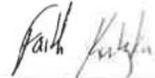


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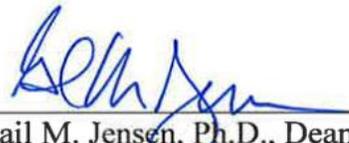
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“WHERE ARE WE?”: NEW DIRECTIONS AND GLOBAL TURNS IN THE AMERICAN
SOUTHERN GOTHIC OF THE 21ST CENTURY

By

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A THESIS

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Abstract.

This thesis, “‘Where Are We?’: New Directions and Global Turns in the American Southern Gothic of the 21st Century,” charts new directions and global currents in American Southern discourse and regional studies, specifically by examining the modern Southern gothic mode. Modern imperialist practices of globalization and late capitalism/neoliberalism continue to uproot and unsettle traditional notions of American place and space, reconfiguring our preconceived understanding of regional identities and traditions. I first examine these novel iterations of “placeless” regionalism in regional gothic texts as a response to this turn toward the “Global South,” including Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway*. I then engage with emergent trends in Southern gothic media, such as the popularity of undeadness as a motif and televisual narratives rooted in regional space, in order to speculate on the future of the South as genre and national identity.

Preface/Dedications

I'd like to thank my advisor Dr. Lydia Cooper for her insight and help in this process as well as my thesis committee and readers, Dr. Rob Dornsife and Dr. Faith Kurtyka. Thank you also to Dr. Surbhi Malik for your thoughtful comments and feedback. Profound, special thank you to Molly Hammond Engdahl, my sister-in-arms and also a frequent reader and soundboard, and to my mom Ellen, who acted as a support network in this personally trying semester. This thesis would not have been possible without the help of all those included.

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INTRODUCTION.

Leslie A. Fiedler famously distinguished the American gothic from its British paternity in his 1960 seminal work *Love and Death in the American Novel*, in which he contends that race provided the crucial differing variable in founding an American gothic literary tradition following the transatlantic divide. Beyond its distinguishing characteristic of a persistent obsession with and anxiety over race and racial violence in the United States, the American Southern gothic tradition in literature and its surrounding theory is one characterized by variety. The “Frankensteinesque” hybridity of its generic makeup makes it notoriously difficult to define, as gothic discourse is “pieced together not altogether seamlessly out of its constituent parts” (Chapman 30). Justin D. Edwards, in his introduction to *Gothic Passages*, contends that this is due to the Gothic’s inherent, and often self-contradictory, instability—its “loose stitching makes the gothic adaptable to various (and at times contradictory) political agendas” (20-21). The thematic patchwork nature of gothic discourse, both socially and dialectically, makes its contemporary American contexts even more nebulous; America’s relatively short history renders the European Gothic’s typical referents, namely the French Revolution, null and void. Faye Ringel agrees that “American Gothic is inherently ahistoric,” granting narratives like the frontier a certain national exceptionalism (15). The short life of America’s gothic traditions, as well as its amorphous historical referents outside the Civil War, is perhaps what suits them as perpetually applicable to contemporary mediums.

Furthermore, recent criticism weds the Southern gothic to its political commentary on America’s traumatic racial history, a literary endeavor which seeks to rectify the nation’s failure to adhere to its own mythology of exceptionalism. “The gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history,” Teresa Goddu claims (10). “Moreover, in its

narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America's self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity." This seeming self-contradiction inextricably entwines the South's regionality with the machinations of the American nation-state; in this sense, Southern gothic acts as a threat to the American mythos while conversely stabilizing the tenets of American regional genre. However, even this conception of the Southern gothic is dated within contemporary scholarly circles; newer projects examine the intricacies of the U.S.'s global relations and its international influences, and parse out the intimate relationship between America's global designs and its regional identities.

While the U.S. South has always been in essence transnational, emergent discussions of a "global South" are fairly recent due to the ubiquity of globalization as a social and economic force in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The ideology of U.S. globalization emerged in the early 1990s with George Bush, Sr.'s articulation of a "New World Order" in 1991 and continues to span well past the events of 9/11 and George W. Bush's "Global War on Terror" (Šesnić 3). What Avril Horner describes as the "Global Gothic" functions as a reaction to "terrorism, continual warfare and environmental disasters resulting from global tensions and global projects, disasters that know no state or geographical boundary," in which both aesthetics and content reflect "the demands and ravages of corporate capitalism and new technologies" (47). Gothic tropes, which so often flourish most effectively in the local and in the microcosmic, continue to contort their original forms in order to confront a rapidly interconnecting global society. Several critics in the 2017 *Cambridge Companion to American Gothic* also remark on this significant global turn, observing that "[m]odernist American Gothic is part of transatlantic modernism. It has international affiliations, but it also exhibits recognizably American dimensions" (Riquelme 57). The movement toward globalization calls for a reimagining of

horror outside its usual referents of place. This transnational globalization of the local directs the contemporary South and its surrounding discourses to what many scholars call a “post-Southern space,” in which traditional bastions of regional identity and locale (borders, boundaries, landmarks) are contested and even upended. The temporal positioning of the “post” within “post-Southern” further elicits pastoral nostalgia for “The Lost Cause” or the seemingly bygone days of genteel Southern hospitality.

These intersecting currents of discourse—gothic contexts, regional aesthetics, and the turn toward a post-globalized order—are increasingly salient topics in scholarly circles across all disciplines. Particularly for my own research, the lively symbiosis of these ideas is crucial in considering concepts of Southern space and place—ones that are perpetually gothicized and continually uprooted in the wake of globalized economics and ideals. The Southern gothic tradition can be traced to postbellum post-plantation society, but its reverberations continue to ripple transgenerationally, provoking constant reconsiderations of the Southern imaginary in increasingly shifting political terrain. Despite the sense of its own rootedness (be that in the ecology or inherited traditions), the South as a region and history perhaps provides the most apt microcosm for considering the tension between these global and regional dynamics. As Jennifer Rae Greeson writes, the South functions as “a domestic or internal other for the US novel, lying simultaneously outside and inside the national imagination.” It thus “becomes foremost a site of connection between the United States and what lies outside the nation – a connection to the larger world, to Western history, to a guilty colonial past and an imperial future both desired and feared” (237). The globally intertwined imperial implications also do not go unnoticed in U.S. Southern discourse; in Southern media, the region and its history “emerg[e] as a domestic site

upon which the racist, civilizing power of U.S. expansion and empire abroad may be rehearsed and projected” (Greeson 237).

These characterizations do not strictly apply to literature, of course. One of the central aims of my argument is to thoughtfully consider emergent forms of Southern media, whether they be television shows, podcasts and video games, and their role in regionalist discourse. Indeed, “the forward-looking temporal function” of the South perhaps uniquely suits Southern gothic stories to these alternative and modernized narrative forms, rapidly burgeoning in mainstream popular culture (Greeson 237). The shapeshifting nature of the gothic mode has historically granted its products the cockroach-esque quality of inextinguishability. As Edwards writes, “Contemporary Gothic is...an adaptable mode...it transforms into different beasts to match the demands of new audiences while simultaneously reflecting the deep-rooted personal, social, and cultural anxieties of the day” (*Cambridge Companion*, 71-72). The gothic’s perverse fixation on matters that lie outside culturally sanctioned boundaries—monstrosity, violence, hauntings, horror—invokes a certain voyeurism in its consumers, one that has not only ensured its longevity but its malleability of form. Specifically within the American and Southern gothic traditions, these tensions manifest most overtly in representations of racialized violence; as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock observes, “anxieties about race, white/black miscegenation, and the legacy of slavery may in fact function most immediately to differentiate the American Gothic from other Gothic traditions” (9).

Contemporary Southern scholarship has also contested trenchant ideas of Southern place, eschewing arbitrary and traditionally-defined borders and defining the region liminally, hemispherically, and globally. The effects of globalization on American regional space and identity are not confined solely to the South, but I argue that the South’s unique history within

the American nation merits a close examination of its current configurations in literature and media, especially in how it relates to both the gothic and twenty-first century American politics. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn invoke “a liminal south, one that troubles essentialist narratives *both* of global-southern decline *and* of global-northern regional unity, of American or Southern exceptionalism” (13, original emphasis). These shifting notions of regionality, specifically within southernness—as well as regional gothic—thus grapple with and speak back to cultural narratives seeded in hegemonic power structures such as imperialism, colonialism, and late capitalism. I hope to illuminate these global designs within America’s regional texts and traditions, and further reconfigure these generic inscriptions as other Southern gothic and regional studies scholars have done in their own ways. In this project, I first engage with a literary example of what I identify as the globalized Southern gothic—Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*—and its novel representations of American regional space, as identifying place-based markers are homogenized and made abject through a post-apocalyptic landscape. I follow these contested regional spaces to the Southwest Mexican border in Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway*, where a close examination of the landscape and the corporeal Mexican body act as sites for larger and more surveilling forces of globalization and U.S. imperialism. Finally, I track these reimaginings of regional representations into the realm of televisual media, where the Southern gothic thrives in its native forms and just as equally challenges them. Particularly in AMC’s 2016 show *Preacher*, Southern media grapples with its own history and crises of faith, raising questions of what it means to be “post-Southern.” First, however, I take a look at where Southern gothic began—the failed Confederate nation, and the not-so-buried ruins of plantation slavery.

The chronological movement toward the contemporary South can be most easily traced to the period of American growth following the Civil War, usually referred to as Reconstruction. The South's legacy of hauntings owes not only to myriad cultural folklores of the region's population, but further the focus on bodily materiality popularized by writers like Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner. This focus on corporeality and liminality has lent longevity to varying forms of undeadness in Southern mythology—a surprisingly replete amount, as I note here, related to the failed Confederate nation. Daniel Cross Turner, in his essay “Gray Ghosts: Remediating the Confederate Undead,” argues that a century and a half after the Civil War, Confederate iconography and figures still remain largely “undead” in the modern psyche, the lasting echoes of war-wrought trauma on the nation. On a separate but related point, Christopher F. Johnston, in his article “The Spirit of Reconciliation in Ambrose Bierce’s *Chickamauga*,” analyzes the concept of national and racial unification in Bierce’s 1889 “Chickamauga,” a short story in which a deaf, mute six-year-old child stumbles across an undead army of revived Confederate soldiers. Johnston asserts that Bierce’s primary intent in his narrative’s racial inclusivity was to satisfy “the nation’s desire for sectional healing,” as both emancipationist and white supremacist regimes clamored for a space in the public memory of the Civil War (102). Together, these two contrasting perspectives of Southern literary purpose offer a telling image of the evolving nature of Southern gothic as both storytelling tradition and socially conscious critique. I posit that while some Southern gothic rhetoric may initially have attempted to unify a fragmented post-war America, its position in modern culture—re-coining Johnston’s use of the word—attempts to reconcile the specific racial and sectional struggles of post-Civil War divisions that linger in America’s sociopolitical landscape.

I first examine how contemporary American Southern gothic engages the concept of reconciliation in a different sense than Johnston's characterization of Bierce's Confederate undead. In juxtaposition to Bierce's purported attempt in "Chickamauga" to "heal sectional bitterness" from the Civil War's divisiveness, I argue that the global turn of the contemporary Southern gothic mode serves primarily to implicate American national complicity in its own blood-soaked genocidal history, the trauma of which can still be keenly felt and witnessed.

In response to Turner's assertions that Confederate ghosts represent "lasting shards of [the old South's] political economy," I contend that the consistent reanimation of the Confederate undead in America's modern culture elicits a regionally specifying effect in parsing out the reverberations of the Reconstruction era's racial legacy. I ultimately analyze the juxtaposition of the "inclusionary" purposes of classic Southern gothic tradition and what I propose to be its contemporary purpose of exploring the long-term ramifications of racial and generational trauma, a habitual and eternal reiteration of history repeating the "relative realness" of the Civil War's Southern reality.

The South is a region "peculiarly time-bound," in Turner's words (54) — why is it, then, that four years of America's historical narrative return again and again to haunt the living nearly 200 years later? Turner suggests that the consistent reiteration of Confederate iconography and undead not only embodies political and economical tensions, but "cultural desires as much as fears" (52). Symbols of the Confederacy, to the regional South, seem to represent something entirely different than their traditionally racist implications—the historical, generationally inherited pride of opposing governmental imposition on a metaphorical battlefield. Similarly, Turner suggests that the remediation of Confederate iconography "make[s] us see the

painstaking, contingent process of nation-(re)building...this Lincolnesque Romantic-nationalistic ethos, where honor, above all, means to die for one's country" (55).

Despite the Deep South's literary and historical prototype as time- and region-bound, I have noted that Southern gothic transcends liminal and spatial boundaries; it is this imbricated space of betwixt that invokes the undead to rise again and conjures ghosts to haunt the mortal plane. As Eric Gary Anderson and company concisely phrase it: "To see the dead is to face the past and its many cultural irruptions in the present" (5). Omnipresent throughout various mediums in the last several decades, the Confederate nation's perpetual return from the grave questions, as Turner articulates, "the 'regressive' position of the former Confederacy and current southeastern United States," positioning its supposed pastness in direct, lateral comparison to America's current political topography (55). My intention is to interpret the purposiveness of this incessant reappearance of the undead Confederacy, in both the contexts of post-Civil War and the modern era.

For an application of this idea, I provide an examination of quintessential reconstruction-era Southern gothic text that sets the stage for the national-regional myth of the undead. Ambrose Bierce's 1889 short story "Chickamauga" offers a vibrant example of what I observe is the initial framework of Southern gothic's nationalist literary purpose. Johnston notes that by portraying a zombie army of Confederate soldiers through a child's eyes, Bierce blindfolds his audience to polarizing racial or political divisions and "underplays its historical specificity" (103). This popular narrative of regional reconciliation and the generalization of post-war suffering, Johnston continues, dominated public discourse in the late nineteenth century in order to achieve the common incentive of national healing.

Nowhere is this post-war reconciliation effort better exemplified, in the estimation of David W. Blight, than in the Union-Confederate reunion of 1913, a public event in which the white veterans of the two armies came together in a highly public display of armistice and national unification to celebrate the shared valor and sacrifice of veterans. The horrifying racial trauma wrought by the war's legacy remained resolutely ignored in the interest of constructing the national memory of the Civil War's aftermath as a joint, peaceful truce of regional resentments:

Oh what a glorious fight they had come to commemorate; and in the end, everyone was right, no one was wrong, and something so tragic and transforming as the Civil War had been rendered a mutual victory of the Blue and the Gray by what Governor Mann called the “splendid movement of reconciliation.” (Blight)

Similarly, Bierce's “Chickamauga” demonstrates the ubiquity of this decidedly patriotic narrative following the Civil War. His undead soldiers are not demarcated based on their race or army affiliation—Bierce simply notes, “They were men...being men, they were not terrible, though unfamiliarly clad.” Rather than “an elder observer,” a disabled child relates the events of the story in his limited, apolitical understanding, which grants Bierce leeway to justifiably blend racial and regional divides that might misrepresent “Chickamauga” as regionalist critique rather than universal anti-war rhetoric.

Bierce's depiction denotes the child as a potential creature of war himself; “the son of an heroic race,” a natural inheritor to centuries of colonizing whiteness. In one of the story's few racial distinctions, Bierce narrates:

He had seen his father's negroes creep upon their hands and knees for his amusement—had ridden them so, ‘making believe’ they were his horses. He now

approached one of these crawling figures from behind and with an agile movement mounted it astride.

The racial demarcation reappears only twice, identifying “Chickamauga” not as a critical commentary on political factors that facilitated the Civil War, but an attempt to unite Northern and Southern suffering under a singular banner of patriotic sacrifice—a form of rhetoric that inflamed subterranean racial trauma that today consistently resurrects itself. As Bierce was a Union veteran himself, the boy’s mother’s grisly death in “Chickamauga’s” finale symbolizes the pervasive, universal loss of civilian life in war, furthering my interpretation—a “tremendous consideration for the way the war impacted all soldiers as well as Southern civilians” (Johnston 103). Thus, while Bierce’s work harshly condemns the glorification of war, it does little to address or criticize the American South’s contentious race relations either leading to or following the Civil War.

The zombification of the Confederate undead in “Chickamauga” signifies a national preoccupation markedly different from modern America’s psychological, latent anxieties surrounding race relations. The unearthing of Civil War casualties, in Bierce’s narrative, physically embodies the universality of veteran suffering and loss; by contrast, contemporary manifestations of the Confederate undead ethically grapple with the reality of African-American oppression as legalized and regularized on a national, historic scale. Blight characterizes the 1913 Blue-Grey reunion as “a national ritual where the ghost of slavery might, once and for all, be exorcised, and where a conflict among whites might be transmogrified into national mythology.” While this reconstructed national mythology may have allowed a fragmented post-war America to make sense of its self-inflicted bloodshed, its greater omission silenced and repressed the legacy of race-based violence and trauma in the wake of slavery and Jim Crow—a

legacy that to this day begs to be voiced, festering and reappearing to haunt the American living with the reminder of its unfinished business. The South, appropriately, remains the host of this racial revenant.

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The Confederate “battle” flag and similar icons still symbolize racial tension and trauma, emblems of race-based hatred and rebellious anarchism that America as a whole may try to forget and cannot — “lasting shards” of the antebellum South’s sociopolitical landscape that we can see echoed in today’s culture (Turner 54). Goddu argues, and Anderson reiterates, that regionalizing the Southern legacy of slavery and racism allows America a scapegoat for its own moral complicity; in the settings of Southern gothic, the ghosts of American history we’d like to forget surface to haunt the living and to remind modern society of its transgressions. Spatially, America’s legacy of racism is seemingly neutralized within the Gothic mode, and “contained” within a specific region (Goddu 72).

Thus, the “reconciliation” that must occur in the modern Southern gothic mode is not “the great hosanna” between the divided political realities of geographical North and geographical South, as Blight aptly details in his research, but of the nation-state with its bloody racial history that will not remain at rest. That is not to say culpability falls squarely on the South for America’s misdoings; while the genre must contend with its own history, the rest of the nation must concurrently acknowledge its own demons that are mistakenly, categorically confined to a Southern locale. As it is, the South itself remains starkly regionalized as a form of the nation’s “other,” marking it as “the nation’s psychic and cultural dumping ground” and counteracting attempts at national unification that may have characterized national rhetoric in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction era (Anderson 26).

America's cultural fascination with the Deep South across literature, music, film, television, and digital media necessitates its regionalization as both place and genre. Keith Cartwright claims, "Marking a zone below temperate borders, and lodging what 'should' be past or uncredited or illicit but won't stay out of circulation, the South serves as an underworld crucial to drier normative spaces" (11). American society is continually thrilled by the Southern mode's otherness, a seemingly detached but still distinctly *American* genre that allows continued cultural engrossment at an arm's length (Hagood 259). Southern gothic remains the shadowy underbelly of mainstream American society and its cultural conventions, invoking its dead again and again out of the collective desire for perversely entertaining storytelling. Taylor A. Hagood further contends, in his essay "Going to Ground: The Undead In Contemporary Southern Popular Culture Media And Writing," that America's cultural obsession with contemporary strains of Southern gothic is due to its ability to "abstract" the South's malleable representations of horror into distinctly modern applications. The South's longevity and "potentially endless proliferation" rely on its adaptability to contemporary fears, such as regionally conflicting economic anxiety between agrarian and urban, contentious sociopolitical platforms like the neo-Confederate right wing, and the numbing "zombie-like" effects of modern pop culture (Hagood 254).

Southern gothic's fervid insistence on reiteration in transcribing and storytelling "keeps things unsettled" in the American psyche (Anderson 32). The exhumed corpses that crawl wordlessly through the mist in "Chickamauga" would come to find themselves revived again and again throughout the following decades, perpetually resurrected in their various forms of bodily decay to host the national and racial tensions that, too, will not stay latent or buried.

What does it mean for today's Southern gothic that the Confederate undead still haunts the modern psyche? I argue that representations of modern Southern gothic attempt, perhaps subliminally, to harness generational and racial trauma through representations of undeadness; the undead Confederacy, specifically, recalls a national history of racial oppression as well as a traditionally regressive mindset of institutionalized racism that still terrorizes contemporary American society. Patricia Yaeger writes that these realizations of racial trauma act as psychological hauntings, particularly for children; often in literature, these remnant "fragments" of psychological horror and trauma manifest as literal ghosts. This creates the effect, Yaeger explains, of "disappearance willed into reappearance" (92). The hyperfocus on residues and remnants is what unites both black and white racial takes on Southern gothic, creating in effect a "shared hauntology" (Yaeger 92). Invisible, subconscious, or peripheral presences often manifest through means of horror, particularly within the imaginations of children naïve to adult prejudices and atrocities—such as Bierce's child narrator in "Chickamauga."

Turner further says, "Ghosts simulate a paralectical doubling, where two realities superimpose in time and space, like a photographic double exposure" (53). In this sense, the landscape of the Civil War-era Deep South's political and racial economy overlays the similar political, racial anxieties of the contemporary world, creating an overlapping space for the dead to rise and walk again, urging American society to learn from its past transgressions. By positioning the sociopolitical reality of the late nineteenth century alongside our own, we viscerally witness how small the gap between those two realities is, allowing the dead to cross over. The incessancy of trauma is "not as a historic haunting but an ever-present reality linked to place, race, and regionality" (Gómez 212); an ongoing intersection of realities that characterize today's modern Southern gothic mode.

In the research of contemporary Southern gothic scholars, the long arc from unifying to sectionalist sentiment appears to have completed its course. While Bierce's army of undead blames no side or region for the atrocities of war, and while rhetoric popularized by post-war reunions valorizes the universal white veteran sacrifice, conceptions of recent Southern gothic hold the regional South accountable for its racially violent history by regionalizing and "othering" the flawed ethos of American society as a whole. With regressive racial realities spatially and ideologically removed, normative American culture can maintain its complicity in the events that characterize today's politically charged terrain. In the subaltern spaces of cultural representation, the conditions of racial haunting manifest again and again in the modern psyche, reminding us that we, too, perpetuate the undeadness of our reality.

I. TRAVELING *THE ROAD* OF THE GLOBAL AMERICAN SOUTH

Here, I provide a reading of a contemporary American Southern gothic text that demonstrates this global turn I suggest: Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*. In *The Road*, McCarthy depicts a post-apocalyptic wasteland that was once the United States, almost entirely devoid of demarcations of location and place as his protagonists attempt to survive an endless nuclear winter and cannibalistic wanderers. In so doing, the text challenges global and capitalist regimes of socioeconomic power that designate fluid conceptions of borders. However, within this seeming placelessness of *The Road's* desolate dystopia, McCarthy concurrently provides regional structures of identity and place, effectively conflating the local with the newly global. I contend that McCarthy deliberately constructs an ambiguous placelessness within *The Road's* apocalyptic wasteland while at the same time invoking familiar relics of regional identity, particularly the antebellum South and the mythic Wild West. The literal collapse of borders, territorial markers, and distinguishing geographical features allows these seemingly conflicted regional literatures to infringe on one another, an apocalyptic rendering of the globalized order in the U.S. at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This essay posits a three-pronged approach: first, situating *The Road* within the discourse of the Global South, or what several scholars call a post-Southern space; second, examining the dual spatial operation within the text, one that both unbinds regional space from place while undoubtedly alluding to material regional callbacks. More specifically, I examine *The Road's* plantation memory and its implicit invocation of the Western frontier, tugging American myth between poles of regression and progression. This tension buoys between pastoral nostalgia for Southern pastness and the colonizing Western desire for charting what Jay Ellis calls "boundless space," as the father and the boy wander through vast and deterritorialized landscapes (315).

McCarthy's reinscription of American mythology, I further observe, responds directly to the United States' capitalist and neoliberalist practices within the globalized economy—value systems that *The Road* renders completely obsolete.

The Road performs aptly as both supplement and antithesis to the new, globalized configuration of the regional gothic. Due to the boundless, apparently “placeless” void of the road itself, it could be feasibly argued that the text offers no regionally specific fealties; however, I note that Southern literature's current grappling with the ways in which “deterritorialization is transforming the region” inversely cements *The Road*'s position as regional literature (Aboul-Ela 852). *The Road* certainly functions as commentary on the imminent threat of globalization on American space, specifically localized, regionalized space; however, within this “ashen scabland,” the text peppers in a helping of regional clues and callbacks to emphasize how profoundly “everything [is] uncoupled from its shoring” (McCarthy 11). In her article “Gothic Trouble: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Globalized Order,” Marie Liénard-Yetarian observes, “The traditional Gothic landscape has morphed into a twilight space where basic human bearings have disappeared. The human body and mind, rather than just the landscape, are the location for Gothic horror” (146). This “twilight space” of the Gothic that Liénard-Yetarian describes, removed from fixed material location, offers telling insight into current conversations concerning globalization and place across multiple disciplines. Such reconfigurations contest our understanding of regional literatures and their articulations of place.

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***The Road* as Globalized, “Placeless” South**

The Road follows the survivalist wanderings of a father and son in the aftermath of (presumably) an apocalyptic nuclear event, in which what was once the United States has been

reduced to a freezing, ashen wasteland and its inhabitants to either cannibalistic bloodcults or “the mummied dead” (McCarthy 24). Together, man and boy, often described as “pilgrims,” migrate nomadically without a concrete sense of direction or even a fundamental sense of locale:

Where are we?

Where are we?

Yes.

I don't know. (McCarthy 94)

While some McCarthy scholars such as Wes Morgan have traced the exact route of the father and his son based on clues within the text, I set aside the potential of precise real-world locations of *The Road*'s narrative for this particular analysis in the interest of more broadly examining how the text functions as both regional and aregional. McCarthy is a notoriously regional writer, and his novels travel from the Appalachian South to Texas gothic, from the open frontier to the Southwest borderlands. With this in mind, I work here to primarily establish *The Road* as a product of the globalized Southern gothic.

The road itself operates dually as both place and non-place, invoking the traditional American road trip narrative while freely inhabiting its derivations—stabilizing the father's attempts at self-location while just as often destabilizing them entirely. *The Road*'s vastly homogenous setting has led some scholars to argue that the narrative exists within a placeless and timeless void; for example, Rune Graulund claims, “Not only is it the first of [McCarthy's] novels to be detached entirely from history, it also breaks with his famous attention to place” (58-59). On the contrary, as this article illustrates, McCarthy is deeply indebted to both spatial *and* temporal location, especially place. McCarthy's fastidious attention to regional and ecological detail, down to Southern Appalachian species of plant, is crucial in both place-based and placeless interpretations. Critical to my argument is understanding the function of *The*

Road's façade of placelessness and, concurrently, its allusions to regional mythologies and compositional layers of rooted place.

McCarthy depicts the topography of *The Road's* landscape over and over through material constructions rendered useless post-apocalyptic event (such as various material goods, or abandoned homes and buildings), exposing the trans-temporal emptiness of global capitalism — “an order that turns human beings into consuming entities or consumed objects” (Liénard-Yeterian 155). In this regard, *The Road* seemingly interrogates the linear, “progressive” ethos of globalized neoliberalism by “necessitating the return to a primal system of social relation,” regressing human society to its roots in “primal Darwinism” (Miller 63). Furthermore, the obliteration of regional markers foregrounds what Ellis identifies as an implicit, perhaps self-contradictory desire for “boundless space,” a primitive idyll that mirrors the unconquered American frontier (315). *The Road* recurrently reiterates the sheer amount of open, unpopulated terrain, landscapes rendered entirely unrecognizable to the father in their barrenness: “Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could see was burned away” (McCarthy 14). As the father and son travel south, they pass through several burned cities, each which also has been reduced to indiscriminate non-places, “distinct precisely because of [their] lack of visual distinctness” (Godfrey 166). In one passage, the father sees only “the gray shape of a city” in the distance, and when he asks the child what he sees through the binoculars, the boy replies, “Nothing” (McCarthy 8-9). The only delineation of the several post-urban spaces that the man and boy traverse is the omniscient, narrative command, “See Rock City” (McCarthy 21). While place does remain—“everything as it once had been save faded and weathered”—its efficacy in orienting both the human psyche and human civilization has long since receded (McCarthy 8).

The fluidity of *The Road's* post-apocalyptic landscape crafts a hyperbolized imaginary space where the global consumes the local in its entirety. As Liénard-Yeterian observes, “Such landscapes of silent and still disaster offer the perfect contrapuntal image to the current flows of abundance and mobility (people and capital), the fluidity and fluxes of hyperbolic consumption having come to a total standstill” (150).

McCarthy renders his post-capitalistic vision effectively in his migrating characters' attempts (and failures) to self-localize. Throughout *The Road*, traditional navigational devices or signifiers of location become utterly ineffective, outdated relics of past order. The father carries a map with him, but it becomes increasingly illegible as he is unable to recognize distinguishing features of the homogenous landscape: “He sat studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought they might be” (86). The only orientating means through which the father tracks their progress on the map is the black lines of highway routes, which too have become functionally obsolete. McCarthy's inversion of the American road trip narrative thus follows highways without cars or movement, and furthermore follows the progress of figures unable to actualize any meaning in post-American society. The pair's only directional motive is southward to the coast, where the father vaguely recalls a fond memory of fishing with his uncle. Chris Walsh astutely notes this lush memory, “the day to shape the days upon,” is one of the text's only instances of pastoral sublime integral to McCarthy's other works (Walsh 52, McCarthy 13). *The Road*, when it does depict the father's memorial South, positions it as a verdant, Edenic haven in which father and son can escape the cold and colorless reality of post-United States. Ashley Kunsu also identifies this place-oriented biblical allusion, describing the blackened and mutilated landscape as “proto-Edenic” and in “a state of becoming” a new earth (64).

While Kunsu contradicts a placeless interpretation of the text, she emphasizes the importance of namelessness in dissolving old systems of order. She argues that while the man and boy do indeed recognize the sites they travel via the map, the two forego naming them outright in McCarthy's endeavor to forge a new world personified by the Christ-like figure of the boy; she writes that "by divesting the post-apocalyptic landscape of those names that signify the now ruined world, *The Road* frees both character and reader from the chains of the old language. Eliminating the old suggests the coming of the new and creates a space in which the new world can be imagined and called into being" (64). Textually, McCarthy makes it clear at several points in the narrative that he, as an author, is privy to knowledge of the characters' locations, thus voiding a singular placeless interpretation of the text. For example, in one passage, the father "found a telephone directory in a filling station and he wrote the name of the town on their map with a pencil," and in another, the boy "had the names of the towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily" (McCarthy 181, 215). That McCarthy deliberately withholds these referents of place from the narrative only further verifies that the façade of placelessness is textually significant in its defamiliarization (making strange) of the United States terrain, and that disorientation functions as a deliberate rhetorical effect. The father helplessly concedes that the large swathes of land that he and the boy cross are part of "no country that he knew. The names of the towns or the rivers"; but in spite of that, he and the boy diligently work to keep track of their travel progress and their positions on the map (McCarthy 202).

In his article "The Cultural Logic of Post-Capitalism: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Popular Dystopia," Carl F. Miller also identifies what he calls a "hyper-localized" vision of humanity in McCarthy's work, in which "perpetual transition prevents any chance at organization into an equitable and predictable human collective" (61). The lack of static concepts

of place within the novel ultimately undercuts any attempts to collectivize as a human society. This construct of placelessness that I identify in *The Road* is not antithetical to the characters' concurrent attempts to seek asylum within location; rather, I argue that these two place-based narrative movements symbiotically inform each other. The homogeneity of the landscape acts as a totalizing force of nature in the novel's narrative universe, one that uproots humanity's attempts to arbitrarily divide the natural world into borders and boundaries that constitute systems of value. However, localized place simultaneously functions as the text's only form of rootedness for characters fundamentally shaped by past social order (the father directly, and the son by his father's influence). *The Road* perpetually grapples with both the futility of location in a globalized society and, concurrently, its crucial role in grounding identity. The father nostalgically reflects how "he'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place" (McCarthy 182). The father frequently expresses a longing for a return to an "intimate knowledge of a landscape and a place" while the text itself, both aesthetically and formalistically, embodies a panoramic vision of post-regional human society (Godfrey 174). Even the most fundamental American borders become obsolete, as the father explains to the boy:

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I dont know exactly. That's a good question. (43)

This passage, as well as others in which the father and boy traverse corroding cities and inoperative highways, exposes the utter futility of human-created notions of place, in which “the frailty of everything [is] revealed at last” (28).

McCarthy’s close attention to architectural space alludes to this regional rootedness that seemingly defies fluid conceptions of globalized space. For a text so topographically indiscriminate in its notions of place, *The Road* reiterates often its fixation with reobtaining southernness. The text frequently and conspicuously mentions the father and the boy’s placement within the South as they travel, one of the more poignant examples being when father and son stumble upon an old plantation mansion, where “chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays” (106). Inside, the man and boy discover a human pantry, filled with presumably captured people waiting to be cannibalized by the house-owners. The scene stands out as possibly the grimmest in a chain of hopelessly dismal events; significant in this regard, as John T. Matthews observes, that “even in post-apocalyptic America . . . unwanted memories of plantation slavery will continue to startle and trouble survivors of what was once a nation” (71). *The Road* further confronts the ethos of slavery by juxtaposing its implicit horrors with the father’s and son’s stubborn adherence to a moral code, in which the entirety of the post-American population is divided between what the duo calls “good guys” and “bad guys.” The father and son are seemingly the only “good guys” within the text, “carrying the fire” of the remnants of human civility (McCarthy 83). This civility is, as McCarthy unequivocally insinuates, directly incompatible with much of Southern history, a history inextricably seeded in American soil—the “frames and panes” of which “have remained ‘oddly intact’ in our national, hemispheric, and global activities” (McCarthy 103, Matthews 71). Even within a post-Southern society, the ghost of slavery as an institution haunts bulwarks of American identity; even within

a text stripped of definitive locations, plantation memory persists in the face of cataclysmic unshoring, suggesting “the extent to which the entire South, from Carolina to California, was stained by the nation’s reliance on slaveholding commercial agriculture” (Matthews 68). McCarthy conspicuously places one of the text’s starkest instances of cannibalism within the physical host of past slavery, suggesting that the consumption of the body is not a new phenomenon but one with which an American audience is uncomfortably familiar. Readers, perhaps even subconsciously, are not allowed to forget that the trans-Atlantic trading system so foundational to the current global economy was predicated inextricably on commodifying slave labor and the human body. As Matthews remarks, “The careful indefiniteness of these sites lets them serve as floating domiciles of a circum-Atlantic plantation society” (72), a condemnation of human consumption within pan-international contexts across Western history.

Furthermore, the guise of placelessness in the text carves out a spatial imaginary in which McCarthy can weave in and out of regionalist concepts—the most striking example being the reconfiguration of the South as what has, traditionally in American literature, been the Western frontier. Rather than “lighting out for the West,” as many protagonists do in McCarthy’s earlier works, it is the warm, pastoral refuge of the South in the minds of the father and son that “acts as redemptive agency when all else seems to have vanished” (Walsh 52). *The Road* unbinds notions of temporal-spatial linearity, in both the fragmentary narrative style interspersed with flashbacks as well as the frequent invocations of ancient rites and ceremonies from a pre-human civilization. In the case of regional mythologies, McCarthy crafts a similar trajectory: he reverses the westward movement toward progress, toward the open frontier of exploration and colonization, and points it southward, a region notoriously “time-bound” and fixated on its own pastness. This fusion of regional schematics “rehabilitates the myth of the frontier in the American literary

imagination” while positioning it within contemporary contexts of overconsumption and globalized reordering (Walsh 53).

Staples of Western and frontier narratives further construct the events of *The Road* and its characters. In his article “Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Rewriting the Myth of the American West,” Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz details McCarthy’s rephrasing of Western myth, observing the ways that *The Road* both digresses from and carries on McCarthy’s earlier borderlands trilogy. Many characteristics of the frontier narrative remain intact, most notably those of regenerative violence, unmapped landscapes, and a “male-locked microcosm” that excludes women characters entirely (11). The man’s and the boy’s tenacious capacity to labor through the dregs of “savagery and despair,” Ibarrola-Armendariz writes, echoes “some of the rites of passage that are the staple of Western fiction and movies” (11). While a Western interpretation of *The Road* is absolutely warranted, my contention is that a comprehensive reading of the text relies on the necessary synthesis of McCarthy’s regional Southern and regional Western imaginaries. Both regional mythologies and their accompanying themes contribute not only to a deeper understanding of the historical and literary movements at play within *The Road*, but further a synthesized understanding of McCarthy’s entire corpus of work, from his early Appalachia to, later, the open West and the Southwest borderlands. Scholars like Walsh and Matthews place *The Road* in the Southern tradition, while those like Graulund argue that McCarthy’s Southwestern desert is an indisputable spatial framework within the text. As *The Road* includes clear allusions to both traditions, and as McCarthy has extensively written within the schematics of both, it is salient to reconcile the two regional influences as coexistent and, in fact, mutually symbiotic. McCarthy’s conflation of regional literatures and histories ultimately reinscribes American myth as vastly panoramic and global, yet unable to completely escape its foundations

in the personal and the local, as the audience experiences the staggering narrative world of *The Road* through the filter of the father's memories of an America that once was. As I will discuss, this globalized understanding of American regionalism directly relates to the United States' practices of hyper-capitalism and neoliberalism.

While *The Road's* post-cataclysmic universe may seem like the end of human civilization, McCarthy's invocation of the frontier equally suggests an uncharted rebirth, the dawn of an emergent new order not entirely without hope. As the man and the boy head south in hopes of rediscovering the father's memorial past, *The Road* "succeeds in reviving the most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier, of a new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning" (Walsh 54). Laura Gruber Godfrey is, perhaps rightfully, not so optimistic; she also observes this inversion of the frontier, but "instead of a conventional frontier narrative of discovery and exploration of bountiful new territory, McCarthy constantly reminds us of what has been lost" (168). However, the boy's survival at the novel's conclusion, as well as his and his father's determination that the boy continue carrying their light into the South, may suggest a redemptive agency that the dismal atmosphere of the text conceals on a surface level.

Thus, the text operates both progressively and regressively in the conjuring of regional imaginaries (in a temporal, not ethical sense); for example, articulating the persistence of plantation memory alongside the nation-building violence of the open frontier. This synthesized region-based reading of *The Road* differs quite a bit from Graulund's, who argues that "once again we must remember that the landscape faced by the man and the boy is not Western, not Southern, nor even a frontier of the most generic sorts" (66). My foundational interpretation of the text necessitates the direct inverse to this supposition, and even though McCarthy's latest

novel may present a marked divergence from his usual *modus operandi*, he does not entirely escape the haunt of his regional affinities.

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Traveling *The Road*: Geography and Topography

As I have delineated, the landscape of *The Road* significantly flattens all geographical points of distinction even as it invokes regionalized signifiers. Although Morgan has convincingly illustrated the probable geographic trajectory for the narrative of *The Road*, the text hardly offers any specific locales—the mountains of Appalachia, the Carolina coast, and the South of the father’s memories all flow together into a single post-American entity, uninhibited land as it existed before human population or colonization. As Walsh observes, the traditional sense of place has “been subsumed by the ubiquitous non-places of post-industrial America, where all organic connections to place have been ruptured and entirely commodified, and where it is virtually impossible to return to or imagine a sense of the foundational South” (50). Material references to Southern ecology and topography recur throughout the text, recalling pastoral nostalgia and in the same sweep estranging it. The father witnesses the charred and blackened remains of what Godfrey identifies as “the most evocative markers” for wildlife in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, listing the father’s encounters with dead mayapple, pipsissewa, and rhododendron as examples (169).

The Road portrays a planet earth marred beyond recognition in its very topography, what many scholars conjecture to be the direct aftermath of human-caused environmental disaster. In her article “The World He’d Lost: Geography and ‘Green’ Memory in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” Godfrey applies a geographical understanding of *The Road*’s alien landscape to parse out its compositional layers of history and meaning. McCarthy’s prose strips American territory of

its designating features; “disaster and ruin have scraped the landscape of *The Road* nearly bare of any former codes or meanings, and the old geography is written over with a new and horrific ‘narrative’” (Godfrey 164). The father’s “place-memories” of his childhood, as Godfrey calls them, are crucial in constructing a textured and complex sense of geography in a land distinct solely for its nothingness (165). The encroachment of the industrialized urban that McCarthy criticizes in his earlier texts, such as *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child of God*, has already become something of the distant past in the world of *The Road*, disturbing the institutional narrative of human progress as the novel provides endless images of complete environmental devastation.

Godfrey contends that McCarthy achieves aestheticization in *The Road* so richly because he superimposes “familiar rhythms” of landscape on scenes of unimaginable desolation and horror—or perhaps more to her point, McCarthy layers the ramifications of environmental devastation atop familiar natural elements (168). Ash, smoke, and fallout smother rivers, mountains, waterfalls, and valleys for thousands of miles, making abject the wildlife the father recognizes from his youth. Frequently throughout the novel, the father’s visions and memories of breathlessly beautiful, sublime scenes of nature are imbricated, both narratively and formalistically, with the new landscape’s “sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (McCarthy 274). That the father can “see” the pastorally rich nature of the old world in synchronization with the destroyed one acts as “a haunting topographical palimpsest” (Godfrey 170). I would add, extending Godfrey’s apt theoretical study of the text’s landscape of ruin, that McCarthy’s textual endeavors can only function in their fullest form by layering an abject, unfamiliar world order atop economic and ideological structures that readers already implicitly know—such as globalized capitalistic exchange.

Throughout *The Road*, the ubiquity of the globalized order subsumes American concepts of the local, hyperrealistically flattening the land itself into “cauterized terrain,” an indistinct ash-filled wasteland in which even the apexes of civilization (such as city-spaces and the domestic) have been reduced to obsolete shells (McCarthy 14). The concurrent invocation of both Southern and Western regionalist literatures—the pastoral and the frontier—further the text’s enactment of nebulous space in response to globalized economy. Furthermore, as Miller writes, “The territorial restrictions that much of the developed world considers axiomatic are predicated on impossibility instead of possibility, and suggest that the sort of open movement depicted in *The Road* may become reality in the twenty-first century” (55). The novel also criticizes the man-made narrative of industrialized progress throughout colonial history, foreshadowing its disastrous consequences through recognizable frameworks of globalization, neoliberalism, and capitalist consumerism. These practices each have their bearing on preexisting notions of localized, regionalized space, and even more so on the land itself. As *The Road* unequivocally suggests, in a post-civilized world devoid of location or familiar systems of order, only the artifacts of human-created capital can survive the backlash of a forsaken natural world.

II. BORDERLANDS GOTHIC: MAPPING *THE DEVIL'S HIGHWAY*

In her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa famously and lyrically describes the US-Mexican border as “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (25). This forging of a “third space” to qualify the US-Mexican border and its surrounding territories has characterized discussions surrounding borderland literature for the last three decades. In contemporary discussion (post-globalization), some scholars identify this border, and its surrounding “borderlands,” as a state of exception in territorial form, in which the legal principles that govern the nation-state are rendered null and void as countless immigrants are left to the mercy of the southwestern Arizona desert. Luis Alberto Urrea’s 2004 novel *The Devil’s Highway* follows the partially fictionalized, partially biographical journey of t

he doomed Wellton 26, a large group of Mexican and indigenous immigrants that attempted and failed to cross the border into the United States in 2001. The terrain they traversed bears the nickname “The Devil’s Highway,” a lonely stretch of desert-land infamous for its inhospitable and often unsurvivable natural conditions. Urrea constructs his narrative through fictionalized reimaginings built on factual accounts from survivors to narratively piece together a chronology of events that is, more or less, unrecoverable due to the amnesia or deaths of the victims. The text unpacks the implications of this exceptional state along the border, and I continue this endeavor by examining Urrea’s corporeal characterizations of the twenty-six travelers and the vast, textured geographical landscape. Furthermore, the critical issues native to borderlands literature like *The Devil’s Highway* can be feasibly depicted through frameworks of what José E. Limón calls “critical regionalism,” which in my application provide “a broad view of the

connection between local histories and global designs” (Cutler 166). The polysemeity of the American Southwest as a regional apparatus—one that imbricates white settler-colonial, Mexican, and indigenous histories—further complicates Urrea’s narrative choices to humanize and dehumanize bodies within this space.

This chapter explores the ways in which processes of globalization and immigration spatially configure the US-Mexican border within *The Devil’s Highway*. I first respond to the preexisting scholarship on borderlands literature by examining definitions of the border in the wake of globalization, imperial violence, and neoliberal commodification. Next, I examine the border, both materially and ideologically, as a site representative of, firstly, the U.S. state of exception, largely indebted to the work of Abraham Acosta; and secondly, as emblematic of embodiment, displacement and resistance. Finally, by analyzing the textual portrayals of landscape, topography, and cartography, I show how Urrea’s personified, nefarious representation of the Southwestern desert functions as a physical ledger for the land’s bloody history, rife with imperial implications that preface the current processes of globalization that characterize the border.

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As in the tradition of several other Chicana literary scholars, this study recognizes that the emergence of borderland literature as a distinct genre was first made possible by the 1848 annexation of northern Mexico, and consequently, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In the words of Lysa Rivera, this treaty “transformed Mexicans living in northern Mexico into strangers in their own land,” and she further claims that “the seeds of a Chicano/a collective consciousness took root after this geopolitical transformation, which engendered a unique border culture” (292). The following years of steady industrialization within the area effectively steamrolled its rich

indigenous traditions and history and, by degrees, created what we would today consider a borderland culture, a space that Anzaldúa describes as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” that is “in a constant state of transition” (25).

The early 1990s witnessed some of the most momentous legislation in regards to burgeoning practices of globalization and their blunt impact on Mexico and its inhabitants. Widely considered to be the launching point of U.S. globalization efforts, George H.W. Bush, Sr. introduced in a 1991 presidential address what he deemed the “New World Order,” or “a new national fantasy...carrying global implications under US signature” (Šesnić 2). The subsequent ratification of NAFTA (the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement) in 1994 proved another significant turning point in unsettling local identities and in further systematically disadvantaging Mexican citizens. NAFTA’s policies effectively entrenched a rapidly growing neoliberal hegemony which entailed “the commodification and privatization of land and labour power,” “the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption,” and “neocolonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources)” (Rivera 291, Harvey 159). The economic suppression of local avenues of production in the interest of fattening corporate capitalism—as well as the seizing of precious agricultural resources—ultimately gutted the Mexican economy, which was already in steady decline due to the devaluation of the peso in 1982 (Anzaldúa 112).

The long-documented history of the United States’ commodification of Mexico is critical when considering the narrative staples of borderland literature, detailed succinctly by Ramón Saldívar in his essay “The American borderlands novel.” He identifies several general connective themes between borderland literary texts: to name a few, “the focus on stories of human emergence as a common generic move...their shared interest in how history functions in

relation to fiction, and how realism as a mode is often redefined in fantastic terms” (1032).

Borderlands texts are especially preoccupied with parsing out the dynamics “between knowledge and power, between utopian progress and dystopian dehumanization, between history and myth, and most importantly, between physical violence and the violence of language” (Saldívar 1033).

Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* foregrounds the material consequences of the border on the Mexican body in the late twentieth century, while Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* inherits this relationship and repositions it within the context of the twenty-first century border conflict, reinscribing and challenging the border identity post-globalization and in a polarizing era of anti-immigration rhetoric.

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The Border as Obsolete Nation-State and State of Exception

Within *The Devil’s Highway* and other borderlands texts, the southwest Arizona border stands to reflect, perhaps more starkly than any other American locale, the unequal distribution of resources and mobility to colonized or “Third World” citizens in the wake of U.S. practices of globalization and neoliberalism. Urrea wryly remarks that the Wellton 26’s nickname “Operation Broken Promise” was perhaps the “most accurate” of catchphrases regarding the event (35). In her article “Dreams Deferred: The Concept of the US-Mexican Borderlands between the Global North and the South,” Jelena Šesnić observes that the conflicts at the border “continue to reflect the contradictions of global distribution of population, resources and opportunities,” while the border itself “will for a long time, remain a site where we observe the uneven impact of globalization” (10). Acosta similarly explores “how the US/Mexico border is preconstituted as object of dispute, that is, how the terms themselves condition its representation as always already

asymmetrically and unevenly given” (111). In relation to my study, Acosta also identifies *The Devil’s Highway* as Urrea’s response to this asymmetrical juridical status of the border.

Urrea deliberately inscribes the borderlands of the US-Mexican border as a dark mirror of the state of exception. The border as characterized in Urrea’s narrative flattens traditional binaries of originary culturalism into an encompassing entity of nonidentity; he destabilizes traditional hierarchies of “Mexican” or “Mexican-American” in not only the Wellton 26’s diasporic indigenous roots, but the nebulousness of their cultural identities or their categorization as basic human beings. As Urrea insistently reiterates, “In the desert, we are all illegal aliens,” thus ascribing a zone “non-anthropocentrism” or “utter deracination” to borderlands space (120).

The US-Mexican border further represents the obsolescence of the nation-state as a governing entity—a site that dissolves and disperses monolithic ideas concerning sovereignty and mobility outward toward what Šesnić identifies as a “multitude” that encompasses what the nation-state deems to be the “permanent” global underclass (3). She writes that “in order to claim a new form of sovereignty, it is no longer necessary for the nation-state to exercise control over its borders, so much as to get hold over ‘global networks,’ including the circulation of people” (5). The multiplicity she suggests forges a new political entity, one that is markedly deterritorialized, heterogeneous, and beholden to the nation-state.

Similarly, in Acosta’s view, it is “the figure of the present-day border crosser...that reveals the sheer heterogeneity of border space” (106); he primarily utilizes Giorgio Agamben’s biopolitical theory of “bare life” to illustrate this contention. The modern state, according to Agamben’s theory, understands conceptually two distinct formulations of life: *zoe*, translated as “bare life,” “which expresses the simple fact of living common to all living beings” (including animals), and *bios*, “the way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Acosta 111). The

indistinguishability within *The Devil's Highway* between these two classifications of life, as well as the “negative territoriality” of the southwest Arizona desert, confounds dualities of inclusion and exclusion, of nature and culture located within these biopolitical formations (Acosta 111). For Acosta, this indistinction is what carves out a state of exception for border-crossers within the Southwest desert—a void between citizen and animal described by Agamben as *homo sacer* (112). Šesnić likewise applies this theoretical understanding of bare life to border crossers in her own research, describing them as “liminally human and non-citizens” in the mindset of the nation-state (6).

It is indeed the border, perhaps above any other locale, that conveys “a threshold in which life is at once both inside and outside the juridical order” (Acosta 112). The Southwestern desert, as Urrea consistently reminds us, constitutes its own laws outside of legal apparatuses or forms of policing like the Border Patrol or ICE—the abandonment of the border crossers, left to die at the mercy of the natural elements, constitutes its own sovereign of law, rather than the application of the law itself (Acosta 112). This self-contradiction within the state of exception along the southwest border, as I later address, demonstrates the significance of Urrea’s topographical depictions within *The Devil's Highway*. Furthermore, Urrea’s portrayal of the Wellton 26 as extensions of Acosta’s aptly applied bare life theory finds purchase in the text’s descriptions of embodiment and dehumanization.

Acosta identifies the US-Mexican border as a doubled figure of exception, in which the overlapping thresholds of the United States and Mexico counter each other as much as they are indistinct from one another—the superimposition of two frontiers that inscribe their own forms of exception. He compares this politicized void to a demilitarized zone, characterizing it as “a space that is neither inside nor outside the juridical order, neither inside nor outside the sovereign

claims of Mexico or the United States, but instead a doubly constituted state of exception existing between both” (113-114). Significantly in regards to Urrea’s political aims, it’s important to remember that the territory of Arizona itself was ceded to the United States only following a cartographical mistake—thus founding a present-day state of exception atop an even more baffling and foundational state of exception. Mary Pat Brady details this in her book *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies*:

Southern Arizona was not part of the land ceded by Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Instead, it was purchased in a separate agreement worked out years later. What happened? While the boundary survey commissioners were working to establish the post-1848 border near El Paso del Norte, they discovered a problem: The Disturnell Map used during treaty negotiations incorrectly located both El Paso del Norte and the Rio Bravo (18).

Beyond the obvious irony of this mapping gaffe, Acosta reminds us that “the territory today known as southern Arizona came into being as an exception...as a critical error over where sovereignty along this region is to be bound” (114). This further insinuates that southern Arizona’s foundation as a U.S. territory lies within its own forsakenness. Linking this historical event to the present conflicts swirling along the borderlands further cements the artificiality and arbitrariness of borders themselves.

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The Border as (Dis)Embodiment and Resistance

As I have established, the site of the border itself functions within a multiplicity of meanings, both metaphorical and material. It represents, for one, the cognitive dissonance not only of the U.S. state of exception but also the arbitrary nature of national borders themselves. It

also acts as “the ideological ‘ground zero’ of Mexican American cultural nationalism and as the symbolic kernel of social and political resistance against the United States” (Acosta 105)—both metonym and reality for practices of U.S. globalization and neoliberal hegemony. As Anzaldúa details in her autobiographical work, the border acts as the divisive signifier between sovereign and Third World and, concurrently, the points of fusion and intersection between the two, their codependency seeded into the land itself. The border further exposes both the pervasiveness and the instability of ever-transient categories of inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, I/other, us/them. In other words, the border functions to “delimit interior and exterior, to indicate a clear division between what belongs inside the nation and what does not” (Cutler 159). As Anzaldúa does, Urrea remarks on the displacement Mexicans feel even within their own culture, estranged from the American stereotypes that categorize them; he provides the example of cuisine, noting that to many Mexican and indigenous farmers, “Mexican food” like nachos, chimichangas, and burritos are entirely foreign. He uses this illustration to claim that “they were aliens before they ever crossed the line,” quite literally a marginalized people (40).

Several borderlands texts as well as adjacent scholarship point out the metaphorical ubiquity of the border compared to its inversely unimposing material reality; Šesnić observes that in borderlands literature, “The state border is both recognized as a geo-political reality and, simultaneously, lampooned as a contingent creation besieged on all sides, weighed down by manifold implications” (6). Specifically within borderland literature, the physical rendering of the border acts as a microcosm for the politics of exclusion that the ideological border polices; its material unobtrusiveness further serves to emphasize its rootedness in arbitrary or obsolete functions of the nation-state. The real border pales in comparison to its prevalence in the Mexican imaginary, demonstrated by the scene in which the Wellton 26 reaches the border:

...they stepped over a dropped and rusted barbed wire fence.

“Los estados unidos, muchachos.”

That’s it? That’s the border? This is North America? It don’t look like much!

(103, original emphasis)

In this passage, Urrea articulates the futile and somewhat absurd notion of bordered space, especially given the high stakes of affiliation within the U.S. nation-state’s imagined community. The critical demarcation of “inside/outside” that defines and marginalizes the identities of so many Mexican and indigenous citizens is, in the material world, a tattered barb wire fence. But, as Šesnić aptly observes, “the border is internalized” for Mexican citizens (3). In Anzaldúa’s account, the notorious borderline between nations is also a shoddy fence of barbed wire, and as mentioned in Urrea’s text, “no matter where [the immigrants] entered, they had only to step over a drooping bit of wire fence, or across an invisible line in the dust” (Urrea 56). Anzaldúa poetically depicts the physicality of the border as a corporeal manifestation of pain in her opening pages of prose:

1,950 mile-long open wound dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, running down the length of my body, staking fence rods in my flesh, splits me splits me, *me raja me raja* [it slashes me, it slashes me]. This is my home, this thin edge of barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless. The sea cannot be fenced, *el mar* does not stop at borders (25).

Anzaldúa’s repeated emphasis on embodiment, and its perpetual relation to displacement, reveals the extent to which “the border acts *on* individuals, usually violently” (Cutler 164). In the same motion, she conveys the natural power of the landscape by upending our preconceived notions of bordered space, as the ocean flows across man-made constructions of separation. Both

of these thematic employments, I note, are critical throughout *The Devil's Highway*. The self-narrated account of Anzaldúa, a queer indigenous woman, provides a far more intersectional understanding of borderlands culture than Urrea's does, but both texts disrupt narrative linearity in their formalistic constructions, and both texts illustrate the extent to which the US-Mexican border is "a geopolitical intersection between two historically delimited frontiers" (Acosta 113).

Acosta further proposes a remapped concept of resistance within border transgression, delineating "a subaltern form of itineracy" through the figure of the heterogeneous border-crosser (106). This resistant mobility that Acosta seeks to retool is central in Anzaldúa's work, "as [she] perpetually elude[s] surveillance and show[s] off for it, as [she] negotiate[s] power and its induction on multiple levels, in multiple spaces, and as [she] demonstrate[s] the breadth of [her] multiple bridges/alliances" (Ramlow 174). However, *The Devil's Highway* complicates these ideas of agency, as the Wellton 26 are granted little to none in a variety of ways; whatever resistance they may attempt to actualize through their border-crossing ultimately proves fruitless due to their graphic deaths. Acosta locates this concept of "resistance," albeit reluctantly, in the survivors' inability to reinscribe the events of their crossing, but it is clearly evident that *The Devil's Highway* troubles the traditional association between border mobility and resistance—demonstrated especially in Urrea's detailed depiction of the Mexican body.

Both Anzaldúa's and Urrea's portrayals of the Mexican (or indigenous) laborer body, and its direct relation to the space of the borderlands, are essential when considering the ramifications of globalized capitalism on the country and its inhabitants. Urrea emphasizes that Border Patrol often just refers to the immigrants as "bodies," not only foreshadowing their probable deaths in the crossing but also their sum value within the U.S. capitalist hegemony. Their other nickname, "walkers," additionally invokes the idea that their identities are defined

solely by their bodily actions, while dually referencing a common catchphrase for zombies—the walking undead, often unaware of their visible undeadness.

Urrea's focus on corporeal physicality appears most strikingly within two passages of *The Devil's Highway*—the popularly referenced sequence detailing hyperthermia, and the figurative reanimation of the Wellton 26's corpses during their posthumous transportation. The book's ninth chapter, "Killed By the Light," depicts in excruciating detail the various stages the body undergoes leading up to heat death, or hyperthermia. In so doing, Urrea intimately links the environmental processes of the desert to the Mexican corporeal form. The land itself seems to inhabit a sinister sentience: "The Growler Mountains collected the light and poured it on them like lava. The heat...slammed into them, instant and profound" (117). He continues to anthropomorphize the landscape throughout the chapter: "The desert's air, like you, is thirsty. It's sucking up your sweat as fast as you can pump it" (Urrea 122). These descriptions innately comingle the elements of the Arizona desert—the land—to the Mexican body.

Urrea then diverges from the migrants' narrative, cutting instead to the senseless deaths of two white campers after they are left stranded in the desert heat. The white couple ignores advisories to drink the recommended amount of water — "they didn't need it" — and Urrea references the details of their imagined domestic space, replete with "a cold one and a grilled hot dog," "a cooler of melting ice" under a picnic table, and "brewskis, diet sodas" (118). This passage illustrates the asymmetrical statuses and resources granted to white American citizens versus the Wellton 26, but Urrea emphasizes once again that the desert does not discriminate based on race. In this delineation, the text establishes the desert itself as a territory of exception, in which hegemonic inscriptions of race and class are sacrificed to the laws of nature, "rendering

visible...the contingent and conflict-ridden nature of the ‘politicality of space’ at the US/Mexico border” (Acosta 116).

Following this passage, the text outlines the six various stages of heat death, describing in lurid detail its debilitating effects on the physical form. With the deaths of white American citizens as the scene’s immediate, referent context, Urrea doubly emphasizes the role of the racialized body so integral throughout *The Devil’s Highway*. The narrative look into the processes of the heat-exhausted, dying body feels uncomfortably intimate, even voyeuristic—and thus also functions as a simulacrum for the United States’ agricultural market’s commodifying relationship to the Mexican laborer body. The use of the second person perspective further rearticulates this dynamic. The border-crossers drink their own urine, pee into their hands or into each other’s mouths, strip naked to cool down, hallucinate demons, and dig holes to escape the sun as the heat slowly drives them physically insane. A closing passage describes the final crescendo of heat death:

Your temperature redlines—you hit 105, 106, 108 degrees. Your body panics and dilates all blood capillaries near the surface, hoping to flood your skin with blood to cool it off...Your eyes turn red: blood vessels burst, and later, the tissue of the whites literally cooks until it goes pink, then a well-done crimson...they bake like a pig at a luau (Urrea 128).

The allusion to imagery associated with “cooked meat,” as well as the complete depersonalization of the dying subject, serve the purpose of dehumanizing the Mexican individual, stripping him down once again to simply a walking, undead body (Urrea 128). Moreover, Urrea makes this process of becoming non-human explicit: “Desolation has begun to edit you. Erase you” (123). The second-person perspective is rhetorically crucial in confusing

and collapsing categorical boundaries that demarcate the subject (I, the reader) from the object, the racialized other. The consistent use of “you” implicates the (presumably, American) reader themselves as a walker dying in the desert, once again establishing the southwest Arizona desert as both a politicized space and one that discards traditional classifications of value based on race or status.

Urrea’s characterization of the undead reappears significantly in one of the book’s final chapters, “Aftermath.” In describing the transportation of the Wellton 26’s corpses back to Mexico, Urrea personifies the dead bodies as though they’ve retained consciousness, taking care to individualize and name each one:

Reymundo Jr. was alone, lost and small inside the bag, almost swimming in all that black rubber space, sliding around as they drove...Heriberto Baldillo’s cactus punctures didn’t hurt...Enrique Landeros’ teeth were broken, but they no longer bothered him...Most of their eyes were open. Small sounds escaped from a couple of the bodies as gases moved through them. Almost sighs. Rustlings in their bags. If you listened, you could hear them whispering. *We’re going home* (192-193).

Again, Urrea’s visceral detail in describing the bodily processes of the post-mortem corpses forces the reader to grapple with an intimate, horrifying understanding of their physicality, a form of abjection at home within the gothic tradition. Urrea’s bodies are universal in their biological functions, but unmistakably Mexican in the careful, re-humanizing description of each victim. Urrea also describes each body’s material possessions: “brown pants,” a “favorite silver rooster belt buckle,” a “colored piece of paper...that nobody would ever read,” “a small mirror,” “a letter in his pants pocket;” these additions effectively individualize each person,

rather than collectivizing them under the names “Wellton 26” or, as the United States media does, the “Yuma 14” (Urrea 192-193). Urrea, earlier in the novel, points out that the U.S. economy has always relied on cheap, skilled labor, from the industrial development of the railroad to modern-day development of agricultural businesses. The U.S. nation-state, he insinuates, has always prioritized the labor and capitalistic potential of the immigrant body over its human dignity. Both his and Anzaldúa’s explorations of embodiment and *dis*embodiment, place and displacement, corporeal pain and imagined spaces and communities, underscore the direct relation of the commodified Mexican body—and those who occupy or traverse the borderlands—to the space of the US-Mexican border. This attention to materiality and decomposition classifies Urrea’s work as deeply gothic, rooted in borderlands space; however, rather than the ghost in the attic or the creature from the forest, Urrea’s other is the Mexican undead, and his monster the commodified form of bordered bodies—the “walkers,” or the living who become undead the moment they enter American soil.

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Critical Regionalism, Borderlands Gothic, and Mapping Desolation

In his article “Border Literary Histories, Globalization, and Critical Regionalism,” Limón contends that U.S. practices of globalization can be most effectively understood through schematics of critical regionalism. He makes the disclaimer that “such local identities, however, are not fixed practices, although they often do retain their distinction and discretion over against a globalizing ‘outside’” (167). Further in this vein, in her article “Borderlands as Bioregion: Jovita González, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the Twentieth-Century Ecological Revolution in the Rio Grande Valley,” Priscilla Solis Ybarra delineates the importance of mapping within borderlands texts, as “considering the bioregional, ecological aspects of the US-Mexico borderlands expands

our understanding of how colonization, exploitation, and racism impact the land and its people” (176). Limón’s critical regionalism figures in the Western and Southwestern histories foregrounding *The Devil’s Highway*, while Ybarra’s gesture to the importance of bioregional interpretations reinforces my argument relating to the regional space of the US-Mexican border. Urrea’s dual invocation of the frontiers of either country is undeniably rooted in American regionalist understandings of the West, but additionally the transposition of this concept within Mexico. Urrea explicitly outlines this dialectic movement in the following passage:

In North America, the myth tends west: the cowboys, the Indians, the frontier, the wild lands...but in Mexico...the myth ran north...The wide open spaces lay northward...the frontier lay north, not west. That’s why norteño people are the cowboys of Mexico—not westerners. The Spanish word for ‘border’ is, after all, *frontera*. The frontier (48).

The text is unflinching in its implications—or rather, accusations—that the modern-day border crisis is a direct result of a long-documented history of white settler colonialism and commodification. Urrea explains that the immigrational motive to migrate north is “a white phenomenon. White Europeans conceived of and launched the El Norte mania, just as white Europeans inhabiting the United States today bemoan it” (8). He further identifies that the migration to the frontier was a two-pronged directional movement, as “the Europeans conquering North American hustled west, where the open land lay,” and “the North American settling Mexico hustled north. Where the open land was” (8). The prominence of the frontier in the development of a distinct American literary genre goes generally unquestioned; but what about Mexico and its ideological, northward ascension toward *la frontera*?

The state of exception acts as a semi-ironic inversion of the American exceptionalism so integrally paired with frontier mythology, underscoring the hypocrisies that underlie the U.S. nation-state's illusions of inclusivity and progressive, forward-facing movement. Part of the frontier's legendary distinctiveness, so argues Stephanie le Menager in her essay "Imagining the frontier," is due to its function in "separat[ing] the USA from global imperial history" (515). Furthermore, le Menager articulates, "The frontier thesis – hence the American thesis – gains much of its symbolic potency by association not with history but with the a-historical concept of nature" (517). Thus *The Devil's Highway*, by rooting its abundant and panoramic sense of place in the border's multivalent histories—and by overtly linking this history to the nature of the land itself—directly subverts the ideological tenets that ground American exceptionalism within the frontier. Understanding *The Devil's Highway's* Western and Southwestern concepts of place provides a direct conduit into histories that frontierism, in its façade of ahistoricism, may attempt to conceal. The frontier, transpositional and technically placeless, acts as a perpetually shifting margin of "progress" in the American imaginary. The border, however, is fixed along cartographical lines even as its ideological dimensions may fluctuate over time. In Urrea's estimation, these two configurations of space coexist in Mexican myth.

Urrea's focus on the material body, the undead, recurring hauntings, and liminal spaces all constitute gothic tropes native to Southern gothic works. The Western and Southwestern influences and locales of *The Devil's Highway* perhaps position it more aptly within a host of frontier gothic texts, "those that invoke uncanny fear or terror through the active participation of the wilderness, or liminal, or borderland settings. What makes those settings so unsettled and unsettling...their locations haunted by their histories" (Hinds 128). However, I propose, more specifically, that *The Devil's Highway* categorizes its own genre of global borderlands gothic,

similar to the global South in its place-oriented relationship to macrocosmic ideas of nation, empire, and capital. On the notion of frontier gothic, Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds explains, “The frontier is not only a spatial borderland, but a temporal one as well, incorporating layered, overlapping periods of time. The frontier defies one understanding of place—of *a* place—by hosting not one set of events but more than one” (130). This temporal multivalence, as well as the haunted liminality of borderlands space itself, positions Urrea’s work as its own form of gothic—still *south*, but regionally situated within overlapping geographies of the West, the Southwest, and Mexico.

As in Deep Southern gothic, conceptions of regional space in contemporary imagination become consistently uprooted and altered as globalization contests traditional and settled ideas of place. This ultimately creates a sense of “placelessness” layered atop material referents of regional space, which can be easily interpreted as operative in *The Devil’s Highway*. Urrea’s characterizations of the placelessness and misdirection of the Wellton 26 do not contradict these regionalist interpretations of the Western frontier and the Southwest (or *el norte*), but rather strengthen them. By emphasizing the nameless sites along the border, as well as the vastness and sentience of the landscape itself, Urrea recalls idylls of frontier imagery via expanses of uncivilized territory yet to be signified by human cartography and border-assigning: “Nameless mountains loomed over them, nameless stars burned mutely overhead, nameless demons gibbered from the nameless canyons” (108). Urrea details the group’s directional progress as they take wrong turns, double back on their trails, travel in circles, or miss important distinguishing sites that could provide reprieve. The omniscient voice provides the exact geographical locations that, in the contained event of the fictionalization, are entirely out of reach to the coyote Mendez and his crew: “[Mendez] could have headed dead east from Charlie Bell

and walked into downtown Ajo and ordered a beer. He had already missed Bluebird Pass. And he had failed to enter a small opening called Temporal Pass” (Urrea 136). The landscape becomes entirely indiscriminate as the group becomes more lost and continues on, a “blank map with landmarks etched in transient memory” (108). Topographical features run together and appear homogenous: “the group looked up...at peaks that could have been the peaks they walked away from hours ago” (Urrea 141). The placelessness of the Wellton 26 is even more conversely emphasized by the hyper-localization paired with their deaths, as exact GPS coordinates mark the discovery points of their corpses. The profound directionlessness that sealed the walkers’ fates turns on its head with the bodies’ recovery, as Urrea details each name and location for each individual. The text’s provisions of name, place, and setting intersperse with the flowing placelessness of the Wellton 26’s wanderings, contrasting contemporary cartographical demarcations with the open, unmapped land of a proto-Western frontierland.

In her article “Neoliberalism and Dystopia in U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Fiction,” Rivera observes, “The borderland is a locus of rapid modernization that is literally rooted in indigenous histories” (295). This historical rootedness acts as an incessant haunt in Urrea’s work, manifested in the ecology of the borderlands itself. “Desolation,” as Urrea refers to the southwest Arizona desert in tribute to a hellish biblical myth, occupies the narrative as its own character—insidious, sentient, and above all, nondiscriminating in its predation. The legible geographic history of borderlands territory concurrently defies U.S.-dictated borders and recalls the tangible existence of the land’s original occupants. Anzaldúa explains that she constantly feels the presence of her ancestors’ spirits, “a sixth sense that’s lain dormant from long-ago times”—a semi-psychic ability she calls *la facultad*, strengthened by experiences of oppression and marginalization (60-61). Similarly, the physical and inexterminable history of the borderlands assumes an endless

presence in Urrea's narrative world and all its subsequent implications. When describing the geography of Veracruz, Urrea writes, "But its native roots run deeper, and more ancient names still grace the towns and villages of the region...Indigenous ghosts haunt the land" (43). These unsettled ancient spirits, teeming within the lands themselves, provide a constant reminder of colonial violence wrought upon them, a cyclical marginalization even more aggravated by U.S. practices of neoliberalism and corporate capitalism. Borderlands texts like *The Devil's Highway* enable us to recognize "how apparently novel developments in neoliberal economic hegemony are actually residual effects of colonial power in the region," functioning along "an ongoing historical continuum that, without intervention, promises to repeat the worst of colonial histories along the U.S.–Mexico border" (Rivera 292).

A significant motif throughout *The Devil's Highway* is that the territory acts as a physical ledger for what's transpired in the desert, from a distant indigenous past to the present events of the Wellton 26; the land tells truths that is in many regards unattainable by human accounts. Urrea frequently divulges the extent of his own fictionalization in his transparency about the travelers' unreliable accounts. The survivors possess either dim, scrambled recollections or no memory at all of the events that transpired on or around the Devil's Highway: "They're in shock. They can't spell their own names. They can't spell the names of the villages and ranches they came from...They don't know what day it is. They don't know the name of where they were" (Urrea 71). However, expert trackers called "cutters" can trace forensically most details of the migrants' whereabouts and behaviors, even their physical traits or walking gaits; they "read the land like a text. They search the manuscript of the ground for irregularities in narration...They had a Ph.D. in reading dirt" (Urrea 29). This ability to "textually" read the landscape ascribes some veracity or reliability to understanding the narratives of the border crossers, which for most

of history have gone unarticulated or have been rendered entirely irretrievable. These readings of the landscape in an attempt to inscribe the events of the Wellton 26's crossing—deliberately couched in academic rhetoric and methodically heterogeneous—positions *The Devil's Highway* as its own subaltern history.

The narrative characterizes the borderlands in superimpositional configurations, layering cultural past upon cultural past to suggest the contested history attached to the territory. Along with other ethnicities crossing the border, the southwest Arizona desert is American, Mexican, and Native American all at once, indigenous and *mestizo*, placing it within intersecting regional imaginaries—both colonial and colonized. One early passage of *The Devil's Highway* reads, “[Indigenous] etchings and ruins still dot the ground...Footprints of long-dead cowboys are still there, wagon ruts and mule scuffs. And beneath these, the prints of the phantom Hohokam themselves” (7). Physical remains, ancient and new, overlay each other; unidentified “bones peppered the entire region” (Urrea 20). The topography of the land itself provides evidence of its own imbricated histories, compositional in effect—the mythic Wild West layered atop traces of indigenous civilizations, further marked by the travels of twenty-first century immigrants attempting to escape the continuum of colonial disadvantage.

Continuing developments in border conflicts impel us to constantly modify and reinform our understanding of borderlands literature—spatially, politically, historically, culturally. The aftershocks of colonialism—and far more recently, of globalized neoliberalism—continue to systematically marginalize the Mexican economy and its citizens, perpetuating problematic colonial-era binaries predicated on racist and classist injustices. These injustices are perhaps most evident when contextualized within the state of exception that exists along the US-Mexican border. Furthermore, some of these issues native to borderlands literature and theory benefit

from regionalist perspectives, which provide a multivalent spatial dimension in parsing out overlapping influences and cultural pasts. *The Devil's Highway*, as well as its predecessor *Borderlands/La Frontera*, both employ visceral depictions of embodiment to convey significant connections between ever-evolving ideas of displacement, mobility, and resistance in relation to the border and its adjacent inhabitants. Ultimately, Urrea makes explicit the intimate ties between borderland itself and the tribulations of its traversers. Ten years after originally writing *The Devil's Highway*, Urrea observed in an afterword, "Everything has changed. And the worst of it remains the same" (221). As conversations circling the US-Mexican border and immigration grow increasingly polarizing, evolving considerations of bordered space become more and more critical. Urrea wrote in 2014 that "every American city is now a border town" (225). This observation begs the question going forward whether the cartographical US-Mexican border, like the frontier in its locational fluidity, is really such a fixed site after all.

III. THE DEEP SOUTH ON T.V.

The Southern gothic has found an eager host, as well as equally eager consumers, within televisual media of the twenty-first century. Particularly with the “golden age” of television in full swing, televisual narratives can provide complex and meaningful plots, thoughtful sociopolitical commentary, stunning visuals, and easy access to large swaths of viewers. The ubiquity of television has paired neatly with the popularity of gothic narratives—especially the Southern gothic, as recent political tensions have turned an especially critical eye to the Deep South and its ideologies. These popular Southern gothic shows, including *The Walking Dead*, *True Blood*, *True Detective*, *Bloodline*, *Ozark*, and *American Gothic*, provide viewers with an imaginative, fictive South, complete with crises of faith, bloody violence, twanging drawls, and (often lampooned) political incorrectness. One such example of Southern gothic media is AMC’s 2016 show *Preacher*, which blends Southern and Western locales, narratives, and cinematic styles. *Preacher* is particularly unique in its application of a modern Southern gothic vision, fused with other regional influences (the West and the Southwest) while exploring technological modernity and faith traditions within the South. It reflects, and perhaps even further foretells, relevant new directions within Southern discourse.

Going forward, I’ll briefly contextualize the literary and sociocultural tradition of Southern gothic to examine its modern preoccupations and conventions, specifically as applied to *Preacher*. First, I argue that incursions of modern technology and society bridge *Preacher*’s homage to traditional Southern gothic tropes while reflecting contemporary anxieties; I extend this contention by examining how modernity is maximized by *Preacher*’s rendering of the global South, which in itself acts as a microcosm of the national empire. Finally, I examine *Preacher*’s construction of a cynical “post-religious” South in the face of these contemporary developments,

and the ways in which the show adapts orthodox religious themes to deconstruct and critique them. Ultimately, *Preacher's* dark and ironic narrative threads together several twenty-first century tensions and anxieties to create a postmodern, global vision within regional boundaries and traditions, situated appropriately within the familiar gothic register.

While the Southern gothic does not have a uniform appearance or trajectory, its tradition includes several tropes that recur consistently as native elements to the genre. My intention is to analyze how *Preacher* as a televisual narrative inherits these tropes, refashions them, and speaks back to them from a modern standpoint; ultimately, media like *Preacher* bridges the historical gap that familiarizes the American gothic tradition with the emergent deconstructions of regional, racial, and temporal boundaries of the modern day twenty-first century. The Southern gothic, in this sense, reshapes itself to embody postmodern and globalized anxieties while continuing to haunt Southern locales and associations.

Preacher's first season is set in the modern day 2016, in a fictional small town in west Texas called Annville. Based on a cult classic DC Vertigo comic book, the show was developed by Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, and Sam Catlin. The show's titular reference is to Jesse Custer, a reluctant preacher with a dark and violent criminal history. Jesse is determined to save the town from damnation when he finds himself saddled with a mysterious, seemingly heaven-granted power of bending people to his will through the spoken word. Secondary characters include Tulip O'Hare, Jesse's gun-toting childhood best friend and ex-girlfriend; Proinsias Cassidy, a snarky and bloodthirsty 900-year-old Irish vampire; Emily Woodrow, an Annville local and single mom dedicated to helping Jesse restore the church's reputation; and Eugene Root, the deformed town scapegoat. While the show features a large ensemble of periphery figures, including corrupt town-members in various positions of power and well-to-do angels, these are

the characters on which the show's narrative hinges. Going forward, I examine the social and political commentary *Preacher* attempts to vocalize through its use of several Southern gothic themes, and its venture into potentially new Gothic territory.

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***Preacher's* Modern Southern Vision**

A divergence from a traditional Southern gothic marked by region, *Preacher* confronts figurative and literal borders and unbinds them from either generic or regional restrictions. The show's visual setting fuses the archetypes of Southern gothic—dusty, sepia-hued landscapes, rustic saloons, tattered church billboards—with sharp technological incursions. One of the pilot's first scenes features a child playing on an iPad while Jesse gives a sermon to a half-hearted crowd of parishioners sprawled across several empty, old-style pews. The inclusion of technology may on a surface level feed into *Preacher's* self-aware and ironic humor, but its omnipresence in the show also reflects anxieties and preoccupations unique to the modern day.

The tension between urbanization and the rural is an age-old conflict in the American gothic, and finds itself no better conduit than the agrarian South. The stark contrast between a time-bound genre audiences are familiar with—Southern gothic—and the infringement of modern technology speaks to one of the most pressing political tensions in the twenty-first century. We witness this to almost absurd extremes in *Preacher*: a young boy takes a selfie with his mother as she smothers his comatose sister to death with a pillow; Jesse calls God on a hand-radio where He's projected via camcorder as if in a Skype session; DeBlanc and Fiore go through a cranky travel agent in order to descend into Hell. These intrusions create the unique ambiance of a traditional cinematic setting of the Deep South, interspersed with startling visual reminders of modern society. While technology can only be a novel and somewhat recent

inclusion in the tradition of Southern gothic, I posit that it responds to the same thematic apprehension—industrialization versus the natural world, and the quandary of humanity’s role in that power-play.

The show further alludes to the dawn of a generation of increasingly cynical, violent children, not only demonstrating the generational shift away from organized orthodox religion, but the cultivation of violent impulses at increasingly young ages. After requesting Jesse “hurt” his abusive father, and Jesse’s reluctant refusal, a town boy named Chris tells him, sardonically, “Pray for me, preacher,” intended to underscore the futility of the entreaty (1.01). In another scene, a bloodied Tulip beats a man unconscious, builds a bazooka, blows up a helicopter, and strews corpses, and the kids she meets react with delight and deem it “awesome,” seemingly desensitized to the onslaught of violence. School-bus children ridicule the bus driver Linus to his face by calling him “Mr. Creepy Weirdo,” and in the season’s finale, after God’s absence is revealed, five young schoolgirls murder and presumably castrate him, then flee the scene giggling. This brutality is paired consistently with kids’ complete absorption in technology—fighting over iPads and taking selfies rather than, for example, play-wrestling like Jesse and Tulip are shown to do as kids for fun. Hagood cites this “zombie-like” engrossment as a common source of anxiety in the modern media’s portrayal of Southern gothic, and further suggests the media’s fixation with Southern gothic themes as “a mirror-gazing undead United States, horrified by its own abjection, in the Kristevan sense, and thrilled by not just the persistence but the refashioning of its cherished other” (259).

Latent in the mass epidemic of technology absorption is the implicit access to the exterior world, a global network free of regional boundaries or containments. The unfettered connection to the international world through technology is a phenomenon uncharted until the current

generation, and in the realm of exponentially expanding modernity, the Southern gothic grapples with molding that rapid advance into its native configurations. *Preacher* illuminates the South's struggle as a region to adapt its own traditions to a rapidly globalizing, modernizing world, and furthermore, the impact of globalization on Southernized, localized space.

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The Dawn of the “Global” South

The South's regionality as both genre and storytelling tradition has remained the central host for America's gothic subculture. Contemporary scholars acknowledge the “South” as primarily a translocational and liminal construct, regionalized for the sake of forgetting past crimes—a psychic “dumping ground” and “repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself” (Anderson 26, Goddu 4). Several scholars assert that understanding the contributions of peripheral voices and traditions to its formation, such as Haitian and African lore, are central to a comprehensive (and justifiably, a culturally inclusive) understanding of the Southern gothic. *Preacher* similarly adopts that globalized perspective; while the majority of the scenes take place in west Texas, the pilot's locations include shots of Russia and Africa, and—a testament to the show's black humor—Tom Cruise is annihilated in a Scientology church in L.A. At least three of the consistent characters speak with strong Irish brogues, a tonal dissonance with the Southern drawls of the surrounding characters. For example, Cassidy's heavy Irish brogue and unfamiliar slang strikes an odd chord of incongruity in a setting rich with the Deep South's visual and thematic markers. More than once, Jesse tells Cassidy, “I don't understand a word you're sayin',” an exchange of linguistic illegibility that creates inherent challenges to the antiquated conception of a vernacularly uniform South. The adaptability and patchwork nature of the gothic as a genre necessarily invokes dialectical diversity and overlapping forms of language;

more broadly, *Preacher's* eager, blended adaptation of several genres—Southern gothic horror, western action, supernatural thriller—reconstructs the archetype of “Southern gothic” to include differing sociocultural influences and to speak to several issues within race, politics, religion, and identity simultaneously. The field of Southern gothic increasingly explores “the ways the tentacles of the U.S. South reach far and deep” into non-American and indigenous literary traditions, and into the exterior global influences that shaped the Southern storytelling tradition (Anderson et al. 2). *Preacher* seemingly acknowledges, if not speaks to, that “fluid, transnational, transcultural backdrop” in the modern American gothic (Anderson et al. 3).

Recent Southern gothic scholarship acknowledges that, due to the global economy and its racially diverse history, the “South” is not simply confined to a collection of states in America’s Deep South—it is a much more nebulous space locationally, and exists primarily as a storytelling tradition situated in a region viewed as “peculiarly time-bound” due to its regressive political and economic reality (Turner 54). The southward geographic movement of the narrative situates the audience back in time while just as often reminding them of its present setting with impositions of modern technology and references. The temporally sealed setting of the Deep South in a post-globalized world presents a microcosm of the American nation, manacled to its historical (and as we see, often morally reprehensible) traditions while forging modernized, imperialistic connections with the rest of the world.

This is not to say the show projects *too* far outside the regional imaginary that acts as both America’s shame-corner and site of perverse fascination. *Preacher* takes several wry jabs at the South’s resistance to political correctness; the removal of the local “red savage” mascot incites town uproar and brawling to protest what the sheriff remarks is a “beloved cultural figure.” One of the town brutes, Donnie, reenacts Confederate battles with his buddies, which

Jesse mocks in the pilot: “Lieutenant! How’d it go—did we win this time?” (1.01). *Preacher* deftly approaches its political commentary with tongue-in-cheek, barbed irony, positioning the provincial mindsets of townsfolk alongside the South’s archetypal resistance to mainstream progressiveness. The allusion to Confederate politics ironically bridges the gap between the original, Civil War-traumatized Southern gothic tradition and its modern iterations, in keeping with the genre’s political observations regarding race.

If the show’s attempts to overlap the South’s present-day reality with its historically race-charged narrative weren’t explicit enough, *Preacher* includes a dual narrative that runs alongside, if perhaps secondarily, to the 2016 main course of the first season. A seemingly unrelated subplot, the parallel narrative follows a cowboy in 1881 as he rides west to retrieve medicine for his dying daughter. The show’s location in Texas fixes it in the overlaying geographical nexus of Southern gothic and western, genres which *Preacher* gleefully crosshatches in grisly violence reminiscent of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*.

In *Gothic America*, Goddu claims that American gothic critiques America’s “national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality” (10). These “historical horrors” make a national identity possible, but must be suppressed in order to sustain it. (10) She adds that by the gothic’s resurrection of these horrors, it disrupts the national illusion with stark reminders of its own undeniable pasts. *Preacher* begins questioning and dismantling this national mythology by the start of the second episode. When the cowboy takes shelter with a group of bright-eyed settlers heading west, one of the travelers voices the classic American ideal:

But this country...it’s more than just trees and rivers. It’s a promise. An ancient contract ’neath these new landscapes and particulars, but its terms are everlasting

and made payable to the righteous. What do you say to that, sir? Do you agree...that this is paradise? (1.02)

The cowboy's response, his only spoken line in the entire episode, is: "It ain't." The shot cuts to a grisly image of scalped Indian corpses dangling from a tree and blowing stiffly in the wind, a distinct location that is later revealed to be the site of Annville. The settler, by declaring the landscapes "new," reiterates the white man's colonial conquest of indigenous land, as well as the silver-lined ideal that American land is by nature an "ancient contract" with the righteous colonizer. In the first season's final episode, the "red savage" mascot hangs himself from the same tree, a darkly ironic echo of the racial horrors that transcend geographical genre within America's historical narrative.

Preacher's dip into the western world may seem an odd tonal choice; it does, after all, intertwine regional histories and genres at the risk of incoherence. But this regional fusion is precisely what I argue *Preacher's* narrative encompasses: American tradition distinguished by regionally adjacent literatures and histories, reconfigured as an aregional and, ultimately, morally singular unit. Fiedler notes that the "hidden blackness" of the American psyche "lives on the last horizon of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence—on the 'frontier,' which is to say, the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face" (xxii). That *Preacher's* setting straddles the expanding frontier in west Texas is, locationally, no coincidence. The show's movement westward positions its narrative world on the figurative margin of progress; its parallel movement southward denotes simultaneous ideological regression. *Preacher's* narrative construction imbricates the West and the South, and all their associations and constituents, as temporally and spatially coexistent.

Within the second episode, the first in which the western and Southern storylines converge, the town's monopolizing meat company dispossesses a Native American couple of their home by purchasing their land and bulldozing their house (1.02). While perhaps a critique of corporate entities, *Preacher* more directly confronts the racial and institutional oppression of Native Americans by interweaving two seemingly disparate narratives, distant temporally but rooted geographically in the same physical location—the same land, as it were. Thematically, the show asserts its social relevance as the U.S. government continues to seize Native American land in the name of corporation and mass production, in the wake of political events like the Dakota Access Pipeline and Standing Rock.

The central question of the episode—whether or not the sinner is capable of “change” — is approached on a more microcosmic level by its plot following Jesse's baptism of a school-bus driver who confesses to pedophilic urges. While Jesse with clear disgruntlement absolves Linus of his compulsions, and although Linus insists, “I'm never gonna be the same,” the appearance of the yellow school-bus visually haunts Jesse for the remainder of the episode; when Eugene says, “I stay the same. I'm always the same. You get what I mean, Preacher?”, it triggers Jesse to track Linus down and physically punish him with a scalding baptism in the bathtub of his home (1.02). The episode's dual narrative begs the question whether the silent shame, the “sins” of an entire nation, can be absolved, and whether a country built atop the corpses of Native Americans can truly “change” — *Preacher's* demonstrative proximity between the racial treatment of Native Americans in 1881 and 2016 suggests it cannot. That the United States remains haunted by its own violent past (and its violent present) contradicts its very foundation rooted in puritanical ethos; this moral inconsistency finds no better home than the genteel, hospitable, faith-centered South. *Preacher* imagines a South deeply perturbed by its own convictions of

faith, questioning the godlessness of the modern world while simultaneously tethered to its regional traditions.

“Past Savin”’: Christian Salvation and Post-Nihilism

It was Flannery O’Connor who said in a lecture on the grotesque in 1960, “While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.” My contention in regard to this characterization is to extend it into *Preacher*’s portrayal of the South as, rather, “religion-haunted,” or at least in an existential phase of post-religiosity. *Preacher*’s abstraction of Christian traditions and its depiction of a false, absent God—and the resulting acts of depravity in Annville locals—gesture to a society exhausted by the notion of faith, even within the nation’s most notoriously religion-ruled territory. Jesse, as well as his flock, is haunted primarily by the quest for meaning in a world increasingly retreating from the security of an extant deity.

Central to the American Southern gothic and certainly no stranger to *Preacher*, as its title may suggest, Christian themes of salvation and redemption primarily drive the ethos and central moral inquiry of the show. While approached in microcosm through its individual characters, *Preacher* ultimately questions the redemptive potential of humanity in the wake of modern society’s mass epidemic of violence and warfare; the didactic and politically regressive religious rhetoric of the Deep South provides the ideal lens through which to examine these themes. This is reflected not only in the visual cinematography of the show, but in its thematic allusions. For example, in the aforementioned episode 1.02 “See,” Jesse baptizes the town-members so they can restart their lives as Christians, while in the arc of the same episode, he forcibly submerges the admitted pedophile Linus in boiling hot water in his bathtub. Through scenes like these, *Preacher* directly challenges the notion of blanket-absolution within Christian traditions.

Additionally, almost without fail, religious motifs are paired with scenes of graphic violence. One of the bloodiest fight scenes in the show's first season takes place in Jesse's church between a vampire and two seraphs; as a chapel is typically sanctioned "holy ground" and a safe space from the wicked and inhuman, something about two angels getting gored to death with a chainsaw seems to strike a resonant point about religion's history of violence.

Angel mythology is a central tenet to the show's lore; the power that possesses Jesse is an angel-demon hybrid called Genesis, and is ultimately the most powerful creation in the universe. Seraphs DeBlanc and Fiore go rogue from heaven in order to retrieve it, but encounter resistance from Jesse and Cassidy. Despite God's ambiguous presence—or lack thereof—in *Preacher*, heaven and hell are concepts not much questioned or debated by any of the characters. Through his power of the word, Jesse accidentally sends Eugene to hell in a moment of anger in the episode "Sundowner" (1.06). When Jesse later asks a hallucination of Eugene how he dug himself out of hell with his hands, Eugene responds, "It's not that far" ("El Valero," 1.08)—a bizarrely poignant suggestion that hell as we know it may exist directly beneath the soles of our shoes, or alive and existent within our living reality.

This spatial representation of hell as both locational and liminal seems to mirror the positioning of the contemporary South as a concept in the gothic tradition. Furthermore, the show, in a rather avant-garde repetitive sequence, represents hell as a space in which one's worst memories and experiences cycle in an endless loop, inciting eternal and human-wrought suffering for the individual. This idea that the suffering of hell is *human*-created based on the agency of one's choices, and not some sadistic form of supernatural punishment, relates to *Preacher's* grander themes of salvation and suffering. Hell, *Preacher* argues, is not what God

does to humans in death, but what we as humans do to ourselves in life—a rendering that implicitly ponders whether humanity deserves a God or salvation in the first place.

Interestingly, *Preacher's* portrayal of Southern Christian traditions does not adhere to a single denomination or practice, but rather an amorphous conglomeration of several traditions. This conflation serves a dual purpose of critiquing Christian traditions as a singular entity while also avoiding the heavy condemnation of any single denomination in particular. Episode 1.02 “See” features several town-members being baptized and “saved,” a distinctly Baptist practice in a Southern context, but Jesse drinks excessively, an indulgence that Baptism forbids. Another priest expresses that “the only price of admission [to the Kingdom of Heaven] is to love the Lord Jesus Christ,” a collectively Protestant idea. Jesse assures Eugene that God will forgive even the most abysmal of sins in 1.01 “Pilot,” but Jesse’s rebuke to his congregation about their damnable sins in 1.07 “He Gone” is oddly puritanical. Jesse’s distinct white collar marks him as a Catholic priest, but his reiteration that faith alone warrants God’s grace is not a Catholic idea; this is a Protestant notion, while Catholicism upholds that observing the sacraments will procure salvation. Linus’ immediate confession of sins following his baptism is a Roman Catholic practice, a sacrament called Penance or Reconciliation; however, Jesse’s congregation collectively recites a prayer of confession in 1.07 “He Gone,” which is not a Catholic practice but a Protestant one. Furthermore, Jesse autonomously runs his congregation on his father’s property in a fashion in line with Baptists’ self-governing organizational system, while Catholic parishes are overseen by local bishops. These seemingly self-contradictory practices prevent a specific religious interpretation; rather, the show seems to universalize Christianity in order to more concretely remark on its practices and morals.

Jesse, despite his determination to save the town and his consistent insistence to Tulip that he wants to preach, never appears particularly certain of his faith, and is both unskilled and awkward in delivering sermons. As early as the pilot, Jesse searches for a sign and when he receives no response, he tells God, “Eugene was right—it’s quiet...fuck you too” (1.01). Jesse—and so it seems, the rest of the town—seemingly follow their faiths out of fear of eternal damnation and death, a driving incentive for organized religion since America’s Puritan origins and frequently a theme in religious Southern gothic. “No matter what you done, He has to be there for you,” Jesse tells Eugene in the first episode with thinly veiled uncertainty. “That’s the whole point.” There seems to be a universal, subterranean understanding in the townsfolk that God’s presence is unlikely, but a concurrent terror or denial bars them from voicing or acknowledging that reality. Odin’s blatant atheism, his categorical dismissal of the “magic man in the sky” (“Monster Swamp,” 1.04), is a personal affront to Jesse under Genesis’ influence, despite Jesse’s own doubts of faith, and he converts him to “serve God” through his supernatural power. Jesse’s determination to convert Odin and to save the town from an abstract damnation propels him to call down God Himself in front of his congregation.

In the tenth and final episode of the first season, titled “Call and Response,” Jesse summons God through the angels’ hand-radio, and He appears before the church congregation on a camcorder, where Annville locals question him, furthering the tone of dark ironic humor and conflation of modern technology that categorically characterizes *Preacher*. Despite the initial awe, it is quickly revealed that the “God” before them is a fake and the real God has been missing for some time, but the pivotal scene underscores a novel and bold theme in contemporary media. More than ever, televisual narratives like *Preacher* directly invoke God to hold Him accountable for His abandonment of humankind; presumably, in response to the global

and violent events of the twenty-first century. These anthropomorphic representations of God, and His disheartening and lackluster exchanges with humanity, seem to have ushered in a new post-nihilist, metatextual, and near-absurdist theme of including “God” as a character in the narrative to hold him culpable for his complicity. While God’s absence in the Southern gothic mode is not novel, the increasing epiphany that God is somehow a “sham” reflects deep modern anxiety in the face of massive, transcontinental acts of violence and destruction, or the capability of that destruction therein. Upon the confirmation that God is “missing,” the members of Annville resignedly consort to acts of apathetic murder and suicide, which ultimately results in the physical destruction of the town. As Fiedler quips: “‘The death of God’ has not yet ceased to trouble our peace” (xxxix).

Preacher’s modern vision is made more striking by the intrinsic contrast to what Fiedler calls the Gothic’s native “pastness,” a fixation with crumbling antiquarian structures of tradition and outdated modalities (118). The eroding castle, in *Preacher’s* case, appears to be the bastion of the Church, more specifically its modes of thought and behavior, in the face of the dawning twenty-first century. The sanctity of Christian values, as evidenced in the show’s finale, cannot withstand the evidence of depravity and violence that characterizes not only the contemporary world, but specifically the Southern ethos. There seems to me a trace of comedic sadism in revealing to a deeply conservative Texan congregation that God, and is not only entirely absent, but replaced by a masquerade of falsity and absurdity, thus the justifying rationale for their morals and behaviors. Adding insult to injury, *Preacher* blows up its hometown. Annville, ironically enough, is situated atop a methane plant, otherwise presented as a boiling repository of cow manure, which is arguably metaphorical for its foundation on false land (presumably repossessed from Native Americans). But perhaps more comically in line with the show’s sharp,

deadpan sense of humor, the town and its morally gray residents are destroyed by their own bullshit.

Initial reviewers in the wake of the finale's airing expressed a range of emotions between disbelief, denial, dismay, and anger. "The sudden, pointless death of everyone in Annville is an almost unfathomable tragedy, or it's a nasty joke, a deck-clearing whoopee cushion engineered to remind the audience that we shouldn't take *any* of this seriously," reviewer Scott Meslow wrote (Vulture). Some praised it as "maybe the bravest move of any show in recent history" (DenOfGeek), while others complained that the show needs to "pull its audacious head out of its audacious ass" (GQ). Most critics felt slightly duped, wondering why they bothered investing time or energy in a batch of generally unlikable town-members if it meant nothing when all was said and done. Despite critics' grouching that *Preacher's* pilot run was a "glacially paced amalgamation of *Supernatural* and *Breaking Bad*" (GQ), I reiterate that, regardless of the show's missteps in pacing and characterization, the instillation of the "why bother" sentiment is a crucial tenet to securing the show's post-nihilistic vision, situated on a scale that tonally keeps pace with the rest of *Preacher's* narrative and often absurdist chutzpah. More succinctly, while it's debatable how novel the concept actually is, *Preacher's* point of it all, its hat in the ring, is that there *is* no point.

None of these points are to say that *Preacher* acts as a flawless exemplar of Southern gothic media; that being said, the show reflects emergent ideologies and themes that characterize, specifically, televised media in a postmodern Southern gothic realm. *Preacher* in particular embodies an increasing inclination in the Southern gothic field to englobe the South as region and as storytelling tradition while simultaneously operating within recognizable genre parameters. The introduction to the *Undead Souths* collection proposes that "old tropes of *the*

Southern Gothic are themselves now decayed, long-standing images and ideas mummified and cracking into dust” (Anderson et. al 6)—while *Preacher* inherits some of these corroding forms and rehabilitates them, its venture into the postmodern, the post-religious, post-nihilistic, and the post-southern position it on the forward-facing margin of Southern gothic media. *Preacher*, and media of its ilk, glances ahead into the bleak locus of the modern transnational world and attempt to make sense of it by reappropriating the most recognizable forms of regional storytelling.

Ultimately, *Preacher* establishes that the South cannot be “spirited away into political obsolescence and cultural oblivion,” as Anderson, Turner, and Hagood articulate in the introduction to *Undead Souths* (8); the Southern gothic’s native traditions and narratives remain fundamentally relevant for exploring cultural identity, and beyond its literary merit, draw a resuscitative amount of intrigue from the American laity. As the Southern tradition continually contorts its forms to speak for both transnational and domestic anxieties, it begs the question whether the regional, post-God South will remain a specter in American spaces, haunting the conscience of a rapidly globalizing postmodern society.

IV. THE SOUTH'S FORWARD MARCH

While Goddu writes that “American literature’s exceptionality came to be located in its ahistoricism,” Southern gothic works boast a unique ability to adapt continuously to contemporary cultural anxieties, and to further represent them through representations of monstrosity, horror, and various stages of decay within modern contexts (9). The South’s perpetual futurity as a regional mythology seemingly contradicts its own inherent, regressive pastness—and the façade of the United States’ exceptional ahistoricism as a whole. U.S. consumers of media, perhaps problematically, perpetuate a semi-voyeuristic relationship with their nation’s own history, perhaps unsettled or enthralled by its self-contradictory violence. Intrinsic to this forward-facing function of the Southern gothic, as I have argued, are novel interpretations of regional identities and spaces.

Emergent representations of placelessness in regional literature further complicate our understandings of American localized space. As witnessed through *The Road* and *The Devil’s Highway*, frontier-esque uncharted landscapes can provide a blank mirror for arbitrary borders and boundaries that the U.S. state has imposed over the centuries—the most poignant being, of course, the U.S.-Mexico border. In spite of their surveillance, vast flows of peoples and capital transgress these borders, migrating through American territory with their own mobility enabled by late capitalism and globalization. This uprooting of spatial markers contests our conceptions of regional place, traditions, and history, and poses an interesting turn in what we hold to be deeply regional literatures. Furthermore, both McCarthy and Urrea’s focus on corporeality, their conjuring of the undead, and their attention to ecological detail in their works draw attention to the rooted materiality of the places to which they write, violent histories housed by the lands

themselves. Through these texts, we witness the land and its inhabitants speak back to modern-day America, sometimes rising in varying forms of decay.

Undead narratives have grown particularly popular across film and television, and they gravitate to Southern locales, such as *The Walking Dead* and *True Blood*. Edwards contends that zombification showcases “the dark side of mass consumer culture” as well as “the fragility of humanity in a social structure underpinned by the dehumanizing impacts of hyperglobalization” (72). As other scholars have extensively observed, undeadness provides hosts for the proliferation of pastness, material history exhumed and revived within the present. McCarthy and Urrea both feature undead bodies in their vast textual landscapes—the gothicized corpses of a post-capitalist society. Turner articulates that within *The Road*, “the presence of undeadness heightens awareness of how extensively and intensively inanimate things influence social spaces and express forms of agency within, and beyond, cultural systems.” In this sense, the undead provides a physical vessel for sociocultural forces that exist beyond the human individual.

Beyond the niche of Southern gothic, televisual narratives within rich regional parameters have also accrued mainstream popularity and acclaim, such as *Westworld*, *Godless*, and *American Horror Story*. Some of these narratives, like *Preacher*, blend regional influences in their storylines and visuals, offering contested preconceptions of regional space and pushing toward a more globalized vision. Beyond televisual media, podcasts like *S-Town* have proved immensely popular in scholarly circles and for listening audiences, while immersive gothic video games like *The Last of Us* and the *Fallout* series have accrued critical acclaim. I suggest that, beyond the simple entertainment value of horror and the gothic, these texts’ prevalence and popularity across all forms of digital media are due to their rich and rooted sense of place, one that invokes nostalgia and transportation in a viewer, undercut by deeply modern fears of the

contemporary world—the gothic’s perpetual “other.” As the genre continues to contort its forms, its tropes, and its narratives to mirror cultural fears, and to adapt to various mediums and platforms as they develop, we have to wonder if the Southern gothic will ever *stop* raising its dead—and if perhaps it will outlive us all.

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