



HELL OR HIGH WATER: MIGRANT ENCOUNTERS WITH NATURE ALONG THE ROUTE IN *SANCTUARY* AND *WE ARE NOT FROM HERE*¹

Lena Elipe Gutiérrez
Universidad de Oviedo

The aim of this paper is to analyze the representation of material and discursive engagements between the migrant population and the natural environment in the Young Adult novels *Sanctuary* (2020) and *We Are Not from Here* (2020). It initially takes into account the contributions of material ecofeminism in the understanding of human and nonhuman forms of agency, and then moves on to focus on the novels in their depiction of the character's relations with the natural landscape along the migratory journey in their flight towards the US-Mexico border. These encounters with natural elements such as water, earth or fire transform the identity of the adolescent protagonists altering their perception of themselves and their position in society. The interchange between diverse forms of nature allows for the emergence of a renewed sense of belonging and self in the characters from the novels. Thus, this paper analyzes the multiple possibilities that arise from the interaction among more-than-human

¹This research was founded by the “Severo Ochoa” doctoral fellowship granted by the Principality of Asturias in the year 2021-2022. The author wishes as well to acknowledge her participation in the funded Research Project PID2019-109565RB-I00/AEI.

entities and the way in which it positively and negatively affects not only the material bodies of the protagonists but also the identities ascribed to those bodies.

Keywords: Latin American migration; ecofeminism; migratory landscape; Young Adult Literature; US-Mexico border

1. Introduction

Nature as a philosophical concept and a cultural repository of norms and moralism has been historically used for the oppression of women, people of color, indigenous groups, queer individuals, and the working and lower classes. The stereotypical association of social marginal collectives with the natural world has been used to justify their disassociation from rationality, subjectivity, and agency, which are commonly identified as White male characteristics. There is no wonder that there has been a long tradition of feminist theorists—most notably Simone de Beauvoir, Sherry Otner, Gayle Rubin, and Judith Butler—that aim at disentangling the idea of ‘woman’ from ‘nature,’ transporting the identity and subjectivity of women from the realm of nature to that of culture. However, in recent times feminist authors such as Karen Barad, Moira Gatens, Stacy Alaimo and Claire Colebrook, among others, have gradually shifted the focus to the material study of bodies and the relationships established between human and more-than-human entities. This change of perspective is enclosed within the field of ecofeminism, which has been described as follows: “[P]olitically engaged discourse that analyzes the conceptual connections between the manipulation of women and the nonhuman” (Buell et al. 2011, 425). Ecofeminism highlights the historic, cultural, and social exploitation and domination of women and nature by patriarchal powers. Among the various trends within this political and academic movement—cultural ecofeminism, rationalist ecofeminism, dialectal ecofeminism—the current of material ecofeminism provides the most stimulating understanding of the various ways in which the discursive and the material interact

in the constitution of bodies as contrasting and intermingling elements that create reality.

The material turn in feminist theory does not proclaim that nature exists prior to discourse. Instead, there is an interest in studying materiality as a concept composed of various forms of power and knowledge, both cultural and natural. The aim is to move towards and “onto-epistem-ology,” in Barad’s terms, which can be understood as the study of practices of knowing (2003, 829). This movement emphasizes the interconnection between elements that have been usually presented as dichotomous: natural/cultural and material/discursive. Practices of knowing and being cannot be separated, since they are mutually implicated: we *know* because we *are* of the world. The use of material ecofeminism allows us to emphasize the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces that operate in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts. Stacy Alaimo situates human bodies within specific environmental contexts, as she understands human processes and events as inseparable from specific biophysical relations and interconnections. The ecofeminist author encourages us to inhabit what she has defined as “trans-corporeality,” that is, “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (2008, 238). This idea facilitates the movement across human and nonhuman bodies and reveals the interconnections between all forms of nature. In Alaimo’s words: “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the ‘environment.’ [...] ‘nature’ is always as close as one’s own skin” (2008, 238). Therefore, the entanglement of all kinds of matter allows us to acknowledge the fact that we, as humans, *are* nature. We are organic, alive and agentic just like that other nonhuman nature that we tend to regard as passive and immutable. We transform and are transformed, influence and are influenced, define and are defined by all the elements that surround us.

One of the main struggles of material ecofeminism has been defining and understanding the agency of nature. Sociologists Michael Callon and John Law’s theory of *hybrid collectif* (1997)

posits that agency is a property created by the interaction of heterogenous components, known as actants, which are sources of action that may be human or non-human. This idea implies that all kinds of matter, either natural or artificial, do not act in isolation, rather they have complex relations and interactions across time and space. As such, those relationships are what perform agency. According to them, there is no difference between the person and the network of entities which act through that given person. Therefore, agency cannot exist in a vacuum, it needs of the actants and, furthermore, it needs those actants to interact. Entities of all kinds are, thus, the result of the relations that made them up; they are “compound realities, the product of a process of composition” (Callon and Law 1997, 140). Similarly, philosopher Carolyn Merchant in her 1989 work *Ecological Revolutions*, reaffirms the idea that nature is a historical actor that can challenge the discursive construction through which it is understood (7). By placing humans and nonhumans in the historical stage, Merchant provides a better understanding of the agency of nonhuman nature. In her words: “The relation between humans and the nonhuman world is thus reciprocal. Humans adapt to nature’s environmental conditions; but when humans alter their surroundings, nature responds through ecological changes” (1989, 8). From this ecocritical point of view, entities and their agency can be understood as network effects that cannot be separated from their specific historical context. When the US government implemented the policy of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) in 1994 funneling thousands of migrant people to remote areas of the desert and the mountains, they put into motion a manufactured *hybrid collectif* that has agency of its own.² As anthropologist Jason De León has explained, the idea was to create

²Prevention Through Deterrence is a US immigration enforcement strategy implemented along the southern border in the mid 1990s. It increased security in unauthorized crossing areas near urban ports of entry in an attempt to shift undocumented border crossings into remote border regions such as the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. Whilst this strategy has failed to actually deter north-bound crossers, it has managed to take the lives of at least 3,200 people in their journey through Arizona (Undocumented Migration Project).

a wall of deterrence that is “equal parts human, animal, plant, object, geography, temperature, and unknown” (2015, 39). It can be seen that the US is strategically using nature’s agentic capacities to weaponize the environment of the border and use it against migrant crossers.

Latinx literature has long been concerned with the engagement of humans and more-than humans in the specific context of the US-Mexico border space. Already in the 1980s we could see the emergence of Chicana writers and scholars, most notably Gloria Anzaldúa with her pinnacle work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), writing from their experiences inhabiting the particular landscape of the borderlands and how this entanglement with the territory affected their identity. In the 1990s rising concerns regarding the increase usage of pesticides and other toxic substances in the Southwestern regions of the US-Mexico border—especially after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the US, Mexico, and Canada—prompted the appearance of Latinx authors that used their works to raise awareness about the socioenvironmental justice struggle. Cherríe Moraga, Helena María Viramontes and Ana Castillo are only an example of this literary movement in the last decade of the 20th century in which characters and narratives are based on the toxic experiences of the US Southwest (Pérez Ramos 2018, 129). Similarly, novels accounting the (undocumented) migrant experiences and its interconnectedness with polluted and dangerous landscapes can also be found from the 1990s onwards. Ito Romo’s *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000) and Lucha Corpi with *Cactus Blood* (1995) present “eco-cosmopolitan migrant/strangers” (Pérez Ramos 2020, 44) whose stories of illegality are closely linked to their inhabiting of polluted spaces. Therefore, “through literature by and about the Chicana/o community it is thus possible to see how toxicity and water pollution, environmental degradation, and cultural deterioration are interlinked in the US Southwest and affect the physical and mental integrity of Chicana/os” (Pérez Ramos 2018, 130). This mistreatment of the natural landscape of the borderlands reflects the disregard that official authorities have for those who inhabit and navigate such territories. Most recently, Latina Young Adult Literature authors such as Jenny Torres

Sánchez, Alexandra Díaz and Aida Salazar, among others, have been using this literary genre as a tool to give an account of the migrant experience of unaccompanied minors in their quest towards the US as they wrestle with the harsh environmental conditions that the US is using at their advantage.

The novels analyzed in this article—*Sanctuary* (2020) by Paola Mendoza and Abby Sher, and *We Are Not from Here* (2020) by Jenny Torres Sánchez—provide their readers with a detailed and, often brutal, account of the dangerous journey that thousands of unaccompanied children undergo from Latin American countries towards the United States. *Sanctuary* introduces us to a 2032 dystopian society in which a supremacist President—of whom we do not know the name—commands a massive deportation of undocumented migrants. The protagonist, Vali, her mom and her little brother, Ernie, are forced to leave the country to establish themselves with their aunt Luna in California, as the state seceded from the rest of the US, hence becoming a sanctuary state for the migrant population. After their mother is arrested at the bus station, Vali and Ernie must continue with a journey in which they are going to go through deserts and rivers, escape from gangs and Border Patrol and witness death, violence and suffering in a desperate attempt to find safety. Similarly, in *We Are Not from Here* Pequeña and her friends Pulga and Chico flee Guatemala as they find themselves involved in a local gang. In order to reach the border, they must cross countries, jump on top of freights and spend whole days trekking without food or water only to end up disoriented in the desert before entering the US. As the novels portray with their protagonists and their companions, during this hazardous flight migrant people sleep under the open sky or inside caves, they drink rainwater or from natural springs, they hide from *la migra* in nature, they traverse deserts and mountains, or they go through the river to reach their destination in the north.³ All of this brings about marginal and illegal forms of economy and movement in which humans and nonhumans alike participate. This further permits the

³*La migra* is the name given to the Border Patrol by the migrant population.

creation of extraordinary bonds that can only be described within the migratory process.

2. Migrant Engagements with the Natural Space

The environment plays a fundamental role in the way we feel and in our cognitive understanding regarding how we feel about that environment we are surrounded by (Weik von Mossner 2018, 55). The migratory context is, therefore, particularly instructive and interesting to study from an ecocritical point of view, precisely because of the intense influence of nature on the body and the mind of those that navigate the migratory space. Philosopher Jane Bennett encourages us to think about the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations as they have the capacity to aid or destroy us (2010, 12). In *Sanctuary* and *We Are Not from Here*, the characters' engagements with natural elements such as water, earth or fire do not only affect their bodies, the materiality and physicality of them, but also serve to account for their state of mind and their emotional and psychological understanding and reconfiguration of themselves and their position in society after experiencing the migratory process.

In the novels at hand, water is the main element with which the protagonists connect. It is a powerful force present all along the stories and determining the ways in which they fuse with the space, as well as how they make sense to what is happening to them. The main character of *Sanctuary*, Vali, has always been afraid of water, even though her father tried to teach her to swim in the Pacific Ocean. In spite of her fear, she has the courage to cross the Colorado River into California but, once she has settled down with her Tía Luna, she is convinced that part of her has remained in the water. In her dreams, she is drowning and takes with her to the seabed all those she loves. At the end of her journey, she tries to reconcile with her memory by going back with Malakas—the Filipino teenage boy that accompanies her and her brother—to the shore where they entered California. The young girl understands that water, apart from being dangerous and treacherous, is also a healing element. Her mother used to tell her that life comes from water: “We were

each born in a sac of water, she told us. We were made of water” (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 278). A new Vali was born from her crossing of the Colorado River: resilient, stronger and braver; but also hurt, tired and traumatized. However, it is important to remember that this element is malleable, free of restrictions and rules and that is why, like the water, the protagonist might be able to adapt to this new life and, hopefully, heal. This is a paramount idea precisely because water can be used to clean wounds. In the Catholic religion it washes away the original sin, and in the Muslim world it is a mandatory element in the Islamic rite of prayer, as it is used for the removal of impurities through the ablution. Similarly, we come across the work of the Mexican artist and painter Ana Teresa Fernández, who uses water in most of her collections and creations, *Aquarius* being the one in which she explicitly combines this natural element with migration.⁴ These are only some of the examples that demonstrate the ways in which water is understood as a purifying and assuaging element across diverse cultures, artistic expressions, and faiths.

With regards to migration across rivers and seas, it can be understood as a way of rebirth and healing. That is why Vali has the imperative necessity to go back to the water from which she emerged and reconcile with her past whilst she tries to accept the

⁴*Aquarius* belongs to the collection entitled *Ablution* (2010). In this work we see a migrant woman washing her hair in the waters of a US shore with the shadow of the bars that delineate the border between one nation and the other at the back of the image: <https://anateresafernandez.com/ablution/ab01/>. The blending of water and migration is common in the work of the Mexican hyperrealist painter, as seen in *Untitled* (2013), in which a woman with a black dress and *stilettos* mops the floor next to the fence that serves as the barrier between the US and Mexico: <https://anateresafernandez.com/pressing-matters/pmatters01/>. This combination can also be found in her work *Foreign Bodies* (2013), where the sea and the beach are present: <https://anateresafernandez.com/foreign-bodies-paintings/>. Similarly, in 2018 she created a whole collection in relation to migration in the Mediterranean Sea with the title *Of Bodies and Borders*: <https://anateresafernandez.com/of-bodies-borders-2/>.

upcoming future. Since the former Vali remains in that water, the girl needs to return to the Colorado River to conclude such a traumatic and painful chapter of her life. The river calls her in dreams, as it is in those waters where she experiences freedom for the first time since she left her home: “There was only the burbling sound of this amazing underwater universe now. This other existence where everything and everyone was suspended and free” (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 278), reflects the protagonist while she is crossing to California. In the water she can suspend all the weight that she has been carrying with her in the journey and during all those years she has lived with a fake identity embedded under her skin.⁵ Likewise, just like Rachel Carson described in her work *The Sea around Us* (1951, 147), water has a unifying effect that can connect us to the other shore and allows us to be in contact with other beings and other creatures. It is an essential element for all kinds of nature—human and nonhuman. This is precisely the reason why Vali feels more in contact than ever with the environment and with herself:

Whether or not I had the skills to stay afloat, I felt like there was a greater current moving me forward. Maybe connected to the sun and the moon or the magical weightlessness of everything floating, gliding, compelling us forward. [...] Because we were all woven from the same thread. Braided together in an intricate pattern. It was only on land that humans could draw all these boundaries and build these gigantic walls. (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 277)

In those waters Vali inhabits Alaimo’s trans-corporeality, as her body becomes a more-than-human entity able to connect with all the nature that surrounds her. This approach calls attention to the active participation of humans as part of the phenomena that takes place within the world. Therefore, Vali is not an external knower through which representations happen, rather she is another element taking part in the inter and intra-activity of the environment.

⁵In the 2032 dystopian society in *Sanctuary*, all US citizens have a chip inserted under their wrist with personal information. Vali and her mother, as undocumented residents, have counterfeit chips with someone else’s identity on them.

Similarly, in *We Are Not from Here* there are numerous instances in which the element of water has importance in the story. Pequeña often uses magical realism as a form of dissociation to evade from her immediate reality. This teenage girl escapes to imaginary worlds filled with nature, fire, spiders, and water as an unconscious mechanism to process all the trauma she is being exposed to, not only along the journey, but also at home as a consequence of Rey's—a gangster from her town—rapes and the resulting pregnancy. There is a pivotal scene in the novel when she suffers a dissociative episode while she is giving birth to the baby. At that moment, the protagonist witnesses the flooding of the room in which she is in and hides in that imaginary water from the smell of blood, fluid and life that emanates from her body:

I close my eyes, and there I find it, the imaginary door, the one that leads me somewhere else, to another world. I can hear the water—rushing, cascading all around me as I stand on rocks and fling my body into the air, leaping toward beautiful water. My body is free, and light, and mine. Just mine. I plunge into that water, clear and cold. Washing away everything—all memory, all blame. All pain. The child cries. My eyes flutter open, against my will, as if his cries demand I stay *here*, in this reality. *No*, I answer, and I picture the water again, see myself submerged in it [...] I focus on the water. Only the water. When I open my eyes again, the water has followed me here. It floods the floor and trickles like sweat from the walls. [...] I feel my bed becomes dislodged from the floor. I feel it lift and float as the water continues filling the room. (Torres Sánchez 2020, 19)

Lyn Di Iorio Sandín studies the ways in which magical realism can be useful to understand traumatic processes in characters such as Pequeña. Her theory pays attention to the disclosure of experiences in which certain subjectivities—Holocaust survivors, victims of abuse, rape or incest, and colonial and postcolonial subjects—experience continued psychic distress (Di Iorio Sandín 2012, 20). According to trauma theory, the traumatized person can only start to heal when they are able to tell their traumatic story to other people. It emphasizes the importance and the therapeutic nature of narrative as a means to have a better understanding of the trauma and start the recovery process. This literary style is, in this case, the

sign that certain discursive formations have been repressed and endure in the traumatic memory but cannot be completely reconstructed. Those moments of magical realism can be, therefore, catalysts of the trauma that cannot be articulated.

According to Di Iorio Sandín, the main indicator that trauma cannot be adequately adjusted to discursive schemes is through episodes of dissociation, as it happens in the case of Pequeña in *We Are Not from Here*. In the words of Di Iorio Sandín: “Dissociation [...] is a productive psychic strategy for those suffering from severe trauma, as it protects them from some of the damage of the original event, until they are able to work out a narrative about the trauma” (2012, 21). This way, Torres Sánchez uses magical realism to portray the fact that Pequeña is overwhelmed by a traumatic experience that she is unable to understand or articulate. It is in these disruptions of magical realism that we can see the intermingling of the discursive and the material in the creation of reality. Rather than existing as a dichotomy, both elements interact in the constitution of bodies. Donna Haraway’s formulation of the ‘material discursive’ proposes to consider nature as a commonplace to which we resort to “order our discourse, [and] to compose our memory” (2008, 159). Water, and nonhuman nature in general, serve the purpose of protecting Pequeña from her reality and from the fear she experiences when Rey rapes her, when she is having the baby, when she goes on board of *La Bestia*,⁶ or when she has to hide from the Border Patrol in the bushes: “I stare at the road, waiting for water to come rushing down the streets. To carry me away” (Torres Sánchez 2020, 103), says Pequeña. Moreover, these disruptions of magical

⁶*La Bestia* (The Beast) refers to a network of Mexican freight trains that carry fuel, materials and other goods throughout the Mexican railroads. However, it has also become the cheapest means of transport used by the migrant population from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to reach the United States. The physical risks of riding these trains are incalculable, dismemberment being the most common consequence. The anthropologist Jason De León describes *La Bestia* in the following terms: [T]he Mexican cargo trains that are equal parts free transportation and potential human meat grinder” (2019, 105).

realism help readers to notice that the protagonist shows signs of a trauma that will leave an emotional scar.

Another important element along the stories is earth. Both novels present scenes in which the protagonists bear witness to the death of some of their friends. In those instances in which they bury their companions, they are returning them to the bowels of the earth so that they can have a dignified rest. Regarding Vali in *Sanctuary*, there are two moments in which the protagonist releases all her energy digging up the soil with her own hands as a way to feel the humidity and the rocks scratching her skin. Firstly, she does it when Tomas, the four-year-old child that was with her and her brother, Ernie, in the meat truck in New York, dies in a mud puddle. She kneels and starts to toss soil in an attempt to create a grave for Tomas:

I got on my knees and started trying to paw through the dirt to dig a grave for little Tomas [...] I couldn't tell if Ernie knew what I was doing or not, but he joined me—his face still a dripping storm cloud as we pulled apart clumps of soggy scrub and weeds. If we hit a large rock or knot of roots, we dug in deeper and scraped even harder. I just needed to keep on tearing away at this ground. To feel something sharp or cold or dirty. Anything besides this obliterating death. (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 212)

In that moment Vali is surrounded by death, desperation and the disconsolate crying of a mother that has just lost her child. The teenage protagonist resorts to the earth and nature as she tries to channel all the emotions that rush through her body and feel, at least for a moment, the vitality of the natural environment. She directs her rage toward creating a new home so that little Tomas can be buried inside the natural floor and receive there the shelter and the refuge he did not have on the outside world. This scene of Vali's attempt to inter the body of the four-year-old has a parallel in *We Are Not from Here*, where Pequeña's cousin Pulga throws dirt in the coffin of their friend Chico when he is buried in a shelter in Mexico: "I am throwing dirt in a hole in the ground, and each particle of soil that falls is a heavy weight in my heart. How can I leave him here? But I do, we do. I throw more and more dirt on him. We pile it on and on and on. All that dirt. Until he is deep in the earth, like he never

existed” (Torres Sánchez 2020, 239). Notwithstanding, in Pulga’s case this natural element has negative connotations. The boy feels guilty, as he is burying his best friend in a faraway land where he does not belong.

As stated before, Vali in *Sanctuary* resorts to the element of earth a second time at Tía Luna’s. Once she is in California, the girl spends long afternoons feeling the soil and the stones between her fingers and reflecting on her past and her future. Vali wonders how to continue her life journey after the migratory experience and after her mother was detained by the Deportation Force—a body of immigration agents in the novel that resemble Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—in the bus station before leaving Vermont:

I don’t know what exactly I’m looking for as I kneel down and start pawing through the dirt. The stems pop off quickly, leaving short, stringy roots behind. The branches poke and scratch me as I try to burrow down. I pull out clumps of grass and weeds. Tear open knots of twisty, dry roots. When I hit a rock, I scrape even harder. My fingernails are soon caked in mud and my fingertips are shredding, but I keep going. I just need to feel something sharp or cold or dirty. It’s just, I feel like I’m fragmented, displaced. (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 294)

Vali once again goes back to the earth, as she associates it with life and fertility. As such, the novel emphasizes the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces that operate in the human body.

Callon and Law affirm that entities of all kinds can be understood as networks whose identities are crafted through processes of transformation, compromise and negotiation (1997, 171). In this interaction with the element of earth Vali is able to recompose her understanding of herself and the new place where she has to restart her life. Once she has settled in her destination, she feels strange, which awakens in her a sentiment of rejection towards the new home. Vali disagrees with the assemblies and committees where her aunt Luna participates, as she perceives them as too simplistic and unable to come up with real solutions for the thousands of people that are still trying to find refuge in the sanctuary of California. Similarly, she does not stand having trivial conversations or eating without thinking about how much that food

and water would be needed by those who are fighting to survive the journey. Consequently, nonhuman nature and its elements become, once more, catalysts of trauma through which the protagonists reconstruct themselves after the migrant journey.

The aforementioned philosopher Jane Bennett (2010), affirms that there is vitality in more-than-human matter which permeates us to reconceptualize our position in the world. According to Callon and Law, the idea of society is better understood as “a collective association of human and non-human entities” (1997, 178). Therefore, in this new post-migratory context in which Vali has to continue with her life it is through the element of earth that she is connected to the environment in which she lives, reminding her that she is still alive, hence the need to keep fighting. The protagonist in *Sanctuary* kneels on the ground to take from that soil that she is tearing apart the necessary strength and determination to continue working for her goals: finding her mother, taking care of her brother Ernie, and healing herself. After Tomas’ death, Vali recites a poem that highlights this bond that she has established with nature along her flight: “*Intentaron enterrarnos. No sabían que éramos semillas [...] They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds*” (Mendoza and Sher 2020, 213).⁷ The girl engages with the natural world surrounding her in an attempt to understand what she has been through during the migratory process.

⁷This line is a variation of the epitaph written by the Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal to the guerrilla Adolfo Báez Bone, who participated in the Nicaraguan Revolution in opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in 1954. Báez Bone took up exile, went to jail and was finally assassinated while fighting for his political convictions. The original poem by Cardenal reads as follows:

Te mataron y no nos dijeron dónde enterraron tu cuerpo,
 Pero desde entonces todo el territorio nacional es tu sepulcro;
 o más bien; en cada palmo del territorio nacional en que no está tu cuerpo,
 tú resucitaste.
 Creyeron que te mataban con una orden de ¡fuego!
 Creyeron que te enterraban
 y lo que hacían era enterrar una semilla.

Somehow, along the journey both protagonists experience all the natural elements—they are washed by water, stained by soil, burnt by the sun, swayed by the wind—and it is the combination of all of them that prompts Vali and Pequeña to become new people. The migrant population suffers a process of dehumanization and animalization that transforms them into a mere body that migrates, travels and crosses borders. This erases and blurs the barriers between human nature and nonhuman nature. Because of this, human supremacy is removed and gives rise to a unique fusion between material elements that is difficult to understand outside the migrant contexts. Therefore, along the trail, migrants have to adapt to the demands of the natural space they are immersed in. As expressed by Vali, just like seeds, both adolescents go to the root of their identities, get soaked and covered by all nature that surrounds them and are born again, as new subjectivities profoundly marked by the migratory process. It is interesting to see that in *We Are Not from Here*, Pequeña was actually an affectionate nickname given to the protagonist, but her real name is Flor: “You cannot forget who you are. [...] They will try to erase you. But you must always remember. Eres Flor”, tells her Soledad, the owner of a refuge in Mexico, when the young girl acknowledges for the first time in the novel what her real name is (Torres Sánchez 2020, 208). This way, when Soledad’s sister, Marta, rescues Pequeña from the Sonoran Desert and manages to take her to her house in the United States, the girl wants to leave Pequeña behind and become Flor, as she feels that deep inside her real name defines her better after all what she has undergone:

I feel a small bit of relief in my chest, like a long-held breath finally being released. And I see inside my chest, dark and empty, but I see a glow come from a small space within that grows bigger and brighter. It’s a flower bud and I watch as it opens up, as luminous petals unfurl. More and more petals, growing larger, taking up more space, filling my whole chest. With life. With hope. (Torres Sánchez 2020, 337)

Pequeña fuses with nature on multiple occasions and, mostly, she bathes in the water that covers her whenever she needs to escape and disappear. All this makes the Flor inside her emerge. Her real name highlights the way in which identity is not static or fixed, but rather created through ongoing relations and connections between all the

entities that conform the world. Anthropologist Vicki Kirby complicates the locatability of human identity understood as an enclosed product. According to her, identity is inherently unstable and dispersed (1997, 141). It is precisely the complex relation between the natural environment and the protagonists what brings about a change in their identities and in their understanding of themselves. Not only were they within nature, but they were part of that nature, as the name of Flor reflects. In the words of Karen Barad: “[W]e are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (2008, 146). As such, Pequeña and Vali leave the migratory process renewed and transformed. Even though they are completely traumatized and hurt, both girls have also become resilient and stronger. Hopefully, this experience will help them to find a purpose where to invest all the potential they carry inside them.

Nonetheless, through the character of Pulga Torres Sánchez portrays a more pessimistic—and, somehow, more realistic—side of migration. Despite experiencing a process similar to the female protagonists’, the boy does not manage to overcome the situation and become stronger. Instead, Pulga remains completely downhearted because of what he had to go through and realizes that life is not full of dreams and colors as he used to think. When his aunt takes him out of the detention facility where he was staying after being found in the desert, the only thing he wants is to recover and believe that, maybe with time, he will be able to heal the wounds from the journey: “My heart thunders in my chest; it shakes and trembles and gasps for air. It reminds me I am alive. It reminds me who I am. It reminds me I want to live. And that maybe, I *will* make it” (Torres Sánchez 2020, 344). Although he manages to wake his heart up from the long lethargy and agony it was immersed in and starts to think about his future recovery, it is clear that his spirit is not the same as Vali and Pequeña’s. This can result from the fact that, unlike the girls, Pulga does not relate with the element of water, but with fire instead. Along the novel, the boy describes numerous images of this: “Ahead I can see other migrants jumping, like bodies from a burning building,” says Pulga once they had to jump from top of *La Bestia* (Torres Sánchez 2020, 189). Moreover, he constantly talks about the way in which the sun and the blazing steel

burn his skin and flesh: “I feel sweat trickling along my scalp, down my face, falling into and burning my eyes” (Torres Sánchez 2020, 196). It is worth mentioning that all this process begins after Chico and him witness the murder of a neighbor at the hands of Rey’s gang and decide to burn their clothes in the backyard to erase all evidence of their presence in the scene: “‘Get the matches,’ I tell [Chico]. And when he comes back with them in hand, we go out to the backyard and build a small fire. It flickers and glows an eerie orange as it consumes the plastic bag and feeds on the clothes inside. We watch it burn” (Torres Sánchez 2020, 40). The migratory experience of these 14 and 15-year-old boys will emerge from that fire, and, that same element will be the one to determine the following journey and what happens to them. In fact, Chico dies wearing the same T-shirt as the day Don Felicio was killed, as he decides to rescue it before throwing the bag to the bonfire and keeps it in his backpack. It is already an indication that, even though both fire and water can purify, the latter is a symbol of life that will nurture Vali and Pequeña, whereas Pulga’s encounter with fire will burn him to ashes. He no longer recognizes himself and does not know where to start the healing of the wounds left by the migrant trail.

3. Concluding Remarks

Throughout the two novels analyzed in this article, the enormous impact that the natural elements have on the protagonists and their companions can be seen. Both stories portray forms of interconnection and interchange between human and nonhuman forms of matter and nature in the complex migratory context. The specific circumstances of migration provide ground for a renewed understanding of the ongoing relations and processes that give rise to this movement across bodies of which Alaimo and Barad, among others, talk about. Through the use of an ecofeminist perspective, we can highlight the connections established between the characters and the natural environment they navigate along the journey. Traumatic memory and narrative memory coexist in those people that have experienced trauma. It is the use of magic, emotions, dreams, superstition and nightmares what might help the protagonists and their companions to verbalize what they are unable

to tell in a realist manner. Thus, magical realism becomes a useful narrative device to express the experiences of characters such as Pequeña and the others, as it has the ability to represent “a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement” (Boehmer 1995, 235). The authors decide to use those moments of magical realism to connect Vali, Pequeña and Pulga with nature and with the landscape that surrounds them, showing the multiple possibilities that emerge from that conjunction between natural elements that coexist in the same space at the same time. Furthermore, there is a political dimension in material feminism. Stacy Alaimo argues that “[p]olitical decisions are scripted onto material bodies; these scripts have consequences that demand a political response on the part of those whose bodies are scripted” (2008, 8). The deaths, the injuries, and the physical and emotional trauma inflicted upon the bodies of Latin American border-crossers is the material result of a series of political decisions. Therefore, there is an interface between the technological, the political, the human and the natural in the escalation of border enforcement along the US-Mexico frontier.

Feminist philosopher Moira Gatens does not conceive the identity of the body as definite, for it is a ceaseless interchange with its environment: “[T]he human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies” (1996, 110). This process can be perceived in the characters in *Sanctuary* and *We Are Not from Here*. They resort to their natural surroundings, both in material and discursive ways, to reformulate their identities. Not only are they profoundly marked by their encounters with nature, but they also use the elements as catalysts for their trauma. Through the analysis of characters such as Vali, Pequeña and Pulga it can be highlighted that the human body and the identity ascribed to that body is not static, as it is constantly altered by its interactions with other entities. These encounters with the environment are not necessarily positive, as some may result in disease, illness, trauma or even death. However, in spite of the effect that these interconnections may have on these children, they alter and transform the bodies that take part in that process.

References

- Alaimo, Stacy. 2008. "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 237-264.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1987) 2007. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs* 28.3: 801-831.
- . 2008. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 120-154.
- De Le, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Boehmer, Elleke. 1995. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buell, Lawrence, Ursula Heise, and Karen Thornber. 2011. "Literature and Environment." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36: 417-440.
- Callon, Michael and John Law. 1997. "After the Individual in Society: Lessons from Science, Technology and Society." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 22.2: 165-182.
- Carson, Rachel. 1951. *The Sea around Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corpi, Lucha. (1995) 2009. *Cactus Blood*. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying in the Migrant Trail*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- . 2019. “‘Como me duele’: Undocumented Central American Bodies in Motion.” *The Border and Its Bodies. The Embodiment of Risk along the U.S.-Mexico Line*. Eds. Thomas Sheridan and Randall McGuire. Tucson: University of Arizona Press: 99-124.
- Di Iorio Sandín, Lyn. 2012. “Trauma, Magic, and Genealogy: Moments of Magical Realism in *Daughters of Stone* by Dhalma Llanos-Figueroa and *The Autobiography of My Mother* by Jamaica Kincaid.” *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*. Eds. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez. New York: Palgrave MacMillan: 19-38.
- Gatens, Moira. 1996. *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*. London: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. “Otherworldly Conversations, Terrain, Topics, Local Terms.” *Material Feminisms*. Eds. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 157-187.
- Kirby, Vicki. 1997. *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Mendoza, Paola, and Abby Sher. 2020. *Sanctuary*. New York: Putnam.
- Merchant, Carolyn. 1989. *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Pérez Ramos, M^a Isabel. 2018. “Lands of Entrapment: Environmental Health and Well-Being in Literature about the US Southwest and Chicana/o Communities.” *MELUS*, 43: 129-150.
- .2020. “Eco-Cosmopolitan Strangers: Migration, Toxicity and Vulnerability in the US-Mexico Bordere through a Revision of Lucha Corpi’s *Cactus Blood*.” *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 81: 43-59.

Romo, Ito. 2000. *El Puente/The Bridge*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Torres Sánchez, Jenny. 2020. *We Are Not from Here*. New York: Philomel Books.

Undocumented Migration Project. Web.

<https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/background> [Accessed on May 2, 2023].

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. 2018. "From Nostalgic Longing to Solastalgic Distress: A Cognitive Approach to *Love in the Anthropocene*." *Affective Ecocriticism*. Eds. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press: 51-70.

Received: January 27, 2023

Revised version accepted: June 6, 2023

