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“The Sea Cannot be Fenced”: “Natural” and “Unnatural” Borders in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*

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Abstract

This article contributes to scholarship in world-ecology by demonstrating how border sites are deeply entangled with the extra-human world. I explore these entanglements across two border zones, the U.S.-Mexico border and Mediterranean Sea, via readings of Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, respectively. These texts present different “solutions” to the displacements caused by (post-)colonial boundary-drawing: while Anzaldúa advocates bioregional “reinhabiting,” Ghosh offers a “translocal” ecological vision that is more suited to our globalized and climatologically turbulent world. This provides a way between a parochial “localist” approach and a homogenizing “planetary” approach.

Keywords: borders, world-ecology, U.S.-Mexico, Mediterranean, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amitav Ghosh

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At the far Western edge of the U.S.-Mexico border, separating the cities of San Diego and Tijuana, is where the story of America’s current “build the wall” immigration politics could be said to begin. The mid-1990s saw a large increase of undocumented Mexicans, many them farmers who could no longer make a living in the face of cheap American products flooding the market following the signing of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). While welcomed by an agricultural sector eager for cheap labor, these workers spurred a backlash of anti-immigrant sentiment and the building of one of the first sections of the border fence in San Diego. As a result, would-be migrants were pushed away from populous areas and into more remote and ecologically fragile parts of the border, which became “sacrifice zones” in the service of the Clinton administration’s “Operation

Gatekeeper” border strategy (Adamson). The San Diego section remains one of the most heavily fortified stretches of the southwestern border, where the fence juts several meters into the Pacific Ocean at the incongruously named Friendship Park (Figure 1). This is also one of the costliest sections to maintain because of the eroding effects of the sand and the sea, and has been built and rebuilt numerous times with the full cost to the taxpayer never made public (Sierra Club).

The San Diego border fence is an apt illustration of the entanglements between human bordering practices and the natural environment, and the way capitalist interests shape and reshape this interrelationship. While, on the one hand, undocumented migrants are targeted as drains on the U.S. taxpayer (even though numerous economic studies have demonstrated otherwise), leading to calls for increased fortifications, the border wall itself has become a sink for government funds that literally end up blowing in the wind.¹ And, though the imposition of the border fence has threatened ecosystems in the interior, the coastal environment has resisted its own division by constantly eating away at the steel slats. Such examples gesture at the importance of considering human bordering practices, and the mobility they induce and constrain, in conversation with ecocritical concerns and approaches. In literary and cultural studies, the concept of diaspora and related terms like transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have been central to theorizing the political, cultural and aesthetic stakes of mass movements of people around the globe. This work has led to important insights about the formation of collective identities across borders, the nature of belonging and the way such movements disturb essentialist notions of place. However, the environment has remained a primarily passive presence within diaspora scholarship; it is merely the surface across which objects and people move. Yet we have recently seen how EU policies converge with natural barriers like the Mediterranean Sea and the English Channel, forcing would-be refugees to undergo treacherous crossings or remain trapped in coastal shanty-towns like the Calais “Jungle.” These developments highlight the fact that the natural environment, in conjunction with political borders and legal regimes, should be viewed as an agent acting upon human mobility and immobility. There is

therefore a need for more attention to what Andrew Baldwin et al. have termed “Anthropocene mobilities,” which entails a recognition that the environment is “the very material substance through which mobility itself is mediated, experienced, and conceptualized” (290). This requires addressing the role of ecological forms and processes in not only driving migration, as in the case of climate displacement, which I address below, but also in shaping broader migratory patterns, experiences, and modes of identification.

The border is one of the most important concepts within the study of migration and diaspora. In Avtar Brah’s words, “embedded within the concept of diaspora is the notion of the border, and, indeed, it is not possible to address the concept of diaspora without considering its relationship to the idea of borders” (194). A border is both a geographic location on the map and a dynamic social actor that directs human flows across and around it. It has a material presence in the landscape, in the form of physical barriers and checkpoints, and a sociopolitical presence through its impact on and determination by economic, linguistic and ethnic differences within and across it; legal instruments; and international diplomatic relations. While the bordering practices of contemporary immigration regimes expand their surveillance mechanisms outside the bounds of the nation-state and inward through restrictions on the everyday lives of migrants (Yuval-Davis et al.), in the age of Brexit and Trump’s America, the border’s territorial presence has become even more significant even as it is increasingly kept out of view of the ordinary citizen. The border therefore serves as a useful starting point for exploring the fractures and convergences between human mobility and the natural world. Border theory, like that of Avtar Brah, has worked to elucidate how national, cultural, and linguistic belonging is figured between and across borders. However, there has been less attention paid to how the non-human environment might feature in these conversations, both as a participant in border regimes and as a resistant force that complicates and works against the imposition of human political boundaries. On one hand, climate change and its effects should further impress upon us the arbitrariness and ultimate penetrability of borders. On the other, the specter of mass migration from

poorer regions, primarily in the Global South, to the wealthier nations of the world – in part fueled by resource depletion and sea inundation – has led to the increased fortification of borders and the reassertion of nation-based territorial sovereignty (as seen with Brexit and Trump’s successful “America First” campaign). This tension – between a natural environment that takes no notice of human territorial boundaries and the potential hardening of these boundaries to ward off the fallout of environmental degradation, for which natural features are then put to service – is central to a reframing of our understanding of the border, and thus human migration, in the Anthropocene.

I situate this work within the larger scholarly project of examining nature-culture intersections and eco-social systems.² Scholarship on world-ecology, for example, is concerned with elucidating the environmental changes that have come about due to the creation of the capitalist world-economy and, in particular, the transformation of “socio-ecological relations” (Niblett; Moore). This includes, for example, the feedback mechanism in which humans act as agents that transform the extra-human world through capitalist forms of production and consumption, which in turn produce ecological effects, like drought and sea-level rise, that impact human social and economic systems. However, world-ecology as method asks us to go further than this, to consider all of history as a reciprocal process of “humans making environments and environments making humans” (Moore 36). As suggested by the examples of the San Diego fence and EU bordering practices above, border sites involve complex dialectics between human and non-human systems. Furthermore, given the centrality of border policing in the maintenance of the capitalist world-system, they form an integral part of the “co-production” of modern history by human and extra-human natures (Moore 15). We know, for example, the role that migration control plays in maintaining the global economic disparities that international corporations rely on for cheap labor. In the case of the U.S.-Mexico border, it has been suggested that a militarized border acts as a “disciplining” mechanism that intimidates would-be migrants and encourages them to remain in their home countries where wages are low and labor rights are limited (Dunn 159, qtd. in Adamson 235).

Borders are yet another way that nature is made to “work” for humans (to use Moore’s terminology), whether this involves deploying naturally-occurring barriers in the service of border policing or imposing bordering practices on the extra-human environment in ways that irreparably damage it. At the same time, as in the case of the San Diego border fence, extra-human nature also “works” against our bordering impulses, in turn making us “work” to maintain them, often in the literal sense of rebuilding fences and barriers over and over again.

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* offered a landmark creative/critical response to the border imposed between Mexico and the United States as a crucial part of the latter’s history of settler colonialism. While the text is most famed for its queer feminist deconstruction of the cultural, racial and linguistic apartheid established by the border fence, Anzaldúa’s assertion of the border’s “unnaturalness” is very often articulated through its impositions on the extra-human world. She draws on natural features as metaphors for the cultural and linguistic displacement felt by those straddling the “*herida abierta*” [open wound] dividing the United States from Mexico (25), but also as literal invocations of the land’s cooptation and resistance to the border and its role in perpetuating American imperialism. Though published long before the current migrant “crises” (at the U.S./Mexico border and at the borders of Europe), it is telling that this work – which was largely responsible for galvanizing Border Studies as an academic field – is also a deeply ecocritical text. We might even go so far as to say that Anzaldúa offers us a model for reading the entanglements between human bordering practices and the non-human world that has become even more relevant in our era of climate emergency and increased border fortification in the United States and elsewhere. The insights of this early work provide a framework for uncovering how other border sites might operate as similarly unique “bundles” of human and extra-human nature that co-produce history (Moore 18). Anzaldúa’s materialist history of the border region of South Texas demonstrates the myriad ways that human capitalist and extra-human ecological systems converge (or collide) to induce or constrain human mobility. In particular, the text alludes to the role of non-human agents in

resisting human boundary-drawing and advocates for a return to land-based bioregional identity formulations as a disruption to imperialist and nationalist logics.

A contrasting borderzone is the water border between Europe and its southern and eastern neighbors, i.e. the Mediterranean Sea, which became particularly significant in the refugee “crisis” that peaked in the summer of 2015. Whereas the U.S.-Mexico border creates a discontinuity in the landscape that is felt by both the region’s human and extra-human inhabitants, the Mediterranean functions as a naturally-occurring impediment that, when deployed in conjunction with legal regulations, transforms (certain kinds of) human movement into a perilous and, in many cases, fatal activity. Of course, whether boundaries are perceived as “natural” or “unnatural” is profoundly shaped by how they are narrated in collective memory, and the Mediterranean has held a longstanding symbolic role of policing the boundary between Europe and its “others,” reinforcing racialized notions of the continent as a self-contained unit of civilization. Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) offers a contemporary engagement with this border site that narrativizes the entanglements between ecology and human mobility that are alluded to in Anzaldúa’s more historical and theoretical text (albeit with creative elements as well). Like *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *Gun Island* deconstructs the imperialist logic of borders by providing an alternative narrative of this Sea as one node in a connected aqueous world spanning from the Atlantic to the Bay of Bengal. It also deploys extra-human agents as partners in this process of deconstruction. However, while Anzaldúa’s text embraces ecological reinhabitation as a remedy to the displacements produced by (post-)colonial boundary-drawing, *Gun Island* gestures at where asserting such essentialist connections between people and place – even in the name of a resistant anti-colonial politics – might lead us, raising a caution for environmentalist activism going forward. Instead, the novel offers us an alternative environmental ethic that we might call a mobile or “translocal” ecology that is better suited to the realities of our globalized and climatologically turbulent world.

Wound on the Land: The U.S.-Mexico Border

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* has been primarily celebrated for its multi-lingual, non-linear, and generically-fluid approach, which functions as a material form of resistance against the displacing effects of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, it is the work's careful grounding in the particularities of its geographical location, Anzaldúa's family home in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, that also makes it an ideal text for extrapolating the interconnections between the human and extra-human at points of crossing. Not only is it a work that emerges from the body as it moves through culturally, nationally, and racially coded space, but also from a specific landscape, its unique biotic makeup, and the transformations it has undergone through successive human interventions. Anzaldúa's critique of American imperialism is framed by the region's natural history, the imposition of Anglo farming techniques, and environmental injustices brought about by the increased privatization of its natural resources. Indeed, the work's environmental preoccupations are central to its articulation of the racial, cultural, and linguistic stakes of this border space. In the opening pages, Anzaldúa invokes a community of "los *atravesados*" (25), a word derived from the Spanish verb "*atravesar*," to cross (a border), but can also mean "troublemaker," stemming from its other sense, "to get in the way," suggesting resistance to those in power (Saldivar-Hull 68).

Borderlands/La Frontera is ultimately about crossing borders of all kinds; deconstructing binaries of race, gender, language, and sexuality; and the U.S.-Mexico border serves as a productive metaphor for the limiting frameworks that Anzaldúa wants to break through/open up. But she's also interested in the deconstruction of the physical border itself, with frequent references to undocumented workers and others that transgress the national frontier in unsanctioned ways, and to the extra-human agents that also undermine its work.

In the context of this particular geography, however, border-crossing does not necessarily require physical movement. Like many in the region, Anzaldúa's family were never migrants, but rather found themselves on the "wrong" side of the border after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 that ended the Mexican-American War, ceding all territory north of the Rio Grande to the

Westward expanding United States. Anzaldúa is therefore able to trace her family's connection to the land where they live back several generations. Her family heritage forms part of the text's critical work through its alternative telling of the region's history, which complicates its official designation as American soil. By foregrounding stories of Mexican dispossession by unscrupulous Anglo-Texans, the text explodes any neat division between cultures, languages, and "First" and "Third" world that is inscribed by the border fence.

The first essay of *Borderlands/La Frontera* is in this way about the border as a metaphorical "open wound" representing the pain of a people rent asunder by the imposition of the 1848 boundary. However, Anzaldúa also illustrates how the border functions as a literal wound across the landscape, and her ideas seem even more pertinent today in light of President Donald Trump's plan to build a concrete wall from San Diego to Brownsville, Texas, reinforcing what Anzaldúa refers to as the "unnatural boundary" between the United States and Mexico (25). Indeed, environmental organizations like the Sierra Club have cautioned that expanding the already hundreds of miles of physical barriers across this region of North America would not necessarily impede human migration (humans typically find ways to circumvent the barriers), but that it will certainly stop the natural flows of non-human migration, leading to negative environmental impacts in an already vulnerable region.³ These include cutting off endangered species like the ocelot and Mexican jaguar from habitats north of the border and contributing to erosion and flooding in the borderland (Sierra Club; Bolstad). The "unnaturalness" of this boundary is further suggested by the built environment: a roadmap and satellite photo of the cities of El Paso and Juarez (Figures 2 and 3) reveal them as two halves of the same city.

In the title of the first essay, Anzaldúa invokes the quasi-mythical Aztec homeland of Aztlán, which the Chicano nationalist movement of the 1960s and 70s mobilized to call for the reunification of Mexican lands on both sides of the border. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, migration to *el norte* is likewise framed as "the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán" (33), a reclamation of

ancestral lands. At the same time, Anzaldúa is engaged in a project of countering the patriarchal nationalist claims of the Chicano movement by recuperating female deities like the Aztec serpent-goddess Coatlicue, a kind of Earth Mother (Saldivar-Hull 63–64). In this way, the reunification of Aztlán is not primarily a nationalist but ecological (specifically Ecofeminist) project. Coatlicue reappears in a later essay in which she refers to the Rio Grande as a “serpent nailed to the fence” (111), alluding to the co-optation of this natural feature in the service of border policing (Ybarra 186). While the river is here helpless against its use as a deterrent to movement, leading in some cases to loss of life, elsewhere Anzaldúa emphasizes nature’s resistance to such man-made boundaries. The work opens with a poem depicting a scene of nature’s intrinsic borderlessness, in which “earth touches ocean” and “the two overlap.” This “gentle coming together” is then quickly supplanted with more violent forms of border-crossing: “houses gutted by waves, / cliffs crumbling into the sea,” and water “gashing a hole under the border fence”. While asserting her home is “this thin edge of / barbwire”, she goes on to write:

But the skin of the earth is seamless.

The sea cannot be fenced,

el mar does not stop at borders.

To show the white man what she thought of his

arrogance,

Yemayá blew that wire fence down. (24)

This resonant stanza further alludes to a dialectical relationship between nature and the political border. To suggest that the “skin of the earth is seamless” is to remind us that such boundaries only matter to humans, and such invocations work together with Anzaldúa’s family history to support her assertion of the border’s “unnaturalness.” The lines also bring us back to the image of the San Diego border fence cutting its way into the Pacific Ocean. The vulnerability of this material barrier to the

elements seems to suggest that, at least in some sense, Anzaldúa's image of the ultimate futility of the border in the face of natural forces can be taken literally.

In the final line of the stanza, nature is personified as Yemayá, the West African water spirit, an allusion to the Africans brought to the region as slaves and whose beliefs and practices add another facet to the *mestizaje* of borderland culture. Where the serpent-waters of Coatlicue are pressed into service, this extra-human agent rebels against white "arrogance," or the colonial logic that presumes nature can be controlled and made to "work" for man. Indeed, the Anglo-Texan's attempts to bend nature to his will is a recurring theme throughout the text, generating parallels between the exploitation of the land and the exploitation of the people. Anzaldúa speaks at another point about the imposition of industrialized irrigation in the early twentieth century, which disrupted the Mexican communal and sustainable *acequia* system and fundamentally changed the South Texas landscape. In addition to privatizing the water supply, which has contributed to the drying up of the Rio Grande (another way in which this serpent is "fenced"),⁴ we are told how agribusinesses "hired gangs of *mexicanos* to pull out the brush, chaparral and cactus," eradicating the region's biodiversity in favor of cash-crops (31). The land was then "cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares" (31) in the move from communal farming to private ownership, imposing further human boundaries on the vulnerable natural environment. These references to the common farming culture that is disrupted in the lands ceded to the United States once again emphasize the "unnaturalness" of the national boundary and the land's physical rupture by border installations.

Anzaldúa's poetic allusions to the land's resistance to the border and the disruption its imposition caused to traditional farming practices and indigenous plant life contain echoes of the bioregionalist movement of the 1970s (see also Ybarra). In ecology, a bioregion is a geographical area of similar climate where similar flora and fauna are found. However, environmentalists expanded its definition to suggest a form of communal consciousness, believing that citizen-like allegiances could be built according to bioregion in a way that challenges national boundaries and

promotes sustainable living (Buell). Bioregionalists also place a great deal of emphasis on watersheds, such that the watershed of the Rio Grande, on either side of the border, would be seen as a single unit. In other words, reframing the borderland between the United States and Mexico as a unified bioregion (Aztlán) provides a counter-narrative to American nationalist rhetoric that renders those on the other side of the border as alien to the geographical space currently mapped out as “America.” Instead, it appeals to a common cross-border identity that emerges from the land itself, mythologized through extra-human agents like Yemayá and the Earth Mother Coatlicue. This mode of identification emerges most clearly in the section *El retorno* in the final essay of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, in which Anzaldúa as speaker is reunited with “my land...*tierra natal*,” a visceral experience that causes a “sudden pull in [her] gut” (111). She ends with the assertion that “the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land” and a memory of herself and her siblings planting and nurturing watermelon seeds after school (113). Here we can see the resonances with bioregionalism’s emphasis on long-term commitment to the place where one lives as a necessity for responsible environmental stewardship.

Ursula Heise has been critical of this importance given to “placeness” in the work of bioregionalists and environmental thought more widely, arguing that it “has not connected to the foundational idea in much recent cultural theory that identities are at their core made up of mixtures, fragments, and dispersed allegiances to diverse communities, cultures and places” (42–43). So, on one hand, bioregionalism offers a useful way to problematize the “unnatural” borders that have been drawn by imperial projects or hardened against “others” seen as threatening to the bounded nation-state. However, on the other, its emphasis on place-based identities can work to essentialize “belonging” to the land in ways that can also prove exclusionary for those who are not perceived to have a legitimate claim to the bioregion and its resources. Despite the work’s primary aim to deconstruct the national border between the United States and Mexico (along with the other essentialisms it seeks to break through/open), Anzaldúa’s invocations of the land re-institute an

essentialist discourse in the text. Her family's longstanding residence in the same location provide a legitimacy to her claims that is unavailable to other border-crossers. This is further reinforced by the tendency to foreground the indigenous heritage of *mestizos*, via the deployment of indigenous mythology, and downplay the extent to which the pre-Anglo agricultural life mourned in the text was the result of Spanish colonization (the *acequia* system originated in Spain). In this way, *Borderlands/La Frontera* falls victim to some of the problems found elsewhere in environmental writing, including the romanticizing of indigenous pasts at the exclusion of extant native peoples on both sides of the border, but also other migrants (from Central America, for example) who do not have the same claim to the land as Chicanas/os. Sarah Jaquette Ray, for example, has demonstrated how discourse about the "proper" environmental stewardship of the borderland has been coopted in the service of xenophobic causes by rendering undocumented immigrants passing through the landscape as "ecological others" within the space.

Borderlands/La Frontera offers a model for exploring the interrelationships between the human/social and extra-human/ecological at border sites. It draws attention to nature's co-optation and resistance to the imposed border, and how its drawing produced ecological changes through large-scale irrigation and corporate farming, leading to adverse effects for both its human and nonhuman populations. However, at times, the environmentalist aspects of the text work against its overall project of deconstructing essentialisms because of its inscription of land-based identities. The seemingly "natural" relationship between Chicanas/os and the land is one that goes unchallenged in the work. The next section will draw on the insights gained from Anzaldua's text for a world-ecological reading of another border site that has become the focus of international attention in recent years: the Mediterranean Sea. In his recent novel *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh situates a narrative of precarious migration to Europe within the context of global climate change and ecological destruction, inviting readers to make connections between the two phenomena. However, *Gun Island* goes a step further by establishing a form of environmentalist thinking that does not

appeal to fixed land-based identities as found in Anzaldúa's text. Through the climatological connections it establishes between disparate parts of the planet, it builds towards a translocal ecology that can accommodate a wider range of mobile populations, including climate migrants.

Water Crossings: The Mediterranean

Anzaldúa's poetic allusion to the cooptation of the natural environment (Rio Grande) as a barrier to immigration anticipates the explicit policy of "prevention through deterrence" that began in the Clinton era and continues today. This policy works by "funneling" migrants into harsher and more remote areas, leading to a dramatic increase of deaths along the most dangerous Arizona sections of the border: from just 7 recorded in the year of its implementation in 1996 to over 2000 migrant remains discovered between 2001 and 2012 (though the real number is likely much higher) (Johnson 1244). Such policies "wield the environment itself as a weapon in the battle to stop illegal migration" (Adamson 234) and sacrifice the lives of immigrants and the fragile desert environment as necropolitical bordering strategy. Though much less explicitly stated, we can see a similar strategy in operation along the southern border of the European Union, with even more deadly results: nearly 20,000 lives have been lost in attempts to reach Europe via the Mediterranean since 2014 (IOM). The majority of those killed have been on the most dangerous Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy, which has remained one of the few routes left due to the effective closing down of the less hazardous Eastern Mediterranean route across the Aegean by a 2016 agreement with Turkey. By pushing migrants to make ever more treacherous journeys, such policies too wield the environment as a weapon, only in this case it is the unpredictable currents of the sea rather than the heat and dryness of the desert.

Unlike the "unnatural" border imposed by the drawing of the 1848 line across North America, the Mediterranean Sea serves as a seemingly "natural" division between Europe and its poorer non-Christian neighbors to the South and East. It has long stood as a geophysical metaphor for Europe's sense of itself as a self-contained cultural space of Western humanist ideals founded on

the Greek and Roman tradition. This is encapsulated by what Serenella Iovino describes as “Mediterraneanism,” a kind of Mediterranean Orientalism, in which the region is cast as a space of “lost perfection” that harks back to classical times (6). This discourse works precisely by disavowing the hybrid and “impure” nature of the Mediterranean region, in which the sea served as a means of connectivity and cross-fertilization of human cultures and non-human species.⁵ The essentialized image of cultural superiority produced through “Mediterraneanism” has taken concrete form in the modern boundary-drawing of the European Union’s Schengen Zone and its increasingly militarized border enforcement that has, in Iovino’s words, “re-colonized” the Sea and rendered it “*Mare nostrum*,” a space to be defended against “others” (7). This discourse and the border policies that issue from it also obscure more recent histories of Europe’s colonial entanglement with refugee-generating regions South and East (Italy in Libya, Somalia and Eritrea; France in Syria), “the umbilical cord that links Europe to the migrants washed up on its shores” (Danewid 1675). The need to reframe (or rediscover) the Mediterranean as an “impure” space of connectivity rather than separation recalls Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic, in which ships, once the instrument of exile and trauma in the Middle Passage, take on new meaning as symbols “for the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts” (4). In Gilroy’s reading, the Atlantic Ocean takes precedence over the landmasses that surround it, precisely for its in-betweenness – neither of Africa nor Europe nor the Americas but a symbol of a hybrid modernity that emerges out of a history of crossings between all three.

The Medi-terranean, or “sea between lands,” is also well-poised to serve as a model for such *métissage* and historical reckoning, such that some scholars have begun to refer to it as “the Black Mediterranean” (Danewid). Iovino’s takes us a step further than Gilroy, however, in asserting that to de-essentialize this region we must think of this body of water “first of all, as a sea” (9). In saying this, she takes her cue from the emerging field of Blue Humanities, which views seas “not just as bodies to be crossed, but as subjects in themselves” (Mentz 997) and “reevaluates the actively co-

extensive role played by oceanic environments in the creation of cultural images” (Iovino 10). This returns us to Jason Moore’s ideas about the dialectical relationship between humans and their environment whereby seas and other bodies of water act upon our social and cultural world as much as we deploy them for material gain (such as through maritime trade). And in this case, a sea that takes on the role of policing the boundary between self and other, West and East, wealthy North and economically deprived and environmentally vulnerable South, offers a particularly rich and complex “bundle” of human and extra-human natures. At the same time, the familiar term “borderland” privileges a terrestrial orientation, leaving water borders as a seemingly blank “gap” in sociocultural meaning (Steinberg and Peters 248–49).⁶ By focusing on the Sea as a border space, this opens up alternative ways of thinking about the “fluidity” of border zones effectively demonstrated in Anzaldúa’s work through the lens of aqueous currents.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* foregrounds this complex intertwining of the social and ecological at the border site of the Mediterranean. Through its layering of stories of environmental disaster over a narrative of precarious migration to Europe, it opens up an explicit dialogue between the green politics surrounding climate change and the racial politics of the migration “crisis.” With these moves, the novel participates in Iovino’s call to de-essentialize the Sea and recall its “hybrid” character. In the spirit of Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” *Gun Island* seems to ask what it would mean to think of the boats of so-called “irregular” migrants as a continuation of this history of Mediterranean connectivity rather than as invaders to an otherwise “pure” or “pristine” space. The novel is ostensibly a sequel to Ghosh’s 2004 *Hungry Tide* and returns us to the earlier text’s setting in the Sundarbans region of Bengal. Ghosh has long been interested in using his work to problematize what Pablo Mukherjee describes as “the pernicious logic of borders” (*Postcolonial Environments* 112) and this ever-shifting tidal region spanning India and Bangladesh serves as an apt site for figuring the ultimate futility of human boundary-drawing and the agency of extra-human forces. Here, the frontier between land and sea changes daily and, over longer periods, the mighty

tides can carve out whole islands and deposit them elsewhere such that the land itself shifts across the national frontier.

In *Hungry Tide*, Ghosh extends this theme through the story of refugee migration from the newly formed state of Bangladesh to the Sundarbans island of Morichjhāpi in the 1970s.⁷ Like Anzaldúa's ancestors, this group of Hindu Dalits find themselves on the "wrong" side of the new international border. Though relocated to a refugee camp in Central India, the arid landscape of the region proves an untenable home for this tideland people, for whom "rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood" (Ghosh, *HT* 165). Morichjhāpi, on the Indian side of the Sundarbans, therefore, proves a more suitable refuge. Although still far from their villages across the border, the bioregional connection allows them to draw on their ecological knowledge to establish cooperative and sustainable ways of living. In this way, the refugees reject the government's determination of where they "belong" based on ethno-religious boundary-drawing and assert instead an ecological dimension of identity that disrupts the neat nationalist narratives of both countries. This agency is nevertheless denied by the local government who violently evict the refugees with the justification that they are trespassing in the local tiger preserve.

As in Anzaldúa, the Morichjhāpi experiment gestures at the resistant possibilities of ecological reinhabiting in the face of (post-)colonial displacement. Though Ghosh tempers this utopian vision with the material realities of caste exclusion, local government corruption and the sway of foreign capital, it still mobilizes a largely essentialist form of bioregional connection between people and place. However, through its hyper-mobile wildlife, overlapping landscapes and travelling deities, *Gun Island*, offers an alternative model of cross-border ecology that is better suited to our globalized and (environmentally) displaced world. The novel revolves around a central myth, that of the eponymous "Gun Merchant" who journeys over many seas to flee the wrath of Manasa Devi, goddess of snakes and other poisonous creatures. The Gun Merchant serves as both a precursor figure of the modern-day climate refugee and a metaphor for humanity's arrogance in the face of

nature's warnings about the environmental consequences of our never-ending quest for profit.⁸ Ghosh overlays this Odyssean Bengali legend with a contemporary narrative of migration in the journeys of Tipu and Rafi who travel from Bengal to Italy across the Mediterranean via the well-worn routes of people-trafficking networks. Indeed, *Gun Island* is a novel in which just about everything seems to be on the move: river dolphins driven from their feeding grounds by toxic dumping (GI 106); bark beetles extending their range into Oregon forests (119-20); poisonous snakes moving northwards into warming Southern California waters (144); and venomous spiders infesting Venice (223). These instances of non-human mobility are mirrored in the human stories of climatic displacement dotted throughout the text. Rafi's migration is prefigured early on with his grandfather's refusal to teach him about the local environment because it is no longer able to provide a viable living (95). Scientist Piya then echoes this in her description of the plight of the river dolphins: "We're in a new world now," she says, "No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals" (106).

Such parallels drawn between human and non-human displacement in the novel are in part an appeal for equal recognition and sympathy, challenging a green politics that prioritizes animals over "undesirable" humans. A potential problem with such equivalences, however, is that they can "naturalize" human migrants and obscure the economic and social factors that also drive migration (Baldwin). The novel nevertheless counteracts this by contextualizing the "irregular" movement of humans with the environmental impacts of global consumer capitalism (234) and local unscrupulous manufacturing practices (105). It also situates such movements within a longer historical frame that predates even colonial times. The seemingly fantastic story of the Gun Merchant's travels turns out to be a historically founded journey from India to Egypt, Turkey and then to Venice during the Little Ice Age, which complicates the "newness" of Mediterranean migrant routes. This Sundarbans folktale about a merchant and a goddess also leads to other unexpected connections between the novel's two main settings, including an astonishing revelation about the Eastern antecedents of

Venice's church of Santa Maria della Salute and its Black Madonna, whose precursor A-sa-sa-ra-me, the Minoan goddess of snakes, appears to be a Mediterranean incarnation of Manasa Devi. Even "bonduki," the Bengali word for "gun," turns out to stem from "al-Bunduqeyya," the Arabic word for Venice, owing to the presence of a foundry at the center of the archipelago. This reveals the "Gun Merchant" as an alternative "Merchant of Venice" figure.

The landscapes, too, seem to blur into one another; as Deen looks down on Venice from his airplane, he describes "a sight that reminded me of the patch of Bengali countryside that I had glimpsed on my last flight out of Calcutta [...]: an estuarine landscape of lagoons, marshes and winding rivers" (162). Rafi also suggests a deep ecological kinship between the two environments, likening the sound of shipworms (also transplants into Venice's warming waters) eating their way through the piers supporting this floating city (251) to crabs burrowing in the Sundarbans: "if you listen carefully, you can tell if an embankment is going to collapse. It's the same over here." (256). Of course, the regions also share the more well-known environmental challenge of rising waters. While the Sundarbans is an oft-cited test case for the impacts of global sea-level rise (Lean), Venice has also been gaining attention with headline-grabbing floods in recent years. In the novel, Deen and his long-time friend Cinta find themselves stranded on a collapsing pier and cut off from the mainland by the *acqua alta*, Venice's periodic extreme high tide that has been gaining in frequency and strength in recent years (Robbins). Such ecological connections extend to other distant and seemingly unrelated parts of the globe as well, such as the "dead zones" Piya describes that are caused by toxic waste in the estuaries of the Mississippi and Pearl Rivers (104-105). As Kluwick rightly points out, it is only through the effects, and I would add specifically the displacements (human and extra-human), inflicted by anthropogenic climate change that these other connections are rendered visible to us (73).

Through this intertwining of stories, mythologies and environmental challenges, *Gun Island* weaves a different ecological ethic to the one found in Anzaldúa and even Ghosh's earlier novel

Hungry Tide. Rather than asserting any essential connection between people and their environment as a way of deconstructing bordering processes, *Gun Island* evokes a mobile or, more specifically, translocal form of ecology that emphasizes connections – human and non-human – between locations with otherwise differing cultures, languages and positions in the capitalist world system. While also about recognizing spatially distant connections and “fragmented” identities in a globalized world, such a translocal ecology differs from the kind of “planetary” thinking advocated by ecocritics like Ursula Heise. Rather than a movement from the local to the global, which suggests a hierarchical structure between the two, translocality is about tracing discrete local-local (or region-region) relationships that form part of a larger web but retain the primacy and distinctiveness of place, or what Brickell and Datta refer to as “situatedness during mobility” (Brickell and Datta 3). Such “situatedness” is vital for attending to the unevenness of such relationships, and their everyday impacts, that can become muted in appeals to the “global” or “planetary.” Though building on diasporic frameworks, it pushes beyond them to also consider intersections between the human and non-human world. Through the human and extra-human (including supernatural) entanglements it traces between Venice and the Sundarbans, *Gun Island* articulates translocal forms of ecological inhabiting that enable a figure like Rafi to establish belonging in both places.

Such translocality in *Gun Island* also works against the kind of “Mediterraneanism” that figures migrant vessels as invaders in a pristine European space, but in a way that imparts lessons for climate activism as well. These issues come to the fore in the novel’s climax in which a migrant ship carrying Tipu is confronted by the Italian navy off the coast of Sicily. To satisfy the country’s nativist currents, the so-called “Blue Boat” has been prohibited from docking by the Italian interior minister, “unless there is a miracle” (207). As all the novel’s characters converge on this spot in the Mediterranean, they encounter a barrage of boats bearing supporters from both sides of the political divide. While the pro-migrant campaigners exhibit signs attesting that “Refugees are not your enemies,” the greater number of right-wing and anti-immigrant groups from across Europe display

slogans with a markedly environmental edge. Assertions such as “No room here; go home”; “We are Indigenous, the only Owners of this Continent”; “Climate migration = invasion” and “Send them back with birth control” (297) employ a distinct blend of Malthusian logic and ecological proprietarianism. Such constructions provide us with an indication of where essentialized ideas about ecological belonging – even when deployed in the name of countering the effects of (post-)colonial displacement – might lead us. Not only does the “we” of the slogans galvanize notions of European racial purity, it does so by drawing on the discourse of indigenous protection and place-based identity. It is this discursive collusion in particular that throws up difficult questions for environmental campaigners going forward.

This discordant flotilla eventually finds its path crossed by a mass migration of dolphins and other sea life, drawing attention to the cruel irony that the non-human inhabitants of this space move entirely freely through the international boundary while humans cannot. This seems to point to the ultimate incommensurability of the two forms of movement, even as both are at least partly attributable to climate change. It is nevertheless through the actions of this throng of extra-human life, apparently directed by an Ethiopian migrant on board the Blue Boat (another incarnation of Manasa Devi), that produces the required “miracle” giving the navy justification to stand down. In addition to recreating the moment of the Gun Merchant’s deliverance in the original story, this is an occasion in which the sea itself along with its non-human inhabitants exerts its presence and agency in resisting its role as border guard. This ending further asserts the need for us to heed nature’s warnings of impending climate disaster (as represented by this new Manasa Devi figure) but also suggests that alongside this requires a reassessment of humanity’s bordering impulses in a climate-disrupted world. The novel’s conclusion in that “in-between” space of the Mediterranean seems to propose that the fluidity and movability of water provides a model for such a reassessment. As Steinberg and Peters put it, “The control of place, its transformation into property, and the

communication and fortification of that property's limits through fences and boundaries are impossible in the unknowable, uninscribable, and uncontrollable space of the ocean" (249).

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to ongoing debates in world-ecology by demonstrating the importance of recognizing human and non-human entanglements at border sites. The texts considered offer evocative explorations of the deep interconnectedness between human bordering practices and the natural world. Gloria Anzaldúa's founding work of border theory, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, demonstrates that these considerations were there all along but became submerged as the text's racial, linguistic and gendered interventions were made paramount. Anzaldúa highlights how the natural world is enlisted as border agent, but also how the environment continuously resists and undermines its cooptation. Looking across two very different kinds of border spaces, we have seen how the deserts and rivers of the U.S.-Mexico border and the Mediterranean Sea in Europe have been deployed as deterrents to movement in necropolitical bordering strategies. We also saw how non-human agents continually undo this work – whether the wind and sand eroding the Southwestern border fence, the Sundarbans tides shifting land between India and Bangladesh, or the currents of animal migrations directly intervening in *Gun Island*.

Each of the texts discussed is committed to generating a decolonizing discourse which aligns such boundary-drawing with colonial and capitalist logics that exploit the land and its people in the service of power and profit. At the same time, they offer different "solutions" to (post-)colonial displacements, whether they be the direct fallout of colonial imposition and resulting nationalist projects, or the "slow violence" of climate change in the *longue durée* (Nixon). *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Ghosh's earlier novel, *The Hungry Tide*, offer ecological belonging and reinhabiting as a form of resistance against the displacements generated by (post-)colonial bordering. These models evoke a bioregional vision in which people's connections to land and knowledge of its plants, animals, weather patterns and water sources forms the basis of an anti-colonial and de-essentializing

discourse that disrupts the “pernicious” logic of national borders. However laudable such visions might be, they do not go far enough to disrupt – and may even be coopted into – anti-immigration discourses that are becoming louder in an increasingly climate-displaced world. *Gun Island*, by contrast, offers us an alternative model of environmental connection that can accommodate the figure of the migrant over a larger scale than is possible when deploying a bioregional ethic. By drawing together seemingly unconnected parts of the globe facing similar environmental challenges, Ghosh establishes a translocal form of ecology that also opens up the possibility of uncovering other unexpected connections, whether related to trade, human migration, or belief. We can see the contrast, for example, in how each text deploys mythological elements: whereas Aztlán and Coatlicue hark back to fixed land-based identities, Manasa Devi is a travelling figure that emerges in different places and times. Such translocal connections pave the way for a more mobile form of ecological belonging that can accommodate someone like Rafi, one of the so-called “ecosystem people” (Gadgil and Guha) who rely on the natural environment for their livelihoods but must now seek a living in an entirely different part of the world. It is also a more fitting model for a climate-changed world in which the power of the sea and other natural agents increasingly make a mockery of human territorial boundaries, as Anzaldúa’s work foretells.

By outlining these two arguments – an ecocritical reading of border spaces and the establishment of translocal forms of ecological belonging – via literary texts, this article also brings literary criticism into conversation with the new but emerging field of Anthropocene mobilities that has up to now been primarily confined to the geographic wing of the social sciences. In turn, my hope is that considering such translocal ecologies as demonstrated in *Gun Island* might offer new avenues for comparative literary and cultural work. In other words, what further insights might emerge if we were to think more deeply about the layers of linguistic, textual, economic, and ecological connections between Venice and the Sundarbans, or the Mississippi and Pearl River deltas, or between any number of locations facing similar environmental challenges? Such linkages

provide new lines of sight through which we might “map” the world-ecology (Deckard, “Mapping”). Even more significantly, what if these connections were amplified through the work of environmental activism? Such translocal ecologies could serve as a tool for raising public awareness about our own climatic futures, while retaining attention to the networks of power and capital that connect “here” and “there.” They might offer us a way between a parochial “localist” approach and a vague “planetary” approach in danger of glossing over stark differences in environmental and other forms of precarity in order to appeal to the notion that climate change is a phenomenon affecting “us all.” The ending of Ghosh’s *Gun Island* contains within it a warning for climate activism if it cannot find a way between these two poles. Its throng of ecologically-minded anti-immigrant slogans seems to allude to the kind of eco-nationalist political discourses that have been taken up by the likes of Marine Le Pen’s “New Ecology” movement in France (Neslen), or the even more extreme eco-fascist ideologies that have been circulating in internet forums in recent years (Manavis). Without an environmental ethic that is able to address both the anxieties of the local and articulate a clear anti-racist and anti-nationalist discourse, these voices may get louder and more prominent in the years to come.

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¹ Former President Trump’s proposed wall only compounded this fact. Although during the election campaign he claimed that the wall would cost only \$12 billion, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) internal report in February put the cost at as much \$21.6 billion, and even this has been described as a major underestimate (Felbab-Brown).

² This includes, for example, emerging literary work in energy humanities (Mukherjee, *Fossil Imprints*), food security (Bhattacharya) and water security (Deckard, “Water Shocks”).

³ It is important to note here that the Sierra Club has not always held such enlightened views and has a history of endorsing anti-immigration positions in the name of environmental protection (Mendoza). This orientation broadly continued up until a landmark unanimous vote in 2013 to support a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

⁴ See Peña for an in-depth exploration of the history of the *acequia* system in the region.

⁵ Iovino notes, for example, that some of the “pillars” of Mediterranean cuisine like tomatoes, maize, rice, pepper and coffee were actually “migrants” from extra-Mediterranean lands (6).

⁶ Steinberg and Peters cite Carl Schmitt, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes for their portrayal of the sea as an empty and “non-signifying” space (249).

⁷ Details of this history are recounted in Mallick.

⁸ The “derangement” Ghosh explores in detail in his book of essays, *The Great Derangement* (2016).