

# Dangerous Playgrounds: Hemispheric Imaginaries and Domestic Insecurity in Contemporary US Tourism Narratives

---

DANIEL LANZA RIVERS

“This doesn’t happen! Four Americans on a vacation don’t just disappear.”

—*The Ruins* (2008)

Speaking in a congressional hearing in 2012, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano responded to a question about anecdotal reports of terrorists entering the United States through the southern border with the affirmation that, yes, terrorists had been known to cross the border between Mexico and the United States “from time to time.”<sup>1</sup> Though no figures were offered to support this statement, the casual tone of Napolitano’s response reflects the palpable, if ambivalent, preoccupation with border security and terrorism that marked much of early twenty-first century political discourse and popular culture in the United States—a preoccupation that reemerged dramatically in the 2016 presidential race when Republican candidate Donald Trump claimed that loose immigration policies allowed “rapists” and “criminals” to migrate across the Mexican-American border.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the first decade of the new millennium gave rise to an unusually cohesive battery of popular culture narratives about US American twenty-somethings displaced and imperiled on the “wrong” side of the border. Films such as *Turistas* (2006), *Borderland* (2007), *The Ruins* (2008), and *Indigenous* (2014), as well as the serialized

comic *La Perdida* (2006), revitalize and reimagine the familiar trope of US Americans traveling across the border to contemplate, and escape contemplating, their entry into the nation's professional sphere.<sup>3</sup> Young tourists in these stories bide their time, waffling about career options while their local handlers lead them to magical beaches, carnivals, and parks where they can play out fantasies of transgression until their destination or their hosts reveal their sinister intentions. Lost, and occasionally inebriated, these young tourists become embroiled in battles for survival as they scramble to escape black market organ traders, terrorists, criminal drug lords, Mayan curses, cannibals, and shamanistic masters who enact violent inversions of security as comeuppance for the geopolitical sins of the United States.

Though these figurations of violence, kidnapping, and the supernatural share obvious resonances with the legacy of imperial adventure cinema and Italian "latsploitation" films, which visualized the Americas south of the US as a primitive realm of cannibals and zombies, early twenty-first century dangerous playgrounds narratives combine elements of these genres with the conventions of self-discovery and intercultural contact that are more characteristic of coming-of-age narratives like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and William Burroughs *Queer*.<sup>4</sup> And even as these coming of age-turned thriller narratives draw influence from the cinematic and literary history of US American travel narratives, these stories are infused with the popular and political sentiments of the post-9/11 period, which arise through repeated presentations of political upheaval, transnational crime, and melodramatic reconciliation with the national agenda of "securing" the hemisphere for the next generation of citizens.<sup>5</sup>

Gretchen Murphy has traced the ways that the imperialist sentiments that inform the Monroe Doctrine of 1824 and the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 took shape within a nexus of political, popular, and cultural discourses that figured US American intervention in Latin American and Caribbean societies as part of "a mythic tradition of spatial and racial coherence that was always under siege and in need of affirmation" even as it pursued aggressive and tactical interventions into the sovereign affairs of Latin American nations.<sup>6</sup> And Greg Grandin's work on hemispheric relations between the US and these nations has charted the ways this doctrine of intervention has revised and revitalized itself throughout the twentieth century, shifting from an agenda of containing political alternatives to one of "rolling back" the influence and presence of non-democratic nations.<sup>7</sup> Describing the rhetorical terrain within which this transformation took shape, Murphy has argued that sentiments characteristic of the Monroe Doctrine emerge "from the interplay between policy and fiction," prompting important questions about the relationship among popular narrative, public sentiment, and hemispheric politics.<sup>8</sup> In the case of early twenty-first century tourism narratives, neo-Monroeist sentiment arises, as often as not, as a personal turn away from the youthful folly of intercultural curiosity and a "mature" realignment with the nativist sentiments that suffuse post-9/11 immigration policy.

Institutional efforts to reinforce the border gained traction throughout the first decade of the new millennium, during which time the *Los Angeles Times* (2004) and the *Associated Press* (2005) ran features assessing whether the US-Mexico border could be used as a possible “springboard” or “pipeline” for terrorism.<sup>9</sup> Emerging amid this atmosphere of nationalist sentiment, early narratives in the dangerous playground trend, such as *La Perdida* and *Turistas*, gained popular attention the same year that President George W. Bush’s 2006 Operation Jump Start initiative deployed over six thousand soldiers from the US National Guard to support border-patrol agencies in constructing a fence along the US-Mexico border. Concerns about the links between terrorism and a perceived dearth of border security surfaced again in 2007 when Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell speculated that the border would grant passage to terrorists to the extent that security was allowed to slacken.<sup>10</sup> And although attempts to pass the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 failed, policy efforts aimed at repelling and policing undocumented residents continued to proliferate under the guise of fostering security, resulting in the passage of what Randal Archibold of the *New York Times* identifies as 222 immigration reform laws and 131 resolutions in 48 states between 2007 and 2010 alone.<sup>11</sup> Katie E. Olivero notes that the passage of Arizona’s SB1070, which empowered law enforcement to use racial profiling to identify undocumented residents, set the standard for similar legislation in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Utah, and South Carolina, which also pressured workplaces and schools to ferret out undocumented residents.<sup>12</sup>

When we examine the narrative structures and patterns of representation that recur throughout the creative works that circulated among this flush of policy efforts, we can see how these attempts to curtail immigration and harass undocumented residents into leaving the country located the breaches in national security on September eleventh, 2011 as evidence that the US needed to revise and deepen its commitment to stemming the flow of undocumented migrants heading north, including the tide of laborers who had been entering the nation in increasing numbers since the passage of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In his discussion of the role that post-NAFTA trade policies played in fostering the economic pressures that drove laborers north, David Bacon identifies 2008 as a peak year for the in-migration of Mexican laborers, as Mexican-born people living within the US reached 12.67 million—or an estimated equivalent of eleven percent of Mexico’s population.<sup>13</sup> And though there is no reasonable correlation between this increased migration of Latinx labor and the desire to further secure the nation from terrorist actions, the coincidence of these patterns in national media demonstrates how the two issues became conflated in the national imaginary under a logic of the state of exception, which justified the extension of governmental powers of surveillance and expulsion by figuring Latinx subjects as threats to US American security.<sup>14</sup> In addition to dramatizing these slippages in security discourse, dangerous playgrounds narratives that shift their setting beyond Mexico to Central and South America also incorporate geopolitical anxieties about economic redistribution that

rehearse national concerns about the so-called “pink tide,” or “leftward sweep,” of Latin American politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup>

After the recession of 2009 sent shockwaves through the domestic economy, legislation aimed at securing the US from Latinx migration gained renewed executive support when the Obama administration sent 1,200 National Guardsmen to the southern border as a response to accusations from Republican representatives, led by Senator John McCain, who claimed that border states remained vulnerable to violence.<sup>16</sup> Though these turn-of-the-millennium immigration policies were ostensibly aimed at fostering a sense of safety along the US-Mexico border by stemming migration from a nation where roughly half of the population was estimated to be living in conditions of poverty, they were unsuccessful in assuaging US American concerns about immigration and national security.<sup>17</sup>

Instead, anxieties about border security continue to circulate well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, in political rhetoric and as a narrative mode that expresses a structure of feeling that draws on the more sensational tropes of imperialist adventure and cannibal horror films along with the melodramatic conventions of the US American bildungsroman in order to represent the nation’s shift toward heightened surveillance and institutionally sanctioned white nativism as a necessary curative for naïveté, one which summons US American youth back into the fold of defensive sentiment by invoking the specter of violence from below.<sup>18</sup>

### **Locating *Los Perdidos*: Generic Synthesis and the Dangerous Playground Narrative**

That these narratives are successful in lacing together the anxieties underpinning US foreign policy with the tropes of imperialist adventure, horror, and melodrama is effected in no small part through their use of the narrative frameworks particular to the US American bildungsroman, a national genre whose variety of forms has been said to reflect the very social and cultural schisms characteristic of US American society. For Lawrence Buell, the diversity of forms among US American bildungsromane reflects schisms between hegemonic and counterhegemonic relationships to national belonging that break down along lines of race, transnationalism, naturalization, and ethnicity.<sup>19</sup>

Buell observes that white, hegemonic coming-of-age narratives are marked by the endurance of an immature self and a refusal to grow up, whereas “the quest for mature social identity and agency” that characterizes American ethnic bildungsromane effects a more nuanced, and more fraught, negotiation of belonging whose resolution often results in a realization of selfhood as an ongoing process of becoming that is negotiated with and through one’s responsibilities to one’s family and ethnic community.<sup>20</sup> Though dangerous playgrounds narratives incorporate these tropes— notably through Carla’s quest to reconcile herself with her Mexican lineage in Abel’s *La Perdida* and through dramatizations of extended adolescence in horror films including *Turistas* (2006), *Borderland* (2007), *The Ruins* (2008), and *Indigenous* (2014)—

the narrative trajectory that marks characters' coming-of-age positions the arrival at maturity as a reintegration into the nation and a realignment with nationalist discourses of security that locates Latinx subjects and Latin American political cultures as threats to US American stability and white femininity.

Working in this way, these narratives bend the form of the US American bildungsroman back toward its roots in the European bildungsroman, in which the idyllic exploration of competing worldviews, or in this case of different hemispheric cultures, resolves with a compromise that is at once what Franco Moretti identifies as "*the interiorization of contradiction*" of one's home culture and also an acceptance that US American society is both flawed and yet more humane than its hemispheric alternatives.<sup>21</sup>

The preoccupation with feeling, and indeed sensation, in these narratives reflects their use of the temporal modes of horror, which Linda Williams locates as the drama of "too early," in order to frame white tourists, and especially female and feminized white tourists, as victims who "are taken by surprise in the violent attacks which are then deeply felt by spectators."<sup>22</sup> Commenting on the slippages between this aspect of horror and the melodrama's elicitation of sensational excesses through the drama of "too late," Williams asserts that the sensational excesses of these genres both elicit physical reactions in the bodies of an audience whose responses are "marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language," but instead to the "inarticulate" affects of the body.<sup>23</sup> And if we examine the way that dangerous playgrounds narratives use these modes to dramatize the political sentiments of early-twenty first century domestic security discourse, we can see how the adaptation of the bildungsroman into a narrative of acceptance and realignment with the nation state captures and extends a neo-Monroeist structure of feeling that emerges during this period.

Writing in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams describes structures of feeling as emergent articulations of possibility that arrive as "specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought ... in living and interrelating continuity."<sup>24</sup> When we consider the sensational nexus these films produce at the juncture of adventure, self-exploration, melodrama, and horror, it becomes clear just how hemispheric discourses of insecurity and infiltration become threaded through the coming-of-age narrative, frothing up within these stories as sensational excesses of feeling occasioned by betrayal, terror, disillusionment, and, finally, acceptance of the project of domestic security and the sovereignty of US American interests in the hemisphere.

### **Doorways of the Imagination: Tourist Imaginaries in Jessica Abel's *La Perdida***

Among the more contemporary works considered here, Jessica Abel's comic serial turned Harvey Award-winning graphic novel, *La Perdida*, offers what is probably the most comprehensive window for exploring how dangerous playgrounds narratives

draw upon the legacy of US American literary culture to revise and extend anti-Latinx sentiment and hemispheric anxieties in the first decade of the twenty-first century. By self-consciously reflecting influences from Jack Kerouac's and William S. Burroughs's tours in Mexico City, and implicitly incorporating the narrative conventions of the colonial adventure narrative, *La Perdida* constructs Carla's quest to explore her Mexican American heritage by living in Mexico City as a fusion of the two forms of US American bildungsroman identified by Buell. In the process, *La Perdida*'s suture of the generic divide Buell correlates with the "fragmentation of the US literary-cultural imaginary" recuperates the more conventional, European narrative of mature compromise by figuring kidnapping and terror as events that subordinate the racial dynamics of the ethnic bildungsroman in favor of a realignment with the nation and the national project of surveilling brown bodies during the war on terror.

Originally serialized between 2001 and 2005 before being published as a collected narrative in 2006, *La Perdida* is a relatively contemporary text whose timeline of composition and release is crossed by the shadow of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. Despite the text's nationalist underpinnings, *La Perdida* has garnered a growing body of laudatory critical attention.<sup>25</sup> Recent articles in *Pedagogy* and *American Literary History* identify the comic as part of a trend of teachable graphic literature—a reputation for teachability that is no doubt bolstered by Abel's recent textbook series *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* and *Mastering Comics*.<sup>26</sup> And Abel's own website (2010) describes *La Perdida* as a story about a girl trying "to live an authentic life" whose "intense desire to make a connection with Mexico and ... unwillingness to see the impact of her own history on her understanding combine to turn an innocent journey down a dark path."<sup>27</sup>

Many popular reviewers compliment the comic's aesthetic execution and its narrative techniques: *Kirkus Review* notes that *La Perdida* "not only utilizes but transcends both navel-gazing self-discovery and the backpackers-in-peril clichés," and Harriet Reisen's profile on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* compares the comic's tone to "film noir."<sup>28</sup> And though it is true that the comic is skillfully rendered, that it achieves a galloping narrative momentum, and that *La Perdida* dissects some of the psychic and social dynamics at work in contemporary US tourism patterns, scholarship on the comic has yet to sufficiently locate Abel's graphic novel within the larger field of literary, historical, political, and cultural factors that undergird the comic's use of the so-called "backpackers-in-peril cliché." Nor have critics adequately addressed the narrative's indebtedness to the longer tradition of travel narratives that figure Latin America as a playground for white tourists who use Latinx nations and subjects as mirrors for self-exploration—a trend that Daniel Cooper Alarcón terms the "infernal paradise" mode of representation.<sup>29</sup>

Because *La Perdida* emerges at the juncture of dangerous playgrounds narratives, drawing together an assemblage of generic conventions and tonal registers that organize nativist sentiment in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, locating *La Perdida*

within the larger field of literary reference and cultural scholarship can offer rare insight into how popular narratives draw from, reproduce, and shape the cultural interplay among popular media, immigration policy, and hemispheric relations in the early decades of the twenty-first century. After unpacking how *La Perdida*'s representation of tourism and intercultural contact synthesizes the narrative conventions of melodrama and horror to reconcile fissures in US American bildungsromane, this study will conclude by situating *La Perdida*'s presentation of inverted security and imperiled white femininity within the broader context of the dangerous playgrounds mode, focusing on recent horror films set in Latin America as well as Hunter S. Thompson's "lost" 1950s novel, *The Rum Diary*, which was first published in 1998 and then adapted into a film in 2009.<sup>30</sup> This final stage of discussion will clarify the ways that "partying," carnival, and the radical retribution of wealth and safety dramatize nationalist anxieties about hemispheric geopolitics in ways that reproduce and justify neo-Monroeist sentiment while obscuring the role the United States has played in fostering political and economic instability within the region.<sup>31</sup>

The first installment of *La Perdida* finds Carla, the serial's narrator-protagonist, encountering Mexico City as a dream realm where she can learn more about her own Mexican American heritage while also reconciling herself to being abandoned by her father.<sup>32</sup> In much the same way that Jack Kerouac describes Mexico in *On the Road* as "the magic land at the end of the road" where he can escape himself and his whiteness, Carla believes that finding the "real" Mexico will grant her an escape from her position as a US tourist by offering a transcendent experience of (implicitly ethnic) self-recognition.<sup>33</sup> The most notably romantic representation of Mexico City that arises in *La Perdida*, *Parque México* is a near-empty public park that is scattered with "disused carnival rides" and that transports Carla from the post-NAFTA realities of political and economic unrest into a tourist imaginary of Mexico that endures after the comic's resolution (16). Entering the park, Carla states, "I felt like I'd found a doorway to the part [of Mexico City] I recognized from my imagination, where the hard truth about the crime rate, and the pollution, and the disappearance of traditional culture, just didn't apply." And at this early stage of her journey, the presence of childhood toys and the blooming jacaranda give Carla "[t]his immediate feeling that everything would be okay. That [she] would find the Mexico [she] was looking for" (15, 16). Like Kerouac's transcendental transportations beyond his whiteness, Carla's contact with this simulation of Mexico feels so encompassing that she will recall at the novel's end that "despite everything ... the magic that park possesses never disappeared" (17).<sup>34</sup> Among the absences that facilitate this transportation and the endurance of Carla's imperialist imaginary are the vocal presence of the Zapatista movement and the political corruption that dominates national politics—including the events leading up to the rigged presidential vote and electoral recount that would occur the same year that *La Perdida* was published as a single volume.

Though these omissions facilitate Carla's quest for self-discovery in a Kerouacian mode, they also direct her quest toward a more hegemonic bildungsroman

marked by immaturity and self-discovery, erasing any racial or ethnic complexities of experience that might underpin her initial encounters with Mexico City. This is likely because Carla's journey is framed by the interplay of two forces, each embodied by a male character who facilitates her encounter with the Mexican nation and its subjects.

Throughout *La Perdida*, Carla's transition from curious tourist to xenophobic adult is alternately harassed and aided by these two men whose diametric opposition allows her to critique, reject, and re-embody US American anxieties about US–Mexican relations. The first character who mediates Carla's experience of Mexico is Henry, her bourgeois "ex-something," who is described as a "blonde, upper-crusty frat-boy ... [the] son of a banker, grandson of a banker, and great-grandson of an asshole industrialist" who has moved to Mexico City in hopes of emulating William Burroughs by living "invisibly" within the city's bounds while he drinks and works on his writing (13, 23). Henry is positioned in relief to Memo, a local political radical and Mexico City native who critiques Carla's longing to escape her US American identity before facilitating her and Henry's kidnapping. Carla first encounters Memo at a gallery opening, where he denounces the art installation for presenting "the work of the common man through the glass of irony and superiority" (26). As Memo's tirade extends to encompass the ideological imperialism of US popular culture, Carla internalizes his critique, saying, "I'm not trying to invade! It's the opposite! I want to learn" (26). After this exchange, the two fall into a tutorial relationship as Memo invites Carla to come see the "real" Mexico at his market stall, where he distributes revolutionary pamphlets and sells Che Guevara t-shirts. The pair continues to spar about Carla's project in Mexico throughout the rest of the comic, but Carla's lineage and her experiences as a US American Latina never seem to arise. Instead, Memo's manifold critiques of Carla's tourist mentality flatten her identity even as the gendered dynamics of their relationship invert the power/knowledge arrangement of Western imperialism to position Carla as a subordinated object of conquest.

Anne McClintock has demonstrated how Western imperialism was arranged around three orders of empire: "[T]he male, reproductive order of patriarchal monogamy; the white economic order of mining capital; and the global, political order of empire," which, "far from being distinct, take shape in relation to each other."<sup>35</sup> And when we examine the ways that these orders of empire are inverted through Memo's tutelage and Carla's obeisance, we can see how *La Perdida's* modal shift from melodrama to horror arrives as an outgrowth of Carla's journey, one that subordinates her quest for self-discovery to a state-of-exception narrative of transnational crime and domestic insecurity. Reflecting on Carla's experiences as a tourist, Adrielle Anna Mitchell has remarked that *La Perdida* is "a disturbingly domestic text" where "almost all of [the] scenes take place indoors, particularly in the rooms of Carla's two sequential apartments."<sup>36</sup> And as we unpack the text's presentation of transnational crime, it is worth noting that Carla's apartment serves as a locus of sensation that is at once a part of Mexico City and also a territorial US American space that is violated as a result of

Carla's desire to encounter Mexico on its own terms. After all, Memo criticizes Carla's "ridiculously large" apartment as an imperialist space that would house an entire family if she wasn't there, and this colonial stand-in goes on to serve as the *mis-en-scène* for emotional excesses that arise as Memo derails Carla's project of self-discovery, as kidnappers hide and ransom Carla's ex-boyfriend, and, finally, as Carla is rescued and repatriated to the US.<sup>37</sup>

In the first of these sensational occasions, the intensity of Carla's break from her quest for self-discovery is marked by the destruction of the physical fetishes that she has invested with her longing to explore her own ethnic Mexicaness: her *folkórico* vases and her Frida Kahlo poster. Functioning in the melodramatic mode Linda Williams characterizes as the pathos of "too late," the rupture of Carla's quest to recover herself reaches its verbal peak when she weeps over her inability to "find" herself in Mexico, saying, "I'm trying to be a Mexican. I'm working every day to see and understand the advantages I have and reject them ... I want to live like you do" (106).<sup>38</sup> Having voiced this confession, Carla regresses to a childlike state, falling on her knees before Memo in tear-stained supplication as she extends a ripped fragment of her Frida Kahlo poster to him and repeats "I'm not a *conquistadora*! I'm NOT!" (106).

This moment, which culminates the second installment of the serial and that saw publication the year following the September 11th attacks, finds Memo reaching for Carla's hand, gently admonishing her as he tells her she can't help her imperialist attitudes. Though the larger context of this moment does suggest a compelling critique of post-tourist patterns of consumption, it notably elides any discussion of Carla's relationship with her absent father (the ostensible object of her "too late" sentiment), favoring instead a narrative of ethnic absolutism and exclusion that positions Carla as a foolish, implicitly white subject whose identity is firmly bounded by her nation of origin.<sup>39</sup> For her own part, Carla makes no assertions of her own hybrid lineage, even as her and Memo's discussion verbally forecloses any possibility that she might achieve what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as a "mestiza consciousness" that could help her negotiate, if not resolve, the tensions among her position as a subject of her own ethnic diaspora, the misogyny she negotiates as a woman and a Latina, and the entwined legacies of colonialism and US American empire that have alienated her from her heritage.<sup>40</sup> Instead the spectacle of Carla's tears prefigure the terror that will arrive two installments later when *La Perdida's* fourth issue culminates with Carla and Henry's capture in her own apartment. The final panel of this later installment, originally published in 2004, closes on Carla standing, held and gagged by her boyfriend Oscar, as her eyes widen with the realization of a threat arriving "too soon."<sup>41</sup>

### **"This Doesn't Happen!":**

#### **Post-NAFTA Imaginaries and the Horror of Political Alternatives**

It is worth bearing down on the geopolitical contexts surrounding the graphic novel's publication schedule here to clarify the hemispheric tensions that undergird *La*

*Perdida's* representation of redistributive politics and transnational crime. In addition to hitting the market in the years following the September 11th attacks—and so emerging amid the fervor of nationalist and security discourses that followed the fall of the Manhattan World Trade Center—*La Perdida* reached readers amidst what Rachel Adams locates as a rising interest in transnational crime networks that particularly infused popular detective fiction during this period.<sup>42</sup> Along with riding in the groove of this popular fascination with cartels and trafficking through its presentation of *El Gordo*, the *mafioso* who engineers Henry's kidnapping after he and Carla snort cocaine together at a mob party, *La Perdida's* presentation of criminality takes on explicitly leftist resonances through Memo's operation of a leftist book stall and through his assertion that Henry's kidnapping realizes “the radical redistribution of wealth” as “a basic Marxist principle.”<sup>43</sup>

Moving beyond *La Perdida* to analyze the representations of drug use, crime, and redistribution that circulate through the dangerous playground mode more generally, we can see *La Perdida's* horror film contemporaries similarly drawing together the conventions of the imperialist adventure narratives—in which Native uprisings harass the narrative action from the fringes of awareness—with more contemporary anxieties about the so-called leftward turn in Latin American politics, which gained global attention after the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>44</sup> Consistent among these dangerous playgrounds narratives is the narrative pivot when “partying” or “letting go” gives way to an inversion of safety that exposes young US American tourists to victimization and retributive violence from Latinx subjects and locales. A clear example of this turn structures the entire plot of the horror film *The Ruins* (2008), which finds a handful of young white Americans leaving the safety of their Mexican resort to hike out to a Mayan pyramid in search of “a little culture.” Upon their arrival, the tourists find themselves trapped on the pyramid by a tribe of “Mayan Natives” who refuse to help release them when a cursed vine with marijuana-shaped leaves begins stalking the tourists, penetrating their flesh and harassing them with hallucinatory sounds until they are driven into a murderous delirium.<sup>45</sup> Though *The Ruins* dramatizes anxieties about drug use and “partying” through the combination of setting and antagonist that invites comparisons with the Italian cannibal horror movies of the 1970s, dangerous playgrounds narratives more often incorporate transnational criminals and geopolitical tensions to dramatize the turn from transgressive play to abject violence.<sup>46</sup>

Writing in *Post-Hegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*, Jon Beasley-Murray has equated the political legacy of Latin America with “a cauldron of social and political experimentation and creativity, a veritable laboratory of rebellion, mobilization, and counterinsurgency,” in which nation-states have continually tried and failed to “construct the fiction of a pact that would bind culture to politics, and subordinate constituent to constituted power.”<sup>47</sup> Though a robust history of revolutionary actions and socialist sentiments can be found across a range of Latin

American national histories, the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century saw a resurgence of counter-hegemonic politics in Mexico and across Latin America as many polities demonstrated a renewed disillusionment with the United States' use of economic, political, and extrajudicial pressures to manipulate hemispheric relations in favor of its political and economic interests.<sup>48</sup>

Vocal opposition to NAFTA and the legacy of US interventionism in Mexico took the form of the Zapatista Movement—alternately referred to as the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or the EZLN—while then Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez's socialist reform government drew fire for its efforts to strengthen national security by enacting social programs aimed at expanding access to education and healthcare. Commenting on the trend in an article published in 2005, the BBC alternatively referred to this development as a “leftward sweep” and a “pink tide,” a shift in hemispheric politics that Tariq Ali describes as “a glimmer of an actual political alternative” to the hegemony of US American influence over the sovereign affairs of Latin American governments.<sup>49</sup> Reflecting on this shift at length, Ali notes “new social movements ... were insisting that, despite the fall of the Soviet Union, the world was still confronted with old choices. Either a revamped global capitalism with new wars and new impoverishment, chaos, anarchy or a rethought and revived socialism, democratic in character and capable of serving the needs of the poor. These leaders were determined to rescue the stranded ship *Utopia* to initiate more egalitarian, redistributive policies and to involve the poor in the political life of their countries” (29). Ali's reference to the utopian project of ushering in a redistributive and inclusive turn clarifies some of the connective tissue among the socialist political projects and indigenous movements seeking recognition and sovereignty throughout Latin America, in that it captures the scale of the challenge facing groups like Mexico's Zapatistas, whose stated goal was to craft the “antechamber of a new world.”<sup>50</sup>

If we work through the thematic preoccupations and patterns of representation that recur throughout dangerous playgrounds narratives during this period, we can see how the pervasive figurations of indigenous, revolutionary, criminal, and working-class subjects as violent traitors are encoded with the very slippages between post-9/11 security politics and nativist sentiment that inform policies such as SB1070 and Operation Jump Start. And when we examine these slippages in relation to the sensational endangerment of the white female body that suffuses dangerous playgrounds narratives, we can see clear lines of influence between US American colonial adventure films of the 1950s and the quest for self-discovery at the heart of these bildungsromane, which locates intercultural intimacy as an ideological battleground where the compromises of adulthood take the form of a mature realignment with the hemispheric interests of the nation state.

By far the most popularly successful film in this trend, *Turistas* (2006) arrived in domestic and international theaters the same year that the graphic-novel version of *La Perdida* hit shelves, grossing an estimated seven million in US markets, an additional seven million internationally, and still another five million dollars in DVD sales.<sup>51</sup> The

film plot follows a group of American tourists who are led to a secluded beach after a bus crash lands their vehicle in the middle of rural Brazil. A night of partying ensues, after which the young US Americans awaken to find that they have been drugged and robbed of their belongings. Though *Turistas*, like *La Perdida*, effects a mild critique of the main characters' cultural insularity, its primary narrative mode falls in line with the trend of horror films exemplified by *Hostel* (2006), a release media critics colloquially referred to as "torture porn" and in which the main characters' cultural insularity serves primarily to amplify the film's atmosphere of terror and grotesque violence.<sup>52</sup>

Following the 2006 release of *Turistas*—and publication of the collected *La Perdida*—*Borderland* (2007) draws more deeply from the tradition of cannibal cult films to offer a story that claims to be "based on true events." Like *Turistas* and *La Perdida*, *Borderland*'s shift from intercultural contact to violent exploitation is also facilitated by carefree "partying" with a group of local women when the troupe gets high on psilocybin mushrooms at a nearby carnival only to have one of their group get abducted by occultists who want to harvest psychic energy from his virginity.

Consistent throughout all of these narratives is the presentation of mysterious destinations—such as playgrounds, beaches, carnivals, and jungles—which stage the pivot from the tourists' quotidian complaints about job markets and career trajectories within the US toward a fierce struggle for survival. Reflecting on the diametrical relationship between the carnival, or "anomic feast," and the state of exception, Giorgio Agamben argues that political states of exception, such as the war on terror, consolidate law in the figure of an administrator while carnival dramatizes the full diffusion of administrative powers into chaos.<sup>53</sup> In their dramatization of this inversion, cinematic and literary dangerous playground narratives locate the ideal travel destination as a place where administrative security gives way to chaos.

In *La Perdida*'s film contemporaries, gore and supernatural danger signal this inversion of imperial relations, as in *Turistas*, when the hung-over and disoriented tourists follow their guide, Kiko, to a house in the Brazilian forest, where their organs are to be harvested and distributed to impoverished children awaiting transplants in Rio de Janeiro. In *Borderland*, this redistribution takes on stark anti-modern and anti-colonial resonances when Paul is kidnapped by an American expat who imprisons him until his sexual energy can be harvested to feed a vengeful African spirit.. In *The Ruins*, this pattern occurs when a tribe of Mayans traps the US tourists atop a cursed pyramid where bodily infestation by cursed vines results in auditory hallucinations and self-mutilation. Throughout, the repeated deployment of drugs and drug imagery works to naturalize the extensions of sovereign powers that justified themselves during the Operation Jump Start period under the guise of stemming the influx of illegal drugs and terrorists crossing the border. Additionally, the figuration of play as a doorway for inversion invites comparisons to another countercultural narrative that predicts and informs this trend: Hunter S. Thompson's *The Rum Diary*.

### Just Letting Go: White Femininity and National Security

Written during the 1950s—when Hollywood depictions of colonial uprisings were giving way to melodramas that located white female subjectivity as a new focus for dramatizing decolonizing tensions—Hunter S. Thompson’s *The Rum Diary* did not see publication until 1998, a few years after the passage of NAFTA occasioned the (re)emergence of the Zapatista movement. The journalist’s cult popularity and the contemporaneous release of the film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) no doubt amplified the novel’s sales throughout the tail end of the nineties, and *The Rum Diary*’s own film adaptation entered production eleven years later in 2009, as policy negotiations around immigration and domestic security were giving rise to the self-deportation movement.<sup>54</sup> Marketed as Thompson’s “lost novel,”<sup>55</sup> *The Rum Diary* stands as a bridge-text, straddling two formative moments in the popularization of US hemispheric tourist narratives, and it figures Puerto Rico as another allegorical zone where tourism, carnival, and betrayal dramatize the victimization of white US American femininity.

Originally completed in 1959, when US American anxieties were running high over Puerto Rico’s potential entry into the American Union, *The Rum Diary* emerged from a period that William McKeen identifies as Thompson’s stint working as a freelance journalist in San Juan, where he covered the local bowling scene before picking up a position as a proofreader for the *San Juan Star*.<sup>56</sup> On the narrative level, *The Rum Diary* raises numerous concerns about Puerto Rico’s political stability. Pedro Malvert notes that US American concerns about Puerto Rico’s formal incorporation into the union were inflamed by the nationalist revolt of 1950 during which *independentistas* stormed the governor’s mansion, killing or wounding forty-eight officials and bystanders.<sup>57</sup> And US American anxieties stirred by this were even further agitated when nationalists made an attempt on President Harry S. Truman’s life later that year. Arriving in the post-NAFTA literary landscape, Thompson’s novel joined what Alarcón sees as a late-twentieth century reemergence of infernal paradise narratives, which occurred as hemispheric economics and the re-emergence of the EZLN were offering US American audiences a new context for the novel’s orientalizing of Latin American difference and its sensationalizing of Puerto Rico’s political instability.

Throughout the novel, Thompson’s alter-ego, Paul Kemp, oscillates between drunken contentment with and xenophobic contempt for San Juan while working at an English-language newspaper and pursuing a blonde Anglo-American expat named Chenault. At the novel’s climax, Kemp joins Chenault at a literal carnival where the only police officer Kemp sees sits “half asleep, idly scratching his crotch” as the city dissolves into chaos, and as a white man is trampled to death before Kemp’s eyes.<sup>58</sup> Oblivious to the danger around them, Chenault encourages Kemp to “just have a good time and let go,” and draws the two of them to a bar where she reaches a trance-like state of inebriation, strips herself naked, and dances with a local man described as a “brute” with a “glistening black chest” (155). Soon enough, the patrons encircle

Chenault and her dance partner, obscuring her from Kemp's view until she is carried out of sight.

While the themes of sexual exploitation are more suggestive than graphic in most dangerous playgrounds narratives, *The Rum Diary* directly frames Chenault's sexual assault through the ideological symbols of US freedom and national security. Recalling her kidnapping, Kemp summons age-old connotations of white womanhood with national territory as he transforms his glimpse of her pubic hair "standing out like a beacon against the white flesh of her belly and thighs" into a stunningly misogynist fetish for national identity, noting the "sacred little muff, carefully nurtured by parents who knew all too well its power and its value, sent off to Smith College for cultivation and slight exposure to the wind and weather of life, tended for twenty years by a legion of parents and teachers and friends and advisers, then farmed out to New York on a wing and a prayer" (163).

By triangulating Chenault's pubic hair with resonances of "prayer," "power," and "value," Kemp can lament Chenault's sexual assault as a "rape" of US American ideological values and economic security, and in doing so, he draws on the same white nativist anxieties about hemispheric politics that cautioned against Puerto Rico's entry into the union.<sup>59</sup> And, ironically, *The Rum Diary's* narrative uprising rehearses what James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull identify as a general trope of 1950s colonial melodramas such as *Elephant Walk* (1954), which, in addition to locating white womanhood as the focus of colonial tensions, were shaped by oversight from a US Central Intelligence Agency that saw Hollywood productions as useful tools for influencing global and domestic perceptions of US American foreign policy.<sup>60</sup> Shaped itself by the influence of these and other popular dramas, which carried on the Monroeist project of influencing policy through public perception and influencing public perception through political rhetoric, *The Rum Diary's* popularity on the market testifies to the enduring relevance of these mid-century narratives, even as it bookends the core dangerous playgrounds narratives under consideration here.

### **Becoming "fit to judge": Allegories of Maturity and Xenophobia**

Drawing on a tradition of US American tourist narratives, the structure of feeling that finds expression in dangerous playgrounds narratives emerges from, extends, and shapes neo-Monroeist sentiments that justify efforts to curtail migration and expel undocumented residents by figuring the southern US border as a geopolitical delineation between the humane order of US American society and the anomic insurrections of Latin America, where transnational drug cartels, revolutionaries, and supernatural agents lurk, waiting to invert the order of US American hegemony. Reinvigorated once in the wake of NAFTA and then again in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks on the WTC, and more recently in the news cycles of the 2016 presidential race, the popular sentiments activated and shaped by these narratives flatter political and legislative actions that exploit slippages in popular anti-terrorist

sentiment to officiate the extended surveillance of Latinx bodies and effect an historic increase in the incarceration and deportation of undocumented residents. The convention of domestic infiltration and seasoned xenophobia infuses the final moments of many of the texts considered here—arising in *The Ruins* as Amy escapes the cursed pyramid with the “Mayan” vine writhing beneath her skin, in *The Rum Diary* through Paul Kemp’s ruminations on Chenault’s violation, and in *La Perdida* through the residue of infiltration that bookends Carla’s journey—transforming the trauma of kidnapping and violence into an anxious fear of Latinx bodies catching naive US Americans with their defenses down.

The most critically well-regarded of these texts, *La Perdida* opens with an image of Carla exiting a *taqueria* in Chicago only to catch sight of someone who “looks exactly like” one of her former captors in Mexico City.<sup>61</sup> When Abel returns to this moment at the graphic novel’s close, Carla reflects that her troubles in Mexico City occurred because she “thought [she] wasn’t qualified to judge” (254). And though *La Perdida*’s narrative negotiations are often read as a critique of Carla’s inability to critically reflect on her own privilege and cultural insularity, I argue that a close attention to the comic’s presentation of Carla’s coming of age in relation to formalist discussions of the bildungsroman clarify how this sense of an ending is shaped by the very hemispheric tensions that were gaining momentum by 2005, when the novel’s final installment hit shelves.

When read in relation to Lawrence Buell’s discussion of the fissures of ethnicity that structure US American manifestations of coming of age, Carla’s quest to explore her hybrid identity through encounters with Latinx cultures and subjects resolves with a “mature” realignment with the security politics of the post-9/11 state of exception, which subordinate her ties to her ethnic heritage under the logic that the US is not yet secure enough to protect its citizens from violent inversions of safety that may be effected by Latinx subjects and cultures, either abroad or, crucially, at home. In this way, Abel’s renegotiation of the US American bildungsroman reshapes the nationalist anxieties that infuse *The Rum Diary*’s turn from adolescent play to the endangerment of the white female body, even as *La Perdida*’s narrative turn toward fear, disorder, and redistributive violence marks an early crest of the wave of hemispheric horror media that continues to enter the political and imaginative marketplace through contemporary political rhetoric about border security and recent film releases such as *Indigenous* (2014) and *The Shallows* (2016).

The momentum of this structure of feeling not only coincides with an amplification of xenophobic and white nativist rhetoric that continues to divert attention from the history of geopolitical manipulations and economic pressures that have fostered unequal access to security and profit throughout the hemisphere, but also does so at the expense of political recognition of undocumented Latinx subjects and the agency of Latinx bodies within national borders. Examined in a broader frame, dangerous playgrounds narratives’ figuration of “mature” compromises with the security politics of the nation state also take on economic tonalities in films where the

originating impulse of young white tourism is a respite from the impasse of contemporary US American professional society, a respite that gives way to a new realization that even the cruel optimisms produced by the US's oligarchical economic structure pale in comparison to the savagery and insurrectionary sentiments these tourists encounter while south of the border.<sup>62</sup>

And just as Carla loses touch with the girl who came to Mexico hungry for friendship outside her expat circle and eager to venture beyond familiar avenues of American hegemony, the bildungsroman that narrates her growth invites the reader to regard the passing away of this intercultural curiosity as a dawning of clarity about the US, a clarity that is not tempered by a clearer vision of hemispheric geopolitics or the Monroeist legacy of intervention. Instead, the network of citations, recurring plot devices, and affective patterns that comprise dangerous playground narratives reproduce, shape, and extend the xenophobic slippages that infuse post-9/11 security discourse by drawing together prevailing concerns about terrorism, national security, and the hemispheric drug trade while also tempering them with geopolitical anxieties about the leftist turn in Latin American politics. And when these narratives use the trappings of coming of age to correlate maturity with anti-immigrant sentiment, racial profiling, and the extension of US influence over the political life of Latin American nations, they position these actions as necessary, if unpopular, steps toward making the Americas safe for the next generation of US American interests.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edwin Mora, "Napolitano: Terrorists Enter US from Mexico 'From Time to Time,'" CNSN News, July 30, 2012, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/napolitano-terrorists-enter-us-mexico-time-time>.

<sup>2</sup> Doila Esteves, "Debunking Donald Trump's Five Extreme Statements about Immigrants and Mexico," *Forbes*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/doliaestevez/2015/09/03/debunking-donald-tumps-five-extreme-statements-about-immigrants-and-mexico/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Turistas* (Unrated), DVD, directed by John Stockwell, (Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), *Borderland*, DVD, directed by Zev Berman. (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2007), *The Ruins*, DVD, directed by Carter Smith, (Universal City, CA: Dreamworks, 2008), *Indigenous*, directed by Alaistar Orr, (Santa Monica, CA: Lightning Entertainment, 2014), and Jessica Abel, *La Perdida* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (New York: Penguin, 1991); William S. Burroughs, *Queer* (New York: Viking, 1985). For discussions of cannibalism and "latsploitation" cinema, see Andrew Syder, "I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are": Latin America and Colonialism in European Exploitation Cinema," in *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America*,

eds. Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 70–84. For discussions of colonial and imperial adventure cinema, see, for example, James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009). For a discussion of narratives of US American youth seeking alterity and self-discovery in Mexico, see Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Daniel Cooper Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the history of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary in US American history, political discourse, and literature, see, for example, Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of US American Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Owl Books, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings*, vii, ix, and 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, "War on Terrorism Draws US and Mexico Closer," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/29/world/fg-usmexico>. See also Associated Press, "Pipeline for Terror," *Daily News*, July 3, 2005, [http://tdn.com/lifestyles/pipeline-for-terror/article\\_bcc396f6-bc07-5713-bd21-3abc22d6929f.html](http://tdn.com/lifestyles/pipeline-for-terror/article_bcc396f6-bc07-5713-bd21-3abc22d6929f.html).

<sup>10</sup> Chris Roberts, "Transcript: Debate on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act," *El Paso Times News*, August 22, 2007, [http://www.elpasotimes.com/news/ci\\_6685679](http://www.elpasotimes.com/news/ci_6685679).

<sup>11</sup> Randal C. Archibold, "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration," *New York Times*, April 23, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html?_r=0).

<sup>12</sup> Katie E. Olivero, "The Immigration State of Emergency: Racializing and Gendering National Vulnerability in Twenty-First-Century Citizenship and Deportation Regimes," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 2 (2013): 1–29, 6.

<sup>13</sup> David Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> James Painter, "South America's Leftward Sweep," *BBC News*, March 2, 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4311957.stm>. Reflecting on this transition in *The Nation*, Naomi Klein notes, "Across Latin America a similarly explosive multiplier effect is under way, with indigenous movements redrawing the continent's political map, demanding not just 'rights' but a reinvention of the state along deeply democratic lines." For more on this trend and the hemispheric anxieties it produced see Naomi Klein, "The

Threat of Hope in Latin America,” *The Nation*, November 3, 2005, <http://www.thenation.com/article/threat-hope-latin-america>.

<sup>16</sup> Randal C. Archibold, “Obama to Send Up to 1,200 Troops to the Border,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/us/26border.html>.

<sup>17</sup> These figures from a study by the Monterrey Institute of Technology are referenced in Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> For more on “structures of feeling,” see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Buell, “The Necessary Fragmentation of the (US) Literary-Cultural Imaginary,” in *The Imaginary and its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*, eds. Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz, (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 23–41.

<sup>20</sup> Buell, “The Necessary Fragmentation of the (US) Literary-Cultural Imaginary,” 33.

<sup>21</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13, 11.

<sup>23</sup> L. Williams, “Film Bodies,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> For particularly culturally and transculturally focused studies of *La Perdida*, see Patrick L. Hamilton, “Lost in Translation: Jessica Abel’s *La Perdida*, the Bildungsroman, and ‘That Mexican Feel,’” in *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 120–31; and Adrielle Anna Mitchell, “Graphic Journeys: Figuring Americans Abroad in Thompson’s *Carnet de Voyage* and Abel’s *La Perdida*,” *CEA Critic* 72, no. 3 (2010): 21–34. Ana Merino and Elizabeth Polli, “Feminine Latin/o American Identities on the American Alternative Landscape: From the Women of Love and Rockets to *La Perdida*,” *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 164–76. Patrick Hamilton has astutely located Carla’s quest to negotiate her hybrid Mexican American identity as a sort of anti-bildungsroman, in which her quest for identify formation “fails” because Carla’s identity fails to cohere, but I think Buell’s discussion of the fragmentation of the bildungsroman offers a more persuasive framework for exploring this negotiation than failure, and that the broader socio-political context of the comic’s publication offers insight into how this “failure” registers on the more conventional move toward compromise and reconciliation with society that Moretti tracks in *The Way of the World*. Hamilton, “Lost in Translation,” 209.

- <sup>26</sup> Jennifer H. Williams, “The Canon and the Cutting edge: On Teaching the Graphic Novel,” *Pedagogy* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 193–99. Theresa Delgadillo, “The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 600–624. See also Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* (New York: First Second Books, 2008) and *Mastering Comics* (New York: First Second Books, 2012). For more on the project, including Abel and Madden’s outreach to educators, see their blog, *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures: Jessica Abel and Matt Madden on Reading, Teaching, and Making Comics*, at <http://dw-wp.com/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Jessica Abel, “La Perdida,” September 26, 2011, <http://jessicaabel.com/work/la-perdida/>.
- <sup>28</sup> “La Perdida,” *Kirkus Review*, January 1, 2006, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jessica-abel/la-perdida/>; *All Things Considered*, “These Aren’t Your Geek’s Graphic Novels,” *National Public Radio*, November 29, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120466798>. See also John Hodgman’s review in *New York Times*, in which Hodgman describes *La Perdida* as a story that “jolts from quotidian travelogue to thrilling adventure territory,” “Comics Chronicle,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/books/review/04hodgman.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
- <sup>29</sup> For discussions of the history of “Infernal Paradise” as a discursive network of representations of Mexico and “Mexicaness,” see Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest*, 40–94.
- <sup>30</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Rum Diary* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1998).
- <sup>31</sup> For more on the history of the US’s role in destabilizing the region, especially as it relates to neoimperialism in the Middle East, see Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop*, as well as Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home*.
- <sup>32</sup> It may be worth noting here that *La Perdida* makes no allusion to a larger network of Mexican extended family beyond Carla’s half-brother, who lives in Carla’s hometown of Chicago. Readers are also not privy to any extended discussion of Carla’s biracial identity or passing with her Mexican friends, who seem to encounter her primarily, if not exclusively, as white.
- <sup>33</sup> Abel, *La Perdida*, 276. Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s work on the infernal paradise narrative has demonstrated how “post-tourist” desires for “realness” that characterize late-twentieth century US tourism rely on a bricolage of colonialist fantasies that obscure the legacies of empire and thus create an imaginary destination where white US Americans can play out psychosocial dramas of self-discovery and redemption, and Rachel Adams’s analysis of Kerouac’s literary journey to Mexico offers further insights into the roots of these fantasies while underscoring how Kerouac and his companions’ journeys to Mexico functioned as a “retreat into a state of childish wonder” that enabled them “to imagine themselves liberated from the responsibilities that burdened them on domestic soil.” Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides*, 160. Though I find that *La Perdida* is indebted to both of these traditions, I argue that Carla’s journey emerges at the juncture of these

traditions, and her fantasies of Mexico and Mexicaness consolidate her longing to liberate herself from her US Americanness, and implicitly her whiteness, with her desire for a “real” Mexico that will somehow awaken the “real” Mexican within her. For more on theories of post-tourism and authenticity regarding representations of Mexico see Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest*, 151–87. For more on Kerouac, see Adams, *Continental Divides*, 149–88.

<sup>34</sup> For more on Kerouac’s transcendence of the self through becoming “Mexican,” see the episode of *On the Road* that finds Sal living among Latinx farm workers in California’s Central Valley. In addition to imagining that he has been racially transformed by the work, such that he imagines himself “sighing like an old Negro cotton-picker” at the end of the day, Sal appropriates a Latino identity after a group of neighboring farmers thrash a tent in the migrant community and he notes, “from then on I carried a big stick with me... in case they got the idea we Mexicans were fouling up their trailer camp. They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am.” Kerouac, *On the Road*, 97–98.

<sup>35</sup> Anne E. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 4, 6, emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, “Graphic Journeys,” 25.

<sup>37</sup> Abel, *La Perdida*, 104.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the temporal conventions of what Linda Williams refers to as “body narratives,” including the melodramatic register of “too late” as a lost sense of self-identity or origin, see Williams, “Film Bodies,” especially 11.

<sup>39</sup> Though the two novels share some stark similarities, including the quest of a young Latina woman to explore her roots and find inspiration in Mexico, Carla’s exclusion from the fold of Mexicaness and the novel’s inclusion of a transnational crime plot stands in marked contrast to the thoughtfully messy negotiations of returning to find oneself in Mexico that makes up the core of Ana Castillo’s excellent experimental novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (New York: Anchor, 1986).

<sup>40</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> For more on how the female protagonist’s curiosity becomes occasion for violent fantasy, see Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” in *Horror, The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (New York: Routledge, 2001), 61–66, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Adams, *Continental Divides*, 190–217. For films that court and reflect this interest, see *The Counselor*, DVD, directed by Ridley Scott (Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013) and *Narco Cultura*, directed by Shaul Schwarz, (New York: Ocean Size Pictures, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Abel, *La Perdida*, 224, 186.

<sup>44</sup> For more on the conventions of the imperial adventure narrative, including the specter of “native” uprisings, see Chapman and Cull, *Projecting Empire*.

<sup>45</sup> More recent variations on this theme include the 2014 film *Indigenous*, which finds another group of young, white US Americans trapped in the Peruvian jungle at the juncture of the northern and southern hemispheres while a pack of flesh-eating monsters picks off their party, and the 2016 release *The Shallows*, which tells a similar story of a young, white American surfer who sets off to find the beach where her deceased mother had surfed with her in her belly only to become stranded on a rock in the middle of a bay with a demonic shark preventing her escape. Though there is some effort to rescue the US Americans in *Indigenous*, which has mixed success, *The Shallows* includes a scene where a drunken Mexican man comes upon the stranded surfer’s pack on the shore and attempts to steal her belongings before deciding to wander into the waters to be eaten by the demon shark instead. *The Shallows*, directed by Jaume Collet-Serra (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> See Syder, “I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are.”

<sup>47</sup> Jon Beasley-Murray, *Post Hegemony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 232–33.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop*; Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007); and Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> This quote comes from Rabasa’s translation of a June 1995 communiqué from EZLN Subcomandante Marcos in José Rabasa, *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 55. Commenting on this communiqué, Rabasa notes, “The communiqués of Marcos ... evoke a history where the enemy has always been victorious, but they also formulate a discourse on violence that grounds its purity in the impossibility (paradoxically, also the condition of possibility) of its demands. Although the Zapatistas are a military force, the power of their violence resides in the new world they call forth—a sense of justice, democracy, and liberty that the government cannot understand because it calls for its demise” (58, emphasis and parenthesis in original text). Though the EZLN officially declared war on the Mexican state, their critique of hemispheric histories of structural violence and of the post-NAFTA realities that displaced indigenous farmers necessarily indict US American interests in Mexico.

<sup>51</sup> Figures drawn from *The Numbers*, Nash Information Group, LLC, “Turistas (2006).” In addition to offering these figures, the Nash Group ranks *Turistas* as 163rd in the 2006 domestic box office and the 171st in international box office earnings. See <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Turistas#tab=summary>.

<sup>52</sup> *Hostel*, directed by Eli Roth, (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>54</sup> Chapman and Cull, *Projecting Empire*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> According to a report from A. O. Scott published in the *New York Times*, actor Johnny Depp supposedly found the novel while reviewing Thompson's papers after the box office success of the film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* revived interest in Thompson's life and work. Depp is credited with working to get the novel published and bringing his name to a film adaptation of *The Rum Diary*. The film entered production in 2009 and upon its release in 2011, it was off-handedly marketed as a "prequel of sorts" to *Fear and Loathing*. For more on this, see A. O. Scott "In San Juan, on the Road to Gonzo," *New York Times*, October 25, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/movies/hunter-s-thompsons-rum-diary-with-johnny-depp-review.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/movies/hunter-s-thompsons-rum-diary-with-johnny-depp-review.html?_r=0), and David German, "'The Rum Diary': Johnny Depp's Hunter S. Thompson Tribute," *Huffington Post*, December 25, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/25/the-rum-diary-johnny-depp-hunter-s-thompson\\_n\\_1030117.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/25/the-rum-diary-johnny-depp-hunter-s-thompson_n_1030117.html).

<sup>56</sup> William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 55–60.

<sup>57</sup> Pedro Malavet, *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 92.

<sup>58</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *The Rum Diary*, 147.

<sup>59</sup> Though the film adaptation released in 2010 eschews the carnival scene, the replacement scene echoes popular slippages between political unrest and the supernatural when Kemp resolves his narrative with a visit to a queer spiritualist named Papa Nabo. *The Rum Diary*, DVD, directed by Bruce Robinson, (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Chapman and Cull, *Projecting Empire*, 75–79.

<sup>61</sup> Abel, *La Perdida*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

### **Selected Bibliography**

Abel, Jessica. *La Perdida*. New York: Pantheon, 2006.

———. "The Drawing Words & Writing Pictures Project." September 26, 2011. <http://jessicaabel.com/books/dwwp/>.

———. "La Perdida - Jessica Abel." September 27, 2011. <http://jessicaabel.com/books/la-perdida/>.

Abel, Jessica, and Matt Madden. *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures: Jessica Abel and Matt*

- Madden on Reading, Teaching, and Making Comics. <http://dw-wp.com/>.
- . *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures: Making Comics: Manga, Graphic Novels, and Beyond*. New York: First Second Books, 2008.
- . *Mastering Comics: Drawing Words & Writing Pictures Continued*. New York: First Second Books, 2012.
- Adams, Rachel. *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Alarcón, Daniel Cooper. *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997.
- Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Multicultural Comics from Zap to Blue Beetle*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Ali, Tariq. *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2008.
- Alonso-Zaldivar, Ricardo. "War on Terrorism Draws US and Mexico Closer." *Los Angeles Times*, February 29, 2004. <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/feb/29/world/fg-usmexico29>.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/la frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Archibold, Randal C. "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration." *The New York Times*, April 23, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/us/politics/24immig.html>.
- . "Obama to Send Up to 1,200 Troops to Border." *New York Times*. 25 May 2010. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/us/26border.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/26/us/26border.html?_r=0).
- Associated Press. "Pipeline for Terror." *The Daily News Online*. July 3, 2005. [http://tdn.com/lifestyles/pipeline-for-terror/article\\_bcc396f6-bc07-5713-bd21-3abc22d6929f.html](http://tdn.com/lifestyles/pipeline-for-terror/article_bcc396f6-bc07-5713-bd21-3abc22d6929f.html).
- Bacon, David. *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.
- Beasley-Murray, Jon. *Post-Hegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Borderland*. Directed by Zev Berman. Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2007, DVD.
- Buell, Lawrence. "The Necessary Fragmentation of the (US) Literary-Cultural Imaginary." In *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*, edited by Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz, 23–41. Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013.

- Burroughs, William S. *Queer*. New York: Viking Books, 1985.
- Castillo, Ana. *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. New York: Anchor Books, 1986.
- Chapman, James, and Nicholas J. Cull. *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema*. New York: I. B. Tauris Books, 2009.
- The Counselor*. Directed by Ridley Scott. Los Angeles: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014. DVD.
- Delgadillo, Theresa. "The Criticality of Latino/a Fiction in the Twenty-First Century." *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 600–24.
- Esteves, Doila. "Debunking Donald Trump's Five Extreme Statements about Immigrants and Mexico." *Forbes*, September 15, 2015.  
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/doliaestevez/2015/09/03/debunking-donald-trumps-five-extreme-statements-about-immigrants-and-mexico/>
- German, David. "'The Rum Diary': Johnny Depp's Hunter S. Thompson Tribute." *Huffington Post*, December 25, 2011.  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/25/the-rum-diary-johnny-depp-hunter-s-thompson\\_n\\_1030117.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/25/the-rum-diary-johnny-depp-hunter-s-thompson_n_1030117.html).
- Grandin, Greg. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Owl Books, 2006.
- Hamilton, Patrick L. "Lost in Translation: Jessica Abel's *La Perdida*, the Bildungsroman, and 'That 'Mexican' Feel.'" In *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama, 120–31. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Hodgman, John. "Comics Chronicle." *New York Times*, June 4, 2006.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/04/books/review/04hodgman.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Hostel*, Unrated DVD. Directed by Eli Roth. Santa Monica: Lions Gate, 2006.
- Indigenous*, DVD. Directed by Alastair Orr. Santa Monica: Lightning Entertainment, 2014.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Klein, Naomi. "The Threat of Hope in Latin America." *The Nation*. November 2, 2005.  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/threat-hope-latin-america/>.
- Malavet, Pedro A. *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- McClintock, Anne E. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- McKeen, William. *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.
- Merino, Ana. "Feminine Latin/o American Identities on the American Alternative

- Landscape: From the Women of *Love and Rockets* to *La Perdida*.” Translated by Elizabeth Polli. In *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, edited by Paul Williams and John Lyons, 164–76. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010.
- Mitchell, Adrielle Anna. “Graphic Journeys: Figuring Americans Abroad in Thompson’s *Carnet de Voyage* and Abel’s *La Perdida*.” *CEA Critic: An Official Journal of the College English Association* 72, no. 3 (2010): 21–34.
- Mora, Edwin. “Napolitano: Terrorists Enter US from Mexico ‘From Time to Time’” *CNSN News*. July 30, 2012. <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/napolitano-terrorists-enter-us-mexico-time-time>.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Mottram, James. “The Long and Grinding Story of *On the Road*.” *Belfast Telegraph*, September 13, 2008. <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/film-tv/news/the-long-and-grinding-story-of-on-the-road-28447028.html>.
- Murphy, Gretchen. *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of US American Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Narco Cultura*, DVD. Directed by Shaul Schwarz. New York: Ocean Size Pictures, 2014.
- Olivero, Katie E. “‘The Immigration State of Emergency’: Racializing and Gendering National Vulnerability in Twenty-First-Century Citizenship and Deportation Regimes.” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 2 (2013): 1–29.
- Painter, James. “South America’s Leftward Sweep.” *BBC News*. March 2, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4311957.stm>.
- Rabasa, José. *Without History: Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.
- Reisen, Harriet. “These Aren’t Your Geek’s Graphic Novels,” *All Things Considered*. November 29, 2009. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120466798>
- Roberts, Chris. “Transcript: Debate on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.” *El Paso Times*, August 22, 2007. <https://www.eff.org/files/filenode/att/elpasotimesmccconnelltranscript.pdf>.
- The Ruins*. Directed by Carter Smith. Universal City, CA: Dreamworks, 2008. DVD.
- The Rum Diary*. Directed by Bruce Robinson. Culver City: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012. DVD.
- Scott, A. O. “In San Juan, on the Road to Gonzo.” *New York Times*, October 27, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/movies/hunter-s-thompsons-rum-diary-with-johnny-depp-review.html>.

- The Shallows*. Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2016. Cinema release.
- Syder, Andrew. "‘I Wonder Who The Real Cannibals Are’ Latin America and Colonialism in European Exploitation Cinema." In *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas and Latin America*, edited by Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney, 70–84. New York: Routledge 2009.
- Thompson, Hunter S. *The Rum Diary*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Turistas*, Unrated. Directed by John Stockwell. Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude for an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- Williams, Jennifer H. "The Canon and the Cutting Edge: On Teaching the Graphic Novel." *Pedagogy* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 193–99.
- Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1994): 2–13.
- . "When the Woman Looks." In *Horror: The Film Reader*, edited by Mark Jancovich, 61–66. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- "Zero Hour in Mexico." *Economist*, January 5, 2006.  
<http://www.economist.com/node/5363298>.