Border Checkpoint as Literacy Technology

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from an array of primary sources, such as the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) periodical *Frontline*, government documents, and news reports of CBP brutality, to discuss the ways that border checkpoints function as technologies that impart everyday literacies of race, citizenship, and class onto all who move through them. Drawing on the work of Jay Dolmage, Kate Vieira, and others, this paper melds public literacy and cultural geography to examine the border checkpoint's influence as a form of literacy technology with particular attention to the Santa Fe Bridge checkpoint between Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. I argue that the border checkpoint is a kind of spatial literacy technology that forms and typifies interactions at population scales and is a place where the racialized norms of inclusion/exclusion become routine. Vieira's "documentary border" and the concrete border are made one in its operations. In examining the border checkpoint in this way, I hope to contribute to our awareness of one of the most powerful shaping tools in the oppressive subjective life on the US–Mexico border, an understanding that is crucial to any abolitionist reckoning with the hegemonic literacies that produce so much harm in our communities.

Introduction

Some years ago, I was on a bus from Los Angeles to El Paso, sailing through the New Mexico dark, looking out at the passing land: all creosote and hill punctuated by the silhouettes of rural homes and abandoned structures. In that darkness, road signs told a story of rote progression: Hobbs—Deming—Truth or Consequences. I nodded off against the glass and the passing signs, and woke up to fluorescent light as bright as noon-day sun. Now amidst concrete barricades, uniformed men searched and moved methodically. Families sat and watched. Dogs alongside handlers raced through the undercarriage of our bus until one started barking. We were outside of Las Cruces. A uniformed man announced in Spanish then English that we had to present our documents: visas, passports, drivers' licenses, all came up. An officer climbed the stairs into the bus holding what appeared to be no more than a half-ounce of marijuana in a loose cellophane bag. Hardly a smuggler's payload. The migra were prompt in the work of sorting out its owner. The "culprit" was found to be an elderly Mexican woman who, speaking no English, meekly held up a California medical card and said something in Spanish about her arthritis. He explained to her that this card did not give her the right to transport the grass over state lines, let alone to be sitting there in front of him. Instead of being granted some temporary mercy (confiscation and reprimand), she was hauled off of our bus in handcuffs, alongside an unrelated teenager, sitting in the corner across from her, who had no identification at all. Both were left to uncertain fates at that checkpoint, miles from any family or friends. At this same checkpoint, some decades earlier, Leslie Marmon Silko found herself caught in an escalating tension where the presence of contraband (her own marijuana) and the potential of violence hung thick in the air: "I thought how easy it would be for the Border Patrol to shoot us and leave our bodies and car beside the highway, like so many bodies found in these parts and ascribed to 'drug runners'" (73). What lies between these moments—Silko's, mine, and those of my fellow passengers—are the heightened states of uncertainty and vulnerability. It is not just *that* checkpoint, but the *form* of the checkpoint, that is the issue here.

In this article, I venture an analysis of this form by examining

1) the theoretical grounds on which the checkpoint can be read as literacy technology with the assistance of Annette Vee, Kate Vieira, and others;
2) the historical durability of the checkpoint form and its elaborations over time, by cross-referencing Jay Dolmage's work on Ellis Island with a contemporaneous checkpoint between El Paso, Texas, and Juárez, Mexico; and
3) the way the space, people, and routine violences of the checkpoint today constitute a literacy technology that produces a global geography of borders.

I conclude with an open-ended meditation on what these aspects of the checkpoint mean for composition studies and compositionists as we grapple with the workings of this literacy technology going forward.

In an era of runaway state retrenchment and an increasing spiral into anti-migrant panic, checkpoints have become a central literacy both "important to governance" and "infrastructural" (Vee 44) to everyday life. I begin by extending Vee's considerations of computer programming literacy to the border checkpoint as a form dependent

on the border's certifying power. As Vee argues, "[c]omputer programming has a lot in common with textual literacy—historical trajectory, social shaping, affordances for communication, and connections to civic discourse . . . the refrain of 'literacy' in reference to computer programming is not only apt because of these parallels, but . . . [because] our definitions of literacy must shift to accommodate this new form of digital writing" (43). Checkpoints exhibit this same shaping of trajectory, sociality, and communication, as well as operating on their own binary logic of admission and denial. For those directly and indirectly impacted, the checkpoint forms a core technological node in the establishment of borders, and with this, it enjoins literacy in a way we must shift to accommodate. To quote Vieira, "Literacy, experienced in [bordered] communities materially, is a navigational technology. It places and displaces. It orients and disorients. It includes and it alienates. These are not metaphors for literacy. They are active verbs that correspond with the development of the nation state, the transnational post, and systems of social inequality" ("On the Social" 30).

The significance of this argument for abolitionist and compositionist scholars is in how our own work can chart the impact of checkpoints on our daily lives, and how the checkpoint in its technical features across national contexts can inform our understanding of the global border complex. The border checkpoint is a literacy technology that dictates the substance of human and non-human relationships from movement to stasis in ways that are consistent enough to be named, typified, and ultimately resisted.

Checkpoint as Literacy Technology

This section draws on work across abolitionist scholarship, as well as composition and technical communication, to pin down the theoretical basis of the checkpoint as a literacy technology. In articulating this, I draw from Vee as well as from Dave Clark in "Shaped and Shaping Tools." I follow Clark's working definition of technology, in which he quotes Thomas P. Hughes by describing it as "'craftsmen, mechanics, inventors, engineers, designers, and scientists using tools, machines, and knowledge to create and control a human-built world consisting of artifacts and systems,'" which "emphasizes not the tools themselves, but their creative design, implementation, and use, paralleling Aristotle's definition of *techne* as practical arts" (89). I will accordingly try to examine the way that people—the designers, enforcers, and subjects of these checkpoints—articulate and make meaning (or are *made* meaningful) through the motives of the apparatus. I use rhetorical analysis to analyze the problems and issues raised by this technology through the examination of publicly available discourse, in both primary and secondary sources, as in the case of government texts, the CBP periodical, publicized killings, and available historiography. I will do so by charting the checkpoint in the US throughout history from El Paso to Ellis Island, and mapping out its global connections, such as the ongoing genocide in Palestine, the spectacularization of sea- and desert-borne migrant death, the intensification of anti-migrant panics in the United States, and the Iraq War.

Checkpoints are deceptively simple technologies, apparatuses "common to all nation states" and the "prime establishment[s] responsible for regulating transboundary movements and enforcing the selective permeability of borders" (Ngo and Hung 179). This tight organization of queues, inspection machines, agents, papers, cameras, holding cells, and their arrangement for maximum efficiency in screening, surveilling, admitting, denying, or detaining human and material flows, comprise a whole technical form that occupies every geographic chokepoint that the state can identify from airports to land ports and seaports. The role of the checkpoint in public life has grown only more pronounced and sophisticated, particularly in the wake of Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill," which stands as "one of the largest investments in U.S. border security in history with over $21 billion allocated for border modernization, including record funding for biometrics and artificial intelligence" (Beebe). The exponentially inflating ICE budget and the deployment of the checkpoint from the District of Columbia to Los Angeles, California, and so on, speak to its overt and subtle influences on all quarters of public life, which show no sign of abating in their potency (Toropin).

The checkpoint is a technical form, a specific means of arranging people and things in space which inscribes all that moves through and around it. This power of arrangement is why they are so important in state building on the US–Mexico, Mexico–Guatemala, and Palestine–"Israel" borders, and elsewhere. This core utility allows us to see the checkpoint as a distributed and internally consistent form across the fields of abolitionist and decolonial struggle, which enables us to track what border theorist Harsha Walia terms the "homology" between "domestic and foreign conquest" (59). The border checkpoint is a technology that regulates transnational movement itself. It performs an array of actions that include not only the shaping of Border Patrol identity, but, outside of "members of the organization," the self-disclosure of all who pass through, including at varying degrees of peril citizens, citizens in the process of actions deemed criminal, people with their papers "in order," and undocumented migrants. In its array of barricades, its refined techniques of crowd control, its modular grafting on over the last century of emerging technologies from photography to biometrics, and its routinized rituals of submission and justifications of violence, the checkpoint is the literacy technology *par excellence* of what Vieira calls the "documentary border" (*American* 10). The checkpoint is a sociomaterial form in the same way Vieira articulates for literacy, which becomes a prime structural nexus that inveighs and produces relations and actions of "assimilation . . . authority, legitimacy, and mobility" (*American* 142).

Border checkpoints as a technology certify motive insofar as they set down what counts as legitimate motive, as expressed in the quintessential question of the customs agent: "What is the purpose of your visit?" In their arrangement of arms, barricades, fencing, and their attendant technologies, border checkpoints were at one time eugenic inspections focused on outward signs of dysgenic burden such as intelligence, disability, and hygiene, and today the mass tagging of biometrics and modern data science. They mediate movement and enforce zones of sovereignty, becoming inconveniences for some and hard barriers for others. They are an inscriptive technology that produces a hierarchy of meaning in the lives of people who move through them by collating

the entire apparatus of visas, passports, preferential crossing programs, and inspection. They are key geographic reference points for the shifting status of the human—movement itself is coded as criminal or potentially dangerous if it circumvents the checkpoint networks. They are a key form in producing the image of a stable national community, closed and guarded from threat. In this role they have become a site for a great deal of specialized knowledge and technical training, from CBP agents themselves to engineers and data scientists who produce the kinds of hardware and software that allow them to function. This training has meant that US checkpoints have accrued a cottage industry for global training wherever border security concerns are identified. For these reasons, border checkpoints demand rhetorical reading as an apparatus unto themselves, as literacy technologies with consequence (Vieira, "On the Social" 30).

The literacies enjoined by the checkpoint are in all cases spatial, because the checkpoint is a geographic apparatus first and foremost. All checkpoints are *chokepoints* that serve to funnel people through as identified threats or non-threats in the same turn as they code the land. The geographer Rasul A. Mowatt writes that cities are organized by technologies of threat identification and control:

> The city by design has taken . . . identified populations and has discursively framed them as threats to the safety of the remaining populace . . . . [T]he city has dealt with and continues to deal with those populations deemed violent with continued blows of violence with social, psychological, and physical death of their person and the people and spaces that they have held dear—a settler colonial city project that continues its occupation of stolen lands and dispossession of stolen peoples. (249)

What Mowatt identifies in the city is core to the function of the checkpoint as technology.

Checkpoints as a literacy technology encode the space around them as impassable except through their permission. All people, all materials, and all encircling land gain their character, from the point of inscription of the dominant, by going through or around the checkpoint. This inscription happens in part through the "social sorting" (Woods 115) of checkpoints. Rhetorician Charles Woods writes of "interlocking consent" to describe the "interlocking nature of various ToS policies [that] amplif[y] the geo-spatial elements of data privacy erosion and unethical digital surveillance via analysis of the rhetorical surveillance practices used at the U.S. Southern Border" (109). At the same turn, every border crossing is configured as implicit consent to the digitization and textualization of bodies. The checkpoint in its literate and technical force inscribes and decodes its crossers; it does not code directly as an exigence for its own being. As compositionist Walter Lucken IV wrote of literacy ideologies in terms of basic writing:

> Looking at this larger historical context enables us to see how the idea of [a] "correct" or "standard" version of languages or literacies, rather than being a description of existing literacy or language practices (those common to United States universities in this case), is in fact an

> ongoing political project that *depends on the existence of non-standard or minoritized Others as its condition of possibility.* (55, emphasis added)

In the case of the checkpoint, its literacies depend, as fundamental matter, on minoritized Others produced through its operations on space and the flows of people. It is with this basic operation of movement and land that the consequences of literacies begin.

To chart these consequences, we must root this process in history, with the assistance provided by Jay Dolmage's reading of Ellis Island in *Disabled Upon Arrival.* Dolmage's work examines Ellis Island as a rhetorical space that served as a circulation point in relations of power—that is, "how power travels through Ellis Island, but also how Ellis Island, as a space and as an idea, structures and shapes power" (9). For Dolmage, this rhetorical space, "through an industrialized choreography" (11)—constant queuing, line inspections, siphoning out for further medical inspection, expulsion, conditional acceptance—constructed the desirable and the undesirable. It inscribed immigrants by disability, race, class, sex, and other categories, which rendered their masses legible to the discourse of the nation. This processual effort was aided by the technology at the center of Dolmage's concern, photography, which he argues was enrolled by the discourse of eugenics in a case of mutual articulation—where photography created, for eugenic purposes, "a new archive and index for the sorting and classification of human bodies in this era . . . ideas about bodily fitness and defect drove the development of the technology" (72–3). The rhetorical space of Ellis Island was an active partner, then, in the development of eugenics, through its partnership with photography as an emerging technology, but its own material choreography was also actively constructing difference and vulnerability as a rhetorical nexus. In order to grasp how the work Dolmage identifies in the checkpoint travels to contemporary grounds, I next turn to the historical work of a similar checkpoint in El Paso, Texas.

From El Paso to Ellis Island

The function that Ellis Island had was consistently staged in other such spaces, as Dolmage himself gestures to, referencing the work of Alexandra Minna Stern and stating that "similar 'spectacular' techniques were also expanded for use at the border of Texas and Mexico in the first decade of the century (at El Paso, Naco, Nogales, Douglas, Tucson, Laredo, Eagle Pass, Rio Grande, Brownsville, and Hidalgo)" (21). These sites produced similar arrays of differentiation and eugenic marking: "initiation through inspection and inoculation" (Dolmage 21), through the textual training of inspectors and the technical apparatuses of photography or spatial design. Accordingly, we can expand Dolmage's analysis of Ellis Island by understanding that what he is describing is not a singular rhetorical space but rather a type of thing, a literacy technology —a border checkpoint, albeit one that is enormously loaded with symbolic meaning in the United States imaginary. Dolmage does not theorize such sites as technologies unto themselves, despite their similarity, because his primary concern is understanding disability by engaging with photography as a technology animated by eugenics and its

attendant texts of bodily interpretation. However, we could easily expand this by taking one of Dolmage's cross-referenced rhetorical spaces—El Paso.

Given the era *Disabled Upon Arrival* explores, 1890–1925, the only checkpoint Dolmage could have been referencing in El Paso was the Santa Fe International Bridge (Dolmage 11; Romo 225). The Santa Fe Bridge—which friends, colleagues, and I would cross daily nearly a century later—fulfilled many of the same functions as Ellis Island as a site of movement, intake, inoculation, and differentiation. In contrast to the binary immigration (either be admitted or be sent back) of sea-borne immigrants hosted by Ellis Island, the checkpoint at the Santa Fe Bridge served the additional function of routinizing the relationships of laboring Mexicans as they crossed back and forth from Juárez, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas. To serve this function, the checkpoint was host to an enormous "delousing plant" that funneled Mexican crossers, particularly those working in "menial" occupations, through an enormous multi-stage bath and laundry facility where they were stripped, inspected, and subjected to kerosene showers while their clothes were "sterilized." It was at this plant, among others, that the use of Zyklon B was pioneered as a sterilizing agent, which, alongside its overall design, was circulated through German pesticide journals as a possible technique for delousing Polish migrant laborers—and was ultimately adopted and used in the gas showers of the Shoah (Romo 240–1). While delousing was part of immigration at Ellis Island, in El Paso, it became a more quotidian ritual of submission and humiliation. The Santa Fe checkpoint was also an important site for the application of intelligence testing. The text of a standardized intelligence test was administered to immigrants from the interior of Mexico who were crossing at the checkpoint in order to generate arguments for increased immigration quotas by demonstrating a supposed racial tendency of "feeblemindedness." These tests "showed" that "the average I.Q. of the Mexican race was 78.1%," which historian David Romo cross-references with intelligence testing at Ellis Island that had the similar effect of placing 83% of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in categories of "imbecile and [feeble-minded]" (243).

The similarities between the Santa Fe Bridge and Ellis Island checkpoints, alongside the other examples that Dolmage cross-references across the Southwest, show that the checkpoint served as a stable technical form in the early twentieth-century US. We can generalize this to our contemporary situation. In their practices of queuing, inspection, and marking, border checkpoints articulate a national community and its Others. While the tools enrolled to assemble the literacy technology of the checkpoint have shifted—photography has evolved to include facial identification and biometrics—this pattern has remained strong. This allows the checkpoint to serve as a metonymic device that contains and produces the border and the nation(s) around it—producing, as Victor Villanueva put it, "a fiction within the fiction of a nation" (34), in this case through its routines of surveillance, biopolitical marking, and ritualized submission. While this form remains a key technology of articulation of US sovereignty and national identity, much has changed in the intervening century. One key change is our entry into a networked age, which Vieira explores, following anthropologist Gilberto Rosas, as the documentary society and its thickening borderlands in her text *American by Paper*, where she works closely with largely Azorean and Brazilian immigrants in South Mills

by crafting a sociomaterial theory of literacy at the intersection of New Literacy and "strong text" theories of literacy (Vieira, *American* 6, 11).

The Checkpoint and Its Global Consequences

The previous section grounded the checkpoint as a technical form in US history with the assistance of Dolmage and Romo. This section charts how the checkpoint unfolds globally by examining how the technology produces routine forms of violence, and how that violence informs a global geography of migrant death that extends from the US–Mexico border into Latin America, Europe, Iraq, and Palestine. It is in this capacity that the checkpoint as a literacy technology articulates national identities in terms of the threat it writes into the state.

Vieira makes the explicit point that the checkpoint is no longer the singular apparatus for the fractal documentation of human, particularly immigrant, life under a mass-bureaucracy: "Document checkpoints do not exist only on the physical border marked on a map. They pervade migrants' experiences in the United States, where documents are demanded in workplaces, in schools, on the road" (*American* 6). Against this context, Vieira examines the literacy practices—defined socio-materially as "a mobile complex of practices and products, instilled with meaning both by institutions and by the people under their thrall" (*American* 142)—of migrants in South Mills, North Carolina. While Vieira is concerned primarily with the complex and lived experiences of her participants and the ways in which they circumvent and make a life under these complex networks of bureaucratic control, here I am concerned with her analysis of the apparatus of "papers" from an institutional point of view. While the checkpoint may not be *central*, it remains, as a form, *essential*. That it proliferates across international contexts, and is a major site for knowledge production and border enforcement training, should lead us to recognize, not downplay, its core significance. For migrants, "everything you want to do depends on a document you don't have" (Vieira, *American* 13). This complex network of visas, passports, and authorizations constructs the migrant so that they can say, "I belong . . . I can pass" (Vieira, *American* 59), or occupy the opposite of that condition: a near total alienation from space, a subject hyper-vulnerable to violence. This "literacy as a material product or technology (like papers) exchanged in bureaucratic and interpersonal interactions" (Vieira, *American* 4) reaches in and textualizes bodies as contraband or illicit. That is, it produces a way of inscribing the bodies under its gaze in a way that exists independently from the content of the living person. Vieira references this through John Torpey as the construction of "file selves" (*American* 7), while Ralph Cintron identifies this textualization as reducing "to manageable proportions the excess of what it means to be an individual" (56–7). Cintron identifies profound civilizational stakes in this process, asking: "In protecting the institution in the name of 'all' [the national community], what actions become justified?" (57). For Vieira, undocumented people are those "not *written into* but *written out of* the state" (*American* 81). Given the array of punitive measures in place to capture and construct the undocumented in order to protect the sacral status of the documented, we can see that undocumented people are not "written

out" of the state, but written *into* it as threats. We can see this by turning once again to the technical form of the checkpoint and its site as a globalized mechanism for border security.

The checkpoint, as a form, textualizes the bodies under its gaze as biopolitical threats as enemies-in-waiting. The technical knowledge around checkpoint construction has become a major export of US and Global North imperial maintenance in its current form. As the journalist Todd Miller attests in *Empire of Borders*, it is through the exportation of checkpoint techniques and the border forces trained on US models that we can see that the US–Mexico, Mexico–Guatemala, and Guatemala–Honduras borders are now an internationalized complex. As Miller expresses, "thinking of the U.S. southern border as simply its divide with Mexico drastically reduce[s] its immense geographic scope and mask[s] its true nature as an instrument for domination" (*Empire of Borders* 35). That the new agencies which spring up as part of these mandates often take their names from Mayan culture and language—the Tecun Uman and Xinca forces, for example—both signals their participation in the nation-building discourses of Indigenismo in those countries, and takes on a particular irony, as displaced Mayan peoples are those whom they most often target (Miller, *Empire of Borders* 6). This naming scheme, understanding Mexico as also a settler colonial state, reveals a fundamental continuum—a way in which settler colonial states demonstrate their affinities through the medium of checkpoint technology. This is a point where abolitionist and decolonial scholarship is especially useful in producing critical insight. Where Miller speaks of the US–Guatemala border, historian Alexander Aviña speaks of the Mexico–Palestine border "built on top of ongoing US settler colonial projects that continue to strip indigenous communities of their land and sovereignty and maintained with technology violently developed in Gaza and the West Bank" (Aviña). The checkpoint and wall-advising specialties of Israeli technicians were so important to the Cold War border projects of Latin (particularly Central) America, that

> [i]n the midst of a "quiet genocide" committed against Mayan communities during the early 1980s—scorched earth military campaigns designed with the assistance of Israeli military advisers—rightwing Guatemalans discussed the "Palestinianization" of the country's indigenous peoples, who comprised more than half of the country's population. Israeli advisers [guiding the implementation of internal checkpoints] told Guatemalan military officers to "treat the Indians like the Palestinians—don't trust any of them." (Aviña)

The checkpoint inscribes roles: the agent, the questioner, the questioned, and the routines and machinery of inspection, which produce the subjects at its heart as untrustworthy, as existing at all times under a heuristic of suspicion. This martialing of suspicion and scrutiny shows how its literacy is built to foreclose abolitionist possibilities, and why abolitionist scholarship must target it squarely. Border checkpoints are important focal points that render the documentary border territorially legible, and where the dynamics of having or not having papers become heightened and sometimes lethally significant. Vieira's project is to examine the distributed reality of papers and the "documentary border" in a way that moves concurrently, but surpasses

the checkpoint as a physical and geographic form (*American* 6). She does not do so to their exclusion—rather, to expand our understanding of the conditions of being bordered—but the checkpoint's particular place in this contemporary situation must still be articulated. The necessity for this articulation is corroborated by scholars such as Tamara Vukov and Mimi Sheller who show that borders, as a virtual and actual space in line with Vieira's documentary border, have become fractalized and now permeate our entire society through the technologies of bioinformatics and remote surveillance which have now superseded the role of emerging photography identified by Dolmage (Vukov and Sheller 226). This distributed condition does not mean that checkpoints have lost their significance, as Vieira argues. As Vukov and Sheller show in their cross-referencing of border and airport checkpoints as sites of disciplining self-disclosure and bio-political management, checkpoints have not been superseded by the documentary border, but intensified by it, just as they intensify it in return (229). Checkpoints are generators of the "dynamic border governance" which Ngo and Hung call "checkpoint politics" (179). In the context of the thickening border, the checkpoint apparatus in its sociomaterial existence has a profound shaping role on the articulation of sovereignty and belonging wherever it is employed—but in the US, Europe, "Israel," and their allies, it is a way of marking and integrating threat as an abstract category core to the identity of those states.

The checkpoint is a literacy technology that reads and writes the nature of what counts as a threat and its countermeasures, which allows us to expand Vieira's understanding of undocumentedness. Dolmage was right in more than one way to identify Ellis Island as being kin with the Fordist production line (14). The checkpoint is still a mass-assembly line. What makes this a literacy technology is that it is an enormous documentary apparatus where people are literally stamped with barcodes dictating the nature and legitimacy of their movement in a machine that is constantly "assigning spatial and social identifiers, signals and codes" (Martén and Boano 528). While the condition of lacking papers and the resulting violence from this state can happen outside of the institutions of checkpoints and embassies at "everyday sites of bureaucratic interactions where papers are demanded" (Vieira, *American* 7), checkpoints produce these conditions and relations at scale. Eugenics, the ordering discourse of immigration in the early twentieth century, has been replaced by the discourse of national security.

Immigrants are now all potential threats, not to the genetic wellbeing of the nation, but to the sanctity of its property and "way of life." The checkpoint, in the current immigration apparatus, is the primary "line of defense" here. In the highlights of a study built to enhance Customs and Border Protection's data collection and streamline its techniques, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) hails the checkpoint as a major assist to their ability to "seize illegal drugs, apprehend illegal aliens, and screen potential terrorists" (1). In a large document that calls for increased inspection technology, canine units, and improved design decisions, the US GAO particularly notes local community concerns to include the fear of negative influence on "violent crime, business, or property values" (59) caused "when illegal aliens and smugglers circumvent checkpoints to avoid apprehension" (1). Woods describes the data collection that happens here as a project of working against immigrant life by

collating vast amounts of data in a way that "produces negative implications for bodies that are already disproportionately and negatively impacted, particularly Black bodies and immigrant bodies" (115). It is through this coding of threat and the latent potential for violence—a potential supposedly increased by the mere *circumvention* of the checkpoint—that we can approach an answer to Cintron's question of what actions this literacy technology justifies.

The way the checkpoint is geared to read personal documents "makes" a certainty out of the individual crossers, and those who do not fit into the schema become marked as existential threats. As we see in the GAO report, people moving through the checkpoint are interpellated into a circuit where they exist as potential terrorist-smuggler-illegal aliens. To contain this potential, the checkpoint apparatus formulates it thusly: *people held to be capable of anything are worth having anything done to them*. In the community of Customs and Border Protection officers in the United States, the checkpoint enables a particular kind of relational production expressed in their everyday vernacular: the officer and the "tonk." "Tonk" is an onomatopoeia for the sound of a flashlight slamming against a human head that has become a noun; "In Border Patrol stations the word 'tonk' is a commonplace description for the person whose papers are not in order. They are the people who most often receive the blow to the head" (Miller, *Border Patrol Nation* 107). As a signifier, this expresses the utter dehumanization of the undocumented person, but as a term, it represents the meeting of human complexity with what David Graeber identifies as the "bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema, and its monopoly of coercive force" (120–1), and undergoes the brute reduction to the zero-point of the police truncheon. This is the kind of quotidian violence that the checkpoint in part exists to write into the world, and so renders mundane the casual atmosphere of immiseration which exists at the border and spreads to the entire body politic.

The effect of the mundane reality of violence that this literacy technology produces is two-fold: First, Border Patrol agents can clothe themselves in an ethos of martial bravery and sacrifice for their efforts in guarding the national community from "potential terrorists." A vast number of texts are generated and circulated to this effect, lauding the bravery of these agents in rendering order to a dangerous world. A key example here comes from an official Border Patrol periodical, *Frontline*, whose issue, "A Powerful Presence," lauds the contribution of CBP agents in the training and outfitting of US and Iraqi soldiers "to create a national security structure that could handle the challenges the nation would face in the years to come" and "[help] the people of Iraq come into their own as a modern, functioning democracy" (Mayfield 9). This issue is replete with photographs that reinforce the danger and selflessness of these agents: hunkering for cover under suppressing fire (Mayfield 13), playing soccer in fatigues with an Iraqi child (Mayfield 14), and coordinating Iraqi guards at inspection points (Mayfield 8). We are given a thrilling narrative of international and inter-agency cooperation, as CBP worked with US Department of Transportation officials to train Iraqi officials in "nonintrusive" (Mayfield 9) inspection techniques, and in that capacity became "'the face of the embassy'" (Mayfield 10), according to CBP agent Mike Fowlkes. The text itself reinforces this ethos of sacrifice and charitable bravery, quoting

numerous agents in their reports of physical hazard but reassuring us that "the work was still rewarding in spite of the danger" (Mayfield 9).

This dynamic role and political function allows checkpoints to exert profound territorializing influence, not only on the people that circulate through them, but on their local geographies, in what political geographers Ricardo Martén and Camillo Boano term "checkpoint urbanism" (529). Examining the three major checkpoints between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez (including the Santa Fe International Bridge), they show that the checkpoints are not just "large scale binational infrastructure complexes that include passageways, control points, bridges, security stations and several other layers of securitisation and filtering" (Martén and Boano 528). Martén and Boano place this checkpoint complex within the political economy of manufacturing and narco-violence (really, low-intensity warfare) on the border, arguing that the checkpoint system as urbanism imbues a "magnetic significance" onto the surrounding cities, "due to the resulting transit dynamics and the surveillance deterrents at the core of their function. Furthermore, their dual nature—official and criminal—has branded the region as a criminal outpost, stigmatizing the people inhabiting it, and perpetuating the idea that Juárez is defined by its violent infrastructures" (526). This process operates as a mode of securitized threat production which, through its socio-material coding of geographic space, recasts Juárez "as the ultimate space for violence" with the consequence of "border restrictions over time and a wave of policies attempting to match the territorial coding of the violent hotspot" (Martén and Boano 542). This capacity for territorial coding makes the checkpoints rhetorical sites of production where the text of the national community as constantly besieged from an illusory Southern invasion becomes expressed in the narrative of "the Wall," or "a vague construct that embodies United States policy in its most naked simplicity: an impossible physical barrier meant to provide absolute order and protection from innumerable dangers" (Martén and Boano 543).

The second effect of this quotidian reality of violence is that, while the migra are able to clothe themselves in the martial ethos, the everyday function of violence and dehumanization which undocumented migrants are subject to at checkpoints suppresses the everyday text of their testimonies of mistreatment. As a literacy technology, the checkpoint selects what must and what must not be read. National security becomes such an accepted condition that everyday cruelties become accepted and expected, such that texts of Agency cruelty only circulate in the national and international media when they cross the line into spectacular acts of violence or mass detainment. Acts of violence on individuals must become truly unthinkable to justify reportage—for example, the 2013 death of 16-year-old Cruz Velazquez Acevedo. At the San Ysidro checkpoint between Tijuana and San Diego, where Acevedo attended high school, he was "'coerced and intimidated'" (Phillips) to sip a liquid that the agents suspected to be an illegal narcotic. Those agents chose not to administer a *three-minute* drug test until after he had begun to convulse and fatally overdose from what turned out to be liquid methamphetamine. Acevedo's death is not unique except in its shocking particularities, and while it resulted in a successful wrongful death and due process lawsuit, it is instructive that the agents' defense team filed for dismissal based on the argument that the case did not arise to a due process abuse because "'[n]onresident

aliens are entitled to constitutional protections only if they have substantial voluntary connections with the United States'" (qtd. in Phillips).[1] The coverage and circulation of texts around Acevedo's death joins other deaths at checkpoints which are too numerous to name. Reports of these deaths and other acts of quotidian violence only surface in reporting from a sea of anonymous abuse because of their remarkable cruelty. The texts of an everyday life—family photos, crush confessions over WhatsApp at midnight, Instagram stories of flautas at favorite spots—are actively suppressed through the violence justified by this security discourse at the contact zone of the checkpoints. Everyday texts such as these are forever altered by the enforced hybridity caused by the checkpoint. Just as Vee argued that conditions have altered such that the writing of code is deeply intersected with the writing of traditional text, now all writing, particularly for people who are deemed non-citizens, takes place with the checkpoint as its implicit reference point (60). All texts are forever altered by this hybridization, having to account for the checkpoint and its instantiated reality as much as for their own quotidian means and ends.

This distortion of everyday texts achieves an important move for the existential identity of the colonial states that employ the checkpoint, which inscribes deaths like Acevedo's within a particular economy of interpretation, shaping how we see, as any literacy does, questions of "historical trajectory, social shaping, affordances for communication, and connections to civic discourse" (Vee 43). These shaping capacities allow quotidian violence to pass by undetected, except as a way of valorizing the system. If Acevedo's death was laundered as an "unfortunate" excess of the checkpoint, the same goes for every death that happens as a circumvention of the checkpoint technology. As Walia puts it, "Like rape culture, victim-blaming responses to border deaths put responsibility on people for 'choosing' to make unsafe journeys. But restrictive policies [that] compel irregular migration and coercive state powers —not migrants—are responsible for these deaths" (137). For Walia, this concern is particularly legible in terms of the deaths caused by checkpoint circumvention. Recall that checkpoints gain in significance as the walls around them grow in impermeability, producing the "impossible physical barrier" (543) that Martén and Boano discuss. Through the sophistication of the checkpoint as technology, the border and its walls are strengthened, and where that sophistication makes subversion mandatory (as there is no other way through), the consequences of that subversion are rendered as a way of highlighting the state's weakness and justifying further strengthening of the checkpoint. It is in this way that we can view the ocean crossings of the Mediterranean; the deaths that result from the crossing of the Sonoran desert; or the thousands rushing in from Calais, France, at the English Channel Tunnel in 2015 and the deaths resulting from it; as products of the robust technological deployment of the checkpoint-wall formation (De León 3; Walia 135). More than merely products, these deaths are a way that checkpoints contribute to the spectacularization of death itself. As Walia points out via Sara Ahmed and other scholars, even the sympathetic display of victimage comes to reinforce the system itself (136). One small example of what Walia identifies here, following Ahmed's notes on how superficial empathy in the display of graphic suffering ultimately reinforces spectacle, is the recent construction of an effigy of ship-borne migrants—figures bound by lifejackets in a small boat, a mockery atop a tall pile of

wood and tinder—by Ulster loyalist forces in the North of Ireland ahead of "Eleventh Night," or "Bonfire Night," the night before July 12th, an historic celebration of settler-colonialist "victory" over the Irish natives in 1690 (Carroll; Morrissey and Brown). This kind of practice broadly shows how the deaths produced by the checkpoint and its walls become fodder for producing the identity of the settler colonial state, a move visible in the deaths in the Sonoran Desert, or anywhere that terrain is weaponized by checkpoints.

Accordingly, even sympathetic portrayals of migrants and their suffering become a spectacle rife for mockery, and a manner of *writing in* a justification for the bordering that orders the kinds of deaths checkpoints produce. The theater of the spectacularized deaths in the Sonoran desert; on the Mediterranean Sea; and in the quiet homes, alleyways, and streets where overdoses occur; produces a theatrical display which not only legitimizes the checkpoint, but enforces what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang term a fundamental "move to innocence" in settler-colonial rhetoric: "In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there" (6). The rendering of migrant deaths as spectacle that Walia identifies becomes a way in which the checkpoint and the wall around it is justified as a bastion of defense against the Other, and so reinforces, from "Israel" to Guatemala to the North of Ireland to the US, a variety of settler nativism which not only eliminates or erases the Indigenous, but writes them into those states as threats that the settler "native" must oppose in order for that state to achieve its own corrupted ideals of freedom.

So here we are: the checkpoints—their routine thievery of time and dignity; and their operations, which are as often pointless as they are cruel—contributing to an ever-lowering fall of expectations in a social environment that descends evermore into naked brutality. That is the object and purpose of this literacy technology. Its brute and uncaring stupidity is as much a pedagogical mechanism as its exacting competencies. What does responding to this pedagogy mean for our field? It is here I shall linger before I depart.

Checkpoint Composition

I have tried to demonstrate over the course of these pages how checkpoints act as a literacy technology in all of the intricacies that the term conveys. As I turn to what this means for the field in terms of concrete pedagogical recommendations and what we must make of this, I confront the fact that *I don't know*. I do not know what composition studies must do, or how it will work in our pedagogies. I only know we must reckon with it as it informs the very ground we stand on. In this way, my contribution resonates with Nattaporn Luangpipat's study in *Literacy in Composition Studies* that centers language ideology and the suppression of Chinese literacy in Thailand; like her, I aim to "[deepen] our understanding" and "[broaden our] perspective" (41) of a key area of everyday suppression. And suppression is very much at issue here.

To provide basic examples of recent note, and how they might translate to the interpersonal relationships of composition work, in June of 2025, a Norwegian tourist

was reportedly denied entry to the United States because of a J. D. Vance meme found on his phone. The administration, for its part, denied the meme was the prime cause of his exclusion and instead said it was about his admission of past drug use (Salam). In March of 2025, the French Minister of Research, Philippe Baptiste, reported that a French scientist was barred from the country because of his critical discourse about the current US administration, which the US government deemed "'hateful and conspiratorial messages'" (Mackey). A German-American green card holder was tortured and detained in March of 2025 and held in an ICE facility for two months over what the government alleged was a drug misdemeanor from years prior (Skipworth). Two things to note: 1) All of these news items are configured as sensational because they involve white Europeans—we do not know how much similar abuse has taken place under the guise of normalcy involving anyone else—and, 2) all of these incidents happened at airport checkpoints, because of their technical reach and their enjoining literacies.

The usage of memes, texts, and other data carried on the phone to incriminate and incarcerate means that the mere things I am writing here could—were I a visa holder and not a citizen, or even then, were I not white—serve as enough justification under the right eyes to justify my refusal at the country's border, or worse. Just as sinister is the unbidden entry of a third party, waiting always at the checkpoints, forcing their way into our communications. I have F-1 visa-holding friends and colleagues with whom I have sometimes censored myself in conversation in writing because horror stories like the aforementioned note that the agents who intercepted those people at the checkpoints did not discriminate between whether they were senders or receivers of the "offending" content. All acts of communication with my friends and colleagues, no matter how caught up in "after hours" informality, must account for the fact that, unless you change your settings, WhatsApp will automatically deposit an image sent to you into your phone's gallery of images. In the mere act of communicating with a friend or a coworker, I could sign their warrant. This freighting on of hazard to everyday communication is made all the worse by a point driven home in all of the rights trainings I asked my students to attend when I taught at the University of Texas at El Paso: the CBP and ICE can search your phone freely, particularly if you use face recognition or thumbprint unlocking, and use whatever they find there ("Border Search"). If you have so much as an ironic meme about weed smoking on your phone, they can put the boot to you, or worse.

All this to say, the checkpoint as literacy technology *defines the edges of what is sayable, and by whom*. This definitional capacity affects the very grounds of what composition can accomplish. Standing here in 2026, we should not forget the most obvious example of the refusal of the checkpoint, the wall, and their attendant logics of steady biopolitical management: Every day that a Palestinian exists is a refusal of the checkpoints and walls that hem them in; every day is a refusal of "Israel's" will to exterminate them. As I earlier signaled, *people held to be capable of anything are worth having anything done to them.* In contradistinction to this logic of genocide and submission made routine through checkpoint and wall formations, we should speak up. Yet, we know that any discussion of this matter is met with the "Palestine exception," and the totalizing proscription on speech, writing, and scholarship which

targets the illegitimate state that holds murder and displacement close to its heart (Shwaikh and Gould 753). The "Palestine exception" demonstrates the chokehold that the checkpoint has on the possibilities of our writing and our pedagogies. At the same time, the example set by Palestinians and other Indigenous peoples as they struggle for their land and their very lives, guides us in our responsibility as compositionists. In this way, Palestine offers us the best example of an abolitionist and decolonial exigency, as "'none of us are free until Palestine is free'" (Aviña).

To whatever extent we can approach the checkpoint in our classroom work, we must account not just for the consequences of this literacy technology, but also for the crucial way in which it has always enjoined resistance. Any geographic border remains an abstraction, a line on a map as easily walked across as dismissed, until it is given bold definition by the checkpoints that anchor it, and the walls that gird and emphasize them as chokepoints. While the dictates of the checkpoint take on the force of gospel, a social ontology that is presented as an inarguable logic of the nation-state, as Iris Ruiz and Damián Baca attest, it is worth talking also of resistance, and what it means to resist this kind of technology: "Today, colonial legacies continue to essentialize, demonize, criminalize, detain, deport, imprison . . . but we are speaking back" (228). These apparatuses, as naturalized as they have become in the mainstream consciousness, have never been met without contest, either in day-to-day response or in outbursts of mass resistance. The Santa Fe Bridge hosted one such outburst, the 1917 El Paso Bath Riots, where Carmelita Torres refused to submit to the delousing process at the checkpoint, and was joined by 30 other women, which then further snowballed into several thousand protestors who "hurled bottles, rocks and insults" (Romo 225) at the customs agents and police who tried to disperse them. Rock throwing at agents still occurs, often with fatal stakes, as in the fatal shooting of 16-year-old Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez and the near-fatal shooting of 29-year-old Miguel Angel Castellanos Martinez (Gaubeca; Riggins and Davis). Edward Said once figured Palestinian stone-throwers on the Palestinian border against its colonizing entity, among other checkpoints, as a powerful symbol of unarmed crowd resistance to militarized power (326). We should extend the same understanding to people like Torres, Martinez, and Rodriguez.

In this environment, as compositionists and abolitionists, we should hold ourselves in "thick solidarity"—"that is, a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences" (Liu and Shange 190). Accordingly, what composition can do—for instructors, and not just those on F-1 visas who frequently contend with the suspicion of airport checkpoints; and for students who cross the border daily at every checkpoint near universities in Texas, Arizona, and California, whose fatigue and trauma is so sublimated as to be taken as "normal"—is to ask questions and promote writing that centrally targets questions like: how does this technology inscribe and decode border death as a matter of its literacy? These checkpoints, in all their apparatuses, are forms of what Simone Browne refers to as racializing surveillance: "when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race, and where the outcome of this is often discriminatory and violent treatment" (8). As compositionists, we can work alongside our students to

challenge borders and help them articulate and push back on how the basic logic of the checkpoint informs their lives.

In its structure, the checkpoint contains the circular logic of an addiction. Put simply by Miller: "When security 'worked,' you sought more. When it didn't 'work,' you needed more" (*Empire of Borders* 23). Just as Lucken IV wrote that traditional models of literacy are, in fact, dependent on "non-standard or minoritized Others as [their] condition of possibility" (55), the checkpoint technology depends on its own failures to gain its significance. If this is a kind of distributed social addiction, then we in the imperial core have the chance to intervene, and this remains an important direction for the advancing of the rhetorical, abolitionist, and compositionist scholarship of checkpoints and of border-making generally. More important than expanding our field's understanding of these issues, this intervention aids in the general project of de-naturalizing these apparatuses and their place in immiserating the numberless masses of refugees and immigrants who are daily relegated to detainment and abuse, or left to anonymous fates in the remote deserts of the Sonora highlands.

What are we to do? I cannot answer this question. I only forward another, posed by Aviña: "A rather stark, uncomplicated choice thus emerges: do we side with the wall builders and their apartheid, counterinsurgent technology that kills refugees in places like the Sonoran Desert or the Mediterranean Sea? Or those who yearn to storm and smash walls with their dreams of a more just, free future for all?"

Notes

[1] It is worth noting that this exact kind of due process lawsuit is no longer legally available as an accountability mechanism to the victims of CBP and their survivors, owing to the 2022 US Supreme Court decision *Egbert v. Boule*.

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