

Cross/Borders:

The Transcultural Poet as Counterwitness in Anthony Cody's Borderland Apocrypha

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Introduction

On August 3, 2019, twenty-two Americans of Latino origin were massacred at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. In his manifesto, the shooter, Patrick Wood Crusius, claimed his attack was “a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas” (Power). Some media watchdogs noted the similarities between the shooter's language and rhetoric used by conservative pundits, particularly those at Fox News. For instance, in 2018, host Tucker Carlson forewarned of a migrant invasion coming to steal the nation's wealth. Carlson, whose audience spans more than one million viewers nightly, then put to question America's moral obligation to provide asylum to the world's poor: “We have a moral obligation to admit the world's poor [...] even if it makes our own country poor and dirtier and more divided” (Wemple). Fellow network host Laura Ingram also warned of “a slow-rolling invasion of the United States” when she infamously compared child detention centers at the southern border to “summer camps” (Riotta). Prior to the massacre, a report by Media Matters for America revealed that Fox News had made more than seventy on-air references to a migrant invasion, with twenty-one references made by Tucker Carlson, Brian Kilmeade, and Laura Ingraham (Power). How journalists debate issues of public concern is no trivial matter. A body of research emphasizes that public rhetoric can play an important role in framing political attitudes towards immigration, especially for White Americans, with Fox News being one of the most important outlets because of its strong negative views on immigration and staunch support from White conservatives (Abrajo et al. 10; Alamillo

et al. 2,6; Chavez 10; Farris and Silber Mohamed 816; Gil de Zúñiga et al). Thus, through their inaccurate reporting and racialized frames, conservative media has promoted a climate of hostility towards immigrants coming to and residing in the United States.

Throughout American history, poets have had a formidable voice in the immigration debate. The most iconic poem is Emma Lazarus's "A New Colossus," the famous sonnet at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Lazarus originally wrote the sonnet in response to the abhorred conditions of Russian Jews at Schiff Refuge on Ward Island. It was not until the 1930s, following the anti-immigration legislation of the 1920s, that pro-immigrationists began to use her poem in public conversations (Schor). Today, her poem is a cultural touchstone for Americans, symbolizing the United States as a nation of immigration and opportunity (Levine). It is within this context that I turn my attention to Anthony Cody's experimental collection *Borderland Apocrypha*, a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award in Poetry. *Borderland Apocrypha* recounts the patterns of violence and trauma committed against Latino communities at the U.S.-Mexican border. The collection calls attention to the importance of transcultural perspectives in public discourses and shows how poetry can challenge representations of Latinos and other immigrant communities. By observing the transcultural inclinations of Cody's collection, this essay illustrates the ways poetry confronts popular "truths" of ethnicity that circulate in conservative journalism in the United States.

In previous essays, I have defined a figure with a diverse social and cultural background whose outsider status affords them a vantage point to testify against pervasive stereotypes in U.S. journalism. I call this figure the transcultural counterwitness. (Moran "Rummaging through the Ashes"; Moran "Entangled Encounters). Through an emphasis on lived experiences, transcultural counterwitnesses demonstrate how right-leaning media confers ethical and moral privilege to dominant cultural groups at the expense of those who remain on the margins. Through its experimentation with voice and form, *Borderland Apocrypha* considers how conservative journalism limits broader discussions of Latino-American identity and encourages simplistic, and often damaging, views of U.S. immigration at the southwest border. By encouraging readers to reimagine the presence and resonance of ethnic stereotypes in our daily encounters, transcultural counterwitnesses invite readers to rethink the ways ethnic stereotypes can lead to real-world violence. Through its analysis, this essay addresses the questions: How does *Borderland Apocrypha* engage with, and oppose, the longstanding stereotypes of Latino communities in conservative journalism?

How can transcultural counterwitnesses draw attention to forgotten histories of ethnic violence? How can transcultural counterwitnesses open readers, particularly White ones, to diverse American experiences? This essay begins by contextualizing conservative journalism's views on immigration before addressing its application in Cody's work.

The Transcultural Counterwitness and Discourses of Latino Immigration

An interest in transcultural memory raises questions about the ways "media disseminate versions of the past across time, space and mnemonic communities" (Erll 9). In the modern era, the meaning of witnessing has moved from first-person accounts toward more generalized experiences of spectatorship (Rentschler 297). Media positions citizens to witness from a distance through its "systematic and ongoing reporting of the experiences and realities of distant others to mass audiences" (Frosh and Pinchevski 1). Thus, witnessing through mass media raises important questions about the problems of representation, dissemination, and interpretation. As critic John Ellis explains: "Seeing through the camera or hearing through microphones is always a position of analysis, of trying to understand a representation rather than experiencing a person or events in front of you" (76). Studies suggest that journalism can impair one's ability to witness racial injustices and make viewers complicit in others' suffering without feeling the need to alleviate it (Rentschler; Ellis).

A body of research suggests that journalism presents a one-sided, negative view of immigrants and immigration (Abrajano et al. 13; Alamillo et al. 3; Chavez 8; Farris and Silber Mohammad 814). More specifically, conservative journalism has a strong tendency to associate migrants, particularly those of Latino origin, with social problems such as crime and national security, although there is no evidence to support such claims (Chavez 3; Silber Mohammad and Farris 160; Farris and Silber Mohamed 817). For outlets with a strong White viewership, inaccurate representations of immigrants can shape public opinions and policies (Alamillo et al. 6; Silber Mohamed and Farris 159-60). A 2021 Reuters/Ipsos poll, for instance, indicated that 22% of Republicans viewed immigration as the most serious problem in America, with 77% wanting more policing and fencing at the border and 56% saying that immigrants should be denied paths to citizenship (Kahn and Morgan). The "immigrant threat" has become a powerful frame in right-leaning news and leads to real-life consequences, such as limited chances for social integra-

tion, a lack of social mobility, and strong public endorsements for mass deportation (Chavez 6-7; Farris and Silber Mohamed 817). Because conservative journalism tends to oversimplify immigration, relying on longstanding stereotypes and sensationalized frames instead of nuanced reporting, transcultural counterwitnesses assert their life experiences in the face of public border guards (journalists, pundits, politicians, and other influential figures) who utilize media platforms to delegitimize non-White groups.

The term “counterwitness” refers to a marginal figure who emerges on behalf of the struggles for racial inequality and social justice (Dean 25). These figures do not have to be present during the time of the event but can supplement victim testimonies by giving voice to their suffering through narratives (Ibid. 23; Ibid. 37-38).¹ The transcultural counterwitness draws on life experiences to defend marginal communities against the presuppositions of race and ethnicity circulating in U.S. journalism. My focus on “life experiences” is influenced by Critical Race Theory’s concept of counterstories, which was first employed in legal courts and is premised on the idea that White Americans cannot easily grasp what it is like to be non-White (Alemán 113; Delgado et. al. 46; Yosso 2). Counterstories help readers come to a deeper understanding of how Americans view race and how race impacts the daily experiences of non-White Americans. By questioning the longstanding “truths” of ethnicity, the transcultural witness invites readers, specifically White ones who align ethically and politically with the artist, to consider how popular stereotypes emerge from the past and reproduce themselves in the present (Moran, “Entangled Encounters”).²

1. In *The Moral Witness*, Dean focuses on atrocity photography. She maintains that “bearing witness” is more than voyeurism because it asks spectators to imagine: “The spectator identifies with a potentially implicated bystander, becoming a witness to his own powerlessness to stop suffering in the world” (158). By extending the relationship between the spectator and image, photography “fashions a counterwitness as an antidote to the spectator’s passivity and voyeurism” (161-62). Even though she does not specifically address other forms of narrative in the chapter, I feel that her argument of “witnessing from a distance” applies to other forms of narrative such as poetry, prose, and so forth.

2. Although I do not refer to the studies directly in the essay, my discussions on the relationships and transfer of memories come from Michael Rothberg’s research on Holocaust memory. His concepts of multidirectional memory and complex implication have been influential on my research. See, Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; and Rothberg, Michael. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019.

The term “counterwitness” draws on research from the public sphere as well. Jürgen Habermas describes the public sphere as a space where private citizens can deliberate common concerns and interests (Fraser 58). These spaces are distinct from the state and can often be critical of it (Ibid. 57). However, as Christian Weisser notes, publics often produce “a singular form of discourse [...] filtered through the dominant perspective” (610). Publics such as television journalism often embody the positions of White America, which help sustain the privilege of that group at the expense of others (Ryder 516). It is important to clarify that although publics do not include the “decision makers,” they have the potential to influence state-action through their discussions and opinions.³ Counterwitnessing, therefore, depends on forming alternative discourses to challenge the “truths” of media witnesses. Poetry is one form of counterdiscourse.

Imagination and engagement are central to the poetic experience. Poetry can offer new responses to journalistic accounts and encourage reflection and social action (Parks 7; Houston 239; Gray 808). For marginal groups, poetry engages with problems of representations to raise social consciousness and creates a greater sense of community (Davidson 159-60). In her study of Audre Lorde, critic Lida Maxwell explains “poetry is the everyday collaborative language of outsiders trying to figure out how they can describe a reality that has been denied and dismissed by elites. [...] Through telling the truth outsiders [...] open up new spaces of significance, meaning, pleasure, and flourishing for themselves, but they also affirm and reveal to others (through that very practice) the reality of other possible worlds and ways of living” (37-38). A focus on experimental poetry offers greater attention to the dynamics of immigrant experiences. For critic Matthew Jenkins, experimental poetry is rooted in an ethical understanding of otherness (19; 21). Its very nature, he insists, “forces, invites, and obliges us to face the strangeness that pervades everything around us, particularly the work and relations between people in language” (21). By testifying from a marginal perspective and drawing attention to narratives of exclusion and violence, transcultural counterwitnesses question dominant truths and ask readers to consider alternative ways of understanding U.S. culture. This essay now turns to Anthony Cody’s *Borderland Apocrypha* to discuss the ways the collection uses personal and collective experiences to counter the pervasive stereotypes of conservative journalism.

3. Fox News and President Donald Trump might have been the most unsettling example of this relationship in recent years, with some critics even questioning whether Fox News crossed a line and turned itself into the de-facto state news during his presidency. See, Illing, Sean. “How Fox News Evolved into a Propaganda Operation: A Media Scholar on the Dangerous Evolution of Fox News.” Vox 22 Mar. 2019.

Imagining the “I” in {1} of *Borderland Apocrypha*

Borderland Apocrypha centers around the history of lynching and violence against Mexicans and Mexican Americans following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.⁴ The collection was conceived prior to the 2020 U.S. election when Cody came across an interactive map from the Southern Poverty Law Center that documented hate crimes in the United States from 1850 to the present (Cody, “Fresno Poet Anthony Cody on Being Named” 1:00-1:19). While looking over the map, Cody observed a pocket of lynchings from the 1850s in the U.S. South, before noting “a single dot in California” (Ibid. 1:36-40). The collection is broken into four sections⁵, with each section investigating how the forgotten histories at the U.S.-Mexican border intersect with the socio-political realities of contemporary American life. The collection opens with a series of interconnecting poems that reflect on the everyday pressures of “mixed” or multiethnic identity.⁶ Sections two and three interrogate the violent politics of U.S. migration through the reworking of treaties, artifacts, and documents. The fourth and final section explores how the afterlife of past transgressions persists in the American present.

Borderland Apocrypha begins with a series of conjoining poems that unfold beneath the page as hanging diagrams and connect using distinct features such as repetition, underlining, and numerical endnotes. The preliminary poem, “Standing in line to take a passport photo, an old white man looks at me and claims I am running,” not only stands as the collection’s opening title but diagrams each underlined word or phrase into new poems in the section [see [Figure 1](#)].⁷

4. The signing of the treaty on February 2, 1848, brought an official end to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Mexico ceded 55 percent of its territory and recognized the Rio Grande as the southern boundary with the United States.

5. Cody labels his sections {1}, {2}, {3}, and {4}. I refer to the sections more formally in the essay, for example, section one, section two, and so forth.

6. The term “mixed” is not mine. Cody uses it in his “Acknowledgements” and in interviews.

7. I would like to thank Omnidawn Publishing and Anthony Cody for allowing me to reprint.

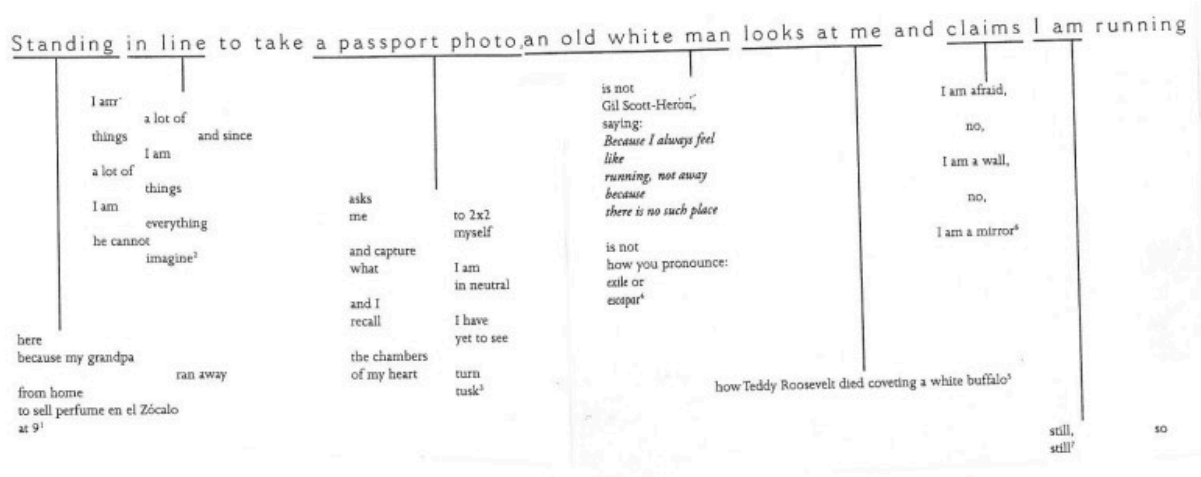


Figure 1: Standing in line to take a passport photo, an old white man looks at me and claims I am running, Cody, Anthony.

Borderland Apocrypha. Courtesy of Omnidawn Publishing and the Artist.

For example, the gerund “standing” in the preliminary title acts as a constituent and dependent for the next title, “*Standing* here because my grandpa ran away from home to sell perfume en el Zocalo at 9” [emphasis added] while the phrase “in line” performs a similar function for the following title, “*In line* I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine²,” [emphasis added] and so forth.⁸ This sequence continues throughout section one, with the final title, “*I am* still, so still⁷” [emphasis added] using the underlined clause “I am” from the preliminary title to conclude the section. This unusual structure not only creates artistic continuity for the section but also introduces readers to the collection’s concerns about ethnicity, identity, and representation.

As a child of Irish and Mexican descent, Cody uses various rhetorical and visual techniques to reimagine the struggles of inheriting mixed identities and histories. The section is premised around a xenophobic encounter between the “I” speaker and an older White male, and centers around the contrasts of the real/imaginary, stagnation/mobility, and being in/out of place. Throughout the encounter, the speaker must defend themselves against the claims that they are “everything / he [the white man] cannot / imagine” [author’s addition] (14). The repetition of “I am” throughout the section draws an immediate echo to Rene Descartes’s first principle, “cogito, ergo sum” [I think, therefore I am]. These imaginaries range from

8. I am drawing on the method of the Reed-Kellogg diagram which originated to help visualize the acting structures in a sentence. Linguists refer to this as constituency and dependency.

common stereotypes of criminality and lawlessness; targeted U.S. initiatives such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Proposition 187, and Operation Wetback; to more abstract concepts, such as the speaker envisioning themselves as a hanging body (19), a blank passport photo (20) a hunted bison, (20) a wall (25), and a mirror (25).⁹

Cody incorporates the rhetoric of immigration to create tonal tension and complicate the address. For example, in the poem “In line I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine²,” Cody employs various semantic choices associated with movement and migration to evoke the language of border crossing:

you wait. feel
the soles
 flatten
you cross. you
 cargo. you
 carry. you
 quiet. you
 come. you
 invite others. (19)

The accusatory tone and the static quality of “standing” oppose the dynamism of the White imagination, specifically when it envisions Latinos and other immigrant groups as invaders. Words such as “carry,” “cross,” and “invite others” reproduce the semantics of border crossing narratives, ones where Latinos are accused of entering America without just cause and encouraging “chain migration,” or migration based on family ties. Cody’s use of rhetoric is not accidental. During the Trump presidency, conservatives launched an aggressive campaign against migrants based on family ties. For example, in his 2018 State of the Union address, President Trump insisted “open borders have allowed drugs and gangs to pour into our most vulnerable communities” before falsely claim-

9. Prop. 187 stands for the infamous “Save Our State (SOS) initiative” in California to establish a state-run citizenship screening system and prohibit undocumented immigrants from using non-emergency health care, public education, and other services. The initiative was introduced in 1994 and was halted in 1999. Operation Wetback refer to the forceful removal of Mexican immigrants—some of them American citizens—from the United States in 1954.

ing that “a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives” (Trump). These false claims were echoed by conservative journalists and pundits who legitimized Trump’s claims and conjured fears of White replacement.¹⁰ Cody, however, subverts the language to emphasize the physical, emotional, and psychological toils of migrating. The poetry invites readers to reimagine the perilous journeys migrants undertake to enter the United States and contemplates the ways migrants and Americans of migrant descent carry the burdens of being labeled “un-American.” In other words, by weaponizing the rhetoric of immigrant narratives, the poetry counterwitnesses simplistic “invasion” narratives by focusing on the hardships and shaming migrants endure before and after crossing U.S. borders.

Cody’s use of diagrams offers readers a visual perspective on the conflictual relationships of mixed American identities as well. Throughout section one, the diagrams organize and map out the relationships between dissimilar, or seemingly disconnected forces such as personal history, cultural stereotyping, and historical violence. The declarative titles, which read traditionally from left to right, are continually disrupted by the lineated stanzas which move the reader from the top of the page to its bottom, dividing the poem into a series of interwoven parts. The diagrams introduce readers to ways poetic form influences meaning, as the hanging stanzas evoke images of bodies on gallows, an idea that inherently connects to the history of racial lynching in the United States. In a 2021 YouTube interview with Keith S. Wilson, Cody explains that the poems illustrate the “cascading elements” of memory, where private memories entangle with public ones and something as mundane as “standing in line to take passport photo” can bring forth memories of “a gallows, [...] border, [...] all of those things that are innately...like in us...while sitting in any situation” (“Curated Conversations” 11:58-12:15).

Cody visualizes these relational elements through his use of artifacts and inverted writing. Section one (and the collection as a whole) integrates numerous public artifacts such as photographs, legal documents, newspaper clippings, and quotes from public figures to help the speaker locate themselves in a complicated memorial landscape. For instance, in the third poem of the section, Cody reprints an image of lynching and surrounds it with lines of poetic commentary [see [Figure 2](#)].

10. There are many examples of white replacement rhetoric, but perhaps the most influential comments have come from Tucker Carlson. The New York Times’s Charles M. Blow has an insightful column discussing his impacts. See, Blow, Charles. “Tucker Carlson and White Replacement.” *The New York Times*, 11 Apr. 2021.

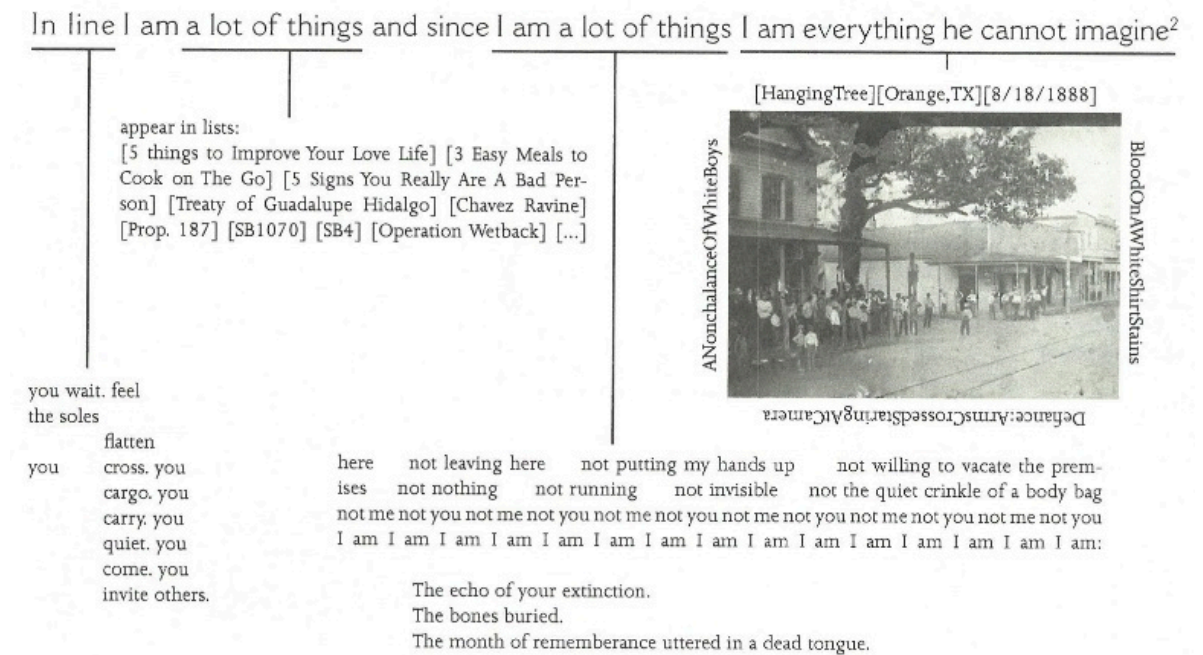


Figure 2: In line I am a lot of things and since I am a lot of things I am everything he cannot imagine, Cody, Anthony.
Borderland Apocrypha. Courtesy of Omnidawn Publishing and the Artist.

The conflict between what one is and what one is imagined unites personal experiences with aspects of the past that are not recognized or are spoken about in painful ways. The visual image draws immediate focus, asking readers to look closer at the White crowd which defiantly meets their gaze, while the rhetorical image of a white shirt stained in blood reinforces how historical denials and misremembrances cannot be easily erased for the descendants of victims. Even today, hanging trees are official landmarks in some southern states. A quick search on Trip Advisor demonstrates the disconnect between the U.S. public and the historical significance of such sites. For instance, most of the comments on the Hanging Tree in Goliad, Texas, focus on the aesthetic beauty of the tree and its surrounding. Commenters make few direct references to the tree's historical significance and gloss over, and in some cases, make light of, its darker histories.¹¹

11. Cody reprints these comments in the poem "Artifacts on a Hanging Tree, Goliad, Texas (a series of 70 Mexican Lynching, 1857)" (73).

Cody's reworking of artifacts also connects the Mexican lynchings with other ethnically motivated ones in U.S. history, such as the lynching of Blacks and Asians.¹² Such connections are not unintentional. In his notes, for instance, Cody explicitly references the ways White intimidation and violence are "part of the fabric of the nation" (156). The attention to such connections reinforces the ways transcultural counterwitnesses unite marginal experiences which have been ignored or forgotten by Whites but remain present in the collective memory of non-White citizens

The Framework of a Nation in "Framework"

Sections two and three further the collection's cross-examination of Latino representations and communicate its larger concerns of transgenerational violence against non-White groups. Section two erases and merges the English and Spanish versions of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, while section three interrogates a series of Mexican lynchings from 1848 to the present. In both sections, Cody examines various treaties, legal documents, and other cultural artifacts to explore the connections between past and present-day transgressions. Cody's manipulation of previous texts through techniques such as textual erasure, juxtaposition, and non-linear writing reimagines the ways ethnic frames impact cultural attitudes and encourage violence. This section analyzes how two poems from section three, "Framework" and "La Maceta," counterwitness Latino stereotypes by opening readers to the forgotten histories of White vigilantism in the United States.

As the title implies, "framework," in its most literal sense, is an essential structure that holds a structure or object in place. The poem manipulates an 1851 magazine reprint entitled "Native women; Native porter; Lynch law in California--Scene of the first execution in San Francisco, on June 10," by splitting the whole into two parts and surrounding each with a series of inverted statements and clusters of unpunctuated clauses which align themselves and angle around the original source to create a visual structure for the artifacts [see [Figure 3](#)].

12. While many Americans are aware of Black lynchings across the United States, less attention has been given to other ethnic groups, for example, Latino, Asian, and Native communities. Shelby Grad has an excellent piece about Asian killings in the American West. See, Grad, Shelby. "The Racist Massacre that Killed 10% of L.A.'s Chinese Population and Brought Shame to the City." *The Los Angeles Times*, 18 Mar. 2021.

The opening frame/stanza establishes itself upon the foundations of Latino stereotypes, for example, "Theft," Banditry," "Drugs," and "Killing Anglos," and juxtaposes them with images of the desired immigrant, a model minority "who knows their place" and serves Whites (65). Cody's interplay between the contemporary rhetorical and historic visual counterwitnesses the ways nativist stereotypes store themselves in public memory and carry over into contemporary discussions of American immigration.

12

gration Restriction League (1894) and James Murphy Ward's *The Immigration Problem, or America First* (1917).¹³ Cody's use of parallel rhetoric reminds readers that outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart are not modern-day outliers but part of a long tradition of White nationalism in public debate.

The second frame/stanza focuses its attention on the real-life consequences of racialized frames. In this frame/stanza, Cody addresses the first known public lynching in San Francisco, the lynching that inspired the collection and its themes.¹⁴ In his notes, Cody emphasizes how violence has been used as a mechanism of control and power in the United States. "Lynching," he stresses, "is in the framework of this nation" (*Borderland Apocrypha* 155). Here, the poem juxtaposes the rhetorical and visual language to underscore the potential ramifications of racial frames [see Figure 4].

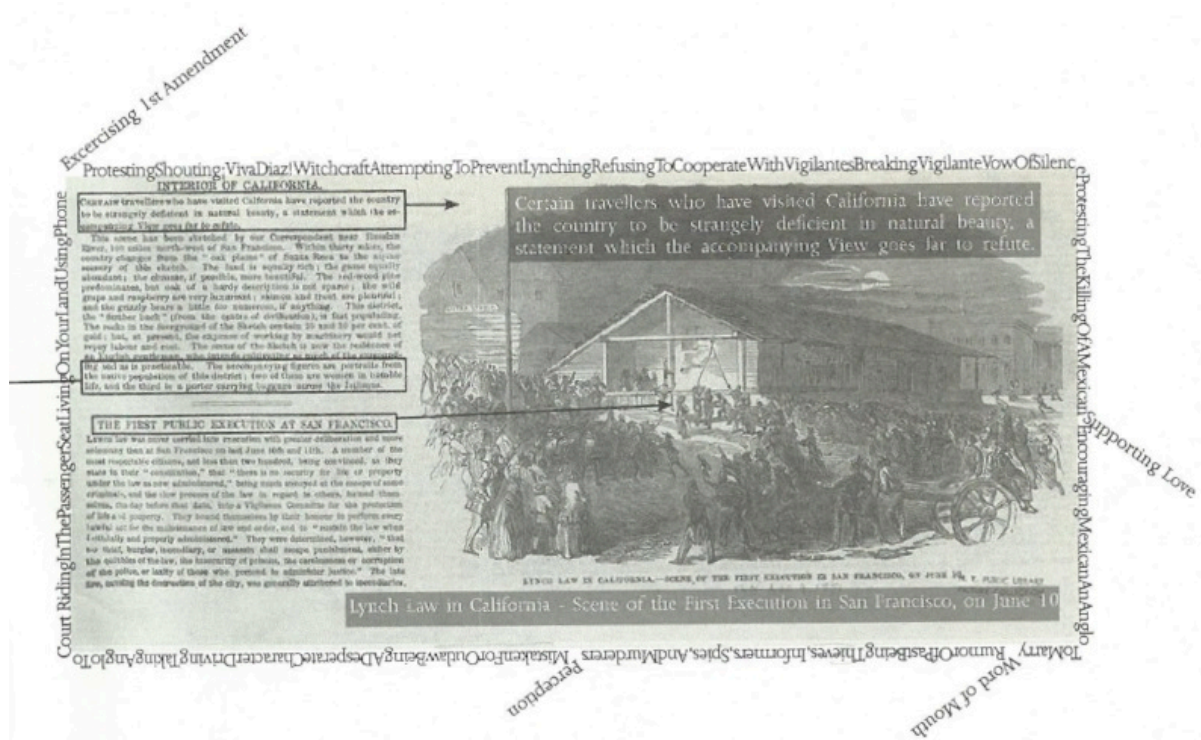


Figure 4: Framework, pt.2, Cody, Anthony. *Borderland Apocrypha*. Courtesy of Omnidawn Publishing and the Artist.

13. Neil Swidey of The Boston Globe provides an in-depth account of these parallels. See Swidey, Neil.

"Trump's Anti-Immigration Playbook was Written 100 Years Ago. The Boston Globe Magazine, Jan. 2017.

14. If interested, Monroe and Florence provide an excellent interactive map that tracks the history of lynching in the United States. See, plaintalkhistory.com/monroeandflorencework/explore/.

Unlike the initial images of the “orderly” natives in the first frame/stanza, the second frame/stanza reimagines a public execution on June 10, 1851, by surrounding it with comments such as “Protesting,” “Shouting,” and so forth. On the surface, the language celebrates narratives of protest and solidarity, as the speaker encourages readers to challenge the “RumorsOfPast” and exercise the first amendment by “ProtestingTheKillings” (99). Protests, especially those inspired by Black Lives Matter, are necessary for “truth telling against erasures, violences, and sanctioned murders in the modern era” (Ibid. 155). Cody’s collection, as this essay argues, is another form of truth telling to prevent injustices. The collection’s use of public artifacts, such as the ones in “Framework,” reintroduces readers to the long, targeted campaigns of violence against minority communities and exposes them to the inconvenient truth that acts of extreme violence have an afterlife. The act of lynching, for instance, has long been associated with the Black American experience. But as Cody’s collection attests, a closer consideration of U.S. history can uncover neglected pasts and bring them into dialogue with current political movements to make the fight for justice a collective American experience.

The frame/stanza thus evokes the language of civil protest to counterwitness historical erasures and conjure up more contemporary moments of active citizenship in the face of oppression, concepts fundamental to the U.S. Constitution. The visualization of the lynching, combined with the extractions of specific phrases from the original text, accentuates the rhetoric of solidarity by emphasizing how the U.S. social and historical landscape is framed by racial violence. Lynching has always been – and will continue to be – associated with White supremacy and vigilante justice. At the height of the Gold Rush (1849–1853), California underwent massive growth, and with growth, came a state of lawlessness and crime. Consequently, the “people” took the law into their own hands (Johnson 568). “Justice,” however, had a distinct ethnic element. From 1849–1902, approximately 280 acts of vigilantism occurred in California (Ibid. 560). In that fifty-year span, 50% of those lynched were non-White, with Latinos being the most targeted group of mob violence (Ibid. 573; 575).

In the frame/stanza, the jubilation of the crowd reminds readers that lynching, during this period of U.S. history and others, is not only a tool of revenge but the framework of American society. Cody’s use of textual extraction, which highlights and calls attention to the journalist’s disregard for the victim, furthers this view: “Certain travelers who have visited California have reported the county to be strangely deficient of in natural beauty, a statement which the accompanying View goes far to refute” (66). The relationship between extraction and image

underscores the “naturalness” of lynching and connects it to the U.S. landscape and its history. The poetic text draws attention to such relationships and calls them into question: “Word of Mouth / RumorsOfThePastBeingThieves,Informers,SpiesAndMurders / Perception / MistakenForBeingOulawADesperateCharacter” (66). The accusations of false rumors and perceptions invite readers to question the ways ethnic violence has been - and still is - reported. “Framework” therefore implores an awareness of America’s complex relationships with the past to counterwitness how ethnic stereotypes recirculate in the public memory and lead to real-life violence.

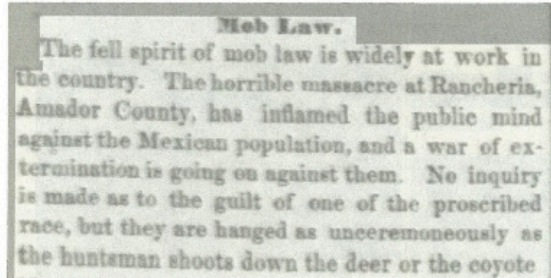
The Past is Present in “La Meceta, a Mexican Lynching, in 7 artifacts, No. 52.”

This complicated relationship between the past and present and the reciprocal and consequential nature between them is further interrogated in “La Meceta, a Mexican Lynching, in 7 artifacts, No. 52.” “La Meceta,” continues section three’s reimagining of Mexican lynchings across the United States over the last two centuries. The poem alters an article on the 1855 Rancheria Massacre and contrasts it with public commentary and legislation from California’s infamous Proposition 63 (1986) and Proposition 187 (1994). The excerpts position themselves in sequence to illustrate a “domino effect” where one event influences the next to set off a chain of events. In effect, “La Meceta” reimagines how longstanding stereotypes manifest into political policies in the modern day.

The poem begins with an excerpt from the *Daily Alta California* posted on August 13, 1855, describing the furor of local Whites in Amador County following a series of robberies and the killing of six Whites in Drytown, California, by alleged Mexican bandits. In retaliation, White locals tortured and lynched more the twenty people, mostly of Mexican appearance, and instigated a series of vigilante attacks against Spanish speakers in the county (Koppel). The extract title, “Mob Law,” foregrounds the spirit of White vigilantism during the years of U.S. western expansion [see [Figure 5](#)].

La Maceta, a Mexican Lynching, in 7 artifacts, No. 52

1. Daily Alta California, August 13, 1855, on Lynching



2. Ballot Summary of California Prop. 63₁ (1986), a fading

Provides that English is the official language of State of California. Requires Legislature to enforce this provision by appropriate legislation. Requires Legislature and state officials to take all steps necessary to ensure that the role of English as the common language of the state is preserved and enhanced. Provides that the Legislature shall make no law which diminish or ignores the role of English as the common language. Provides that any resident of or person doing business in state shall have standing to sue the state to enforce these provisions.

3. Pete Wilson speaks on C-SPAN, November 1994 in support of Prop 187, the backbone of his gubernatorial campaign₂

"This has nothing to do with race"

Figure 5: La Maceta, pt.1, Cody, Anthony.

Borderland Apocrypha. Courtesy of Omnidawn Publishing and the Artist.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo paved the way for the Federal Lands Act of 1851 which transferred over forty percent of land in California to American ownership, shifting the wealth to the hands of Anglo-Americans while forcing the Mexican population into economic dependency and wage labor (Moore 102). Such policies, which targeted Blacks, Chinese, Mexican, and Natives, codified White xenophobia into law and led to widespread ethnic conflict in the area. The dehumanizing language of the article, which compares Mexicans to prey such as “deer” and “coyote” (83), illustrates that from its origins ethnic violence has been an essential part of California’s development. Journalists, politicians, and other public agents have long histories of dehumanizing immigrants to stoke public outrage and promote ethnic exclusion. Historically speaking, American readers might be reminded of the numerous signs used during U.S. segregation, such as those in Dallas Texas circa 1930 outlawing “Dogs, Negroes, Mexicans.”¹⁵ More recent examples, however, include the dehumanization of unaccompanied, migrant children in U.S. journalism. For example, a 2017 study by Theresa Catalano describes how journalists use conceptual metaphors such as “animals” and “tracking” to connect migrants to animals (131). Here, Cody elucidates the ways in which the killing process is built into the rhetoric Americans

15. “Segregation Signs.” *For All the World to See*. University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

use to speak about Latinos and other non-White groups. Readers are reminded that when an enemy is inhuman, the killing process can be simplified to a necessary, and even moral, duty to eradicate a threat to public safety (Steuter and Willis 38).

The poem also inspires readers to witness how such representations are entangled with past transgressions and transfer over generations. Cody positions the “Mob Law” extract against a manipulated version of Prop. 63 and Prop. 187 to further highlight how recent legal actions aimed at Latino communities are rooted in the language and experiences of violence. Prop. 63, the controversial 1986 law that made English the “official language” in California, passed with a 74% margin, the most for any proposition in California history. For its proponents, Prop. 63 would protect Americans from the threats and perils of bilingualism, biculturalism, and ethnic separatism. Linguistic plurality, they insisted, would corrode U.S. democracy and fracture national unity (MacKaye 136-38).

In part two of the poem, “Ballot Summary of Prop. 63,” Cody suppresses the legal jargon to amplify the racist undertones of the state amendment, where parts of the original texts are faded to accentuate others. Readers are invited to witness how the political language of the proposition mirrors the predatorial language of “Mob Law.” For example, phrases such as “to take all steps necessary to / ensure” and “diminish / any / person” are associated with phrases from the “Mob Law” extract such as “inflamed the public mind” and “a war of extermination” (83). The juxtaposition of the two texts exposes the amendment’s violent nature by positioning artifacts of different historical eras in dialogue. By forging seemingly disparate concepts - lynching and language laws- the poem contends that language law is nothing more than a continuation of lynch law disguised as legal policy.

This connection is further exemplified in part three of “Le Mecata” when Cody includes a quote from former Californian governor Pete Wilson, the politician who pushed Proposition 63, Proposition 187, and countless other anti-immigration bills through the state legislature. During an interview on C-SPAN, Wilson insisted that “[Proposition 63] has nothing to do with race.” Here, the rhetoric of White nationalism reminds the reader that the distance between the past and 2020 is “devastatingly minimal” (Cody, “Fresno State’s Anthony Cody Vies for University Honor). Contemporary readers might be immediately reminded of 2019 when Fox host Laura Ingram argued that demographic changes were destroying “the America that we know and love” (2:06-2:08). Later in the segment, she praised the Trump administration’s will to strengthen border walls, declaring: “There is something slipping away in this country, and it's not about race or ethnicity. It's what was

once a common understanding by both parties that American citizenship is a privilege, and one that at a minimum requires respect for the rule of law and loyalty to our constitution” [emphasis added] (10:34-11:00). With both accounts, the poetry counters the hollow claims of objectivity to illustrate how the violent undertones of anti-immigrant rhetoric are circulated over time. By drawing attention to the previous claims of political objectivity, the poetry counterwitnesses the current attacks on migrants by bringing past transgressions into dialogue with present ones.

In the fourth and final section of the poem, “Ballot Summary of California Prop. 187,” Cody continues to explore the systematic efforts of White America to stymie the integration of Latinos. In “Prop. 187,” Cody uses the technique of redaction – a technique where one abridges a document to create a new, coherent whole – to bear light on the racial and social intentions of the 1994 bill. Proposition 187, also called the Save Our State (SOS) bill, was a 1994 state mandate that required migrant citizens to verify their status before receiving access to public healthcare and education. The vote passed on November 8, 1994, with strong support from White conservatives. Less than a week later, the bill was appealed and deemed unconstitutional.

Cody redacts and alters the judicial language of Prop 187 to reimagine the bill’s ulterior motives. For example, the proposition originally reads:

The People of California find and declare as follows:

That they have suffered and are suffering economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal aliens in this state. That they have suffered and are suffering personal injury and damage caused by the criminal conduct of illegal aliens in this state. That they have a right to the protection of their government from any person or persons entering this country unlawfully. (“California Proposition 187”)

Cody redacts the text so that its opening reads: [see [Figure 6](#)]

4. Ballot Summary of California Prop. 187₃ (1994) as a Triptych of Deduction

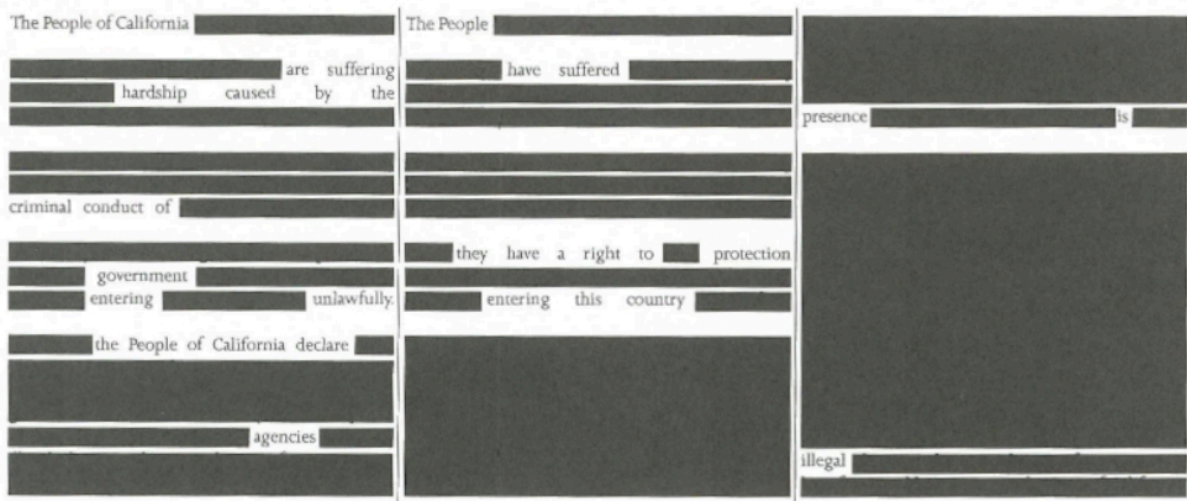


Figure 6: La Maceta, pt.2, Cody, Anthony.
Borderland Apocrypha. Courtesy of Omnidawn Publishing and the Artist.

The poetry questions the intent of the bill by striking out the sections of text and reworking them rhetorically and visually. The use of redaction shifts the focus of Proposition 187 from the political perpetrators to the victims it targets. The “they” of the poem does not scapegoat “illegals” but calls attention to the unlawful intentions of the state against its immigrant populations. Cody redacts the judicial jargon so that each stanza/section of the bill becomes more direct and targeted. The final stanza/section, “presence / is / illegal,” becomes an inditement of the bill. By focusing on the voices of the victims rather than the perpetrators, “Prop. 187” validates how U.S. policies impact migrant communities and invites readers to reconsider how political practices and policies are rooted in White extremism. Visually, the triptych structure” of “Prop 187” undermines the political and social nature of the bill as well. The blocks of redacted text and white gaps between the lines create visual borders on the page that must be crossed and considered. The blocks of redacted text also create a “walling” effect on the page, where large parts of the section are sectioned off or encased between blocks of black to produce the image of a wall. Readers are left to ponder what else lies behind political policies. Here, the experimental form suggests that physical borders are not the only obstacles migrants must cross, as political policies are effectively just another form of border walls.

Pushing Across the Borders in “Borderland Apocrypha”

In the fourth and final section of *Borderland Apocrypha*, Cody returns to the present-day turmoil at the southwest border and its impacts on individuals. Much like his previous sections, section four consists of a variety of poems that stretch across the page and force the eye to travel in unusual, but intentional, linear patterns. This interplay between form and rhetoric asks readers to rethink the borders between “us” and “them” and invites discussions of the way stories about the U.S. border consist of gaps, erasures, and silencing. For example, in the poem “A [Disintegrated] Portrait of God, as a Border,” Cody leaves large gaps of white space on the page and silences parts of his texts (121-4), while in other poems, such as “Nightjars,” he stretches his poetic lines across the page, winds them in squares, and blurs the text into illegibility (136-7). In simpler terms, by giving Latinos a voice in the telling of U.S. border histories, *Borderland Apocrypha* effectively asks readers to cross historical, political, and narrative borders. Although each poem in the section is unique in its approach, I end this essay by focusing on Cody’s final poem “Borderland Apocrypha.”

Thematically, Cody closes his collection by returning to its core concerns of ethnicity, identity, and representation. Much like other poems in the collection, the address and repetition interrogate the various “truths” that shape migrant identities. Throughout the poem, the “you” is given strong emphasis and carried from line to line and stanza to stanza: “You believe / The repetition. But don’t. [...] Recall that beneath // You, nothing is still. Recall that beneath you, are the others” (150). As in section one, the address complicates the autobiographical assumptions of the poem. The addressed “you” is both the “I” addressing themselves in the second person and someone allied with, and implicated in, the encounter. Resultingly, the experiences transcend individual experiences to a collective one. Readers are positioned as the “you” and asked to contemplate the threats against the Latino other. The poem involves the reader further by evoking violent images that feel graphic and current. For example, when describing the fear they feel from a knock at the door, the speaker recounts “A nearness unknown until an apnea arrives // Tearing you from bed for the noose, the blade, the bullet, / The fingers forcing the larynx” (150). Here, the speaker asks readers to imagine how moments of terror shape the experiences of non-White Americans. In the broader American experience, such moments could also conjure more recent images of police brutality, most notably the killing of Eric Garner in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020.

The second-person address also underpins the dangers of investing in singular truths of migrant narratives. The speaker asks readers to interrogate the “repetitions” that frame migrant narratives and invites them to consider the ways media stories push violent, self-serving narratives of migration forward:

[...] *Push*. The television and the paper will say the fault
Is active. *Push*. The scientist will diagram the earth, halved
And demonstrate why nothing remains static. *Push*. The present
Remain, here. *Push*. Here. *Push*. Here. *Push*. Leave. Return.
You exist. *Push*. You are present. *Push*. Swallow them quiet” [author’s emphasis] (151).

As in other parts of the collection, Cody employs the rhetoric of conservative media to counterwitness its fearmongering and slander of migrants. Within the lines, the repetition of “*push*” recreates the fantasies of conservative news, where viewers are invited to imagine thousands of migrants pushing across borders to replace White America. The threat of migrant invasion was a prominent talking point in right-leaning media, particularly in 2018, when journalists and pundits begin referencing a “migrant caravan” surging toward the U.S. border from Central America (Peters et. al.). With its final lines, “*Borderland Apocrypha*” asks Americans to rethink the ways they approach migration in their private lives and public encounters. Although “[t]he television and the papers will say the fault // Is active,” (151), readers are invited to see beyond singular truths of media and consider the historical, political, and social actions that shape the present. In the end, readers are asked to cross over the rigid borders of us/them narratives and contemplate an America where all citizens “exist” and “are present” (151).

Conclusion

Borderland Apocrypha demonstrates how conservative media frames the Latino experience for White Americans. Readers are asked to contemplate the ways in which public discussions shape cultural understandings of race through journalism’s reproduction of inaccurate, and often dangerous, stereotypes. By acknowledging the lived experiences of non-White individuals, the transcultural counterwitness defends marginal groups from singular and inaccurate “truths” about ethnicity.

Secondly, transcultural counterwitnesses draw attention to the ways racial violence emerges with present-day realities. Anthony Cody's rhetorical and visual reworking of public artifacts, and his juxtaposition of private and public histories, offer a reconsideration of the connections between the past and present. In turn, his collection invites readers to consider how past injustices shape the experiences of non-Whites in the United States. Thus, by shedding light on some of the darkest moments of the U.S. past, transcultural counterwitnesses contemplate new paths of American plurality.

Lastly, *Borderland Apocrypha* considers how Latino experiences are tied to broader issues of citizenship. If citizenship evokes a sense of identification and belonging, as historian Elizabeth Keyes maintains (116), then Cody's collection interrogates how U.S. citizenship is felt differently across racial and ethnic lines. By utilizing unconventional techniques such as spatial manipulation, diagramming, intertextual reworkings, inverted writing, and superscription, Anthony Cody calls attention to the private and public forces that shape an understanding of American identity and interrogates how American identity is rooted in violent "truths" that justify racism and exclusion. Thus, through their use of life experiences, transcultural counterwitnesses forge more nuanced considerations of American identity for contemporary audiences, ones founded on a deeper reflection of the U.S. past and its consequences in the present, as attested by the poems in this collection.

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