

## FINDING JUÁREZ AND EL PASO IN *EVERYTHING BEGINS AND ENDS AT THE KENTUCKY CLUB*

ANGÉLICA LOZANO-ALONSO

Furman University

**Abstract:** In *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*, award-winning author Benjamin Alire Sáenz uses the real space of the Kentucky Club to connect all the stories in this book. This bar serves as an apt metaphor in that it mimics the liminal space of the border and the experiences of border citizens in Juárez and El Paso. Using a cultural studies approach I take theories from geography and architecture to examine the role of the bar as it relates to the history of the two cities. I consider how the metaphor of this particular bar that continues to exist has changed in meaning over time and space. The bar takes on a new significance in the context of these particular stories when I demonstrate how the bar's role has changed from being a provider of freedom for US citizens seeking escape from Prohibition, to becoming a symbol of the decline of the city due to the violence associated with drug traffic. Ultimately, Alire Sáenz is able seek hope in the middle of sorrow and reclaim the bar as a symbol of hope for the future of the city in the most unexpected of ways.

**Keywords:** Latino literature, Chicano literature, border crossing, spatial theory, cultural studies

In *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz uses the real space of the ambitiously named bar “the World Famous Kentucky Club” to connect the collection’s seven short stories and portray 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century life along the US-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. In the book, the characters face homophobia, femicide, hate crimes, drug addiction and drug violence, but in the end, Alire Sáenz is able seek hope in the midst of sorrow despite the painful and violent topics he addresses. The Kentucky Club functions as an apt metaphor for the changing meaning of the liminal space between these two border towns and the experiences across history of the people living in the sister cities. I will begin with a study of the history of the real physical bar and will trace the changing nature of the relationship between the two cities. Next, I will consider spatial representations of the bar in a selection of stories and, finally, consider how the Kentucky Club reflects the history and future of the two cities and their inhabitants.

Strategically situated close to the Santa Fe border bridge, the bar was founded in 1920 by the Kentucky Pioneer factory as a response to US prohibition laws (1918-1933) (*Kentucky Club Menu*). Throughout US Prohibition, Juárez and, by extension, the Kentucky Club, represented interstitial spaces because they were located within a space of constant negotiation of meaning, just a couple of blocks away from the United States Mexico border. According to Homi K. Bhabha in *Location of Culture*, "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. . . Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively"(2). As such I will consider how the changing meaning of the bar reveals what Mexico and US have meant to each other over the course of history. Prior to entering into an analysis of the short story collection, it is helpful to consider the history of the real Kentucky Club and what it signified in the United States and Mexican imaginary over the course of the last century.

When the bar opened in 1920, Mexico represented a playground for US tourists who indulged in the freedom of the sale of alcohol, gambling, and cabarets. *Avenida Juárez*, where the Kentucky Club is located, was a street full of neon lights leading to nightclubs and bars. The heyday of Juárez is intricately tied with the history of US prohibition as demonstrated by a false urban legend that Al Capone conducted business in the bar (Chessey). During its boom it was comparable to present day Las Vegas, Nevada, in its glamour and as a city where gambling and activities that were illegal elsewhere were allowed. After Prohibition ended, Juárez continued to be an American tourist destination. According to the menu, during World War Two, tickets for baseball games, bullfights, and boxing were all sold at the Kentucky Club (*Kentucky Club Menu*).

In the 1970 and 1980s, during the rise of the Chicano nationalist movement, Juárez and other border spaces came to symbolize the in-between nature of Chicano cultural and literary identity. The border became a symbol of a space intricately tied to Chicano/a identity and one such example of this in Gloria Anzaldúa's *The Borderlands*. It is a real shared space between two countries with unequal access to resources, and it exposes the benefits and the downfalls of these disparities. As Anzaldúa describes it,

The U.S.-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe to distinguish us from them. (25)

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

At the same time that the Chicano nationalist movement was growing, Chicano scholars began to enter academia but they had unequal access to power. Scholars of Chicano Studies found that they were on the periphery of English or Spanish departments; they had to fight to argue for the value of the works being written by their community and to find a place the field of literary theory in general. As Ramon Saldívar writes, “a method of interpretation that will provide a ground for the development of a way of reading Chicano literary texts as a group of works that intentionally exploit their peripheral status to and exclusion from the body of works that we might call majority literature” (11). As R. Saldivar continues, “Chicano prose fiction begins to illuminate the gaps and silences that are the limits of the ideological consensus of American literary history” (18). Not only have Chicanos as critics and authors for the most part been excluded from United States and Mexican history and literary canon, but due to their position on the fringes they contest both national narratives in their work. Chicano critic Bruce-Novoa complicates this idea even further when he declares,

We continually expand the space, pushing the two influences out and apart as we claim more area for our reality, while at the same time creating interlocking tensions that hold the two in relationship. In reality, there are not just two poles, but many. Neither Mexico nor the U.S.A. is monolithic. Each is pluricultural. Thus the synthesis is multiple and pluripliant, not bipolar at all. This means that we are not simply bicultural, but intercultural. (60)

Cultural Studies as an approach allows us to see how meaning is created. When applied to the understanding of the border communities, it has an interdisciplinary approach that decenters authority which allows us a deeper understanding of Benjamin Alire-Sáenz's text.

In the 1920s Juárez benefited from the increase in US tourism as a result of Prohibition and in the 1990s, with the passing of North American Free Trade Agreement, the booming *maquiladora* industry grew the economy of the city. But the region has also experienced the abuse of environmental standards and the violence of the drug wars. At times it functions as a metaphorical homeland space for Chicano intellectuals, but it is also a real place which has seen an increase in crime due to Mexico's drug war.

In 2010, 90 years after the bar first opened, Juárez was declared the murder capital of the world. Tourism from the United States to Juárez stopped. Juárez went from representing a tourist destination where one went to experience the freedom and decadence of its nightlife, to a painful and flagrant example of the growth and severity of Mexico's drug violence. In contrast, El Paso was recognized as one of the safest cities in the United States. In examining the significance of the bar, the reader can see how American desires have been projected onto the bar and, by extension, onto Juárez. In turn, Juárez has been the one to bear the real consequences of these desires. In an effort to curb the drug violence and danger, in a dramatic move the city of Juárez razed *Avenida Juárez* and painted everything white. Most of the bars were shut down (Lanier). The three-lane one-way streets and neon lights were removed and the streetscape was sanitized as the city government removed all the color, texture, and history. In its place is now a two-way street with an idyllic bike lane and wide sidewalks. The Kentucky Club is one of the few bars that was able to survive this transformation of the streetscape, but, in the process, lost its unique exterior, and it now blends into the newly sterile environment with its exterior white walls that make it match the rest of this part of the city.

Just as the changing external streetscape of the bar reveals its changing role in Juárez, the stories that take place in various time periods show how

Mexico and United States relations have changed throughout history along the border. The seven stories in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's collection represent different time periods, take place in El Paso and Juárez, and are connected by multiple protagonists visiting the bar. Through the club, I show how El Paso and Ciudad Juárez's relationship is an on-going negotiation of meaning and understanding.

The title of the book, *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*, is also a commentary on the role of time and space on the border. A careful reader can see the bar as representative of the historical changes that have occurred between United States and Mexican relations over the course of time. As Juan Bruce-Novoa declares, "Chicanos find history indispensable. It must be learned and repeated, preferably out loud, but if that is not possible, then in print. From the start it is understood that to make the world meaningful we must name it from our perspective" (71). By documenting the history of the bar, this collection of stories documents Chicano border history. At the same time, the stories themselves are nonlinear in the way that they are placed within the collection and the majority of the stories have a nonlinear organization. The narratives flash forward and backwards. At times characters are disoriented because of drug use or because they are hurt as a result of physical abuse. Memories and fantasies are often interspersed with action of the story telling.

Characters fantasize about different outcomes. Likewise, the relationship between the United States and Mexico is ongoing but includes all of the contradictory parts of the history of the two nations' relationship. Like the new mestiza consciousness that Anzaldúa describes in the *Borderlands*, border citizens must learn to develop "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned." (101). It is in building up a tolerance for ambiguity and leaning into it that the reader can have a better understanding of the place of the Kentucky Club.

The first story titled "He Has Gone To Be With The Women" is narrated by an older Mexican-American writer from El Paso named Juan Carlos de la Tierra. His name is significant as it connects him to the land, environment, and the role geography will play in tying in these stories to their place on the map. He describes his love story with Javier, a native of Juárez. Like the many Chicano writers whom he represents, Juan Carlos idealizes and writes poetry about the imagined border space, but in the current environment of violence no longer crosses the border into Mexico. In contrast, Javier, a Mexican national who is from Juárez, regularly visits Juan Carlos in El Paso and with his presence reminds him of the real effects of violence, femicides, border policy, and xenophobia experienced by those who live on the Mexican side of the border.

While Juan Carlos knows that Javier's mother is a victim of the femicides, it isn't until he falls in love with him that Juan Carlos fears the violence of Juárez. His relationship with Javier is symbolic of how some intellectuals theorize the idea of the border. As Michaelsen and Johnson write in the introduction to *Border Theory*, "The borderlands in other words, are the privileged locus of hope for a better world" (3). Ironically, as represented by Juan Carlos, those same intellectuals often don't actually experience border crossings even if they live right next to the border. Juan Carlos can ignore the reality of the experience of Mexicans by staying on the U.S. side of the border and keeping to his privileged middle-class routines of going to his favorite café every Sunday morning to buy the *New York Times* and "free-trade. Fresh-ground coffee" (12), and then return to the safety of his house in his quiet neighborhood. To middle-class Chicano intellectuals like Juan Carlos, the border can be a romanticized construct. In her criticism of

Michaelsen and Johnson's utopian view of the border, Alejandra Elenes writes,

By claiming that the struggle for Chicana/o identity should focus on an utopian future when it would no longer be necessary, Johnson and Michaelsen are proposing the same type of ahistorical politics that has given way to (...) antiimmigrant sentiments, and to the passage of Propositions 187, 209, and 227 in California. Their ultimate goal will maintain whiteness as the universal model and basis of a homogenous identity. For many years, Chicana/o and other people of color have called this process "assimilation." Moreover, this construction of Chicana/o identity would only claim an identity that is always already defined in opposition to the normative. Ultimately, this notion of identity denies Chicanas/os any sense of agency and undermines the political struggles of the Chicana/o Movement. (245-246)

In contrast, Mexican national Javier cannot ignore the pain of the lived reality that the city he loves is full of violence. He does not have the luxury or the privilege of assimilation.

Juan Carlos' character slowly comes to acknowledge the physical and political reality of the border. In an attempt to show Javier his love, Juan Carlos visits Juárez for the first time in many years. He narrates:

Walking across the bridge, I noticed the emptiness. When I was young, the Santa Fe Bridge had been teeming with pedestrians. Avenida Júarez had been packed with vendors and people from El Paso who were more than ready to unwind after a long week. But those days were gone now. The bridge was nearly deserted. I made my way past the soldiers with rifles slung across their backs, soldiers who more closely resembled high school boys than men. (37)

The movement of the middle-aged narrator across the Juárez Bridge functions as a transition from the nostalgia of the end of his youth and the glory of El Paso to the painful violent present. The soldiers' youth and their rifles contrasted with the writer's memories of joy-filled past trips to Juárez show the impact of the violence on residents and visitors to the city. As Javier's lover, Juan Carlos must face the painful reality of Juárez if he is to fully love and understand his partner.

Their visit to the Kentucky Club takes on a sacred quality of a confessional with Juan Carlos' return to Juárez. While visiting the bar, Juan Carlos confesses to Javier that he was sexually abused as a child. Later, when Javier is murdered in Juárez, he is buried in an unmarked grave like "all the nameless women who have been buried in the desert" (43). The death of Javier and the deaths of the many disappeared women are similar to the death of the vibrancy of the city. In the end of the story, the bar takes on a sacred quality once again when Juan Carlos returns to the Kentucky Club. Without a known gravesite, the bar is where he chooses to honor the memory of Javier, the man he loved and lost to the violence of Juárez. The sacred space of the bar is extended to all of Juárez with Javier's disappearance and the city becomes like a mass gravesite for all the victims of violence buried without a known burial stone.

"The Art of Translation" also addresses the violence that is a result of the border that the two nations share. The story takes place in the 1980s. Nicolas (Nick) Guerra was a first-generation undocumented college student at the University of New Mexico who loved books and language, but the story begins with him in the hospital as the victim of a hate crime who in the trauma of the violence retreats to silence. Nick was assaulted by a group of young Anglo men who carved words of hate into his back leaving him physically and psychologically alienated from language and his body.

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

In “Millennial Anxieties: Borders, Violence and the Struggle for Chicana and Chicano Subjectivity,” Chicano Studies scholar Arturo Aldama writes about how bodies and communities that are identified as Other are easier to mistreat because of the abject nature of how they are perceived.

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

Bodies that are marked as “Other” because of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation become sites where power brands subjects, turning them into social abjects: invisible, subversive (un-...), libidinal, and violent, and in the case of slavery, branded objects to be bartered, sold, and literally worked to death. (20)

The young men feel that they can abuse Nick’s body because they see him as an object and not as a subject. Aldama argues that an essential part of the conquest of the Americas and the production of colonial power was manifested in the mistreatment of indigenous bodies. For him, that violence continued and was repeated in the relationship between the US and Mexico, but in this case Mexican bodies are the recipients of the violence. He writes, “Linguistic violence—the creation of the Other—interanimates violence on the body” (25).

The enormity of the “linguistic violence” that results in violence on the body and the hatred Nick experienced are beyond language and comprehension, even for this character who has access to two linguistic codes. His chosen silence is a sign of his mental instability. The graphic nature of the abject crime can be connected with the wall that divides the two nations. The 2008 border wall erected between Juárez and El Paso successfully decreased the drug violence in El Paso, but violence in Juárez increased as it became more difficult to escape the city. In addition, undocumented immigrants were forced to find more dangerous routes to cross the border through the desert.

Arturo Aldama explains the paradox of the border, a space he describes as a free zone between the United States and Mexico. He proposes:

The border serves as a “free zone” for U.S. citizens and U.S. corporations (U.S. border crossers). The free zone applies, among others, to weekend tourists crowding the bars, drinking cheap beers, and seeking male and female prostitutes, and to U.S. companies exploiting “cheap” labor and lax environmental regulation controls. (...) Contrary to the free zone where all Euro-American taboos drop, the border is also a free zone of violence, a barrier to those trying to cross from the south—as evidenced by the Border Patrol, weekend vigilantism, bandits, and coyotes who after collecting their fees rob, rape, and denounce border crossers. (15)

This paradox is a recurrent theme throughout the collection of stories. After the wall was erected between the two cities "Record numbers of migrants from Mexico and Central America died on the arduous trek through the Sonoran Desert into Arizona between 2010 and 2014" (Duara). The wall built between El Paso and Juárez, the more aggressive stance against immigration, the resulting violence in Juárez, the deaths of undocumented immigrants and the parallel political rhetoric are akin to the physical marking of Nick’s body. Like Nick’s body, the Latino community in the US/Mexico border region and beyond disproportionately bears the brunt of the violence that stems from American border policy.

A male body as the recipient of violence is a notable choice when throughout western history and literature, the female body has often been synonymous with landscape. Mountains and valleys have been used in poetry and literature as metaphors to describe female anatomy. Nick’s body, like the border, is a real space that fails to erase racism, sexism, and violence against the other. Likewise, residents of Juárez regularly deal

with the violence of the realities of social inequality, discrimination, and hatred. As Debra Castillo writes in "*Border Theory and the Canon*":

the border in this sense reflects those stereotypes about itself that each society has refused, while readmitting the stereotypes about the refused other it also reflects the border as a well-known site of refusal—the literal and figural dump for each society's urban, industrial, toxic and sexual wastes. (187)

The character's body, like the physical space of the border, carries the burden of the violence.

During Nick's slow progress to recovery, he visits a bar as an attempt to reintegrate into society. Bars are social and solitary spaces at the same time. One can sit alone at a bar. In fact, the way that a bar is laid out with seats facing the bartender indicates that it is socially appropriate to go to a bar alone. Bars can also be a place to meet new people, seek romance, or be a place to socialize with new and old friends. While there, Nick meets an older woman and together they cross the border to the Kentucky Club. Because the story is set in the 1980s, the couple's ability to walk across the border to the club represents a more carefree political time and their meeting allows him to rediscover the pleasures of his body through his sexual awakening. The rediscovery of the landscape of his body leads to his freedom. Ultimately, he sees the hate crime as an act of war, but he will no longer accept his role as a voiceless victim; he will be a fighter who will defend his rights to live in the United States. He reclaims his right to language when he realizes he is strong enough to face hatred because his last name is Guerra. Finally, Nick remembers how to conjugate the verb "ser=to be" in Spanish, a reminder that he is back to being a part of the living world.

While visiting a bar leads Nick to reclaim his body and move beyond the violence of the hate crime, a bar as a symbol for the lost glory of Juárez is problematic when considering the role that illicit substances have played in the history of the city. While alcohol is now legal in the US, the initial economic boom of Juárez was because it offered the illicit product to US consumers during Prohibition. Likewise, Juárez has provided the United States with illegal drugs. The city is a key corridor in the transport of drugs from Latin America into the US. US demand for illegal drugs drives the black-market economy but Mexico endures the consequences of the violence left in its wake. Throughout the collection of stories, multiple characters die and/or are incarcerated or hospitalized for their drug use. While a bar may represent a carefree space, if it is associated with alcoholism, bars can represent the loss of freedom and death for the characters that become dependent on alcohol, in the same way that drug addiction oftentimes ends in the loss of freedom and death.

The collection's longest story, "The Rule Maker," begins with Max, a young boy living in a simple home in Juárez with his mother who abandons him for days at a time. Though Max's mother is often absent, he feels safe in Juárez because he has good friends, a family next door who cares for him, and a bike that allows him to explore his neighborhood. The reader infers that she abandons him because she prostitutes herself to earn money. Her participation in the sex service industry represents one of the many ways in which the characters in the collection participate in the black-market economy of Juárez. Historically this illicit economy has thrived because of United States citizen's consumption of illegal substances.

When Max is nine years old, without any warning, his mother takes him to live with his father in El Paso and he never sees her again. Max doesn't return to Juárez until he and his father visit the Kentucky Club as a celebration for Max's admittance into college. In this particular story, the visit represents a rare moment of emotional connection for the father and son. While there, Eddy shares with Max that he met his mother at the Kentucky Club. For the first time Max realizes how much Eddy loved his

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

mother and that is why his father cannot find a lasting relationship with another woman.

Eddy cares for Max as best as he can, but he is an emotionally distant father who does not provide comfort or warmth for the boy. Though he provides no instruction or guidance on how to do it, he demands that Max be a good student, attend Catholic mass every Sunday, learn to swim, and never do drugs. He provides all the material goods that Max needs, but he does not demonstrate or give any indication of his affection for his son. Max longs for a father who will openly show his love for him and provide him with a home instead of a house.

The home and house as physical spaces are important for how they are different. Sociologist Mary Douglas writes about the qualities that make up a home. In homes decisions are made with the family unit's safety in mind and with looking ahead for the future. Adults care for children and protect them. Goods are distributed in a way that fills the needs of all (Douglas 297). The theme of characters who are poorly cared for, abandoned, or physically abused by their parents is one that repeats itself throughout the collection. Characters who endure the consequences of drug addiction, oftentimes as children who love an addict, dream the safety of a home to protect them from the violence that is a result of their family member's addiction. In Max's case the adults provide shelter and food, but they do not provide the homes that he hopes for. They expose him to their illicit businesses, but he is held to higher standards and he is expected to be responsible for caring for himself. His father declares the rules he must follow but despite his young age, Max must take the initiative and find ways to follow them such as attending church by himself, keeping the house clean, being a responsible student and finding someone to teach him how to swim.

The neighborhood in El Paso is a lonely space. Initially Max thinks that his father doesn't work, but as he gets older he realizes that his father is a middleman who distributes drugs. Eddy chooses to live in a low-income, destitute neighborhood with abandoned homes because it is full of transient renters who can be potential customers and because he can hide his business in a neighborhood that no one cares about (Alire Sáenz 86). He lives on the fringes of society because it is likely that this is the only way he can achieve economic success, but his son longs for more. In the *Poetics of Space* Bachelard writes that "our house is the corner of our world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (4). Max's microcosm is empty and poorly cared for; Max tries but fails to create the warmth of a home.

The dysfunctional familial relationships in the collection function as a metaphor for the relationship between Mexico and the United States. Children are abused or abandoned in the same way that its richer, more powerful neighbor exploits Mexico. Children grow uncertain of their futures and what is expected for them; Mexico is stunted by the US exploiting its human and natural resources. According to Bachelard, a house should shelter daydreaming, protect dreamers, and allow its inhabitants to dream in peace. Houses and, if Bachelard's metaphor is expanded, border cities that fail to protect all of their inhabitants, including the poor neighborhoods, fail to protect their dreamers. Gloria Anzaldúa examines the role of inclusion and exclusion as well as the role of safety on the border,

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants. (25)

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

In their function as a space that excludes and includes, borders fail to perform their most basic function as houses and cities that thrive.

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44

August 2020

In "The Rule Maker," despite his inability to express emotion, Eddy imagines a better future for Max through the rules that he imposes. His insistence that Max attend church, though Eddy never accompanies him, shows his desire for his son to have protection everywhere he goes. A religious space has been described by Henri Lefebvre as an absolute space in that "it is located nowhere. It has no place because it embodies *all* places and has a strictly symbolic existence. (...) The space of sanctuary *is* absolute space even in the smallest temple or the most unpretentious village church" (236). Eddy pays his tuition to an all-male Catholic school; in addition, he demands that Max earn straight As, as an attempt to help him to secure a legitimate profession. He tells him to learn how to swim, an unusual request in the desert, but this rule shows Eddy's desire for his son to be socially mobile and confident in environments that aren't common in El Paso.

As long as Max follows his father's rules, Eddy gives him great liberty. He buys him a bike and then, at sixteen, a new Volkswagen Beetle. The ability to move through space indicates Max's growing freedom and power. According to Lefebvre, cars function as extensions of our bodies and as a type of mobile home (96) as he writes, "Owners of private cars have a space at their disposition that costs them very little personally, although society collectively pays a very high price for its maintenance" (359). Vehicles represent access to new worlds, but Max prefers not to know them. After a list of the things his father bought him in one year, Max describes how he rides the bus aimlessly to eavesdrop on the Spanish speakers' conversations. Max's choice to ride the bus is an act of rebellion with his desire to know more about the community he had to leave. As Barbara Harlow writes in, "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile," "Buses then, which traverse the space between rural and urban, like prisons and factories, situate new forms of struggle and immanent historical change through organized resistance" (155). While riding the bus he learns of the violence in Juárez,

One of the women was telling the other woman that the streets of Juárez were becoming rivers of blood. She spoke about a young woman the soldiers took away who was never seen again, and they spoke of the kidnappings and beheadings and the houses where people were found tortured. They talked about all the women who had disappeared. (89)

Max rejects his access to power and chooses to learn more about the experiences of the powerless. Likewise, Max feels great guilt about how his father's business contributes to Juárez's violence (90). Though Max does not draw the connection, the reader cannot help but wonder if his mother was one of the many victims of violence in Juárez. His father's predilection for spending time with prostitutes also hints at his mother's profession and the possibility of his mother's demise.

Despite his negative feelings about his father's chosen profession, Max must follow Eddy's rules because he is still a child. In the end, all of Eddy's rules help Max to gain access to college and he attends Georgetown, a university that is significant for its location in the power center of the country. Max literally moves from the fringes of the country to its governmental center in the District of Columbia. Eddy's rules help Max to escape El Paso and become a law-abiding citizen who can be a part of the hegemony and contribute positively to his community. Eddy successfully launders his money so that four years of Max's tuition, housing, and transportation are secured. Eddy enables his son's literal and social mobility and helps him to assimilate so he can gain access to the country's economic and physical capital.

Eddy has no remorse for his chosen profession, but as the story progresses, he experiences a downward spiral of addiction. Ultimately, Eddy overdoses and is put on a ventilator in a hospital. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*, Michele Foucault draws a connection between the institutional nature of a hospital and how it resembles a prison. He writes, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (228). In both spaces, bodily rhythms are monitored and controlled. These two spaces limit our movement through space. They are institutions that are meant to be temporary spaces but are frequently end points. Throughout the collection of stories, characters often find themselves in prison and in hospitals. In *RetroSpace*, Juan Bruce-Novoa notes that "the *pinto*, or convict, experience is a theme of major import in Chicano literature. Despite its apparent negativity, its significance is, however, paradoxical. Like school, prison signifies the rejection of the Chicano by society" (73). Eddy is a Chicano who chooses to sell drugs as a way to succeed in a society that excludes him but then Eddy's addiction entraps him, and he must rely on a machine to breathe. His only possible escape is death. Max's final act of love is to return from college to turn off the ventilator so his father can die and be set free. In the end, Max realizes that his father loved him all as evidenced when he describes his father as "the man who saved my life" (101). Max can only be safe because his father secured his escape first from Juárez and then from El Paso.

The story "Chasing the Dragon" takes place in present day and also addresses the region's contemporary problem of drugs and violence. Seventeen-year-old Conrad narrates his family's complicated story and relationship to drugs, drug abuse, and emotional abuse. Orphaned at a young age, he and his older sister Carmen were raised by their wealthy aunts and uncles. Before their death, Conrad and Carmen's strikingly beautiful parents had emotionally abusive relationships with each other and with their children. Though the nuclear and extended family is wealthy, emotionally they all are poor. Carmen is the only source of comfort that Conrad knows. Despite, or perhaps because of, the distant relationship that he had with his parents, Conrad loves to examine and discuss a picture of his parents taken in an unidentifiable bar in Juárez. His obsession with the photograph that captured his parents' glamour is reminiscent of Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. He argues that houses are meant to capture dreams that lie beyond our earliest memories. A child at the time of his parents' deaths, Conrad sees the picture as an unconscious attempt to return to a home that never existed. Conrad describes how before the violence in Juárez began, he visited several bars to try and identify where the picture was taken, but none of the bars looked like the image in the photograph. This is because the bar in the photograph is a place that, like his parents and the fantasy of a safe childhood home, cannot be captured.

In another story, "Sometimes the Rain," the narrator is a Mexican American man named Ernesto (Ernie) Zaragoza who reminisces about the summer of 1970, the summer when he graduated from high school and discovered his own sexual desires. That summer he was surprised when he fell in love with Brian Stillman, an Anglo farm boy. In the coming of age story, these two boys with seemingly different backgrounds and from different social groups fall in love despite living in an era when men were not allowed to openly love each other. Though they never consummate their relationship, the two young men are able to find kindness in each other and overcome both of their fathers' emotional and physical abuse. When the two friends cross the Mexican border, Brian chooses for them to go to the Kentucky Club because his father once told him it was his dead mother's favorite bar. For Brian, Max from the "Rule Maker," and Conrad in "Chasing the Dragon," the bar represents nostalgia for parents who are lost to them. It is significant that all four characters associate the bar with their dead or absent parents; the bar is a connection to their lost past, just like the physical bar is a connection to the lost glorious past of

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

Juárez when in its heyday it was visited by famous people from both sides of the border.

For Ernie in “Sometimes the Rain,” the bar is a space where he dreams and imagines what it would be like to openly embrace and declare his love for Brian. Bars can be a space for escape from difficult realities. I argue that they are spaces that are as sacred to the gay community as churches because of their protective nature at a time when being openly gay was dangerous. While the Kentucky Club is not a gay bar, in the character’s imagination, the bar becomes a place where he can openly express his love for Brian. In an article in the journal *Feminist Studies*, Catherine Fox argues that the concept of safe space is tied to notions of privilege because “Safety continues to be an important element for communities committed to creating the conditions in which oppressions are addressed and marginalized peoples can live and thrive” (630). One only has to look at the recent 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Stonewall Inn Riots to find another example of a bar that has also become a sacred space because of its role in the history of the community. In Ernie’s fantasy they would no longer have to hide their true selves. In this story the Kentucky Club represents a safe space where they can dream of love (a mother’s love or a lover’s love) and where characters can imagine that their future is secure. While it is often a temporary safe haven, visiting the bar helps the narrator to admit his own homosexual desire. The realization that he is in love with Brian helps Ernesto to come of age in this new understanding of himself.

In addition to longing for a past that did not exist, in “Chasing the Dragon,” Conrad also is unsatisfied with his life and searching for his identity. While his extended family provides him with all the material goods that he and his sister Carmen need, they go through life numb. He seeks pleasure in sexual encounters; she experiments with all available drugs. Carmen often speaks of her desire “to chase the dragon” and encourages Conrad to experiment with her. Colloquial terminology about drug use often invokes movement and imagination—tripping, taking a trip, chasing a fix, chasing the dragon. This particular expression used by Carmen is about a fantasy creature that is impossible to capture because it is imaginary. Like Conrad, she is also a dreamer seeking comfort, but her method is ultimately deadly.

Carmen is the only source of a constant sense of home and love that Conrad has experienced, but as her addiction grows, she is unable to care for him. As she experiments with increasingly dangerous drugs, she ventures into impoverished and, as a consequence, dangerous parts of the city. Low income areas of cities are not inherently more dangerous, but the fact that they are often located in spaces that have been abandoned or ignored by community leaders makes it so that crime can flourish in these areas. An example of the link between low income areas and drug use is seen in “The Rule Maker” through Eddy’s choice to live in a poor neighborhood to ensure the success of his drug dealing business.

Twice Conrad must rescue Carmen from motels located in dangerous and impoverished neighborhoods in El Paso. A hotel is similar to a home because it provides shelter and a place to sleep, but it is unlike a home in that it does not anticipate the future needs of its inhabitants as they relate to provisions, clothing, and future planning. The motel as a place that fails to plan for Carmen’s future foreshadows her end. After overdosing at a grubby almost abandoned motel, she dies in a hospital, another space that, while it shelters and protects its inhabitants, is also a temporary and transitional space that lacks the comforts of home.

Following his sister’s death, at the end of the story Conrad describes a painting in Carmen’s room. It contains a dark room with a door that opens up into the sky. Before dying, Carmen had told him that she would fall asleep looking at the horrible things hidden in the dark room. Once again, there is an example of a house that does not protect its inhabitant.

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

Conrad's sorrow that Carmen failed to look towards the freedom represented by the sky in the painting shows how she is imprisoned by her circumstances and cannot find an escape. While Conrad and his sister have shelters and economic protection, like many citizens of El Paso, they lack a home where they can feel safe to dream. The theme of having material wealth but longing for comfort is repeated throughout several of the stories. Multiple characters are left to constantly seek false escape routes such as drugs and sexual encounters that often lead to death or solitude.

Another character who struggles with difficult family relationships can be found in "Brother in Another Language." The protagonist Charlie has recently attempted suicide. He hates his wealthy Mexican American family who is emotionally distant. Parents who are wealthy and emotionally distant, violent and cruel, dead or abusive can be read as representative of the complicated relationship between the US and Mexico along the border. Like it or not, the two nations are tied by the desert landscape that crosses the border that they share. They breathe the same air and live under the same sky, but their nationality varies based on the address of the neighborhood where they were born. Like familial relationships, they have not chosen to be with each other, but they cannot avoid their connections either.

For Conrad and Charlie's, siblings provide the comfort that distant parents cannot offer, but in both stories the siblings die tragic deaths. This is just one of many examples of characters in the collection that are left without anyone to provide emotional support. As a consequence of dead parents, siblings, or lovers, the protagonists of the stories are abandoned and lonely, like the desert. The arid landscape of the majestic desert provides comfort for some of the characters, but for other characters it is an unforgiving and lonely space. Characters who remember when the desert was not associated with the current violence long for a time when the extreme beauty of the desert was something to admire. Nowadays the desert is a violent space where present day undocumented immigrants die. Desperation for a better life and present-day difficulties in crossing the border legally make people willing to face the extreme weather. The desert is also the site where women are murdered and victims of drug violence are buried in unmarked graves alongside them.

Deserts are a narrative touchstone in many of these stories. In "Sometimes the Rain," the memory of the desert as a space of sexual awakening in the 1970s is described with nostalgia. It is the rain in the desert that reminds Ernesto in the present of his lost love of his youth. In "Art of Translation," running in the dessert helps Nick reclaim himself and to overcome the trauma of the hate crime he experienced. In "He Has Gone to Be With the Women," the title refers to Javier who, like the women in the desert, dies as a victim of criminal violence in Juárez.

The changing symbolism of the desert also reflects the changing relationship of the US and Mexico. In the 1970s it is a space of sexual awakening, in the 1980s it represents emotional healing, and, in the present, it represents suffering and death—for victims of femicides, drug violence, and undocumented border crossings. It is in the desert where undocumented migrants attempting to cross the border into the United States experience extremely dangerous crossing border conditions that sometimes result in death. The current day rhetoric that criminalizes undocumented immigrants forces more and more migrants to choose the unforgiving landscapes in their attempt to cross the border without being noticed.

Border crossings are also used to show how the experience of crossing the border has changed over time. Characters in the present often draw contrast with what it used to be like when they crossed the border in the past. The stories are not organized in chronological order and the reader is left to decipher the time period of each story based on the emotions

and descriptions of the characters when they cross the border. The nostalgia for a lost youth or nostalgia for past memories of more happy times spent crossing the border or spending time in the Kentucky Club parallels the nostalgia for the time when there was stability in Juárez that allowed inhabitants of El Paso and Juárez to cross the border easily.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's collection emphasizes the long history of connections between the two nations and, in particular, between the two cities. His longing for the continued success of the Kentucky Club can be read as a longing for a positive experience of border crossing, a desire for recognition of Chicano identity, and as an attempt to document the long history of relationships between the cities of El Paso and Juárez. A celebration of the union of the two cities is found in the final story of the collection.

"The Hurting Game" begins with the death of Tom, a successful Mexican American lawyer from El Paso who died as a consequence of his drug addiction. In flashbacks the reader learns that he and the narrator, Mexican-American Michael, had a five-year relationship that, despite Tom's wishes for more, was never serious. Michael resists formalizing his relationship with Tom because he experienced physical abuse from his father and mistrusts love. As a high school counselor from El Paso who helps teens who are physically abused by their parents, Michael cannot escape his past as a victim of physical abuse. Once again, there is a character who was physically abused and who cares for the physically abused. This is yet another parallel to the abuses committed on the landscape of the border.

The two characters met at a dinner party and never actually visited The Kentucky Club together, but Tom likes to reimagine their first meeting and to pretend they met there. This is an attempt to legitimize their relationship by tying it to a place that has come to represent Juárez and the history between the two border cities. The bar is an imaginary romanticized space for Tom, much like the borderlands is for some intellectuals an imaginary romanticized space. Over the course of their relationship, Tom becomes addicted to drugs and dies the victim of his association with drug criminals. The collection of stories ends with Michael discovering that Tom faked his own death and that he is alive and imprisoned in Juárez. When Michael realizes Tom is alive, he finally admits to himself that he loves Tom. Michael imagines meeting Tom for drinks at the Kentucky Club and telling him, "No, not everything [begins and ends at the Kentucky Club], just your dreams" (222). Here the idea of dreams, when taken in connection with Bachelard's description of home, shows that the two men have found their home, peace, and comfort in each other. By finally accepting how the two cities, and by extension the two lovers, are tied together, the two men are finally able to openly experience each other's love.

In the stories that represent drug addiction, the narrators long for safe homes, which by extension can be read as a desire for safe border cities. In "The Hurting Game," Tom and Michael disrupt the typical narrative of the collection where drug addiction ends in hospitalization, death, and incarceration. Instead, Tom fakes his own death in order to break free from the drug lords that are chasing him. His disruption of the typical narrative allows him to create a hopeful future and to return to a safe home and begin a loving relationship with Michael. Tom reclaims jail as a space to secure his freedom from the drug lords and begin his love story. In "The Hurting Game," the Kentucky Club functions like a home in that it allows the characters to daydream and make a better future a reality. For Tom and Michael, the Kentucky Club becomes a place of imagination and dreams, and the reader hopes that the city of Juárez, like the Kentucky Club in the final story will eventually be able to protect its inhabitants again and that the Kentucky Club will protect the two cities' dreams.

In *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*, award-winning author Benjamin Alire Sáenz uses the physical space of the Kentucky Club in Juárez to connect all of the stories in this book. The Kentucky Club bar functions as a metaphor that mimics the liminal space of the border and the experiences of border citizens in Juarez and El Paso. It simultaneously evokes the past glamour of the city as a destination for Americans seeking alcohol during Prohibition, while it also embodies the present-day deterioration of the city and associated decline in tourism due to the drug violence.

Since the collection of short stories was published in 2013, the Kentucky Club is one of the few bars that has survived Juárez's violence. The club that represents the city continues to endure and like Tom and Michael's relationship one can hope it too will find a way to disrupt the narrative of violence and death of the vibrancy of Juárez and successfully reinvent itself. It is only through the two characters and by extension the two cities admitting their connection to the inescapable realities of Juárez that they can be set free to create a new future together. The collection reclaims the endurance of the bar as a symbol of hope for the future of the two cities.

Through examining the liminal role of the real space of Kentucky Club in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's collection of stories, I show how the bar, like the border between Juárez and El Paso, is a constant site of negotiation of meaning that has changed over time. Like the landscape of the border and the evolving connections between the two cities, the Kentucky Club has changed in significance. It reveals how El Paso and Juárez, and by extension the US and Mexico, have related to each other over the course of history. The collection gives a voice to those who have experienced homophobia, femicide, hate crimes, drug addiction and drug violence. In recognizing their experience, Alire Sáenz reveals the complexities of life on the border. As Bruce-Novoa declares,

Chicano literature is an ordering response to the chaos which threatens to devastate the descendants of Mexicans who now reside in the U.S.A. The space this response opens is an alternative to both Mexican as well as U.S. spaces, while at the same time being a synthesis of those two zones that border it.  
(70)

In *Everything Begins and Ends in the Kentucky Club*, Alire Sáenz seeks to order and find peace in the chaos of life on the border. He dares to dream a better future for his characters. In the end, the history and enduring nature of the Kentucky Club stands as a hopeful symbol of the resilience of its community.

---

ISSN: 1523-1720  
NUMERO/NUMBER 44  
August 2020

CIBERLETRAS

## WORKS CITED

- Aldama, Arturo J., and Naomi Helena Quiñonez, eds. *Decolonial Voices : Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*. Indiana UP, 2002.
- Aldama, Arturo J. "Millennial Anxieties: Borders, Violence and the Struggle for Chicana and Chicano Subjectivity." *Decolonial Voices : Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*. Indiana UP, 2002. pp. 11-29.
- Alire Sáenz, Benjamin. *Everything Begins and Ends in the Kentucky Club*. Cinco Puntos Press, 2012.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *The Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Trans. by Maria Jolas. Beacon Press, 1994.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *RetroSpace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, and History*. Arte Público Press, 1990.
- Calderón, Héctor and José David Saldívar, eds. *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. Duke UP, 1991.
- Castillo, Debra A. "Border Theory and the Canon." *Postcolonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon*. Ed. by Debra Madsen. Pluto Press, 1999, pp. 180-206.
- Chessey, Bob. "The Myth of Al Capone in Juarez." *Frontera Norte News*. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Douglas, Mary. "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space." *Social Research*. Vol. 58. No1, 1991, pp. 287-307.
- Duara, Nigel. "El Paso and Juárez Know what Happens when a Wall Divides Two Cities". *Los Angeles Times*. 25 Jan 2017.  
<http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-trump-wall-el-paso-20170125-story.html>. Accessed 7 Apr. 2017.
- Elenes, Alejandra. "Border/Transformative Pedagogies at the End of the Millennium: Chicano/a Cultural Studies and Education." *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*. Ed. by Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez. Indiana UP, 2002, pp. 245-261.
- Fox, Catherine O. And Tracey E. Ore. "(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in 'Safe Spaces," *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 36, No. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 629-649.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*. Transl. Alan Sheridan. Vintage, 1985.

Harlow, Barbara. "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile," *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Ed. Héctor Calderón and José D. Saldívar. Duke UP, 2009, pp. 149-163.

"Kentucky Club Menu." *Yelp: Photos for Kentucky Club Bar & Grill*. 24 Mar 2016.  
[https://www.yelp.com/biz\\_photos/kentucky-club-y-grill-ju%C3%A1rez?select=GqHpV6FZAhOuiEC\\_EJ2Rw](https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/kentucky-club-y-grill-ju%C3%A1rez?select=GqHpV6FZAhOuiEC_EJ2Rw). Accessed August 1, 2020.

Lanier, Clint and Derek Hembree. "Explore One of Juárez, Mexico's Oldest Bars: The World Famous Kentucky Club." *The Huffington Post*. 16. Feb 2016. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clint-lanier-and-derek-hembree/exploring-the-world-famous-ky-club\\_8916624.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/clint-lanier-and-derek-hembree/exploring-the-world-famous-ky-club_8916624.html) Accessed August 1, 2020.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, 1974.

Michaelsen, Scott and David Johnson. *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*. Minnesota UP, 1997.

Saldívar, Ramón. "Narrative, Ideology and the Reconstruction of American Literary History," *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Ed. Héctor Calderón and José D. Saldívar. Duke UP, 2009, pp. 11-20.