

Ofelia Zepeda's Poetics of Creation and Inhabitation

In this paper, I read poems by the Tohono O'odham scholar and poet, Ofelia Zepeda, arguing that they lyrically and linguistically establish the creation of desert lifeways as well as their inhabitation. I suggest that attuning ourselves to her poetics of creation and inhabitation give us a different way of understanding the desert: rather than as a disordered or lifeless space, the desert is vibrant with life. An important part of understanding this perspective is to rethink migration beyond the framework of the nation state: the Tohono O'odham and their traditional migrations through their lands precede and exceed the U.S.-Mexico border.

Using multiple languages, Zepeda insists that the Tohono O'odham people, although their lands are sundered by the U.S.-Mexico border, must continue to insist upon and lyrically express the importance of the freedom of movement (such as journeying from the desert to the ocean) in conjunction with claiming their traditional lands. She shows how the legalistic languages of the nation state cannot properly express or examine life in the desert. Working through her lyrics of creation and inhabitation, I show how rather than an empty desert devoid of life, Zepeda's poetry of the Sonoran Desert—her Tohono—is full of stories that live, breathe, walk, and speak through acts of creation and inhabitation.

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