Spaces—Communities—Discourses
Charting Identity and Belonging in the Americas
Mexican-U.S. Border Literature and the Narco Novel

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In a 2006 interview, when asked about Mexican border literature, Daniel Sada spoke of his irritation at what he called the “fragmentation” of literature and classifications that worked only for didactic ends. A few other writers and critics have been equally scathing about a literature labeled “a tourism of the marginal,” which celebrates a geographical identity politics. The perceived fetishization of violence that embraces the so-called narco novel has also been derided (Abad Facioliunc 514). Inherent, however, in this criticism is the recognition that a literature is emerging from the north that, like the sometimes maligned narco corrido, evidences the horror of the violence in the region. So my paradox as a reader takes these repudiations more as a sign of the coming of age of “la literatura de la frontera norte,” as it has gained the recognition as well as the ire of critics who have acknowledged its singularity. In this essay I evaluate the wealth of shared characteristics in these border novels that, in my view, justifies their classification as a category and I endeavor to prove that far from just cashing in on the frenzy of violence, they in fact stand in for contemporary history. Through literary techniques that refigure temporality, readers accompany the narrator in searching for meaning amongst a welter of events and interpretations, and they are provided new insights into lived reality. Apart from Mexican writers, I include two bestselling authors writing in English whose novels are based on the history of the Mexico-U.S. border. The genre of drug crime fiction, i.e. the narco novel, fills in the lacunae where historians and sociologists are inhibited or fear to tread, as they could be implicated in the explanation of dreadful events or in siding with one drug cartel against another.

1 In an interview with José Manuel Prieto, Daniel Sada said, “I am exceedingly irritated by the fragmentation of literature: that a writer might self-identify as ‘detective,’ ‘fantasy,’ ‘romantic’ or ‘minimalist’ is reason enough for me to stop reading her or him. ... It may be that this whole mess of adjectives thrown together any which way only works for didactic ends; perhaps in that context the infinite number of conceptual demarcations might be justified, but for me as a reader or as a writer, they don’t work at all. I could give a fig about the future of border literature” (Sada, no pag.).

2 As Valeria Luiselli remarks, “El espectro de lo que hoy se denomina “narcoliteratura” –aun cuando lo que se escribe no siempre trata directamente sobre el narcotráfico– es amplio. ... La poca cen de esta literatura, a mi parecer, es la que se escribe desde la cómoda posición del turismo de la marginalidad” (no pag.).

3 In the words of Héctor Abad Facioliunc, “las hampones están dedicados a contar sus fechorías disfrazándolas de hazañas” (514).
Literature, on the other hand, in its inconclusive or purposeless search for meaning, as Gabriela Polois Dueñas has surmised, operates with an ethics different from that of legal documents. Novelists supplement history with nonlinear and intuitive reconstructions of contexts. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur has explained that if historians feel themselves bound by a debt to people from earlier times, and realize this debt by means of documentary proof, novelists render reality its due in through other means. But they too are obliged to be reliable.

The question of reliability is to fictional narrative what documentary proof is to historiography. It is precisely because novelists have no material proof that they ask readers to grant them not only the right to know what they are recounting or showing but to allow them to suggest an assessment, an evaluation of the main characters. (Vol. III 162)

Daniel Sada might be dismissive about what he considers vain and self-serving categorizations but other writers from the Mexican border as well as French literary theorists have been forthright in their assessment of how literatures from regions peripheral to literary heartlands carve out a space for themselves. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova provides a detailed exposition on a hierarchical literary world that privileges a few metropolitan centers like Paris, London, New York, Mexico City, and the obstacles faced by writers belonging to the periphery or regions far from the consecrated spaces of literary production. New entrants into a literary space have to assimilate the criteria of these spaces or run the risk of permanent alienation. Casanova has elaborated on the methods used by those who have successfully rebelled against the domination of these centers, who have to struggle to create conditions conducive to their literary visibility. Elsewhere Pierre Bourdieu has stated that

4 According to Luis Astorga, “El sociólogo no puede abordar el tema de manera heterodoxa sin desatar sospechas de todos los bandos y bandas en pugna, de ahí la dificultad para explorar la vida de los verdaderos traficantes; en el mejor de los casos corre el riesgo de que se le considere ‘sopón’ en potencia o ‘cómplice’” (83). Gabriela Polois Dueñas writes, “Mi interés en Culiacán se basó en un estudio ético, no sólo porque el libro que leí sobre el país, sino porque su análisis de la realidad de los asesinatos y el hecho de que se den en una sociedad donde no sólo vivimos, sino donde se encuentran los autores, que es lo que convierte en una cuestión serio...” (83). However, literature has been able to recognize itself in the news reporting on its own crises by the official press corps, nor in the newspaper accounts which ironically could be considered foundational fictions? My inquiries tend toward a concern for ethics, which should be understood as the inoperative search for meanings. Ethics necessarily illuminates a path, not an end point; it implies a constant compromise with what should be and as such there can be no ethics without imagination; thus its importance in literature. ... A testimony—as a literary genre and not a legal discourse—makes it obvious that fiction surpasses the limits of the law when attempting to comprehend certain human conflicts, in this case, the ones connected to life experiences located within the traffic of illegal drugs. (561)

5 “Para aceder a la simple existencia literaria, para luchar contra esta invisibilidad que desde el principio les amenaza, los escritores tienen que crear las condiciones de su ‘aparición’, es decir, de su visibilidad literaria. La libertad creadora de los escritores frente a un sistema de las ‘periferias’ del mundo no les ha sido concedida de entrada: la han conquistado únicamente a fuerza de combates siempre negados como tales en nombre de la universalidad literaria y de la igualdad de todos ante la creación” (Casanova 233).

Elmer Mendoza says in an interview with Miguel Cabáñez:

MC: Algunos de tus cuentos y tus novelas pueden entrar en lo que denominado Federico Campbell como literatura criminal, en el cual el centro es un crimen. ¿Cómo piensas que tu obra se inserta dentro de la corriente de escritores del norte como Eduardo Antonio Parra, Daniel Sada, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, David Toscano, Daniel Sada, etc...? EM: Se habla de que en el 99 aparecen como tres o cuatro libros creo, que se convierten en libros importantes en la literatura mexicana, y que por una coincidencia los autores son norteamericanos. Algunos incluso viven en el Norte, no se han ido a vivir al DF... Hay un momento en que nos damos cuenta de que es en Estados Unidos donde los autores se están formando con más seriedad y donde incluso se le están encontrando elementos de cohesión que no cuenta nos hemos dado. En la Universidad de Sinaloa se crea un seminario sobre la narrativa del Norte y entonces, nos reunimos y vemos lo que está pasando. Sentimos que si realmente hemos crecido algo, pues los que primamos debemos darle paso somos nosotros e intentamos estudiar nuestra identidad colectiva. Igual si nos parece harto, pero no nos parecemos tanto. A fin de cuentas, cada quien tiene su estética. ("Un discurso")
difference between victims and victimizers. However, Elmer Mendoza’s stream of consciousness writing style with the jumbled language registers of narco-traffickers, politicians, onlookers, and police detectives has ideological as well as stylistic implications. Druglords who are portrayed as distributing large sums and earning good will while the violence that accompanies their activities becomes part of the landscape, compete with the state for power. Parallel economies thrive and the federal state becomes just one of the contenders to use force while crimes are left unsolved and impunity thrives. Readers share the burden of employment with the author, and the mixed up dialogues in the text open up new vistas as they are the “places of indeterminacy” that do not fulfill expectations. The texts in turn respond to a situation of perplexity by holding themselves up as repressed and entangled stories that demand to be told. If Mendoza’s characters give us only fragmentary information, they help us discover the web of questions to which the work suggests an answer. In Ricoeur’s words, even if the whole of the text can never be perceived at once ..., placing ourselves within the literary text, we travel with it as our reading progresses. This mode of grasping an object is unique to literature. Throughout the reading process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories. (Vol. III 167)

Through strategies of persuasion the reader is invited to appropriate the text. Mendoza explains why he uses the colloquial language of Culiacán to explain the unceasing and arbitrary violence:

Como escritor lo que estoy intentando es dilucidar algunos registros que pudiera tener [la violencia] sobre la realidad y sobre la mitología; más sobre la mitología que ha surgido sobre el caso. Y buscar convertirlo en Literatura, sin que haya un sentido moral o un sentido de juzgar a los que no me corresponda. (“Un discurso”)

In Don Winslow’s The Power of the Dog, the narcotics trade is shown as the dark side of globalization where the Chinese and Colombians all play for high stakes on the Mexico-U.S. border. In an interview Winslow confesses that the idea of researching the cartels first came to him when he heard of the killing of nineteen men and women just across the border in Mexico in a place where he often used to go to use for cheap weekend. His research led him to conclude that the war on drugs was lost before it began because drugs were easiest to come by in American prisons (Winslow 2007). Though the story is told without literary guiles, its manner of composition, with no Manichean divides between good and bad protagonists, positions Winslow’s novel as an alternative narrative to official discourses on narco-trafficking.

In Daniel Sada’s short story, “Ese modo que cola,” published in 2010, the subterranean violence that is a characteristic of his writing is manifest: a small airplane from Colombia with a cargo of drugs makes stopovers in an unspecified part of northern Mexico on route to Denver, Colorado. Sada’s text has territorialized the world of drugs and therefore does not need to form part of a national tradition. It is fitting to see this writing as dealing with what has now become a universal theme contextualized in interchangeable spaces.

In a seminal work, Nery Córdova has elaborated on how the portrayal of deviance has become a “predisposition” of all writing and culture on the region as it has enveloped its economy, society, and politics. It is the overarching condition, the condition under which life is lived and has been historically evolving in the state of Sinaloa, and so its cultural products carry the indelible mark of social conflicts either directly or as a subliminal current.

For his part, Elmer Mendoza maintains that the violence endemic to his native Culiacán, which serves as a backdrop to his writing but is far from being a fetish, is his only theme and context. His Balas de Plata (2008) and La prueba del ácido (2010) deal with the sporadic but interconnected crimes that the main protagonist of his detective novels, Edgar Mendieta, (El Zirlo to his companions), unravels in order to stay relevant as a professional police detective in Culiacán. Narco-trafficking is introduced unpretentiously as part of the fabric of daily life in the city. There are common characters in both novels, Mendieta’s companions in the police force or drug kingpins like Marcelo Valdés and his daughter Samantha. At one point she blusters the principal protagonist, the detective Edgar Mendieta for suspecting her father in the murder of Bruno Canizales, a popular social figure and also a party transvestite, and through her words the reader gets an insight into the meshing of drugs, power and influence:

Te busqué por dos asuntos, Mendieta, primero: respeto a mi padre, cabrón; es uno de los hombres más importantes de este país; el presidente, sus secretarías y cuanto la embajada anda con ellos se le cuadran, si no fuera por él millones de genios estarian desempeñand.

Commerating with the father of the deceased, Marcelo Valdés advises him against airing news about the assassination as it would have a snowball effect on all of them. Through the eyes of Marcelo Valdés, the professional trafficker, we get an idea of the traffickers’ sense of self, their social status and the manner in which they have substituted the state. The police wonder why Marcelo Valdés took to the narcotics

8 Nery Córdova writes, El auge de esta extraordinaria y diversificada empresa de la desviación –por sus contenidos actuales de ilegalidad– ha ejercido, así, una vigorosa influencia y un impacto razonable, profundamente incuestionable. De la economía a la política y de la sociedad a la cultura: las andanzas de las drogas ilegales han marcado sus rasgos de desviación sobre la vida sinaloense. En el mundo gótico y empírico, cabalgamos pues sobre el paradigma del epígrafe de Nicol que asume que la violencia se transforma y forma cultura, precisamente cuando ha crecido y rebasado su condición pasajera e incidental, se ha arraigado en el pensamiento y en la vida social y se ha convertido, ya, en “una predisposición.” (La narcocultura 43)
trade, pondering on whether his origins in Badiraguato, a place historically associated with opium cultivation, have any role to play. Other sources point to the faster social mobility through which drug lords become local caciques and then undertake economic development generating good will as well as status along the way.9

Necios, se la pasan criticándonos pero bien que viven de nosotros; hice crecer este labar
ma, levanté bérboles enteros y créo más fuentes de trabajo que cualquier gobierno; no permitiré que lo dividan; era un rancho polvoriento cuando empezé y miren hasta dónde llega. (178)

Meanwhile more unexplained deaths occur. The woman who first spots the dead body of Bruno Canizales commits suicide and her sister’s lover (a young son of the commissioner of police from his casa chica) is mysteriously gunned down. As a woman an unlooker warily comments,

¿Oiga no piensa acabar con la violencia?, yo escuché a los políticos, a los policías, a los soldados prometiendo cosas, pero los encubridos no acaban ... en este país la justicia está en manos de los delincuentes y mientras ustedes, los del Gobierno, se hacen de la vista gorda, vamos a seguir igual. (160)

Rossana Regulllo has remarked on the “gaseous” violence that the narco-machine spews out, its “phantasmagoric” presence that is suspected in every development. The angry and yet cynical woman, who refuses to go to the police because she feels it is of little use, has put everyone in the same category as the perpetrators of the violence because of their supposed inaction. For her they are mere agents of a counter-machine riddled with corruption, impunity and militarization. She is distraught because no civilian security exists and feels besieged by the police as well as the narco.

The assassinated Bruno Canizales has friends and enemies in unlikely places. But then life is complicated in Culiacán. The murderer turns out to be someone he knows. He is the father of Paola, the ex-lover of Bruno Canizales. He also shot Ezechiel, the son of the police commissioner from his “casa chica.” The murders have apparently little to do directly with the drug trade, the illicit amassing of wealth and a parallel

9 Lilian Paola Ovalle writes:

Los narco han venido a jugar el papel del Estado y han dado respuesta a demandas de las comunidades en materia de vivienda, espacio público, educación, recreación, entre otras. De esta forma, el ‘narcomundo’ ha podido cristalizar el discurso legitimador de sus acciones al presentarse socialmente como ‘gente comprometida con el desarrollo regional’ ... La forma en que los narcotraficantes adquieren los recursos deseados, caracterizada por la rapidez, la transitoriedad. La pérdida de límites se expresa en las relaciones de estos actores con todo el conjunto de la sociedad. El sujeto obtiene los recursos materiales que desea y dada la importancia que socialmente tienen tales recursos, empieza a sumar un cambio de su rol en el ambiente social. Se percibe a sí mismo como más poderoso, y al saberse respaldado por una red de complicidades y por una organización igualmente poderosa, comienza a relacionarse con el Otro estableciendo relaciones funcionales mediadas muchas veces por la violencia material y simbólica. De ahí se deriva la imagen del narcotraficante sellada por su carácter sumamente violento y trasgresor. (132)

power apparatus. But the signs of a dysfunctional society pervade all spheres with no distinctions between the “good dead” and the “bad dead.”

Detective Mendida is candid about how he transported drugs once (172) and recounts that he gave half the money to his mother and then went on to study literature. His love interests, career reversals and his dogged determination to find killers without letting their narco-trafficking antecedents interfere with his work despite the tugs and pressures from opposing sides, offer a glimpse not just of a policeman’s life in Sinaloa but of a society that has become unhinged because of an artificial and fratricidal war it is made to fight by the federal government and the United States.

Mendoza’s next novel, La prueba del ácido, is set during the presidency of Felipe Calderón. Early on the police and detective comment with consternation at the president’s war on drugs: “¿Vieron la declaración del presidente? ... ¿Está loco o qué? Le está declarando la Guerra al narco, ¿sabe cuántos policías pueden morir? Todos” (19).

Samantha Valdés, the drug trafficker heiress, reappears. The case under investigation is that of a Brazilian cabaret dancer with powerful narco clients, Myra Cabral de Mello, who has been murdered and whose breast has been grotesquely mutilated. This calling card of the murderer, a strange and bizarre act of cruelty, signifies revenge and illustrates the manner in which, in a society injured to violence, criminals acquire individuality. Even Culiacán society is shocked. The police, cartel bosses and everyone else here live in affective and geographical proximity and we find out that Detective Mendida had been once been in love with the murder victim.

The border region is a high-risk zone of contact, with locales where the father of George W. Bush likes to hunt, where FBI agents work on secret missions and parallel security outfits of the state police and Bush’s agents fight amongst themselves. The central power has lost credibility and meanwhile the narco industry retails in this war is firm of purpose and well endowed. Beleaguered detectives of the Sinaloa police like Mendida are also courted by the narco, who enjoy legitimacy amongst sections of society because they provide patronage and support where the State is perceived to have abdicated. When Samantha Valdés invites Mendida to work with them, she does so with no cynicism but with complete faith in the viability of her proposition.

Precisamente por eso me interesas, Zurdo Mendida, ¿eres que no necesitamos gente honrada en nuestras filas? Aunque no lo creas o no lo hayas pensado, este negocio no funcionaria sin grandes dosis de fidelidad y honradez; el grupo que se resquebraja, si no aplica correctivos con urgencia, desaparece. (239)

And Mendida’s dispirited fellow police officer remarks: “¿Quién puede hacerle la Guerra a esos cabrones? Lo tienen todo: armas, relaciones, estrategias, espias, dinero, aliados: realmente muy complicado” (78).

When Mendida insists on prosecuting an ex-governor, he is advised to take a course in police training either in Los Angeles or Madrid. But he also has allies within the cartels and is protected by a set of gangsters. Edgar Mendida could have become a drug trafficker instead of a detective just as Marcelo Valdés could have become a
politician. The novel is as polyvalent as the society it depicts and virtue is not a given in any character's trajectory. Elmer Mendoza's free indirect style prose mixes characters' voices, and the brazen thought and expression of the narcoes matches the arrogance of the FBI agents. These are what Harry Polkinkins has called the twilight zones of border writing, where languages, dialects, and identities fuse into each other and become bastards (37-43).

According to sociologists, marijuana and opium have been the mainstay of the economy of Sinaloa for at least a century. During the Second World War, when Adolf Hitler cut access to the poppy fields of Smirne, Turkey began a search for new manufacturing bases for morphine, which was needed in hospitals. Presidents Roosevelt and Avila Camacho made a pact in 1942 on poppy cultivation, and Badiraguato became an opium capital with official blessings. Culiacaén was baptized the new Chicago and it became a violent city with luxurious lifestyles where much money changed hands (Arias/Omar). By the 1960s the dealing in opium was a common business activity with which politicians were associated. The tide turned abruptly in 1975 with Ronald Reagan and Operation Condor. This anti-drug crusade began with two thousand arrests made in Culiacán alone, and traffickers were accused of crimes against health. Opium cultivators and traffickers fled the region to neighboring states or Tucson, Arizona after they had been persecuted and tortured. Hamlets in the hills of Badiraguato were razed whether the inhabitants were opium cultivators or not and this led to what Nery Córdova has called the blossoming of the "flores de la ira." The ambivalence that locals show towards the authorities, anger and hatred against federal forces and contempt for local police, all of which are evident in Mendoza's novels, began after Operation Condor. It is part of the defiance of this region against the center.²⁹

Don Winslow's *The Power of the Dog* ploughs through the historical memory of Sinaloa in the fictional mode. He describes the atrocities of the federal army on the compesinos, the Sinaloan clans with international connections, their bloody internecine rivalries and Mexican politics during this period. Early in the novel, the head of the Baja California cartel, Tio Barrera, who began his career as a special assistant to the governor of the state, describes the war unleashed against the cultivators:

The Americans wanted to scatter us Sinaloans. Burn us off our land and scatter us to the winds. But the fire that consumes also makes way for new growth. The wind that destroys also spreads the seeds to new ground. I say if they want us to scatter, so be it.

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²⁹ As Córdova points out, 
Los retenciones costreñas en las ciudades, pueblos, carreteras y caminos rurales: ... los asesinatos y atentados a masacres de inocentes pero acusados en flagrancia de sospechosos o de ser sujetos rezagados de las campañas, cerros, abismos y precipicios de Badiraguato: ... Se trata de imágenes que han revivido los viejos escenarios de la Operación Condor de hace una treintena de años, la infamia militar del gobierno mexicano que, con el mismo pretexto de la lucha para acabar con el narcotráfico, arrasó con la raíces de miles de poblados y rancharías con todo y habitantes, en Sinaloa, Chihuahua y Durango, y que aún se recuerda renuente y doloridamente. ("Las drogas" 11-12)

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³⁰ As the narrator says in the novel, 
Operation Condor was intended to cut the Sinaloa Cancer out of Mexico, but what it did instead was spread it through the entire country. And you have to give the Sinaloans credit—they response to their little diaspora was pure genius. Somewhere along the line they figured out that their real product isn't drugs, it's the two thousand-mile border they share with the United States, and their ability to move contraband across it. Land can be burned, crops can be poisoned, people can be displaced, but that border— that border isn't going anywhere. A product that might be worth a few cents an ounce on their side of the border is worth thousands just one inch on the other side. (Power 103)
to their labs and process it into crack, and the shit is on the streets weeks—sometimes just days—after leaving Colombia. (103)

When Art's most trusted agent is tortured to death, Art launches a manhunt that leads to the decimation of some cartel and he acquires the title of the "The Border Lord" (298). He is obsessive in his pursuit of Adán Barrera, but the relentless violence and wanton cruelty of rival gangs make him wonder at the self-righteous and muscular policy of those whose side he is on. The novel contains vignettes of Mexican history, the portrayal of the life and assassination of Father Juan Parada modelled on the real life of Jesús Posadas Ocampo, the cardinal who was mistakenly murdered by rival gangs on the tarmac of Guadalajara airport, and also the killing of presidential hopeful Luis Donaldo Colosio. These incidents are emblematic of the fragility of once stable societies and nations and the tentacles of the trade that reach everywhere.

Don Winslow has been candid in interviews on the futility of the drug war. Like Elmer Mendoza, he tries to show fuzzy biographies and trajectories, the inertia through which individuals from all strata—small rancheros, Irish youth in New York alleys, reluctant yet ambitious Sinaloa citizens—get drawn into the business. World views that describe the war of one side as legitimate are impossible in a scenario where there are many floor crossers and turncoats from the army, police and DEA.

Other researchers are similarly skeptical about a war in which it is impossible to demarcate an enemy side. "Capitalism against itself" is how the war against this trade has been described by Luis Carlos Restrepo, because it has two sides with the same fundamental beliefs in profit and consumerism. Yet, false battlelines are drawn and dichotomies made between crusaders of the government and the rags-to-riches merchants of a prohibited product. Miguel Cárdenas has called the immigrant and the narco-trafficker the twin products of globalism castigated because they are considered illegal. Despite this, one can add, they are recognized as sources of use value and huge exchange value. Commenting on the ostentatious lifestyles associated with the drug trade, Héctor Abad Faciolince has called it the "narco-citizenship del gusto" and

12 In an interview, when asked by Kerry O'Brien, "Was there a point in the research where it became at all clear to you whether a point has been reached in the history of that war on drugs in the United States... [where the war was lost]?," Winslow replied:

The only thing that you have to ask yourself about the war on drugs is where is the easiest place in the country to buy drugs? The answer is fall. To me that says all you need to know about the criminal model. After 20-some odd years of this war drugs are easier to get, cheaper to get and they're more potent. That war is lost, then we should abandon it and move onto another way of dealing with this problem. I get crazy on this topic, I really do. ("Crime Writer")

13 Restrepo points out that

La lucha contra las drogas es una guerra del capitalismo contra sí mismo. Curiosa guerra que pretende erradicar la manifestación más plena y neoliberal del fetichismo de la mercancía. Guerra contra una de las más antisociales y efectivas formas de acumulación del capital que no obstante irigir de manera generosa al sistema financiero, provoca en los espíritus puritanos un íntimo de cruzada" (24).

he describes it as inevitable, since it has only made manifest the latent bad taste of the bourgeoisie. Narco-traffickers showed that the glitz and glamour the latter banked after was within everyone's reach.

Philip Caputo's Crossers has the drug trade as a strong side story but it also valorizes the exceptional space that is the border near Tucson, Arizona in the San Rafael Valley, where the main protagonist Gil Castle moves after losing his wife in the 9/11 attacks. Castle displaces his own horror at what happened in New York at the center to the violence of the U.S.-Mexican border on the periphery. He is portrayed not as an interloper but as a man who is returning to his roots. This is brought home when we read the diaries of T.J. Babcock and his grandfather Ben Erskine from his mother's side that date from the time of the Mexican Revolution. The diaries are interspersed with the life of Gil Castle, who has been invited by his cousin to their homestead in the San Ignacio Valley, and they establish a continuity with past conflicts that undergird current scenarios, which makesake the story gain in reliability. In these extracts the border is limned as an island that straddles two countries. Throughout the novel there is an intent to show how the lives of a set of people on one side of the border are intertwined with those south of the Rio Bravo. "Back in those days it was common for Mexicans to cross the line and steal cattle from us gringos—and it was common for gringos to return the favor" (23).

Babcock and Erskine get accidentally embroiled in the Mexican Revolution while looking for cattle in Mexico and then Babcock falls in love and marries a commander of Pancho Villa. The association of the two friends continues with the politics of the border. They are asked by the government of President Calles and also by the friendly American government to nab two disloyal colonels who are gun-running into Mexico. They agree because they had earlier bought on the side with Babcock's wife Ynez for the revolutionaries ("Years before Bracamonte had paid us to smuggle guns into Mexico, now we were going to be paid to collar two fellos for doing the same thing..." 308). But then they fear a backlash and Babcock and Ynez relocate to the United States, where Ynez dies and Babcock compares her to a border desert flower that wilts in the north:

There's a flower that blooms in the low desert at springtime, a white one that's called a dune primrose. Pulling Ynez out of Mexico up to Prescott was like tearing one of them primroses out of the sand and trying to make it live in those cold, piney mountains. (312)

These thoughts cross Gil Castle's mind when he listens to narco corridas and encounters coyotes, illegal immigrants and a scenario far removed from New York.

They sang of modern day outlaws, not in a Wild West that had never died but in a West that had been tuned and then reverted to a new and more toxic wilderness—narcos and narco snitches, shady gringos looking to score in Mexico, blood and money and blood money... (141)

The diaries are evidence of the present-day Erskines' ownership of their portion of land. But the druglord Yvonne Menendez wants Gil's cousin's ranch for their pur-
poses. This effectively changes the storyline and the protagonists of narco novels appear. These include "The Professor," a U.S. Army veteran and ex-DEA agent who joins the drug cartels when he comes under the radar of the U.S. government because he refuses to stop investigating the torture of a colleague. The narrator muses about the way the Professor reasons his life: "Narco-trafficking after all, was market capitalism with the muzzles off. Like the stock exchange, it ran on greed and fear, with revenge thrown into the mix." (135).

Gil Castle's cousin Blaine, however, decides to confront the vandalsizing Mexican migrants with a group of vigilantes in keeping with his grandfather's notions of violence, and again we sense a déjà vu feeling of the past. Gil reacts angrily to the word "closure" when someone suggests that his move to Arizona has helped assuage his mental anguish after the personal tragedy he suffered after 9/11: "This whole notion of "closure," he thought, rose from a culture so marinated in television that it had come to see life as a miniseries, each episode resolved in an hour, and so on to the next" (373).

Layers of meaning are peeled back and various historical identity-conferring events that have helped to individualize the border characters continually intrude to give the reader a more nuanced understanding of contemporary border politics.

U.S. citizens like Blaine and Bill Erskine are killers too, though their acts can be explained away as self-defense. Morally ambivalent characters who think that the ends justify the means, they are so constituted to show that geography plays a compelling role in character formation. And that Mexicans and U.S. citizens, far from having essential traits that mark them as different, are constituted by their ever changing circumstances and their location in a space. The consciousness of belonging to the border, where the center's hold is tenuous, makes them communicate in a particular manner with others in that space. This consciousness explains sentences like the following: "The law he had sworn to uphold, the law codified in books, lies lightly on the border, where the law of vengeance takes precedence. It has always been so; it will never be otherwise." (292).

When Gil Castle moves to the San Rafael Valley, he begins to understand what living in this space partly connotes. Of immigrants he concludes,

What had driven them to turn themselves into human contraband, to be bootlegged across an imaginary line in the desert? ... That much he was sure of—he wasn't filling trash bags with clothes and shoes and backpacks but with the discarded pasts of people intent on remaking their lives. In that sense, he and they were citizens of the same country. (242)

Castle consciously tries to adapt to his new life. He brings with him New York liberal ideas that sometimes clash with those of his cousin, who favors a hardline approach towards immigrants and recruits vigilantes. The novel is aimed at average middle-class Americans, as the author hopes.

In this essay four novels have been analyzed that deal with border sensibility which signifies the stakes in a space. In my view, these texts are part of a discourse aiming at cultural recognition of the border amid a history of neglect in both Mexico and the United States. Elmer Mendoza and Don Winslow describe Sinaloa and its peculiar drug-menaced fate. Though employing very different literary techniques (Mendoza uses the sophisticated free indirect style, while Winslow's narrative mode tends towards realism), both authors problematize the drug trade. They refrain from portraying it as a war and show how difficult it is to demonize when a cross section of people are involved in the business. The same themes reappear in Crossers with a greater emphasis on the physical aspects of the geography on the border areas of Tucson, Arizona and Nogales. As the authors have emphasized in interviews, the border is not a gratuitously chosen theme in their novels but a source of identification; it offers the possibility of seeing situations from opposing sides. The views of Joan Ramón Resins on the identity that comes with a space can be applied to writers who deal with Mexico-U.S. border themes:

[The spiritual materials out of which the identity is hammered out must be self-evident to all the members of the group. This means that the cultural components of the identity presuppose a common pool of memories. But if we ask what is the social surface of inscription of those memories, the answer cannot be a Folkgeist or popular soul, but a common space or literally a common ground on which collective representations take shape as on a screen or canvas. By common ground I do not mean a mystical relation to the land in the sense that land and nationality imply each other. I mean, rather, that a group's interrelation with a territory, especially during the group's formative period, entails that land through the slow sedimentation of experience." (65-66)

The appropriation of border identity by these writers has been criticized but, as they have averred, it is more an empathy with a space and its existential dilemma. Their varied approaches are just so many ways that throw light on a region in the grip of a vicious trade and also the way in which its tentacles spread to all areas of human endeavor. Seen from the point of view of four dissimilar novelists, the problem is not local but transnational and chameleon-like changes its colors, adapting to cultures and penetrating their space.

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14 Philip Caputo said in an interview,

In 2006 I'd started doing research and interviews for a nonfiction piece about border issues for the Virginia Quarterly Review. In the course of that work, I'd stumbled on historical material and was fascinated to learn that what we think of as contemporary problems on the Mexican border—illegal immigration, smuggling, violence—go back at least a hundred years. I was also struck by the similarities between the Mexican drug cartels and today's Islamist terrorists. The former are motivated by greed, the latter by religious and political fanaticism, but they are alike in the atrocities they commit, in their utter lack of compassion and conscience. The stories illegal immigrants told me about their sufferings moved me as well. One of those tales involved a man who was abandoned by his coyote (as immigrant smugglers are called), got lost in the mountains, and nearly died before he was rescued by a rancher I know. Moral conflict and moral ambiguity are themes that have consumed me throughout my career, and there is plenty of both on the border. ("Conversation")
Works Cited


