DOI: 10.2478/abcsj-2019-0022
American, British and Canadian Studies, Volume 33, December 2019

"In the desert, we are all illegal aliens": Border Confluences and Border Wars in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*

RALUCA ANDREESCU
University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract
In May 2001, a traveling party of 26 Mexican citizens tried to cross the Arizonan desert in order to enter the United States illegally. Their attempt turned into a front-page news event after 14 died and 12 barely made it across the border due to Border Patrol intervention. Against the background of consistent tightening of anti-immigration laws in the United States, my essay aims to examine the manner in which Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2004) reenacts the group's journey from Mexico through the "vast trickery of sand" to the United States in a rather poetic and mythical rendition of the travel north. Written to include multiple perspectives (of the immigrants and their coyotes, the immigration authorities, Border Patrol agents, high officials on both sides of the border), Urrea's account, I argue, stands witness to and casts light on the often invisible plight of those attempting illegal passage to the United States across the desert. It thus humanizes the otherwise dry statistics of immigration control by focusing on the everyday realities of human-smuggling operations and their economic and social consequences in the borderland region. At the same time, my paper highlights the impact of the Wellton 26 case on the (re)negotiation of identity politics and death politics at the US-Mexican border.

Keywords: US-Mexico border, desert, illegal immigrants, militarization of the borders, death, bearing witness

> The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta*
> where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.
> (Anzaldua 3)

Introduction: The American Militarized State and the Southern Border

In his presidential announcement speech in 2015, Donald J. Trump asserted that the United States "has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems" and was quick to single out Mexican nationals as his main concern. He stated that "[w]hen Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. … They're sending people that have lots of problems .... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people" ("Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech"). Along these lines, the securing of US borders and the expulsion of illegal immigrants were at the core of Trump's presidential campaign agenda and have informed some of the first major policies when his administration took over the White House (his bid to build a two thousand mile-long wall, triple the number of ICE[1] agents, end DACA,[2] separate families at the border and detain migrant children, to name some of the high-profile measures).

However, in spite of Trump's inflamed rhetoric, his administration's anti-immigration measures are just the most recent in a long series of similar strategies regarding the criminalization of immigrants and the militarization of the US-Mexico border over the last four decades, unequivocally supported by former administrations' discourses that were comparably steeped in the language of war. President Reagan's "war on drugs" in the 1980s, President Clinton's "war on crime" in the 1990s, and President Bush's "war on terror" post 9/11 led, among others, to the rise of militarized security spaces at the southern border meant not so much to prevent or respond to armed threats coming from Mexico, but to rein in the movement of civilians across the border into the United States. It has been argued that, in fact, the American southern border is testament to the fact that the "historic distinction between the internal and external roles of the police and military has blurred" and created "an ideal location to observe how police and military combine into an all-encompassing logic of perpetual war, surveillance, and security" (Jones 50, 45). Various layers of interdiction technologies are used, old and new, such as

> walls, fences, generator-powered stadium lights, night vision goggles, helicopters, x-ray machines, automatic gate arms, steel columns that rise up out of the ground in front and in back of vehicles to keep them from speeding off, three-sided nail-studded sticks that can be put under rear tires, drug-sniffing dogs, and concrete barriers arranged in a slalom pattern to slow traffic to a crawl. (Saint-Germain 62)

Additionally, an unprecedented number of Border Patrol agents have been deployed, proving that "border enforcement is a pillar of US immigration policy" (Coleman 422), which in the southwest arguably takes the shape of a "border war." In fact, the transformation of national borders into highly militarized security spaces is a steady process going back decades all over the world, and the new US-Mexico border is but a "microcosm of this global change" (Jones 38). Official reports documenting "Operation Big Miguel" in 2012, for instance, acknowledge that "[t]echnology originally created for use in tracking explosive device networks in Afghanistan and Iraq is finding new purpose in supporting US Customs and Border Protection by providing mission overwatch during border patrol missions" (Jones 47).

Defining for the modern nation-state and integral to the ideology of national community, borders delineate a domain where identity and authority are exerted, but they concurrently create loci of contestation. This means that borderland regions are prone to manifestations of "violence, insecurity, and lawlessness," as "the state's coercive authority and control are constantly challenged and subverted by transnational forces" (Shirk 43). The US-Mexican border region is one example of how "forms of violence ... tend to be particularly severe in neighboring states with major economic disparities" (Shirk 60), and this combination of socio-economic inequality and violence ostensibly leads to increased criminality in the trans-border communities. The coupling of a perceived economic threat with an arguable rise of criminality makes people rally behind stricter enforcement of border control and makes it easier to sell anti-immigration policies. And when "passive expressions of power" fail to function properly in reining in the flow of unwanted masses across national borders, physical violence proves to be a more efficient means against unwanted movement, as "most deaths at borders occur because

new enforcement technologies, from walls to drones and high-technology sensors, make the crossing much more difficult and dangerous" (Jones 18).

As a result of increased border militarization and an intense cracking down on illegal immigration in mainly urban areas in California, Texas and Arizona, migrants and smugglers tend to use more and more a sector at a far corner of Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert, where "a migrant will typically walk two days or more through 35 to 40 miles of high desert, where temperatures … exceed 100 degrees,"[3] which turns the crossing into "a deadly gambit" according to Ken Rosevear, executive director of the Yuma County Chamber of Commerce (qtd. in Martinez). These developments at the US-Mexico border have led to a steady increase in the number of deaths in the region and have determined American activists to condemn the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for "using the desert as a weapon against migrants" (Téllez and Magaña) and to conclude that "mass deaths and disappearance are the inevitable outcomes of a border enforcement plan that uses the wilderness as a weapon" (according to a report by the Arizona-based group No More Deaths qtd. in Carroll). This migrant corridor across the Sonoran desert seems to embody a metaphorical wall that President Trump can already count on (Davis et al.), given the steady increase in the number of deaths along the south-western border. Official Border Patrol statistics speak about over seven thousand lives lost in the region over the last couple of decades (O'Dell et al.).

It is against the background of this "slow-motion disaster unfolding in the borderlands," where migrants are being funneled by US government policies into "a black hole of disappearance and death of historic proportions" (Devereaux, "Bodies in the Borderlands") that my essay examines the manner in which Luis Alberto Urrea's border travelogue *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2004) stands witness to those running the gauntlet of illegal passage to the United States across the desert and exposes the consequences of immigration policy at their most immediate, human level. Written to include multiple perspectives (of the immigrants and their coyotes, immigration authorities, Border Patrol agents, high officials on both sides of the border), I argue that Urrea's book offers precious insight into one of the most divisive contemporary issues through

a story dealing with the (re)negotiation of identity politics and death politics at the US-Mexican border.

"Nearly invisible in that brutal light": A (Different) Face of the Criminal Body

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2005, Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* reenacts the dreadful journey of a group of twenty-six Mexican men (dubbed the Wellton[4] 26) through the "vast trickery of sand" (Urrea 19) in the Arizonan desert in 2001. The majority of the men came from the poverty-ridden and politically violent Southern Mexico where "children were dying. Dengue fever had made its way up from the Amazon. Malaria was spreading again, and it was worse than before – this new black blood malaria" (Urrea 49). Contrary to the inflammatory rhetoric of the day, they were "[n]o terrorists, excons, or drug mules," but mostly "small-plot farmers, coffee growers, a schoolboy and his dad" (Urrea 49). Having not seen one in their lives, they "walked into the desert carrying soft drinks," ironically proving that "[t]hey were aliens before they ever crossed the line" (Urrea 49). Based on research materials – "reports, legal documents, testimonies and trial documents, correspondence, and many hours of taped interrogations and confessions" – from both sides of the border, amassing "four leather-bound notebooks of about 144 pages each" (Urrea 14), Urrea's account recreates the final days in the lives of the fourteen men[5] who died trying to cross the Arizonan desert and accompanies the surviving twelve on their journey through the American bureaucratic system in the aftermath of the tragedy. Because "border-related deaths are often invisible" as they "go unnoticed or unrecorded," the narrative aspires to bear witness to "this litany of deaths and injuries" (Weber and Pickering 52, 102) at the US-Mexican border and thus to increase their visibility in an openly political act of activism and solidarity.

It has been argued that borders are "places where commonality ends abruptly" (Urciuoli qtd. in Spener and Staudt 9) and which create "zones of opportunity, rebellion, lawlessness, and danger" (Rose 90). According to Jason Ackleson (2011), the US-Mexican borderlands delineate a "risk society" in which "the social, political, economic, and individual risks

increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection" (qtd. in Stea et al. 128). Azam Ahmed of *The New York Times* sees the Southern border as "a line where fear and hope collide to shape American politics." In Urrea's narrative, the US-Mexican borderlands are constructed mainly as a space of the marginalized and the abject, where migrants led by their coyotes cross not only physical borders, but also those between "legality and illegality, criminality and innocence, human agency and objectification" (Gumbar 132), and ultimately life and death. Lisa Flores noted that the massive deportations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Great Depression years and the emphatic criminalization of entry in the United States led to the rhetorical construction of the Mexican body as a criminal body (qtd. in Aguirre and Simmers) whose movement across the border tends to create pockets of lawlessness which need to be contained and ultimately cast off.

Nonetheless, in Urrea's narrative the borderland region is also depicted as a mythological place, home to both historic and legendary inhabitants from Mexican and Indian folklore (such as the wailing ghost of La Llorona, the dreaded Chupacabras, or the evil spirit of the witch Ho'ok) and contemporary ones (the walkers treading the desert in search of a better life for the families left behind and their exploitative coyotes). Consequently, the party's journey north arguably gains mythic and symbolic proportions. It has been observed that conflicts in borderland regions, which are integral to identity politics, tend to be reproduced in historical narratives and artistic representations by political leaders and so-called "ethnic entrepreneurs" alike. As a result, "martyrs from past conflicts are 'reanimated' at appropriate times as a strategy of social mobilization against threatening others" (Kolossov and Scott 5). From this standpoint, one can argue that Urrea's narrative tries to establish its own panoply of border-crossing martyrs, sacrificial figures of historically failed immigration policies and enforcement, in search for the Promised Land of American opportunities. The trails covered by the Wellton 26 from their rural Veracruz across Mexico have been previously traveled by "desert spirits of a dark and mysterious nature" against which "rosaries and Hail Marys don't work"; as the misfortunate would soon find out, "[y]ou need a new kind of prayers … to negotiate with this land" (Urrea

20). Moreover, "[t]he whole way was a ghost road, haunted by tattered spirits left on the thirsty ground: drivers thrown out windows, revolutionaries hung from cottonwoods or shot before walls, murdered women tossed in the scrub" (Urrea 99). This seemed to confirm some of the travelers' ancient beliefs that indeed "north was the direction of death. North was the home of winter, and the underworld could be found there" (Urrea 99).

Crammed inside a van too small for the number of people it transported – "[i]n the trade, these rides are known as 'coffin loads'" (Urrea 76) – , the party of migrants were carried across the Mexican desert "sitting on each other, knocking heads, cracking chins off shoulders, … tossed around like laundry" (Urrea 108). As soon as they reached their destination at the border, the van immediately made it back for Mexico while the men's "feet crunched on the grit of the desert, and the plants began to tear at their arms and legs. They crossed onto the Devil's Highway on foot" (Urrea 109). This part of the Sonoran desert is known for its challenging landscape and for the many souls it has claimed over time as a consequence, and carries a mythological aura of misfortune: "In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place" (Urrea 19). Moreover, this highway is a place which "has always lacked grace" and "those who worship desert gods know them to favor retribution over the tender dove of forgiveness. In Desolation, doves are at the bottom of the food chain" (Urrea 20).

In Urrea's story, for these travellers the desert quickly turns from a place of hope and promise into an intimidating place of alienation and death, where "[b]lack ironwood stumps writhed from the ground." Having been "[d]ead for five hundred years, they had already been two thousand years old when they died. It was a forest of eldritch bones" (Urrea 19). It wasn't just sere vegetation contributing to the seemingly lifeless desert landscape, but also the piles of human remains which populate it. Because of the multiple waves of migration along the centuries, Devil's Highway represented a "vast graveyard of unknown dead … the scattered bones of human beings slowly turning to dust … the dead were left where they were to be sepulchered by the fearful sand storms that sweep at times over

the desolate waste." And as large number of people tended to die "of heat, thirst, and misadventure" attempting passage of this desert, it soon came to be known as "the most terrible place in the world" (Urrea 26). The place similarly abounds in killer flora and fauna, which further contributes to the perils faced by migrants oblivious to what this journey actually entailed:

> The plants are noxious and spiked. Saguaros, nopales, the fiendish chollas. Each long cholla spike has a small barb, and they hook into the skin, and they catch in elbow creases and hook forearm and biceps together. Even the green mesquite trees have long thorns set just at eye level. Much of the wildlife is nocturnal, and it creeps through the nights, poisonous and alien: the sidewinder, the rattlesnake, the scorpion, the giant centipede, the black widow, the tarantula, the brown recluse, the coral snake, the Gila monster. The kissing bug bites you and its poison makes the entire body erupt in red welts. Fungus drifts on the valley dust, and it sinks into the lungs and throbs to life. The millennium has added a further danger: all wild bees in southern Arizona, naturalists report, are now Africanized. As if the desert felt it hadn't made its point, it added killer bees. (Urrea 21)

At the same time, such descriptions replete with visual and auditory imagery establish a sharp contrast between the liveliness of critters at home in the desert environment and the group of people who obviously do not belong there, unfit for survival.

The construction of the migrants' condition as "dead men walking" similarly abounds in sensory imagery, rendered as if directly witnessed and consequently more poignant. Mentally and physically debilitated by this point in their journey, the party of travellers kept on treading through this realm of abjection, where their personhood was being gradually erased under the blazing sun and where "the only laws that govern are those pertaining to biological life exposed to severe desert climate" (Acosta 226). As if steadily approaching their obliteration, the men were "so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost" (Urrea 18). More shockingly still,

> They were burned nearly black, their lips huge and cracking, what paltry drool still available to them spuming from their mouths in a salty foam as they walked. Their eyes were cloudy with dust, almost too dry to blink up

> a tear. Their hair was hard and stiffened by old sweat, standing in crowns from their scalps, old sweat because their bodies were no longer sweating. They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems. (Urrea 18)

Having walked days on end with no proper equipment and scarce amount of water, lost in their tracks and eventually abandoned by their coyotes in the scorching heat of the Arizonan desert, the men "start to lose themselves" and the survivors' accounts of those days "fade into a strange twilight of pain" (Urrea 111). They soon "started to break apart as the demons and angels started to sing" and could but "stumble … away toward illusions in the brutal light." According to testimonies by survivors,

> Men were swimming. Men were killing Mendez [their coyote guide]. Men were on the beach, collecting shells and watching their children splash. Their women stood naked before them, soft bellies, hands on ribs, breasts. Men hid their faces from a furious God. And they walked. (Urrea 155)

Towards the final leg of the Wellton 26's journey across the American border, Urrea takes us rather clinically but not less uncomfortably through the stages of heat death, which are "the same for everyone," irrespective of "what language you speak, or what color your skin" and "[w]hether you speed through these stages, or linger at each," hyperthermia will still manifest itself in a succession of six stages: "Heat Stress, Heat Fatigue, Heat Syncope, Heat Cramps, Heat Exhaustion, and Heat Stroke" (Urrea 123). What draws attention here is the repeated use of the pronoun "you" / "your," which is more inclusive and marks not only a shift in the use of pronouns in the narrative, but also Urrea's appeal to our shared humanity and intimacy with bodies in pain:

> Your scalp burns along the part in your hair, or where your hair is thin. Your cheeks, your neck burn. Your eyelids burn, too. And the tips of your ears. Your lips are not only burned by sun, but by wind; they become dehydrated, and they get rough and flaky, and you keep licking them to try to wet them, and they get sanded until they crack and bleed. (Urrea 122)

He then goes on to describe in graphic detail the progressive deterioration of the live organism struggling to cope and while acknowledging that normally "people most at risk from hyperthermia are the elderly," he nonetheless contends that "the wicked genius of Desolation is that it makes even the young old so that it can kill them more easily" as "Desolation drinks you first in small sips, then in deep gulps" (Urrea 123, 124). And as the desert begins to "edit you," to "erase you" (Urrea 125), one's sole chance of survival rests with the American Border Patrol agents, who, in their turn, have witnessed hundreds of deaths by sunlight and hyperthermia, though "illegals [also] drowned, froze, committed suicide, were murdered, were hit by trains and trucks, were bitten by rattlesnakes, had heart attacks," so much so that "bones peppered the entire region" (Urrea 32-33).

It has been argued that the use of sensory language in Chicana/o literary narratives serves to allow engaged readers to "encounter the systematically dehumanized brown body and person as fully human, rather than a caricature drawn by stereotypes and political rhetoric" (Lopez 162). Not only does it humanize the otherwise "criminal bodies" of "illegals," but sensory and experiential imagery in Urrea's narrative creates more intimacy between the plight of the immigrants and his readership, in an attempt at countering the remoteness imposed by the political inflammatory rhetoric of the day and by the "packaged media images" which, according to Nancy Piñeda-Madrid, make us "aware, but not engaged" (qtd. in Lopez 163). Along these lines, performance artist and political activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña observes that

> What begins as inflammatory rhetoric eventually becomes accepted dictum, justifying racial violence against suspected illegal immigrants. … Since they are here 'illegally,' they are expendable. Since they have no 'legal residency,' they lack both human and civil rights. To hurt, attack, or offend a faceless and nameless 'criminal' doesn't seem to have any legal or moral implications. (69)

The apparent irrelevance of the "criminal body" that Gómez-Peña references above is arguably what Urrea's narrative tries to thwart when exposing what has been deemed "the law's absolute abandonment of life along the Devil's Highway" (Acosta 229). The narrator decries the field of

invisibility and sheer abandonment within which the movement of people occurs in the Sonoran desert as "on the Devil's Highway, you had to almost die for anybody to notice your face" (Urrea 77). And as Urrea maintains that the Arizonan desert is working to erase the identities of all these migrants who end up as "coordinates on topo maps, identified by GPS numbers," some never identified by name and only known as "this poor guy" or "that poor guy there" (132), the author takes it upon himself to prevent just that by closely working with activists and officials on both sides of the border to reconstruct as accurately as possible the floating identities of the Wellton 26/ Yuma 14. His endeavor can be seen as a symbolic act of restitution and is part of a concerted effort conducted by medical examiners, forensic pathologists and anthropologists in Pima County to identify and subsequently repatriate the remains of people who are found in the desert. This visibility of death at the border is part of an open political act of solidarity which aims to "put names to our migrant sisters and brothers, and bear witness to the deaths of those unknown, of whom there are hundreds buried in our communities," according to members of Tucson-based Coalición de Derechos Humanos, who operate across borders to record the number of lives lost (qtd. in Weber and Pickering 71). Their recordings have been seen as an attempt at restoring order in an otherwise chaotic situation as "[t]he counting of border deaths has become a significant part of wrestling back control of the US-Mexico border" (Weber and Pickering 43). In similar fashion, Scott Warren[6] of the No More Deaths humanitarian organization believes that "witnessing" the various places where people have died in the desert is an act of "spiritual completion" which enables the souls of the unidentified departed be put to rest in that place (qtd. in Devereaux, "No More Deaths Trial").

Openly aiming to "show Americans the face of the undocumented" (Urrea 215), Urrea's narrative rather startlingly describes the remains of the least fortunate members of the Wellton 26 as they are photographed and their personal effects prepared for the final reports documenting their deaths:

> The dead have open mouths and white teeth. They are stretched in angular poses, caught in last gasps or shouts, their eyes burned an eerie red by the sun. Many of them are naked. Some of them have dirt in their mouths.

> When the corpses are those of women, their breasts have shrunk and withered and cracked open under the sun. The dead's' open mouths reveal gums that have turned to some substance that looks like baked adobe, crumbling and almost orange. They look like roadside attractions, like wax-and-paper torsos in a gas station Dungeon of Terror. For many of them, these are the first portraits for which they have posed. (Urrea 46)

He likewise focuses on portraits of the survivors, whose equally invisible bodies start their "ping-pong journey through the system" (Urrea 189): "In the sheriff's department videos, the survivors' faces are almost black against the stark white hospital pillows. The camera zooms in close to them. Their features are overwhelmed by the glare. They're nearly invisible in the brutal light" (Urrea 78).

There is, however, one aspect of this concerted effort to increase the visibility of death at the US-Mexico border that Urrea deems condemnable in his narrative. He decries the manner in which the media and the Mexican government exploited the case for political gain in its immediate aftermath. The author arguably finds it ironic that Mexico should declare the fourteen dead migrants folk heroes and lament all twenty-six victims' plight through the desert, but not surprising, given that "Mexico loves a martyr, perhaps as much as it dislikes confronting the catastrophic political malfeasance that forced the walkers to flee their homes and bake to death in the western desert" (44). He then goes on to describe in vivid detail the staging of a major media and political event upon the return of "their martyred heroes" (188) to their native Veracruz and sorrowfully observes that "[n]obody wanted them when they were alive and now look – everybody wants to own them" (44). One noteworthy incident that Urrea recounts features Rita Vargas, the Mexican consul in the border city of Calexico, Ca., who was knocked down and almost crushed beneath an inflamed crowd of people gathered on the tarmac to witness the return of the dead to their native Veracruz, as

> the people surged in a kind of bloodlust or panic, and the metal barriers that the government had set up to separate them from the dead collapsed. It was a scene out of a deadly rock concert disaster – The Who Play Veracruz – and Vargas was knocked down and crushed beneath the weight of the shoving humans. Police and soldiers beat and shoved their way through the tangle of arms and necks to pry her loose from certain death.

> They dragged her out onto the tarmac, where she caught her breath and stood up, tried to gather herself and straighten her clothes. The governor was already making pronouncements. Commentators were already jabbering: America was to blame! The governor was sad, yet honored, to welcome back the sons of the state. (Urrea 188-89)

This violence, which welcomed the return of the dead to their country of origin, was accompanied by a very detailed stage management by the Mexican authorities, who even "had arranged for a photogenic young woman to step forward for the cameras," with the "grieving families … kept back while the young woman recited a prepared document" (Urrea 189). What most infuriates him, however, is how a lack of coherent and concerted political action of both sides of the border in the aftermath of Wellton 26 – when heated promises were made and a border accord seemed inevitable – continues to claim the lives of those seeking passage through the deadly Sonoran desert. The Mexican-American author and activist claims that since the ill-fated incident in May 2001, "the filth and depravity of the border churns ahead in a parade of horrors" as "the slaughtered dead turn to leather on the Devil's Highway, and their brothers and sisters rot to sludge tucked in car trunks and sealed in railroad cars" while "the big beasts and the little predators continue to feed on the poor and innocent" (193). One of the main reasons for the failure to bring about change is, according to Urrea, the heavy militarization of borders in the aftermath of 9/11, when "[a]n open border suddenly seemed like an act of war, or a flagrant display of foolishness. The United States was gunning for bad guys" (Urrea 194). His travelogue lets linger the idea that the countless deaths in the borderlands region are caused not by the desert, nor by the coyotes exploitative of hopeful migrants, nor even by strict patrol agents. Rather, what arguably "kills the people is the politics of stupidity that rules both sides of the border" (Consul Flores Vizcarra qtd. in Urrea 202-203).

Conclusions

At the end of June 2019, a photograph of Salvadoran father Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his two-year old daughter Valeria, floating face down in the shallows of Rio Grande, sparked a wave of public outcry in

the United States. The two had attempted to cross from Mexico to Texas in pursuit of the American Dream and their final – lifeless – portrait stands as a pictorial representation of the plight of migrants making desperate attempts at better living conditions on American shores. Just a few days before the Martínezes' demise, the bodies of two infants, a toddler and a young woman were found in the Texas desert, and they are believed to have died from heat exposure. These are just two of the most recent examples of the manner in which the natural landscape from the billowing waters of the Rio Grande to the scorching heat of the Arizonan desert has been weaponized against migrant bodies, to become part of the so-called "necropolitics of deterrence" which "organize the lives of migrants in constant proximity to death, to bare life" (Lennard). Mainly a result of the Clinton administration through its Prevention through Deterrence policy, this federally-sanctioned approach to immigration south of the border has reached its peak under the current administration, as "[b]iopolitical commitments to 'let die' by abandoning citizens appear increasingly credible in light of the growing authoritarianism in the United States" (Giroux 180) – all the more so with respect to migrants attempting illegal entry, as recent measures by immigration authorities prove.

The climate of violence at the US-Mexico border which propagates the image of immigrants as enemy of the state and of the United States as a country under siege is sustained by the constant presence of armed patrolmen, military drones, helicopters, infrared sensors, and army vehicles guarding the two-thousand-mile long border between the two neighbors. This "fortress mentality" (Grandin) of the United States makes it obvious that its response to the immigration problem has been to bulwark the borders and turn the country into a fortified enclave through the use of "anti-citizenship technology" (Inda 127) which pushes immigrants to areas inimical to human survival: "The goal here is social prophylaxis. It is to prevent undocumented immigrants from becoming 'problems' in the social body through preventing their entry into the country" (Inda 127-28). This new world order, of which the current situation at the US-Mexico border is but an illustration, and this new biopolitics, argues Henry Giroux, not only condone violence by the state against the citizens (in this case, non-citizen immigrants), but also

"relegate entire populations to spaces of invisibility and disposability" (181).

It has been my contention that Urrea's narrative, built around "the big die-off, the largest death-event in border history" (Urrea 42), was drafted in response to the silence and invisibility veiling death at the southern border. Written as intimately as if eyewitnessed and abounding in sensory and experiential imagery, the oftentimes lyrical account speaks of one of the great tragedies of this global age and appears highly relevant even fifteen years after its publication. Taking us to zones rarely witnessed and allowing intimate access to the rather distant realities of the human-smuggling operations and their economic and social implications in the American-Mexican borderlands, Urrea's account of the fate of the Wellton 26 serves as a symbolic reenactment of the migrants' hopeful trek through the Arizonan desert towards the bright lights of American cities. The proximity that the author sets out to create between his readership and the migrants arguably aims to raise "compassionate awareness," or "*conocimiento*," which becomes vital when considering how "suffering is too often rendered invisible and characterized as insignificant through popular rhetoric and media discourse" (Lopez 174). An openly activist endeavor, nonetheless eager to give the floor to all the parties involved (survivors, coyotes, patrol agents, high officials on both sides of the border, even the dead in an attempt to salvage their identities), the narrative humanizes and renders visible the otherwise dry statistics of immigration control in the United States.

Notes:

[1] US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security.

[2] The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals immigration policy was introduced by the Obama administration in 2012 and is mainly meant to protect undocumented immigrant youth from deportation.

[3] Approximately 38 degrees Celsius.

[4] Town in Yuma County, Arizona.

[5] Known as the Yuma 14, they represent to this day the largest group of people to die trying to cross illegally the Arizonan desert.

[6] A geography professor and No More Deaths volunteer, Warren was arrested at the beginning of last year by the Border Patrol in Arizona and stands trial for

transporting and harboring illegal immigrants to the United States, for which he faces more than two decades behind bars.

Works Cited

Acosta, Abraham. *Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.

Aguirre, Adalberto Jr., and Jennifer K. Simmers. "Mexican Border Crossers: The Mexican Body in Immigration Discourse." *Social Justice* 35.4 (2008): 99-106. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Ahmed, Azam. "Where Fear and Hope Collide: Images from Mexican Border, and Beyond." *The New York Times* 25 Mar. 2018. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.

Carroll, Rory. "US Border Patrol Uses Desert as 'Weapon' to Kill Thousands of Migrants, Report Says." *The Guardian* 7 Dec. 2016. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Coleman, Matthew. "From Border Policing to Internal Immigration Control in the United States." *A Companion to Border Studies*. Ed. Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Davis, Charles, Ana Adlerstein, Edwin Delgado, and Ed Pilkington. "What Is Life Really Like in Border Country, Where Trump Wants His Wall?" *The Guardian* 15 Jan. 2019. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Devereaux, Ryan. "Bodies in the Borderlands." *The Intercept* 4 May 2019. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

---. "No More Deaths Trial Opens as More Bodies Discovered Along Arizona-Mexico Border." *The Intercept* 14 May 2019. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, and Loqueras for the End of the Century*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2001.

Giroux, Henry A. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability." *College Literature* 33.3 (2006): 171-196. Web. 16 Aug.2019.

Grandin, Greg. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York: Holt, 2019.

Gumbar, Diana. "The Dystopia of Border Crossings in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*." *Politics, Identity, and Mobility in Travel Writing*. Ed. Miguel A. Cabañas, Jeanne Dubino, Veronica Salles-Reese, and Gary Totten. New York: Routledge, 2016.

"Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech." *Time* 16 June 2015. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Inda, Jonathan Xavier. *Targeting Immigrants: Government, Technology, and Ethics*. Malden: Blackwell, 2006.

Jones, Reece. *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. London: Verso, 2016.

Kolossov, Vladimir, and James Scott. "Selected Conceptual Issues in Border Studies." *Belgeo*, Société Royale Belge de Géographie, 1 (2013): 1-16. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Lennard, Natasha. "With Record Numbers of Displaced People, Deterrence Policies to Stop Their Movement Are Mass Murder." *The Intercept* 6 July 2019. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Lopez, Christina Garcia. "Creating a More Compassionate Narrative: Undoing Desconocimiento Through Embodied Intimacy in Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*." *Remapping the Latina/o Literary Landscape: New Works and New Directions*. Ed. Christina Herrera and Larissa M. Mercado-Lopez. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Martinez, Michael. "Yuma: 'The Devil's Highway' for Immigrants." *Chicago Tribune* 18 May 2006. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

O'Dell, Rob, Daniel González, and Jill Castellano. "'Mass Disaster' Grows at the U.S.-Mexico Border, But Washington Doesn't Seem to Care." *The Arizona Republic* 20 Dec. 2017. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Rose, Ananda. *Showdown in the Sonoran Desert: Religion, Law, and the Immigration Controversy*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.

Saint-Germain, Michelle A. "Re-Presenting the Public Interest on the U.S.-Mexico Border." *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities*. Ed. David Spener and Kathleen Staudt. Boulder: Rienner, 1998.

Shirk, David A. "States, Borders, and Violence: Lessons from the US-Mexican Experience." *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur*. Ed. Wil G. Pansters. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012.

Spener, David, and Kathleen Staudt, eds. *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities*. Boulder: Rienner, 1998.

Stea, David, Jamie Zech, and Melissa Gray. "Change and Non-Change in the US-Mexican Borderlands after NAFTA." *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion*. Ed. I. William Zartman. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2010. Print.

Téllez, Michelle, and Maurice Rafael Magaña. "A Climate of Hate: How Border Militarization Is Getting Deadlier." *Truthout* 27 Mar. 2017. Web. 16 Aug. 2019.

Urrea, Luis Alberto. *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*. New York: Hachette, 2004.

Weber, Leanne, and Sharon Pickering. *Globalization and Borders: Death at the Global Frontier*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.