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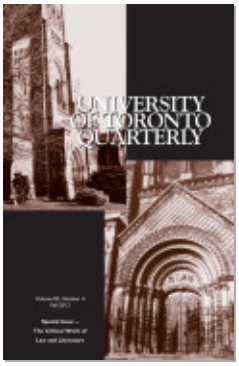

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In the Shadowlands of Sovereignty: The Politics of Enclosure in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*

ABSTRACT

In recent years, sovereignty has become a newly central yet also hotly contested term within political theory, as nation-state territorial jurisdiction is increasingly subordinated to other ambulatory and often piratical networks and flows of people, services, goods, and capital. This essay analyzes Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 film *Babel* for insight into the contemporary formations of sovereignty and its exceptional spaces, enquiring about that term's currency as a regulatory construct. In so doing, I critique the usual tendency to explain sovereignty – individual and juridical – through the logic of the border and enclosure. Drawing on Roberto Esposito's work on the immunitary paradigm, I look to *Babel* to develop an alternate mapping of community that, while refusing to culminate with Esposito's affirmative biopolitics, approaches individual and collective embodiment alike as sites of flux, porosity, messiness, and vulnerability.

KEYWORDS: sovereignty, biopolitics, citizenship, embodiment, aesthetics

> What remains constant is the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between self and other, the individual and the common.
>
> — Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas*

Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) begins with the sale of a rifle. This transaction, which occurs in rural Morocco, sets in motion a veritable pageant of international affairs in an era of national sovereignty in its twilight. When the gun becomes a plaything for the preadolescent sons of its new owner, a sheepherder named Abdullah, a stray bullet accidentally pierces the window of a tour bus and near-fatally wounds American Susan Jones, who has voyaged to Morocco on an elite tour with her husband, Richard, in an effort to repair their marriage after his apparent infidelity. The diplomatic crisis that ensues produces repercussions that are not only lethal but also geographically far-reaching, repercussions that *Babel* traces in its four networked narratives. While Jones is ultimately rescued and her life saved, the family members of the gun's Moroccan owner become

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disposable pawns in the power play of American dominance, as a massive police hunt leads to the killing of one youth. Correspondingly, the Japanese businessman who casually gave away the rifle on a hunting trip and his adolescent daughter, Chieko, are subjected to their own legal scrutiny, which aggravates the troubles of the hearing-disabled, emotionally disturbed Chieko. By no means last, the Jones's two children and their Mexican nanny Amelia undergo a protracted ordeal at the US-Mexico border, leading to Amelia's eventual deportation. Each of these storylines converges on the contemporary meanings and geopolitical formations of sovereignty – national and individual, political and economic – a term that has become ever more fluid, mobile, and under negotiation in recent political philosophy and practice alike.

This essay reads *Babel* as a cinematic mapping of the conflicting, uneven jurisdictions and reach of sovereignty in the face of its progressive evanescence. *Babel* imaginatively diagrams not only the countless exceptions and omissions but also the varied loopholes and privileges – as they attach to persons and places – that regulate sovereignty in the present era, shedding light on both the costumes and choreography of its often theatrical performance. This essay's study of the exclusions authorized by purified conceptions of both national and individual sovereignty will further illumine the stakes of recent legal and theoretical debates about that term, pointing to what those academic accounts of sovereignty variously capture and overlook. By mining the homology between national and individual sovereignty, *Babel* wrestles with how that construct oversees not only statecraft but also local possibilities for community. Moreover, *Babel*'s reflections on the politics of enclosure are mirrored in its formal and aesthetic features. Each of the film's four interlaced though stylistically segregated crucibles in sovereignty induces the audience's complicity with conflicting fears and desires that its storyline, however, eventually sanctions for indirectly authoring structures of geopolitical exclusion. While *Babel* thereby sustains a layered critique of American hegemony, it simultaneously encourages and subverts an array of neoimperial prejudices and yearnings in its audience – much as it sets the viewer up to enjoy experiences denied to certain of its characters.[1] Yet, above all, *Babel*'s indictment of the regnant logic of sovereignty is partner to its ruminations on the ontological status of embodiment. At the same time as it confronts the immunitary reactions that constitute political community, it contemplates those dimensions of corporeal vulnerability

1 Lauren Berlant enlists the notion of 'nonsovereign' commons, which captures much of what is at stake in *Babel*. Likewise, thank you to my amazing students in my Fall 2012 graduate seminar on 'Law and Literature' for many of this essay's insights into *Babel*. In addition, thank you to the Cornell Law and Humanities Workshop, Kevin Attell, Neil Saccamano, and the editors of this volume for invaluable advice on the essay.

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that resist redemption via an affirmative biopolitics. In sum, it is in the shadowlands of sovereignty – in the hazy frontier beyond the border and in defiance of the enclosure – that *Babel* glimpses community in all of its confusion and disorder.

Debates about sovereignty increasingly preoccupy law and literature scholarship. Almost since its inception in the 1970s, 'law and literature' as a field of criticism has met with misgivings. Skeptics have lampooned the field for being predicated on multiple kinds of wishful thinking, or on a series of intertwined fantasies and doubts about both the virtues and blind spots of those two disciplines. Within such a narrative of its genesis, literature is seen to compensate for the shortcomings of law, imbuing it with a disavowed humanism, and law is believed to lend to the study of literature real-world bearings and consequence. In such a climate, detractors have over and again sounded the field's death knell, both citing its inborn constraints and forecasting its certain obsolescence.

In recent years, however, law and literature scholarship has undergone something of a renaissance, with new intellectual developments and a new generation of scholars at once rekindling its sense of opportunity and expanding its scope. Theorists of law and literature have typically categorized scholarship that brings the two disciplines into conversation as falling into three different formations, whether as 'law *in* literature,' 'law *as* literature,' and 'legal and literary hermeneutics' or as the three strains of humanism, narrative, and hermeneutics. Yet much of the renewed energy in law and literature begs to be explained as exceeding those received categories. Whereas some emerging scholarship in the field productively departs from its typically European and American provenance to explore the status of law in the Global South and within the currents of globalization, other recent work has been fueled by theoretical shifts and advances in literary study. In particular, literary criticism and theory has undertaken what some term a 'political turn' (linked to the corresponding 'ethical turn'), attributable in part to a heightened investment in overtly political constructs and debates, inspired, for instance, by the work of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler, to name merely a few. Literary study has thus deepened its long-standing dialogue with political theory, causing pivotal terms within political thought to migrate into literary analysis and focus its concerns accordingly. Along with an investment in notions such as democracy, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, and human rights, 'sovereignty' is one such analytic that has increasingly come to preoccupy the law and literature community.[2] And while the foregoing political vocabularies can carry precise legal referents and implications, they further open up law and literature scholarship to

2 Indeed, one prominent theorist recently surmised to me that *sovereignty* has become the most hotly contested political term of late. Thank you to Jane Bennett for such an insight.

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foundational questions about the origins and justifications of law, about law's constitutive limits, and about the recent evolution of transnational legal orders.

Much of the recent purchase of sovereignty can be explained as a by-product of real-world changes in the global legal order. For our purposes, the growing attention to sovereignty responds to a continuum of alterations in the geopolitical architecture of international law in the post-Westphalian era.[3] The thrust of many such theorizations of sovereignty has been to better grasp the unprecedented technologies and cartographies through which extralegal regimes of power are newly carving up and administering both geographical space and other deterritorialized zones and networks of political, legal, and economic belonging. To exist in a post-Westphalian world is to witness the waning of the nation-state and its formal legal domain, as state influences are ever more subordinated to agonistic forces. Above all, the neo-liberal economic order progressively overrides the interests of the state, driving the latter's policies and mortgaging them to its superior authority. This burgeoning province and sway of the financial sector has entailed multiform effects, albeit assuming varying guises based on region and context. So long as the market exists in tension with politics and law, its heightened pre-eminence guarantees that it will intermittently eclipse those forces.

For some theorists, in turn, the properties historically tied to nation-state sovereignty are being progressively transferred to other organizations and energies, whether the market or other supranational registers of loyalty.[4] This gradual supplanting of national sovereignty requires that we therefore speak of multiple sovereignties that coexist, exerting a surplus of demands that at times coalesce and at others diverge and compete. For Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, this 'palimpsest of contested sovereignties, codes, and jurisdictions' has contributed to a blurring of distinctions between the legal and illegal, spawning 'counterfeit' and 'outlaw' cultures nonetheless 'infused with the spirit of law' (9, 16, 19). For the Comaroffs, these opposing regimes of sovereignty especially proliferate within the post-colonial state, a reality they attribute to the afterlives of empire. Other theorists argue that the very construct of sovereignty has become outmoded. This, for instance, is one implication of Michel Foucault's study of biopower, the inception of which for him marks a conversion from sovereignty to biopolitics and governance (see Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*). For

3 Theorists typically correlate a collection of attributes in an effort to stipulate the term's distinctive properties. In general, they define sovereignty in terms of supremacy, perpetuity, decisionism, absoluteness and completeness, non-transferability, and specified jurisdiction.

4 Wendy Brown also emphasizes how religious channels of belonging have come to supersede the national. See her *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*.

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Foucault and those indebted to his thought, sovereignty thus offers a periodizing term that signals the transition from one political mode to the next. To such ends, we might ask whether recent talk of sovereignty in part reflects a quest for a replacement paradigm better geared to fill the explanatory vacuum left in the wake of nation-state legal sovereignty's real-world demise as well as descriptive obsolescence.

In whatever case, there is little question that sovereignty has become newly deracinated and detached from its usual territorial boundaries and referents. On the one hand, global capital's many tributaries refuse to obey the geographical barriers that otherwise secure nation-state jurisdiction. Whether involving movements of people, commodities, ideas, or organizations, such traffic roves in defiance of the nation's borders and through non-spatial channels that surpass them. Overall, these circuitous pathways render definitions of national sovereignty that affix it to territorial enclosure increasingly unhelpful and passé.[5] It is consequently ever the case that sovereignty must be understood as plural – meaning that any given geographical space is comprised of several discontinuous sovereignties that intersect, bifurcate, and overlap one another, vying for jurisdiction and authority. In addition, these contested orders of legitimacy instate zones or enclaves of asylum, exception, and immunity, as Keller Easterling studies in *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerade*. For Easterling, controlled locales like the cruise ship, the port city, and the offshore site establish 'special pirate space[s] with [their] own special temporary amnesties' that further act as 'the locus of global anxieties about security' (20, 101), a notion that will become pertinent to González Iñárritu's *Babel*.

Precisely this erosion of national sovereignty – whether in the abstract or by way of the sorts of exceptions that Easterling identifies – has incited a series of defensive, or we might say 'immunitary,' measures. For Wendy Brown, such is the contradictory role played by the many 'walls' and physical blockades that have of late been erected around the world. As Brown argues in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, these fences and other physical barriers work to symbolically and psychically fortify national sovereignty in the midst of its dissipation. In so doing, these structures assuage fears of national decline by staging 'a spectacle of [the state's] rectitude and might,' working to 'resurrect the imagined space and people of the nation that sovereignty would contain and protect' (104). Within Brown's analysis, it is paradoxical but far from surprising that such artificial yet iconic enclosures would multiply precisely when the state's authority and legitimacy have come under heightened siege, causing such

5 It is worth noting here that legal and other historians increasingly dispute the notion that sovereignty was ever clearly linked to well-delineated geographical signposts and barriers. See Benton.

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architectural cordons to function as defensive mechanisms that quell and manage an impending crisis. To be sure, Brown's argument about geographical boundaries can be extended to a range of similarly reactionary phenomena that establish legal, economic, physical, and other enclosures. And it is axiomatic that such obstructions almost uniformly work to supervise, if not outright prevent, the migrations of peoples, which is why for many theorists predatory nationalisms are a direct by-product of state sovereignty's looming irrelevance (see Appadurai).

Brown further presents her study of the bulwarked state as divulging what she describes as the 'theological remainders' that haunt all expressions of sovereignty (26). Indeed, any attempt to excavate the theoretical foundations of recent work on sovereignty must confront those discussions' frequently Schmittian nuances, as they perhaps most integrally inform Agamben's influential thought. While a more complete account of sovereignty's political-theological genealogy would look to Jean Bodin, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Thomas Hobbes, let me focus on Carl Schmitt. Schmitt's classic *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* critiques proceduralist, 'scientific,' and 'economic-technical' explanations of constitutional democracy that rely on what Schmitt deems overly tidy, sterile accounts of political decision-making (65). From a contemporary vantage, there are hence key parallels between Schmitt's complaints and those that motivate many appraisals of the Habermasian public sphere (see Connolly; Warner). For Schmitt, as for Jürgen Habermas's critics, models of politics that exclusively prize rational deliberation fail to grasp core dimensions of politics, which for Schmitt inhere in their 'theological' qualities. Although for Schmitt all political terms of art are at base secularized constructs, his key concern is that modernity's disenchanting logic has divested political existence of certain vital energies – which he associates with the 'miracle,' 'intense passion,' and 'the power of real life' (36, 15).

Schmitt therefore treats sovereignty as the vector for restoring to politics those qualities that modernity has quarantined and purged. For Schmitt, the defining feature of sovereignty is the power to decree the 'exception' to law, yet that radically singular 'decision' equally reinforces the embedding normative-juridical order. It is this idea that Agamben popularizes and enlarges when he, too, explains sovereignty in terms of the suspension of law and the state of emergency. Agamben's thought has, of late, been widely en vogue and, moreover, widely criticized, perhaps most persuasively on the same grounds that have promoted it – namely, that his formulation of the category of the 'state of exception' applies so sweepingly as to forfeit whatever critical-explanatory precision it might yield. Above all, Agamben understands the core history of Western politics in terms of the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion. This split is for him paradigmatically crystallized in the separation between 'bare life' and

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'political existence' (a vocabulary acquired from Hannah Arendt), yet for Agamben '[o]ne of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics ... is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside from what is outside' (131). This perpetual slippage between citizen and outcast creates 'zones of indistinction' that have become the norm rather than the exception, rendering what he labels 'the camp' the quintessential space of modernity, with the properties of the camp increasingly characterizing other spaces. Agamben's thought will prove especially instructive for interpreting *Babel* in that he (like Brown) explains all political community as generated by the demarcation between inside and outside and the apportioning of rights accordingly – in other words, by the politics of the border and the community's self-enclosure.

Yet while Agamben's definition of sovereignty (along with Arendt's and Foucault's) may hinge upon the category of life, its status within his thought is also where the limits of his thought emerge. For while 'bare life' for Agamben is the focal point around which all matrices of sovereign power converge, that site is more of a surface or object on which sovereignty's operations play out. Biological life is, in other words, more of an index for sovereign power, or a scheme for decoding the machinery through which populations are managed, kept docile and efficient, rather than something Agamben submits to analysis on its own terms. The phenomenality and ontology of life, in turn, fall outside the scope of his inquiry. It is thus fair to say that the life encircled within theories of biopolitics (whether for Foucault or for Agamben's merging of Schmitt with Foucault) is conspicuously depleted of those very energies that Schmitt in his early thought sought to revive and retrieve. In this sense, Agamben's redeployment of Schmitt's sovereign exception, a concept Agamben intentionally deflates, misses crucial work that it performs – namely, as a placeholder for and means of verifying those perceptional faculties that might offer a lever of resistance to the instrumentalizing, mechanistic, neo-liberal logic that, for Foucault, inaugurates biopolitics in the first place. This is by no means to suggest that Schmitt's peculiar species of vitalism should not give us great pause. To the contrary, his aim to reanimate the theological dimensions of politics is partner to a belief that they will directly solidify and replenish the sort of national imaginary that licenses Brown's borders and other apparatuses of exclusion. Indeed, these currents within Schmitt's thought are further what have rendered it a balm for neo-conservatism and, as such, contributed to his long disfavour.

That said, we might nonetheless ask whether such vitalism can be reconstellated to instead cast political community as unbounded and multiple, rather than unified, self-identical, and enclosed. Precisely that is a central agenda of Roberto Esposito's recent contributions to biopolitics. Esposito sets out to track the resilience of the organic metaphor of the body politic, examining how it has regulated dominant conceptions of politics

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and, in particular, engendered the immunitary paradigm, a rubric he enlists to decipher the 'superimposition between therapeutic practice and political order' that we might initially ascribe to Foucault (*Immunitas* 140). Esposito understands immunization as the 'symbolic and material linchpin around which our social systems rotate,' or, in other words, the distinguishing attribute of modernity (*Immunitas* 2). For Esposito, the impulse to self-preservation is 'the presupposition of all other political categories,' including sovereignty, and cannot be wholly surmounted or eliminated (*Bíos* 9). In this respect, it is endemic to all instantiations of community, which must incorporate and thereby inoculate themselves against those pathogens seen to menace them, although that dynamic is also productive. As Esposito puts it, 'In order to "recharge" itself, life constantly needs what threatens it – a block, an obstacle, a bottleneck – because the constitution and the function of its immune system requires an "ill" to activate the alarm' (*Immunitas* 90). In effect, Esposito offers a different explanation from Agamben's of the continual vacillation between internal and external that facilitates politics, capturing how community always verges on being self-purifying or extremist.

But Esposito's core projects vis-à-vis the immunitary paradigm are twofold. First, for Esposito the immunitary impulse is what renders biopolitics at perpetual risk of slipping into thanatopolitics, as occurred under German fascism. This potential slippage illustrates how processes of immunization are in persistent jeopardy of becoming lethal and justifying 'an excess of preservation' (*Immunitas* 143) or reactions that are predatory or purgative. Second, Esposito crafts a divergent scheme of immunization that recalibrates how it 'implicates and stimulates the common' (*Immunitas* 18). Here, Esposito draws in particular on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea of the 'flesh' (and, in *Bíos*, on Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze) to reconceive community not in terms of the contained, homogeneous, and unified (assumptions that he links to the 'body,' a term he strategically jettisons) but instead as plural, porous, and continually exteriorizing. Along the way, Esposito develops a strikingly different account of why 'life' is central to politics – and through an explanatory prism that does not flatten or mute the density or phenomenality of visceral existence. Rather, Esposito directs us to how irreducible multiplicity and reciprocal contamination might re-imbue politics with what he calls 'the potentiality [*potenza*] of life's becoming' (see *Bíos* 194).

Esposito's affirmative biopolitics, as such, elucidates how the category of life might be recast not as immunitary or defensive but rather in terms of fecund intensities that are poised to explode sterile, insular accounts of individual and national sovereignty alike. However, as we will see, González Iñárritu's *Babel* will also put pressure on Esposito's remapping of the biological-political. Just as Agamben's notion of the exception is overly broad and imprecise, Esposito's immunity paradigm is so capacious

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as to squander its own explanatory profit, with its sheer scope and range of application detracting from its diagnostic accuracy. But, most important, we must ask whether Esposito's appeal to the 'flesh' is not an overly redemptive solution, one that minimizes the relentless confusion and brutal haplessness of politics, which *Babel* will instead demand that we consider. Within Esposito's thought, his effort to refashion 'the norm' to entail successive individuation bypasses those sociopolitical realities that cannot be recuperated as possibility-laden and hence salvific. If Esposito advances a brand of vitalism, then we must ask whether his thought does not marshal its own idealism that dangerously sanitizes both embodied life and political existence of all messiness and brokenness that cannot be reclaimed as productive or affirmative. In other words, Esposito is too quick to transmute chaos and pandemonium into purely enabling multiplicity, with the effect of silencing those aspects of embodied existence that cannot be thus reconciled. It is in contravention of such an impulse that *Babel* instead broods over thorny, arbitrary realities – social and geopolitical – that resist Esposito's brand of refurbishment and recovery.

Babel's own reach has been global. The third in a triptych including *Amores Perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003) by director Alejandro González Iñárritu, it was awarded the Best Director prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 and was thereafter nominated for seven Academy Awards, winning for Best Original Score. González Iñárritu himself describes *Babel* as being about failures of communication – or 'the fact that nobody's listening' – on both a human interpersonal and a political-institutional level (qtd. in Swietek). This syndrome is one that González Iñárritu also attributes to 'borders,' both those internal to the individual and those that separate nation-states (qtd. in Philbin).

Babel is made up of four networked narratives that collectively span the globe. While its storyline gradually discloses the intersections between its threads, it equally stages the vast distances – geographical, economic, and legal-political – that divide its characters. As in other classic mosaic narratives, *Babel* thus investigates the failed crossing of boundaries, which it attributes to both territorial confinements and other political and economic stratifications. It dramatizes this sense of simultaneous interconnection and separation through not only its plot but also its aesthetic and other cinematic devices. In essence, *Babel*'s formal and stylistic features – from its cinematography to its editing and music – enact impediments to global communication and connectedness, with the contradictions and foreclosures of sovereignty playing out in its very aesthetic. Its disparate episodes refuse to congeal or mesh, mirroring much broader structures that impede and interrupt geopolitical solidarity.

Much of the film's momentum is achieved through visual juxtapositions that imply simultaneous commonality and divergence, with the camera in match cuts moving from one nearly identical image to another as it shifts

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between locations and threads. Yet, most strikingly, each storyline is informed by a palpably different pacing and visual style, reinforcing the sense of their seclusion. Most immediately, the visual and regional backdrops to each segment engender their different affective textures. In frequent long takes, the camera broods over geography and architecture, rural and urban, redoubling the plot developments within a given thread by reflecting their properties in the landscape. Whereas the footage shot in Tokyo and Mexico depicts teeming crowds and overwhelming traffic, the scenery in Morocco is thinly populated, with the camera surveying the barren, near-desert countryside that frames the dramatic action. In Morocco, wide-angle pans traverse panoramic, treeless vistas of rolling hills and intermittently jutting rocks. In all four plot lines, the physical environment that enfolds González Iñárritu's characters equally magnifies and compounds their crises. Whereas the Jones parents' ordeal is aggravated by feelings of impotence on civilization's outskirts, for the hearing-disabled Chieko the swirling mass of technologized humanity that engulfs her makes a mockery of her sensory isolation.

This general aura of remoteness and removal is both troped and fostered by González Iñárritu's manoeuvring of the camera. Much of the diegesis is composed of long takes (rather than rapid editing that quickly cuts from one shot to the next), elongating its pacing to create a tone of unhurried, almost meditative observation. Relatedly, many interactions between characters are filmed from afar, augmenting that quality of detached spectatorship. This distancing of the camera denies the audience intimacy or proximity with those characters, a technique that again echoes broader kinds of geopolitical disconnection while permitting the viewer's illusion of indifference. The removed psychic space of the camera thwarts a certain level of engagement even while it indicts that limited scope, in effect chastening the very disinterest on the part of the viewer that it encourages. Likewise, whereas a minimalistic, sparse aesthetic mutes many scenes' emotional tenor, in others González Iñárritu's visual effects produce the opposite quality. For instance, when Susan Jones (Cate Blanchett) is rushed through the inaccessible Moroccan village of Tazarine to have her wound provisionally sutured, the camera pans a crowd of villagers with such speed that their bodies blur together, escalating the atmosphere of panic while reproaching the colonial gaze that elides those lives.

Beyond its visual elements, *Babel* manipulates sound in ways that further its commentary on geopolitics. Most immediately, its very title foregrounds the significance of language as an originary site of difference, problematizing how it both facilitates and encumbers communication. Indeed, the film's dialogue is replete with a surfeit of competing languages, which together overtake English. In a sense, *Babel*'s very script subverts the status of English as the lingua franca of international diplomacy and law. Its subordination to other languages further induces linguistic alienation

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and vertigo in González Iñárritu's primarily Hollywood audiences, decentring that perspective even while other of the film's features accentuate and even congratulate it. For example, *Babel*'s storyline begins in remote Morocco, and it is a full nine minutes into the film before English appears. Precisely this time lag both simulates and queries cultural, temporal, and geographical displacement, at once punishing and rewarding Western self-reference. Of course, this linguistic self-consciousness further prompts questions about how the politicization of language can consolidate xenophobic nationalisms, underlining its role in codifying sovereignties as it polices the terrain between inclusion and exclusion. This seems to be at least one reality emblematized in Chieko's hearing impairment, which exiles her from linguistic community entirely.

In addition, the shift from one geographical locale to the next is frequently announced with extradiegetic music. When the dramatic action migrates south of the US-Mexico border to Tijuana, traditional Mexican dance band music signals that transition. Foreshadowing the festivities that await, this music's energetic exuberance offsets the sterile, regimented nature of daily life in the United States. In contrast, haunting, lyrical, single-noted reed instrument or guitar music accompanies much of the action set in Morocco, with austere, plaintive melodies echoing both the pastoral surroundings and the hard poverty of the film's Moroccan characters. While we might dismiss this reliance on auditory coding for exoticizing undercurrents, *Babel*'s sheer auditory variety segregates the episodes and amplifies the perception of their separateness. Precisely this tactic mirrors analogous barriers to global solidarity, enacting what we might conceive of as an aesthetic apartheid. *Babel*'s experiment with sound thus places into high relief the architecture of sovereignty as containment, isolation, and enclosure, with the aesthetic compartmentalization of its four episodes reinforcing the vast gulfs dividing the related characters' social, economic, and political circumstances.

By no means last, the other distinctive feature of *Babel*'s form involves its relationship to temporality, as each segment unfolds at its own velocity. As one might expect, much of the action in Morocco assumes a languorous, contemplative pace; as the camera slowly canvasses broad expanses of land, this technique elongates time. This protracted duration assumedly simulates the indefinite quality of Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan's ordeal, as her life hangs in the balance. However, such a portrait of the ahistorical, arrested temporality of Moroccan culture further marshals neo-colonial prejudices. Regardless, the protraction of these sequences contrasts conspicuously with the rapidity and intensity of the action located in Japan. In those scenes, the camera immerses its vision in densely populated, vertiginous cityscapes while cutting from one shot to the next with abruptness and haste, accelerating the film's pacing, seemingly to underscore Tokyo's centrality as a civilizational hub.

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But the most troubling aspect of the film's distortions of time involves the varying degrees of space allotted to each segment, as well as the proportion of real time that elapses therein relative to what that segment occupies within the film's total duration. Not surprisingly, the plights of Susan and Richard, and later of the Jones children as they roam the US-Mexico borderlands, consume the largest spans of cinematic time – and, by extension, most of the audience's attention. Moreover, the shooting of Susan and the arrival of the rescue helicopter bookend the other developments, thereby contextualizing them. While the diegesis does not obey chronology but rather disrupts the linearity of the events leading up to and following Susan's injury, her trial is nonetheless what overarches and, as such, organizes the other threads. The other casualties in the film – the killing of the young Moroccan Ahmed (Said Tarchani), the deportation of Amelia (Adriana Barraza), and the disappearance of Santiago (Gael García Bernal) – are, as a consequence, sidelined and downplayed in importance. In this way, *Babel*'s basic storyline itself simultaneously performs and arraigns European American self-reference and myopia.

Even more significantly, whatever closure the film proffers revolves around the well-being of the Jones family. Susan's life is saved, the children are delivered from their risky odyssey to Mexico and near-fatal abandonment in the desert, and the integral, sacrosanct space of American domestic harmony is restored. Even the narrative in Tokyo metes out a degree of finality, given that the suicide of Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) is averted and she reconciles with her father. However, the fates of those characters who hail from the Global South are virtually forgotten. While Amelia is deposited into the arms of her son Luis, she is deprived of her entire life in Southern California, with all of her possessions symbolically remaining behind. The last shot of Santiago observes his car careening down a potholed road in the depopulated wasteland of the border. And the destitute Moroccan family is last witnessed as Abdullah (Mustapha Rachidi) sobs in grief, pieta-like cradling his one dead son, while his other son, Yussef (Boubker Ai El Caid), hands himself over to the authorities. By refusing these characters even faint restitution, *Babel* invites its audience to disclaim their relevance, at the same time as it overtly rebukes that impulse. Insofar as the reconstitution of the American family yields adequate resolution for *Babel*'s viewers, these omissions, here again, simultaneously enact and thereby impugn blinkered, neo-imperial neglect. Yet while *Babel* may court its viewers' narcissism, the fates of its characters equally excoriate that self-reference, subverting whatever sentimentalized, triumphalist expectations about neo-imperial pre-eminence its audience may bring to the film.

Beyond *Babel*'s formal features, its overarching storyline and each thread in that mosaic directly contend with the realities of nation-state sovereignty in flux and crisis. The separate vignettes along with their intersections almost beg to be read as a parable for foreign affairs. It is not

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accidental that the gun that nearly kills Susan Jones is, in a now-cyclical story, a cavalier neo-imperial bequest that unleashes a bout of brutal hazing on the 'Third World.' The superficial generosity of Yasujiro (Koji Yakusho), who is depicted as unable to recall his former hunting guide's name, wreaks havoc for *Babel*'s Moroccan characters, and the film underscores the utter haplessness of those developments. The shooting is initially believed to be a terrorist attack, and the film documents how that rhetoric spirals out of control, inciting an outsized diplomatic crisis. Moreover, as Yasujiro is absolved of accountability for the fiasco, his amnesty signals how financial licence disburses an array of other immunities. Although the law officers in Japan question him, their sole object is to trace the pathways that expedited the gun's movements, rather than to prosecute its wealthy legal owner. *Babel* further materializes these immunities in physical space, for Yasujiro and Chieko in the luxury condominium they inhabit high above Tokyo, directly below the penthouse. Its elevation provides a bird's-eye view of the city, indexing its inhabitants' relative privilege and other legal-fiscal defences. In addition, those quarters are both elegantly furnished and meticulously, almost antiseptically maintained, as is conveyed in the frequent shots of shoes being removed in the foyer – another image that might also seem to gratify European American stereotypes.

A similarly compulsive need for hygienic self-discipline is an insignia of American privilege, and let me now turn to analyse each of *Babel*'s storylines independently. The implication is that Susan and Richard have journeyed to Morocco to rekindle their marriage after both his philandering and a loss in childbirth. Richard's betrayal itself carries allegorical resonances. Insofar as Richard's adventuring is the root cause of domestic discord, its repercussions are devastating at home and abroad. One interpretation of *Babel*'s geopolitical commentary, then, would be that it follows the sacrifices and wounds endured as the United States attempts to restore sanctity to the homeland after its integrity has been desecrated – and notably due to internal misconduct. However, the further suggestion is that Susan's anxieties about sex and neurotic need for cleanliness – or need to overly aggressively police her body's borders – have incited Richard's infidelity. Right before the shooting, Susan exhibits near-paranoid apprehension about germs and contamination while at a roadside café. She obsessively, frantically applies hand sanitizer and furiously reprimands Richard for his willingness to consume the local ice, violently dashing it from his glass to the ground. Susan and her phobias thus stand in for American exceptionalism and entitlement writ large, symptomatizing the enabling logic that supports those ideologies. Along with her generic name, the casting of the nearly albino-blond Cate Blanchett further renders Susan an icon of American whiteness and, by extension, racialized conceptions of national identity. Here, I should note that *Babel* is not without troubling

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undercurrents related to gender, as each of its threads reifies geopolitical crises in sovereignty by enacting them on the bodies of its female characters. Indeed, even Susan's mishap in Morocco is ultimately a crucible in American manhood, with the bulk of the ensuing action following Richard's impotence to rectify the situation.

In turn, it is through Susan's ordeal that *Babel* offers an imaginative portrait of the garb and choreography of sovereignty in its present-day performance. In Morocco, the camera is preoccupied with the features of Richard and Susan's tour bus and its movements, before and after that enclosed space is punctured by the violating bullet. The Joneses and other travellers are safely ensconced in the roving sovereignty of the bus, with its pristine, artificially purified environment, as is emphasized through the passengers' complaints about air conditioning. Akin to the tourist ship, the bus exemplifies what Easterling calls a 'special pirate space with its own special temporary amnesties' 'able to slip through jurisdictions and political boundaries ... to gain both access and immunity' (20, 32). The bus, in other words, functions as a floating zone of sovereignty, with its facade of security and impermeability offering a prophylactic against its surroundings. While *Babel* flags the neo-colonial dynamics of that mobility through the tourists' belligerence and selfishness, this travelling enclave of exemption provides a fitting emblem for sovereignty in its twilight. The bus's jurisdiction is ambulatory and itinerant, just as sovereignty is progressively detached from precise geographical referents. Paradoxically, its sheer nomadism buffers it against the territory it circumnavigates, although while sowing confusion and chaos in its wake. Moreover, the tourists are united not by nationality (the dialogue plays up their language barriers) but rather by fortune, just as the untrammelled circulation of economic sovereignties instates parallel matrices of exception.

Yet above all it is Susan's American citizenship that cancels and subordinates all other interests to her own. The struggle to save her life and avenge the underlying violation of the symbolic American body politic throws an entire region into turmoil. Even the tourists are hostage to that emergency as they await the Red Cross helicopter, confined to the suffocating interior of the bus with its limited fuel and stale air. In turn, *Babel* is also an imaginative study of the imbalances and discontinuities in sovereignty created by American dominance, which render US citizenship an arrant trump card that attaches to American bodies and overrules all competing classes and suits. Whereas the narrative traversing the US-Mexico border contemplates how that liminal no man's land leads to suspensions of rights, the Morocco storyline dramatizes how deterritorialized American sovereignty – embodied in the iconic whiteness and phobic self-enclosure of Susan – can annul sovereignties even within rival national jurisdictions. Much as Susan's injury is the pivot for all of *Babel*'s action, her centrality not only stages American self-reference but also

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suggests how legal rights and protections are haphazardly stratified globally. The events precipitated by the shooting reveal certain lives to be less valuable than others, making the whole incident a case study in chronic exceptions to the universality of rights. *Babel*'s Moroccan characters become wholly expendable when labelled mere suspects, with the murder of young Ahmed a tax to appease American hegemony. Of course, the post-9/11 rhetoric of terror exacerbates these disparities, and Susan's privileges are likewise fortified by her alliance with the other migratory sovereignty that exerts dominion in that episode – namely, the tourist industry with its powerful fiscal ties and pirate colonies.

At the same time as Susan's trial spawns a state of emergency that reduces certain lives to political inconsequence, it illustrates the immunitary logic that, for Esposito, is endemic to sovereignty. Susan's hyperactive monitoring of her and Richard's dietary intake and exposure manifests a desire to quarantine and inoculate them against contagion and contamination, with the biological allegorizing the political. However, the surgery that prolongs her life most fully elucidates the structure of immunization. This surgery requires Susan to submit to the penetration of her skin by a foreign object, with all the risks of infection and toxicity that the needle sanitized over a lighter flame forebodes. To preserve her existence, Susan must consent to a type of bodily adulteration and invasion – in a procedure that temporarily restores her corporeal integrity but without halting her internal bleeding. Ironically, then, Susan must undergo a violation analogous to the one first wrought by the bullet in order to mitigate its after-effects. With the needle at once signifying the threat of Otherness and an antidote to that scourge, Susan must incorporate it into her own body to neutralize those hazards and boost her natural defences.

But while Susan's surgery may open up the patterns of immunization intrinsic to sovereignty, the scene directly before the helicopter's arrival adumbrates a contrasting order of community instead extending from an embrace of corporeal vulnerability and messiness. After the surgery, and after the opium-induced daze administered by an elderly Moroccan woman overseeing her, Susan and Richard experience what is held up as reconciliation. This reunion by no means compensates for the fact that their marital drama occurs against the backdrop of Moroccan poverty and exacts devastating tolls from that population. Nonetheless, the events that trigger their rapprochement are revealing. As Susan awakens from her stupor, she confesses to Richard that she has soiled herself: 'I peed my pants. I couldn't hold it in. I peed. I'm gonna pee again.' Reduced to almost childlike expression, Susan solicits her estranged husband's help so that she can urinate in a pan. This sequence, as such, provides a snapshot of Susan – until now, a figure for American xenophobia and insularity – in a condition of profound helplessness, reduced to a state of bare survival and total dependence on others to carry out the most

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rudimentary, shame-inspiring of bodily functions. This act of eliminating waste exhibits its own immunitary logic, being vital to the body's homeostasis by purifying it of toxins and other waste. However, the scene also preserves an ambivalence, given that Richard's aid in performing this regulatory function quickly turns erotic. Indeed, the footage explicitly creates a slippage between these dual registers of intimacy, with the camera lingering over Susan's underwear pulled tight over her clenched thighs, her cries that could elsewhere be mistaken for pleasure, and, in particular, the passion and lack of inhibition with which she and Richard kiss as he suspends her in a position of radical exposure.

As such, even while their rekindled romance refortifies the sanctity of American domestic space (and by extension national sovereignty), it simultaneously engenders a markedly different anatomy of the biological-political. As Esposito suggests, immunization posits a body that is self-contained, unitary, defensive, and authored by a regime of property rights. In contrast, the exchange between Susan and Richard is animated by a very different economy of the corporeal. Their renewed affection entails the breaking down of boundaries, self-relinquishment, and intermixing. Esposito construes this distinction in terms of that between the body and the 'flesh,' the latter of which he deciphers as a font of fluidity, porosity, and openness. As Esposito puts it:

> What the flesh scatters and opens, the body unifies and closes. What the body identifies, the flesh alters. If flesh expropriates, the body appropriates. We might say that the body is to *immunitas* as flesh is to *communitas*. (*Immunitas* 74)

However, this exchange between Richard and Susan also emanates from an intimacy grounded in human messiness – a messiness constitutive of both embodiment and community – that cannot be tidily recuperated by way of an affirmative biopolitics and that Esposito's thought as a consequence fails to fully capture. It is this messiness that the camera broods over in its protracted observation of the scene, with the diegesis's acoustic immersion in the throes of Susan's agony *cum* pleasure amplifying such recognitions. In turn, we might say that *Babel* vivifies and enacts the body's vulnerability as a site of belonging and being. Harnessing the viewer's corporeal faculties of engagement, *Babel* is aesthetically absorbed with the profound disorderliness of embodied community, through its snapshot of Susan's woundedness unfolding a phenomenology or somatics of embodied existence.

While the action in Morocco tracks how American citizenship and its migratory sovereignty trumps other interests, the events that implicate the Jones children, Mike (Nathan Gamble) and Debbie (Elle Fanning), volunteer their own cautionary tale. Ironically, precisely the phobic anxieties

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about overexposure for which Susan is a spokesperson are the root causes of the mishaps at the US-Mexico border that almost kill her children. When the Joneses are detained in Morocco, their nanny, Amelia, is forced to choose between attending her son's wedding south of the border and abiding by Richard's abrupt, condescendingly delivered orders to remain in San Diego. In a bargain that nearly proves fatal, Amelia opts to take the children along, expecting to return home that night. This decision and the ensuing odyssey, here again, simultaneously court and censure European American narcissism. Foreshadowing the alleged perils that await, the diegesis fosters sympathetic identification with and trepidation over the kids' fates, seemingly verifying the fears that sanction the rigid protection of national boundaries. Yet by at once admonishing those same worries, *Babel* also accentuates the ambiguities and confusion that haunt these shadowlands at the outskirts of national sovereignty. Multiple incidents on the characters' journey presage risk, fuelling the action's rising momentum while equally acknowledging and undercutting derogatory stereotypes about Mexican life and culture. Amelia and the kids are escorted to the wedding by her rash, volatile nephew Santiago, who pokes fun at their qualms.[6] For instance, as they cross the border, young Mike informs Santiago, 'My mom told me that Mexico is really dangerous,' to which he mirthfully replies, 'Yeah, it's full of Mexicans!' Thereafter, Santiago fires a gun into the air during the after-party, while Amelia briefly abandons the kids for an amorous liaison. But, most of all, Santiago is visibly drunk on the return trip, which culminates in a high-speed car chase through the barren frontier of the borderland. In effect, by corroborating the paranoia that motors the dramatic intensity of this storyline, *Babel* fatalistically elicits and thereby chastens the reactionary desires for security and surveillance that, in the end, warrant Amelia's extradition.

These motifs of risk and surveillance are further troped through González Iñárritu's visual effects. High-angle camera shots track the progress of Santiago's car on its journey to the wedding. Even while Mexican dance music cultivates a festive atmosphere, the camera's all-encompassing overhead gaze enacts a type of observation that renders the audience complicit with its removed yet suspicious vantage. This monitoring of the car's progress contrasts both its movements and its juridical status with the tour bus. By trailing these vehicles that equally ferry privileged Americans across the Global South, *Babel* magnifies the disparate circumstances under which those characters gain entry to national spaces. Although one experiences uninhibited access, the other's passage is aggressively curtailed. While the bus is exempt from the restrictions that usually regulate migrations through sovereign territories, the Mexican

6 Indeed, in discussing the film, González Iñárritu himself states that '[s]tereotyping cultures – that's what's spoiling the world' (qtd. in Swietek).

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Santiago's car is afforded no such ease. Likewise, whereas the tour bus offers immunological armour for its elite passengers (although that shell is breached), Santiago's car inspires invasive scrutiny. These distinctions, no doubt, correlate with the varying legal protections afforded their passengers. Much as the tour bus offers a mobile, deterritorialized zone of supralegal privilege, it secures for its passengers amnesties and exemptions. Near oppositely, Santiago's car traps its travellers within an inverse locus of extralegality resembling a type of Agambenian state of exception. Their presence in the car deprives them of and overrides their rights, even as they are fully inscribed within the surrounding juridical order, with their fates directly validating it as the norm. Precisely the liminal status of the car is what suspends the distinction between the opposing categories of citizen and alien. In turn, its mobile exceptionality begs to be refracted through the explanatory prism of Agamben's notion of the camp, which he describes as a 'dislocating localization [that] is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living' and that increasingly 'metamorphoses into the *zones d'attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities' (175). Here, it is not surprising that the sequence concludes as Santiago's car disappears into those thresholds of sovereignty.

One especially haunting sequence fuels the mounting suspense in this thread. Before the wedding, Mike and Debbie are included in a farmyard game with local children wherein the goal is to catch and restrain live chickens, which unbeknownst to the kids will be slaughtered for the feast. They gleefully participate, only to witness the killing of a chicken that Debbie has captured with pride. Santiago spins the chicken by its neck, ripping off its head, with a graphic shot of blood spurting from it as Mike watches in horror. Abruptly afterward, the diegesis cuts to Susan directly following her injury, with blood visibly flowing from her neck in an analogous open wound. This parallel is multiply significant. In both instances, children are partner to, if not responsible for, the underlying violence, in a nexus that serves to foreclose the possibility of innocent bystandership or unwitting participation – a stance that, as I have suggested, *Babel* also strategically denies the viewer. But, above all, this equivalence probes the ontological status of life in its sheer vulnerability, which it refuses to neatly conflate with its politicization. By juxtaposing the chicken's expendability with the overblown response to Susan's injury, *Babel* highlights the imbalances that subtend the economic and political valuation of life. Yet in so doing, it further elaborates what I have called an alternate anatomy of embodied community, one that resists being *either* collapsed into biological life *or* reduced to the modulations of power *or* transformed into a redemptive biopolitics. This imaginary exercise, on one level, recasts embodiment in ways that thwart the regnant architecture of sovereignty, with its myths of unity, identity, isolation, and self-enclosure. Yet on another level, *Babel* lingers over the disarming messiness and sheer

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haplessness of all embodied existence, resisting the impulse to either idealize or cover over that condition of disunity and fracture.

Nevertheless, the burgeoning anxiety aroused by the action in Tijuana is proven prescient and, arguably, legitimate by the developments that unfold on the foiled return trip to the United States. At a routine border stop, the hotheaded Santiago becomes belligerent and, after a brief altercation, flees. Whereas Susan's gunshot wound provides the axis for the film's overarching storyline, the border crossing is the turning point in this segment. Throughout, the camera fixates on fences and other barriers. On the journey south, it pans dividing walls that barricade a highway on the nether side of the border, in a hand-held shot filmed from a moving vehicle embedded within sequential images of flags, graffiti, street vendors, Catholic iconography, and other insignia of Mexican cultural nationalism.

But, most important, the scene following the characters' late-night attempt to gain re-entry employs a series of cinematic devices that feature the mechanisms of security that *Babel* both documents and decries. At the checkpoint, Santiago's car is submitted to full investigation. When Santiago questions an order, the officers search all of its interior compartments, including Amelia's purse, rifling through their contents, with questionable legal grounds. The car's passengers are visibly blinded by the station's bright, fluorescent lights, which the camera multiple times imposes on the audience as the glare of the flashlights held by the officers reflects off the camera's lens to blur and distort its vision. The camera in this way fully collaborates with the law's intrusions, at once inflicting them on the viewer and implicating us within that gaze. As the officers surround the car, their advance is shot from multiple angles, the camera itself encircling the vehicle and exaggerating the exposure of the unnaturally bright lighting. At times, the reactions of the characters are captured through their reflections in rear-view mirrors, proliferating the camera's sites of observation.[7] Whereas the tour bus functions as a space of sovereign immunity and enclosure, Santiago's car undergoes the reverse treatment. It is unduly prone to surveillance, representing an antithetical space of suspended legality that, in this case, elevates the repercussions of otherwise mundane infractions (here, driving under the influence). Notably, law officials play crucial roles in all four narratives, in each a vector for enforcing and codifying the exclusions that sustain the body politic. This link is most forcefully brought home in the informal hearing commanding Amelia's deportation. When Amelia disputes the pronouncement of 'definitive and immediate deportation,' she is threatened that even a trial will 'only prolong[] the inevitable.'

The border scene also dramatizes the heedless but very real collusion of ostensible sites of innocence with larger structures of geopower and their

7 Thank you to Nancy Quintanilla for insight into the cinematic devices at issue in this scene.

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machinery of exclusion. Asleep during much of the search, Debbie momentarily gains consciousness and is questioned by a guard. To refute Santiago's claim that the kids are Amelia's "nephews," the guard inquires of the half-awake Debbie, 'Is she your auntie?' To this, Debbie, unaware, shakes her head and mumbles 'no.' This betrayal incenses the officials and authorizes their progressively more abusive treatment of Santiago, climaxing with a verbal assault that impels him to abscond. This disavowal by Debbie of her primary caretaker directly supervises the boundaries and bonds of the idealized, nuclear American family, even while it ushers in concrete, totalizing consequences. In a way, Debbie's rejection of Amelia exhibits the very yearning for unity and identity that informs insular conceptions of the American domestic space and lends ideological sanction to restrictive immigration policies – casting her, like her mother, as a mouthpiece for the biases subtending American exceptionalism. Debbie executes a decree that not only excommunicates Amelia but also reinforces the border's inviolability. Indeed, we might explain the relentless scene in which Amelia and the children almost die from dehydration and overexposure while lost in the border's barren wasteland as itself a theatricalization of the walls that verify national sovereignty under the threat of sovereignty's encroachment.

In each of the foregoing threads, then, we have seen how crucibles in sovereignty come to be reified and otherwise brought to bear on the bodies of *Babel*'s female characters, occasioning varying degrees of paternalistic oversight. Yet this homology between individual and juridical-political-territorial sovereignty becomes most salient in the narrative thread located in Japan, which primarily concerns the plight of Chieko, an adolescent living in Tokyo who suffers from severe hearing and speech impairment. While economically privileged, Chieko experiences her deaf-muteness as deeply isolating and disabling, especially in her interactions with young men. Moreover, it is disclosed that Chieko has recently lost her mother in what the legal authorities deem a suicide. However, the storyline codedly implies that Chieko may have played some role in that death. Her father, Yasujiro (the businessman responsible for the offending rifle's presence in Morocco), overtly states that she first stumbled on the body, although she lies to a police offer about the method of suicide. Whereas Chieko claims that her mother jumped from their balcony, she in fact shot herself in the head, a detail that creates another parallel with the shooting in Morocco. This tragedy has severely exacerbated Chieko's emotional difficulties, which the storyline vivifies through her repeated outbursts of anger.

González Iñárritu's manipulation of sound during Chieko's narrative comments on both her condition and its relevance to debates about sovereignty. With great irony, these sequences at times aggressively bombard the viewer with auditory intensities that simulate the clamour of urban Tokyo. In one protracted scene that follows Chieko in a nightclub

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after she has taken ecstasy, the throbbing, driving beat of 1980s pop that morphs into rave music induces a trancelike immersion in the scene, although with the sound repeatedly cutting out to mimic the total silence that engulfs Chieko. These audio contrasts measure the depths of her isolation, as Chieko's immediate environment denies her access to its primary register of engagement. Yet in so doing, the pulsating, overpowering music entices the audience to enjoy those very dimensions of experience refused to Chieko. The narcotic atmosphere of the club propagates a mode of community that Chieko cannot fully inhabit, even while it causes the viewer to inadvertently conspire with the broader regimes of exclusion that ostracize Chieko.

In this respect Chieko's predicament indexes deep liabilities of the logic of sovereign self-enclosure, as it regulates the legal terms of incorporation within a community – namely, the distinction of inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside, or, for Agamben, 'bare life/political existence.' Whereas the film's other threads contend with territorial sovereignties, an analogously spatialized boundary enforces Chieko's condition. As such, Chieko's impediments render her a prototype of the self-enclosed sovereign *subject*, and the painful borders produced by her sensory seclusion are metaphorically cognate to parallel limits that barricade the sovereign state. To thematically link *Babel*'s four episodes, Chieko's auditory confinement reifies and thereby indicts related structures of apartheid that both constitute the logic of sovereignty and wreak havoc on *Babel*'s other characters' lives. That is, the aesthetic compartmentalization of *Babel*'s storylines mirrors Chieko's sensory quarantine, emblematizing and enacting spatial as well as experiential barriers to political community.

Yet Chieko ultimately attempts to transcend her damaging self-enclosure in ways that return us to the ontological status of life, although *Babel*'s insights defy both an Agambenian or Foucauldian frame and Esposito's affirmative remapping of immunity. Outlawed from modes of auditory participation, Chieko strives to transgress that ban through means that verge on the inappropriate. Different sequences follow her as she engages in sexually aggressive behaviours, for instance, as she exposes herself to a group of young men and physically assaults (kissing and then grabbing) her dentist during an exam. Such conduct further sets in motion the film's highly symbolic denouement. Chieko invites a policeman, Kenji Mamiya (Satoshi Nikaido), to her apartment under the pretence that she will answer his inquiries about her father, but she surprises him by entering the room naked and forcing herself upon him. Kenji vehemently protests, although Chieko's eruption into agonized sobs elicits a degree of compassion. The remaining duration of the film, approximately another forty minutes, returns multiple times to follow their ensuing interactions, elongating that short span of real time relative to the accelerated pacing of the other vignettes.

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One especially moving snapshot watches Kenji and Chieko sitting in silence in a darkly lit room, holding hands, as the yet-naked Chieko inserts one of Kenji's fingers into her mouth and begins sensually sucking it.

Chieko here actively solicits the infringement of her bodily integrity and sovereign self-enclosure that, for her, proves so isolating. And it is through such gestures that *Babel* reimagines community beyond the dual and corresponding logics of the territorial border and biological immunization. As I have suggested, Chieko's predicament materializes deep casualties of that regnant architecture of sovereignty, with its expectations of identity, separateness, and enclosure. And while her efforts to escape her condition may offend, they also throw the logic of sovereignty into crisis, instead envisioning a modality of political belonging grounded in the messy vulnerability of corporeal being.

A similar baring of the flesh allows Chieko to repair her fractured relationship with her father. In the film's terminal scene, Yasujiro returns home late at night but shortly after Kenji's departure to likewise discover Chieko naked on their balcony, an encounter filmed from afar. The presumption is that she is weighing suicide, and her father averts that outcome as they embrace, both weeping. The camera lingers over this exchange before retreating backward, zooming out into the distance to shrink the apartment's relative space within its frame. Much as Chieko and her father fade in importance against the backdrop of the Tokyo skyline, the vast web of the global is suggested to overtake their local drama, eclipsing the domestic with other deterritorialized forces.

It is this concluding image that gestures toward a form of community that might evade and supersede the logic of enclosure that typically regulates discussions of law and politics. For while Chieko's behaviour reinforces her exclusion, it also repudiates her sensory quarantine. Chieko's handicaps render her all too contained, integrated, and impenetrable – as such, an icon of sovereignty *in extremis*. However, her quests for intimacy and self-revelation at once betray an abiding vulnerability and an opposing desire for permeability, openness, and intertwining. In the midst of *Babel*'s superabundance of competing languages, Chieko's transgressions imagine pathways of communication that might short-circuit and thereby overwhelm those linguistic and other barriers – barriers that the film not only documents but also stages through its own form and aesthetic. As such, Chieko's behaviours suggest how community might be forged not through immunitary responses gone haywire but instead through recognitions of interpersonal porosity, neediness, and reciprocity, as those qualities are quintessentially materialized in the body. That said, *Babel*'s vision of individual and political embodiment does not purify that condition or render it overly affirmatively. Rather, in a concluding exchange that might

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elsewhere appear a prelude to incest, *Babel* accepts accident, confusion, and entanglement as essential fonts of sociopolitical community.

To conclude, if all of *Babel*'s characters variously suffer from the many sovereignties that carve up the world and inflict their collateral damage on ordinary lives, González Iñárritu leaves us with a fleeting portrait of community in its starkest and most naked form – but also in its organic strength and resilience. In so doing, the film points us to the value of an aesthetic or literary imagination in exposing the violences and foreclosures that sustain our current legal order, thereby offering its own basis for theorizing the relationship between aesthetic production and law. However, it does more than critique the many exclusions that gird the logic of sovereignty. Rather, the film gestures beyond them to illustrate how a particular kind of aesthetic experience can recalibrate our assumptions about law and politics, creating new imaginative spaces within which social justice might cautiously emerge.

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