

Pan-American Highways: American Tourism to Mexico and 1950s Hollywood film Stephanie Fuller

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Abstract

This article examines American films from the early 1950s which feature journeys to Mexico. Movies such as *Where Danger Lives* (John Farrow, 1950), *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) and *Wetbacks* (Hank McCune, 1954) present journeys to Mexico as escapes from American life in which romanticised freedom is closely connected to mobility and automobiles. The article explores the connection between the films' cinematic vistas of Mexican landscapes and American tourism to Mexico in this period. Through their journeys to and across the border, these films call the wider relationship between the US and Mexico into question as national identities are constructed through travel, landscape and touristic encounters.

Keywords: *Mexico, automobiles, 1950s Hollywood, landscape, tourism, American national identity*



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Pan-American Highways: American Tourism to Mexico and 1950s Hollywood film

Stephanie Fuller

Margo Lannington's plan to escape across the border into Mexico forms the central narrative thrust of John Farrow's 1950 film, *Where Danger Lives*. The film takes the protagonists motoring across the United States dramatizing Lannington's fall '...From Penthouse... to Bordertown Dives!' as promised by the movie's trailer. Played by Faith Domergue, Lannington's romantic dream of Mexico pervades the whole film, and indeed her whole back-story, as it is revealed that she has spent years secretly sending money to a bank in Mexico City in preparation for her departure. This dream motivates her to pursue the charming Dr Jeff Cameron (Robert Mitchum) and persuade him to start a new life with her south of the border. However, she is not drawn to Mexico solely for touristic reasons. Lannington is also on the run from American police and Cameron becomes entwined in her criminal plot as she murders her older husband in such a way as to make the young doctor believe he is the culprit. As they drive south towards the border the couple take on disguises, pretending to be runaway lovers on their way to be married secretly in Mexico. Playing both tourists and fugitives in the film, Lannington and Cameron are drawn to Mexico for touristic and criminal reasons.

The early 1950s saw the production of a proliferation of American films which feature journeys to Mexico like this one. One of the most prevalent narrative structures in these films sees American characters travelling south into Mexico to pursue romance whilst also fleeing the strictures of American society in some form. Journeys to Mexico and the formation of romantic relationships are central to the narratives of *Where Danger Lives*, *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Borderline* (William A. Seiter, 1950), *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis,

1950), *His Kind of Woman* (John Farrow, 1951), *Wetbacks* (Hank McCune, 1954) and more. This article will explore the confluence of these romance narratives with romanticised imaginings of Mexican locations as well as the connections between these Mexican spaces and the relationship between the US and Mexico in this period.

The romance of exotic locations which contrast with the everyday is a crucial element of what John Urry has theorised as the ‘tourist gaze.’ For Urry, ‘[s]uch practices involve the notion of “departure,” of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one’s senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane.’¹ Implicit in Urry’s search for contrast and breaks from the mundane is the need for an other to be kept fixed in place, an other which is often more traditional than modern American society. This conception of tourism positions modern viewers in opposition to the primitive sights they gaze upon. Rather than using Urry’s terminology of the ‘tourist gaze,’ which as Bronwyn Morkham and Russell Staiff argue, is reductive and collapses the relationship between different cultures, this article will seek to develop a conception of the touristic encounter through space and movement, and sites rather than sights.² Taking inspiration from Giuliana Bruno’s move away from visual conceptions of viewing to one that is geographic, inhabited and mobile, tourism will be understood as a physical, spatial practice rather than a vision-based one.³

Following this spatial approach to tourism, the relationship between the US and Mexico will also be interrogated through ideas of space and cartography in the case study films as they present romanticised Mexican landscapes. These US imaginings will be examined through ideas of colonialism and cultural imperialism, specifically focusing on the spaces and geographies of the films. As Edward Said has argued, colonialism is always a necessarily

geographic phenomenon. He attests: ‘To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about.’⁴ In examining links between tourism, film and colonialism, the article also draws on Homi K. Bhabha’s work on colonial discourses and his understanding of mobilities in relation to power relations. Bhabha argues that ‘[f]ixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.’⁵ Questions of motion and fixity are crucial to Bhabha’s analysis, and particularly in terms of the overwriting of others through stereotypes. In its investigation of American travels in Mexico, the article will therefore examine the ways in which cinema participates in and illuminates these geographic colonial practices.

The article will begin by focusing on the ways in which Mexico becomes a romantic site in these films. Histories of romantic tourism are used to argue that Mexico is depicted as a specifically romanticised space for tourists and fugitives alike wishing to escape the United States. Drawing on historical newspaper reports it analyses the media narratives which circulated around travel to Mexico in the early 1950s US and explores how the country becomes a romanticised location for the US at this time. The second section of the article moves on to examine the connections between automobiles, mobility and travel to Mexico. Through close analysis of travelling sequences in *Where Danger Lives* and *Out of the Past*, it suggests that the romance of Mexico is closely bound up with the romance of the road and contemporary cultural discourses linking automobile travel with American national identity. The final section of the article focuses on developing an understanding of touristic encounters

as spatial and mobile in nature. Close readings of interactions between characters and landscape explore the ways that American and Mexican identity is constructed through these travelling films, where American mobility is pitted against Mexican staticity, and Mexican landscapes are overwritten with American exoticised images. Exoticism and primitivism are important features of these encounters and through their concern with tourism the films themselves become touristic acts which depict and begin to question the relationship between the US and Mexico.

The Romance of Mexico

Romance has always been integral to tourism, and it was during the Romantic period that tourism was first popularised and extensively written about. Although many critics draw clear lines of influence between romanticism and tourism, the particular characteristics of romantic tourism have been debated widely. Patricia Jasen attests that ‘romanticism’s association between images, commodities, feelings, and personal fulfilment was a vital contributing factor to the development of... the tourist industry.’⁶ For Amanda Gilroy, romantic tourism was characterised by a ‘fascination with... exotic topography and racial others’ and offered ‘access to imaginary spaces of personal liberation and medicine for the troubled mind.’⁷ While George Dekker argues that touristic romanticism was inextricably linked to the literary form, claiming ‘Romantic tourists and novelists shared an aesthetic that effectively defined both tour and novel as privileged spaces exempt from the boring routines and hampering contingencies of ordinary life and rich with opportunities for imaginative transport.’⁸ This article uses such notions of romantic tourism to investigate the connections between romanticised cinematic representations of Mexico and American tourism to the

country during the post-second world war era. As in these understandings of romantic tourism, the romance of travelling to Mexico in the films is linked to the expansion of consumer culture and commodification, and particularly the mass-produced automobile. The potential for liberation or escape and tourism's role in the constitution of identity for American travellers is also central to these cinematic narratives.

Since the establishment of its current position in the mid-nineteenth century, the US-Mexico border has continuously functioned as a symbol of escape from American rules and regulations.⁹ By the 1850s, it is estimated that over 4,000 slaves had fled across the border from the US south into Mexico where slavery was outlawed and no extradition treaty was in place.¹⁰ Later, the Civil War saw many Confederate officers escape into Mexico to avoid imprisonment. Perhaps the most famous border escapee was Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, who fled south into Mexico after an incursion into Columbus, New Mexico, managing to evade capture by US cavalry under the command of General John Pershing. Although modern American media often depicts Mexican wrong-doers fleeing across the border to safety, in reality, as Steven Bender has argued, the US-Mexico border has served as a route of escape as much for US citizens as for Mexicans and people of other nationalities.¹¹ In film too, the boundary has regularly been presented as a place of escape for Mexicans and Americans alike since the beginning of the twentieth century. Early pictures such as *Mixed Blood* (Charles Swickard, 1916) show both US and Mexican characters fleeing to the border to escape retribution, and 1935's *Bordertown* (Archie Mayo) tells the story of Mexican-American Juan/Johnny Ramírez, who, when being pursued on charges of murder, has no option but to head south into Mexico.¹²

While early border films were often filled with tales of fugitives trying to escape law and order by heading south of the boundary, by the 1950s the United States was also becoming increasingly obsessed with travelling to Mexico on vacation, a development which the films analysed herein actively engage with. The early 1950s was a pivotal period in terms of the relationship between the US and Mexico. It saw temporary labour programmes recruit tens of thousands of Mexican workers in the US south, huge rises in undocumented migration, and mass deportation exercises by the US immigration services. This resulted in a circular flow of migration between the two countries which provoked strong positive and negative reactions among different sectors of the American public. Southern businesses wanted access to cheap and flexible labour while many American workers blamed Mexican migrants for lowering wages. Despite these protests, as historian David Lorey has argued, the Mexican population in the United States increased steadily and the economies of the two countries became more and more interdependent in the border region in this period.¹³ Amidst this shifting demographic and economic environment, Mexican workers regularly suffered poor working conditions, low pay, discrimination and often exploitation and abuse in the United States.¹⁴

The US and Mexico were also becoming increasingly interconnected through the growth of tourism. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw a huge rise in American travel to Mexico. Newspapers describe an ‘amazing tourist boom’ beginning in 1950, with more than half a million tourists crossing the border a year.¹⁵ The explosion in journeys south across the international divide was in no small part due to the fact that Mexican holiday resorts began to be advertised to the general American public at this time. Acapulco played a crucial role in this discourse and newspaper articles such as ‘Pesos go Farther at Story-Book Acapulco’ and ‘Acapulco – Resort City for Budgeteers’ emphasised the fact that exotic resorts ‘no longer

should be considered exclusively the playground for those with unlimited funds.’¹⁶ The fact that Acapulco was well known as a resort favoured by Hollywood stars was also emphasised in media reports and further demonstrates the complex role of the American film industry in US travel to Mexico. Additionally, the inauguration of the Pan-American Highway, at a time when car ownership was increasing exponentially, played a key role in opening up Mexico to ordinary Americans.¹⁷ The then-748 mile highway was hailed as ‘the only paved road reaching deep into Mexico,’ which enabled the holiday to start ‘the moment the border is crossed.’¹⁸ These increases in migrant and tourist traffic across the border worked to enmesh and integrate the United States and Mexico in significant ways and, perhaps as a result, Mexico loomed large in the American cultural imaginary at this time.

Alongside the huge numbers of American tourists heading south, another important group of border crossers during this period were the US artists, writers and filmmakers who sought political refuge in Mexico. Mexico City was the destination of choice for many communists, liberals and left-wingers seeking to avoid persecution or prosecution in the US, and newspapers often featured headlines about the need to close the border to fleeing radicals.¹⁹ As Rebecca Schreiber reports, early exiles included many African American artists who sought freedom from ‘racial discrimination and political persecution’ in the United States.²⁰ They were followed by a large number of Hollywood workers who were blacklisted by the film industry, including screenwriters Hugo Butler, Dalton Trumbo, Gordon Kahn, Albert Maltz, and John Bright.²¹ These cultural producers chose to leave the United States in light of ‘government harassment’ under Senator McCarthy’s communist hunt, and fled the policies that could see them subpoenaed by committees or detained under the Internal Security Act.²² Mexico was the country of choice because of its proximity, the lack of an extradition

treaty, the fact that American citizens did not need a passport to cross the border (and anyone suspected of connections to the communist party would not have been issued a passport) and the cheaper cost of living.²³

Through the experiences and writings of these left-wing exiles in Mexico, American tourism south of the border appears explicitly as a symbol and symptom of the kind of ‘informal imperialism’ that John Britton has argued characterised the United States’ relationship with Mexico and other countries deemed vulnerable to communism during this period.²⁴ American tourism to Mexico in particular provided a way for these exiles to articulate concerns about the connections between the two countries. Writing of Willard Motley’s work, Schreiber argues that ‘[t]ourism...functioned as a literary trope for discussing US racism and imperialism.’²⁵ In his writing, ‘Motley’s experimentations in point of view, specifically refracted across lines of race, class, and nation, contributed to ... an expressly anti-imperialist mode of representation that, by staging indigenous perspectives that frame and challenge tourism, undermines the unilateral point of view that shapes traditional travel narratives’.²⁶ For Schreiber, American imperialism is thrown into focus through the questioning and breaking down of traditional tourist perspectives. In the texts she analyses, the use of US tourism as a means of questioning the country’s position in the world begins to destabilise the position of the United States as protector of the American continent and opponent of old world colonialism. For the series of films produced during this period too, travel to Mexico begins to question the United States’ position within global debates around colonialism. In the context of the cold war, such debates were articulated most explicitly in US government denunciations of the Soviet Union’s encroachment into Eastern Europe as a colonial phenomenon. But, as its critics pointed out, the American government simultaneously

interfered and interceded in other countries, and Latin America in particular, as part of efforts to combat the spread of communism.

In his study of border crossers, Bender draws a comparison between fugitives and a very specific category of tourists, claiming that ‘border fugitives share the ideal with the vice tourist of enjoying some pursuit – here freedom – that is less available within the United States.’²⁷ But the parallel search for greater freedom than was granted in the US can be drawn between fugitives and tourists of all kinds. In *Where Danger Lives*, *Borderline* and *Wetbacks* in particular, Mexico is represented as backwards and primitive, and it is through this primitivism that tourists, fugitives and political refugees are adjoined as the country promises both exoticism and freedom from the law, order and politics exercised in the United States. As outlined above, this search for a contrast from everyday sights and sites is a crucial element of Urry’s ‘tourist gaze.’ Implicit in Urry’s search for contrast and breaks from the mundane is the need for an other to be maintained, and kept fixed in place; an other which is, in these films, more traditional than modern US society, and which functions akin to what Dean MacCannell identifies as primitive symbolism. In an early study into tourism, MacCannell found that his data consistently pointed to the idea that ‘tourist attractions are precisely analogous to the religious symbolism of primitive peoples.’²⁸ These conceptions of tourism positions modern spectators in opposition to primitive touristic sights. By way of response, this article instead develops a conception of the touristic encounter through space and movement, and sites rather than sights.

Thomas Torrans has theorised the role of the US-Mexico border as a place of escape through his concept of the ‘magic curtain.’ Torrans argues that as a magic curtain, the border ‘is transformation itself, the embodiment of change. It is a storied place that alters all who pass

through it in one form or another.’²⁹ Although the notion of a ‘magic curtain’ is somewhat vague, Torrans’ focus on the ‘storied’ and transformational nature of the boundary is useful as it suggests a heavily narrativised space that offers transformation. For the protagonists in *Where Danger Lives*, crossing the border offers the opportunity for change and transformation, and the characters duly plan to start a new life together as husband and wife beyond the boundary. The romantic draw of Mexico for Lannington and Cameron is so strong that it structures the entire narrative of the film, and the border becomes exactly the kind of narrativised space that Torrans describes. Following the movie’s exposition section set in San Francisco, the narrative is driven solely by the desire of the two protagonists to reach the Mexico border. The film travels steadily south from San Francisco through the changing US landscape until it arrives in the border town of Nogales. Early dialogue in the story prefigures the explicitly spatial narrative that will follow. Before they leave, Lannington’s husband (Claude Rains) warns Cameron, ‘If you take her, it’s a long road and there’s no turning back... time passes and then there’s the end of the road.’ Cameron and Lannington’s romance plays out spatially through their journey, and the border functions as the ‘end of the road’ for the narrative which finally sees Lannington shot by American border police as she clings to the boundary fence.

Romance, Tourism and Automobility

Automobile travel plays an important role in films featuring escapes to the border from this period, and particularly so in *Where Danger Lives* and *Gun Crazy*. For the former, the entire journey to Mexico takes place in vehicles and occupies a large proportion of screen time. For *Gun Crazy*, the characters also head steadily south throughout the film, eventually

planning to cross the border, set up a ranch and start a family together. As they travel through the country in a variety of stolen vehicles, their romance is played out on the road and their increasingly criminal endeavours are visualised through the cars' interaction with the landscape. The sale of automobiles rose sharply in the post-Second World War period in the United States, and at this time, travelling and exploring the country by car became an important part of what it meant to be American. Mark Osteen has argued that in the late 1940s and 1950s, 'Americans internalized their identification with cars, commodifying themselves via automotive self-extension. The selling of autos in the aftermath of World War II, when automobility was promoted as a solution to economic and social malaise, encouraged this process.'³⁰ Osteen describes how this form of automobility was constructed as an antidote to personal problems, which enabled ordinary families to travel and brought a new degree of freedom to American life.

Further, in his study of the production of free roadmaps by oil companies in this period, James Akerman has claimed that automobile travel and exploration of the US became 'the quintessential expression of American identity.'³¹ Linking back to frontier mythology, Akerman argues that this new mobile construction of American identity placed emphasis on moving, exploring and mapping territory.³² Travelling by car became an intrinsic part of what it meant to be an American at this time, and the free maps were significant in that they often promoted specific routes away from major highways, and pointed out sites of national interest, for example national parks. For Akerman, this large body of free maps demonstrates the 'industry-wide promotional argument that discretionary automobile travel was not merely a pleasant diversion, but was in fact an essential act of American citizenship in the twentieth century.'³³

The natural landscape and national parks play an important role in *Gun Crazy*'s journey across the US. Early on in the film after they decide to marry, the couple spend an idyllic honeymoon at an exotic natural paradise with tropic plants and waterfalls as their backdrop. As they drive through the countryside in this section of the film, motoring becomes a way of appreciating the great outdoors and the US natural landscape. Parts of the film were shot on location on at the Angeles Crest Highway, a 66 mile stretch of road which takes in the Angeles National Forest through tight mountain passes.³⁴ Driving against these dramatic natural scenes in an open top car, the characters trace a route across the country, exploring and discovering the natural environment. At points the camera hovers just in front of the vehicle looking through the windscreen at the protagonists as both camera and motor move through the countryside, shaking with every bump and shudder of the road. These shots literally transport viewers along with the van, creating haptic sensations of motion and automobile travel, enacting the kind of mobile American identity Akerman describes. However, the characters' participation in this idealised, natural and American automobility lapses when they turn to crime in order to pay for their new life together. On the run, they frequently change vehicles and disguises, finally deciding to head across the border to escape the police. When they attempt to outrun the cops in the film's final showdown, the film pauses on a sign indicating that the characters have headed into the Madera National Park. On this trip, however their car tears through the landscape, not concerned with exploring or appreciating its natural beauty but with escaping their pursuers, whatever the cost to the natural world around them. Driving too fast with dust filling the screen behind them, the characters ground the car and run it into bushes. Annie Starr (Peggy Cummins) and Barton Tare (John Dall) are dispatched by officers soon after,

demonstrating that the correct, American way is to explore and appreciate the natural landscape not to tear through it out of control.

Building on Akerman's conclusions, this emphasis on tourism and touring in *Gun Crazy* also implicates cinema in the production of a mobile, travelling American identity. Examining the connections between cinema and earlier practices of spectatorship, Giuliana Bruno has argued that '[t]he art of viewing followed the older touristic drive to survey and embrace a particular terrain: the compulsion to map a territory and position oneself within it.'³⁵ Thus for Bruno, cinema derives from the very same genealogy as travelling and mapping and shares with them an important spatial and geographic lineage. In *Where Danger Lives*, the explicit emphasis on cartography and landscape brings this connection to the fore, and the film itself is positioned as a touristic act, one that is constitutive of American identity.

Through their journey to the border, Cameron and Lannington are constructed as travelling subjects, and their identities become entwined with the journey itself. As the police follow their trail, the characters are constantly identified and defined by their vehicle. The convertible they set off in is swapped for a rusty van in order to throw their pursuers off the scent. As they traverse the empty, parched desert, the action cuts between the incessant spinning of the vehicle's wheels and close-ups of the faces of the characters. A tracking shot moves alongside the bottom of the van from the front wheel to the back, with the road blurring the rest of the screen. A close-up of a spinning tyre fades into Lannington's face, and later another shot of a wheel turning relentlessly on the hot tarmac is faded across an extreme close-up of Cameron's eyes and forehead. The linking of the wheels and the characters evokes not only their tense and whirling state of mind at this point in their journey, but also constructs

them as travelling subjects whose identities are inextricably bound with movement, touring and travel.

These travelling protagonists participate in touristic encounters on their journey as they pass through two towns, pretending to be a couple on their way to wed in Mexico. In both places they are addressed as tourists, and the differences between the modern, vibrant city of San Francisco where the movie began, and these backwater borderlands towns become extant. The film's opening in San Francisco highlights American modernity, as skyscrapers glimmer and traffic moves swiftly over a bridge outlined with lights sparkling against the night sky. Scenes of the city buildings at night fade into one another, shimmering with the glamour and modernity of the metropolitan space. In sharp contrast, as the film approaches the border, the landscape becomes increasingly empty, dull and deserted. These small towns, one called Postville, and the other unnamed, are home to bilingual populations and both Americans and Mexicans. The one Mexican-speaking role in the movie is that of Pablo (Julian Rivero), an aging drunk driver who is helped out of trouble with the US sheriff by his Spanish-speaking friend Dr Maynard (Harry Shannon). Pablo is unable to operate his decrepit car correctly, and is dressed in dirty, shabby clothing. Lannington and Cameron crash their vehicle into his, and this encounter cannot help but create oppositions between the modern Americans with their technology, smart clothes and mobility, and the borderlands filled with broken vehicles that cannot travel and backwards inhabitants who are stuck in the past.³⁶

Touristic encounters also take place in a bar in San Francisco early on in the movie. The set features an explicitly tropical decor, with lush vegetation and palm trees filling the screen, creating the effect of an exotic untouched landscape. Cocktails are served in coconut shells, and seating booths are constructed out of bamboo and other plants. As Cameron enters

the bar, a long tracking shot follows him through the smoky atmosphere as he searches for Lannington, the physical movement of the camera recalling the exploring, tracking and mapping qualities of American identity proposed by Akerman.³⁷ The tropical bar constructs the two lovers as tourists as they sample exotic drinks and food, and dance the night away in a place outside of the space and time of their ordinary everyday lives. The bar prefigures their escape to Mexico as their romance is tied to the tropical space; this is the only place where they meet, and the lovers' language emphasises this sense of spatial specificity as Cameron declares he wants Lannington 'here, like this.' The fact that they go on to encounter only barren dusty landscapes and dark and dangerous towns on their journey highlights the romanticism at work in the characters' expectations of Mexico. Their dream of romantic Mexico is attainable only in the simulated space of the tropical bar, and likewise their relationship cannot survive the realities of their decidedly unexotic journey to the real Mexico. Through the difference between the reality of the characters' borderlands encounters and the romanticised vision of Mexico evoked in the bar, the film seems knowingly to call attention to its own exoticising of the country.

Throughout their journey, the modern travelling Americans are clearly contrasted with the dwellings and inhabitants that they encounter. Lannington and Cameron enact mobile, modern identities which fix into place the undeveloped locations around them. Produced as the US tourists' others, these primitive towns are presented as artefacts and are fixed in time and place. Thus the film adds an extra dimension to Akerman's understanding of the connections between travelling and American national identity. While the depiction of tourism, and auto-tourism in particular, as an essentially American pastime produces an idea of the nation as mobile and explorational, it also constructs Mexico for the United States as a fixed, static

space. In mapping out the mobility of travelling Americans, *Where Danger Lives* also demarcates and fixes Mexico into place. The romance of Mexico produces mobile, travelling American subjects, but simultaneously takes away possibilities of movement for Mexico and Mexicans.

This echoes the way in which tourism and cinema are connected through Mexican landscapes in *Out of the Past*. In this film, ex-crook Jeff Bailey is sent to Mexico to trace Kathy Moffat, the runaway girlfriend of a mobster. Bailey follows her trail across Mexico and finds her in Acapulco where, set against romantic Mexican backdrops, romance grows between the characters and they plan to run away together. The Mexican scenes all take place as flashbacks in the film, and the country comes to function as a dreamy, unattainable past which cannot be reclaimed despite Moffat's present dreams of heading back to Mexico to start over again with Bailey. As it depicts Bailey's initial journey south, *Out of the Past* clearly locates audiences as it travels through Mexico City, Taxco and on to Acapulco through Robert Mitchum's narration. The camera tracks high across the streets of Mexico City as if looking down from a plane, and then hitches a ride on the side of a bus as the church and central plaza of Taxco are revealed. Then picture-postcard scenes in Acapulco show the sparkling coastline, a rustic well and church, and finally the next shot shows Bailey walking down a bustling street. Here, the pavements are lined with typical Mexican fare and the Spanish signs covering the walls of shops and bars clearly signal the Mexican location. When Markham enters the Café Mar Azul, the music which spills out from the movie house opposite is also distinctively Mexican with violin, trumpet and marimba.

This sequence explicitly positions the camera as a tourist travelling through the country, and sets up the way in which Bailey and Moffat are clearly identified as American tourists

throughout their stay in Mexico. Their romance is conducted on the beaches of the resort and in tourist bars and hotel rooms, and does not survive outside of this romantic, tropical location. Although they have both travelled to Mexico for illicit reasons – Moffat to escape persecution for stealing money from her ex Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), and Bailey under duress to return her to the gangster – the freedom and apparent lack of law and order in the country allows them both to temporarily forget their criminal pasts. As in *Where Danger Lives*, the highly exoticised spaces of their romance seem to call into question the film’s exotic Mexican landscapes. Here again, the romantic dream Mexico is starkly contrasted with the Mexican spaces which see the characters pursued, fleeing and separating in order to escape Sterling’s retribution.

Romanticism, Exoticism and Imperialism

Through American publicity around holiday resorts which emphasised the exoticness of destinations like Acapulco and the Yucatán Peninsula, in the 1950s Mexico became understood as a comparable equivalent to Caribbean tropical paradises that was cheaper, easier to get to and just as glamorous.³⁸ Exoticness is also an important factor in many films which feature journeys to Mexico. For example, the 1954 film *Wetback*’s publicity materials specifically highlight its exotic locations, describing it as a ‘romance under tropical skies’ and emphasising the fact it was shot on a ‘magnetic Island paradise’.³⁹ Contemporary reviewers of the film did not always find much to like, but were unanimous in their praise of these exotic locations and the Eastman Color process which rendered them ‘so beautiful’ according to *Harrison’s Reports*.⁴⁰ For *Kine Weekly*, the ‘[m]agnificent land and seascapes further compensate for its uneven script. You can feel the sun on your back and taste the salt in the air.’⁴¹ Similarly,

Variety found the film had ‘excellent scenic footage’ which complemented the ‘tropical mood’.⁴²

The fact that *Wetbacks* was filmed in Eastman Color was significant in creating its tropical atmosphere. The Eastman Color system was initially introduced in 1951 and by the mid-1950s it had overtaken the Technicolor process to become the ‘industry standard’.⁴³ Reviewers of early Eastman films found the colour system variously to be ‘unreal,’ with a ‘predominance of vivid blues’ and a tone that gave ‘the players at times a super tropical tan.’⁴⁴ *Wetbacks*’ reviewers certainly singled out the colour system as a positive and defining feature of the film, and the strong blues and tropical tans perhaps gave the movie an even more lush and exotic edge. According to trade press reports, the film’s producer-director McCune changed the name of his company from Telecraft Productions to Pacific Coast Pictures specifically for the production of *Wetbacks*.⁴⁵ With this name change, McCune created an inextricable connection between the ostensibly Mexican setting of the film and the Pacific Islands. That location filming took place both in Mexico and on Catalina Island in the Pacific, despite the absence of any islands in the film, demonstrates the movie’s conceptual interchangeability of Mexico and tropical island locations. Hollywood has a long tradition of this kind of tropical conflation, for example, W. S. Van Dyke’s 1928 feature, *White Shadows in the South Seas* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1928), was set on the Pacific Island of Tahiti, but Mexican actress Raquel Torres was called in to play the lead Tahitian role.⁴⁶

Wetbacks’ positioning of Mexico as a tropical paradise opens it up to US colonisation, in the words of Raymond Betts, producing an ‘illusionary’ Mexico which is constructed entirely by the colonising nation.⁴⁷ Jeffrey Geiger has examined the representation of the Pacific Islands in Hollywood film, and argues that these depictions are never simply concerned

with demonstrating exoticness, but rather are also always bound up with colonial discourses. In relation to *White Shadows in the South Seas*, he posits that ‘the film is self-reflexively gesturing toward the historical textualisation of the Pacific as a site of western fantasy: an impossible Eden glimpsed among the colonized tropics.’⁴⁸ Thus for Geiger, representations of Pacific island paradises are overlaid with the self-conscious construction of western fantasies, and it is these American fantasies of tropicalism which are also inscribed upon the illusionary Mexican landscape of *Wetbacks*.

Wetbacks tells the story of Jim Benson (Lloyd Bridges), an American fisherman who is out of work and out of cash. Benson’s position is exploited by the US immigration authorities who, unbeknownst to him, use him to entrap a gang of criminals smuggling Mexican workers into the United States by setting him up to bring Mexicans into the country by boat. Rather than centring on motorcar journeys towards Mexico as in the movies discussed above, here Benson travels by boat. But still, with most of the action taking place off the Mexican coast and in the village of Delgado, the film’s reinscribing of Mexican terrain plays out the distinctly spatial and geographic processes by which colonialism operates. As Edward Said has argued, ‘[i]mperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.’⁴⁹ Similarly, Cole Harris claims that the act of mapping is one of the most powerful tools of colonisation; in the Americas colonial maps reorganised space in Eurocentric perspective, renaming, removing and ignoring ‘indigenous ways of knowing and recording space’.⁵⁰ Rather than finding anything specifically Mexican about the setting of *Wetbacks*, the production company and reviewers alike understood its landscape as a denationalised tropical and exotic space. Taking the Mexican out of Mexico, the film re-maps the surface of the country with a homogenous

tropical environment, explicitly highlighting the fact that many of the scenes were filmed elsewhere. Through its illusionary tropical vision of Mexico, *Wetbacks*, like *White Shadows in the South Seas* before it, gestures towards American colonisation and construction of Mexico.

This overwriting of Mexico is particularly apparent during the film's scenes set in the drab American immigration service offices. Two items on the walls of the set draw attention to themselves. One, a large map, shows the United States and northern Mexico. In this map, the US is detailed with the reliefs of mountains and valleys, creating a complex and visually beautiful cartography. In contrast, the terrain of Mexico is entirely blank, coloured in one tone and lacking any distinguishing marks. Although this map is presumably designed to aid the immigration service in their patrol of the border, it lacks any identifying features on the Mexican side of the line. Mexico is vacant and silenced, erased and ready to be overwritten by Americans with their own fantasies of what lies beneath the borderline. On the wall directly next to this map, and behind the American officers, a calendar hangs conspicuously, and appears to feature an image of a tropical island. In his examination of the construction of Hawaii's paradise image in the early twentieth century, DeSoto Brown argues that the fantasy was produced in large part through the advertising strategies of American industry.⁵¹ Employed by cruise liner companies, hotels and Hollywood alike, fantasy images of Hawaii were constructed to sell to Americans. The appearance of the tropical calendar in the US immigration service office highlights the all-pervasive nature of these tropical fantasies in American culture but also hints at the action to come in *Wetbacks*. The calendar foreshadows the film's construction of a fantasy paradise and confirms Mexico's position within the diegesis as a space overwritten with American tropicalism.

Exotic tropicality is also the overriding theme of the film's Mexican topography. In the village of Delgado where Benson is stranded, most of the action takes place in a bar owned by Alfonso (Nacho Galindo) which has the appearance of a simple shack or beach hut. The tropical atmosphere of the bar is enhanced by the presence of foliage and the exotic plants and trees seen outside through the open sides of the room. As Benson and undercover officer Sally Parker (Nancy Gates) sit drinking together, the open panels behind them reveal palm trees and the ocean beyond. The tropical scene is fixed behind the couple, framing their romance in exotic terms, and later in the evening while the bar staff fall asleep, the Americans talk into the night, accompanied by a guitarist, whose slow, sliding melody reveals a Hawaiian influence. Much of the rest of the action in Mexico happens aboard Benson's ship, with the sea and sky reaching out into the background, presumably stunning in vivid Eastman Color. In *Wetbacks*, as in the other films discussed, the illusionary exotic Mexican landscape is inextricably linked to the growing romantic relationship between the protagonists, and provides a space where the exotic can also become erotic.

Conclusion

This article has argued that one of the key ways in which Mexico was represented in early 1950s American cinema is as a romanticised, romantic site. In US films which feature journeys to the border, the romance of Mexico pervades the narratives, often drawing the characters to pursue a new life together below the boundary. The Mexico border has served as an escape route from the United States ever since its establishment, and has been depicted as such in cinema since the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Where Danger Lives*, *Out of the Past*, *Gun Crazy*, and *Wetbacks*, characters head south of the border to escape US

jurisdiction (or its ruthless capitalist environment in Benson's case) but also to enjoy the romantic, tropical sites on offer. It is through the representation of Mexico as primitive that its romance takes on both touristic and fugitive imperatives, offering an exotic escape from everyday life, as well as refuge from the modern law and order of the United States. Mexico's role as sanctuary in the films also recalls the left-wing political refugees who travelled to Mexico to escape persecution and prosecution under American cold war policies. It is perhaps no coincidence then that one of the screenwriters who fled to Mexico during this period, Dalton Trumbo, would later claim credit for the script of *Gun Crazy*, where Mexico represents an unachievable escape from the relentless police hunt the characters face.

The 1950s saw a huge surge in American travellers to Mexico as new Pan-American highways were constructed and automobile ownership ballooned in the United States. Echoing this tourist trend, several of the films examined in this article privilege automobile travel, and emphasise the movement of vehicles. For *Where Danger Lives* in particular the characters are explicitly associated with a travelling identity which is denied to the borderlands towns and people they meet on their journey. As a way of understanding the interactions of the American tourists with the sites they encounter, this article therefore posited an alternative to Urry's 'tourist gaze,' instead constructing the concept of a cinematic tourist mobility which sees tourists moving, tracking and mapping the places and people they encounter while these sites and sights are made static and fixed into place, denied movement in all senses. These acts of travel and mapping are further constructed as essential acts of American citizenship through the promotion of automobile travel and tourism as national pursuits at this time. In various different ways, each of the films examined in this article depict the relationship between the United States and Mexico as an imperial one. They seem to suggest that rather than just being

concerned with contemporary border policy or developments in tourism and migration, cinematic representations of the US-Mexico border also tap into wider debates about the United States' place and role in the cold war world.

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¹ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2002), 2.

² Bronwyn Morkham and Russell Staiff, 'The Cinematic Tourist: Perception and Subjectivity,' in *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*, ed. Graham M. S. Dann (New York: CABI, 2002), 311, n. 1.

³ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (New York and London: Verso, 2002).

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⁶ Patricia Jane Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 11.

⁷ Amanda Gilroy, 'Introduction,' in *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel, 1775-1844*, ed. Amanda Gilroy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 2.

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⁹ The 1819 Adams-Onís treaty between Spain and the United States established that the areas of Texas, California and New Mexico belonged to the Spanish Empire. This treaty was ratified in 1831, and in 1836 Texas won independence from Mexico, to be later annexed by the US in 1845. Following the 1848 treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the US-Mexican war, Mexico was forced to sell around a third of its land to the United States. In 1853, the US made a further purchase and together the area bought by the US comprised all of the

land known today as California, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Arizona as well as parts of Wyoming and Colorado. See John Davenport, *The U.S.-Mexico Border: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, foreword by Senator George J. Mitchell (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005).

¹⁰ Steven Bender, *Run for the Border: Vice and Virtue in U.S.-Mexico Border Crossings* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012), 13.

¹¹ See Bender, *Run for the Border*, chapter one.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ David Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), chapters six and seven in particular.

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- ³² *Ibid.*, 152.

³³ Ibid., 154.

³⁴ American Film Institute Catalogue, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:afi&rft_id=xri:afi:film:25944, accessed 2 April 2014.

³⁵ Bruno, *Atlas*, 176. Much work has been undertaken on the connections between movies, motorcars and modernity more broadly. See for example Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Tom Gunning, 'Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows,' in *Cinema and Modernity*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 297-315. Akerman also discusses the influence of both railways and automobiles on American culture in 'Road Maps'.

³⁶ Pablo is devoid of a surname, and his overtly typically Mexican forename further emphasises the reductive and tokenistic role the character serves.

³⁷ Akerman, 'Road Maps,' 152.

³⁸ Rebecca Torres and Janet Henshall Momsen, 'Gringolandia: Cancún and the American Tourist,' in *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border*, ed. Nicholas Dagen Bloom (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 59.

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