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Re-Thinking the Borderlands:

The Imaginative Potential of Current U.S-Mexico Border Literature

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> As obvious as it might seem, to truly and completely reject a culture of violence, to banish it from our minds, we must first fully refuse to participate in it, and refuse to assist in its normalization. When we consider the border, we might think of our home; when we consider those who cross it, we might think of those we hold dear. - Francisco Cantú

Introduction: Frontiers, Borders, Walls: The Lines on Which We Think

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign Donald Trump called for the construction of a much larger, fortified border wall between Mexico and the United States, claiming that if he was elected he would “build the wall, and make Mexico pay for it”. From December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019 this resulted in the longest government shutdown in US history, after Mexico refused to pay for the wall, and the Democrats opposed the demand of president Donald Trump to request 5.7 billion dollar in funding. On February 15, 2019 Trump then declared a national emergency: provoking a constitutional clash, and hereby making use of his last means to surpass the Senate.

President Trump has legitimized his call for a national emergency by arguing how the southern border is facing a humanitarian and security crisis through the ‘invasion’ of ‘illegal’ Mexican and Central American migrants, citing his wall as primary solution. Yet, the Democrats have accused the Trump administration of bringing into being immigration policies and rhetoric that amount to a ‘manufactured crisis’, and are openly doubting the efficiency of a border wall.

The current sphere of crisis in the White House, in which the Senate is starting both legal and symbolic procedures in order to nullify Trump’s national emergency, reveals how the border, together with the broader issue of immigration, is a hotly contested subject, which

divides nation and government. Tensions became felt on a national level when, in the summer of 2018, Trump's controversial family separation policy was (officially) being implemented. All of a sudden, Greg Grandin writes, "it was as if all the many decades of long-ignored border brutalism came bursting forth, in an unbearable torrent of stories, photographs, videos, and audio clips: caged babies wailing for their parents, children injected with drugs to force them to sleep, abandoned Walmarts converted into detention centers" (464). The public outrage forced Trump to back down from the worst of his policy, but still provided him with the means to use the public attention in order to insists on his "zero tolerance" immigration policies.

Border brutalism, of this kind, is not a recent phenomenon. The border before Trump, as Grandin explores in his recent work *The End of the Myth* (2019), was no idyll. Conflict grew especially in the decade of 1970, and from the 1980s onward the borderlands were rife with paramilitary cruelty, vigilantism, and racism. Trump's declaration to build 'a big, beautiful wall', as Grandin argues, nonetheless marks a shift in thinking. It indicates the death of America's most potent myth: that of pioneers advancing across the frontier, a word that is central to the history of the United States, and has come to mean less a place than a state of mind.

The frontier, he argues, has for decades proven to be America's strongest myth, and served as a powerful symbol of American universalism. With the promise of endless expansion it allowed the United States, in the eyes of its critics, to avoid a true reckoning with its social problems, such as racism, economic inequality and violence. The frontier became a way of life, and expansion came to be justified not just as a condition of freedom, but as freedom itself. Trump's predecessors, as Francisco Cantú writes, have over the past four decades, hence each found "ways of channeling aggression outwardly by identifying new frontiers and promising boundlessness in a shrinking world" (par. 18).

Trump's promise to build a wall has put an end to the myth of limitlessness. The wall now is America's new symbol: a monument to the final closing of the frontier. Conveying a kind of geopolitical realism, it stands for a nation that, in the words of Grandin: "still thinks freedom means freedom from restraint, but no longer pretends, in a world of limits, that everyone can be free - and enforces that reality through cruelty, domination and racism" (466). The wall, as Cantú notes, in many ways then still serves the same purposes of the earliest expansionist rhetoric: "the border remains abstract in the minds of most American people, yet it represents a problem and a promise distinct enough to distract from more immediate and enduring social ills" (par. 19).

This thesis puts into question the notion of the border, and investigates possibilities of different formulation of borders. This entails an imaginative effort. It asks us to imagine being on the border, and to think *from* the border, i.e. to question the lines on which we think. In addition to theory, it is suggested, we could turn to literature as the space to trace and conceptualize these lines, and to look for (possible) new and more complex formulations of borders. The larger objective of this research hence is to question how border discourses resonate within border literature, *and* how border literature imagines the borderlands differently. Whilst limiting its scope to literary representation of borderlands - consisting of a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots - this research reflects on the wider political and theoretical issues that surround the border, and particularly on the contextual paradox the U.S - Mexico border presents: simultaneously opening and closing its border.

(Different) ways of seeing: contradictions of a border

While the emergence, or rather announcement, of the border wall can, as Grandin has shown, be situated in relation to the centuries of racism and violence that preceded them, the call to fortify

the border strongly contradicts with a globalized worldview where financial goods flow quite freely. This has also been pointed out by Joseph Nevins, who in his investigation of Operation Gatekeeper explores the contextual paradox of the US- Mexico border, and argues how the NAFTAization and militarization of the US - Mexico border , paradoxically, occurred at the same time. Arguing how increasing economic integration and liberalization along with immigration restriction have become complementary trends, Nevins argues how the border is not a material reality, but constitutes an ideal type that is never fully realized. Borders are “ways of seeing”, “metaphors and manifestations of how we perceive the world and act within it” (7).

Previous scholarly analyses, in their attempts to critique the territorial notion on the border, have used this way of thinking (i.e. the border as a way of seeing) to reflect on the militarization discourse of the border (Nevins; Palafox). Nonetheless, the study of the border as a tool of governmentality still limits us to think of other formulations of the border, since the border is approached from out of the same framework as it seeks to contest. Paradigms of the past that focus on the border as a tool of violence deny the possibility of living at the border and, consequently, may blind us to alternative subjectivations and more nuanced readings of lives and struggle at the border. Even more so, these readings run over the contradictions at the heart of the border discourse: i.e. the internal frictions of neoliberal world order.

To explore new formulations of border the research traces how within a growing body of scholarship (Anzaldúa; Arrizón; Balibar; Baud & van Schendel; Giudice & Giubilaro; Mignolo & Tslostanova; Rajaram & Grundy Warr), we can detect a shift in focus. These studies are doing an attempt to move beyond past paradigms, and have started to investigate the border beyond its territorial and militarized meaning. Cristina Giudice and Chiara Giubilaro have argued for the need to revision the border when explaining how the dominant view of the border as a mere

geographical or material reality, has immobilized the border. Through the figure of the line and the impression of fixity, borders have been kept out of time and consequently beyond change. As demarcation lines in space, borders are presented as incontestable and non-negotiable: you can cross them but there is no possibility of questioning or remaining on it. When adapting the view of borders as ways of seeing, we can nonetheless start to explore the human and experiential dimensions of the border. This, not only reveals the constructedness of the discourses around the border, but also explains how opposing, and sometimes contradictory, discourses and rhetorical strategies exist simultaneously. Borders are thought up and instituted to differentiate, filter, and control, yet they are also crossed by moving bodies, and as such perpetually signified and negotiated (Giudice & Giubilaro).

Through a deterritorial understanding of the border a way of thinking has emerged which celebrates the fluidity and permeability of borders. The research critically investigates new entry points in the study of borders, i.e. the borderscape (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr), the notion of hybridity (García Canclini), and smooth spaces (Deleuze & Guattari), but also problematizes these notions by pointing out how they have proven to be incomplete in order to account for the fact how the border not only opens (for trade and goods), but simultaneously (and contradictorily) closes for people and movement: deterritorialization and territorialization thus occur at the same time.

It should not be forgotten how borders have a profound effect on the lives of people in the borderlands. This is especially tangible in the border city of Tijuana, known as boasting on of the most crossed-borders in the world. Previous scholarly analyses of this city, departing from a deterritorial view of borders, have created the perception of Tijuana as a kind of utopia, a hybrid city, made into a symbol of cultural postmodernity (García Canclini). Yet, more recent

developments have drastically changed the public perception of the city. In November 2018 the arrival of the migrant caravan in Tijuana, constituting of over 5000 undocumented immigrants, led Trump to increase and legitimize security measures and migration policies at the San Ysidro border, making legal crossing nearly impossible[1]. This resulted in a grim scenario when a few desperate migrants tried to breach the fence separating the two countries: migrants, including mothers and toddlers where enveloped with tear gas. Images of border brutalism spread through the world again.

This stresses how thinking of different formulations of borders includes taking into account today's given geopolitical context. Tracing the disjunctures of the border discourse the research poses how the concept of the borderland can be reconceptualized as critical tool of analysis and a potentially transformative space: offering a view between territorial and deterritorial theorizations of borders. The study of borderlands implies a critique of state-centered approaches that picture the border as unchanging (Baud & van Schendel), and is enabling the possibility of embracing large migrant communities living in parts of the country located far from the border (Arrizón).The borderland gives a new sense of shape to borders, acquiring a spatiality beyond territoriality. Whilst this has, in its turn, has led to romanticized notions of borderlands as sites of hybridity and transcultural exchange, it should be noted how the borderland is also rendered as an experience. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa embodies this view of the borderlands. Borderlands, are both physical and metaphysical, and are places where "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third

[1] In a podcast for *This American Life* entitled "Let me Count the Ways", journalists Ira Glass, Julia Preston, Nadia Reiman and Zoe Chace, tell the stories of the many ways in which the Trump administration is targeting (legal) migrants, through a quiet bureaucratic war. See: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/656/let-me-count-the-ways

country - a border culture" (Anzaldúa 25). Within Chicano/a consciousness the borderland became a symbolic cultural marker, reaffirming space and identity.

To rethink the concept of the borderland as a critical tool of analysis and potentially transformative space, the research departs from Étienne Balibar's scholarship on the border as way of being and conceptualization of the borderland as new (political) condition. Balibar has been the first to introduce the idea of Europe as a borderland. Borders, he explains, are vacillating, as such they no longer function as the shore of politics but rather as the space where politics take place. As a consequence borders are no longer be found at the shores of the nation, but constitute the very nation itself. Balibar stresses how areas, nations and regions in Europe should start to ask the ontological question of what it means to *be* a border, given that it has become a daily experience: it is precisely what we are living, what most intimately affects our "being" (*The Borders of Europe* 217).

To put into question the notion of the border is difficult to imagine, given that we talk about the border as a way of thinking *and* being. It is in this regard that Balibar has suggested how it could be fruitful to work on the imagination itself: to imagine being on the border, that in-between space, in which one is neither citizen nor expatriate, neither inside nor outside. Imagination could hence be the means to not only think about the border, but *from* the border: revealing and questioning its internal meaning and organizations.

Balibar's work on the imagination and conception of the border as state of being, has not been explored or applied within the context of the U.S. - Mexico border(lands). This is a significant gap since Chicano/a thinkers have long been exploring the borderlands as a heterogeneous site of a creative and imagined homeland -Aztlán - , and a state of consciousness (Arrizón; Berelowitz). Bringing into conversation Balibar's scholarship on the border with

Chicano/a thinkers explorations of the borderland is indispensable in order to account for the inherent complexities of the border as a way of both thinking and being.

By combining Balibar's scholarship on the border as a state of being and the borderland as condition, with Chicano/a scholarship on the borderland as imagined homeland and state of consciousness, it is shown how re-thinking the concept of the borderland requires a combination of different theories and strategies. Through the concept of the borderland the border is not approached through an 'or' or 'either', but an 'and', allowing us to draw new connections between different cultural and theoretical alleys. Moreover, it allows us to not run over, but to trace and investigate contradictions and disjunctures in the border discourse. Imagination, as stressed by Balibar and Chicano/a scholars, hereby plays a crucial role. To investigate 'the lines on which we think', we have to place ourselves on those lines. This is an imaginative effort, that nonetheless can be seen as a political act. It allows us to map the borderlands through the imaginary, and to open up new spaces that contradict with the dominant order.

Indeed, the invention of new spaces, as Verena Andermatt Conely has pointed out in her reading of Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations on borders, always carries a component of fiction. This thesis explores this component of fiction, suggesting how literature, by means of its imaginative potential, could provide the means to re-think the borderlands. As both the source and outcome of the imagination the research approaches literature as a rhizome, a space where opposites flow into each other, the lines between fiction and reality are blurred, and multiple voices, truths, and stories exist next to each other.

The need to investigate how expressive art and print culture have the potential to form novel epistemologies of borders, has, already, been stressed by Alicia Arrizón. Yet, Arrizón's study has limited itself to explore how border literature can reveal the hardships of living at the

borderlands, hereby countering unsubstantiated alternative facts, propagated by anti-immigrant groups. The current and stark developments at the US - Mexico border, allowing for discrimination, xenophobia and resulting in the criminalization of border cities such as Tijuana, stresses the need to undertake more and varied investigation that not only counter the view of the border as militarized and territorial boundary, but also explore the possibility of other formulations of borders and borderlands.

To imagine the borderlands, and the community of this borderland entails a cosmopolitan effort that, in itself, is already a political act. To imagine the borderlands differently, is potentially transformative. Bringing together the predominantly Anglo-American field of border studies with European theorizations on borders (Balibar), as well as Chicano/a explorations of borderlands, it is shown how re-thinking the borderlands entails a rhizomatic effort. This way of thinking provides a methodological framework that uses the idea of rhizome as a reading strategy. This research hence designs and combines different theories and methods in order to analyze the representation of the border(land) in recent works of border literature. The borderlands consists of a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots, forming a variety of possible connections. Reading, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, can participate in making these connections. The result is not an interpretation but a map, a tool with which to find the way, it is the production of an experiential reading. Tracing rhizomatic connections in a multivalent corpus of recent border literature, and combining the method of close reading with critical discourse analysis, the research investigates how literature renders the borderlands spatially, and as a space of becoming.

This thesis has selected a varied literary corpus, that, while not exhaustive, is representative and illustrative for contemporary U.S. - Mexico border literature. Of object to

analysis will be *The Line Becomes A River* (2018) by Francisco Cantú, *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2009, translated in 2015) by Yuri Herrera, and *The House of Broken Angels* (2018) by Luis Alberto Urrea. The works have all been published recently (between the period of 2009 and 2018) and thus allow for a more specific temporal focus on the border(land). The selection of the corpus can furthermore be justified because the works are written by writers with diverse backgrounds: (Mexican-)American, Chicano and Mexican: categories that are nonetheless not static or easily defined. Taking into account the background of these writers allows for a nuanced discussion and look on identity at the border, and is enabling a discussion on the identity politics that are at the heart of issues around stereotypes and discrimination.

Through a rhizomatic reading this research will investigate how border literature critically explores the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border, and has the potential to form novel epistemologies of borders and borderlands. Through a spatial and experiential reading (focusing on the borderland as a space of becoming) this thesis will investigate how the studied corpus of border literature are all centered on and around the US - Mexico border, but imagine and render the border, as well as life at the border, in a variety of ways. This is being reflected in the diverse forms and genres of the novels, consisting in both nonfiction and fiction, and respectively to be differentiated as a memoir (*The Line Becomes A River*), a mythical novel deeply entrenched in Mexican culture (*Signs Preceding the End of the World*) and a family immigrant saga (*The House of Broken Angels*).

What these varied novels nonetheless have in common is how they challenge dominant discourses and narratives of the border: i.e. the securitarian logic of the border as a demarcation line, as well as romanticized notions of the borderlands. The works show that what is missing from the (theoretical) study of the border is the ability to encounter stories on an individual

human scale. Border literature is able to give voice to the multiplicity of lives, identities and stories that are formed through the border, and the borderlands: spaces of struggles and resilience, space of becoming, and places of home.

In order to bring into conversation theoretical accounts of the border(discourse) with literary representations of the borderland this thesis will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter will provide a critical and theoretical overview of (historical) discourses on the border, as well as the ways of thinking that have emerged in order to approach the border. Approaching the border as a 'way of seeing', this chapter argues how the concept of the borderland can be re-conceptualized as critical tool of analysis and potentially transformative space, offering a view between territorial and deterritorial theorizations on borders. Literature could, as this chapter furthermore suggests, be the space to reflect upon the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border, and offer new perceptions on the borderland.

The following chapters of this thesis will move to a literary analysis of the selected case studies. Each of the case studies will be analyzed in a separate chapter, allowing for a thematic approach. Firstly, the memoir by former border patrol agent Francisco Cantú *The Line Becomes A River* will be analyzed. This novel in particular makes clear how the study of border can never give true expression to the experience of them. Cantú's memoir reveals the internal meaning and organizations of a militarized border, bringing instead to light its natural beauty, and giving a face and story to its inhabitants and crossers. Analyzing this work through its contradictions (the representation of the border as an Agambian 'zone of exception', and landscape full of life), this chapter provides a critical spatial analysis of the borderland, and investigates Cantú's representation of the borderland as a heterotopia: a space that can simultaneously accommodate often violently contradictory differences (Boedeltje). The concept of the heterotopia hereby not

only allows for a spatial reading, but also enables us to explore how we have come to be embodied by borders, of what it means to inhabit a place of contradictions: to inhabit a state of in-betweenness: to explore the borderlands as a space of becoming.

In the third chapter the novel *Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera will be analyzed, whereby special attention will be paid to its form as a mythical novel, deeply entrenched in Mexican culture, allowing for the deepening of the meaning and location of the border. Touching upon the limits of a spatial reading of this novel, this chapter explores how Herrera mocks the readers traditional sense of geography, and horizontal reading of this novel as a quest across non-places. By staging his protagonist's Makina journey as a journey to the underworld, a vertical reading of this novel allows for a reading in which Makina's crossing to the other side does not come to entail an erasure of identity, but rather allows for the construction of an (alternative and multivalent) identity. Tracing the connections between migrations and translation, this chapter suggests how language plays a crucial role in the process of (Deleuzian) becoming, and the opening up of new spaces. This allows us to explore how new possibilities, new ways of speaking and new ways of being arise when reaching the end of the world, i.e. the world as we know it.

In the fourth chapter the family immigrant saga *The House of Broken Angels* by Luis Alberto Urrea will be analyzed. It will be investigated how this novel can be placed in a certain literary tradition of immigrant saga's and Chicano family saga's, but also is breaking with the conventions of this genre. Urrea strikingly portrays what it means to live lives at two sides of the border (Tijuana and San Diego), and is giving voice to the (identity) struggles this causes, in two countries, but also within a pan-generational family itself. Approaching this novel through the notion of the family, and as an interrogation of heteropatriarchal representations of the Chicano/a

family, allows us to see how Mexican-Americans have been narratively constructed to fit in the country, which in its turn has placed limits on their (family) epic and ways of storytelling: i.e. it has restrained them to "make a home". Urrea's transnational approach on the notion of the family, nonetheless reveals a transformative potential, enabling us to read *The House of Broken Angels* as rewrite into a transnational romance.

In the end, this thesis aims to investigate how we can trace the contours of (new) borderlands within border literature, in which borders are both reflected upon and transformed. Tracing rhizomatic connections in a multivalent corpus of border literature shows how the borderlands consist of a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots, forming a variety of possible connections. Today's stark neoliberal context of border protectionism, and the normalization of the militarized borderlands, stresses the need to come up with new ways of thinking, and renewed perceptions in a world in which migration and mobility affect the way we look at nations and borders.

> 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. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. - Gloria Anzaldúa

1. Thinking the US - Mexico Border(land)

The US-Mexico border, more than other boundaries, is the subject of a rich academic discussion and intense social-science research. It is the model of border studies and borderlands genre throughout the world, Robert R. Alvarez, Jr. points out (451). This can perhaps best be explained through the contextual paradox this border presents: “No other border in the world exhibits the inequality of power, economics, and the human condition as does this one” (Alvarez 451). The US - Mexico border, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25).

Whereas the United States’ northern border is the world’s longest international boundary, separating the United States from Canada, this ‘forgotten’ border[2] has remained obscure even to Americans, and is very easy to cross. This stands in stark contrast with the southern border, which in the San Diego - Tijuana region, as argued by Joseph Nevins, “is perhaps the world’s most policed international divide between two nonbelligerent countries” (5). The US - Mexico border is a border between the “First” and “Third” World, between Anglo America and Latin America, between the Occident and the Orient.

[2] See: Fox, Porter. *Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey along America's Forgotten Border*. W W Norton, 2019.

The US-Mexico border has, historically, been established with the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1853. Rather than providing a neutral line of separation, this has given rise to the idea of the border as *cicatriz,* a wound; the border is a site of a historical trauma. The US - Mexico border, Anzaldúa argues, is set up to differentiate 'us' from 'them', and defines the places that are safe and unsafe. The borders between nation states, as Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr argue, rather than providing static lines, "demarcate belonging and non-belonging, and as such authorize a distinction between norm and exception" (ix). In a growing body of scholarship ((Balibar; Giudica & Giubilaro; Nevins; Mignolo & Tslostanova; Rajaram & Grundy Warr; Rumford) this has marked a shift in thinking about the border. Rather than approaching the border as a territorial reality the border has been rendered as a way of seeing: "metaphors for and manifestations of how we perceive the world and act within it" (Nevins 7).

Investigating the border as a way of seeing this chapter provides a critical overview of (historical) discourses on the border and reflects on the contextual paradox the US - Mexico border presents: i.e. the internal frictions of a neoliberal world order. Territories, as the approach on the border as a way of thinking shows, cannot be constricted by the enclosing frame of a rigid (militarized) borderline, since the social cannot be entirely dominated. Lines, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari, will detach themselves from fuzzy borders, and introduce variations against the dominant order (Conley 99). Nonetheless, deterritorial views on borders (borderless worldviews) tend to have little practical value in the twenty-first century. Tracing and investigating these tensions this chapter proposes how the concept of the borderland can be reconceptualized as a transformative space and critical tool of analysis: enabling new lines, and flights, of thought on the border(land) as a way of being, and tool of the imagination.

1.1 History of a Militarized border and the Logic of Securitization

In his investigation of the history of the frontier, and the emergence of the border wall as new American symbol, Greg Grandin, as mentioned in the introduction, shows how the frontier for decades served as a powerful myth in the United States' national consciousness, coming to mean less a place than a state of mind, "an imagined gateway into the future" (Grandin, par. 1).The frontier, as famously proclaimed by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893[3], promised endless expansion. This, in the eyes of its critics, allowed the United States to avoid a true reckoning with its social problems: It not only conveyed the idea that the country was moving forward but promised that the brutality involved in moving forward would be transformed into something noble" (Grandin 456). This explains why the borderlands, with all their racism and military and para militarized cruelty, long remained apart from the American heartland, contrary to how we experience this now. News from the border, Grandin writes, no matter how bloody, stayed beyond the nation's consciousness (*The Guardian* par. 12).

Whilst the United States has known multiple frontiers, as well as dissents and counter-movements, Grandin points out how the expansionist imperative has remained constant for centuries, and has been instrumentalized by presidents ranging from Woodrow Wilson (1911-1913) to Barack Obama (2009-2017). The election of president Donald Trump in 2016 nonetheless has put and of to the myth of endless expansion. Today, America has a new symbol: the border wall. Yet, Trump's call to fortify the borders can, as Grandin shows, be situated in

[3] See: Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Penguin Great Ideas, (1893) 2008.

relation to the centuries of racism and violence that preceded them. Border brutalism is not a recent phenomenon but fits in a pattern of an increasing militarization of the borderlands. Whilst only recently, and often briefly, images of border brutalism have started to spread across the world, the institutionalization of violence at the border has long historical roots, and are embedded within its policies and politics.

That the border was no idyll before Trump was especially true, Grandin argues, in the decade of the 1980s and 1990s, during which anti-migrant violence was fueled by angry veterans returning from Vietnam: snipers took aim at Mexicans crossing the border; and the KKK set up a 'border watch' at San Diego's San Ysidro point of entry. Brutal vigilantism, Grandin vividly describes, caused hundreds of - innocent - deaths. This changed around 2000, when awareness of the violence began to break through. National attention was paid to the reports of vigilantism, that long existed, but were previously ignored. Witnesses, Grandin writes, "began to report seeing men wearing camouflage and driving civilian vehicles, shooting and killing migrants" (*The Guardian* par. 13). Yet, this did not mean that border brutalism and vigilantism was put to a halt. Through an extensive historical investigation, Grandin shows how, in fact, vigilantism surged anew in a more aggressive form during the last years of Obama's presidency. According to Grandin the country's inability to imagine a future moving outward caused the fights over the people trying to move inward to grow even more intense.

If the border wall marks the end of the myth of the frontier, Grandin's history of border brutalism and vigilantism shows how in many ways it will still serve the same purposes of the earliest expansionist rhetoric (*The NewYorker* Cantú). The remoteness of the border region and the harshness of its terrain, and the fact that many of the Border Patrol agents are themselves veterans of foreign wars, all contributed, Grandin points out, to a "fortress mentality". This, as

Cantú writes, has led to a situation in which "the militarization of the borderlands, has become so commonplace that one often grows numb to its manifestations" (*The NewYorker* par. 2). Indeed, the "fortress mentality" or logic of securitization and militarization is, other than media seem to suggest, not a recent phenomenon that has occurred under the Trump administration. Timothy Dunn, in his investigation on the militarization of the US- Mexico border between 1978 and 1992, points out how, already a decade ago, this mentality has led government officials to portray migration and drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States as a 'national security' issue, legitimizing the most extreme measures.

The study of the militarization of the border reveals a logic of securitization. This logic is based on a view in which the -dangerous- outsider is conceived as a threat to the nation, which, as a consequence, needs to protect and secure its borders. The concept of security, as Jeremy Slack et al. point out however is an entirely subjective and constructed concept. This is also argued by Jason Ackleson, who, in addition, points out how undocumented migrants - or so called 'illegal aliens' - are, as a result, constructed as one of these security problems. Nonetheless, within political discourse in Congress and in mainstream media, Slack et al. point out, security keeps being framed as "almost synonymous with militarization" whereby it is stressed that "a secure border is one that necessitates more equipment, agents and fortifications" (10). This logic has had a profound effect on the U.S - Mexico border region: in a short time the border (region) changed from a relatively calm and interconnected area of border cities, into a heavily patrolled border with more than 20,000 border patrol agents, long wait times, strengthened entry and exit requirements and a variety of border barriers.

Today's security policies on the U.S - Mexico border, most clearly recalled in the public imagination through the controversy around family separations, were not created *de novo*, but

have emerged from a - gradual - intensification of measures dating from the late 1970s (Ackleson). These measures were first modified and strengthened in the early 1990s when, as investigated by Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper* became the pinnacle of a national strategy, achieving "historically unprecedented levels of enforcement along the US-Mexico boundary" (2). Replacing the old strategy of apprehending migrants after they cross, with a strategy that attempted to thwart migrants from entering the United States, the national strategy came to push people away from urban areas and use the desert and the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo as a kind of natural deterrent. As a result migrant deaths increased, going from five to ten bodies a year, to hundreds. Whilst it has not been proven yet if these measures have led to a decrease in illegal migrant crossings, the strategy has been widely celebrated and has to date found its successors in new - and controversial - strategies and operations, such as Operation Streamline.

Ackleson argues that we can explain and investigate the occurring and workings of these (controversial) strategies through the securitization framework. Within this framework the border has been reconstructed as a 'problem', and the crossers as 'threats'. This has led the discourse to create a dichotomy of 'chaos' versus 'order'. The border needs to be 'controlled', which, according to the discourse, needs to be done so through military measures and operations. The securitization framework thus helps us to make sense of how the threat of immigration through the US - Mexico border has, partly, been discursively constructed. Yet, as Slack et al. argue, this has resulted into a situation in which violence, whether structural or directly perpetrated, has become central to the militarized strategy for border enforcement (23). Whilst the Gatekeeper Era (1990s) has received substantial attention in literature, they argue how violence has, slowly, become embedded, and thus hidden, within the border discourse. This stresses the need to give attention to the more recent exponential increase of border militarization and protection

strategies. Even more so, they argue, it is important to think and investigate of other formulations of secure borderlands, formulations that can exist beyond the militarized version we see on the US - Mexico border, and the increasingly closed border of the European Union (10).

1. 2 Paradoxical Occurings: NAFTAization and Militarization of the Border

The need to think through the militarization discourse of the US - Mexico border has been stressed by Nevins, who, in his investigation of Operation Gatekeeper has aimed to explain its paradoxical occurring. Operation Gatekeeper became implemented at a time of unprecedented levels of economic and demographic growth in the border region, marked by an increasing integration between the US and Mexico. The NAFTAization and militarization of the US - Mexico border, he shows, thus, paradoxically, occurred at the same time. This, as Nevins argues, has come to be a global trend, and speaks to the growing gatekeeper role played by states. The gatekeeper role, he writes, "entails maximizing the perceived benefits of globalization while "protecting" against the perceived detriment of increasing transnational flows - especially of unauthorized immigrants" (6). The trend of increasing economic integration and liberalization, along with immigration restriction thus shows that what might seem to be contradictory trends are in reality complementary, and have become inherent to the securitarian border discourse.

This, as Nevins stresses, shows how the border is not a social phenomenon in a material sense, but rather is a 'way of seeing'. Borders function as "metaphors and manifestations of how we perceive the world and act within it" (7). Rather than seeing the border as a thing, Nevins argues, the border is an ideal type that is never fully realized. This stands in contrast with the perception of the border in militarization discourse, in which, as Giudice and Giubilaro have argued, the view of the border as a mere geographical or material reality, i.e. a demarcation line

in space, has immobilized the border. Through the figure of the line and the impression of fixity, they point out, borders have been kept out of time and consequently beyond change: they are presented as incontestable and non-negotiable. However, as the investigation of the border discourse shows, borders are perpetually signified and negotiated.

The view of the border as a 'way of seeing' has marked a shift within the field of border studies . Rather than investigating the border as a mere geographical and material reality, these studies argue how the border is also a discursive and symbolic construct, and has human and experimental dimensions (Balibar; Giudica & Giubilaro; Nevins; Mignolo & Tslostanova; Rajaram & Grundy Warr; Rumford). Borders, Cristina Guidica and Chiara Giubilaro reformulate are the result "of a composite articulation of material aspects, concerning their external realization, and structures of imagination, symbolic constructs and conceptual formations that involve the border and make it meaningful" (79). To analyze the border, Giudice and Giubilaro argue, we then need to place ourselves not on one side or the other, but actually on the border: "unveiling and challenging its internal organization" (8).

Within a substantial body of scholarship (Nevins; Palafox) analyses of the border through militarization and securitization discourse have, from out of this position, revealed much about the governmental and biopolitical workings of the border. The border has been studied as an Agambian 'state of exception'[4], rendering its subjects (i.e. refugees and migrants) to bare life. Yet, the study of the border as a tool of governmentality still limits us to think of other formulations of the border, since the border is approached from out of the same framework as it seeks to contest. The border, as should be stressed, is not just a (military) apparatus, or a

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[4] See: Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception.* Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005.

place of passage. Rather, it is a place of residence for millions of people. Paradigms of the past that focus on the border as a tool of violence deny the possibility of living at the border and, consequently, may blind us to alternative subjectivations and more nuanced readings of lives and struggle at the border.

1. 3 New Entry Points: The Deterritorialization of Borders

To think of different formulations of borders, and to deconstruct the notion of the border as a militarized point of passage, it is indispensable to include the inhabitants of the border region. This has been stressed by Rajaram and Grundy Warr, who argue how the border is not an emptible or readily instrument of separation, but rather is replete with actors and agents, making this in a "paradoxical zone of resistance, agency and rogue embodiment" (Rajaram & Grundy Warr ix). Rajaram and Grundy Warr argue how the focus of security discourses and practices has been the territorial border; whereby the border is conceived as a transformative line, and as one that is strengthened and fostered to protect a community against dangerous outsiders - migrants or refugees. In order to account for the complexity and vitality of, and at, the border, this conception, they argue, falls short. Rajaram and Grundy Warr hence propose how the term *borderscapes* could provide an entry point for the study of the border as a discursive site; allowing for a study of the border as mobile, perspectival, and relational. This entry point makes it possible to, as they write, "study the practices, performances, and discourses, that seek to capture, contain, and instrumentally use the border to affix a dominant spatiality, temporality, and political agency" (x).

The entry point of the borderscape, allows for a deterritorial reading of the border and paves the way to study how the border operates discursively, but can also be inscribed with

political agency. Rajaram and Grundy Warr use the term borderscapes in order to emphasize the inherent contestability of the meaning of the border, found between the notions of belonging and non-belonging. They hence stress how the conception of the political border as located in a specific zone, at the shores of a nation, is problematic. Such conceptions, they write, “are attempts to clear territorial space of dissension and difference; they are instrumental means of asserting the limits of territorial justice and belonging” (xxviii). The borderscape, however, is not contained in a specific space. The dominant meaning of the border is made known through the identification of spaces and social practices that are alien or inappropriate. Arjun Appadurai's typology of five different ‘scapes’, characterizing a modern, disjunctive, irregular and perspectival globality, thus has affinity with the conception of the border scape, Rajaram and Grundy Warr point out. Within the borderscape, they argue, spatiality is contested and subjective, and is, in its fluidity, constituted by irregular communities, temporalities and agencies. The borderscape, they conclude, is thus not a static place, but a zone of varied and differentiated encounters, giving rise to “multiple resistances, challenges and counterclaims” (xxix).

Nonetheless, whilst the borderscape provides an entry point to study the border outside and beyond its territorial meaning and allows for a multiplicity of readings, borders have, to date, become more ‘real’ than ever. A growing body of scholarship therefore, instead, has adopted the concept of the *borderland* in order to account for the complexity of living on, and at, the border (Anzaldúa; Arrizón; Balibar; Baud & van Schendel; Giudice & Giubilaro; Mignolo & Tslostanova). The borderland is theoretically understood through its geographical meaning as the region in one nation that is significantly affected by an international border, but by means of a cross-border perspective the region on *both* sides of the border could also be taken as a unit of

analysis (Baud & van Schendel). The study of borderlands then implies a critique of state-centered approaches that picture the border as unchanging (Baud & van Schendel), and is enabling the possibility of embracing large migrant communities living in parts of the country located far from the border (Arrizón).

The concept of the borderland allows for a deterritorial reading of the border, yet it also takes into account how the border functions through its territorial (and geographical) meaning. Through the study of borderlands it can hence be stressed how, as Anzaldúa has argued, the border not only divides land, but has also divided a people and a culture. This has led to new perceptions of the borderlands as contact zones, broad scenes of interaction, amounting to "collective spaces of transcultural/transnational encounters" (Arrizón 1). Borderlands, Anzaldúa concludes, are both physical and metaphysical, and are places where "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture" (Anzaldúa 3).

The view of the borderland as contact zone and spaces of transcultural and transnational encounters has led to renewed and celebratory views of these spaces as zones of hybridity, transit and cultural exchange. Hybridization, as argued by Dear and Burridge, long has been a neglected aspect of globalization. Yet, the emergence of cultural hybridities carry great significance, enabling us to study the "production of novel cultural forms and practices through the merging of previously separate cultural antecedents" (302). It is in this regard that they argue how hybridization has also become a state of mind, functioning as manifestations of how individuals confront and respond to contextual change. In *Hybrid Cultures* (1995) Néstor García Canclini uses the position of the hybrid as an entry point to analyze modernization and to describe Latin American cultures. Cultural phenomena, García Canclini argues, cannot be understood through a single disciplinary approach, the social sciences are therefore in need for a new nomadic

approach; reading and drawing relationships among different cultural alleys. Arguing how the border city Tijuana can be regarded as a symbol or emblem of postmodernity, García Canclini approaches the borderland as a site of creativity, a space where “dying certainties of nationalism were being destabilised and an unforeseen creativity might emerge” (Montezemolo 737).

1.4 The Borderland as Smooth Space

The approach on the border(land) as a potential utopian space has been conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze and Féix Guattari as the ‘smoothing’ of space. In ‘Rhizome’, the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013) Deleuze and Guattari argue for rhizomatic connections to replace what they call the (vertical) model of the ubiquitous Western tree (Conley 95). Rhizomatic connections form open territories, and bring to their observer a new sense of shape that moves and forever changes. A rhizome moves horizontally and changes it form by connecting and reconnecting. Unlike the tree it thus can never be fixed or reduced to a single point or core. Criticizing the static model as a spatial model defined by vertical orderings (assuming space to be pre-existing), Deleuze and Guattari propose a more horizontal thinking of the world in terms of rhizomatic lines and networks (Conley 97). Differentiating between ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ spaces, they argue how striated spaces are those spaces replete with barriers and borders; in a territorial sense, and as part of a mentality. Striated spaces crossed by physical or real borderlines, drawn by both states and institutions, prevent the emergence of new ways of thinking, and thus impede a person's mobility in mental and physical ways. Nonetheless, they reveal a utopian possibility when suggesting how striated spaces can be smoothed, entailing the removal and erasure of mental and physical borders: to do away with the state, and its institutions.

Conley, in his reading of Deleuze and Guattari, suggest how this utopian project is enacted by rhizomatic thinking, opening the possibility of new hybrids, and new spaces. Pointing out how the social cannot be entirely dominated, he argues how rhizomatic thinking allows us to see how the order-world is never stable, but constantly being transformed:

> Lines detach themselves from fuzzy borders and introduce variations in the constant of the dominant order. These variations can lead to a break and produce lines of flight that bring about entirely new configurations (99)

Deleuze and Guattari have faith in subjects in striated spaces. Undermining control by creating new lines of flight these subjects open up a new world: a world of becoming-minoritarian. Through the undoing of borders these subjects (finding themselves at the limit of mental and social territories, i.e. unstable borders) create an optimal circulation of ideas. Through the invention of smooth spaces, the world becomes a borderless one: opening up new spaces and of becoming.

1. 5 Debordering and Rebordering

Through the deterritorial understanding of the border, a way of thinking has emerged which celebrates the fluidity and permeability of the borderland. In this view borders are seen as porous, mobile and as spatially changeable units. This, has led to romanticized notions of the borderlands, as sites of creativity, utopian possibility and transcultural exchange. These views nonetheless to date stand challenged: Trump's announcement of a national emergency, and the exponential increase of militarization at the US - Mexico border, points to the dominant force of securitization and militarization logic in popular discourse. Indeed, Étienne Balibar points out,

'smooth spaces' or deterritorial worldviews have little practical value in the twenty first century: they are too decontextualized. Ironically, as explained by Chris Rumford, the deterritorialization of borders has led to a renewed importance of the land border. Debordering and rebordering, he argues, accompany each other. Whereas the entry points of the borderscape, the borderland, García Canclini's conception of the hybrid, and Deleuze and Guattari's smooth space, have expanded our notion of the border in its deterritorial meaning(s), these readings thus proven to be incomplete in order to account for the fact how the border not only opens (for trade and goods), but simultaneously (and contradictory) closes for people and movement: deterritorialization and territorialization thus occur at the same time. This has been acknowledged by García Canclini, who argues how his attention to the deterritorialization of the borderland of Tijuana, has blinded him to the reterritorialization sought by the migrants who converted into new residents of the border. Hybridity, he points out, thus also runs the risk of covering up contradictions (Montezemolo 737;740).

This shows the need for new ways of thinking that can think through the very disjunctures[5] the border presents: the border functions as a tool of governmentality, providing security and producing violence, yet it also is a, romanticized, site of transcultural encounters and a source of creativity and resistance. Rather than using the borderscape as a new point of entry, or adding this as the sixth scape to Appadurai's analysis of globalization, I argue how the borderland can be rethought as a critical tool of analysis, and a potentially transformative space: offering a view between territorial and deterritorial theorizations of borders. Borderlands are

[5] I take this term from Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), - hereby understanding new global cultural economy to consist of complex, overlapping, disjunctive order.

(political) spaces that exist in a territorial sense, but are also able to include large migrant communities living in parts of the country located far from the border . In addition borderlands are part of a mentality and subjectivity: this mentality can be formed against rigid lines, but can also let lines of thought detach themselves, and introduce new variations. To re-think the borderland as a critical tool of analysis then means to investigate how the border both functions as a way of being and as a critical tool of the imagination. This I argue, is a critical project that can only unfold when combining different disciplines, methods and theories. Balibar's scholarship on the border as a way of being, and the borderland as new (political) condition, allows us to trace the first lines of this project: i.e. to map and re-think the borderlands.

1.6 Rethinking the Borderlands

In his attempt to provide an alternative to the dominant models of globalization, - clash-of-civilizations, global network, center versus periphery- ,Balibar has been the first to argue for the idea of 'borderland Europe'. Borders, he argues have become so diffuse that whole countries now can become borderlands, or as he argues: Europe itself is a borderland. Political space, he argues, after all should be imagined terms of overlapping sheets or layers. In his theorization of the borderland, the borderland thus is defined as:

> The name of the place where the opposites flow into one another, where 'strangers' can be at the same time stigmatized and indiscernible from 'ourselves', where the notion of citizenship, involving at the same time *community* and *universality,* once again confronts its intrinsic antinomies" (*Europe as Borderland* 210)

In his analysis Balibar argues how borders are vacillating; borders have moved inwards into our nations, and are to be found and felt everywhere. As such, borders are no longer to be found at the shores of a nation, neither are they still to be regarded as the shores of politics. Rather, as object of protest and contestation as well as unremitting reinforcement, borders have become the spaces where politics take place. Subject to overdetermination state-borders are endowed with a global significance, giving them a double meaning: both local and global. Balibar thus does not argue that borders are disappearing by means of their fluidity or the fact that they are vacillating, rather, he shows how the quantitative relation between border and territory is being inverted. Whereas borders were once singular, they are now multiple and dispersed throughout societies. This means, as Rumford points out, that political space can no longer be equated with the nation-state, and bordering processes have, as a consequence, thus acquired a spatiality beyond territoriality.

Pointing to the spatiality of borders, Balibar approaches the borderland as a political space with overlapping sheets or layers, i.e. through its disjunctures. Rather than instrumentalizing the concept as an entry point, he studies the borderland as a condition: one of politics and being. Europe, he writes, might have "become accustomed to thinking that they had borders, more or less "secure and recognized," but they did not think they were borders" (*The Borders of Europe* 217). Europe - not just its margins our outskirts - , Balibar stresses, thus should start to ask the question of what it means to *be* a border, given that it has become a daily experience: it is precisely what we are living, what most intimately affects our "being" (*The Borders of Europe* 217).

Nonetheless, to put into question the notion of the border is difficult to imagine, Balibar points out. It implies the very effort "to conceptualize the line on which we think" (*Europe as*

Borderland 216). However, he proposes, it could perhaps be fruitful to work on the imagination itself, exploring is possibilities of variation: to imagine being on the border, that in-between space, in which one is neither citizen nor expatriate, neither inside nor outside. Imagination, could then be the means to not merely think about the border, but *from* the border: revealing and questioning its internal meaning and organization, but also enabling new formulations. Imagination, could change the line(s) on which we think.

This is also argued by Appadurai, who points out how the work of the imagination has become a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity. Imagination, he writes, "is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern" (175). Especially when enabled collectively, imagination can, as such, become the fuel for action within diasporic public spheres. Shared imagination, he argues, can be turned into collective actions that, frequently, operate beyond the boundaries of nations; and thus beyond borders.

However, the work of the imagination and Balibar's conception of the borderland as a state of being, have not been explored yet within the context of the US - Mexico borderlands. This is a significant gap since Chicano/a thinkers have long been exploring the borderlands as heterogeneous site of a creative and imagined homeland - Aztlán -, and a state of consciousness (Arrizón; Berelowitz). Bringing into conversation Balibar's scholarship on the border with Chicano/a thinkers explorations of the borderland shows itself indispensable in order to account for the disjunctures of the borderlands, and to investigate the border as a way of both thinking and being. Or, to put it differently, as a home.

1.7 Home and The Border

In her investigation of the representations of home in the San Diego - Tijuana borderlands Jo-Anne Berelowitz points to the tensions between the two spatial arenas of home and the border:

> Home bears associations of rootedness, enclosure, domesticity, safety, a haven to be ventured from and returned to; whereas border suggest uprootedness, transnational movement, international governance, liminality, risk, exposure, and change (323)

And yet, she argues, for a large number of people the borderlands *is* home. Or, as Anzaldúa puts it into words in the introduction to *Borderlands/ La Frontera*: "It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions… No, not comfortable but home" (n.p).

The border plays an important symbolic role in the Chicano consciousness. From the late 1960s to the late 1970s a nostalgia for the lost mythical homeland (Aztlán) and the determination to recapture it, became central themes for the Chicano Movement. Aztlán became a rallying trope of the movement and was applied to name the territory of Northern Mexico annexed by the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War[6]. When first proposed by poet Alberto Baltazar Urista, better known as Alurista, at the 1969 Denver Chicano Youth Conference, it marked a move toward self-affirmation and determination. However, later activists, scholars and historians of Chicano history, came to view Aztlán as a problematic emblem, inscribed with masculinity, nationalism and militarism (Anzaldúa; Moraga).

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[6] The Mexican - American War waged between 1846 - 1848. The war ended with the signing of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty in 1848, and ceded to the United States the land that now comprises the states of California, Utah, and Nevada, as well as part of Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming, Colorado.

Yet, as Berelowitz points out, Alurista's *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* did help create what Benedict Anderson has called an 'imagined community'[7]. Aztlán, Arrizon writes, became a tool to reclaim Chicana/o identity and borderlands agency: connecting a mythical Aztec past to contemporary Chicano struggles. When, in the early 1980s the nationalistic phase of the Chicano Movement was over, this resulted in a shift in significance for the concept of Aztlán. Aztlán, Berelowitz writes, became "deracinated, mobile, a concept whose place was in the hearts of Chicanos, an element of Chicano subjectivity, rather than an expanse of territory" (333). Citing Cherríe Moraga's feminist theorizations as an example, Arrizón points out how queer Aztlán became a particularly potent cultural metaphor for redefining the Chicano Movement in the 1990s. Using the concept of Aztlán to create an 'imagined community' Moraga called for liberation from the sexism and homophobia that damaged the Chicano movement, making queer Aztlán into the site of the imagined borderlands. The renewed notion of Aztlán as both physical and imagined surpassed the nationalist agenda of the Chicano movement, and became a symbolic cultural marker, reaffirming space and identity.

The reconceptualization of Aztlán as an element of Chicano subjectivity around the 1980's, led to a discursive shift , depicted by Berelowitz as "*Aztlán-as-home"* to "*borderlands-as-home-not-home"* (333), Berelowitz argues how the term borderlands came to substitute the romanticized and nostalgic focus on Aztlán as homeland. The term borderlands signifies not so much a physical terrain, but an experience: "the experience of living and moving between

[7] See: Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, (1983) 2016.

disjunctive worlds: Indian and European, Mexico and the USA, self and other, home and not home" (Berelowitz 333). In *Borderlands/la Frontera* Anzaldúa embodies this view of the borderlands. She conceptualizes the Aztlán as an in-between place, coinciding, as Arrizón points out, with the physical and metaphysical space of the US - Mexico border. For Anzaldúa the border is "una herida abierta", an open wound. This reveals much about the pain and violence to be found here, yet it also shows how this is a zone replete with actors and agents. The borderland is a contact-zone, and collective space; a site of constant change.

1. 8 Imagining the Borderland

To rethink the concept of the borderland is ultimately an effort of rhizomatic thinking, the border is not approached through an 'or', but an 'and', drawing new connections between different cultural and theoretical alleys. Bringing into conversation Balibar's European scholarship on the border(land) with the predominantly Anglo-American field of border studies allows us to trace these connections, and to approach the border as a way of being. Borders, Balibar shows, are intrinsically linked to our daily experiences and political existence. Combined with Chicano/a scholarship and conceptualizations of the borderland as imagined homeland and state of being, this allows us to see how the border can become an element of subjectivity, an in-between state that is both a physical terrain and experience. This reveals a utopian potential. Deleuze and Guattari stress how rhizomatic thinking in striated spaces open up the possibility of new hybrids, connections and new spaces. Nonetheless, their notion of 'smooth' spaces have little practical value in the twenty-first century. Balibar argues how this notion is too decontextualized and not sufficiently tied to action. Moreover, as this chapter has ought to show, it resists to differentiate

between financial flows and population flows. In today's globalized world financial flows circulate quite freely, while population flows are controlled by (militarized) borders.

Instead of running over these contradictions this chapter suggests how the concept of the borderland, by means of its rhizomatic connectivity, allows us to investigate and reflect on the contextual paradox the US - Mexico border presents. The borderland is both a physical terrain and experience, and thus a site of constant change, and possibility. This stresses the importance of the work of the imagination, which, especially when enabled collectively has the potential to become the fuel for action within diasporic public spheres. Shared imagination, Appadurai has argued, can be turned into collective actions that operate beyond the boundaries of nations.

To operationalize the concept of the borderland and to explore the work of the (shared) imagination, border literature, this research suggests, provides a space to trace rhizomatic connections and to explore the possibilities of its variation. In the following the research will analyze a corpus of recent border literature, and question how these work can provide an answer to the contextual paradox (open/close) of the US-Mexico border. Having argued for the need to design and combine different theories and disciplines, i.e. to combine Balibar's European scholarship with the predominantly Anglo-American field of border studies, and Chicano/a theorizations, the research will focus on a multivalent corpus of border literature. *The Line Becomes A River* is written by Francisco Cantú, a third generation Mexican American, offering a North-American and predominantly non-fiction account on the border. Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding The End Of The World* is a mythical novel, deeply entrenched in Mexican culture. His novel narrates the epic journey from Mexico to the United States. Lastly, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The House Of Broken Angels* narrates the family (hi)story of the pan-generation Mexican-American De La Cruz Family, centered in the borderlands of San Diego-Tijuana.

Approaching these works of literature through a strategy of rhizomatic reading allows us to explore how literature critically reflects upon the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border, and explores the border(land) as a state of thinking and being. In the following analyses it will be questioned how border discourses resonate in literary works, and how the borderlands are rendered spatially, and as a space of becoming. Ultimately, it can then be explored how border literature imagines the borderlands differently, and has the potential to form novel epistemologies of borders and borderlands: i.e. can exceed the paradox and contradictories of the deterritorial and territorial border that has been brought to light in this chapter.

2. Imagining (another) space: The Line Becomes A River

> I'm tired of reading about the border in books. (...) I want to see the realities of the border day in and day out. I know it might be ugly, I know it might be dangerous, but I don't see any better way to truly understand the place (Cantú 22-23).

In the above passage Francisco Cantú explains to his mother why he has joined the border patrol, stressing the impossibility of understanding the border through theory or books. Through the writing of a memoir, entitled *The Line Becomes A River* (2018), Cantú attempts to come to grapple with his experiences on the border as a US border patrol agent in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Or, to put it differently, to come to terms with the reality that he has helped to create when enforcing and enacting border policies. As such, his book is not the work of embedded or investigative/undercover journalism, but rather functions as testimony of the events he has witnessed, and participated in, placed within the larger narrative of (im)migration and politics.

According to Cantú borders are to be viewed as "microcosms of all of these painful, beautiful violent, incomprehensible mysteries of our modern lives" (Kenny par. 10). We are, he states, embodied by borders: borders are intimately bound to the lives of people. Cantú's approach on the border as a microcosm allows for a critical spatial analysis of the US - Mexico borderlands. His memoir reveals the internal meaning and organizations of a militarized border, bringing instead to light its natural beauty, and giving a face and story to its inhabitants and crossers. However, *The Line Becomes A River* does not present the borderland as a romanticized site of utopianism, hybridity or creativity. Depicting the border as a state of exception and as a zone where rights are suspended, Cantú explores how within the borderlands you become

conditioned to live with an ever-present sense of unease of being watched, and to be made to exist at the margins. Instead of investigating the border as a microcosm we could, as I argue, therefore rather read the borderland as heterotopia: as spaces that can simultaneously accommodate often violently contradictory differences (Boedeltje). This does not only allow for a critical spatial analysis of the borderlands, but also investigates how we have come to be embodied by borders, of what it means to inhabit a place of contradictions: to inhabit a state of in-betweenness. Reading Cantú's memoir as a personal struggle with questions of compassion, redemption and identity construction, allows us to explore the human and experiential dimensions of borders, and to investigate the borderland as a space of becoming.

2.1 Border and Self

Written as half-study, half-memoir Cantú's work inhabits an uncertain space between the notions of non-fiction and fiction. His work is made up of loosely strung episodes, clippings from books he has read, fragmentary encounters with border crossers and agents, and the surreal nightmares that he suffers. Cantú hence challenges the reader to find the meaning, or some sense, in his writings. *The Line Becomes A River* is the result of Cantú attempting to come to an understanding of his four years serving in the border patrol. Yet, whilst including contextual pieces of history and research, his work does not provide answers to the questions that his participation in border and immigration enforcement have raised. Nor does it attempt to explain the politics that have led to it.

Rather than reading his work as reportage, I argue how his work becomes more valuable when reading it as literature, a haunting memoir: a personal exploration of what border militarism and policies mean when encountering its stories on an experiential and individual,

human scale. Cantú's memoir shows how it is not enough to merely study the border, but stresses the need and effort to put oneself on the border: to imagine the border, and to challenge its internal meanings and organizations. This is also an invite to its readers. Through the imaginative power of literature, Cantú open ups a place for its readers to experience the horrors suffered at the border, to explore the moral complexities of border control, and simultaneously to imagine the borderland as a landscape, full of life, and as a space of living.

In narrating his own experiences and complicity in the border patrol Cantú raises important questions of the relation between place and identity: between the border and self. Or, as he writes:

> I don't know if the border is a place for me to understand myself, but I know there's something here I can't look away from. Maybe it's the desert, maybe it's the closeness of life and death, maybe it's the tension between the two cultures we carry inside us. Whatever it is, I'll never understand it unless I'm close to it (23).

The question of identity construction along the border plays an important role in the construction of Cantú as a narrator. When his mother, who in the book takes up the role of a moral mentor, tells him how the choice to keep her (Mexican) maiden name was a decision made to never forget her, and Francisco's, heritage, Cantú responds: "I'm grateful for those things (..), but having a name isn't the same as understanding a place" (23).

Yet, the notion of a name takes up an important role in *The Line Becomes A River*. In the dessert, a name determines if someone is human, and indicates the value of a life or a death. In the first part of his book, when narrating his encounter with a pregnant Mexican woman and her

man at the border, he writes how soon after having turned them over at the station he comes to the realization that he had already forgotten their names (41), hinting at his complicity in the dehumanization of border crossers. In the second part this leads him to reflect on his own name, being named after Saint Francis, San Francisco de Asís. This name not only claims his Catholic Mexican roots, but carries a moral meaning and implicit responsibility: San Francisco de Asis, after having faced years of war and violence, dedicated himself to God, and turned into the patron saint of animals, the poor and all the living. According to the legend he could talk to animals, enabling a bridge between two worlds. Reminded by his cousin that he is the only one who still carries the family name, it is suggested how his name places an implicit responsibility upon Cantú. Explaining how he was almost named Joshua Tyler Cantú-Simmons, a real gringo name according to his cousin, he acknowledges how that name would have made him an entire different person. His cousin agrees, "That's right, she said. A name is everything" (104).

Cantú's notion and embodiment of his (Mexican American) heritage changes his construction as a narrator. As a third-generation Mexican Cantú first attempts to put his heritage aside, merely acknowledging how his ability to speak Spanish could provide moral support for illegal crossers being extradited by the border patrol. This infuriates his mother: You grew up near the border, living with me in deserts and national parks. The border is in our blood, for Christ's sake" (23). Yet, throughout his memoir we come to experience how Cantú feels compassionate for the Mexican border crossers he arrests: trying typical food of Oaxaca, mezcal, and listening to their stories. This leads him to question if the divide he has tried to uphold between his actions toward the migrants (and thus, his own history) and his profession as a border agent can be held as separate pieces. His role within the border patrol is ambiguous, and reveals the moral complexities that revolve around the act of providing help, and upholding the

law (i.e. discourses of humanitarianism and securitarianism). Just as Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals, Cantú is caught between two worlds: between the world he grew up in, and the world he now inhabits; between Mexico and the United States.

2.2 Upholding the Law

In order to make sense of his own (hi)story Cantú casts his own life within a broader context of immigration crisis. In the first section of the book Cantú therefore himself functions as a character, placed within the larger histories of border policing, political geography and migrant narratives that surround him. Cantú explains how the reality of the border is one of enforcement. This is reflected in his writing, Cantú is reporting on what he does and what he sees, and as such the reader goes along with the agents upholding the law. Writing about his training and introduction into the work of the field agent, Cantú describes the Border Patrol from within. These descriptions, instead of justifications or accusations, powerfully reveal the internal frictions and contradictions of border policies. When Cantú catches his first dope load we read how his supervisor discourages him to track the traffickers:

> Hell no, he said, you don't want to bring in any bodies with your dope if you can help it. Suspects mean you have a smuggling case on your hands, and that's a hell of a lot of paperwork- we'd have to stay and work a double shift just to write it up. Besides, he said, the prosecutors won't take it anyway. Courts here are flooded with cases like this. He smiled. Abandoned are easy though. You'll see. (28).

Through Cantú's reportings it becomes clear how the United States border control and immigration system promotes iniquities, putting into question its securitarian logic. Or, as he puts it: "Politicians thought if they sealed the cities, people wouldn't risk crossing in the mountains and the deserts. But they were wrong, and now we're the ones who get to deal with it" (16). This makes Cantú wonder in what it means to become a 'good' border patrol agent. He wonders how he might explain certain things, especially the (political) sense of it. In one of the most controversial passages of the book he writes:

> It's true that we slash their bottles and drain their water into the dry earth, that we dump their backpacks and pile their food and clothes to be crushed on and stepped over, strewn across the desert and set ablaze. And Christ, it sounds terrible, and maybe it is, but the idea is that when they come out from their hiding places, when they regroup and return to find their stockpiles ransacked and stripped, they'll realize their situation, that they're fucked, that it's hopeless to continue, and they'll quit right then and there (..) that's the idea, the sense in it all (33-34).

Through Cantú's first-hand witnessing of the implementation and effects of operation Gatekeeper, it is made felt what it means when pushing people away from urban crossing points towards the harsh conditions of the desserts. Whilst describing its logic from within, and enforcing it through policies, Cantú comes to face the systems' victims; making us acknowledging the human cost of border policy. His complicity with the system also translates into the way he constructs himself as a narrator, and third generation Mexican. His narrative becomes inscribed with tenderness and emotions, as well as (untranslated) Spanish words. Recounting a moment of connection with the only surviving, yet frightened, injured border

crosser from Guerrero (Mexico), Cantú writes: “I wondered if he could ever have been made to imagine a place like this - a place where one of his companions would meet death and another would be made to forget his own name, a landscape where the earth still seethed with volcanic heat” (46).

2.3 Zone of exception

Throughout the book Cantú’s stories and experiences become interlaced with a sense of discovery as he learns more and more about the world of the border, coupled with a sense that he will never know, nor understand it. Cantú spent a good part of his childhood on the terrain of the border, having his mom working for the national park of Arizona. Yet, now that he has returned to the ground where he grew up, it seems as if the landscape has changed. Whereas his childhood provided him with “images of wooden canyons and stone mountains rising up from, the earth (..) the warmth of the sun beating down upon endless scrublands” (3), the landscape now seems ruthless, “seethed with volcanic heat” (46), “cracking and shifting as it cooled” (67). Instead of a world full of life, light and natural beauty, Cantú experiences the border as a dark, and increasingly dystopian place, allowing him to drive across rocky hills and long valleys, where “the earth became darker as I neared the flow, devoid of brush and cactus” (67).

Through Cantú’s description of the landscape as a deadly wasteland the border is presented as what Giorgio Agamben has called a “state of exception”: a place where laws and rights are applied differently or even suspended in the name of the security of the nation state. According to Agamben's theory of power, sovereignty is still omnipresent, and rules by deciding if and when to withdraw and suspend the law, diminishing the rights and protection of certain people, in certain places. When the state of exception emerges its subjects undergo a suspension

of their ontological status; stripped of their political life and driven outside the domain of law the subject is reduced to mere biological or ‘bare’ life. The subjects of sovereign power, or the state of exception, are at once bound by, and abandoned by the law.

Cantú argues how the US-Mexico border can be understood as a vast zone of exception. The border, he writes, is a landscape often written off as a ‘wasteland’, that is hostile and ruthless. Yet, it is not recognized how the landscape has been *made* to be hostile (Authors note 258). In *The Line Becomes A River* Cantú shows how the militarization of the borderlands weighs heavy on the landscape: it is stripping the landscape of its people and its belongings. This is best exemplified in one of the nightmares Cantú suffers. Dreaming how he is back in the dessert, he describes how “Looking at the landscape I feel free, surrounded with sparse beauty, happy to be close again to the dessert” (98). Yet, when encountering a group of smugglers and demanding them to hand in their belongings, looking for contraband and wrapped bundles, he finds every chest to be empty. The smugglers respond: “You’ve already taken them from us”. This has an immediate effect on Cantú’s perception of the landscape: “I look out at the walls of the canyon and find that all beauty has drained from the landscape, that I am surrounded only by the sinister threat of violence, by faceless men and stacks of empty chests” (99).

Cantú’s perception of the changing landscape allows us to see how the natural surroundings of the border are put to use through securitarian politics as a biopolitical tool of governmentality. Cantú’s approach on the border as a landscape hereby allows for a spatial reading of Agamben’s scholarship. The importance of this has been pointed out by Claudio Minca who argues that, while there is an immense body of scholarship on Agamben’s theorizations of bare life and the state of exception, little has been written so far about the spatial

dimensions of his thought. Reading Agamben's theoretical edifice as a grand spatial theory could nonetheless provide new views on the functioning of (sovereign) biopolitical power.

In his spatial reading of Agamben's theories Minca points out how the concept of the space of exception is key to Agamben's theoretical apparatus and is structured by two key spatial-ontological devices: the camp and the ban. Through Agamben's theory of exception, it is shown how rights and laws are only applicable to specific territorial situations and can only be suspended with respect to such specific situations (Minca 389). The repetition of the exception must hence necessarily be spatialized, Minca argues, "for its very existence depends upon its (concrete) location outside of the juridical order, beyond the 'measure' that translates space into the norm" (389). The repetition of exception requires a 'where' in order to allow for the grounding of the exceptional act. As such the act of exception becomes a spatial device, tracing a threshold between the state and the space of exception. Nonetheless, within the state of exception this relation is made unlocalizable. The excluded in the exception remains in a relation to the norm by its very suspension; hereby obscuring the relation between the excluded and the norm.

According to Agamben the camp can be studied as the paradigm and geographical translation of the state of exception. The camp constitutes a space of exception: it is the space where the state of exception becomes the rule and gains a permanent spatial form. Yet, whilst its territory lies outside of the judicial order, it is not simply a space external to that order. Within the camp the state of exception transforms into a permanent spatial order and whilst presenting a definitive rupture with the territorial *nomos* produced by the modern European nation state, it thus manages to make a permanent suspension of order into the norm. The attempt to cancel the ambiguity of the original spatialization, and thus to make its location unlocalizible, hereby has become, as Minca argues, "the supreme biopolitical task of the nation-state" (391). He hence

stresses how finding the language to describe this permanent suspension and original spatialization is geography's most pressing task today.

2.4 The Language of the Landscape

Approaching Cantú's memoir through a spatial reading of Agamben's theoretical edifice, could be a first attempt to find a language to describe a process of permanent suspension. Describing the border from within, Cantú challenges the normalization of the securitarian logic and militarization of the borderlands. Central to this is how Cantú contrasts the supposedly fixed line of the border with its natural landscape. Tracing the history of how the border has been drawn, he writes how when in 1892 the border had to be re-marked, the surveyors commented on the strangeness of their task, as well as the extreme and unfamiliar nature of the landscape. The report they wrote, he reconstructs, took special care in describing the point where the border gave itself over to the Rio Grande, described as "(carrying) an immense amount of sediment (...) and as a consequence it is border by alluvial bottoms, through which by erosion, it is continually changing its bed" (62). It was, Cantú writes, "as if the surveyors wished to acknowledge how the border, no matter how painstakingly fixed upon the land, could go on to endlessly change its course with the whims of a river" (62).

Writing how the border has been drawn in contradiction with its natural surroundings, Cantú seems to argue how the landscape of the border (especially the desert) has been put to use as a tool of governmentality and has become inscribed with violence. His attempt to make this localizable could be seen as a spatial critique on the militarization of the borderlands, a process marked by the normalization of a state of exception. However, by paying attention to the natural

beauty of its landscape, as well as to its inhabitants that have made the border their home, Cantú does not depict the borderland as a mere space of exception.

Through Cantú's notion of the landscape we could come to a different reading of the border as a zone of exception. The need to investigate landscapes has been stressed by Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy Warr who argue how all space is constructed and how due to this "space and spatial relations should be considered in terms of processes of change, and of landscapes as always *in the process of becoming* rather than temporally fixed spaces" (xxiv). Rajaram and Grundy Warr pint out how human landscapes are contested creations. As landscapes of power they help to make particular ideologies and political practices more familiar, meaningful or natural; precisely because they are inscribed in the landscape (xxvii). Cantú's contestation of the landscape of the border as inhabitable desert or militarized wall, could in this regard be read as an attempt to provide new views on the borderland as a space of becoming, and as a space where the most fundamental contestations over identity occur. Through this approach we are in need to include the violently contradictory differences of the borderland. Instead of an Agambian or utopian reading of the borderland, I argue how a reading of the borderland as heterotopia allows for a critical spatial analysis of the borderland, and allows for an approach on the borderland as a space of becoming. Investigating the heterotopic condition of the US - Mexico borderland hereby enables an investigation of how the border is intimately bound to the lives of people. We are, as Cantú has stated, embodied by them.

2.5 Heterotopia and the process of becoming

In his lecture "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault argues how our present epoch will perhaps be above all be the epoch of space. Our epoch is one, he writes, "in which space takes for us the

form of relations among sites" (2). Comparing the heterogeneous conditions of space with the tradition of utopias Foucault argues how a heterotopia is a space that is disquieting, and can inhabit contradictions, offering a different or another (hetero) place that somehow challenges or contests the space we live in. Heterotopias thus function as counter-spaces, which are, in different ways, outside the ordinary. They are spaces that reflect and contest simultaneously. Foucault cites the mirror, the cemetery, the brothel and the prison as examples.

The view of heterotopias as both representing and inverting other sites, allows us to investigate the US - Mexico borderland as both a zone of exception and as a site of contestation. Whereas Agamben has been accused of a certain pessimism about the possibility of resistance, Foucault's notion of heterotopia allows for a reading of the borderland as a paradoxical zone of resistance and resilience. This is reflected in Cantú's memoir. Narrating his encounters with border crossers Cantú shows how that even though they risk their lives every time they try to cross, they will do anything to be on the other side. Or as his deported friend Jose puts it: "They can take my money, they can rob my family, they can lock me away, but I will keep coming back. I will keep crossing, again and again, until I make it, until I am together again with my family. No, no me quedo aqui. Voy a seguir intentando pasar" (242).

However, even more so than representing and inverting other sites, Cantú shows how the border reflects and contest the self (i.e. singular identities). Instead of reading heterotopias through their territorial meaning they thus also reveal how we have come to be embodied by heterotopias, and thus borders; of what it means to inhabit a place of contradictions. If Foucault's paradigmatic example of a heterotopia is the mirror, we could argue how Cantú's memoir functions likewise: it becomes a place to reflect and contest the presupposed utopian space of the United States, as well as his own believes. This is reflected in the form of his novel. Occupying

an ambiguous position between fiction and non-fiction, *The Line Becomes A River* mirrors the construction of heterotopia as a place between myth and reality. Rather than providing a journalistic reportage Cantú's memoir narrates his personal struggle with questions of compassion and redemption allowing us to see how the border has human and experiential dimensions, not only dividing a land, but also a people (Anzaldúa). The borderland becomes for Cantú not only the place where he has grown up, but remains a place of becoming The borderland then is not a space where national identities become more strongly affirmed by means of a border (a mark of separation), but rather constitutes a zone of hybridity, bringing to light the multivalent nature of identity. Living between two worlds Cantú becomes to inhabit this state of in-betweenness, a place of contradictions.

2.6 Nightmares of the Border

Finding himself caught between two worlds - the world he grew up in, and the world he now inhabits, -, Cantú's memoir takes up the task to reimagine what it means to normalize and internalize a certain kind of behaviour as normal[8]. In the first section of the book we hence come to experience how Cantú is bearing the physical weight of his role and status as a border patrol agent. Passages of his observations on the border are interchanged with more fictional passages of the nightmares he suffers from. In these nightmares Cantú is grinding his teeth out "searching

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[8] See: King, Richard. "Good Fences Make Good Neighbours". *Patterns of Prejudice.* 53:2, 2019, pp. 210-212.

for someone to show them, someone who can see what is happening" (58). He dreams how he is "clenching my jaws, unable to stop, unable to pull them apart (...) then slowly at first, my molars begin to pop and burst (...) I dream that a piece of my tooth has chipped off in my mouth (...) I dream that I am grinding my jaws from side to side, that my teeth are slowly catching and breaking as they are dragged across a decaying surface" (87). The nightmares continue until Cantú loses sight between dream and reality: "I dream that I am not dreaming, that I am truly clenching my teeth until they shatter in my mouth. I am desperate to stop myself, desperate for help. This is real, I think to myself. The other dreams were different - this one is real" (88).

The nightmares about teeth can be read as an allegory to the hundreds of unidentified migrants who, each year, die in the desert. Naming the borderlands' lost has proven to be a hard task, with insufficient funds available. Since bodies decompose rapidly in the desert forensic identification of migrants is obstructed, and often only bones or teeth serve as means of identification. Yet, even if dental structures can be identified, dental records are often missing. "No one deserves to be just a number"(107), Cantú cites a forensic expert. Yet, within the media, he shows, migrants are dehumanized by being represented as "an undifferentiated mass" (110).

While having transferred from field work towards intelligence work, away from the border Cantú's nightmares continue, reaching a point at which "I could barely sleep, a point at which my mind had become so filled with violence that I could barely perceive beauty in the landscape around me" (129). Being unable to put his experiences as a border patrol agent into context, Cantú is left with more "questions now than ever before" (142). At the end of the section, having suffered yet another nightmare, Cantú wakes up from his bed and weeps. He exclaims, hereby making an allegorical reference to the legend of Francisco of Assisi: "Brother wolf (...) I will make peace between us, O brother wolf" (160).

2.7 Embodying the Border

In the final section of Cantú's book, where he has left the Border Patrol for a job as a barista, barriers between Cantú and the world of the border, as well as the barrier between reader and narrative have collapsed (Werntz). Through the arrest and deportation of his work friend José, we are immersed in the drama of family separations, and given a fulsome experience of how the border crosses through and over human lives. Cantú is drawn back into the world of the border he has left. In the courtroom of a Streamline proceeding[9] this brings back memories, and an awareness of the dehumanizing realities of border politics. Recognizing the smell of "dozens of unwashed bodies that had for days struggled through the desert, skin sweating and sunbaked (180), Cantú comes to realize how never before he had seen so many men and women in shackles, "I had never laid eyes on a group of people so diminished" (182).

Whilst helping out José's children and wife by starting a (civil) lawsuit for a request for a stay of removal; collecting testimonies to his good character, and bringing his children to both the courtroom and prison, Cantú is morally challenged: "How do you come home to your kids at night when you spend your day treating other humans like dogs" (188), the public defender rhetorically asks when referring to the border patrol. Cantú keeps quiet, wondering if his help is a way to make good for the lives he had sent back across the line. This brings up the question of

[9] Streamline proceedings are part of "Operation Streamline". Implemented in 2005 Operation Streamline is a joint initiative of the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice in the United States.The initiative has been launched under a 'zero-tolerance' policy to prosecute unauthorized immigrants as criminals. Streamline proceedings are controversial and contested: often up to 70 people (sometimes wearing shackles) are tried at the same time for a single *en masse* hearing.

redemption, yet, Cantú asks himself: “If I was seeking redemption, I wondered, what would redemption look like?” (206).

Through the story of José and his family we are presented with the human face of immigration and its moral complexities: i.e. the pain that ripples through lives and society. This raises the question of how we are capable of perceiving the pain of others, without appropriating. The question of pain is present in Cantú’s book. Referring to Cristina Rivera Garza’s book *Dolerse* he cites how “Pain not only destroys, but produces reality” (157). Pain is to be conceived as a political language, a producer of meanings and legitimacy. Yet, being faced with the pain of others, Cantú does not know what to do. When confessing this to his mother, he exclaims: “I feel hurt, but it isn’t mine (..) It’s like I never quit, I finally muttered. It’s like I am still part of this thing that crushes” (229).

Through the story of José, as well as his direct involvement in it, Cantú is made aware that while there are thousands people just like José, thousands of cases and thousands of family, the story of José is unique to him. Or, as his mother explains:

> it’s because of him that their situation is no longer abstract to you (..) You know what’s keeping him away, what keeps him from his family. It’s something close to you, something that’s become a part of you (229).

If perceiving the pain of others presents certain impossibilities, the reality of the border does not. Cantú is drawn back from a reality he has tried to escape, and painfully made aware by his mother how this is a reality that he has helped to create: making this a part of who he has become. This ultimately leaves him with the task to reimagine this behavior, the part of him that

has absorbed its poison. And thus his mother asks, “what will you do? All you can do is try to find a place to hold it, a way to not lose some purpose for it all” (231).

2.8 Re-Imaging the border

In *The Line Becomes A River* we are made aware that to reimagine one's behavior is a task of the moral imagination. Cantú’s complicity in the border patrol has, as his mother argues, made the reality he has helped to create a part of who he has become. To come to grapple with these moral complexities, we could argue how the writing of his memoir has been Cantú’s attempt to render an alternative borderland, and thus an alternative way of being. Rather than approaching the border as a heterotopia, in the sense of a real urban space, we could therefore also argue how Cantú’s memoir itself functions as heterotopia: a literary representation of (another) borderland.

That the heterotopia was never intended as a tool for the study of a real urban space, has been argued by Kelvin T. Knight. Investigating the paradox that exists between Foucault’s various definitions of heterotopia (described as both an unimaginable space, representable only in language, and as a kind of semi-mythical real site), Knight points out how the heterotopia seems inherently contradictory. However, when investigating the decidedly literary tone and context of a radio lecture Foucault has given on this subject, Knight argues how the heterotopia was never intended as a tool for the study of a real urban space, but rather functions as “a set of literary motifs used by writers to present an alternative configuration of space” (147). Within the space of literature an imaginative transformation of space finds place, representing and inverting other spaces, blurring the lines between reality and fiction.

Approaching heterotopia as a tool of the literary imagination, allows us to see how Cantú in *The Lines Becomes a River* attempts to imagine an alternative configuration of space;

i.e. an alternative configuration of the borderland. This involves an ethical and personal trajectory, wherein Cantú has come to grapple with the reality he has helped to create, and its questions of guilt, redemption, and responsibility: i.e., a task of the moral imagination. Rather than grounding the border as a zone of exception, making its biopolitical violence inherent to the landscape, Cantú's memoir shows how the state of exception is enacted through its normalization. Whilst his memoir does not provide answers to the questions he has set out, and struggles with, we can find strength and potential in its literary imagination by presenting other stories, other views, and thus other spaces.

The potentials of (another) borderland can be traced in the last pages of the novel. Introducing himself as not a *migra*, a ranger, but a tourist, Cantú finds himself in the border village of Boquillas. A place, where as a man he encounters tells him, "Narcos don't bother us" and "even the rangers and la migra leave us alone" (245). Wondering why they aren't cameras or sensors, his guide explains: "Here the law comes from the people" (246). Emerging himself in the landscape of the Boquillas Canyon, surrounding the Rio Grande, Cantú realizes how, "for one brief moment, I forgot in which country I stood. All around me the landscape trembled and breathed as one" (247). Cantú's haunting memoir hence does not end on a tone of despair, nor does it call for redemption. Rather, it shows how literature, through its imaginative potentials, has the poetic force to imagine another borderland. For Cantú this is a liquid landscape: a landscape where opposites, cultures and identities flow into one another. As a tourist Cantú wanders through the landscape, as if acknowledging how he himself can also change with the whims of a river.

3. Signs Preceding the End of the World: The Epic Journey of Migration and Becoming

The previous chapter has offered a (mainly) Northern-American perspective on the border, whereby the border has been approached through the writing of a book with a (predominant) non-fictional nature. Having argued to read Cantú's *Line Becomes A River* as literature instead of reportage, allows for an exploration of this book as a haunting personal memoir. Nonetheless, the border is both approached and contested through a framework of (Northern)American enforcement and policies. In this chapter the analysis of Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding Of The World* allows for a Mexican perspective on the border. Herrera's mythical novel, deeply entrenched in Mexican (indigenous) culture, focuses on the journey of border crossing, offering an a-temporal narrative, and archetypal representation of its protagonist. This obliges us to focus on other aspects, i.e. to move away from the moral task to imagine another borderland, and to emerge ourselves in the epic journey of migration and becoming.

Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* narrates the journey of Makina from Mexico to the United States. Marked by death, destruction and failure his novel explores how this journey to *el otro lado*, entails the stripping of meaning of both identity and space. Herrera's novel can be read spatially: the chapter headings are geographic in nature, and the narrative reads as a quest across a landscape of non-places in which all warmth and human connections are pushed aside (Richardson). Yet, rather than writing a novel that is grounded in space and time; i.e. within our categories of understanding, Herrera mocks the reader's search for a traditional sense of geography (Richardson). His narrative emplaces Makina's voyage within the structure of the nine-stage descent into the Aztec underworld of Mictlán . By the end of the novel, whilst

having reached the 'promised land' as well as the papers providing her with a new identity, Makina hence, figuratively, descends into darkness, dissolving from the world she has known.

Herrera's mythical approach on the story of migration allows for a reading in which the border is not constructed as separating two distinct geographical areas, between two countries, but rather opens up a new space between reality and myth (Rioseco). However, even more so, Herrera shows how language, and particularly literature has the poetic force to open up such a place. Instead of presenting Makina as a 'real' character, she can be read as an archetype (Sánchez Becerril), or, in the words of Nathan Richardson; "more a symbolic, and ultimately a linguistic construct, than an imitation of 'real people'" (17). What this points us at, I argue, is how Herrera uses language and literature as a means to undercut and undermine the stable concepts of identity, space, and language itself. Marcelo Rioseco has argued how within Makina's mythical story what matters most is the crossing, the 'coming apart'. To explore this 'coming apart' I argue how we need to explore the connections between migration and translation that are to be traced in Herrera's novel. Approaching the process of translation as a process of (Deleuzian) becoming, this allows for a reading in which *Signs Preceding the End of the World* is not to be conceived as an apocalyptic story, nor a story of annihilation, but rather explores how new possibilities, new ways of speaking (Richardson), and new ways of being arise when reaching the end of the world, i.e. the world as we know it.

3.1 The Door

"I am dead" (11) we read on the first page of Herrera's novel. Makina, his protagonist, has witnessed how yet another earthquake has allowed the earth to open up, swallowing everything

around her[10]. Whilst her “Little Town” is riddled with bullet holes and tunnels “bored by five centuries of voracious silver lust” (11), bearing its colonial legacy, this is the first time it has affected her. Nonetheless, Makina doesn't spend much time reflecting. Glancing a quick peek over the precipice she “empathized with the poor soul on his way to hell. Happy trails, she said without irony, and muttered Best be on with my errand” (12). Not long after, her mother Cora sends her off to “the other side” with a message for her brother. Makina seems to be the only right person for the job, she is a “smart and schooled” woman, “who else can I trust it to, a man?” (12), her mother explains herself.

As a female protagonist in a macho-world, Makina not only survives the sinkhole but every pitfall on her journey. Yet, she only does so since her identity is based on and valued through pragmatism. It hence doesn't seem coincidental how Makina is a play upon the word *máquina* (machine). Running the switchboard with the only phone for miles and miles around, Makina’s moral code is based upon four rules:

> “You don’t lift other people’s petticoats.
>
> You don’t stop to wonder about other people’s business.
>
> You don’t decide which messages to deliver and which let to rot.
>
> You are the door, not the one who walks through it (18).

[10] Herrera’s opening passage strongly recalls Tomás Rivera’s *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), a seminal work of Chicano literature and one of the first books in the emerging literature of Mexican Americans / border literature. Through this reference Herrera grounds himself in a tradition of border writing, yet also hints to the intelligibility of this genre and narrative.

It is through this last notion ("You are the door, not the one who walks through it"), that Makina's role as both women and, soon, border crosser is being exemplified. Makina's role as a door stresses that while she is granted a role in "a man's world", this does not mean she has been granted access to this world. In a broader sense this also goes up for the border - door and border are images of boundaries that both separate and connect -: while borders are vacillating and found to be everywhere, they do not mean the same for everyone, are radicalized, and are thus experienced in different ways: making them impossible to cross for certain people.

Nonetheless, while Makina has taken up this role, she notes how her job not only determines her value within her village, but also lets her intervene within the political. Or as the narrator puts it: "Makina had neither been naive nor lost any sleep blaming herself for the invention of politics; carrying messages was her way of having a hand in the world" (20). Makina hereby shows how translation is a valuable asset in a world constructed by language: "Makina spoke all three, and knew how to keep quiet in all three, too" (19). Language, creates safe spaces: it provides a tool for survival, yet it can also be explored how it opens up new spaces. However, this begins with the stripping and hollowing out of meaning of both Makina as a character, as well as the space around her.

3.2 Non-Places

In his reading of *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, Richardson points out how Makina's journey in this novel is spatial: she moves from village to town to city and finally to another country. Yet, whilst the chapter headings are explicitly geographic in nature (The Earth, The Place where the Hills Meet, The Obsidian Mound, The Place Where the Flag Waves, to name a few), the spaces described within these chapters resist the human impulse to place-making

(Richardson 13). If landscapes, in the definition of Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr are human constructs, always to be considered in terms of processes of change, and thus as contested spaces, Herrera offers little sense of place or (human) meaning. While the novel resist to name the places Makina travels from and towards, Martin Lombardo points out how the places named in the chapters headings all refer to frontier or border zones, hereby suggesting a certain impossibility to cross them. Rather than writing a novel that is grounded in space and time, and thus within our categories of understanding, Herrera creates "una atmósfera atemporal" (Sánchez Becerril 107), in which Makina travels across a landscape of non-places: spaces devoid of meaningful human interaction (Richardson 13).

To read Makina's journey as a quest across a landscape of non-places means to see a connection between the hollowing out of her as a character and the places she crosses. In his investigation of non-places, Marc Augé, has pointed out how a non-place can be defined as a place that does not incorporate any organic society. Augé, placing his thoughts within the notion of 'supermodernity' particularly refers to places created by late capitalism, i.e. shopping malls, train stations and airports, yet his definition also includes peripheral locations such as detention centers, refugee camps, and, as *Signs Preceding the World* suggests: the border. The non-place thus can provide luxurious or inhuman conditions, but is always a zone of stasis: "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (Augé 103). Within the non-place, i.e. a place devoid of meaningful human interaction, the subject can become no more than what he does or experience in this role that is ascribed to that place. Under modern-capitalist circumstances this is the role of a passenger, customer, or driver, under peripheral circumstances this is the role of the refugee, the migrant, or the border crosser.

3.3 Lost Cities, Lost Dreams

When reading Makina's quest as a journey across a landscape of non-places it should be noted how human interaction and warmth has drained from the places she passes through. Not being able to "be sure a place was where the map said it was until she'd gotten there" (32-33), Makina isn't able to distinguish her dreams from memories or reality. Places hence not only become non-places through their lack of human interaction or organic society, but also through the sense that they are places that both are and are not. Dreaming of lost cities, "literally lost cities inside other lost cities, all ambulating over an impenetrable surface" (33), Makina contemplates on the hollowed out landscapes she passes: "She knew what it contained, its colors, the penury and the opulence, hazy memories of a less cynical time, villages emptied of men" (33).

In Herrera's novel lost cities become places of lost dreams, which stresses how space and identity are indeed mutually constructive. Sensing a pregnant woman resting beneath a tree in a landscape that contains nothing but "a frayed strip of cement over the white earth" (43) , Makina is comforted by the thought of a mother inhabiting this space:

> If that was any sort of omen it was a good one: a country where a woman with child walking through the desert just lies right down to let her baby grow, unconcerned by anything else (43)

Yet, when approaching the woman, being able to discern the features of this person, Makina realizes how she is not a pregnant woman but some 'poor wretch' already swollen with putrefaction, "his eyes and tong pecked out by buzzards" (44). The fertile land becomes a landscape of death.

Having left behind her coyote and guide Cucho, after a confrontation with the border patrol, Makina continues her journey - wounded, after being hit by a bullet that has passed right through her - all by herself. Cleaving her way through the cold, on her own "sustained by nothing by an ember inside" (69), Makina tries to find her way to her brother, to the "promised land", sensing how "There was still some light in the sky but it was turning dark, like a giant pool of drying blood" (68). When finally being able to find the place her brother has moved to, in order to claim a land he believed belonged to their father[11], Makina finds out that there is nothing there. Only machines, still at work: "obstinately scratching the soil as if they needed urgently to empty the earth" (70). An irritated 'anglo', explains to her:

> I don't know what they told you (...) I don't know what you think you lost but you ain't going to find it here, there was nothing here to begin with (70).

Makina's quest for her brother, and her passage to the "other side", leaves her to find nothing than sheer emptiness. The world around her as Richardson seems to suggest, is "all cold, indifferent, and impermeable (..) sealed to the possibilities of meaningful, sustained, and open human exchange, the dynamic that converts space-time into place, if not home" (14).

3.4 The Underworld: between Myth and Reality

Nonetheless, by staging his novel within the structure of the nine-stage descent into the Aztec underworld of Mictlán , reading Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* as a quest

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[11] This is a clear reference to the idea of the border(land) as a *cicatriz:* a scar, or open wound, the loss of a region that once belonged to Mexico (also referred to as the Mexican Cession).

across non-places, glances over the novels mythical richness and meaning. Moreover, it would only allow for a horizontal (spatial) reading of Makina's journey. Indeed, as Richardson has argued, Herrera mocks the readers traditional sense of geography. This, I argue, he nonetheless not merely enacts through a portrayal of non-places, but also by providing a vertical narrative, staging Makina's journey to the United States as a journey to the underworld. The journey to the underworld hereby both refers to the criminal world, and thus to the (predefined) path and route for migrants entering an illegal economy and existence as an illegal alien in the United States, and as a journey to the mythical underworld, suggesting a transformative potential.

Being sent to the United States as a mule and messenger, Makina is ascribed a (limited) role, directly connected to the non-space of the border, as argued by Augé. However, Makina's journey to the other side becomes to entail a (individual) mythical journey: one in which her ontological status between life and death becomes unsure. This allows for a spatial reading of the border whereby the border is no longer represented through its territorial existence, and thus a line or wall separating two distinct geographical areas, but opens up a new space between reality and myth. Rioseco points out that while *Signs Preceding the World* initially fulfills all the expectations of border narrative (Makina's journey is staged as the search of a relative, whereby she has to move between the typical references and characters of that setting: the border, drugs, violence, immigration), the staging of the narrative within the pre-Hispanic cosmovision of the underworld of Mictlán weaves a double story: "one story of incredible poetic force that occurs in a reality that is imprecise, yet historical; and another that constructs a mythic story, narrating a journey in which what matters most is the crossing, the "coming apart." (par. 14).

The "coming apart" is enacted by Makina when passing through the various levels and challenges of the underworld on her journey to the United States, postulating the impossibility to

return. The reading of Makina's journey as a mythical journey allows for a richer reading of the (border) narrative. This, as Rioseco argues seems to be the goal of Herrera in his writing: "to tell a story that is also a story of life and death, and illumination that is also a descent (...) A fall into a dark world, dangerous and cruel, but also birth into a new world (par.13). Reading Makina's journey from Mexico to the United States as a journey between life and death, myth and reality, I suggest, allows for a reading in which Makina's crossing to the other side does not come to entail an erasure of identity, but rather allows for the construction of an (alternative and multivalent) identity: devoid of inscribed roles, and presumed (national) identities, opening up new spaces and possibilities.

3.5 Opening up New Spaces

The opening up of new spaces, and construction of a new/alternative identity, occurs in *Signs Preceding The End Of The World* by and within the realm of language. This is reflected in the form of the novel, in which a writing is developed that explores its expressive possibility through allegorical-mythical writing (Rioseco). Yet, this is also explored within Hererra's main character. Language, as Ivonne Sánchez Becerill, points out is everything to Makina: "para Makina la lengua es el material con el que trabaja, su habilidad para utilizarla la define" (118). While both functioning as a door, and as a mule (Makina has to take a package (i.e. drugs) from her local 'topdogs' with her in order to be able to cross the border), Makina's skill as a translator grant her agency, i.e. a hand in the world, becomes inherent to her process of becoming, and allow her to make sense of the world around her. Through a mythical reading of the novel Makina's role as a translator recalls the figure of Malinche, whom as both the mistress and translator of Hernan Cortes, became a (contested) foundational figure in the Mexican national consciousness: the

embodiment of treachery, and the symbolic mother of the new Mexican people. Makina, embodies this ambiguity: positioning herself between life and death, and between two cultures.

3.6 The Translator

Having proposed the figure of the interpreter as the new protagonist of our times, Zygmunt Bauman stresses how mediation is the key role to be played by intellectuals today (*Legislators and Interpreters* 1989). In *Signs Preceding the End of the World* this view is echoed, yet the interpreter is substituted by the figure of the translator, whose role goes beyond the mere translation of language. Makina, it is suggested, becomes the modern Malinche: mediating between cultures and languages. For the reader Makina is the only viewpoint the novel offers, grabbing hold of the narrative voice. As a result, Richardson points out, readers are bound to the enigmatic protagonist. Both narrator and reader can go nowhere else, and thus we note small details that take large forms: "we too register the silence and the labored conversations (...) we feel their pain. Or confusion" (16). Whilst the characters in the novel are emptied, and stripped down of their identity - just as the places around them -, Makina is made felt real and even captivating by language. Makina translates the world around her - which often seems devoid of meaning -into emotions and feelings, thus inscribing people and places with meaning through language.

In *Signs Preceding the End of the World* the translator (Makina) is presented as a survivor in a globalized world. Makina alone, Richardson argues, controls language: she is the linguistic center of her community; master of three tongues - the local indigenous tongue, the Latin (Spanish) and that of the North (English) (17).Knowing when to speak and when to keep silent, Makina makes her way through the local bosses and gains her respect by the coyotes who

guide her to the other side. Towards the end of the novel Makina's ability to write in English makes her rescue a group of undocumented immigrants. Yet, this act of rescue is not so much accomplished due to her ability to write in English, but rather by the act of mimicry[12] she enacts within the (host) language. Encountering a racist border patrol agent who forces a undocumented and frightened migrant to show off some of his poetry, Makina takes over the pen and writes:

> We are to blame for this destruction, we who don't speak your tongue and don't know how to keep quiet either. We who didn't come by boat, who dirty up your doorsteps with our dust, who break your barbed wire. We who came to take your jobs, who dream of wiping your shit, who long to work all hours. We who fill your shiny clean streets with the smell of food, who brought you violence you'd never known, who deliver your dope, who deserve to be chained by neck and feet. We who are happy to die for you, what else could we do? We, the ones who are waiting for who knows what. We, the dark, the short, the greasy, the shifty, the fat, the anemic. We the barbarians (99-100).

Through this act of writing Makina not so much translates her Latin tongue into English, but rather enforces, and violently brings to light, the racism and stereotypes that are to be found at the heart of dominant languages, reminding us that language is never innocent. Auto-irony is put

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[12] I understand mimicry through Homi K. Bhabha's double vision. Mimicry is the colonial power's desire to create a reformed recognizable other, that is 'almost the same but not quite', and appears when members of a colonized society imitate and take on the culture of the colonizers. As such it thus also comes to disrupt the authoritative power of the colonial discourse. See: Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, no. Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis, 1 Apr. 1984, pp. 125–133.

into use by Makina as a means of resistance. Indeed, as Richardson concludes: Makina is at once a consequence of language, a weapon of language, and a language weapon herself (17).

3.7 Migration and Translation

The act of translation is employed as a powerful, and even political act within Herrera's novel; strengthening the subject position of the migrant, the border crosser, i.e. the outsider. Loredana Polezzi hence argues how we can draw a connection between the notions of translation and migration:

> Both terms are connected to the way in which we, as individuals and groups, mark the boundaries that define who we are, their coupling holds out the promise of change, but also openly exposes us to difference, awakening deep-seated fears echoed in words such as invasion and contagion (345-346).

The terrain on which translation encounters migration, Polezzi argues, is often represented either as utopian or dystopian, yet it always one where crucial stakes are placed and played out. When considering migration from the perspective of translation we are thus reminded that not only texts or languages travel, but also people.

Agency is a crucial issue in the encounter between migration and translation, since migrants occupy different positions as either agents or objects of translation. This has been made explicit by Michael Cronin. In *Translation and Identity* (2006) he stresses how the question of migration and translation is of real, immediate and urgent seriousness (45). Cronin argues how migrants can either gain the ability to translate, adopting an autonomous practice of translation,

or be translated by others, in which case translation becomes enacted through a heteronomous practice. He notes how translation can thus be used as a strategy of assimilation, or as a form of accommodation, trying to negotiate spaces of resistance and of survival for the language and culture of their origins. The ability to translate, or be translated, can in some instances, he concludes, be a matter of life and death (45).

Referring to this as the biopolitics of language, Polezzi argues how Giorgio Agamben has identified language as the supplement which distinguishes human politics from any other form of social interaction. The terrain where translation encounters migration hence is an eminently political space, and, she argues, “any act of translation that inhabits it is, therefore, an eminently political action” (353). Polezzi argues how as such, both agents and objects of translation can, in different yet complementary ways, qualify as political actors, by witnessing the issues surrounding migration. Reconfiguring translation as an act of witnessing, Polezzi argues how this makes it into a gesture against the dehumanizing nature of contemporary power and its attempts at containment: “However ambivalent or subject to exploitation they might be, (..) acts of translation and self-translation have at least the potential to bear witness not just to the experience of the migrant but also to our understanding of being “human” (354).

3.8 Translation, Migration, and Becoming

Arguing how Herrera draws connections between migration and translation in his novel allows us to see how Makina and other migrants in the novel (i.e. the other border crossers she encounters, as well as her brother), are presented as both agents and objects of translation. It should therefore be stressed how Makina’s story is not presented as a *Bildungsroman*, but a familial drama. The choice to cross the border, and to go to “the other side” has not been made

by Makina: her mother has ordered her to deliver a message for her brother, who has left years earlier to reclaim a piece of land that supposed to belong to his father. Sánchez Becerril argues how this is exemplary for a specific culture of migration: “Una cultura de la migración, cultivada, creada y recreada a través mismo del proceso de migración: el padre, primero; después el hijo en busca de la herencia del padre; Makina, en búsqueda del hermano” (110). Migration then is not a solitary or individual decision, but rather “nace de un consenso familiar y requiere la activación de las relaciones de toda una comunidad” (110).

Makina’s journey to the United States, due to this, not reads like a successful immigrant story, but rather shows how migration entails the tearing apart of families. Reflecting on the notion of a family, Makina notes how:

> never she had known a Happy Family of the sort people talked about, the sort so many swore to defend; all of them were more than just one thing, or they were all the same thing but in completely different ways: none were only fun-loving or solely stingy, and the stories that made any two laugh had nothing in common ” (79).

Migration, as reflected in *Signs Preceding the End of the World,* whilst often not based on individual choice, has a profound effect upon families and communities. When preparing for her crossing, and how to find her brother, Makina hence makes sure how there has to be someone to help her back. She is wary for what happens when one stays at the other side for too long. When crossing to the other side, it is suggested, it is as if there is no way back. Translation becomes substitution. Or, as Makina puts it when describing how this happened to a friend of hers:

> (he) stayed away too long, maybe a day too long or an hour too long, at any rate long enough too long that when he came back it turned out that everything was still the same, but somehow all different, or everything was similar but not the same: his mother was no longer his mother, his brothers and sisters were no longer his brothers and sisters, they were people with difficult names and improbable mannerisms, as if they'd been copied off an original that no longer existed: even the air, he said, warmed his chest in a different way (20).

Yet, as Makina's journey develops, and she passes door after door, it seems as if for Makina there is also no more possibility to return. Having traced the path to her brother Makina finds a different person. Presented with an incredible story we read how Makina's brother was unable to reclaim the land that belonged to his father ("there was nothing there to begin with"), and too embarrassed to return, her brother accepted an offer to fill in a place in the army, using the identity of a son of a privileged family who voluntarily signed up for the army. Having treated his identity for that of another person off he went to war: fighting for a country where only when passing of as another person he is granted a place to stay.

Having been allowed to keep the identity of the family's son, Makina's brother decided to stay with the army, having no clue what else to do. Or, as Makina describes it: "there was her brother in his battle-worn uniform, alive and in one piece. All of a sudden he had money and a new name, but no clue what to do, where to go, what the path of the person with that name should be" (92). Asking him what his plan is, or how to be able to continue without a plan, Makina's brother responds that he guesses that this is what happens to everybody who comes: "we forget what we came for, but there's this reflex to act like we still have some secret plan" (93). Now, it's too late to return. Arguing how there must be something he has fought for,

Makina's brother declares to stay in the army while figuring out who he is. Makina senses how she has lost her brother:

> He leaned in toward her, and as he gave her a hug said Give Cora a kiss from me. He said it the same way he gave her the hug, like it wasn't his sister he was hugging, like it wasn't his mother he was sending a kiss to, but just a polite platitude. Like he was ripping out her heart, like he was cleanly extracting it and placing it in a plastic bag and storing it in the fridge to eat later. (93-94).

Her brother has translated and turned into someone else, yet not knowing even himself who this person is. Makina knows that it is too late to bring him back. Pulling out the envelope her mother has given her, after her brother has left, she reads: "Come on back now (...) Come on back now, we don't expect anything from you" (94). This is a notable decision, one of Makina's ground rules is that one does not decide "which messages to deliver and which let to rot" (18). Her decision to not give her mother's message to her brother, hence suggests how she has declined her role as messenger: it marks the start of her personal trajectory.

3.9 New Ways of Speaking

Translation, in connection with migration, as *Signs Preceding the World* seems to suggest, first entails a loss. It includes the tearing apart of families, relations, and identity. In Herrera's novel this process is enacted in linguistic terms. It is described as a process wherein the copying of a person entails the loss of the original, postulating the impossibility of return. Yet, Herrera's novel also explores the possibilities and alternatives that reside in language and translation. Language does not only provide a tool for survival, but also opens up new spaces and

possibilities. In “The Place Where The Wind Cuts Like A Knife” this is explored through Makina’s encounter with people of the borderland. In her bewonderment Makina describes how “they are homegrown and they are anglo and both things with rabid intensity” (...) “Their gestures and tastes reveal both ancient memory and the wonderment of a new people” (65). And then, she exclaims, as if almost in awe, they speak:

> They speak an intermediary tongue that Makina instantly warms to because it’s like her: malleable, erasable, permeable; a hinge pivoting between two like but distant souls, and then two more, and then two more, never exactly the same ones; something that serves as link (65)

The people of the borderland and their ability to speak multiple languages at once, warms Makina, since it opens up, as described, “a nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born” (65). Coupled with the mythical structure of the novel, and the allegorical-mythical writing style, it could be argued how this passage allows for a reading of the borderland as the opening up of a place between myth and reality; “a nebulous territory”. Or, as the novel allegorically seems to suggest; the opening up of a space between world and underworld. This, as Makina realizes, is a space of possibility and creation. The interchangeable use of two tongues does not just provide another way of saying something, but creates something new. Or as it is strikingly put:

> It’s not another way of saying things: these are new things. The world happening anew, Makina realizes: promising other things, signifying other things, producing different objects. Who knows

> if they'll last, who knows if these names will be adopted by all, she thinks, but there they are, doing their damnedest (66)

If *Signs Preceding the End of the World* signals the end of the world, it does not do this in an apocalyptic sense. Rather, it is suggested how new possibilities and new ways of speaking arise. The border, as Herrera seems to suggest, thus is much more than a physical reality. Border crossing is an epic journey.

3.10 New Ways of Being, or Becoming(minor)

To describe the process of border crossing through language, and, as argued, a process of translation, Herrera's novel shows how new ways of speaking also entail new ways of being. Casting Makina's journey to the United States as an epic journey, staged within the structure of the nine-stage descent into the Aztec underworld of Mictlán , allows for a reading of Makina's journey as a journey of becoming. This process of becoming is one that undermines notions of stable identities. As such I argue how Makina's trajectory of becoming could best be read through a Deleuzian framework. Herrera, through his approach to language, not only debunks the monolingual myth of language, but shows how, when considering language in Saussurean terms, differences do not serve as opposition, but rather as positive differences, i.e. as "pre-conceptual differences that are constitutive of the content of the terms" (May 141). This view on the concept of language is related to the concept of becoming. Becoming, as Todd May explains "is the affirmation of being, it is the affirmation of difference in itself, of a pure difference that is not reducible to the identities, the actualities, that present themselves to us" (148).

All becomings are, according to Deleuze and Guattari, becomings-minor: they are fluid movements of creativity that subvert the dominant identities that are bestowed upon us (May 149). Becomings, rather than providing new frozen stable identities, hence are moments of becoming, reached through creative acts. As such the concept of becoming does not provide a new epistemic notion of identity, but rather offers us ways to think, and to act, in a world that, as May puts it, “oppresses us with its identities” (151). Deleuze and Guattari have faith in subjects in striated places. Through the process of becoming minor a new world is opening: “a world of becoming minoritarian in which women, Afro-American and queer subjects of all kinds put the dominant order into variation” (Conley 99). Changes of this nature, they argue, occur at the limits and at the margins: they occur at the limit of mental and social territories, from unstable borders. They occur in and through language.

Reading Herrera’s novel through this framework allows for a reading through which it is acknowledged how the opening of new spaces, the construction of another identity, as well as the staging of the border between reality and myth, is enacted through language, and the poetic force of literature. Herrera’s *Sign Preceding The World* is a minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari). This is perhaps best explained in the translators note by Lisa Dullman. In this note she points out how the translation of Herrera’s novel provided her with a great challenge, since his novel exhibits a multitude of distinct characteristics, displaying a non-standard language:

> its rhythm and orality; a style that is elegantly spare; striking metaphors, which are often unusual but jarely jarring; a mix of registers both low and high - slang and colloquial but also lyrical and eloquent, some rural and others urban and both often very Mexican (or very much of its border)land neologism, to just name some (Dullman 110).

In her translation Dullman argues how she has tried to create an English that was geographically non-explicit, allowing us to get lost in a language that resist easy interpretation. This I argue, is illustrative of the (linguistic) project that Herrera has undertaken in his novel: it is a project of what Deleuze & Guattari have described as becoming nomad, immigrant and gypsy of our own language (*What is A Minor Literature* 19). Herrrera shows how language, and more specifically the writing of a minor literature, can safe one from interpretation or codification, providing a line of flight and escape. Deleuze and Guattari point out how the desire to evade interpretation is not a desire to be *against* interpretation, rather the desire is to affirm an alternative, which is simultaneously uninterpretable (*What is a Minor Literature* 14). Herrera's minor use of language shows that when using the polylingualism of your own tongue, this tongue can escape from its oppressive character, and can open up new spaces: zones of linguistic third-worlds. Dullman has, in her turn, shown how this (minor) use of language can still survive in translation, and in a host language. Her translation in English enacts a non-standard use of language in ways that are not geographically recognizable. This, she explains, meant emphasizing the oral nature of the language (using colloquialisms), and to occasionally leave specific words in Spanish, deliberately choosing not to translate (111-112). Dullman's translation resists interpretation, showing how, as Deleuze and Guattuari put it: "Even if it is major, a tongue is capable of intensive use which spins it out along creative lines of escape, a use which now forms and constitutes an absolute deterritorialization" (27)

Reading *Signs Preceding the End of the World* as a moment of becoming-minor and minor literature, allows for a different reading of the novel, and more specifically its title. It hints at the end of the world as we know it; the world as Makina knew it, yet it moves it protagonist in the direction of possibilities that before had been beyond her ken. Gringolandia, as Rioseco has

pointed out, does not provide the answer for Makina, but rather provides a form of survival, yet neither do her abandoned village, the collapsing town or the undesired Gran Chilango. There is no place, no people, and no possibility to return. Nonetheless, even within this growing state of darkness and the collapse of signification Makina keeps moving forward. Descending down a staircase, being unable to remember how to say verse in any of her tongues, Makina receives papers from a stranger, providing her a new with a new name, a new life: "I've been skinned" (106), she whispers. Makina, figuratively, descends to another world:

> She stopped feeling the weight of uncertainty and guilt; she thought back to her people as though recalling the contours of a lovely landscape that was now fading away: the Village, the Little Town, the Big Chilango, all those colors, and she saw that what was happening was not a cataclysm; she understood with all of her body and all of her memory, she truly understood, and finally when everything in the world fell silent finally said to herself I'm ready (107).

Makina's descendance to another world, another being, leaves the reader in the dark. Makina becomes imperceptible. The narrative, in turn also becomes imperceptible, resisting interpretation in terms of meaning. Herrera's novel hereby not only provides new ways of thinking on the concept of becoming but also on the notion of (border) literature and language itself. His novel shows how literature has the poetic force to open up new spaces, and to point readers beyond the world as we know it.

4. The House of Broken Angels: A Scattered Mexican-American Family Saga

The previously analyzed works have unfolded on the border (*The Line Becomes A River*) and through the crossing of the border (*Signs Preceding the End of the World*), providing a spatial reading of the US - Mexico border(land) as zone of exception, heterotopia, a landscape of non-places, but ultimately a space of becoming. The border(land) has hereby been approached through different genres (i.e. a memoir and a mythical novel), and from a Northern American and Mexican perspective. Luis Alberto Urrea' *The House of Broken Angels* (2018) offers a different (i.e. Mexican-American) perspective. His story is staged at two sides of the border, and explores what it means to make the borderland of San Diego - Tijuana home. This is examined through the story of the pan-generational Mexican-American De La Cruz family, who, while scattered across the country, all gather in San Diego for the funeral of the family matriarch (the mother) and the Farewell Birthday party of the family patriarch (Big Angel).

The House of Broken Angels, and its family (hi)story, can be placed within a literary tradition of immigrant sagas, and more specifically of Chicano family sagas. Yet, Urrea is also clearly breaking with the conventions of this genre and its narrative. The family, as has been pointed out by Richard T. Rodriguez, has been the crucial symbol and organizing principle that frames the history of Mexican-Americans in the United States, and is the single issue most at stake, in some shape, form or fashion, in Chicano/a cultural politics (2). Yet, the notion of the family has hereby often been romanticized, and inscribed with nationalism and traditional gender roles. This calls for an interrogation of heteropatriarchal representations of the Chicano/a family: a project, which I argue, is undertaken in *The House of Broken Angels.* Reading the novel as an interrogation allows us to see how Mexican-Americans have been narratively constructed to fit

in the country, which in its turn has placed limits on their (family) epic and ways of storytelling: i.e. it has restrained them to "make a home". Urrea's transnational approach on the notion of the family, nonetheless reveals a transformative potential, enabling us to read *The House of Broken Angels* as rewrite into a transnational romance.

4.1 Big Angel and the diminishment of the patriarch

"I am the patriarch" (55) Big Angel tells himself for the thousand time, wrestling himself out of the minivan, ready to bang open the doors of the chapel and take over the funeral. Ordering his wife to roll down his wheelchair slowly down the middle, he makes sure how his gathered family knows "the sheriff was back in town" (56). The kids and grandkids call him Pops, a magic word that, in the perception of Big Angel flowed down the clan: "Here comes Pops" "Pops in da house" "Check it. Pops is low-riding" (56). Yet, whilst keeping up this image, Big Angel's death has announced itself. Suffering from cancer his doctor has told him how he will die of a systemic collapse, pointing out that while his will might be strong, his body is worn out.

Throughout the novel, as if speaking to an "invisible interviewer" (61), Big Angel attempts to convince both family and reader of his role as the family patriarch: the man who holds the family together. His role as a patriarch not only establishes his role in the family, but in the United States itself. Having made the decision to build up a new life in San Diego, with his wife Perla (of whom his mother strongly disapproves), Big Angel has fully assimilated himself and has to deal with accusations of his family members of wanting to turn himself into a gringo. Yet, this does not bother Big Angel. By fiercely combating negative (Mexican) stereotypes, such as being lazy and never being on time ("Mexican Time"), Big Angel is not only is "as punctual as a German", but fights for a place in his new world. His story reads as an immigrant success

story. Working at Pacific Gas and Electric, Big Angel feels that he is in charge. He hereby does not care about the job, nor about computers: “A Mexican doing what these rich Americanos couldn't do that was the point” (11). Bringing his own coffee mug to work, painted with the words EL JEFE, Big Angel clearly gives off this message. However, what is not revealed is its double meaning:

> But what they didn’t know, of course, was that “jefe” was slang for “father”, and if he was anything, Big Angel was the father and patriarch of the entire clan. The All-Father, Mexican Odin” (8).

Big Angel’s self-fashioning as patriarch is in accordance with the Chicano family ideal, as promoted in strands of Chicano cultural nationalism tethered to machismo (Rodriguez 1). This ideal can be identified as “a safe haven in a heartless world”, and be linked to the notion of *familismo,* theorized as “the strong identification and attachment of Hispanic persons with their nuclear and extended families” (Smith-Moriss et al. 35). The family and the home provide a space of safety in a world where, especially Latino’s find themselves in socially vulnerable positions (Ayón et al.), facing discrimination, xenophobia and other backlashes. Yet, this ‘safe haven’, Rodriguez argues, often provides a romanticized and nostalgic image of the family, denying how the family ideal also turns against modernity, other ways of living, and individual autonomy. The Chicano family hence still is often defined through traditional gender roles: men are to be found at the head of the family, and women are relegated women into secondary roles. Big Angel, mocked by his younger brother as (self-declared) “pope of Tijuana” (58), seems to have taken up the traditional role of father, patriarch, and leader. Through a fierce will to live he

praises his "ability to outsmart and outmaneuver everyone and everything" (55), including death and God: "After all, he was named Miguel Angel. Who else in the family was named after the archangel Michael? He wished he had a flaming sword" (55).

Nonetheless, while Big Angel is hailed by the family as patriarch, and functions as an example for his son Lalo, eternalized in the form of a tattoo reading POPS 4EVER, the family is well aware of the short time he still has to live. His physical and psychological well-being is being questioned, and Big Angel has become reliant on his family members:

> They had presided over Big Angel's last three death scenes, from which he had unexpectedly resurrected and returned home, more arrogant than ever. But now he was carved down to the size of a child and not able to walk more than ten steps, and those while leaning on his walker. True, his son had affixed a bike horn to it and to his wheelchair, so Big Angel could make *ah-oo-gah* sounds to amuse himself. But it was a diminishment of the patriarch for sure (42).

His wife, Perla, and daughter Minnie must help him bathe and relieve himself; help him to change his diaper, and put him to bed. This causes Big Angel great pain: "Big Angel had always been their leader. Since Don Antonio abandoned them to starve in La Paz, his siblings had looked to him as their father figure. And now he was his own daughters baby (66). However, as Urrea shows this reversal of (traditional) roles, specifically the diminishment of the patriarch, allows for a rupture of the heteropatriarchal family genealogy, and allows for a (re)telling and exploration of a complex, rambunctious family (hi)story. Organizing a farewell birthday party, Big Angel makes sure this will be "a puro party that nobody would forget" (23).

4.2 Family of Angels

The House of Broken Angels is a story about a complicated family that typically would begin with a family tree to help the reader make sense of the relationships. Yet, Urrea does not offers us this tool of guidance. Even his protagonists have a hard time keeping track of their family members, and the relations between members. Many of the events we are witnessing are seen through the eyes of Little Angel (Big Angel's half-brother), who has to keep a cheat sheet in order to know who everyone is. Yet, the chaos of this family is not to be caught on this sheet of paper, and makes him anxious: "”Family was too much responsibility" (90). We are nonetheless offered a (historical) family narrative through the memories of Big Angel. Facing death Big Angel contemplates on his life, and his family history.

Whereas the De La Cruz family is not to be caught in a family tree, the name Angel does allow for a genealogy of the family. Little Angel notes how within his blended family, the name Angel imposed a family structure on them:

> The siblings thought of their father as First Angel - El Primer Angel. It was like some South American novel - every man in the family with the same name. At least they had been spared a sister named Angela, though one of the grandnieces was named Angelita (116)

Within this passage a direct reference is made to the canonical Latin American family saga *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez. Traditional family sagas, such as *Cien Años de Soledad* often interact with a national past, centering happenings of a recent history at the heart of a family narrative. Referring to this as 'foundational fictions', Doris Sommer points out how, within the Latin American context, historical romances and politics go hand in hand:

revealing an interconnectedness between history, politics, and fiction, within the process of nation building. Urrea's refusal to stage the family saga within a singular national (hi)story, and ultimately his rupture with the family saga, then reveal a transnational approach. By drawing a connection between the genealogy of his family of angels and the canonical family immigrant saga *Cien Años de Soledad,* he shows how nationalism is rejected, but, critically reveals how patriarchy and hierarchy still resonate within the family structure of the De La Cruz family.

4.3 Family and Nation

The traditional patriarchal family structure that resides and is reflected upon in *The House of Broken Angels* can be linked to a Chicano family ideal present in certain strand of Chicano cultural nationalism, as argued by Rodriguez. Yet, the intersections between family, race, and nationalism are not unique to the Chicano movement. Within the United States the family serves as a powerful metaphor and analogy of the nation. Depicting this as the nation-as-family model, George Lakoff has shown how within the United States political beliefs are structured by the idealization of the family. At the basis of the nation-as-family model situates an imagined traditional family ideal that is not only heteropatriachial (thus consisting of heterosexual couples, biological children, and a specific authority structure), but is also racialized (Collins). As such, the nation-family-model also serves as the philosophical bases of anti-immigration arguments. In Urrea's novel these anti-immigrant sentiments are presented as daily encounters. In a scene wherein Little Angel goes shopping with a family member (La Gloriosa) we read: "A white woman stepped up to them and said, warmly, "You'll be out of this country on your ass very soon," then stormed toward the dog food aisle" (202). When driving to his mother's funeral, we read how Big Angel notes a guy on the overpass holding up a "BUILD THE WALL" sign (24).

On the radio it is argued how hating Mexicans "was alright because of ISIS and the border wall" (233).

The De La Cruz family live in San Diego, having "been around here since before your grandparents were even born" (8). Big Angel's grandfather, we read, had come to California after the Mexican Revolution, enlisting in World War I as a U.S soldier yet ending up in Los Angeles. With the wave of deportations of 1932 the De La Cruz family became Mexican again. This changed when both Big Angel and his wife Perla (following his father) crossed the border from Tijuana to San Diego, in search of a better life. Having made his way from illegality to the working middle class, being able to afford a "Classic Southern California ranch-style house (...) in a Mexican neighborhood south of San Diego" (93), Big Angel's story reads as an immigrant success story. Yet, we are also reminded how "things weren't always middle class for the family" (158). Years of struggle preceded them. In these years Big Angel refused anyone to get government help. The family was crammed in their tiny first apartment, behind a garage in San Ysidro, not fifty yards from the border. "Pretty Ballsy", their son Yndio notes, "since Ma and Pops were both illegal as hell back then" (158). In those days, we read, the only thing Perla wanted was to return to Mexico:

> She did not understand his obsession with the U.S. This was not a better life. At home, at least, there as community, laughter. Even hope. (..) Here, she found loneliness and worse hunger than in Mexico - worse, because all around her people were rolling like pigs in huge piles of food and clothes and liquor and nice underwear and cigarettes and money and chocolate and fruit (159).

The House of Broken Angels shows how achieving the (Mexican) American dream is only possible when working multiple jobs. This asks much of a family, who have to endure the hardships of poverty, loneliness, and illegality. Yet, in the current political situation, economic accomplishments determine if immigrants become successful in the United States, and are able to be granted citizenship, i.e. political rights. This is reflected most clearly in Trump's recent immigration proposal. In this proposal immigrants' skills are emphasized over family ties[13]. This ultimately is an attempt to decrease family-based immigration: the new plan is targeted to significantly increase the educational and skills requirements for people allowed to migrate to the United States. If the United States' politics is based on the notion of a family, immigration policies thus show how this American family is racialized and economically informed: preferring skilled individuals over (other) families.

4.4 The Chicano Family: A Site of Contestation

Celebrating the particularities of Mexican-American life and attacking the anti-Mexican racism inherent in American culture, *The House of Broken Angels* deconstructs the notion of the ideal imagined American family and nation. Interestingly, Urrea enacts this critical project, from out of the notion of the family itself, exploring the history of the Mexican-American De La Cruz family. Urrea hereby does not simply approach the notion of family out of the same framework as it seeks to contest, meaning that he does not pose another ideal national family. Neither does he use the notion of family as has been done in certain strands of Chicano cultural nationalism,

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[13] See: Shear, Michael D. "Trump Immigration Proposal Emphasizes Immigrants' Skills Over Family Ties." *The New York Times*, 15 May 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/us/politics/trump-immigration-kushner.html.

which in its turn has used the notion of the family as an instrument of nation-building and/or unremitting protest. Rather, he shows how the notion of family also can be re-inscribed as a tool and site of contestation, opposed to the idea of a homogenous nation, not only in nationalistic terms, but also in terms of gender and sexuality.

By writing an immigrant family saga, Urrea roots himself within a certain tradition of Chicano writing. The topic of the family, Catherine Leen has pointed out, is central to Chicano and Chicana writings, whereby the family motif has become part of literary creations. To understand why family is such an integral part of Chicano literature, Leen reviews the history of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States, revealing how Mexicans and Mexican Americans not only had to endure hardships, but were only welcome in the United States if they assimilated: “many felt that the only way that they could successfully participate in North American society was to minimize their differences” (Leen 68). Due to this, Leen argues, and given the suspicion with which Mexican customs were viewed, it is not surprising that home is often presented as a space of refuge and comfort in Chicano literature, and family is presented as the primary source of consolation and protection.

The family motif in Chicano literature nonetheless promotes an ideal that is based on traditional gender roles, providing a heteropatriarchal structure. The issue of the ways in which Chicano literature and culture has relegated women into a secondary role has been much debated, as this ideal was also present in Chicano cultural nationalism and the movement. Within the Chicano movement women had the responsibility to provide the feminine spirit of nurture, ensuring the survival of Chicano culture. In *Borderlands/ La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa hence argues how Chicano culture privileges the family unit, and community ties, at the expense of individual (female) autonomy:

> The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insists that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala.* If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favour of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman (39).

In *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (2009) Rodriguez builds on Chicana feminist critique, and calls for the interrogation of heteropatriarchal articulations of cultural nationalism that both frame and underscore a genealogy of Chicano/a cultural texts. In his investigation kinship and the family are examined, simultaneously, as ideologies adopted by heteronormative and patriarchal discourses *and* as crucial sites for political struggle when informed by 'egalitarian possibility' (2). Acknowledging the political and communitarian value of the family, Rodriguez thus approaches the family as a double-edged sword: "a signifier with many meanings that both troubles *and* assists in the struggle for communitarian politics" (12). The Chicano/a family is a contested site that is both enduring and, as shown through his interrogation, potentially transformative. What Rodriguez hereby nonetheless does not take into account is how the family has also become part of literary creation, and thus also functions as a literary motif. Chicano/a writers, as Leen notes, also have used the notion of family and home in order to provide critical perspectives on the family, and as a way of 'talking back' to Chicano nationalist discourse and patriarchy (66). This, I argue, is exactly what Urrea deploys in his novel. Instead of presenting an essentialist notion of the Chicano family he shows that if the Chicano family is a site of contestation, this is a shattered one.

4.5 The Scattered Family

Referring to his family as a "his scattered family" (23), Big Angel confirms how the De La Cruz family does not conform to the notion of the ideal imagined family. Having settled with a woman that already had children ('used goods', according to his mother). His family is a blended one. Yet, not only by means of blood ties, but also by means of origins, language and cultures. In *The House of Broken Angels,* Big Angel explores these complexities by immersing himself in memories of his journey from La Paz (Mexico) to San Diego in the 1960s and the complexities of his family drama. Big Angel hereby reminds us how, as argued by Anzaldúa, the border not only divides land, but has also divided a people, and a culture: even (far) away from the border, as exemplified in the case of Little Angel, the border comes to function as a schizophrenic condition in diasporic communities and families.

The effects of border and US immigration policies have scattered Big Angel's family. As the patriarch Big Angel cannot protect his family from the struggles that come with their uncertain status, within the US and within two cultures. Early in the novel we learn how Big Angel has only one son left: "Lalo was the last of the boys. Life had taken the others" (69). The death of his (step)son Braulio has a profound effect on the family. Killed on the street in a gang shooting, Lalo can't rinse of the image of the crime scene: "*Damn Braulio*, he thought. The blood stayed on the sidewalk for days - turned brown. It was like some dead lake" (69). His mother Perla, still after ten years, is not able to make it to his grave without collapsing on the way. The gap Braulio has left within the family is made felt throughout the novel, as does the trauma of his death. Dead in his grave for almost ten years, Minnie reminds us how "The son inflated by his absence into the position of family saint" (21).

Lalo, the youngest son is unable to take up the position of Braulio as future family patriarch. Traumatized by his experiences in the US army in Iraq and his undocumented status he has to seek refuge in the house of his parents. His story reads as that of many illegal immigrants, who, while promised US citizenship come to discover that their years in the US army has not granted them legal status. Following his brother Braulio, who set up the plan to figure out the 'immigration thing', he is told by a (racist) army recruiter how he used to serve with "goddamned taco benders", and how his illegal status does not form a problem:

> Don't even say the word. I don't give a shit if you're wet or dry, if you get my meaning. *Wet* or *dry* don't matter shit to me. And it don't matter to Uncle Sam. (..) "If you are willing to fight for your nation", Sarge lied, "your nation is ready to fight for you". Son, you join up, we handle your papers. Hell when you muster out, bingo, you're American. Automatic-o (77).

Where his brother Braulio served two year and never saw combat, Lalo is severely traumatized, having lost "half his boys in that Allahu-Akbar alley" (72). Believing how his military ID was all he needed, Lalo gets in serious trouble, finding out how he is lied to: "The recruiters, the army - everybody had said what they needed to say to get one more body on the firing line" (78). And Lalo is not the only one. Lots of his homeboys, we read, fell for it: "later they were all squatting in veteran bunkers in Tijuana, wondering how they got kicked out of the country" (78). When trying to take a friend to the other side of the border, Lalo finds out how, to his surprise, he is not actually a US citizen, and is convicted for 'alien smuggling', resulting in his deportation. Whilst things were "okay in TJ" (81), he has to go back to take care of his father: giving him no other

option than crossing the border illegally: “creeping and running across the Tijuana River in the dark like some friggin’ wetback” (81).

Always watching for the border patrol, and government drones, Lalo lives in a state of unease, of being watched. His life is to be found at two sides of the border, yet this cross border life is made impossible through increased border policies. Where he first did not even needed a passport to return to the U.S, since the border consisted of “a line of wooden booths manned by Immigration and Custom agents” (284), the border has, in a post-gatekeeper era changed to a wall, protected by drones and infrared towers.

4.6 A Mexican can’t be racist to a Mexican: contradictions and hypocrisies of a family

What it means to live your life at two sides of the border is expressed by Lalo through his identification as Chicano. The term Chicano, as should be noted, is a chosen identity of some Mexican Americans in the United States, and came into existence when the political resistance among Mexican-Americans became organized and mobilized. It hereby emerged, and was embraced, as “a self-conscious appropriation of a negative term (connoting low class) as a declaration of pride and class consciousness” (Alcoff 398). That the term Chicano is contested becomes clear through Big Angel’s response to Lalo ‘speaking Chicano’: “Chále!” he said out loud. “What?” said Big Angel (..) “Are you talking like a gangster again”? (81). Explaining how instead he is speaking Chicano, using *chále* as an expression of saying ‘no’, Big Angel asks why he does not speak Spanish “like a normal human being” (81). When Lalo accuses him of racism, Big Angel simply exclaims how: “A Mexican can’t be racist to a Mexican” (81). This is not taken for granted by Lalo, who defends himself: “I’m a Chicano. I’m talking Chicano” (81). When Big Angel hints at the negative connotation of the word (“didn’t I tell you that the word

'Chicano' came from 'chicanery'" (81)), Lalo fells misunderstood. "Here we are Pops", he said, parking his father. Freakin' culture clash up in here" (81).

The idea that "Mexicans can't be racist to Mexicans", is a first touch upon the contradictions and hypocrisies that are to be found in Big Angel's Mexican-American family. In this family many of its members have the feeling not to "fit in". Lalo can't live up to the standards of his father, or his dead brother and his wife Perla feels how "I was never white enough for your father's family" (97). Witnessing most of the story through the eyes of Big Angel's half-brother Little Angel: son of a Mexican father and American mother, we learn how his decision to live far away from his family, in Seattle, is also based upon this feeling of not fitting in, not being welcome, and being watched: "He always felt self-conscious just walking in the front door of Big Angel and Perla's house like everybody else. As if he hadn't earned a membership yet to their club" (98).

Little Angel's sense of unease, of belonging and not belonging is peculiar, since this state of being is mostly expressed by Mexican-Americans who are not (allowed to) fit in the United States (Anzaldúa). To have these feelings towards his own family, point to the contradictions at the heart of the family saga of the De La Cruz family. Being called "The American" or "The Assimilator" by Big Angel, Little Angel has to endure these ambiguous nicknames or insults: "Little Angel's job was to take it and smile" (36). Overhearing how his sisters has called him "gringo-Mex", Little Angel is hereby well aware how his siblings think he is cheating the system somehow: "A culture thief. A fake Mexican. More Gringo than anything" (167). His family, Little Angel feels, does not understand that for him growing up as a Mexican kid in the United States wasn't a paradise either; being called 'tacobender', 'wetback, or 'burrito breath'. His family does not even like to speak Spanish to him, well they know perfectly well know he can. It

is, he concludes as if "each side had something to prove, and none of them knew what it was"(167).

In one of the most touching passages of the novel, in which Little Angel finds Big Angel reading the newspaper on his bed, this subject is touched upon again, yet in relation to the (universal) status of the immigrant:

> Newspapers were scattered all over the bed. Big Angel had circled an infamous picture about a hundred times. A dead toddler facedown in European surf. Drowned and cast off like a little bag of unwanted clothes. Big Angel saw Little Angel looking at it. He picked up the paper, folded it carefully, and set it on his bedside table. "Nobody wants the immigrant," Big Angel said. "He drowned, that boy". "I know." "Trying to get a new life". "I know." "Our people look like that," Big Angel said. "In the desert." *Our people.* "I'll have to think about that one," Little Angel said. It occurred to him that maybe Big Angel wasn't a Republican after all. He realized he knew very little about his big brother. "Seems like we've been here a really long time," he said. "Seems there are very few de La Cruz bodies in the desert." (...) "We're pretty much Americans now, right? I mean, this is a post-immigration family. By what, almost fifty years?" "Yeesus." "I'm still Mexican, Little Angel said. "Mexican-American?" (..) Big Angel wiped his lips. He had thought they were wet, but they were chapped. "Must be nice, Carnal," he said. "To choose who you are" (104).

In this complex conversation, compassion and empathy are shared by means of transnational memory, making the status of an immigrant into a universal one. Yet, the image of the drowned boy also brings up questions of to whom we relate (our people), as well as difficult questions of (national) identity and belonging. Instead of providing answers, Urrea delves into the

complexities of these (family) questions, and the complex relationship between brothers born in two different countries, yet sharing their multiple identity. His characters, as this passage shows, rather than inhabiting a singular identity, all contain multiple identities: Mexican, American, Republican, Mexican-American, Chicano. These identities contain contradictions and, and are not simply be caught in words or on paper. In the end, even Little Angel starts to doubt if he even knows his brothers.

4.7 (An)other Mexican-American Family

Rather than presenting a traditional family, and framing the book around the notion of a singular Mexican American identity, Urrea shows how the Mexican American community is complex, and diverse. To highlight the diversity of the Mexican American community is, as Mark Athitakis writes in the *LA Times*, of great importance in times where “alt-right rhetoric has been reducing it (Mexican-American community) to a malevolent threat” (par. 7). However, this portrayal of the Mexican-American family does not merely function to reveal racist tendencies of the ideal imagined American family. Instead, Urrea also challenges the representation and political use of the Chicano family. *The House of Broken Angels* has been critiqued for portraying a Latinx culture so exuberant that it begins to feel performative, perhaps even to the edge of caricature (Lindgren par. 7). Yet, I argue that what has been overlooked is how Urrea shows how the family is ultimately an act of performance. It hence is Little Angel who notes how “Their entire life as a family had relied on playacting” (261).

Acknowledging how the heteropatriarchal structure of the De La Cruz family has been reliant on playacting, i.e. on assumed traditional gender roles, allows us to see how new possibilities occur now that the show of Big Angel, the family patriarch, nears its end. *The House*

of Broken Angels as such provides a critical perspective on the Mexican-American family, and on how the family has functioned within Chicano consciousness and activism, undermining individuality, female authority and other ways of being. In the novel these issues are thematized around the loss of Big Angel's son Yndio. Big Angel, as we read in the novel, has lost his sons to the (American) army and gang-violence. Yet, we also learn how he has not lost but pushed away his other son Yndio[14], a "non-cisgendered, non-heteronormative cultural liberation warrior" (84). Having escaped his family, or rather Big Angel's family, Yndio secretly meets up with mother Perla and sister Minnie, but stays away from his (step)father. At the end of his life Big Angel brings up the story of Yndio to Little Angel: "I destroyed my own family." the patriarch said" (270).

Big Angel's nearing death, and his need for confession and redemption, nonetheless allow for new future possibilities. Through Big Angel's systemic collapse, he needs to be nurtured for by his wife and daughter. Yet, whilst being uncomfortable with this reversal of roles, it also reveals his growing need for intimacy, making him connect on a deeper level with his younger brother. In a touching passage of the novel this leads him to ask Little Angel why they never kiss. Discussing how kissing your mother doesn't count, but is required, Big Angel admits how he would like a kiss from his brother. This kiss, on his burning forehead, lets the brothers - despite old wounds and differences - grow closer to one another. Asking his brother to crawl into bed with him, the image of the strong patriarch is substituted with the loving image of two brothers:

[14] The name Yndio also seems to thematize the ethnic background of the De La Cruz family, it is a play upon the name Indio, meaning 'indigenious people'.

> The brothers lay side by side, shuffling through so many memories. So many imperfect scenes. It felt as though they had opened a box of old photographs, each of the pictures torn and tattered (277).

The reversal of roles within the De La Cruz family, in which the women have to take care of the 'patriarch', and sons are lost, or pushed away, as well as the growing intimate, yet complex and imperfect, bond between the (half)brothers, allows Urrea to start to render and explore an alternative Mexican American family. This family, I argue, is not an essentialist nuclear Latinx or Chicano family, as promoted through the construct of *familismo* and certain strands of Chicano machismo, but a family in which authority, may it be female or other, is not undermined by a heteropatriarchal or nationalistic ideal.

The exploration of this other Mexican American family could be understood through the notion of the queer family, a term coined by Chicana lesbian writer Cherrie Moraga in her writings. In her works, Moraga uses queerness as a lens through which to redefine culture. . In *Waiting In The Wings* (1997) she enacts this critical project through the notion of the family. Queering the Chicano structure of the family, she presents a blueprint in which queer motherhood becomes a radical place of possibility (Tatonetti 229), establishing *la familia* as a site of resistance to power (Rodriguez 7). Moraga's alternative rendering of *la familia*, Rodriguez points out, hence strives toward a utopian space that both is able to critique and sustain Chicano/a community formation as a collective consciousness. The queer family hereby takes form from the metaphor of a "Queer Aztlán", which according to Moraga, would be "A Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its jotería" (p. 147). M

The final pages of Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels*, I argue, could be read as an embrace of jotería (a term coined by Moraga to depict queer community), by which we could understand this term as not only to include different sexualities, and genders, but also nationalities and cultures. The highly performative last scenes allow Big Angel to for the last time perform his role as patriarch, and protector of the family. Yet, it is Yndio who also has to enter the stage. "Son! Save your father!" we hear Perla scream dramatically. Yndio appears out the shadows, putting an arm around his father's shoulders. Together "they fell into family theater as though they had been in rehearsal for a month" (304). Scaring away the gunman, *The House of Broken Angel*'s plot reads as the end of an action movie. Yet, rather we could read it as the reformation of a shattered family. Minnie (Big Angel's daughter) is appointed as the new family matriarch, and the family crawls together in bed. Watching this scene unfold, we get an insight in Yndio's thought, who is astonished by this sight: "This wasn't the family he remembered" (308). Showing himself hesitant, but also unable to leave, he is finally welcomed by his father: "Son", Big Angel finally said. "Why aren't you in here with me?" (308). In one of the last scenes in the novel we are provided with the image of the De La Cruz family all gathered in the bed, around the dying patriarch. The De La Cruz family, as the queering of the family structure shows, becomes a family with a transformative potential.

4.8 The Borderland as Home

In his exploration of the Mexican-American de La Cruz family, Urrea uses the notion and literary motif of the family to talk back to both Chicano and American nationalist discourses, reuniting their families through its flaws. Breaking with the conventions of the genre of the immigrant saga and the Chicano family saga, he hereby shows how Mexican Americans have

been narratively constructed to fit in the country, which in turn has limits on their (family) epic and ways of storytelling: i.e. it has restrained them to make a home. Throughout his novel Urrea hence also explores the tensions between the two spatial arenas of home and the border: revealing how the border still has a profound impact on post-immigration families, families that have been around in the United States for decades. Whereas his novel portrays and centers around a profoundly nuanced family history, this does not undermine that his novel is simultaneously spatial. Staging the family history at two sides of the border. *The House of Broken Angels* and its family narrative hereby shows how the borderland is ultimately a space of home: a place with both negative and positive connotations. Yet, this notion of home, just as Urrea's notion of the family, transcends national boundaries.

Urrea's exploration of (an)other Mexican American family, as opposed to the ideal national family, allows for a reading of his novel whereby Mexico, and particularly Tijuana is not staged as radical other but as constitutive part of the borderland of Tijuana-San Diego. The nuances of this are made clear by aunt Lupita. Watching her beloved, yet troubled and traumatized husband Jimbo, we get insights in her thoughts: "That great buffalo of a man. He had saved from Tijuana, not that anyone needed to be saved from Tijuana! Viva Tijuana! She loved Tijuana. She told herself to stop thinking like a gringa. He had saved her from poverty" (221). Perla, in her turn, is astonished by the sight of Tijuana. Originating from La Paz, a place all deserts and sea, her overwhelming impression of Tijuana is twofold: "symphonies of noise and endless swirls of dust" (39). Yet, the most amazing thing about Tijuana was something she never imagined: "the unexpected gringos" (39). Downtown Tijuana, we read, "was an endless parade of towering, noisy, apparently rich americans (...) "kids were already learning English" (39). Through these nuanced representations of Tijuana, and the celebrations of the particularities

of Mexican-American life, Urrea explores how the borderland of Tijuana-San Diego could, similarly as the other family, be potentially transformative, moving beyond binaries of nation, race and culture. To do so, we should pay attention to Urrea's transnational approach. Urrea's rewriting of the family immigrant saga and Chicano family saga, and his rejection of linking the notion of the family to a homogenous nation and national history, could be read as the rewriting of a foundational fiction into a transnational romance, or epic.

4.9 Rewriting the Transnational Romance

In her study of foundational fictions Sommer has pointed to the interconnectedness between narrative and nation-building, arguing how generations of Latin American writers and readers have produced and consumed foundational novels as part of the more general process of nation-building (117). All this assumes, she writes, "that literature has the capacity to intervene in history, to help construct it" (117). In her analysis of three, very different, foundational fictions she points out that while these novels all different, due to national and political contexts, these "national" or "historical" novels nonetheless all turn out to be love stories, romances, replete with stock characters and predictable relationship (140). Asking why the romantic novel has been promoted as the most significant discursive medium for national development, Sommer points out how evidently, an analogy was assumed between the nation and the family, and by extension between ideal history and (domestic) romance (141).

Applying the framework of the foundational novel to Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels* allows us to see how his novel could be approached as a historical romance. The familial history of Big Angel, as extensively explored in the novel, is informed and guided by his unconditional love for Perla, and his children. Big Angel's life story, and his journey from La

Paz (Mexico), to Tijuana, and eventually San Diego hence is to be read as a love story. From Perla's side of view we read how her decision to join Big Angel in the United States was also a romantic choice, yet, as the mother of two fatherless boys, also a choice by which she was risking everything. Nonetheless, Big Angel becomes her hero: "He fought anyone who insulted her or her children. He even fought off his own family's rebus and married her" (40). In his explorations of family relations, Urrea shows that what matters most is love. In his attempt to put this into words, and leave his daughter with a blessing, with "beautiful words to sum up a life" (235) Big Angel speaks: "All we do, mija (..) is love. Love is the answer. Nothing stops it. Not borders. Not death" (235).

Nonetheless, while *The House of Broken Angels* could be depicted and read as historical romance, it resists to give expression to an analogy between family and nation. Big Angel's family is Mexican-American, blended, and its history and lives are grounded within and across two countries. Acknowledging how lives become increasingly globalized, I argue how Urrea approaches the family and the familial memory through the transnational. Instead of making an analogy between a heteropatriarchal and essentialist family, and homogenous nation, Urrea explores how the queered and blended Mexican American De La Cruz family gives expression to the transnational family and transnational family life.

The transnational family, as pointed out by Zlatko Skrbiš, is a symptom of our increasingly globalized lives, which take place across borders and boundaries, and implies dynamics, flux, and change (231). In his investigation of the transnational family Skrbiš points out how emotions are central to the transnational migration experience, and the negotiation of transnational family life:

> Migrant stories are linked with the experiences of adjustment, settlement, nostalgia, a shattered sense of belonging, renewal, loss, discrimination, abrupt endings, new beginnings and new opportunities - all potent sources of emotions (236).

Emotions are central for helping us understand family life across borders, Skrbiš argues, and are a constitutive part of the transnational family experience itself. Yet, he points out, theorizations on transnational families often do not take this into account.

Alerting to the fact how migration experience is often beautifully captured through prose or poetry (241), Skrbiš hints at the imaginative potential of literature to give expression to the transnational family experience. This enables us to read *The House of Broken Angels* as a narration of the transnational experience, a rewriting of a (nationalist) foundational fictions into a transnational romance. Exploring complex transnational family ties, narrations of journeys, and paradoxes of the migration existence itself . By letting evolve his narrative around the farewell birthday party of the family patriarch Big Angel, Urrea explores the complexities of transnational family lives, by means of a reunion: a symbolic congregation of transnational family members, leading to the reformation of the De La Cruz family. In the end, as Skrbiš argues, transnational migrant involves a reconfiguration, of existing relationships with family and friends. Or, as Perla puts it: “Families came apart and regrouped, she thought. Like water. In this desert, families where the water” (40).

Rewriting the family immigrant saga, or foundational fiction, into a transnational family romance, Urrea shows how literature has the imaginative power to provide a rupture between the analogy of nation and family, and ultimately is able to give expression to the transnational family. Moreover, it gives expression to how the transnational family is making the borderlands

of San Diego - Tijuana into a home. This notion of home, just as Urrea's notion of the family, transcends national boundaries, and is inherently complex: striated with borders, cross border living, or rather a transnational life, is made impossible. Yet, Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels* reveals the possibilities and necessities of a transnational (family) life, in an increasingly globalized world.

5. Conclusion

The need to think of different formulations of borders has, in today's neoliberal context of border protectionism and the normalization of militarized borderlands, become paramount. A photograph, published on 25 June 2019 in a Mexican newspaper has captured the grim reality of the migration 'crisis', unfolding on the US-Mexico border. The images, taken on Monday 24 June show the bodies of a Salvadoran father and his 23-month-old daughter, lying face down in shallow water. The toddler's arm is draped around her father's neck, her tiny body tucked into his T-shirt. The photo ricocheted around on social media, being referred to as the potential new 'icon' of the border crisis in the United States, "It's our version of the Syrian photograph - of the 3-year-old boy on the beach, dead", representative Joaquin Castro, Democrat of Texas told the *New York Times* (Ahmed & Semple par. 8).

Already for months advocates have been warning how deaths at the border would increase now that increased US policies are making it harder for those seeking asylum to turn themselves in at ports of entry, thus being forced to cross in more dangerous areas. A history of the militarization of the border(land) has shown how these policies, as pictures as these are tempted to illustrate, nonetheless have not been created *de novo*, but have emerged from a ,gradual, intensification of measures, most specifically from Operation Gatekeeper in the 1990s.

Despite proclamations suggesting the evaporation of national boundaries in the face of intensifying globalization, Nevins, in his investigation on Operation Gatekeeper, has argued how the intensification of (military) measures at the US- Mexico border demonstrates how the state regulation of boundary enforcement and immigration is growing (6). Referring to this as the

growing gatekeeper role played by states, Nevins points out how increasing economic integration and liberalization along with immigration restriction have become complementary trends.

While the approach on the border as a way of seeing, or a way of thinking, has marked a shift in the field of border studies, and attempts to start to move beyond past paradigms and think of other formulations of borders, the deterritorial way of thinking that has emerged from this, to date stands challenged. There is truth to be found in the contention that borders have become more porous, permitting cross-border socio-economic interaction and digital interconnectedness. Nonetheless, while financial goods flow quite freely, the US-Mexico border has become harder to cross now (for unauthorized migrants) than ever, and we can observe employment of overt methods to control and limit the levels of certain types of interaction between the two countries (Nevins 6). It can be argued, Jose Palafox has argued, how, indeed, a new function of borders in a global economy might actually be to simultaneously "open" and "close" borders. This reveals a (neoliberal) logic which does not simply revolves around a distinction between humans vs economic goods, but rather differentiates between good/productive vs bad/destructive people and products. Trump's recent announcement, and threat, to place a 5% tariff on al Mexican imports to pressure Mexico to curb immigration into the US, as well as his plan to favor skilled immigrants over families, strikingly illustrates this.

The contradiction of the opening and closing of the border, theorized in the research as the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border, stresses the need for an approach that can take into account today's given geopolitical/neoliberal context and goes beyond deterritorial and territorial conceptions of borders. This is a critical project that can only unfold when combining different disciplines, methods, and theories. New entry points in the study of borders (i.e. the borderscape, the notion of hybridity and the smooth space) have expanded our notion of the

border in its deterritorial meaning(s). Through the notion of the borderscape it is brought to attention how it is indispensable to include the inhabitants of the borderland in theorizations on borders (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr). The notions of hybridity and smooth spaces moreover reveal the utopian potential of borders and border zones and their potential of producing novel cultural forms and practices (Dear & Burridge). Arguing for smooth space, i.e. the erasure of all borders (thus also mental territories) and the advent of a global citizenry, Deleuze and Guattari argue how rhizomatic thinking can lead to a break and produce lines of flight that bring about entirely new configurations. This poses an ultimate goal for the utopian thinker, i.e. to move towards a borderless world.

Through the investigation of these new entry points, and ways of thinking that have emerged around borders, it is revealed how borders are also part of an (arborescent) mentality. Through the approach on the border as a way of seeing it is revealed how territories cannot be constricted by the enclosing frame of a rigid (militarized) borderline, since the social cannot be entirely dominated. Lines, as argued by Deleuze and Guattari, will detach themselves from fuzzy borders, and introduce variations against the dominant order (Conley 99). This offers opportunities for thinking of different formulations of borders. Yet, to argue for the dissolvement of all borders, as Deleuze and Guattari have argued, is as anarchists of sorts, has little practical value, and does not provide an answer to the contextual paradox that is placed at the heart of this research.

This research has posed how the concept of the borderlands can, instead, be rethought as a critical tool of analysis, and a potentially transformative space. Borderlands are (political) spaces that exist in a territorial sense, but are also able to include large migrant communities located far from the border, and thus acquire a spatiality beyond territoriality. Borderlands give a

new sense of shape to borders. Moreover, it can also be investigated how borderlands are intrinsically bound to the lives of people, and have become part of subjectivity. To rethink the borderlands as a critical tool of analysis then means to investigate how the border both functions as a way of being and as a critical tool of the imagination.

How borders not only inform our thinking but are also to be investigated as a state of being has been argued by Étienne Balibar. In his theorizations Balibar memorably contends that the border has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has been transported to the very center of the public space, into the middle of our experience. However, his theorizations are grounded in a European context, ignoring how the politicization of borders, and the creation of borderlands are defining features of the current global conjuncture.

It is a surprising and significant gap that Balbiar's conception of the border as a state of being, and idea of the borderland, have not been explored within the context of the US-Mexico borderlands, since Chicano/a thinkers have long been exploring the borderlands as heterogeneous site of a creative and imagined homeland - Aztlán - and a state of consciousness (Arrizon; Berelowitz).In the field of Chicano/a studies the borderland has become a symbolic cultural marker, reaffirming space and identity. This research has attempted to bridge this gap, and has investigated the border as a state of thinking and being while also paying attention to the particularities of the US-Mexican context. More so than in the European context, the United States and Mexico are intrinsically bound to one another, in terms of landscape, culture, language, and people, letting emerge cultural hybridities that carry great significance. The desire in thinking of new formulations of borders, the research suggests, might then not be to wish for the dissolvement of all borders, but rather to draw new connections, to open up new spaces by transforming existing borderlines.

To transform existing borderlines, and to open up new spaces, the latter have to be made more porous before they can be erased (Conley 106). To think of different formulations of borders then first consists of a critical investigation of (existing) border discourses. The publication and circulation of the picture of the drowned Salvadoran father and his daughter strikingly illustrates this point. In *The Guardian* Peter Beaumont critically notes how images like these raise a profound challenge: how should we respond to such horror? Drawing from the work of Susan Sontag and her discussion on the appropriation of the pain of others[15], Beaumont notes how the photo places a responsibility upon us to both bear witness and *know* what we are seeing: “to protest and not simply acknowledge what we see in Le Duc’s harrowing picture requires that we do not look away; that we demand to know the context and ask the hard questions” (par. 23).

To demand to know the context and ask the hard questions, forces us to see how the borderlands are spaces which inhabit often violently contradictory differences: producing violence and death, but also enabling the emergence of new hybrids and connections. To explore the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border means to take into account and critically investigate the disjunctures of the borderland, to ask new questions, and to draw new connections. This thesis has argued how border literature provides a space to trace these connections, and gives voice to the multiplicity of lives, identities and stories that are formed through the border, and the borderlands: spaces of struggles and resilience, and places of home.

Indeed, what is missing from theorizations on borders is the ability to encounter stories on an individual human scale, and to investigate the borderland as home, in both the positive and negative connotations of the word. To suggest how border literature is a space to trace and

[15] See: Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

explore the rhizomatic connections of the borderland means to explore how border literature renders the borderland spatially, and to investigate how literary works render the borderlands as spaces of becoming. Through a literary analysis and close reading of three recent works of border literature (*The Line Becomes A River* (2018) by Francisco Cantú, *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2009, translated in 2015) by Yuri Herrera, and *The House of Broken Angels* (2018) by Luis Alberto Urrea) this research has attempted to demonstrate how the strategy of rhizomatic reading provides a methodology to operationalize the concept of the borderland, and can produce lines of flights that bring about entirely new configurations. Rhizomatic reading ultimately provides a methodological tool to investigate how border literature provides an answer to the contextual paradox (open/close) of the US-Mexico border. Moreover, it reveals the imaginative potential of literature to imagine and trace the contours of alternative or new borderlands.

The studied literary works in this research show a great variety, differing in style, genre, narrative, and are written by writers with diverse and different backgrounds (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano), as such they are illustrative for the diversity and richness of border literature. Moreover, they account for the richness and particularities of the borderland, providing different views, representations, and experiences of the border(land) and its inhabitants. To explore how they provide answers to the contextual paradox (open/closed) of the US-Mexico border, it is of importance to stress the different ways in which this project is enacted and can be approached.

In *The Line Becomes A River* the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border can be approached through a spatial reading of the borderlands as an Agambian 'zone of exception', and Cantú's personal project to reimagine his own behavior and complicity in the border patrol. In the analysis and close reading in chapter 2 Cantú's memoir is read as the literary account of

describing a process of permanent suspension, providing a spatial critique on the militarization of the borderlands, marked by the normalization of a state of exception. However, his work becomes more valuable when reading it as a heterotopia: a counter-space, that somewhat challenges or contest the space we live in. More so then only providing a spatial critique, his memoir hereby reveals how the border reflects and contest the self, and the idea of a singular identity. Approaching heterotopia as a tool of the literary imagination reveals how within *The Line Becomes A River* Cantú attempts to imagine an alternative configuration of space and being. This reveals the potentials of (another) borderland, for Cantú this is a liquid landscape and identity: a landscape where opposites, cultures, and identities flow into another.

That thinking of new formulations of border might first entail the breaking down of old barriers, beliefs, and the hollowing out of meaning has been most significantly explored in Herrera's novel. In *Signs Preceding The End Of The World* the contextual paradox of the US - Mexico border is critically addressed and revealed by Herrera, staging Makina's journey from Mexico to the United States as a vertical journey to the underworld. The journey to the underworld critically refers and reflects upon the criminalization of migrants, and border crossing, i.e. the (predefined) path and route for migrants entering an illegal economy and existence in the United States. However, it also refers to a journey to the mythical underworld (Mictlán), suggesting a transformative potential. Herrera's mythical novel, a novel deeply entrenched in Mexican culture, provides an alternative story of border crossing, and a different (spatial) sense of the border. His narrative allows for a spatial reading of the border whereby the border is no longer represented through its territorial existence, and thus a line or wall separating two distinct geographical areas, but opens up a new space between reality and myth. Rendering the process of border crossing through the process of translation Herrera shows how language

can provide a line of flight, sensing us to the end of the world as we have known it, and forcing us to think of the possibilities beyond.

In Urrea's *The House Of Broken Angels* the rewriting of the family immigrant saga into a transnational romance, allows for a critical investigation of the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border. The novel fiercely deconstructs the notion of the ideal imagined American (national) family, revealing how the border and racialized border policies still have a profound effect upon post-immigration families, such as the De La Cruz family, and Latinx communities in the United States. By enacting this project from out of the notion of a Mexican-American family, Urrea uses the notion and literary motif of the family to talk back to both Chicano and American nationalist discourses, reuniting their families through its flaws. Reading his novel as an interrogation of the heteropatriarchal representation of the Chicano/a family, it is shown how the queering of the family structure inscribes the De La Cruz family with a transformative potential. It allows for the writing of a transnational family romance, providing a rupture between the analogy of nation and family. Moreover, it gives expression to how the transnational family is making the borderlands of San Diego-Tijuana into a home that transcends national boundaries.

Through the analysis of these three varied works of recent border literature, it is shown how they render the borderlands differently in its spatial dimensions and as spaces of (personal) becoming. Reading these works as a reflection upon the contextual paradox of the US-Mexico border, it could be argued how the books provide a counter-narrative, offering different stories and representations of the borderland. In all three works the perception of the territorial and militarized border stands challenged. In *The Line Becomes A River* the securitarian logic of the US-Mexico border is put into question through a disclosure of the system iniquities, and the

moral complexities involved in upholding these laws. The border is investigated as a ‘zone of exception’: a place where laws are suspended in the name of the nation. In *Signs Preceding the End of the World* the decision of Makina’s brother to join the US army, by means of someone else’s identity, is explored as a loss of his identity and as his only option to maintain a ‘semi-legal’ status: only when passing of as another person, and fighting for a country, he is granted a place to stay. The violence that the US army enacts on (undocumented) immigrants and their families is most critically addressed by Urrea in *The House of Broken Angels*, in which both sons join the US army, leaving the only son that is still alive (Lalo) severely traumatized, and without legal status.

Nonetheless, when arguing how these novels reflect upon a paradox, it is not enough to analyze how they provide a counter-narrative against the idea and experience of a militarized, and thus closed, border. Rather, attention should be paid how these literary works themselves pose a paradox and reveal how imagined borderlands are inscribed with violence and pain, but also make new connections and open up new spaces. The strategy of rhizomatic reading enables to investigate how border literature both reflects upon existing discourses, and has the potential to form novel epistemologies of borders and borderlands, i.e. to open up new spaces. Literature, as explored by Cantú in *The Line Becomes A River,* functions as a space and tool of the moral imagination, a space where we can (de)construct new lines on which to think and imagine an alternative configuration of space; i.e. an alternative configuration of the borderland. Language and translation, can, as shown by Herrera, provide a line of flight, sensing us to the end of the world as we have known it, and enforcing us to think of the possibilities beyond. This, as explored in the analysis of *The House of Broken Angels* is a transnational world, in which foundational fictions analogous to the nation-state stand challenged, and the narration of

Mexican-American family saga allows for a rewrite into a transnational romance. Rather than reflecting upon the paradox of the US-Mexico border, the analyses of these literary works through the approach of rhizomatic reading, reveals how, in many ways, the opening up of new spaces, and the potential to trace (another) borderland, lets border literature exceed the paradox of the open and closed border.

The conclusion to this thesis can by no means be exhaustive, or account for all the lines, connections, and variations that have been traced within the literary analysis of this multivalent corpus of border literature. The different approaches and readings of this corpus are illustrative of the variety of border literature, and the richness of the borderlands. The selected corpus, and the limited temporal scope of the research can however by no means account for the heterogeneous nature and qualities of border literature. In general, tracing rhizomatic connections in a multivalent corpus of border literature perhaps leaves more out than that it can take into account. The research has investigated how border discourses resonate within a selected corpus of border literature, and how they render the borderland spatiality, and as a space of becoming. Nonetheless it has only briefly touched upon issues around identity politics, linguistics, or the background of its writers. In addition, if the concept of the borderland includes groups of migrants living far away from the border, this should encourage the decision to analyze works of literature that do not (geographically) center on and around the US-Mexico border, but are situated in different parts of the country, or world. This would broaden the scope of border literature, and enrich its corpus. If thinking of new formulations of borders asks us to make new connections, and explore possibilities of variation, these new questions should only be welcomed, suggesting and inviting for further research.

In many ways, this research has stressed the imperative for future research to think of different formulations of borders that go beyond deterritorial and territorial theorizations of borders. Having combined Balibar's theorizations on borders and borderlands, with Chicano/a thinkers conceptualization of the borderland as state of being and imagined homeland, this research has argued how this is indispensable to combine different theories and disciplines, in order to account for the disjunctures of the borderlands, and to investigate the border as a way of both thinking and being. Imagination hereby plays a crucial role: enabling a bridge between different worlds.

Having argued how deterritorial notions of borders to date stand challenged, and borderlands are facing overt methods that limit and control certain types of interaction between the two countries, border literature, and its (alternative) imaginations of borderlands circulate freely. Literature, as should be stressed, does not stop at national borders. The circulation of border literature allow the borderlands to be approached as a space of transcultural and transnational encounters, a contact-zone. Literary borderlands are deterritorial in the Deleuzian sense of resisting codification, and can be ascribed with the desire to affirm an alternative which is simultaneously uninterpretable (Deleuze & Guattari *What Is a Minor Literature* 14). Nonetheless, they reflect upon the territorial realities of a (militarized) border. To investigate the imaginative power of border literature and its ability to think of different formulations of borders, means to investigate these tensions, negotiating deterritorial and territorial views. This research has hereby shown how border literature is not mainly concerned or to be analyzed in its representation of borders, or as providing an answer to the conceptual paradox of the open and closed border, but has the transformative potential to imagine the borderlands differently: to open up new spaces, and, ultimately, new ways of being.

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