

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Isolation and Intimacy in the Sonoran Desert: A Migrant's Account

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In Arizona, most migrants who die en route also die in isolation. They lose their group, the trail, whatever final belongings they may be carrying. Even if they can hear a highway or see city lights, the distance between *aquí* and *allá*, or *here* and *there*, often kills them. By design, that distance is almost always the Sonoran Desert, which stretches from the Gulf of California, through Sonora, Mexico, and up into central Arizona.

There are many ways to chart this region's geography. In this essay, I consider the value and shortcomings of migrant death maps before appealing to Javier Zamora's poetry as a literary example of mapping this humanitarian crisis as also ecological in nature. While witnessing violence against humans in Southern Arizona remains important to exposing and challenging government policy, I contend that accurately navigating this landscape requires attention to how it both isolates beings, and also puts them into intimate relation with one another. The more one learns about the desert, the more one recognizes it as an endangered home and community, not simply a mass grave.

Since the United States' implementation of the 'Border Patrol Strategic Plan: 1994 and Beyond,' approximately 7,500 people have died or disappeared while crossing this landscape by foot (Colibrí Center for Human Rights 2020). Such violence is largely due to the plan's strategy of 'prevention through deterrence,' which heightens militarization and surveillance at major entry corridors such as San Diego, California and Nogales, Arizona. By weaponizing the Sonoran Desert as 'more hostile terrain,' U.S. Border Patrol intentionally pushes traveling migrants into rural areas that will increase their chances of apprehension, as well as death (U.S. Border Patrol 1994).

‘By design, not by nature.’ Such has become my internal refrain every time I see a map of Southern Arizona related to this ongoing crisis. In March of 2019, I co-led a university trip wherein students and I met with various on-the-ground actors, including border residents, patrol agents, activists, and unauthorized day laborers. Depending on the actors’ differing interests, they referenced maps foregrounding border wall construction, military checkpoints, humanitarian aid stations, or, most commonly, the discovery of human remains.

Throughout this trip, we saw at least three versions of Humane Borders’ ‘Map of Migrant Mortality,’ which marks the location of these remains with little red dots (Humane Borders). Dr. Gregory Hess, who is Chief Medical Examiner for Pima County and partner in this map’s creation, projected it while emphasizing that some dots represent more than one death, and many migrant deaths are not represented at all. According to Hess, at least half of all migrant corpses in this area likely remain unfound, while about a third of those found remain unidentifiable (Hess 2019). When Hess proceeded to show graphic slides of how the desert climate can both disperse and desiccate corpses, effectively preserving them as mummies, I saw many of my students look away.

‘By design, not by nature,’ I wanted to interject. But the damage had already been done, and it would end up being done more than once. ‘Damage’ may not be the best word to use here, though I am using it to name a process wherein my students’ physical experience of a place was reduced to one of harm. That harm wasn’t their own but, rather, that inflicted through the many injustices we were there to witness. When we met Dr. Scott Warren, a geographer and humanitarian aid worker, he was still on trial for two felony harboring counts and one conspiracy to transport count. Unable to talk about the details of his case, which involved tending to migrants and eventually ended in acquittal, he used the same aforementioned map to illustrate the difficulty of successfully traversing this landscape by car, let alone foot. For example, the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range between Yuma and Tucson consists of 1.9 million acres of Sonoran Desert used for active military drills. Though entered regularly by unknowing pedestrian migrants, this range regularly refuses entry to research-activists like Warren, who are keen to garner more accurate death counts.

‘Maps like these are not neutral. They reflect power,’ Warren emphasized (Warren 2019). This was his own version of ‘by design, not by nature,’ which he used to explain colonialism and its legacy within this region. Such ideas certainly made sense to my students and me, though I was already growing weary of all the maps, dates, and statistics on this trip. As a literary scholar, I was in need of a narrative: one that challenged the idea that this landscape, the very same one in which I grew up, was predominantly experienced as desolation and despair. In other words, I needed a story that wasn’t *just* about death in the Sonoran Desert.

When Maria Singleton, an artist and activist in Ajo, Arizona, invited me to participate in an interactive version of Humane Borders’ ‘Map of Migrant Mortality,’ this need became even more pronounced. In this context, map viewers chose a red dot, reviewed its information, and then positioned it accordingly. My dot read, ‘18-1740, Santos Ramírez Martínez (39), 6/30/2018, Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge.’ I placed it in the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge section of the painted plywood map and, in theory, humanized Santos

Ramírez Martínez a bit. Such humanization, I know, is indeed important. In practice, however, I still felt an overwhelming sense of insufficiency. Though I now knew this person's name, age, and place of death, I still had no idea of how they might have mapped their own migration experience. 'How did they navigate the desert? What did they see in it, and what did it see in them?,' I wondered.

My interrogative yearning for a story was really a need for another type of map. When I placed that handheld dot onto that enlarged migrant death map, I was literally *across* the street from one of the three remote entrances to Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. In that moment, I was living on the same land that Santos Ramírez Martínez once was living and, shortly thereafter, also dying. The land, more than anything, had the potential to connect us. And acknowledgment of that potential, I realized, was precisely what I perceived to be missing from the many iterations of Humane Borders' 'Map of Migrant Mortality.'

Witnessing is an act of connection. It requires presence. When migrants perish all alone in the desert, therefore, the desert is their only witness. As a body becomes a corpse, mesquite trees may offer some final shade, with stoic saguaro cacti standing by. A quail family might also scutter through, in company with bumbling tree beetles and a lone carpenter bee. Given that most migrants die while crossing in the summer, however, a human's moment of death is most commonly marked by absence: the absence of water, as well as any respite from excessive heat. Such absence literally defines the desert, as it is a landscape with fewer than 10 inches of annual rainfall and etymologically derived from *deserere*, meaning 'to leave and forsake.'

According to government policy, much public discourse, and even the aforementioned maps, the desert *deserts*. It is not a witness but, at best, an accomplice and, at worst, the assassin itself. There are, of course, also maps that plot the desert's own victimization. For example, Defenders of Wildlife has made multiple maps of how ongoing border wall construction will block already imperiled wildlife corridors, including those of the jaguar, Sonoran pronghorn, and Mexican gray wolf (Wilcox and Bird 2020). But dominant framing of the border crisis as first and foremost a humanitarian crisis means that violence against plants, animals, and humans rarely make the same map. Even as maps such as Humane Borders' 'Map of Migrant Mortality' make a point of being representative and inclusive, therefore, they do implicitly endorse the idea that humans suffer *on account* of the desert, not *alongside* it. Such misunderstanding is indeed harmful, as it is precisely what allows the U.S. Border Patrol's 'prevention through deterrence' strategy to continually exploit this landscape as an alibi for systemic cruelty.

When my students look at the maps of this strategy's effects, especially under the guidance of experts like Hess, Warren, and Singleton, they eventually learn to see these thousands of migrant deaths as entirely unnatural. My perhaps unique hope, however, is that they also learn to see, and experience, this Arizona geography as involving harm *and* harbor, isolation *and* intimacy. For landscapes, like humans, are complex and even contradictory. And my hypothesis, born of this university trip to the border, is that narrative maps, though largely metaphorical, represent such complexity better than many of the visual maps in circulation.

Unlike most of the students on this trip, I had read multiple fictive and non-fictive accounts of migration in this region beforehand, including Luís Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004), Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* (2015), Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017), and Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River* (2018). Because of this, I had a stocked imagination, not just lists of information, to shape my physical experience of the sites we visited. In my head, I most often returned to Zamora's *Unaccompanied*, a collection of poems about the author's border crossing at age 9. Given the title, one might expect this book to emphasize the desert's isolating, *not* accompanying, nature. But Zamora actually self-identifies as a nature poet who knows better (Kingsley-Ma 2018). That is, he knows to think of plants and animals as peers and partners, not just potential threats.

Zamora is from San Luis La Herradura, a small beach town outside of San Salvador, El Salvador. In an interview published in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, he recalls the daily juxtaposition of human violence and natural abundance there, where gang warfare and institutional impunity caused people to fall dead in broad daylight, right among the tropical fruit trees, lush mangroves, and flocks of pet chickens. Yet, in El Salvador, and also en route to California, he claims to have seen more 'beauty' than 'danger.' As he states, 'It's only after growing up that I began to realize, oh shit, I was so close to death. You know, having cravings in the desert because you're hungry and thirsty is not a beautiful thing' (Kingsley-Ma 2018).

*Unaccompanied* is not about beauty; it's about processing the place-based trauma of migrating as a minor without any adult supervision. When Zamora returned to Tucson nearly two decades after having crossed the nearby mountains on foot, and a month after publishing this book, he realized that such processing is necessarily ongoing. Feeling his trauma anew while in Arizona, he states, 'It was because of the climate, heat, landscape. Those were the saguaros that I had seen, the immigration helicopters that I heard. And so many people acting as if nothing was happening' [my translation] (Gúzman n.d.).

For Zamora, land is clearly central to witnessing the migrant experience. Yet, he depicts a desert that does more than simply demand attention; it actually reciprocates it. I'm calling this reciprocity a form of intimacy because it entails mutual understanding, and even care. In 'Saguaros,' Zamora notices bats flying across a dusky lavender sky only to encounter the same obstructive 'barbwire and barbwire [sic]' that walking migrants do (Zamora 2017: 7). These bats are likely the lesser long-nosed species, which flies up from Mexico every spring to drink from saguaro cactus blooms. When a bat tells Zamora, 'saguaro blood seduces us' [my translation], he relates by stating, 'I also scraped needles first, then carved those tall torsos for water.' Yet, as Zamora drinks, border patrol helicopter 'spotlights' drive him and 'thirty others dashing into paloverdes.' In this line, and in this poem, humans notably remain more anonymous than the plants that provide them with sustenance and shelter.

To natives of the Southwest, naming such plants may seem like a no-brainer. But it's important to remember that Zamora has never lived in Arizona; he's just gone there before, many times, and mostly in his memory. In 'Jumping Cholla Cactus,' he imagines the perspective of a cholla cactus who has watched many world-weary migrants 'come and go' (Zamora 2016). The cactus laments being brushed by humans, which causes it to release its 'silvery-yellow spines' as a form of self-protection. '¿by what logic do you pull yourself out,

like you pull us out of your skin?,' it wonders, notably mixing English words and Spanish punctuation. In other words, by what logic do you continually expose yourself to the dangers of the desert? And when there is danger, the cactus adds, '¿shouldn't you cast a part of yourself out?,' just as it does. Zamora never answers these questions. Ultimately, however, this cactus positions itself as a keen listener and sympathetic witness who, like migrants themselves, 'hears the voices of your legs asking how they got this far.'

Fluctuating between identification and dissociation, 'Saguaros' and 'Jumping Cholla Cactus' together demonstrate how Zamora refrains from collapsing the human and nonhuman. He's merely showing them to be in relation. Yet, this small gesture directly undermines the 'more hostile terrain' stereotype that allows the U.S. Border Patrol to scapegoat the desert with its 'prevention through deterrence' strategy (U.S. Border Patrol 1994). As a stereotype, this idea is rooted in ignorance about foreign policy; domestic policy; and the Sonoran Desert as a naturally transnational landscape.

In 'The Book I Made with a Counselor My First Week of School,' Zamora illustrates the danger of this ignorance through shock, as well as subtlety. Describing a collection of his childhood drawings that had been captioned by a school counselor, he writes, 'Next to what might be yucca plants or a dried creek: *Javier saw a dead coyote animal, which stank and had flies over it*' (Zamora 2017: 8). The tentative labeling here suggests that the drawings, to be fair, may have been indecipherable. But the shock value comes in the poem's closing line, wherein Zamora reveals, 'I just smiled, didn't tell her, *no animal, I knew that man.*' As an initial response, readers likely judge this counselor as being woefully uninformed about the common traumas of border crossing. Yet, upon further consideration, or perhaps their own encounter with an image of this same landscape, readers might experience a similar difficulty with such identification.

Do a coyote and human corpse really look that different after dispersal and decay? And is one death inherently more tragic than another? In the desert, it is often hard to name what's still there, let alone what's already been lost. I watched my students continually struggle with this during our trip together, which is partially why I wished I had assigned them more preparatory reading. Had they read Zamora's *Unaccompanied*, they might have recognized more plants, more animals, and more aspects of their own interaction with the surrounding landscape.

Naming, of course, isn't essential to witnessing. If it were, we would have no way to acknowledge the thousands of unidentified migrants killed in this border crisis, or the plant and animal species that may have disappeared before they were even discovered. Witnessing the Sonoran Desert through information *and* imagination, however, facilitates feelings of isolation *and* intimacy. Seeing the desert as Zamora sees it, for example, prompts one to look at visual maps like Humane Borders' 'Map of Migrant Mortality' with more nuance, compassion, and also comprehension. Rather than see human deaths plotted against an inhumane landscape, one recognizes an entire desert ecology under threat. Saving such ecology will require far more than reading literature about it, but if one border crisis victim can find intimacy amid so much isolation, surely its witnesses can too. And that intimacy, I think, is more directly at odds with the militarization and weaponization of the Sonoran

Desert, which reduces its geography to one type of death instead of all its many, interconnected types of life.

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