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El Río Grande as Unruly Archive: Submerged Histories of the Chamizal Dispute

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El Río Grande as Unruly Archive: Submerged Histories of the Chamizal Dispute

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by

Alana Camille de Hinojosa

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

El Río Grande as Unruly Archive:
Submerged Histories of the Chamizal Dispute
by
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Master of Arts in Chicana & Chicano Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Chair

This interdisciplinary and preliminary study on the century-long Chamizal land dispute, caused by the meanderings of the Río Grande, considers the diasporic consequences of the Chamizal Treaty of 1964 and its community relocation project. Today, the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas represents the only territory of the former Mexican north, lost to the U.S. in 1848, to have ever been returned to México. Scholarship typically represents this treaty as an example of friendship between the two nations, and therefore overlooks both the treaty’s consequences on the 5,500 Mexican-Americans who lived on this contested land and what this dispute illuminates about the fluidity of (geo)political borders. The Chamizal dispute, therefore, illustrates not only that (geo)political borders are a colonial construct that violently separates the empowered from the disempowered, but also how these power relations reshape the lives and world(views) of those caught in the middle of (geo)political disputes. Indeed, the whole point of setting the border between México and the U.S. in 1848 was that the river was not supposed to
move; in fact, a moving border was not supposed to be possible. However, I argue that the diligent erasure of this dispute from both dominant U.S. history and counterhegemonic accounts signals this history’s constructed unknowability. I suggest that this “unknowability” is not only willed, but underwritten by transformative forms of knowledge. The Chamizal story therefore reminds us that “there already exists a terrain through which different stories and geographic knowledges can be and are told.”

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1 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.
The thesis of Alana Camille de Hinojosa is approved.

Eric Avila

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University of California, Los Angeles

2018
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Introduction

Water as body, and el Río Grande as a moving body that carries the liminal space we know as the U.S.-México border, that herida abierta between the First- and Third-world that Gloria Anzaldúa told us we must continuously tend for, is what I want to imagine here.1 This corporeal fluidity that is el Río Grande has a presence that is history and a history that is present: legacies of white settler colonialism, conquest and imperial violence as well as the still healing wounds of displacement, dispossession, and diaspora. This presence is a history of borders: borders created, enacted, crossed, expanded, moved, and interrupted. It is a history of colonial waters—yes. But it is also a history of Indigenous waters, migrant waters, remembering, resisting, flooding waters. Indeed, the whole point of setting the international boundary in 1848 between the U.S. and México at the deepest channel of the Río Grande was that the river was not supposed to move; but the river did move, does move, and will move again.

I began to learn of this Río Grande three years ago when I was conducting oral histories with Mexican and Central American women about their experiences of undocumented migration to the United States. During this process of collecting oral histories, I was struck by some of these women’s visceral memories of swimming across the Río Grande into southern Texas. I was particularly struck, however, by the river’s embodied presence that seemed to extend itself into these women’s present lives—be it in dreams, daily consciousness, or otherwise. It was this preliminary sense of the river’s embodied presence that later prompted me to ask these women in subsequent interviews an unfamiliar question: If the Río Grande had a face, how would you describe it? One particular response by a woman named Sandra would later become a fundamental cornerstone to El Río Grande As Unruly Archive. Though Sandra was initially

surprised by the question, she coolly responded: “How would I describe the river’s face?” she repeated back to me. “Como una cara vientre porque las tantas vidas que se pierden.”

This image of a face-like womb—of the river as a body of bodies whose womb holds the more than 7,000 migrants who have died since 1998 while attempting to cross into the United States, many drowning in the Rio Grande—this image would not leave me. I returned repeatedly to the page of my notebook where I had scribbled the words and the page became worn and soiled from my relentless, returning hands. I would repeat the words to myself—“una cara vientre”—struggling to make sense of why Sandra would describe the river’s face as a womb housing those who are often called “los desaparecidos.” It was not until months later, after both learning of the Aztec earth goddess Tlaltecuhtli and reading Edouard Glissant’s Poetics of Relation that I came to better understand the insights of Sandra’s “una cara vientre.”

Let me begin, ever so briefly, with Tlaltecuhtli. Described as “the womb and tomb of life” because she was ripped apart by her brothers to form the earth, what I find particularly interesting about her story is that in 2006, just to the west of Templo Mayor in México City, a monolithic carving of Tlatecuhtli was found. Though heavily fragmented, all the pieces of her body were arranged back together except the pieces that would have made up her abdomen. As a result, a large opening to this area of her body is left. I want to suggest, then, that this opening is

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2 “Like a wombed face because of the many lives lost in its waters.” (Translation mine)


4 In a 2013 The American Prospect article titled “Ghosts of the Rio Grande,” the reporter described “los desaparecidos” as those who have not only died while crossing the Rio Grande borderlands, but as those who have “vanished.” These stories of the dead, the reporter contends, haunt those living on both sides of the international border. See: Brendan Borrell, “Ghosts of the Rio Grande,” The American Prospect, June 10, 2013, [http://prospect.org/article/ghosts-rio-grande](http://prospect.org/article/ghosts-rio-grande).

5 Mark Pedlty, Musical Ritual in Mexico City: From the Aztec to NAFTA, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 8.
not only a kind of gaping wound, but also her womb—that herida abierta holding “los desaparecidos.” Similarly so, in his book *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant inquires about the ocean as a womb as well as a source of life, death, knowledge, and imagination. Writing on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Glissant correlates the “the belly of the [slave] boat” to the “violent belly of the ocean depths [slaves] went.” These boats, he contends, “[are] a womb, a womb abyss...this boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.” He continues, reflecting on the ocean’s recording of this death: “The abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except – more and more threadbare – in the blue savannas of memory or imagination.” The ocean, Glissant seems to suggest, is not only inscribed with memory (“the unconscious memory of the abyss”), but is a site of potential and remembering. This is to say that the ocean records and remembers that which has been denied—as we do too, despite however much this memory might be erased and repressed.

I find Tlaltecuhtli’s story and Glissant’s insights helpful because they make connective leaps between the living and dead, the land and body, as well as across racialized groups and geographies that have—and I use the transitive verb—been made “to disappear.” They have been made to disappear not only by (neo)colonial acts of legally authorized violence, but also by postmodern “regimes of visibility” that lead us to believe that everything can (and must) be seen (and thus mastered) and therefore if it is not visible it is not “there.” Thus, in a culture ruled by

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7 My use of transitive verb “to disappear” is inspired by Sherene H. Razack’s discussion on how colonial projects have sought to make Indigenous peoples disappear not only by implementing law that actively produces their disappearance as independent sovereign nations, but also by making Indigenous peoples into “remnants,” “debris,” and a sick, dysfunctional, self-destructive, and therefore an already vanishing people. See: Sherene H. Razack, *Dying From Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015): 10, 16.

these regimes, “neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either
improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any
meaningful result.”\(^9\) But what Tlateuhlit, Glissant, and Sandra each show us is that which/who
is made to disappear, is nevertheless powerfully present. Indeed, they have a presence that
announces itself, however subtly or symptomatically, and which insists on being recognized as
real. And it is this “seething presence” that not only so often suggests a \textit{return of the repressed},
but also demonstrates that nothing, including geography, is exempt from wonder.\(^10\)

Keeping these connections in mind, I propose that the Río Grande is also a womb/abyss
pregnant with as many dead as living and, of course, their memories.\(^11\) Sandra’s “una cara
vientre” therefore indicates that “los desaparecidos” are not in fact disappeared but below the
river’s surface. They are, in other words, present, but out of sight—submerged under the river’s
surface, just below the skin of the river, just below Sandra’s reflection in the river’s dark,
moving waters when she crossed the border nearly 20 years ago as a young girl. In other words,
“una cara vientre” suggests a different kind of presence whose legibility requires and abides by a
different sight. This different sight—a sight that trusts the instinct that “invisible things are not
necessarily not-there”—is at the heart of this preliminary study.\(^12\)

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Soon after meeting Sandra, I began to dream of a flooding Río Grande (a river that at that
time I had never seen) so often that I started to make a list of facts about the river that I hoped

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\(^9\) Avery Gordon, \textit{Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination} (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.

\(^10\) Ibid. 8.


\(^12\) Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American presence in American Literature,” \textit{Michigan
Quarterly Review} 28, 1: 34.
would somehow help me understand why I kept dreaming of it. Nothing proved helpful, however, until I came across a short paragraph in a U.S.-México borderlands history book that recounted the story of a 630-acre piece of land called el Chamizal. As the book told it, at the time of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, el Chamizal was south of the Río Grande in México but suddenly in 1864 was north of the river due to a dramatic flood that changed the river’s course. This story stunned me: to read that a simple change in a river’s water level could shift the U.S.-México border and bring pieces of land back and forth across the boundary, like a pendulum in the rain [See Figure 1 and 2].

It was not until 1963, however, after nearly a century of documented conflict and tension over its ownership, that the U.S. agreed to formally return el Chamizal to México by virtue of the Chamizal Treaty, which parcelled out the land by giving some acreage to the U.S. and some to México [See Figure 3]. Yet, before the land was returned, the U.S. federal government spent $42 million to relocate 1,386 commercial, public, and residential properties on el Chamizal. This included a Border Patrol headquarters, two international port-of-entries, several railway buildings, 11.7 miles of track, as well as three largely post-war, working-class, and single-family neighborhoods. These neighborhoods—Rio Linda, Cordova Gardens, and the last two blocks of the historically Mexican-American borough of Segundo Barrio—were therefore evacuated of their some 5,500 Mexican and Mexican-American residents. Soon after, these communities were bulldozed, demolished, and razed to the ground [See Figure 4]. And soon after this, portions of the Río Grande riverbed were then filled with earth and a concrete canal was built to redirect the river along a newly agreed-upon and streamlined border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez.

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Figure 1: International Boundary Commission map from 1889 of the El Paso-Ciudad area. This map depicts the meandering Río Grande river channels and el Chamizal. ["Changing Course" by Robert M. Utley]

Figure 2: [Cleofas Calleros Papers UTEP Special Collections]
Today, the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, erected to honor “wild rivers and reasonable men,” commemorates the Chamizal Treaty of 1964 and the only land of the former Mexican north to have ever been returned to México after it was lost to the U.S. in 1848. Of course, these particular tensions over claims to el Chamizal—tensions anchored in the struggle over the sovereignty of modern nation-states, but also the integrity of private property on both sides of the border—took place on the unceded and occupied ancestral lands of the Indigenous Mansos People and the more recent Tigua/Ysleta de Sur Pueblo. The Chamizal story, therefore, geographically takes place across historical layers of (ongoing) subaltern dispossession and is thus inscribed and imbued with traces of colonial theft and violence. Indeed, the U.S. is “predicated on haunted grounds: the land is haunted because it is stolen.”

What if, then, we were to think about the repeating and disruptive meanderings of the Río Grande—across time and the 2,000 mile Rio Grande borderlands, which I will discuss later in this study—as a material manifestation of this haunting? And how might these meanderings be the return

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17 “Subaltern” and “subaltern classes” comes from Antonio Gramsci’s investigation into hegemony and the almost total hegemonic power of the capitalist class over society. He argues that working classes and the poor are able to develop their own political and social worlds, networks, and communities in the face of the overwhelming hegemonic power over language, thinking, politics, economics, etc. Gayati Spitak, however, has importantly critiqued Gramsci’s theorization of the subaltern. She disagreed with the autonomy Gramsci attributed to the “subaltern,” arguing that this autonomy produces a homogeneity of the subaltern group and subaltern identity. This kind of essentialism, she contends, is what makes it so the term “subaltern” has no theoretical rigor. I use “subaltern” in this study because my fieldwork has demonstrated that those who lived in the working-class Chamizal neighborhoods did exhibit distinct world(views), networks, communities. Nevertheless, I keep Spivak’s important arguments in mind in order to avoid essentializing each Chamizal community member as part of a total and completely shared world(views). See: Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Dagenham: Lawrence & Wishard, 1973); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, A Reader, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Figure 3: Map of Chamizal Settlement, relocated boundary, and additional Segundo Barrio acreage to be evacuated. [Photo courtesy of Nestor Valencia]

Figure 4: El Paso-Juarez borderlands prior to commencement of construction.  [Pollard Rogers Papers, UTEP Special Collections]
of the repressed? Of “modernity’s phantoms” resisting, intervening, and producing material
effects?¹⁹

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The story of the Chamizal Dispute illuminates not only the fluidity of (geo)political
borders, not only that borders are a colonial construct, a materialized fiction, that violently
separates the empowered from the disempowered, but also, and perhaps most importantly, that
the land “talks back” to these colonial constructs. While the legal mechanics and political
background of the Treaty has been widely documented, little to no documentation or scholarly
consideration exists on the 5,500 ethnic-Mexican residents who were once again—more than 100
years after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—dismayed by both the redrawing of
(geo)political borders. In fact, having reportedly offered Chamizal residents the choice to either
remain in the U.S. or “return” to México, the U.S. government’s settlement of the Chamizal
Dispute echoes the similar predicament Mexican citizens living in the Mexican north found
themselves in following the 1848 Treaty. ²⁰

Despite the magnitude of insights the Chamizal Dispute story has to offer us, scholarship
on the U.S.-México borderlands often relegates this history to just a few fleeting sentences that
typically, if not always, overlook the displaced families. Instead of exploring the power relations
between the empowered and disempowered that reshaped the lives and world(views) of the some
5,500 people displaced, scholarship on this region follows the codified re-telling of this story
that represents the Treaty as an example of peace, friendship, and goodwill between the U.S. and

México [See Figure 5]. In fact, the few scholars who do consider this history usually do so by rushing, to varying degrees, through its nuances and neglecting to consider its historical significance in any meaningful way. And yet, what was perhaps most unsettling for me to learn was that this history is largely absent from counterhegemonic accounts and scholarship as well. For example, given the Chicano Movement’s dicho, “We never crossed the border, the border crossed us,” it is especially troubling that the Chamizal story was absent from the Movement’s vernacular and public rhetoric. More than this, the filling-in and canalization of the natural Río Grande riverbed (“to corral its wandering”) further signals the far-reaching material erasure and social unintelligibility this history has undergone.  

For example, in Juarez the portions of the natural riverbed have been converted into parking lots, sports stadiums, jungle gyms, and trash receptacles. I want to suggest, therefore, that the erasure of the natural riverbed from the visual landscape is both a metaphor for and material demonstration of the erasure of the displaced families from the codified re-telling of the Chamizal story that the streamlined canal similarly symbolizes. These profound and profuse erasures are both troubling and telling as they disclose how the burial and denial of past injustice requires diligent—indeed anxious—management,

maintenance, and reframing to serve hegemonic needs. Indeed, what this diligent erasure of the Chamizal Dispute from both dominant and counterhegemonic accounts indicates is a deep investment in this history’s unknowability. Unpacking this investment and the desires and needs it serves is central to this study’s endeavors.

If we keep these hegemonic desires and needs in mind, it’s worth noting that while the Chamizal Dispute and Treaty is certainly distinct, it is not exceptional; rather, the Chamizal Treaty is part of extensive devastations to native and nonnative communities of color across time and geography. For one, the federal government’s use of eminent domain to clear the so-called “blighted” communities of el Chamizal falls within the more recent, but nonetheless established pattern of dispossessing subaltern people from their homes. For instance, the story of Chavez Ravine, a working-class and largely Mexican-American community displaced through eminent domain in 1954, as well as the 1968 demolition of the Fillmore District, a thriving Black neighborhood in San Francisco known at that time as the “Harlem of San Francisco,” are testaments to the causalities of urban renewal policies during the 1950s and 60s: dislocation, displacement, and therefore the production of more vulnerable people; decreased political power due to population loss; the dispossession of property, assets, and wealth, however modest, that lead to further marginalization, uneven development, and structural racism.

Further still, the erasure of subaltern and alternative places like the unruly Río Grande from the landscape and, as a result, dominant discourse and public memory is also not exceptional. By the 1920s in California, for example, the Los Angeles River had already been established as a troublesome river that rejected the cartographic rules of linearity and rationality by flooding with its “governable fury.”22 This rhetoric, of course, played a crucial role in the

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eventual lining of the Los Angeles River with miles of concrete. What this tells us, then, is that the Chamizal Dispute and the treaty’s lining of the Río Grande are situated amidst an established history of not only displacement and dispossession, but profound erasures (material and otherwise) of subaltern people, places, and their histories. What are we to do, then, with these erasures? What are we to do with the story of the Chamizal Dispute, a history that we were never meant to remember, nevertheless know?

“Reading” Unruly Río Grande Landscapes

*El Río Grande as Unruly Archive* is, in its broadest sense, an interdisciplinary analysis of the unruly (“recalcitrant river”\(^2\)) Río Grande and what I am calling the Chamizal diaspora—the forced removal of Chamizal residents, the dispersal of their communities, and the recognition of a shared historical trauma and/or “homeland” (el Chamizal) that now exists, literally, in another country.\(^3\) Though the Treaty involved and affected multiple, distinct subdivisions and neighborhoods who in many other cases did not interact with one another, I refer to these residents collectively as Chamizal residents to evoke their shared trauma, displacement, and dispossession as a result of the Chamizal Treaty. To thoroughly discuss this shared trauma, its implications, and consequences, I draw on creative, conceptual, and material geographies from the Río Grande borderlands and the conquest of the U.S. West in order to demonstrate not only how displaced Chamizal residents were both shaped by and challenged colonial and knowable


\(^3\) Mary Chamberlain, "Diasporic Memories: Community, Individuality, and Creatively — A Life Stories Perspective," *The Oral History Review* 36.2 (2009), 179. I should also note that Maria Eugenia Trillo, who wrote her linguistics doctoral dissertation on her relocated Rio Linda community, described her relocated community as a diasporic community that “now manifests itself as an ephemeral social and linguistic entity that is dispersed all over El Paso” and the world. See Trillo, *The Code-switching Patterns of the Rio Linda Community of El Chamizal in El Paso, Texas: An Emic Perspective of Syntactic Constraints*, 26.
geographic arrangements, but also to illustrate the Chamizal Treaty’s place within broader legacies of subaltern displacement and dispossession.

More than 50 years after the Chamizal Treaty of 1964, only a small number of individuals who were displaced are still with us, the majority of whom were children or young adults while they lived in the Chamizal. Over the course of two years between 2015 and 2017, I met and spoke with seven individuals whose families were displaced by the Chamizal Treaty: Peter Ramos, who grew up in Rio Linda and was 20-years-old when his parents were relocated from their home; María Eugenia Trillo, who was 15-years-old and still living with her family in their Rio Linda home; María Soccoro Acuña, who was also 15 and living with her family just north of Rio Linda on 10th Street in Segundo Barrio; Lupe (Castañedas) Morrow, who was 18 and living on the most southern block of Segundo Barrio [See Figure 6]; Mike Patino, who was five-years-old at the time of his relocation, and his mother, Lidia Levine, who grew up and raised her children in Cordova Gardens. For this study, I put these interviews in conversation with two additional sources: 1) the countermemories of former residents as documented in the El Paso Herald-Post and the El Paso Times archives, and 2) a collection of oral histories gathered by the UTEP Institute of Oral History as part of its 1994 Chamizal Oral History Project. Of the 17 individuals interviewed for the Chamizal Oral History Project, however, only four were displaced Chamizal residents. These remaining 13 interviews are with both federal and local politicians and representatives, real estate appraisers, and a professor at UTEP. In this way, then, the Chamizal Oral History Project largely replicates the codified narrative of the Chamizal history. This is unfortunate because at the time of the project’s collection, many more Chamizal residents were likely to have been alive and available. Nevertheless, the recorded memories of the four Chamizal residents included as part of UTEP’s project are crucial to this study’s
undertaking because so few documented accounts from those who were displaced are available to us. Thus, taken together with the interviews I conducted, this array of sources gives us a multigenerational perspective on the Chamizal Treaty and its relocation project. Indeed, considering the interviews I conducted with those who were minors at the time of their relocation, these memories provide the only windows still available into what it might have been like for their parents—many of whom were first time property owners—to be forcibly pushed out of their homes.

I make the case, then, that the memories of those displaced constitute the distinct features of “diasporic memory:” not only the need to tell and announce their presence and place within history; not only the need to (re)connect with one another due to their forced dislocation; but also a form of politicized memory that consist of alternative positionalities, struggles, and interpretations over the meaning of space, place, and borders.\(^{25}\) I want to suggest, however, that this diasporic politicization and “talking back” that occurs in place—that is, within dominant discourse, social systems, and along the frontier of the U.S. nation—consists of another form of remembering that historian George Lipsitz calls “countermemories.” As Lipsitz defines it, countermemories are subaltern memories that force revision of dominant, existing histories by offering new perspectives about the past.\(^{26}\) The countermemories of the Chamizal Dispute, therefore, address the social erasure of the Chamizal diaspora by providing “localized experiences of oppression [and] using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent a universal experience.” This is to say that the diasporic politicization of

\(^{25}\) Mary Chamberlain, “Diasporic Memories,” 179.

the Chamizal diaspora is a product of the community’s marginalization. However, I also want to suggest that it is a product of the Río Grande’s unruly, liminal presence that underwrites the very place of these communities. To be clear, “place” here, refers to both the Chamizal diaspora’s marginal place within dominant discourse and social systems, as well as the geographic, frontier location of el Chamizal—a place, I am arguing, that is imbued with the ebbs and flows of the Río
Grande. To put it another way, the diasporic memory and “situated knowledge”\(^{27}\) of the Chamizal diaspora emerges from a marginal place of oppression, repression, and unintelligibility, as well as transformative and unruly resistance. Thus, the Chamizal Dispute and Treaty is a story of margins: both practices of geographic domination that regulate subaltern people to peripheral and marginalized socio-geopolitical spaces, but also practices of resistance that enact these marginal spaces as places of incredible possibility. It is from el Chamizal’s site of possibility that I situate this study.

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Let me, now, give attention to what underwrites this site of possibility. In his collection of essays on the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora cultures, Edouard Glissant eludes to a similar unruliness and unknowability that I discuss and mean to attend to here. Caribbean diaspora cultures, Glissant argues, consist of what he calls “submarine roots”—cross-cultural roots that are “floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches.”\(^{28}\) Glissant, however, importantly suggests that the “submarine roots” of these Caribbean diaspora cultures have a second connotation. They evoke, he says, the web of branches, cultures, and structural relations that situate disremembered Black diasporas across the ocean as integral to the persistence of coloniality. So deep are these submarine roots plunged into the abyss of oceans that (neo)colonialism’s violences—like the “disappearing” of migrants along the U.S.-México border—are effectively made “unseen” or made “to disappear.”


Though some may find it unfitting to consider Glissant’s “submarine roots” within the context of this thesis, I do so because I think the history and culture of the Chamizal diaspora consists of similar, though distinct, submerged roots. For one, the unruly Río Grande that produced el Chamizal similarly floats free, refusing a fixed position along the boundary established by Anglo-Americans (“their efforts [were] undone by the Rio Grande's stubborn tendency to meander”).29 I want to suggest, then, that the culture of the Chamizal diaspora is underwritten by this unruliness and its unsettling refusal to adhere to colonial, cartographic rules. Secondly, and as already mentioned above, the disjuncture of the Río Grande and the Chamizal communities was largely understood as “open[ing] the door to a great new era in El Paso.”30 The violence and disjuncture implicit in this settlement, however, was so institutionalized, so naturalized that its traces have been seemingly and seamlessly concealed from view—hence the partial erasure of the Río Grande riverbed from the landscape. Keeping these two things in mind, what “structures” the Chamizal diaspora and its sense of place are the submerged, unruly, and diasporic tenets of coloniality and subaltern resistance. Of course, while these tenements are submerged (unseen) they are nevertheless present.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, Black feminist theorist bell hooks discusses subaltern practices of resistances, what she calls transgressive knowledges, that challenge and move beyond borders in a way that re-envision margins as places empowered by transformative resistance.31 I want to suggest, then, that while el Chamizal is a largely hidden space, it is also an unresolved and contested site that is imbued with ephemeral and trangressive knowledges that

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are antagonist to transparent space. These transgressive knowledges—not unlike Glissant’s “submarine roots,” or Sandra’s “una cara vientre”—ask us to consider and configure into our ways of knowing our surroundings that which/those whom “no one knows.” Indeed, such transgressive knowledges urge a deeply geographic reconsideration for what we have been told is dead, absent, impossible, and unknowable.

I am asking, then, that we “read” el Chamizal, the now confined Río Grande, and the Chamizal diaspora not only as maps of colonial violence or as a “geography of scars,” but also as geographies of subaltern resistance. 32 Indeed, if we call that “[t]he power of hegemony lies precisely in its ability to make groups believe that the current state of affairs is natural and fixed,” the “reading” of the Río Grande that I am urging for here illuminates how the historical unruliness of the river refused and denaturalized the ideologies of white settler conquest and domination imposed onto geography. 33 That is, the river ruptured the boundary’s colonial and geographic knowability. I can’t help but wonder then: what does this particular “reading” open-up for us in terms of different inquiries and possibilities about geography, corporeality, and power?

I think Cathy Cohen’s call for a “politics of deviance” helps us in thinking through this question. 34 As Cohen explains it, a politics of deviance is invested in and interested in “redefining the rules of normality that limit the dreams, emotions, and acts of most people.” For Cohen, deviant practices, behaviors, and attitudes are forms of “definitional power” that not only hold the capacity to create alternatives to the dominant and established norms of living (gender,
sexuality, respectability, domesticity), but they in turn can direct us toward alternative and necessary ways of knowing our worlds. The unruly (“ever-present flood menace”) Río Grande is a materialization of a politics of deviance. In rejecting the colonial cartographic rules of linearity and rationality, the unruly Río Grande offers us unfamiliar but necessary insights, worldviews, and epistemological curiosities that together submerge us into a process of learning and knowing different knowledges and geographic world orders. This being said, while I am encouraging a reading of the unruly river as a politics of resistance, we must nevertheless keep in mind and trouble our understanding of such resistances when they, like the Río Grande, take place on stolen and ancestral Indigenous lands.

(U)Mapping the Chamizal diaspora

When attending to the Chamizal diaspora and its consequences, I want us to be mindful of Black geographer Katherine McKittrick’s important reminder:

Diaspora has the potential to be a hegemonic geographic project, a renewed version of Man’s classificatory-exclusionary-bourgeoisie-spaces-for-us-spaces-for-them (them-as-the-absolute-Other) – unless, I think, we fill it with human life, attend to its radical creolized potential, and continue to insist that mapping diaspora is an ethical and unresolved politic, a really human, human geography.

The Chamizal Dispute and diapora is, indeed, an unresolved politic: a spatially erased

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and silenced politic, urging us to fill it with human life and recover its deeply human, poetic, imaginary, and Indigenous geographies. I want to encourage, then, a reading of the unruly Río Grande as a conjuring of Gloria Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” where, living in a state of nepantla, you resist a world made up of “iron cast molds” and instead “experience reality as fluid, expanding and contracting.” Keeping this in mind, I propose that we think with the unruly Río Grande by paying attention to not only how this river “unmaps” or denaturalizes the ideologies and practices of white settler conquest and domination imposed onto geography and space, but also what the river discloses about how space has been imagined and lived by subaltern people living in the borderlands. This tension between mapping the Chamizal diaspora as a deeply human geography and unmapping the colonial claims inscribed onto the region is important to this study’s endeavors; this tension, I propose, is a generative tension in that it conjures up the transformative potential of what Laura G. Gutiérrez calls “unsettling comforts.”

In his book *The Power of Maps*, Denis Wood contends that “the map is powerful precisely to the extent that [its] author…disappears, for it is only to the extent that this author escapes notice that the real world the map struggles to bring into being is enabled to materialize

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38 Gloria Anzaldúa, “now let us shift…”, in *this bridge we call home*, (Florence: Taylor and Frances, 2013), 544.


40 In her book *Performing Mexicanidad*, Laura Gutiérrez employs the theory of “unsettling comforts” to describe the character of the disruptive work of the performing artists she examines. These artists, she argues, unsettle sense of comfortability or naturalness about gender and sexual systems. She explains that “unsettling” is used both as a verb as well as an adjective. In one sense, “unsettling comforts” suggests the act by which comfort becomes unsettled or, in other words, that something has happened to disturb comfort—which is to say normalcy. As an adjective, however, the phrase may suggest the “comfort is unsettled,” meaning the result of a process. See: Laura Gutiérrez, *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabaretera on the Transnational Stage*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 17.
(that is, taken for the world).”\textsuperscript{41} Put another way, as the authors of colonial maps and their colonial interests, desires, and needs are done away with altogether from the maps themselves, their hegemonic vision and representation of the world is “enabled to…fill our vision.” How, then, as we act in resistance toward these maps, do we reorient our vision to wonder, inquire, and interrogate space, landscape, and the built representations of our surroundings? Indeed, Henri Lefebvre reflects on the significance of orientation in the conclusion of his book \textit{The Production of Space}: “I speak of an orientation advisedly,” he begins. “We are concerned with nothing more and nothing less that that. We are concerned with what might be called a ‘sense’: an organ that perceives, a direction that may be conceived, and a directly lived movement progressing towards the horizon.”\textsuperscript{42}

Building on these insights in her book \textit{Queer Phenomenology}, Sara Ahmed contends that if space is always oriented as Lefebvre argues, “then inhabiting spaces ‘decides’ what comes into view. The point of such decisions may be precisely that we have lost sight of them: that we take what is given as simply a matter of what happens to be ‘in front’ of us.”\textsuperscript{43} Keeping this in mind, Ahmed suggests that a queer phenomenology asks similar questions about orientation—not simply the orientation \textit{in} phenomenology, but perhaps more importantly, about the orientation \textit{of} phenomenology. Thus, a queer phenomenology might perhaps begin by re-aligning oneself and redirecting their attention toward “different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant.”\textsuperscript{44} Of course, the flooding Rio Grande deviates and is deviant; but it also, as Chicano literary scholar Omar Gonzalez suggests, takes on its own queer


Let us, now, return to the generative tension of un/mapping; for if we are to unmap the colonial claims etched onto the Texas borderlands while simultaneously mapping the Chamizal diaspora, I want us to not only interrogate (or, if we are to follow Ahmed’s call, queer) our orientation, and not only reposition our attention toward different objects (submerged and deviant), but that we also refuse to dissolve ourselves and our interests. Rather, I ask that we consider how we have been “directed,” how we have taken on the shape of this direction, and how we can redirect ourselves again and again.\footnote{Ahmed, \textit{Queer Phenomenology}, 14.16.} This is all to say that this study makes a case for what a more careful and critical consideration of the Chamizal Dispute and Treaty have to offer us: a new doorway, a new orientation, or \textit{mangata}—the Swedish word for the roadlike reflection of the moon on the water—through which to not only begin interrogating human geographic knowability and inquiry, but also a fluid direction, illuminated by the light of a Coyolxuahqui moon, through which to begin re-orienting ourselves in a way that demands asking different, renewed questions about our present world order and future possibilities. For instance, how does the unruly Río Grande ask us to consider how we read (for) resistance? How might the river’s unruliness further evoke Guitérrez’s “unsettling comforts” or what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness?”\footnote{Chela Sandoval, \textit{Methodology of the Oppressed}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 148.} Or, further still, how might the history of the Chamizal Dispute command a reconsideration of/for the dim memory and seething presence, however suppressed, of that unruly river—that pendulum in the rain—within our own lives and
geographic order? And what does this awareness of the unruly river, in whatever form that might take, open up for us in terms of re-imagining our present world and future possibilities?

Corporeal Encounters with the Unruly Río Grande

While this study primarily attends to the history of el Chamizal, I do not mean for my focus on el Chamizal to suggest that the Chamizal Dispute is the only moment of this unruly pendulum in the rain. In 1906, for instance, a U.S. land and irrigation company along the border near Mercedes, Texas, was so worried about potential flooding and damage to their property when the river threatened to flood and change its course that they illegally cut a new channel to force the river into a straighter path. In effect, this straightened out the course of the river, leaving a portion of land north of the river’s former loop south of the new straightened riverbed. Nothing much would come of this until sometime after 1929 when the small town of Rio Rico was relocated onto land east of Mercedes and within the former loop of the Río Grande riverbed due to flooding. [See Figure 7]. Yet, because the town was south of the relocated riverbed, México gradually took claim. Of course, U.S. officials had taken little notice to the river’s shift and therefore claimed no formal governing power over the town. It was only until 1970, some 60 years later, that the United States formally relinquished title to the land under the Boundary Treaty of 1970. It would take another two years for this transfer to be officially authorized, and another five years before the hand-over finally took place. In 1970, however, a man by the name of Homero Cantu Trevino filed a lawsuit to prevent Immigration and Naturalization Services from deporting him from Texas to México. He argued that, having been born in 1935 on Río Rico soil, he was a U.S. citizen. And though a U.S. judge initially denied his case six years later,

'The Forgotten Americans'---a Twist of Fate

BY CHARLES HILLINGER
Times State Writer

RIO RICO, Mex.—This town is in the wrong country. It really belongs to Texas.

"All my life I thought I was a Mexican. Now they tell me I'm a Texan," said 72-year-old Felipe Cantu, one of the 500 residents of Rio Rico.

Rio Rico was once north of the Rio Grande, but a change in the river's course put it on the south side—in Mexico.

Now the Rio Ricans call themselves "los americanos olvidados"—"the forgotten Americans"—and many of them want their American rights.

Figure 7 (Above): Map pictured in Los Angeles Times, August 24, 1973.
Figure 8 (Below): Los Angeles Times, August 24, 1973.
an appeals court later ruled that because the cutoff was unauthorized and the river shift went unaddressed by the U.S., anyone born in Rio Rico before 1972 was entitled to U.S. citizenship. Dubbed “the lost and forgotten Americans” by U.S. newspapers, for years Mexican migrants continued to tell U.S. [See Figure 8] Border Patrol agents they were residents of Rio Rico in hopes of claiming U.S. citizenship.

And in 1982, just forty miles downriver from Rio Rico in Brownsville, Texas, a retired U.S. Army colonel named Herbert M. Williams claimed ownership of a small, 154-acre island that was formed when a hurricane flooded the lower Rio Grande Valley. Having declared the island’s independence after neither the U.S. nor México formally announced sovereignty over the small tract of land, Williams, who was part Cherokee, named the island the “Cherokee Nation” [See Figure 9]. A local newspaper picked up the story, headlining the article: “Island in Rio Grande inspires plan for new nation.” In it, Williams explained his reasoning behind the name: “My mother always said, ‘Son, one of these days you'll recover the land of our great-grandfathers.’ This land was created by an act of God to give it back to the Indians.”

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later printed this motto—“Created by an Act of God”—on postage stamps and gold and silver coins to represent his new nation, along with distinct Cherokee Nation vehicle license plates. Brownsville county officials warned him that he would be cited and reprimanded if he continued to do so. No further reporting explains what ever became of Cherokee Nation.

More recently, however, I recognized this pendulum in the rain when I read an article published in April of 2016 in the conservative newspaper *The Washington Times* titled, “Border Patrol ordered to release illegals ‘still soaking wet’ from Rio Grande, union says.” According to the article, unless agents actually see migrants stepping out of the Río Grande onto U.S. territory, they are not to be detained. The order came after President Barack Obama issued plans in 2014 for limiting deportations and immigration enforcement. As a result, the article reported, if apprehended migrants claimed they have been in the U.S. since or before January 1 of 2014, they were to be fingerprinted, processed for any serious criminal records, and released if they have not committed any serious crimes or been affiliated with gang activity. While the January 1 date was not set in law, Border Patrol officials argued that the Obama administration had re-started the “catch-and-release” policy of previous decades and created what they call an “open border.”

What is particularly striking to me about this latter article are the repeated expressions of irritation by Border Patrol agents and immigration officials towards the visibly “dripping wet” and deviant bodies of apprehended undocumented migrants. These “still wet” migrant bodies literally evoke the long-standing racial slur “wetback,” and visibly signal the “illegal” crossing of the U.S.-México border. This wetness renders these migrants as legible embodiments of the river/border (perhaps this is another example of the river’s seething presence”) as well as the “illegal alien” status that engenders them as “less-than-human.” Their mobility, however, discursively and corporeally carries the unruly Río Grande with them as they move north of the

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international border — thus contesting the “fixed” boundaries of the U.S. nation. Consequently, I recognize the agents’ frustration as not only a response to their inability to legally reprimand what they see as the disobedient mobility of “illegal” people, but also a response to the “common sense” encroachment of the international border beyond its recognized and designated location. In other words, these “dripping wet” migrants not only contest space, but they are producing it. Indeed, their “deviant” mobility illuminates Cohen’s politics of deviance and geographer David Harvey’s argument that the politics of space lie in the contradiction between mobility and immobility, who has access to certain spaces, and who is said to produce (legitimate) spaces. 52 Indeed, “a geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice. And if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place.” 53

I evoke these distinct histories along the international boundary because I see them as corporeal and/or embodied encounters with the Río Grande that show us that although subaltern people of color have been relegated to the utmost margins of knowledge, conceived of and treated as outside the production of space, subaltern people have always had a part in producing the space of our material world. In fact, they have had a part in producing alternative geographic knowledges. Drawing on geographer Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick’s groundbreaking work on “black geographies,” I argue that, like black geographies, stories like those discussed above similarly and distinctly illuminate “how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the space of les damnés as invisible/forgettable at the

same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space."\textsuperscript{54} Within the context of this particular analysis, I recognize the “invisible/forgettable” to be Chicana/os\textsuperscript{55} living in the borderlands, border-crossing migrants, and the unruly Río Grande itself. Thus, if we follow Woods and McKittrick’s directive to further consider “how the unknowable figures into the production of space,” I take up this call in this study by arguing that the Río Grande is a geographic region that represents the submerged, dis(re)membered histories of the “disappeared.”

Thus, while the Río Grande has long been considered a factor in the social and political reality of the borderlands, as an inert background to transnational lifestyles along the border, migration patterns, and borderlands enforcement, I challenge this interpretation by considering how the river is an active agent, despite however suppressed it might be, that offers additional insight toward the land’s intervention in our world’s becoming. Such interventions are indicative of the corporeality of the land—what geographer Sarah Whatmore calls the flesh of “things,” “corporeal differentiation,” or the particular dispositions, characteristics and affects of specific bodies that are active agents in the workings of power.\textsuperscript{56} Importantly, however, is how these corporeal encounters open up a distinct “poetics of questioning”—or, in other words, possibilities for thinking about the rupture of hegemonic space, the production of alternative poetic terrains, and the body as the vehicle of this radical possibility.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, the unruly Río Grande in all its manifestations not only discloses how space is malleable and perpetually unfinished, but also reveals geographic contests and discourses over ownership, nations, and borders. Herbert William’s Cherokee Nation is one such example. The unruly river, therefore,


\textsuperscript{57} Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxiii.
has across time and space demanded of us a questioning of the possibilities of and for space and our place in their imagining and production. The unruly Río Grande and its corporeal encounters are not only resisting hegemonic discourse and systems, but are actively theorizing about the world and its possibilities.

**Encountering & Confronting (Im)possibility**

When I first happened upon that small paragraph on the Chamizal Dispute nearly four years ago, what overwhelmed me about this story was what I perceived as its utter impossibility. That is, that the international border could not be moved, let alone by the forces of a river. Of course, it was this sense of the impossible that would leave a relentless and evocative effect on me. Let me explain. The Chamizal Dispute is a history that has been rendered largely unintelligible. I think, then, that my initial surprise and dismissal of this history was a response to the diligent maintenance of this history’s material and discursive erasure and, in turn, its unknowablity. At the same time, however, it is precisely this sweeping erasure that signals the construction of this history’s impossibility. The presence of this story’s seeming impossibility returns to me repeatedly—in both my material world as well as in my dreams. This study, therefore, does not simply emerge through academic fields and disciplines, nor through just the historical context. More than this, it emerges through my dreaming of the unruly river, of its seething and seemingly unknowable presence. It emerges, in other words, “out of the encounter with the oftentimes barely visible presence of the several other parties or things moving in and out of the analytic scene, out of a kind of haunting.”

\[58\] *El Río Grande as Unruly Archive* came forth, in other words, through a return of the repressed, their talking back, and “an unknown that

\[58\] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 44.
The Chamizal story did, indeed, have a haunting effect on me; yet it is this history’s profound erasure that augments this haunting. I believe, however, in the transformative power of this haunting. I believe in this haunting because it shows us that the impossible is possible and, perhaps more importantly, already exists in our past and geographic order. This haunting and its confrontation with the (im)possible therefore draws us into “the structure of feeling a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”

Keeping all this in mind, I think my initial surprise and dismissal of the Chamizal story shows us how we have come to un- or mis-see our world as modern subjects, as well as how we can learn to see differently.

And yet, this realization, this confrontation with the (im)possible, did not surprise me. As we know very well, the U.S. is built on the blood, bones, and bodies of what historian Mae M. Ngai calls “impossible subjects”—“aliens,” “illegals,” “wetbacks,” the undocumented, and more generally, “the wretched of the earth”—who occupy legally vulnerable or criminalized positions that are excluded from justice but not from the laws that discipline and punish their statuses. What is implicit in the production of impossible subjects, however, is how colonial empires have (and must) ban from sight what the colonial (Anglo-American) subject cannot bare

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59 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 9.

60 Ibid. 8.

61 In Frantz Fanon’s book The Wretched of the Earth (1961), the “wretched of the earth” are any of the following: the dark, the poor, the indigenous, the foreign, and evil “niggers.” Today the “wretched of earth” has multiplied: the homeless, the jobless, the incarcerated, the invincible laborers, the underdeveloped, the criminalized, the refugee, the undocumented (im)migrant, the disposable, the impoverished, the abandoned, the unescaped.

62 Of course, the blood, bones, and bodies referenced here include not only those of the colonized, but those confined to the improvised and invisible excluded spaces of native and nonnative people of color. See: Mae M. Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). See also Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965).
to see. This “what” is the abject/savage—that which and who must not be desired. The border system, of course, participates in this project by working in part as “an abjection machine” that transforms people into impossible subjects, and thus renders them un-intelligible, ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human, and thus ineligible for personhood. ⁶³ I think, however, that the more important question to ask here is not so much who are these impossible subjects, but why the colonial subject cannot bare to see what it has banned from view but which is nevertheless desired and kept at bay (both interior and exterior). Banning the abject/impossible subject from sight but keeping it at bay tells us that the impossible has always been possible; indeed, the (im)possible is integral to Anglo-America’s socio-economic desires, needs, and structural epistemology. Important to my consideration of the Chamizal story, then, is how Euro-American colonial imaginaries and their material power structures not only depend on a repetition of dis(re)membering subaltern people, places, narratives, and histories, but is contingent on “a willed unknowability of the abjected.”⁶⁴ Confronting the (im)possible exposes this willed unknowability and demands a reckoning of how we can come to (un)see.

I began to consider, then, the tension between my surprise and unsurprise. That is, I began to consider the seething presence of erased histories, un/expected denials and refusals, and the dim memory of silenced voices recounting a world without borders. I want to suggest, then, that this (un)surprise is not only indicative of decolonial insights and “unsettling comforts,” but that it is an engendering (un)surprise. The Río Grande’s curious conceptual otherness is underwritten by transgressive and imaginative forms of knowledge that have been relentlessly refused and denied by dominant epistemologies. What are the implications, then, of

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⁶⁴ Ibid. 53.
acknowledging the unruly Río Grande’s (im)possibility and (un)knowability? How do displaced Chamizal residents contribute to its meanings? What does the presence of the (im)possible have to offer us in re-imagining and enacting the more just world we need? And, in addition to the wonders of this unexpected and (un)knowable unruly river-border, what does this confrontation with the (im)possible tells us about our present? Put another way, how did we get here, to this present? With our imaginaries so closed-off, so confined and narrowed by a common sense of (im)possibility that we did not choose? Keeping these questions in mind, I take heed from Michel Foucault’s call for “conceptual needs,” by which he meant that our conceptualization of power should not and cannot be founded simply on an isolated investigation of any conceptualized object, but that “we have to know the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance.”

**Life After Death along the Borderlands**

The U.S.-México border and its borderlands have long been depicted, discussed, and theorized as spaces of deviance, negation, and death by dominant media sources and scholars alike. In Peter Andreas’ *Border Games*, in which he investigates U.S. border enforcement and political representations of the international border in the 1990s, Andreas powerfully illustrates the hegemonic construction of the border’s spatial deviance to serve the hegemonic needs of the U.S. nation-state. For instance, Andreas examines how the U.S. government skillfully exploited images of “illegal” migrants rushing across an “open” border that was, in turn, described by politicians and media sources alike as a border “under siege.” He explains that these images were disproportionately projected and displayed as means to rationalize national policies that almost

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exclusively target the border as both the source of “illegal” immigration and the most urgent and appropriate site for its solution.  

Nicholas De Genova builds on these insights in his discussion on the “spectacles of migrant ‘illegality,’” in which he argues that the spectacle of border enforcement renders migrant illegality “spectacularly visible.” Significantly, this focus on fortifying and policing only the most visible and popular urban entry points effectively funneled border-crossing migrants into some of the most lethal and remote areas of the border. These remote areas, of course, were furthest from the public and media’s attention, and thus these already illegible lives and deaths were pushed further out of sight.

By and large, scholars of race and borderlands history continue to apply what Michel Foucault calls “biopower”—the power to let live and let die—and what Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics”—places of wounded, murdered, and sometimes missing bodies as consequences of colonial geopolitical power—to the borderlands and (im)migration studies. In this way, the borderlands and broader analytical accounts of border-crossing migration tend to focus and narrow their lens almost entirely on “sites of death.” In a similar vein, historian Victor Ortíz-Gonzalez’s work on the decay, pollution, land exploitation, and perceived emptiness of the El Paso-Juarez borderlands illuminates, at least in part, this region’s “spaces of living death” with


67 De Genova argues that this border performance of the production of illegality can only be accomplished through racialized discourse and visuals that justify its implementation. See: Nicholas De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, the Scene of Inclusion.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180-1198.


“populations dead to others.” Yet, the dominant perception of the borderlands as a blank and 
dead space coupled, ironically, with the hyper recognition of this region’s mass and hyper-
exploited labor, facilitated the arrival of the highly polluting and labor exploitative maquiladora 
industry. In this way, the U.S.-Mexico boundary has “become a racialized ontological device 
through which to exact glocal forms of economic subordination.” The maquiladora industry 
Cases marked the borderlands as the receptacle for toxic and nuclear waste dumps. Waste 
dumps such as these have serious consequences on the health and livelihood of those living in 
these regions—thereby perpetuating this region’s “spaces of living death.”

Of course, these scholarly works and others like them are critical contributions to the 
field of borderlands studies. And while I take up these contributions in my analysis, I do not 
prioritize further theorization of violence, absence, and death. Rather, I seek to do two things: 1) 
to ask what these forms of violence do (in other words, what does this violence both produce and 
displace?) and 2) to reconsider absence and death entirely. Concerning the former, I follow the 
insights of Richard Slotkin and his work on the Anglo-America’s “regeneration through 
violence” in order to suggest that through past and enduring killing abstractions the white settler 
colonial subject not only makes himself, but comes to know himself as dominant. Put another 
way, it is through the act of violence and, more particularly, the ongoing process of violence, 
that the Anglo-American subject not only comes into being, but through which he comes to


know himself as dominant. Concerning the latter point, however, is my overhaul of absence/death. This reconsideration is underwritten by Black geographer Clyde Woods’ essay “Life After Death” in which he discusses his concerns over not so much the abundance of scholarship that focuses on the U.S. nation-state’s killing abstractions, but the willingness of scholars to end their discussions at these life and death conflicts — something he calls “Black and other nonwhite ‘essentialisms.’”73 In this essay, Woods remarks on the relationship between race and geography, and wonders aloud:

[M]y encounters have forced me to seriously question a social science literature that is, for the most part, seemingly incapable of hearing the cries emanating from the soul of this nation. The same tools that symbolize hope in the hands of the surgeon symbolize necrophilia in the hands of the coroner. Have we becoming academic coroners? Have the tools of theory, method, instruction, and social responsibility become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies? Does our research in any way reflect the experiences, viewpoints, and needs of the residents of these dying communities? On the other hand, is the patient really dead? What role are scholars playing in this social triage?

What interests me, in addition to this idea of academic coroners, is his question of whether the patient, or the subject of analysis, is really dead. The question reminds me of Sandra’s “una cara vientre.” In fact, “una cara vientre” asks a very similar question: are these migrants really disappeared, and are they really, in fact, no longer with us? Thus I believe that “una cara vientre” demands not only attendance to the very presence of the disappeared, but, more than this, a serious, creative consideration and heightened awareness of “the wanton,

elaborate strategies undertaken to erase its presence from view.”

In a similar way, then, this study asks and reconsiders the answers to: Have the counterhegemonic voices and memories of the Chamizal Diaspora been so silenced, so erased, so destroyed, that they cease to exist? Moreover, is the unruly Río Grande so dominated, so entirely subdued that it was been effectively “tamed”? McKittrick builds on Woods’ insights here in her consideration of what she calls “a black sense of place.” She similarly asks, “What if our analytical questions did not demand answers that replicate racial violence?”

Keeping these questions in mind, while my analysis is historically framed around spatialized violence, geographic domination, and the dis(re)memberment of the land and Chamizal communities, I take heed from Woods and McKittrick and situate this study not simply on the grounds of human suffering, but on human life, resilience, resistance, and reclamation.

More than 50 years have passed since the signing of the Chamizal Treaty, and fewer and fewer of those who lived on el Chamizal are still with us. We must, therefore, record and document their lived experiences and memories. But rather than assuming that once these few individuals pass that their knowledge and stories will pass with them or “disappear,” I want us to seriously consider how the land of el Chamizal is imbued with their spirit and (counter)memory. What I mean to assert here, in other words, is that we exist, we continue, our dead are not dead.

_El Río Grande as Unruly Archive_, therefore, rises from both disappointment and delight: the disappointment of disjuncture, denial, and erasure, but also the joy of resilience, resistance, agency, and the lasting memory. Thus, in order to preserve the place of the Chamizal diaspora in

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history and their right to a remembered presence, we must continuously (re)invest the story of el Chamizal and the unruly river with new meanings of both suffering and joy. This study is a step toward this investment.

**Methods**

Drawing on creative, conceptual, corporeal, and material geographies from the Río Grande borderlands, I explore and examine the relationship between geographic practices of domination and corporeal encounters with the “impossible” unruly Río Grande. Here I am referring to geography as space, place, and location in its physical materiality, embodied and sensual presence, and imaginative configurations. I conceptualize these geographies in this way so that I may examine not only the tangible materiality of el Chamizal and the Río Grande, and thus consider and attend to the memories and insights I argue are imbued within their materiality (“blue savannas of memory”), but so I may also investigate the ways in which additional unruly, subaltern geographies manifest bodily and discursively. Building on McKittrick’s important book *Demonic Grounds*, I suggest that the nuanced and varied geographies explored in this study demonstrate what McKittrick calls “oppositional geographies.” In place of “oppositional,” however, this study explores and inquires about what I am calling unruly Chicana/o geographies—the material, embodied, and imaginative sites of Chicana/o viability, subjectivity, resistance, agency, possibility, wonder, and, in some cases, reclamation. In many ways, then, *El Río Grande as Unruly Archive* is a study of the indefatigable meanderings—material, imagined, and otherwise—that might assist us in conceptualizing more just and perhaps more poetic alternative geographies as well as our place in them.

Because so little scholarly (or otherwise) attention has been given to the Chamizal

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76 McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xi.
diaspora, my time sifting through the state archives of the University of Texas at El Paso and the National Parks Service’s Chamizal National Memorial not only helped me to reconstruct and reimagine the nuances of the Chamizal Relocation Project, but, perhaps most importantly, sifting through these archives demonstrated to me that, as Luce Irigaray once said of her own research methods, “it was necessary…to note the way in which the method is never as simple as it purports to be.” Working with these state archives required, demanded even, that I look/listen for the silences/absences/hauntings of the Chamizal diaspora within the official record. Let me elaborate. At these state archives I confront what theorist Anna Laura Stoler calls the “colonial archive” and what historian Lisa Lowe calls the “archive of liberalism.” As Stoler defines it, the colonial archive is an intricate and highly advanced technology of the imperial state that collects “codified beliefs that clustered (and bore witness to) connections between secrecy, the law, and power.” Lowe builds on this framework by importantly observing how state archives absorb colonial violence within far-reaching narratives of modern reason and progress that naturalize not only violence toward subaltern people, but the subsequent forgetting of that violence.

Similarly so, the vast majority of materials at UTEP and the Memorial overwhelmingly represent codified perspectives of the Chamizal Dispute and Treaty. While these archive materials are useful in what they do indeed tell us, they nevertheless collectively naturalize the violences of the Treaty. What I learned, and what I am learning still, is to “read” for the fleeting moments the repressed present themselves in the codified stories of state archives.

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79 Ibid. 87.

The Chamizal National Memorial plays a critical role in the burial of the Treaty’s injustice by providing and commemorating a flattened historical narrative in the Memorial’s visitor center. This exhibit largely omits the place of Chamizal residents in this history as well as their voices and perspectives. There is no mention, for example, of their struggle and community activism to receive fair and just compensation for their properties, nor is there any mention of the widespread harassment and threats they received by government representatives if they refused to accept the government’s initial offers on their property. \footnote{Chamizal residents reported that government representatives threatened to take away homeowners’ passports and shut off their electricity if they refused the government’s initial offer on their property. I speak more about this in chapter 3.} This is especially troubling considering the Memorial houses the only public copies of personal documents collected by one of the federally contracted real-estate appraisers who assessed Chamizal properties. Significantly, this particular set of documents consists of multiple, unique photographs of Chamizal homes and residents, particularly of children outside their homes. [See Figures 10-13]. Yet, only a few photographs from this collection, all of which are of homes alone, are on display.

Keeping this in mind, the countermemories afforded to this study by the seven individuals I interviewed, the four individuals interviewed as part of the Chamizal Oral History Project, as well as those from my newspaper archival work collectively speak to the countermemories of this community, their struggles, and community resistance. Indeed, their testimonies attest to “the economy of affirmation and forgetting” that devises the colonial archive. These countermemories therefore demand a different reading of the colonial archive as an informative and telling source, yes; but more importantly, as a source that takes part of colonial practices of narrative dominance. Put another way, their countermemories demand of us to resist familiar and convenient methods of investigating and making sense of the Chamizal Treaty. Rather, they ask of us to privilege other ways of “reading” these archives and unruly
Figure 10 (Above) and 11 (Below): Boys playing in Chamizal.
[William E. Woods Papers, Chamizal National Memorial Papers]
Figure 12 (above) & 13 (below): Photos of various Chamizal neighborhoods.
[William E. Woods Papers, Chamizal National Memorial Archive]
Chicana/o geographies. I contend, therefore, that while these transgressive geographies may be significantly obstructed and repressed, they have not been destroyed.

*El Río Grande as Unruly Archive* is, indeed, an interdisciplinary study. Its interdisciplinarity, I strongly believe, is emblematic of our time and our present needs. But, as Roland Barthes reminds us, interdisciplinary work “is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go.).” Rather, “[t]o do something interdisciplinary it’s not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinary consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.” Similarly so, this interdisciplinary study, which is underwritten by the unruliness of the Río Grande and its refusal to “belong” along a fixed colonial boundary, belongs in many ways to no one. For many readers, then, this interdisciplinary refusal will likely mean a somewhat unpredictable and no doubt unsettling reading of this study. I ask, however, that we keep in mind what this unsettling reading might do for us, how this study’s interdisciplinarity might conjure up, at least in part, the “unsettling comforts” of the unruly Río Grande that are crucial to this study’s endeavors.

**El Río Grande as Unruly Archive**

I want us to consider, now, how the land records and stores memories—particularly subaltern and counterhegemonic memories that are excluded from the colonial archive. Drawing on my earlier discussion of “una cara vientre,” Tlaltecuhltli’s womb/tomb, and Glissant’s ocean/abyss, what I want to argue for here is a reading of the Río Grande as an unruly archive of submerged, dis(re)membered histories. Although dominant conceptions and policies continue to construct the borderlands and the Río Grande into a space of negation or an inert and passive

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space, I challenge this space of negation and propose instead that the Río Grande borderlands is an active, indeed unruly, geographic region that represents and stores the histories and memories of the seemingly “disappeared.”

Toni Morrison’s important essay “The Site of Memory” has been foundational to this idea. In her essay, Morrison discusses the deep poetic relations between memory and landscape, the remains or traces of geographic narratives, as well as how these various and often obstructed sites of memory not only offer us a different sense of place, but also different epistemologies that re-imagine a world where subaltern lives matter. She considers, in other words, the geographic resonance of space. Her attention to the Mississippi River, however, is particularly helpful to me. Similar to the Río Grande’s canalization, the Mississippi River was streamlined and straightened in the 1920s through canals and levees built to prevent the river from flooding as well as to make room for infrastructure and houses. “Occasionally the river floods these places,” Morrison writes. “‘Flooding’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering[…] remembering where it used to be before it was straightened out.” 83 The Río Grande between El Paso and Juárez no longer floods like it once used to; nevertheless, I want to suggest that the Río Grande, too, floods with memory, recalling where it used to be before it was straightened out, another world without borders, and, of course, memories of conflict and resistance.

In developing this call to read the river as archive and to privilege this archive’s distinct but obstructed unruliness, I also draw on the insights of Black feminist scholar M. Jaqui Alexander and her work on water crossings as a source of cultural memory and generational trauma for Black subjects. In Pedagogies of Crossing, Alexander urges her readers to recognize that water, like people, is unrelated only on the surface (“Down in the abyss, their currents reach

for each other and fold without the slightest tinge of resentment, into the same Atlantic”).  

Her attention to that which is “down in the abyss,” rather than what is on the surface or skin of the ocean is significant. It is significant because what is down in the abyss is cloaked in the darkness of the ocean, so remote, so unreachable, and therefore, seemingly unknowable. But this place of darkness and depth, Alexander suggests, is a place of ancestral knowledge and incredible possibility.

Indeed, this reminds me of “una cara vientre” because like the undercurrents down in the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, the unruly meanderings of the Río Grande have also been rendered down in the dark unknowable abyss. In fact, from the perspective of Anglo-America, the Río Grande’s disruption to the U.S.-Mexico border was a manifestation of the land’s “dark” madness because it was understood as behaving like the region’s dark and “savage” “greasers.” In this way, the river was seen by Anglo-American settlers as one more beast to be tamed and put “in place.” Let me give an example of this. Prominent El Pasoan historian Gladys Gregory, who wrote extensively on the Chamizal Dispute throughout the 1950s, likened shifts in the Río Grande to “the witches in Macbeth,” proclaiming the river’s meanderings “have brewed an evil influence destined to defeat the best of human intentions.” If we recall the Chamizal Memorial’s dedication to “wild rivers and reasonable men,” it’s clear that the Treaty’s fixing of the river through the canal is the material consequence of Anglo-America’s domination, indeed its taming, of the river’s dark “madness.” This is all to say, that the submerged contents of its river archive—subaltern narratives, voices, and geographies—have long been fixed within


85 Coined by Anglo settlers in the early 1800s, “greaser” connoted not only the dark, filthy, and greasy appearance of Mexicans and Indigenous people, but also their place along the fringes of humankind.

dominant imaginaries as dark, mad, and unknowable. They are what the colonial subject cannot bear, and thus must be put out of sight.

While the “submerged” contents of this river archive have certainly been made to disappear, they have not disappeared. Nor are they simply buried or lost. Rather, these contents are an active presence in the everyday lives of those living on the border and are thus suggestive of larger unresolved stories that contest and rupture the knowability of our surroundings.

Significantly, the material and ephemeral unruliness of the Río Grande determines that this river-archive’s contents are never fixed. Rather, this unruly archive mirrors aspects of what cultural studies scholar Diana Taylor calls the “repertoire:” unfixed ephemeral knowledges that disappear and persists at the same time. The contents of this river-archive, in other words, move according to the meanderings of the river itself, through its nepantla waters, colliding, shifting, and always re-interpreting a more complex, unresolved story. This archival unruliness is the very antithesis of the colonial archive that exists within and through the fixity of geography, language, narrative, and history.

More than suggesting that the Río Grande is saturated with submerged stories, I am suggesting that the river holds the capacity to speak for itself—to talk back—to tell us stories that have been suppressed, denied, and erased from dominant historical accounts. Land, then, is infused with distinct, corporeal ways of knowing and emotional memory. Indeed, I am inspired by the insights of Indigenous and Aboriginal people who have always privileged and advocated for “a reclamation of the land as pedagogy,” the language of the land and the spirits of place, as a deeply urgent avenue through which to nurture and rebuild alternative ways of knowing that hold

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the promise of moral rightness and justice.\textsuperscript{88} This pedagogy contends that “the land is already a narrative — already an artifact of intellect before people represent it…there is no wilderness.”\textsuperscript{89} Moreover, Indigenous knowledge systems are grounded on an ideology of mutual reciprocity and responsibility in which animals, plants, and landscapes are “alive,” imbued with “spirit.”\textsuperscript{90} They are active participants in the everyday narrating practices that bring our worlds into being. Thus, I “read” el Chamizal and the Río Grande as artifacts of intellect and spirit that elucidate and “speak” alternative insights and knowledges about the possibilities for our world.

Let me give an example of this “speaking.” In her poetic essay “Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time,” M. NourbeSe Philip’s recounts sitting by a river, listening to the sound of the water passing by her, and the wonder of how land continues to intervene in our becomings:

Listen to the river. I did. The Credit River. And within the sound of water I hear the sounds of the languages of the First Peoples. The liquid, mellifluous sounds of their languages. I listen and hear how the very sound of the space around us shapes us fundamentally—from the ground up so to speak, so that even the tongue must remain faithful to the language of the land.\textsuperscript{91}

The river reminds us of our connectivity to land. It reminds us how we are shaped by it,
and vice versa. It reminds us that land and body are continuous, and thus demands a recognition of humanness as geographic and geography as human. Rather than restricting human relationships to land within the realm of ownership, property and otherness like Euro-Anglo colonialism has done, Indigenous relations to land are underwritten by a profound understanding that land and the human body are less distinct than we think; rather, they are extensions of one another. Drawing on these insights, Diana Taylor suggests that cultural memory is the repertoire of practice, imagination, interconnection, and embodied knowledge that is often, if not always, embedded in its environment, bound-up with a “psychic pulse” between body and land.  

Wondering aloud, Taylor asks: “How does one come to inhabit and envision one’s body as coextensive with one’s environment and one’s past, emphasizing the porous nature of skin rather than its boundedness?” Of course, Latina and Chicana artists like Frida Khalo, Ana Mendieta, Laura Aguilar, and Judy Baca have long explored and committed themselves to these cornerstones of Indigenous worldviews and undertakings in their creative practice. In her essay “La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra,” for instance, Baca situates herself and her life work along “a simple idea:” that the Los Angeles River has memory:  

Somehow memory is embedded in place and, as artists, scholars, and educators, learning to put our ear to the ground to listen and to understand the spirit of place is one of the most important of all creative, life-affirming activities. For me, it has been the basis for the creation of public monuments. Of course, learning to listen is more difficult than it seems. [...] But if we are successful listeners, we can challenge the


cycle of colonization, gentrification, global warming, and anti-historicization of our landscapes and of our minds.

Part of this “successful” listening, however, necessitates a more careful and critical listening to/for how violence inflicted on land has a direct connection to the wounds of the people—something Indigenous epistemologies have, of course, long contended. In interviews I conducted with displaced Chamizal residents, some in fact evoked this connection between the wounds of land/body when they attributed their feelings of dislocation to not only the rupture of their communities, and not only to the slicing and dividing up of el Chamizal, but also to the partial filling-in of the river in order to redirect it through the canal. In fact, Maria Eugenia Trillo, a former Chamizal resident who explained to me that those living in the Chamizal diaspora have a deep connection to the land of el Chamizal because their families buried their newborn’s belly buttons into the land, called upon the body to describe and address the dislocation and geographic erasure of her community. “When they dispersed our community,” she began, “it was as if they had cut off the hand or the arm but that you could still feel the fingers. You would look down and there was nothing there but you could still feel it. And that’s how we still feel.”

That Trillo equates her dislocation from her home and community with dismemberment and phantom limb syndrome is significant not only because of its ephemeral and haunting connotations, but more importantly because it reminds us that, “despite the limitation of remembering through trauma and semantic and spatial confusion, the violence of loss is unmistakable, menemoically traceable, and corporeally inscribed.”

This is all to say that the geographic wounds of el Chamizal and the Río Grande are also the wounds of the Chamizal

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94 Razack, *Race, Space, and the Law*, 89.
diaspora. The consequences of the Chamizal Treaty therefore make Indigenous worldviews about the continuity of land/body explicit for us. Indeed, these consequences demand of this study that the body not fall out of our analysis of the logics of racism or the bodily symptoms of racial injustice.  

*El Río Grande as Unruly Archive,* therefore, seeks to consider what kinds of possibilities emerge when Chicana/o studies encounters human geography and considers, without appropriating, Indigenous epistemologies about the humanness of geography. Keeping in mind the geographic dismemberment of the Chamizal communities, I want us to think about these geographies of bodies and their (geographic) dis(re)memberment by considering how particular people and their communities—across time and space—have been so disjointed, so suppressed and denied, that they have been spatially obstructed from the landscape and dominant, familiar ways of seeing. Indeed, the visual landscape of our everyday surroundings, what Dolores Hayden calls “the power of place” and what Katherine McKittricks calls “the vessels of human violence,” are hegemonically employed to obscure, suppress, and deny from view both the presence of subalternity as well as the land’s artifacts of intellect.  

For example, in redirecting and straightening the Río Grande, the U.S. government executed a colonial cartographic logic that not only put the unruly river “in place” but erased the memory of the river’s unruliness from the visual landscape itself, thereby encouraging its unknowability. And in dismembering and rearranging the river, former Chamizal residents were also put in their “rightful” place: not only a displaced and dispossessed place, but a place denied of a right to remembered presence.

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This study exposes, addresses, and attends to these vessels of human violence by seeking out, restoring, and inserting, at least in part, the submerged voices of the Chamizal Diaspora into the historical record. Exposing these vessels, however, also means learning to recognize what geographer Juanita Sunberg calls “traces.” All actors, she argues, can be said to leave traces, be they texts, oral narratives, footprints, and/or feces. The land, therefore, also leaves traces through configurations of vegetation, soil types, and a variety of other traces. For example, traces of the unruly Río Grande include the former and dried up Río Grande riverbeds in both Ciudad Juarez and along Paisano Drive in El Paso. But traces of the unruly river also include, if we recall, the “dripping wet” migrants moving through the borderlands that I discussed earlier. What these various and distinct traces tell us is that despite practices of geographic dominance that dismember and rearrange the land according to linear, predictable, and familiar colonial spatial patterns that disremember deviant, transformative spatial patterns, the unruly Río Grande has not been so dominated that it ceases to exist. Rather, these corporeal traces disclose for us the “voice” and “memory” of the land resisting, still, domination and amnesia. Learning how to recognize these traces, the presence of unruly Chicana/o geographies, and uncovering why and how the dominant story of the Chamizal Treaty is remembered, will reveal the tools and ideologies that suppress countermemories and the Chamizal diaspora in our present. It is my hope that in exposing these vessels of human violence as well as refocusing our attention to el Chamizal’s power of place that we might begin to develop and enact what Emma Pérez calls a “decolonial imaginary….a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history.”

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I want to take a moment, however, to make one thing absolutely clear: While this study will primarily investigate the consequences of conquest, displacement, and dispossession on the lives of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, we cannot underestimate or brush aside the fact that ethnic-Mexicans, as nonnative people of color, have also, to varying degrees, participated as colonial settlers. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang explain in their important essay “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” because the U.S. is both a settler colonial nation-state and an empire, it has and continues to displace native people and prompt others—including nonnative people of color—onto Indigenous lands through slavery, war, and economic displacement. I bring this to our attention not only because too often are ethnic Mexicans and Indigenous people lumped together in the field of Chicana/o Studies—the field from which I am situated and from which I write—but also because the insights and teachings that the Chamizal story has to offer us are those which Indigenous epistemologies have always privileged and implemented into the materialization of their worlds. These potentially transformative insights—which must also include an ethics and practice premised on caring for the land and the interdependency of all—will only be available to us as a tool of daring for and enacting change if nonnative people of color like myself (and white settlers of course) acknowledge and attend to our complicity and investment in white settler colonialism and white supremacy. We must, in other words, “confront our collective illegitimacy [to the land] and determine how to live without participating in and sustain the disappearance of Indigenous peoples.”

This is all to say, in other words, that yes: ethnic-Mexicans are at the center of this study. However, I ask that we respect and honor the

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101 Razack, *Dying From Improvement*, 27.
First Peoples and keep in mind Anzaldúa’s needed reminder: “This land was Mexican once / was Indian always / and is / and will be again.”

It is from this point of departure that I ask we enter, make our various ways, and exit *El Río Grande as Unruly Archive*.

**Darkness, My Sight**

In order to make use of the archival presence and the “submerged” contents of this unruly river-archive, we must develop the different kind of sight I alluded to at the beginning of this introduction. This different sight entails generating a “vision-illuminated darkness” in order to enact what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “la facultad.” Let me explain what I mean here. The contents of this river-archive are submerged into the depths of the river, and therefore into the darkness of the river’s own womb/abyss. Thus, we need to adjust our lens to see with and alongside the river’s darkness, not despite it, so that we may illuminate that which and who has not only been obstructed from our view, but also what we think is absence, nothingness, or the supposedly impossible. Central to this particular endeavor is asking how darkness offers a place or direction through which to interrogate (un)knowability. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa calls on her readers to embrace darkness and confront what she calls the Shadow Beast in order to develop “la facultad” of mestiza consciousness. As she defines it, la facultad importantly interrogates the unknowable by breaking with dominant forms of consciousness and modes of seeing with its “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface.”

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104 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 60.
the presence of the “disappeared,” the unknowable and impossible, to sift through and put to use the submerged contents of an unruly river archive. I want us to consider, then, how la facultad might also offer us means to attend to geographer Edward Soja’s call for a more wary and vigilant consideration of unjust geographies and the political organization of space:

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and disciplines are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.

How might a “vision-illuminated darkness” assist us in seeing/sensing these hidden consequences? In her book *Buenas Noches American Culture*, María DeGuzmán works to untangle the historical stigma of darkness, arguing that Latina/o self-representation through tropes of night is an “aesthetico-political practice” and act of resistance to state-sanctioned definitions of Latina/os and their conditions for exclusion. Following these insights, this study repositions the lens on the “dark” Río Grande and subaltern people living and moving through the borderlands in order to call attention to this region as a space of resistance. That is, I site the Río Grande as a terrain of struggle that, if we are able to see with darkness, holds the capacity to articulate the histories of the so-called “disappeared” as well as the unresolved stories that make up the contents of unruly river archive. I therefore employ this “vision-illuminated darkness” as a thematic tool through which my discussion on unruly Chicana/o geographies can be read. The unruly river archive, in other words, requires and abides by the different sight of a “vision-

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105 In her discussion on Latina/o aesthetics of night, De Guzman attends to what she calls “tropes of night” that when hegemonically employed, are a symbol of the overlooked—those who are both hyper visible because of their perceived darkness, but who are systematically unseen because of that darkness.
illuminated darkness.” The insights of the Chamizal history are not buried or lost to us, but submerged in an illuminating darkness. This confrontation with the dark unknown importantly reconstructs the knowability of our surroundings by suggesting that the submerged and structurally invisible people, places, stories, and insights of unruly Chicana/o geographies exist within our present geographic and social order. Indeed, they are already within our view. However, illuminating the seeable and unseeable and why they are (un)seen requires the unfamiliar and often uncomfortable work of looking for that which is both “a present absence and an absent presence.”

Once we begin to develop this alternative vision we can begin to sift through the submerged contents of this unruly archive in a way that forces revision of dominant narratives and constructs more just socio-spatial relations that neither hinge on the oppression of certain people’s humanity nor the concealment of their voices/histories. Thus, if we can trust this alternative sight and if we can trust what this archive tells us about colonial, cartographic rules that depend on and normalize the division, displacement, dispossession, erasure, and objectification of subaltern people and their subjectivities, stories, voices, and lands, we might begin to see that not only do we have the capacity and power to change these rules, but that, as McKittrick so importantly reminds us, “there already exists a terrain through which different stories and geographic knowledges can be and are told.”


107 McKittrick, Demonic Grounds, x.
Dispossession Precedes Accumulation

I begin this preliminary and unfinished study with a historical overview of the U.S. Anglo-American invasion, conquest, and exploitation of what is now the U.S. Southwest, what was once the Mexican north, and what was (and still is) hundreds of years prior, Indigenous land. This historical framing allows for an advanced discussion of the continuous evolution and adaptation of the logics of white patriarchal supremacy, capitalism, conquest, and settler colonialism upon which the United States was founded. I revisit these legacies of geographic domination to demonstrate how the Chamizal Treaty produced, more than 100 years after the 1848 Treaty, what Anzaldúa calls “los atravesados”: not only those who cross borders, but more particularly, those who have been crossed and thus disempowered by the redrawing of geopolitical borders.108

In the following section, then, I trace the strategies and practices of U.S. geographic domination and white settler colonialism so that I may situate the Chamizal Dispute within this country’s layered, persisting history of subaltern dispossession and displacement that has, in turn, lead to the intergenerational and structurally secure wealth of Anglo-Americans. This historical framing therefore demonstrates that “dispossession has preceded capital accumulation everywhere.”109 Significant to this chapter’s particular endeavor is the careful notation of the multifaceted, legal and illegal ways Indigenous and Mexican people were displaced from and dispossessed of their lands and how through this process, Indigenous and Mexican people were produced as disposable, racialized subjects. The works of historians Richard Slotkin, David Montejano, Cheryl Harris, Arnoldo León, Oscar Martinez, Donald Worster, and Maria E.

108 Ibd. 161.

Montoya are foundational to this section’s largely historical framework and its discussion of how U.S. land policy—defined by the grid system, surveying, mapping, and private property—made the facts of landownership and landlessness meaningful by gradually securing and equating landownership with whiteness, and landlessness (dispossession) with Mexican and Indigenous people.  

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how subaltern people living in the former Mexican north and U.S. West were both violently put “in place” while simultaneously rendered as “placeless people.”

Writing, Returning

No matter how I seem to sketch and write this study, I find myself returning to that herida abierta—that unnatural wound along the skin of land—in my accounting of the Chamizal Diaspora. To account for diaspora and its consequences is to attend to such wounds and their estrangements and to the violent ruptures that have conditioned people of color: ancestors who were torn from their lands or those who left their homes in order to survive; ancestors who were raped by invaders who would then in that act of sexual violence become our ancestors; and, of course, the trauma and longevity of these schisms and gulsfs on the body, language, family, and lands. So, as Stuart Hall once apprised his readers, if this study “seems preoccupied with the diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement, I urge you to remember that all discourse is ‘placed,’ and the heart has its reasons.”

I want, now, to suggest that this continuous return to that herida abierta, and to land as

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body, is an unresolved but nevertheless generative return. It is, in fact, a visceral response to place and the land itself. It is what Lucy Lippard calls “the lure of the local,” that pull of place that steers and operates on each of us, revealing our politics, desires, imaginaries, and spiritual as well as ancestral memories. “Even in places we’ve never been before,” Lippard contends, “human lives can eerily bubble up from the ground and haunt us,” guide us and nurture us as we tend to “the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere.” Indeed, geographer Yi Fu Tuan theories over senses place in which he argues that individual pulls to place are both a biological response to the natural landscape and built environment as well as a cultural reaction to that environment. What this means, of course, is that seemingly spontaneous attractions to place are not in fact coincidental, not at all random in the least. These attractions do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are the consequence of inherited memories and corporeal knowledges coaxing us back to where we have been before.

What this tells us, then, is that despite profound erasures of subaltern histories and places, the land nevertheless remembers, as does the body, recalling, always, the dim memory of place that operates on and steers the body toward confrontations with la memoria de la tierra. This particular form of memory and the body’s steering toward these places of memory is why, I think, several years after his relocation from el Chamizal, Peter Ramos found himself in Juarez standing aside the weeping willow his mother planted in the front yard of their home in Rio Linda. As he tells it, this encounter—indeed, his confrontation—was a rather remarkable coincidence considering it was the result of meandering, curiously, in the night:

112 Quoted in Hayden, The Power of Place, 16.
I used to hangout in Juarez quite a bit…and I remember one time just out of curiosity they had a road...they called it the Malecón back in those days... but it was kind of like a freeway cause there were no turns it was kind of a straight shot...and we drove down there. I was with some friends of mine and....I said..."You know I think we're about the area where I used to live." And then I saw that there was a park. It was called Parque Chamizal or something like that. So we went in and I spent quite a bit of time wandering up and down because the streets were pretty much visible. And I got to the point where I could…you know..."This is where my house used to be." And it was weird. And I never understood that, you know? Why did they get rid of the houses? And that weeping willow was still there and my mom's mimosas were still there but nothing else. Everything else was gone. I'm sure they had a reason for doing that I just had no idea what that would have been.113

While Ramos suggests that his encounter with his mother’s willow tree was somewhat unexpected, I want to propose instead that his confrontation with the last, remaining trace of his family’s former home was not coincidental, not at all random in the least. Rather, despite the demolition of his home and the erasure of his family’s community (“everything else was gone”), the land returned to México is nevertheless inscribed and imbued with the memories and wounds of the Chamizal diaspora. The dim memory of direction, in other words, operating during the blacks of night (“vision-illuminated darkness”) steered Ramos’ body toward his mother’s willow tree. As Ramos’ account shows us, then, the Chamizal diaspora entails far-reaching and deep-seated loss; but his account also demonstrates how the Chamizal diaspora is also a story of indefatigable (and sometimes unexpected) presence, agency, and return.

113 Ramos, in conversation with the author, August 2016.
These “returns” to place are not unlike the meanderings of the Mississippi and Río Grande rivers remembering where they were before they were straightened out; for the pull of place is also the rush of our imaginations, the rush of our emotions, the rush of our “flooding.” “Writers are [also] like that,” Morrison says, “remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared.” 114

Indeed, when I shared with my family two years ago that I would be traveling to El Paso to conduct the fieldwork for this study, I did not anticipate that I would soon learn that my visit to El Paso would be my own unwitting return. Let me explain. My mother’s father—my grandfather David Hinojosa—was born and raised in Western Texas. My grandfather’s family, however, had originally settled near the mouth of the Río Grande and would continue to settle there for generations to come. 115 This information, however, is as much information about my grandfather or his family that had ever been shared with me. And yet, when I told my tía I would be traveling to El Paso, she shared with me a family legend that the Hinojosa family had once owned, and later lost, a large parcel of land in the El Paso Valley. When I asked my mother about this, she nodded and said she had heard the story too. “Look into it,” my mother said. “I’ve always wondered about it.”

According to official records, the Joaquin de Hinojosa land grant of 1692 was the oldest and largest, but least known, land grant in the Chihuahuan Acquisition [See Figure 14]. Joaquin

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de Hinojosa, a Franciscan friar who oversaw the El Paso Valley missions, was granted the deed to this land, totaling 177,136 acres, as both a private individual and a representative of the church. While this dual ownership later lead to confusion and a series of court battles over the ownership of this strip of land, more than a century later in 1794, a man from the Rio Grande Valley named Juan Jose de Ynojosa Ballí petitioned for confirmation of this grant, alleging he was the legitimate heir of Joaquin de Hinojosa, who had been granted a tract of land in Coahuila and Texas, situated upon both sides of the Rio del Norte and where the pueblos of Ysleta, Socorro, San Elizario, and Senecú were located along the southern bank of the river. After a series of court hearings, Ballí was found the legal heir and owner of the land. Title to the land was passed down to generations of Hinojosa and Ballí families by informal, verbal, and family arrangements until the title was officially terminated in 1922 after descendants could not provide the original grant deed to the Texas Supreme Court. Having only a copy of the original deed, the Court denied the family’s claim to ownership.

What interests me about this story, in addition to the dual ownership of the grant, the missing deed, and thus the U.S. courts’ process of legalized dispossession within my own family history, is that the geographic region of the Joaquin de Hinojosa land grant is no stranger to the unruly ebbs and flows of the Río Grande. In fact, I want to suggest that this region is underwritten with the river’s unruly insights due to an extraordinary flood in the early 1830s that not only swept away the Ysleta and Socorro missions—pillars of conquest and colonialism—but also caused the river to form an additional channel south of the old one, thereby placing Ysleta,


Socorro, and San Elizario on an island some twenty miles in length and two to four miles in width. For the remainder of the Mexican period this area was called La Isla, as the Rio Grande continued to flow through both channels. By 1848, however, when the deepest channel of the river was declared the boundary between the United States and Mexico, water had ceased entirely to flow in the old, northern riverbed. U.S. officials, therefore, proclaimed La Isla to be U.S. territory—despite great Mexican protest.

This is all to say that the haunting of the Chamizal Dispute story and my unwitting pull toward its landscape is grounded in the dim and ancestral memory of direction coaxing me southeast to the Texas borderlands—a landscape whose very becoming is the product of rupture and the impossible: the unruly Rio Grande. Yes: “All water has a perfect memory.” And like water I am learning to remember not only where I was before I was straightened out, but to listen to and act on the insights of that “flooding” pull to place. However, this pull between body and land, this “flooding,” is neither always about home nor about returning to some kind of a place of origin. Nor does this pull always result in a happy return. Sometimes the lure of the local is about the illusion of home, of home as a memory, of returning to not so much to a homeland but a “landscape of longing” that I am arguing entails confronting and trusting the wonder of the unknowable and impossible. Indeed, these are often, if not always, unresolved, painful returns to legacies of rupture and loss; but they are generative nonetheless.

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119 quoted in Lippard, Lure of the Local, 8.
Figure 14: Plat of the Fray Joaquin de Hinojosa Land Grant

[Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in the Chihuahuan Acquisition by J.J. Bowden]
As I write these words I must trust what I cannot see, what has been blocked, concealed, and erased from history, the land, and in turn, my view; but which my body nevertheless recalls, what my body senses, my body steering me toward an unbearable corporeal utterance that is already an active presence in my everyday life. In these ways, and others, this corporeal writing is my making my way closer to, my encounter with “una cara vientre.”

As we enter *El Río Grande as Unruly Archive*, I want us to ask one last thing of us: that we keep in mind the insights of Senegalese textile traditions that urge weavers to recreate, alternate, and change their textile patterns because it is believed that only evil spirits travel in straight, predictable lines. Continuous breaks in weaving patterns, on the other hand, confuse these evil spirits and slow them down. While some may find it unfitting to consider Senegalese textile traditions within the context of this study, I share these weaving traditions and their insights because I think the unruly Río Grande—a distinct geography in its entirety from Senegal—similarly exhibits this knowledge. Indeed, the meanderings of the Río Grande, in their small way, sought to confuse, slow down, and disrupt the evils of U.S. conquest and colonialism and their colonial spatial patterns of linearity and rationality. The river, in other words, is like the continuous breaks in Senegalese weaving patterns.

More than this, there is another logic to these Senegalese textile traditions that I want to call upon here: not only do these breaks in weaving patterns confuse evil spirits, but breaks in patterns are also considered the rebirth of the weaver’s ancestral knowledge and ancestral power. In this way, then, I read the Río Grande’s ruptures to the international boundary as ephemeral and material moments of ancestral, transgressive, and Indigenous knowledges of incredible and transformative possibility. Keeping all this in mind, throughout this thesis I mean to chart a
discursive, wandering path to refuse the white linear imaginary. But I also chart this path to, at least in part, re-imagine the presence of the unruly Río Grande emerging through these very pages. In turn, I like to think that this wandering path, like my writing/returning to the El Paso borderlands, might perhaps be ancestral knowledge emerging through and onto the pages as well.
Long before Mexicans became “aliens” in their own land following the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that both officially concluded the U.S.-Mexican War and commenced subsequent processes of Indigenous and Mexican displacement and dispossession, Anglo-America began laying the groundwork for its racist construction of the “illegal” and thus “impossible” Mexican subject. Integral to the early phases of this construction was the long-held belief that Mexicans, due to their racial mixing and dark skin color, were a wicked and subhuman race. Indeed, as Anglo-Americans began settling in the 1820s in what is now Texas and what was then northern Mexico, lore had already developed amongst settlers about deceased Mexican bodies remaining intact when left unburied. As this lore had it, so foul were Mexican bodies that even animals did not scavenge on Mexican corpses. In fact, as one Anglo settler writing in 1836 after the Battle of San Jacinto reported, while buzzards and coyotes devoured dead horses left behind by the battle, these animals refused to feast on the Mexican dead scattered across the battleground. More than this, it was even said that if wild cattle happened to nibble at the bones of deteriorating Mexican bodies that the cattle’s milk would spoil.

What is both troubling and telling about these anecdotes, their contribution to colonial divisions of humanity, and the ways in which these anecdotes shaped Anglo imaginations about Mexicans, is that this perception of Mexicans as so wicked, indeed, “the very antithesis of the Anglo American,” that even their material bodies were adversely corrupted, pivoted on a

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121 The Battle of San Jacinto, fought on April 21, 1836, in present-day Harris County, Texas, was the decisive battle of the Texas Revolution.
colonial and racist tradition that persists and endures today. This tradition tends toward a Manichaean dualism in which Europeans, whiteness, and light are equated with civilization and good, whereas non-Europeans are equated with darkness, baseness, madness, and even the devil.\textsuperscript{122} Put another way, lores like the one above hinged on a fundamentally racist logic that not only grew to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging, and thus misconstrued public imaginations and imaginaries by framing and fixing this subhuman Mexican race, but also augmented the already long-established category of “illegal people” and their modes of “living death”\textsuperscript{123} that Indigenous and African peoples were already a part of. Thus, in turn, this colonial logic and its symbolic colors fixed the more recent rhetoric of the “illegal Mexican” within the better part of U.S. policy, dominant discourse, and public imaginaries.

I want to give special attention to this Manichaean dualism because it allows us to make some important connections between racialized groups across time and space. For instance, since the inception of the United States, the idea that slaves were of a “savage” and “dark” condition and that Black men lusted after white women plagued Anglo fears and fantasies; the result of which was the structural devalue of Black people and their humanity because of their dark skin. Similarly so, the Anglo encounter with dark-skinned Indians produced the widespread belief that Indigenous people were barbaric and violent. Consequently, “when whites arrived in Texas, they unconsciously transferred onto the new [Mexican] ‘colored’ folk they encountered a pseudo-scientific lore acquired from generations of interaction with blacks and Indians.”\textsuperscript{124} Described as “dark to the point of blackness,” Tejanos were quickly added to the list of the “wretched of the

\textsuperscript{122} Leon, \textit{They Called Them Greasers}, 20, 5.


\textsuperscript{124} Leon, \textit{They Called Them Greasers}, 8.
Indeed, writing in 1846 during the U.S.-México War, the Reverend Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister in Boston, called Mexicans "a wretched people; wretched in their origin, history, and character," who must eventually give way as the Indians had done. In these ways, then, Mexicans were both perceived and institutionally treated as embodiments of a “dark” madness. This racist perspective and its influence on how Anglo-Texans perceived and pursued the settling of the West soon gave way to the racial slur “greaser.” Coined by Anglo settlers in the early 1800s, “greaser” connoted not only the dark, filthy, and greasy appearance of Mexicans and Indigenous people, but also their place along the fringes of humankind. And while Mexicans had been granted U.S. citizenship following the 1848 Treaty and thus certainly had access to some of the privileges of whiteness, from the perspective of Anglo-Americans not only did Mexicans not deserve the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship—as they were American citizens in name only—but their corporeal darkness evoked their weak claim to existence, civilization, Christian salvation, and humanity itself.

Important to my consideration of the unruly Chicana/o geographies of the Río Grande is how these binary divisions between light/dark, heaven/hell, good/evil, possible/impossible, and knowable/unknowable similarly transfer over to the land, the landscape, and the river itself. Let me elaborate on this. Since its outset, the racial slur “greaser” was bound to the dominant perception of dark colors connoting dirt and thus the filth of the earth. The adobe architecture that characterized the arid Texan landscape is a keen example of how this racist connotation resulted in its eventual removal. Distinguished as germ-infested “mud hovels” and the epitome of...

125 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965).


slovenliness, the perceived filth of these adobe homes were easily and conveniently transferred over to the Tejano residents who lived there. In fact, newspapers across Texas reported that hogs lived alongside Mexicans in these adobe homes and therefore, “it was hard to tell where the hogs left off and inhabitants began.” Thus, as soon as Anglo-Texans began to feel more secure of their hold on Texas in the early 1800s, the adobe architecture was swiftly demolished, erased from the visual landscape, and replaced with brick buildings. Newspaper reports claimed that the rapid switch from adobe to brick hinged on aesthetic and hygienic concerns. “The removal of the ancient adobe,” the El Paso Times reported, “with all [its] bad association means a new life for El Paso.”

Of course, this “de-Mexicanization” overlooked the practicality of not only adobe’s natural cooling and thermal qualities, but its abundance throughout the arid southwest. This is all to say, that the adjudged blackness of the earth expressed not only filth, but as the signifier for the madness of the earth and its dark inhabitants, represented a central obstacle to Anglo-American progress and civilization.

Similarly so, from the perspective of Anglo-America, the meanderings of the Río Grande and its disruption to the fixity of the U.S.-Mexico border was a manifestation of the land’s “dark” madness. The unruly Río Grande, in other words, was understood as behaving like the dark and “savage” greasers. And “burdened” with the obligation to subdue the external and wild river (“brew[ing] an evil influence destined to defeat the best of human intentions”) Anglo-American settlers saw the unruly river as one more beast to be tamed and put in place. Indeed, if we recall the Chamizal National Memorial’s dedication to “wild rivers and reasonable men,” there is no doubt that the Chamizal Treaty’s fixing of the Río Grande through a canal is the

128 David Romo, Ringside Seat to a Revolution, (El Paso, Cinco Puntos, 2005), 216, 231.

129 Ibid. 216.
material consequence of Anglo-America’s taming of the river’s “madness.” This concrete canal, however, is only but a single example of what historian Donald Worster describes as Anglo-America’s much longer “incessant modern drive to remake nature” and thus, in turn, make itself.\textsuperscript{130} The streamlined canal, in other words, is but one moment in a much longer colonial history of Anglo-Americans obstructing and eliminating from the landscape any kind of “madness” (and sometimes landscaping it out of the nation entirely, as is the case with el Chamizal) in order to not only master the wilderness, but more importantly, to define and secure the Anglo-American settler’s dominance over such “dark” madness. Subduing “madness,” and therefore producing the dominant Anglo-American subject through this suppression, was facilitated through repeated violence. Indeed, “[t]he first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.”\textsuperscript{131} In other words, it is through the act of violence and, more particularly, the ongoing process of violence, that the Anglo-American colonial subject not only comes into being, but through which he comes to know himself as dominant.

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In \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera}, Anzaldúa warns us about the consequences of dichotomies such as those between reason and madness by tracing how colonial projects rendered the (Euro-

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Anglo) mind the site of intelligence and the (dark) body as that of “an ignorant animal.”\textsuperscript{132} But the “madness” of the body, Anzaldúa tells us, is the site of a different kind of intelligence underwritten by emotion and an ancient, dark intuition that operates on and guides each of us—that is, if we don’t reject this alternative intelligence as we have been conditioned to. This alternative and “mad” intelligence is what Anzaldúa calls “la facultad.”\textsuperscript{133} I want to suggest, then, that the Río Grande’s unruly geographies are manifestations of this facultad—the land’s very body and voice announcing itself and its rejection of the rational, linear, and knowable colonial spatial patterns repeatedly and violently imposed onto it. The unruly Río Grande’s speakability reminds me of McKittrick’s gentle, but urgent reminder: “If space and place appear to be safely secure and unwavering, then what space and place make possible, outside and beyond tangible stabilities, and form the perspective of struggle, can potentially fade away.”\textsuperscript{134} What, then, does the unruly Río Grande illuminate about struggle and possibilities for resistance? How does its meanderings conjure up a window, a different terrain, or alternative route through which to better understand the body as a source of transformative epistemologies and knowledges? Indeed, I want here to build on the insights of Anzaldúa who suggested that the Río Grande is a winding serpent whose refusal to adhere to colonial spatial patterns and instead pursue its perpetual becomings is a manifestation of the river’s shedding of skin, its wild forked-tongue speaking the seemingly impossible and unknowable.

At the heart of this discussion, then, is a consideration of how U.S. practices of geographic domination render subaltern, racial, and unruly geographies and their distinct spatial

\textsuperscript{132} Gloria Anzaldúa, \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza}, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 59.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. 60.

knowledges not only illegible, but as a result impossible and unknowable. As a consequence of these geographic dominations the wonder of the unknown and the impossible has been wholly closed-off to us. The erasure of both the Chamizal Dispute from national consciousness and public memory as well as the more literal erasure of the natural riverbed from the landscape is an example of this obstruction. Thus, rather than “reading” the meanderings of the unruly Río Grande as moments wherein the river slowed down and engaged the world, and therefore opened up alternative terrains and possibilities for our spatial imaginations, Anglo-American imaginaries rendered these ebbs and flows “mad,” meaningless, and perhaps most importantly, impossible.

This seeming impossibility is where we must tread lightly; for if radical women of color feminists have taught us anything it is that what is seemingly impossible nevertheless exerts residual consequences that are present and available to us. By residual consequences, I mean what literary critic Raymond Williams referred to as elements of the past that persist and endure, but which are often made less legible to us within contemporary social and spatial formations. This chapter begins to make more visible these residual consequences—both the violences of U.S. conquest as well as the distinct and present offerings of unruly geographies. I begin this work by tracing the legacies of subaltern people’s displacement and dispossession in the U.S. West. I situate the Chamizal Dispute within these legacies in order to illuminate how the corollaries of the Chamizal Dispute are residual tokens of U.S conquest. However, while subaltern spaces like el Chamizal contain the traces and confrontations of colonial violence, they also contain traces of struggle and resistance. Keeping this in mind, I mean for this chapter to begin our careful consideration as to how unresolved and contested spaces like el Chamizal are imbued with the wounds of the land and people that hold the capacity still to speak for

135 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133-34.
themselves and to offer us different movidas to slow down, engage, and build the alternative world we need. “Let the wound caused by the serpent,” Anzaldúa reminds us, “be cured by the serpent.”

Taming the Wild West

The geographies of domination that underwrite the Texan landscape and borderlands contain the traces and residual consequences of old and new social hierarchies and their colonial spatial expressions of racism and sexism. At the very core of these spatial expressions is the weaving of an elaborate tapestry of colonial tales, myths, and dreams. The “desti-nation” doctrine of Manifest Destiny, for instance, and its purported moral crusade to liberate Mexicans from a despotic and feudal system of government, is one such tale. Cultural theorist Edward Said importantly reminds us, however, that tales such as Manifest Destiny are not simply “some kind of airy Eurocentric fantasy,” but rather systems of knowledge about subaltern spaces, places, and people that misconstrue and shape public imaginaries. Keeping this in mind, the “divine” order of Manifest Destiny through which Anglo-Americans set out to tame the so-called Wild West hinged on Euro-Anglo ways of knowing propelled by a devastating desire for conquest and settlement. Glissant called this desire “arrowlike nomadism:” the shattering invasions of Euro-Anglo conquerors across time and geography by which their violent claiming of lands that were not their own was accomplished through exterminating the lands’ “wild”

136 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 68.

137 Patricia L. Price, Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 41.

occupants. Indeed, within the context of the U.S., arrowlike nomadism involved “those who tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness.”140 Of course, while these “explorers” ridiculed the nomadic lifestyles of Indigenous communities as irrational and unproductive ways of living, the conquest of the West was accomplished through the violently unrestrained, and arguably nomadic, mobility of the Anglo-American. The making of the Anglo-American colonial subject and his dominance, in other words, was accomplished through this unrestrained mobility; and the violence that was (and still is) part of this mobility was absolutely crucial to their conquest project. Indeed, as Slotkin puts it, the “American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars.”141

Take, for instance, Stephen F. Austin, the so-called “Father of Texas,” who arrived and settled in Texas in 1825 from Missouri. Austin evoked the logic of arrowlike nomadism when he reflected on the purpose of his migration: “My object, the sole and only desire of my ambitions since I first saw Texas, was to redeem it from the wilderness—to settle it with an intelligent, honorable, and interprising [sic] people.”142 Six years later, another Western settler named Josiah Gregg evoked similar sentiments when he said he “looked forward with anxiety to the day when Indian titled to the land is extinguished and flourishing white settlements dispel the gloom at

140 Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence, 4.
141 Ibid. 22.
which present prevails over this uninhabited region.”\textsuperscript{143} What these accounts tell us is that the U.S. West as we know it was produced not only through the unchecked adventuring of Anglo-Americans, but that the West “is where this [arrowlike nomadism] movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in prepare for their repercussions in the world.”\textsuperscript{144}

Reading the early declarations of Austin and Gregg through a Manichean lens, however, further equips us to see more clearly how prominent imaginations of settling of the West were largely contingent on practices of geographic domination that purported to “enlighten” the darkness of the wild frontier. Through this enlightened taming in the name of progress, sensibility, and ultimately, modernity, Anglo-America would not only expand, but would establish its democracy on the ideals and practices of geographic domination. Indeed, Fredrick Turner’s Frontier Thesis, which asserts that the formation of American democracy is attributed to the egalitarian occupation of the frontier, speaks to this point exactly.\textsuperscript{145} What this means, then, is that American democracy emerged and took shape through a mastering of the “dark” earth and the racial domination of its “greasers.” The emergence of Manifest Destiny, as one Boston reverend put it in 1846, would secure this domination and thus "the steady advance of a superior race, with superior ideas, and a better civilization...by being better than Mexico, wiser, humaner, more free and manly.”\textsuperscript{146}

Long before the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny swept the Anglo-American population, however, the removal of Mexican people from their lands was already well underway. During the brief Texas Republic alone, Mexicans endured forced marches, widespread dispossession,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[145] Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas}, 85.
\item[146] Quoted in Zinn, \textit{A People’s History of the United States}, 157.
\end{footnotes}
and random violence at the hands of Anglo-Texan settlers. As the unofficial military police force of the Anglo order, the frontier brigade of Texas Rangers—created, unofficially, by Stephen F. Austin himself in 1823—played a critical role in these processes of Anglo-American settlement. Stationed along the border until the 1920s when today’s Border Patrol emerged as an official institution, the Texas Rangers served to suppress any Tejano efforts to protect their property or retaliate against Anglo violence. In fact, the tragic *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* not only narrates the senseless violence inflicted on Tejanos by the Texas Rangers, but is arguably the founding story of the Texas Rangers. Policed and brutalized by the Rangers, Tejanos living in the former Mexican north, commended by Anglo elite as “the best plantation hands in the world,” rapidly became yet another colonial society producing wealth and assets for the Anglo bourgeois elite arriving and settling in Texas.

Noting and fully understanding the implications of these processes of subaltern, geographic domination, we can infer that while Anglo-America propaganda depicted the Western frontier as a blank and empty space, the West was never in fact regarded as uninhabited. Historian Maria Montoya writes about this contradiction, arguing instead that Anglo officials and entrepreneurs saw the West as “unsettled nature.” She argues that because Mexicans and Indigenous peoples did not appropriate the land by imposing on it cartographic rules for private property, capital improvement, or permanent occupation, the West was “unsettled” and thus free

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147 Ibid. 126.


150 Maria Montoya, *Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grant and the Conflict over Land in the American West, 1840-1900*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 80.
for the taking. As one Anglo-American settler said of the Western frontier: “the land had no value, the grass was free, the water belonged to the first comer.”\footnote{Montejano, \textit{Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas}, 85.} Using this “empty” narrative, the U.S. violently implemented exclusive possession of the frontier and, in turn, reaped the land’s “untapped” resources by eliminating what settlers claimed to be the “savage” obstacle to the land’s best appropriation. The long-term consequences of these myths are staggering. As a system of colonial knowledge that endures, Anglo-Americans continue to position themselves as the original, rightful, and most productive inhabitants of lands that were violently taken from Indigenous and Mexican peoples. What this tells us, then, is that Manifest Destiny—indeed all national mythologies, including the Chicano Movement’s Aztlán—are intricately spatialized stories.\footnote{Sherene Razack, \textit{Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society}, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2004), 3.}

I think, however, that there is something else that urgently needs to be noted here. While U.S. history portrays Western expansion as exceptional and idyllic, nothing was exceptional about this colonial project. As Montoya argues, the U.S. West “was a region that reflected the broader trends of nineteenth century imperial and colonial endeavors throughout the rest of the world” where “capitalists were attempting to displace precapitalist land-tenure systems with their more ‘liberal’ forms of holding property.”\footnote{Montoya, \textit{Translating Property}, 5, 80.} Even within the boundaries of the U.S., the conquest of the Western frontier fell in line with a much longer colonial spatial pattern. For instance, comparing the U.S. West and South, Worster highlights the similar consequences of ranch and plantation institutions on their respective social landscapes: he argues that both ranch and plantation not only defined their regional identities, but both were also “spawned by the
capitalist revolution in agriculture” that was founded on dispossession and a nonwhite, subordinate workforce.\textsuperscript{154} Put another way, Worster is arguing that racism and the idea of private property, which have been tightly bound since the inception of the U.S., justified multiple settler colonialist strategies toward the dispossession and displacement of subaltern people. For example, for Indigenous people, racism justified the widespread dispossession of their ancestral lands; for Mexicans, racism justified the dismantling and gradual dispossession of their property; and for African-American slaves, it justified the total exploitation of their labor by treating their bodies as property. This nonwhite workforce—all of whom were perceived by Anglo-Americans as dark, filthy and baseless people who were innately unproductive and thus incapable of producing value themselves—were the very people who would produce not only the assets for the intergenerational wealth of today’s U.S. white society, but also the very spaces and built environments of the U.S. nation.

**Built-in Imperfections: Setting the International Boundary**

Though it has been argued that U.S. officials chose the Río Grande as the southern border because rivers are, as one borderlands historian argued, “often the most, if not the only, conspicuous feature, making them convenient points of reference” across unfamiliar territory, this explanation could not be farther from the truth. The Río Grande was nowhere near the most conspicuous feature across the landscape, nor was it the most convenient location for an international border. Let me elaborate. Not only did the Río Grande have multiple, meandering channels, but the river also underwent periods of severe drought in which portions of its channels would erode from the landscape by the force of large accretion deposits. In fact, during the original surveying and mapping of the international boundary in the early 1850s, U.S. appointed

\textsuperscript{154} Lippard, *Lure of the Local*, 136.
surveyor William H. Emory repeatedly reported that his crew couldn’t survey the boundary because the Río Grande was so dry that there was no visible channel, and hence they had no idea where to place the border. So often was this the case that Emory and his crew frequently resorted to waiting for heavy rains and floods to “reveal” the river. To their relief, in some cases old fence posts assembled by Mexican ranchers and farmers along portions of the Río Grande did the work of “revealing” the river. Of particular importance were cottonwood fence posts that, instead of rotting in the moist bottomlands of the river, often regenerated into an arc of towering trees whose trace unmistakably marked portions of the Río Grande that, by the time of Emory’s surveying and mapping of the boundary, had either dried up or shifted entirely. Noting these difficulties in pinpointing the exact location of the river, it is clear that the writers of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the politicians and businessmen they represented set the southern boundary along the Río Grande not because of its “pronouncing” features across the landscape, but because of the trade and profit that the river guaranteed.

Indeed, in his monumental historiography of the Anglo Texas settlement, historian David Montejano contends that the making of Texas and the larger U.S. Southwest is inseparable from the Río Grande. In order to understand the boundaries of Texas and the immediate cause of the U.S.-Mexican war, “we must forget the present condition of the Rio Grande and accept the fact that in the early nineteenth century the greatest expectations of the commercially minded settlers were pinned on that river. Often compared to the Mississippi or the Hudson river, Anglo-Americans were determined to obtain jurisdiction over the Río Grande and its lucrative access to

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the Chihuahua-Santa Fe trade with the Gulf of México that would open U.S. trade to world markets. The city of Matamoros, located at the lower east end of the river, was one of the crucial port cities. In the 1820s, silver bullion, lead, wool, hides and beef from Monterrey, Saltillo, and San Luis Potosí were all passing through Matamoros. By 1830, Matamoros had become the largest town on the northern Mexican frontier and third in trade among all Mexican ports along the Gulf. U.S. acquisition and control over the river and its trading ports, then, promised to secure the U.S.’s future as a mercantile empire.

Far-sighted Anglo-American businessmen understood all too well the critical importance of gaining control of the Río Grande; and, thus, with the independence of Texas in 1836 announced the entire length of the river as the new boundary with México. “It was a paper claim, of course,” notes Montejano, “for the republic had no control or influence beyond the Nueces [River].” To assert their faulty claim, Texan forces embarked on two military expeditions into Nuevo México and Tamaulipas to demand and defend the Río Grande as the new boundary. These expeditions, however, were utter failures. In the Diary of Colonel Thomas Jefferson Green, written in 1836 as he and his expedition were marched through the lower Río Grande settlements as prisoners of México, Green expressed not only his own undeterred feelings of rightful ownership over the Río Grande, but that only white possession and occupation of the river could induce the wealth of the landscape’s natural resources:

The Río Grande, from its head to its source […] is capable of maintaining many millions of population, with a variety of products which no river upon the north continent can boast. This river once settled with the enterprise and intelligence of the English race, will yearly send forth an export which it will require hundreds of steamers to transport to its

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158 Ibid. 18.
delta, whiles its hides, wool, and metals may be increased to an estimate which now appear chimerical.

Green’s journal entry certainly harmonizes with the logic of Manifest Destiny — particularly that nature itself had designed the river as the source of Anglo-American wealth. But what I find more interesting is the timing of Green’s entry; indeed, in 1836 the doctrine of Manifest Destiny had yet to be coined. “The date at which the doctrine emerged as a force to be reckoned with in politics is important to ascertain,” argues historian Mario Barrera in his book Race and Class in the Southwest. Though Barrera admits that the doctrine’s 1845 emergence can only be ascertained approximately, Barrera makes clear that the date at which Manifest Destiny was declared by “the full chorus” came only after the annexation of Texas had materialized as a feasible political undertaking. “The suddenness with which the doctrine emerged and spread inevitably arouses suspicions,” Barrera writes, “as does the common belief that the annexation of Texas was a contested political issue.” Keeping this in mind, then, it may be more accurate to say that the ardor behind Manifest Destiny was the result of ideological manipulation driven by capitalist needs. That very same year Texas was admitted into the U.S., which therefore set the scene for the U.S.-Mexican War. Almost immediately, newly elected President Polk echoed earlier cries by demanding the Río Grande as the new southern border of the U.S. and sending troops to occupy the Nueces Strip with orders to ward off any Mexican attempts to cross into the

159 Ibid. 20.

160 Price, Dry Place, 41.


162 Ibid. 12.
north side of the river. Rightly interpreted as an act of war, Mexico sent troops to defend its territory. Two years later, México surrendered to the U.S. and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848. The U.S. paid a total of $15 million to México for its northern territory, including what are now New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado.

**Colonial Impositions & Spatial Knowledges**

To augment my earlier point about the so-called practicality of setting the border along the Río Grande, I build on the insights of Montoya whose work demonstrates that modern Enlightenment thought did not organize and make sense of the land according to its natural geography like rivers, mountains, and other natural landmarks, but rather imposed onto the land a grid system of pristine lines and squares. As part of the larger “sociospatial institutions” that geographer Patricia Price argues construct the world into a series of “tightly jigsawed nation-states,” the grid system promised to impose and establish an American national order onto the landscape of the Wild West. What is important to note about this grid system and its practices of geographic domination are the system’s two pillars of thought: 1) that the natural geography had the potential to frustrate this system of pristine lines and squares, and therefore warranted practices of geographic domination to prevent further disruptions, and 2) that only white men —

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163 Keeping in mind this chapter’s focus on the legacies and layers of settler colonialism, I want to quickly note that the Nueces Strip has a much longer history of U.S.-imposed violence. Indeed, during the Texas Revolution, the Nueces Strip was the same stretch of land in which Anglo-American raiders forced thousands of *mexicanos* to abandon their ranches. Fleeing their homes, many *mexicanos* resettled on the southern side of the Río Grande in the old established towns of Paso del Norte, Guerrero Viejo, Mier, Camargo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. In the immediate years following the U.S.-Mexican War, thousands more fled their homes and settled on the south side of the river as well. Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 30. See also, Mueller, *Restless River*, 18.


165 Price, *Dry Place*, 33.
not nature — could rightly determine the boundaries that carve the land into distinct parcels, towns, sections, and nations. Needless to say, Indigenous and Mexicans peoples who had their own way of ordering their local and regional worlds alongside and according to the ebbs and flows of the unruly river and who, from the beginning, had been confounded at the shortsightedness and mere stupidity of managing a landscape without regard to natural geography, were unsurprised by the political chaos prompted by the unruly Río Grande.

This is not to say, however, that Mexicans did not eventually adopt the perspective of fixed, invariable boundaries — though it is likely, at least in the case of the Chamizal Dispute, that this perspective was wholly asserted because adhering to a fixed-line theory would better guarantee the return of the Chamizal land tract. For instance, as early as the 1870s, Mexican representatives asserted that the international boundary was “fixed astronomically” and that “no provision was made for the event not then foreseen, that the rivers, suddenly changing their course, should penetrate into either of the two territories, dismembering them in such a way as to render the boundaries indefinite and imaginary.” But this pristine, unwavering boundary is imaginary, and its fiction serves not only to separate the empowered from the disempowered, not only to close-off the landscape from “madness,” but also misconstrues our imaginations in such a way that normalizes these uneven geographies. Indeed, more compelling to my overarching analysis is how colonial spatial systems like the grid suppress the very possibility of unruly Chicana/o geographies.

While the Treaty writers had, at least in part, anticipated the challenges of the setting the new border along the Río Grande, they nonetheless assumed that by imposing their colonial spatial patterns onto the river, they could outwit it. Article V of the Treaty, for instance, specifies

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166 Montoya, *Translating Property*, 81.
that the boundary will follow the middle of the river and that where more than one channel exists, the deepest channel will mark the “real” boundary.\footnote{168} Having assumed, therefore, that this logic resolved any future confusion over the exact location of the border, the Treaty goes on to declare the international border as one of “due precision” in which “no change shall ever be made […] except by the express and free consent of both nations.” Though the U.S.-Mexico border was officially proclaimed in October of 1855 (seven years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo), surveying the entirety of the boundary was not as easy as had been anticipated.\footnote{169}

Following their appointment in 1850, Emory and Salazar, the bi-national surveyors of the boundary, embarked on their journey of mapping the international border onto their “authoritative maps.”\footnote{170} But when they arrived where the boundary between New Mexico and Chihuahua was said to belong, controversy erupted.\footnote{171} The 1848 Treaty described the boundary of southern New Mexico only as a line that ran “north of the town called Paso” without identifying the distance. Unsure of how to address this issue, the surveyors resorted to treaty maps only to realize that the treaty negotiators had used an incorrect map when charting the border. These faulty maps had incorrectly placed El Paso 34 miles north and 130 miles east of its actual location. Unable to find an accurate map, the surveyors were left to decide where the border should be. In 1854, after nearly a year of heated debate due to the disputed region’s rich copper and silver reserves and lucrative cattle grazing lands, México and the U.S. finally agreed to the location of the boundary—but only after the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 was signed,
affording the U.S. additional railroad transit, as well as giving the U.S. other privileges across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, including the right to intervene on behalf of U.S. investors. What this means, of course, is that the “authoritatize maps” of the 1848 Treaty and their “felicitious mistakes” conveniently afforded the U.S. the ability to, as Chicana scholar Mary Pat Brady puts it, “(mis)take” additional lands for its hegemonic desires and needs. 172 Thus, though the boundary was finally set, Mexican concerns remained that the U.S. would continue to dismember México, for the U.S. government had been relentless in seeking and pursuing additional border “adjustments.” Indeed, the Chamizal Dispute would be one such “adjustment.”

Flooding, Resisting Waters

In order to broaden our understanding of these border “(mis)takes,” I want to return to the oppositional geographies of the unruly Río Grande. These unruly meanderings, as mentioned earlier, were the result of frequent flooding combined with the river’s tendency to overwhelm its width, open up new bending channels, and sometimes abandon older channels altogether. Indeed, prior to the construction of levees, the river below El Paso meandered across its four to six mile wide flood-plain during these periodic floods — meanders the Spanish conquistador in 1858 called Las Vueltas del Río. 173 These floods washed away churches, missions, homes, and agricultural fields until the early part of twentieth century [See Figure 15 and 16].

Once the U.S.-México boundary was set, however, these meanderings often left detached tracts of land to the north or south of the surveyed border. As early as 1856, for instance, a Texas


citizen wrote to the U.S. government about his concerns of a threatening avulsive\textsuperscript{174} change in the river’s course.\textsuperscript{175} Described as an “anxious inquiry,” the letter was sent to the then-acting U.S. Attorney General Caleb Cushing\textsuperscript{176} whose opinion on possible changes in the river’s course and, thus, the international boundary crucially and tellingly pivoted from the fixed-line ideology:

> With such conditions, whatever changes happen to either bank of the river by accretion on the one, or degradation on the other, that is, by gradual, as it were, insensible accession or obstruction of mere particles, the river as it runs continues to be the boundary. The general aspect of things remains unchanged. […] But on the other hand, if, deserting its original bed, the river forces for itself a new channel in another direction, then the nation, through whose territory the river thus breaks its way, suffers injury by the loss of territory greater than the benefit of retaining the natural river boundary, and that boundary remains in the middle of the deserted river bed.”\textsuperscript{177}

Put another way, Cushing’s opinion significantly asserts that unless treaties specified otherwise, river boundaries were not in fact fixed borders—an opinion that not only contradicts the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but also illuminates what historian Oscar Martinez calls the “built-in imperfections” of the U.S.-México border. These “imperfections,” of course, often, if not always,

\textsuperscript{174} The sudden separation of land from one property and its attachment to another, especially by flooding or a change in the course of a river.

\textsuperscript{175} Mueller, Restless River, 22.


\textsuperscript{177} Ibid. 37
Figure 15: Flood in El Paso, Texas. Date unknown.  
[Otis A. Aultman Collection, UTEP Special Collections]

Figure 16: Flood of 1925 in El Paso, Texas.  
[El Paso Times Special Files, UTEP Special Collections]
benefited the U.S. and its hegemonic desires and needs.\textsuperscript{178}

Crushing’s interpretation of some boundaries in some cases not being fixed lines resurfaced less than 30 years later when México and the U.S. met to resolve their dispute over la Isla de Morteritos—a small island along the Texas-Tamualipas border that at the time of the 1850s surveying had been north of the Río Grande’s deepest channel, but by 1884 was south of the deepest channel.\textsuperscript{179} During this meeting, both governments agreed to a treaty that implemented Cushing’s opinion, stating that the U.S.-Mexico boundary could change if a gradual shift in the river took place but that the boundary would remain intact when “the force of the current” cut a new bed or produced a new channel.\textsuperscript{180} This was a pivotal moment. In fact, the Treaty of 1884 was the first time both the U.S. and México agreed to espouse an invariable boundary. To implement this new rule and address future border concerns, an ad hoc International Boundary Commission (later renamed to the International Water and Boundary Commission) was created in 1889. In 1900, the commission was made into a permanent body once it became clear the Río Grande would continue to resist its fixed parameters.

**The Chamizal Dispute**

Though concerns over el Chamizal were first brought to the International Boundary Commission’s attention in 1894, this was not, in fact, the first time the U.S. government had received concerns over el Chamizal. In 1866, Pedro Ygnacio Garcia del Barrio, a Mexican citizen born in 1847 during the U.S.-Mexican War, inherited from his grandfather the title to an

\textsuperscript{178} Martinez, *Troublesome Border*, 9.

\textsuperscript{179} Mueller, *Restless River*, 40.

\textsuperscript{180} Martinez, *Troublesome Border*, 24.
old 1818 Spanish land grant called el Chamizal that included land that is presently spread across both sides of the U.S.-México border. In fact, the Chamizal land grant included land from present downtown El Paso and Segundo Barrio to the present cathedral in Ciudad Juárez. In 1864, however, two years prior to García’s inheritance, a great flood inundated half of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez and prompted a swift southern diversion of the Río Grande—leaving residual land that was part of el Chamizal north of the river in El Paso. [See Figure 4] Though this was not the first time a heavy rainfall had moved the channels of the Río Grande across the landscape, the 1864 flood was the first flood to substantially move the river since the signing of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. What this particular flood meant, therefore, was that although Mexican property owners of Mexican territory prior to 1848 were seldom bothered by the meanderings of the river and knew to understand the boundaries of their properties according to natural landmarks other than the meandering river, the flood of 1864 fragmented their property by transferring it into an entirely different nation with a completely different sense of property itself [See Figure 17].

Of course, Anglo-Americans settlers, having assumed the international boundary had changed with the river’s shift, quickly began squatting and settling on el Chamizal as it was now north of the river in “U.S. territory.” Consequently, the very same year García inherited el Chamizal, he met with Mexican President Benito Juárez during his exile in El Paso del Norte (today’s Ciudad Juárez) to discuss his concerns over the Chamizal land tract. Now aware of the situation, México sent a letter to the U.S. government questioning the legality of the Anglo-American squatters’ assumption. However, nothing concrete to address these concerns came of the letter; that is, except a formal, but unavailing recognition of the need to clarify the definition


182 Maria Eugenia Trillo (teacher) in conversation with the author, September 2016.
Figure 17: From "El Chamizal: Caso Incluso"
[John F. Friedkin Papers, UTEP Special Collections]

Figure 18: This map shows the meanderings of the Río Grande as well as the location of the Chamizal land grant. Drawing by Victor M. Guzman Garcia [Password 43, no. 4 (1998)]
of the international boundary. What’s more, less than ten years later in 1873 another great flood further degraded Garcia’s land by moving the Río Grande further south. Although Garcia sent a second letter to the U.S. government demanding his family’s land be returned to him, this letter was also unacknowledged. While Garcia would continue to fight for his property, ultimately the very same colonial tools of dispossession discussed above were used to strip Garcia of his family’s Mexican property.

It was not until 1889, following the bi-national establishment of the International Boundary Commission, that Garcia filed his first official claim against the U.S. with the International Boundary Commission. The commission took on the case in 1894 and shortly into its investigation was confronted — as Emory and Salazar had been — with a discrepancy between the official U.S. and Mexican maps depicting el Chamizal. The two maps geographically agreed with one another except in the bed of the Río Grande. A formal note written on the U.S. map explained the situation, stating:

This map has been compared with the corresponding Map of the Mexican commission and is found to represent the true Boundary[.] The two Maps agree, except in the bed of the River, which circumstance is the consequence of the two Surveys being made at different periods, six months apart, during which time the River changed its bed, as it is constantly doing, but always within narrow limits.

183 Before taking on the Chamizal case in 1894, the commission’s first project to prevent further meanderings of the Río Grande was the construction of a channel to divert the river along a alternative, shortened route. However, as a result of this channel cut, Cordova Island, which had always been Mexican territory, was left north of the newly diverted river — hence the word “island” in name.

In other words, the two maps depicted a slightly different boundary between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. But this was not the only discrepancy; for Salazar’s signature was missing from the U.S. Map — the very signature that granted this map its authority— therefore rendering it illegitimate. The Mexican map, however, contained no note of explanation regarding these discrepancies between the two maps and was signed by both Emory and Salazar as all the other maps have been. Indeed, of all 54 of the official U.S. and Mexican border maps from the original surveying, only the single U.S. map showing the Chamizal did not have Emory and Salazar’s signatures. This significant and troubling discrepancy caused the IBC to go into a three-month emergency hiatus. Unable to definitively answer who had erased the signature and for what purpose, the commission had no choice but to privilege testimonies from citizens on both sides of the border about the various floods and degrees to which these floods had shifted the Río Grande.

After months of hearing testimonials, the IBC concluded in 1895 that the issue of el Chamizal was not merely a case of an individual citizen claiming a small parcel of disputed land, but rather that it was a larger international issue in which México was claiming on the behalf of the Garcia family hundreds of acres of what had overtime become Segundo Barrio. As a result of their new understanding of the scale of the disputed Chamizal, the commission tabled the case until an arbitration tribunal could meet at a later date to decide the outcome. To this day, it is unclear who blotted out Salazar’s signature.

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186 Rebert, *Linea*, 177.
Garcia, ultimately, did not live to see the Chamizal case settled. Exactly six months after his death on January 16, 1911, an arbitration tribunal mediated by a Canadian jurist voted to award most of the Chamizal claim to México.\textsuperscript{187} Having applied Cushing’s 1856 decision, the Mexican and Canadian representatives of the tribunal voted to return el Chamizal on the grounds that the change in the boundary had been the result of a sudden shift in the river’s course and not a gradual one. The commission, therefore, recommended the international boundary go back to its 1864 position when the movement originally took place, and that all land south of the 1864 boundary go to México and all land north go to the U.S. [See Figure 19 and 20] Nevertheless, despite having agreed to respect the commission’s decision, the U.S. ultimately refused to recognize the tribunal’s decision. Headlines reported that the tribunal as an utter and total failure, therefore adding to the building tensions and hostility between the two nations. Moreover, the tribunal decision had also established steps to make way for the Garcia family to recover the Chamizal property — though, of course, the Garcia family was never compensated for their loss of property.

It wasn’t until some fifty years later during the administration of John F. Kennedy that el Chamizal was settled, finally, in 1963 and signed into law on September 24, 1964. Kennedy’s Cold War liberalism emphasis on the U.S.’ image abroad, particularly in Third World countries, coupled with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and México’s refusal to comply with the U.S.-led embargo with the island, convinced U.S. policymakers to consider reforms that would win the goodwill of México.\textsuperscript{188} In fact, U.S. politicians who traveled to México during this time

\textsuperscript{187} Guzman Garcia, “The Legacy of Captain Alonso Garcia I.,” 166.

Figure 5: Recommended redistribution of el Chamizal by the 1911 Tribunal. [Cleofas Calleros Papers. UTEP Special Collections]

Figure 6: Legend to 1911 Tribunal map above.
often returned with stories of Mexican Communists distributing pictures of el Chamizal with captions claiming the U.S. had stolen the land from México.\footnote{Paul Kramer, “A Border Crosses,” \textit{The New Yorker}, September 20, 2014.} Thus, a “[s]olution of the Chamizal problems,” claimed the \textit{El Paso-Herald Post} in 1963, “will deny Communists and other enemies of the United States in Mexico one of the propaganda weapons they are using to injure U.S.-Mexican relations.”\footnote{“Chamizal Solution Costs Reds Issue,” \textit{El Paso Herald-Post}, July 19, 1963.} Of course, while Cold War liberals believed formal justice concerning the Chamizal Dispute was important to the U.S. standing in the Third World, policy and reforms required no greater commitment from such liberals to actually pursue and ensure full justice; hence why the Chamizal Treaty did not return the entirety of the original Chamizal land tract or address Pedro García’s claims, but rather returned a symbolic tract of land that covered significantly less acreage than the one originally requested by Mexico on behalf of the García family.\footnote{In her book \textit{Impossible Subjects}, Mae M. Ngai discusses Cold War liberalism’s role in shifting immigration reform to a question of formal equality. She builds on Mary Dudziak’s work on how Cold War liberals believed equality for Black people was crucial to the U.S. image abroad, but that there were no serious efforts to actually end racial subordination in the U.S. Ngai similarly argues that Cold War liberals pushed for immigration reform that welcomed immigration from all nations equally, regardless of race; however, these policies were seriously unequal as they failed to take into consider the different sizes and need among countries or relations between particular countries with the U.S. See: Mae M. Ngai, \textit{Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 245.} Rather, the land actually returned as “el Chamizal” totaled 630 acres — land situated between the 1852 and 1896 rivers [See Figure 19 and 20]. This acreage included some of the eastern part of Segundo Barrio, Rio Linda, and Cordova Gardens.\footnote{Eugenia Trillo, \textit{The Code-switching Patterns of the Rio Linda Community of El Chamizal in El Paso, Texas}, 10.} Moreover, the northern acreage of México’s Cordova Island—land that had never been disputed—was handed over to the U.S. as part of the settlement.

Following the signing of the Chamizal Treaty into official law, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson met with Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos in El Paso to commemorate the end
of the Chamizal Dispute. An *El Paso Times* photograph of the two presidents standing along the newly established geopolitical border dividing El Paso and Ciudad Juarez as they go to shake hands graced national newspapers across both countries. Described as a grand gesture of return, a reporter from México City called the act “the greatest diplomatic triumph in Mexico’s history.”

Dedicated to “wild rivers and reasonable men,” the ceremony celebrated the domination of the unruly Río Grande. More than this, the ceremony celebrated the spatial re-ordering of working-class Mexican-American families and the “sacrifice” of their homes, property, and community in the name of the so-called progress, friendship, and goodwill between the U.S. and México.

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What this history tells us, of course, is that the meanderings of the unruly Río Grande and its unforseenability ruptured time and time again the colonial fiction of innate and immutable geopolitical boundaries, and in doing so illuminated the paradoxical disorder of fixity. Speaking to this colonial fixity, cultural theorist Homi Bhabha argues,

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as

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disorder, degeneracy, and daemonic repetition. 194

Still, the history of the Chamizal Dispute and Treaty offers us something else: it shows us not only that geopolitical borders are socially constructed, but that borders can—indeed they have—been redrawn to serve hegemonic needs and colonial spatial knowledges.

Figure 21: International Boundary Commission survey map for El Chamizal case Number 4. [“Changing Course” by Robert M. Utley]

Dispossessing the Wilderness

I want to return, now, to a discussion of colonial spatial knowledges and their systems because it allows us to situate the Chamizal Dispute and the consequences of its settling within broader legacies of subaltern displacement and dispossession. Let us begin with the grid system and the Anglo-American system of private property. As part of a larger colonial project, the grid system was a critical tool in both displacing and dispossessing Mexicans and Indigenous people of their land. While scholars have elaborately discussed whether this dispossession was legal or illegitimate, like other scholars of the borderlands, I am uninterested in the distinction not only because of the long-term consequences of the inevitable violence of displacement and the marginalization implicit in dispossession, but also because it is clear both legal and illegal dispossession occurred. Historian T.R. Fehrenbach, for instance, argues that the hacienda class of elite Mexicans were confiscated of their property “perfectly legally, according to the highest traditions of U.S. law.” Here, Fehrenbach importantly suggests that the legal code of private property was the very vehicle through which Mexicans and other subaltern people living in the Americas were displaced and dispossessed. As a result, they were reordered within a new social hierarchy and pushed to the geographic margins of society and knowledge production.

But long before the Treaty of Guadalupe, the Anglo-American property system has been used to dispossess subaltern people of their lands. Let me give an example of this. Following his purchase of the Louisiana territory, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the twin keys to dealing with the remaining Indigenous people was first to “encourage” their assimilation into U.S. farming and stock-raising practices and second to integrate them into the capitalist economy. In turn,


this assimilation quickly engendered what Jefferson had anticipated and intended: a looming
incentive for Indigenous people to sell their lands in order to have the financial means to
contribute and participate in the new U.S. economy. I want to suggest, then, that this process of
land loss not only created and later managed the “proper place” of Indigenous people along
segregated, geographic margins, but it also further intertwined property and whiteness in a
seemingly natural way — thus illuminating for us one of my earlier contentions that geographic
knowledge has always been racialized and race, from its inception, has been a deeply spatialized
organizing principle of these United States. In fact, this conflating of ethnicity with landlessness
was central to Anglo-Americans’ Manifest Destiny to occupy, liberalize and democratize the
unsettled spaces of the U.S. frontier.\footnote{Montoya, Translating Properties, 13.} Consequently, both the perceived and real landless reality
of subaltern people has become so naturalized that it has misconstrued and spatialized our
imagination about the natural “place” of non-white people. Furthermore, the drawing of
geopolitical borders further fixes the material physicality of race and racism by purporting to
visibly mark these innate boundaries between races. Take, for instance, the words of U.S.
Attorney General Cushing who in 1856 described the U.S. and México as the two nations
separated by “natural objects of indeterminate natural extension of which of themselves serve to
keep off the public enemy.”\footnote{Mueller, Restless River, 37.} Through this logic, the international border is not only a legal and
acceptable boundary, but a natural one.

Let me elaborate on the consequences of this naturalized displacement and spatial
reordering of subaltern people. Though the 1848 Treaty explicitly outlined that Spanish and
Mexican land titles, indeed, “properties of every kind […] shall be inviolably respected,” the
conquest, removal, and near extermination of Mexican and Indigenous life and culture was made possible by imposing and acknowledging only the property rights of Anglo-Americans on land that was not their own. This meant, and continues to mean, that only Anglo possession, occupation, and organization of land is legitimate and hence privileged as the foundation for property rights. The 1873 invention of the barbed wire—which replaced the “natural” fences of prickly Osage Orange and which quickly came to represent the new sign of American progress—was one of the key technologies to establishing this colonial spatial reality [See Figure 22]. Anglo-American settlers not only used barbed wire fencing to visibly mark the boundaries of their private property, but also to rob Mexicans of theirs. In fact, following the raids and removal of Indigenous and Mexican people from their lands, Anglo-Americans seized property by quickly fencing it and calling it their own. As one witness to the raids of Mexican ranches put it, “after [they took the property] they fenced the ranches—it was the English, they fenced some land that wasn’t theirs.” For Indigenous populations, however, the barbed wire fencing was a brutal blow to their livelihood and ways of living. Indeed, it created the conditions for both the physical and cultural disappearance of Indigenous people. Once erected across the Western landscape, barbed-wire fencing made it nearly impossible for Indigenous people to engage in their migratory patterns and nomadic hunting practices. Thus, though at first barbed-wire was upheld as a mere regulatory force to the disorderly lifestyles of Indigenous and Mexican people, the “order” of barbed wire destroyed their culture and alternative ways of living.


Ultimately, then, barbed-wire fencing not only propelled Westward expansion by making the facts of landownership and landlessness meaningful, but it also ushered in new definitions for the “proper place” of Mexican and Indigenous people. For Indigenous communities, this meant being confined and contained to Indian Reservations. Similarly, Tejanos were spatially reordered and worked in the predominately Anglo sector of town but lived in what was locally called “Mexican towns” not only along the geographic margins of cities, but also in more rural locations that were often racially segregated into their own towns entirely. For instance, in one rural Texan town, Tejanos town.” At the end of the workday, these Tejanos were expected to return to “Mexican town” by no later than sunset. “So completely segregated were the two
“towns,” writes Montejano that, “in effect, there was an Anglo world and a Mexicano world whose main point of contact was the ‘dusty fields.’”

More than this, the fencing-off of private property along a grid’s pristine lines and squares utterly contradicted both Indigenous land use and Mexican property systems that marked their territories according to the land’s natural features — rivers, mountains, distinct stones and trees, among others. Under these subaltern spatial systems, boundaries were preserved not through the Anglo-American’s assumed and assigned integrity of maps and fences, but rather, through oral stories and verbal agreements amongst neighbors that marked these complex, but vague boundaries not only onto the landscape, but also in community imaginations. These “invisible” mental boundaries, however, were unrecognizable, impractical, and unproductive to Anglo-Americans. In turn, Anglo-Americans accused Tejanos and Indigenous people of using unscientific plans and imperfect systems of organization and agricultural cultivation. The grid, they argued, would resolve the “madness” of subaltern spatial systems that were largely considered backward and unproductive.

Even after the grid system was established, however, Anglo-Americans would continue to complain of the “unproductive” Mexican. During the “Agricultural Revolution,” in which new Anglo farming developments proliferated across Texas in the early 1900s, Anglo-Americans claimed that Mexican ranchers refused to implement new farming technologies, and were therefore wholly against modern innovation and technology. Portrayed as deeply rooted in the past and incapable of effectively contributing to society, Anglo-Americans argued that if Mexicans were not monitored properly, they would become a threat to American progress. For some Mexicans, however, their “refusal” to implement new farming technologies had less to do with indifference or some kind of traditional perspective, and more to do with poor financial

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means to seriously invest in such technologies. More importantly, however, is not simply the falsity of this myth, but also how these modern farming technologies were yet another factor in Mexican dispossession. Indeed, many Tejano ranchers were actually receptive to technological innovation and improvements because they believed that once technological equality was attained, social equality amongst Tejanos and Anglos would soon follow.\textsuperscript{204} Attempting to invest and keep up with these new developments, some Tejano ranchers resorted to mortgaging their land—which only accelerated their loss of land and social status as landowners.

Moreover, when it came to defending both the mental boundaries and collective ownership of Mexican property in U.S. courts, Tejanos quickly learned that their “complex, but vague” systems of property did not hold up in court.\textsuperscript{205} That is, the “informal” property system of the Mexican frontier — rooted in communal, as well as individual, ownership that was often expressed in casual, customary understandings among neighbors—conflicted with the U.S. property regime of private property and, thus, was rendered illegitimate. The passing of the 1860 Homestead Act, which encouraged squatting and awarded Anglo-Americans land they could prove they had settled for at least five years, only furthered tensions between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans. Land-owning Mexicans who fought relentlessly to fend off American squatters and prove the legitimacy of their land titles, quickly learned that the fact of their properties was deeply uncertain. Eventually, the expense of legal proceedings to defend old titles and English translators during court proceedings, together with the uncertainty of the outcome, persuaded many Mexican owners to sell their land to Anglo-Americans at drastically low prices.\textsuperscript{206} From

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\textsuperscript{204} Ibid. 59.
\textsuperscript{205} Maria Montoya, \textit{Translating Property}, 2.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid. 30.
\end{flushright}
the perspective of Anglo-Americans, however, all was well for the dispossession of “unproductive” Mexican landowners was good for everyone. The refusal of U.S. courts to enforce and incorporate the Mexican grant system into modern U.S. property law suggests what Montoya calls the mistranslation of property.\textsuperscript{207}

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Noting these layers of subaltern dispossession, I want to return to the Chamizal Dispute because although el Chamizal was originally south of the Río Grande and therefore within Mexico’s national boundaries, these very same colonial tools of dispossession were used to strip Garcia of his family’s Mexican territory. After the second great flood that moved the Río Grande further south, Garcia not only wrote to the U.S. government to express his concerns over the erosion of his property, but also to express his discontent over the increasing number of American squatters who were settling on his land under the Law of Accretion.\textsuperscript{208} Indeed, there are even accounts of Garcia’s granddaughter recalling stories of Garcia repeatedly trying to farm his land north of the river but failing because he was constantly run off his land by Anglo-Americans at gunpoint. Meanwhile, the value of the Chamizal was rapidly increasing as the city of El Paso prepared for the coming of railroads. And by the time Garcia went to the IBC in 1889, most of the Mexican landowners in the El Paso area had been bought out, chased away, or had simply given up their claims to their lands.\textsuperscript{209} What this tells us, of course, is that what happened

\textsuperscript{207} Montoya, \textit{Translating Property}, 4.

\textsuperscript{208} An international law that automatically gives rights of ownership to the landowner of an opposite riverbank property when the river of demarcation gradually moves its banks so much so that it takes land from one owner and gives it to another on the opposite side of the river.

\textsuperscript{209} Guzman Garcia, “The Legacy of Captain Alonso Garcia I.,” 168.
to Garcia was all part of a larger project of dispossession in which the Anglo-American elite settling in Texas built their influence and intergenerational wealth by persuading many Tejanos that they had never really owned their land. And while Pedro Garcia refused to abandon or sell el Chamizal, he was nevertheless a victim of dispossession.

**Conclusion**

A fundamental premise of Manifest Destiny was that the U.S. would never have to absorb

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210 Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 44.
populations with a religion, language, race, or concept of property different from those of the mostly white, Protestant settlers. The removal and dispossession of native and nonnative people of color from their lands secured this promise. By the 1920s, for instance, Mexicans who had stayed in Texas following the U.S.-México War had been largely reduced to the status of landless and dependent wage laborers. What this tells us, then, is that “[t]he process by which [Anglo-Americans] came to feel an emotional title to the land was charged with a passionate and aspiring violence” toward the very laboring classes who would go on to build the inter-generational wealth of the Anglo-American elite. Despite this foundational labor, Mexicans were deeply despised and feared across the Southwest. One El Paso publication, for instance, berated the El Paso elite who employed Mexicans by claiming this “cheap labor” was “at the cost of every ideal cherished in the heart of every member of the white race.” “True” Americans, the publication argued,

> do not want or advocate the importation of any people who cannot be absorbed into full citizenship, who cannot eventually be raised to our highest social standard, but help to raise that standard to even higher planes; where the avariciously inclined will be relegated to the nether darkness from which they drew their blackened souls.

Two things stand out to me about this rhetoric. For one, this article evokes what historian Leo Chavez recently termed “the Latino Threat” — the looming narrative that foreign and U.S.-born Latinxs are portrayed as a danger to the U.S. nation not only because of their growing numbers

\[211\] Montoya, *Translating Property*, 81.


and inability to assimilate into Anglo-America, but also because of their passionate desire to execute a re-conquest of the U.S. Southwest. 214 Secondly, and what I find more interesting, is the longevity of tropes of darkness that have emerged throughout this discussion’s related, but distinct investigations into colonial practices of geographic domination and their residual consequences. To reiterate, these tropes of darkness elicit colonial divisions of humanity that not only frame and fix this “Latino Threat” within the fantasies of Anglo-America, but similarly anchor these fears of subaltern resistance to the meanderings of the Río Grande as well. The concrete canal, as I have discussed, was a response to this Latino Threat [See Figure 23].

What I want for us to take away from this brief beginning to a much larger discussion is what the historical unruliness of this river, its ruptures to colonial spatial patterns, and its production of alternative terrains offers us. While the unruly river has, in many respects, been erased from the landscape and thus obstructed from our view, I am proposing not only that the river is inscribed with the spirit of subaltern people and their alternative senses of place, but also that the river’s unruliness is the material manifestation of their memories, their agencies, their voices. I want to suggest, then, that the river’s historical meanderings evoke what Anzaldúa might very well have called otherworld encounters—by which she means potentially transformative confrontations with the supposedly impossible, and sometimes haunting, presence of spirit. It is an enduring, haunting presence, as history of course is anything but dead and over. And, as Avery Gordon reminds us, if haunting describes how that which/who is seemingly not there is often in fact “a seething presence,” being haunted is therefore not only a distinct way of knowing what has happened or what is happening, but is also, “a transformative recognition.” 215

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Encounters with the unruly river are, indeed, such transformative potentialities. Yet, because “we’re supposed to ignore, forget, kill those fleeting images of the soul’s presence and of the spirit’s presence,” because we have come to believe that our worlds are ruled by regimes of visibility that make it so everything can be seen, and because we have invested in colonial killing abstractions of refusal and denial, we have largely shut ourselves off to the alternative poetic geographies and imaginaries of what the unruly Río Grande has to offer us.216

By alternative poetic geographies I mean the poetry of what the Chamizal story does for us. To begin, it offers a glimpse and arguably exposes the vast and ongoing systems of colonial power that (re)order subaltern people, places and their histories so that they are out of sight. And, as Avery Gordon so importantly puts it, “[w]e need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.”217 And if we are to imagine living elsewhere I want to suggest that we need to demand and insert the (im)possible into this imagining. The Chamizal story, therefore, also gives name to the impossible and, perhaps most dear to this study, makes visible the materiality of this impossibility. There is poetry in this; and like a serpent shedding its skin, the unruly Río Grande and its wild, forked-tongue announce and give shape to political and more poetic terrains of struggle and resistance through which we can envision different worlds built upon recurring becomings and alternative conceptions of our socio-spatial relations.

216 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 58.
217 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 5.
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