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**Voices of Migration:
The Representation of The Mexican American
Border
in Bruce Springsteen's Songs**

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Abstract

The music of Bruce Springsteen is often interpreted as a form of artistic expression that reflects the struggles of working-class communities and the search for authenticity and moral values in American society. Through his lyrics, Springsteen gives voice to marginalized groups and tells stories that are frequently excluded from dominant historical narratives. In this context, his work can also be understood as engaging with the experiences of Mexican Americans and the broader social realities shaped by the Mexican American border. This paper analyzes how the Mexican American border is represented in a selection of eleven Bruce Springsteen songs, which are divided into two thematic groups. The first group includes four songs that focus on the effects of racism and the important contributions of immigrants to the development of the United States. These lyrics highlight how immigrant labor and presence have been essential to American society, while also exposing the discrimination and inequality these communities have faced. Through this contrast, Springsteen emphasizes the tension between inclusion and exclusion in the national narrative. The second group consists of seven songs that explore the social and human realities of the Mexican American border more directly. These songs reflect experiences such as poverty, displacement, insecurity, and the emotional impact of life in border regions. Rather than portraying the border simply as a physical boundary, Springsteen presents it as a space shaped by historical, political, and economic forces that deeply affect individual lives. The narratives emphasize the human cost of systemic inequality and the complexity of migration experiences. The analysis is developed considering Adam Bradley's approach to song lyrics as a form of literary expression, which allows Springsteen's work to be read as narrative art with social and political meaning. From this perspective, the songs collectively suggest that the experiences of Mexican Americans are not isolated cases, but part of broader structural conditions.

Key words: Bruce Springsteen; Chicano Movement; Mexican American border; Racial Discrimination; Song Lyrics Analysis.

Reflection on the Contribution to SDG 10 (Reduce Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)

The analysis of Bruce Springsteen's songs about the Mexican American border maintains a clear thematic connection with two Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Following the analysis of lyrics proposed by scholar Adam Bradley, this paper explores how Springsteen's lyrics are fundamental in two ways. On the one hand, the selected songs function as a medium to reflect both the impact that racism had in the United States, as well as, to portray the importance that immigrants had in the construction of the country. On the other hand, they become the main voice to give visibility to marginalized voices, particularly those of Mexican Americans, whose experiences are often silenced in dominant political and media narratives. Through storytelling and characterization, Springsteen humanizes the realities of border crossings, exploring the structural inequalities that force migration. In doing so, his work not only denounces social injustice but also fosters awareness among listeners, aligning with the core of aim of SDG 10. Furthermore, these selected songs implicitly connect with SDG 16, as Springsteen questions the fairness of border policies and highlight human cost of exclusionary practices. Ultimately, this project demonstrates that music, particularly Springsteen's lyrics can act as a powerful cultural tool to challenge inequality and contribute to broader discussions on social injustice and human rights.

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1 Introduction: Race and Border in Bruce Springsteen's Music

The United States is often portrayed, both politically and in popular discourse, as a "nation of immigrants" (Bishop 3). Thus, multiculturalism is commonly understood as a key element in interpreting the country's social, cultural, and historical identity. However, this narrative of inclusion coexists with a long history of racial inequality and structural marginalization. In this regard, race has been widely understood as a cultural construct with significant structural causes and consequences (Lipsitz 371). From this perspective, racism can be defined as an ideology of racial superiority based on socially constructed distinctions of race (Alaniz and Cornish 65). Consequently, racialized minorities have historically been denied full access to representation and self-expression, as they were primarily perceived through imposed racial categories rather than as autonomous subjects (Dyer 10).

One of the minority groups that has faced the consequences of racialization and structural inequality in the United States are Mexican Americans. They became an oppressed racialized group because of the expansion of the American Empire in the 19th century (Muñoz 32). In this context, Mexican communities experienced a process of internal colonization, which contributed to the weakening and marginalization of their cultural identity. Against this background, the Chicano Movement emerged as a response to these conditions, demanding equality and civil rights, rather than separation from American society. This process of political and cultural affirmation was also reflected in artistic production, which became a key space for expressing resistance and redefining Mexican American identity.

Artistic production has reflected the historical contexts of Mexican American experience, offering insight into the values, conflicts, and transformations of this community. These dynamics of exclusion and identity formation become particularly visible in spatial terms, especially in the context of the Mexican American border. Literary texts have been particularly significant in articulating the voices of those living in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. A key example is Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which portrays the lived experience of the Mexican American border as a space of

cultural hybridity and identity negotiation. Music, similarly, "functions socially to create a sense of individual and group identity" (Crawford and Hamberlin 4). In this sense, bands such as Giant Sand or Calexico have highlighted the cultural intersections of the border from the Anglo-American perspective. However, the representation of migration in artistic production is not limited to this geographical context, but also extends to broader reflections on displacement and social inequality, as seen in the music of Bruce Springsteen. Significantly, these representations emerge from an Anglo-American perspective, revealing how Anglo artists have also engaged with Mexican American heritage and border realities.

Bruce Springsteen's music has been widely described as an art form that speaks to generations searching for authenticity and social values (Beebe, Fulbrook, and Saunders 18). Through his lyrics, Springsteen has narrated the experiences of individuals and communities often marginalized or silenced within American society, while also engaging critically with its social and political structures. Although his early work was not explicitly political, focusing instead on broader reflections of American life as in *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (Columbia Records 1978), his trajectory changed significantly following the reinterpretation of "Born in the U.S.A." by Ronald Reagan's administration (Margotin and Guesdon 227). Despite its critical message about the Vietnam War, the song was misread as a patriotic anthem, which Springsteen himself later described as being "hijacked by Ronald Reagan and recast as a flag-saluting celebration" (Cortellessa 33). This misinterpretation marked a turning point in his public engagement, leading him to more explicitly articulate his political stance in interviews where he questioned dominant narratives of American identity.

Following this moment, Springsteen's work increasingly incorporated explicit social and political critique, addressing issues such as racism, police violence, and structural inequality. As he has acknowledged in the podcast "Renegades: Born in the USA" done with Barack Obama, from early in his career he was aware that "music was categorized with white audience" (Springsteen and Obama), which informs his later commitment to amplifying marginalized voices. This can be seen in albums such as *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Columbia Records 1995), where he continues to portray excluded communities, including African Americans and Mexican Americans. His engagement with the latter is also connected to his

personal exposure to Mexican culture in California (Hodgkinson 16) and is reflected in later projects addressing the Mexican American border, such as *Inyo* (Columbia Records 2025). More recently, his criticism of contemporary immigration enforcement, including ICE operations and policies associated with the Trump administration (Cortellesa 33), has reinforced the explicitly political dimension of his work. Across his career, Springsteen has consistently used both recorded music and live performance as platforms for social commentary, ultimately “moving across American life through a variety of voices and styles” (McParland 240).

Taking all of this into consideration, the aim of this essay is to analyze how the Mexican American border is represented in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how Springsteen’s songs reflect the racial and social dynamics that have historically shaped the United States.

Regarding the structure of this paper, I divide it into two main sections. The first part establishes the theoretical framework, focusing on racism in the United States, the Chicano Movement, and the concept of the border. It also introduces Adam Bradley’s *The Poetry of Pop* as the methodological basis for the lyric analysis, along with the analytical tools used in the study that will be useful to understand the posterior analysis. The second part focuses on the analysis of selected songs by Bruce Springsteen, organized thematically into representations of racism and discrimination, and descriptions of the border, including both migration and border violence. A conclusion summarizes the main findings of the study.

The motivation behind this research is twofold: first, to highlight the ongoing realities faced by Mexican American communities, particularly in relation to the border. Second, to explore how music can function as a medium for articulating social and political struggles.

This being a work of literature research that falls within the field of Anglo-American Studies, I have decided to use the reference style used in MLA’s 9th edition.

2 Theoretical Background: Race, Border and Lyric Analysis

2.1 Race and the United States

Race is a fundamental factor to understand the development of the United States, as it has shaped both American identity and history. From the periods of slavery and colonial expansion to the establishment of segregationist systems, racial hierarchies have been embedded in socio-political structures. Consequently, my aim is to examine race –and the subsequent racism informed by race division– as it is crucial to comprehend the historical and social foundations of the United States. I decided to explore the effects of racism on Mexican Americans¹ and African Americans as they are essential to understand the contexts behind the selected songs for the analysis of this paper.

Races are social products mainly constructed and shaped by society and law (Lopez 13). They can be understood as a historically developed systems of meaning in which physical traits acquire significance because society assigns racial interpretations to them. As a result, these systems of meaning are reproduced in the material conditions of society. At the same time, the law plays a direct regulatory role as its legal consequences have been used to restrict and exclude individuals with certain physical characteristics (Lopez 15).

This racist perspective is further explored through the land stealing of Mexican Americans (Alaniz and Cornish 84). The United States became a powerful capitalist country during the 19th century. Thus, the aim was to expand with the acquisition of new territories. Mexico, which became independent in 1821, was still technologically undeveloped. Therefore, it became a key target for the expansion of the United States, due to the combination of isolation, political instability and underdevelopment. To assure the influx of Anglo settlers, the Mexican Government assured them land grants (Alaniz and Cornish 85). However, the situation became worse as the Anglo pioneers developed racist attitudes from the very beginning. In New Mexico, the establishment of Anglo

¹ I decided to introduce Mexican Americans in this section to compare the different portrayals of racism. However, there is a specific section about the history of Mexican Americans, being the central theme of my analysis.

settlers was slower due to Apache dominance in the region. However, when the Apache were defeated by the United States army in the 1880s, Mexican population became exposed to a "level of racist terror" (Alaniz and Cornish 89). Mexicans, like African Americans, entered in the United States working class as an exploited minority.

Beyond the American Southwest, racism against African Americans emerged as an ideology in reaction to the rise of abolitionism in the 1830's, in response to the demands for emancipation when the federal government was committed to the protection of slavery (Fredrickson 79). Defenders of black slavery needed a justification that assimilated with the changes of the time. Consequently, they found theories that made white domination and black slavery natural and necessary. Some of these theories were based on scientific ethnology². However, they wanted to avoid contradicting the Genesis story. Therefore, they adopted the 18th century idea that the black had degenerated from the original white Adamites³ (Fredrickson 79 - 80).

Considering these theories, conservatives declared that a social hierarchy was essential to any society. Consequently, discrimination and violence against slaves conveyed the message that "being the wrong color was an obstacle (...) to membership in the nation" (Fredrickson 80), as Mexican Americans had to face. As a result, the Supreme Court declared, in the Dred Scott decision in 1857, that African American people were not and could not be American citizens (Horton 15).

In this sense, the rights of African Americans were dependent on the Radical Republican Party, which passed the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868 (Fredrickson 83). However, the Republicans' failure to prevent the South from becoming Democratic in 1876 exposed African Americans to white supremacist violence, segregation, and discrimination, as also happened to Mexican Americans. Southern spokesmen organized a pro-segregation offensive, contending that the South was economically undeveloped and that its

² Scientific ethnology is a branch of anthropology that studies the cultural and social structures of different societies to identify patterns of similarities and behaviors.

³ The concept of the *white Adamite* goes back to the *pre-Adamite* and *polygenesis* thesis defended by Isaac de La Peyrère. The theologian argued that human beings existed before Adam and Eve within a *pre-Adamite* framework. This idea is closely related to *polygenesis*, the claim that multiple human groups were created by God at different temporal times (Zellmer 2). These theories were later adopted by American racial thought in 19th century to justify racial hierarchies and slavery.

development depended on removing African American workers from politics (Ortiz 88). Consequently, Jim Crow segregation laws were constructed under these ideals. These laws were indispensable in maintaining social differentiation, as they separated people according to race (Lopez 120-122). To rationalize this social separation, businessmen and academics criticized public education and portrayed African Americans as unsuitable for political participation (Ortiz 88). Furthermore, segregation laws and restrictions on African American voting rights reduced them to a lower social status (Fredrickson 13). In this sense, white supremacists in the American South invoked racist theories as systems of meaning to justify the need for Jim Crow laws separating white Americans and African Americans (Fredrickson 13).

Segregation was still imposed in the 20th century United States. African Americans mobilized with the Civil Rights Movement with the aim of outlawing legalized racial segregation and discrimination in the 1960's (Fredrickson 15). The Movement emerged in the context of the post-World War II. European empire started to collapse after the colonized world began movements for national liberation (Bush 48). In this context, African Americans interpreted these events as the reflection of the vulnerability of white power, and therefore, they hoped for a movement that led to the redemption of America. These circumstances and the social movements that arose, became a role model for other minority groups in the United States, including the Chicano Movement, which became another key movement that raises against discrimination.

Race has played a central role in shaping the United States, functioning as a socially and legally constructed system that has historically justified exclusion and inequality. As I have tried to show, historical developments reflect ongoing efforts to challenge these structures. In this regard, the African American experience and the Civil Rights Movement provide a paradigmatic case for understanding racial inequality. However, it should be noted that other minority groups and intersecting factors such as class, gender, religion, or sexuality also contribute to broader dynamics of injustice, which are beyond the scope of this study. This context is relevant to understanding how artists like Bruce Springsteen engage with themes of inequality and social justice in the songs selected for this analysis.

2.2 Mexican Americans: The Chicano Movement and The Border

The creation of social movements was crucial to defend the rights of minorities that were oppressed in the United States. Among the different movements that emerged in the progressive vindication of racial justice, the Chicano Movement became the raising voice of many Mexican Americans.

In this section, my aim is to explore the history of the Chicano Movement and the importance of the border to understand the social and cultural circumstances that have shaped Chicano identity. The information provided enables me to make an exhaustive description of the relation between Mexican Americans and the border within the selected songs that I am analyzing in this paper.

2.2.1 *The Chicano Movement*

The Chicano Movement originated from a series of mobilizations aimed at unifying Mexican Americans as a people. They pursued this through the celebration of their racial and cultural difference from white Anglo society (Patiño 6).

Mexican Americans began fighting for their rights in the agricultural fields during the first half of the 1900's, when immigrant farmworkers recognized the inequality of their living and working conditions (Alaniz and Cornish 132). Farmworkers had few rights and were frequently threatened with deportation and violence. In this context, different groups emerged, such as the *Confederación de Uniones de Obreros Mexicanos* (CUOM) in 1927. The main purpose of these organizations was to improve wages and the working conditions of Mexican workers.

The continuous struggle of farmworkers and the unions led to efforts toward unionization during the 1940's and 1950's. These struggles led to strikes, and activists such as Cesar Chavez gained prominence and later founded the United Farm Workers (UFW) (Alaniz and Cornish 149). Consequently, the UFW faced conflicts like those that had been confronted by the early organizations. The Unions gained support from radical students and civil rights activists. Thus, the UFW reawakened social consciousness within the labor movement. Therefore, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta among other activists, founded the National

Farm Workers Association (NFWA) (Alaniz and Cornish 150). The NFWA provided support against police brutality and worker's compensation, among other issues, capturing media attention and appealing for outside help (Alaniz and Cornish 151).

The struggles and movements presented above became influential in the rise of *El Movimiento* between the 1960's and 1970's, which were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. Consequently, Chicano's developed their own perspective, fighting for civil rights, educational opportunities and mobilizing against the Vietnam War (Alaniz and Cornish 181). The most crucial mobilizations were developed by the Youth Movement. Chicano student's coming from Spanish-speaking homes were denied bilingual education, which resulted in non-academic programs that contributed to illiteracy at all grade levels (Alaniz and Cornish 182). The Youth Movement provided hope and a sense of connection to Chicano students. Furthermore, the Vietnam War radicalized Chicano activists, as the heroism of the Vietnamese freedom fighters inspired resistance to oppression (Alaniz and Cornish 185).

Another important issue within the Chicano Movement was the Mexican American border. Conditions at the San Diego border helped mobilize activists within the movement, such as Bert Corona, who emphasized the importance of ethno-racial unity. Thus, activists included undocumented workers as central to the border struggle, especially because deportation policies and Border Patrol practices threatened their well-being (Patiño 4).

2.2.2 *The Border*

Rather than being a fixed line that separates territories, the border should be considered an active process that continuously redirects flows of people. In this sense, borders function as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, shaping social formations (Nail 4). This is the process that Jaques Ancel describes as *frontières plastiques*, that is, an equilibrium between social forces (Nail 6).

This dynamic perspective is explained through the theory of *kinopolitics*, which focuses on the analysis of social motion (Nail 27). Rather than analyzing societies as static, *kinetics* understand the border in motion. There are different types of movement happening in the border: flow, junction, and circulation. Flow is what measures the movement of humans across the borders (Nail 25). Junction

explains the redirection of the flows (Nail 27). And circulation refers to the regulation of flows within the border (Nail 29).

The Mexican American border must be understood in motion, a movement that redirects flows of people across the border. Therefore, it is not limited to a fixed geographical line, but it rather consists of multiple border regimes⁴. There are four types of Mexican American borders: fence, wall, cell and checkpoint.

The fence divides the earth into a delimited territory (Nail 171) with the function of expelling flows of people. The wall is the division of territorial life into political, as it is the composition of militarized agencies, as the ICE or Border Patrol (Nail 184). Furthermore, the cell is a type of border developed in the Medieval period that focuses on the enclosure of individuals rather than merely dividing the territory (Nail 193). Finally, the checkpoint establishes an economic balance in the rapid expansion of flows of migration (Nail 203) as the individuals are divided according to collections of data, such as, age, height or location (Nail 110).

The historical context of the Chicano Movement and the border provides the foundation for the later analysis. Since the selected songs reflect the social and political realities of the border, the context presented in this section allows a more grounded analysis of themes from a historical perspective.

2.3 Adam Bradley's Lyric Analysis

Springsteen's songs portray the socio-political realities of his country. They also express the voice of oppressed communities. He does this in his songwriting through different literary techniques. Consequently, it is essential to examine the socio-political elements in his lyrics. This will be the basis of my analysis, and I will contextualize my conclusions through the historical framework previously presented. To proceed, I rely on the methodology that Adam Bradley proposes in his book *The Poetry of Pop*, which offers a methodological approach to explore songs with a focus on textual content, making it suitable for the aims of this work.

The analysis of lyrics is a topic under discussion in literary studies, partly because there are discrepancies regarding the consideration of song lyrics as

⁴ The word regime in this context refers to the norms, movements and technologies used to control the motions in the border by the United States Government.

poetry. Adam Bradley argues that “poetry lives in the lyrics” (Bradley 13), and therefore it is necessary to acknowledge that lyrics are created using many of the same tools as poetry. From this perspective, songs tend to combine elements of music and poetry (Bradley 19). Other scholars such as BaileyShea or Pattison express skepticism about the literary status of lyrics. This relates to the idea that the specific words chosen in songs can sometimes be interchangeable without major impact (BaileyShea 4). BaileyShea also suggests that words in songs “play a role that they were not meant to play” (BaileyShea 6). Pattison, on the other hand, provides a comparison between song lyrics and poetry, highlighting the simplicity of song language compared to poetic language (Pattison 123).

Despite these debates, this study follows Bradley’s approach, which considers song lyrics as texts that can be analyzed through poetic and literary tools. In this sense, Springsteen’s songs are often highly narrative, including characters and settings, which makes this approach particularly useful for the analysis of his work. For Bradley, lyrics exist in relation to voice, instruments, and performance (Bradley 3), and therefore songs combine linguistic and musical elements in a way that produces meaning beyond spoken language (Bradley 4).

Regarding methodology, Bradley proposes three main dimensions for the analysis of song lyrics: the purpose behind analyzing lyrics as poetry, poetic forms in pop music, and the poetic functions of pop music (Bradley 5-6). However, for the purposes of this study, not all these dimensions will be applied in full. Instead, I will focus on a selection of analytical tools that are most relevant to my research.

These tools include style, particularly pop diction, line structure and syntax, and figurative language, as well as narrative strategies such as the story-song and heteroglossia through persona-song. These elements will be used in a focused way to structure the analysis of Springsteen’s songs in a clear and coherent manner.

Style, according to Adam Bradley, is the “patterning of forms that come to define the artist, genre, or time of period” (Bradley 231). Within style, my analysis focuses on pop diction, which consists of the words or phrases chosen for a song (Bradley 246). In Bruce Springsteen’s songs, it is important to analyze the choice of words, and the syntactical position that they adopt in a sentence. Therefore, in

the analysis of diction, syntax becomes key as I describe in the analysis of songs such as "Ciudad Juarez". The position of specific words within a sentence is crucial for identifying who the voice is speaking and the role that the voice adopts within the song. Also, figurative language consists of forms that can create memorable or emotive language (Bradley 140). With these forms, the listener can imagine, identify or reconcile ideas. The most significant in Springsteen's lyrics are metaphor, personification, anaphora and symbols⁵.

Story-song and persona-song are two different types of narration in a song. Story-songs are linear narratives that move forward from the beginning to the end of the song (Bradley 296). Persona-songs, on the other hand, are directly linked with Heteroglossia⁶. This type of story mixes a variety of voices, normally alternating between the "I" of the singer and the "We" of a relationship (Bradley 300). These concepts are useful for conducting the analysis of the songs selected for this essay, as Springsteen's lyrics often function as cycles centered on a group of characters, as in "Matamoros Banks," a particular setting –in this case, the border– and a specific time frame (Bradley 297).

All the tools provided above are going to be applied in the following section which consists of the analysis of the songs. The combination of the different methods presented allows me to support my thesis provided in the introduction of this paper.

⁵ The rhetorical figures appointed are the most prominent in Bruce Springsteen's songs, and therefore the analysis is focused on the impact that they have within the selected songs. However, it might be the case to find other rhetorical figures, apart from the ones listed. If that is the case, those rhetorical figures will be applied.

⁶ Heteroglossia is a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. In Springsteen's songs, heteroglossia refers to the presence of multiple voices within a single song, rather than just one unified voice.

3 The Mexican American Border in Bruce Springsteen's Songs

In Bruce Springsteen's work, music becomes a means of social criticism through which structural problems in the United States, such as racism and immigration are addressed. Using story-song (Bradley 296), Springsteen can blend and denounce the racial tensions and discriminations that many minority groups had to face.

3.1 Immigration and Racism in the United States

3.1.1 *The Introduction of Racial Tensions*

The songs "My Hometown" and "American Skin (41 shots)" portray racism as a structural social issue and a source of direct violence. Both are part of Springsteen's work, appearing in *Born in the U.S.A.* (Columbia Records 1984) and *Live in New York City* (Columbia Records 2001). While "My Hometown" presents racism as embedded in everyday life and economic decline, "American Skin (41 shots)" exposes its most extreme consequences through police brutality.

In "My Hometown", racism appears indirectly, intertwined with economic problems and the transformation of working-class communities. The song functions as a story-song, as Springsteen constructs a linear narrative of childhood, social change, and the gradual loss of innocence.

To do so, the first-person narrator describes, how his life used to be before the racial tensions emerged. The song starts with the image (Bradley 145) of an "eight years old"⁷ and "running with a dime coin in my hand" (Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*) which resembles the innocence of the child. At the same time, the phrase can be interpreted as a metaphor for the loss of innocence associated with the hometown. Using metaphorical language, social tensions are represented as dynamic, highlighting the intensity of racial conflict during the 1960's Civil Rights Movement: "In 65' tension was running high (...)" (Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*).

These events are further developed through violent imagery reflecting how racial struggles were being inserted in society shaping the life of the speaker: "There was a lot of fights between the black and white" and "words were passed

⁷ The direct quotations included in this analysis are sourced from Bruce Springsteen's official website as well as from physical vinyl records and cd's.

in a shotgun blast" (Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*). Moreover, racism is not presented as an isolated phenomena but as something connected to broader structural changes. The parallelism in the lines "there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more and they ain't coming back to your hometown" (Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A.*) reinforces the idea that racial conflicts were the main cause for losing the essence of the hometown. Consequently, the speaker is no longer able to recognize his hometown. This idea is portrayed through the change of pronouns in the chorus. At the beginning the noun "hometown" is preceded by the pronoun "my" resembling the hometown as part of the identity of the character. However, as the racial conflicts arose the pronoun changes to "your" reflecting the distance that was created between the hometown where he grew as a child and the one to which he is leaving now.

Violence in America is one example of clash between values and norms (Roy 112) as reflected in "American Skin (41 shots)", in which racism is presented as a direct and systemic form of violence. The song also functions as a story-song, as Springsteen constructs a narrative shaped by a dialogue and tension (Bradley 297), rather than a linear personal memory as in "My Hometown". The song was inspired by the case of Amadou Diallo, a 23 years-old immigrant from Guinea who police officers mistaken with a serial rapist. He was shot 41 times, resulting in 19 hits (Roy 3).

From the beginning, the song builds tension through an implied dialogue between a mother and her son. The mother's repeated warnings –like "Charles you've got to understand the rules" and "if an officer stops you (...) be polite and don't run away" (Springsteen, *Live in New York City*) – suggest that racial awareness is taught as a survival strategy from a young age. This dialogue reflects the idea that, according to Bradley, many songs are structured as narratives creating short stories (50).

The chorus, "You can get killed just for living in your American skin," (Springsteen, *Live in New York City*) uses metonymy to represent the body as a racialized marker of vulnerability. The phrase "American skin" suggests that racial identity determines exposure to danger rather than protection or equality. Furthermore, the repetition of "41 shots" functions as rhetorical device, transforming the killing of Amadou Diallo into a symbol of police brutality. This

repetition emphasizes institutional violence as a structural rather than an isolated phenomenon.

Overall, the song shifts the representation of racism from the more indirect, community-based tensions found in "My Hometown" to an explicit critique of state violence. It highlights how racism is not only embedded in social decline but can also manifest as immediate, life-threatening action carried out by institutions meant to protect citizens.

3.1.2 *The Role of Immigrants*

In the songs "American Land" and "We Are Alive", included in *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* (Columbia Records 2006) and *Wrecking Ball* (Columbia Records 2012), Springsteen conveys the essential role that immigrants had on the development of the country. While "American Land" focuses on the disenchantment that immigrants encounter when reaching the United States; "We Are Alive" tries to give voice to those immigrants that have suffered the consequences of racism.

"American Land" is a persona-song (Bradley 300), whose character is a young immigrant trying to enter in the country. The song is structured to describe two versions of the country. On the one hand, the character presents the idealization of the United States. This is reflected using images: "gold comes rushing out the rivers straight into your hands" (Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*) which echoes the historical period of the Gold Rush, or "there's diamonds in the sidewalk" (Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*) referring the wealth of the American country. However, the narrator is aware that to reach that status, he had to work hard which idea parallels the concept of the American Dream. This is portrayed through the following line "(...), for any hard-working man, who will make his home in the American Land" (Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*).

On the other hand, the narrator must face reality when he reaches Ellis Island which distance from the idealization portrayed above. At Ellis Island, immigrants underwent a structured inspection process as the main goal was to only let in those immigrants that were useful for the prosperity of the country (Cannato 9). Nevertheless, the narrator portrays the desperation of immigrants to reach the continent and start a better life: "with nothin in their bellies but the fire down

below" (Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*). However, many immigrants were unable to survive because of the harsh labor that they were forced to perform. This is portrayed with the use of anaphora: "They died in the fields and factories" and "They died building the railroads" (Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*). Additionally, the introduction of immigrant surnames – "The McNicholas, the Polsalski's, the Smiths, Zerillis, too" (Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*) – and the repetition of "They died" in the anaphora emphasizes the sacrifices made by generations of immigrants, suggesting that their contribution and suffering should never be forgotten.

This idea connects directly with the song "We Are Alive", in which Springsteen blends multiple voices using heteroglossia (Bradley 27). Those voices belong to immigrants who passed away in different historical situations, as he displays in the song: "I was killed in 1963" or "I died last year crossing the southern desert" (Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*). Even though the years mentioned "1963" and "last year" resemble that there are two people speaking, it is Springsteen himself the one personifying the voices of those immigrants. Nevertheless, the narrative voice describes not only how they died, but also how they were perceived in American society. The line "Well they've left our bodies here to rot" (Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*) represents how immigrants were seen as inferior, which resembles the ideas settled by whiteness theory⁸. Considering this theory the voices in the song are asking Springsteen "oh please let them know" (Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*), as raced people were able to just speak for their own race (Dyer 10). Therefore, for those immigrants who passed away, Springsteen's lyrics are the only solution to portray the harsh realities that they had to face. Furthermore, the image in "we are alive, to carry the fire and light the spark," (Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball*) resembles how still nowadays society is fighting against racial injustice as "to carry the fire and light the spark" has always been a symbol of fight and resistance. Consequently, all those immigrants who lost their lives while fighting for their rights, continue living through the voices of individuals who, as Springsteen, denounce racial discrimination.

The songs analyzed in this section function as an expressive instrument through which Springsteen can voice the consequences of immigration. He

⁸Whiteness theory refers to the fact that whites were seen as non-raced. Thus, they had the power of decision and control over race people (Dyer 11).

employs the textual depth of his lyrics to give voice to those immigrants who have sacrificed their lives in search for a better future. The American dream and the social, cultural, and human consequences of migratory movements are, highlighted in these lyrics, providing visibility and relevance to the suffering that characterizes their experiences.

3.2 The Mexican American Border

As I have shown in the previous analysis, Springsteen has been able to reflect both, how racism has shaped American society, and how minority groups can be given a voice and visibility in American culture, to disclose how they have been often excluded from dominant narratives. Mexican Americans are one of the minority groups whose stories are more often presented in Springsteen's lyrics. Specifically, his songs portray the realities at the Mexican American border. In this part of the analysis, I blend several specific songs from *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Columbia Records 1995), *Devils and Dust* (Columbia Records 2005), and *Inyo* (Columbia Records 2025) to create an illustrative narrative through which I examine the role and the consequences that the Mexican American border has had for many Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

The conflicts that Mexicans must face in the Mexican American border are the result of a bigger process that starts with the living conditions that they encounter in their hometowns. In the selected songs, Springsteen creates a dichotomy between Mexico and the United States that helps him evoke this division. Mexico is represented as a dangerous land with no prosperity which forces the abandonment of many people to the North. This is portrayed through the inner thoughts that the character reflects in the song "Across the Border". The lines "We'll leave behind my dear the pain and sadness we found here" and "without hope in our hearts" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) reflect how the situation in Mexico is no longer sustainable. This is emphasized with the introduction of "hope" that is already lost, and even emotionally with the nouns "pain and sadness". The emotional diction reflects the psychological motivations and the circumstances that Springsteen evokes in his songs. In the song "One False Move" Springsteen portrays, as well, the unstable situation in Mexico with geographical or spatial metaphors about direction and stability: "I couldn't find the steady ground" (Springsteen, *Inyo*). The fact that he introduces the adjective "steady" following the noun "ground" emphasizes on the idea that Mexico is no

longer a land for stability. The United States, on the other hand, is portrayed as the land of opportunities. However, the characters are idealizing the land up in the North as portrayed in the song "Ciudad Juarez". The fact that Springsteen introduces the verb "heard" in the line "We traveled north, where we heard there was work to be done" (Springsteen, *Inyo*), further supports the idea that Mexican's did not know what they were going to encounter when reaching the North. They just portrayed an idealized view, despite all the dangers that the North conveys as I try to analyze later in this analysis, because they need to escape from their living conditions in Mexico. This view is further developed in the song "Across the Border" with the use of natural elements as "Sweet blossoms fill the air" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) which portrays the North as a land full of life where nature can grow, and therefore, the metaphor to portray that the North is a land where Mexicans can grow. Furthermore, the dichotomy between Mexico and the United States is further supported with the introduction of two juxtaposed adjectives following the noun "waters". First, he mentions "muddy waters" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). The fact that he introduces the adjective "muddy" to accompany the noun in the part of the song referring to Mexico, reflects how there is no progress in Mexico as they are stuck. "Clear waters" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*), on the other hand, is introduced in the section about the North suggesting a land of opportunities to grow in life. However, this idealized vision of the North sharply contrasts with the reality that Springsteen portrays upon arrival, where danger, exploitation, and death redefine the migrant experience.

As mentioned above, Mexican immigrants believe in the North because they need to trust and idealize it to escape from those realities. However, when they reach there, what they encounter is far away from what they had expected. The North in Springsteen's songs is portrayed negatively, using harmful diction in "Ciudad Juarez", "One False Move", and "Balboa Park". The situation in the North is represented as a process in which we see how the people working there became trapped: as in "Make you sick inside" (Springsteen, *Inyo*) or "to end up with the poison in their blood" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). The fact that both lines have the words "sick", and "poison" can be interpreted as a metaphor and a contrast that may symbolize different stages of destruction, where suffering can either remain or become fatal.

Mexicans when reaching the North, they encounter another obstacle: the border. The use of parallelism in the following line "The drugs flow north across the river, the guns flow south" (Springsteen, *Inyo*) creates an image of movement, that from a metaphorical point of view, parallels the physical movement at the border. Therefore, the border –as I had presented in the theoretical background–, is not something static but rather a place in movement. Furthermore, the stories of people crossing the border are crucial to understand the situation that immigrants will encounter later. In the song "The Line", Springsteen builds the story upon dichotomy between the experience of a Mexican officer and that of an American officer. The song starts with the American officer's narration. Springsteen's use of "whole" instead of the expected "home" in the line "I was still tryin' to find my way back whole" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) shifts the meaning of the line from a physical return to an internal struggle for completeness. Rather than suggesting a journey back to a familiar place, "whole" emphasizes the need to recover a sense of identity that has been fractured. This nuance can be read in parallel with the experience of Mexican migrants crossing the border, for whom the idea of "home" is often uncertain or out of reach. In this light, the journey is not just about arriving somewhere, but about trying to remain emotionally and psychologically intact despite displacement and loss, making "whole" a much more powerful and complex choice.

Furthermore, the song introduces an important irony through the American officer. After losing his wife, the officer encounters a Mexican woman attempting to cross the border. His detailed description of her suggests that she reminds him of his wife: "her eyes reminded me of what I had lost" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). Because of this emotional connection, the officer is moved to help her, revealing a conflict between his duty as an officer and his personal sense of empathy, reinforcing the idea that both migrants and guards are, in different ways, trying to recover something they have lost. This dichotomy reflects Jacques Ancel's theory of *frontières plastiques*, according to which borders are not fixed or static divisions, but flexible spaces shaped by human interaction, movement, and emotional experience (Nail 6). In "The Line," the border becomes a place where personal loss, empathy, and identity constantly redefine the meaning of separation between both sides.

Although many immigrants manage to cross the border, others do not. This is portrayed in "Matamoros Banks", where Springsteen reverses the narrative of "Across the Border". At the end of "Across the Border", the character prays the night before he is attempting to cross the border: "And tomorrow my heart will be strong" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). The adjective "strong" highlights the danger inherent in the journey. In this context, "Matamoros Banks" can be seen as the fatal continuation of that hope. The song portrays the river carrying the body of the man who attempted to cross. Springsteen structures this image in reverse: it begins with the body being carried by the river— "for two days the river keeps you down"—and ends with the narrator diving "into the silty red river" (Springsteen, *Devils and Dust*). The description of the river as "red" foreshadows the fatal outcome, suggesting violence and death associated with the crossing.

Those who survive the border crossing, encounter a new form of struggle: access to work. In Springsteen's songs, those works are described as precarious, controlled by an American citizen, and often associated with violence, exploitation, or fatal consequences. To portray this idea, I focus on the following songs: "Sinaloa Cowboys", "One False Move", "Balboa Park" and "Ciudad Juarez".

The type of jobs that Springsteen portrays in these songs are normally related to drugs or underground economies. This idea is presented with the use of specific diction. First, Springsteen introduces semantic fields related with drugs as "methamphetamine", "hydriodic acid", "toncho"⁹, or "ballons of cocaine" (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) which emphasize the illegal nature of this work. Furthermore, he mentions diction related with weapons: "guns", "pistol", or "bullets" (Springsteen, *Inyo*) highlighting the constant presence of violence. Together, these lexical choices suggest that the workers are not only engaged in precarious jobs but are also embedded in environments where illegality and danger are constant. Consequently, death is not portrayed as accidental but as the logical consequence of the system in which they are forced to operate. In this way, Springsteen highlights the human cost of these forms of labor as I try to justify in the analysis below.

In these songs, death is portrayed differently. To start with, the song "Sinaloa Cowboys" reflects death as an inevitable consequence of these jobs. Springsteen

⁹ "Toncho" is a slang term for drugs.

suggests that these types of works offer immigrants greater economic opportunities, as reflected in the line “you (...) make half as much in one ten hour shift” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). At the same time, he emphasizes that the characters are aware of the dangers associated with their labor as can be observed in the line “if you slipped the hydriodic acid could burn right through your skin” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). Furthermore, Springsteen portrays the dehumanizing treatment, underlying how easily immigrants can be replaced. This idea is reinforced through the image in “They’d leave you spittin’ up blood in the desert” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). The fact that Springsteen introduces the image of the blood in the desert suggests how immigrants are dehumanized and treated as if they were machines, and therefore seen as replaceable.

Dehumanization is also present in “Balboa Park”, where Springsteen portrays death because of institutional indifference. The immigrants in the song are denied individual identity, as they are referred with nicknames such as “Spider”, “X-man”, and “Cochise” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*), which reinforces their marginalization within American society. This lack of identity becomes especially significant in the moment of Spider’s death, when he got hit after being caught in the headlights of a Border Patrol car. The image of the headlights suggests sudden exposure and vulnerability, emphasizing his inability to escape. Furthermore, the description of how “Spider held his stomach, limped to his blanket” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) presents a slow and painful death, in which he receives no assistance. This idea is reinforced in the line “closed his eyes and listened to the cars rushing by so fast” (Springsteen, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*), which conveys a sense of abandonment and indifference. Through this imagery, Springsteen highlights how immigrant lives are disregarded, as even in moments of extreme suffering, they remain invisible and unprotected.

Finally, the portrayal of death in “Ciudad Juarez” is the most emotionally charged, as it is narrated through a father’s grief and desire for vengeance after the murder of his daughter. The violence depicted in the song reflects the broader reality of femicide and insecurity in Ciudad Juarez¹⁰. Within this context,

¹⁰ The insecurity in Ciudad Juarez is mainly caused by the femicide, the murder of women by men, since 1993 (Perez-Ramos 63). Young, and often migrant women have been brutally raped, tortured, murdered, and mutilated. Their bodies have often been found abandoned in the Chihuahua desert (Perez-Ramos 64).

Springsteen personifies the city by directly addressing it in the line "Give me back my lost heart Ciudad Juarez" (Springsteen, *Inyo*). This direct address transforms the city into a symbolic interlocutor, as if it was capable of hearing and responding to the speaker's demand. The phrase "my lost heart" functions as a metaphor for the murdered daughter, intensifying the emotional weight of the request. In this way, the city is not merely a setting but is constructed as a space implicitly associated with violence and loss, reinforcing its role as a symbolic agent within the narrative.

The analysis that I have done in this section reflects the Mexican migrant experience as a journey shaped by poverty, hope, violence, exploitation and loss. Through personal stories and symbolic imagery, Springsteen exposes the harsh realities experienced by immigrants, giving voice to individuals who have been excluded.

4 Conclusion: The Raising Voice of the Voiceless

The aim of this study has been to demonstrate how Springsteen's lyrics have become a means of portraying the experiences of many immigrants along the Mexican American border. The importance of this research relies on the fact that it highlights the role of music as a powerful tool for representing and understanding complex social issues. In this regard, Springsteen's lyrics give voice to the struggles, hopes, and identities of immigrants living along the Mexican American border. Through his narrative style and use of figurative language, the selected songs contribute to raising awareness of the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

In the first part of the analysis, I have shown how Springsteen's lyrics function as a reflection of American social struggles. Albeit my analysis focuses on the Mexican American border, I have also explored the struggles faced by other minorities, as African Americans. My aim has been to demonstrate that racism and ethnicity are central concerns in Springsteen's lyrics. From this perspective, I then narrow the focus to the specific experiences of Mexican Americans. On the one hand, the lyrics portray the development and impact of racial tensions on American society and local communities. In this sense, the introduction of racial tensions in the song "My Hometown" reflects the loss of identity and connection with a familiar place. Furthermore, I have reflected on how the behavior of many immigrants in the United States is shaped by the fear generated by racial tensions. Through the specific case of Amadou Diallo in "American Skin (41 shots)", Springsteen has been able to portray how racial violence persists nowadays. Thus, the song further develops the fear with which immigrants grow up, even when they are born in the United States.

Through the songs "American Land" and "We Are Alive", Springsteen portrays immigrants' realities and, therefore, gives them a voice that had previously been silenced. Through the song "American Land", I have described the idealized vision that immigrants had of the United States, which resembles the idealization that Mexicans have of the North. This idealization is the one that makes many immigrants to go to United States, even though reality will not match with their expectations. Moreover, Springsteen highlights the importance of immigrants'

labor for the development of the country. Nevertheless, in "We Are Alive", the singer reflects the consequences faced by immigrants when they attempt to speak out against racism. Even though the United States government has sought to silence immigrant voices, Springsteen's lyric in "We Are Alive" give voices to those who lost their lives, as well as, to those who continue fighting for their rights.

Considering the racial tensions portrayed in the first half of the analysis, my aim has been to focus attention on one specific minority group, namely Mexican Americans. Through this analysis, I have been able to show how the situation of many Mexican immigrants is the consequence of a broader process. First, using diction and imagery, I portrayed how the harsh situation in Mexico forces many Mexicans to idealize the United States. Thus, this creates the dichotomy between the difficult situation in Mexico and the opportunities that the United States can offer. Despite the ideal life that Mexicans portray outside Mexico, the North is represented in the opposite way. Springsteen breaks this conventional idealization, reflecting the North as an insecure and dangerous place. This contrast between expectation and reality is further complicated by the way in which Springsteen represents the Mexican American border in the song "The Line." This, in fact, is reflected through the juxtaposition of the perceptions that the two characters have about the border.

Furthermore, rather than functioning as a passage between two spaces, the border becomes a site in which dreams of economic and personal improvement are confronted with systemic violence and control. This is portrayed through the types of work that Mexicans encounter. Springsteen uses different semantic fields to portray not only the precarious environment of these jobs, but also the danger and insecurity associated with them. Thus, through songs such as "Ciudad Juarez," I have further described how death is a central theme that shapes the characters' reality. Through the comparison of how the characters die in the songs, illustrated through figurative language such as personification, imagery, or symbolism, I have portrayed how these deaths were the result not only of the working conditions, but also of the oppressive environment created around the Mexican American border.

If I blend all the analysis together, there are similar patterns between the immigrant characters in the first groups of songs and the situation of Mexicans.

As portrayed in the analysis, the socio-economic situation is the main reason for many immigrants to escape from their hometowns. The decision of migrating may be related with the type of idealization that the United States has portrayed for itself. Thus, this portrayal of the country is the main reason for the biased perspective of many immigrants, resulting in disenchantment with the socio-economic and, more importantly, racial conditions that they encounter. Nevertheless, the stories and the characters behind Springsteen's lyrics show a pattern in the lives of immigrants trying to enter in the United States to start a new life.

My analysis focuses on the textual analysis of lyrics, but it is also important to consider the impact of music as a performative and collective experience. Springsteen's songs go beyond listening, as live, they become a space to emotionally shared and collectively acknowledged social realities. His ability to mobilize audiences goes beyond narrative representation, and I was a witness to this in one of his concerts in. The themes analyzed in this study were intensified through, performance, speech and audience response. While singing songs as "Land of Hope and Dreams" or "Born in the U.S.A" I was contributing to one of the goals that I have portrayed in my analysis, that is, to give visibility and voice to the oppressed. The experience reinforced the idea that Springsteen's work transcends the written text, functioning as a form of social engagement that invites reflection on migration, inequality, and identity. In this sense, his music operates as a bridge between analysis and lived experience, demonstrating how artistic expression can contribute to a deeper awareness of the realities it portrays.

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