

Constructing Deadly Nature at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Introduction

‘El Camino del Diablo,’ the Devil’s Highway, snakes through the deserts of southern Arizona from the outpost of Ajo to the lively city of Yuma, closed off to the casual traveler. You have to get a permit to drive it, and even that is not always possible. When I was in southern Arizona in January 2024, the whole road was inaccessible, apparently on the missive of U.S. Border Patrol. It would have been a good drive, I was told, not too hot that time of the year, and the scenery of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, the saguaro-lined hills, and the vast untouched stretches of military land would have given me a taste of the true desert. Despite the closure and the associated warnings, he would have been happy to take me—after all, the foreboding name isn’t to be taken too seriously. In 2019, New York Times journalist Michael Benanav made the long drive, noting that while the road “may feel like a death-defying excursion into forbidding territory, it’s actually quite safe” (para. 2). The risk of death or at least serious injury by any lingering, lurking threats—rattlesnakes, ankle-breaking animal grottos, sharp cliffs, cactus spikes, old warheads buried in the earth, heat, cold, thunderstorms, sandstorms—can be easily mitigated with a well-kept car, plenty of water, and a functional GPS. Of course, these are things that the vast majority of undocumented migrants crossing up through southern Arizona do not have, and when you follow the line of the Devil’s Highway on Humane Border’s map of migrant mortality, each red dot represents a life ended by the same landscape others are able to safely spectate.

The Sonoran Desert of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States is a unique natural and social landscape, shaped into the iconic background of the Wild West and, perhaps most importantly, the setting of a longstanding political ache: the U.S.-Mexico border. The term “the Devil’s Highway” is applied to many areas in the borderlands, including the old Ajo-Yuma path, former U.S. Route 666 (for clear reasons), and the amorphous migrant trails which crisscross up from the border towards Tucson, Phoenix, Yuma. Luis Alberto Urrea’s 2004 book

The Devil's Highway documents the 2001 tragedy of the Yuma 14, where over half of a group of young migrants traveling from Mexico perished in the deserts. The book's opening depiction of the climax of the fateful journey highlights the role of the landscape not only in the literal deaths of the men but in their disorientation, their fear, stemming from intertwined reality and myth. Chupacabras and others stalk the rocky outcroppings, the gruesome ends of Spanish conquistadores become legend, and the *Cabeza Prieta* itself appears to the unsuspecting traveler:

“Suddenly, the ground split....Out of the hole rose a black human head. It glistened, either wet or made of coal, some black crystal. Its eyes were burning white....It rose until just the tops of its shoulders were visible. It cast a shadow. And it turned as it watched the traveler pass. It was laughing at him.” (Urrea, 2004, p. 14).

In many descriptions of migrants' journeys through the borderlands, such encounters with the natural and the unnatural in turn color the accounts, and in fact lead to thousands of deaths in the vast desert of the southwestern United States (De León, 2015; Smith, 2018, 2019, 2023). As much as this is a largely anticipated phenomenon when encountering an environment as intense as the Sonoran Desert, the formulation of American border policy in fact specifically weaponizes this environment to kill migrants in service of broader border enforcement and supposed migration prevention. Since the 1990s, the number of migrants who have died in the Arizonan borderlands has increased exponentially, despite increased attention on the border in the national and international perspectives. Outlining the weaponization of the environment against migrants in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, understanding how such formulations are normalized and excused in the American consciousness, and exploring the connections

between this situation and others is an important element of conceptualizing modern dynamics between nature and people. This essay will draw from my bachelor's thesis research, which was grounded in a brief period of fieldwork in Tucson, Arizona in January 2024. Using sociocultural anthropology as a primary framework and drawing from various fields, I will explore the three elements I previously outlined, building towards an exploration of environmental weaponization as a human rights issue more generally.

At the Border

The U.S.-Mexico border has been a locale of conflict for hundreds of years. From the first conquests of the region by the Spanish to the Texan revolution against Mexico to the subsequent Mexican-American War, claiming territory and settling distinctions between domains has been largely conducted through bloodshed (Alvarez, 2017). As with the rest of the Americas, the mass genocide of Indigenous American peoples underlies everything and echoes still. Neither the American nor Mexican state would exist without that foundational reality, and in many ways, the violence of the borderlands region in particular is thus construed as cyclical and perhaps inevitable. Smuggling—of goods, drugs, people—has been well-established across the border for decades. Under Prohibition, Americans would trickle into Mexican border cities like Tijuana to drink, feeding the criminal reputation of the region (Sears & Malone, 2023). The transience of the western United States in general is amplified at the border, where many are undocumented, suffering from addiction, or homeless (Baker, 2024). Beyond these social struggles, a “mythos of death” (Benanav, 2019, para. 5) permeates the stark desert landscapes, drawing from this long history and hinting an explanation for current realities.

In terms of migration, a constant at the border, the mythos of death has only been reinforced by recent developments. Since the 1990s, the number of migrants who die crossing

the border and the U.S. borderlands has grown significantly, most directly following the implementation of the border enforcement strategy Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) in 1994 (U.S. Border Patrol [USBP], 1994). The first component of PTD was the closure of urban entry ports along the border, particularly in ‘twin cities’ (such as El Paso/Juárez, San Diego/Tijuana, and Nogales Arizona/Nogales Sonora), and a crackdown of border enforcement efforts in these cities. Catching transportation further into the United States is generally far easier in urban environments, and the hardening of the border in them caused a major disruption in longstanding border flows. The second component was based around the ‘funnel effect’: migration towards the United States would not be necessarily halted by the closure of border ports or the decreasing availability of legal means of entry, and thus migration traffic would redirect to rural stretches between major cities. U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) would be unable to effectively control the entirety of the border, particularly in remote areas with rough terrain, but the very remoteness and roughness of the region would act as a virtual wall. The risk of injury, death, and essentially disappearance in the vast deserts north of the border would discourage migrants from attempting the crossing in the first place, and thereby prevent illegal migration into the U.S. overall. The core of this policy is the anticipated death of at least a portion of migrants in the borderlands—in order for the deterrence factor to take shape, some people would have to die, becoming a grim warning sign to others considering the journey (Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2007; USBP, 1994).

The effects of PTD were immediately evident. By 1997, it was already clear that the border was much more dangerous for migrants than it had ever been before, and between 1993 and 1997, at least 1,600 migrants died in the borderlands (Eschbach et al., 1999). The Tucson sector of the border saw a sharp increase in migrant deaths at the turn of the century, rising from around 14 bodies recovered per year in the 1990s to 200 bodies recovered in 2005 (Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2007). It is also generally believed that USBP and medical examiner numbers

do not match the true toll of the border, due to the difficulty of finding and recovering remains (La Coalición de Derechos Humanos & No More Deaths [NMM], n.d.-a; Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2007). Per USBP (2021) statistics, 8,049 people died crossing the border between 1998 and 2020, 2,888 of which occurred in the Tucson sector. These official numbers, plus the consideration that they are likely a severe undercount, have drawn significant attention from migration and humanitarian rights watchdog organizations, as well as generating a local network of humanitarian organizations, including No More Deaths/No Más Muertes (NMM). NMM argue that there is a purposeful crisis of disappearance and death in the borderlands engineered by broader policy and institutional activity (NMM, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

Looking at the nature of deaths paints a particular image of this humanitarian crisis. The vast majority of migrants who die in the borderlands are not directly killed by USBP. Rather, they succumb to the elements, the sweltering heat, the bitter cold, the dehydration, the rugged landscape, the wildlife. Ultimately, the cause of death for most victims of the border goes undetermined, as remains are often skeletonized. Following ‘undetermined,’ exposure is by far the most common cause of death (Koleski et al., 2022). The deadly force of the desert was known and noted in the 1994 USBP policy, which stated: “The prediction is that with traditional entry and smuggling routes disrupted, illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement” (p. 7). This is following the acknowledgement that “illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger” (p. 2). Knowing the 2,000-mile border would be impossible to effectively patrol, to block with a wall, the best remaining option was to use the landscape of the borderlands as the weapon itself—where the temperatures, the ground, the lack of water, the lack of cell service, and the unpredictable weather conditions would do the dirty work.

Understanding the migrant death crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border as a sort of environmental issue is crucial to best understanding its sociopolitical formulation. Border issues and respondent policy has dominated American politics and public discussion for years, particularly since the 2016 presidential election and President Donald Trump's anti-migrant, build-the-wall rhetoric. As the next election approaches, the issue of border securitization remains pressing, and President Joe Biden has already begun taking a harsher stance on migration in preparation (Gambino, 2024). As much as humanitarian organizations have indeed drawn attention to the issue at hand, little has been done on a structural level to address or mitigate it. There is no official or central structure for ensuring migrant rights or even investigating the true extent of the crisis. Bringing broader and more critical attention to migrant death in the borderlands is central in combatting it, but based on my own observations in Tucson, the issue isn't necessarily of a lack of knowledge about the issue, but rather a cultural and discursive normalization of it. This normalization—and the role of normalization in excusing or justifying the deaths of thousands of migrants on a regular basis—is largely conducted through the naturalization of the crisis. Having briefly outlined how nature and environment is not only practically hostile towards migrants in the borderlands but indeed knowingly utilized as a weapon, it is necessary to connect this to broader trends in the American consciousness.

Exploitation, Conservation, Militarization, Mythicization

Nature, land, environment, and their preservation are strong components of American national identity. In the 19th century, Frederick Jackson Turner developed his famous thesis on the American frontier, wherein Turner argues the American is made specifically through the interaction of the European with the wilderness of the continent (1920). The frontier, which is practically the entire American West and perhaps the entire country, is a unique social zone to

Turner, where the struggle of developing complex civilization out of the “primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier” (p. 2) defines social fabric and individual identity. While much of the conquest of the continent and its thorough colonization were based around an idea of wrangling, taming, and organizing the wilderness—as with most modern state-making projects (Scott, 1998)—the 19th century also saw the birth of a preservation and protection movement. The establishment of National Parks, alongside other forms of environmental protectorates, is the foremost example of this era (Mackintosh, 1999). Such protectorates were formed under a specific ontological understanding. In the 1964 Wilderness Act, ‘wilderness’ is defined as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (p. 2), distinctly placing ‘man’ and ‘nature’ in opposing camps.

There seems to be a tension between some of these elements—conquering nature versus preserving it, the American as made through nature versus the human as separate from it. Recognizing these contradictions or tensions in our conceptualization of natural spaces and human existence is necessary to understanding how human relationships with nature are evolving today. The dramatic and dangerous changes to our planet brought about by climate change bring the damaging power of modernist conceptions of nature into sharp relief. But what exactly is this modernist conception?

The most obvious opinion of nature in the modern West and more generally the modernist worldview is nature as a resource for exploitation. Anthropologist Jack Thornburg (2016) argues that “Western culture’s relationship to the natural world has been one of either ambivalence or hostility” (p. 2), but that only more recently in the course of history has humanity gained the technological power and developed the social mindset which allowed it to not only comprehend but manipulate the natural world quite thoroughly. Particularly, the rise of consumer demand in the 19th century combined with the capabilities of the industrial

age led to a dramatic increase in the amount of resource exploitation on the global scale. Inextricable here is the role of colonialism and the form of natural exploitation nearly ubiquitous within it, as well as the associated global proliferation of ordered and segmented space (Fanon, 2001; Whyte, 2018). The manipulation and exploitation of land and natural resources, and the ability to excuse or ignore the ill-effects of such behaviors on the environment, have been the central currency of industrialization. Associating these issues with humanitarian or human rights abuses is resultant and necessary. Environmental degradation, the loss of land or resources, and the decimation of indigenous or longstanding local knowledge and practice have been increasingly considered human rights issues (Gilbert, 2013; United Nations Environment Programme, 2015). Concern over this particular worldview and habitual interaction with nature has been necessary in global responses to climate change, particularly when addressing behaviors which have generated rapid environmental degradation. The dramatic and often unequal effects of climate change on people have also led to much critique of this conceptualization, as is evident in the drive for incorporating indigenous knowledge and perspective on nature in research and action (Whyte, 2018).

Another, less-addressed view of nature in the West—one which I argue in part generates and legitimizes the exploitative view—is the preservationist standpoint. Yrjö Haila (2012) explores the political component of nature conservation movements, tracing a genealogy of thought from Enlightenment philosophy, addressing “how nature has one a place in the normative order of modern societies” (p. 30). Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers promoted individualist and rationalist views of humanity, thus positioned as distinct from the unpredictable, irrational wilderness, such as in Cartesian dualism or Francis Bacon’s works (Blum, 2018). On the other hand, other contemporaries expressed an anxiety over the limitations of humanity in nature, such as Thomas Malthus (1998), who believed the “all pervading law of nature” (p. 5) to constrain human existence. Out of this anxiety, as well

as a general social response to the changes of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic view of nature arose, built on the view that “nature was not only to be exploited; nature was also to be adored” (Haila, 2012, p. 33). But this view was not delinked from the rationalist perspective, and while they harped on the transformative spiritual power of nature, humanity was placed in a separate camp from the natural world. Interaction with nature was positive, and thus nature ought to be preserved, but this interaction was sanctioned rather than integral. Importantly, Romantic views of nature and subsequent preservation movements aligned with the growth of nationalism in Europe and the United States, where “nature was constructed as an important part of the symbolic cultural self-image of the gradually consolidating nation-states” (p. 34). Particularly, younger states with a higher need for unifying cultural forces focused on their natural landscapes as a source of pride. This is especially evident in the United States, demonstrated by Turner’s frontier thesis, which essentially argued that land and the social experience of wilderness is the core of American-ness.

But the definition of wilderness outlined earlier is a very particular view of nature, and one which is heavily contested both for its practical insensibility and for its problematic connotations. For one, nature is not ‘untouched,’ both in the sense that the natural environment has been almost unilaterally affected by human activity at this point and in that humans are a part of nature and for a great majority of human history lived (if not symbiotically than at least in known interdependence) with the natural world from which it has been divided in the modern West. Second, this preservationist view promotes the idea that nature and humanity *can* be separated, which is fundamentally at odds with human existence and when considering the consequences of the Anthropocene. Movements for protecting and defending natural areas or wildlife or endangered species are admirable in their intention and often have many positive effects, but these elements of their historical roots and philosophical arrangements ought to be considered. While nature preservation is of course seen very positively by many, it exists in

tandem with rampant exploitation of natural resources, and the human/nature distinction perpetrated by longstanding conservationist approaches could arguably complement extractive/exploitative perspectives. Haila (2012) argues that these tensions or “mutually contradictory interpretive frames” (p. 29) lead to ambivalence in the politics of nature, and while ambivalence for Haila is an opportunity for productive change, I argue it can also create a space where covert exploitation is possible. This is particularly evident at the U.S.-Mexico border, where the romantic image of the deserts of the American West, with towering saguaro cacti and purple mountains and vast plains, drove for environmental protection throughout the 20th century. The Cabeza Prieta refuge was established in 1939 and Saguaro National Park, just outside Tucson, was established in 1994.

This movement for environmental protection, and in fact the veneration of the Sonoran Desert more generally, has economic and cultural bases as well. In Tucson, much of the city’s tourism marketing revolves around the easy access it provides to a variety of nature reserves, and thus constructs an idea of a pristine landscape just beyond the comfortable boundaries of the city itself (Prytherch, 2002). The dramatic vistas and harsh conditions of the desert make it an influencing force on both everyday life and overarching culture in Tucson—the city’s bus stop shelters are held up by metal saguaro, the highway underpasses are decorated in prickly pear reliefs, and downtown is washed in colorful murals of the desert’s flora, fauna, and people. The general association between land, environment, and identity in the United States is concentrated particularly the image of the American Wild West (Paul, 2014), and Tucson is the setting for its last vestiges. Maintaining the image of a wilderness, a frontier, is thus necessary for its economic and social maintenance. Wilderness, and the idea of an untouched space more generally, is threatened in southern Arizona by the infrastructural development of and increased attention on the border and border enforcement.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the border was a developing sore spot. For decades, the Bracero Program had created the opportunity for legal, seasonal, cyclical migration between the United States and Mexico, but increased anti-migrant and anti-Mexican discourse led to its end in 1964 (Massey et al., 2016). Paralleling national crime crackdowns and the criminalization of marginalized communities, migrants were construed as ‘illegal aliens’ and legal immigration became more difficult. Under President Ronald Reagan, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) strengthened border patrol and enforcement capabilities. Prevention Through Deterrence was a direct culmination of patterns of criminalization and militarization at the border, serving as an escalation of anti-migrant sentiment. Concurrently, the border was becoming militarized. Lisa Meierotto (2014) explores the dynamics between conservation and militarization through the example of the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, which rests along the Devil’s Highway to the west of Ajo, Arizona and to the south of the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, where bombing tests are conducted. Meierotto investigates “the hybrid construction of nature- and nation-building in the American borderlands” (p. 638), where the urges to securitize the border and to protect the unique landscape of the Sonoran Desert come into direct conflict. Militarization, and in fact the existence of the border in the first place, has direct and significant effects on the environment, such as habitat fragmentation and pollution.

The increasing development of border infrastructure since the 1990s and a rise in migrant traffic through the remote areas of the borderlands has drawn yet more attention to nature conservation in the borderlands. One of the overt displays of the connections between migration and conservation is concern over pollution and environmental degradation due to migrant traffic. Jason De León (2015) notes an association between migrants and trash, both regarding items they leave behind in the desert and the polluting force migrants have on the environment, the nation at large: “migrant ‘trash’...has become the physical evidence used by

anti-immigration activists to demonstrate that Latino border crossers are destroying America” (p. 170). Sarah Hill (2006) explores the discursive construction of migrants as uncontrollable natural forces, “deluges” or “surges” across the border (p. 785), marring the fragile desert environment. Here, it is clear how militarization and conservation, though seemingly at odds with each other, can enter into the same space, as Meierotto (2014) explores—both protect the Self against the Other, nature and the nation becoming one, and the migrant poised as a dangerous, polluting enemy to both.

Paralleling or underlying the American narrative of the frontier and the wilderness space more generally is the idea of nature as dangerous. Particularly, scholars investigating the logics of colonialism and thus the elements of post-Enlightenment philosophy which generates it have discussed the formation of the wilderness (or the jungle) as a space of savagery. Gautam Basu Thakur (2016) has investigated British literature on colonial India, where the land of colony is positioned as both picturesque/pure and grotesque/violent. In a moment, the venerated space which ought to be protected and preserved (of course, following the necessary extraction of its resources) can bare its teeth and bite. Basu Thakur terms this tension ‘necroecological,’ evoking the anthropological idea of a ‘space of death,’ which Michael Taussig (1984) explores. Taussig confronts endemic political violence in Latin America, tracing it back to the colonial encounter with the landscape, which to European colonizers seemed unpredictable and irrational and terrifying, justifying the exertion of extreme violence on colonial subjects. The imagined savagery of the indigenous populations of colonial states was represented by the irrational, wild, and untamable jungles, thus necessitating extreme, preemptive action against them. In Putumayo’s rubber forests, “the European and colonist image of the primeval jungle with its vines and rubber trees and domination of man’s domination stands forth as the colonially apt metaphor of the great space of terror and deep cruelties” (p. 483). This imagined (or projected) violent character of indigenous peoples is in

reality the phenomenon of the ‘colonial mirror,’ Taussig argues, “which reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonize” (p. 495). In colonial states or situations, this mirroring phenomenon is so intense that it creates a new social space—the space of death, which is born out of and projected upon the very land and environment which is venerated and economically exploited by the colonial relationship.

In the case of the United States, which we must remember is foremostly and centrally a settler colony, the space of death is related intensely to the “mythos of death” (Benanav, 2019, para. 5). Turner’s frontier was a risky place to be, just as nature is generally constructed as dangerous or untamed, and the American landscape can be primed to kill. Paul Christensen (2008) looks to the role of violence in the construction of nation and national identity, arguing that the myth of the unified national Self is fundamentally constructed through the destruction of the Other, to the point that to lack an enemy to destroy is to kill the nation (p. 312). In the case of the United States, Christensen points to Richard Slotkin’s (1973) notion of ‘regeneration through violence,’ which positions the violence of expansion on the American West as fundamental to the construction of the American Self. When also considering the deep connections between the idea of the (Wild) West and its landscape, and particularly the iconic image of the saguaro-studded deserts which comprise the borderlands, the idea of these spaces as violent is explicable. The zone of transformation for the Turnerian settler is fundamentally a zone of confrontation with wild, unpredictable, and hostile terrain and environment, which perhaps operates on behalf of the abstract ‘savage’ who inhabits the void into which the state expands. The process of America’s colonization of the entire continent was a metaphorical and often literal wrangling of nature for economic gain, but as we know, nature tends to fight back. It lashes out in droughts, tornadoes, great floods. Bubbling Yellowstone or the craggy Rocky Mountains are insurmountable, unconquerable, but they are segmentable.

The Sonoran Desert is undeniably a practically dangerous landscape. It is easy to get injured or die as a result of its conditions, but millions of American citizens live safely and happily in those very conditions. Residents and tourists alike can safely trek through mountains and dry washes where migrants die on the regular; they can even drive the Devil's Highway itself with little risk. So, it's not that the land is inhabitable—it's that its more hostile elements have been directed away from some and towards others. But what else could be expected from a violent landscape? A thus revered and protected landscape?

Naturalizing Death at the Border

Through this discursive cultural construction of a violent natural space, the deaths of migrants who attempt to cross the borderlands may appear inevitable. The very landscape of the nation is founded on violence, and this violence feeds the national Self. Nature is hostile, and though it ought to be preserved in its fearsome beauty, unsanctioned entry into it will lead to an untimely demise. Considering these notions helps rectify the tension between competing tendencies in the borderlands—the centrality of and veneration for the natural landscape, and the fact that this landscape has been used as a deadly weapon against thousands of migrants with little mass public concern—by rendering them compatible. In Tucson, I was told that people had been dying in the desert for thousands of years, and migrants were just a new demographic. And the migrants pollute, both the land and the nation, and therefore the hostility they experience is not only inevitable but perhaps deserved. The tension dissolves into a social ambivalence for the cruel reality of mass human rights violations at the border, allowed for the abject weaponization of the land and the environment. I argue this constitutes a naturalization of death at the border.

I use 'naturalizing' here in a double sense: first, naturalization as normalization, or the construction of a certain phenomenon as regular and in fact possibly inevitable; and second,

naturalization as assigning to natural and environmental forces. The first strand of naturalization in the case of the migrant death crisis is the assignation of said crisis to overarching socio-historical patterns of violence and destruction on the American frontier, and the constructive role of these patterns in American national identity. The second is based in the central position of nature in the idea and experience of the American West, the view of this natural landscape as wild and hostile, and the ambivalent relationships between nature conservation and border militarization.

Combatting this naturalization is not easy. Much of the work of humanitarian organizations and scholars since the 1990s has been to argue that the migrant death crisis is in fact not a natural (in both senses) phenomenon but rather an engineered technology of the state, and that it thus ought to be thoroughly addressed. *No Más Muertes*, in an extensive report in collaboration with La Coalición de Derechos Humanos, beseeches readers to consider the crisis of disappearance which surrounds the official death toll of PTD. (NMM, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d). Fundamentally, they argue, the known ineffectiveness of PTD and in fact its logical incoherence (given the strength of push factors for migration through the Americas) means that the “goal of prevention is an illusion, [and] the means of contemporary border policy amounts to a campaign of state violence against migrating peoples” (NMM, n.d.-a, p. 9). The surrender of migrants to the whims of the desert amounts to a social abandonment, and in fact a roundabout death sentence, facilitated on many levels, ranging from the actions of individual USBP agents to federal policies to national discourses.

Scholars have illuminated the dynamics of this crisis through theoretical explorations, utilizing Michel Foucault’s biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben’s state of exception and bare life most significantly (Apatinga, 2017; Doty, 2007, 2011; Dowle, 2017; Estévez, 2014, 2021; Sherwood, 2018). In my bachelor’s thesis, I argued for the application of Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics in understanding the migrant death crisis. Mbembe (2019) draws

heavily from Franz Fanon's (2001) exploration of the space and violence of the colony, arguing that the structures of modernity and particularly the democratic state are founded on (and maintain) relations of colonial violence. The spatial component of states is clear, and the role of nature in national myths has been well-established, and Mbembe adds the notion of 'topographies of cruelty,' of which borders are a primary example. "They are no longer merely a line of demarcation separating distinct sovereign entities. Increasingly, they are the name used to describe the organized violence that underpins both contemporary capitalism and our world order in general" (p. 99).

The U.S.-Mexico border is a clear example of such violent borders. As No Más Muertes has argued, PTD essentially legitimizes a regime of violence against migrants who are already heavily stigmatized and criminalized in the United States, and the utilization of the natural characteristics of the borderlands to enact it allows for this to happen quite covertly. However, this is not an isolated phenomenon, and understanding the migrant death crisis in the United States allows for a broader consideration of not only migrant human rights but the relationship between environments and human rights more generally.

Environment as a Weapon

Charles Travis (2024) argues that environmental characteristics have been an element of human conflict throughout recorded history. Of course, the array of forces or formations which can be considered environmental is massive, and this leads to innumerable uses of them for human purposes. Knowledge of and dominance over a particular natural scape is often crucial in establishing power, like the Mongols and the Eurasian Steppe (p. 33) or the early modern Spanish navy (p. 45). Another is the utilization of natural phenomena to weaken an opponent, such as in the American Revolution, where the harsh weather conditions weakened British foot soldiers on the rebels' behalf (pp. 65-6). Nature also becomes a fear tactic, such as in the U.S.-Vietnam War, where the jungles disguised tunnel complexes and melted away only to the

power of Agent Orange, not only shaping the course of the war but psychologically impacting its combatants (pp. 135-7).

Now, as the effects of climate change are increasingly evident and impactful around the globe, new perspectives on the weapon potential of environmental elements have arisen. Environmental racism is one such notion, which has drawn attention to the relationship between environmental degradation, its effects, and broader social configurations (Davies, 2018; Opperman, 2019). Following this sort of association between environmental issues and sociopolitical structures it is evident that climate change has disproportionate effects on certain areas of the world and thus specific populations (World Bank, 2023). This vulnerability spectrum is not coincidental, in fact largely overlapping with the lines of economic development—lines which can be neatly traced to colonial boundaries (Escobar, 1995). Scholars have begun to explore the weaponization of vulnerability to increasingly hostile economic conditions. Kimberley Anh Thomas and Benjamin P. Warner (2019) argue that this weaponization tendency transforms threatened groups into threats themselves—climate refugees become criminal migrants, for example—thus excusing their social marginalization and legitimating the disproportionate effects of climate upon them (pp. 8-9).

At the U.S.-Mexico border, though, I observe something which transcends even these tendencies. The discursive formation of a space of violence, an obsession with the sanctity of the nation, and the criminalization of largely poor, non-white migrants from Latin America comes into play with an already hostile stretch of land, facilitating and then downplaying a massive humanitarian crisis. While indeed drought and extreme heat have made the Sonoran Desert increasingly dangerous since the 1990s, the actual risk factor of the changing environment is not the operative issue here. Rather, it is the known and purposeful weaponization of it against an ‘undesirable,’ polluting population. Representation is a powerful force, as Arturo Escobar (1995) argues—Escobar explores how representations of a ‘Third

World' have justified decades of ineffective and neocolonial interference in the name of development (pp. 214-5). Here, similar representations of space, nature, and people have justified a paradigm of noninterference with a crisis which is at its root man/state-made.

It is necessary and vital that we begin to consider such weaponizations of environment in service of sociopolitical violence as not only a growing possibility, given the dramatic changes in the climate we have already begun to see, but as a preexisting reality. While major strides to protect and conserve nature have been made since the beginning of the Romantic environmentalist period, that reality is in fact not in conflict with but rather intertwined with such weaponization. The case of the United States' border enforcement strategy illuminates how the callousness of actual government or structural practice can be easily overlooked, normalized, or even outright justified at the social-discursive level. In the borderlands, a space of death overlaps directly with a space that is not only accessible to but the average citizen but profitable to the local community, whose identity largely surrounds the image and experience of the Sonoran Desert. Conservation of nature is not enough to prevent inhumane effects on people—rather, more nefarious human relations with nature must be confronted. To this day, outcry against death in the borderlands is rather contained and minor in comparison to the national panic surrounding illegal migration. De-naturalizing this crisis is only possible once we understand how the United States government has utilized an indeed hostile but ultimately neutral force to its own ends, and such explorations can lead us to better track how this sort of practice is conducted on a larger scale.

The Border and Beyond

In this essay, I have explored the modern American border enforcement policy Prevention Through Deterrence and how it weaponizes the landscape and climate of the Sonoran Desert against migrants. I have attempted to illustrate how the discursive positioning of nature as

hostile, distinct, and untamable has contributed to the American frontier mythos and subsequently created a space of death in the borderlands. I have gestured to connections between this example of environmental weaponization and the naturalization of death and state violence and broader historical patterns. Finally, I have argued for a more direct confrontation with such weaponization.

Human rights violations can be perpetrated through or behind the screen of nature, and I argue that this tendency should be investigated critically not only at the U.S.-Mexico border but beyond. Another infamous border could likely draw similar critique—the European Mediterranean border—as well as patterns of weaponization of famine and disease (fundamentally environmental issues as well) in warfare and oppression, such as now in Sudan. Confronting this uncomfortable but pressing reality is necessary to developing better human rights mechanisms as well as coming to better respect and value our increasingly fragile natural environment, as well as to recognizing how the two are inextricably linked. The deep connections between common social philosophies which have persisted over the last several centuries (and successfully justified extensive human rights violations in the past) and this weaponization tendency may not be so easily unwound, but identifying and addressing the purposeful weaponization of environments against people around the world can strengthen human rights conditions both at the border and beyond.

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