally disenfranchised: they highlight the ways the US-Mexico border can only be culturally legible through the mobilization of its apparatus of control
and the militarization of the borderlands. In contrast, the analyses of King’s and Hogan’s novels focus on what can be seen in the borderlands when the surveillance machine is absent from the demarcation line. They give us access to an alternative understanding of the US-Canada border that makes visible the palimpsest of cultural and national geographies that coexist at any given time but are obfuscated by master narratives of the nation that need cohesion and coherence to serve their purpose. In this chapter, I put the work of a Chickasaw writer and a Chicana writer in conversation to establish the common ground between them: the violence that stems from shared histories of colonization. As I engage with *Mean Spirit* and *Desert Blood* the determinism of the physical demarcation line explodes: no longer exclusively tied to the borders with Mexico and Canada, the violence of the borderlands brings to the forefront other demarcation lines that fail to register in the national imaginary: reservation borders. By putting the two novels in conversation, the commonalities of the histories of exploitation and disenfranchisement establish a deeper understanding of the workings of colonialism, of capitalist exploitation, and of the tool that enforces them and makes them possible: borders.

Following violence as the common denominator one encounters when studying borders, this chapter embarks in an analysis of Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* (1990) and Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* (2005). Both novels present fictionalized accounts of historical violence: while *Mean Spirit* exposes what is known as the Osage Reign of Terror, the murders of Osage people at the beginning of the twentieth century as oil is discovered on their reservation lands, *Desert Blood* brings attention to the feminicidios in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s, the killings and mutilations of poor brown women around the assembly plants south of the US-Mexico border. Considering the relation between borders and their economies, the analyses in this chapter explore how the social and economic forces that converge in border spaces (US-Mexico border,
reservation borders) engender violence to exploit and regulate the vulnerability of border subjects who have no recourse against powerful border economies and the legal structures that enforce them.

Set in the 1920s in Oklahoma, *Mean Spirit* exposes how the oil underneath Native lands drives Anglo Americans to launch murderous campaigns to acquire the mineral wealth belonging to Native peoples. In addition to the onslaught of murders of Native men and women during the first part of the twentieth century, the novel depicts various forms of colonial erosion of tribal sovereignty such as the federal provision that allows officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to declare Native people incompetent to manage their land and resources. The BIA declarations of incompetence result in the assignment of Anglo American legal guardians to Native people that in turn signify American Indians’ loss of control over their agency, over their wealth and property, and their subsequent inscription in a space of vulnerability and exploitation. Developing the theme of exploitation, the novel portrays a number of Anglo men marrying Osage women as a point of entry into the reservation and as the key to accessing natural and economic tribal resources: by marrying Native women, white men gain access to the oil wells beneath the reservation land. In doing so, they also enact a continuation of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny by expanding white dominance over tribal lands. Thus, Hogan’s historical fictionalization implicitly asks us to think about the relation between reservation borders, wealth, autonomy, legal regulation, and violence.

Echoing Hogan’s concern about violence and the vulnerable positions border subjects occupy, Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood* presents a grueling tale of female exploitation in the border town of Ciudad Juárez. In the form of a murder mystery, the novel exposes the epidemic of killings in Ciudad Juárez in the 1990s: the murders and brutal mutilations of
muchachas del sur, young women from rural Mexico and beyond that arrive in border towns to work in the maquilas—the assembly plants that pepper the Mexican border landscape. The vulnerable position of these women in the ring of capitalist exploitation (no family, no support group, no economic resources, no representation, no voice) makes them an easy target for all kinds of predators that go unpunished thanks to the interconnectedness of all social strata in the pursuit of power and profit in an exploitative economic system. The fictionalized events of the novel show how violence becomes a mechanism to enforce the border, how crimes are used to mark territory, and how the vulnerability that the border creates provides a breeding ground for exploitation and abuse. Thus, Gaspar de Alba’s novel (much like Hogan’s) brings to the forefront the ways borders participate in the creation of vulnerable subjects that become the targets of physical and economic violence.

The analysis in this chapter, then, zeroes in on the spaces of violence generated by borders regardless of their geographical location. As the US-Mexico border is an easily recognizable geopolitical line in the national imaginary, it occupies center stage in the US border drama. Reservation borders fly low under the radar, however: even though they mark the boundaries of different Indian nations within the US they do not carry with them the heavy surveillance of the southern border and they do not attract attention to themselves. Although reservation borders remain largely invisible both to the mainstream American eye and to the national discourse about political lines, reservation borders serve the same functions as the southern boundary and the 49th parallel: they delimit space in terms of legal boundaries, they signify a change in social and cultural mores, and they create a no man’s land where exploitative economies can work with relative ease in relation to federal policies and state control. By examining the fictionalization of historical events in the novels of Hogan and Gaspar de Alba, I argue that violence appears as an
intrinsic regulating mechanism of border spaces and nation building projects across time. In addition, I maintain that the creation of vulnerable subjects and their exploitation in the service of capital comes hand in hand with the material and social construction of border economies and the expansion of power structures. To jumpstart the discussion in this chapter I pay attention first to Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and her remapping of the Americas as a space gridlocked by recurrent cycles of violence. A close reading of the map that opens the narrative in *Almanac* gives us a starting point for understanding violence as an intrinsic part of the history of the Americas and for understanding violence as a structural principle of imperial expansion and projects of nation building.

1. **Remapping and forecasting violence: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead***

   Silko’s novel opens with a table of contents followed by a map that spreads across two full pages. At first sight, there is nothing necessarily strange or innovative in the format of this move: tables of content are commonplace in novels and maps and family trees can be found framing many literary works as well. But the map that Silko uses to frame the narrative may seem peculiar to the Western reader since it challenges Euro-American mapmaking conventions. As we saw in the previous chapter, Euro-American cartographical practices stem from the ontological principle that maps are understood as mirrors of geographical spaces (and in this sense they represent geographical truth) and that maps are imbued with scientific accuracy, rendering the mapped space knowable and controllable. As I argue in Chapter 3, Indigenous mapmaking practices sometimes differ from Euro-American ones and do not stem from these

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71 For example, Denise Chávez’s *Face of an Angel* (1994) and Greg Sarris’s *Grand Avenue* (1994) use family trees to open up their works. In terms of using maps, Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* (2004) offers a two-page map tracking the movement of the protagonists across the US-Mexico border, Emma Pérez’s *Forgetting the Alamo or Blood Memory* (2009) presents a one-page map of 1836 Texas drawn by Alma Lopez, Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula, Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) introduces also a one-page map, and Charles H. Red Corn’s *A Pipe for February* (2002) frames the narrative with a two-page map of Pawhuska, Oklahoma in 1924.
same ontological principles. Instead, Native maps function as multilayered and multi-referential representations of space insomuch as they relate to the history of the people that inhabit the charted area: Native maps use histories and stories to represent and give meaning to both space and place, constructing in this way a visual representation of the geographical area in relation to the experience of the people living there. Thus, the representational practices of Indigenous maps do not presuppose scientific accuracy and instead embrace their contingency as representations of time, history, and story. As such, maps are far from immutable: they are subject to change over time as the history and experience of the people grow. In this vein, the map that opens Silko’s narrative does not look like a traditional Euro-American map of Central and North America: the map’s main legend identifies the space represented in the map as an “Almanac of the dead/ five hundred year map,” that is, not merely a geographical representation of space but a representation of history as well, following Indigenous mapmaking practices.

The five hundred year map represents parts of Central and North America: it identifies Mexico with magnified and bold capital letters in the space between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans (see Figure 1). It draws a straight line above Mexico and presents Tucson as a hub for the different transit routes represented in the map through dotted lines with directional arrows. In addition to four boxed legends in the four quadrants of the map, it also includes a drawing of the giant stone snake that is part of the story in the novel and a list of characters identified in different areas of the map in relation to places and movement routes. Besides that, the map inscribes certain places such as Haiti, Cuba, New Jersey, and Mexico City in spaces that emphasize their connection to the events in the story rather than to their geographical coordinates. Thus, the cartographical representation in Almanac challenges Euro-American mapmaking practices as it disrupts common assumptions about scale and scientific accuracy.
Since the map is still recognizable as a map from a Western perspective, however, Shari Huhndorf interprets its purpose as highlighting the historical role of cartography as a “weapon of imperialism” through its use of geometric scale (however rough), European toponomies, and spatial divisions such as the US-Mexico border. But because its legends recall the colonial histories that created these spatial practices and geographies, the map employs European cartographic conventions against themselves to engage in what Sherene Razack, citing Richard Phillips, labels “unmapping,” or the effort “to denaturalize geography by asking how spaces come to be” but also “to undermine the world views that rest upon it.” (155)

Whether you interpret the map as a subversion of Euro-American mapmaking conventions or as following different ontological principles based on Indigenous mapmaking practices, it certainly presents different layers of meaning by reflecting the history of the Americas alongside the stories that give shape to the novel. I would argue that basing the drawing of the map on Indigenous mapmaking practices, Silko presents a map that works ideologically against Euro-American cartography as it makes visible the history of violence brought about by colonial conquest.

The boxed legends in the map offer a mélange of history and story that connects the history of the Americas to the different plots in the novel, producing in turn an evocative representation of experience and stories. The upper left corner legend reads

Almanac of the dead/ Five hundred year map. Through the decipherment of ancient tribal texts of the Americas the Almanac of the Dead foretells the future of all the Americas. The future is encoded in arcane symbols and old narratives.

Presenting the Almanac of the Dead as a five hundred year map speaks to the history of conquest and colonialism in the Americas: it refers to the ancient text that the characters of the novel work to decipher and at the same time it recasts the history of the Americas as an almanac of the dead,
both a chronicle of death and a forecast of death to come.\textsuperscript{72} Together with the legend on the upper right quadrant that reads “Tucson, Arizona. Home of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars,” the map emphasizes the history of conquest and colonialism as a history of violence, opportunism, and conflict. As Western Shoshone historian Ned Blackhawk shows in *Violence Over the Land*,

from the use of the US Army to combat and confine Indian peoples, to the state-sanctioned theft of Indian lands and resources, violence both predated and became intrinsic to American expansion. Violence enabled the rapid accumulation of new resources, territories, and subject peoples. It legitimated the power of migrants, structured new social and racial orders, and provided the preconditions for political formation. From the initial moments of American exploration and conquest, through statehood, and into the stages of territorial formation, violence organized the region’s nascent economies, settlements, and politics. Violence and American nationhood, in short, progressed hand in hand. (9)

In his history of the Great Basin area, Blackhawk underscores the role of violence in the making of the Americas to subvert the seemingly harmonious conceptualization of national formation in the US cultural imaginary (1) and uses violence as an interpretive concept and method that opens up historical landscapes that would be inaccessible otherwise (6). Likewise, Silko’s inscription of violence as the organizing principle of the map and the narrative that it introduces also serves as a critical lens that calibrates our engagement with the text and the history it presents and evokes.

Following Silko and Blackhawk’s conceptual lead, this chapter focuses on the histories of violence brought to the limelight by the novels of Hogan and Gaspar de Alba. The fictionalizations of historical events that both authors present in their works serve an important cultural function, for, as Priscilla Wald puts it, “history needs to be rewritten not only to register

\textsuperscript{72} Virginia E. Bell explains how the genre of the almanac is common to both Maya and Laguna cultural traditions in the Americas and also to Euro-American settlers. She understands the almanac as a narrative historiography that “encode[s] a cyclical notion of time in which events are determined by seasonal patterns instead of, or more than, linear teleologies” (7).
past injustices but also because history—the story of the past—justifies the institutions and structures of the present” (192). To understand the ideological pressures that shape our shared present we must be able to acknowledge the ways they are rooted in violence, since, as Blackhawk succinctly puts it,

much like a family bereft by tragedy, a nation unable to confront its past will surely compromise any sense of a shared civic culture. National histories need to be shared by all, not imposed from above, and finding ways of celebrating the endurance as well as ascendancy of contemporary Indian people appears a thread from which to weave potentially broader national narratives … Without recognition, first, of the magnitude of Europe’s impact upon the Americas, histories of the nation will remain forever incomplete. (293)

Analyzing Hogan and Gaspar de Alba’s novels by paying attention to the structural historical violence they present raises awareness about the importance of acknowledging the multiple histories eclipsed by dominant narratives of the nation. In this way, we can start to come closer to a shared civic culture that strives to repair the tear that historical erasures cause in our shared national consciousness.

2. Black gold, legal incompetence, and structural abuse: the cycles of violence in Linda Hogan’s Mean Spirit

Linda Hogan’s Mean Spirit, published in 1990, presents a fictionalized account based on much too real historical events on Osage land in Oklahoma in the 1920s. Her novel brings attention to the wave of murders of Indian people that accompanied what Osage writer and historian John Joseph Matthews termed “the great frenzy,” the oil boom era that started after the discovery of oil beneath the Osage reservation in 1897. Even though the federal government forced the Osage to accept the division of their Oklahoma reservation (created in 1871 after the tribe was forced to move from their home in Kansas to Indian Territory) into individual allotments following the amendment of the Dawes Act in 1906, the Osage managed to maintain
tribal ownership of the reservation’s subsurface materials (Wilson 92). The discovery of oil underneath Osage land did not only bring large production royalties to Indian people but it also brought a new horde of prospectors and money-hungry Anglos to the land, characters that sought to benefit from the oil production as they had benefited previously from timber-cutting contracts and pasture leases. The cycle of entrepreneurship, abuse, violence, and murder accentuated by the discovery of oil peaked in the 1920s when production royalties were at their largest (Wilson xi). While the oil leases increased the pecuniary gain of Indian peoples, this economic gain came at a high cost: the number of murders in Indian country grew in direct proportion to oil revenues, so much so that the wave of murders displaced printed tales of extravagant Indian spending in the national press in favor of reports of what the newspapers termed “The Osage Reign of Terror” (Wilson 145). National attention to the exponential number of murders in Indian Territory finally forced the attention of the US Bureau of Investigation (precursor to the FBI) and resulted in long years of trials that finally elicited a conviction in 1929—although most murders remained unsolved. Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* portrays a fictionalized account of this historical moment, using the waves of murders brought on by the discovery of oil to weave a story about colonialism, dispossession, structural racism, and native resistance.

Hogan’s novel takes place in Watona, Oklahoma, the “meeting place” for the Osage people. Set in the 1920s, *Mean Spirit* begins with a prophecy: Lila Blanket, river prophet and one of the Hill Indians tells her people of the need to send one of their own down to Watona. She speaks of the need to learn about American laws if they are to prevent losing everything they have, as the Blue River has revealed to her (5-6). Indeed, she decides to send her own daughter Grace to live in town with Belle and Moses Graycloud, Lila’s second cousins. The admonition of the Blue River responds to a federal plan for building a dam at the mouth of the river, a dam that will
destroy the Hill Indians’ land and livelihood. Ironically, while the discovery of oil in the land purchased by Grace Blanket stops the building of the dam it also precipitates her demise (and the demise of many Indians who discover oil beneath their property). The murder of Grace Blanket jumpstarts the series of murders that plague the novel. Grace Blanket’s daughter Nola, who incidentally witnesses her mother’s murder, inherits her mother’s land and wealth and becomes one of the richest Indians in town. From that point forward, she lives her life in fear of being killed for her family’s fortune. The novel intertwines the lives of Nola Blanket, the Grayclouds, the Hill Indians, and other Osage people from Watona with the law enforcement agents, prospectors, lawyers, legal guardians, and other unsavory characters who manipulate the law and plot the murder of wealthy Indians to gain access to the natural resources of the land.

By fictionalizing historical events in the novel, Hogan draws attention to a series of events usually erased from mainstream national narratives. Even though she does not set out to rewrite history or to present an ethnographic account of the Osage,73 Hogan’s use of a historicized narrative rescues Native experiences from the hidden trove of US national histories, thus carrying out the kind of literary activism I described in the previous chapter. Through Mean Spirit, Hogan underscores the history of structural violence that plagues Native peoples in the US; she captures the machinations of unscrupulous Anglos as they plot to profit from appropriating Indian wealth and resources; she denounces the trafficking in Indigenous remains and the desecration of tombs and sacred places; she underscores the compounding economic and cultural violence inflicted on Indian people by exposing the implication of the legal system in the dispossession of Indians through competence claims and legal guardians, and she highlights the

73 Even though Hogan does not set out to relay an ethnographic account of the Osage, Native scholar such as Osage Robert Warrior decry her misrepresentation of Osage customs and traditional practices. In his spirited review “The Deaths of Sybil Bolton, an American History,” Warrior criticizes Hogan for writing about Native peoples outside her own tribal affiliation (Chickasaw) and not presenting factual information about Osage traditional practices in Mean Spirit.
gendering nature of settler colonialism’s exploitative practices. In this way, Hogan’s novel critiques the economic, cultural, psychological, and gendered violence that pervades the abusive economy surrounding the borders of the Osage reservation in the early 1900s, an economy that preys on the vulnerable subjects it creates—subjects that have little legal recourse to defend themselves.

2.1. Missing bodies, dead eagles, and oil derricks: economic and cultural violence

Even though the discovery of oil under the Osage reservation acts as a catalyst for the murderous episodes that set the story in motion in Mean Spirit, the violence waged against Indian peoples in the novel is not exclusively tied to mineral wealth—rather, it takes many different shapes. As historian Terry P. Wilson puts it, “after allotment in 1906, news of the oil pools beneath the surface would focus national attention on the tribe’s holdings” but the trouble for Osage people started earlier than that since “during the last three decades of the nineteenth century the resource more readily accessible for exploitation was the Osage themselves” (49). Hogan brings attention to some of the other ways Natives in Indian Territory suffer from Anglo profit-lust by inscribing within the novel’s story the desecration of Indian tombs and the theft of Indian remains to be sold for profit to museums and shows around the world. The commodification of Native remains, as we saw previously in the analysis of Thomas King’s Truth and Bright Water, becomes a staple of settler-colonialist practices.

The first mention of grave robbing in the novel happens shortly after Grace Blanket’s murder and burial. A few days after “wet clots of earth, mixed with corn kernels according to custom, were shoveled on top of [Grace’s] casket, and the wet clay was tamped firmly down on top of it” Ona Neck, one of the Hill Indian elders, hears the cawing of crows from her house and sees from her door big birds flying over the graveyard (42). She makes her way to the cemetery and finds
that Grace’s “casket was upended on the ground where it had been opened and left vacant,” her resting place desecrated to the point that “nothing remained, not the body of Grace, not the beads, gold, not even the medicines that had been buried inside the coffin for the woman’s journey to the other world” (42). The disappearance of Grace’s body from her upturned grave makes Belle Graycloud suspect that her body has been taken to hide evidence of her murder, but Moses Graycloud thinks that “perhaps Grace’s body had been taken to that museum in Connecticut that had bought bodies and moccasins and baskets only a few years earlier from local graverobbers” (89). Unfortunately, the practice of stealing Indian remains has a long history since “the bodies of Indians were at a premium for displays across the country and in Europe” (120) and the trafficking in Native remains continues to be a lucrative endeavor given “how much money Indian bodies are getting on the black market from museums and roadside shows” (318). The white world’s fascination with the commodification of Indigenous life and culture represents not only a physical assault on the material remains of the people but also a traumatic cultural injury in terms of memory, beliefs, sense of being in the world, and overall Native ontological principles. In stealing and selling Indian remains to museums and other “roadside shows,” gravediggers and other entrepreneurs inflict a cultural violence over Native peoples that goes unpunished and unchecked, a violence that dehumanizes and reduces them to tradable commodities—commodities that contribute to the formation of an economic web that catches reservation life in its middle.74

In addition to the trafficking in Indian bodies, Mean Spirit presents other forms of cultural and economic violence perpetrated on Native land such as the mass killing of eagles marked for

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74 As previously explained in Chapter 3, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 forces federal agencies and federally funded institutions to return Native cultural artifacts and human remains to their tribes. Until the late twentieth century, then, Native peoples in the US had little legal recourse to fight the desecration of their people’s tombs and remains and the public display of the same in museums and exhibits around the nation.
taxidermy by Anglo hunters. Hogan, weaved into the murder plots, the legal abuses, and the systemic exploitation of human and natural resources, exposes a frontal attack on the spiritual beliefs of the Indians in the novel that is not only sanctioned by the white world but also unintelligible as an attack by its perpetrators. During one of the quarterly pay periods on the reservation, a group of white hunters arrive in Watona and kill three hundred and seventeen eagles that they “pack … in paper, ice, and woodchips for the long journey by train to taxidermy shops in New York, London, and Philadelphia” (110-111). While for the hunters “they’re just birds,” for Belle Graycloud the killing of the eagles amounts to genocide. As she runs errands in town, Belle sees something that makes her “tur[n] and loo[k] again at what she hope[s] [is] an error of vision” (109). What stops her in her tracks is a pickup truck filled with eagle carcasses. Belle’s reading of the spectacle in front of her differs radically from that of the hunters who plan to sell the eagles “undamaged, as souvenirs” (110). Belle notices that

they were golden brown birds, with the blue-white membranes of death closed over their eyes. For what seemed like a long time, Belle stood rooted to the spot. Her marrow went cold. She stared at the dead, sacred eagles. They looked like a tribe of small, gone people, murdered and taken away in the back of a truck. (109-110)

Belle equates the killing of the eagles to genocide for they are people and a sacred part of her culture. The notion of eagles as people is foreign and incomprehensible to the entrepreneurial hunters that do not understand Native ontologies: the intimate connection between people, animals, and the natural world that informs Indian worldviews does not compute for the hunters, since they understand the world around them mostly in terms of profit, ownership, and capitalist opportunity.

The eagle episode in the novel not only speaks to the cultural and spiritual differences between Anglos and Indians but also to the self-destructive nature of exploitative capitalist
practices. As Belle tells her husband Moses not to confront the hunters because the law protects eagle hunting, Moses bitterly replies “the law is on their side because it’s their law” (113), marking a distinction between what the law looks like in the hands of the federal government and what it would be like if it were in Native hands instead. As they watch the hunters pack up their bounty, the Grayclouds look at “the boxes [that] contained dry ice. When [the hunters] lifted the wooden lids, smoke rose up, erasing the hunter’s faces. In that wisp of a moment, they looked foreign and strange, like visitors from another world, a world that eats itself and uses up the earth” (114). The smoke of the dry ice defaces the hunters and makes them foreign—foreign not only to the Native peoples in Watona but seemingly foreign to the US as a nation as well. Given that the bald eagle is the US national symbol par excellence, symbolizing freedom and national spirit, the fact that the hunters are killing the animals en masse symbolizes a nation that cannibalizes itself for profit: the hunters belong to a world that “eats itself,” a world that can divorce the representation of freedom from the animated being that gives material shape to the very ideal. While the eagles are sacred to the Native cultures in Watona in their materiality, killing them poses no problem to the white hunters who can turn their national symbol of freedom into a souvenir to generate profit. In this way, Hogan’s novel emphasizes the cultural and spiritual distance between Anglos and Indians and highlights a fundamental rift between the ontological principles that organize their relation to the world around them and to the spatial claims they make.

In the same way that the national symbol of freedom can be turned into a source of leisure and a memento available to consumers nationwide, so can the Native inhabitants of Watona be turned into a source of entertainment—a spectacle the white hunters can enjoy before setting out to decimate the eagle population. Since the hunters arrive in Watona during one of the quarterly
pay periods, they are inconspicuous as they “blended in with the con men who sold lottery
tickets and the gamblers who brought in their own yards of green felt on which to deal their slick
cards” (57). Invited by the oilman Hale, the “marksmen from the East had traveled across the
continent in plush new trains in order to shoot eagles out of the balmy Oklahoma sky” (57) and
they become part of the dubious collection of Anglos attracted to the reservation by oil royalties
and quarterly earnings. The easterners make their long trip to the oilman’s sponsored eagle hunt
and instead of setting out to conduct their business, they pause to enjoy the sight before their
eyes:

the eastern eagle hunters had never seen such Indians as these and they postponed
their hunt until after payment time in order to watch the well-dressed men and
women who came from miles around. Most of the Indians were Osages, though
there were some Creeks and Seminoles, and a few Chickasaws. They set up tents
and teepees on the first rise of the wide, rolling hill above town. (57)

The hunters’ ideological predetermination, distilled from generations of demonizing Indians and
condemning them to a past that cannot be reclaimed, allows them to conceive of Natives only as
poor savages confined to rural and impoverished areas. Thus, the image of wealthy Indians, of
“well-dressed men and women,” becomes a roadshow for them to enjoy, a rarity to be consumed
and laughed at, collected and recounted at home, a source of amusement to fill in a moment of
leisure before the hunt. The disconnect between the hunters’ enjoyment of the Indians’ social
transactions during payday, the Anglo peddlers’ exploitation of the situation by marking up the
prices so high they are called “scalpers” (57), and the hunters’ unwitting attack of the people’s
spiritual beliefs by killing the eagles speaks to the radically different worldviews espoused by
Anglos and Natives at this time.

The difference in worldviews becomes most evident in Hogan’s depiction of the relation
between the earth and the oil wells as the frenzy to tap into subsurface mineral wealth increases.
For Hale, the oilman who has a chokehold on the access to natural resources on the reservation, the sight of the derricks and the oil wells means that he can be “King of the Indians” (54), that he can make a large profit by manipulating the law to his advantage and by exploiting Natives. On the other hand, the Indian perspective of the narrator in *Mean Spirit* underscores how the balance between the human and the natural world is tipped by the violence over the land inflicted by the oil barons, sending the world out of sync. The narrator reflects on the harm done to the earth while describing the landscape left behind by prospectors:

Up the road from Grace’s sunburned roses, was an enormous crater a gas well blowout had made in the earth. It was fifty feet deep and five hundred feet across. This gouge in the earth, just a year earlier, had swallowed five workmen and ten mules. The water was gone from that land forever, the trees dead, and the grass, once long and rich, was burned black. The cars passed by this ugly sight, and not far from there, they passed another oil field where the pumps, fueled by diesel, worked day and night. These bruised fields were noisy and dark. The earth had turned oily black. Blue flames rose up and roared like torches of burning gas. The earth bled oil. (53-54)

The desolation from attempts to strip the mineral wealth has consequences beyond the possible extraction of oil: everything around it suffers and so do the people connected to that place. As Belle says, “all along the smell of the blue-black oil that seeped out of the earth had smelled like death to her” (29). The opposition to this violence comes not only from the characters in the novel but also from the earth itself as “gas rumbled under the ground like earth complaining through an open mouth, moaning sometimes and sometimes roaring with rage” (148). Mother Earth indeed rages against the violence of the derricks and sends the man-made structures flying into the sky through an explosion that came from inside the earth. It burned and roared like God’s wrath against the Baptists. [China] remained standing at the edge of the woods as the fireball rose up and lit the sky like a new sun. It melted the hard earth, melted the metal derrick until it was nothing but golden flux on the ground. She shielded her eyes from the fiery glare. (185-186)
The rage coming deep from the center of the earth echoes the rage that the Indian characters in the novel feel towards the exploitative lust of the entrepreneurial Anglos. However, even as Mother Earth and the Native peoples in Watona try to ward off the advances of colonial practices and exploitative schemes, the force of capitalism appears unstoppable as it uses the structures of the law to bend and twist its mandates in the service of profit.

2.2. Mapping money and legislating life: physical and psychological violence

The law is indeed a powerful mechanism that governs the life of the inhabitants of Watona, a space presented in the novel as a “limbo between the worlds” (6), a “magnet of evil” (7), a buffer zone between Anglo encroachment and the mountain settlement of the Hill Indians. The town represents a space where claim to the land is contested, a border space where the inexorable advance of capitalism tears the land apart. Set in the heart of Indian Territory, the place “where every outlaw and crook used to hole up and be safe from the law” (52), the space is now populated by “newer kinds of thieves than had been visible before, and these thieves wore fine suits, diamond stickpins, and buffed their fingernails” (40). These new kinds of thieves go around flying progress as their banner, wielding the law as their weapon, and using federal detachment from the happenings on Indian land as their shield. Indeed, cloaked in the trappings of legal entrepreneurship and modernization, the well-suited thieves make a profit out of buying and stealing Indian land (52).

The struggle over the acquisition and exploitation of Indian land finds its most poignant expression in the geological maps of the Territory that appear throughout the novel. These geologists’ maps, commissioned by the Anglo masterminds behind the plots to dispossess Native peoples and exploit the reservation’s natural resources, render the land’s potential for profit in different ways: they delineate the ownership of land allotments and they also speculate as to the
location of oil pools beneath the reservation. For the Native inhabitants of Watona the maps do not represent economic opportunities so much as they represent a chart of violence. For Belle Graycloud, for example, the map hanging from the Sheriff’s office equals a graphic representation of the doom of her people: “It wasn’t just the pictures of wanted men on the wall” that disturbed Belle, “but the geologist’s yellowed maps of the Oklahoma Indian Territory with their estimates of where oil might exist. Like prophecies, they were, like divining where one black stench of oil might flow into another” (145). She reads the map as prophesizing the direction that the oil-hungry entrepreneurs in Indian Country will take in violating the land and any person standing in their way. In this sense, these mapped prophecies echo the omen that opens the novel as the Blue River tells Lila Blanket, river prophet, that the Hill Indians need to send someone to town to learn the laws and the ways of the Anglos to ensure the survival of their people. Both the Blue River and the geologists’ maps prophesize the danger that white encroachment poses for the Native inhabitants of Indian Territory. Similarly, for the keeper of the fire, dreamer, and water diviner Michael Horse the maps indicating land ownership represent a guide that might help predict imminent violence against Indians (79). While Native peoples may use the geological maps as a way to predict who is in imminent danger given their allotments, for unscrupulous men set on seizing profit at whatever the cost the maps are tools to generate targets for their economic schemes.

The use of geological maps by Anglos in the novel represents the intersection between the legal apparatus that governs land and oil transactions in Indian Country and schemes for moneymaking. The federal government divided the land of the Osage into allotments as a result from the implementation of the Dawes Act in 1906, mapping out a division of land previously unified. As the narrator in Mean Spirit reflects, “the act that offered allotments to Indians, the
Dawes Act, seemed generous at first glance so only a very few people realized how much they were being tricked, since numerous tracts of unclaimed land became open property for white settlers, homesteaders, and ranchers” (8). Legally opening the land to white settlement allows Anglos to purchase tracts of land on the reservation. In addition, the discovery of oil in the Territory functions as a beacon for many speculators and entrepreneurs such as John Hale, oilman and exploitation ringleader, who uses the maps to strategize about his business investments:

Every quarter, when Indians were paid their oil royalties, most found themselves still in debt, owing the stores, the court-assigned legal guardians, and some of them obligated to bookies and bootleggers. That meant they’d sell off a few more acres of land and Hale was always ready with a quick offer and fast cash. A geologist had mapped out the underground for Hale and a few other men. The maps pictured the locations of oil pools. If he could just keep going a little while longer, Hale was certain he could make his fortune in oil. (54)

Whether waiting to take advantage of the Indians’ need for liquid assets after payment time or scheming to acquire the lands that promise to yield the most oil, Hale unscrupulously uses maps as a tool that allows him to tap into profit regardless of the consequences. The geologists’ maps echo the five hundred year map framing Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*: they map the profit to be made from the land while implicitly charting the violence that will enable the profit-making ventures. Hale also uses a legal system designed to exploit American Indians to trick the people of Watona. Moses and Belle Graycloud experience his cunning first hand as they see the boundary lines change in front of their eyes as Hale expands his lease of their land to include access to the creek for the cattle he sets out to pasture there (305). As they go to the Indian Agency to figure out how this could have happened, the administrator of the BIA tells them

“Yes,” he said. “We leased out some of more of your land.” He got up, turned his back, and put some papers in a stack. Then he glanced toward them, swallowed, and said quietly, “So sorry, Belle, Moses. It’s not me doing it. It’s not even the leasers. It’s what is legal.”
Belle sat down. “Why is it that so many crimes are backed up by your laws?” The man turned to his desk. He met her eyes. “I don’t know.” (305)

Indeed, many of the abuses mapped in Watona seem to be backed by the law and the federal policies enforced by the BIA. Reflecting on the implication of the legal system in this way, Hogan brings attention to the legal backing of exploitative entrepreneurship, which depends on the systematic disenfranchisement of the Native population. The clearest example of the structural legal abuse comes in the form of the competency commissions created by the federal government to decide whether Indians are capable of managing their own affairs.

Following the Burke Act in 1906, an amendment to the Dawes Act, the federal government created a series of competency commissions to issue fee simple patents to determine the land ownership of Indians. While the Dawes Act divided Indian reservations into individual allotments to be claimed by tribal members or to be sold as surplus land, exponentially multiplying the borders within the sovereign space of Indian nations, the government nonetheless held onto the title of the land in trust for a period of twenty-five years “to protect the Indian while he learned to support himself” (McDonnell 21). After passing the Burke Act, which reaffirmed federal trust over land, the secretary of interior gained “the authority to prematurely issue fee patents to so-called competent Indian allottees when the secretary determined that they were capable of ‘managing their own affairs’” (Deloria and Wilkins 170). The competency commissions, then, were in charge of determining who could manage their own affairs and who could not—their rationale to make such decisions, however, was mutable and had little to do with actual intellectual or financial competence.

In Mean Spirit, Hogan presents the reach of the competency commissions and their power over the lives of Native people when the officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs invalidate Moses Graycloud’s certificate of competency. One payment day, Moses goes to the Agency to
receive his annuity and he only receives ten percent of what is due to him. When he asks for the rest of his money, the BIA worker tells him “‘they changed the regulations … You’re a full-blood Indian, Graycloud. According to the rolls here.’ He pointed at the piece of paper. ‘Full bloods only get part of their money. You’re getting ten per today’” (60-61). Even though the official justification for the change in policy is not explicit, the exchange that follows between the BIA workers points to the reasons behind it: one of the officials tells the other “‘Hell, some of them buy three cars. We don’t even have that kind of money, and we’re Americans’” (61). The implicit distinction here between competence and incompetence appears tied to issues of nationality (most American Indians did not have access to American citizenship until the Citizenship Act in 1921), of perceived racial superiority on the part of the Bureau workers, and of mainstream understandings of rational and wasteful spending patterns. The BIA workers can only understand the alleged extravagance of an Indian buying three cars on the reservation as a mismanagement of funds that justifies the exercise of federal control over Indian assets and money. Moses, “sound[ing] reason[able]” and not letting “an ounce of the anger he felt filte[r] into his voice” brings attention to the shift in policy and tells the agents

“In the spring you told us our people with white blood only received part of their money since they are part white. And not entitled. Now you are saying that we full-bloods get only part of our money since someone we never see believes that we mismanage it? The government is doing this, right?”... “Is that right?” ... “If you carry on that way, Mr. Graycloud, the judge will declare you an incompetent.” (61-62)

The BIA workers take Moses’s restrained line of questioning in the only way they are equipped to take an Indian speaking—as a threat. Tellingly, the counter-threat they activate in return exposes the competency commission as a tool of control over the Native population, a weapon to keep Indians compliant and dependent on the goodwill of the federal agents. The effectiveness of this strategy is patent in the novel as the other Indians witnessing this exchange think they
had heard this argument and knew it by heart. Sometimes there was even a grain of truth to it, but no one thought it should matter how they spent their money. They knew only that the courts used the argument against them, assuming they were like children and without a nickel’s worth of intelligence. (61)

The ways the legal system is stacked against Native interests in Indian Territory is not lost to the characters who know it is a “smart thing to keep silent on the affairs and regulations of Washington, to be still and as invisible as possible. They might be cheated, but they still had life, and until only recently, even that was not guaranteed under the American laws, so they remained trapped, silent, and wary” (63). Surrounded by a legal system firmly anchored in policies designed with the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples in mind, the Indians in the novel navigate many dangers that put their lives at stake.

The competency commission not only acts as a control mechanism over the Native population that affects Indians’ legal status and cash flow; its rulings also set in motion chain reactions that have serious consequences in the lives of the people of Watona. As Terry P. Wilson explains in his history of Osage oil, the money fever produced by the oil royalties in Osage County had the government officials and the collection of speculators and entrepreneurs on the reservation working together to maximize profit:

So eager were white businessmen to gain their part of the Osage bounty that they tried to ensure their profits in advance. Agency traders and Kansas merchants waited for the Indians to receive their money and hand it over to satisfy debts accrued since the previous quarter’s payment. … Later it was discovered that some government employees regularly made loans to members of the tribe, redeemable on payment days, at the exorbitant interest rate of 24 percent. Many Osage were even deprived of handling their cash themselves as the agency distributors parceled out their shares directly to the growing hosts of creditors. (50)

With so many interested parties converging on the exploitation of one pool of resources, Indians were caught in the middle of a web of exploitation and deception. *Mean Spirit* mirrors the bind of Native peoples as it delves into the consequences of the rulings reached by the competency
commission. Well into the novel the narrator points out how “that spring, nearly all of the full-blood Indians were deemed incompetent by the court’s competency commission. Mixed-bloods, who were considered to be competent, were already disqualified from receiving full payments because of their white blood” (241). Not only are Indian peoples deemed incompetent to manage their own affairs, but also they are assigned federally mandated legal guardians to administer their money and resources (62), further depriving them of control over their assets and their autonomy. Hogan makes patent this insidious network of disenfranchisement as she exposes how the competency claims lead to different insurance scams that end up in a wave of crime and murder.

The legal disempowerment of Native peoples in Watona constitutes the main factor in determining their fate in the hands of Anglo businessmen and oil barons. Even if Indians are deemed competent, the filtering process of receiving their annuities and royalties through the federal agency evacuates their control over projected and actual incomes, especially since the federal agents take it upon themselves to settle their debts to white creditors before releasing any left over money to the Indian owners. This restriction of cash flow together with the extension of generous lines of credit on the part of the white entrepreneurs counting on royalty payouts results in a shortage of liquid assets that throws Native landowners into a cycle of continual debt. Taking advantage of such situations, oil baron and entrepreneur John Hale sets up a series of schemes designed to benefit from the Indians’ circumstances. As we have seen before, Hale uses the shortage of money to settle debts as an opportunity to buy land that would not be on the market otherwise. In addition to real estate speculation, Hale also comes up with devious strategies that grant him relatively quick access to Indian resources: murdering Indians to consolidate landownerships and taking out insurance policies to collect debt in the long run—or
in the short one, as it happens. Regardless of the legal status of Indians, then, land ownership and
the potential of oil pools underneath the land put Natives in imminent danger in the novel.

Taking out insurance policies on wealthy Indians becomes one of the legal avenues Hale
pursues to profit from the oil boom in Watona—that is, if it were not for the subsequent murders
he orchestrates, totaling at least seventeen in half a year (39). He pays attention to the legal
situation of Indian landowners, works to get them in debt, and then preys on them by activating
highly organized schemes like the one he lays on Walker. Banking on the legal barriers that
separate Walker from his own capital, Hale presents Walker with a seemingly beneficial
proposition:

Walker owed Hale for three breeding horses and some cattle, but because Walker
was a full-blood Indian and did not receive the full amount of his annuity, he
couldn’t pay off the debt. Hale, who’d arrived in town to order new drilling
equipment, on hearing that Walker was broke, came up with the idea of taking out
a life insurance policy on Walker. That way, he told the older man, he could
collect later when Walker
died, and he’d call it even for now. Walker thought it
was an excellent arrangement and he signed the agreement with Hale, and since
the policy required a physical examination, he accompanied him to the doctor’s
office. (65)

The ostensibly beneficial agreement between Hale and Walker that would allow the latter to
expunge his debt in death appears like a long-term solution to a short-term problem for Walker.
Odd as it may seem, it might have been a harmless solution if Hale had not had other plans for
him. However, once the policy is signed and the doctor certifies that Walker is “strong as a
horse” (65) Hale starts to plot his murder. Enlisting the help of Mardy, a young white man, Hale
relies on social stereotypes of Indians as drunken souls prone to suicide to justify his actions and
to coat the murder with a veneer of social legibility. He tells Mardy that Walker is suicidal and
that “they had to rush … before the man committed suicide and invalidated the insurance policy.
It wasn’t really murder, Hale convinced the rosy-cheeked young man, since it was just a matter
of time before he was going to kill himself anyway” (96). Using these racial stereotypes Hale manipulates the culturally primed Mardy into committing what he later equates to an act of “kindness to the poor unhappy Indian who wanted so much to die and be put out of his unhappy, lonely life. ‘After all,’ Hale said to Mardy, ‘Poor Walker has nothing to live for in all the world but a good swig of whiskey now and then’” (96). The weight of the racial stereotypes and the social discourse about how unfit Indians are for modern life seems to be enough to persuade Mardy into joining Hale’s criminal enterprise. The only white person in the novel suspecting Hale of foul play is Doctor Black, the physician who administers Walker’s medical checkup. Black starts to see a pattern between the alleged suicides of otherwise healthy Indian men and the insurance policies taken on their lives:

He looked at Hale, then looked out the window at the crowds of people on the busy street, the fast business of oil money changing hands, hawkers selling Indian people useless baubles, and white men collecting on their debts. He didn’t like any of it. He’d written a letter to Washington. The last two Indians who died had insurance policies. One of them named Hale as beneficiary. And Hale had a lien on the property of the other one. But in DC they’d told him there wasn’t enough evidence. And it was outside their jurisdiction. (66)

Doctor Black puts two and two together and suspects that the series of suicides are indeed murders designed to pay off through insurance policies. Even though he takes action to alert the authorities, he does so to no avail since Washington’s red tape and jurisdictional wars keep the problem conveniently out of reach. As doctor Black explains to Reverend Billy at one point, “In any other time or place” an oilman taking out a life-insurance policy on an Indian landowner “would sound strange, I should say. But here, business is business. I don’t understand it. It’s a different kind of law at work here. Nothing’s wrong when cash is at stake” (155). Indeed, Osage County suffers from the highly orchestrated negligence of a government wishing the problems did not exist in the first place and ignoring them into oblivion. The most poignant summation of
this way of thinking comes from Mardy as a witness for the defense in the murder trial that
brings the novel to a close:

[Mardy] simplified the war against the dark-skinned people: they were in the way of progress. Everyone needed the land, the oil, the beef-fattening grass, and the water, and all was fair, he told them. “We have to go on, as a race. I mean.” He looked earnestly at the eyes of the others. “It’s like clearing the land for your farm, or hunting the food you eat. They shoot deer, don’t they? Well, maybe you would call that a plot,” he said, “or call it murder, but here it’s just survival.” (327)

Equating the exploitation of resources to modernization, the murder of Native peoples to hunting, and the pilfering of wealth to racial advancement, Mardy makes a rhetorical appeal that can only convince those who believe Indians are subhuman elements who belong in the past and have no claim to their present or the resources that are rightfully theirs.

2.3. When marriage becomes the fastest route to riches: gender violence

Echoing the ideological premises that imbue Mardy’s rhetoric during the trial, Hogan presents Anglo perspectives on Native people as natural resources firmly fixed in the entrepreneurial radar. The novel portrays Indian women living under siege, becoming targets for murder plots because of the ways the law genders lineage and structures the inheritance of headrights and allotments. In line with the timber cutting, the oil drilling, and the killing of the eagles, white men reduce Indian women to natural resources ready to be exploited, to “business investments. Another white man, when asked what he did for a living, said by way of an answer that he’d married an Osage woman, and everyone who listened understood what that meant, that he didn’t work; he lived off her money” (34). Women, in this economy of exploitation and mercantilism, become an exploitable resource that can be trafficked in and disposed of whenever it is no longer useful for the capitalist machine.
The ideology that supports the commodification of women through marriage proposals and schemes appears in its most striking form in the letters sent to the Indian agent in Watona, echoing historical occurrences in Osage County. One such letter opens up with “I am a young man with good habits and none of the bad, with several thousand dollars, and want a good Indian girl for a wife. I am sober, honest industrious man and stand well in my community” (34). While the letter writer presents himself as an outstanding citizen of good nature the continuation of the letter offers a glimpse of the deprecatory racial ideology underlying his business proposition: “I want a woman between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age, not a full blood, but prefer one as near white as possible” (34). While marrying an Indian woman figures as a promising business investment, marrying a white-looking Indian brings with it the bonus of social palatability for the wannabe Anglo investor. The potential profit to be derived from the marriage transaction trumps the disparaging racial discourse that shapes the writer’s ideology. After all, if he marries an Osage woman “He doesn’t need a business. He’s got an Indian wife” (193).

Native peoples’ access to subsurface mineral rights and land allotments on the reservation puts them in the crosshairs of different con artists and fortune hunters. After murder mastermind Hale has Grace Blanket killed, a “man claimed he was Grace’s legal husband. The agency had tracked down a justice of the peace who signed the papers. The woman didn’t match Grace’s description. He was just one of many fortune-hunters” (144-145). The presentation of con artists trying to pass off as the legal husbands of dead Indian women points to the ideological construction of Native women as resources to be exploited either in life or in death—echoing the trafficking of Grace’s remains considered in the previous section. In a similar way, wealthy Native men also become opportunities for the economic advancement of white women and for the men they are linked to through family ties and circumstance. During John Stink’s funeral in
the novel, the narrator explains “there was a rumor that the old man was a millionaire, and in fact, so many newspapers carried the tale of his money that John Stink’s legal guardian received hundreds of letters with offers of marriage from women all over the country” (99). The media exposure of Indian oil wealth and perceived reckless spending contributes to setting up Native peoples as attractive targets on the sights of white businessmen, fortune-hunters, and other opportunists.

In addition to media exposure, the legal system’s determination of headrights through marriage and reproduction contributes as well to luring profit-seekers into the picture. As the heir to her mother’s money and property, Nola becomes the wealthiest woman in Osage County and this puts her in immediate danger. The Indian agents place her under legal guardianship to manage her estate, cutting her off from her fortune and resources. Aware of the ways the legal system and the profit-lust of white entrepreneurs condition the chances of survival in Watona, Nola decides to marry her legal guardian’s son to make the best of her chances. She resigns herself to marrying young Will, thinking that “it was the times, really, with headrights and claims to land multiplying with the birth of a child, and white men marrying Indian women to possess their wife’s and children’s allotments of land” (165) that dictated her choices at that moment. Nola fears for her life but manages to find a respite from the threat while she is pregnant. Nola “was saved by her pregnancy, by the fact that she was now worth two headrights, two royalty payments, two allotments of land” (321). As a pregnant woman, she not only gives life to progeny but also multiplies headrights and access to the tribe’s natural resources, making her a valuable asset while she is alive. Mardy’s testimony in the murder trials reveals the complex relation between life, death, schemes, murder, and exploitation as he concedes that killing both parties in an Indian marriage is not a good idea since one spouse needs to be able to inherit from
the other: “Hale could not kill both Benoit and Sara because the money had to go through Benoit. They were certain the sheriff would later find a way to marry Lettie. Then they could claim the money through her” (351). While Hale and his accomplices kill Sara by blowing up the house with her in it, they need Benoit to inherit Sara’s money as her legal husband: then, Benoit can marry Lettie and Hale and company can kill Benoit and orchestrate a marriage between Lettie and Sheriff Gold, funneling the money in the direction of their interests. Thus, Hale and his accomplices work within the law (marriages, leases, insurance policies) and outside the law (murders) to garner resources that will ensure them large profit margins.

Through the murder plots involving inheritances and marriage, insurance schemes that end in murder, leasing of lands through the Indian Agency, killing of eagles, trafficking in human remains, and the overall capitalist circus around the oil drilling on reservation land, *Mean Spirit* makes patent the implication of the legal structures in the cycles of violence portrayed in the novel. The intersection between what the law allows and how the Anglo entrepreneurs work the law to their advantage highlights the multifaceted infliction of violence on the Native population in Indian Territory. Even though the discovery of oil underneath the reservation benefits some of the Native population in Watona financially, the exploitative economies built around the oil boom place Indians at risk: since the federal government imposes the legal structures, Indian people occupy a space of vulnerability most clearly evidenced by the competency commissions and their power over Native access to resources. This vulnerable space created by an unbridled pursuit of profit leaves the Indigenous population without legal recourse to fight the different waves of violence that come their way. As a result, Indians become acceptable losses—expected collateral damage in the path of progress that the oil industry represents. The systematic disenfranchisement of the Native population in the novel reveals how violence regulates the
reservation as a border space. Since the borders around the reservation signify a change in legal structures, a space with blurred jurisdiction guidelines, and an opportunity to profit from tacit exploitation of people and resources under the law, the borders around Osage County both enforce and allow for economies of violence and abuse.

Hogan’s fictionalization of historical events renders the borderlands as spaces where the power struggles of different economic structures create a legal system that breeds violence and is in turn maintained and regulated by violence. While *Mean Spirit* underscores events toward the beginning of the twentieth century, similar examples of systemic disenfranchisement and legal lawlessness take place at the end of the century: in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood*, the fictionalized portrayal of the ring of violence surrounding young brown women lured to the border by the promise of economic advancement in the assembly plants echoes the structures of exploitation in *Mean Spirit*. The gender violence in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century finds its continuation and exponential growth in the Juárez of the 1990s. While white men in Hogan’s novel consider Indian women tradable commodities, white men in *Desert Blood* use the bodies of poor brown women as props for the development of their snuff film industry.

3. **Making a killing: contextualizing Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood***

In her 2005 novel *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba fictionalizes the massive killings of young brown women in Ciudad Juárez since the early 1990s. Set in 1998, the novel unveils and brings attention to the murders and brutal mutilations of *muchachas del sur* that have skyrocketed in the US-Mexico border since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. Amidst the explosion of neoliberal frenzy and corporate control of the border landscape, Ivon Villa (protagonist of the novel and impromptu criminal investigator of this murder mystery) discovers for the reader a wave of violence against women of epidemic proportions that has little
reverberation in the English-speaking world, even though it takes place at its front door. She reports the gruesome details of young women raped, brutally mutilated, viciously abused, killed and left to rot in the desert and other public places. After her little sister Irene is kidnapped in Juárez, the El Paso native and Gender and Women Studies professor-turned-sleuth Ivon leaves no stone unturned to find her sister. In the process, she uncovers a complex web of interconnected power players (Border Patrol officials, Mexican Juniors, federal state police officers, unscrupulous US entrepreneurs, media types, and low level thugs) dedicated to the production and online distribution of snuff films. Under the moniker “Lone Ranger Productions,” the film crew kidnaps brown girls they call “pennies” and north-of-the-border girls they call “nickels” to torture and kill them on camera while streaming the snuff films online for an international audience. The way the snuff film gang refers to the young women as racialized low denomination coins reflects the space these young women occupy in the border economy: as pocket change they are the expendable, easily replaceable, meaningless collateral damage of the assembly plant industry—the assembly workers who are disassembled for profit so far from God, so close to the free-tariff world.

While the US-Mexico border has been a contested site since its inception, a low-intensity conflict zone (Dunn 19) that bears witness to the implosion of the Third World into the First (Saldívar 8), the advent of neoliberalism has amplified the area’s social instability. The emphasis on private enterprise, free trade, open markets, and globalization gaining primacy at the end of the twentieth century brings with it an ideological shift that places the burden of social responsibility on the individual and subsumes social relations under a market logic transposing social accountability from governments to corporations. The implementation of NAFTA in January 1994 and the subsequent growth of assembly plants along the US-Mexico border present

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75 The sons of assembly plant moguls in Mexico are typically called Juniors.
a crude example of the impact that neoliberal economic policies have on the everyday lives of
the people they exploit. The *maquiladoras* along the border entail the promise of economic
advancement for disenfranchised populations in their demand for cheap labor. The possibility of
social and economic advancement, however, comes at the expense of the temporary suspension
of civil and labor rights for the workers who give their lives to the materialization of profit, since
neoliberal practices mute the language of civil rights with the rhetoric of entrepreneurial
engagement and economic gain. The overwhelmingly female worker population has to endure
not only deplorable working conditions in the assembly plants, but also a climate of widespread
violence against women in the place they now call home.

*Desert Blood* shows how young girls from rural Mexico and beyond, arriving in border
towns to work in the twin plant industry, occupy the most vulnerable position in the ring of
capitalist exploitation energizing the *maquilas*. Lured to the border by the promise of social and
economic advancement, *las muchachas del sur* arrive at Ciudad Juárez to find a for-profit
machine that has no concern for meeting the infrastructural needs of its workforce. As the
character of Father Francis, organizer of an El Paso NGO named *Contra el Silencio* that
organizes *rastreos*—grid searches—in the desert to look for the bodies of disappeared women,
explains to a journalist,

people don’t migrate north to cross the border, anymore. The jobs are here, now, in Juárez, at one of the three hundred *maquiladoras* they’ve built all over the city. Young women are lured here in droves, and yet the city cannot accommodate
them all. There’s no subsidized housing for them, so they have to live in these
godforsaken shantytowns hours away from their jobs, and their lives are in constant danger. That poor child we found this morning, she’s a victim of that infrastructure, do you see? She probably came here hoping to make a good life for herself, hoping to make money to send back home to whatever village she came from, and now she’s here, with the buzzards. The twin plant industry has got to take responsibility for the havoc they’re wreaking on this border. It’s as simple
and as complicated as that. (253)
Migrant young women occupy the most vulnerable position because more often than not they have no family in the area, no support group, no economic resources, no representation, and no voice. This position makes them an easy target for all kinds of predators that go unpunished given the interconnectedness of all social strata in the pursuit of profit in that economic system (Border Patrol officials, Mexican Juniors, *federales*, US entrepreneurs, media types, and garden variety thugs). Young brown women have little recourse in front of an organized web of unscrupulous people who see them as a tool of their trade, raw material for their entrepreneurial schemes, or as an outlet for their rage. As scholar and activist Rosa Linda Fregoso reflects,

> the various *feminicides* in Mexico make evident the exercise of power across the social spectrum: the power of the state over civil society; the rich over the poor; the white elite over racialized people; the old over the young; men over women. It is a novel kind of “dirty war,” one waged by multiple forces against disposable female bodies. (2)

The fictionalized events of the novel show how the vulnerability stemming from the lack of infrastructure in the border provides a breeding ground for exploitation and abuse. In a place where the struggle for economic profit generates violence as a mechanism for control and enforcement of power, young women live under siege. As law professor and activist Elvia Arriola conceptualizes the actual situation of the women working in the assembly plants, the patterns described by the workers in accounts of their experiences in the *maquiladoras* amount to what she terms “fatal indifference” on the part of the capitalist force, “a systematic, structural disregard by corporations and their agents for the humanity of the laborer” (33), since “the phenomenon of the Juárez murders begins with free-trade laws’ licensing of a form of corporate activity that exploits the physical and spiritual strength of a poor country’s people” (33). Emphasizing the culpability of the capitalist machine in the creation of a no man’s land, Arriola points to the structure of the exploitation that takes place along the border.
The implication of the legal system in the creation of a buffer zone of lawlessness and corporate profit between the US and Mexico in Gaspar de Alba’s novel echoes the structural disenfranchisement of Native peoples, and Native women in particular, in Oklahoma in Hogan’s *Mean Spirit*. In the same way that federal provisions tangle Indians in a net of regulations that limit their agency and endanger their very survival in Hogan’s novel, young brown women stand at the mercy of profit-seeking businessmen in *Desert Blood* without the enforcement of laws that could protect their labor practices and their working environments—they suffer the fatal indifference of the nations that profit from their labor and of the national borders that create a space for such disenfranchisement.

3.1. **Raising consciousness and humanizing the victims: Ivon Villa’s journey into structural violence**

The impetus behind Gaspar de Alba’s murder mystery is to reach the widest audience possible to raise awareness about the epidemic of killings and “break the silence on the US side of the border” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 6). Using her first-hand knowledge of the geographical space and her research, Gaspar de Alba writes a novel that joins the ranks of other Freirian projects of conscientização, of creating a critical consciousness to battle the culture of silence that surrounds the killings. Among these projects designed to raise critical awareness and give a voice to the dispossessed we also find scholarly and activist conferences such as the Burials at the Border conference in 1999 at New Mexico State University, the Maquiladora Murders, Or, Who Is Killing the Women of Juárez? conference in 2002 at UCLA, research and scholarship by Rosa-Linda Fregoso, Cynthia Bejarano, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Elvia Arriola, and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba among others, films and documentaries such as Lourdes Portillo’s “Señorita Extraviada” or Enrique Murillo’s “Las Muertas de Juárez,” the poetry of
Marjorie Agosín, and songs and other artistic productions by artists ranging from Tori Amos to Alma López and Coco Fusco. All these different cultural expressions come together with the work of various NGOs on both sides of the border to create grassroots movements that fight for recognition, justice, and an end to the brutal gender assaults that take place at our front door. In this sense, the activist work of Gaspar de Alba parallels the form of activism that Hogan puts into motion in her novels: by fictionalizing historical events, both writers raise awareness about the histories of violence that mainstream narratives of the nation work to erase. By basing their novels on historical events, Hogan and Gaspar de Alba encourage a critical consciousness in their readership that asks readers to question the inclusiveness of experience in commonplace narratives of Americanization and nation building. In doing so, Gaspar de Alba and Hogan reclaim the histories of Native peoples and women of color, histories discarded by mainstream narratives of the nation so that they never have the chance to make it into the popular consciousness.

In its effort to reach a wide audience and to raise consciousness about the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, *Desert Blood* presents a protagonist its audience might empathize with. Ivon Villa is a college professor who has never heard about the murders of young women on the border until she reads an article about them in *Ms.* magazine on her way to El Paso. Disturbed by her lack of knowledge about the epidemic of murders, Ivon’s trajectory of discovery mirrors the potential discovery of the reader: from the shock of learning about the murders, to the desire to research the phenomenon, to the struggle to connect the dots and understand how such a thing can possibly continue to happen with impunity. After reading *Ms.* magazine’s article about the killings, on the plane, Ivon looks at the picture that accompanies it—the half-buried body of a girl in the sand—and muses “a dead woman’s body. 106 dead brown women. She couldn’t figure
out what upset her most: the crimes themselves or the fact that, as a native of that very border, she didn’t know a thing about them until just now” (3). Troubled by her ignorance about an issue that seems impossible to ignore, Ivon starts to consider the ramifications of the lack of publicity for the murders and tries to understand how she could have been oblivious to it. She confronts her cousin Ximena, a social worker, telling her

“I didn’t know about all the women being raped and killed in Juárez. Why didn’t you tell me about it? I had to read about it in Ms. magazine. These crimes were already happening in 1996, when I was here last, and you didn’t say anything about it then, either. I’m all ignorant about this shit.”

“Hell, any time you come to town it’s like a doctor’s visit, prima. You’re in and out the door, practically, because you’re so done with this place. I didn’t think it mattered to you.”

… “You still should’ve said something,” Ivon insisted. “It’s not even on the news.” (22-23)

While Ivon appears dumbfounded by her ignorance and the lack of exposure that the epidemic of killings has in the media, Ximena considers it a local issue of concern only to residents of the area. She is happy to hear that Ms. magazine is running a story about the killings and tells Ivon that “other than those stupid little newswires they publish in the El Paso Times, nobody’s interested. People think of it as Juárez news, not El Paso news, like the two cities weren’t fucking Siamese twins” (23). Ximena’s observations about the artificial distinctions in the media between the twin cities emphasize how different these media representations are from the lived experience of the people who live there: while the press ignores the issue for the most part under the pretense that it is a south of the border issue, the inhabitants of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez know that a clear-cut distinction between the issues north and south of the border is a media illusion. The selective attention the media pays to the epidemic of murders in Ciudad Juárez and the sensationalized news about them echo the attention of the press to the so-called reckless
spending of rich Indians rather than to the murders as the Reign of Terror develops in Oklahoma in Hogan’s *Mean Spirit*.

The only media outlet in the novel that works to spread information about the murders is a TV show for Channel 33, *Mujeres sin Fronteras*, spearheaded by Rubí Reyna, a graduate in journalism from the University of Texas El Paso. Daughter of a transportation businessman wielding a certain amount of social and economic power, Rubí convinces the TV station to let her produce a talk show for women, and the managers agree, “thinking it would be a cooking and fashion show that would help them draw advertising to the channel, but Rubí Reyna had another idea” (318). Indeed, Rubí “convinced them that what Juárez needed was a show that focused on professional women and that they could use the show to inform women about the murders and at the same time use the murders to raise the ratings of the show” (318), hoping to use the public platform as a channel to disseminate information about the rampant cases of gender violence in the borderlands. The exposure of the epidemic of murders humanizes the victims and also debunks common media misconceptions that portray the victims of gender violence as loose women putting themselves at risk (319), as sexually promiscuous women willingly giving their bodies to men for pleasure, as “‘maquí-locas,’ assumed to be maquiladora workers living *la vida loca, or una vida doble,* of a border metropolis, coded language for prostitution” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 3). In the novel Ivon thinks “no wonder these crimes haven’t been solved ... From the prostitutes to the police, everyone thinks it’s just about sex, it’s about the girls going off with men, *por allí*” (186). The widespread social denigration of women, together with their readily accepted victimization when subject to gendered violence in a patriarchal society, contribute to the culture of silence surrounding the killings in Juárez and El Paso, making the public voice offered by *Mujeres sin Fronteras* all the more valuable.
As the plot of the novel moves on, Ivon comes in contact with the nasty world of sex exploitation and gendered violence through the kidnapping of her baby sister Irene. The kidnapping of Irene, an El Paso inhabitant, also helps to debunk the idea that all the victims of gendered violence on the border are young women working in the assembly plants. The disappearance of her baby sister throws Ivon into an investigative frenzy: as a Gender and Women Studies professor with training in cultural studies (118), Ivon puts her research eye to the task of understanding the cultural and historical context that produces the conditions necessary for the killings and mutilations to go on with impunity, hoping to find clues as to who orchestrates the kidnappings and murders that plague the border space. Ivon puts into conversation the political changes in Mexico, the relation between the ruling government in Mexico and the maquila moguls, the expropriation of land to make room for assembly plants, the use of the Sierra Blanca as a nuclear dumping site, the relation between NAFTA agreements and the increased funding for the Border Patrol in the US, the wars of succession after a Juárez-cartel druglord dies, the protests on both sides of the border against violence directed at undocumented immigrants, the testing of air defense missiles in White Sands, and the high incidence of domestic abuse against women in Juárez (119) and still has no clear idea of what is going on or how all the pieces fit together. Sadly, even with the overload of information that Ivon gathers throughout the novel, neither she nor the reader gains a clear understanding of what is going on other than a sense of interconnection between economic policies, capitalist endeavors, multinational trade agreements, abject poverty, and structures of power. As Gaspar de Alba writes elsewhere, “nowadays we know too much, and yet we continue to know nothing” (Making a Killing 2). Even though research about the killings of young women is available, there is not much literature out there about who these young women are—as Marjorie Agosín’s poem makes
poignantly clear, “All we know about them/ is their death” (25). The attempt to understand how the young women being killed figure in the jigsaw puzzle of borderland economies in the novel helps humanize the victims and make them real:

Why were the bodies of one-hundred-thirty-nine hijas de Juárez rotting somewhere in the desert or the morgue? Who were they? Other than Irene and the other American girls, the others were called muchachas del sur, girls from the south: poor, young migrant women with dollar signs in their eyes and the American Dream of success and US citizenship fastened to their hearts with safety pins. Underpaid, sexually exploited, forced to live in hovels made of maquiladora scrap in the middle of the desert, their reproductive cycles under surveillance at the factories where they worked, the tragedy of their lives did not begin when their desecrated bodies were found in a deserted lot. The tragedy began as soon as they got jobs at the maquiladoras. (Desert Blood 331)

Telling the stories of the disappeared women and how they come to find themselves in this plight helps reclaim their subjectivities, their lives and their bodies from the desert and other public places where they are left to rot.

In the process of finding her sister (she eventually finds her almost dead and severely tortured), Ivon discovers different aspects about the material reality of the border. Following the lead of police officer McCuts, Ivon comes to a disturbing realization: the federal government uses El Paso as a dumping ground for sex offenders. McCuts has been recording the information about the relocation of sex offenders and has created a map that shows how

Missouri Street, running parallel to I-10, had row after row of halfway houses filled with registered rapists, child molesters, peeping Toms, and pimps. And downtown, in the streets closest to the bridge, … lived an entire neighborhood of habituals who could easily walk across the Santa Fe Bridge and ply their trade on poor young women in Juárez. (273)

The use of El Paso in the novel as a one-way-ticket destination for sex offenders highlights the borderlands’ position in the national imaginary: a no man’s land of blurred jurisdiction lines, a disposable space that can be forgotten in its liminality, an area where legal enforcement seems questionable and not bound to happen. Like the border space of the reservation in Hogan’s novel,
the US-Mexico border is governed by the same economic drive that mutes the legal structures and makes ample allowances for the people filling their coffers with the sacrifice of vulnerable subjects.

The more Ivon delves into the interconnection of the social, economic, and political structures in the ring of exploitation in the borderlands, the more she understands the structural nature of the problem. Ivon realizes that the violence against women as a phenomenon does not necessarily boil down to the simple question of who did it:

Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt policemen, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women, immigration officers protecting the homeland—what did it matter who killed them? This wasn’t a case of ‘whodunit,’ but rather of who was allowing these crimes to happen? Whose interests were being served? Who was covering it up? Who was profiting from the deaths of these women? (333)

Rather than focusing on the particular degenerates that do the actual killing, the novel directs our intellectual inquiries to the social, economic, and political structures that allow the murders. Only by questioning the structural premises that allow for a climate of hatred against women, violent poverty, and criminal impunity can we begin to understand how to address and redress a situation such as the one in Juárez. Ivon reaches the following conclusion:

That’s what it was, she realized. A huge malignant tumor of silence, meant to protect not the perpetrators, themselves, but the profit reaped by the handiwork of the perpetrators. A bilateral assembly line of perpetrators, from the actual agents of the crime to the law enforcement agents on both sides of the border to the agents that made binational immigration policy and trade agreements.

The cards fell so perfectly in place, it was almost nauseating. This thing implicated everyone. No wonder the crimes had not been solved, nor would they ever be solved until someone with much more power than she, with nothing to lose or to gain, brought this conspiracy out into the open. (335)

Realizing that economic opportunity, power, and legal agreements hold together the web of violence surrounding her in El Paso and Juárez, Ivon suspects that the problem can only be addressed at a structural level: in the same way that “this thing implicate[s] everyone,” the
solution to the problem must implicate everyone as well and must have the backing of a strong border structure able to exercise economic pressure to effect change.

3.2. Feminicidios as crimes against humanity: a human rights framework

As Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano show us in their edited volume *Terrorizing Women, Feminicide in the Américas* (2010), the killings of young brown women in Ciudad Juárez and in other cities along the US-Mexico border are not isolated incidents. Instead, this violence against women can be understood as a phenomenon that is linked to feminicides in other parts of Latin America and other parts of the world such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, or Sierra Leone. Following their lead, I understand the Juárez feminicidios in Gaspar de Alba’s novel as the result of gendered power structures that implicate both the state and the individual perpetrators, as the result of social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities, and as a “crime against humanity” in a human rights framework with the potential to establish a platform to fight against feminicidios at a structural level.

Marcela Lagarde y de los Rios, professor of sociology, anthropology, and feminist studies and member of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, puts forth the term “feminicides” rather than “femicides” to refer to the violations of women’s human rights (xv), building on the work of feminist theorists Diana Russell and Jill Radford. While the term “femicides” stands as the gendered counterpart to “homicides,” “feminicides” signifies an “extreme form of gender violence” that is able to occur because the authorities who are omissive, negligent, or acting in collusion with the assailants, perpetrate institutional violence against women by blocking their access to justice and thereby contributing to impunity. Feminicide entails a partial breakdown of the rule of law because the state is incapable of guaranteeing respect for women’s lives or human rights and because it is incapable of acting in keeping with the law and to uphold the law, to prosecute
and administer justice, and to prevent and eradicate the violence that causes it. Feminicide is a state crime. (xxiii)

Understanding feminicides as a crime against humanity, as genocide against women, opens the space for the creation of transnational feminist alliances that conceptualize violence against women as a weapon of terror, as an integral part of warfare that extends its reach beyond the end of armed conflicts and that requires “an alternative analytic concept … for mapping the hierarchies embedded in gender-based violence” (Fregoso and Bejarano 7). Discussing feminicides as a state crime is crucial in locating state accountability around gender-based crimes. The human rights approach implied by the use of “feminicide,” as Fregoso and Bejarano explain, “implicates both governments that violate human rights and private actors who perpetrate violations of human rights” (19). Gaspar de Alba’s novel, by tracing the web of interconnection between the government’s implication in the crimes of Juárez and El Paso (by omission, negligence, or collusion) and the individual actors that engineer the feminicides, highlights the need to think about these crimes structurally rather than as isolated occurrences.

When we focus on their structural aspect, on the patterns of exploitation and violent poverty that enable them, and on the international links to other examples of feminicidios across the globe, we start to break the culture of silence that surrounds the crimes and we can fight against them through international law in a discourse of human rights. As Ivon reflects at one point, “maybe if more people around here thought each one of these girls that disappears was their sister, they might be able to stop these crimes. But hey, if it’s not your sister, it’s not your problem, right?” (214). We need to overcome the fatal indifference that shrouds the epidemic killing of women both in the novel and in real life and work to fight against it through a platform of labor legislation and human rights that can exert the pressure needed to make a difference.
I understand the desire to raise a critical conscience in the reader as the driving force behind the novels of Hogan and Gaspar de Alba. In presenting a fictionalization of historical events belonging to different time periods in US history, the writers draw attention to specific moments that do not usually appear in mainstream narratives of the nation. These different moments capture violence as an intrinsic part of historical development; they show that regardless of the geographical location or the geopolitical configuration of borders, violence appears as a constitutive part in their creation and maintenance. Bringing to light the not-so-glamorous parts of national histories, Gaspar de Alba and Hogan reclaim the lived experiences of brown women and Native people as part of the history of the US, as what needs to be a constitutive part of our collective consciousness. To build more inclusive and comprehensive histories of the US as a nation, we must look for the stories that fall through the cracks in sanitized mainstream accounts of national genealogies: we need to learn to live with all of them in their glory, in their hurt, and in their irreconcilable contradiction to reach what Ned Blackhawk calls a “sense of shared civic culture” (293). The fictionalized accounts that Hogan and Gaspar de Alba present in their novels open the door to the kind of border stories that would otherwise be eclipsed in master narratives of the US, stories active in the cultural imaginary of some—stories that need to be present in the cultural imaginary of all.
Afterword

I have always been fascinated by ideas of national and cultural identity. Maybe it is because I am the Catalan daughter of a Spanish father and a German mother growing up in a small town in Cataluña where my foreign mother was affectionately considered a “foreigner” and my Spanish father was consider a stranger—and not in a nice way, since he represented all things locally considered Spanish and therefore oppressive and cultural supremacist. Maybe it is because I spent half the time answering the “where are you from?” questions with a “from here” as I was not phenotypically recognized as a Spaniard, but rather a foreigner. Growing up in a space where different cultures struggled for recognition and for control over the cultural discourse, questions of national identity and cultural identity have always been around me—often in contradiction, often catching me in the middle and demanding that I choose sides because apparently it is an either/or rather than this and that world.

As I started reading literary works by Chican@ and Native American authors, they resonated for me precisely because of the frequent disconnect between the protagonists and their cultural surroundings: the protagonists are often caught in the middle of national and cultural discourses that would have them choose sides (nationalism or assimilation) while they live in the impossible blurred space of in-between. The rigid ideological boundaries enforcing this kind of violence on subjects who occupy multiple national and cultural positions always seemed myopic to me—like a push to stay small and closed and untouched in a world bursting at the seams with difference and multiplicity and possibility. This is where I started thinking of borders as the space where ideological battles are most prominently fought and the space where ideas of the nation and culture tested and reified.
Another force that shapes this project comes from the classroom: teaching Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* to students in an “Introduction to Fiction” course for a Research I institution was important in understanding the cultural imaginary of the students in the class. They overwhelmingly understood the novel to take place in the distant past—they could not understand that the lives of agricultural workers it depicts are set in a contemporary framework: that such lives are led *today*. They understood what happens in the novel as a thing of the past, as part of a history that has no relationship to the present, a history that has no place in their sanitized history of the US. The students’ ahistorical engagement with literary representations and their limited recognition of contemporary situations underlines the need for the analysis in this project: raising awareness about the multiple histories that fall outside of a master narrative of the nation and thinking about how what my students consider the “distant past” has real life consequences for many people in the *present* remains one of the most powerful motivating forces behind my work.

It should be clear in the preceding chapters that I read Chican@ and Native American novels side by side to show how colonialism, the structures of oppression built into the making of the nation, and the ideological practices that culturally and legally enforce national belonging work in a similar fashion across the board. When one focuses only on Chican@ literature or only on American Indian literature it is easy for people to dismiss what you are saying as “the sad story of a group that doesn’t really belong in the US anyway.” When you look at these bodies of literature in tandem, however, the patterns seem to stand out more in their pervasiveness and cannot be denied. Putting them in conversation allows us to see how the mechanisms of erasure, of discipline, and of oppression, function systemically and structurally. Also, it makes a stronger point about how those narratives and histories that are often adjudicated to the past are indeed
present and shape the social structures in which we live. Instead of “dividing and conquer” by isolating timeframes I put them in conversation to show that they cannot be ignored if we are to understand what is happening socially both historically and today.

Borders provide an absolutely important starting point for reading American Indian and Chican@ literature in conversation: they represent the ideological battleground where campaigns over national belonging unfold, the space where the nation is made and remade, and the place where issues like citizenship, sovereignty, social and political access, language, and all the violence deployed for the defense of national discourses converge. As such, borders are central to an analysis of the overlapping histories of colonialism that shape contemporary Chican@ and Native American realities since “geography” and “land” are inevitable keywords used to process American Indian and Chican@ issues in the cultural imaginary.

This dissertation, then, has been an effort in mobilizing borders as a way of seeing and asking questions: while border theory is a complex and multifaceted field without unified methodological principles, I focus on the common denominators that bring together various critical perspectives under the rubric of border theory. Common denominators such as the concern with borders and the effects they have on the people they cross, the drive to recover and rewrite histories from perspectives traditionally pushed aside by master narratives of the nation, or the application of social justice frameworks to think about the structures of violence and dispossession that shape our everyday lives, provide a critical vantage point to establish a conversation between Chican@ and American Indian Studies. This way of looking allows us to examine colonialism and the ideologies that shape it, it helps to give voice to the histories and peoples who fall outside homogeneous national genealogies, and it brings to the forefront the violence inherent in processes of nation building. Taking colonialism as the common ground
between Native and Chican@ experiences positions borders and their surrounding ideologies as framing devices that can put these two literary traditions in conversation. Such a conversation opens the opportunity to establish a social and historical dialogue to interpret cultural representations of Indians and Chican@s in literary works.

The next step this project wishes to take is looking at the deployment of metaphorical borders, of ways of structuring social relations inherently based on national mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, in post-9/11 urban spaces. Putting Sherman Alexie’s Ten Little Indians (2003) in dialog with Helena María Viramontes’s Their Dogs Came With Them (2007), for example, would enable an exploration of how moments of national crisis are precisely when national identities need to be confirmed and strengthened, hence the rise of anti-immigrant discourses and American nativism to re-invigorate the lines of social inclusion and exclusion.

While most of the novels I analyze here take place in rural or small town settings, my argument here can easily be extended to show how the ideas about borders I take up here are applicable to other contexts as well.

In Their Dogs Came With Them, for example, Viramontes sets the story in contemporary East L.A. and reproduces the technologies of control associated with the US-Mexico border in an urban setting: a neighborhood is quarantined to contain an alleged epidemic of rabid dogs and the inhabitants of the neighborhood are subjected to border-like conditions, complete with checkpoints, papers, helicopters, floodlights, and curfews. The containment and control of a section of the city and its Chican@ inhabitants takes effect by banking on the behaviors learned from the US-Mexico border: the urban reproduction of the surveillance mechanisms of the border mobilizes an ideology easily recognizable by everyone, an ideology that seemingly keep people in their place. The reproduction of security borderlines in an urban space appears as a
critique of the long history of forceful social containment in the US, drawing attention to the mechanisms that allow the spatial regulation of given social groups. In this sense, the metaphorical reproduction of physical containment lines in the novel speaks to the long history of social containment and erasure in the US.

While Viramontes’s novel presents a physical enactment of metaphorical borders, the stories collected in Sherman Alexie’s *Ten Little Indians* speak to the internalization of metaphorical borders in terms of self-understanding and in terms of establishing relationships between people. *Ten Little Indians* presents nine stories in which the Native characters reflect and evoke both their internalization and their critical stance towards receive notions of being Indian and claiming a historical presence as Indians in an urban setting. The collection of stories explores issues of Native visibility and invisibility in urban spaces, the consequences of historical amnesia and historical erasure as a people, the politics of claiming historical trauma, and the social space allowed for Native peoples in contemporary urban settings. By representing the seeming oxymoron of the urban Indian in the stories, Alexie reclaims a social space for Native people that is negated and regulated through the deployment of internalized notions of metaphorical borders.

The continuation of my project, then, expands the notion of borders narrowly conceived as geopolitical lines that affect people only in certain geographies. It intends to explore the notion of metaphorical borders to show how the effects of the border in specific geopolitical locations translate into ideological premises that seep through the national imaginary and are then deployed in other contexts removed from national boundaries. Even though its focus remains local, my project emphasizes the transnational aspect of comparative work in American Indian and Chican@ Studies since the multiplicity of histories brought together this way cannot be contained by national boundaries. In essence, I want to explore how the ideologies surrounding
borders do not stop at the end of any given boundary line—they are mobile constructs that shape human interaction in unexpected places, ideological processes that are absorbed into the national imaginary until they appear as common sense, unquestioned and inherently true. All in all, I want to speak out loud about the violence that is continually inflicted on many people in the US by perpetuating social discourses that diminish, erase, belittle, and scorn them. Ned Blackhawk tells us that unless we recognize the histories of violence that shape our reality we will never be whole. Taking up Blackhawk’s lead, my project underscores the ways ideologies and histories of colonialism affect our social structures, raising awareness about the interrelation of structural oppression so that we can work together in changing the structures that govern our lives.
Fig. 1. Five Hundred Year Map in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*


NAGPRA: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.


NEXUS Fact Sheet.


_Criticism in the Borderland: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology._


