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Literature and Human Rights Violations in U.S. Borderlands (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Migrants and Minorities

Presenter: Tereza M. Szeghi

Title: Literature and Human Rights Violations in U.S. Borderlands

Abstract: This paper offers a comparative assessment of how Ana Castillo (in *The Guardians*) and Louise Erdrich (in *The Round House*) craft overtly didactic novels as a means of raising awareness about contemporary human rights violations in the U.S-Mexico and Ojibwe borderlands, respectively. I argue that placing their novels in conversation with one another calls attention to the ways that excess policing of borders and ambiguities regarding jurisdiction in border zones both (albeit differentially) contribute to human rights violations. It is not part of the general U.S. consciousness to think about our internal borderlands (i.e., those surrounding tribal lands), but when viewed in comparison with the U.S.-Mexico border (how it is perceived, militarized, and undermined) we can better understand that legal and jurisdictional indeterminacy along reservation borderlands further erodes tribal sovereignty. As a consequence tribes are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and handicapped in their efforts to seek justice for their citizens. And yet, as Ana Castillo vividly dramatizes with respect to the U.S-Mexico border, treating a border as an absolute dividing line between two nations does not assure justice or legal clarity for the people who regularly lose their lives to borderlands' violence. When read together, *The Round House* and *The Guardians* forcefully argue that borders do not serve but rather undermine the realization of universal human rights. Instead borders of different types (internal, external, heavily regulated, and ambiguous) variously reinforce the notion that rights are not evenly shared based on one's status as human but unevenly distributed on the basis of nation, legal status, and colonial inheritance.

Keywords: borderlands, literature, human rights, *The Round House*, *The Guardians*

Biography: Tereza M. Szeghi is an Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Social Justice at the University of Dayton. Her research and teaching focuses on the human rights of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. Her most recent publication, entitled "Weaving Transnational Cultural Identity through Travel and Diaspora in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*" was published in *MELUS* in Winter 2014.