

HAUNTED LANDSCAPES: A CASE FOR ETHICS IN THE SOUTHWEST

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A letter to my father from the Spanish Archives division of the General Land Office in Austin, Texas, dated May 5, 1977, reads: "Our records show that Manuel Barrera is the original grantee of the tract "La Tinaja de Lara" which comprised 25,684 acres located in Jim Wells County. On September 28, 1836, the grantee was put in possession of the tract, he having occupied it in 1833. It was patented to the original grantee on May 8, 1899."

I remember early conversations about my family's history and my great-great-great grandfather, Manuel Barrera. We had these around the dinner table during my high school years in the 1980s. Often these conversations focused on the fact that my father, as heir to the descendants of original owners of the Spanish and Mexican Land Grants, now called the Texas Land Grants, petitioned, in association with the *Asociación de Reclamantes*, that he was eligible to claim certain monies Mexico accepted responsibility of owing due to an exchange of debts with a treaty signed by the US and Mexico on November 18, 1941.

What did it mean that my great-great-great-grandfather was presumably the original grantee of the tract "La Tinaja de Lara," which comprised all that land in Jim Wells County? Why was my family now in Laredo, and why were we not rich landowners? Could anybody really *own* the land, and what of the people or structures that occupied the area now? For that matter...what did it mean that I had Spanish, Mexican and indigenous blood and lived on what was once Mexican soil but was now the United States?

My father, whose family lineage traces to Old Spain, remained haunted by this history of dispossession to his death. After years of pushing through the proper channels in Austin, he gave up the ghost that was *La Tinaja De Lara*. In the end, he acceded that any land his family had once had a legal claim to had been so permanently altered by Anglo dispossession, commercial farming and agribusiness, and rampant growth that "no amount of radical idealism [could] get it back" (Comer, 1999, p. 222). I don't think he ever believed he'd actually get the land back. But he remembered stories tied to the place, took great pains to trace our genealogical line, and contacted

others in similar predicaments. To me, he embodied a kind of isolation, as throughout his life he remained oriented by a future that was only possible by recalling the past. His memories of what *La Tinaja* meant to his father had left a hole in his heart, he said. He was haunted, he said. This was something I could not understand at the time. How could he be haunted by a loss he never directly experienced?

The late New Mexican poet, Sabine Ulibarrí encapsulates the significance of *la tierra* – the land – to Mexican Americans, *mestiza/os* and indigenous cultures in the American Southwest. In the award-winning PBS documentary, *Chicano! Quest for a Homeland*, he says: “The land was sacred because your parents and grandparents were buried there. Some of your children were buried there. And you would be buried there. The sweat, blood and tears of generations have filtered into the land; so it is holy, sacred...sacrosanct” (Ruiz, Galán, Cisneros, Moreno, and Ulibarri, 1996). Ulibarrí speaks to an ethical connection to place, what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling” that returns to past traditions and places of origin as a basis and orientation for continued belief. Ulibarrí’s sentiment conjures a collective past, recognizing the claims others – our ancestors – have upon our bodies in the present. Michel de Certeau (1986) argues similarly. He writes: “While place is dogmatic...the coming back of time restores an ethic” (p. 592). If we imagine that place and ethics are intimately connected, that, as Pierre Nora (1989) has so eloquently argued, in the modern world we have so many *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because we no longer have *milieu de mémoire*, “real environments of memory”

(p. 7), then how do we capture the paradox of abusive systems of power that yet speak and make themselves known via memory and narrative? How do we account for what Anne McClintock (2014) has termed “administered forgettings” (p. 821) that leave spectral traces and temporal disturbances, forms of “ghosting” that can effectively repudiate official US doctrine and policies?

I am a product of the South Texas *monte*. Growing up in Laredo in the 1970s and 80s, indoor games meant little to my friends and I. Our north side neighborhood dissolved into thickets of native *chaparral* and we lived to explore monolithic plateaus of sticky brush where we built endless forts from mesquite limbs snapped by families of wild *javelina*. We prowled the *senderos* and explored miles of untamed *monte* fed by natural creeks and reservoirs. But Laredo’s wild spaces, like those of South Texas, are vanishing. The city’s population has skyrocketed to over 260,000 inhabitants (not including those who live

and work in the area without official residency papers), and the infrastructure is notoriously disorganized. In short, the new wealth and substructure created by NAFTA have wrought havoc on the ecological limits of the landscape. In *Adios to the Brushlands* (1997), Arturo Longoria bemoans the systematic clearing of native *chaparral* in South Texas by large-scale ranching and dry farming practices that exploded in earnest in the 1970s and 80s. But this was only the beginning. Today, the devastation of the *chaparral* in the name of oil and gas exploration and unbridled corporate interests is choking the lifeblood of the *monte verde* that is our sacred heritage as *tejano/os*. With the impending possibility of an expanded border wall and a looming, intensifying military presence, it remains to be seen how this unique biosphere will fare.

A few years ago, I found myself driving from Lubbock to Laredo almost weekly. My father was suddenly and inexplicably dead, and my mother was alone in the home our family had occupied for over forty years. The drive was surreal. The I-35 corridor, old Highway 83, and even forgotten country roads on the outskirts of unexceptional towns like Asheron, La Pryor, and Carrizo Springs were thick with semi-trailer trucks, oil tankers, groundwater treatment trucks, wastewater treatment trucks, hazmat trucks, trucks full of sand, steel pipe, drill rigs, casings, missiles...and all those methane plumes that marked the escape of dangerous gases into the atmosphere. Rampant, unchecked industrialization and fracking had found a home in South Texas. My life, like the *chaparral* that formed an integral part of my identity, had become a place full of holes. I finally understood my father's sense of isolation; his loss, like mine, was not meant to be silenced.

In the pioneering work of cultural studies, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) reminds readers of the ancient, continuous story that indigenous cultures and *mestiza/os* must recover on the path towards a historical accounting that insists upon a moral and ethical reckoning with ancestral places and originary sites of collective belief. She assesses counter evidence within US-Mexico Borderlands narratives and ideologies that have left material and spectral traces on *mestiza/o* bodies to evoke a Borderlands consciousness that is nothing short of utopic. Using primal metaphors tied to indigenous and embodied knowledge, she unearths deep and unexplored hidden transcripts with the goal of decoding a secret language that speaks of what is "Other" to compel individuals and, indeed, entire cultures, beyond fragmentation towards forms of remembrance and coherence. She writes: "I have a topoi, a place I call *el cenote*. In my imagination, I descend into this dreampool, sinkhole, deep well. I access my

culture's collective history as well as my own personal reservoir of memories. Memories collide, conflict, converge, condense and negotiate relationships between past, present and future" (1995). Under the earth, in a primal, metaphoric space marked by *el cenote* – a natural pit of accessible groundwater found throughout the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico – she pieces together fragments of silenced collective memories. Evoking myths and stories that yet haunt an American genocidal past, she labors to excavate indigenous stories buried but not forgotten to re-write a *new* reality where Borderlands subjects can embrace history as a process linked to humanistic desires beyond the tangle of administered forgettings.

It was during my long drives that I became haunted by Anzaldúa's *cenote*. The *cenote*, deep and brimming in uncanny signs, seemed a good place to drown. Here, I thought, I could piece together the lost pieces of myself, fragments of both flesh and spirit rent asunder by the cage of a profit economy that left my father homeless in his heart and where my *monte* was for sale. Lost in my self-reflexive malaise, I wrote a coming of age novel and kept my protagonist underwater for a year. Here she would triumph, I told myself. Under the earth, I would seed her with the strength of the ancients – powers marked in the red and black ink of the lost metaphors and primal memories Anzaldúa so eloquently evoked. In many ways, it is an angry novel, but because it is geared to a young adult audience, it is full of hope and builds upon a narrative that overturns those crushing patterns of global capitalism that we often don't realize affect us directly. I hungered to insert a different story into the rhetoric of progress that so blindly gouged the landscape that was my birthright. I wanted to expose the weaknesses of our profit economy and make visible the fault lines in a way that placed the landscape – *la tierra* – at center stage. I needed to understand how I too, had become haunted.

Avery Gordon (2008) provides us with a language by which to identify hauntings, acknowledge the material and social effects they produce, and quite possibly establish "a reckoning" with their instrumentality (p. 18). For Gordon, haunted landscapes and haunted bodies expose the cracks and riggings of disturbances and disruptions that are not so easily silenced. Following Foucault, Gordon considers the politics of haunting as an avenue to understanding modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, and repression. Significantly, haunting, unlike trauma, seeks to produce an action, a future oriented "something-to-be-done" (2008, p. xvi). Gordon's methodology gives us both the vocabulary and the tools to reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly by tracing the insights of "structures of feeling" of those who *sense* broader social

totalities yet imbricated within violent systems of modernity (italics in original, p. 18). It is the individual's horror of destruction and absence—conscious or not—that foments those ethical relationships with what is dead but not buried, with what remains impalpable, transient, and ghostly.

I am haunted by counter-narratives of nation-making and identity in Mexican and Native American and *mestiza/o* narratives that disrupt linear monologues embedded in modern neoliberal practices on the Borderlands. In my latest book project, *The Haunted Borderlands*, I look at people like my father and fictional characters who are haunted by or embody aspects of what Native and Mexican American scholars call “return and recovery.” These individuals long for a place or a homeland that has been rendered invisible or obsolete by the “brutal amnesias” that states and governments contrive to erase their own atrocities (Gordon, 2008, p. 820). To exist in a haunted landscape, I argue, is to fear what *could* return. Understanding the political force of haunting, then, is one way to understand how individuals negotiate spaces of memory and avenues of associative remembering. This path allows us to uncover cultural scripts that occur in those liminal spaces between the historical, the psychic and the spiritual, and the emotive and affective.

Laguna Pueblo author, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) echoes Anzaldúa's sentiment regarding *el cenote* when she writes “the ancient Pueblo people depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview complete with proven strategies for survival” further acknowledging that “the ancient Pueblo people could not conceive of themselves without a specific landscape” (p. 268-269). A central tenet that links these two scholars' ways of knowing the world is epitomized in Paula Gunn Allen's (1986) characterization of a central tenet of Native American epistemology: “We are the land” (p. 119).

What insights come to those who embody the weight of cultural memory and history, and how do such forces operate within historical and public memory? How do we account for affective elements within the living present that speak to the embryonic or the not-yet articulate? Martha J. Cutter (2012), in an editor's introduction to a special issue of *MELUS* dedicated to haunting, argues that we can “ghost back” against the silenced and erased voices of the past in efforts to “move society and individuals beyond fragmentation, toward forms of remembrance and coherence” (p. 5-6). Following Gordon, Cutter insists on an understanding of haunting in terms of its political thrust, which she stresses is crucial for both healing and

social progress. She writes that understanding and “claiming the disremembered and unaccounted for events, bodies, and identities that haunt US history is vital to social progress” (p. 5). Ghosting back against our haunts moves individuals and society beyond fragmentation towards new ideologies of synthesis and renewal.

When we uncover and make visible “officially decreed forgettings” (McClintock, 2014, p. 824) in the public record, we open previously closed windows in ways that breathe justice into the symbolic wounds caused by administered forgettings. Further, we must desire to move beyond the cages of officially sanctioned cultural scripts in order that the traumas of past injustices be resolved; we must hunger for flipping scripts, getting “woke,” or whatever it takes to get the real story out. Only when we expiate these ghostly encounters will we curtail the ritualistic repetitions of history that continue to stifle healing and social progress of cultures historically othered. In the American Southwest, this is crucial to uncovering the narratives of Mexican American and indigenous voices that have been effectively relegated to the margins of the landscape itself or – as signified by my father’s isolationist sentiments – the recesses of memory.

I coined the term the “bordered frontier” to denote the dialogic nature entwined within the complex ideologies that comprise the intrinsic connections between border and frontier paradigms in the Southwest. Only a course that considers the possibilities inherent to both border discourse *and* a frontier paradigm is suitable to deconstruct conflicts based in the historical prioritizing of vast, open spaces and the imperatives of Manifest Destiny that stagnated, silenced, or erased the histories and stories of those necessarily othered by official US policy. This path requires a “topospatial” (Saldívar, 1997, 75) reading of the landscape that configures a palimpsest, a space worked upon, etched over in terms of history and modernist practices that occluded or erased earlier practices, belief systems and ways of being. For it is upon this palimpsest that American ideologies and indigenous and other ways of knowing contend for legitimacy.

The point, then is to re-situate the histories and ruling mythologies of cultures and people that have been effectively silenced by official doctrines and policies such as Manifest Destiny in the American Southwest. I believe there is an ethical component to affirming the Southwestern landscape as a cultural heritage site, a signifier of history for Mexican Americans, *tejanas/os* and *mestizas/os*. Private haunts and ghostly matters that entwine collective memories of dispossession signify ways of being-in-the world that remain

entombed within the landscape. When we break open embodied aspects hidden beneath the façade of geography to expose places and spaces where colonial and colonized cultures intersect and overlay, we reveal a palimpsest that remains haunted by history. A place-based ethics informed by the politics of haunting and *milieu de mémoire* doesn't simply manipulate dominant, often destructive narratives and patterns of being-in-the world. Rather, it imbues a sense of restoration and moral obligation within a contested landscape where various cultures and ethnicities continue to vie for rootedness.

Growing up on the Texas border meant that I grew up juggling conflicting ideologies and ways of being-in-the world. In Laredo, which straddles its Mexican "sister city" Nuevo Laredo to the south and an expansive frontier to the north, east, and west, this was not difficult to do. Almost everyone I came in contact with existed comfortably on both sides of more than one culture and language. Like U.S.-Mexico border writing, which José David Saldívar (1997) calls "bilingual and dialogic" (p. 14), the daily lives of most Laredoans encompass and flit between Mexico and the United States. But this is changing. Narco violence, border militarization, and detention centers bursting with economic, social, and climate change refugees now mark the terrain. Nonetheless, I continue to find my greatest solace, my most perfect moments of peace, when I ride my mountain bike over the rough terrain and through the *senderos* of my uncle's 5,000 acre-ranch off highway 359. On the way to the ranch, I pass a small *colonia* equipped with its own ballroom. I feel grounded on the ranch. What grounds me is the sameness of the dusty gravel under my feet, the constancy of the syrupy, bitter smell of mesquite. From the high ridges of this place, I see the mountains of Mexico; but I also see a new landfill and two new fracking sites. To the east and west the expanse of land is vast and what textbooks might term frontier-like, but this place has been called "the border" for at least 160 years.

I cut through an overgrown *sendero* and think about our modern condition, which Pierre Nora reminds us has us building and constructing so many "monuments" of memory—exhibitions, symbolic landmarks, memorials—because we no longer have "real" environments of memory. I love this place. Each thing that shoots up from the forever-parched earth sticks, needles, or prickles the skin. The thorns and spines that flourish here force me to maneuver with wide eyes. Rushing through this dry landscape is not just dangerous, it is impossible. I am rooted in and held by this dry, dusty place

where remain the traces of the ancients, spirits unsettled and teeming,
where remains the dust of my father's bones.

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