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The Borderlands Poetics of Bruce Springsteen

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Abstract

How does the music of Bruce Springsteen interrogate prevailing constructs of the U.S.-Mexico border region? In his folk masterpiece The Ghost of Tom Joad *(1995) and other works that feature Spanish-speaking protagonists, Springsteen implicitly reconceptualizes the Americas as an unbordered and fluid space. His performances enact Mexico and the United States as transamerican ideations rather than discrete nations. Although the booming academic field of border studies reframes static images of both Latin America and the United States in favor of malleable transnational paradigms, it still tends to privilege cultural production emanating from the borders themselves. This propensity does not leave much space for an engagement with canonical figures of U.S. culture such as Springsteen, a singer/songwriter who theorizes the borderlands in ways that at first may seem at odds with his career-long, conscious associations with red, white, and blue semiotics. This article examines the Hispanic presences in Springsteen's oeuvre from his debut 1973 albums onward and contrasts them with the relatively fixed representations of the borderlands in the lifework of Bob Dylan.*

At a prompting, a cadaver at the bottom of a river begins to tell a story. Whose body is this? Which river? What story? And whose is the voice in the wings that cues it all? Little is clear but liminality: a subject, or perhaps an object, exists at the borders of life and death, silence and speech, one shore and another. This existence, however, is not so much a product of borders as an active transgressor thereof, contesting as it does the claims of any of the sides at hand. The borders themselves are unbordered. Now, if a veil of ignorance lifts, a more particular context appears: the corpse is Mexican, the river is the one known as either the Rio Grande or the Río Bravo, and the story is of a man who died as he tried to reach his love on the northern side of a national line. As turtles gnaw at his eyelids, he calls for his love to meet him on the southern side. As for the stagehand who prompts the dead body to speak? He is Bruce Springsteen, the New Jersey icon once dubbed in a breakthrough 1974 article not only as the future of rock and roll but also as a "Latin street poet."[1] The song of the cadaver is "Matamoros Banks" of his 2005 *Devils & Dust* album, and through it Springsteen performs the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Investigations of those borderlands are growing rapidly within diverse fields in the academy. Such scholarship tries to account for a Latin America that does not stop at the river separating Mexico from the United States, given the constant

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[1] Jon Landau, "Growing Young with Rock and Roll," *The Real Paper* 22 May 1974 [no pagination].

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transnational movements of people, ideas, and things. Border studies inherently challenge the normative and limited notions of a clean distinction between Latin America, however it might be defined, and any other "America," be the latter the United States or North America. The problem, however, is that as with any boom, the field runs the risk of becoming a niche enterprise. The tendency of border studies is to focus either narrowly on cultural production originating in the region of the Mexican-U.S. national line or diffusely on any and all cultural contact zones wherever they might appear. As a result, border studies ultimately may carve out a vibrant scholarly space doomed, like its subject, to the margins of scholarly taxonomies. This result would be due to its relative lack of engagement with canonical literatures that, at first glance, may seem irrelevant to discussions of borders.

The claim that putative borders are centers is important, but the assertion that putative centers are borders is transformational. Kirsten Silva Gruesz proposes with great acuity that "the critical potential of borderlands theory lies not merely in its insistence on local expressions of difference or resistance, but in the implicit dialogue with the national that it calls forth: the very concept of the border is unintelligible without the nation."[2] How far can border studies extend? In particular, how can border studies take account of a poet such as Bruce Springsteen, known for consciously invoking red, white, and blue national semiotics? Although border studies allow for a deconstruction of both Latin America and the United States in favor of much more fluid transnational ideations, such studies still tend to privilege the centrality of cultural production emanating from the borders themselves. This propensity does not leave much space for a consideration of canonical figures such as Springsteen, a singer/songwriter with tremendous cultural capital who theorizes borders through song, particularly in his 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and in songs such as "Matamoros Banks."

In her preface to the first edition of the widely read *Borderlands/La frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes,

> The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.[3]

This intimate shrinking of space, this contingent and unsettled juxtaposition of increasingly intertwined cultures, offers a fairly postmodern concept of the border. Anzaldúa suggests, in effect, that borderlands of all sorts are performative in nature, which is why they are not restricted to the Mexican-U.S. line and why "the Borderlands" is a flexible concept. The borderlands contest their own liminality: they are

[2] Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 10.

[3] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 19.

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not finite, rigid, and geographical, but transcendable, malleable, and epistemological. The border, rather than being a particular line in the sand, arises amid various matrices of phenomena that can appear and disappear in diverse circumstances.

This protean concept of the border has not been realized, however, by much of the scholarship that has followed *Borderlands/La frontera* because of the political imperative driving the field forward. The underlying thrust of border studies is to counteract the traditionally dominant historical and literary narratives of the United States that cast the country as emanating from a Protestant Northeast and gradually working its way westward, subsuming all other cultural and political models along the way. However diverse the monographic details, border studies broadly challenge this foundational myth by asserting the existence and significance not only of cultural (historical, political, economic, etc.) production along the formerly Mexican lands taken by the United States after the latter's invasions of 1846–48 but also, at times, of entirely unorthodox epistemologies. Given the twinned effort at studying alternative loci of cultural production and alternative local concepts of knowledge itself, the inclusion in border studies of such Anglo artists as Springsteen (an artist, moreover, strongly associated with a different geographical region) may seem therefore to be a recolonizing gesture. The premise of border studies, after all, is that the mainstream is not the only stream through which to navigate.

Only when a borderlands artist reframes, from the ostensible periphery, a singer/songwriter from the ostensible center does a nationally known artist tend to appear in border studies scholarship. For example, José David Saldívar broke new ground in 1997 in his influential *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* by taking as subjects the bilingual Mexican American singers Tish Hinojosa and El Vez. Saldívar explores how the album *Graciasland* by El Vez (read "El Vez" as a Spanglish play on "Elvis") makes such moves as replacing the lyrics to *Graceland* by Paul Simon with Tex-Mex referents (the Rio Grande, for instance, substitutes for the Mississippi River in the opening line of Simon's title track) and recasting Elvis's "Suspicious Minds" as a song entitled "Immigration Time." Saldívar's goal is to "draw attention to the variety of ways in which some U.S.-Mexico border writers and activist-intellectuals have begun the work of exploring the terrors of border crossing and diaspora."[4] What happens when a canonical figure such as Springsteen also explores those "terrors," when he, in *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and elsewhere, takes up as a folk singer the voices of Mexicans who die in their footsteps? In so doing, it would seem, Springsteen theorizes and performs the borderlands in a way that Anzaldúa would recognize.

Of the twelve tracks on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, four deal exclusively with borderlands subjects. "Sinaloa Cowboys" and "Balboa Park" are ballads narrated in the third person about undocumented Mexicans who die in California in the course of trying to make a life for themselves in the illegal drug trade. Springsteen's narrators are entirely sympathetic to their protagonists. A third borderlands song, "The Line," is relayed in the first person by Carl, an Anglo protagonist, who works for the California Border Patrol with a man named Bobby Ramírez, himself born in

[4] José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 197.

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Mexico. In the song Carl falls in love with an undocumented Mexican woman and ultimately helps her and her family escape over the very line he is in charge of delineating. A fourth track and the most interpretatively open, "Across the Border," is a first-person ballad of an anonymous individual who dreams of crossing the border. The nationality of the narrator and the direction of the crossing are unclear. Notably, in all four songs the Mexican characters possess sustained, if frustrated, agency. Moreover, all the narratives are finely attuned to existing sociopolitical contexts. The border in Springsteen, rather than being a line that sharply separates two distinct national realities, is consistently transgressed as the United States and Mexico materialize as an interwoven entity. As in Anzaldúa, the border does not stay at the border. As a result, in Springsteen it is always contested but never truly crossed.

The early Springsteen wrote often of borders, culturally speaking, and repeatedly found them far from the river between Mexico and the United States. The two albums of his 1973 debut year, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, set most of their ballads in the New Jersey–New York conurbation and contain various tracks that explicitly reference the Spanish-speaking world. The hard-luck characters who move in and out of these songs do so in environments in which Hispanic individuals and places are very much a part. When those people or landscapes are backgrounded, however, stereotypes about them tend to abound. For example, the song "Mary Queen of Arkansas" from *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* suggests, "The big top is for dreamers; we can take the circus all the way to the border" and ends, "But I know a place where we can go, Mary / Where I can get a good job and start out all over again clean / Oh I got contacts deep in Mexico where the servants have been seen." The next track, "Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?" concludes, "Señorita, Spanish rose, wipes her eyes and blows her nose / Uptown in Harlem she throws a rose to some lucky young matador."[5] Neither of these passages is contestatory of anything. The first plays into the worn notion that crossing the border into Mexico offers an otherworld opportunity for self-reinvention alongside the foreign poor. The second intertextually recasts much-covered verses about roses in Spanish Harlem for an awkward production of Spanish typecasts like "señorita" and "matador." Meanwhile, the most well-known song of *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, the jubilant "Rosalita," apostrophizes a woman of indeterminate Hispanic origins in its chorus: "Rosalita jump a little lighter, / Señorita come sit by my fire / I just want to be your love, ain't no lie, / Rosalita, you're my stone desire." Clearly Springsteen's characters are willing to escape to Mexico and to serenade Hispanic women—his famously working-class protagonists do not live isolated from transamerican movements—but there

[5] The spelling of Spanish words in all songs cited in this article follows the sounds as recorded by the singers rather than the reproduction of those words in written genres such as liner notes and official web sites. There is almost always a discrepancy between the sounds, which tend to follow customary Spanish stresses and the Spanish pronunciation of "ñ" (instead of "n"), and their written representations, which often lack the corresponding diacritical marks. In this article, if both Spanish pronunciation and orthography are anglicized, as in an upcoming reference to Juarez (Juárez in Spanish) in Bob Dylan's "Just like Tom Thumb's Blues," the citation will spell the Spanish word in accordance with English.

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is no particular attempt at questioning national or cultural categories in these tracks.

The same cannot be said, however, for the ballads on each of the two albums that explicitly feature Latino protagonists: "Lost in the Flood," a track on *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* that is spoken more than sung, tells in its final verse of a Spanish-speaking youth shot by a policeman; and "Incident on 57th Street," a nearly eight-minute-long ballad from *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, relates the saga of "Spanish Johnny" and "Puerto Rican Jane." These two protagonists dialogue with each other as "a cool Romeo" and "a late Juliet" amid the usual Springsteen urban underworld of pimps and guns and bedside departures. There is no Spanish spoken in any of the dialogue and no references to particular elements of Latin cultures. Indeed, these characters are seemingly interchangeable with the non-Hispanics who populate other Springsteen songs about the down and out. Nor is the languid score of "Incident on 57th Street" remotely Latin in any recognizable way. As Anna Celenza notes, the song contains no references to Hispanic musical cultures, no hints of mariachi, no *requinto* or *guitarrón*.[6] Instead, the track features the same guitar, piano, and percussion that are characteristic of all the E Street Band albums. Yet, significantly, the lyrics offer neither identifiably Anglo characters nor even a Springsteen proxy narrator voiced in the first person. Few Anglo musicians in the 1970s were yielding the sort of foregrounded spaces to Hispanic individuals that Springsteen does in "Incident on 57th Street" and in the final third of "Lost in the Flood."[7] Despite some of the stock imagery in the other songs from the two 1973 albums, Springsteen seems to have been engaged from the beginning in a far more flexible American imaginary than his later popular successes would suggest. It is probably because of the varied presences of Hispanic

[6] Personal communication with Celenza.

[7] "Lost in the Flood" tells three successive stories of different men lost in the violence of their own lives. The third story, set in the Bronx as the narrator gazes at "some storefront incarnation of Maria" (it is quite possible that this Maria is actually María), tells of a gunfight between policemen and a street gang. In the midst of the skirmish, sings Springsteen,

> And some kid comes blastin' round the corner
> but a cop puts him right away
> He lays on the street holding his leg screaming something in Spanish
> still breathing when I walked away
> And somebody said, "Hey man did you see that?
> His body hit the street with such a beautiful thud"
> I wonder what the dude was sayin'
> or was he just lost in the flood?

The story of the "kid" carries equal weight in the song with the stories of the previous, non-Hispanic men; as in "Rosalita," Springsteen's narrator lives in a world in which Spanish speakers are part of his daily landscape. Unlike "Rosalita," however, the Hispanic character here has his own agency and speaks in Spanish from his own subject position—he is not commanded to "jump a little higher" or do anything else in a refrain—and, moreover, the narrator has no access to that agency. Unlike the sadistic onlooker, Springsteen's narrator wonders at what the youth, shot by the forces of authority, might be saying. This recognition of an autonomous space for a Hispanic individual, however, does not cross any cultural borders. Instead, it reinforces them by noting an uncrossable border between those who do and do not speak Spanish. Yet the lyrics also escape the easy stereotypes of songs such as "Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?" and "Rosalita."

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figures in so many of his early songs that Jon Landau described him in May 1974 as a "Latin street poet" in *The Real Paper*, a Cambridge weekly, after seeing Springsteen perform in Harvard Square.[8]

Springsteen as the New Dylan?

The Landau article catapulted Springsteen to national fame. Two months later *Rolling Stone* featured an excerpt of the review in a major advertisement opposite its masthead with the headlining quote from Landau, "I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen."[9] The syntax proved more accurate than usual. A year and a half later, on the same October day in 1975, both *Time* and *Newsweek* carried cover stories on Springsteen with the respective headlines "Rock's New Sensation" and "Making of a Rock Star."[10] Quietly dissolved here in the casting of Springsteen as rock's great hope with his new *Born to Run* album was the possible alternative framing of Springsteen as an up-and-coming folk singer. *Time* noted that "Springsteen defies classification" and that John Hammond, the Columbia Records executive considered the discoverer of performers from Billie Holiday to Bob Dylan, "thought of him first as a folk musician."[11] Nonetheless, the thrust of the Landau ad through the twin October 1975 articles and accompanying media explosion unquestionably situated Springsteen and his work within rock and roll. All writers recognized that Springsteen's songs were committed to telling the trials of working-class individuals; yet the possibility that this characteristic marked a reinvigoration of a national folk music tradition in the line of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger rather than of rock and roll was gradually lost. The hints in the early albums of an inchoate folk musician capable one day of internationalizing his songs and thereby his country and continent, desirous one day of singing the fears and hopes of Mexican peasant populations, went generally unseen. The cadaver of "Matamoros Banks" would have seemed a strange fruit of Springsteen's labors to the *Time* and *Newsweek* authors.

Guthrie had sung of Tom Joad to be sure, but Springsteen? That Seeger on his *Greatest Hits* album of 1967 had put a bilingual acoustic version of "Guantanamera," the Cuban folk song built on verses of the liberation martyr José Martí, was fully in keeping with his Weavers past. That Springsteen would release an homage album and tour in 2006 called *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, situating himself in a folk genealogy of protest music, would not have been predicted given his early billing as the future of rock and roll. Certainly the young Springsteen was touted repeatedly as the next Dylan that everyone had been waiting to emerge, thanks to the lyrical complexity of the early albums matched by the rock and roll swagger of the music. Hammond said he sounded like Dylan; everyone agreed the scrawny kid

[8] Landau, "Growing Young."

[9] Jon Landau, "I Saw Rock and Roll Future and Its Name Is Bruce Springsteen," *Rolling Stone*, 18 July 1974, 3.

[10] Jay Cocks with James Willwerth, Jean Vallely, and Joan Downs, "The Backstreet Phantom of Rock," *Time*, 27 October 1975, 48–58; Maureen Orth with Janet Huck and Peter S. Greenberg, "Making of a Rock Star," *Newsweek*, 27 October 1975, 57–63.

[11] Cocks, "The Backstreet Phantom," 51.

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looked like Dylan; and as *Newsweek* noted, "The comparison was so tantalizingly close that Columbia promoted the first album with ads announcing they had the new Bob Dylan."[12] Yet even by 1975 there were many versions of Dylan from which to choose, with the early folkie who sang of the oppression of minorities just one of them. Springsteen, however, was clearly cast as the electric Dylan of post-1965.[13] Despite his dedication to working-class narratives, Springsteen and his songs were viewed as apolitical, authentic, and provincial slices of quintessentially national life.

Notably, the actual Dylan had been writing about the Mexican-U.S. border long before Springsteen appeared as a "Latin street poet" in Harvard Square and as a dead Mexican emigrant in "Matamoros Banks." Throughout his unparalleled career, Dylan has been consistent in his representations of what that border means and what happens when it is crossed. Although Dylan's aggregate lyrical and musical vocabulary is more diverse and sophisticated than Springsteen's and has commanded substantially more scholarly consideration, such is not the case in his treatment of the southern frontier of the United States.[14] For Dylan, Mexico is a topos marked with rain, violent death, sex (often with prostitutes), and tequila. When Dylan's characters cross the border, such as that which divides El Paso, Texas, from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, they always enter this same seedy otherworld. Thus Dylan's most well-known evocation of a border crossing, "Just like Tom Thumb's Blues" (1965), opens, "When you're lost in the rain in Juarez . . . Don't put on any airs / When you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue / They got some hungry women there / And they really make a mess outta you." This stanza contains several interesting metonymic moves. First, the border town is framed with disorientation and a correspondingly dismal clime. Second, the grim implications of "Rue Morgue," both in its literal sense and in its associations with Edgar Allan Poe's tale of murder, are resituated within Juarez. Third, and apparently almost syllogistically, the women of this Mexican border town lie in wait as borderlands succubi. Finally, the slightly out-of-tune piano and guitar that accompany the narrator evoke an off-centered, "American" (as opposed to characteristically Mexican) soundscape. Musically the narrator is characterized by instruments traditionally associated with U.S. folk and rock music. The dissonance in the tuning of these instruments evokes the psychological dissonance felt by the narrator as he occupies a foreign space across the border.

The unchanging strophic structure of the song suggests that the location of the ballad's narrative is effectively unchanging too. The second verse certainly does not introduce a new dramatic locus, and so the third would appear to take place still in the border town. That third verse features a woman who seems to be a sex worker: "Sweet Melinda, the peasants call her the goddess of gloom / She speaks good English

[12] Orth, "Making of a Rock Star," 59.

[13] Dylan's performance at the Newport Folk Festival of that year is regarded as the turning point of popular music of the 1960s. In it, according to the prevailing narrative, he outraged his folk music fans by turning away from acoustic protest songs to electric rock.

[14] Major bibliographies and library holdings show substantive academic work on both writers, but the quantity of publications on Dylan noticeably supersedes that on Springsteen. Other gatekeeper markers, such as nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature and honorary doctorates, generally have attached themselves to Dylan rather than Springsteen.

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and she invites you up into her room . . . And she takes your voice and leaves you howling at the moon." This Mexican woman really does "make a mess outta" the protagonist, indeed robs him of his humanity (via his voice) to the point where he is transformed into a beast. This metamorphosis hardly seems representative, however, of the power dynamics generally involved whenever an Anglo man crosses the national line and secures the services of a prostitute. In "Just like Tom Thumb's Blues," there is no search for understanding of life at the border and those who live it, no attempt to move beyond the concerns of a narrator wrapped up in his own failures at consolation. Something similar happens in "Wanted Man" (1969), a breezier song by Dylan whose narrator notes: "I got sidetracked in El Paso, stopped to get myself a map / Went the wrong way into Juarez with Juanita on my lap." In Dylan, once a man from the United States crosses the border, he loses what few bearings he has left. His only chance at finding himself seems to be through sex tourism, but failure there is no success at all.

This lack of realistic engagement by Dylan with Mexico and with the border needs to be contextualized both within his own overall corpus and within the diachronic changes in popular U.S. notions of Mexico and of border crossers. Regarding the general tendencies of his oeuvre, the fact that Dylan's border songs feature inward-looking protagonists is in keeping with the interior mindscapes in most of his songs, whatever their narrative frames, after the mid-1960s when he left behind his profile as a folkie dedicated to socially committed music. His eschewal of Mexico in songs ostensibly set in that country seems of a piece with his relative disengagement in all his work, after his early protest-singer period, with realistic portrayals of actual communities, whether foreign or domestic. For example, when Dylan released "Romance in Durango," coauthored with Jacques Levy, on *Desire* in 1976, it resembled more the other filmic, surreal songs on the album such as "Isis" than the opening track about a wrongly convicted boxer, "Hurricane," an isolated throwback to his old socially engaged self.

Although "Romance in Durango" is set entirely in Mexico, its narrative develops via cinematographic set pieces rather than nuanced cultural observations. The protagonist is Mexican, and all the action takes place on the southern side of the border. To depict this environment, Dylan employs a hybridized mariachi song form based on the *corrido*, and a mariachi ensemble featuring guitar, *requinto* (treble guitar), *guitarrón* (bass guitar), accordion, and trumpet. Like the *corrido*, Dylan's song follows a clear verse and refrain structure. The verses, which display a *ranchera lenta* style with its slow tempo, 4/4 meter, and the guitar and *guitarrón* alternating beats, lay out the basic narrative. The refrain, sung in a quicker duple meter more typical of the *corrido*, features metric syncopations typical of many mariachi dance rhythms. Like the traditional *corrido*, the song's first line sets the scene for the narrative: "Hot chili peppers in the blistering sun." This line, highlighted by the recognizable quick, repeated notes of the *requinto*, clearly reveals to listeners a Mexican sound/landscape. The plot of "Romance in Durango" is that of the typical *corrido:* a tale of violent events associated with a local hero or everyman. Love also plays a role in the tale: "Me and Magdalena on the run / I think this time we shall escape." Later verses evoke "the Aztec ruins and the ghosts of our people," "the bloody face of Ramón," a gunfight in a "cantina," and the drinking of

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"tequila where our grandfathers stayed / when they rode with [Pancho] Villa into Torreón."

Such phrases hardly constitute a faithful portrait of contemporary Mexico. Yet Dylan must be contextualized within the reality that mainstream U.S. consciousness of the border and its issues is quite different now from what it was in the 1960s and 1970s. When Springsteen took up the borderlands as a subject in the 1990s, their place in national conversations was beginning to shift in paradigmatic ways. By that point many U.S. citizens far away from the border were encountering Mexico and Mexicans in the experienced course of their own lives, whether through personal contact, television newscast exposure, or even, albeit obliquely and mutated, the foods they began to eat. Marlon Brando in the title role in *Viva Zapata!* (1952), his eyelids taped to approximate director Elia Kazan's image of a Mexican, and John Wayne as Davy Crockett in *The Alamo* (1960) were no longer the couriers of Mexican culture in the U.S. mass media as they were in Dylan's youth. Any evaluation of Dylan's borderlands songs needs to take such developments into account.

Other folk singers of Dylan's era did touch directly and movingly on border issues. Phil Ochs's "Bracero" of 1966 mourns the plight of Mexican migrants in California under a U.S. government guest worker program, and Joan Baez embodied a certain sympathetic and sympathizing Mexican American presence alongside Dylan himself. In addition, throughout the 1960s, the farm workers' movement of César Chávez forced specific Mexican and Mexican American issues into the national news. Collectively, however, border issues in general did not reach, in the 1960s and 1970s, the levels of mass consciousness of more recent decades. The recent emigrations over the border of millions of undocumented Mexicans has spurred public discourse far beyond that which appeared in the moment of "Romance in Durango." The number of Spanish speakers in the United States then was nowhere near what it is now; and the same can be said about the degree of dominance of Spanish as the most taught second language in U.S. high school and college classrooms. When Dylan began writing, Mexico, for most people in the United States, was probably conceived of primarily as a filmic landscape akin to that in "Romance in Durango." Certainly the details and consequences of the Mexican-American War of 1846–48 that lie at the root of so many borderlands issues never have held a narrative grip on the U.S. public comparable to those of the Civil War or the Revolutionary War, even though the seizure of more than half of Mexico (then including California, Texas, and all of the present-day U.S. Southwest) proved utterly crucial to a developing U.S. sense of national identity.

Springsteen would be among the first major Anglo artists to see the border as something other than an immutable geopolitical line and consequently to transmute into lyrics the realities of Mexican migrant workers. "Romance in Durango," however, is the one song by Dylan in which he anticipates some of Springsteen's moves in *The Ghost of Tom Joad* by casting himself in the role of a Mexican. To this end, Dylan even includes a bilingual refrain:

> No llores, mi querida
> Dios nos vigila
> Soon the horse will take us to Durango.
> Agárrame, mi vida

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soon the desert will be gone
soon you will be dancing the fandango.

The Spanish of the refrain is untranslated (the liner notes do not include lyrics to any of the songs on the album), a linguistic move that, along with the Mexican subject position of the narrator, amounts to an unusually hybridized gesture by Dylan.[15] Such challenges to a monolingual Anglo listener, nonetheless, are effectively neutralized by the succession of Mexican stereotypes that form "Romance in Durango" in the first place. The song relies heavily on familiar tropes of what happens south of the U.S. border: violence, tequila, a protagonist on the lam, and a compliant Mexican lover. The untranslated Spanish of the chorus adds color but does not seem to undercut the definitive powers of borders per se. Mexico appears as a theme, as a backdrop, but neither the country nor the line that divides it from the United States is interrogated in any particular way. Indeed, for Dylan the border between Mexico and the United States always marks space finitely, which is why setting any song south of it immediately produces an instantly recognizable otherworld. In some sense, realistic engagement with Mexican society is therefore as absent in "Romance in Durango" as in "Just like Tom Thumb's Blues," for the focus again is entirely on a protagonist on the run from himself.[16]

Springsteen Turns to the Border

Years later Springsteen approached the borderlands differently. His path traveled a direction inverse to that of Dylan in that he shed his rock image for that of a folk singer. In 1997, more than two decades after "Romance in Durango" appeared, Springsteen won a Grammy Award for *The Ghost of Tom Joad* as the Best Contemporary Folk Album. He performed the title track at the ceremony. Yet when Springsteen went acoustic, his fans for the most part abandoned him. As Kate McCarthy noted at the time,

> [there was an] increasing ideological gap between Springsteen and his listeners. Springsteen's audiences, almost exclusively white, have always been an interesting mix of working-class locals and liberal intellectuals from the suburbs. The small size of the latter class, however,

[15] The opening couplet translates as "Don't cry, my dear / God is watching over us"; the fourth line means "Hold on to me, my darling," although an ungenerous interpretation could argue that "mi vida" is better translated in its literal, inward sense of "my life."

[16] Other representations by Dylan of Mexico include "Goin' to Acapulco" (1967), released with The Band on *The Basement Tapes* in 1975. Notably it does not offer any portrayal about either Acapulco or Mexico at large. The chorus is simply "Goin' to Acapulco / goin' on the run / goin' down to see some girl / goin' to have some fun / yeah goin' to have some fun." The absence of Acapulco is repeated in *I'm Not There*, a 2007 film about Dylan in which the song is given a full and mournful rendition in a scene featuring Richard Gere as Dylan and no element reminiscent of anything Mexican. "Brownsville Girl," a 1986 song on *Knocked Out Loaded* co-authored by Dylan and Sam Shepard (Brownsville is the city in Texas opposite Matamoros in Tamaulipas), also privileges a filmic backdrop over any realistic engagement with Mexican culture. It begins with a retelling of a Gregory Peck movie and includes the lines, "Way down in Mexico you went out to find a doctor and you never came back. / I would have gone on after you but I didn't feel like letting my head get blown off." For additional considerations of the nexus of Dylan and Latin America and Spain, see Christopher Rollason, "'*Sólo soy un guitarrista*': Bob Dylan in the Spanish-Speaking World—Influences, Parallels, Reception, and Translation," *Oral Tradition* 22/1 (2007): 112–33.

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> has always made the former the core Springsteen constituency. As his music and especially his performances have become more explicitly politicized, the distance between Springsteen and his fans has grown. The illegal Mexican immigrants he sings about on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* are unlikely to show up at a concert or buy a CD, and Springsteen's championing of their rights is falling on increasingly hostile ears among blue-collar concertgoers.[17]

As for the "liberal intellectuals" whom McCarthy identified as the second and minor constituency for Springsteen, their collective scholarly output on the album tended to privilege two songs that do not speak directly to border issues, the eponymous opening track and "Youngstown." The title song, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," attracted considerable academic interest because of its explicit intertextuality with both John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the 1940 John Ford/Henry Fonda film of the same name: that is, the song readily lends itself to existing academic models of inquiry involving comparative textual study. Often not fully drawn out, however, were the parallels that Springsteen implies in "The Ghost of Tom Joad" between a Dust Bowl Okie displaced to the migrant agricultural fields of an unjust California and the fate of contemporary border-crossing Mexicans. "Youngstown," for its part, is the most aggressively rhythmic song on the album and tells of generations of Ohio miners whose blue-collar extraction of ore "won this country's wars." The workers are then served up as cannon fodder in "Korea and Vietnam," and their survivors end up forgotten in the "fiery furnaces of hell" of U.S. labor. The familiarity of such protagonists within the lifework of Springsteen, along with the driving beat of the song's accompaniment, easily made "Youngstown" the most accessible track on the album to Springsteen fans or scholars.[18]

The border songs of *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, however, are the heart of the collection. The first commonality they share is the apparent dominance of lyrics over melody and rhythm. The songs offer stories whose plots develop verbally more

[17] Kate McCarthy, "Deliver Me from Nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the Myth of the American Promised Land," in *God Is in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, ed. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2001), 38.

[18] The tensions and possibilities implicit in the two images of Springsteen as a working-class rocker and as a folk singer emerged in October 2008 in a new context as he volunteered free performances on behalf of Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Obama, as a black liberal intellectual of immigrant roots, had encountered difficulty drawing support from the same blue-collar white male demographic that formed the core of Springsteen's traditional fan base. Springsteen, whose 9/11 tribute "The Rising" had become one of the Obama campaign's theme songs, was a natural choice to attempt to mediate this distance. His performances took place at political rallies in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, all swing states with decayed industrial sectors. Springsteen, however, showed up on stage alone with an acoustic guitar and a harmonica and gave folk renditions of his songs. The set list in both Pennsylvania and Michigan included "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and, almost inevitably, "This Land Is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie. The Ohio performance included "Youngstown." The participation of Springsteen in the campaign climaxed when he joined an ebullient 89-year old Pete Seeger and Seeger's grandson to sing "This Land Is Your Land" at the end of the "We Are One" inauguration concert for Obama on January 18, 2009, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Springsteen again thereby inserted himself in a folk genealogy stretching from Guthrie and Seeger, who had begun singing together in the era of World War II, to his own socially committed musicianship. Standing in the same Lincoln Memorial space where Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have a Dream Speech" in 1963 at the March on Washington—and where, at that same event, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez sang "When the Ship Comes In"—Springsteen turned to Seeger and said, "Lead us, Pete." Smiling, Springsteen waited for Seeger to launch the song on a banjo and then joined him on a folk guitar.

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than musically. For the most part, the dramatic narratives proceed linearly from beginning to end, whereas the melodic sequences, once established, mostly repeat in an AABA form.[19] In folkie fashion, Springsteen is the only musician and singer on three of the songs ("Across the Border" is the exception), supporting his vocals only with an understated acoustic guitar and an even more restrained keyboard. The vocals themselves are generally hushed and of limited range, all of them falling within the same octave, with Springsteen often verging on a whisper. The minimalist, languorous contours of this soundscape are thereby entirely different than the epic rock albums for which Springsteen is mostly known. As a result, although musicology does not generally seek to privilege lyrical analysis, the case can be made that the verbal elements of Springsteen's borderlands songs merit disproportionately more critical attention than is customary, even with respect to the rest of his discography.

"Across the Border" is perhaps the most Anzaldúan of the tracks on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* because of the openness of its interpretive possibilities. Although Springsteen's voice remains quiet, wistful, and dreamy, the track stands out from the other borderlands songs for its layered contributions from seven other musicians (including several regular members of the E Street Band) on harmonica, violin, pedal steel guitar, drums, accordion, and bass; for the backup vocals performed by three singers; and for its two extended instrumental verses that break up a verbal narrative that is not linear in the first place. "Across the Border" opens with a three-line declaration of an imminent crossing: "Tonight my bag is packed / Tomorrow I'll walk these tracks / That will lead me across the border." The direction of the crossing is not specified, nor is the border identified. All the listener knows is that the other side offers a dreamlike escape to the singer. The mix of instruments that makes up the accompaniment gives no clear sense of the narrator's national identity. Not until the second half of the first verse (the first appearance of the B section) do specific details appear that aid in contextualizing the narrative of the song: "We'll leave behind my dear / The pain and sadness we found here / And we'll drink from the Bravo's muddy waters." The Bravo, as the Mexican name for the Rio Grande, identifies the border at hand as that which separates the United States from Mexico. Nevertheless, there is no clue as to which side of the Río Bravo/Rio Grande is preferred. By invoking the Mexican toponym, Springsteen's narrator opts deliberately for a particular cultural and national affiliation, but unlike a later song, "Matamoros Banks," there is no clear privileging of the southern side of the border river over the northern.

The use of "Bravo" does not necessarily suggest that the first-person voice of "Across the Border" is Mexican. Equally possible is a reading in which a figure like Springsteen's many Anglo characters, including the protagonist of "The Line" on the same album, has fallen in love with an undocumented Mexican woman in the north and acculturated himself southward in small ways, such as by referring to the border river as the Bravo and briefly using Spanish in the lyrics of the second statement of the melody's B section: "Tonight we'll sing the songs / I'll dream of

[19] I would like to thank Mark Katz for his nuanced suggestions that helped shape this analysis.

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you my corazón / And tomorrow my heart will be strong."[20] In other words, the "here" of the "pain and sadness we found here" is not definitively specified. Perhaps a Mexican couple is about to abandon a life of poverty and take their chances in the undocumented north. Perhaps an Anglo man and an undocumented Mexican woman are about to abandon a life in the shadows and take their chances in the beloved south. Either way, little is resolved, for borders both persist and dissolve simultaneously, whatever the interpretation. As the song reaches its climax, "we'll drink from the Bravo's muddy waters" is paralleled by the narrator's hope that "someday we'll drink from God's blessed waters," as if the border and the divine are one and the same. Yet on the other side of the border is a space of "sweet blossoms" where "Pastures of gold and green / Roll down into cool clear waters." This image is a dream more than a reality, a promised land neither Mexican nor U.S. where the lovers will "eat the fruit from the vine / I know love and fortune will be mine / Somewhere across the border."

The interpretative potential of the song contests the very liminality of borders. Even though a river divides Mexico from the United States, the song seems to suggest that that division is malleable and moveable and capable of being transcended in many different senses. The musical composition of the song emphasizes this lyrical theorization of the border by setting in unresolved dialogue a contrasting B section, the lyrics of which evoke Spanish ("my corazón," the "Bravo's muddy waters," and the syntactically parallel "God's blessed waters"), with A section lyrics that do not. As Celenza observes, of the twelve stanzas of text, four are dedicated to the B section of the music, which contrasts with the rest of the song by being set in a minor key.[21] The lyrics associated with the turn to minor are important. They compel special attention from the listener because they are always set apart from the initial musical frame: the "Bravo's muddy waters" is marked by the first melodic shift to the B section, and the "corazón" and "God's blessed waters" (set to the same B section melody) appear right after the two instrumental interludes. During these nonverbal passages, a harmonica and a violin in effect silence the words of the dominant melody with which the song opens. The listener is thereby cued to concentrate particularly on the lyrics in the B section, those that suggest Mexican associations. As a result, the A- and B-section melodies rely on each other in a sinuous interrelationship rather than with the latter always subsumed to the former. This fluidity may be a musical analogue for Springsteen's vision of the interplay between majority and minority populations in the United States. After his voice slowly convokes the last verse of the song, his wistful harmonica takes over for an extended instrumental coda. Metaphorically the song's suppleness suggests that the divisions signaled by borders actually can and should be transcended, that fixed binary relationships are unrepresentative of the cultural and interpersonal realities of all those whom borders are meant to define.

[20] "Corazón" literally translates as "heart" but here functions as in the colloquial expression "mi corazón," approximately, "my love." This moment is also that in which an accordion is first heard. The instrument is suggestive of the *norteño* music that is popular on both sides of the border.

[21] Personal communication.

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A performance of lissome borders also takes place in "The Line," another whispered narrative of romance. "The Line," composed in a compound AABA form, provides a more specific story than "Across the Border." Carl, a discharged soldier, explains in the opening stanza "my wife had died a year ago / I was still tryin' to find my way back whole / went to work for the INS on the line / with the California Border Patrol." The musical form of "The Line" is A A B A^1 C A C A^1. The INS pairs Carl with Bobby Ramírez, "a ten-year veteran" of the Patrol whose "family was from Guanajuato / so the job it was different for him." The life stories of Carl and Bobby are described using the same music, the A section melody. The implications of this musical similarity are subtle, yet strong: the connection between military service and border patrol, the unspoken observation that "Bobby" is no longer "Roberto," and the reality that although he and Carl share the same job, it is entirely different in its import because of their respective life histories. Given his background as a soldier, Carl explains, "I was good at doin' what I was told / kept my uniform pressed and clean / at night I chased their shadows / through the arroyos and ravines." Told to defend a line in the sand, Carl does just that. His very work is the implementation of division. Then, one day, he sees a woman in "the holdin' pen" (i.e., a border crosser who has been caught and caged) and "her eyes reminded me of what I'd lost / she had a young child cryin' in her arms / and I asked, 'Señora, is there anything I can do?"' This meeting is played out in the song's fourth stanza (A^1), and in the last line the melody ends on the third scale degree. At this point the border begins to break down audibly, as the melody fails to return to the cadential close on the first scale degree laid out in the preceding A sections. The change in musical structure (from A to A^1) suggests that Carl has been changed by the encounter. Carl, charged with enforcing the border's rigidity, finds an undocumented Mexican woman who looks like his late wife. Her child, by metaphorical extension, could be his. Consequently Carl invokes the little Spanish he knows to try and understand her and ask if he can be of help. Unlike the scenes in Dylan's borderlands songs, an Anglo protagonist here wonders about a Spanish-speaking individual in distress.

The key scene in "The Line" unfolds during the first C section, when Carl notes: "There's a bar in Tijuana / where me and Bobby drink alongside / the same people we'd sent back the day before / we met there, she said her name was Louisa / she was from Sonora and had just come north." The transgression of borders here is wholesale. As Celenza suggests, the predictable exchange of A and B sections disappears as, musically, the listener's sense of the song's structure is disturbed.[22] The C section in the music signifies when Carl has crossed "the Line" separating the U.S. and Mexico. It also serves as a metaphorical bridge in the ballad's narrative: "Bobby" from Guanajuato works with Carl, the Anglo soldier, to catch undocumented Mexicans in southern California and send them back over the national line. They then cross the border to socialize with those folks in Tijuana. Carl dances with Louisa, an alter ego of his late wife, and promises to help her, her child, and her brother cross the line illegally.

[22] Personal communication.

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The song's opening melody returns in the sixth stanza (A), when Carl, the border guard become coyote, fulfills his pledge. Having crossed over the "bridge" (in both a musical and sociological sense), he sees that Louisa's brother has a bandaged chest, presumably having been shot by another border agent. In stanza seven (C), Carl, Louisa, and her brother cross "the Line" together and, as they near the California highway that leads to some sort of freedom, none other than Bobby Ramírez, on duty, pulls up in a jeep and flashes his headlights. Carl, now an illegal border crosser himself, has been caught in California by a man from Guanajuato. As Bobby and Carl face each other with their guns—the scene is reminiscent of a duel in a Western—"we stood there starin' at each other / as off through the arroyo she ran." The undocumented trio escapes. No shots are fired in either direction. Bobby Ramírez stays silent, and six months later Carl "left the line." By this phrase, Carl means that he quit the Border Patrol, but in all senses he had left the line long before that: the line long had ceased to be divisive, ceased even to be linear. The melody of the final stanza (A^1) ends on the third scale degree; Carl's encounter with Louisa has left him a changed man.

The musical structure of the song reinforces this lack of linearity, for as in "Across the Border," the A and B sections interlace in an alternation in which no permanent hierarchy is rigidly established. "The Line" ends as Carl notes, "I drifted to the Central Valley / and took what work I could find / at night I searched the local bars / and the migrant towns / Lookin' for my Louisa / with the black hair fallin' down." Carl is now a migrant himself, wandering through the fields of California. He calls Louisa his but is patently aware she is not. He has subsumed, to a considerable extent, his borderland identity to hers. Springsteen, like Anzaldúa, thus conceives of the borderlands as a place where "the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."[23] Including "The Line" in border studies therefore does not vacate a decolonizing effort but participates in it.

[23] This reading of "intimacy" does not take into account Anzaldúa's gender and sexual politics, a central component of *Borderlands/La frontera*. She declares in that text, for example, that "being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent). It's an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts" (41, italics hers). A future study that might explore Springsteen through Anzaldúa's positioning on such issues could focus on the homosocial nature of his career-long privileging of concepts of fraternity as a core element of human solidarity. A concordance of his oeuvre probably would reveal "brother" to be a word invoked far out of proportion to its normal usage rate. His E Street Band also is typically represented as a brotherhood even as it includes two women: singer Patti Scialfa, who is also Springsteen's wife, and violinist Soozie Tyrell. Whether such brotherhoods can be queered in any way through Anzaldúa is an open question. Springsteen has addressed relevant issues explicitly in his "Streets of Philadelphia," the title track of *Philadelphia*, a 1993 film that was a breakthrough popular and critical success for its then-daring exploration of AIDS and homosexuality. The song, which later appeared on his *Greatest Hits* album, concludes, "So receive me brother with your faithless kiss / Or will we leave each other alone like this / On the streets of Philadelphia." Another track that also appears on *Greatest Hits*, "This Hard Land," features a similar line and moreover is a borderlands song. "It's me and you Frank, we're lookin' for lost cattle," sings Springsteen boisterously, setting up at least the suggestion of a cowboy romance, "Way down south of the Rio Grande. / We're ridin' cross that river in the moonlight / Up onto the banks of this hard land." He concludes the song with the following invitation: "Hey, Frank, won't you pack your bags / And meet me tonight down at Liberty Hall / Just one kiss from you, my brother / And we'll ride until we fall / We'll sleep in the fields / We'll sleep by the rivers / And in the morning we'll make a plan / Well if you can't make it, stay hard / Stay hungry, stay alive if you can / And meet me in a

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Representing the National as Transnational

Kirsten Silva Gruesz has suggested that the role of Latin America "in the past and future shaping of U.S. identity narratives remains disturbingly understudied and undertheorized."[24] To redress the state of scholarship on transamerican issues, she focuses on nineteenth-century "ambassadorial icons of national cultures. . . . When writers or works are identified as particularly 'national'—a phenomenon that occurs frequently—they are made available as a kind of export product. . . . The cults of Longfellow, Cooper, and Stowe in nineteenth-century Latin America . . . are examples of such exportation."[25] If any U.S. poet of the late twentieth century has a claim to be an icon of national culture, it is Bruce Springsteen, notwithstanding the existence of an official poet laureate position connected to the Library of Congress since 1937 and the occasional conscious attempt at informally nationalizing a bard, such as when Bill Clinton asked Maya Angelou to read a poem at his first inauguration in imitation of John F. Kennedy and Robert Frost in 1961. In the 1970s Springsteen was declared the future of rock and roll, a genre closely associated with national mass culture. In the 1980s he reached pop stardom by his constant invocations of patriotic semiotics: the cover of his wildly popular *Born in the U.S.A.* album of 1984 featured him facing the U.S. flag while dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans, out of which stuck a red baseball cap.[26] The songs received massive radio play, and the videos, also themed with Americana from sandlot nostalgia to Arlington Cemetery, established Springsteen as probably the most familiar figure of the newborn MTV generation. In the early 2000s Springsteen vaulted back into the role of national poetic icon with his album *The Rising*, an extended meditation on 9/11 and probably the most widely circulated text in any genre on that subject. In January 2009 he opened the "We Are One" concert for the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama with an acoustic version of the title track of *The Rising*; two weeks later he played canonical songs from *Born to Run* and *Born in the U.S.A.* with the E Street Band as the centerpiece of the Superbowl halftime show. No other U.S. poet of the last forty years comes close to this combination of conscious authorial manipulation of patriotic signs and vast, if intermittent, popularity among both the public at large and scholars.

Springsteen is not, however, an ambassador in the sense of Gruesz. His songs, written in English and in U.S. musical idioms, are not principally for export. He represents, instead, the nation to itself. Nonetheless, in a very real sense he is an ambassador of culture, particularly in his borderlands songs that mediate Latin America to the white working-class individuals who form his core audience.

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dream of this hard land." A gender-based critique of such lyrics would complicate any facile dismissal of a song such as "The Line" as enshrining normative heterosexual romance—and the possibility of cultural union that a Carl-Louisa relationship suggests—within Springsteen's corpus.

[24] Gruesz, *Ambassadors*, 13.

[25] Ibid., 15.

[26] The title track, indeed, was subject to one of Ronald Reagan's more infamous misreadings when his campaign asked to use it as a reelection theme. The lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A." offer an acute critique of the Vietnam War, the treatment of Vietnam veterans, and the utter failure of the American dream. Yet its eponymous chorus led Reagan and nearly all observers to conclude that it was a paean to the greatness of the patria.

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Gruesz concludes that the challenge for current transamerican scholarship "is not to integrate Latinos to an existing national tradition, but to reshape that tradition in a way that recognizes the continuous life of Latinos within and around it."[27] This effort is something in which Springsteen has engaged since his inaugural releases of 1973 and particularly profoundly in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. In the elegiac "Sinaloa Cowboys" on that album, he begins by singing softly, "Miguel came from a small town in northern Mexico. / He came north with his brother Louis to California three years ago. / They crossed at the river levee, when Louis was just sixteen / And found work together in the fields of the San Joaquin." Already this strophic song "recognizes the continuous life of Latinos within and around" the United States. As in "Incident on 57th Street," no Anglo character appears in this ballad; Mexicans in California are the sole protagonists. Unlike the earlier song, however, Springsteen now avoids romantic invocations of Romeo and Juliet and thin epithets such as "Spanish Johnny" and "Puerto Rican Jane." Instead, he carefully depicts with a spare realism how some "men in from Sinaloa" (thus, also Mexicans) were "looking for some hands" and how soon "Miguel and Louis stood cooking methamphetamine." One day the meth lab blew up and "Louis Rosales died." The characters have last names now, realistic to boot; they are not dubbed with dubious monikers by outsiders, unlike the protagonists of "Incident on 57th Street." Meanwhile, the fact that "Louis" is no longer "Luis" may suggest an Americanization akin to that of Roberto "Bobby" Ramírez in "The Line." In the final verse of "Sinaloa Cowboys," Miguel "kissed his brother's lips and placed him in his grave." At this moment the song ends abruptly, both verbally and melodically. Brutal and entirely realistic, "Sinaloa Cowboys" represents to a U.S. audience an all-Mexican ensemble of individuals in California. Springsteen exports the United States to itself. He reshapes the national tradition by revealing it to be transnational. He knew it was so all along.

In discussing *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Gavin Cologne-Brooks considers the possibility that "perhaps there must always be something artificial—something even of postmodernist pastiche—about Springsteen seeking to re-create the fireside intimacy of folk tradition."[28] He dismisses this idea, however, by validating the album as a "genuine commitment" to "the plights of other beleaguered groups" (such as undocumented border crossers, for instance) that grows from Springsteen's earlier empathies for blue-collar Northeasterners.[29] Solidarity and sympathy alone, however, do not explain many of the tropes invoked by Springsteen. As Bryan Garman notes, "His representations subvert stereotypes, refuse to accept dominant myths, avoid deterministic analyses, situate people in historical and social contexts, and construct historical agents whose lives and choice are shaped by a multitude of complex factors."[30] Nowhere is this analysis more evidenced than in "Matamoros

[27] Gruesz, *Ambassadors*, 211.

[28] Gavin Cologne-Brooks, "The Ghost of Tom Joad: Steinbeck's Legacy in the Songs of Bruce Springsteen," in *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*, ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 43.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Bryan Garman, "The Ghost of History: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie, and the Hurt Song," *Popular Music and Society* 20/2 (Summer 1996): 108–109.

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Banks," the bittersweet ballad of hope and death from 2005 in which Springsteen offers the persona and story of a cadaver at the bottom of the river between Mexico and the United States.

The liner notes to "Matamoros Banks" include an explanatory preface to the song: "Each year many die crossing the deserts, mountains and rivers of our southern border in search of a better life. Here I follow the journey backwards, from the body at the river bottom, to the man walking across the desert towards the banks of the Rio Grande." The ambassadorial import here is multiple even though the poet at hand is a U.S. citizen who directs himself to a U.S. audience. Certainly the preface is in English; the point of view is from the north ("our southern border"); the river is Grande, not Bravo. Yet in "Matamoros Banks," the poet plans to "follow" rather than lead, cross from south to north, commence from death rather than from life. Moreover, the prevailing point of view will be that of the Mexican protagonist, not of an Anglo narrator who may sympathize with him but ultimately stand apart. Springsteen, of course, invisibly crafts and cues the entire performance; yet he strives extraordinarily hard to allow his Mexican subject the space to speak. Normative power dynamics are subverted here rather than reproduced—this maneuvering is not minstrelsy, not brownface, not some folk version of Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass—as customary hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and nationality are not concretized but contested.

This contestation, however, is explicit only in the liner notes. Without the written preface, the opening stanza challenges hierarchies instead by not particularizing a geopolitical context for the scene it describes: "For two days the river keeps you down / Then you rise to the light without a sound / Past the playgrounds and empty switching yards / The turtles eat the skin from your eyes, so they lay open to the stars." Whose body is this? Which river? And how did these events come to be? The refrain is equally imprecise but yields to a specificity of place: "Goodbye, my darling, for your love I give God thanks, / Meet me on the Matamoros / Meet me on the Matamoros / Meet me on the Matamoros banks." There are three unexpected switches that take place in this refrain: the transition from a second-person narration by an anonymous narrator to a first-person imploration, the parallel movement from a dead object to a live and speaking subject, and the invocation of a toponym that geopolitically situates the scene. Springsteen's narrator, who will be taken to represent Springsteen himself, will never again resume his point of view, never again apostrophize. Instead, he will subsume himself entirely to the voice of the cadaver now resurrected into agency. Correspondingly the presence of a refrain lends a quiet strength to the arising of this second agency, marking it with the gently insistent repetition of an imperative. Although the Mexican town that is named may not be familiar to most of Springsteen's listeners, the body floating in the river will be recognized as clearly privileging one side of the water over the other. A position is being taken with respect to borders both geographical and psychological, borders that move themselves with those who transit through, on, and across them.

The following verses in "Matamoros Banks" do as the liner notes foretell: Springsteen follows his protagonist backwards in time and into life. A Mexican man, narrating in the first person, walks toward the river whose northern side he aims

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to reach even as he longs for his love to meet him on the southern side. The final verse concludes, "The lights of Brownsville, across the river shine / A shout rings out and into the silty red river I dive."[31] Here a Mexican heading northward toward a U.S. border town suffers that fate due, presumably, not to extralegal hit men but to the duly constituted and trigger-happy U.S. Border Patrol. A "shout rings out" evokes homonymically a "shot rings out," and there is every reason to believe that the "dive" into the river is actually that of a falling body, given its death foretold in the opening stanza. The song ends with the cadaver's reiterated plea, "Meet me on the Matamoros / Meet me on the Matamoros / Meet me on the Matamoros banks." At this point, all dualities are effectively dissolved. The imploring voice is at once dead and alive, situated in Mexico through the protagonist and in the United States through Springsteen himself and, adrift, in a river of in-betweens.

In "Matamoros Banks," Springsteen does not pretend to be Mexican in some anachronistic and tawdry fashion. He makes no attempt at imitating Mexican tropes, either verbally or musically. His singing in English and his acoustic guitar instead evoke U.S. associations. Once again he works in the traditional folkie mode of a solo singer/songwriter. The same gentle interplay of acoustic guitar and keyboard appears here as in his other border tracks, this time complemented just a little by classically inspired, as opposed to mariachi, violins. Yet Springsteen's subject position manages to be almost as fluid as the river that is everywhere in his border songs, a river that does not mark binary divisions of any sort, a river that flows wherever those who attempt to cross it appear. Springsteen contests and transcends multiple American lines in this performance, which is to say that "Matamoros Banks," although perhaps not Springsteen himself, is originary of the borderlands.

Including the creative work of a non-Hispanic figure in border studies, particularly one as associated with mainstream patriotic imagery as Springsteen, may seem odd. Yet this border is one more that ought to be transcended, for such a stance implicitly contradicts the very anti-essentialism that motivates the best of border studies work. The greatest strengths of the field reside in its proffering new and flexible organizing principles rather than simply new or overlooked objects of study. For this reason, the inclusion of Springsteen in border studies is key. Unexpectedly he implicitly reconceptualizes the Americas in his borderlands songs. His performances do not thematize or typecast the border but theorize it. He enacts simultaneously Mexico and the United States as transamerican ideations and in so doing redefines both. He performs the borderlands not because he offers local enunciation alongside the line between two nations but because he contests the definitive divisiveness of that line in the first place. He unborders the border, places it at the center of various national and transnational imaginaries. As Simon Frith suggests, "the question is not how a piece of music, a text, 'reflects' popular values, but how—in performance—it produces them."[32] Springsteen and his music, born in the U.S.A. have produced a nation and national identity that flow far beyond their apparent borders.

[31] This Brownsville is the same as in Dylan's song "Brownsville Girl."

[32] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 270.

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In "American Land," a rip-roaring live track added to later releases in 2006 of *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, Springsteen sings,

> The McNicholas, the Posalskis, the Smiths, Zerillis too
> The Blacks, the Irish, the Italians, the Germans and the Jews
> The Puerto Ricans, the illegals, the Asians, Arabs miles from home
> Come across the water with a fire down below
> They died building the railroads, worked to bones and skin
> They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind
> They died to get here a hundred years ago, they're dyin' now
> The hands that built the country we're always trying to keep down.

The "illegals" in Springsteen define the United States as much as the legal immigrants from the other cultures that he lists or onomastically implies. They even define him, for "Zerilli" apparently is an Italian surname of his own maternal immigrant forebears. In addition, they define the ironic "we" of the last verse because, in Springsteen, the line between us and them is always and inevitably crossed. Indeed, that line is "scattered," perhaps even blowing, "in the wind." From whatever the direction, those who come to the United States across a body of water, whether an ocean or a river, all find themselves in the same boat. All have died building the country with their hands. For Springsteen, that is bond enough. New Jersey, as a result, turns out to be not so much a state as a statelessness of mind.

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