



KENOMATIC SPACESHIP: *BARRIER* AS A TIMELY REPRESENTATION OF US BORDERLAND SPACE

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In 2015, the first chapter of the comic series *Barrier*—by writer Brian K. Vaughan, artist Marcos Martín, and colorist Montse Vicente—was published on the DRM-free digital comics platform Panel Syndicate; in 2018 Image Comics picked it up and released it in print. The series tackles issues related to the US–Mexico border security and immigration, taking a leap into the sci-fi genre to convey a powerful message on incommunicability and sociocultural clash. The plot is quite simple in itself, starting off with hardened Texan landowner Libby and illegal Honduran immigrant Oscar incidentally meeting at the US southern border; at once, they get abducted by a couple of aliens, who will release them after a mutual exchange of memories.

For a scholar interested in the US–Mexico borderlands, it's easy to draw on *Barrier* as a timely, fruitful stimulus of reflection on contemporary border dynamics. As several authors have pointed out—it reveals necessary mentioning at least Smith's seminal work (1950)—the image and (hi)storytelling of the US was based on the westward conquest and the myths intrinsic to the American West construct; the concept of such a frontier itself roots deeply into the American national ethos and has fostered the production of innumerable representations in popular culture. The US–Mexico borderlands have often embodied the myth for historical reasons, just as the natural landscapes of this vast region have provided the material backdrop to many a western narrative, from dime novels to neowestern products. Nonetheless, a different kind of images has been consolidating in the past few decades, juxtaposed to the western-inspired ideal of the frontier. Especially since the implementation of a specific range of immigration policies in the 80s, institutional and public discourse on border security has been constructing an idea of frontier strictly related to its physical boundary, as an indispensable limit to external threats and thus necessarily militarized.

Significantly, *Barrier* was produced right before the advent of the so-called Trump era, as things at the border were already quite critical; they have been increasingly so



especially since 9/11 and the consequent implementation of war-level measures along the boundary (Vuillamy 2010), backed up—and legitimated—by the evolution of border discourse towards an increased discrimination and general control over the whole population. Given Trump’s ostentatious persona and reiterated stress on the wall building matter, it’s easy perhaps to forget that the “crisis at the border” trope developed long before his administration took office in January 2017. In fact, the migratory flow from the Northern Triangle countries—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—has existed for decades, often depending on sociopolitical and governmental downturns in the Central American region; nonetheless, mass migration has been increasing since the beginning of the 21st century. The steady increment and the numbers themselves, though, wouldn’t seem to justify the use of the term “emergency” nor the character of exceptionality intrinsic to the border discourse itself, as it has been articulated in the media and institutional spheres. Several studies have delved into migration flows across the US–Mexico border, tracing the socioeconomic cycles on which illegal border crossing seems to have historically depended; among many, it’s worth recommending the long-standing work scholars Douglas Massey and Jorge Durand have dedicated to the matter (e.g. Massey et al. 2003). Interestingly, according to US CBP reports, yearly apprehension numbers as well have oscillated in a same range since the mid-70s.

Reorganized in 2003, the CBP (Customs and Border Protection) is currently the largest US federal law enforcement agency, a major part of its personnel being Border Patrol agents; it coordinates its activities with fellow agency ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), formed in 2002 in order to specifically focus on immigration control and enforcement. Both the Border Patrol and ICE agents have been known for exerting abuse against civilians, yielding to excessive use of force, as well as repeated violation of protocols and human rights. In particular, the operation of ICE’s several detention facilities along the border has been criticized by independent media and activist organizations, whereas the question hasn’t been truly addressed by US officials so far. As one of the main pivots of institutional border discourse has been the existence of an assumed state of emergency, these facilities—and the consequent handling of detained immigrants—are legitimated to fall into a kenomatic gray area, an actual state of exception where a suspension of legality takes place (Agamben 2003). In the case of the border, it becomes a space—material and conceptual—corresponding to a vacuum, a place emptied of lawful rights; extending Agamben’s definition, it could be argued that the borderlands have come to embody a space where an emptying of humane values occurs as well. The dehumanization intrinsic to the current configuration of migrant detention is complemented by a systematic discursive invisibilization of the migrants as individuals.

Returning to my exercise of critical analysis of borderland representation, *Barrier* provides indeed the depiction of a kenomatic space by means of a quite effective

metaphor: once they meet at the very border, its protagonists are abducted and kept in an alien spaceship where they find themselves at the mercy of apparently inhumane beings. As I could stress in a previous text (Marini 2019), the alien metaphor serves the parallel drawn between illegal immigrants and threatening, invasive extraterrestrial beings. A few other comic series exploit the extraterrestrial abduction trope and alien metaphor to tackle questions related to immigration, such as *Saucer Country* (Vertigo, 2012-13); *Barrier*, though, articulates the abduction space in a rather meaningful manner.



Figure 1 *Barrier* (collected edition, 2017), chapter 2, p. 68.

Aside from the striking, colorful artwork—beautifully delivered by Martín and Vicente—which elicits Yayoi Kusama-esque moods, the spaceship architecture and metaphorical characterization certainly deserve some attention. Whether purposely done by the authors or not, the alien space of detention reveals itself quite interesting to trace a semiotic parallel with the reality of detention facilities on the US–Mexico border. From the outside, it looks like a meteorite rather than a spaceship, not giving away

its nature nor its true purpose; once inside, the protagonists will find an unexpected, overwhelming reality, alternative to what they've known so far and yet, somehow, vaguely familiar. Liddy and Oscar navigate across different spaces inside the ship, just as migrant detainees go through stages during the process of detention; overbearing weekly protocols take them to and fro impersonal handling areas, from a non-place (Augé 1992) to another, without a chance to ease their constant distress.

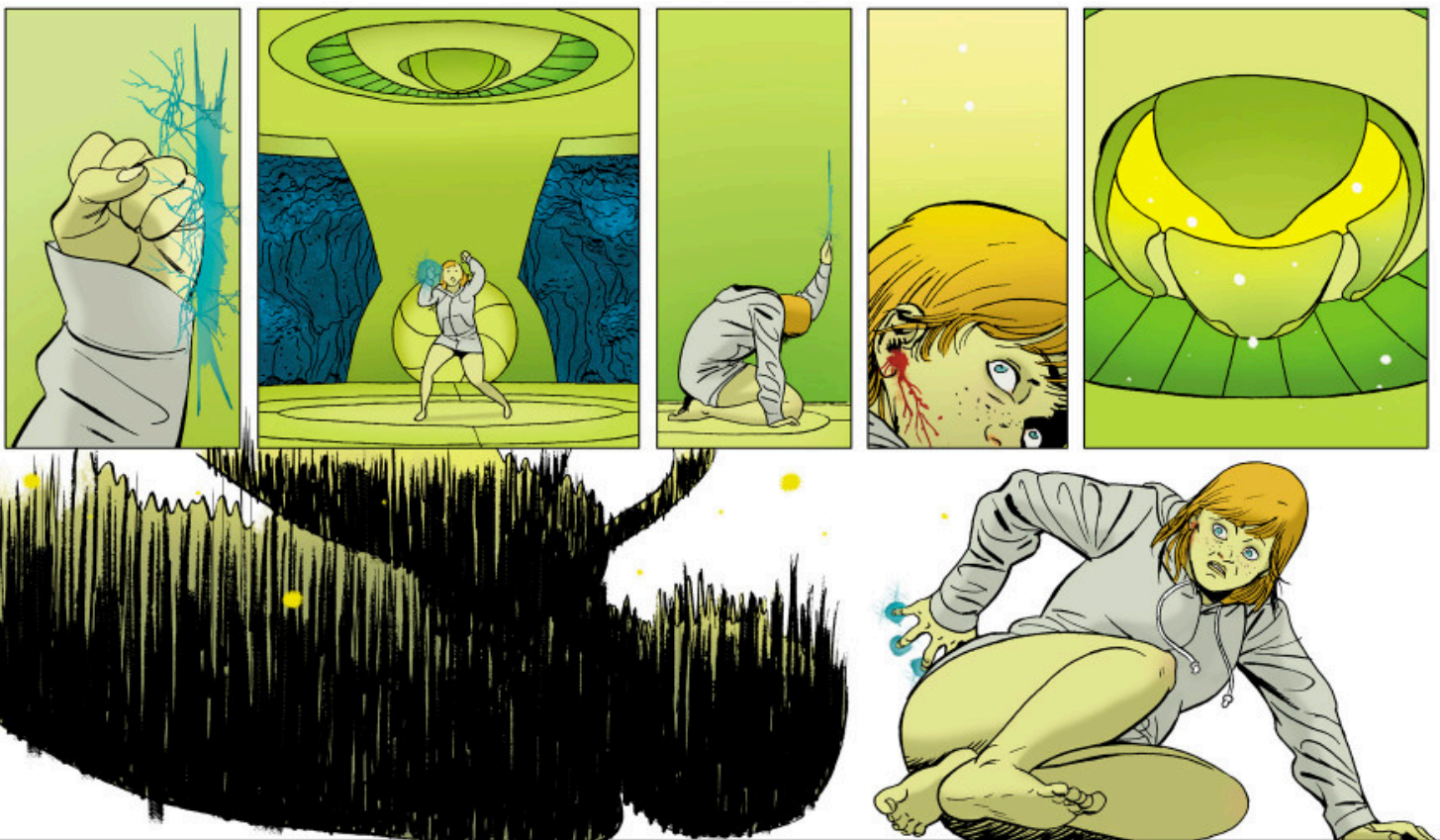


Figure 2 *Barrier* (collected edition, 2017), chapter 3, p. 98.

From the initial setting—a rather eerie cave populated by odd creatures and swarms of bloody eyeball-like dreadful spheres—the protagonists are thrown into the aliens' command deck, which is characterized from the beginning by an acid and lime green palette conveying a threatening, unnatural mood. The only contrasting color is bright red, used to signal blood and sudden anger throughout the series. Both human characters are evidently impotent and also deafened; the tension stemming from their mutual linguistic incomprehension starts to smooth out, as now words would be of no use anyway. *Barrier* is a multilingual book right from the start, as the very first

utterance the reader encounters is bilingual. Speaking with his boss in English and yet expressing his fear in Spanish, the verbal manifestation of Liddy’s Mexican farm-worker clarifies that, often, emotions are conveyed in one’s own maternal language—no matter the assimilation process one’s been put through. Liddy herself will only speak English, as Oscar will speak Spanish throughout the five chapters; with a brilliant expedient, the authors have the aliens speak a color language, their balloons filled with bright shades—the reader can assume—according to the message and feeling they are expressing.



Figure 3 *Barrier* (collected edition, 2017), chapter 5, p. 174.

With newly developed mutual understanding, Liddy and Oscar move to the following setting, a forest-like scenery in which once again the color palette strongly modulates moods. As the two take an alien animal hostage, they return to the deck in order to confront the chief aliens, who will force them to see each other’s memories of the events that led them all to meet. The narrative turning point for the main characters involved is indeed the exchange of memories, when a sudden awareness of the Other’s



experience and trauma sheds light on the hopes, pains, and behaviors, driving them up to that moment. The exchange facilitates a connection that comes across as necessary to overcome prejudice and mistrust; overborne by the public discourse on the border, the actual struggles and diverse realities of the transnational region often seem to fall through the cracks. The aliens' reasons to leave their wrecked planet to find a better, more livable place, resonate with migrant feelings, giving (Spanish-speaking) voice to the distress intrinsic to such a hard choice. Aside from the insight on some of the controversial reasons of illegal immigration, the articulation of Liddy's character brings up an aspect of the matter often neglected in public discourse: the risks and distress the inhabitants of the immediate borderlands have to deal with daily. The migrants' attempts of crossing are strictly related to human trafficking, as well as their passage inevitably intertwines with transnational criminal activities. Civilians residing on both sides of the boundary are forced to cope with both immigration and border enforcement infrastructures, living themselves in a state of uncertainty and danger.

The comic series has a rather open ending, as the human protagonists—eventually released by the aliens—find themselves in a familiar place, only to be caught by Arabic-speaking characters. The authors bring the reader to experiment alienation, constructing a multilingual story without any translation provided; nonetheless, for both the reader and the protagonists, mutual understanding will reveal partially possible through the sharing of experiences and memories. Furthermore, the linguistic clash between Liddy and Oscar is representative of the historically conflictive relationship between the Anglo culture—monoglossic and characterized by assimilationist ideals—dominant in the US society, and the Hispanic range of diverse cultures existing in the country; a conflict embodied by the southern border indeed (Casey and Watkins 2014). The US national storytelling has been challenged by alternative perspectives, especially those raising from culturally strong minority groups. National identities are often formed by exclusion of elements considered alien and Other, through a process of construction made of complementary, partial narratives defining an assumedly common belonging (Salmon 2001). Such fundamental exclusion inevitably traces internal boundaries, fractures whose depth is often hidden in a public discourse subjected to platitudes and politically driven agendas.

By means of clever metaphors, peculiar graphics, and stunning color work, *Barrier* stimulates a timely reflection on linguistic, cultural, and physical boundaries existing in the US. Borderlands are not just a geographical region along the border; they also represent a conceptual locus of inevitable encounter where mutual understanding, humanity, and awareness, often fail to bridge differences. Drawing on White's take on the value of narrativity (1980), the memory exchange trope reveals the personal story as means to understand foreign—alien—experiences, allowing the participants to discover and interpret realities different from their own. Vaughan, Martín, and Vicente's work is a small—yet brilliant and thought-provoking—contribution to the possibilities



of popular culture products to stimulate openminded consideration and, perhaps, bridge the void of awareness and understanding currently tampering with the public perception of border-related reality.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Marini, Anna Marta. 2020. “Kenomatic spaceship: *Barrier* as a timely representation of US borderland space.” *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published January 9, 2020. <https://popmec.hypotheses.org/category/blogposts>.