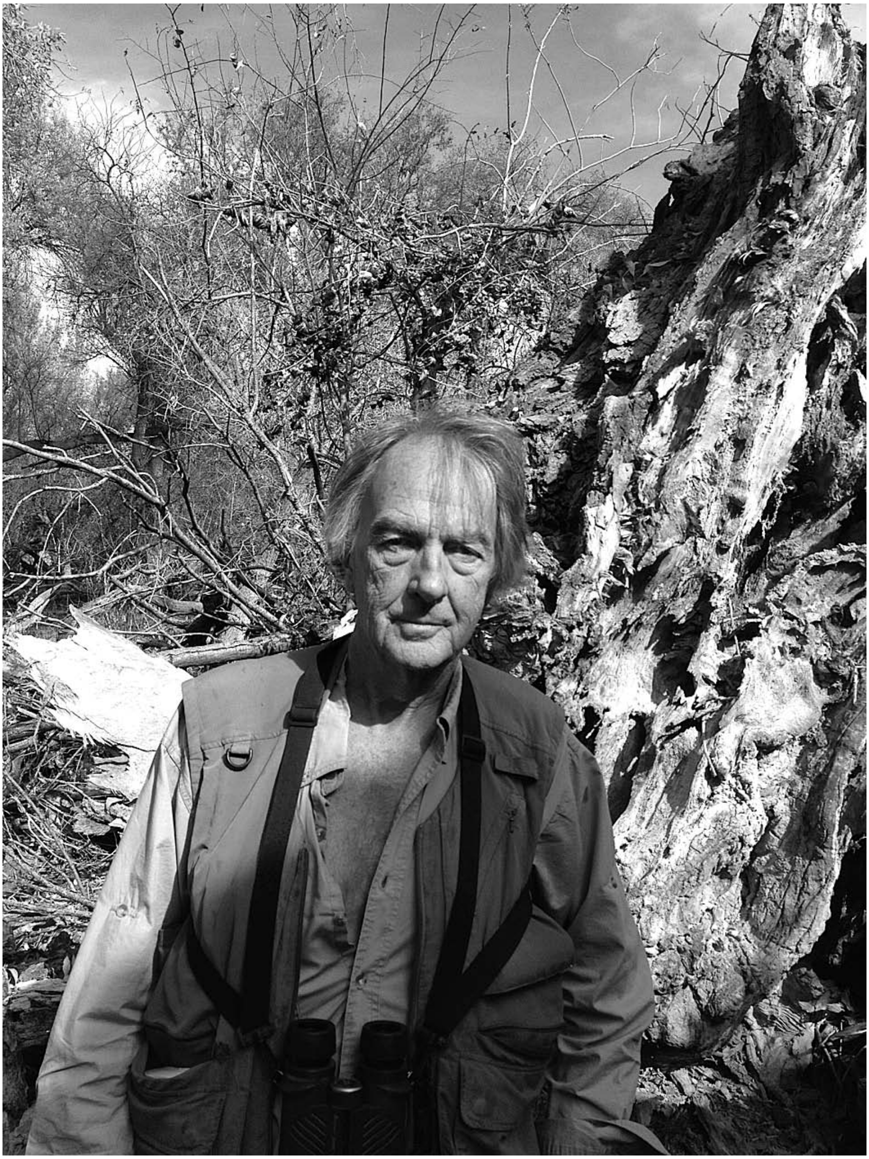

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Charles Bowden's Anarcho-Biotic Poetics

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Abstract: Charles Bowden's literary journalism thrives on the traces of stories buried in the desert he walks as sacred text. His connection to the desert and the Sunbelt in the United States is a paradox of despair and hope. Bowden rejects theories and calls for imagination as a poetic and performative deconstruction of Western abyssal thinking. His poetics signal the limits of language and reason and cultivate instead an intimate testimony about his suffering and ecstatic body dragging itself along the earth's body in non-Christian communion. This paper explores how through Bowden's self-representation he bears witness in accordance with the indigenous principle of nonjudgmental storytelling. His literary persona as the solitary anarchist without a tribe expresses a type of *nepantla* consciousness, and enacts transcultural visions about how stories determine who we are and where we are heading. His solitary end-of-the-world ethics envisions apocalyptic retribution to the "staying land," but Bowden's world-turned-upside-down is seen through the gaze of a fragmented and deracinated self, whose distrust of community pushes him not to cynicism but to radical association with the nonhuman. Much of Bowden's writing is closer to poetry than to journalism and is informed by a sense of justice that is posthumanist and too radical to be called environmentalist, since that term separates the one who utters it from the land. Bowden's elaboration of contradiction moves from the disorderly fashion he ascribes to his early writing in *Blue Desert* (1986) toward contradiction as desert, abyss as foundation, and paradox as truth.

The literary journalism of Charles Bowden (who died at age sixty-nine on August 30, 2014), thrives on the traces of stories buried in the desert he walks as sacred text throughout his work from *Blue Desert* (1986) to the recent trilogy comprising *Inferno*, *Exodus*, and *Trinity* (2006–09). These stories are the testaments of those who have fallen, many of them Mexican, during their attempts to cross the border. Other stories are pre-Colombian, dating back over 2,000 years, when ancient tribes that belonged in the desert perhaps died less violent deaths, until the genocide began. Bowden's walking becomes a form of bearing witness to the deaths of individuals and entire cultures. "The night," he says "the delicious night, denies such stories. The night insists on beauty. But we hurt. Our bodies whisper: Yes, the stories are here."[1] These telegraphically terse lines express the nucleus of his affective thinking. He constantly affirms beauty, especially in wild places (on the land and in the imagination) but also our suffering, and how we must face it instead of anesthetizing ourselves, how the body, not the rational mind, holds some fundamental insights, and that in human culture these insights are storied.

The sheer number of Bowden's books, some of them collaborations with photographers, artists, and other writers, not to mention essays and articles—would suggest that he must repeat himself or at least revisit the same themes often. Yet in each text he selects a new and fascinating cast of characters whose stories he interweaves with his own in a recombinant poetics of endless possibilities. And while Bowden's voice and affect are immediately recognizable, his method of telling others' stories makes them unique in how they ring true. It is impossible to do justice to this prodigious oeuvre here, and so I have decided to leave aside texts about drug trafficking and migration, and instead to focus on a manageable selection for examining Bowden's poetics and post- or even antihumanism.[2] A consideration for us as literary critics and theorists is to respond to Bowden's work with the respect he infuses into telling others' stories. My challenge is to perform a reading of his work worth sharing, and that doesn't betray his conviction that the truth cannot be captured in theory but only through the senses. So my orientation through his texts follows Bowden's feelings about how to live fully in a culture of death.[3] This sounds like my theme is the ethical thrust of Bowden's writing but his poetics are wary of abstract and universal discourses like those of ethics, and much more expressive of the thrust:

> I want something very simple: to be that mesquite root found alive at one hundred and seventy-eight feet in hard rock, a root shaped like a cock and probing for a wet place, or shaped like a finger on a mother's hand and reaching out to touch the face of love, a throbbing hungry thing pulsing and coursing onward without a care but with a purpose and that purpose may be no more than its own appetite but still that is something."[4]

To delve into Henri Bergson's *élan vital* would be tangential even if the French philosopher's musings on the mysterious life force seem relevant to Bowden's consistent but perennially surprising expressions of creative energy. What fascinates me is how élan fuels Bowden in a human world that he sees as death-driven and essentially deadening. How does he draw inspiration and wisdom from sheer life force, and how does he assume a stance with ethical implications based on those gut feelings? In other words, how does his writing connect ideas, emotions, and ethics, or in Aristotle's rhetoric logos, pathos, and ethos? To relate any philosophy of consciousness or knowledge to Bowden's work, even Nietzsche's disavowal of logic and morality, would do violence to Bowden's mode of representation, since he claims closer kinship with animals and plants than with humans. In another instance at the beginning of *Blues for Cannibals* he identifies with the mesquite: "I am the tree struggling in the hot ground of my desert," and goes on to reject any messages from on high, insisting that "[T]he messages must come from here, from the ground itself,"[5] leading toward a kind of acceptance of the earth and its conditions that few European philosophers have entertained: "But we can accept the storm, the pitiless sun, the rot and then the dust. And we don't ask why, this is our wisdom, or at least the wisdom of my brother the mesquite and the one I reach toward every dusk and every dawn and sometimes in the blink of midnight."[6] Bowden refuses to constrain fleeting insights by fixing them in a system arrogantly or naively thought to withstand the passing of time. This is one of the reasons that despite the recognizable textures of his language, his ideas roam freely and are not restricted by the fear of contradiction.

What strikes me most about Bowden's nonfiction is how much more consistently poetic, creative, and speculative it is than most fiction I read. So another important component of my reading will focus on his language and how he struggles to give expression to the horror and the beauty he perceives. "In my travels toward other bloods I have simply learned how feeble my perceptions are."[7] Sight, the commonly privileged sense—"seeing is believing"—is often usurped by touch, taste, and smell in Bowden's experience. "Imagine this: a world of tongues and caresses, a constant touching of the genitals, a world hidden like the planet Venus from common view by the clouds of scents streaming off our desires, a world obscene with appetite and orgasm and strong spices and drenched chilies."[8] It follows that instead of thinking about the world in a cerebral way, Bowden searches by walking the land that is both body and text, an insight that he shares with individuals who tell him similarly inflected stories: "His people once believed the trees and shrubs were hair, the rock and mountains bone, the streams blood, and the wind the earth breathing. Some of the old people still do."[9] Walking along songlines and dreaming-tracks on the earth conceived as a living being recalls the Australian Aboriginal praxis of the walkabout, and there are similar beliefs and practices in the American Southwest. "[T]he nomadic Chemehuevi navigated wide expanses of this arid terrain with songs. The songs gave the names of places in geographical order, and the place names were descriptive, evocative, so that a person who'd never been to a place might recognize it from the song. . . . A song was the length of the night and a map of the world, and the arid terrain around Las Vegas was the Storied Land of the great myths."[10]

In another Southwestern reference, Rebecca Solnit cites Jaime de Angulo's reflections on what the Pit River Indians meant by "wandering": "It would seem that under certain conditions of mental stress an individual finds life in his accustomed surroundings too hard to bear. Such a man starts to wander. He goes about the country, traveling aimlessly. . . . He will not make any outward show of grief, sorrow or worry. . . . The wanderer, man or woman, shuns camps and villages, remains in wild, lonely places."[11] Solnit goes on to relate this form of despair to "the desire for what Buddhists call unbeing. . . . It's not about being lost but about trying to lose yourself."[12] While at times Bowden's hiking through the desert recalls this form of despair and desire, he also mentions another kind of quest: "I travel a lot, and when I travel I tell people it is for a story, but what I am really looking for is love. Not a woman for myself, but love on the faces of people and in their gait and in the smooth joy of their speech. I travel in the true desert. The Sahara, I believe, has more water than the modern world has love."[13] Bowden's walking the desert in *Blue Desert* or *Inferno* diverges from this loving affirmation of humanity fueling his travels in *Blues for Cannibals*, making it fruitless to generalize in order to theorize his impulses.

Bowden might reject my assertion that he walks the desert as sacred text, together with any suggestion that his hiking enacts a spiritual ritual, only because he is suspicious of all holistic concepts, whether attributed to God or humanly constructed to comfort us. On the other hand, in *Trinity* he describes his expedition into the desert as "part of an expedition into myself and out of my life, one that would take me to the sacred ground."[14] A fellow critic expresses the spirituality of wild men in the desert with the same reservation I feel, but does so nonetheless in his comparative study of Bill Broyles, Bowden, and Edward Abbey: "[T]he three resonate to the same, dare I say, mystical desert vibrations."[15] In a rare and enigmatic reference to a collective identity signaled by the first-person plural, Bowden rejects collectively organized ritual yet suggests a kind of collective will for love over hate:

> We are not druids here or pantheists or fairies in a sylvan whirl of velvet and chimes. True, we sing, we have our song. But no chants, never chants. Or ceremonies. We are not of the peaceable kingdom here, and we have little peace. We contain a great deal of anger and even more of violence, the hand reaches out at all hours for the throat. We wait for the moment to strike back and yet we struggle, struggle each and every second, to still that hand, to open that fist into a warm palm and caress the face. To not reach for that gun.[16]

How much more nuanced is this struggle than Nietzsche's declaration of himself and those like him as superior free spirits motivated by the will to power. Bowden avoids summing up his ideas into a theory of human nature and development, which would mean de-poeticizing them. His poetics enact paradox and thereby avoid the pitfalls of philosophical discourse intent on speaking a universal truth inevitably fraught with internal and blind contradictions. Clearly influenced by his friend Edward Abbey, Bowden reworks some of his themes and images but also pushes them further away from the contradictions inherent in reason. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey, too, speaks of mysticism and paradox: "To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock."[17]

Together with Bowden's rejection of belonging to a group held together by shared ideology and ritual, he rejects language, the medium that most binds a people to each other and the individual to a preconceived reality. Though of course for a writer this is impossible and so like many twentieth-century poets, Bowden engages in relentlessly inventive play to free language from logic. The history of the Greek word "logos" demonstrates above all else the mutability of its meaning. But in postmodern usage, especially influenced by Derrida's critique of Indo-European languages, we tend to relate the term "logos" to the symbiotic relationship between those specific languages and logic:

> For Aristotle, *logos* is something more refined than the capacity to make private feelings public: it enables the human being to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for him to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is advantageous and what is harmful, between what is just and what is unjust, and between what is good and what is evil.[18]

This concept, like so many in Western epistemology, is based on a hierarchy of being and the compulsive need to assert the superiority of humans over other life-forms, on the basis of our ability to reason (and the unfounded assumption that animals lack this ability). This is also the understanding of humans' relationship to the world that Bowden most vigorously ridicules and denounces. His challenge is to do so from outside of reason, and to some extent, from outside of language, which is an odd goal for a writer best known as a journalist. Bowden opens *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing* with this conundrum: "Names don't help me much anymore. They belong to that time when everything was kept in its place. Before the winds came up and the water came up and licked the land away, this land is your land, this land is my land, this land is gone."[19] On the other hand, he admits, "[B]ut words are all I have, my skills are limited and the words at best are a veil, maybe a shroud, between us and this world we touch but cannot embrace, a ball of dirt we stand on but never can really know."[20] Without reducing good and evil to philosophical abstractions, Bowden's deep ecology identifies human supremacy as the root of the worst injustices against the biotic, that is, the complete world: "We cannot say this thing about people, that there are too many of us and not enough of everything else."[21] How many introductory philosophy courses and even lectures by eminent philosophers start with the assertion that humans are superior to other animals on the basis of language, morality, and knowledge? Bowden shows the disastrous consequences of this supremacist thinking and rejects its very basis, not through rational argument but through his lust for other life-forms, other bloods. However, true to his avowal of contradiction, instead of chastising humans for being out of balance, he questions whether we can or should curb our appetites. In *Inferno*, Bowden returns continually to attack the concept of balance, and goes so far as to question if humans really belong to the earth "because our hearts are too large and hungry for this ground."[22] He speculates that our voracious appetites are part of our very nature and that the real problem lies in separating our nature from Nature, which we bracket off to idealize and exploit. He makes a subtle distinction between the appetite to possess things and the appetite to feel things but, though this distinction would be central and crucial to any ethical argument, he chooses to enact the feeling rather than pursue the logic required by argument.[23] He mocks the new environmentalist mantra: "Balance, that is the key, and let's sing a little of that harmony like those monkish fools safe in their choirs, spared the madness of the whiskey, the power, and the tits. . . . There is this eternal thing, we insist on its existence and it is nature and it is pure and it never has sagging breasts and the hunger in the bones for just one more taste from the needle."[24]

Bowden's beyond-good-and-evil is rooted in his recognition of both the otherness of animals and his desire "to meld with beasts,"[25] which is very different from simply liking them or being concerned about their welfare. Contemplating snakes, Bowden states "[W]ords like *good* and *evil* and *fear* and *doubt* seem nothing to them. I cannot imagine a snake wondering about the word *yes.*"[26] In another instance, Bowden recalls his first crayon drawing as a child: a worm thinking about a man, a crafty act of sacred cow tipping.[27] As is more common in poetry, Bowden shrinks the distance between word and reality, and furthermore, he does not bar animals from language but instead imagines them enacting a language of immediacy that does not substitute names for objects: "I am part of a species where many find it forbidden to cross religious lines. Or race lines. I want to cross bloodlines. I want to risk my life for another organism, to shed my culture and join another culture, to meld with beasts, to destroy the notion of parks and zoos and reserves and flow in a river of blood off some Niagara and be pounded into another life."[28] Of the rattlesnake that frequents Bowden's porch, he says, "[S]he is incapable of evil,"[29] yet he says about elephants, "I like the fact that they are capable of crime,"[30] and enjoys imagining the elephant stomping people to death: "I am attracted to these thoughts."[31] This difference between how he perceives the rattlesnake's serenity and the elephant's rage and need for freedom exemplifies Bowden's refusal to generalize about animals or anything else in the name of knowledge or truth or justice.

One fundamental aspect of the genre sometimes called (unimaginatively) New New Journalism, or literary, creative, and speculative journalism, is the practice of immersing oneself in the situations of which one writes subjectively. But in Bowden's case, this immersion relates not only to the dictates of investigative reporting, but even more to enacting his corporeal presence as embodied voice, becoming disembodied voice in *Inferno*. Bowden embodies and enacts the principle of contradiction (suggestively pushed back to the etymology of that term: contra or against diction, discourse, reasoned argument). In his introduction to *Blue Desert*, paradoxically entitled "Coordinates of Blue Desert," Bowden situates himself on slippery terrain, "My home is a web of dreams," and continues to ground his storytelling in his own being: "This book proceeds, much the way I do, in a disorderly, relentless fashion. It is fat with contradictions but sounds one steady note: the land."[32] Particularly when not reporting on specific crimes, like drug trafficking and its attendant murders, Bowden relinquishes language informed by a sense of being a participant in shared institutionalized discourses. At times his halting voice seems that of an aphasic child or even an extraterrestrial anthropologist surveying this bizarre world for the first time. This voice enacts the principle of nonjudgment: "You can see a war out there, or you can see a friendly place. Or you can simply see and skip the words."[33] Nonjudgment should not be confused with being neutral or sitting on the fence, however. Bowden sees things in ways that disorients the reader's comfort, thereby allowing us to interpret and experience for ourselves. More radical than the *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, theorized by the Russian Formalists as an artistic technique, Bowden's defamiliarizing perception strives toward another consciousness. "[D]esire reaches past thought and escapes its strangling hold. . . . Still, there linger moments of reaching and acting not so much without a thought as without the constraint of thought. . . . I slither on the ground following the snake, and I see everything with fresh eyes."[34] The following passage dealing with the ravages of economic globalization in the global South demonstrates how this alien perspective interrupts logical reasoning and the conventions of investigative reporting:

> It hardly matters where this place is because it is so many places now. The spices vary, the weather also. But it is a city and it keeps growing and there is no work and no one really believes there will be work. They just live here after a fashion.
>
> There are programs, policies, plans, meetings, slogans, marches, and lots of things to drink out of bottles. The revolution has arrived here and its color is red.[35]

Here he doesn't name such forces as globalization, which would automatically be associated with a kind of sociological or political discourse, in the sense that Foucault uses the term "discourse" as institutionalized language even if it is the counter-hegemonic discourse of antiglobalization. In other instances, though, Bowden offers a rigorous analysis of global economics, showing once again the diversity of his arsenal, the aphasic child's voice suddenly turning to shrewd political commentary reminiscent of Noam Chomsky:

> And yet the very nature of states now makes disintegration inevitable. To tick off the forces is easy. One, as the economies go global, capital ceases to respond to local control or desires. Two, as the populations continue to grow, economic growth becomes essential for the state because only jobs and food and shelter can in the end preserve them from their nominal subjects. And three, the global economy creates structural unemployment—meaning permanent elimination of jobs as opposed to cyclical ups and downs—because global corporations seek automation, low wages and fewer workers creating more profits.[36]

In *Blues for Cannibals*, Bowden playfully interjects stories he gathers about Native Americans seemingly to destabilize his own use of analytical discourse. He graphically sections off the following paragraph, once again inverting epistemological hierarchies this time through tongue-in-cheek factual accounting without comment: "We are in the heart of spring now. One day a ring appears around the sun and instantly the Mexican newspaper reassures its readers. It interviews scientists who explain it is caused by particles of freezing water in the atmosphere and is perfectly natural and portends nothing, nothing at all. It does not mean the end of the world, nor does it herald a series of calamities."[37] The practice of citing, in this case obliquely, the beliefs of other cultures demonstrates the kind of deep respect for difference championed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his call for transcultural thinking inclusive of indigenous knowledges: "As a post-abyssal epistemology, the ecology of knowledges, while forging credibility for non-scientific knowledge, does not imply discrediting scientific knowledge. It simply implies its counter-hegemonic use."[38] Bowden's ironic inclusion of prophetic vision denied by scientific experts enacts this very tension between dominant Western epistemology and its dismissal of indigenous beliefs as unfounded superstition. The irony of the Mexican newspaper denying "a series of calamities" lies in its absurd contradiction of newspapers daily reporting undeniable series of calamities.

The enactment of altered states of consciousness through defamiliarizing speech necessarily implicates the speaker's identity. Since ethos (Greek for "character") is considered to be an essential component and distinguishing feature of literary and speculative journalism, it becomes an especially interesting problem of self-representation. Given that Bowden and many other literary journalists limit persuading the reader through reasoning and strictly empirical data, their persona becomes all the more important in conveying integrity and credibility. The situatedness of this kind of writing does not refer only to immersion in a particular locale, but also to the speaking subject's identity. It is common practice for these journalists to interweave bits of memoir writing in order to give a sense of what makes them tick, what about their past relates to their convictions and passion to write about the present and even prophesy the future. Bowden does this in each one of his works by remembering some childhood experience, however vague and explicitly mythologized. In the preface to *Blood Orchid*, he imbues a quote from Albert Camus with just this kind of power: "A person's life purpose is nothing more than to rediscover, through the detours of art, or love, or passionate work, those one or two images in the presence of which his heart first opened."[39]

In *Blue Desert*, Bowden rebels against being known as Captain Death for his newspaper coverage of homicides and counters the imposition of this dark identity by conjuring up a childhood vision of a pastoral idyll:

> I like to remember being a boy on that Illinois farm and I am holding a cane pole down by the creek and the fish are jumping. The sun skips off the quiet pools of water and the air comes fresh from Eden. Up by the house the old man and his cronies are drinking beer from quart bottles, the Holsteins graze and cool spring water skims across the limestone floor of the milk house. And I am in the sun, and this is what I want and who I am.[40]

The affirmation "this is what I want and who I am" defies logical explanation other than associating desire and being with serene existence on the land. In *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*, Bowden reconfigures this same memory giving it a dark edge caused by war and a changing way of life that forces people off the land to become dependent on systems and authorities;

"[T]he men broken but held together by bottles, the ocean whispering from the sawed-off cannon shells, the fabric of life unraveling before me and yet caressing my face. That is the floor of my optimism, all from a room and afternoon and time that was vanishing as fast as I swallowed it."[41] By the end of this book, Bowden further demythologizes the idyllic childhood memory, the stream of consciousness resonating with the tune of Gershwin's "Summertime": "[A]nd the drinking is heavy and my daddy is rich and he's gone all the time and my momma's good-looking and she's cooking like a slave and men are drinking because they are all scared."[42] The fear and violence do not, however, preclude Bowden's optimism grounded in the childhood scents and sights before rational understanding. The land and the caressing of his face simply trump all idiocy, lunacy, and despair.

Bowden elaborates on these memories—the floor of his optimism—connecting childhood consciousness to his sense of adventure and deep attraction to animals: "Dogs first beckoned me into the kingdom of other bloods."[43] And: "The dog slips away in the brush. The future is disappearing with the dog's ass, and I scramble, a boy of six or seven, possibly eight. Dead leaves and broken twigs litter the ground, a wet rank odor rises. In my head I am free and have no dream beyond being the dog and being the forest. Everything is in the moment."[44] This sensorial basis of all experience sparks and feeds Bowden's radical biotic imagination that surpasses all thinking, whether skeptical or utopian. The opacity of otherness, the unknowable yet physically graspable, forms the very basis of being in Bowden's experience. "The first dog was named Dick. Right now I can smell his fur, the tongue licking my two-year-old face. I never knew what he was thinking. That much the dogs have given me."[45] The dog as mediator to other bloods expresses an unknowable life force whose message is to forge ahead but always sensually integrated in the biotic world.

Always mindful not to pillage Native cultures, Bowden instead quotes people, even if in brief passing and anonymity. In one such instance, he refers to an unnamed man obliquely identified as "standing out in front of the tribal gambling hall at seven a.m. smoking," remembering that "in his language, the word *ni'* has two meanings: Mind. And Land."[46] In Bowden's poetics this unity would be: Body. And Land. He says, "My touchstones always seem to be of the flesh. And on my tongue."[47] I suspect that for Bowden, "mind" has been hijacked by the Western thinking he associates with theories, always secretly in service of yet more exploitation. This rejection of the Western mind leads Bowden to praxis (practice and a form of knowledge) rooted in the body. He remembers his earlier work, *Killing the Hidden Waters*, undertaken in a research institute "amid heaps of reports, elegant graphs, and piles of computer printout," after which he came to the conclusion that he did not believe the numbers. So he takes another route to a different kind of knowledge:

> I went walking—walking mountains, walking bajadas, walking deserts, walking with scientists, walking with Indians and most often walking alone. *I learned with my feet* what the books, reports, symposiums, commission conclusions, and studies skirted: that resources are limited and that technology, invention, and industrial voodoo cannot increase the amount of a resource but simply accelerate the destruction of a resource through consumption. The well does not make water; it mines water [my emphasis].[48]

Bowden's poetics ground him, literally, through his feet to the land on which he nevertheless feels himself to be an intruder. In one instance, he follows the trail of the ancient Hohokam, making comparative observations between past and present, indigenous and invader cultures, but his wording subtly prophesies the return of the extinguished:

> The people passed this way seeking visions and dreams and the shells became a door opening up the secret regions of their heads. Southwestern cultures once had many such journeys—salt journeys, eagle killings, shell journeys—all ventures leading to places off the map but deep in the country of the heart. This is a game almost no one plays anymore. But then the world that risked such journeys has been *temporarily* obliterated [my emphasis].[49]

Linear time and its teleological concept of history as human development are debunked by Bowden, even as he excludes himself from the prophesied return of a world currently extinct. Given his outsider status, he contemplates the ancient monuments as "a message sent that I will never receive."[50] In this instance of identifying himself as Euroamerican, he contemplates the distance between this cultural legacy and his yearning for what Australian Aboriginals call a belonging place: "I know no desert language. I am the interloper, the refugee, the tourist, the present that denies the past. I speak a tongue forged on another continent, one rich with words spawned in green forests under gray, soggy skies. I do not belong here. I just have these longings."[51] And yet, on another trip to a bat cave, Bowden experiences a connection so strong that it bridges human and animal worlds completely—"We stand inside a brief island of life, a hiding place of our blood kin"[52]—justifying his use of the word "holocaust" to describe the ongoing extinction of the bats due to pesticide use.[53]

Bowden's literary persona as the solitary anarchist without a tribe who nevertheless feels kinship ties with bats and snakes expresses a type of radical *nepantla* consciousness, and enacts transcultural visions about how stories determine who we are and where we are heading.[54] "I speak for the mongrel, the mestizo, the half-breed, the bastard, the alley cat, the cur, the hybrid, the mule, the whore, the unforeseen strain that pounds against all the safe and disgusting doors. I speak for vitality, rough edges, torn fences, broken walls, wild rivers, sweat-soaked sheets."[55] While from the perspective of identity politics, one might question Bowden's right to speak for mestizos and half-breeds, from his obvious conviction to represent minoritized characters in ways that are complex, empathetic, and truthful, another kind of question follows: how often does the charge of appropriation come from a puritanical and essentializing position, and even covers up for a lack of interest in the other and a lack of solidarity? Ironically, despite the categorical "I speak for," Bowden never really does this but instead interweaves each character's voice and story judiciously and in a nonjudgmental way. His solitary end-of-the-world ethics both contrast and resonate with an indigenous in-between yet communal sense of identity. Bowden and such Native storytellers as Leslie Marmon Silko and Australian Aboriginal Alexis Wright all envision apocalyptic retribution to the "staying earth," but while most Native storytellers overtly draw from a vast and rich repertoire of collective stories generative of a coherent belief system, Bowden's world-turned-upside-down is seen through the gaze of a fragmented and deracinated self, whose distrust of community pushes him not to cynicism but to radical association with the nonhuman. In the chapter titled simply "Serpent" in *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*, Bowden states his position in characteristically concrete yet paradoxical terms. Each verse opens with the first-person pronoun, sign of identity and individuation, both a place of possibility and a prison from which to escape:

> I have never believed in a hierarchy of being, with complex organisms up in the tower room and less complex organisms toiling in the fields.
>
> I have never trusted the word *I*.
>
> I have never felt comfortable with the word *nature*.
>
> That is why I have come to snakes.
>
> I want in.[56]

These simple lines once again reject the basic Western philosophical principle of human supremacy, a rejection cleverly worded to link that arrogance with the feudal or capitalistic exploitation of the poor by the elites. Bowden enacts paradox in haiku fashion by casting doubt on the word *I* despite beginning all four lines with it. And in the last line, he succinctly critiques Western thinking's separation of human from the biotic community (inclusive of such blood kin as bats and snakes). Even in his more journalistic writings, like *Murder City*, Bowden consistently interrupts prose narrative with verse, forcing the reader to shift gears, to slow down and contemplate the words set apart by versification on a different temporal plane. In the midst of the spreading violence that permeates Juárez, seemingly on the road to hell with no return, Bowden interjects optimism that can only be understood as coming from that floor of childhood that insists instinctively and unflaggingly on life. The clash between what is and what the best in us can imagine is graphically differentiated on the page in the transition from prose to verse:

> The city now is murder, extortion, arson, kidnapping, rape, robbery, car theft, and the sweet haze of drugs and alcohol. The temperature bumps one hundred ten, but the marijuana and the cocaine and the heroin and the cold beers save the human heart from the human violence.
>
> I see no problem.
>
> I see a future.
>
> I see the way things will be here now and the way things will be where you live in good time.
>
> I see a city where basic institutions erode and then burn or die, and yet in the morning, my fellow human beings get up, smell the coffee, and continue on with their lives.[57]

As in the previous quote, both transitions to verse from prose also insist on the integrity of the speaking subject to own what he states. In this latter example, Bowden's insistent "I" and the repeated "see" fuse bearing witness to the horrors of violence with seeing beyond it through some inner and clairvoyant I/eye. This obsession with searching for truth and concrete evidence to vindicate the victims of a world controlled by blood money likely compels Bowden to flee to the desert.

These frequent forays into the desert, together with Bowden's predilection for epigraphs drawn from the Bible, suggest parallels with the temptation of Christ in the desert: "[F]orty days and nights and not a single word. Just those damn bones that keep singing. And four rules. That is all I can come up with. Obedience is another matter altogether. I have never been good at this obedience."[58] However, Bowden's stark lyricism grounds all values in bodies instead of transcendental ideals. He swigs whisky after hiking all day, and is continually brewing espresso; when receiving a woman in his desert abode, the lovemaking he describes bears comparison with nature films on animal mating habits. This he acknowledges fully and humorously, "Love, I know, is essential if death is to be put in its place, and it has a place, but love is essential even if I do not know the words that give it flesh and scent. That is why we find it so difficult to write about sex. Not because we are so inhibited and prudish but because when we write about sex, we get acts and organs, a breast, a vagina, a cock, juices, tongues and thrusts—and wind up with recipes but no food."[59]

Nothing he experiences in the desert is represented as a temptation to resist. Instead, Bowden enacts being a desiring machine with a voracious appetite. In his book *Desierto*, he likens himself to a man who has been drinking since noon and who "lives in one completed room like a monk in a cell," noting "I know the hunger. I can sense our sameness: the whole world is sexual to us, down to the very last stone."[60] His orientation might be called omnisexual, or in Deleuze and Guattari's terms nonhuman, molecular sexuality.[61] Contemplating a waitress at a casino where he is attending a conference on the plight of desert tortoises, he expresses his desire across biotic lines: "[T]he cocktail waitress brings me another drink—this time a scotch. I feel expansive. She has great legs, long firm stems sketched by the black net stockings. I want the river, the bear, the tortoise, and those legs."[62] On the one hand, the fragmentation of the woman's body here begs for feminist critique, yet Bowden's fragmentation of himself and of his perceptions mimics some other life-form that is not easy to accuse of male entitlement. Strangely, the woman's legs are valorized as belonging to the elemental things for which Bowden longs. That said, the desiring machine's fetishes somewhat limit the representation of women, strangely equating such sexualized markers of femininity as stiletto heels, push-up bras, and make-up with freedom through sensuality. Environmentalists are repeatedly characterized as sorely lacking in this regard, as if only dogmatic puritans could possibly forego these trappings. Bowden's preference for a certain look limits his representation of women in instances when they are reduced to abstract signs of his lust for life.

Whenever I teach this text, students criticize how Bowden's gaze objectifies women's bodies, yet I have the uncanny feeling that Bowden's gaze is like a snake's flicking tongue. In *Inferno*, after quoting God's punishment of the serpent, condemned to go upon its belly and to eat dust, Bowden muses: "Imagine no knife, no fork. The tongue split and no hands to help you grab the roast. I want to eat the dirt and lick the rock. I am loyal if nothing else."[63] His loyalty is to the snake, not God.[64] The biblical epigraph with which he opens *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing*—"Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things. But flesh with life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat"[65]—is explained by Bowden but rejected together with obedience to God: "In the Old Testament, the laws insist we must not drink blood. . . . I swallow the blood, all the bloods. / I am that outlaw, the one crossing borders. / The earlier time is over."[66] There is no name for this brand of anarchism since it exceeds human society, and yet it is an anarchistic impulse pushed to the limits of human experience, desire, and love.

Much of Bowden's writing is closer to poetry than to journalism and is informed by a sense of justice that is posthumanist and too radical to be called environmentalist, since that term separates the one who utters it from the land. His representation of nonhuman life-forms as having intrinsic worth regardless of use-value to humans is consistent with the tenets of deep ecology. Yet, he also gets things done. To facilitate his dealings with people in power, he forges a public persona derived from a theatrical understanding of the human world. Specific performances take place on sets, and people are players—slipping into roles that come with appropriate costumes and props—in a constantly changing game. He opens *Inferno* with a humble explanation of what he achieves in this role-playing game and also how it sullies him:

> So with a bunch of other souls, I was suddenly in cahoots with the Secretary of the Interior and various faces of the faceless bureaucracies. I wanted around five thousand square miles. In the dying breaths of that administration, the effort resulted in close to a half million acres of my desert being born again as a national monument.
>
> I would come home at night during that period with the sensation of a coal miner endlessly scrubbing to get rid of the grime.[67]

"My desert" he calls this place to which he doesn't belong. But then in *Inferno* Bowden finds the poetic resolution to this paradox of not belonging yet longing. The feminized desert is experienced as the foundation of life, though the land is paradoxically characterized by negation, much like the ancient Hebrew concept of *tehom,* the abyss of nothingness from which all life emerges. "She says nothing now. I want to eat the dirt and lick the rock. Or leave the shade for the sun and feel the burning. I know I don't belong here. But this is the only place I belong." Then he talks about how we ignored the warnings about overpopulation, concluding, "I thought, something will turn up and fix everything. This was an act of faith and I am made out of acts of faith. So I have come to this place because it eats acts of faith and then rots them and slowly takes them back into the ground. Still, she is silent."[68] This rotting as life-generating force, he refers to as miasma, which the OED defines as "an unhealthy or unpleasant smell or vapour"; "an oppressive or unpleasant atmosphere which surrounds or emanates from something." Miasma theory originated in the Middle Ages and persisted into the mid-nineteenth century, holding that disease was born on bad air from decaying organic matter. But Bowden doesn't theorize the desert's association with death and renewal: "I do not seek to know what all this means. I simply feel it, all the birthing and juice in the place of ultimate desiccation."[69]

Bowden situates his own death, and life before birth, in this space of negation, once again recalling Australian Aboriginal dreamtime—the convergence of time immemorial and the present:

> Before I was born, I would often come to this place. I do not mention this lightly—in fact, I seldom mention it at all. People would not abide me if I spoke of this matter. But I would come here before I existed and I would drink from the stagnant waters and marvel at the seep of the empty valley and the bite of the barren mountains. The sky ached. I would come here for the calm, for the certainty of my life and my death.[70]

What I mean by this being a poetic resolution has nothing to do with any kind of a solution to contradiction. Rather, Bowden's elaboration of contradiction moves from the disorderly fashion he ascribes to his writing in *Blue Desert* toward contradiction as desert, abyss as foundation, and paradox as truth. He hears the unsayable in the singing of bones in the desert that he walks, an act of imagination that resonates with the Aboriginals' understanding of walking the songlines. Vertigo—which he says is "the only form of balance worth living"[71]—he describes as a physical sensation of spinning in response to those songs. His vertigo throws him into the spinning that allows him temporary access to the miasma or kernel: "[Y]es, spinning, and within the spinning the hand flailing, fingers like talons reaching for just a touch of the coarse skin, the tongue lapping out for a taste of all the slime and ooze."[72]

Zen koans and other enactments of paradox resist analysis and confound reason. They prod the mind to imagine and the body to simply recite the unsayable. To this end, Bowden fuses the desert's body with a woman's, his own alienation with his belonging:

> I hear the hum of the rocks and see, finally, the scream of the stars at noon. I touch the face of the clock in the scattered rocks. I smell the ooze all around me in the dry desert. I am on my knees now. The bone goes into my mouth, slowly, ever so slowly, the tongue crumbles as my mouth fills with bone. I spit out the fragments of my tongue onto the sizzling soil. A stub flounders in my mouth as the singing bones go down my throat and choke me into the music. I am now a man ready for my desert, an Adam finally prepared for the face of Eve.[73]

While Bowden performs his own apocalyptic death and entry into the kernel in *Inferno*, it cannot be considered the end point of his writing in the sense that Revelation is the teleological even if circular ending of the

Bible. The literal disintegration of the speaking subject in *Inferno* is one of multiple expressions of love that Bowden explores with unabated curiosity through diverse languages, subject positions, and physical settings. In *Blues for Cannibals*, he retreats from the ultimate limit experience of *Inferno* into the mundane world of his own garden and kitchen, doling out recipes like some stranger and wiser wine-guzzling Galloping Gourmet. But even the reduced space of this sanctuary resonates with the abyss of *Inferno*, as several of Bowden's loved ones die. He has one of his friends buried on his ranch—"I do not go there now—the ground around the house sings too much of Chris and his voice pains me"[74]—and he seems perpetually aware of the others' burial sites as presence, punctuated by the loud sucking sounds of the mesquite probing for water.

The dynamic and mutating self remains at the core of all the experiences Bowden relates, and the essence of what he means by "yes"—the ultimate and unconditional affirmation—he identifies as his final incarnation: "I have changed, not into a new person but into a final person and this person can only say yes."[75] This is a strange finality from a Western storytelling perspective, in that "yes" throws open the doors to all possibilities and does not give a sense of any ending. In the midst of worldwide catastrophe, he asserts that "joy sits there at the table if we are willing to reach and touch it."[76] This is not some religious philosophy that insists on personal conviction while ignoring the individual's troubled place in a web of biotic connections. On the contrary, life-affirming conviction is sparked by the torrent of marginalized multitudes flowing along the river of blood:

> I can feel the river but as yet I cannot map it or spell out all its tributaries or describe the sea toward which it courses. I no longer think I am living in a world that is dying. Now I fervently believe it is being born. The birth is hard, the labor pains sharp, the medical assistance minimal. But still the birth is real and I feel big with it. What is being born is a new place fashioned from discarded, abused, and tortured ground. What is being born is a new people recruited from trash, from rejects, from fugitives, from refugees, from the nameless and faceless and frightened and angry. And this people is desperate and bold and surging around me. I find them everywhere. They lack passports, they have nowhere to go. They are fuel for the fire of this creation.[77]

This radical avowal of exactly those whom global economic systems and all their underlying ideologies strive to exploit and crush, recalls Guillermo Góhis Peña's "End of the World Topography," in which he defines the Fourth World as "a conceptual place where the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas meet with the deterritorialized peoples, the immigrants, and the exiles;

it occupies portions of all the previous worlds."[78] Bowden manages to relate the intensely personal—even unsayable—to the experiences of the Majority World without ever generalizing or appropriating another's being or voice. Despite implicating himself as one of the cannibals in *Blues for Cannibals*, the diverse appetites he performs throughout his works are always appetites to feel and not to possess in any capitalistic sense. His disintegration into the music of the bare bones enacted in phantasmagorical odysseys through the desert expresses a lust for life, finally rooted in the earth that he prophesies as on the verge of being inherited by the desperate, who are not necessarily meek. Bowden's work is a kaleidoscope ("observation of beautiful forms" in Greek) undulating between the microscopic and the cosmic, the intimately subjective and the most expansively communitarian. He desires nothing short of communion with the biotic universe.

Elegy

This article was submitted months before Charles Bowden died. I cannot entomb him with the accustomed R.I.P. since he performs death, in *Inferno* and elsewhere, spinning to a chorus of deafening song in a desert he claimed to know long before his birth, where he passionately licks rocks that shred his ecstatic body.

You have found your country. Now enter it. Into the flesh of beasts, into the gigantic snake. Spinning into the kernel of the desert where the bones sing and the coyotes answer under a blood moon in a green sky with screaming stars.

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Notes

1. Charles Bowden, *Blue Desert* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986), 172.

2. I also limit references to *Trinity* because it is the focus of another project on nuclear criticism.

3. Elsewhere I examined the term "sentipensante" (feeling-thinking), borrowed by Eduardo Galeano from an indigenous language of Colombian fishermen, that I apply to Bowden's awareness of the violence inherent in separating mind from body in the pursuit of theory. In *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* Bowden gives tangible form to this problem plaguing analytical discourse: "There is a fine line we say we will not cross and yet that line must always be crossed if we are to live a life and have a death. This commonplace is seldom noted and almost always lied about. We erect barriers and we call these barriers disciplines, or professions or, sometimes in the name of God Almighty, ethics. And these barriers keep us on one side of the line and keep what we see and feel and sense and fear on the other side of the line" (109). For my discussion of Bowden's relation to other storytellers where I quote these lines see "Beyond the Boundaries of Critical Thought and Toward Feeling-Thinking Stories," *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies*, 30:3–4 (July-October 2008), 316–31.

4. Charles Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals: The Notes from Underground* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 23.

5. Ibid., 6.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Charles Bowden, *Some of the Dead Are Still Breathing: Living in the Future* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 61.

8. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 7.

9. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 56.

10. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 192–93.

11. Ibid., 19.

12. Ibid., 19.

13. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 11.

14. Charles Bowden, *Trinity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 49.

15. Anthony Channell Hilfer, "A Passion for the Desert: Bill Broyles, *Sunshot*; Charles Bowden, *Inferno*; Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 54, no. 2 (2012): 259.

16. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 6–7.

17. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 6.

18. Paul Anthony Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 21.

19. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 5.

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Ibid., 7.

22. Charles Bowden, *Inferno* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 69.

23. This distinction he makes in *Inferno* (130). In a similar vein, Bowden's thinking on capital punishment refuses to collapse personal ethics and public morals for the sake of logical consistency. While he admits that he would gladly have killed some child murderers himself, he is against capital punishment "with the cited exception of my own handiwork, because I do not trust the state to dole out the killing fairly" (*Blues for Cannibals*, 146), which as he honestly concludes leaves "the matter where it always ends up: inconsistent but actual life" (161).

24. Bowden, *Inferno*, 116.

25. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 149.

26. Ibid., 45.

27. Bowden, *Inferno*, 26.

28. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 149.

29. Ibid., 45.

30. Ibid., 124.

31. Ibid., 135.

32. Bowden, *Blue Desert*, 1.

33. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 9.

34. Ibid., 75. This image resonates with Edward Abbey's influence: "I lie on my belly on the edge of the dune, back to the wind, and study the world of the flowers from ground level, as a snake might see it" (*Desert Solitaire*, 30). But as in most cases of comparison with Abbey, Bowden's language is more performative and poetic.

35. Ibid., 11–12.

36. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 189.

37. Ibid., 193.

38. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges," *Eurozine*, http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-29-santos-en.html.

39. Charles Bowden, *Blood Orchid* (New York: North Point Press, 1995), xiii.

40. Bowden, *Blue Desert*, 11–12.

41. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 2.

42. Ibid., 220.

43. Ibid., 64.

44. Ibid., 25.

45. Ibid., 65.

46. Ibid., 54–55.

47. Bowden, *Inferno*, 121.

48. Bowden, *Blue Desert*, 136. Both the motif and repetition here are reminiscent of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*: "I went for walks. I went for walks. I went for walks and on one of these, the last I took in Havasu, regained everything that seemed to be ebbing away" (58).

49. Ibid., 134.

50. Ibid., 135.

51. Ibid., 135.

52. Ibid., 10.

53. Ibid., 13.

54. *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl term (an Aztec language that continues in use in modern day Mexico), "connoting 'in between' or a reference to the space of the middle" (ChicanoArt.Org, http://www.chicanoart.org/nepantla.html). While this border consciousness often refers to people of mestizo, or mixed-blood, heritage, in Bowden's case I use it to connote his striving toward a consciousness beyond human. It is important to qualify how this border term is borrowed, and not unthinkingly appropriated. Instead of attributing *mestizaje* to a specific community of people, thereby using it as an identity marker, Bowden sees the best of American culture as issuing from this process, "the restless, bastard nature of my nation and myself" (*Trinity*, 231).

55. Bowden, *Blood Orchid*, 29.

56. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 46.

57. Charles Bowden, *Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 148.

58. Bowden, *Inferno*, 17.

59. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 13.

60. Charles Bowden, *Desierto: Memories of the Future* (New York: WW Norton, 1991), 55.

61. I am also reminded of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of flows relating to their conception of nonhuman, molecular sexuality. According to schizoanalysis, desire does not lack its object but is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it. "Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand. . . . [W]e always make love with worlds," *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1972), trans. Robert Hurely, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 323, 325.

62. Bowden, *Blue Desert*, 38.

63. Bowden, *Inferno*, 26.

64. The literal disintegration of the speaking subject's body in *Inferno* is reminiscent of the following lines from Antonin Artaud's radio play: "When you will have made him a body without organs, / then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions / and restored him to his true freedom," from "To Have Done with the Judgement of God," in Susan Sontag (ed.), *Selected Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 571. These lines inspired French philosopher Gilles Deleuze to imagine the Schizophrenic as a Body without organs, an explorer of depths rather than surfaces. If I were to theorize *Inferno*, whose extreme poetics actually invite such an approach more than most of Bowden's other books, I would apply Deleuze and Guattari's second volume, *Anti-Oedipus: A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), to explore how Bowden enacts the Body without organs in his fantasy of dissolution. According to such an approach, Bowden's incessant walks through the desert could also be read as an act of deterritorialization in opposition to the endless neuroses encouraged by capitalism. Alas, the length of this essay does not allow me to be sidetracked into theorizing what so adamantly resists theoreti-

cal thinking. And it must also be noted that Bowden communicates these impulses much more effectively and affectively than Deleuze and Guattari.

65. Gen. 9:2–4.

66. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 41.

67. Bowden, *Inferno*, 7.

68. Ibid., 21.

69. Ibid., 77–78.

70. Ibid., 36.

71. Ibid., 139.

72. Ibid., 41.

73. Ibid., 135.

74. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 264.

75. Bowden, *Some of the Dead*, 18.

76. Ibid., 17.

77. Bowden, *Blues for Cannibals*, 180.

78. Guillermo Gómez Peña, *The New World Border* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), 244.