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## "This World Must Touch the Other": Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border in American Novels and Television

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“THIS WORLD MUST TOUCH THE OTHER”:  
CROSSING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER IN AMERICAN NOVELS  
AND TELEVISION

by  
Guadalupe V. Linares

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Amelia M.L. Montes

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 2013

“THIS WORLD MUST TOUCH THE OTHER”: CROSSING THE U.S.-MEXICO  
BORDER IN AMERICAN NOVELS AND TELEVISION

Guadalupe V. Linares, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Amelia M.L. Montes

This dissertation is a literary, cultural, and theoretical analysis of selected twentieth and twenty-first century novels and television in which characters cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The novels considered are: *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* by Cormac McCarthy, *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory* by Emma Pérez, *Dancing with Butterflies* by Reyna Grande, and *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea. In addition, I also examine the television series *Breaking Bad* created by Vince Gilligan. I use McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* to balance Chicana/o perspectives of border crossings found in the other novels in order to create a more complex picture of the border's symbolic value for contemporary readers and viewers. Through a comparison of texts by Chicana/o authors to ones by Anglo-American authors, this dissertation argues that, in their attempts to disrupt power relationships represented by the border, Chicana/o authors construct more redemptive narratives that strive to understand and heal the cultural, economic, and social fissures found between U.S. and Mexican culture.

I first explore McCarthy and Pérez's depictions of the historical violence that resulted in the wake of the Texas Revolution and the Mexican-American War. This comparison sets the stage for the rest of the dissertation, which goes on to treat texts

individually while also showing contrast. The second chapter uses Chicana critical theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Edén Torres to consider the ways in which the border informs perceptions of the female body in Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies*. The third chapter argues for the importance of bringing comedic elements into border crossing stories through an analysis of class, race, and gender in Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North*. Finally, the last chapter considers the ways in which *Breaking Bad* uses Western genre conventions to mythologize and exaggerate Mexico and the border for a U.S.-based audience.

## Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation was a lonely process. Many days, it was just me, my computer, and a stack of books piled next to me on my couch or at one of the tables in the front room at the Coffee House. But even in the most trying moments, I knew that I never had to be alone—there were many people willing to listen as I puzzled through my ideas and frustrations. I would like to offer my gratitude to a few of those people.

Thank you first to my adviser, Amelia M.L. Montes, for her guidance, support, and generosity. Without her commentary and encouragement, this dissertation would not exist. Thanks to my committee member Thomas Lynch, whose course *The U.S. West and Australian Outback* had a profound impact on this project. Also, thank you to committee members Frankie Condon, Thomas Gannon, and James Garza for donating their time to this project and others.

I am also indebted to many friends and colleagues who have listened to me over the years, but especially to Lesley Bartlett and Maura Giles-Watson. For more than a month, Lesley read through draft after draft of a paper that I presented at the Southwest Texas Popular Culture Association Conference in February of 2012. That paper went on to become chapter two of this dissertation. Maura, in addition to the constant encouragement she has offered since the beginning of our friendship, also took me to see the border crossing station between Tijuana and San Ysidro in July of 2012.

Finally, thank you to my father, Leo Linares, and my late mother, Susie Linares. Outside of their love and support, they have also inspired my work through their own stories of border crossing—my mother's from the U.S. south into the north, and my father's from Mexico into the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was in the first grade, I was pulled aside at the beginning of the school year and led to a windowless cinderblock room with walls painted the color of yellowed teeth. The woman who came for me also came for another student—a boy who shared my first name, Guadalupe. Once in the room, the two of us sat down at what I remember being a big, round table. There were several other students already seated there, and they looked like us with skin, hair, and eyes all darker than that of the students left in the main classroom. But even though we all looked similar, I spoke a different language. I understood the woman who talked to us in slowly enunciated English words, and they did not. But in the end, that did not matter. We were all the same to this teacher, which I understood later when I asked her why I was there, and she responded that we were all going to learn English. At six years old, I did not know to tell her that English was all I knew, all I had ever known because my white mother told my Mexican father that it was all I would need growing up in the United States. Maybe the teacher did not recognize my own accent, which was Southern, like my mother's, and unfamiliar at the elementary school I attended in Bendersville, Pennsylvania. I did not stay in this ESL class long—my mother saw to that after the teacher failed to hear me—but years later I remembered this moment as the first time that I felt the metaphorical border that separated me from all of my peers, white or Latino. In many ways, this dissertation is part of my ongoing attempt to understand the history into which I was born—one that crosses the U.S.-Mexico border as well as the Mason-Dixon line.

I thought that my experience as a mixedblood child was uniquely my own for years. All of the other students in my elementary school and later in my high school seemed to fit easily on one side of some binary dividing white and other. Growing up as an only child, I also spent much of my time reading, and the characters in the books that I read almost exclusively occupied the white side of that dividing line. It was not until I began my undergraduate education that I started reading African American literature and could finally see parts of my own experience reflected in the books that I read—especially in ones like Nella Larsen’s *Passing* or James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, both books in which characters find themselves in the ambiguous position of being able to “pass” for white. In *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, cultural theorist Edén Torres writes about a similar experience with literature in her own introduction. She tells readers:

Books captured me when I was in the sixth grade. And though I loved the rhythm and flow of words, nothing I found in the many libraries I visited described my life. In junior high, I began to find African American writers, and the world suddenly opened. My wounds became visible for the first time. Many of the things I suspected about white folks, but could not voice, came off those pages and told me I was neither crazy nor alone.

(1)

Like Torres, I found parts of my own experiences reflected in these books, but I also knew that as much as I could relate to them, I could not claim the struggles I saw characters go through in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Torres goes on to say: “Though I strongly identified with black folks and their struggle, I



knew the experiences of African Americans were not mine. It was just close enough to teach me a great deal about who I was in relationship to power” (1). Just as it did for Torres, my exposure to African American literature helped me begin to see the network of power structures all around. Slowly, my memory of that ESL class came into focus. I had not realized that what I felt during that moment was powerlessness, though I suppose that is because children often feel this way. As I grew older and learned more about African American literature, though, I began to see that what made me powerless in that situation was not just my age but a multitude of assumptions about people with names like mine or features like mine that had followed me into my first grade classroom.

I eventually found my way to Chicana/o literature, though not until the spring semester of 2008 when, during my second year of graduate school, I took a class called Chicana Literature and Theory. Though Chicana/o literature has a long history dating back to the nineteenth century, very few of these works permeated my high school or undergraduate education. I remember reading only Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*, though I tried to make up for this lack by taking classes in Latin American literature in which we read authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, and Isabel Allende. These books, however, did not speak to the struggle of living between worlds, as, I eventually discovered, Gloria Anzaldúa did in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

As I read more and more, I quickly learned that even within Chicana/o literature there is a wealth of experiences, many of which I did not recognize. Instead, I gravitated towards books that told the story of recent immigrants or children of recent immigrants rather than those about people who had lived in the border region for generations. For

example, Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* felt familiar to me. In it, the main character, Celaya, grows up on the U.S. side of the border and makes a trip to Mexico City with her family every year. As the child of a Mexican American mother and a Mexican father, Celaya comes of age in a confluence of cultures, just as I did. Moreover, I was attracted to her because, even though she lives in San Antonio for a time, Celaya does not grow up in the border region. Yet despite living far away from the border, she is always aware of it. This was the experience that I knew, and this is what I wanted to write about, though it did not work out exactly as I imagined.

This dissertation was never supposed to be about novels set near the U.S.-Mexico border. Rather, it was supposed to be about books in which characters cross the border and leave the region behind—ones like Celaya. The problem that I encountered, though, was that I did not find many of those characters. So many of the novels that told stories of border crossings left their characters in Southern California or other parts of the Southwest. As I knew from growing up in south central Pennsylvania, though, there are Mexicans and Mexican Americans all over the United States. Over time, I realized that I still approached the material from a U.S.-centric point of view because the border does not begin and end in the United States. I began turning towards authors who grew up on both sides—authors like Reyna Grande, who spent the first nine years of her life in Iguala, Guerrero, a town located almost 2,000 miles south of the border. From here, I broadened my scope in another way to include Anglo-American writers from different regions who were also writing about border crossings. I reread *All the Pretty Horses* and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy and trudged my way through *The Tortilla Curtain* by T.C. Boyle. In this way, I began to see that anyone could feel the border. Moreover, I

understood that any depiction of the border crossing had something to teach me, even if the characters doing the crossing were romanticized or villainized.

As I read more and more, I decided that I wanted this project to contain a mixture of perspectives in order to contrast each author's depiction of the region and the crossing. Eventually I settled on the following novels: *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) by Cormac McCarthy, *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory* (2009) by Emma Pérez, *Dancing with Butterflies* (2009) by Reyna Grande, and *Into the Beautiful North* (2009) by Luis Alberto Urrea. I appreciated the historical account of the border formation in McCarthy and Pérez's work, and I wanted to consider how contemporary re-imaginings of historical events challenged past narratives. Moreover, I wanted to think about the ways in which Pérez responds to McCarthy's work. As I explain in the first chapter of this dissertation, some readers and scholars accuse McCarthy of being misogynistic in all of his work, claiming that he writes only for and about men. Pérez, however, clearly takes inspiration from *Blood Meridian* in her book about lesbian cowgirl Micaela Campos, showing that *Blood Meridian*'s audience is more diverse than credited.

In contrast to the novels set in the mid-nineteenth century, Grande and Urrea's works deal with the current troubles faced by immigrants crossing the border now. Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies* shows a mixture of documented and undocumented crossings, while Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* changes the conversation altogether, portraying the undocumented immigrant not as victim but as hero. These two books show nuanced portraits of recent immigrants alongside those who are not so recent to the U.S. In their complex characterization, *Dancing with Butterflies* and *Into the Beautiful North*

break down stereotypes and assumptions about those who cross in either direction. But I also wanted to include a text that did engage with some of those stereotypes and fears, which is why I came to the subject of my final chapter.

As I was just beginning to think about this project, I also started to watch the AMC original television series *Breaking Bad*—a show steeped in the drug trade on both sides of the border. I did not begin making connections between *Breaking Bad* and the texts discussed in the first three chapters right away, though. I became more interested in it after seeing the season three premiere in which two cartel members cross the border and begin pursuing the main character in revenge. From here, I began to compare the ways in which the show's creator, Vince Gilligan, imagined an undocumented border crossing to the ways in which this act is depicted by someone like Grande, who has actually made that trip.

At times while working on this project, the collection of texts that I chose seemed disparate to me, united only by the act of crossing a geopolitical line. Other times, however, I could see the variety of ways in which they speak in conversation with each other. They are all preoccupied with similar concerns—one being the drive to understand the individual self in relation to communal and cultural commonalities. More than that, the Southwest setting that I had been trying so hard to eschew became a vital connection between these works. In this dissertation, I write about four out of the five texts in comparison to Westerns by Anglo-American authors and filmmakers. The only text that I do not compare to the Western genre is Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies*, but even this novel about a group of female dancers shares similar preoccupations with the genre in that, like a Western, the characters struggle with a desire for independence.

The Western hero's longing for independence is in line with a deep drive towards individualism that characterizes so much about U.S. culture—a drive that is, in its own way, contradictory. I noticed this contradiction while reading Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer*, which I read twice during the time that it took me to write the first two chapters of this dissertation. This novel tells the story of an unidentified murderer in Seattle, Washington whose ethnicity is in question by the general public and media. In it, there is a character modeled after conservative talk radio personalities. This character, Truck Schultz, makes grand proclamations about United States history and culture on his radio program without grounding his claims in historical facts or present realities. At one point, he says: "My fellow Americans, five hundred years ago, we came to this untamed land as God-fearing individuals who wanted to live individual lives" (344). Moments later, though, in his description of one murder victim, he describes the victim's dreams as being cut short, saying: "He had the same dreams as you and I, folks, the same dreams" (344). Despite claiming that Americans want to be individuals, Schultz describes this young man as the same as everyone else—everyone else besides, of course, the Native Americans whom he lumps together in an indistinct mass. Here, he inadvertently exposes the desire that pulls at many characters in U.S. literature—the simultaneous urge to be seen as both a singular entity and to be part of a whole. But Schultz does not realize the contradictions in his statements, nor would he be willing to acknowledge them anyway. While not isolated to the genre of the Western, these texts, written or visual, deal with the concurrent desire for both individualism and communalism.

Many scholars who work on the Western genre point out the variety of ways in which this genre is innately contradictory. For example, in *West of Everything: The Inner*

*Life of Westerns*, scholar Jane Tompkins claims that Western heroes, despite their suspicion and rejection of so-called civilized society, unintentionally support and reinforce the value of that very society through their actions. She writes: “The genre’s revenge plot depends on an antithetical world of love and reconciliation both as a source of meaning—it defines the male code of violent heroism by opposition—and as a source of legitimation” (41). According to Tompkins, the very motivations that guide Western heroes into isolation continue to steer their behavior outside the communal setting of the town.

In addition to Tompkins’s ideas, scholar Forrest G. Robinson’s book *Having it Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics* looks at multiple examples of Westerns that seem to undermine the very ideas upon which they are built. Robinson introduces his project by saying:

The great popularity of these books is quite obviously the result of this emphasis on the heroic, with its abundance of vigorous action in colorful settings, and its attention to such values as courage, independence, self-reliance, and the stoical indifference to pain. We come back to these books, and we urge them on our children, because they tell this familiar and very gratifying story about ourselves. (1)

At the same time, Robinson claims, “they do much more than this” (1). He goes on to argue: “If these books reinforce our sense of the heroic, they also challenge it” (1). Robinson explains the value of this contradictory genre, stating: “These novels are enduringly popular, I argue, because they give us access to an ongoing cultural conversation on central, painfully vexing questions of power and authority” (2). The

Western is in constant dialogue with power and authority. Its heroes sometimes reject power structures only to end up replicating them without realizing it. Many characters in the texts discussed in this project do the same—especially the women in *Dancing with Butterflies*.

Because the Western responds to, in Robinson's words, "vexing questions of power and authority," it is no surprise that Chicana/o writers would find kinship with this genre—especially given the turn towards revisionist histories seen in works such as McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.<sup>1</sup> Chicana/o literature and theory works to break apart systematic authority, just as Western heroes often do. In works such as Pérez's *Forgetting the Alamo* or Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* that call back to the Western genre, there is a clear struggle to reclaim land, history, and culture that has been subsumed by the genre. At the same time, there is also a hint of reverence for the Western in these works, suggesting that these authors wish to add to an ongoing conversation rather than squelch it.

More than working towards reclamation, though, all of the texts that I have chosen to include also struggle with breaking down binary understandings of places, people, and cultures. The border is a particularly useful device to help guide an audience through this process. As Urrea says in an interview with KPBS in June of 2012: "The

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<sup>1</sup> There has also been a turn towards "revisionist histories" in scholarship as well. In Jeffrey Wallmann's book *The Western: Parables of an American Dream*, he gives a brief explanation of what he calls New Western Historicism but what he notes is also "sometimes called 'revisionist historicism' or 'revisionism'" (4). He writes: "A development of roughly the last two or three decades, revisionism is by and large an overdue and well-intentioned focus on the greed, genocide, and environmental destruction that attended our pioneering movement, in an effort to counter a culturally ingrained vision of virile heroes winning the West for Truth, Justice, and the American Way" (4). At times, though, Wallmann is critical of these revisionist scholars, saying: "Yet too often in their criticism, revisionists like [Jane] Tompkins impose their own contemporary mores on the Old West rather than engage with the culture in which westerns are set" (6). His criticism, however, does not consider that what is absent in the Western, or any text, can speak just as loudly as what is present.

border is a really handy metaphor. Anyone can understand it.” Urrea, who, like me, is the child of an Anglo mother and a Mexican father, uses the border—a symbol of division—in order to begin breaking down the barriers that it represents. He continues to explain the usefulness of the border as metaphor in the interview, saying:

When you’re trying to talk to people about...what our pastors would have called the sin in our lives, what I call the fences that separate us as human beings, people don’t get it. So you talk about the Mexican border, and then you try to grow off of that. There’s no way to mistake the fence, but there’s a fence through every audience. There’s a fence that went between my mother and father. The kitchen was New York and the rest was México.

The contemporary literature surfacing now continues to work towards finding common ground for readers in an attempt to break down the fence that Urrea describes.

As more and more immigrants who have entered the country without documentation attain access to education, I am certain that there will continue to be a surge in writing that treats the border crossing and border crossers with increasing complexity. For example, published in August 2012, Reyna Grande’s own memoir *The Distance Between Us* is one of the first in what will likely be a long line. In *The Distance Between Us*, Grande writes about the toll that immigration takes on her family. She spent the first nine years of her life in a small Mexican town before moving to Los Angeles where she lived without documentation until she and her family were able to legalize their status as a result of the Immigration Reform Act of 1986—an act that also allowed



my own uncles to attain documentation. In a blurb for the recent paperback edition, Sandra Cisneros expresses the importance of Grande's memoir, saying:

I've been waiting for this book for decades. The American story of the new millennium is the story of the Latino immigrant, yet how often has the story been told by the immigrant herself? What makes Grande's beautiful memoir all the more extraordinary is that, through this hero's journey, she speaks for millions of immigrants whose voices have gone unheard.

As Cisneros points out, Grande's memoir is one of the first that tells the Latino immigrant story in the voice of the immigrant.<sup>2</sup> In telling her own story, Grande is able to portray her family members with all of their complications. She does not shy away from her father's alcoholism or abuse, nor does she make herself or her siblings the object of pity. She understands that, while being part of a community of people who share this experience and this culture, she and each of her family members are still autonomous beings. In this way, she claims some of the power taken from her as the result of being silenced as a child in both Mexico and the United States.

This dissertation keeps in mind that all authors speak from different contexts, and it tries to understand those contexts as much it does the novels and television shows discussed. I have organized this dissertation to begin with novels that wrestle with the history of the border formation and then proceed to discuss novels set during contemporary times by writers who have personal insight into current perceptions of the

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<sup>2</sup> Within American literature, there is a long history of disenfranchised people's voices being filtered through Anglo perspectives. For example, abolitionist and author Lydia Maria Child edited Harriet Jacob's 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, and author John G. Neihardt writes the 1932 *Black Elk Speaks* based on conversations with Black Elk.

border as well as experience crossing it. I end by considering a contrasting depiction of the border crossing as seen in a more popular medium: television.

The first chapter focuses on two novels set in the mid-nineteenth century: *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy and *Forgetting the Alamo* by Emma Pérez. *Blood Meridian* takes place a year after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, while *Forgetting the Alamo* is set over a decade earlier during the Texas Revolution. Both books depict the violence that arose as the U.S.-Mexico border transformed into the boundary that we know today. Both authors use historical texts to imbibe their novels with as much specific and accurate detail as possible. Rather than promote the nationalistic rhetoric of Manifest Destiny used to justify the seizure of land and countless murders, McCarthy and Pérez present alternative accounts of history that show the violence at the time to be mindless. McCarthy, however, presents readers with a bleak vision of humanity that suggests that this brutal state of mind is the default from which there is no escape. On the other hand, Pérez offers hope to her readers that one can break free from this cycle of violence with the help of love as defined by Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed* in which she describes “love as a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community’” (140).

The second chapter analyzes the relationship between the four female narrators in Reyna Grande’s novel *Dancing with Butterflies*. I examine this novel in relation to Gloria Anzaldúa’s claim in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*: “The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin—as sister, as father, as *padrino*—and last as self” (40). *Dancing with Butterflies* shows its characters wrestling with cultural and social

expectations that define how a woman should act, what she should look like, and what she should value. This chapter seeks to understand how the characters are able to elevate the importance of the self at the same time as finding ways to honor and support other women. It does so through an analysis of how two of the four main characters see their bodies and considers the ways in which the border between the United States and Mexico impacts each woman's perception.

The third chapter focuses on Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *Into the Beautiful North*. In this chapter, I consider why reviews on the book are split, with some reviewers finding its humor charming and others accusing Urrea of making light of a serious story shared by many undocumented immigrants. In this chapter, I argue that this book is an important addition to novels about border crossings because of its comical approach. Through the use of humor, Urrea encourages readers to empathize with characters who may come from much different social, cultural, and economic contexts than their own. By making readers laugh, Urrea locates commonalities between a variety of audiences at the same time as celebrating difference. For Urrea, the border does not have to be a symbol of division; instead, it can act as a seam that unifies two nations. Through this depiction, he offers hope to readers that it is possible for relationships between both sides of the border to transform.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation takes on the television show *Breaking Bad*. Though *Breaking Bad* is a different genre than the other texts discussed in this dissertation, its inclusion is important because it considers the ways in which border crossings are depicted for a different kind of audience—one that may not pick up *Into the Beautiful North*, let alone *Blood Meridian*. In the *New York Times* article "The Dark Art

of 'Breaking Bad,'” journalist David Segal discusses the show’s audience, saying: “The top three markets for 'Breaking Bad' are Albuquerque/Santa Fe, Kansas City and Memphis; neither New York nor Los Angeles are in its top 10. The show, in other words, doesn’t play on the coasts. It gets chatter, just not among what has long been considered the chattering class.” He goes on to say that the show’s creator, Vince Gilligan, may be “TV’s first true red-state auteur.” According to Segal, Gilligan’s “characters lead middle-American lives in a middle-American place, and they are beset with middle-American problems.” The show is, indeed, primarily about Anglo-American characters, but its depiction of Mexican characters reveals anxieties not only about Mexico or the border but also about U.S. culture. Because the audience for this show is arguably different from those who might pick up the novels discussed previously, examining it allows one to see the contrast between how the U.S.-Mexico border appears to those who are physically or emotionally close to it and how it appears to those who see it from afar.

## CHAPTER 1

“A TASTE FOR MINDLESS VIOLENCE”:

RECONSTRUCTED HISTORIES IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*  
AND EMMA PÉREZ’S *FORGETTING THE ALAMO*

**Section I**

In May of 2010 I spent two weeks travelling through Utah from Moab to Kanab, stopping along the way at four National Parks, one Tribal Park, and an animal sanctuary. In each location, one thing remained the same: everywhere there were museums that held old movie sets or props from iconic Western films located next to similarly themed restaurants or hotels. Many of the museums were free of charge, and at the Little Hollywood Movie Museum in Kanab, I watched lizards crawl up the walls of the homestead set from *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. The walls in the house were covered with old newspaper, and there was a cast iron skillet hanging near the fireplace along with a bed made out of wooden slats that was topped with a sad, primitive mattress. It looked like it would be hard to live there, which is to say, it looked exactly like I was in a Western. I was surprised that I could walk through this for free until I went to Monument Valley and realized that those wooden shacks were not the real attraction, that no one would pay to see them, that they would be only a dim memory by the time anyone got home. What I would remember: my first view of the Mittens as I approached Monument

Valley Tribal Park on US-163 and the contrast of the deep rust color of the land against the blue sky.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the Mittens, one can feel (though maybe not articulate) exactly what Jane Tompkins, author of *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, argues about what the Western landscape communicates: “Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, [the landscape] says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime” (73). The place feels and looks like a challenge, and for the hero of a Western, it is. The challenge for the Western hero is not only to navigate through and survive in this place without the comforts of civilization but also to triumph. Tompkins articulates the relationship to power, stating: “Power, more than any other quality, is what is being celebrated and struggled with in these grandiose vistas. The worship of power, the desire for it, and, at the same time, an awe of it bordering on reverence and dread emanate from these panoramic, wide-angle views” (76). At once, the place makes one feel powerless and also makes one crave nothing more than to inhabit and be part of the landscape. In this regard, it is no surprise that the mythologies and stories born from the history of the U.S. settlement in the West have created a genre with conventions that construct the Western hero as the ultimate symbol of independence, strength, and self-reliance.

The West of the Western is not focused on the specific locale of place; rather, the landscape is representative of a particular mindset. In *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, scholar Lee Clark Mitchell describes it as representing “the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with the urbanized East” (5). In this way, the mythos of the West is divorced from the actual

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<sup>1</sup> The Mittens are two iconic buttes located in Monument Valley. They are called the “Mittens” because of their shape, which makes them look like two large mittens jutting out of the ground. Monument Valley has a long history of film appearances, especially in Westerns, beginning in 1939 with John Ford’s *Stagecoach*.

history of Western settlement. Though it may take on the trappings of that history by appropriating the cultures native to the place and mimicking historical conflicts, it ultimately recasts the narratives in a way that privileges one perspective above all others.

Tompkins explains this perspective, stating:

For the setting by its hardness and austerity seems to have selected its heroes from among strong men in the primes of life, people who have a certain build, complexion, facial type, carriage, gesture, and demeanor...And because the people who exhibit these traits in Westerns are invariable white, male, and Anglo-Saxon, the Western naturalizes a certain racial, gender, and ethnic type of hero. There is no need to *say* that men are superior to women, Anglos to Mexicans, white men to black; the scene has already said it. (73)

Outside of the normalized white, male hero, Tompkins lists some other features found in the Western genre as: “death, women, language, landscape, horses, cattle” (6). For Tompkins, the presence of death, lack of women, distrust of language, celebration of landscape, and presence of horses and cattle unite Westerns, whether filmed or written. These qualities create a specific narrative about the West—one that Tompkins and other scholars agree writes women out of its history. Though these stories are fictional, their power to construct the history of the place for their audience transcends questions of narrative truth and asks readers to consider instead the power structures involved in storytelling—a power structure easily visible as one browses through any gift shop in the Southwest.

Every gift shop from Moab to Kanab sells coffee mugs and magnets with pictures of John Wayne along with cowboy boots and hats. Walking through these shops reminded me of the gift shops that I once worked at in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania—shops that sold Civil War caps in both blue and gray (though gray always sold out first), shot glasses that read “The South Will Rise Again,” and boxes full of toy soldiers that turned the battle into a fun game for children to play. Not only did these gift shops sell a set of Civil War themed soldiers, there was also a set for the Alamo—101 pieces with Anglo soldiers cast in blue plastic and Mexican soldiers in brown. I remember selling these play sets to young boys and wondering what it would look like when they played with them. Would they adhere to history as they learned it from their elementary school textbooks or would they abandon it altogether and make it up as they went along? If they were from the South or Texas, would they recast the narratives altogether, making the South the winners, the Texans stronger?

I worked in these gift shops every summer from 2002 until 2005. During my last summer there, I read Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) for the first time while I sat behind the counter. Had I known about the similarities between the ways in which tourists talked about the Battle of Gettysburg and the way they talked about the West at that time, I might have realized how futile those questions about the toy soldiers were and how malleable history. But I did not think about this until five years later on my vacation to Utah when I read *Blood Meridian* for a second time while lying in my tent at night. By that time, I had also read Emma Pérez’s *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), though not her novel *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory* (2009). I understood the power relationship that went into the construction of



history and could see that so much of Utah's and the Southwest's history was masked by the mythology found in Westerns. When I finally did read *Forgetting the Alamo*, I saw *Blood Meridian* everywhere—in the faces of the Colonel and Rove, who reminded me so much of members of Glanton's gang; in the gruesome massacres; in the structure of the titles; and in the ways that both novels simultaneously adopted and rejected the characteristics of the Westerns that came before. This chapter takes for granted that both McCarthy and Pérez work to disrupt notions of the West as determined by the genre of the Western and argues that, through this disruption, both authors participate in the act of creating a nuanced, inclusive history of the U.S. West and the conflicts that led to and stemmed from the creation of U.S.-Mexico border.

## Section II

*Blood Meridian* stands in stark contrast to the construction of Western history that many of the tourist attractions in Utah presented. While *Blood Meridian* follows much of the Western genre, it also lacks some of the most important qualities. One can find nearly all of the elements in Tompkins list of characteristics ("death, women, language, landscape, horses, cattle" (6)), but one will not find the feeling that these qualities create a circumstance under which the characters, divested of civilization, can finally locate some kind of truth or satisfaction. Tompkins explains this quest for significance, stating: "The hunger Westerns satisfy is a hunger not for adventure but for meaning" (15).

Readers looking for meaning in *Blood Meridian* will be disappointed.<sup>2</sup> Rather than offer

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<sup>2</sup> Though McCarthy has gained popularity over the last ten years beginning with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), it is important to remember that his books did not always sell. Though they were esteemed by critics, his early novels were not popular. *Blood Meridian*, in fact, was out of print in the U.S. for many years and was only reissued by Vintage in 1992 after the success of *All the Pretty Horses*. In an

worn depictions of the Western hero prevailing in the face of death, McCarthy shakes readers by calling into question *why* these so-called heroes are in this place at all. In his revision of the Western, McCarthy creates a world that scholars consistently describe as a mythic representation of the West—one that recasts old myths and highlights the violence and racism for which previous narratives have tried to offer explanations or have overlooked altogether. McCarthy emphasizes stories that have been subsumed by the glorified mythos surrounding the settlement of the West.

Set in the direct aftermath of the Mexican American War, *Blood Meridian* spans the years 1849-1850. The first chapter introduces the main character, an unnamed young man referred to only as “the kid.” Neglected by his father, the kid leaves his home in Tennessee and heads west. Along the way, violence follows him as he makes his way through Texas and across the recently established U.S.-Mexico Border.<sup>3</sup> He first crosses the border as part of an unauthorized U.S. Army mission led by Captain White, who believes in the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and crosses the border intending “to whip up

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interview with McCarthy scholar Rick Wallach, Peter Josyph, author of *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy*, asks Wallach about the period of time during which *Blood Meridian* was out of print. He inquires: “What does it say about American culture that *Blood Meridian* was out of print for so long?” Wallach responds with a practical answer, saying: “The idealistic response is that *Blood Meridian* was out of print because it told such uncomfortable truths about ourselves that we refused to acknowledge its existence—but I don’t think that’s really the case. I think it was McCarthy’s publisher refusing to invest a great deal of money and effort in marketing his books” (99). Wallach goes on to explain the nuances of his answer, and while the practicality of his answer is undeniable, he avoids the question of *how* McCarthy’s publisher was to market this book, this anti-Western, to a U.S. audience that celebrates the Western genre as a symbol of American-ness.

<sup>3</sup> The border as we know it today was formed on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. After prolonged negotiation between the U.S. and Mexico, the U.S. purchased for \$15 million the territory that would later make up the U.S. Southwest. Even at the time, the price was seen as an insult. Later in the summer of 1848, the U.S. offered Spain \$50-\$100 million for Cuba (Howe 803). Moreover, the terms of the treaty designed to protect the people already living in this territory were often ignored. The treaty stated that all people living in the territory were to become U.S. citizens “unless they took action to retain their Mexican citizenship,” which would mean relocating across the border (Howe 809). Despite this promise, though, many Mexican Americans as well as Native Americans were denied the full rights of citizenship for years. Under the treaty, they were also promised that the titles to their land would be honored, which was rarely the case.

on the Mexicans” (29). Captain White and most of his men are quickly killed in a Comanche raid shortly after they cross the border. The kid is briefly imprisoned in Chihuahua before being recruited to join John Joel Glanton’s gang of scalp hunters. Glanton crosses the border because of a recently established opportunity presented by the governor of the state of Chihuahua, Angel Trias. In an attempt to stop Comanche raids, Trias offers to pay men for each scalp that the group can acquire. While part of this gang, the kid meets Judge Holden, the ex-priest Tobin, and a cast of others. Together, they roam the countryside killing indiscriminately. The gang scalps any dark-haired people—women, children, members of peaceful tribes, mixedblood Mexican citizens. For example, before returning to Chihuahua to collect their earnings, the gang slaughters two tribes along with a few innocent bystanders. Upon returning to Chihuahua, Trias invites the gang to a banquet to celebrate their accomplishment, but he quickly instructs them to leave town after the commotion that they cause with their drunken behavior. They leave only to continue their slaughter.

Soon after leaving Chihuahua, the gang gets another contract to collect Indian scalps, this time from the governor of Sonora. Eventually, though, they abandon the formality of the contract and begin marauding. Once they cross back into U.S. territory in Yuma, Arizona, they overtake a ferry located on the Colorado River and use it as a front for a robbery. They overtake the ferry with the help of the Yuma tribe, but despite this moment of allegiance, they go on to slaughter the tribe after gaining control. Eventually, the Yuma return to attack the ferry and kill most of the gang, including Glanton. Toadvine, Tobin, the kid, the judge, and a few others survive the massacre and head west to San Diego. The men are eventually separated, though they all end up in San Diego or

Los Angeles. Upon arriving in San Diego, the kid is imprisoned again and released only after agreeing to tell the authorities where they can find Glanton's fortunes. After being released, he heads north to Los Angeles where he sees Toadvine and another member of the gang hanged for their crimes.

The ending of the novel evolves quickly, compressing the remaining years of the kid's life into a few pages. He continues wandering across the West performing a variety of different jobs and eventually finds himself in Texas again where he encounters the judge at a bar. Though plenty happens throughout the course of novel, it is largely plotless, unmotivated by revenge or conquest. Rather, it is a catalogue of violence that culminates with the kid's death at the hands of the judge in an outhouse—a scene so gruesome that the narrator does not describe it despite the reader's growing insensitivity to the horrors of this world. In the end, McCarthy's West is decidedly without explanation. While Captain White believes in Manifest Destiny, the men in Glanton's gang kill for no reason other than profit, and even that seems to be a tenuous reason at best. Though they are motivated by money, they also seem largely uninterested in the trappings that wealth can provide. They kill and scalp because it is in them, just as it is in the kid who, at age fourteen, begins to develop "a taste for mindless violence" (3).

Many of the characters in *Blood Meridian* are based on historical figures, not simply creations from McCarthy's imagination. John Joel Glanton is modeled and named after a real man, a member of the U.S. Army who later led a gang of scalp hunters into Mexico, and so are Judge Holden and Angel Trias. Because McCarthy addresses historical memory so directly, knowing that these details are gathered from a variety of

eyewitness sources enhances the experience of reading *Blood Meridian*.<sup>4</sup> McCarthy's incorporation of fact into the novel asks readers to see the contents of the book as true in some form, which can be a challenge for those who are used to idealized depictions of Westward expansion.

For example, in an interview with scholar Harold Bloom, Peter Josyph, author of *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy*, tells Bloom: "I don't see *Blood Meridian* as being about any West that ever existed in the American past." Bloom responds to this statement: "O no no, no no no no—" (85). He goes on to explain his emphatic refusal by stating: "It transcends. Whatever the holocaust that was visited on the Native Americans—and it was horrible, the decimation not just of *a* people but *several* peoples—one rather doubts that the particular nightmares that are being rendered so vividly by McCarthy are anything but his own nightmares" (86). Both Bloom and Josyph insist that the West of *Blood Meridian* is merely a stylized creation. While it may be stylized, McCarthy's vision, which is no less accurate than some accounts of Western settlement, is built of historical record. In particular, Bloom's syntax reveals an inability to acknowledge the violence found in *Blood Meridian* as part of U.S. history. He frames his discussion of the destruction of Native peoples as something that is "visited on" them, a passive construction that refuses any historical ownership over these events. Though Bloom acknowledges the historical sources from which McCarthy gathered so much of the material for *Blood Meridian*, these sources do not lend credibility to the narrative for Bloom; rather, they are proof to him that McCarthy is simply bad at creating his own

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<sup>4</sup> Most notably, McCarthy used Samuel Chamberlain's narrative *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* in which he recounts his time spent as part of Glanton's gang. A more comprehensive list of McCarthy's sources can be found in John Emil Sepich's essay "'What kind of indians was them?': Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*."

plots. To Bloom, McCarthy's vision is "a very individualized mode of perceiving carnage" (86). This is *one* man's vision, he says, though looking at the sources from which McCarthy gathered details would suggest that it is not one man's vision but an amalgamation of many visions.

Though I find Bloom's perspective troubling, examining it helps highlight the main argument made by scholars like Timothy Parrish, who see in *Blood Meridian* a challenge to readers that asks them to face the violence done in the past and the violence that constructing Anglo-centric historical narratives continues to do. In most of Bloom's conversation with Josyph, I see a refusal to engage with the specific concerns that *Blood Meridian* raises about U.S. expansionism and the formation of the border. Despite being an Americanist, Bloom wants little to do with the concrete facts from U.S. history that McCarthy reassembles in this novel. Bloom claims that "there is no greater work by a living American," but to him, that greatness does not come from the ways in which McCarthy deals with the multitude of wounds that *Blood Meridian* attempts to uncover (77). For Bloom, it is not enough that *Blood Meridian* speaks about the U.S. West—it must *transcend* it. He says: "I think of that great subtitle: *or The Evening Redness in the West*, which means the sunset, but it doesn't just mean the Western United States, it is also a kind of elegiac look at Western consciousness" (88). While Bloom does make a convincing case for this statement, what is implied by his commentary is that this novel is great, or that any novel is great, because it *transcends* place. From a purely theoretical standpoint, there is truth in this statement, but by looking at *Blood Meridian* only from a global perspective, Bloom does exactly what *Blood Meridian* tries so hard to avoid—he ignores the very real and localized historical conditions that produced this novel.

Certainly *Blood Meridian* speaks about humanity's will to violence, but it does so *in the U.S. Southwest*. It would be remiss to consider that place-specific history only as a stand-in for all of humanity.

In contrast, Timothy Parrish considers the implication of McCarthy's historical creation from both a global and local perspective in his book *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*. Parrish speaks in conversation with postmodern theory that claims that history and fiction work in the same way. He rejects the idea that history offers a "real" or "true" account of what has happened, explaining that facts themselves offer nothing without being situated within a story:

The 'facts' of history matter only insofar as they are part of a narrative that controls and manipulates their meaning...Recognizing that history, like fiction, is a form of representation does not turn history into something that is untrue or merely fantastic. History is inevitably a story, one that is well or not so well told, and thus is always, in its deepest sense, a way of perceiving the world that is also a fight to make the world over as one wants it to be. (1)

Parrish makes it clear that he is not rejecting the concept of history, only trying to rethink the way we see it, and he sees novelists like McCarthy engaging with that process as well.

Parrish's examination of *Blood Meridian* focuses on the violence found in McCarthy's depiction of the west. Borrowing from theorist Rene Girard, Parrish claims that *Blood Meridian* "suggests that there has always been one way for humans to know the past: in terms of what Rene Girard calls a universal 'will to violence' that humans

codify as history” (80). In his reading of *Blood Meridian*, violence is the only factor that remains consistent from past to present.<sup>5</sup> History itself is a story constructed of facts that tries to forget this base reality about human nature. Moreover, history behaves as a form of domination because the act of constructing it requires one to destroy other histories. The violence found in the novel as well as the violence found in the act of creating and destroying histories can be further understood when considered in relation to literary naturalism.<sup>6</sup>

Scholar Barclay Owens writes about *Blood Meridian* as a work of literary naturalism in his book *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*, stating:

In depicting violent contests, there is a fine distinction at times between historical romance and historical nightmare. The truths McCarthy has to tell are part of the American grotesque, most fully developed in naturalism and intensified by postmodernism. The absurd ironies of *Blood Meridian*

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<sup>5</sup> Though this is Parrish’s reading of the text, a 1992 interview with *The New York Times Magazine* reveals that McCarthy’s philosophical position is similar. He states: “There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed...I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.”

<sup>6</sup> Literary naturalism has its roots in nineteenth century Europe. Perhaps the most famous and influential naturalist was the French author Emile Zola, who rejected the idealistic depictions of life found in Romanticism and focused instead on stories about the middle and lower classes. American literary naturalism is generally agreed to have begun in the 1890s as the country transitioned from an agrarian economy to an industrial one and as the population moved from rural to urban areas. In Donald Pizer’s book *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*, he explains that early American naturalist authors such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser “believed that contemporary America was a closed rather than open society and that life in this society was characterized by a struggle to survive materially rather than prevail morally” (4). Pizer also traces two additional waves of naturalism in American literature. He sees separate instances of naturalism arise in works from the 1930s and late 1940s through the early 1950s, though he also explains that each wave differs from the previous in such substantial ways that there is no strict formula for the American Naturalistic novel. To account for how and why these waves happen, he argues that each one is an “expression of the American attempt to explore at moments of national stress through highly structured dramatizations of particular social moments the problem of man’s belief in his freedom in an increasingly restrictive world” (89). Pizer’s view of naturalism is ultimately much more positive than the critics to whom he responds, critics such as Lionel Trilling and Malcolm Cowley, who accuse these works of being formulaic and derivative.



are not those of Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* or the New Western History's revisionism. *Blood Meridian* contains these truths but moves beyond them to a simpler, darker, older truth: mankind is a natural-born killer. (61)

Essentially, Owens argues that *Blood Meridian*'s characters are motivated by instinct, like primates, and that the violence we see them commit is a result not of moral depravity but of biological drive, which is one of the defining characteristics of naturalism. Naturalistic works reveal a dark, harsh picture of the world that treats human beings with scientific objectivity. We are beasts, these works claim, who adapt to our surroundings for survival.

*Blood Meridian* does support a naturalistic perspective. If we examine the opening of the novel, for example, it is clear that the kid is shaped by circumstances. Because his mother died in childbirth, because her death drives his father to alcoholism, because he cannot read, he becomes a violent creature. After the kid runs away, is shot, and heals, though, the narrator then claims: "Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (4-5). This asks a question of the reader: are humans shaped by the world or do they have a hand in shaping it? Literary naturalism believes the former—that humans are a product of their environments. Social conditions, genetics, and physical environment shape what they become. While the narrator does question whether or not that is true, the content of the novel itself leaves little room for debate. Owens looks at the many times

that the narrator compares the men to apes as evidence that they are driven by instinct, though one does not have to look hard to find a creature driven by instinct in this novel.

The judge's speeches, however, expose the desire to understand. According to scholar Donald Pizer, the instinct to understand, or at least attempt to understand, is also commonly found in Literary Naturalism. In his book *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation*, he writes: "The naturalistic novelist is willing to concede that there are fundamental limitations to man's freedom but he is unwilling to concede that man is thereby stripped of all value. In particular, he finds significant the human drive to understand if not to control and he finds tragic the human capacity, whatever one's class or station, to suffer pain and defeat" (10). To Pizer, the deterministic nature of naturalism does not shut out human complexity and chalk behavior up to mere instinct; rather, it highlights and honors the struggle of attempting to understand in the face of all that works against us. In *Blood Meridian*, this can be seen when Toadvine asks the judge why he bothers to record images of animals and plants in his ledger, to which the judge replies: "Whatever exists...Whatever in creations exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (198). Though Toadvine argues that "no man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth," the judge disagrees, stating:

The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (199)

The judge believes that taking control is a choice. By trying to understand and know the world, one can have control over it rather than being controlled by it. The various myths that surround the judge suggest the same thing. For example, the ex-priest Tobin recounts a story about the gang before the kid joined them in which the men run out of gunpowder and find the judge sitting on a rock in the desert. Having been pursued by “savages” for days, the group has shrunk in size from thirty-eight to fourteen. The judge leads them through the desert and up a volcano where he proceeds to make gunpowder out of ash and urine, allowing them to massacre the men who have been following them. To Tobin and the other members of the group, this seems magical. For the judge, however, it is the mere result of understanding his environment, which gives him the capacity to exert control over it. His behavior is the result of his knowledge, not part of a predetermined fate, and this knowledge gives him an advantage over all of the other parties involved. Unlike the kid, who is uneducated and illiterate, the judge is highly educated. He speaks several languages and, as this example shows, has an advanced understanding of science. These qualities have nothing to do with any innate power, however. Rather, they are the result of the environmental situation into which he must have been born. To be fair, there is very little information given about any of the characters’ pasts. The first sixteen years of the kid’s life are covered in the first three pages of the novel, and other than that, we know only small details about other characters. Tobin, for example, was once a priest, and Toadvine, who has the letters “HTF” branded on his forehead, was accused of being a horse thief. The judge, however, is a mystery. While he is called Judge Holden, why or how he receives the title “Judge” is never explained. Even so, his behavior shows the reader that the judge comes from a background that provided him with an education that

allows him to dominate the gang. The men are at his mercy because they are aware that he wields more power in this environment than they do, which puts him in a position to dominate the group. While the judge may not look exactly like the heroes of the Western that Tompkins describes, his presence does mimic those heroes in some way. His white, male gaze overpowers all others around him and reflects the power structure that has created the history of West, both as seen in the Western and as seen in history books—a power structure that the novel questions.

The project that *Blood Meridian* undertakes is admirable and makes huge strides in uncovering other perspectives of Western settlement. Ultimately, though, one book can never account for all perspectives, something that Emma Pérez addresses in her novel *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory* (2009). Like McCarthy, Pérez plays with the mythologies of the West, but having published her novel twenty-four years after *Blood Meridian*, she also responds to McCarthy's vision. Though *Blood Meridian* challenges standard ways of constructing history and advocates a postmodern lens, it does so without questioning some stereotypical characteristics of the West/ Western. For example, women in *Blood Meridian* are relegated to two spheres: they are either prostitutes or domestic caretakers. There is no place for a woman like *Forgetting the Alamo*'s narrator Micaela Campos in *Blood Meridian*, so Pérez must reconstruct the world to make room for her story. She does so while retaining the qualities that define McCarthy's novel—most notably, the unnerving violence. Also like McCarthy, she employs certain facts regarding details such as timeframe and place; however, the ways in which she shapes these facts leaves readers with a vastly different impression of human nature. McCarthy's novel allows little room to hope for a future that escapes this pattern of violence. Pérez's

novel, on the other hand, offers the possibility of redemption, if only on the individual level. In creating this world, Pérez flips both standard Western mythologies as well as McCarthy's mythology to reveal a Chicana perspective.

### Section III

In Emma Pérez's article "Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard," the author explains her motivations for writing the novel *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory*, saying: "I write fiction not only because I have a passion for literature, but also because I am frustrated with history's texts and archives" (122). As a historian, Pérez questions the colonialist attitudes that shape the way history is recounted and impact what gets remembered. Specifically, she works to restore voices and histories that have been silenced because of their position on the fringes of society—be that because of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class. Her focus on the issues of gender and sexuality comes through well before the publication of *Forgetting the Alamo*, though. In her theoretical text *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* published ten years previously, Pérez addresses how and why history, and specifically Chicano/a history, omits stories about women, and she also proposes a theory by which they can be recovered.

In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Pérez critiques the work that Chicano/a historians have done in their quest to bring the Chicano/-a back into US history. She explains: "Restricted to the boundaries of arguments that came before, Chicano/a historians have tended to build a discipline that mimics the making of the frontier, or 'American West,' while at the same time opposing the ideological making of the 'West'" (4). Because

Pérez sees similar constructions of history replicated by Chicano/a historians, she decides to break apart the methodology itself, which is impacted by colonial relations. She observes that in the first essays about Chicano/a history women are only discussed as they relate to men. These histories mimicked the colonial mindset that had previously written Chicano/as out of history, and in order to combat them, Pérez introduces a construct that she calls the decolonial imaginary, which is a “new category that can help us rethink history in a way that makes agency for those on the margins transformative” (“Queering the Borderlands” 123). In this construct, history becomes decolonized through the act of uncovering voices that speak to a multiplicity of experiences rather than reinforcing one normative way of thinking about race, sexuality, class, religion, and culture. With this in mind, it becomes easy to read *Forgetting the Alamo* as a response to *Blood Meridian*.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Pérez enacts her theoretical position, making the novel an exercise in historical recovery just as *Blood Meridian* was twenty-four years previously. Whereas Pérez’s work deals explicitly with gender, though, McCarthy is accused of avoiding the issue. McCarthy’s work has received criticism for what scholar Nell Sullivan has described as “an unmistakable ambivalence to women, even an outright misogyny.”<sup>7</sup> Nearly all of the female characters found in *Blood Meridian* are either prostitutes or end up victim to the horrific massacres that occur throughout the novel. In this way, one might accuse McCarthy of participating in the willed forgetting of female narratives—an accusation that I might not contest. Ultimately, though, both authors do

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy himself has acknowledged his inability to treat female characters with the same level of complexity as he does male characters. While talking about his most recent project, he explains in a 2009 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*: “I was planning on writing about a woman for 50 years. I will never be competent enough to do so, but at some point you have to try.”

battle historical erasure, even if they do not always account for all voices. McCarthy deconstructs antiquated notions of the west by questioning established Western codes of honor and morality seen in literature and film and exposing that the violence that characterizes these stories is senseless and motivated by the desire to dominate. Pérez's novel takes for granted that the violence in this place is both senseless and selfish. Rather than accept this world as is, though, she creates a narrator, Micaela Campos, who struggles to navigate through the violence and who eventually comes to a place where it does not define her or the way she sees her home.

Though written after *Blood Meridian*, *Forgetting the Alamo* takes place years earlier in 1936 soon after the Battle of the Alamo. Micaela and her family live in El Pueblo, Texas where her father operates a ranch with the help of an Anglo man named Stephen Walker. Walker is also father to Micaela's cousin, Jedidiah Jones, though neither man will publically recognize their relationship to the other. Because Jedidiah's mother is a Tejana prostitute, Walker disowns his mixedblood son. After Jedidiah's mother dies, Micaela's family and Miss Elsie, the madam of the brothel where his mother worked, take turns raising him. Jedidiah's presence in the novel gives readers access to information about the social dynamic in Texas at the time. His story reveals both the power that Anglos wield over the Tezano population as well as the exploitation that women, and especially Tejana and Native women, face at the hands of all men.

The novel's main conflict, however, is introduced when Micaela and her father go to San Antonio de Bexar after the Battle of the Alamo. In the carnage, her father comes across his younger brother's head—a discovery that leads him to take part in the Battle of San Jacinto. When he leaves home for battle, Micaela follows him and arrives in time to

see the devastation, which includes her father's corpse. Her anger is exacerbated once she returns home and discovers that while she was away marauders have raped her mother and killed her twin siblings. Convention tells her that these crimes must be avenged. For example, when her father sees his brother's head, he goes to battle to seek revenge. Despite the warning from his wife that he would die at San Jacinto, he justifies his actions by saying only: "They killed my baby brother, Ursula" (21). With her father dead and Jedidiah missing, Micaela believes that it is her duty to pursue revenge in the name of her siblings and mother.

When she leaves home, she must dress as a man to gain access to the places that the perpetrators occupy—places that she had previously gone only in the company of her father and cousin. As she journeys through Texas and east to New Orleans, Micaela confronts unspeakable violence, but she also falls in love with Clara, a young woman of African American and Native American decent. Though her affection for Clara sometimes grounds her, Micaela still spends most of the novel chasing the men who have destroyed her family with the intention to kill them. These men come straight out of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Like Toadvine, their wounds reveal a history of violence. One man has a scabbed nose that appears to have been cut back, and another is missing half of an ear. They are marked by their deformities, which indicate their mutated sense of morality. Though Micaela does murder three men who are part of the gang, the two worst perpetrators, Rove and the Colonel, are left alive and in positions of power in her hometown.

The final chapters of the novel leave the reader with several important realizations about the nature of these particular Anglo settlers. Rove kills Jedidiah for the deed to the



family's land—a deed that Micaela, dressed as a man, had just won from Jedidiah in a poker game. Though Rove is the one who murders Jedidiah, he blames Micaela, who is put on trial, found guilty, and sentenced to hang the following day. In addition, the court also seizes her family's land and orders them to move by the end of the week. With these details, readers get a sense of how powerless the incoming political system makes the Tejanos. Land that had previously been in families for generations is now seized almost without explanation, and this is only one way in which the political system is rigged in favor of the Anglo settlers. Micaela only escapes prison because of the help she receives from her mother, Miss Elsie, and Clara. She then flees across the border to Mexico where she hides out in a convent. Though Micaela does not fully succeed in her quest for revenge, the end of the novel suggests that murder is not an antiseptic for her wounds. Rather, justice is the ability to tell stories that stave off historical and cultural erasure.

Like *Blood Meridian*, *Forgetting the Alamo* also includes elements that seem naturalistic. Micaela is shaped by her surroundings. Her status as a woman and as a native Tejana dictates the way that she is seen by the world—or at least it tries to. Micaela subverts these expectations by dressing as a man—an act that shows how she does feel the “drive to understand if not to control” (Pizer 10). At the same time, though, her desire to understand does not lead her to dismantle notions of the feminine so much as it helps her reinforce the social constructions of masculinity. She acts as any man might in the world of this novel: getting drunk, seeking revenge, fighting out of jealousy and pride. Though she challenges the social, biological, and environmental factors that contribute to female identity, she still falls prey to them. The way that cultures come together in this location also contributes to the way that Micaela responds to gender

constructions. Because the incoming settlers do not respect the cultures that have existed in Texas long before their arrival, they expect the same behaviors from Tejana women as they do from Anglo-American woman.

Historian Antonia I. Castañeda's article "The Political Economy of Nineteenth Century Stereotypes of Californianas" illuminates the social factors that contribute to conceptions of womanhood in both Mexican and Anglo culture during the nineteenth century. To understand how stereotypes of Californiana women are constructed and how these stereotypes allow Anglo settlers to justify their treatment of all Californios, Castañeda examines texts written by Anglo males who travel to California. Though her article speaks specifically about Californianas, it is also about the state of womanhood in nineteenth century U.S. culture. To understand how these Anglo men saw Californiana and Mexicana women, Castañeda first considers what the woman symbolizes in American culture. Because the economy at the time was in the process of transforming from agrarianism to industrialism, she explains that this change also impacted the role that women played in society: "Women began to be defined primarily for their sexual function as reproducers of the species, and by the social roles ascribed to wife and mother" (214). The home is no longer a place where both men and women work side by side; rather, it becomes a place that men *leave*. Women are then left with the burden of rearing the children—a burden which means that they "[hold their] country's morality in [their] hands" (222). Castañeda goes on to explain that, because of these gender roles, "the American woman became the symbol of the country's innocence, morality, and virtue; she was held almost solely responsible for the morality and virtue of the nation" (222). Because women are viewed as symbolic of morality, this allows men to judge

entire cultures based on their Anglicized conceptions of femininity. This perspective ignores cultural considerations at the same time as cordoning off Anglo women to purely domestic settings and jobs. The premise of *Forgetting The Alamo* shows that women in nineteenth century Texas are similarly limited in options once Anglo-Americans begin settling. Micaela, after all, has to dress as a man to gain access to jobs and places that are seen as inappropriate for women. She does not have the freedom to openly carouse, fight, or seek revenge, though historically women in her family were not restricted to domestic spheres. During her father's youth, for example, it was more common for women to own land than men, a detail which I will explain further later in this section.

Theories of literary naturalism can further account for changes in attitudes towards gender roles, and many aspects of these theories can easily be found in Castañeda's argument, which shows how economic and biological factors coalesce to dictate social norms. So-called "Spanish" women—that is, women of higher economic status—are seen as desirable by Anglo men and are elevated to the status of "Californiana." Darker-skinned, lower class women, however, are seen as Mexicana. As Castañeda points out, this "negates Californianas' *mestizo* racial origins...the Mexican prostitute and the Spanish Californiana are totally unrelated by race, culture, class, history or circumstance" (227). The economic situation, along with gender, controls how each woman will experience social situations. Moreover, all of these factors are in a constant state of flux as new people and cultures come together. This is true in *Forgetting the Alamo* as well. Like Californianas, Tejanas during this time period are also in a state of transition, and also like Californianas, Tejana women are *mestizas*.

As social factors change, those changes affect the ways in which people experience all parts of their identity—even the biological parts. When Anglo conceptions of gender begin to permeate the culture that already exists in the area, Micaela is told that, because of biology, she is unable to care for herself. In order to maintain her independence, she has to embody the type of person who is capable of caring for oneself—that is, she has to become a man, which means leaving the domestic environment.

A return to Jane Tompkins's book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* can help clarify how this comes into play in a Western setting. In this book, Tompkins considers how and why women are relegated to the domestic sphere and argues that this writes them out of the Western genre altogether. She explains the dualism found in Westerns, saying: "These are the classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusion versus truth, words versus things" (48). All of these oppositions can be understood in relation to gender. The parlor, the East, illusions, and words are all experienced as feminine/domestic in the Western. The mesa, the West, truth, and things all embody the stoic, masculine hero. If one considers the ways in which *Forgetting the Alamo* plays on the conventions of the Western, it becomes easy to see why Micaela struggles with gender identity. She does not fit solidly within the confines of womanhood as defined by outside Anglo eyes, nor does she fit the mold of the Western hero. Though she shares characteristics with both, she identifies most with the conception of masculinity that she sees around her. Early on in the book, she reveals her strong bond with her father, stating: "It was spring and I was long past fifteen, having turned eighteen the previous fall

making me an old maid by most opinions, but it was the way my father treated me that may have confused us both. I was more like a son and less of a daughter but his propensity for proper rituals and tradition often plagued his common sense” (11). Though her father embraces her identity in all its plurality, he is also unable to imagine a future for her outside of a domestic role. Before he goes away for battle, for example, he makes arrangements for Micaela to marry an older man named Venustiano—a man with whom her mother has been having an affair for years. He makes these arrangements out of concern for Micaela’s future, stating: “He’ll take care of her” (18). Though his wife, Ursula, protests, saying that Micaela does not need to be taken care of, he insists that “all women need taking care of” (18).

This attitude is new within the Campos family. As we learn early in the book, the land on which Micaela’s family lives was previously owned by the women in the family: “My great-grandmother Campos had passed down to her daughter, my grandmother, the same piece of paper that had been stamped by the Spanish Crown when their family had claimed the land grant that would be tendered through generations. My grandmother had offered my father the title on the day she was to die having had no daughters to whom she could will the land” (20). Over her father’s lifetime, though, perspectives about landownership shift. Rather than will the land to Micaela before he goes away for battle, he changes the name on the title to “Jedidiah Jones,” insisting that Micaela will not want for land or money after she marries Venustiano. The power dynamic within the family shifts from one in which women are empowered in similar ways as men to one that insists that they need to be cared for by them. Dressing as a man allows Micaela to shift between gender identities, which challenges naturalistic philosophies in some ways. She is not

completely dictated by social constructions of genetic features, but in order to survive, she must reinforce them. The end of *Forgetting the Alamo*, however, continues to disrupt these philosophies.

At the end of the novel, Micaela comes to an understanding of the world that is not dictated purely by outside factors. After being saved from hanging by the women in her family, Micaela crosses the border into Mexico where she hides in a convent. There she gains a new perspective, stating:

Something inside me has changed and I guess it's a feeling for the generations coming upon us, the generations that need a legacy of truth to keep them going 'cause sometimes truth is all we got on our side... We don't got to be like [Walker, the Colonel, and Rove]. I've been sitting here among holy ones in a convent hidden far from anyone who may think he recognizes me and I've been here long enough to realize I never want to murder another sonovabitch again. (205)

Here, Micaela shows that one does not have to be dictated by the past, but in order to escape it, one must also escape the place. Micaela's case provides a particularly interesting example because she does not escape the place—the place escapes her. At this point in time, because of the Texas Revolution, the border that exists separates Mexico and the Republic of Texas, not Mexico and the United States. When Micaela heads south to evade her punishment, she is still close enough that she can return regularly to visit her mother, Clara, and Clara's twins (who were fathered by her cousin Jedidiah). The presence of the border offers her the above insight.

Though the border typically has negative psychological effects on the individual, in this case it offers a way for Micaela to metaphorically separate herself from all sorts of entanglements. Moreover, she ends up in a convent—a place that gives her another option for how to be a woman in this world, though it is also a domestic space. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderland/ La Frontera*: “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (39). For Anzaldúa, these choices are limiting. For Micaela, though, the opportunity to live in a convent *amongst* nuns without having to be one saves her. Previously, her choices had been to be a mother, a prostitute, or to repudiate her gender altogether and live as a man. All of these roles, however, would require her to shut out parts of her identity. Living in a convent amongst other women frees her from expectations to fulfill the obligations of womanhood as dictated by Anglo culture (though, of course, Anzaldúa does identify some of those same expectations in Mexican culture). Moreover, crossing the border also helps challenge these social constructions. Even though Micaela does not leave her home far behind, the newly established border allows her to leave behind some of the factors that subjugate her in Texas—namely, the male, Anglo gaze. In this way, *Forgetting the Alamo* complicates the philosophy that naturalism espouses. While Micaela is absolutely the product of her environment, she is also able to exert some control over her life in a way that the kid is not. Whereas the kid’s “taste for mindless violence” does not change as he journeys west and across the border, Micaela’s does. As her environment changes, so does she, suggesting that humans are not merely animals at the mercy of outside forces and that they do have power in shaping in the world. The ways in which humans are capable of

exacting power in the world can be seen through the ways in which both *Blood Meridian* and *Forgetting the Alamo* talk about games.

#### Section IV

Because naturalism takes a Darwinian stance, it treats the act of survival as a game that can be won or lost: how one navigates through different events in life is determined by how one understands and experiences the rules. Naturalism exposes the various factors that form the lens through which humans experience conflict. In *Blood Meridian*, the judge thinks that games are ultimately fair: they are just one side pitted against another in a competition dictated by the same set of rules. The judge believes that the wager defines the game—without a wager, even if it is simply pride or humiliation, the game has no meaning. He goes on to compare games to war, saying: “But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all” (249). War, he claims, is the ultimate game because the wager is so huge—it ends in acquiescence at such a grand scale that it consumes the game and the players. The winner subsumes the loser. To the judge, this proves that the concept of morality is a human invention that is permanently flawed. He states: “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views” (250). Here, the judge tries to make a distinction between “historical” and “moral” law, claiming that historical law is something objective that exists without interference from human beings. Through this



lens, the judge rejects the notion of divination or higher powers. The winner is merely that—a winner who is rewarded with pride and obedience from other parties. This reward, however, is not proof of moral right or wrong—only power. Morality in itself, the judge claims, benefits only the weak. This is reinforced with an early example from the novel. Captain White enters Mexico because he believes that it is the right thing to do. He explains to the kid: “What we are dealing with...is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico...We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” (34). Despite the so-called moral position that White takes, the Comanches quickly slaughter him and his unit. Of course, it is important not to confuse the judge’s views with McCarthy’s or to believe that because the judge does wield such power over the gang that we are to trust his insights. Even so, the book’s ultimate understanding of the world is nihilistic and asks readers to question how and why morality is constructed.

*Forgetting the Alamo*, though, leaves readers with a more concrete understanding of morality, and references to games once again help shape the novel’s insight. Scenes in which Micaela participates in poker games frame the novel. Early on, Jedidiah wins Rove’s horse in a game, an act that Micaela believes leads to all of the bad fortune that befalls her family. As the reader learns, though, Jedidiah is not the real winner of this game. Though his three aces do beat Rove’s three kings, neither beats Micaela’s hand: a full house, queens over jacks. Ultimately, though, this hand is meaningless, as Jedidiah explains to her. He tells her: “Now look here, Micaela. Nobody invited you to play in that game. You got yourself a winning hand that nobody was gonna listen to ‘cause you’re nothing but a girl. You got that? Now learn your place” (8). Unlike the judge, Micaela is

unable to see the game of poker, and also war, as a contest that merely establishes winners and losers without regard to morality. It does establish privilege, but it does so without regard to fairness or equality. This is explained more clearly near the end. While watching her cousin play poker, she thinks:

Men were fools at games. The only way they ever won, really won, was by cheating and stealing and believing they had played fair. As if there was such a thing. Games were never fair when there was always someone who pretended he knew more than anyone else and established the rules in his favor at the outset. Then there were those who had tricks of sorts that kept them in the lead. And there was the fool. Pegged by the rest. The born loser. By the end of the first hand, the others knew he would be the one they would all steal from. (171)

Comparing Micaela's perspective to the judge's, we see that both are trying to account for something that they do not understand. In the judge's case, he tries to account for constructions of morality. He does not understand how morality can be seen as objective, and by understanding life as the drive to win, he is able to see morality for what it is—an invention that allows the powerless to usurp control by claiming rightness.

Micaela speaks from another position, though. Her question is: why are immoral people in power? And her answer is that the concept of fairness is the actual construction. To Micaela, there is no fair game because rules are created and manipulated by those who already have an advantage. To use the judge's terms, "historical law" is no less of a construct than "moral law" precisely because history itself is an invention—a truth that is illustrated clearly in both novels. For example, in *Blood Meridian*, the judge

observes petroglyphs on a rock wall and records some of these images in his ledger. Once he is done, he scrapes away one of the symbols, thus wiping it out of history. The only record that it existed is in the drawing that he has made in his ledger—a gesture that shows his domination over historical record. Despite making a distinction between “historical law” and “moral law,” this event illustrates what the judge will not acknowledge—both are at the mercy of humans.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, the malleability of historical record is most clearly seen near the end of the novel when the Colonel seizes the Campos family land. He defends his decision, saying: “I got all the rights from here on out, missy. I am the law. Get used to it or get yourself on back to Mexico” (201). His proclamation reveals that he has constructed the law to work in his favor and also that this construction dismisses historical ties to the land. In *Forgetting the Alamo*, the concept of “law” itself—whether historical or moral—is a construction. When the Colonel says “get yourself on back to Mexico,” he ejects Micaela’s family from the history of the place. How can they return to a place they have never left? From the Colonel’s point of view, though, the history of the place *before* he occupies it is unimportant. In this way, both novels show how historical record is at the mercy of those in power.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, though, Micaela speaks from the point of view of the disenfranchised while the judge in *Blood Meridian* speaks from the point of view of the privileged. At the same time, *Blood Meridian* does not necessarily advocate the kind of detachment from morality that the judge espouses. Like the judge, though, it does suggest that morals ultimately have nothing to do with how the game turns out. In *Blood Meridian*, the Anglo settlers do not win the war because they are better people or because

they are good Christians; they win simply because they are better at playing the game. On the other hand, *Forgetting the Alamo* responds to this version of the story by saying that Anglo settlers do not win because they are better at playing the game; they win because they establish the rules of the game without any regard to conceptions of fairness or justice.

While Pérez's response to McCarthy's novel could be read as derisive, the care that she takes to preserve so much of the setting and so many of the characters from McCarthy's world shows that she does not write from a position that tries to take him to task for continuing to write Chicanos/as and women out of Western stories. Parts of her novel can even be read as homage to McCarthy's work. And in fact, McCarthy's novel tries to engage with the very issues that Pérez raises in her own work, be it scholarly or creative. McCarthy is also concerned with how power relations factor into historical construction. Scholar Timothy Parrish explains this, stating:

In this way, *Blood Meridian* offers a reading of American history that is also a reflection on our own multicultural moment. *Blood Meridian* shows not only that American history—however we define it—has been created out of inevitably murderous encounters such as the ones that this book depicts but also that the American present is itself a constellation of analogously murderous encounters. *Blood Meridian* says that Americans cannot retrospectively erase, or seal off, acts such as killing “Indian savages” or maintaining African slaves in order to fulfill the story that is American history. No mere writing of history can erase the obdurate facts of those murdered and enslaved dead. (98)

As Parrish explains, the violence in *Blood Meridian* works to highlight the violence that has been done and covered up in the name of constructing a nationalistic narrative. In this way, McCarthy and Pérez both do similar kinds of work. One of the primary differences between McCarthy's work and Pérez's, however, has to do with how each novel views morality.

As Parrish points out, *Blood Meridian* refuses to participate in a history that wipes out the violence done in the name of expansionism. Scholar Mark A. Eaton agrees with this perspective in his article "Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction" when he claims that failure to acknowledge this part of United States history is in itself an act of violence: "Real violence in the borderlands is followed by the virtual violence of a sort of willed forgetting. What gets forgotten are not only the violent acts themselves but also the bodies left for dead" (159). Though both scholars frame willed forgetting as a negative act, they also comment on the lack of morality found in *Blood Meridian*. Parrish writes: "McCarthy is not saying that with a different ideology there would be no killing; he is saying that the only way that we can know ourselves is through the acts of violence that are committed in the name of history" (84). In Parrish's reading, violence is not something that can be avoided. That is, McCarthy does not make moral judgment about violent behavior; he merely acknowledges it as fact and tries to expose the historical erasure of violence in U.S. history. Eaton takes on a related position, explaining that "the violence in *Blood Meridian*...is presented simply as one of the hard facts of frontier life, but one which needs to be viewed not in the old myth and symbol vein of American studies, but rather in a new paradigm of political domination and power" (157). For both of these scholars, violence in this book is not to be read as a

commentary on morality but rather as an indisputable fact about human nature. And the evidence in the novel supports this. The narrator himself (though the narrator is unnamed, it must be a man) is largely detached from the bloodshed. He does not ask the reader to feel pity for those who are massacred but simply to witness it.

Though *Blood Meridian* depicts violence as something that cannot be avoided, it does suggest that it is something that can and should be *remembered*. The closest that *Blood Meridian* comes to offering a moral for the reader is in the act of remembering this violence. Parrish remarks about historical memory: “History is always a form of social action and as such obligates its readers either to accept its call to action as true or fight its claims. One resists the truth of a given history not only by labeling it as false but also by writing, or enacting, a counterhistory in narrative form” (2). Parrish’s main claim is that all histories are created from the same facts, but the same facts do not always create the same story. Rather, different arrangements of facts inevitably shut out the multiple ways that any piece of history can be understood. Parrish’s reading of *Blood Meridian* points out the danger of selective remembering as well as the inevitability of it. Though *Blood Meridian* does not moralize about the actions it describes, it still behaves as a form of social action that speaks back to the disenfranchisement of so many cultures and people. Unfortunately, it is unable to avoid participating in the very kind of historical erasure that it indicts, which Pérez points out with *Forgetting the Alamo*.

*Forgetting the Alamo* acknowledges the same violence that *Blood Meridian* does, and it also sees this violence as something that should be remembered. In Pérez’s novel, however, she gives the disempowered a voice. Rather than adopt a third-person, omniscient narrator as McCarthy does, she creates Micaela—a brave but troubled young

*mestiza* whose story has been covered up as a result of the various kinds of violence, both physical and psychic. In this novel, memory is a redemptive force that combats this violence, which is clear in the final sentences of the epilogue when Micaela tells readers: “Maybe the only justice we’ll ever know is in surviving to tell our own side of things. Maybe that’s enough for now. Telling our own stories so we won’t be forgotten” (206). Micaela, who physically fights for her home and her place in history for so much of the novel, comes to understand that the acts of violence themselves are not the only way to get justice, though she never says that violence is not *one* way to get it. Instead, the final lines suggest that there are two ways to seek justice: one is simply through destruction and the other is through survival. The latter is, of course, the moral option.

The main difference regarding the moral stance that each novel takes is related to how each novel takes on historical memory. McCarthy’s work “refuses to take sides, much less moralize about the evils of imperialism” (Eaton 159). The only truth in McCarthy’s novel is violence. While one might be tempted to see the very act of writing *Blood Meridian* as a moral stance that declares that selective remembering and historical erasure are wrong, there is no evidence in the text to support this. *Forgetting the Alamo*, on the other hand, offers what *Blood Meridian* will not: an unwavering declaration that violence is not the default state of humanity but rather a choice that is made and can be unmade.

To return briefly to Donald Pizer’s discussion of naturalism, he explains why nineteenth century American authors were attracted to this form: “They believed that contemporary America was a closed rather than an open society and that life in this society was characterized by a struggle to survive materially rather than prevail morally”

(4). Both novels acknowledge that American society is closed, and because they are set in the mid-nineteenth century in a place where cultures were in constant conflict, it may be possible to argue that these novels show the process of *how* it becomes closed. Both also feature characters who are motivated out of “a struggle to survive materially.” McCarthy, however, calls into questions whether or not “prevail[ing] morally” has ever been an option while Pérez staunchly answers, “Yes.” Of course, this leaves readers to question two things: how is morality being defined and how does one make (or unmake) the choice to behave in this way? Third-world Chicana feminist theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, and Edén Torres can help readers puzzle through the question of how one can make the choice to be a moral being in the face of so much turmoil.

## Section V

In their theoretical work, Anzaldúa, Sandoval, and Torres struggle to understand how power relationships operate and also offer alternate ways of engaging in those relationships that provide a way for the colonized to establish agency. Anzaldúa’s foundational book *Borderlands/ La Frontera* is one of the first texts that offers a recounting of the southwest’s history through the eyes of a Mexican American woman.<sup>8</sup> She does not speak about women as accessories to men’s activities but rather theorizes about how culture shapes female identity. Through her eyes, women are not merely *victims* but rather partners who are, consciously or unconsciously, complicit. She explains: “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it

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<sup>8</sup> Though Mexican American perspectives can be found in texts like Rodolfo Acuña’s *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, which was published nearly fifteen years before *Borderlands/ La Frontera* was released in 1987, Anzaldúa adds another dimension to the conversation by focusing on gender and sexuality.



communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Men make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (38). Anzaldúa goes on to talk about the role of the woman in ways that are remarkably similar to Castañeda’s discussion of female stereotypes of the nineteenth century. Women, she writes, are “expect[ed] to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men” (39). In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Micaela struggles to find a way out of this value system, which she recognizes as corrupt. Being in a subordinate role, though, presents her with challenges that characters like the judge or even the kid do not face. For most of the novel, she plays into the rules of the game. She does exactly what Anzaldúa describes—she transmits men’s laws without questioning them, which is most obvious in the jealousy that she expresses in her relationship with Clara.

For example, Clara and Micaela meet for a second time in Galveston where Clara is dealing cards in a bar. The two pick up where they left off, and their relationship is both physically and emotionally intense. When the two are alone in Clara’s room, their relationship is tender—they share secrets, and Clara reads to Micaela from her favorite books. When they go out into the world, however, Micaela changes. As she watches other men interact with Clara, she begins to replicate the behaviors of men that she has witnessed throughout her life. While watching how men react to Clara when she deals poker one night, Micaela gets jealous, and her jealousy quickly transforms into violence:

I could see from my corner [the man grabbing Clara] had a persistent temperament and that was when my jealousy did the things I did not think I was capable of doing. Up to that moment I thought only fear and revenge

had provoked me and brought me to the time and place where I now found myself but something else erupted from inside me and I had no acquaintance with this sadistic reaction. (115)

While Micaela is aware that she has a temper, she believes that it only emerges as a response to fear or a desire for revenge. When she attacks the man who is flirting with Clara, a man who turns out to be the sheriff's son, her jealousy manifests itself in the form of violence. As a narrator reflecting on this moment from a different time, Micaela recognizes that her behavior is what is expected from a man. After she beats the man nearly to death, she is hurt when Clara reacts compassionately and helps move him to the bar. Later on, before she and Clara have to flee town, she gets drunk in celebration of her actions. She later contemplates this moment, thinking: "Maybe I was more like my cousin Jedidiah Jones than I had thought was possible. Maybe I was nothing but a fool" (116). This statement illustrates that Micaela has begun to recognize how she transmits men's rules and laws through her behavior with Clara. Unfortunately, it does not happen in the moment of violence, though, and her jealous behavior does not stop at this point. She goes on to get into other fights over Clara, and each time Clara remains unimpressed.

While Micaela does not abandon her violent tendencies until after she spends time in the convent, she learns something important in New Orleans from a tarot card reader named Miss Celestine that helps the reader understand her later transformation. While reading Micaela's cards, Miss Celestine describes the significance of each card's image, explaining: "Those? Those are warnings, mon cher. Warnings that you must abide by your heart and not let your head rule your heart or you will end up like this. Upside down and ruled by money" (130). Miss Celestine's comments show the reader a clear contrast

between Micaela and the men she is fighting. While Micaela is still capable of love, the men she chases have changed in such a way that their value system is turned on its head. Miss Celestine continues her explanation, telling Micaela: “Love belongs to all, mon cher. It is people we do not own and no, you do not own [Clara]. No one can possess her. She will not allow such possession but she will allow love and it is your love she waits for, but you, ah, you think you are like him” (130). The “him” to which Miss Celestine refers is the image of a hanged man on a card. Miss Celestine’s tarot card reading points out the main flaw in the way that Micaela has been viewing Clara. She sees her as a possession, just as the men who harassed her during the poker game. At one point, she even refers to her as “my Clara” (115). As Miss Celestine explains, though, love is not about possessing another human being—which is to say, love is not about control. Once Micaela begins to learn this lesson, she can break apart some of the laws and rules that she has previously been transmitting without question.

Pérez’s Micaela goes through the process described in Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*, which allows her to begin breaking apart constructions of gender, class, and sexuality. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval identifies five different modes of consciousness that subordinate classes use to understand the world and affect change. These are: the equal-rights form, the revolutionary form, the supremacist form, the separatist form, and the differential form. The first four forms of consciousness are fixed in a certain ideology. For example, in the equal-rights form, “members of the subordinated group argue that the differences for which they have been assigned inferior status lay in appearance only, not in ‘reality’” (56). Sandoval goes on to say that the equal-rights form “seeks integration” and “assimilation” (56). Micaela experiences this

form of consciousness early in the novel when she fights with her cousin for recognition of her superior hand in poker. She wants to be seen as an equal in this situation. While there is value in this form of consciousness, it inevitably breaks down whenever members of this group begin recognizing differences. Again, this can be seen in *Forgetting the Alamo* when examining the relationship between female characters. While they share a gender, Micaela, her mother, Clara, and Miss Elsie are all very different women, and these differences sometimes lead to powerful disagreements. Differential consciousness, however, is a form that allows for movement between all forms.

Sandoval compares differential consciousness to “the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (58). The differential mode allows one to select the appropriate mode for any given situation and move between them as necessary. By the end of the novel, Micaela begins to inhabit this mode. To understand what allows her to be able to shift gears, however, one must turn to Sandoval’s theory of the hermeneutics of love. The differential mode of consciousness is enacted through the process love, though she is not speaking of romantic love but rather of love as a force for social change.

Sandoval explains:

Third world writers...similarly understand love as a “breaking” through whatever controls in order to find “understanding and community”: it is described as “hope” and “faith” in the potential goodness of some promised land; it is described as Anzaldúa’s *coatlicue* state, which is a “rupturing” in one’s everyday world that permits crossing over to another; or as a specific moment of shock, what Emma Pérez envisions as the

trauma of desire, or erotic despair. These writers who theorize social change understand “love” as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement. (140)

In this passage, she explains that the act of love can allow an individual to rupture forms of consciousness that do not always recognize difference. It does so because the act of love disrupts power structures and breaks down binary relationships. Sandoval continues her explanation, stating: “To fall in love means that one must submit, however temporarily, to what is ‘intractable,’ to a state of being not subject to control or governance” (142). She goes on to explain that while Western conceptions of love are sometimes understood in an either/or relationship (either one has hope and thus acts on that hope or one does not and therefore gives up), there is a third option for loving in which one chooses “drifting” (143). This third option is what begins the process of rupturing typical understandings. Rather than choosing one side of the binary, a binary that keeps the colonized in subjugated positions, one can choose a third option that rejects the binary in favor of a state of uncertainty. Through making this choice, one inhabits the differential form of consciousness, which allows for oscillation between many different forms.

In the case of *Forgetting the Alamo*, Micaela slowly deconstructs Western conceptions of love and moves towards differential consciousness. There are many social constructions that work to control Micaela, but it is through breaking free of them that she is able to arrive at a place of revolutionary love rather than continuing to stew in her

anger. Though Micaela is motivated by love of her family, Clara, and Juana, she only understands how to transmit that love in a binary way for the majority of the novel: either she expresses her affection in the form of exacting revenge on anyone who does harm to her family or she gives up and accepts the violence bestowed on her loved ones at the hands of the settlers who come in to destroy their home. Micaela's relationship with Clara, though often troubled, ultimately saves Micaela because Clara requires her to reconsider what love looks like when one takes away the power dynamic that had previously encouraged Micaela to treat Clara as a possession. Though Micaela goes through a transformation regarding *how* she practices love, her capacity to love at all differentiates her from the characters in *Blood Meridian*.

Like *Blood Meridian*, *Forgetting the Alamo* does not believe in an idyllic world in which violence does not exist and everyone can get along. This would be unreasonable. What it does believe, though, is that it is possible to overcome violent instinct. Micaela, for instance, has the opportunity to kill Walker near the end of the novel. She holds a knife to his throat but stops when he confesses that he is the one who killed her father. She explains her choice to let Walker live, saying: "I stopped and turned around without any fear in my heart and body 'cause I knew he had to live with himself for the rest of his days and I knew that by confessing to me, he thought he was free of his sin. But he wasn't. He killed a man who loved him. Least I never committed such treachery" (206). In this instance, Micaela recognizes something that she could not see earlier in the novel: that being able to live with one's conscience is a victory in itself. *Forgetting the Alamo* defines morality in an individualized way that is not measured by any one set of tenets, religious or otherwise, but by the capacity to live with one's choices.

This capacity comes from being able to empathize with and connect to others who are different in a variety of ways. Walker, for example, can see only the differences in himself and Micaela's family, which prevents him from being able to make a meaningful connection with them. While the third world feminist theorists that I have used to understand Micaela's actions do embrace difference, they do not do so at the cost of losing connections with others. Edén Torres, in her book *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, explains the importance of making connections with those who are different, stating:

The ability to make connections is often difficult, but we must behave as if we know it is absolutely possible and necessary. We have to do it despite the hardship and real dangers involved. Such a commitment increases our capacity to perpetually incorporate new voices, to critically think about and acknowledge questions and challenges as they arise, and to refocus on a larger vision. (186)

Torres does not say that it is important to make connections only with similar people but rather that it is important, no matter how hard, to learn to communicate with all kinds of people. Through this, she claims, humans are able to create bonds that allow them to work together without denying difference. *Forgetting the Alamo* and *Blood Meridian* both show the results that arise when humans see difference without bothering to also forge connections in the face of that difference, though *Blood Meridian* accepts that the conflict that arises out of difference will inevitably be violent. As Timothy Parrish explains: "For McCarthy, the 'historical' reasons why a groups of people commits some violent act are less important than the recognition that a belief in history as the true story

about the destiny of a given people requires groups to assert their identity and thus their history through acts of violence” (85). As Parrish explains, in *Blood Meridian*, the formation of history is always a fight that inevitably leads to violence.

In *Forgetting the Alamo*, however, Micaela struggles to understand how it is possible to escape a way of seeing the world that acknowledges difference only as a negative trait. She achieves this through self-reflection. Micaela makes a shift from expecting her *actions* to do most of her communicating for her to finding meaning in verbal communication. In this way, she reenters the domestic space because, as Jane Tompkins reminds us, language is seen as feminine in the Western. When I say this, though, I fear that I may be misinterpreted as arguing that *Forgetting the Alamo* advocates traditional gender roles. It does not; rather, it refuses to belittle the role of domestic life. As Tompkins states: “The Western *answers* the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture” (39). With this in mind, Pérez’s novel can be seen as an answer both to McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and to a genre that has previously disregarded all things feminine, though the conflicts found in the genre also rely on the feminine to justify so much of the violent behavior. Tompkins explains: “The genre’s revenge plot depends on an antithetical world of love and reconciliation both as a source of meaning—it defines the male code of violent heroism by opposition—and as a source of legitimation” (41). Tompkins explains that, despite being cast aside, women are integral to the Western because their presence and what they represent to the culture is often at the heart of what Western heroes strive to protect. *Forgetting the Alamo*, though, recasts the role of women from one of submission to one of empowerment. The domestic space and the wilderness are no longer



antitheses of each other. Instead, Pérez introduces a world in which, though differential consciousness, Micaela is able to switch back and forth between modes as the situation dictates.

## Section VI

When I think back to the sets of toy soldiers that I sold while working in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, I am struck most by what those soldiers unintentionally reinforced. Their whole bodies colored blue and gray or blue and brown conveyed to the children who begged for these toys that there were only two sides to this, or any, conflict. These play sets and the games that they would no doubt inspire communicated that there are good guys and there are bad guys, that it is easy to tell them apart, and that in the end the good guys can always triumph. The Western as a genre reinforces the same notion through the ethical code by which its heroes abide. One of the “qualities [that] mark the mainstream Western,” according to scholar Norris Yates, author of *Gender and Genre: An Introduction to Women Writers of Formula Westerns 1900-1950*, “is the simple clash of good with evil” (7). He elaborates on this point, stating: “The West brought out the best and worst in people; it rewarded the good with adventure, romance, and usually prosperity; it punished the bad, usually with violent death” (7). Yates highlights one of the most attractive qualities about the Western: the world of the stereotypical Western is easy to navigate and to understand because the system of morality is so clear-cut. Moreover, that system justifies some of the most questionable behavior by the genre’s heroes. Tompkins elaborates on this system of morality, stating:

The ethical system the Western proposes, which vindicates conflict, violence, and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on top with everyone else in descending order beneath—this code and this hierarchy never appear to reflect the interests or beliefs of any particular group, or of human beings at all, but seem to have been dictated primordially by nature itself. (73)

Not only does Tompkins explain how the Western justifies violence and celebrates the Anglo male, but she goes on to explain why it is so easily accepted by outside eyes: this code of conduct is not presented as a construction but as an innate fact.

McCarthy and Pérez both struggle with these assumptions and work to deconstruct the simplistic binary of good vs. evil. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy, however, does not complicate the question so much as he simplifies it further. There is not good and evil, there is only war. As the judge tells readers, “War is god” (249). Violence and nothing else dictates the actions of man. As McCarthy breaks down the binaries that divide “good and evil” or “us and them,” he does so not by expanding options but by reducing them. *Blood Meridian* tells us that humans are all motivated by the desire to preserve, the desire to survive, and the desire to destroy. It is this drive and no other that propels us through time. *Forgetting the Alamo* disagrees. Micaela, though motivated by all of these desires, is also driven by love. Precisely by forging connections with others, she breaks down the binaries that rule her earlier understand of the world, which helps reshape her understanding of morality. While Micaela always believes that she is doing right by her family, by the end she recognizes her behavior as a mere performance of honoring them. The actual act of honoring them is much simpler—it

comes in the form of memory. In *Forgetting the Alamo*, language and not action is at the heart of both preservation and morality.

As I conclude this chapter, I am reminded of the beginning of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. She writes: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). These texts, while both set along the physical U.S.-Mexico border, address the concept of borders in a metaphorical way. They intuitively acknowledge that the U.S.-Mexico border, or any other border, creates an *us* versus *them* mentality. This binary division does not work for either McCarthy or Pérez, and in their novels, they struggle to understand how to see the region and its people in a more nuanced way. McCarthy looks for what unites all of the cultures while Pérez celebrates difference. McCarthy's white, male perspective no doubt influences his decision to look for a common denominator between all cultures, just as Pérez's Chicana perspective makes her more sympathetic to the colonized point of view. In the end, though, both of these perspectives contain truths—it is possible for it to be true that humans, regardless of class, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, are at once profoundly similar to and different from every other human. Acknowledging and allowing for difference, however, makes room for hope.

## CHAPTER 2

“THE LESS DANGEROUS THE CROSSING IS, THE MORE IT COSTS”:

IMPACTS OF THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ON FEMALE IDENTITY IN

REYNA GRANDE’S *DANCING WITH BUTTERFLIES*

### Section I

If you look at Tijuana during the midmorning from the pedestrian bridge that divides the United States from Mexico, the line of cars staring back will let you know for certain that you should never, ever cross the border by car unless you do not want to come back or unless you do not mind abandoning it and crossing on foot, though that line is long too. When I visited in July of 2012, there were seven lanes of traffic entering San Ysidro, California from Tijuana—six of automobiles and one of pedestrians.<sup>1</sup> Getting into Mexico from the U.S. side is easy—you walk or drive straight through. No one asks to see your papers. When you cross into Mexico on foot, there are no lines—just a fence with a turnstile.

During my visit, I walked over to Tijuana with my friend Maura. I had recently helped her and her husband move from Lincoln, Nebraska to San Diego, and crossing into Mexico was part of her thank you to me. Another part of it was the driving route that took us four hours out of the way just so that I could see the part of Interstate 8 that hugs the U.S.-Mexico border and offers a view of the fence right from the car. On this part of

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<sup>1</sup> Since my visit to the border in July of 2012, the border crossing between Tijuana and San Ysidro has undergone massive construction, though the changes were in progress while I was there. The gate through which I walked is now closed, and a new pedestrian entrance has been opened on the east side of Interstate-5 next to the public transportation terminals and a McDonalds. Traffic entering Mexico has been rerouted to a new port of entry called El Chaparral, which has 22 inspection lanes. This change tells me that perhaps the lack of traffic I saw entering Mexico was likely due to time of day—10:00 on a Monday is obviously not peak travel time for those entering Mexico. Construction is currently underway on the northbound crossing into the United States that is expected to cut down on the wait time entering the U.S.

the border, the fence is tall, brown, and picketed, and on both sides there is little to see but sand. Along that section of Interstate 8, the road itself is the sole difference between what is on the north and what is on the south side of that fence.

Between Tijuana and San Diego, though, the world changes. In Tijuana, there are multiple dentists on every block who cater to the U.S. residents who come across for discount dental work.<sup>2</sup> There are pharmacies that put out sandwich board signs advertising Viagra and Cialis, or you can go next door to the restaurant that serves Viagra Soup. And as you stand in line to cross back into the United States, there are multiple billboards on display for the plastic surgeons, who, just like the dentists and pharmacies, will serve you at deeply discounted prices.

As I looked at these signs, I could not help but think of Reyna Grande's novel *Dancing with Butterflies* (2009) in which one of the main characters crosses into Tijuana several times to get plastic surgery. After reading the book, I wanted to see the border crossing between these two countries. Despite having gone to Mexico the year before, I had never actually seen the border in my adult life. My family lives in Morelia, Michoacán, a city three hours west of Mexico City, so my father and I flew. While our experience in the Houston airport was a kind of crossing in its own right, going through customs was nothing compared to spending an hour and a half in line inhaling automobile fumes. And that, I knew, was nothing compared to my father's first experience crossing

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<sup>2</sup> I met one of those residents the month before my visit at a bar in the Detroit airport. He was on his way to Tijuana via San Diego to get more dental implants. I can't remember if it was his second or third trip, only that, even with the cost of flying and a hotel room, he still saved thousands of dollars. Also, his teeth looked great.

the border. When I told him that I would be going to San Diego, he told me, “That’s where I first came across when I was a wetback,” and then laughed.<sup>3</sup>

When I crossed into Tijuana with Maura, I tried to see what the city must have looked like to the characters in *Dancing with Butterflies*, three of whom are Latinas born in the United States and one who is undocumented and spent the first twenty years of her life in Michoacán, Mexico. Of course, I could not. I grew up in south central Pennsylvania, and though I have always *felt* the border, the border as metaphor is nothing compared to the border as reality. What I saw, instead, was another side of Gloria Anzaldúa’s famous declaration from *Borderlands/ La Frontera*: “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). One has only to hear about the femicides in Ciudad Juárez or the corpses of undocumented immigrants from Mexico and other Central American countries left decomposing in the desert to understand that there is also a literal truth to Anzaldúa’s statement.<sup>4</sup> But the signs that catered to U.S. tourists told me that there was another kind

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<sup>3</sup> My father entered the U.S. to find work for the first time when he was 17. Though a permanent resident now, he has crossed into the United States without documentation several times in his life, but he rarely talks about the crossings themselves. He told me once that he just waded across the Rio Grande, that it was not deep, and then he was just here. I wonder if it was ever that simple, though. All of my uncles and one of my aunts have come across the border without documentation at least once. My Aunt Sylvia, who I saw for the first time in over twenty-five years only three days after my trip to Tijuana, told me about her first crossing. She took me to the beach, where she pointed to a stagnant pool of brown water and told me that the first time she crossed the border, it was in Texas, and she was so tired from running through the sand that she made my uncle stop and let her drink from a pool of water that looked just like that. He yelled at her to hurry up because my dad was waiting somewhere to pick them up.

<sup>4</sup> The femicides in Ciudad Juárez began between 1993-1994 around the time that NAFTA went into effect. The victims share a similar demographic: they are mostly young, poor women who often work in the maquiladoras along the border or in other services positions. In addition to being killed, these women are often raped or tortured. There are many theories regarding who commits these murders and why, ranging from serial killers, to producers of snuff films, organ traffickers, and drug dealers. Diana Washington Valdez’s book *The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women* links the violence against women to government corruption and relationships between authorities and drug cartels in Mexico. Alicia Gaspar de Alba also writes about the murders in her novel *Desert Blood*, and they are also the inspiration for the longest section of Roberto Bolaño’s novel *2666*.

of violence at work in this border region as well. Because what else does one do during surgery, dental or plastic, but bleed?

At first glance, one would think that the only thing that attracts U.S. residents to Tijuana is the promise of affordable upkeep for the body. The services and products advertised through sandwich board signs and billboards focus on maintaining the appearance of youth. This kind of dedication to the body runs counter to some of the cultural values found on both the U.S. and Mexican sides of the border. Cultures in both places show evidence of buying into and honoring dualism in which the mind and body are seen as separate from each other. The introduction to Elizabeth Grosz's book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* succinctly lays out the philosophical roots of dualism at the same time as explaining how it has influenced several waves of feminism. With its roots in Descartes's philosophy, dualism believes that the mind and body are separate entities that function independently from each other.<sup>5</sup> In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz explains that "the male/female opposition has been closely allied with the mind/body opposition" (14). Whereas men have been perceived as cerebral, women have been linked to the body. In cultures in which the mind is elevated in status, this dichotomy is used to justify subjugating women. Grosz lists some features that have been used to both align women with the body and to dismiss the validity of the body altogether: "By implication, women's bodies are presumed to be incapable of men's achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities" (14). Grosz

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<sup>5</sup> Descartes is credited for the separation of the mind from the body and consequently for the privileging of the mind over the body. Grosz sees Descartes's dualism not simply as one of mind and body, though, saying: "What Descartes accomplished was not really the separation of mind from body (a separation which had already been long anticipated in Greek philosophy since the time of Plato) but a separation of soul from nature" (6). The result of this, she explains, is that the mind is detached from nature and placed "in a position of hierarchical superiority" above it and thus above the body, which can only be tied to nature.

goes on to explain that this view of the female mind and body “restrict[s] women’s social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms” (14). Women’s biological traits, such as the ability to bear children, confine their social roles at the same time as allowing misogynists to believe that there can be a distinction between the cerebral and corporeal.

While I was in Tijuana, I could not help but feel the contradictions present in these ideas more strongly than usual. On both sides of the border, dualism permeates relationships between genders. In my chapter on *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy and *Forgetting the Alamo* by Emma Pérez, I outlined some of the cultural expectations that women faced in the nineteenth century. For example, I used historian Antonia I. Castañeda’s article “The Political Economy of Nineteenth Century Stereotypes of Californianas” to explain how the Cult of Domesticity influenced the ways in which Anglo men saw women of Mexican descent. Rather than try to understand cultural differences, Anglo men expected that Latinas should behave as Anglo women and often saw their behavior as representative of the culture as a whole. One can see evidence of this mindset in Twentieth Century texts as well—notably, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which focuses on gender expectations.

Anzaldúa learned from her experience growing up along the Texas-Mexico border that women are taught to uphold certain ideals. She writes: “The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men” (39). Expanding on this, she explains that it is presumed that women will act selflessly, forgoing her own needs for that of her husband, children, or other family members. She explains: “If a woman doesn’t renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish” (39). Anzaldúa is critical of this binary division that continues to casts selfishness in a negative



light and suggests that selflessness is a virtue. Anzaldúa criticizes this supposed “virtue,” which she believes is another way that women are kept subservient to men. She writes: “The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin—as sister, as father, as *padrino*—and last as self” (40). While Anzaldúa states that this behavior is anticipated of everyone, she also explains that women are particularly vulnerable because culture, as established by the Church and by men, evaluates their worth primarily based on their ability to give of themselves.

Reyna Grande’s novel *Dancing with Butterflies* features four female characters who struggle against this expectation. Rather than attend primarily to the needs of others, each character wants to fulfill her own desires. As readers come to see, however, these desires do not always come from within each character. Instead, they are often responses to societal pressures that instruct the women to want particular kinds of possessions or strive for certain body types or relationships. The turmoil that each character experiences is not unique to Latina women living on or near the border, but their proximity to it does highlight the intersectionality of cultural, societal, and biological expectations that often guide behaviors. Moreover, the presence of the border suggests a dualistic relationship not only between genders but also between cultures and nationalities. The characters in the novel each struggle with how the choices they make reflect their relationships to Mexican culture and to U.S. culture.

## Section II

Set primarily in Los Angeles, California, *Dancing with Butterflies* follows four female characters who share a cultural heritage as well as a passion for Mexican folk dancing. Yesenia, the oldest character, is the director of Alegría, a Folklórico company that she founded and operates with the help of her husband, Eduardo. Adriana and Elena are two sisters who dance for the company, and Soledad, an undocumented worker from a small town in the state of Michoacán, designs, sews, and repairs costumes for the company. Soledad is the only character born in Mexico. Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena are all Mexican American women born and raised in California. For these three women, Folklórico connects them to their Mexican heritage and gives them a way to celebrate their bodies in the face of cultural and societal norms that makes them feel shame or guilt at focusing too much on the self.

The novel opens in Yesenia's voice. She is dancing, but her knees are also in terrible pain. At forty-two, Yesenia is no longer the agile dancer that she once was, but she refuses to accept the effects of aging without a fight. Because of everything that Yesenia has given up for Alegría and for Folklórico, she feels betrayed by her body. Her devotion to Folklórico has directed many of her choices. For example, she chooses to have only one child because she needs to devote most of her time to directing and acquiring grants for Alegría. When she goes to the doctor to have her knee examined, though, she learns that she has osteoarthritis, a condition in which the cartilage between bones breaks down and causes intense pain. The doctor informs her that she will have to give up dancing, but he also recommends that she lose weight to help her situation. Yesenia misinterprets his suggestion, thinking that she will be able to dance again if she

loses weight. After seeing a magazine advertisement for a plastic surgery clinic in Tijuana, though, Yesenia believes liposuction will provide a quick fix, and with the weight off, she will immediately be able to return to dancing. When she finds out that she can never dance again no matter her weight loss, the news sends her into a further depression, which she tries to alleviate through repeated plastic surgeries and through having an affair with an old high school crush. Though her family knows only about her plastic surgery, the procedures are enough to worry her husband and her son, Memo, both of whom also dance. Eventually, her desire to recapture her youth also has a terrible impact on Alegría. Yesenia borrows money from the group's account to pay for her surgeries. Though she intends to pay it back, the group breaks up when the members find out.

Yesenia is not the only one whose devotion to the group wanes. Elena, one of the group's most talented dancers, also quits after the death of her first child. At the beginning of the novel, Elena is eight months pregnant. Though Elena has mixed feelings about her pregnancy when she first learns about it, she and her husband quickly become excited. Unfortunately, the child dies unexpectedly before birth, and in her grief, Elena pushes away everything and everyone she cares about. She and her husband divorce. She rejects the sympathy offered to her by members of Alegría. Finally, she quits dancing altogether. She also meets Fernando, a seventeen-year-old undocumented student at the school where she teaches. Fernando is a naturally talented dancer who excels at dance much more rapidly than the other students who participate in the school's Folklórico group founded by Elena. Though Elena has given up on both dancing with Alegría and directing the group at school, she agrees to give Fernando rides to practice so that he can

join Alegría. Her relationship with Fernando is charged from the start, and eventually the two engage in a sexual relationship, which leaves Elena feeling guilty and fearing that she will be imprisoned if anyone finds out.

Like Elena, Adriana also has questionable relationships with men, though hers are much different. As young girls, Elena and Adriana lost their mother in a car accident, which left them alone with their abusive father. After their father beats Adriana one evening, Elena calls the police. Their father is sent to prison, leaving the girls to be raised by their grandparents, who never liked their mother and consequently have no sympathy for either child. Because Elena is older and leaves Adriana alone when she goes away to college, their grandparents convince Adriana that her sister does not care about her and has abandoned her. Adriana's feelings of abandonment and her desire to please her father impact the way she relates to others as she grows up. When the novel begins, Adriana is twenty-three, and she constantly dates men who only want to take advantage of her. In addition to making bad choices regarding men, Adriana also chooses to dance Folklórico though it is not her passion, and she is not particularly good at it. Adriana has a beautiful voice, but rather than audition for a mariachi band, she continues to dance because she feels as though it is the only connection that she has left to her mother. Eventually, she falls for an abusive man named Emilio who once danced with a professional Folklórico company in Mexico City. Her relationship with Emilio quickly falls apart when the two get into an accident, and Emilio abandons Adriana at the scene despite her injuries. This acts as an impetus for Adriana and Elena to begin repairing their relationship and helps give Adriana the courage to give up dancing and pursue singing.

The relationships that all of these women have with each other, with their families, and with Folklórico are balanced by the presence of Soledad, whose story is so much different from their own. Soledad, an undocumented woman in her early thirties, does not dance, though she also loves Folklórico. She is uncomfortable in her body because she has a birthmark that covers part of her face and because she is overweight. Her self-consciousness keeps her from dancing, but she expresses her passion for Folklórico through costume design. When the novel opens, Soledad hopes to open her own dress and costume shop with her friend Rubén. These plans fall through when Rubén reveals that he plans to spend all of the money that he had agreed to pay for the deposit on Sex Reassignment Surgery. Because she does not have proper documentation and because her savings are meager, Soledad cannot move forward with the plans on her own. Moreover, an emergency requires Soledad to spend most of her savings. A scorpion bites her grandmother, who lives in Mexico. Because of her age, she falls ill and dies. Soledad volunteers to use her savings to buy plane tickets for herself, her mother, and her U.S.-born sister, Stephanie, to fly to Mexico. While her mother and sister can easily return to the U.S., Soledad is forced to cross again with the aid of a coyote, which proves difficult. When she injures her ankle, her coyote leaves her behind, and eventually an older Anglo man named Jerry helps her. Jerry and Soledad develop feelings for each other, but when Jerry refuses to help other immigrants like her, Soledad leaves his home knowing that she will be picked up by border patrol and deported.

The four women all come together at the end of the novel to help Soledad cross back into the U.S, and the final trip across the border is transformative for all of the women. Though they are all scared of the consequences, they are also ready to take the

risk. Having finally acknowledged their destructive behavior, Yesenia, Elena, and Adriana see the opportunity as a chance for redemption. For Soledad, this crossing is a way to wipe the slate clean and undo the feelings of betrayal that she experienced when she and Jerry turned away the immigrants who needed their help in the desert. Yesenia makes all of the arrangements. Using her sister's passport, the women drive Soledad directly through a border checkpoint disguised as a dancer. At the end of the novel, Folklórico becomes more than a symbolic way of maintaining their connection to Mexican culture—it quite literally rescues Soledad from the poverty stricken life that awaited her in her hometown.

Though Folklórico connects all four women to their Mexican heritage, Yesenia, Elena, and Adriana experience that connection much differently than Soledad, who spent her first twenty-years in Mexico. As literary critics Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba address in their book *Border Women: Writing from la Frontera*, the border's significance differs depending on which side one occupies. Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba claim that for U.S. residents, the border is a metaphorical line that does not consider the real conditions under which people on the opposite side live. Rather, it is used to create a multicultural location in which geographic boundaries lose their dominance. From the Mexican side, however, the border acts as a genuine division between one culture and another, creating “a definitive barrier” (2). For example, the two authors look to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* as one of the foundational texts that treats the border as metaphor, and they also offer a critique of how that metaphor looks from a Mexican perspective:

Anzaldúa's book, despite its multiple crossings of cultural and gender borders—from ethnicity to feminisms, from the academic realm to the work of blue-collar labor—tends to essentialize relations between Mexico and the United States. Her third country between the two nations, the borderlands, is still a metaphorical country defined and narrated from a First World perspective...Anzaldúa's famous analysis does not take into cognizance the many other othernesses related to a border existence; her "us" is limited to U.S. minorities; her "them" is U.S. dominant culture.

(15)

Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba believe that Anzaldúa's perspective, as complex and inclusive as it is, still does not account for the whole picture. Because Anzaldúa's "us" is defined as U.S. minorities and her "them" is defined as dominant U.S. culture, voices from the Mexican side of the border are silenced in this metaphor. Of course, Anzaldúa's perspective, like any individual perspective, is limited by experience. Having never lived in Mexico, it would be remiss for her to try to speak for the Mexican side of the border. Moreover, with *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Anzaldúa works to show the ways in which a Third World exists within the First.

Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba understand that there are limitations and complexities that anyone writing about the border must face. The problem for Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba lies not with the primary texts; rather, they question the ways in which scholars compound texts from the border region without considering the economic and cultural differences that impact the formation of both the author and the text. They argue that scholars of border studies should consider the border from both sides in their

studies or they should specifically acknowledge that they are focusing only on one side in order “to recognize the material and metaphorical differences involved in such transnational analyses” (4).<sup>6</sup> Though the authors of *Border Women* refer to the ways in which scholars and readers see the border, these ideas are helpful in understanding how the multi-voiced narration functions in Reyna Grande’s *Dancing with Butterflies*.

In *Border Women*, Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba focus on short story collections and fragmentary texts, a choice that they explain by stating: “Theorizations about the border cannot be consolidated into a singular, hegemonic structure, but rather need to maintain an alert attentiveness to the nuances of multiple voices and positions” (32). Because of the use of multiple voices, Reyna Grande’s *Dancing with Butterflies* illustrates the disconnect between how U.S. and Mexican residents view the border. Moreover, the book is filtered through author Reyna Grande’s own experiences growing up on both sides of the border, adding to the novel’s ethos. As Grande reveals in her recent memoir *The Distance Between Us* (2012), she lived in Mexico until age nine at which point she entered the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant with her father and two siblings. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, she reveals that her novels are influenced by her own experiences, though they are fiction. Her perspective gives readers both an insider and outsider perspective. Like the new mestiza described in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Grande has had to “[learn] to juggle cultures” (101). As an immigrant, she knows that it is different for someone to cross the border and

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<sup>6</sup> Though Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba primarily critique scholarly views of the border, they do not make clear how they treat Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. Because *Borderlands/ La Frontera* straddles genres, they could (and probably should) consider her work as both a theoretical, scholarly work and also as a creative work. Looking at the text from both perspectives might complicate their claim since Anzaldúa sees the borderlands as both geographic place and metaphorical space, allowing her “to recognize the material and metaphorical differences” that these authors want to consider.



begin the process of assimilation than it is to be born into a community of people who are already engaged in this process. This experience gives her a nuanced perspective into how individuals from different but complimentary backgrounds struggle through the challenges of living in a cultural borderland. She uses this knowledge to create Yesenia, Adriana, Elena, and Soledad. The three women born in the United States never experience the border as a concrete barrier while Soledad sees and experiences it from both perspectives. Her presence in the novel keeps the reality of the border present for readers.

### Section III

The novel's structure shows how characters like Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena can forget the reality of the border while Soledad is perpetually aware of it. Because it is told from four alternating first-person narrators, readers experience multiple perspectives, each of which offers a more complex picture of Latino culture in Los Angeles. Despite sharing some cultural similarities, such as dancing Folklórico, each character is also affected by a myriad of other influences. In this way, *Dancing with Butterflies* questions assumptions about the impact that culture has on identity formation and instead looks at how culture intersects with a variety of different circumstances, such as familial relationships, class structures, and expectations of gender roles.

The use of multiple narrators is reminiscent of novels such as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. Like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the alternating narrators work to show competing perspectives of similar events. Just as readers observe the variety of feelings

that each of the Bundrens experience in the wake of Addie's death, they are allowed to see how individual characters in *Dancing with Butterflies* interpret the same event. For example, by having access to both Adriana's and Elena's thoughts, readers can see that the ways in which each sister remembers her past is remarkably different. Adriana does not understand Elena's reaction to her mother's death and interprets her refusal to talk about it as apathy, thinking: "And this is why I don't understand why Elena tries to act as if Mom never existed. That ungrateful bitch just plain forgot she ever had a mother. She hardly talks about her and she hates it when I ask her about Mom" (76). Later, though, readers get a glimpse into Elena's perspective. When Adriana makes mole con pollo to celebrate Elena's birthday, just as her mother used to do, Elena thinks: "She doesn't understand how painful it is to remember her" (245). If readers were only allowed access to one sister's emotions, the ways in which they viewed the other would be altered. By giving readers insight into both perspectives, though, they are allowed to feel sympathy for each sister while also seeing the limitations of each point-of-view. In this way, the multiple narrators work to highlight the isolation of the individual, just as it does in *As I Lay Dying*. Whereas individual isolation in *As I Lay Dying* seems to be a perpetual state that becomes, at least for Darl, increasingly problematic, *Dancing with Butterflies* offers readers a sense of hope that one can break through to a place of communal understanding. The form, therefore, highlights one of the novel's primary conflicts: the struggle to find a balance between being an individual and being part of a community.

In order to understand how the craft of the novel underscores this conflict, I find it useful to compare the form of *Dancing with Butterflies* to the short story cycle.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>7</sup> There are several terms that can be used to describe the genre of the short story cycle, and among them is composite novel. Though the label is widely contested, the definition remains fairly stable no matter the

*Dancing with Butterflies* is certainly not a short story cycle, it operates in similar ways in that, like a short story cycle, it is composed of several different but related situations linked by place or protagonist. Unlike the short story cycle, though, each section of *Dancing with Butterflies* is dependent on the whole. Though some short story cycles, such as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, can often stress the individual struggle, scholar James Nagel writes in his book *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of the Genre* that this form "frequently lends itself to the exploration of a family or a community...rather than the internal life of a single individual" (16-17). As the title of his book suggests, Nagel focuses on the emergence of the short story cycle among writers of different ethnicities. He examines books such as Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* to understand why the short story cycle has been embraced by writers of different ethnicities and explains that "the story sequence offers not only a rich literary legacy but a vital technique for the exploration and depiction of the complex interactions of gender, ethnicity, and individual identity" (10). Though Grande's technique differs from that of the short story cycle, the use of multiple narrators provides an effect similar to the one that Nagel describes. Readers see how interactions between gender and ethnicity come together and impact individual identity. In the case of *Dancing with Butterflies*, readers also see how the presence of the U.S.-Mexico border becomes part of this equation.

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critic. Scholars Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, who use the term "composite novel," define the genre in their book *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* as "a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (3).

## Section IV

For most of *Dancing with Butterflies*, the U.S.-Mexico border is a constant reminder of division: cultural division, economic division, and division between genders. These divisions produce a variety of reactions, inspiring one character to embrace her Mexican culture almost exclusively and others to reject parts of it. Often, though, the characters vacillate between these reactions, many of which stem from shame. In *Chicana Without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, Edén Torres examines the internalized shame and feelings of guilt that she has witnessed in a variety of circumstances and explains that these feelings develop as a result of imposing boundaries, which then act as “an insidious method of social control” (30). Guilt, Torres says, may lead people to “do things they are not supposed to do” while shame may cause people to “not do the things they are supposed to do” (30-1). All of the characters in Grande’s novel illustrate how guilt and shame impact behavior. Though each woman acts out in troubling ways, the undocumented character, Soledad, does so far less often and comprehends the consequences of her actions much sooner than her U.S.-born friends, which inevitably leads readers to question how and why Soledad is better able to manage her emotions. Examining the ways in which each woman sees the border can help answer this question.

Though each of the main characters feels proud of her cultural heritage, she must also cope with the ways in which the outside world sees it. The border is representative of the psychological wound that, as Anzaldúa claims, exists as the result of two cultures “[grating] against” each other. This psychological wound creates feelings of doubt and worthlessness that the oldest character, Yesenia, assuages with dance. Once that is taken

from her, however, she has nothing by which to measure her worth outside of constructions learned and passed on over time—constructions that require her to measure her worth through the male gaze and eventually lead other characters to accuse her of behaving selfishly. Soledad also falls prey to similar forms of control, but her vision of the border as a real barrier reinforces and reinvents the importance of selflessness.

In Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, selflessness is described as a virtue designed to keep women subservient to men. Anzaldúa, however, does not advocate for strict individualism that dismisses communal identity. Rather, she exposes how unquestioned commitment to rules and customs encourages a loss of self and how that then leads to a loss of agency. The final scene in which all four women band together to help Soledad cross back into the United States shows that selflessness does not have to act as a mechanism of social control. According to Anzaldúa, acts of selflessness are often reserved for and targeted towards “those with power in the community,” most of whom, Anzaldúa makes clear, are men (40). At the end of *Dancing with Butterflies*, though, the character's relationships with each other are elevated in importance. No longer are relationships with other women “at the bottom of the ladder” (40). The final scene of the novel creates a scenario in which the selfless behavior usually practiced in response to those who hold more social power becomes targeted towards those who are in similar situations, and it is embraced as a healing mechanism. Through selfless acts, all four characters are able to band together and physically conquer the border. Helping Soledad across the border solidifies their bonds with each other, which diminishes the power that masculine conceptions of the female body have over each woman's sense of worth. By the end, *Dancing with Butterflies* recasts the function of selflessness to

feminine bodies in order to create self-actualized individuals within a communal structure. It no longer keeps them in subservient roles, but rather allows these women to acknowledge and begin questioning racial, domestic, economic, and sexual barriers.

## Section V

Before the transformative experience helping Soledad across the border, the four main characters in *Dancing with Butterflies* struggle to claim their agency without realizing that a variety of factors influence any desire. In Karl Marx's theories about society and social change, he argues that humans do not make choices freely but are guided by material relationships, explaining: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (5). Marx's theories reject the popular individualistic perceptions common in the U.S. that sees humans as autonomous beings capable of controlling or changing all facets of one's life. Rather, Marx argues that the individual is shaped by the necessity to fulfill certain needs, which requires one to enter into social relationships. Because of this, the individual cannot be a sovereign being. Unaware of this, the characters in *Dancing with Butterflies* struggle to gain control over their choices. Of these characters, we meet Yesenia first, and her voice sets the tone.

As an aging dancer, Yesenia can no longer practice or perform without feeling pain. She is at the mercy of her body, and her narration immediately draws readers' attention to her corporeality. For example, before Yesenia sees a doctor about the pain in her knees, she meets a man who has only one arm. She feels disgusted by his deformity, and the image of the man haunts her: "The whole day I haven't been able to put him out

of my mind, wondering how one can deal with being incomplete” (10). Her interpretation of this man as “incomplete” reveals her preoccupation with the physical self. When she is later diagnosed with osteoarthritis and has trouble coping with her inability to dance, she begins to feel incomplete despite having her legs. Though she can walk, dance has defined her for so much of her life, and losing this ability causes her to see herself as disfigured, much like the man missing his arm.

Before Yesenia learns that she has osteoarthritis, though, she has already begun to notice changes in her body. While at practice, she avoids the mirrors because she does not want to see how her body is aging. She thinks: “I grew up looking at myself in large mirrors, the objective eyes in which I studied my own body. The mirrors never lied to me. Throughout the years they showed me the dancer I was becoming. Now what they reveal is something I don’t want to see” (52). Even before her diagnosis, she understands that her body is changing, and she fears aging. Afterwards, however, the reality of her situation takes hold. She begins to gain more weight because she does not get enough exercise, which exacerbates her condition. There are other reminders that she is getting older as well—reminders that are not only connected to her body. For example, her son Memo decides to move out of their family home and into his own apartment across town. His absence is yet another reminder to Yesenia that all things are temporary, and she wishes “that time would stop, that it had stopped months ago, right before [her] knees began to stiffen and swell up, right before Memo decided he was old enough to be on his own” (116). Her desire for stasis leads to her decision to get plastic surgery.

When Yesenia sees a newspaper advertisement for a surgeon in Tijuana, she briefly remembers the horror stories that she has heard about surgeries gone wrong, but

they are no match for her nostalgia. Plastic surgery, she believes, will allow her to go back in time. Moreover, it temporarily allows her to believe that she *can* control her body even if she cannot control her son. Yesenia's surgeries give her a feeling of power. After her first surgery, for example, her husband and son accuse her of not thinking about them. She responds by saying that she does not have to think about them because it is *her* body. Yesenia believes that she claims agency over her body and her life, but she fails to recognize that her decisions are not simply the product of her desire. Rather, her desire is created by a system of social and economic structures.

Yesenia's initial apprehension about the surgery illustrates how she is subsumed by these structures. When she goes to Tijuana for her initial consultation, for example, she plans only to talk to the doctor, but when he has a spot open up for surgery later that afternoon, she takes the opportunity despite her uneasiness. Though Yesenia does not recognize the variety of influences that coalesce to guide her decision, readers can see that her actual motivations are much more complicated than simply wanting the surgery. The appointment forces her to look at her body through a lens that normalizes particular body types. While Yesenia is no stranger to cultural glorifications of youth and thinness, she had previously learned to appreciate her body through dance. After realizing that that time of her life has passed, though, she believes that "[her] body has betrayed [her]" (172). Looking at the pictures that the nurse takes during the consultation, she notices the details that have been identified as imperfections—saggy skin, a scar from her Cesarean section, bulges on her thighs and back. Though the doctor does not appear to pass judgment on her body, he does assume that she will want to go through with liposuction



and more. His economic investment causes him to recommend procedures that Yesenia had not previously considered, such as a tummy tuck and face-lift.

When Yesenia's body begins to conform to typical standards of beauty, she feels powerful. After surgery, she seeks out her old high school crush again, and the attention that he gives her because of her newly transformed body is intoxicating. Previously, Yesenia's identity as a dancer allowed her to retain a sense of power. For example, her dedication to Folklórico helps her to justify her decision to have only one child to family and friends who expect her to dedicate her life to family. Throughout Yesenia's sections, she is preoccupied with how the female dancers in Alegría change when they become pregnant. She thinks: "The women always leave. Start getting married. Having children. Pursuing a career. Little by little letting go of their passion for Folklórico" (5). She observes that women are expected to behave selflessly and dedicate their time and energy to others—to family, husbands, and children. The women in her family perpetuate the vision of the woman as a primary support structure for the family. Her mother, for example, had to work two jobs to support her children after Yesenia's father died, and her sister, who is married to a lawyer, enjoys being a stay-at-home mother to her three children. Yesenia claims that her sister "has no desire to do anything else in her life but be a good mother and wife and a dutiful churchgoer" (60). In contrast, Yesenia explains that her decision to have only one child is motivated by her own desire to continue working—both at her job and with Alegría. By choosing not to give up either, she refuses to conform to her family's expectations regarding the role of the woman.

For Yesenia, the family contains a clear hierarchical power structure, but she can see this one because it closely resembles feudalism. Men retain the most control and

women are expected to accept their subjugated role. In contrast, the economic, social, and cultural forces that coalesce and eventually lead Yesenia across the border to Tijuana are not as recognizable. There is no clear figure to blame or against which to rebel. Chela Sandoval talks about this shift in understanding power in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed*. In the first section, she examines the work of Fredric Jameson and writes: “I thus read much of Jameson’s manifesto as eulogy, a funeral dirge for a lost time and a place where it was once possible to know exactly who you were and where you stood; a time when it was possible to map your position in social space and to consider from what Archimedean point you could court the possibility of action” (23). Sandoval’s reading of Jameson explains why Yesenia directs her anger towards her husband and son. In her desire to resist her position as a disempowered subject, she must search to understand where she fits into society so that she can then fight against the forces that subjugate her. Unfortunately, she can only see individuals who are immediately in front of her—her family and her dance company. As Sandoval explains, understanding one’s position “is necessary for comprehending the place in the social order from which one is expected to speak” (23). Yesenia’s blindness to the conceptions of physical beauty and economic forces that lead her across the border cause her to redirect her resistance. As Michel Foucault explains in his essay “The Subject and Power,” this is understandable because “people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the ‘chief enemy’ but for the immediate enemy” (780). In Yesenia’s case, the immediate, clear enemy is her family, but her repeated trips across the U.S.-Mexico border force her to encounter how economic concerns control those on either side.

The first time that Yesenia crosses into Mexico for liposuction, there is no mention of the crossing itself, though Yesenia does wonder what the clinic will look like. When she steps inside the building, her worries are put to rest. She observes the clean floors and windows, and notices the other patients: “As we walked down the hallway to the lobby I spotted several women and a few men, most with blond hair and blue eyes. If I didn’t know I was in Tijuana I would think I was in a clinic in the U.S. *Well, if gringos get their surgeries done here then it must be safe*” (169). The interior of the clinic and the client base allows her to imagine that she has not crossed the border at all.

When she returns weeks later for a facelift, however, the border becomes palpable. While in the clinic, she asks the nurse if she believes that having the procedure will make her happy. The nurse does not answer but instead looks at her “with contempt in her eyes” (216). She is clearly angered by the people who easily cross into Mexico to get discount cosmetic surgery. The poverty in her country is visible to anyone headed north on the interstate. Yesenia herself has to face this on the way home when she sees a young woman and her child begging for money as she waits in line at the checkpoint. Looking at the mother and child, she remembers the nurse’s look and thinks: “Yes, it’s stupid, isn’t it?...That here I am spending thousands on surgery while you and your child suffer hunger, disease, and poverty I can’t even begin to comprehend” (227). Though Yesenia is aware of the cultural differences on both sides of the border, she only faces the economic differences en route to get her surgeries. When she does encounter these differences, her role is reversed. On the Mexican side of the border, she is the one in power—at least in an economic sense. Her desire to achieve certain standards of beauty helps create and support class and social divisions. While these divisions exist in the U.S.

as well, they are not as visible to Yesenia. Limited by her own experience as a U.S. citizen, her point of view only offers brief glimpses into how the border acts as a controlling force for both sides. Soledad, on the other hand, provides another perspective—one that is capable of seeing the power that the border imposes on social and economic interactions and, in her case, on familial relationships as well.

## Section VI

Of the four narrators, Soledad is the most sympathetic. When readers first meet her, they learn that her name means “loneliness” or “solitude.” Soledad believes that these two words sum up her destiny. She has a birthmark that covers part of her face, and from birth, her mother has believed that this makes Soledad ugly and undesirable to men:

When the midwife put me in Ma’s arms for the first time and Ma saw the red spot on my face, the spot she says looks like the fingers of the devil, is this why she decided to name me Soledad? Did my mother know I’ll be alone forever? Did she feel in her heart I would never be held by the arms of a man, feel his lips on my lips, hear the latidos of his heart whenever I rested my head on his chest? (22)

In addition, she also tells her: “Men get scared when they see you, Soledad” (46). Her mother’s views regarding gender and women’s roles within the family are traditional. Though Soledad, who designs and sews Alegría’s costumes, aspires to open her own dress shop and have a career as a seamstress, her mother cannot see a future for a woman outside of the role of wife and mother. Because of her appearance, she does not believe that Soledad will ever fulfill those roles, and she tells her that her younger, U.S.-born

half-sister Stephanie will take care of her once she receives the malpractice settlement to which she is entitled because the top of her index finger was amputated when the doctor cut her umbilical cord. Her mother believes that women have no agency in their lives unless they have money and even the act of acquiring money is something over which women have little power.

Because the accident involving Stephanie's finger gives her an economic advantage, her mother does not view her deformity in a negative light. Rather, she refers to the affected finger as her "lucky finger." While convinced that Soledad's birthmark sentences her to a life of loneliness, she does not think that Stephanie's finger will sentence her to the same fate. Soledad attributes Stephanie's luck not merely to the money but also to being born on the U.S. side of the border with "not one but *two* American names" and "all the privileges and rights of a U.S. citizen" (24).

These privileges and rights are illustrated for the reader when Soledad has to decide whether or not to return to Mexico after her grandmother dies from a scorpion sting. This situation requires Soledad to make a choice: should she think about her own well-being and stay in the United States or should she cross back into Mexico to honor her grandmother knowing how difficult, dangerous, and expensive it will be to return? The choice is a moral one for Soledad, and it also shows the reader how different she is from Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena. Like these characters, Soledad has been focused on her own troubles—especially those surrounding her desire to open a dress shop. Going to Mexico would mean sacrificing the money that she has saved for plane tickets and other expenses, and it may mean sacrificing the dream altogether if she is unable to return.

Soledad, however, feels a sense of duty to her grandmother that trumps the desire she has for her own dreams.

When Soledad returns to her hometown, she no longer feels at ease there. Her body continues to remind her of the border. For example, her weight can be seen as evidence that she has adapted to parts of U.S. culture. Soledad compares her own body to her brother Lorenzo's. Having not seen him in thirteen years, Lorenzo looks different from what Soledad remembers. Poverty has limited his diet, making him "too skinny," and Soledad notices this contrast when they embrace: "When he hugs me, I feel so fat as I feel his rib bones poking into me" (128). Before returning to Mexico, her body makes her feel ugly and unwanted. She would examine it in the mornings before work, paying attention to the "cellulite on [her] thighs" and "the balls of fat" and stretch marks on her stomach. In the U.S., Soledad reads these characteristics along with the red birthmark on her face as evidence that no man would want to be with her, and her mother reinforces this idea. In Mexico, however, her body reminds her of the material differences between both sides of the border. For example, during a trip to the monarch sanctuary in the oyamel forest shortly before her departure, she reflects on her last visit when she was twenty. At that time, she was capable of walking greater distances, and she thinks that it is because "[she] wasn't too fat then and [she] was used to the walking" (240). In the United States, though, she can afford a car—a material luxury that changes her body over time. She explains: "The years driving in America have made me lazy"(240). Like Yesenia, Soledad realizes that the body communicates with the outside world and that meanings change based on which side of the border one inhabits. Soledad, however, does not get to drive easily through the checkpoint and leave this reality behind.

When Soledad eventually tries to cross back into the U.S., her body becomes an impediment. It no longer reminds her of the material differences between her family in Mexico and her family in the U.S. Instead, her physical abilities shape the ways that she is capable of crossing. She is already slower than the others crossing with her, but in her second attempt, she also twists her ankle while walking over rocky terrain in the dark. Though she struggles to fight through the pain, she is slower than before and cannot keep up. Eventually, her coyote has to make a choice: leave her behind or risk getting caught. He chooses to leave her behind and continues on with everyone else. When faced with crossing the border, Soledad's body weighs her down both physically and metaphorically. It is a physical obstacle that keeps her from crossing safely as well as a reminder that she does not fully belong to either place.

Though Soledad does not cross the border safely, she does make it across. After abandoning her along a road, the coyote insists that border patrol will pick her up within an hour. When they do not come, she wanders through the desert until she happens upon a house occupied by an aging white man named Jerry. Once Jerry enters the story, Soledad's feelings about her body transform once again. When Jerry first meets Soledad, he is contemptuous of her and of all undocumented immigrants. Her birthmark, however, reminds him of his deceased wife. The birthmark that Soledad's mother and Soledad herself previously saw as evidence that no man would ever want her now saves her. Jerry takes pity on Soledad and allows her to stay with him as her ankle heals. With Jerry, she experiences the comfort of feeling accepted in her body. Eventually, the two make love after sharing a kiss on New Year's Eve. After this happens, Soledad contemplates staying with him, thinking: "I could learn to love the desert the way he loves it. I could learn to

live without Alegría. Forget my dream of having my own business. Yes, surely I could” (344). This moment becomes another crucial one for Soledad in which she has to make a decision that will alter the way she sees herself in the world.

Staying with Jerry would not simply mean giving up her friends and family. As she states, it would also mean giving up her dream. Her desire to have her own dress shop motivates her. When her friend Ruben backs out on an arrangement to go into business together, she does not give up. When her money is gone after financing the trip to Mexico, she has the opportunity to give up and stay with her brother and his family. Though this would surely be less dangerous, she refuses. Yet the moment that Jerry accepts her physical body, telling her that she has “nothing to be ashamed of” (344), she is ready to abandon everything, which shows how important it is for Soledad to feel at home in her body. At the same time, it also illustrates the role that others play in shaping how people view their own bodies. Soledad struggles to feel comfortable because she has spent so many years listening to her mother tell her that she is physically inadequate. Since childhood her mother has told her that no man would be interested in her because of the birthmark on her face, and through these claims, her mother has unintentionally taught her to measure her worth by the way men look at her. When Soledad finally understands what it feels like to have a man desire her, the feeling is intoxicating. She has become what her mother has conditioned her to believe that she could never be: a sexually desirable being.

Soledad may have chosen to stay with Jerry were it not for an event that happens immediately after she begins to contemplate staying. After hearing a commotion outside, Jerry and Soledad look out the window to see a group of immigrants who are being



chased by border patrol. At this moment, the reality of the border comes back to Soledad. Though she is hyper aware of the border upon her arrival at Jerry's, her awareness slowly dissipates as the two begin to fall for each other. When this group runs towards Jerry's house begging for help, Soledad remembers that what the border means to her is very different from what it means to Jerry, who quickly reminds her that she cannot open the door or she will be taken away as well.

Soledad listens to Jerry and does not open the door, but she is ashamed of her actions. Though Jerry's affection gives her the impression that her body has power over him, this incident shows the reality of her situation. These immigrants are a reminder of how powerless the border makes her no matter which side she occupies. Unable to live with the shame of not helping them, she decides to leave Jerry's house a few days later knowing that she will be picked up by border patrol and deported to Tijuana. By leaving, she refuses to play the role of a submissive woman, and she resists the power structures that work to keep her subservient.

Unlike Yesenia, Soledad has a clearer understanding of how the border exerts power, which allows her to direct her resistance more accurately. By leaving Jerry, she does not simply reject him or his behavior. She also rejects the power structures that shape his behavior and the ones that would keep her tied to him should she choose to stay. When Jerry first meets Soledad, he lumps her into an amorphous category of all Mexicans, saying things such as: "Goddamn Mexicans. They never learn" (308). Shortly after he finds her with her injured ankle, he also tells her about another immigrant who died of exposure in the desert, saying: "Damn Mexicans just don't get it...Even animals know to stay inside when the temperature drops like that" (328). But he also tells her that

“he thinks [she is] different” (328). He does so only after he learns that Soledad understands and can speak some English and after he sees the birthmark on her face that reminds him of his deceased wife. Because of these characteristics, Soledad becomes an individual in his eyes.

For Jerry, the border creates a nebulous conception of an enemy that lurks just across an invisible line. Scholar Marcial González talks about the border’s power to raise panic in his essay “A Marxist Critique of Borderlands Postmodernism: Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and Chicano Cultural Criticism.” He writes: “The border also has an ideological function: to whip up racist hysteria among U.S. citizens by creating scapegoats of undocumented immigrants, effectively blaming them for high unemployment rates and other depressed economic conditions” (281). For Jerry, the border does exactly that. Like Soledad, he sees the border as a strict division between cultures and places, but his belief in his own superiority leads him to judgment. The border is a line that is supposed to protect what is “American” from what is other, just as the fence separates his property from the rest of the desert. This notion of ownership is one quality of the individualistic thinking that guides Jerry’s behavior, though he does not realize that the ideology of individualism exerts power over him just as media constructions of beauty controls Yesenia’s actions.

## **Section VII**

In Michel Foucault’s essay “The Subject and Power,” he examines the link between individualization and state’s power, explaining that over time a new form of power has evolved that encourages individualism. “This form of power,” Foucault writes,

“applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (781). Individualism thus introduces a contradiction because it requires that the individual both reject certain forms of power in the act of constructing one’s identity while also requiring the same individual to replicate those very forms of power as one fights to have others recognize one’s identity. Jerry’s behavior illustrates this contradiction. Despite seeing himself as an individual, he does not allow people from the Mexican side of the border to claim their own identities. His behavior replicates the larger power structure that minimizes and silences voices that are seen as “other” in the United States, and it does so in order to preserve and protect his individual identity.

Soledad stands in contrast to Jerry. When she refuses to help the people running towards Jerry’s house, she looks out only for herself. Jerry encourages her to save herself and not open the door, but for the woman who has just spent all of her savings getting her family to Mexico, this act feels selfish and uncomfortable. Moreover, she recognizes what Jerry cannot: that she is exerting the same power over these strangers that she has experienced many times over. While Jerry may not be aware that he is trapped in a cycle of power, Soledad intuitively feels this. Her departure is an act of resistance—not simply against Jerry but against the complex web of circumstances that has brought Jerry to his state of mind.

In Chela Sandoval’s theoretical book *Methodology of the Oppressed*, the author adds to Foucault’s discussion of power, explaining the importance of context: “Before the

citizen-subject's birth into the social world, the intersections of race, culture, sex, gender, class, and social powers are already locating in order to provide a particular space to hold that individual, to pattern the kind of subjectivity it will be permitted" (164). Sandoval and Foucault both explain the notion that the individual can be free is misguided because each person is inevitably constrained by a variety of factors—factors that Sandoval identifies as “race, culture, sex, gender, class, and social powers.” Jerry is no freer from these constraints than Soledad, but his context causes him to occupy a subjectivity that privileges and normalizes his experience. Like Jerry, Yesenia also inhabits a vastly different subjectivity than Soledad. Though Yesenia is also a woman and also culturally Mexican, she still has a more socially powerful position than Soledad simply by being born on the U.S. side of the border. She also participates in the replication of power as she crosses into Mexico for cosmetic surgery because she continues to make the citizens subject to her in her quest to gain agency over her body and life. Though Yesenia has more economic freedom than Soledad, her duties as mother and wife do limit her in ways that Soledad does not experience. A further examination of Foucault's work can help explain the differences between the characters and show how all of the women begin to transform by the end.

In hypothesizing about how one can break free of a system of power, Foucault writes: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” (785). Foucault argues that the state uses the concept of individuality to manipulate and control its subjects. The solution, though, is not only to fight against the state but also to fight against the mindset of individuality that forces one to reproduce power in an effort to escape it. He writes:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (785)

In *Dancing with Butterflies*, refusing individuality does not come easily for the characters born in the United States. Though Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena share cultural characteristics from both the U.S. and Mexico, they have been conditioned to believe in the notion of individual rights on which the U.S. Declaration of Independence is founded. The cultural inheritance that they receive from the Mexican side of the border goes against the tenants of individualism, though.

To return to Anzaldúa, her book *Borderlands/ La Frontera* elaborates on how communal identity operates in Mexican cultures. She explains the importance of conformity: “If you don’t behave like everyone else, *la gente* will say that you think you’re better than others, *que te crees grande*. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. *Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order” (40). She goes on to talk about who gets respect: grandmothers, fathers, bosses. Women, though, are at the bottom of this hierarchy. As a woman and also as a lesbian, Anzaldúa rebels against the “social categories and hierarchies” and refuses to be subject to behavior that devalues her perspective. Because this can be read as a call to individualism, she could be seen as embracing U.S. values, which is perhaps why scholars such as Debra A. Castillo and

María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba feel the need to point out the reasons why Anzaldúa does not and cannot speak from a Mexican perspective. Of course, Anzaldúa never claims to speak from a Mexican perspective—her perspective is from the borderlands, which she describes as “a third country” (33).

Like Anzaldúa, Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena all inhabit this third country. Over time, so does Soledad. Though a Mexican citizen, she no longer feels wholly one nationality or another. Moreover, her experience living on both sides of the border helps her identify the variety of ways in which power gets transferred, which then allows her to enact more effective forms of resistance. Being from Mexico is not the only reason why she can see this, though it does contribute to it. For example, her mother is also from Mexico, but she continues to pass on stifling notions of womanhood to her daughter. Soledad behaves differently not only because she is a woman living in the United States who is culturally and nationally Mexican. She does so also because she is undocumented, because her body does not conform to commercial understandings of beauty, because she is poor and has been poorer, because she is a seamstress, because she loves her family and wants to be loved by them, and because she also wants to be desired by a man. All of these qualities come together to make her a complex individual who is also part of a larger tapestry in a variety of communities. She feels a sense of duty both to herself and to others, though her commitment to both takes time to develop. At the end of the novel, Soledad is still learning how to live in harmony with both her sense of self and sense of community, but as she makes her way across the border for the second time in her life, she also begins modeling this behavior for Yesenia, Adriana, and Elena.

## Section VIII

At the end of the novel, Yesenia finally realizes the consequences of her actions after her tummy tuck goes badly and leaves her with a triangle of dying skin on her abdomen. She understands that the impact of her cosmetic surgeries and her other behaviors are not localized to her existence. They also affect her family and her dance company, not to mention the ways in which they impact class and social relationships on both sides of the border. After going through this trauma, she thinks: “What is this worth? To have done this to my body after the years of joy it gave me. To have defiled its sacredness so that now I feel like a monster, hideous, revolting. Instead of a butterfly something else has emerged. Something I don’t quite recognize” (346). Though Yesenia looks physically different, what emerges is a psychological difference. She recognizes that, along with her body, her behavior has transformed. Her inability to recognize herself at this moment is key to her change. She suddenly sees that her actions have not been characteristic of her but that she has been allowing other voices to guide her. In her desire to reclaim her previous relationship with her body and herself, she decides to put Alegria back together. To win back their trust, she performs an act of selflessness: she brings back Soledad. This choice is an important one. While she could have done something else—pay back the money that she borrowed, for example—the decision to help Soledad shows the company that she recognizes both Soledad’s talent on an individual level and also that she understands the vital role Soledad plays in their community of dancers. By supporting one individual, she models a commitment to the group. This decision is an act of resistance against a state system that encourages Yesenia to think primarily about her

own gain, and it is also an act of resistance against cultural divisions that relegate women to domestic duties.

Yesenia changes through a very simple act: the act of reaching out to another woman in friendship. In the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Count on Me: Tales of Sisterhood and Fierce Friendships*, Nora de Hoyos Comstock, founder, president, and CEO of Las Comadres Para Las Americas<sup>8</sup>, writes: “A landmark UCLA study found that reaching out to friends is a woman’s natural response to stress. It is said these friendships can bring us peace, fill the emotional shortcomings in our romantic relationships, and help us remember what lies deep inside every one of us. Women are a source of strength to each other” (ix). The collection argues, using the personal experience of many Latina writers, that friendships between women create, in the words of psychologist Dr. Ana Nogales, “a sacred space in which to heal” (xiii).

Among the essays in this collection is one by Reyna Grande called “My Teacher, My Friend” in which the author recounts her friendship with her friend Diana, an English professor at Pasadena City College. The essay describes the evolution of their friendship from one that adhered strictly to their roles as teacher and student to a familial relationship. In her memoir *The Distance Between Us*, Grande also recounts the details of Diana’s impact on her life. One can see, reflected in the relationships between Yesenia, Elena, Adriana, and Soledad, hints of the relationship that Grande experiences with Diana. In the essay “My Teacher, My Friend” (and also in *The Distance Between Us*), she describes their relationship, saying:

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<sup>8</sup> Las Comadres Para Las Americas is an internet-based organization that provides ways for Latinas across the United States to connect and begin dialogues with each other both online and face-to-face.



The months I spent with Diana were very special to me. She exposed me to things that I had never known before. She took me to Greek and Italian restaurants. She showed me foreign movies that she liked, and sometimes in the evening we should sit in her backyard and plan my future while throwing balls for her four dogs to catch. (148)

These details expose the impact that Diana's friendship has on Grande, which in turn can be used to help understand how friendship also transforms her characters: it reminds them that there are a myriad of other stories and experiences in the world and that sharing them has power to give one a feeling of communal belonging. Through nurturing that feeling, one can also become empowered to claim her desires without guilt or shame. The end of the novel shows all four women in the act of becoming unstuck from their personal stories.

At the same time, *Dancing with Butterflies* does not devalue individual experience. For example, when Soledad confesses to the incident involving Jerry and the other immigrants while waiting in line at the border checkpoint, Adriana tells her: "Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. Sometimes you have to think about yourself, even if it hurts others, and that is okay" (387). Though this statement might be described as selfish by some, the fact that it comes from Adriana is telling. Previously, Adriana blamed her sister for leaving her behind in her grandparents' house when she went to college. She understood her sister's departure to be an act of selfishness and proof that her sister did not love her. After Adriana is in a car accident, though, the two begin to speak openly with each other. Adriana stops blaming her sister, and Elena understands

why she would have felt angry. By coming together, they can, in Elena's words, "help each other heal" (367).

In the same collection of essays, psychologist Dr. Ana Nogales writes in her essay "A Heart-to-Heart Connection" "that when we become disconnected from one another, we are more prone to anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. But when we reach out to other women, we become empowered" (195). Nogales writes specifically about female friendships. She claims:

There is no doubt that women and men react differently when they need emotional support. Most of the time, women are not asking for direction or instructions. Women want to be listened to, and when we are heard, we can arrive at our own conclusions. By connecting with each other, we have authentic friendship on our side—an essential in the life of every woman. (199)

Though the women in *Dancing with Butterflies* were previously friends, they did not rely on their friendships with each other to support them through times of crisis. When they do finally turn to each other, the journey becomes easier. As Nogales claims, "friendship is essential in the life of every woman." For these four women, given their particular intersection of class, gender, culture, and social statuses, their friendship has the potential to be revolutionary.

For example, in Adriana's sections, there are several references made to a famous image from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. In the short story "My Name," the narrator, Esperanza, recounts the origins of her name. Named after her great-grandmother, she, like Soledad, wonders if her fate is contained in her name. She thinks

about her great-grandmother, who was essentially kidnapped by her great-grandfather and forced to marry, saying: “And the story goes that she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (11). Esperanza sees this all around her in her Latino neighborhood. The women in her neighborhood are often shown at their windows, trapped by domesticity or by abusive husbands and fathers and unable to connect with each other in meaningful ways.

Esperanza declares, though, that “[she has] inherited her name, but [she doesn’t] want to inherit her place by the window” (11). This language is echoed when Adriana compares herself to her mother, who died in a car accident, saying: “I have my mother’s face. I inherited her name. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll also inherit her place against a shattered windshield” (16). Unlike Esperanza, Adriana does not say that she does not *want* to inherit her mother’s place against a shattered windshield; she says that she wonders if she will. She does not think that she has control or power in her life. In so many ways, she does not. There are forces that operate outside of her and direct her behavior, and by isolating herself during her most vulnerable moments, she cannot battle those forces. Ultimately, she and all of the other characters come to realize that in order to gain agency, they cannot focus only on the self. When they do focus entirely on their own desires, they become consumed with guilt and shame.

At the end of the novel, several characters use the word “shame” to describe their feelings. When Yesenia visits a doctor in the U.S. to discuss the botched surgery, she “lower[s] [her] head in shame” when speaking to the doctor. Later, when she decides to rescue Soledad, she does so because she wants to win back the trust of her dancers and to look at them and “feel no shame” (378). Soledad, after ignoring the needs of the

immigrants, feels shame spread through her “like a poison” (362). Elena and Adriana are also inundated with shame—Elena for the relationship she has with her high school student and for leaving her sister behind years before, and Adriana for her role in the downfall of Alegría and for her own behavior with men. Just as Edén Torres explains in *Chicana Without Apology*, shame acts as a means of control. For the characters in *Dancing with Butterflies*, it encourages them to retreat inwards and keep their behaviors secret because shame causes “the feeling or perception that as a person you are flawed at the core. No wrongs can be made right because the very being is wrong” (Torres 31). Moreover, the women risk shaming not only themselves but also their communities should they admit to their behavior. Torres explains this, stating: “We Chicanas/os are often communal actors, whose individual desire is subsumed by the needs of the whole” (32). The novel, however, suggests that by sharing the very behavior of which they are ashamed, the women can then help each other navigate through their emotions and emerge in a place of compassion. For example, when Soledad tells the women what happened at Jerry’s house, Adriana says to her: “There’s no shame in what you did.” Yesenia and Elena each agree, and all three women detail why Soledad’s actions were reasonable: because she would have also gotten caught, because she would have gotten Jerry in trouble, and because the outcome would have been the same either way for those immigrants. The ending does not suggest that Soledad’s shame goes away immediately after hearing her friends reason their way through her choice, but their words do offer reprieve from her pain. Furthermore, the support that the women show for each other begins the process of breaking down the power structures that had previously caused them to see their worth through the male-gaze. Through re-evaluating and privileging

relationships with other women, all four characters disrupt the concept of individualism that isolates them, and they do so without having to give up individual desire.

## Section IX

When I crossed the border into Tijuana in July of 2012, I did so with Maura—a woman who, if I were Mexican enough, I would call my comadre.<sup>9</sup> Nora de Hoyos Comstock defines the word, saying: “The term encompasses some of the most complex and important relationships that exist between women. Comadres are best friends, confidants, coworkers, advisors, neighbors, and godmothers to one’s children...comadres make up the support system women create for themselves on the personal and professional fronts” (ix-x). Though the term is usually used to describe friendships between Latinas, Comstock explains that “comadre friendships can also blossom with non-Latinos who appreciate a Latina’s openness and warmth” (x). If I were Mexican enough—if I had grown up in a house where we spoke Spanish, if I had therefore learned to speak Spanish, if I behaved more like my Mexican aunts and less like my white mother, who was independent and sometimes fierce to the point of meanness—I could

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<sup>9</sup> I borrowed the phrase “Mexican enough” from the title of Stephanie Elizondo Griest’s work of nonfiction *Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines*. In this book, the author writes about her experience growing up as a *mestiza*. The child of a Mexican American mother and Anglo-American father, the author writes about the ways in which she is perceived by others:

Nearly every accolade I have received in my life—from minority-based scholarships to book contracts—has been at least partly due to the genetic link I share with people charging through the snake-infested brush. What separates us is a twist of geographical fate that birthed me on one side of the border and them on the other. They are “too Mexican.” I am just enough. (3)

Throughout the book, which chronicles her travels in Mexico, she considers how both she and others living on both sides of the border understand her bi-ethnic identity.

In addition, the phrase “Mexican enough” also appears in Reyna Grande’s memoir *The Distance Between Us*. Grande describes going back to Mexico after an eight year absence, writing: “As I walked away from Meche’s house, I realized there was something else I had lost the day I left my hometown. Even though my umbilical cord was buried in Iguala, I was no longer considered Mexican enough” (281). The appearance of this phrase in both books illustrates that the fissure felt by those who live with both U.S. and Mexican cultures exists no matter the side of the border onto which one is born.

perhaps use the term “comadre” without feeling like I was appropriating something that does not feel like mine. With that word, I could call Maura what she is to me—someone who is more than friend, more than colleague, and someone with whom I can be freer than with family.

Before we left downtown Tijuana to go wait in line for our return trip, Maura and I stopped at a stand called La Michoacana where I bought us ice cream with pesos I had left over from my trip to Morelia the year before. In that moment, I remembered ordering ice cream with my dad in Morelia from a man who pushed his ice cream cart through the streets, honking a horn that looked like it belonged on a bicycle. The man named the flavors (*coco, fresa, mango, mamey*), and as he did so, my dad translated for me. But I knew what they all meant—even mamey, which I had just tried for the first time the day before. My dad was trying to take care of me, but I felt frustrated with him because I had felt so powerless since our arrival in Mexico. Though I could understand almost everything said to me, I was too embarrassed to try to speak back. But I knew that I could order my own ice cream, and I wanted that power, as small as it may have been.

I may have done the same thing to Maura as my dad did to me—translating the flavors as the server named them for us. I do not remember. But I do remember telling Maura how glad I was that we made that short trip because, with her support, I discovered that I have the power to speak my imperfect Spanish. Because Maura was there to help me understand signals, I also discovered that men flirt with me, which I did not know because, like Soledad and Yesenia, my body does not conform to the images of beauty seen in the media. In that brief time, Maura helped me see that I could deconstruct some of the assumptions that I had inherited over time—assumptions about my body and

about my ability to speak Spanish.<sup>10</sup> Like the characters in *Dancing with Butterflies*, my perception of my physical and cultural self is influenced by a myriad of outside factors that work to influence and control my behavior. Sometimes this knowledge can feel stifling, and I cannot help but wonder how anyone can ever gain agency over the self if we are the sum of environmental and social factors. The characters in *Dancing with Butterflies* do not offer models that can help answer that question, but they do illustrate that one can still resist those factors. My very brief time in Tijuana gave me a glimpse into what Yesenia, Soledad, Adriana, and Elena learned slowly and continued to learn up until the very end of the novel: that fear and shame have the capacity to transform.

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<sup>10</sup> To my father's credit, he has been trying to help me get over my fear of Spanish for years. When I tell him that I am embarrassed to speak because the syntax of my sentences never does the work that I think it does, he reminds me that he grew up in the middle of nowhere and went to school for only a year and a half. "I speak hillbilly Spanish," he tells me.

## CHAPTER 3

## SLAPSTICK IMMIGRATION: COMEDY AT THE BORDER

IN LUIS ALBERTO URREA'S *INTO THE BEAUTIFUL NORTH***Section I**

Unlike so much contemporary fiction that deals with U.S.-Mexico border crossings, Luis Alberto Urrea's novel *Into the Beautiful North* (2009) is funny.<sup>1</sup> Readers are invited to laugh out loud with Urrea as his four young protagonists make their way from their small town in Sinaloa into the United States for the purpose of recruiting seven men to bring home to their village. They go in search of these men both to help defend their town against the drug traffickers who have recently arrived, and to repopulate the town, which is currently inhabited almost exclusively by women. The characterization and details of their journey are quirky and often feel over the top. It is the kind of novel that would make a plane ride go by quickly. Despite the fast-pace and jovial tone of the novel, *Into the Beautiful North* is also filled with overt racism and dangerous characters who lurk in the background. Reviews are split on this novel. Some reviewers appreciate the novel's whimsy and light-hearted take on a difficult topic. Others believe that Urrea's approach trivializes the subject matter.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Emma Pérez's *Forgetting the Alamo*, Reyna Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies*, and Urrea's own *The Devil's Highway*, a few other examples of books that depict border crossings between the U.S. and Mexico in a more serious light include: T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Alex Espinoza's *Still Water Saints*, Reyna Grande's *Across a Hundred Mountains*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, among so many more. There is also a wealth of books that focus exclusively on the relationship between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, including: Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, and much of Charles Bowdon's nonfiction, his most recent of which is *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*.



In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reporter Alexander Cuadros compares *Into the Beautiful North* to two of Urrea's previous works, explaining that *The Hummingbird's Daughter* (2006) took twenty years to write and that his nonfiction book *The Devil's Highway* (2004) was a Pulitzer finalist. He uses this as evidence that *Into the Beautiful North* does not treat the act of crossing the border seriously. Cuadros writes: "With this book, what once was a terrible rite of passage for slews of dirt-poor Mexicans has become quick, easily digestible - even cute - fare. This is Border Crossing Lite." Cuadros accuses Urrea of not respecting the levity of his subject matter, but the accusation does not sit well with writer and educator Olga García Echeverría. She responds to Cuadros's review in *La Bloga*, an international collaborative blog about Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, asking: "Urrea has long been known for his serious border material. So is the expectation, then, that Urrea only write dark, tragic stories about the border? Border Crossing Heavy. Por Vida?" As she points out in her review, one of Urrea's motivations for writing this novel is to offer an alternative to the "Border Crossing Heavy" stories.

In an interview included in the Reading Group Guide published in the novel's paperback edition, Urrea explains some of his motivations for writing the novel, stating: "I was sick of immigration/border writing. It started to feel like it was all the same, making all the same points, by all the same writers...I wanted to write something that made me laugh out loud everyday" (5). *Into the Beautiful North* offers a different tone to the standard border-crossing narratives, and it also offers a new premise. These are characters who want to reclaim Mexico by bringing its people, specifically its men, home. They do not want a materially better life. They want a return to an old one—one that does not split families because of economic worries. Though the novel's protagonists

are young and their actions can certainly be read as idealistic, their approach is revolutionary. They are ostensibly fighting the drug traffickers who invade their town, but their real fight attacks the dependent, paternalistic relationship that Mexico has with the United States as the result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the rebellion against this relationship is what has landed it on a banned book list in the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona.

The banned book list specific to the Tucson Unified School District resulted from the 2010 House Bill 2281, which sought to dismantle the Ethnic Studies Program and specifically the Chicano/a Studies Program in the district. The bill accuses the courses offered on Mexican American history, culture, and literature of promoting racial solidarity, resentment of a particular race, and of advocating for an overthrow of the U.S. Government. The banned books list, which contains a number of textbooks and novels, are thought to be promoting anti-U.S. sentiments. On the surface, *Into the Beautiful North* does not seem to do any of these things. To a xenophobic reader, the group's goal should actually be a welcome one. After all, they want to help Mexican men *leave* the United States, and their plan does not involve a government overthrow or any other violence that would take place on the U.S. side of the border. It does, however, disrupt the power structure that makes so many poor Mexican citizens dependent on the U.S. economy, and

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<sup>2</sup> On August 12, 1992, the United States, Mexico, and Canada reached an agreement that would eliminate tariffs on goods crossing the borders of these countries. The North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, went into effect on January 1, 1994. Since then, there has been debate about the positive and negative effects that NAFTA has had on all of the countries involved, though because Canada and the U.S. had already reached a similar agreement six years before, the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is more widely debated. Section IV of this chapter will offer further explanation about the impact that NAFTA has had on the Mexican economy, but for an even more detailed account, I recommend two books. First, *NAFTA's Impact on North America: The First Decade* edited by Sidney Weintraub is a collection of 15 essays written by authors in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada that gives readers a sense of how each country understands the consequences of NAFTA. For a more personal account of NAFTA's effects, Ann E. Kingsolver's book *NAFTA Stories: Fears and Hopes in Mexico and the United States* offers stories from a variety of perspectives, including factory workers, teenagers, farmers, and scholars, among others.

it suggests that anyone—even a nineteen-year-old girl like the novel’s protagonist—can fight against this power structure.

In an interview available through the NEA Art Works Podcast, Urrea explains that he believes the humor and structure of the story works to disarm readers: “If I made it really entertaining, if I made it an adventure, then it would be a subversive act in that it would make the general American reader not only read about but maybe root for people that they either don’t think about or actually look down on.” While encouraging empathy does not seem like it should be called a “subversive act,” it most definitely would be from the Tucson Unified School District’s point of view in that it would give voice to an entire group of people who they would rather silence in order to continue replicating power dynamics that privilege Anglo-American narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Though *Into the Beautiful North* is certainly a different kind of immigration story, it is an important one despite—or perhaps because of—its whimsy. It opens up possibilities for what border crossing stories can look like. For example, the other novels discussed in this project treat the border crossing gravely. Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* and Emma Pérez’s *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory* both deal with the violence that erupted as the border was being shaped into what we see today. In addition to looking at specific acts of violence, they also consider how the presence of the border encourages further violence. The historical violence that readers witness in these two novels grows into a much different but just as insidious force in novels set in contemporary times. In Reyna Grande’s *Dancing with*

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<sup>3</sup> The language used in House Bill 2281 shows paranoia and suspicion of ethnic identities. The bill reads: “The legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not based on ethnic background” (1). It therefore prohibits any course that “advocate[s] ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (1). Implicit in the bill’s drive towards individuality is fear that group solidarity has the potential to tip the balance of power.

*Butterflies*, for example, she explores the emotional violence done to the family and to the individual. In all three of these examples, Gloria Anzaldúa's well known opening of *Borderlands/ La Frontera* rings true: the border is an open wound (25).<sup>4</sup> While there are humorous scenes in each book, these moments act as tension-relief. With *Into the Beautiful North*, Urrea eschews the emotional weight of the border crossing which characterizes Grande's, McCarthy's, and Pérez's novels and that also characterizes some of his own books, such as *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*, which is a work of nonfiction that traces the journey that led to the death of fourteen undocumented immigrants in the Arizona desert. One reader told Urrea that, with *Into the Beautiful North*, he invented a new genre—"slapstick immigration" (*Art Works*). Urrea tries to understand why his approach has not been received well by some reviewers, hypothesizing:

I think the humor in the book has confused some people...every once in a while someone says, "Well, it doesn't have the kind of substance that his other books have." And I think that's so funny because I consciously tried to put more substance than usual in this book. That it's funny or that the people have joyous lives even if they are poor or desperate seems to throw some reviewers. (*Art Works*)

Because writings about border crossings often focus on struggle, Urrea suggests that it may be puzzling for readers to encounter characters who are not constantly consumed by the serious issue of mere survival. But with this novel, he also insists that stories of

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<sup>4</sup> In the opening of *Borderland/ La Frontera*, Anzaldúa makes two references to this image. In the poem that proceeds the first section of prose, she writes: "1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a *pueblo*, a culture" (24). She repeats this image soon after: "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25).

survival and stories of inequities are not the only stories that those who cross the border have to tell. The injustices found in all other books that deal with border crossings remain at the forefront of *Into the Beautiful North*, but in spite of the many conflicts present, Urrea's novel works towards reconciliation. He celebrates the differences between each country at the same time as highlighting how both places struggle. There is joy and sorrow in both places, though in this novel, the joy is never overshadowed by the sorrow.

## Section II

*Into the Beautiful North* follows the adventures of four characters—Nayeli, Tacho, Yoloxochitl (Yolo), and Verónica (Vampi)—as they make their way north from their tiny, coastal village of Tres Camarones, Sinaloa into the United States.<sup>5</sup> Nayeli, Yolo, and Vampi are nineteen-year-old women who have recently graduated from high school and who spend their free time watching movies at the local theater along with many of the other residents of Tres Camarones. Nayeli works at a restaurant and Internet café called La Mano Caída (The Fallen Hand). Her boss, Tacho, names his restaurant to circumvent the cruel jokes and comments about his sexuality. The narrator explains: “For years, the joke about Tacho’s ‘kind’—los jotos—was that they suffered from the affliction of ‘la mano caída.’ The fallen hand, the cartoony limp wrist of the gay man in the common pantomime: just the phrase made people laugh. Except for Tacho. He didn’t accept being called ‘faggot’ by anybody” (18). Tacho adopts this phrase as the name of his restaurant to “[throw] it back in their faces,” an act that earns him respect for his

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<sup>5</sup> Tres Camarones, which translates to “Three Shrimp,” is not a real town, though one inspires it. In his June 2012 Book Talk with KPBS in San Diego, Urrea explains that he modeled Tres Camarones after his family’s hometown of Rosario, Sinaloa. He tells the audience: “I named it Tres Camarones because it’s stupid. I thought it’d be funny.”

cleverness (18). The four begin their journey together, but they do not go for the reason that so many people in their hometown have gone. They go not to stay in the United States and work but rather to bring men back to their village.

At the beginning of the novel, Nayeli notices for the first time that there are very few men left. The only two mentioned are Tacho, who is gay, and an older man named García-García, who owns the town's movie theater and is described as "the sole rich man of the town" (39). Even Nayeli's father, who was the town's only police officer, left years before to look for a better paying job in the United States. Nayeli is not the only one to notice that there are no men—two bandits infiltrate the small town and take note of the gender distribution. At first, they are drawn by Anglo-American tourists who stumble upon Tres Camarones while looking for good surfing and marijuana. Shortly after their arrival, they realize that this would be a good place to expand their drug trafficking business because there are no men and no cops. The bandits slink in the background, but their presence hints at violence. They refuse to pay after eating at Tacho's restaurant and eventually kick García-García out of his house in the middle of the night.

Nayeli decides to do something to combat the bandits after watching a showing of *The Magnificent Seven* at the local theater. Nayeli is captivated by the premise of the film. The local priest describes the plot to her, saying: "The villagers are beset by bandidos. Overwhelmed and outgunned, they resort to a desperate plan... They send a group of brave peasants north to Los Yunaites... They find seven gunmen. The magnificent seven, you see? Seven killers that they bring back from the border to fight for them" (52). While her friends make jokes throughout the film, Nayeli watches, barely paying attention but feeling an "electric charge" (54). Even García-García sees a parallel

between the film and the town's situation and thinks: "That was what Tres Camarones needed! Real men doing manly things like shooting sons of bitches out of windows!" (53). After the film is over, Nayeli tells her friends that they also need to go north to the United States to find the men. She explains: "We have to go get them... We have to go to Los Yunaites and get the seven... We have to stop the bandits before they come and destroy the village. Don't you see? They're coming" (55). For Nayeli, there is more at stake than losing control of the village to the bandits. She explains: "We can repopulate the town. We can save Mexico. It begins with us! It's the new revolution!... Isn't it time we got our men back in our own country?" (56). Nayeli's plan is an act of revolution against a variety of power structures that have transformed her village and essentially sentenced it to death. In addition to saving the village, Nayeli also has personal motivations for going north: she wants to bring back her father, who has settled in Kankakee, Illinois.

Nayeli and her friends have little trouble convincing the adults of the town to let them begin their journey, primarily because they are supported by Nayeli's Aunt Irma—a fierce woman who is a former bowling champion and the first woman to run for and win the election for mayor in Tres Camarones. With the town's support, they quickly set out on a bus bound for Tijuana, and they take with them the phone number of a man named Chava Chavarín—Irma's old crush from her days as a bowler who she believes still lives in Tijuana. She claims that to cross the border one needs connections, and he will be theirs. The bus ride to Tijuana takes several days, and along the way, they lose their backpacks and witness the discovery and arrest of a Colombian couple who are in Mexico without documentation.

When the group arrives in Tijuana without their belongings, they are scared and unequipped to handle their situation. Chavarín's number does not work, and the operator informs her that "there hadn't been a phone number like that in Tijuana since 1964" (94). Alone in Tijuana, the group ends up in a variety of dangerous situations. They spend the night in a cheap hotel in the red-light district under the advice of the owner of a taco stand, who later tries to break into their hotel room. The next night, they go home with a couple who live in the dump where they meet Atómiko—a former member of the Mexican Army and a trash picker. Atómiko helps the group make a connection with a coyote who agrees to take them across the border. Their first attempt fails when they run into a border patrol van parked in the middle of the road with its headlights turned off. They are quickly deported to Tijuana except for Tacho, who is confused for a terrorist when agents mishear him. When talking about his restaurant "La Mano Caída," the officers think that he says Al-Qaeda. Though Tacho is separated from the girls, they all make it across the border soon after—the girls with the help of Atómiko, who convinces the coyote to take them across through a tunnel that is usually reserved for moving drugs, and Tacho with the help of a wealthy man who he meets in a gay bar and who drives him across the border in his BMW using someone else's passport.

In the United States, the girls get in touch with a blond missionary named Matt who had visited Tres Camarones and left each girl in the village with an index card that contained his phone number and address in San Diego. Matt allows the girls to stay at his house and helps them make contact with Irma and Tacho. By the time Tacho joins them in the United States, Nayeli has tracked down Chavarín, who now works as a janitor in a bowling alley. After learning that Nayeli has located Chavarín, Irma flies to the United



States and takes over the search. Nayeli is saddened by how her situation develops in the United States: Vampi and Yolo immediately pair up with men (Vampi with someone called El Brujo and Yolo with Matt), and she feels as though the entire trip may have been nothing more than “an elaborate dating service for La Osa” (260). Nayeli is surprised by how these relationships affect the trip: “Of all the threats of the journey, Nayeli had never imagined romance would be the most ruinous” (260). In many ways, this feeling foreshadows the outcome of Nayeli’s journey to find her father.

After Irma takes over the recruitment process, Nayeli and Tacho depart for Kankakee. They take a van that once belonged to Matt’s deceased mother and drive across the country, encountering a variety of negative stereotypes about Mexicans along the way. When they finally reach Kankakee, they have become conditioned to believe that they are unwelcome and unliked in the United States, so Nayeli is surprised when a local librarian and police officer help her locate her father and even drive her to his apartment. Unfortunately, what she sees there leads to anything but a happy reunion. She sees her father step out of a truck with another woman and another child. Crushed, Nayeli returns to the hotel room without talking to them to find Tacho, who is nursing a case of food poisoning. They leave Kankakee by bus because the van no longer runs, and they are eventually found at a border checkpoint in Calexico. The agent who finds them recognizes them from the first time they were captured in Tijuana, though, and instead of deporting them, he helps them get back to San Diego to meet up with the rest of the group.

While they are gone, Irma stays busy assembling a group of men to return to Tres Camarones and fight off the bandits. Having placed an advertisement in the paper to

recruit the men, Irma is shocked by the number of applicants: seventy in total, all begging to return home. Rather than choose seven, she and Chavarín work together and pick twenty-seven. Readers do not get to witness the return to Mexico. The epilogue shows only the image of Nayeli, Tacho, and Atómiko followed by a group of men as they approach Tres Camarones. Unlike the plot of *The Magnificent Seven*, though, there is no hint of the battle that follows, only the promise of a different future for the village.

### Section III

John Sturges's 1960 western *The Magnificent Seven* is a remake of Akira Kurosowa's *Seven Samurai* (1954). In both films, gangs of bandits threaten villages of poor farmers. The bandits periodically invade the villages to steal their crops, leaving the villagers with little to eat. In *The Magnificent Seven*, the villagers do not have the technology to fight the invading bandits, who threaten them with guns. They go north into the United States to find guns with which they can defend their home but instead return with gunmen, who are cheaper than buying both weapons and ammunition. Though *Into the Beautiful North* is inspired by *The Magnificent Seven*, Nayeli's quest is ultimately much different. She does not look for outsiders to rescue the village; rather, she wants to bring in people who understand and value the place and the culture. She does not look for men who will fight and leave but men who will fight and *stay*. In order to preserve her village, she recognizes that she needs a balance of men and women to maintain the population. As she points out, there are no more children being born. Since the only men left are García-García, who is much older and married, and Tacho, who is gay, there is no hope that this will change. Though the bandits do make her realize that

the town's safety is threatened, she is also aware that the lack of heterosexual men threatens more than safety: it threatens the town's survival.

*Into the Beautiful North* also differs from *The Magnificent Seven* in that it has female characters. *The Magnificent Seven* features only one female character with a speaking part, and her primary role is only as the love interest to one of the gunmen. When the gunmen arrive in town, though, they do not see any women. One gunman comments on this, saying: "You know, I've been to some towns where the girls aren't very pretty. Matter of fact, I've been to some towns where they were downright ugly. But this is the first time I've ever been to a town where there's no girls at all." Of course, there are women, but the men of the town are afraid of what the gunmen might do to them and try to hide them. In this film, the women have literally been removed from the narrative, and it is only an hour into it that they make an appearance. *Into the Beautiful North*, on the other hand, brings women into the narrative not only as characters but also as heroes. Urrea explains his choice, saying: "I just thought it'd be interesting to write the hero's journey from the female perspective instead of the male" (NEA). In this way, Urrea's project is similar to Emma Pérez's in *Forgetting the Alamo, or Blood Memory*. While Pérez writes women back into a historical space that is dominated by masculine narratives, she also writes women into a genre that ignores the domestic: the Western. By borrowing from the premise of a well-known Western film, *Into the Beautiful North* joins Pérez in her attempt to find a place for women in a hyper masculine space. In addition, the inclusion of Tacho also calls into question the Western's construction of masculinity.

Tacho is one of the few men still residing in Tres Camarones. Outside of him, the only men who remain are García-García and a few young boys who are not old enough to

go the United States yet. García-García is too old and too complacent to be of much help against the bandits, which becomes clear when they kick him out of his own home.

Tacho, on the other hand, shows strength and resilience long before the bandits ever arrive. Having put up with derogatory statements about his sexuality for so long, he learns how to prove his bravery to the very people who insult him. In order to survive, he uses his eccentricities to his advantage:

A man like Tacho had to learn to survive in Mexico, and he had learned to re-create himself in bright colors, in large attitudes, thus becoming a cherished character. If you wanted to achieve immortality, or at least acceptance, in Tres Camarones, the best thing to do was become an amazing fixture. It was very macho to be a ne'er-do-well, even if you were gay. (18)

In order to become an “amazing fixture,” Tacho exaggerates his sexuality, which is seen in the name he chooses for his business. Not only is the name “La Mano Caída” a way for Tacho to reclaim the gesture that had been used to belittle gay men, it is also a way for him to show the men in the town that he possesses the same quick wit and assertiveness that they value: “Even the most macho men in town had embraced him immediately, because he was wittier than they were, and because of this, somehow more macho” (19). In his own way, Tacho is an outlaw. He refuses to accept blindly customs and behaviors that he recognizes as unjust. He does this by exploiting the values held in such high regard by the heterosexual men who used to live in the village. By showing that he possesses the very characteristics that they admire, he proves to them that his sexuality does not prohibit him from being courageous. Because he stays behind, Tacho is perhaps

braver than any of the men who have left—at least he would be in the eyes of Irma, who describes the men who left Mexico as “traitors” (313). Through Tacho, Urrea asks readers to re-imagine the male hero.

The critique of gender, though, is not the only way that Urrea subverts the traditional Western. Because *Into the Beautiful North* is set in contemporary times, many other stereotypical characteristics of the Western change. For example, the movement of the novel shifts. Rather than move or stay west, Nayeli and her friends travel north and then east. In *The Devil’s Highway*, Urrea explains that the movement north is standard to Mexican mythology: “In North America, the myth tends west: the cowboys, the Indians, the frontier, the wild lands, the bears and wolves and gold mines and vast ranches were in the west. But in Mexico, a country narrow at the bottom and wide at the top, the myth ran north” (48). Urrea explains that, historically, population movement takes a northward path. The Mayas, Aztecs, and Spaniards all “pushed north” (48). More than this difference, though, is the impetus for the group’s journey. Nayeli’s desire to bring men back to Mexico privileges the domestic life that the Western struggles at once to deny and to save.

In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins explains that there is tension between the domestic setting and the wilderness. While talking about the 1956 film *The Searchers*, she explains: “In this story, as in many Westerns, women are the motive for male activity (it’s women who are being avenged, it’s a woman the men are trying to rescue) at the same time as what women stand for—love and forgiveness in place of vengeance—is precisely what the activity denies” (41). Tompkins argues that “women’s discourse...is a necessary and enabling condition of most Western novels and films” (41). While women

are noticeably absent from the genre, their presence drives it because there is nothing for the heroes to fight for or to preserve without them. In the case of *The Magnificent Seven*, though, women are further removed. For the gunmen, farmers and agrarianism stand in place of the domestic life that women typically represent. Because of this, women are even more on the periphery than they would be in a typical Western. Since the farmers work to protect their wives and daughters from the gunmen, the gunmen focus only on issues of traditional, heteronormative masculinity. By all but removing the female gender from the narrative, *The Magnificent Seven* works to define masculinity on its own terms rather than in conjunction with or in comparison to femininity, which can be seen in how the village's children admire the gunmen.

Compared to the seven gunmen, the farmers' lives seem quaint despite their struggles with the bandits. Even the children recognize this, and several of the male children idolize one of the gunmen in particular. They believe that their fathers are cowards in comparison, and one boy says to the gunman: "We're ashamed to live here. Our fathers are cowards." To his credit, the gunman recognizes that these children romanticize his role, and he tells them:

You think I am brave because I carry a gun; well, your fathers are much braver because they carry responsibility, for you, your brothers, your sisters, and your mothers. And this responsibility is like a big rock that weighs a ton. It bends and it twists them until finally it buries them under the ground. And there's nobody says they have to do this. They do it because they love you, and because they want to. I have never had this kind of courage.

While there is recognition that stasis and responsibility require courage, all of the credit is given to the male characters. The farmers' roles may be devalued by some of the children in the village, but the women are invisible. They do not get to be brave or responsible or independent in this story. They barely get to be seen.

In *Into the Beautiful North*, though, there is no one left to hide the women or to keep them safe. Moreover, these are not women who need to be kept safe. Nayeli, her friends, and her Aunt Irma are resilient and fight to claim and keep their power. In the face of García-García, who tells Nayeli that her karate abilities are “hardly feminine,” Nayeli replies: “Perhaps...it is time for a new kind of femininity” (42). The novel traces this new kind of femininity, and because of Tacho's role in the novel, it also introduces the idea that there might also be a new kind of masculinity on the horizons. Ultimately, these new brands of femininity and masculinity have to do with acknowledging the relationships between the genders rather than privileging one over the other. For example, it might be easy for a reader to see Nayeli's search to bring men back to the village as a gesture of acquiescence to gender roles. After all, she believes that the men are needed to protect the village from bandits. But the bandits are only the immediate threat. Like the villagers in *The Magnificent Seven*, the women left in Tres Camarones are starving, though not just for food. The village itself is atrophying. Without industry and without children, its lifespan is limited. Though she is too young to articulate it, Nayeli recognizes the interdependence between genders that *The Magnificent Seven* tries to deny. The men and women need each other, just as Mexico and the United States need each other. As the next section will explain, the economic relationship that has developed between the two countries creates a dependency that the border sometimes obscures

because it offers the illusion of absolute separateness. Urrea, however, does not see the border simply as a dividing line. In *Into the Beautiful North*, he uses it to highlight unexpected commonalities.

#### **Section IV**

In an interview conducted by reporter Adrian Florido and televised on KPBS in San Diego in June of 2012, Urrea talks about why he chose the title *Into the Beautiful North* for his novel. He says:

I wanted to write a love song to both countries, both our people. I think that we don't remember in America that we are related and we love each other... You either see the border as this hideous scar that separates two warring, alien cultures, or you see it as a largely imaginary line that fell like the dew out of the heavens one day, and it's just the seam that unites two people.

According to Urrea, the title of *Into the Beautiful North* is not to be read ironically. His vision of the United States in this novel is indeed beautiful, but it is complicated in its beauty, just as Mexico is. Urrea himself has connections to both sides of the border. He was born in Tijuana but moved to San Diego as a child. In addition to his own experience moving across the border, he lived with a constant reminder of the division between both sides. His father was born in Mexico, while his mother was born in the United States. In several interviews, he discusses the cultural differences found in his own childhood home. In the book talk that preceded his interview with KPBS in San Diego, he explains the variety of ways in which his mother differed from his father. For example, she never



learned to speak Spanish, drank tea out of demitasse cups, read to him from Charles Dickens, and pronounced his name “Louis.” He goes on to explain that his father worked to “combat the Americanization of Luis with Mexican culture” by bringing him books to read in Spanish and insisting that everything good that existed was Mexican in its origin. In some ways, his novel *Into the Beautiful North* tries to resolve the fight to privilege one culture over the other: neither Mexico nor the United States are portrayed as better countries either culturally or socially. They are simply different in a variety of ways, but in spite of their differences, they share many similar concerns.

In a review in *Quarterly Conversation*, writer and editor Lucy Popescu states: “Urrea often seems to want to reconcile the two sides of the border in his books. In *Into the Beautiful North*, both the U.S. and Mexico are portrayed with a romantic allure, but both are also shown as scarred by violence, extremism, and criminal elements.” Popescu’s phrase “romantic allure” captures one of the reasons why some readers, such as Alexander Cuadros, might struggle with this book. It is a little bit romantic, a little bit over the top. At the same time, though, it illustrates that the “violence, extremism, and criminal elements” that both countries experience are linked. For example, *Into the Beautiful North* shows that there are conversations and radio programs in Mexico that employ the same kind of nationalistic rhetoric against immigrants from other Central American and South American countries that we are used to hearing in the U.S. Even Irma participates in these conversations. For all of her feminist leanings, her beliefs about immigration are not as progressive. When she meets a Guatemalan woman who is in Mexico on her way to the United States, for example, Irma has no sympathy for her, telling her: “Go back where you came from!...Mexico is for Mexicans” (36). She later

rants to Nayeli and her friends: “These illegals come to Mexico expecting a free ride! Don’t tell me you didn’t have Salvadorans and Hondurans in your school, getting the best education in the world. They take our jobs, too... What we need is a wall on our southern border” (36). To a reader in the United States or even to a reader in northern Mexican states, her statement is ironic. Irma, however, is unfamiliar with current perceptions of Mexicans in the United States. She passes on her outdated, romanticized knowledge about U.S.-Mexico relations to Nayeli, who naively believes that she will be welcomed into the United States with open arms.

When Nayeli is first captured by the border patrol, she tells the agents that she is on a mission to bring Mexican men home. “I am here as a service to both our countries,” she explains (159). Though impressed by the originality of her story, the agents do not believe her. When they proceed with her deportation, Nayeli feels deep shame, and the narrator explains: “She had thought that the Americanos would be happy to see her” (161). When she finally crosses the border successfully, she faces distrust and indifference on a regular basis, which gets more palpable as she travels further east en route to Kankakee to find her father. In Kankakee, though, the people change. She approaches a Mexican restaurant to ask if anyone there knows her father and is directed to the library where she is told “they help everybody” (317). Nayeli tries to protest, thinking that they will not help her because she is Mexican, when the restaurant worker interrupts her, saying: “This is Kankakee, morra! They like Mexicans here!” (317). When she goes to the library, she finds that this is true. A librarian and local police officer work together and figure out where her father lives. Both even offer her a ride to his apartment.

Of all the unrealistic and idealistic elements in the novel, Kankakee seems like the most unlikely: a place in which Mexican immigrants are not merely tolerated but welcomed. But, unlike the imaginary village of Tres Camarones, Kankakee is a real place. Urrea wrote about Kankakee in a short article published the *New York Times* in June of 2006, three years before the publication of *Into the Beautiful North*. He discovered Kankakee after being invited to the public library to do a reading where he expected to find a small library with a small crowd and was surprised on both accounts. The library in Kankakee is a large building that was once the Provena Health headquarters, and the crowd was huge: 325 people. Urrea also expresses his surprise at the diversity of the crowd, writing in his article: “There were the expected bright Midwestern faces. But beside them were the faces of people who'd once lived in the Chicago projects and the towns of Guanajuato State in Mexico, who were now working in Kankakee's farms, nurseries and restaurants.” In his interview with KPBS, Urrea elaborates on Kankakee's diverse demographic, explaining that the mayor noticed the influx of Mexican immigrants into the town. Rather than ignore it or try to stop it, though, he decided to talk to the people about where they came from and why, and he found that many of the workers came from the town of León, Guanajuato. The mayor continued his investigation by flying to Guanajuato to ask the mayor why so many residents were leaving the city, only to discover that, like Kankakee, sectors of León had been voted among the worst places to live in Mexico. Upon his return to Kankakee, the mayor began working to bring together his community with the creation of a new library.

Like León, Guanajuato and like the imagined Tres Camarones, Sinaloa, Kankakee, Illinois has a slew of problems. These problems are described in an article in *NEA Arts Magazine*:

Kankakee's dark times began as the 1980s drew to a close. "We experienced a severe economic downturn and lost about two-thirds of our industry," said Bertrand, a Kankakee native who witnessed the shut down of the city's biggest employers: a Roper oven factory and a General Foods dog food plant. "We were a classic industrial midwestern community and our industries consolidated or moved to Mexico."

Kankakee was beset both by financial struggles and by violence. When the businesses left, the residents who could afford to leave did and left behind "a community saddled with financial stagnation, gang warfare, and rampant crime" (Gallant). When Don Green became mayor in 1993, he fought to rescue his hometown, which led to the construction of the library as well as strengthened relationships among Kankakee's residents.<sup>6</sup>

Like Mayor Green, Nayeli also wants to save her hometown. And like Kankakee, Tres Camarones suffers from a mass exodus of its citizens when their agricultural industries begin to die. When the novel opens, Tres Camarones also starts to see violence encroaching. Their problems are not that different from Kankakee's. While Tres Camarones is an imaginary village, the troubles it faces are real. In a *New York Times* article, foreign correspondent Damien Cave writes about the declining population in

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<sup>6</sup> The library was only one part of Green's plan, which included "merging debts, consolidating programs, creating a community policing infrastructure, and drastically reinventing the culture of the police department" (Gallant). The library, however, drew people to the downtown area because it offered a variety of arts-related programming, including a talk from Luis Alberto Urrea as well as music and art festivals. Green credits events such as these with contributing to Kankakee's rebirth, saying: "Without the arts, you don't have a community...It not only deals with your current issues but with the past and your shared history. It's something that gives confidence and a sense of worth to your community" (Gallant).

Mexico. His headline sums up the content: “In Mexican Villages, Few Are Left to Dream of U.S.” This article addresses the fear that immigration reform would lead to an influx of immigrants from Mexico. As Cave points out, though, the population in Mexico has already dwindled and “most of the people who could go north already have.” His article looks at El Cargadero, a small town in the state of Zacatecas, and he describes the desolation found there:

In a region long regarded as a bellwether of illegal immigration — where the flow of migrants has often seemed never-ending — the streets are wind-whipped and silent. Homes await returning families, while dozens of schools have closed because of a lack of students. Here in El Cargadero, a once-thriving farm community of 3,000, only a few hundred people remain, at most.

Like Zacatecas, Sinaloa, where Urrea locates Tres Camarones, is a central state. In his article, Cave explains that “the collapse of the Mexican peso in 1994 and the North American Free Trade Agreement” created a difficult economic situation for Mexican farmers in central Mexico. Unable to make a living where they were, some were “pushed...to Mexican cities,” which created “a migration pattern that would soon reshape both sides of the border.” Eventually, migration to Mexico’s cities transformed to migration across the border. Though Tres Camarones is not a place found on the map, Cave’s article shows that its economic troubles are grounded in reality and that the consequences are not isolated to Mexico.

Early in *Into the Beautiful North*, Urrea establishes that the U.S. and Mexican economies are intricately connected. For example, when the men referred to as

“bandidos” first enter the town, they are lured by young men vacationing from the U.S.: “The American boys who started it all by making a peeved chibacall to their Mazatlán connection, seeking a key of gold bud, were on spring break from some college in California” (12). Just as these surfers are oblivious to the less-than-ideal surfing conditions in Tres Camarones, they are unaware that their desire for marijuana will have an impact on the entire town that will outlast their visit.

Outside of this moment, *Into the Beautiful North* also examines larger policies that have an impact on Mexico’s economy. For example, while shopping in Mazatlán, Irma is baffled by the price of beans, and she asks the vendor: “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?” (35). The vendor explains the process, telling her: “These beans are grown here in Sinaloa...The best frijoles in the world! Right near Culiacán. Then they’re sold to the United States. Then they sell them back us...It gets expensive” (36). The impacts of NAFTA are complex and not limited to the kinds of exchanges that this vendor describes.

In *Hyperborder: The Contemporary U.S.-Mexico Border and its Future*, architect Fernando Romero describes the multiple effects that NAFTA has had on both sides of the border, including increased immigration from Mexico into the U.S., lower wages for workers in Mexico, and an agricultural market that is dominated by U.S. imports into Mexico and that makes it difficult for farmers in Mexico to make a profit. Romero explains that both countries have come to depend on each other: “Due to Mexico’s reliance on remittances, the United States’ dependence on Mexican undocumented labor,

the reciprocal nature of sister cities, and the constant exchanges of goods and people across the hyperborder, the two nations have arrived at an unforeseen and unprecedented state of interdependence” (94). Urrea highlights this “interdependence,” as Romero describes it, throughout *Into the Beautiful North* with moments such as the ones described above, though the countries are not linked only through economics. There are also social dynamics created by the border that guide and encourage behaviors that often overlook the symbiotic relationship between both countries.

## Section V

In *The Devil’s Highway: A True Story*, Urrea describes the reputation that the Border Patrol has amongst those who want to cross the border, explaining that the Border Patrol agents are feared and that stories about their brutality and corruption get handed down among the crossers. He states: “Stories burn all along the borderlands of Border Patrol men taking prisoners out into the wasteland and having their way with them. Women handcuffed, then groped and molested. Coyotes shot in the head” (17). From the point of view of those struggling to get across the border and then to get across the vast expanse of the desert, the Border Patrol is the villain. Urrea, however, paints a much more complex portrait of these agents in both *The Devil’s Highway* and in *Into the Beautiful North*. In *The Devil’s Highway*, he acknowledges both sides of their job, stating: “If it was the Border Patrol’s job to apprehend lawbreakers, it was equally their duty to save the lost and dying” (18). And in *The Devil’s Highway*, they do. They play a vital role in the rescue of a group of immigrants who attempted to cross the desert in the spring of 2001. Abandoned by the smuggler who was supposed to lead them through the

desert to safety, they were lost for days and eventually ran out of water. When one agent eventually found them, the men were starting to die. Of the 26 who attempted this crossing, only 12 survived.

Even when not faced with a life and death situation, *The Devil's Highway* reveals that Border Patrol agents are more complex than their reputation suggests. When writing about the experience of arresting undocumented immigrants, Urrea explains: "Arrests of illegals are often slightly wry, vaguely embarrassing events. The relentless border war is often seen as a highly competitive game that can even be friendly when it's not frightening and deadly. Agents often know their clients, having apprehended them several times already" (16). He uses details from his research writing *The Devil's Highway* to inform parts of *Into the Beautiful North*. In the novel, the Border Patrol agents who initially capture Nayeli and her friends are men who have a sense of humor but who are also aware of their power. For example, readers witness a friendly exchange between one of the detainees and the agents in which one agent asks: "Didn't I see you last week?" The detainee, a pregnant woman named Candelaria, quips back: "Don't you ever take a day off?" (151). Candelaria even jokes with them, saying that she "will send [them] a postcard" when she makes it across, and the agents laugh (152). But the section that follows shows a much different exchange in which "two migra agents beat the holy hell out of a boy in a checkered shirt" (152). Urrea does not discount the violence inflicted by the Border Patrol, but he also refuses to depict all of the agents as heightened caricatures of evil. One agent in particular plays an important role in the novel: Arnold Davis, who has been with the Border Patrol for twenty-seven years. Davis observes a difference between the new agents and those who have been around for a while: "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" (158). The terms "Agent" and "Terminator" come with their own connotations. For Davis, the term "Agent" seems to suggest a level of humanity as well as the power to act out of one's own desires, while "Terminator" suggests a mindless machine that takes instruction and aims only at destruction. In the holding cells, Nayeli sees both.

Agent Arnold Davis meets Nayeli after she and her friends are caught during their first attempt to cross. Davis stands out to Nayeli immediately because of his skin color: he is the first black person who Nayeli has ever seen in person. Nayeli is captivated: "She was amazed by his hair, gray and white, tight to his skull. His skin shone and, she was astounded to realize, he had the same skin tone as hers, just a shade darker. She knew she was a sweet tanned color, but she had always imagined herself as white" (155). Here, the narrator highlights what the two have in common: their skin tone. At the same time, it is also the characteristic that somehow makes them different from each other—at least, based on what Nayeli has learned to think about black people from the media sources she has access to in Tres Camarones. She is shocked by their physical similarities and cannot stop staring at him. Davis picks up on this and asks her, in Spanish, to explain why she is "eyeballing" him, to which she responds: "It is...your skin...It is...beautiful" (155). The ellipses, the first and third of which do appear in the novel, show that Nayeli struggles to identify her feelings about this commonality. When she settles on beautiful, it is a moment of connection rather than division between her and Agent Davis.

Nayeli recognizes that her own skin is dark, and she is even used to having it pointed out to her. For example, in Tijuana, the man who directs her to a motel room calls her “prieta,” which offends her: “Nayeli was taken aback by that. Nobody had ever called her ‘dark-faced girl’ in her life. Maybe morena—brown girl. That was almost romantic. But prieta was considered rude in Tres Camarones” (98). Even without Nayeli’s acknowledgement, readers know that her skin tone is dark from the way others talk about her. The bandits, for example, meet Nayeli at La Mano Caída, and they comment on her appearance, one of them saying: “A little dark...But she’ll do” (12). While the ideology that privileges whiteness as beautiful does infiltrate Nayeli’s village, Nayeli does not learn to think of herself as different or other than white until she approaches and crosses the border, though this takes time to internalize. After she is captured and immediately before she meets Agent Davis, she looks around the holding pens where she and the other detainees are kept, not seeing how she is seen as different from them: “What made them different from her? She could not tell” (155). As she makes her way across the border and then across the United States, she does come to see herself as different—not only from the Anglo-Americans that she meets but also from Mexican Americans and documented Mexicans.

Agent Davis returns at the end of the novel to remind readers of the connection that Nayeli previously experienced. When the two first met in San Diego, he was on loan from the Calexico station, but when he appears again, he is back in Calexico performing random searches of buses heading west on I-8—one of which carries Nayeli and Tacho back to San Diego to meet up with Irma and the others. He recognizes the two immediately and, after loading them into his van, asks about their plan to bring men back

to Mexico. Nayeli updates him, explaining that there are twenty-seven men waiting for her in San Diego. Though he does not believe them in San Diego, he appears to change his mind. In addition, readers already know that he is jaded by a system that has changed to a point where it seems only to produce “Terminators.” Though there is no clear explanation of why Agent Davis begins to believe Nayeli and Tacho, he does tell them: “I like you kids...I really do” (331). The connections that he builds with them over the course of these two interactions lead him to make the choice to help them instead of deporting them. He takes them to his house, feeds them eggs and tortillas, and then drives them back to San Diego in the cover of night.

In her review for *Quarterly Conversation*, Lucy Popescu states that the novel “loses some of its momentum when Nayeli and Tacho set off alone on the last leg of their journey across a huge swathe of the United States,” though she also believes that “this brief misstep is corrected with the pair’s final, redemptive meeting with a border agent.” The journey that Popescu calls a misstep, though, is crucial in giving the final meeting with Agent Davis its weight. As Nayeli and Tacho travel across the country, what is left of their previous vision of the United States crumbles. Before leaving Tres Camarones, Irma tells them: “You will see...The Americanos are kind. Friendly people. Generous people. They have quaint customs—they aren’t really, shall we say, sophisticated like we are. You can’t drink the water—it will give you diarrhea. But it’s very clean there. Good food. You’ll see” (62). As they come to see, though, not all or even many Americanos are kind, friendly, or generous to them. Though they get some insight into this when they witness two white men try to attack a camp of undocumented workers, their cross country drive shows them the variety of ways in which Mexican people are marginalized—and

not just by Anglo-Americans. In Colorado, for example, they stop at a Mexican restaurant. When they first enter, they feel at home. A Mexican man greets them from the kitchen, saying: “Welcome, amigos!” (278). This friendliness is quickly replaced by judgment. When they try to order in Spanish, the waitress, who is also the owner’s wife, tells them: “We speak English here” (279). When Nayeli and Tacho admit to the couple that they came across the border without documentation, the owner gets angry, shouting: “You get out of here. Illegals. What about the rest of us? What about us, cabrones? I came here LEGALLY! You hear that, LEGAL. You criminals come in here, make me look bad? I’m sorry, but you have to leave. Get out!” (281). Previously at the onset of their drive, they hear voices on the radio that call Mexicans “unwanted” and claim that they “carried disease and harbored terrorists” (268). Though Nayeli cannot understand what is being said, readers do. This rhetoric has infiltrated the minds of these two restaurant owners, and rather than recognizing any kind of kinship between themselves and Nayeli and Tacho, they see only one glaring difference: their legal status.

When Nayeli and Tacho get to Kankakee, they are surprised that the town accepts and welcomes Mexicans. By then, they have become used to feeling invisible. Even though Kankakee proves to be different, it is not enough to undo what they have learned about attitudes towards Mexicans. In the wake of their journey, Nayeli even believes that Kankakee is “the strangest place she had ever been,” though previously she had expected to be welcomed by the people of the United States (320). The time spent driving across the country shows her that Kankakee is the exception, not the rule. Moreover, the warm reception in Kankakee does little to deaden the pain that she experiences when she witnesses her father step out of his truck with another woman and another child. Though

so much of the novel avoids the serious tone that border crossing narratives usually employ, this part does not. This broken family is the cost of immigration—broken not only by her father’s infidelity but also by a variety of economic and social factors that lead him across the border, away from his family, and into a new life.

When readers encounter Agent Davis at the end, it is with the full weight of Nayeli and Tacho’s journey in their memories. Their journey has constantly reinforced division: division between U.S. and Mexican culture, between English speakers and Spanish speakers, and between the documented and undocumented, among others. When Agent Davis finds them on the bus, he remembers Nayeli because of her story and also because of her smile, which is almost infectious. He even asks her: “Where’s that smile of yours?” Nayeli responds, telling him: “Gone” (329). By this point, Nayeli’s optimism is broken. Readers do not get an insight into Nayeli’s thoughts again, so we cannot know for certain that Agent Davis’s kindness restores her spirits, but his behavior is a reminder that connections can be used to reinvent the power structures that evolve from focusing narrowly on differences.

*Into the Beautiful North* does not advocate for ignoring difference, though. Rather, it encourages readers to see connections alongside those differences. As Urrea says in his KPBS interview, one can see the border “as this hideous scar” or “as a largely imaginary line that fell like the dew out of the heavens one day.” Urrea’s image of the border as a “seam that unites two people” implies simultaneous separation and unity, and the content of *Into the Beautiful North* depicts both attitudes towards the border. If the border is, as Gloria Anzaldúa describes it, an open wound, *Into the Beautiful North* tries to find comfort and joy in the wound—in that unreconciled and uncomfortable place.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“A SOCIETY CRUMBLING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF ITS OWN UNCHECKED  
COMMITMENTS”: CONTEMPORARY ANXIETIES IN *BREAKING BAD*

**Section I**

At Marlboro College, the tiny liberal arts school I attended as an undergraduate, we did not have television. From the fall of 2001 until the spring of 2005, so many sitcoms and dramas began and ended without my notice. But I grew up with only network TV, anyway, so the change from having six channels to having none was not that big. When I moved to Nebraska in August of 2006, I got cable TV for the first time in my life. It took years for me to realize that cable TV did not only mean *more* viewing options but that sometimes it meant better options—ones that reminded me of the novels that I read in my English classes as both an undergraduate and graduate student. Though film studies are a standard part of so many English Departments, I have never had the patience to sit through a film that is much longer than an hour and a half, so television has always been my visual genre of choice. Moreover, television offers a longer and sometimes more nuanced look at its characters because of its episodic nature. Current programs such as *Downton Abbey*, *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Breaking Bad* deliver texts just as complicated and layered as novels.

In a September 2012 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Thomas Doherty, chair of American Studies at Brandeis University, wrote about the relationship between the novel and episodic television in an article entitled “Storied TV: Cable is the New Novel.” He makes a distinction between shows such as the ones previously

mentioned and the standard half-hour sitcoms and hour-long dramas that preceded them.

He calls this new breed of shows, such as *Breaking Bad*, Arc TV. This “moniker,” he says, “underscores the dramatic curvature of the finely crafted, adult-minded serials built around arcs of interconnected action unfolding over the life span of the series.”

Essentially, these television shows are not like the typical sitcom or drama that provides multiple entry points for viewers throughout its lifespan. Viewers get more out of these shows if they are watched in order from the beginning. Doherty compares this new genre of television to the novel, writing: “Yet [Arc TV’s] real kinship is literary, not televisual. Like the bulky tomes of Dickens and Dreiser, Trollope and Wharton, the series are thick on character and dense in plot line, spanning generations and tribal networks and crisscrossing the currents of personal life and professional duty.” Doherty goes on to explain how this format differs from its predecessors:

The dramatis personae existed in a realm that was picaresque, a pre-novel mode in which a one-dimensional protagonist is hit by one damn thing after another... By contrast, Arc TV is all about back story and evolution.<sup>1</sup> Again like the novel, the aesthetic payoff comes from prolonged, deep involvement in the fictional universe and, like a serious play or film, the stagecraft demands close attention. For the show to cast its magic, the viewer must leap full body into the video slipstream.

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<sup>1</sup> As Doherty points out, the picaresque is precursor to the novel. Though it emerged in sixteenth-century Spain, it shares some features with typical sitcoms and dramas. For example, the picaresque is usually held together primarily by characters rather than an overarching plot. The events describe happen to the same person, but the structure is episodic, allowing the audience to enter into the narrative at any point. The term “picaresque” has roots in Spanish. The word “Picaro” translates to “rogue,” and many picaresque narratives follow roguish characters on their adventures. Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605) is responsible for the transition from the picaresque into a form more closely resembling the novel.

Doherty credits this evolution to more lax censorship, the ability to view on mobile devices, as well as other technologies such as DVR, which allow viewers to rewind and rewatch as many times as they want.<sup>2</sup> According to Doherty, the ability to repeatedly view an episode “not only helps aficionados connect dots and track motifs across a season but encourages artists to more carefully embroider the details of their product.” Literary scholars are always “connect[ing] dots and track[ing] motifs,” so it is no surprise that this new genre of television would attract the attention of a variety of scholars—not just in English, but also in American Studies and Philosophy. The show *Breaking Bad* has attracted me for just these reasons.

In this fourth and final chapter, I am considering AMC’s original television series *Breaking Bad*, which premiered on January 20, 2008 and will begin its final eight episodes this August. Unlike network television series, *Breaking Bad*’s seasons are much shorter, a typical season being only thirteen episodes.<sup>3</sup> Created by Vince Gilligan, *Breaking Bad* tells the story of a high school chemistry teacher named Walter White, who joins forces with his former student Jesse Pinkman in order to manufacture and distribute crystal methamphetamine in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Walt suffers from aggressive lung cancer, and in the first episode, viewers learn that he will most likely die soon. He has little money to pay his medical bills and does not want to leave his wife, son, and

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<sup>2</sup> A DVR is a “Digital Video Recorder,” which allows viewers to record and save television programs.

<sup>3</sup> Though a typical season is thirteen episodes, the first season is only seven episodes, and the fifth and final season is sixteen, which have been broken up into two eight episode arcs, the first half of which aired from July through September of 2012 and the last of which will begin this August. Also unlike typical television shows, *Breaking Bad* has a finite end. Because of this, the show is not at the mercy of ratings like other television shows that are renewed from year to year based on viewership. Perhaps in this way it has a kinship with Mexican telenovelas, which typically run less than one year and also feature complicated relationships and plotlines.



soon-to-be-born daughter with a mountain of debt. Cooking meth, he learns, is a way to make money quickly.

The genre and premise of *Breaking Bad* differs radically from the content of the previous three chapters, which all examine novels. The first chapter considers Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Emma Pérez's *Forgetting the Alamo*, two books that look at the border from a historical perspective. In these novels, both authors question how power manifests itself in historical memory and asks readers to consider whose stories get to be told and whose stories are silenced. The second chapter on Reyna Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies* examines the four different female perspectives through which the story is told. Each voice reveals something different about how gender and perceptions of the body impact a woman's identity as well as how one's awareness of the border shapes those views. The third chapter on Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* explores the perspective of undocumented immigrants. Rather than write about what drives people into the United States, though, Urrea tries to understand what keeps them from going home. The first three chapters emphasize how perceptions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity shape individual identity as well as how these perceptions also inform national consciousness. This chapter on *Breaking Bad*, however, will not consider gender or sexuality, but it is linked to the other four chapters by one act: the act of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

Though the concerns in this chapter are different from those found in the previous three, its inclusion is important for a variety of reasons. First, the genre of television attracts a wider, more varied audience, and because of the current conversations surrounding the topic of immigration reform, it is important to think about how

depictions of the border are offered to a mass audience. Second, I want to examine how the border looks from the perspective of someone who has not experienced living there. The authors discussed thus far all have ties to the border region. Emma Pérez is a Texas native, for example, and Reyna Grande and Luis Alberto Urrea were both born in Mexico and crossed into the United States as children—Urrea with documentation and Grande without. Both Urrea and Grande also lived in Southern California for a significant portion of their childhoods. Despite being born in Rhode Island and growing up in Tennessee, Cormac McCarthy spent extensive time in the Southwest while researching and writing *Blood Meridian*, research that included learning Spanish and visiting all of the places described in the novel. In contrast, Vince Gilligan was born in Virginia. His perspective offers a glimpse into how the border is perceived by those outside of the region and culture.

The show's setting was almost accidental, though. As Gilligan reveals in an interview published in *Local IQ*, a magazine about local arts and entertainment in Albuquerque, he originally planned to set the show in California but changed his mind after Sony, the studio that produces *Breaking Bad*, suggested they move to New Mexico because of tax incentives. After visiting Albuquerque, though, Gilligan saw more possibilities for the story, and he explains: "The money became the least reason for making the show there. I had only been to Albuquerque a couple of times before we started shooting, but when I got out there, suddenly it dawned on me what the show could be. I began thinking about all those great John Ford movies, and all those Sergio Leone westerns." Gilligan now says that he "can't imagine the show would be nearly as interesting as it is if it were set anywhere else." As Gilligan points out, the landscape in

New Mexico calls to mind old Westerns, and the show itself echoes many of the themes found in those films. In addition, the proximity to the border also opens up other possibilities. Though California also shares part of the border between the U.S. and Mexico, Albuquerque is located only 270 miles north of Ciudad Juárez, a city with a notorious reputation because of the prominence of drug cartel violence. As the seasons progress, this violence begins crossing over the border and into the show.

In the first season of *Breaking Bad*, the characters remain mostly isolated from the type of cruelty associated with Ciudad Juárez. In the second season, one of the secondary characters, Walt's brother-in-law Hank Schrader, sees the violence first hand because of his job with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). By season three, the border becomes a prominent part of the plot, and season four shows some of the series' main characters crossing into Mexico. Because there is so much to consider on the topic, this chapter will focus on how the border is introduced in season three of *Breaking Bad*. First, I will give readers a brief synopsis of the first two seasons in order to set up the discussion of the third. After this, the chapter will concentrate on a comparison between Walter White and two minor characters introduced in the opening scene of season three who appear throughout the first eight episodes. These two characters bring Mexico to the forefront of the plot. They are Mexican-born members of the cartel, and from their first appearance, it is clear that they come from a different world—one that is as mythic as it is violent. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of this mythical and stark portrayal of Mexico and the border to a U.S. audience in order to reveal the ways in which *Breaking Bad* asks viewers to question conceptions of law and nationalistic allegiances.

## Section II

### *I. Season One*

The two main characters in *Breaking Bad* are an unlikely pair. As an over-qualified high school chemistry teacher, Walter White's partnership with his former student Jesse Pinkman seems unexpected. In high school, Jesse displayed no promise as a student, and his adult life is likely not much different from what Walt would have imagined for him. He both uses and makes meth, which gives him the connections that Walt needs to distribute and sell his own product. The two characters reconnect in the series premiere when Walt goes on a ride along with his brother-in-law Hank Schrader, a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent who offers to let Walt watch from the car while he busts a meth lab. As Hank and the other agents investigate inside the house, Walt sees Jesse flee the crime scene without being noticed. Hank later gives Walt the chance to look at the crime scene, and Walt cannot help but notice piles of money, which gives him the idea to use his own chemistry skills to pay medical bills and leave behind money for his family after his death. Using the information that Walt has about Jesse's involvement in the meth lab, Walt blackmails him into becoming his partner in a new operation.

The first two seasons of the show explore the morality of Walt's choices. Because he struggles to pay for his cancer treatment and wants to leave his family financially secure after his death, viewers are asked to sympathize with his point of view. At the same time, his desire to make the money he needs as quickly as possible leads to dangerous situations for both him and Jesse. When the two begin their operation, Jesse is the sole dealer, and he cannot sell at the speed that Walt demands. He asks Jesse to find

someone who can work with larger quantities, which leads him to a local distributor named Tuco Salamanca.<sup>4</sup> Tuco has a bad temper, and his own drug use causes fits of violence. After the first meeting, Jesse ends up in the hospital, leaving Walt to avenge his partner and see that he is compensated for his pain. Walt's own meeting with Tuco goes better but only because Walt uses mercury fulminate to cause an explosion. As a result of acting violently, Walt gains Tuco's respect, and he agrees to go into business with him and Jesse.

## *II. Season Two*

The second season opens with the trouble that arises as a result of Walt and Jesse's involvement with Tuco. Their first exchange ends badly after Tuco beats one of his own men to death in front of them. Tuco later kidnaps both Jesse and Walt after the DEA finds the body of his employee. He plans an escape to Mexico where he has family and connections to the cartel, but he wants to bring Walt along to continue making meth. While holding Walt and Jesse hostage, Tuco explains that crossing the border can work in their favor. He tells them that his cousins are on their way north from Mexico to smuggle them back across the border. There, he tells them, they can set up a super lab, and his connections will keep the *federales* at bay.<sup>5</sup> Of course, they do not make it across the border. Hank eventually kills Tuco in a shoot-out after he tracks down Jesse's car in his investigation of Walt's disappearance. Tuco is killed, and Walt and Jesse escape

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<sup>4</sup> The name Tuco is likely a reference to the character Tuco Ramirez, a bandit in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Released in 1966, the film is a famous Sergio Leone spaghetti Western. Eli Wallach, the actor who played the bandit Calvera in *The Magnificent Seven*, also played the role of Tuco in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

<sup>5</sup> The word "*federales*" is a short term for the Mexican Federal Police.

without being seen. Though they are alive, they are left without the distribution network that they needed. Over the course of the second season, their business evolves. They begin by recruiting their own dealers, but when one is caught in a sting operation and another is murdered for selling in someone else's territory, they are left to find another way to sell their product. Saul Goodman, a shady lawyer who helps them with a variety of business dilemmas and with money laundering, sets them up with Gustavo Fring. Gus is a Chilean immigrant who owns a regional fast food chain called "Los Pollos Hermanos." A community-involved businessman on the surface, Gus uses his reputation to hide in plain sight, and for that reason, he does business carefully and safely. While he is interested in a partnership with Walt, he is less interested in Jesse, who he sees as an enormous risk. Because Jesse and Walt disband their partnership briefly, Walt is able to enter into business with Gus. Despite being scrupulously careful with so many aspects surrounding his meth operation, Gus is forced to work with the Mexican cartels, which becomes a driving force in seasons three and four.

Though the U.S.-Mexico border looms in the background, the first two seasons only briefly address the role of the border in the meth trade. Hank's role as a DEA agent offers viewers a glimpse at the difference between the violence found on the U.S. side of the border compared to what is found on the Mexican side. Though Hank works in Albuquerque, he understands that the meth trade there has ties to what happens in Mexico. When Hank kills Tuco in the season two episode "Grilled," he becomes a hero in the eyes of his colleagues, and he is recruited to join a Tri-State Border Interdiction Force, which takes him to El Paso, Texas and the forefront of the fight with the cartel. Through his experience as part of a Tri-State Border Interdiction Force, viewers see how

the cartel uses fear and threats of violence to stay in control. For example, a man known as Tortuga (Tortoise) betrays the cartel by talking to the DEA. Later, in Mexico, Hank and several other agents wait to take down part of the cartel using Tortuga's information only to see his severed head making its way across the desert strapped to the back of a turtle. The violence does not conclude here. Several agents are gravely injured when the explosives that are also attached to the turtle detonate. In El Paso, Hank is out of his element in multiple ways. Before the explosion, he felt isolated because he was the only agent who did not speak both Spanish and English, but this moment shows him that he is much more removed from the violence found in Juárez than he realized. Though Hank's stay along the border is brief, it works to foreshadow the violence that is to come in season three when Tuco's cousins eventually cross the border and begin their pursuit to avenge his death.

### *III. Season Three*

From the opening scene of season three, the border looms over every action. In fact, the first scene is set on the Mexican side of the border. It shows two men, nearly identical, with shaved heads and sharkskin suits, crawling across the desert to Santa Muerte's shrine where they offer a crudely drawn image of Walter White.<sup>6</sup> These two men appear throughout the first eight episodes of the season, and they are clearly of a

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<sup>6</sup> Shrines to Santa Muerte can be found throughout Mexico. She appears as a skeleton dressed in a robe and holding a scythe. Though the name "Santa Muerte" invokes associations with Christianity, the church does not look kindly on Santa Muerte. Rather, she is a figure embraced by working class people or those who are somehow disenfranchised. People who are poor, gay, or otherwise on the periphery of society pray to her for protection, and lately, she has also become a figure associated with drug traffickers. Because of her affiliation with drug cartels, there has been plenty of discussion about Santa Muerte in recent news articles, many of which describe those who follow her as a cult. A recent online *National Geographic* article by journalist Alma Guillermoprieta entitled "The Vatican and Santa Muerte" offers brief but specific details about the appearance of shrines across Mexico, rituals associated with her followers, as well as an explanation of the Vatican's desire to disassociate Santa Muerte from Catholicism.

different world than Walt. While Walt often tries to intimidate others, these men do not have to try. They embody intimidation through their eerie silence. They do not speak for the first six episodes, and they are not named until the seventh. Their back-stories come together slowly, though never fully, and their motivations for wanting to kill Walt are not clearly expressed until the third episode of season three when viewers learn that they have come to avenge their cousin's death. Having been denied permission to kill Hank, the cousins seek out Walt to take his place. Because Gus wants to continue working with Walt, though, he needs to turn their attention in another direction. He gives them permission to go after Hank, telling them that he can grant this because they are in his territory. He secretly warns Hank of their plot, though. As viewers slowly learn, Gus uses the two cousins against the cartel of which they are a part in an attempt to gain complete control over the meth production and trade on the U.S. side of the border and to get back at them for murdering his original partner. When the cousins try to attack Hank in a parking lot, he fights back. He kills one and gravely injures the other, who dies in the hospital later that day. Though Walt's family suffers emotionally as a result of the cousins' attempt to kill Hank, Walt sees very little fallout from the death of these two men. He knows only that they were likely after him and that Gus saved him.

Though the cousins' actions are bereft of morality or humanity, they are oddly attractive characters. Their silent and stoic presence echoes the demeanor of so many Western heroes, though their excessive violence towards innocent bystanders make them more reminiscent of villains.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, viewers realize that their motivations are not

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<sup>7</sup> One example of a villain in Western film is Calvera in *The Magnificent Seven*, a film discussed in chapter three. Calvera is the leader of a gang of bandits who periodically raid a small Mexican village. They steal their food, leaving them with little to survive. In addition, chapter one gives examples of villains in Pérez's *Forgetting the Alamo* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In both novels, gangs of men rape, murder, and



that much different from Walt's. Like Walt, they act out of loyalty to their family, and like Walt, they are willing to sacrifice anyone who seems to threaten them. Also like Walt, despite acting outside of the law, they are subservient to a variety of other power structures. The cousins answer to the cartel, and Walt answers to Gus. Because Walt believes in and values the notion of individual freedom, he struggles to extricate himself from these structures. In fact, most of the series follows Walt as he tries to resist one conception of the law, only to be subsumed by a different one. The cousins, on the other hand, know their place within the cartel. They know to whom they answer, and they do not stray. Though the cousins seem to embody the Western more than Walt, it is Walt who strives for the kind of individual freedom that the Western hero seeks.

### Section III

In Gilligan's previously mentioned interview with *Local 10*, he says that the landscape in Albuquerque reminds him of "all those great John Ford movies, and all those Sergio Leone westerns," showing that he was influenced by the Western genre, but he is not the only one to see *Breaking Bad* as part of this tradition. In a *New York Times Magazine* article "The Dark Art of 'Breaking Bad,'" journalist David Segal describes *Breaking Bad* for his readers, stating: "The story and setting were an update of the spaghetti Western, minus the cowboys and set in the present."<sup>8</sup> To me, this seems like an

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steal indiscriminately. These characters do not show mercy and are excessively violent or cruel. In contrast, heroes, such as the gunmen in *The Magnificent Seven*, fight against immorality.

<sup>8</sup> The Spaghetti Western, a sub-genre of the Western, emerged in Italy during the 1960s. Sergio Leone is credited as one of the pioneers of the genre. Spaghetti Westerns took conventions from their U.S. counterparts and exaggerated them with the use of over-the-top violence and eccentric villains. Though ostensibly set in the U.S. southwest or in northern Mexico, Spaghetti Westerns were usually filmed in southeastern Spain. When the genre first evolved, casts often spoke only Italian, but over time, filmmakers enlisted actors from a number of countries. For example, Sergio Leone recruited Clint Eastwood from the

uncontroversial statement. From my first viewing of the show, I considered it a Western and did not expect this to raise any questions or disagreement, but I was wrong. After speaking on this topic at an academic conference, an audience member asked me where the horses, cowboys, Indians, and frontier were in the series. The contemporary time period and the external conflicts may not shout “Western,” but there are many other characteristics that do: the landscape, for example. The series pilot opens with images of the New Mexico desert: cacti, red rocks, and red dirt all set against an impossibly blue sky. These types of images are common ways to begin a Western, as Jane Tompkins states in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. She explains that opening with the landscape implies that the story about to be told comes from a natural place: “In the beginning, say these shots, was the earth, and the earth was desert. It was here first, before anything. And the story you are about to see goes back to the beginning of things, starts, literally from the ground up” (70). In the case of *Breaking Bad*, though, the natural is juxtaposed with a series of very unnatural images and events. After the establishing landscape shot, Walt enters the scene driving an RV while wearing only underpants, shoes, and a gas mask. Though the first images establish *Breaking Bad* as part of the Western genre, what follows promises to deliver something new. The characters are not cowboys or Indians, though a Native American does help Walt tow the RV out of the

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United States to star in his famous trilogy that included *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). Because actors were often from different countries, films would be shot without sound and voices would later be dubbed in for different audiences. U.S. reception was not favorable at the time, and there were many debates about the authenticity of these films. More details about critical reception as well as genre features can be found in Christopher Frayling’s book *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*.

ditch into which he drives.<sup>9</sup> Even without the stereotypical roles found in Westerns, the conflicts that drive the characters and that underlie the show's premise speak in conversation with Western novels and films.

In *The Western: Parables of the American Dream*, literary scholar Jeffrey Wallmann surveys a variety of popular Western fiction, including film, television, and novels. The second chapter, entitled "Brandin' and Cullin'," works to establish a definition of the Western. Wallmann argues that Westerns share the following characteristics: they "focus on the more permanent values and aspirations of the essential human dilemmas" (19), test their characters, rely on dualities, and are built upon the mythology of the American Dream. Wallmann defines the American Dream in the context of the Western as "the dream of seeking happiness in self-realization" (16). According to Wallmann, the pursuit for independence, individuality, and self-reliance defines the Western.

*Breaking Bad* is built upon Walt's desire to be self-sufficient. When he discovers that he has cancer and his insurance will not cover the best treatment, his old business partner offers to pay his medical bills. Walt, however, is too proud to take what he considers charity. He wants to provide for his family alone, and in his desire to make this happen, his character is tested in a variety of physical and moral ways. Again, tests such as these are characteristic of the Western according to Wallmann, who writes: "Thus, the stories that develop are about the testing of mettle, the realization of who individuals fundamentally are and what they ultimately stand for. Westerns, then, are about personal character—not the piety of values, but the mix of temperament, chemistry, behavior, and

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<sup>9</sup> There are several Native American characters in background roles such as these. They are often depicted as helping Anglo-American characters or falling victim to them, a pattern similar to historical treatment of Native Americans.

environment that molds one's character" (22). Walt's character is tested repeatedly throughout the series, but the tests do not shape him so much as they reveal the kind of man he has always been, which is not the same man that he wants others to see. Despite being involved with a variety of illegal activities, including murder, Walt continues to believe that he acts morally. He needs to believe in his own morality so that he can see himself as a hero to his family. In *Breaking Bad*, though, there are no heroes in a traditional sense of the word. There are, instead, antiheroes, such as Walt. Wallmann defines the term antihero, explaining that antiheroes "are not necessarily the opposite of heroes." He clarifies his statement, saying: "They have to be sympathetic characters to gain an audience. Generally, they either behave like the conventional heroes but are cynical and emotionally wounded...or they are roguish outlaws and villains who rebel against social proscriptions" (27). In the third season, Walt is pitted against another set of antiheroes: Tuco's cousins.<sup>10</sup>

Tuco's cousins display an egregious lack of empathy. In the season three premiere "No Más (No More)" they kill a group of undocumented workers while trying to enter the United States simply because one man recognizes their cartel affiliations. In later episodes, they also kill a Native American woman so that they can hide out in her house, and they presumably kill an elderly woman so that they can use her van to transport their wheelchair-bound uncle to a meeting with Gus. These murders are only a few examples of their crimes, but as horrific as the killing are their methods. They use an axe. Because of their cruelty, they command respect within the world of the drug trade. These two men

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<sup>10</sup> A few examples of antiheroes in Western fiction and film include the following characters: Rooster Cogburn in Charles Portis's 1968 novel *True Grit* (also adapted to film in 1969 and remade in 2010); William Munny from the 1992 Clint Eastwood directed film *Unforgiven*; and Django from Quentin Tarantino's most recent film *Django Unchained* (2012).

are a different kind of antihero. Walt adheres to Wallmann's definition in that he "rebel[s] against social proscriptions," and his terminal illness gives him reason to be cynical. The cousins would qualify as "roguish outlaws and villains," but while they may rebel against mass social proscriptions, they obey the rules learned in their youth. While viewers only get a small glimpse into "the mix of temperament, chemistry, behavior, and environment that molds [their] character," it is clear that they have been raised to see violence and abuse as appropriate forms of retaliation (Wallmann 22). Moreover, they have learned a familial code of conduct that demands retaliation in the face of behavior that appears disloyal or disrespectful. By avenging family who has suffered betrayal, they believe that they fulfill their duty and earn the same kind of respect.

The third season episode entitled "One Minute" reveals the cousins' origin story along with their names. The opening scene is a flashback in which the cousins, now identified as Marco and Leonel, are playing outside as children. Marco breaks Leonel's toy, and Leonel complains to his uncle, Don Salamanca, telling him that he wishes that Marco were dead. Don Salamanca then asks Marco to get a beer for him from a bucket of ice water and proceeds to shove his head into the water. Leonel, horrified by this action, struggles to make his uncle release his brother. Once Leonel slaps his uncle in the face, Don Salamanca lets the boy go, stands up, and tells both of them, "La familia es todo (Family is all)." Don Salamanca takes Leonel's complaint literally. When he states that he wishes his brother were dead, Don Salamanca uses this statement to teach him to respect language and to teach him the law by which he will live: "La familia es todo (Family is all)."

Because Walt claims to act in the name of providing for his family, it would be easy to believe that Walt and the cousins both adhere to the same set of principles, and perhaps they do. But Walt and the cousins both have different definitions of family. Walt's conception of family is nuclear, so he only feels responsibility to his wife and children. The cousins, however, believe in an extended family. The distinction between how these characters delineate family is further evidence of their cultural difference. By looking at the ways in which Walt and the cousins construct family, viewers can see that Walt pursues the American Dream as defined by Wallmann. He "seek[s] happiness in self-realization" (16). Walt tries to detach himself from all ties. Even in his pursuit to provide for his family, he leaves them behind, which will be discussed in further detail in section five. In contrast, though, the cousins remain within a large but tightly knit familial structure—one that is so close that it intertwines family with business. Because of this, these two men may not seem like either Western heroes or antiheroes. They do, however, maintain the stoicism and silence that viewers are used to seeing from Western characters.

#### **Section IV**

The contrast between Walt and the cousins introduces the dualities on which the Western relies. The first episode of season three sets up a number of these dualities for the reader: the rich are contrasted with the poor; Mexico is contrasted with the United States; old customs are contrasted with new ones. As Wallmann explains: "Westerns, being mythic, rely largely on dualities for the tests, obstacles, and enemies that the heroes encounter. The duality most often associated with westerns is the conflict between good

and evil” (30). Wallmann points out that the conflict between good and evil is not the only duality found in Westerns, though. There is also conflict between the east and west, justice and injustice, law of nature and law of man, and community and individualism. But because the Western needs a hero, the conflict between good and evil is most prominent. It drives both internal and external conflicts for the heroes, who are often motivated by the desire for justice, whether on a personal or public level. While *Breaking Bad* introduces a number of dualities for the reader, it also asks viewers to consider why and how these dualities are constructed.

More than simply fitting the definition of the Western as constructed by Jeffrey Wallmann, though, *Breaking Bad* does a specific kind of work. Scholar Lee Clark Mitchell writes in his book *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*: “Like other escapist narratives, Westerns map out anxieties about conditions from which people want to escape—anxieties that change with time as do their imaginative solutions. Countless Westerns have appeared for nearly a century now, supposedly fixed by generic code but actually responsive to crises and fears that earlier Westerns failed to anticipate” (6). According to Mitchell, the Western is a constantly evolving genre that responds to the social anxieties of the time. Viewers see this in *Breaking Bad*, which responds to a variety of anxieties.

In an essay entitled “Walter White’s American Vice,” philosopher Jeffrey E. Stephenson explains how crystal meth acts as a symbol for some of these anxieties: “The experience of crystal meth is one of high energy, frenetic, hyper-driven, and undisciplined activity. Indeed it’s the drug of a society obsessed with activity, action, movement, getting places, doing things, succeeding. It’s the drug of hysteria and

capitalism, of the rampant fury of accomplishment” (209). Stephenson goes on to describe how Walt is caught in this “fury of accomplishment,” stating: “Walt is engaged in a system where he’s pressured constantly (and for years) to think in terms of financial success, and the sense of empathy with which we approach Walt leads us blindly to embrace the fact that our economic system in its current form is acceptable” (211). As it becomes harder and harder to empathize with Walt or rationalize his actions, viewers are forced to examine the importance of the material wealth that Walt pursues without question. When the cousins appear, the filming techniques suggest that they represent an older time—one that somehow avoids the “corrupting value system” found in the United States and the “society crumbling under the weight of its own unchecked commitments to the American dream of success and consumerism” (Stephenson 211). Because they enter the story from Mexico, the differences between the cousins and Walt are clearly marked by borders both metaphorical and literal. The next section of this chapter will explain the significance of those borders, beginning with how filming techniques invite viewers to see Mexico.

## Section V

The introduction of the cousins in season three encourages viewers to see these men as wholly alien from attitudes found in the U.S. They are juxtaposed with Walter White in order to show this contrast, and the filming techniques used to introduce them reveal that they are different from characters on both sides of the border. Like the first season, the third season of *Breaking Bad* begins with images of the landscape, though this time the scene is located on the opposite side of the border. Viewers first see one older



man crawling across the desert sand with handkerchiefs tied around his elbows and knees. Others look on without any hint of shock, and a truck passes by, barely swerving to miss him. Slowly, it is revealed that there are many other people making this journey. The cousins enter the scene in a new car. They drive past all of the other men who began crawling long before them and step out of their car in stylish suits. They look around, look at each other, and then fall to the ground to begin crawling along with the others. They are the first to reach the target: a shrine to Santa Muerte. Here, they light a candle, and place their offering amongst a variety of others—flowers, toy *luchadores*, plastic bracelets, and many other items, all of which are meager in comparison to their thick stack of pesos. At this point, one cousin hangs up a crudely drawn image of Walter White. Their intimate knowledge of this ritual shows that they are familiar with the culture, but their material possessions set them apart from the poor village.

There is a metaphorical border between these men and the villagers. At the same time, they are also literally on the other side of a geopolitical border, which is indicated by the coloring found in this scene and others set in Mexico. In the scenes set in Mexico, the coloring is manipulated. In the DVD commentary for this episode, which is entitled “No Más,” director of photography Michael Slovis explains that he used a straw filter to film every scene that takes place on the Mexican side of the border, which gives these parts an almost burnt-looking quality. Slovis reveals that the practical reason for filming this scene through a straw filter was to make an overcast day appear oppressively hot, but he proceeded to film every other scene set on the Mexican side of the border though the same filter. The effect calls to mind the sepia tone characteristic of old photographs. There is a hint of nostalgia in these colors, which is interrupted when the cousins enter

the scene in their luxury car and shiny suits. Though the place itself feels antiquated, the main characters in this scene are contemporary. The juxtaposition of setting and character suggests that, despite living with modern luxuries, the cousins adhere to laws and customs from an older world—a world familiar to viewers of Westerns.

The landscape in the opening of season three communicates more than the actual characters do. Like so many characters found in Westerns, the cousins rarely speak. In fact, viewers do not hear their voices until the season's sixth episode, "Sunset." Scholar Jane Tompkins understands silence in Westerns as a rejection of language itself. She claims: "For the Western is at heart antilanguage. Doing, not talking, is what it values" (50). This is true in *Breaking Bad*, though Tompkins argues that the Western's rejection of language comes from a place of distrust. She explains: "Westerns distrust language in part because language tends to be wielded most skillfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength" (51). In the case of *Breaking Bad*, though, the cousins' lack of language has more to do with respect for words rather than a distrust of them. As young children, for example, the cousins learn to value language, as the previously discussed flashback at the beginning of "One Minute" shows. Their uncle teaches them to honor the literal meaning in language by showing them the reality that their words invoke, and this commitment to the literal guides their behavior throughout their lives. At the same time, these men are members of the cartel, which means that they possess the kind of power that Tompkins believes Western heroes typically reject. Their connections give them "class privilege, political clout" and "financial strength," but because most of the show takes place on the U.S. side of the border, viewers rarely witness how the cartel members compare to other Mexican

citizens. Instead, they are contrasted with those in the U.S. who work within the same business—specifically, Walter White.

In the third episode of season one entitled “And the Bag’s in the River,” Walt struggles to come to terms with his actions. After trapping a meth distributor and DEA informant known as Krazy-8 in Jesse’s basement, Jesse leaves Walt with the task of killing him. Though both men are new to this world of crime and murder, Walt is much more out of his element than Jesse. Because he is invested in seeing himself as a moral man, he takes the time to rationalize his decision to kill by making a pros and cons list. On his list of reasons to let Krazy-8 live, he writes:

It’s the moral thing to do  
 Judeo/ Christian Principles  
 You are not a murderer  
 Sanctity of Life  
 He may listen to reason  
 Post-Traumatic Stress  
 Won’t be able to live with yourself  
 Murder is wrong

His list of reasons to kill him, however, includes only one statement: “He’ll kill your entire family if you let him go.” In the cousins’ world in which family is all, this reason would be enough. This reason, in fact, makes the act of composing such a list unnecessary. Walt, however, responds both out of a sense of duty to his family and a sense of duty to humanity. In the end, Walt does kill Krazy-8, but only after first deciding to set him free. His sense of logic and morality lead him to believe the fifth item on his

pro list: that Krazy-8 “may listen to reason.” Walt asks him to give him a reason, “any reason,” not to kill him. Though Krazy-8 acknowledges that Walt may not believe anything that he tells him, they proceed to bond over a location familiar to both of them—Krazy-8’s family furniture business. Once Walt deduces that Krazy-8 has been plotting to kill him with a shard of broken glass from a dropped plate, however, Walt abandons his sense of morality and retreats to survival mode. When he realizes that Krazy-8 has been manipulating him, Walt learns to distrust language. He also learns that language, like the chemicals he uses, can be combined and used to manage unpredictable variables.

Though Walt becomes distrustful of language, he does not learn to respect it in the way that the cousins do. Instead, he uses language to manipulate others. For example, when his wife, Skyler, tells him that she knows about his involvement with drugs in the season three premiere, Walt corrects her language. He is not, as she has labeled him, a drug *dealer*. He is a methamphetamine *manufacturer*. Television critic Donna Bowman argues in her review of the episode that this distinction reveals the ways in which Walt “uses language to try to control conversations and draw other people into his version of reality... A version where that distinction is crucial to one’s moral standing.” In this way, Walt is not only lying to those around him; he is lying to himself. While the cousins learn to view language as a tool that *should* reflect reality, Walt uses it to manufacture reality. Walt’s reason for making a distinction between dealing and producing does, however, relate to the cousins’ mantra: “Family is all.”

Though Walt tries to justify his actions, he also wants to break free from the business. Despite a lucrative offer proposed by Gustavo Fring, Walt turns down millions

because he believes that leaving the world of meth manufacturing will help him win his family back. Gus, however, dismisses the notion that Walt should want his family back in the season's fifth episode, "Más (More)." When Walt insists over and over again that he will not cook because that is what cost him his family, Gus appeals to his sense of pride—the same pride that kept Walt from accepting an old friend's offer to pay for his treatment in season one. But Gus also appeals to his sense of a normative hetero-masculinity by saying to him: "A man provides, and he does it even when he's not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man." Gus insists that Walt's duty is not to be present for his family but rather to provide for them financially. In essence, Gus encourages Walt to reject the domestic life by claiming that it is not essential to a man's identity. Through appealing to his sense of masculinity, Gus both frees and traps Walt. Though he is free from his efforts to regain Skyler's trust, Gus also lures him into a world from which escape is not possible.

When Walt joins Gus's meth manufacturing operation, he agrees to live within Gus's rules, but he is also living under the cartel's rules because of Gus's relationship with it. The problem, though, is that the rules are not the same on both sides of the border. The cousins' strict code has to bend to conform to the rules on the north side of the border. As revealed in the sixth episode, "Sunset," the cousins do not go after Walter White because they believe that he killed Tuco. Though they know that a DEA agent is responsible, their superiors have ordered that the DEA is off limits because of the attention it would attract. Instead, bound by rules that demand some form of retribution, the cousins substitute Walt, who has only betrayed Tuco, for the actual killer.

In the third episode of season three, “I.F.T.,” Gus arranges a meeting with members of the cartel, including the cousins, their uncle, and an upper-level member named Juan Bolsa.<sup>11</sup> Bolsa and Gus do all of the talking. Bolsa begins by apologizing for intruding on Gus’s territory and explaining that these men are related to Tuco, who was a key man in their operation north of the border. He explains that Walt betrayed Tuco, and the betrayal led to his death. Bolsa tells him: “Ya sabes, la sangre se paga con sangre. (So now you see, blood must be repaid by blood.)” In addition, Bolsa explains that if Gus gets in the way of their revenge, he risks losing his good relationship with the cartel. While Gus convinces the men to allow him to finish his business with Walt before he is killed, Bolsa warns him to do it as soon as possible, saying that the cousins are impatient and that they are not like “tu y yo.” Bolsa’s implication in this statement speaks to their brutality, but it also speaks to their ingrained value system that demands quick retribution. Because of that system, they do grow impatient waiting for Gus.

In “Sunset,” the cousins begin returning to Gus’s restaurant to intimidate him, after which Gus arranges to meet with the cousins in rural location at sunset where he tells them that they are in his territory and that he calls the shots. He explains: “El norte de la frontera es mi territorio. Mi decir. (North of the border is my territory. My say.)” Rather than go after Walt, Gus tells them that he gives them permission to kill the DEA Agent responsible for Tuco’s murder. He explains that this is a gesture of respect to them and their family before giving them Hank’s name. This scene reveals the ways in which

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to directing the cousins to kill Walt in lieu of Hank, Juan Bolsa is also responsible for Tortuga’s death. He orders the cousins to behead Tortuga in the season two episode “Breakage,” a detail that is not revealed until season three’s episode “I.F.T.” Bolsa’s last name translates to the word “bag” in English, though in this case, one might more accurately translate it as “sack.” The character’s name is a reference to the character “Johnny Sack” on HBO’s series *The Sopranos*, which tells the story of Italian-American mobster named Tony Soprano.

those in power control others by reinterpreting ingrained social and moral codes. Neither Gus nor the cartel has any investment in whether or not the cousins' familial debt is settled. For cartel members like Bolsa, avenging Tuco's death would symbolize nothing more than the breadth of the cartel's power. Instead, Gus and Bolsa use these two men to force each other into corners, and they do so not by breaking laws but by manipulating them.

Viewers mainly see the ways in which Gus uses others characters' moral codes against them. Depending on which side of the border one occupies, though, his tactics change. While both Walt and the cousins claim to value family above all else, they have different definitions of family, which Gus uses to his advantage. Walt has a stereotypical Anglo-American conception of family. To him, his family is nuclear, so he only feels responsibility to his wife and children. Motivated by a desire for financial independence, Walt desperately wants to be a good provider, and Gus uses this information to appeal to him. In fact, he furthers Walt's longing by telling him: "A man provides." According to Gus, Walt's role is to provide materially for his family rather than emotionally.

In contrast, the cousins commitment to their large but tightly knit familial structure requires that Gus change his approach. Being part of the Salamanca family also means that they are born into the cartel. As a result, Gus has to find a way to appeal to their loyalty both to family and to business. He does so by taking advantage of their understanding and respect for power structures. These men are followers, so he simply tells him whom to follow.

In comparison to Walt's desire for independence, the cousins' obedience might be read as weakness, but the actions that follow show that they are not weak. The cousins

track Hank down in a parking lot, though Hank receives a warning phone call while sitting in his car one minute before their attack. Hank believes the call is prank at first, but because he suffers post-traumatic stress after killing Tuco, he also becomes paranoid and looks in every direction. When he sees the first man point a gun at him in his rearview mirror of his car, he backs into him, pinning him against the car parked behind him. The shootout that ensues leaves Hank on the ground with one of the cousins standing over him and a gun pointed at his head. He does not kill Hank in this moment, though, but instead looks at him and says: “No. Muy facil. (No. Too easy.)” He leaves Hank to go back to his car and retrieve an axe, giving Hank just enough time to reload his gun with a bullet that fell from the man’s pocket. Hank shoots him in the head just as the man raises his weapon.

One cousin dies at Hank’s hands, just as Tuco did, but the other survives into the next episode, albeit without his legs. By the end of this episode, entitled, “I See You,” one of Gus’s men kills him in the hospital. Before his death, though, the surviving cousin gets a glimpse of Walt as he looks into his hospital room. Recognizing the face of the man they had previously tried to kill, he propels himself out of his hospital bed and crawls towards the door before being pulled back up by the hospital staff. The cousins’ final moments show that, despite their obedience, they are anything but weak. Even so, they lose the battles against Hank and Gus. They do not lose because they are ill equipped or because they are innately bad men, however. Hank succeeds by chance. Because he has been forewarned and he finds an extra bullet that fell out of one cousin’s pocket, he survives. Gus wins because he has orchestrated an intricate betrayal of the cartel. Even though the cousins have few, if any, redeeming qualities, their demise is not



without its own set of injustices. In the end, the cousins' commitment to extended family kills them. Because they are not pitted against Walt in this final battle, though, one cannot read this as individualism symbolically winning over communalism. Rather, they lose because their commitment to an outdated code of conduct—"Family is all"—does not bend with time or place.

## Section VI

In *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, Lee Clark Mitchell claims that typically westerners do not write Westerns. He states: "Westerns are always written from the East on behalf of values signaling the West's demise" (6). Previous chapters reveal that this is beginning to change. For example, Emma Pérez, a Texas native, joins the tradition with *Forgetting the Alamo*, and Luis Alberto Urrea also takes inspiration from the classic Western *The Magnificent Seven* for *Into the Beautiful North*. Even Reyna Grande's *Dancing with Butterflies* is preoccupied with the drive to individualism found in a variety of Western texts. *Breaking Bad*, however, remains true to Mitchell's assertion. Created by easterner Vince Gilligan, *Breaking Bad* wrestles with the capitalistic, individualistic value system that allows Walter White to justify actions that are wholly unethical. More than mythologizing the West, though, *Breaking Bad* also mythologizes Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border.

In comparison to the depictions of the border found in the novels discussed in earlier chapters, *Breaking Bad*'s portrayal is simplistic. In this series, the people who live on the other side of the border are easy to understand, and they almost blend together. The cousins themselves appear almost identical, after all. There are also rules that

everyone seems to know, and every act of defiance leads to retribution. Though the show does show Mexican citizens who are not involved with the drug trade, even those characters have to abide by the cartel's rules. For example, when the cousins steal clothes in order to blend in with the undocumented immigrants at the end of "No Más" they do it right in front of a family. They approach a farm, take clothes directly off of the clothesline, and all the while the family looks on in silence. The family does not say anything, but they seem to know intuitively that their role is to accept whatever happens. All of the characters in this scene are somehow beyond language, and even those who are not involved with the cartel say nothing but appear to understand everything. In comparison, the U.S. side of the border is rife with characters whose speech is contradictory and whose motivations cannot be trusted. On the U.S. side of the border, no one is who they say they are.

While *Breaking Bad* reveals frustrations about U.S. culture, it does so by playing into the fears surrounding the border. The show depicts only two scenes in which non-cartel-affiliated Mexican citizens cross the border without documentation. In the season two's episode "Breakage," two unnamed men swim across the Rio Grande and uncover an item that is important later in the episode, and in season three's premier "No Más," the cousins cross while hidden in a farm truck. These two scenes are brief, though, and both only exist to introduce a more significant plot elements. The scene in season three, for example, contrasts the cousins with immigrants who enter the U.S. in order to work. More often, the show capitalizes on the fears that dangerous, powerful people can enter the country at any time without detection and that more entrants are somehow involved in illicit activities than not. Because *Breaking Bad* primarily shows Mexican characters in

powerful roles, its depiction of the country remains simplistic and does not contradict the portrayal of Mexico as the enemy.

In an article for *Project Syndicate*, a website dedicated to publishing articles by esteemed intellectuals around the world on topics ranging from economics to science, professor of economics Kenneth Rogoff writes about *Breaking Bad*: “Most of the characters on the US side of the border are portrayed with sympathy and depth. The main protagonist’s step-by-step descent into the drug underworld unfolds with such subtlety that each individual decision he makes along the way seems almost reasonable.” Rogoff goes on to explain: “Unfortunately, the other side of the border receives more superficial treatment.” He laments this aspect of the show, writing: “‘Breaking Bad’ is brilliant television, but it is regrettable that so many Americans see only this side of things. Mexico has profound security problems in some regions, but it is also a country that just might be on the threshold of a huge political and economic transformation.” Rogoff’s article goes on to explain a variety of positive changes underway in Mexico’s economy, showing how the series offers a limited view of the country.

Journalist Douglas Haddow agrees that *Breaking Bad* does not accurately depict Mexico or the drug trade on either side of the border. In an article for *The Guardian*, he argues:

While it would be unfair to frame *Breaking Bad* as DEA propaganda or somehow opposed to drug policy reform, its thematic scope fits neatly into the drug warrior’s rhetoric of morality and personal choice. In main protagonist Walter White’s world, the meth market is occupied by

Kierkegaardian anti-heroes with enough agency to decide their own fate.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, his is a world where one's situation is predicated on individual choice, rather than economic determinism.

Haddow criticizes the show for simplifying the depiction of the drug trade, especially in Mexico but also in the United States. According to *Breaking Bad*, Haddow argues, the violence that results from the drug trade is about "the sins of the individual" rather than the consequences of bad policies. Haddow believes this perspective is dangerous because it frees governmental power structures from blame. He claims: "The show is not just apolitical, it's anti-political in that it absolves politics of all responsibility and puts all responsibility on the shoulders of its characters. This makes for good TV, but it ignores the systemic conditions that allow violence to continue." Haddow fears that the series suggests that violence on the Mexican side of the border is the fault of individuals who make bad choices rather than a system that encourages and rewards those choices with the promise of financial gain.

Though Rogoff and Haddow both agree that *Breaking Bad*'s treatment of Mexico is, at best, ill informed, there are other writers who argue that the depiction is fair and accurate. Journalist Patrick Radden Keefe claims that there is a surprising amount of truth to *Breaking Bad*'s depiction of the meth trade in his *New Yorker* article "The Uncannily Accurate Depiction of the Meth Trade in 'Breaking Bad.'" He explains that so much about the show is unrealistic, so he was surprised when, while writing an article on the business infrastructure of Mexican cartels, he found that many of the show's details rang true. He writes: "I spent the past six months interviewing drug traffickers and D.E.A.

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<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard is a twentieth-century Danish philosopher whose work often focused on the importance of the self. He is sometimes considered the first existential philosopher.

agents for an article about the business side of a Mexican drug cartel, and, having been an ardent fan of ‘*Breaking Bad*,’ I was startled by how much the show gets right.” In *Breaking Bad*, he sees reflections of true stories that he has heard about shifty lawyers, theatrical violence, and tactics for selling drugs. The only inaccuracy that he identifies is the presence of a super lab on the U.S. side of the border, claiming that this would more likely exist in Mexico because of lax requirements for importing chemicals. Each writer builds from different kinds of evidence to make their claims. For example, while Rogoff considers how unrealistic the portrayal of Mexico is from an economic standpoint, Radden Keefe builds his argument about the show’s realism from his own investigations. Ultimately, though, all of these writers speak from outsider perspectives. They are, like Vince Gilligan, trying to understand a place that is foreign to them but also connected to their lives.

In the end, I am not interested in debating the accuracy of *Breaking Bad*’s depiction of Mexico as much as I am interested in the existence of the conversation itself. It shows a willingness to engage with the reality of a place that is often mythologized and demonized in political conversations. *Breaking Bad* may not encourage viewers to see Mexico realistically, but it does encourage viewers to consider the relationship between Mexico and United States in a way that complicates the premise of one being “good” and the other being “bad.” To do this, *Breaking Bad* uses easily recognizable genre conventions to align the so-called heroes on the U.S. side of the border with the supposed villains on the Mexico side, showing that ultimately neither side strictly adheres to or disobeys the laws. Moreover, through its contrast between Walt and the cousins, it shows laws to be human constructions. Facing this realization is important in order to begin

breaking down nationalistic allegiances that encourage further division. In some ways, perhaps *Breaking Bad* is already making strides in this direction.

Recently, Univision, a popular Spanish-language network in the United States, announced that it will add a Spanish-language adaption of *Breaking Bad* to its line-up in the fall. In a way, the series itself is actually crossing the border. The new show, to be called *Metástasis* (Metastasis), will follow *Breaking Bad*'s major premise, though it will be set in Mexico rather than the United States and use actors who are well-known in Latino communities. *Breaking Bad*'s border crossing shows that the preoccupations it introduces are familiar to audiences on both sides of the border, though in reconstructing the show for a Latino audience, the show will likely transform in many ways. While *Breaking Bad* does open conversations and encourages a U.S.-based audience to examine its value system and national identity, the show presents a bleak view, suggesting that there is no escape from the problems that plague its characters or its viewers. There is no hope of redemption, just as there is no hope in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In contrast, though, authors with connections to Mexico and Mexican culture insist on redemption. Emma Pérez, Reyna Grande, and Luis Alberto Urrea all leave their readers with the sense that their characters can change in positive ways. For them, the border, whether metaphorical or physical, can be overcome with the help of others. In *Forgetting the Alamo*, Micaela does so with the assistance of Clara and her mother. In *Dancing with Butterflies*, all four women unite to help each other break through a variety of borders, and *Into the Beautiful North* shows the consequences of the breakdown in community and claims that restoring these bonds will save the place. In *Breaking Bad*, however, its

U.S.-based characters are sentenced to isolation, which shuts down the possibility of liberation from the power structures that trap them.

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