

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Looking at the Border Wall in *Brown Neon*

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In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reminds us that there is something that we simply cannot understand when looking at representations of horrors, suffering, and death. There is something that the image cannot grasp, just as there is something that language or any other meaning-bearing system cannot grasp. But, of course, we do still do this – we look at things knowing that there is something ungraspable about what we are seeing, whether it be out of a sense of joy, horror, fear, comfort, anger, a combination of some or all of these feelings, or something else. We look, knowing that there is something that is not, or cannot, be communicated.

I was led to reflect on this while reading *Brown Neon* (2022), Raquel Gutiérrez's celebrated collection of essays, and felt prompted to write here in *Literary Geographies* because while reading I was also reminded of Lacey Schauwecker's short essay 'Isolation and Intimacy in the Sonoran Desert: A Migrant's Account,' published here in 2020. I want to put these two texts into conversation with each other since they share some common themes, but I also want to highlight the impossibility of a conversation that *Brown Neon*, in particular, gestures towards. Both Schauwecker's and Gutiérrez's texts take the same location as their main interest (the US/Mexico border), and both texts are imbued variously with senses of hope, anger, and other emotions. In her essay, Schauwecker comments on 'a literary example of

mapping this humanitarian crisis as ecological in nature' (Schauwecker 2020: 250). The essay reflects both on a trip she took in 2019 to Southern Arizona with some university students, as well as on Salvadoran writer Javier Zamora's poetry that offers a different kind of map than those offered to the participants of the trip she led. On this trip, Schauwecker and her students met with activists and border patrol agents, as well as people who may not have had institutional roles in either enforcing or contesting border policies but who did live and work in the area. Schauwecker writes of the harrowing experience of being shown 'graphic slides of how the desert climate can both disperse and desiccate corpses...' and noting that, when these slides were shown to the group, '[she] saw many of [her] students look away' (Schauwecker 2020: 251).

What Schauwecker's essay is ultimately interested in is the relationship between two different types of archives. On the one hand, there is the important work of border activists to document the various crises of the border region, crises that should lead us to conceptualize the border crisis as a contemporary condition rather than a moment.¹ The work of creating maps indicating where migrant bodies have been found, for example, is an important act of recognition and witnessing, as Schauwecker rightly notes (Schauwecker 2020: 252). At the same time, these types of archives which are constructed of percentages, statistics, plots points on a map – in other words, data, an extension of the pervasive calculability to which we are all subject, beyond life and into death – these types of archives leave Schauwecker 'in need of a narrative' (Schauwecker 2020: 251) or what she calls 'another type of map' (Schauwecker 2020: 252). It is for this reason that she turns to Zamora's poetry and its careful negotiation of the relationships between migrant experience and the desert itself, between human and non-human worlds. Zamora's narrative framing of these issues constitutes, for Schauwecker, an important complement to the border archive that emphasizes data, offering itself as another archive that differs in form but speaks to the same feelings of isolation and intimacy that she witnessed on the university trip with which she opens her essay.

Gutiérrez's *Brown Neon* reflects on some of the same questions that Schauwecker is interested in. While the entire essay collection could be productively put into dialogue with Schauwecker's essay on isolation and intimacy, here I am most specifically interested in the second section of Gutiérrez's book: 'Difficult Terrains,' because it is here where the question of looking is emphasized and the specter of the breakdown of a conversation is introduced. This section's first chapter explicitly evokes Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Dick's dystopian, science fiction novel prompts consideration of the status or meaning of life in a dead world overrun by technology, but Gutiérrez's 'Do Migrants Dream of Blue Barrels?' centers the desert itself as an agent of death – the peril that the desert represents for human life being, no doubt, exacerbated by technological advances in border 'security' and other global processes that lead to planetary warming. The blue barrels in the chapter title refer to the water stations placed in various locations around the Sonoran Desert by humanitarian aid organizations like Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas. Gutiérrez recounts their first glimpse of the blue barrels, comparing this moment to seeing Stonehenge for the first time because of what both structures represent in terms of the 'vibrant life beyond the little world I was trying to escape' (Gutiérrez 2022: 73). The obvious humanitarian value

of these blue barrels is that they represent the possibility of a temporary reprieve from the harsh realities of passage through the desert for migrants traveling north. As Gutiérrez reminds us in the opening page of this section, while it is hard to deny that the Sonoran Desert landscapes can be objects of aesthetic beauty when viewed through the lens of a social media feed, ‘there is another thing one cannot deny – any slight carelessness on your part and the desert will kill you’ (Gutiérrez 2022: 71). When a volunteer for Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas warns Gutiérrez and their travel companions that the specter of a possible vehicle breakdown meant that their group would be exposed to the same dangerous conditions as migrants, the reader can almost feel Gutiérrez’s incredulity leap off the page: ‘we would never be exposed to the same conditions as migrants making this trek’ (Gutiérrez 2022: 72).

The second chapter of this section, however, is where the question of what happens when we look at objects that cause pain comes into fullest view. ‘Behind the Barrier: Resisting the Border Wall Prototypes as Land Art’ reflects on a trip Gutiérrez took with a friend to view border wall prototypes in the wake of Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency in 2016 and subsequent Executive Order directing the construction of his infamous wall. Not unlike the previous section where Gutiérrez recognizes the material and symbolic distance between their experience of seeing blue barrels in the desert and the experience of actual migrants, here Gutiérrez again confesses to participating in a sort of cosplay. Along with their friend, Michelle, they have chosen to take this brief trip to observe the prototypes as a weekend activity before heading off to a wedding later that same afternoon, both being fully cognizant of the fact that the border wall prototypes present ‘the material convergence of art, monument, and xenophobia.’ Gutiérrez levels a self-criticism precisely for taking this trip: ‘I am a citizen playing dumb, I think’ (Gutiérrez 2022: 91).

What is ultimately at stake in Gutiérrez’s description of the brief field trip to view the border wall prototypes is the specter of the wall as an object to be looked at. In looking at the wall we are confronted with the breakdown of a possible conversation given, as Sontag reminds us, there is something we cannot grasp about it and the pain it causes. It is as if Gutiérrez is taking Sontag’s assertion that ‘No “we” should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain’ (2003: 7) and extending it: no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when looking at the object that causes other people’s pain. There are obviously serious political and humanitarian questions wrapped up in the very existence of the wall, but what Gutiérrez is suggesting is that we can hold those important questions and, at the same time, ask a series of others. What does it mean to look at the wall? To consume the structure as a created object that has an aesthetic value (even if aesthetic judgment leads us to qualify it as, precisely, ugly – an ugly structure with a racist function)? What are we to make of the fact that U.S. Customs and Border Protection evaluated the proposed designs by considering not only functional categories like how easy the wall would be to climb or otherwise breach, or the feasibility of constructing the proposed wall in the difficult desert landscape, but also the aesthetic beauty of the designs (note: the aesthetic beauty only from the northern side)?² This seemingly minor detail, coupled with the provocative assertion by Swiss artist Christoph Büchel that the border wall be considered landscape art and that former President Donald Trump, himself, should therefore be understood as a conceptual artist (94) asks us to hold

together the multiple questions that Gutiérrez asks in this section. Büchel's 'art-bro provocation' (110) appears to have been little more than an attempt to call attention to himself, an ugly collaboration with the aestheticization of state violence, something Gutiérrez and a number of other artists have noted.³ But the, at times, confessional nature of Gutiérrez's essays wrestles with the fact that they, themselves, sought an opportunity to look at the border wall, much like many of us have looked at it from further away, perhaps in news reports or on the social media feeds of activists and influencers. Indeed, we have continued to look at the wall and its expansion under President Joe Biden,⁴ and the continued expansion of the wall seems all but certain regardless of who wins the 2024 presidential election.⁵

Much like Schauwecker identifies two distinct archives that tell a story about the border – activist data points and narrative poetry – in *Brown Neon*, Gutiérrez asks us to hold together at least two things. We must engage in the important act of witnessing the actual violence enacted by the wall; to fail to do so would be tantamount to adding a violence of social forgetting on top of the material violence that the wall realizes for both human and non-human life. But we must also consider the narrative forces at play; this is not about provocatively calling the wall a piece of art, but rather it is about wrestling with the story that the wall's very existence tells us about ourselves. This call to do both things – to witness and to wrestle with the story – calls for a sort of conversation with the narrative of the wall while at the same highlighting the impossibility of doing so. We may be able to witness, but conversation breaks down before it even starts because there is an abyss, a differend, something we cannot grasp about what the wall does.

Gutiérrez closes this chapter of *Brown Neon* by recounting the scene at the wedding they attended later that day with their friend Michelle. At the reception following the ceremony, Gutiérrez reunites with 'so many great faces, all of whom hear about [their] visit to the border wall prototypes and [their] purpose for visiting them' (Gutiérrez 2022: 118). They tell the story, the story of looking at the wall with all the contradictions wrapped up in this act. In the end, this section of *Brown Neon* asks us to do something akin to what Jacques Derrida explores in the collection of condolence letters, memorial essays, and eulogies compiled under the title *The Work of Mourning*. On the occasion of the death of a friend, Derrida writes that 'one should not develop a taste for mourning, and yet mourn we must' (Derrida 2001: 110). *Brown Neon* similarly exhorts us – we must not develop a taste for looking at the wall, and yet look at it we must.

Notes

¹ See Janet Roitman's book *Anti-Crisis* where she convincingly argues that 'the term "crisis" no longer clearly signifies a singular moment of decisive judgment...' For Roitman, crisis is now, rather, 'a protracted and potentially persistent state of ailment and demise' (Roitman 2014: 16).

² <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/08/border-wall-prototypes-tests/>

³ <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/artists-curators-respond-christoph-buchels-border-wall-project-9775/>

⁴ <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/10/05/biden-border-wall-texas-starr-county/>

⁵ <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/maddowblog/gop-targets-harris-border-wall-stance-details-matter-rcna168652/>

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