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“The Radio Said They Were Just Deportees”: From Border Necropolitics to Transformative Grief in Tim Z. Hernandez’s *All They Will Call You* (2017)

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Abstract: Just as necropower discriminates between those who can and those who cannot live, post-mortem circumstances are explicitly affected by an irrefutable gentrification of memory and grievability. Drawing on the political dimension of mourning and on the concept of slow death, this paper proposes a necropolitical reading of *All They Will Call You* (2017), where Tim Z. Hernandez revisits the 1948 plane crash that killed 28 Mexican deportees at Los Gatos (California) and the subsequent oblivion that prevented their memorialisation except for a mass grave containing their remains and a protest song (“Deportees”) composed by Woody Guthrie. My analysis focuses on Hernandez’s attempts at dismantling the tropes of criminality and expendability that Latino immigrants are associated with as a result of their racialised vulnerability, which are distinctively aggravated in border contexts. Excavating in the background stories of these deportees seems to me an ironic contestation to the failed forensic work that left them unnamed and unritualised for seven decades. And, at the same time, I contend that, in line with the work of many activists and artists in the US–Mexico border, Hernandez mobilises solidarity while transforming our perception of migrant bare lives into one of migrant agency.

Keywords: border studies; necropolitics; thanatic ethics; migrant literature; Tim Z. Hernandez



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Did you wash the dead body?
Did you close both its eyes?
Did you bury the body?
Did you leave it abandoned?
Did you kiss the dead body?
(From “Death” by Harold Pinter)

1. Introduction

On the 28th of January 1948, a Douglas DC-3 plane carrying 28 migrant farmworkers from the United States back to Mexico together with three crew members and an immigration officer crashed at Los Gatos Canyon, in Central California, killing all on board. While the four US nationals¹ were given family funerals and state recognition, the unidentified migrants’ remains were buried in a mass grave at Fresno Holy Cross Cemetery with only a plaque referring to them as “28 Mexican citizens”, their families were never officially informed nor their life stories ever traced. Such neglectful anonymity was immediately condemned by folk composer Woody Guthrie in his protest song “Deportee” (Guthrie 1948), which was first popularised by Pete Seeger and then, over the years, by Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton, Judy Collins or Bruce Springsteen, among others. The lyrics reproach explicitly the criminalisation of these Mexican workers—“they chased them like rustlers, like outlaws, like thieves”—and the poor media coverage of their tragedy by consistently emphasising their Otherness through the term *deportees*.

California-born Chicano writer and activist Tim Z. Hernandez admits he had never considered that the impact of this song would last almost seven decades, “until it found the

grandson of migrant farmworkers, moved by a question posed in the lyrics: Who are these friends all scattered like dry leaves?”, which was impelling enough “to go searching for the answer” (Hernandez 2017, p. 200). On his search, Hernandez embarks upon a complex interdisciplinary venture to try assembling these nameless bodies with their background stories, which explains the fragmentary style of the resulting text, anticipated, as if on a metafictional move, within the opening pages:

Despite the investigation team’s best efforts, in the end, it was a patchwork job. Names were as dismembered as the bodies they belonged to. Adding an *a* at the end of his name would turn Tomás Gracia de Aviña into a female—Tomas*a*. Put that arm with this torso. And this foot with that ankle. And now the last name Lara too got a makeover, and the tall stoic caballero, Guadalupe Ramírez Lara, was now Guadalupe Laura Ramírez—a female. Ramón Paredes was truncated into Ramón Pérez. This head with that neck. What about Apolonio Placencia? That finger looks a good fit with this hand, different shade of brown, yes, but close enough. Little did Apolonio know that in death he’d become Italian—Placenti. And this was how their names would go down according to official records: Apolonio Placenti, Guadalupe Laura Ramírez, Tomasa Aviña de Gracia. One Italian and two women. (18–19)

This excerpt evidences that the dialectic of hypervisibility/hyperinvisibility affecting deaths at the border on a global scale resonates heavily in Hernandez’s reconstruction of Los Gatos wreck, where he seems to align with Schimanski and Nyman’s argument about borderscapes operating as “sites of pathological regimes [. . .] in which people are made ‘publicly invisible’ and excluded from politics at the same time as they are made ‘publicly visible’ as ethnicised or racialised others” (Schimanski and Nyman 2021, p. 4). While denouncing the contemptible bureaucratic process behind these 28 migrants’ post-mortem disappearance, he draws attention to the obstinate materiality of their bodies, thus confronting readers with the tangible corporeal presence of their unritualised remains in stark contrast to the opacity these fatalities were dealt with. In consonance with some of the lines of inquiry of the Thanatic Ethics project, Hernandez conceives the migrant’s body as a vector of both de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, but he recreates one of these scenarios where the latter does not happen because the body cannot be identified and the funeral rituals cannot be performed.²

By a similar token, the creative process behind the work was also affected by an evident dispersal, which was generated by the concurrence of diverse intertextual modes, genres and sources: from relatives’ or eye-witnesses’ testimonies and official records to newspaper articles, pieces of folk music or indigenous mythology. Half investigative journalism, half docu-fiction, *All They Will Call You* (a line borrowed from Guthrie’s song) is an attempt at compensating the failure of governmental forensics and at restoring the anonymous deportees’ humanity by dismantling the stereotypes of criminality and expendability through which Latino immigrants are “tropicalised” as a result of their racialised vulnerability.³

By adopting a necropolitical perspective (Mbembe 2003; Berlant 2007; Valencia 2018), my analysis of Hernandez’s text explores the intersections of life, death and mourning in migratory contexts, because, even when presented as “natural” or “accidental” (as it was the case in Los Gatos), border deaths “are in fact the result of the structural violence of migration policies” (Cuttitta 2020, p. 12). His work should be therefore addressed as a collection of life-narratives framed within the space defined by death, which, along the deadly routes leading to the US–Mexico border, has become inextricably linked to questions of citizenship, belonging and human rights. To this effect, in line with significant contributions within the field of border studies (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999; Paasi 2003; Van Houtum et al. 2005; Newman 2006), I prioritise the performative and socially constructed quality of the border, thus reinforcing this shift in focus from linear and static partitions to processual bordering.⁴ Additionally, by drawing on Judith Butler’s (2016) positive re-conceptualisation of vulnerability as resistance, I contend that Hernandez’s thanatopoetics creates a site of

collective mourning, furnishing a sense of political community and mobilising trans-border solidarity. I find that Butler's understanding of vulnerability as a constitutive element informing social relations as well as politics and ethics is particularly illuminating for my reading because it explains how precarious bodies relate in neoliberal times and how they may spark modes of allyship and activism that emerge from below in unpredictable ways.

2. Confronting Border Necropolitics: "They Chased Them like Outlaws, like Rustlers, like Thieves"

As an expansion and radicalisation of the Foucaultian notion of *biopower*, Achille Mbembe conceives *necropower* as the ultimate manifestation of sovereignty—"the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003, p. 11); this concept helps account for the prevalence of death in contemporary societies, especially in systems of violence and domination, where the political—in the guise of war, resistance, fight against terror or border securitisation—makes the murder of its enemy its primary objective. Mbembe claims that along with mass killings, genocides and exterminations, mostly fostered by racial supremacy, necropolitics is administered through small doses of death, through which entire populations are subjugated to an existence of extreme precarity that confers them the status of living-dead or, in Giorgio Agamben's words, a condition of "bare life" (Agamben 1998). The production of these death-worlds, Mbembe argues, is assisted by two factors that would justify the consideration of the agricultural landscape of California Central Valley as one of these necropolitical scenarios.⁵ First, necropolitics produces a necroeconomy through which modern capitalism exposes populations to deadly dangers and risks so as to obtain maximum profit from their exploitation; second, necropolitics relies on the confinement of certain populations using the camp-system as a means of surveillance, control and discipline and subjecting them to this permanent condition of life-in-death (Mbembe 2003, pp. 38–39).

Devised as a response to the afterwar labour shortage, the Bracero program signed between Mexico and US to hire those 28 workers and millions like them during the harvest season from 1942 to 1968 might qualify as one of these death-worlds, considering the exploitation and daily humiliations the inmates went through. Even if their recruitment signified the enactment of new migrant hierarchies where beneficiaries were selected upon utilitarian criteria—sex, age, health, physical ability—the California labour camps recreated in Hernandez's text were indisputable sites of necropower where racialised others were treated, Leonard Nadel complained, as livestock "herded into lines for mass examination, into booths for mass fumigation, into buses for mass transportation" (quoted in Toffoli 2018, p. 127).⁶ The Bracero program's reliance on a system of restricted migration that would minimise border deaths does not imply that human inequality, abuses, and violence in general were eliminated. And on that premise, Hernandez makes an accurate account of the ante- and post-mortem circumstances acting upon these 28 precarious lives and (un)grievable deaths.

By that token, readers are soon confronted with the experience of Luis Miranda Cuevas, one of these "guest-workers" killed at the plane crash, upon his arrival at the Santa Fe Bridge Receiving Center, on the dusty edge of El Paso-Juárez border:

To officiate the passing, the Bracero Program Welcoming Committee would initiate him with a ritual delousing of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, better known by its abbreviation, DDT. A powerful spraying insecticide sprayed from the top of his black hair, into his ears, across his eyelids, into his nostrils, down his cold trembling naked body, into the creases and folds of his parts nobles, hair follicles, between his fingers and toes, the soles of his feet, and back again. Before handing Luis back his clothes, they would first be wiped in a bath of Zyklon B, the same chemical agent used to extinguish human lives in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. (36)

Hernandez's invocation of the deadly methods employed in Nazi Germany is highly significant if considered from the critical perspective of necropower. Mbembe addresses

precisely the Holocaust as a paradigmatic necropolitical practice where racism facilitated the state's administration and management of death assisted by modern technologies (engineering, medical, architectural) that improved the efficiency of these death-regimes. As evidenced through this excerpt, immigrants seemed to enter the realm of American necropower, and the border became a transit point between life and death, because, despite the US government's promises, Mexican seasonal workers suffered abuses from their employers, racial discrimination by local population, dangerous exposure to agrochemicals, and other manifestations of what Laurent Berlant termed "slow death": that is, the gradual deterioration and wearing out of lives, bodies, and environments within contemporary global capitalism (Berlant 2007, p. 754). For Berlant, slow death is not an exceptional event, nor a crisis precipitated by a series of recognisable episodes, but a mode of social relation so strongly normalised in the realm of the ordinary that it eludes public attention, effective accountability and policy making. Although it permeates all the practices and institutions with which we relate on a daily basis, it affects primarily those precarious subjects who are left over and marked for exhaustion and attrition.

As if epitomising the vulnerability of this precariat discussed by Agamben (1998) or Berlant (2007), Luis's naked body, exposed to the denigrating inspection of the camp's authorities, stands as the living signifier of the Braceros' *bare life*, stripped of legal status and transformed by sovereign power into a dehumanised existence without rights:

Luis found himself in yet another line. This time he was made strip naked, carry his belongings in his hands, and wait with the rest of the workers, ass exposed, under the wide glaring eye of the desert sun. If Casimira could see me now, he couldn't help but laugh. Though any chance of lasting modesty would be shattered in the next few minutes, Luis shielded his crotch with his clothes and kept his gaze straight ahead, as did everyone else, until the moment of his evaluation.

The evaluation was a test of degradation. If a worker could endure the test, they most certainly would endure life as a bracero in el Norte.

Luis upper eyelids were turned inside out and inspected for conjunctivitis. Then his mouth was prodded and examined for sores or abscesses, any signs of declining health. If his body had any scars on it, even just one, he would be turned away and scorned. "We don't want troublemakers here." Next his testicles were gripped and kneaded by strange fingers. After which, he was made to bend over and spread his cheeks so that his anus could be scrutinized and prodded with tongue depressor. His hands were then examined for calluses, a sure sign of whether or not a man was capable of hard work [. . .] Luis would pass his test and eventually be admitted to work in the United States. (36–37)

The distressing image of Luis's vulnerable, defenceless, and ultimately "emasculated" male body (that would even embarrass his girlfriend Casimira) invites a questioning of the meanings of masculinity which, in contexts of migration and diaspora, may deconstruct gender and class subjectivities in crucial ways. Deborah Cohen (2006) argues that Braceros' border crossing entailed the gendered transformation of these male *campesinos* (idolised in Mexico as the patriarchs, breadwinners and heroic entrepreneurs for having the courage and means to "travel North") into a capitalised, feminised and docile class of migrant labourers (82). Forcing them to work and reside in the homosocial environments of the camps and barracks, the organisation of this new transnational domestic space, Cohen maintains, undermined the heteronormative logics of their background culture when having to cook their own food and wash their own clothes (87–88). Crossing to the United States was also crossing these deeply rooted gender boundaries concerning men's and women's spaces and tasks and reconsidering the performative practices of masculinity in a new context where racialised male hegemony and privilege were necessarily challenged.⁷

Either overworked in the fields or "penetrated" in the inspection barrack, the worn-out bodies of these exploited migrants are regarded as human waste and thus constructed,

when no longer needed, as *disposable*, by a rhetoric of othering that, Zygmunt Bauman argues, charges them with unwarranted pretenses, indolence or wickedness (Bauman 2004, pp. 40–41). As Guthrie claimed in his “Deportees” song, they were often perceived as living on the brink of criminality—“they chased them like rustlers, like outlaws, like thieves”—and feeding parasitically on the social *body*. In the decolonial logics proposed by Tijuana writer and activist Sayak T. Valencia (2018), the so-called “breadbasket of the world” (the agricultural landscapes of San Joaquin Valley described by Hernandez) derives much of its profitability from the undisguised and legitimised amount of violence that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the predatory demands of hyperconsumption where “the body becomes in itself the product or commodity” (13). Through the term “gore capitalism”, Valencia articulates a strong critique of global neoliberalism derived from her witnessing of the commodification of violence to serve Mexico border economy. She suggests that as a consequence of their “racial expendability”, Latino migrants’ lives and bodies are marketed and commodified as sources of capital while simultaneously effaced from public politics and rendered as disposable.⁸ It seems that, in light of this significant work on human waste-ability (Bauman 2004; Bales 2004; Márquez 2012; Valencia 2018), necropolitics should be reconsidered as a more capacious term. After all, in Mbembe’s conceptualisation of sovereignty, he explicitly refers to “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (Mbembe 2003, p. 27, italics added). It is, in fact, worth noting that the very name these labourers are known by, Braceros, suggests their arms (*brazos*) were embodied extensions of the food crops they produced and thus equally offered to serve and *feed* capitalist demands. And yet, though their work generated visible profit for the US, as migrant and racialised workers, once their contracts were terminated, Braceros were disposed of and repatriated: “A representative of the Agricultural Labor Bureau of the San Joaquín Valley offered this insight: ‘We are asking for labor only at certain times of the year, at the peak of our harvest, and the class of labor we want is the kind we can send home when we get through with them’” (37).

The Douglas DC-3, the plane in which the Braceros were occasionally deported after their seasonal work ended, participated also in this regime of waste, as these models were part of the surplus aircraft that would not be used for military purposes after World War II: disposable technology for disposable migrant bodies. As a matter of fact, after the Los Gatos Canyon wreck, there followed other transportation accidents where a considerable number of these seasonal workers were killed or injured all over the country, and more outstandingly, in the border contexts, where their disposable bodies were often cargoed in appallingly risky and precarious conditions. One of the most important collisions was the Chualar Tragedy of September 1963, which took the life of 32 migrant farmworkers in California’s Salinas Valley, generating a transnational wave of protests which, in the Civil Rights momentum of the 1960s, might have accelerated the official termination of the program after this ultimate exposure of its safety hazards and of the realm of exploitation and impunity on which it operated. As argued by Lori A. Flores, the Chualar crash “had added the element of *sudden death* to what they already perceived as braceros’ *slow death* from their ten to fourteen-hour workdays of backbreaking labor, segregated and substandard housing, malnutrition, and inadequate healthcare” (Flores 2016, p. 80, italics added). A similar stance is adopted by Jamie Longazel and Miranda Cady Hallett, who, in their edited volume *Migration and Mortality* (Longazel and Hallett 2021), claim that, beyond the physical death occurring during perilous border crossings between Central and North America, many migrants also experience legal, social, and economic mortality as a result of the exclusionary policies deliberately aimed at dispossessed people in transit.

In essence, the domain of necropower operating in the border zones described in *All They Will Call You* and in other accounts of similar tragedies relies on what Ariadna Estévez terms “pro morituri principle” (Estévez 2021, p. 19), that is, a legal interpretation that condemns subjects—mostly migrants with racialised and disposable bodies—to inhabit life-threatening spaces or situations that are potentially lethal because they generate systematic illness, debilitation, social abandonment and permanent fear.

3. Challenging the Gentrification of Memory and Mobilising Transformative Grief: “Who Are These Dear Friends All Scattered like Dry Leaves?”

Alexandra Delano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass claim that although images of dead migrant bodies have become so ubiquitous that they have been naturalised as “the new normal”, thousands of them around the world remain unnamed, invisible, ungrievable and unritualised (Alonso and Nienass 2016, p. xxii). In line with the work of many activists and artists in the US–Mexico border, Hernandez’s work evidences that in this necropolitical space, not only Latino migrants’ lives, but also their afterlives, are subjected to a regime of oblivion and invisibility. At this point, it might be useful to consider what Iosif Kovras and Simon Robins (Kovras and Robins 2016) call “death as the border”, implying that bordering practices extend far beyond the physical frontier and the living migrants crossing it to decisively determine the post-mortem management of their bodies and their families.

In his efforts to mourn collectively these unacknowledged losses by uncovering their untold background stories, he challenges the “fragile condition of rememberability for people that do not count as citizens” (Oberprantacher 2016) and confronts Judith Butler’s famous question about “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Butler 2004, p. xv). Hernandez responds by excavating in the biographies of these anonymous victims as in an ironic contestation to the mass grave where these 28 deportees were buried for almost 70 years without names, identifications or rituals.

Apart from revealing “a tension between the care and concern they arouse and the exclusionary politics they reflect” (Edkins 2016, p. 362), missing and dead migrants challenge state control of information as they evade official records by having their names, addresses, or families disconnected from their bodies (359). Not only are their identities obliterated in this realm of invisibility and neglect, but the larger context of precariousness that motivates migration from their home countries tends to be obviated too, as the focus is usually placed on the destination countries of the Global North. So, in this light, Hernandez’s literary forensics is an equally subversive initiative which contrasts with the opaqueness of the processes through which migrant remains are disposed of. Although all the 32 passengers on board the plane met the same accidental death at Los Gatos Canyon, the differential value of their lives (on account of their class, race and nationality) generated an uneven allocation of grievability between the four US nationals and the 28 Mexicans deportees. At this point, it is worth evoking Butler when she argues that despite claims about a mortalist humanism that equates us all in death and loss within a “tenuous we”, one should not obviate this powerful “hierarchy of grief” (Butler 2004, pp. 11, 20), which reveals that the alleged common vulnerability of all humans is intersectionally embedded within already existing structures of inequality that condition both our lives and afterlives. Consequently, drawing on the critical framework proposed by Mbembe and Butler, it could be thus argued that there is a necropolitical dynamic regulating the practice of memorialisation, where some subjects are deemed legitimately grievable and memorable and some others are not. This dynamic is powerfully at play in border territories and migratory contexts, which operate as

axes of differentiation and constitute the basic foundation for biopolitical and necropolitical practices. Differences become essential. Biopolitics open certain bodies for circulation and transform them in objects/subjects of power by processes of subjectivation. Necropolitics immobilize bodies; subjectivize them and transform them into bare life: to be rich, somebody has to be poor; to be healthy, somebody has to be sick. In order to live, others have to die. (Montenegro et al. 2017, p. 144)

Challenging this exclusionary quality of the borderscape which has contributed to the erasure of the victims’ identities within a neglectful and uncaring bureaucracy, Hernandez scatters their names on the page, just as their bodies were “scattered like dry leaves” over Los Gatos Canyon.⁹ Such seemingly ekphrastic fashion brings to mind the experimental style of Caribbean-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip, whose epic poem *Zong!* honours the 132 African slaves who, in 29 November 1781, were thrown overboard to drown in the

Atlantic for the captain to reclaim the insurance money. Like Hernandez, who also recreates a traumatic event through fragments of voices, memories and silences, Philip conjures up the names of the drowned Africans by sometimes listing them at the very bottom of the page to signify their descent into the water and sometimes dispersing the words and letters along the page, vividly evoking pieces of the shipwreck floating on the sea.

But even admitting to the importance of Hernandez's political gesture in naming the anonymous deportees and trying to dignify their memory by connecting their bodies with their identities, I agree with Jenny Edkins on the ambiguity of such politics of registration and documentation, since "the use of names both distinguishes individuals as equal and of value and, at the same time, in a sense, reduces each person to bare life" (Edkins 2011, p. 32). By attending not only to the deportees' names but also to their truncated life affects and aspirations through their families' testimonies, Hernandez moves beyond the dehumanising system of statistics, data and registration to produce alternative representations of border deaths. To that end, he seems to align with some border studies scholars (Edkins 2016; Cuttitta 2020; M'charek and Black 2020; Reineke 2022) who consider that, taken alone, the counting and identification of the dead migrant bodies may trivialise the human realities behind the numbers, and therefore, quantitative approaches should be improved with good practices of accountability, proximity and care. Hernandez himself admits his "telling is not interested in the *calculable* details, but rather the testimonies themselves, from the people whose lives were touched directly in *incalculable* ways" (Hernandez 2017, p. xiv, italics added). To that end, he resorts to what Robin C. Reineke (2022) calls "forensic citizenship", engaging families and friends to provide context-specific information on these migrants deceased or disappeared along the border.

Among the prison labourers who witnessed the crash and helped searching for pieces of human remains, there circulated the Mexican folk legend of La Huesera (The Bone Woman), "who wanders around canyons, [...] collecting bones of dead animals and people [...] and puts them back together with whatever bones she does have" (18).¹⁰ As if impersonating this mythical figure of La Huesera, Hernandez embarks on an act of remembering, both in the sense of assembling and piecing together the scattered bodily *members* with their life-stories and of memorialising their precarious lives and (un)grievable deaths. The testimonies of the surviving prison laborers he interviewed to document the event from peripheral angles thus illustrate his attempt at unseating vision and knowledge from a privileged position by resorting to subaltern and racialised perspectives that had been excluded from official accounts of the event. "Officialness too has its inconsistencies", Hernandez admits, and to counteract them, he defends that "[t]o stumble upon a plane crash is to stumble upon the fragmented and broken shards of stories, and to have faith that from these clues our own glaring humanity offers enough light to fill in the unknown" (Hernandez 2017, p. xiv).

This alternative production of knowledge about border deaths also implies a different perception of migrants' *bare life* as migrant agency (even if post-mortem agency), which is articulated in the language of "glaring humanity" that still resonates in those precise spaces where the limits of the (in)human are tested. In line with noteworthy critical scholarship highlighting the political potential of mourning (Butler 2004; Honig 2011; Liebsch and Goodwin 2016), Giorgia Mirto et al. argue that such potential is usually accentuated in border zones where "migrants' bodies acquire a post-mortal political life that engages with the humanitarian tragedy witnessed" every day (Mirto et al. 2020, p. 104). Hernandez describes how the arduous process of recovering, identifying, burying and memorialising these 28 Mexican deportees was one of these collaborative interventions where local communities in the border contexts assume the imperatives of care and accountability that governmental authorities have abdicated from during decades in their entanglements with migrant deaths. These grassroots collective actions (like the one performed in Fresno Holy Cross Cemetery in September 2013) respond to what Mirto et al. term "grief activism", as they transform necropolitical violence into expressions of affective relationalities and

communal solidarity that have contributed to acknowledge the dead migrants as grievable subjects (Mirto et al. 2020, p. 108).

In response to these more positive and politically capacious understandings of mourning and grief, it is no coincidence that Hernandez adopts the genre of documentary fiction, which, compared to more traditional modes of storytelling, provides readers with narratives calling for situated analysis and interpretation, thus remaking their role from passive observers to active co-creators (Hinken 2006) and demanding an ethical witnessing of the vulnerable Other. Accordingly, in the opening authors' notes, he includes readers in this ethically accountable "us" that should contribute to the reconstruction (albeit fragmentary and contradictory) of the tragedy: "While the telling itself is true, its loyalty is not to people of fact, but to people of memory. Which is to say, all of us" (Hernandez 2017, p. xiv).

The spectacle of the dead migrant body and of the ambiguous loss (Boss 1999) experienced by the families who had not been able to emotionally resolve and transcend grief because there were no identified bodies to mourn mobilises feelings of sympathy, kinship and solidarity: a circumstance which conjures up Butler's positive resignification of *vulnerability as resistance*: "Indeed, I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment" (Butler 2016, p. 22). In light of Butler's argument, Hernandez's initiative could be read as one of these performative interpellations where vulnerability inspires readers to engage politically with the precarity of these migrant workers and to activate expressions of transformative grief.

4. Conclusions

As evidenced by the above discussion, *All They Will Call You* is an example of how literary works can reallocate grievability and accountability in more egalitarian ways. Art can by no means undo the trauma of migrant deaths, but it allows us to tell what has been silenced and to visualise what has been hidden within a mass grave and obscured by an uncaring bureaucracy. Against the neglect of necropolitical agents at the border, Hernandez offers his text as a site of collective mourning while vindicating the validity of coalitional gestures and subaltern affiliations. In his attempt at combating the gentrification of memory that left these deportees' bodies and background stories forgotten for seven decades, he succeeds at translating the language of border violence into a language of humanity and kinship. In so doing, he seems to echo Butler's (2016) resignification of vulnerability as resistance when he extricates the migrants' lives from the patronising paradigms of victimhood and defeatism and "re-tropicalises" them not just as *bare lives* but as epitomes of migrant resilient agency.

In his adoption of the genre of documentary fiction, Hernandez mobilises local and transnational solidarity, public accountability and grief activism by appealing to readers who do not resign themselves to their role of bystanders and gatekeepers at the border, but who feel interpellated by the suffering Other; even if, as suggested by Honig, the importance of the dead Other has been minimised in political theory, where

the problem of the other is usually taken to be the problem of the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee, perhaps the problem of sexual difference. In response to the problem so conceived, political theorists write books about the ethics and politics of multiculturalism, alien suffrage, the conflicting claims of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, internationalism and democracy, the politics of gender or sexuality in patriarchal societies. These are important, ongoing areas of inquiry.

But what if the other is dead? (Honig 2011, p. 49)

A similar disregard has been denounced by the thanatic ethics scholars who criticise the failure of postcolonial studies to engage with the conflict of migrant deaths and defend the need to consider "an ethic of resuscitation, visibilisation and repair" aimed at memorialising and humanising those who have died in transit and have been condemned to oblivion and invisibility (Banerjee et al. 2023, p. 4).

In line with the aforementioned proposals, a necropolitical reading supported by the critical contributions of Agamben (1998), Mbembe (2003), Berlant (2007) or Valencia (2018) has certainly enabled me to identify bordering processes conducive to a regime of *slow death* that preceded the *sudden deaths* at Los Gatos Canyon wreck and helps explain the unequal distribution of grievability affecting the 28 disposable lives of those who were disdained as “just deportees.” I contend that initiatives like Hernandez’s represent an appropriation of the forensic practice (or rather “counter-forensic” for Banerjee et al. 2023, 9) that states and other agents operating at the border have abdicated from in their uncaring and neglectful handling of the migrants’ bodies and of their families’ right to mourn and ritualise them.

In the poem he read during his controversial 2005 pre-recorded Nobel Lecture (partially quoted above as foreword to this article), Harold Pinter challenged the bureaucratic formalities associated with mortality by depicting an anonymous speaker, presumably an officer, interrogating a person about a corpse in the humdrum, robotic and redundant questions usually employed at investigations: “Where was the dead body found?/Who found the dead body?/Was the dead body dead when found?/How was the dead body found?” (Pinter 2005, p. 262). As the questions accumulate in a dramatic *crescendo*, this detached and dehumanised approach transitions to one defined by care and proximity where the affective relationalities of the deceased are given prominence—“Who was the father or daughter or brother?/Or uncle or sister or mother or son/Of the dead and abandoned body?”—to finally culminate in an expression of utter intimacy: “Did you kiss the dead body?” (Pinter 2005, p. 262). Hernandez’s story about the death and delayed memorialisation of these 28 forgotten Braceros enacts a similar turn from necropolitics to thanatic ethics that tightens the affective and political bonds between the dead and the living. The burial place at Fresno Holy Cross cemetery where in September 2013 the Mexican deportees were finally ritualised is one of such meeting points of the living and the dead, the migrants and the locals, the traumatic past and the reparative present. But far from letting himself be carried away by a celebratory rhetoric, Hernandez admits that this is an unfinished project, because, although all 28 names were inscribed on the Italian granite headstone, he was only able to find and interview four of the reported passengers’ families:

Another thought occurred to me. Because of the angle at which the headstone is mounted, it appears the names almost rise up from the earth. While the crowd cheered, I couldn’t help but think that until the names rose completely out of the earth and had their stories told, the headstone alone would never be enough. (Hernandez 2017, p. 212)

Even if representing only a partial reparation, this *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) invites a performative conceptualisation of the border as a site of violence, detention and exclusion which paradoxically and simultaneously offers opportunities for alliances and resilient coexistence. Thus seen, the *humus* soil covering the Braceros’ bodies can be reimagined as the cloak of *humanity* that transforms their subjection within a regime of commodification and disposability into a recognition of their legitimate grievability.

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Notes

- ¹ Frank Atkinson (Pilot), Marion Harlow Ewing (Co-Pilot), Bobbie Atkinson (Stewardess), Frank E. Chaffin (Immigration Guard).
- ² Led by Bidisha Banerjee, Judith Misrahi-Barak and Thomas Lacroix, the transnational project Thanatic Ethics: The Circulation of Bodies in Migratory Spaces was conceived in response to the failure of postcolonial and diaspora studies to engage with the question of migrant deaths. It started in 2020 as a series of interdisciplinary webinars, conferences and workshops dealing with thanatic representations in literature, artworks and migration politics. The network of humanities and social science scholars

involved “seeks to make visible the bodies of the dead [...] to memorialize the migrant dead and thereby do justice to them and ultimately to the living” (Banerjee et al. 2023, p. 2).

³ For Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, “to tropicalize [...] means to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images and values” (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 1997, p. 8).

⁴ In the same vein, by adopting the term “borderscape” along this article, I align with contemporary understandings of the epistemic and geopolitical multidimensionality of border contexts where “cultural appropriations and social contestations become visible via a broad repertoire of communicative means and strategies.” (Scott 2020, p. 9).

⁵ In his collection of stories *Breathing, in Dust* (Hernandez 2010), Hernandez had already denounced the outrageous contrast between the lucrative agribusiness operating in the San Joaquin Valley in Central California and the precarity of its farming communities.

⁶ In 1956, American photojournalist Leonard Nadel (1916–1990) documented his six-month experience with the Braceros, capturing the journey from their Mexican sending communities to the contracting sites, and their precarious work in the California fields, so as to ultimately denounce their exploitation “in a sensitive and honest portrayal” (Loza and González 2016, p. 113).

⁷ For a transnational understanding of how the male body is commoditised and resignified in neoliberal economies, see Venkatesh’s *The Body as Capital: Masculinities in Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (Venkatesh 2015).

⁸ Ethnic studies scholar John Márquez (2012) formulates the concept “racial expendability” to argue that in white supremacist societies, black and brown bodies are generally viewed as criminal, deficient, threatening and thus constructed as disposable and superfluous.

⁹ The 28 Mexican nationals were identified as: Miguel Negrete Álvarez, Tomás Aviña de Gracia, Francisco Llamas Durán, Santiago García Elizondo, Rosalio Padilla Estrada, Tomás Padilla Márquez, Bernabé López García, Salvador Sandoval Hernández, Severo Medina Lara, Elías Trujillo Macias, José Rodríguez Macias, Luis López Medina, Manuel Calderón Merino, Luis Cuevas Miranda, Martín Razo Navarro, Ignacio Pérez Navarro, Román Ochoa Ochoa, Ramón Paredes Gonzalez, Guadalupe Ramírez Lara, Apolonio Ramírez Placencia, Alberto Carlos Raygoza, Guadalupe Hernández Rodríguez, María Santana Rodríguez, Juan Valenzuela Ruiz, Wenceslao Flores Ruiz, José Valdivia Sánchez, Jesús Meza Santos, and Baldomero Marcas Torres. A headstone with their names was finally placed on the grounds of Holy Cross Cemetery (Fresno, CA) in September 2013, 65 years after the plane crash.

¹⁰ Hernandez’s allusion to the ghostly presence of the unmourned deceased evokes similar formulations criticising the regimes and politics of care in migration contexts. Worth mentioning are Bidisha Banerjee (2023), who considers the affordances of spectrality to articulate, in the form of a *post-mortem* haunting, a protest to such uncaring regimes, and Anna-Leena Tovainen (2019), who refers to the “zombification” of the migrants as affected by unbelonging, invisibility and a death-in-life existence.

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