

Trash, Tools or Belongings?: Views of Material along the Mexico-U.S. Border

By Ian Rice

ABSTRACT: Since the mid-1990s, U.S. immigration policy has weaponized the harsh landscape of the Mexico-U.S. border to deter unauthorized migration. This strategy has not only increased the risks of migration, but has also resulted in tons of material discarded by migrants throughout the border region. These objects are frequently characterized as ‘trash’, justifying their removal and laying groundwork for a political alliance between ecological and anti-migratory movements. However, artistic works by J. Leigh Garcia and Tom Kiefer provoke reinterpretations of migrants’ discarded objects as tools and belongings. Drawing out the implications of these new interpretations, I deconstruct the ‘human’/ ‘nature’ and ‘human’/ ‘material’ binaries to problematize the concept of ‘trash’ and the aforementioned political alliance. Moving away from these oversimplified binaries, I advocate a shift towards an interconnected understanding of ‘human’, ‘nature’, and ‘material’.

Introduction

Migration due to wars, persecution, and economic, social, and environmental problems has increased globally, as have international efforts to reduce and control it. One region commonly associated with migration is the border between Mexico and the United States. Dividing these countries is a nearly 2,000-mile stretch, whose terrain varies between hills, deserts, mountains, rivers and beaches. The rugged landscape plays an important role in U.S. border enforcement, as anti-migratory policies like Operation Gatekeeper convert the border environment into a weapon, a geographical tool used by the U.S. to control migration.¹

Collectively called “Prevention Through Deterrence” or PTD, these border policies increased enforcement in urban areas to push migration away from cities. Migrants would be forced to cross at more rural parts of the border, so the thinking went, and would be deterred by

¹ Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 4-5.

the much more difficult and dangerous passage.² Although the usage of border geography to deter migration has been well documented, less examined is the link between PTD and the buildup of tons of material discarded by migrants along the border.³ These objects, frequently characterized as ‘trash’,⁴ and the relationship they enable between anti-migratory and environmental politics, are what I will investigate in this essay.

As a gateway to critically examining the material at the border, I refer to the artistic exhibitions of J. Leigh Garcia and Tom Kiefer. In their beautiful, powerful and inspiring work, the artists respectively offer intriguing visions of ‘trash’ as it relates to migration and the border environment.

J. Leigh Garcia is a Mexican-American artist specializing in printmaking who finds inspiration in her bicultural heritage. On one side, Garcia comes from European migrants who have resided in Texas for seven generations. On the other, she is the granddaughter of Mexican migrants, whose grandfather swam across the Rio Grande to cross into the United States. Through her artwork, Garcia explores the tension she feels between Mexican and Texan cultures and aims to “encourage awareness of our current immigration and foreign affairs policies by confronting viewers with the gruesome reality that death occurs daily on the Mexico-U.S. border.”⁵

Tom Kiefer, an American photographer based in Arizona, also makes the material effects of the U.S. migration system central to his work. While employed as a janitor in a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) processing facility, Kiefer began photographing detained migrants’

² De León, *Open Graves*, 6.

³ Lisa Meierotto, “Environmental Disruption as a Consequence of Human Migration: The Case of the U.S.-Mexico Border,” in *Migration and Disruptions: Toward a Unifying Theory of Ancient and Contemporary Migrations*, ed. Brenda J. Baker and Takeyuki Tsuda (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 186, 188.

⁴ I use quotation marks to call the term ‘trash’ into question throughout the essay.

⁵ J. Leigh Garcia, “The Violent Environments of the Mexico-U.S. Border,” *Edge Effects*, February 1, 2018, <https://edgeeffects.net/immigration-art>.

belongings that were deemed ‘non-essential’ and discarded. His exhibition *El Sueño Americano / The American Dream* showcases those belongings to “explore the humanity of those who risk their lives crossing the desert into the United States to create a personal connection for the viewer and to extend compassion and empathy to those who seek a better life.”⁶

This essay is divided into four parts. The first analyzes the artwork of J. Leigh Garcia to understand how ‘trash’ is represented in the contexts of the border, the environment, and migration. I use the concept of defamiliarization proposed by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky to show that Garcia’s art provokes a reevaluation of the concept of ‘trash’. In the second part, I demonstrate the utility of border materials through Tom Kiefer’s photography, arguing that the term ‘tool’ is appropriate to describe them. Moving forward, the third section of the essay offers yet another term, ‘belongings’, to refer to the material at the border. Finally, by developing the implications of the term ‘belongings’ with respect to the ‘human’/ ‘nature’ binary, I problematize the alliance of environmental and anti-migratory politics. Using the Poststructuralist technique of deconstruction and Ecocriticism, I conclude that an interconnected interpretation of ‘material’, ‘human’, and ‘nature’ invalidates this political alliance and the concept of ‘trash’.

I: Border material as ‘trash’

‘Trash’ is visible everywhere, from streets and houses to the ocean and in space. While it provokes a feeling of repulsion in some cases, ‘trash’ is frequently considered mundane, making it invisible, disposable, or forgettable. The theorist Viktor Shklovsky observes, “[a]fter we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about

⁶ Tom Kiefer, “El Sueño Americano / The American Dream,” T O M K I E F E R, access date March 28, 2021, <https://www.tomkiefer.com/el-sueno-americano>.

it, but we do not see it--hence we cannot say anything significant about it.”⁷ ‘Trash’ is one such commonplace object. Even though the specific items making up ‘trash’ differ, the parts are grouped together and collectively labeled ‘trash’, meaning that people become familiar with it. To formulate a new perspective about an object, then, Shklovsky proposes the technique of defamiliarization: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”⁸ Upon intensifying or varying the mode of perception, Shklovsky suggests that one can access new points of view of an object.

Although Shklovsky centers his theory in literature, his technique of defamiliarization also applies to the broader artistic world. Defamiliarization occurs when observing the work of artist J. Leigh Garcia, where common items such as gallon jugs of water become key elements that provoke a lengthier perception. For example, her serigraph *Asilo (Asylum)* depicts a migrant lying prone on top of cacti and wire fencing, partially covered with a blanket of plastic jugs. The fencing and the cacti interlace to become a bed, symbolizing a connection between U.S. immigration policy and the border landscape. Additionally, the plastic jugs that cover the person hint at a taxonomical tension: are they tools to survive, or are they ‘trash’? Whether the water jugs are survival tools or not, the viewer quickly realizes that the migrant will not rise again. The body of the person seems too comfortable amid the spiny nest, reminding that for some migrants the only asylum received is death.

In presenting this death, Garcia further defamiliarizes ‘trash’ through the medium of her work. Her artwork is physical, or rather, it has a material presence and calls attention to this fact.

⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 3rd ed., ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 9.

⁸ Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 9.

Instead of printing *Asilo (Asylum)* on paper, the artist chooses to place the design on a piece of plastic tarp. Consequently, she asks the viewer to focus on the plastic and judge the value it has (or lacks). The inspiration for this work came from the 2013 controversy of the Sacred Heart Cemetery in Texas, where the remains of more than 300 migrants were discovered “buried less than six feet underground in body bags, trash bags, plastic wrap and even a milk crate.”⁹ Given the tragic context of Garcia’s plastic-based print *Asilo (Asylum)*, the viewer begins to visualize some of the complex linkages between migration, the environment, and border ‘trash’.

Another of Garcia’s serigraphs that aids in defamiliarization is *Santo Toribio Romo Gonzalez y Los Coyotes*. This work depicts the patron saint of migrants in the middle of the desert, standing atop a mound of plastic gallon jugs encircled by coyotes. Seeing Santo Toribio not in a church but on a modern-day migrant trail draws the viewer in, which defamiliarizes the surrounding materials. In the saint’s presence, the commonplace plastic water jugs become extraordinary, even miraculous, and resist being labeled ‘trash’. By elevating the water containers to Santo Toribio’s level, Garcia frames them as a lifesaving tool, with similar importance to the patron saint’s spiritual guidance in today’s migrations. She explains, “[t]he Sonoran Desert today is littered by trails of discarded water jugs, backpacks, clothing, and rosaries left by immigrants passing through. These abandoned objects are reminders of those who have made this journey before and act as a trail for future immigrants to follow.”¹⁰ Using Santo Toribio’s presence to defamiliarize the viewer, Garcia elevates border ‘trash’ to new importance and enables an interpretation of the discarded items as survival tools.

Each of Garcia’s works strongly criticize the U.S. immigration system. In the first, the combination of the wire fencing and the cacti expose some of the risks migrants face during their

⁹ Garcia, “Violent Environments.”

¹⁰ Garcia, “Violent Environments.”

journey. The wire fencing represents the border enforcement mechanisms put in place by the U.S., while the cacti allude to PTD's geographical method of combating migration. In the second work, the circle of coyotes around Santo Toribio references the need to employ a human smuggler, called a coyote, to facilitate clandestine migration into the U.S. Coyotes may be skilled at navigating the treacherous borderlands that PTD has weaponized, but they are notorious for taking advantage of migrants. Garcia explains that "[t]he coyotes cower around Santo Toribio, who is there to protect the people they exploit."¹¹ The artist's work attributes the scale of danger along the border to U.S. border policy that impedes migration of all types.

Garcia further criticizes the U.S. migration system from an environmental perspective, through the presence of plastic jugs in both images. Her work reminds the viewer how these jugs carry the water that migrants depend on, and alludes to the border policies that push migrants towards the desert and create that very need for water. While the containers are often discarded in the borderlands by migrants, Garcia's representations of the jugs resist a simple migrant 'trash' narrative. Instead, she draws attention to the overarching political structures, where the jugs "symbolize the environmental toll of the United States' immigration system."¹² The recurrent theme of plastic across Garcia's work reminds the viewer how migration affects the border environment while also pointing to the system that is ultimately responsible.

II: Border material as tools

The artwork of Garcia defamiliarizes the objects seen daily along the border by introducing new facets of them--for example whether they have value. Similarly, one theme that Tom Kiefer's exhibition "El Sueño Americano / The American Dream" explores is the utility of border 'trash' as a survival tool. The objects displayed in the exhibition are detained migrants'

¹¹ Garcia, "Violent Environments."

¹² Garcia, "Violent Environments."

belongings, which CBP deemed unnecessary and discarded. But Kiefer pushes back against that characterization. His photo “Duct Tape Water Bottle, 2017” showcases one of the most common items found along the border: a plastic jug covered in duct tape. Instead of seeing its alleged worthlessness, Kiefer reminds the viewer of the bottle’s original purpose: carrying all-important water in arid border regions. The caption reads: “[o]ne gallon of water weighs 8.36 pounds. A bare minimum of one gallon of water per day is needed when temperatures exceed 80 degrees when physical activity is involved to avoid severe dehydration...The average number of days it takes a migrant to cross the desert is about seven.”¹³

The anthropologist and archeologist Jason De León explains that gallon-sized water containers are ubiquitous at the border because they are crucial survival tools for migrants. “In no uncertain terms, bottled water is what keeps people alive ... Migrants favor this style because its large handle and thick walls make it durable and easier to carry on long walks.”¹⁴ Additionally, De León notes that it is common to camouflage the bottles with fabric, plastic, or paint to avoid the Border Patrol.¹⁵ In Kiefer’s photo, the duct tape likely served to reinforce the bottle while camouflaging it, suggesting that this object is more appropriately classified as a tool, not ‘trash’.

Another photo of Kiefer’s, “Trail Markers”, also demonstrates the utility of the supposedly unnecessary objects. In the photo, seven yellow rubber ducks sit on top of a black box, showing off their vibrant color. The color aids migrants as they search for the most efficient route to the U.S. in a landscape with few reference points. The caption explains, “[b]rightly colored objects are placed along a path to assist those traveling behind them. These

¹³ Kiefer, “El Sueño.”

¹⁴ Jason De León, “‘Better to Be Hot than Caught’: Excavating the Conflicting Roles of Migrant Material Culture,” *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 3 (September 2012): 484, www.jstor.org/stable/23322335.

¹⁵ De León, “Better to Be Hot,” 484.

rubber ducks were used as trail markers, one of which still had a twist-tie used to fasten to a bush or tree branch.”¹⁶ Again, Kiefer exhibits the practicality of these materials, resisting their initial characterization as worthless ‘trash’.

As with the work of J. Leigh Garcia, analyzing the medium Kiefer employs to present border material illuminates important points about ‘trash’. First, his photos create a unique representation of the objects. Instead of grouping them together under a common label of ‘trash’, Kiefer uses a more focused perspective to emphasize each object’s singularity. The material that stands out is quotidian--sunglasses, tubes of toothpaste, canned tuna--but it conveys importance and necessity through this medium. Secondly, Kiefer emphasizes the importance of these objects throughout the entire collection of photographs. When seen together, the viewer realizes that these objects once traveled with migrants and may have made the difference between life and death during the crossing. The viewer can imagine the weight of the objects and the emotions experienced by those who carried them. Because of the exhibition, what was ‘trash’ to the CPB transforms into something useful and meaningful to the viewer.

While the next section will address the problematic act of creating sympathy and empathy through objects, for now it is clear from Kiefer’s artwork that border materials help migrants survive crossing attempts. Yet the various methods and tools utilized to endure the suffering of the desert have limited effectiveness. De León clarifies that “[t]he best that any migrant technique can hope to accomplish is assuage some of the suffering experienced in the desert and possibly help someone avoid an untimely death.”¹⁷

If these techniques have limited potential, it is necessary to investigate the reason, and rethink the term ‘trash’ from a higher level to observe the political structures at work. The

¹⁶ Kiefer, “El Sueño.”

¹⁷ De León, “Better to Be Hot,” 493.

research of archeologist Gabriella Soto helps to attain this goal. When she arrives at the border, she sees tons of ‘trash’, which inspire her to think about the forces creating such an accumulation. According to Soto:

Migrant objects are continually moving into and out of archaeological contexts, used by migrants, left behind accidentally or to lighten a load, later retrieved by others, transported for deposition in a landfill, or preserved. The closest analogy I can find is community responses to war or natural disasters: picking through the debris and ruins, making decisions about what can be saved or not, each choice laden with a drive to bring order to events beyond control.¹⁸

Through the lens of ruins, Soto reveals the impact that U.S. border policy has on the landscape. It is not by chance that many tons of discarded material lie in isolated regions between Mexico and the U.S., but rather a direct result of PTD pushing migrants towards dangerous terrain. Put simply, “the markers of disaster--deaths and piling ruins--are products of border security policy.”¹⁹ Therefore, U.S. immigration policy bears much responsibility for the danger of the border landscape and the need to carry tools to survive, which are ultimately discarded at that very border.

III: Border material as belongings

While one way of rethinking ‘trash’ is to see it as a survival tool, another is conceptualizing this material as migrant belongings. In this way, the objects become valuable (differentiating them from ‘trash’) and communicate an ambiguous idea of humanity. To clarify this idea, Soto describes the border objects as:

everyday things made into something “more” by their presence in such massive quantities in extremely harsh landscapes. Many times, these things seemed recently abandoned, as if the owner was just around the corner. It provoked a kind of ghostly feeling to be both

¹⁸ Gabriella Soto, “Object Afterlives and the Burden of History: Between ‘Trash’ and ‘Heritage’ in the Steps of Migrants,” *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 3 (June 17, 2018): 461, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13055>.

¹⁹ Soto, “Object Afterlives,” 461.

clearly removed and so intimately connected to the objects' absent owners, and to never know for sure what had happened.²⁰

The photographer Tom Kiefer similarly finds an emotional connection to the belongings discarded by CPB. At first, he collected superficially valuable items such as food, but quickly began saving other discarded things which he found to be significant.²¹ To him, the objects were not disposable because of their connection to humans. They were "extensions of the human body, especially in light of their owners' unknown fate."²² Instead of tools that are distinct from humanity, a lost shoe or abandoned backpack suggest a connection to a human being while emphasizing the absence of one.

However, it is necessary when considering linkages between human and object to highlight a critique of artwork that re-humanizes migrants through their discarded belongings. The purpose of this artistic style, according to academic Juanita Sundberg, is to forge connections between the viewer and those who used the objects.²³ Because the viewer can relate to using a water bottle or a pair of sunglasses, the art might evoke feelings of sympathy for migrants or inspire empathy by showing a common need. Yet the scholar Vicki Squire advises against the use of art to re-humanize migrants, because this can reproduce idealized views of them.²⁴ Garcia's and especially Kiefer's work--given his exhibition's purpose to "explore the humanity"²⁵ of migrants--might evoke dramatized ideas: a strong migrant who braves the desert to reunite with his family in the U.S.; a vulnerable and powerless person crossing through a

²⁰ Gabriella Soto, "What Migrants Leave Behind," *SAPIENS*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/mexico-border-migrant-trails/>.

²¹ Soto, "Object Afterlives," 467.

²² Soto, "Object Afterlives," 467.

²³ Juanita Sundberg, "'Trash-talk' and the Production of Quotidian Geopolitical Boundaries in the USA-Mexico Borderlands," *Social and Cultural Geography* 9, no. 8 (December 2008): 885-6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360802441424>.

²⁴ Vicki Squire, "Desert 'Trash': Posthumanism, Border Struggles, and Humanitarian Politics," *Political Geography* 39 (March 2014): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.12.003>.

²⁵ Kiefer, "El Sueño."

hazardous border region. Squire cautions against such simplified and prescriptive narratives, arguing that re-humanization “rests on problematic over- and under-investments of migrant agency in which humans are assumed either as supreme or powerless rather than as embroiled in struggles that are both messy and difficult.”²⁶

Nevertheless, both Garcia and Kiefer’s art is necessary and beneficial. It offers a glimpse into a world where the ambiguous sentiment of ‘something more’ conjured up by migrant belongings is not illogical. Furthermore, it successfully demonstrates that objects along the border are part of a complex and disorganized reality, and that the labels used to define those materials matter. Their powerful artwork even blurs the lines of where border ‘trash’ ends and ‘human subjects’ begin. As Squire explains, “‘human subjects’ are intimately related to the production of ‘objects of trash’--both in the sense that it is people who are conceived as producing waste and also in the sense that the production of waste destabilises the very order on which the category of ‘the human’ rests.”²⁷ By grappling with the complexities of border ‘trash’ Garcia and Kiefer’s art respectively invites deeper queries into how that ‘trash’ orders human existence.

IV: Problematizing ‘trash’ in political discourse

Despite the ambiguity and instability of the term ‘trash’, the word is hegemonic in government discourse. For instance, the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality runs the website Arizona Border Trash, which documents material along the border and organizes community events to collect and dispose of the ‘trash’. The site notes that border ‘trash’ is left by undocumented migrants, and characterizes the environmental impact with examples like “Strewn trash and piles”, “Loss of vegetation and wildlife” and “Vandalism, graffiti and site

²⁶ Squire, “Desert ‘Trash’,” 17.

²⁷ Squire, “Desert ‘Trash’,” 15.

damage (historical and archaeological).”²⁸ The label of ‘trash’ is also applied to border materials in federal government reports. A 2016 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Arizona report stated: “[d]rug and human smuggling also generate thousands of pounds of garbage in the form of discarded personal items, bicycles, tires, and abandoned vehicles.”²⁹ From the perspective of these organizations, the term ‘trash’ describes all types of objects discarded at the border by migrants.

As one might guess, using this term facilitates an ecological argument against migration. Describing the material at the border as ‘trash’ signals that the objects are ‘unnatural’, and often presents the ‘artificiality’ of ‘trash’ alongside a pure, ‘natural’ landscape. For example, the BLM report juxtaposes the “remote, rugged and fragile” desert and the migrant routes, which “damage native vegetation and disturb wildlife on public lands.”³⁰ This rhetoric reveals a xenophobic ecological agenda that strategically frames the desert as a victim of foreign intruders to limit unauthorized migration.

This representation of migrants is racist and dehumanizing. First, it draws on racial stereotypes with historical ties to the border, especially perceptions of Mexicans as dirty.³¹ Sundberg explains that within the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, “undocumented immigrants are produced as a category of people who behave inappropriately by leaving their intimate belongings in the wrong place.”³² Formulating that ‘trash’ is something inherently linked to undocumented migrants, therefore, is a racist assertion that intends to degrade them.

²⁸ Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, “Arizona Border Trash: About,” ADEQ, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.azbordertrash.gov/about.html>.

²⁹ Bureau of Land Management Arizona, *Southern Arizona Project Report FY 2015*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.blm.gov/documents/arizona/public-room/report/southern-arizona-project-report-fy-2015>.

³⁰ Bureau of Land Management Arizona, *Southern Arizona*.

³¹ Sundberg, “‘Trash-talk’,” 877; Lisa Meierotto, “The Blame Game on the Border: Perceptions of Environmental Degradation on the United States-Mexico Border,” *Human Organization* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 19, <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.71.1.y5708437tr680151>.

³² Sundberg, “‘Trash-talk’,” 877.

Dehumanization also emerges in this representation. An interpretation of ‘trash’ as something without value, unnatural, less than ‘human’ and ugly within a beautiful and ‘natural’ land imposes these characteristics on the people who leave objects along the border.³³

The academic Philip Cafaro and biologist Winthrop Staples III establish an ecological argument for limiting immigration to the U.S. that tries to avoid such thinly-veiled racism and dehumanization. To justify limiting migration, the authors point to the United States’ world-leading environmental footprint and contend that more U.S. citizens will only mean the expansion of a pattern of pollution.³⁴ However, there are various problems with Cafaro and Staples’ argument. The authors note that the U.S. population produces extensive pollution, and they aim to limit this quantity instead of changing the mindset and systems that facilitate it. They answer this critique in the essay, explaining that “re-engineering the world’s largest economy and changing the consumption patterns of hundreds of millions of people are immense undertakings that will be difficult, expensive and (we may assume) only partly successful.”³⁵ But, at the same time, limiting migration to the U.S. is an enormous task that appears just as difficult. Strategies such as building walls, using drones to monitor the border, instituting new laws or expanding the Border Patrol have their own complexities and ecological consequences.

Cafaro and Staples also emphasize the necessity of redoing trade deals such as NAFTA and investing more money into foreign aid.³⁶ These methods are necessary despite being challenging. The academic Priscilla Solis Ybarra expresses her concordance with the authors, but responds, “I wonder why Cafaro and Staples do not shy away from these challenges the same

³³ Squire, “Desert ‘Trash’,” 15.

³⁴ Philip Cafaro and Winthrop Staples III, “The Environmental Argument for Reducing Immigration to the United States,” *Backgrounder*, June 2009, 5, <https://cis.org/sites/cis.org/files/articles/2009/back709.pdf>.

³⁵ Cafaro and Staples III, “Reducing Immigration,” 5.

³⁶ Cafaro and Staples III, “Reducing Immigration,” 7.

way they do from the prospect of reducing consumption within U.S. boundaries. Foreign policy changes can be just as tall an order as changing U.S. rates of consumption.”³⁷ Cafaro and Staples’ work has important components, but its problems impede its success in justifying a cessation of immigration.

Yet the combination of ecological and anti-migratory politics is problematic for still another reason: it is based on the artificial separation of ‘human’ and ‘nature’. The theorist Slavoj Zizek critiques this style of ecological thinking, arguing that ecology is increasingly resistant to social change as it tries to defend an idealized version of ‘nature’ from ‘human’ actions.³⁸ But this protection actually harms the environment by not taking into account the instability of the ‘human’/ ‘nature’ binary. To apply Zizek’s point, one can think of the border region that BLM Arizona wants to protect from the ‘trash’ and impacts of migration. Immediately, difficulties emerge in defining the ‘natural’ state which ought to be protected, determining which impacts of migration are harmful, and identifying what is ‘trash’. Zizek posits that “what we need is an ecology without nature: the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature is the very notion of nature we rely on.”³⁹ Therefore, the previously noted instability of the ‘human’ marker combines with the unstable ‘nature’ marker to deconstruct the ‘human’/ ‘nature’ binary and invalidate the ecological argument against migration.

It is not necessary to share the same perspective as Zizek to understand that the aforementioned anti-migratory ecological arguments are based in a false binary and are unsound. However, problematizing the union of these political currents in this way does not signify that

³⁷ Priscilla Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife: Mexican American Literature and the Environment* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 172.

³⁸ *Examined Life*, directed by Astra Taylor (2008; Toronto: Zeitgeist Films, 2009), DVD.

³⁹ Slavoj Zizek, “Nature and Its Discontents,” *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008): 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25195185>.

global climate change should not be taken seriously. Neither does it deny or diminish the ecological and humanitarian devastation that exists on the border or the importance of regulated migration. In fact, academic Lisa Meierotto observes that “[l]arge scale migration is one of the most pressing threats to biodiversity conservation efforts today.”⁴⁰ But it is key, as she identifies, that these threats do not originate from one lone actor. Meierotto suggests that “the causes of environmental harm are not so linear, and multiple actors contribute to degradation in a number of different ways.”⁴¹ It is critical to think about the systems that regulate the border environment and their role in its degradation.

The political movements that try to protect the environment by problematizing migrants need to take into account the criticisms this essay illuminates, and consider existing PTD policies which contribute to ecological harm. Unfortunately, it is easier to call an object ‘trash’ and concentrate a critique on one actor instead of reforming the entire system. Still, this essay intends to clarify the problematic nature of doing so. Through the deconstruction of the categories of ‘human’ and ‘nature’, there are new opportunities to rethink the environment and find effective ways of advocating for it.

These epistemes and ontologies are not new. They have been part of Chicana and Latina environmentalism for generations, according to Solis Ybarra, although they acquire new importance today. She explains that “Latina/o environmentalism is inextricably linked with social justice issues in the twenty-first century as much as, if not more than, in the past.”⁴² Considering the combination of political, socioeconomic and cultural tensions that have resulted

⁴⁰ Meierotto, “Blame Game,” 14.

⁴¹ Meierotto, “Blame Game,” 19.

⁴² Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 180.

in the buildup material at the border, it is clear that any attempt to separate ecology from ‘the human’ and from social justice will not last.⁴³

I return to the work of Garcia, where ‘humans’, ‘objects’, and ‘nature’ are visibly and symbolically interlaced in the borderlands. Her art echoes the powerful Latinx environmentalism discussed by Solis Ybarra, forefronting “social and political change to end this mass displacement and loss of life.”⁴⁴ In the space of her artwork, ‘the material’, ‘the human’, and ‘the natural’ break free from their categories. They become interwoven, challenging hegemonic notions of the U.S. immigration system and emphasizing the need to critique border ‘trash’, not merely dispose of it.

⁴³ Solis Ybarra, *Writing the Goodlife*, 187.

⁴⁴ Garcia, “Violent Environments.”

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