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# Telling the Story of Mexican Migration: Chronicle, Literature, and Film from the Post-Gatekeeper Period

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TELLING THE STORY OF MEXICAN MIGRATION:  
CHRONICLE, LITERATURE, AND FILM FROM THE POST-GATEKEEPER  
PERIOD

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Ruth Brown

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Susan Carvalho, Professor of Hispanic Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2013

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### TELLING THE STORY OF MEXICAN MIGRATION: CHRONICLE, LITERATURE, AND FILM FROM THE POST-GATEKEEPER PERIOD

This study examines how the social process of undocumented Mexican migration is interpreted in the chronicle, literature, and film of the post-Gatekeeper period, which is defined here at 1994-2008. Bounded on one side by the Mexican economic crisis of 1994, and increased border security measures begun in that same year, and on the other by the advent of the global economic crisis of 2008, the post-Gatekeeper period represents a time in which undocumented migration through the southern U.S. border reached unprecedented levels. The dramatic, tragic, and compelling stories that emerged from this period have been retold and interpreted from a variety of perspectives that have produced distinct, and often paradoxical, images of the figure of the undocumented migrant. Creative narrative responds to this critical point in the history of Mexican migration to the U.S. by applying the inherently subjective and mediated form of artistic interpretation to a social reality well documented by the media, historians, and social scientists. Throughout the chronicle, literature, and film of this period, migration is understood as a cultural tradition inspired by regional history. These stories place their undocumented protagonists on a narrative trajectory that transforms migration into a heroic quest for personal and community renewal. Such imagery positions the undocumented migrant as an active agent of change and provides discursive visibility to a figure often represented, in media and political rhetoric of the period, as an anonymous, collective Other. Filtered through this creative lens, migration is revealed as a complex social process in which individual experience is informed not only by personal ambition, but also by the expectations of the home community and its culture of migration. The creative works examined here foreground the history, motivation, and experience of their migrant protagonists in relation to the socio-historical context of this period. In doing so, they compose tales of migration in which the figure of the undocumented migrant plays a primary role, one informed not only by the experience of migration, but also by personal and community history.

KEYWORDS: Undocumented Mexican migration, cultures of migration, chronicle, literature, film

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CHRONICLE, LITERATURE, AND FILM FROM THE POST-GATEKEEPER  
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## Chapter One: Introduction

Undocumented migration between Mexico and the United States is not a new phenomenon; citizens of both countries have likely made clandestine, undocumented border crossings since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created the modern political boundary between the two countries in 1848. Despite this long history, the ways in which undocumented Mexican migration is both experienced and represented has changed dramatically since the early 1990s. The present study examines how the social process of undocumented Mexican migration is interpreted in the chronicle, literature, and film of the post-Gatekeeper period, which is defined here as 1994-2008. This period, bounded on one side by the Mexican economic crisis of 1994, and increased border security measures begun in that same year, and the other by the advent of the global economic crisis of 2008, is often characterized in creative discourse as a time of perilous border crossings and increased undocumented migration to the U.S. The creative works included here foreground the history, motivation, and experience of their migrant protagonists in relation to the socio-historical context of this period. In doing so, they compose tales of migration in which the figure of the migrant plays a primary role, one informed not only by the experience of migration, but also by personal and community history.

This study examines a small selection of the many creative works produced by Mexican and Mexican-American chroniclers, authors, and filmmakers in the decade following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and similar security measures in 1994.<sup>1</sup> These works respond to a critical period in the history of Mexican migration by

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<sup>1</sup> This study defines the Post-Gatekeeper period as the years 1994-2008, a period that begins with the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and similar national security measures along the southern U.S. border, and ends with the advent of the global economic recession in 2008. While this period encompasses

applying the inherently subjective and mediated form of artistic interpretation to a social reality well documented by the media, historians, and social scientists. In his discussion of the cultural dimensions of globalization, Arjun Appadurai's asserts that diasporas bring the "force of the imagination, as both memory and desire, into the lives of many ordinary people, into mythologies different from the disciplines of myth and ritual of the classic sort. The key difference here is that these new mythologies are charters for new social projects and not just a counterpoint to the certainties of daily life" (6). The chronicles, novels, short stories, and films examined here are, above all, stories. These tales of ambition, perseverance, and survival illuminate the intricacies of the individual lives behind the headlines, interpreting the figure of the undocumented migrant as an active agent of personal and community renewal.

As is common to most narratives about the migrant experience, creative narrative of post-Gatekeeper period tell a tale of travel. While their authors make a clear effort to ground their narratives in the socio-historical context of the period, the works discussed here maintain, at all times, a sense of narrative distancing and creative mediation that defines them as stories, intentional constructions in which the repetition of motifs and the utilization of narrative paradigms functions to communicate meaning. These works can be understood as what Amy Shuman calls "small-world stories", narratives in which the trope of travel functions both literally and metaphorically (2). Writing that small-world stories move "the plot from behind...are about travels, and stories that travel, reports told by people not necessarily present in the experience the stories recount", Shuman assigns a positive value to mediated accounts such as those studied here:

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a span of fourteen years, the creative works examined in this study are drawn from the first decade of this period.

the farther stories and storytelling travel from the experiences they recount, the more they promise. And stories almost always travel. The representation of experience in stories is often inadequate, failing the promise to represent and understand experience, but this failed promise, or in positive terms, the almost fulfilled promise, nonetheless provides a compelling process for making meaning of everyday life and experiences. (1)

Creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period participate in the larger body of popular discourse about Mexican migration by offering a stylized, detailed account of migration that portrays the figure of the undocumented migrant as a complex individual whose migration is defined by personal and community history. Tales of migration that seek not only to inform, but also to influence, these stories construct an alternative mythology around the undocumented migrant, one which advocates for the humanity of this polemic, and often marginalized, figure.

### **The Figure of the Undocumented Migrant**

Throughout the history of Mexican migration, the figure of the undocumented migrant has occupied a primary discursive position in news reports, political rhetoric, social science research and creative narrative production about Mexican migration to the U.S. Creative narrative discourse in particular has shown an affinity for this figure, mirroring historical periods of change with the increased production of stories, chronicles, and films about the migrant experience. The years following the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Bracero Accord of 1942, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the advent of Operation Gatekeeper and other similar security measures

in 1994 exemplify this linkage between historical flux and creative production, with each period corresponding to a distinct group of creative works that seek to reflect and interpret their particular socio-historical context. The present study focuses on creative narrative production during the years following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper. A time in which undocumented migration through the southern U.S. border reached unprecedented levels, the dramatic, tragic, and compelling stories of migration that emerged from this period have been retold and interpreted from a variety of perspectives that have produced distinct, and often paradoxical, images of the figure of the undocumented migrant.

The macro-historical context of Mexican migration paints a picture of a social process marked by distinct periods in which social and economic factors combined to influence greater international migration from Mexico to the U.S. Most historical overviews of Mexican migration to the U.S. examine this social process from the perspective of economic factors that encourage movement from one country to the other. Such accounts begin with the history of Mexican migration in the early 1990s when the development of rail lines connected the Mexican interior with existing lines in the U.S. (Cardoso 26). Railways brought labor recruiters to the interior of Mexico, specifically the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato, where early flows of migration are said to have originated (Cardoso 26). These railways also provided an escape route for Mexicans fleeing the violence and poverty of the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910. A time marked by social unrest, the near collapse of agricultural production in Mexico, and relative economic prosperity in the U.S., the first decades of the Twentieth century saw a

notable increase in the number of Mexicans from various economic classes migrating to the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

While migration to the U.S. decreased substantially during the Great Depression,<sup>3</sup> domestic labor shortages caused by U.S. involvement in World War II renewed the flow of migrants from Mexico. The *Bracero* Accord, instituted in 1942, sought to respond to these shortages by providing temporary visas for laborers to enter and work in the U.S. on a seasonal basis. The program, which lasted until 1964, marked a point of transition in which, as Jorge Durand observes, Mexican migration changed from being a “long-standing process of dubious legality into a legal, male process, of rural origin, oriented to agricultural work” (*Bracero* 29). During this time, labor recruiters utilized the networks established during the early 1900s to connect migrants, mostly men, from specific communities in the central plateau region of Mexico with employers in the U.S. (Durand, “Mexican Immigration” 109). These men were contracted to work seasonally, with the expectation that they would return to Mexico after completing their contract. The vast majority worked for agricultural growers, planting and harvesting labor-intensive agricultural crops; others were employed by the mining and railway industries. In the program’s peak from 1954 through 1964, over 350,000 *braceros* a year were mobilized for low-skilled, temporary labor in the U.S. (Durand, *Bracero* 32).

While the *Bracero* program offered a path to legal labor migration for millions of Mexicans, it occasioned a parallel increase in the number of undocumented workers entering the U.S. Citing estimates that five million illegal workers entered the U.S. during

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete overview of the economic factors that influenced early labor migration between Mexico and the US, see Lawrence Cardoso’s 1980 study *Mexican Emigration to the United States 1897-1931*.

<sup>3</sup> Massey et al. discuss the effects of the Great Depression on rates of labor migration in *Return to Aztlán* (42).

the 22 years of the program, Durand concludes that the program was nonetheless unable to satisfy demand for labor during that time (*Bracero* 32). Migrant networks, established through labor recruitment efforts at the beginning of the century and during the early years of the *Bracero* program, continued to flourish in the years following the program's termination. Such networks facilitate the movement of aspiring migrants, both documented and not, by linking them with agricultural and other low-skill jobs in the U.S. and make migration, as Massey et al. observe, a more accessible prospect for Mexicans from certain communities (61). By reducing the risks and costs associated with migration, these social networks facilitated an increase in undocumented migration in the years following the termination of the *Bracero* Accord in 1964 and helped to institutionalize the migrant flow between certain western Mexican communities and the U.S.

The two decades leading up to the U.S. Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 are characterized by both a tightening in immigration law and increase in undocumented migration between Mexico and the U.S. With the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, the U.S. began to drastically reduce the number of visas available to Mexican citizens. There appears to be little data to substantiate numbers of migrants crossing clandestinely into the U.S. during this period, nevertheless, some researchers consider an increase in the number of apprehensions and deportations as evidence of increased undocumented migration (Cerutti and Massey 19). This perception of increased undocumented entry led, in part, to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. In addition to offering amnesty to long-term residents and a legalization program for undocumented agricultural workers, IRCA included sanctions for employers who knowingly hired undocumented

workers. IRCA also allocated new resources to the Border Patrol, empowering the agency to more aggressively control undocumented crossings along the southern U.S. border.

Initiated in 1994, Operation Gatekeeper was one of three major security plans undertaken by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in an effort to decrease undocumented migrant crossings through major urban areas of the U.S.-Mexico border in the early 1990s (Massey, *New Faces* 31). In combination with “Operation Hold the Line” in the El Paso area and “Operation Safeguard” in the Tucson area, Gatekeeper’s restriction of undocumented crossings between Tijuana, Mexico and San Ysidro, CA encouraged undocumented Mexican migrants to seek entry via increasingly clandestine and dangerous methods in the mountainous areas east of San Ysidro, CA and the deserts west of Nogales, Arizona (Ganster and Lorey 186; Massey, *New Faces* 31). The remote nature and extreme weather of these areas exposed migrants to dangers such as heat exhaustion, hypothermia, dehydration, and injury (Massey, *Crossing* 284) and the numbers of migrants who died in these regions soon began to rise. Julián Castro-Rea’s findings that the number of migrant deaths in the area covered by Operation Gatekeeper climbed at an average rate of “more than one migrant killed per day, to a total of 3,800 deaths of migrants from 1994 to 2006” (120) echo those of Karl Eschbach and his colleagues (1999) and Wayne Cornelius (1991) to underscore the macabre nature of unauthorized border crossings in the post-Gatekeeper period.

The years following Operation Gatekeeper represent a distinct period in the history of migration from Mexico to the U.S., one characterized not only by the dramatic nature of undocumented border crossings, but also by the comparatively large number of migrants attempting to enter the U.S. without authorization. The rapid increase in

Mexico-U.S. migration associated with the 1990s and early 2000s can be traced, at least in part, to the unequal balance that existed between the booming U.S. and recession-laden Mexican economies of the time (Lowell, Villareal and Pasell 5). Economic incentives combined with a long-standing tradition of migration and established migrant networks to position undocumented migration as a favorable option for Mexican fleeing the poverty of *la crisis económica* (Lowell, Villareal and Pasell 4-6).<sup>4</sup> The record number of Mexican migrants, and in particular those who were unauthorized for legal entry, entering the U.S. peaked during the decade following Operation Gatekeeper and began to fall precipitously following the U.S. recession in the early 2000s, even turning negative (-1,000) for a short period in 2008-09 (Haddad and Shepherd 172-3; Lowell, Villareal and Pasell 9; Lacy n.p.), signaling a close to the post-Gatekeeper period and transition into migratory trends influenced by the global economic recession.

The increase in migration, both documented and not, that mark the decade following Operation Gatekeeper placed the figure of the undocumented migrant at the forefront of public, political, and creative discourse. The term “undocumented migrant” is in itself problematic, with terms such *illegal*, *irregular*, *clandestine*, *unauthorized*, or *alien* commonly used to describe those persons who enter a country without passing through the processes or requirements of state security efforts. Nicholas De Genova, who adds *extra-legal* to this list of categories, suggests a preference for *migrant* over *immigrant*, writing that *immigrant* implies deference to “migrant-receiving nation-state, in terms of outsiders coming in, presumably to stay” (421). In this study, the term *undocumented migrant* provides a descriptive category appropriate to the characters in

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<sup>4</sup> Often referred to as simply *la crisis*, the Mexican economic crisis of the 1990s, which featured a dramatic devaluation of the peso in December of 1994, is frequently cited by Mexican scholars as one of the main reasons for increased Mexico-U.S. migration in the 1990s (Garcia 43).



these stories. By and large, the protagonists of these tales are *migrants* by virtue of their circular patterns of movement; few if any of the characters intend to stay in the U.S. permanently. Similarly, the works examined here are characterized by the manner through which their protagonists enter the U.S., which is to say without authorization from U.S. customs and immigration controls. Choosing the term *undocumented migrant* is thus reflective of not only the context of the works being studied, but also a category of representation that is descriptive without being punitive.

The increase in undocumented migration to the U.S. of the early 1990s brought the figure of the undocumented migrant more fully into the public eye. In particular, political discourse and media coverage offer examples of the way in which the figure of the undocumented migrant was portrayed in popular discourse of the period. In their study of rhetoric related to Proposition 187, a 1994 ballot initiative that sought to limit access to state-sponsored support services for noncitizen residents of California, Kent Ono and John Sloop observe that nationally distributed news media in particular portrayed migrants using “stereotypically caricatured representations” (27), that featured “abundant images of dark-skinned people running in streets and across highways and climbing over and under fences” (38). Such imagery is grounded in both local political rhetoric regarding Proposition 187 and national narratives of border security produced by governing bodies and immigration enforcement agencies. The publicly conceived image of the undocumented migrant during this period is directly informed by what Matt Coleman calls a “nonlocal executive and congressional articulation that view the U.S.-Mexico border from afar as an instrumental and malleable landscape where the “national interest” is both evident and pursuable” (188). In these iterations, the image of the

undocumented migrant emerges as anonymous, collective, and bereft of individual history and experience.

These local and nonlocal articulations, and the media reports that manifest them in the public eye, frequently portray the undocumented migrant as a direct threat to national U.S. security. Arguing that the U.S.-Mexico border functions as a stage on which border control measures are ceremonial practices that communicate meaning (11), Peter Andreas conceptualizes Operation Gatekeeper as the skillful exploitation of “dramatic images of illegal immigrants rushing across the border” (13). Images such as those observed by Ono and Sloop distill migration into the specific moment of undocumented bordering crossing, positioning the migrants in such videos as anonymous bodies, alien invaders defined by visual and stereotypical modifiers such as skin color, clothing type, and action. Portraying migration in this way converts the border itself into a region that must be defended. Matt Coleman affirms that the cultural conception of the “illegal alien” during this period is conditioned as an extension of political decision-making and popular and political discourse, which often represents the “US Southwest border region as an unruly landscape of uncontrolled migration” (190). Such imagery imposes a social taboo on the act of undocumented border crossing, locating the “immigration problem” at the border and placing the fault for this problem with those who choose to enter the U.S. without passing through official border control processes.<sup>5</sup>

In public and political discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period, undocumented migration is frequently portrayed as a collective experience in which individual

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<sup>5</sup> Andreas affirms that the manipulation of such images by political entrepreneurs targets the border “as both the source of the illegal immigration problem and the most appropriate site of the policing solution (rather than, for example, the workplace),” thus laying the blame for migration “problems” with the migrants rather than the larger socio-economic issues that encourage, and facilitate, their migration (13).

experience is sublimated to an image of the migrant as human capital. Imagery such as that produced through Pete Wilson's 1994 California gubernatorial campaign ads<sup>6</sup> demonstrates how the use of the public pronoun "they" aggregates individual migrants into a single subject. In one Wilson campaign ad, migrants attempt to cross the border fence or weave through traffic in large groups in the dead of night, while the narrator intones "they keep coming, two million illegal immigrants in California. The federal government won't stop them at the border, yet requires us to take care of them" (danieljbmitchell n.p.). In discourse such as this, the pronouns "they" and "them" erase individual experience, dehumanizing the figure of the undocumented migrant and positioning it as an alien Other.<sup>7</sup> Rhetoric such as this exemplifies a neoliberal perspective in which the figure of the undocumented migrant is commodified as human capital, pawns in what cultural critic Néstor García Canclini calls the "juego anónimo de fuerzas del mercado" (64). The portrayal of the undocumented migrant as labor power is seen in the way rhetoric of the period poses the debate over migration in terms of cost and benefit to the state (Kent and Ono 29-31).<sup>8</sup> Such imagery distills the figure of the undocumented migrant into a simplistic stereotype in which individual motivation, experience, and history is sublimated to an image of the migrant as commodified body, an alien Other whose presence is both taboo and threatening.

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<sup>6</sup> Discussing these campaign ads, Massey observes how Governor Pete Wilson sought to reinvigorate his "foundering" reelection campaign by taking advantage of "public anxieties about immigration, he blamed the state's economic troubles on immigrants" (*New Faces* 29)

<sup>7</sup> Kent and Ono further observe that Proposition 187 rhetoric such as that of the Wilson campaign often, implicitly, directs "their messages at "you" (the citizen audience member of the programs) against "them" (the implicitly non-white, noncitizen foreigners)" (30).

<sup>8</sup> Kent and Ono find examples of cost and benefit imagery throughout rhetoric of Proposition 187, not only in that crafted by anti-immigrant discourse, but also in that which sought to defeat the proposition. They note that "arguments both for and against Proposition 187 use appeals that assume undocumented immigrants are human capital" (31).

Stereotyping the figure of the undocumented migrant as alien Other strips this figure of individual characteristics and imposes upon it an aura of anonymity, a condition of being unnamed or unidentifiable. This anonymity is troublesome, and a bit paradoxical. The nature of undocumented migration during the post-Gatekeeper period implies, on one hand, a positive and empowering quality to be unidentifiable. Certainly, the ability to pass under the radar, to be invisible to state security and immigration enforcement measures, facilitates success in undocumented border crossing. At the same time, anonymity places migrants in a vulnerable, marginalized position and exposes them, as Nuria Villanova affirms, to violence, both man-made and natural:

Anonymity is so closely related to the migrant condition that it seems essential at this point to explore its consequences in depth. Anonymity, although a companion of freedom and emancipation, has many faces. It also becomes, dramatically, an ally of exclusion and this violence. It shows its more terrifying faces when a bunch of migrants die crossing the desert or get killed on San Diego highways, or when hundreds of young women are kidnapped, tortured, and assassinated in Ciudad Juárez. (22)

On an individual level, anonymity might serve to empower and facilitate successful border crossing for some migrants. However, in transmitting imagery of undocumented migration as a collective, anonymous experience, dominant modes of political, economic, and media discourse marginalize the figure of the undocumented migrant and deprive it of an individuality and complexity that might translate into active agency.

In contrast to the anonymous, collective imagery found in political, economic, and media rhetoric of the post-Gatekeeper period, many of the chronicles, novels, short

stories and films produced in the same period construct their undocumented migrant protagonists as individuals whose migration is informed by personal and community history. The creative works examined in this study exemplify this orientation, they utilize narrative techniques respective of their genre to foreground the individuality of their migrant protagonists and portray migration as more than a simple outcome of economic process. These stories interpret undocumented migration not only in respect to the dramatic socio-historical backdrop of the post-Gatekeeper period, but also in relation to the history of the community from which their migrant protagonists hail. By portraying their migrant protagonists as individuals whose experience is informed by personal and community history, these works echo the findings of social scientists who observe a culture of migration in Mexican communities with long-standing traditions of international migration.

In particular, the work of sociologists such as Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, William Kandel, Jeffery Cohen, and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo seeks to understand the many levels of individual and community experience that make up the social process of Mexican migration. These scholars' work postulates an understanding of Mexican migration as cultural act, a strategy for living in which migrant motivation and decision-making are informed by community history and practice. The idea that certain Mexican communities exhibit a "culture of migration" is forwarded by Massey and his colleagues in the 1987 work *Return to Aztlán*. Massey and others approach both the *why* and the *how* of Mexican migration to the US by examining an array of factors that go beyond the macro-economic context, shifting their research emphasis to the "migrants themselves – to interactions with their environment, confrontations with restrictive state policies,

comparisons with non-migrants, and contrasts between the first migrants and those that follow” (15). The image of Mexican migration found in such studies aligns closely with that expressed by creative narrative of the post-Gatekeeper period; in both, migration is shown to be an intergeneration process that exists on a level deeper than that of simple macro-economic processes and popular political and media discourse.

Despite the challenges involved in defining and using the term “culture,” this study intentionally employs the term “culture of migration” in order to draw a connection between social science scholarship on Mexican migration to the US and creative production of the post-Gatekeeper years. Throughout research on Mexican cultures of migration, population movement between Mexico and the U.S. is understood as an outcome of cumulative causation; maintaining that a community’s experience with international migration, over the course of multiple generations, makes additional movement progressively more likely, Massey et al. understand migratory behavior as a self-perpetuating cultural act (45). Such findings indicate that movement to and from the US functions, at least for people from communities with long-standing traditions of migratory behavior, as a normative cultural practice. Sandra Faulker et al. describe functional culture as a “design for living, that help people “adjust and cope with their environment... organize collective life and ... solve the problems and answer the questions of everyday life” (38). Research on the Mexican culture of migration indicates that migratory behavior is informed by myriad factors arising from personal and community experience and need; for communities with long-standing traditions of movement to and from the US, migration serves as a normalized strategy, and a way of living that is both accepted and expected of young people.

Conceived as such, migration is more than an outcome of economic imbalance, it is a social practice informed by community life and tradition. Affirming that migration is neither haphazard nor a decision made in haste, this research positions migratory behavior as a socially acceptable, and often expected, means of remedying specific economic pressures that arise within a family throughout the life cycle. Various researchers have shown that the decision to migrate often starts at the household level, where families and individuals use migration to adapt to specific economic imperatives that manifest at various stages in the life course. These imperatives range from wanting to feed and maintain a family, to needing to respond to specific economic change and volatility (Kanaiaupuni 1316). Massey et al. identify three primary migration strategies that are employed at various stages in the life cycle: temporary, recurrent, and settled (212-13):

- **Temporary** migrants made a small number of short trips to the United States at stages in the life cycle devoted to raising young children. These migrants tended to be married fathers in their mid to late 30s.
- **Recurrent** migrants sought to maintain a high standard of living in Mexico by working regularly in the United States. These migrants tended to be in their late 20s to early 30s and either single or recently married.
- **Settled** migrants, generally single or recently married, made a small number of trips to the United States before deciding to stay and work steady, usually urban jobs.

Such findings foreground the array of factors that inspire migration, showing how reasons for migrating are not only individual, but fluid in the sense that individual circumstance changes over the course of the life cycle.

By linking migrant motivation not only to economic need but also to personal history and community expectation, these findings emphasize the important role that community plays in influencing individual decision-making. Kandel and Massey observe this influence when they write that “it increasingly enters the calculus of conscious choice and eventually becomes normative. Young people who grow up and come of age increasingly expect to migrate internationally in the course of their lives. For young men, especially, migration becomes a rite of passage, and those who do not attempt it are seen as lazy, unenterprising, and undesirable as potential mates” (982). Kandel and Massey have found that the more a community’s families become involved in migration, the higher the likelihood that children will look to the US for opportunities and social mobility. By reducing their investment in the acquisition of local resources such as education, people raise the odds that they “actually will migrate as they get older and, through their involvement in international migration, ultimately pass promigration values on to their own children” (1002). Conway and Cohen echo this view, finding that migration traditions are entrenched in individual and community aspirations of “success” (40). The culture of migration is thus defined as a cyclical social process in which migration, viewed as a common strategy for social mobility, has become embedded in community practice that reproduces itself in future generations.

The degree to which migration is embedded in community practice can be seen in the way that, as migrants age and move further along the life cycle, the economic



imperatives presented by community obligations often become reasons to migrate. One example of this can be found in communities, such as those in Oaxaca, that maintain traditional cultural practices such as *servicio* or *cargos*. These responsibilities involve time and financial commitments to both local community-based government and the church (Conway and Cohen 38)<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, the improvement, construction, and maintenance of homes serve as powerful incentives to migrate. In his study of such homes, Peri Fletcher contends that the large and comparatively opulent houses of migrants, which are highly visible in small rural communities, provide visual incentive to other migrants who wish to advance socially. Kandel and Massey affirm that the social visibility garnered through activities such as the sponsorship of community events and the construction of opulent homes transforms migration into an enviable lifestyle choice, one that appears to offer Mexicans from impoverished communities a viable path for social mobility (982). In these findings, the visual performance of success plays an influential role in the decision-making process of future migrants; faced with few other options, migration becomes, for many communities, an inevitable path that is followed by young men seeking social mobility.

Research on Mexican cultures of migration demonstrates that while migration is a strategy employed by individuals and families in response to economic imperative, the choice of *who* migrates is often a gendered process. Throughout this literature, migration is frequently shown to serve as a cultural rite of passage for young men, who see it as a culturally expected experience of adulthood (Kandel and Massey 982; Hondagneu-

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<sup>9</sup> Conway and Cohen find that Oaxacan families often make the decision to send a migrant to the U.S. based on the *cargo* system, a hierarchically arranged system of committees and positions that organize the political life of the village with family heads returning “for a second and third (or more) round of transmigration following the completion of community service” (38).

Sotelo, *Gendered* 191; Conway and Cohen 40). Women, on the other hand, may be motivated by other factors. Kandel and Massey have found that women's aspirations to migrate are based more often on the desire to live in the U.S., rather than to work, and that these aspirations are motivated more by family and personal experiences, rather than by community involvement (982). Whereas work in the U.S. is seen as a rite of passage for young men, women's decision to migrate is more closely related to the social reproduction of the family. Often migrating for the purpose of joining family in the U.S., many women seek to either reunite with husbands who have already established themselves or help grown children and other relatives (Kanaiaupuni 1315). Asserting that explanations of men's migration often do not hold true for women, Kanaiaupuni affirms the tendency, among contemporary social scientists, to individualize explanations of migratory behavior by distilling motivation down to the personal and community level.

In their study of Mexican cultures of migration, social scientists have looked beyond demographic data to examine how key elements of this social process are evidenced in creatively produced artifacts. Such research looks primarily to examples of popular art and music produced either by migrants themselves or by members of their communities. In particular, this research examines *retablos*, photographs, and *corridos* to identify patterns and themes that support and engage with scholarly findings regarding the Mexican culture of migration. The creative works analyzed in these studies are chosen for their testimonial proximity; as works created by migrants and their communities, such forms of expression are positioned not only to reflect individual experience but also to influence others in the community. The sense that artifacts of popular culture might play a role in the transmission of migratory behavior is

underscored by the fact that these genres of popular culture are visual and oral, and thus easily accessible to people from all social, economic, and educational levels. The *retablos*, photographs, and *corridos* examined in these studies exemplify the way in which creative, artistic expression can engage with and interpret the ideas, themes, and actions that characterize Mexican cultures of migration.

Jorge Durand and Douglass Massey's extensive cataloguing of *retablos*, or votive paintings, found in churches and private collections throughout migrant-sending states in Western Mexico identify numerous linkages between these works and in the cultures of migration in which they were produced. Produced or commissioned by migrants and their families to express thanks or ask for religious favors, *retablos* are generally painted on tin, wood, or cardboard and generally depict a scene from a specific event accompanied by descriptive text and the image of a particular saint. In their review, Durand and Massey show that the production and commission of these paintings supports other research regarding the aspirations and experiences of migrants. For instance, certain votive paintings, such as those represent 'finding one's way in the U.S.' and 'gratitude for homecoming', were mostly prepared by men (100% and 58%, respectively). However, while all of the 'homecoming' *retablos* are commissioned by or executed by men, 62% of those offered by family members were left by women; these statistics echo studies that show migration to be a gendered process in which men migrate earlier and more frequently than women (Durand & Massey, 1995).

The practice of sending photographs home to those in the sending community further exemplifies this connection between creative production and research on the cultural nature of Mexican migration. This practice, explored by Jorge Durand and

Patricia Arias in their study of family albums in sending regions, underscores the image of migration as a desirable strategy for social mobility. Such photographs tend to be taken in studios with migrants dressing in their best clothes, sometimes rented or borrowed for the occasion, implying a perception of wealth that is intended to help alleviate family anxieties and demonstrate migrant success to the home community (Durand and Arias 12). This practice is featured in David Riker's 1998 film *La ciudad/The City*. Here, each of four vignettes is preceded by a short scene, filmed in a photography studio, in which a migrant changes clothes, chooses a background, and has his or her picture taken. Durand and Arias affirm the important role that these photos play in encouraging future migration, arguing that such images help to convert individual experiences of migration into local tradition and lore (12).

A third source of creative expression regarding Mexican cultures of migration is the *corrido*, a traditional Mexican folk ballad in which a first person narrator comments on a specific historical occurrence. Such songs typically express the narrator's point of view, though their authors are frequently anonymous, and sometimes a *corrido* be attributed to what Chew-Sánchez calls the *dominio público*, meaning that the individual performer has the right to interpret each song as he or she sees fit (n.p.). The genre has historically played an important role in the oral tradition of Mexican and Mexican-American communities (Chew-Sánchez n.p.). In her study of *corridos* about Mexican migration, María Herrera-Sobek acknowledges that the production of such works has followed in close step with the historical ebbs and flows of migration. *Corridos* of the *Bracero* era, for instance, narrate the characteristically masculine orientation of migration at that time. In both *Canto del bracero* and *Me voy para el norte*, the narrator sings of

men who decide to leave their wives at home and seek work in the U.S. (lyrics available in Herrera-Sobek, *Bracero* 166-7). In these examples, the *corrido* offer a medium through which to share information about migration, to record the “conditions in Mexico which drive a man to leave his homeland to seek a better life” (Herrera Sobek, *Bracero* 66) and pass on information about migration to future generations.

In these examples, creative production by migrants and their communities provides an alternative source of discourse regarding the figure of the undocumented migrant. These artifacts have a testimonial quality and often narrate, as Durand and Massey observe in the case of *retablos*, the most “salient events at the moment of their occurrence...[and] an immediate record of migrant’s most pressing concerns” (67). In attempting to catalogue and quantify the ways in which these works engage with key findings of research on Mexican cultures of migration, such studies reveal how individualized stories reveal patterns of behavior, commonalities of experience that help to explain the social process of migration to the U.S. The process of individualization found in such research echoes that observed in creative narrative production from the post-Gatekeeper years. Throughout the chronicles, novels, short stories, and films of this period, undocumented migrant protagonists hail from communities steeped in the migrant tradition. Their stories are told in the context of this culture, grounding the figure of the undocumented migrant in a rich milieu in which individualized stories are intertwined with community history and expectation.

## **Migration as Heroic Quest**

The canon of creative narrative about Mexican migration to the U.S. has a long and rich history that consistently echoes periods of flux in the movement of people between the two countries. Novels about the diaspora of the Mexican Revolution, chronicles from the *Bracero* period, Chicano/a fiction and Hollywood films about the immigrant's struggle in a new land are but some of the many genres and movements which have sought to interpret times of historic change in the social process of Mexican migration to the U.S. These disparate works are unified not only in theme, but also in an apparent desire to record, interpret, and respond to the impact that socio-historical context has on the experience of individual migrant protagonists. The goal of individualization is particularly salient in creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period, during which time an impressive quantity of chronicles, novels, short stories, and films about the theme of migration to the U.S. were produced. Set against a backdrop marked by the security, rhetorical, and cultural context of these years, fictionalized narrative of this period transforms the social process of Mexican migration into a heroic quest in which the individual migrant plays an active role as agent of change.

In comparison to previous periods, the years following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper are particularly rich in regards to not only quantity of works produced, but also the variety of genres in which the theme of undocumented migration is explored. Of these works, those falling into the genres of chronicle, fiction, and film offer of the best examples of the way in which fictionalized narrative seeks to interpret the figure of the undocumented migrant through a creative, artistic lens. This study examines three works from each of these genres. Each was published or released between 1994 and

2005, and each set its stories of undocumented migration squarely in the context of the post-Gatekeeper period. All tell stories of undocumented migration, portraying border crossing attempts that occur through remote rural, or heavily fortified urban, areas. The constant threat of apprehension by the Border Patrol or other governmental authorities influences the decision of these protagonists to contract with guides, often called *coyotes*, to help them pass through border security measures undetected. While the works differ in how explicitly they reference the specific years of the post-Gatekeeper period, they unanimously exhibit characteristics that link them to this period.

The works included here exhibit commonalities of theme, action, and ideas that span the genres. Indeed, these stories appear, at first glance, to offer endless variations of the same migrant tale. These patterns, however, are instrumental in understanding the many ways in which these stories engage with the socio-historical context of the post-Gatekeeper period. Examining how narrative perspective, characterization, dramatic action, and ideas in the background are repeated across the genres reveals a close connection between creative narrative and the findings of social scientists regarding the cultural nature of Mexican migration. Following a narrative analysis based on the premise that form reveals function, this study seeks to identify how patterns in narrative structure and technique inform the construction of the figure of the undocumented migrant in these works. This analysis is driven by a narratological approach which recognizes, as Paul Cobley notes, that “the thoroughly social nature of the construction of meaning [and] the fact that representational systems, rather than their users and objects, allow meaning to occur” (n.p.). In the preface to *Narratology Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Mieke Bal encourages the literary critic to see narratology as a “heuristic

tool, not an objective grid providing certainty” (n.p.). As such, this study directs its focus on patterns of representation, *how* the story is told, in order to define how these works construct the figure of the undocumented migrant.

The focus that this study places on *how* the story is told reveals a tendency, among creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period, to reference a common set of themes, actions, and ideas that link them to individualized, community-based social science research on the Mexican culture of migration. The emphasis that these works place on migrant motivation, the idea that migration is a rite of passage for youth, and the role that community expectation plays in the individual migrant experience reiterates the findings of social scientists who consider transnational migration to be a normative behavior that is transmitted across generations of people from certain Mexican communities with long-standing traditions of out-migration to the U.S. (Kandel and Massey 981). The works examined in this study engage with this research through the reiteration of its themes, actions, and ideas. The repetition of such structural elements throughout these works also links them to one another and allows a point of comparison through which to examine how creative narrative of this period functions to privilege individual experience and to portray migration as an action informed by more than simple economic need.

In creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period, the themes, actions, and ideas that characterize the Mexican culture of migration are transformed into narrative motifs that are reiterated across the genres to produce a common discursive paradigm. The recurrence of character types, motivations, and actions throughout the creative narratives presented in this study is notable; in truth, the stories of the post-Gatekeeper period seem



to offer endless variations of the same basic migrant tale. Using narrative techniques typical of their respective genres, the works analyzed in this study portray migration as an individual quest born of cultural influence and community experience. The creative works found in this study reference and engage with both social science findings and the narrative paradigm of the heroic quest in such a way as to privilege the role of the individual migrant and his or her unique set of motivations and experience.

American folklorist Stith Thompson observes three classes of narrative motifs that find easy parallels in social science literature regarding the Mexican culture of migration. Across the genres examined in this study, these three classes, namely the *actors in the tale*, *certain items in the background of the action*, and *single incidents* (Thompson 415-6), are consistently interpreted in a way that reflects and engages with research on the culture of migration:

- *Actors in the tale*: While undocumented migrants function as the primary actors in these tales, the figure of the undocumented migrant is commonly interpreted as a set of conventionalized characters defined by the various types of migration that occur over the course of the life cycle. Thus emerge stock characters such as the young single man who is out for an adventure, the married man who migrates to support his family, and the woman who finds greater personal freedoms in the U.S.
- *Certain items in the background of the action*: The reasons that these characters give for migrating frequently mirror the findings of social scientists. Social mobility, generational influence, and a community's previous experience with migration are the primary motivators of migration in these works. Creative

narratives of this period account for these motivations in great detail, drawing the reader's attention to the role that these ideas, or "items in the background" to use Thompson's terminology, play in the individual migrant's decision-making process.

- *Single incidents:* The works of this period typically describe a similar series of actions that are undertaken by migrants in their journey to the U.S. As such, these stories interpret the undocumented migrant experience as a series of actions that occur as a progression through a set of proscribed stages, namely: making the decision to migrate, leaving home, reaching the border, crossing the border, arriving in the U.S., and (at times) returning home.

The repetition of such motifs throughout the creative narratives of this period forges a common vocabulary of cultural references that links these works to social science research on Mexican migration. This narrative vocabulary functions as a backdrop of shared cultural experience against which the experiences of individual migrants can be compared and contrasted.

The reiteration of narrative motifs throughout creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period not only demonstrates the process of narrativization accomplished in these stories, but also functions to establish a common set of literary references around which the paradigm of the hero quest emerges. The hero quest is an apt metaphor for the migrant experience; utilized since ancient times in folktales, legends, myths, literature, and film the quest offers a common point of literary reference whose proscribed steps mirror those of Mexican migration in the post-Gatekeeper period. Discussing the universality of what he calls the "monomyth," Joseph Campbell describes the typical

progression of a hero as one in which a man ventures forth from the “world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (30). While there is variation among how works engage with the narrative paradigm of the heroic quest, all place their migrant protagonists on a similar trajectory of movement in which the physical and emotion challenges of undocumented migration serve as tests of strength, and the ultimate goal is to return home displaying the wealth and success gained through his or her experience. The hero quest provides, in creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period, a conventionalized narrative paradigm that allows creative producers to interpret individual experience in light of a common set of cultural references.

In the creative works of this period, the heroism of migrant protagonists is frequently qualified by actions, specifically those accomplished in the migrant’s successful progression through the typical stages of migration. Northrop Frye observes three main stages of the quest that clearly parallel the process of undocumented migration in the post-Gatekeeper period:

- The *conflict*, which Frye describes as the “state of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures,” is evidenced in narrative descriptions of a migrant’s life in the home sending community, the decision to migrate, and the preparations made and experiences encountered prior to arriving at the border.
- The *death-struggle*, or “crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die”, is commonly interpreted to be the migrant’s clandestine attempts at crossing the Mexico-U.S. border.

- The *discovery*, or “recognition of the hero,” is often interpreted as the home community’s reaction to the migrant’s experience and his or her reception upon arriving home (187).

The emphasis that these stories place on individual progression through the stages of migration places the crucial test of migrant heroism at the border. Pitting their undocumented migrant protagonists against the extreme conditions and security nexus of the U.S.-Mexico border in the post-Gatekeeper years, these works construct migration as an individualized experience in which undocumented migrants play an active and primary role.

Casting undocumented migrants in the role of hero implies certain cultural and literary associations that confer on migrant protagonists a sense of exceptionality. The emphasis that these stories place on the extreme nature of the post-Gatekeeper border crossing experience serves to highlight individual strength and perseverance in the face of great physical and emotional challenges. As we shall see, the heroism of migrant protagonists is frequently constructed in such a way as to reference the cultural figures of conquering or martyred heroes. Migrants who succeed in unauthorized border crossings are often portrayed as strong, victorious, and, in some cases, invincible or invulnerable, characteristics that folklorist Orin Klapp has associated with the archetype of the Conquering Hero (19). The migrants who do not survive these crossings are frequently portrayed as martyrs; the great detail with which their death and posthumous return home is described implies its own form of heroism. Klapp observes that the “particular ritual and dramatic significance” traditionally given to the martyred hero’s death reflects the difficulty that was experienced in killing them and implies a sort of triumph on the part of

the dead hero (22-25). A few of the migrant protagonists examined in this study fall into the category of anti-hero; while their petty, ignominious, clownish, or dishonest characteristics set them at odds with the positive image of the hero as conqueror or martyr, it nevertheless reinforces the idea that they are exceptional in some way, individuals whose characterization goes deeper than that expressed in some examples of media and political discourse from the time.

The narrative paradigm of the hero quest also allows the works examined in this study to highlight personal motivation and experience while simultaneously underscoring the relationship between the individual and his or her community. In these works, the home community is afforded substantial influence; it inspires migration through collective experience, sustains migrant determination in the face of physical and emotional challenges, and judges the overall value of the migrant endeavor. Discussing the role that the community plays in the paradigm of the heroic quest, critic Dana Heller affirms:

The quest affirms the hero's essential individual service to the collective whose salvation rests in his hands. However, the hero must sever his ties to the social order before any restoration can be achieved...The successful completion of the rite of passage depends on this realization, as well as on the hero's restoration of life to the community from which he is initially divided. The adventures of the male quester must eventually bring together the individual and the all...[T]he unity that is achieved through the masculine monomyth...parallels the internal unity of the hero as he makes his own inner progress. (3)

While Heller is critical of the misogynistic basis of this paradigm, her observation rings true in the context of post-Gatekeeper creative narrative. Characterized as heroes on a quest, the undocumented migrant protagonists of these stories are positioned as active agents of change in both their own lives and the lives of those in their home communities.

Each genre examined here features a distinct set of narrative techniques that define both the form and function of their respective works. As such, the way in which undocumented migrant protagonists are characterized as heroes differs within each genre. Migration chronicles emphasize the heroic valor of the undocumented crossing, novels and short stories focus on the personal transformation that occurs as a result of migration, and feature-length films foreground the role that community plays in evaluating and defining migrant success. Despite utilizing different techniques to characterize their migrant protagonists as heroes, all works examined here express a common vocabulary of characters, ideas, and actions that reference the socio-historical context of the post-Gatekeeper period and social science research on Mexican cultures of migration. Throughout these works, the repeated characterization of migrant protagonists as conquering, martyred, and fallen heroes establishes a common narrative vocabulary based on imagery, themes, and actions that elevate the figure of the undocumented migrant to a position of active agency and individuality.

Though based on the true events surrounding the clandestine border crossings of large groups of migrants, migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper years feature the narrativization of real-life experience typical of the chronicle genre. In *Crossing Over* (Rubén Martínez, 2001), *The Devil's Highway* (Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004) and *Morir en el intento* (Jorge Ramos, 2005) the dramatic interplay of individual stories with

pluralizing language that blends groups of migrants into a single character emphasizes the individuality of migrant experience. These stories are set during a time in which the difficult conditions surrounding clandestine border crossing resulted in increasing numbers of dramatic migrant deaths. By accounting for the multifaceted reasons that lead migrants to attempt, and survive, such crossings, these stories privilege individual experience and reject the image of the undocumented migrant as anonymous, collective Other.

In three novels and short stories of this period, migration is interpreted as a rite of passage, a coming-of-age quest that impacts both personal and community development. The protagonists of *Across a Hundred Mountains* (Reyna Grande, 2006), “Estrellas de arena” (David Manuel Carracedo, 2004), and “Telar de infortunios” (MaLuGiSaVe, 2004) pass through a series of stages typical to undocumented migration of the post-Gatekeeper period. As these migrants progress through these stages, they encounter tests of survival, both physical and emotional, that challenge their personal resolve. These are sites of personal transformation positions, heterotopia in which migrant survival is linked to personal history and the fortifying influence of the home community. Using the chronological and narrative disruptions typical of heterotopic discourse, these stories imply that the migrant experience is not only highly personalized, but also dependent on his or her relationship with the community and its culture of migration.

Drawing from a rich tradition of feature-length films about migration, feature-length films from the post-Gatekeeper period frequently interpret the story of undocumented migration at the end of the 20th century using techniques commonly associated with melodramatic cinema. In the films *Cuando llegan los mojadros* (directed

by Alonso O. Lara, 2003), *De ida y vuelta* (directed by Salvador Aguirre, 2000) and *La tragedia de Macario* (directed by Pablo Véliz, 2005) the visual performance of masculinity contrasts migrant with non-migrant characters in a way that encourages pathos for the migrant protagonists. These films place their migrant protagonists in narrative dialogue with the cultural stereotypes that commonly define *machismo* using popular imagery and music. Examining how the performance of migrant success is often illusory and based on fleeting material gain, these films characterize their migrant protagonists as imperfect heroes who embody a fluid masculinity that stands as a challenge to the patriarchal power structure of migrant-sending communities.

Responding to a time period in which the figure of the undocumented migrant moved to the forefront of discourse regarding Mexican migration to the U.S., creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period engage with the social process of migration on many levels. Converting the themes, actions, and ideas that characterize Mexican cultures of migration into narrative motifs reveals how these works relate not only to the socio-historical context of the time, but also to one another. As stories, these works seek to portray the figure of the undocumented migrant in a way that is relatable; as heroic quests, these tales reference a universal narrative vocabulary of myth, valor, and sacrifice. The image of the migrant as hero directly contrasts with that found in media and political discourse of the post-Gatekeeper years and rejects that portrays undocumented migrants as anonymous figures that pose a threat to the security of the U.S. Such tropes enact a form of violence on the figure of the undocumented migrant, pushing it to what Eduardo Barrera calls a “status of a disincarnate essence, an ambulatory and omnipresent phantom in a heterotopia” (177). The archetypal figure of the hero, in contrast, communicates a



universality that underscores the active agency of undocumented migrant protagonists. Seen through this creative filter, the well-studied social process of Mexican migration emerges as a new mythology, in which the figure of the undocumented migrant is affirmed as an individual who is deeply connected to the home community and its culture of migration.

## Chapter Two: Migration Chronicles - A Paradoxical Visibility

*La crónica o la novela sin ficción dependen de la noción de "frontera", pero sobre todo, del arte de cruzarla. A medida que la mentalidad de fortaleza se arraiga en los territorios que temen a los bárbaros, pocos estímulos pueden ser tan sugerentes como la mezcla de géneros y culturas.*

–Juan Villoro

A genre that is traditionally associated with helping its reader make sense of emerging social realities, the chronicle, or *crónica* as it is commonly known in Spanish-language usage, is a natural fit for authors hoping to interpret the dramatic, tragic and at times shocking realities of the U.S.-Mexico border crossing experience for U.S. and Mexican readers. Although journalists have been using the chronicle form to interpret the Mexican migration experience through a creative lens since at least the Bracero period,<sup>10</sup> the publication of book-length migration chronicles has increased dramatically since the advent of Operation Gatekeeper and similar border security measures in the early 1990s. Migration chronicles published during the post-Gatekeeper period<sup>11</sup> provide a narrative footprint that has influenced numerous subsequent *cronistas de migración* by demonstrating how the literary and creative influences of the *crónica* genre can help to bring discursive visibility to the figure of the undocumented migrant.

This chapter identifies the key characteristics of the migration chronicle as an independent literary genre and examines three works that exemplify this genre during the post-Gatekeeper period. Though based on the true events surrounding the death or clandestine entry into the U.S. of large groups of undocumented migrants, the works examined in this chapter feature the narrativization of real-life experience typical of the

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<sup>10</sup> Generally defined as 1942-1964

<sup>11</sup> Defined in this study as 1994-2005.

chronicle genre. Using a common set of narrative motifs that reference characteristic elements of the Mexican culture of migration, these chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period interpret individual migrant stories as quest tales in which the undocumented Mexican migrant plays the role of hero. This literary crafting has the effect of elevating the figure of the undocumented migrant and highlighting his or her unique experience against a background of generic cultural and discursive stereotypes. By placing the individuality of their migrant heroes in direct contrast with the anonymity inherent in many public stereotypes, the works examined in this chapter create discursive visibility for the figure of the undocumented migrant and memorialize the thousands of lives lost as a result of post-Gatekeeper border security policies.

### **Reporting on Migrant Tragedy**

Contemporary migration chronicles bring a transnational perspective to a literary form refined by the Mexican chroniclers of the last half century. The hybrid literary form found in contemporary migration chronicles references and engages with the works of twentieth-century Mexican chroniclers such as Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, and Juan Villoro. Poniatowska's chronicles about public tragedies such as the 1968 student massacre at Tlatelolco and the 1985 Mexico City earthquake<sup>12</sup> have particular resonance with the work of contemporary migration chroniclers who write about tragic, but true, events of migrant death on the southern U.S. border. Using a variety of literary techniques and extensive investigative reporting, works such as Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco* convert simple news headlines into rich narratives of individual, personal experience that invite their readers to appreciate the depth of the story and the individual

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<sup>12</sup> *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) and *Nada, nadie. Las voces del temblor* (1988), respectively.

lives behind the headlines. A genre practiced by authors from both sides of the border, contemporary migration chronicles adapt this same basic premise in order to portray subjects and experiences in the U.S., Mexico, and the in-between space of the border in a critical and creative light.

In documenting the experiences of individual migrants, migration chroniclers uphold the chronicle tradition of contextualizing their works within contemporary social, political, and historical processes. Much like the works of Mexican chroniclers of the 70s and 80s, contemporary migration chronicles respond to particular events and correspond with specific periods in the history of migration from Mexico to the U.S. The first major titles of the genre come from the Bracero era. Works of this period, such as *Murieron a mitad del río* (Luis Spota, 1948) and *El dólar viene del norte* (J. de Jesús Becerra González, 1954), explore the experiences of men who migrated for work as contract agricultural laborers.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, with the exception of Ted Conover's *Coyotes: A Journey Across Borders with America's Illegal Migrants* (1987), few migration chronicles were published between the Bracero and Gatekeeper periods. However, the period of time between the advent of Gatekeeper and similar security measures and the beginnings of the global recession, defined in this study as 1994-2008, featured a large increase in the publication of such works. Since 2008, the genre has continued to increase in popularity as the economic pressures that the global recession has exerted on migration transfer into social and political arenas.<sup>14</sup> By interpreting events of historic and social

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<sup>13</sup> See María Herrera-Sobek's *Bracero Experience* for an excellent discussion of these works.

<sup>14</sup> Some notable migration chronicles published after the start of the recession include *El muro de la vergüenza: crónica de una tragedia en la frontera* (Miguel Escobar, 2006), Victor Ronquillo (*Migrantes de la pobreza*, 2007), Sam Quinones (*Antonio's Gun and Delfino's Dream*, 2007), and Eduardo González Velázquez (*Con todo y triques: Crónicas de migración*, 2008), and Joseph Nevins (*Dying to Live*, 2008) as well as individual stories published on the Internet. Currently, migration chronicles can be found on mainstream sites such as that of UNAM's *La Jornada*, which maintains a *crónica* subsection under on its

importance through a creative lens, contemporary migration chronicles continue the chronicle tradition of making the individual stories of marginalized persons visible to the reading public.

The migration chronicle can be defined as a subgenre of the contemporary Latin American chronicle, a narrative form that blends literary technique with reportage journalism for the purpose of examining the intersection of social processes with individual experience. In the chronicle genre, literary manipulations such as characterization, the use of descriptive elements, and the development of narrative plot arcs mix freely with the techniques of traditional reportage journalism. Despite an apparent disregard for the presumed objectivity of reportage journalism, the narrativization of social processes evident in chronicles does not weaken the sense of the “real” transmitted by these works. Rosana Reguillo affirms that the supposed veracity of the chronicle’s version of history is strengthened by narrative manipulation, a process that she perceives as an opening that facilitates the “juxtaposition of versions and anecdotes that approach a territory of the story or (re)locate it” (55). In stating that to “relocate the story means to participate in some way in what is told,” Reguillo recognizes a participatory function that takes the chronicle beyond the impartiality of strict reportage journalism and positions it as a tool for discursive advocacy for individual, local experience in the face of generic, global culture.

In its most basic form, the chronicle is an accounting of an event or series of events; it is rooted in historical occurrence and intends to represent that event to the

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migration subject page, and on independent blogs and websites. The genre has even received official recognition in the form of a writing contest sponsored by the governmental organizations CONAPO, CONULTA, and IME. The *crónica* contest “Historias de migrantes”, formed with the goal of stimulating the creation of testimonies related to all aspects of the migration experience, awarded prizes to authors living in both the US and Mexico in 2006 (Unidad de Comunicación Social).

public as historical fact. Inherent in the genre's name is its ability to register time, or *cronos*, and to establish a temporal order to events (Corona and Jorgensen 3). The contemporary chronicle's journalistic orientation can also be seen in its typical distribution, in which reports are initially published in periodicals and then often, but not always, collected into book form (Corona and Jorgensen 1). Migration chronicles are generally composed of a series of stories or reports that relate various aspects of the migration experience. While these works tend to focus on the journeys of individual migrants, they also typically include the stories of *coyotes*,<sup>15</sup> Border Patrol agents, and other people who are connected to the migrants in some way. Migration chronicles will often examine a specific event, such as the death of a large group of migrants, and use that event as the narrative axis around which other stories revolve.<sup>16</sup> At other times, such works will feature an ad hoc selection of stories that are unified simply by the common theme of migration across the southern U.S. border.<sup>17</sup>

The implication of an active narrator in the ordering of a series of historical events is one of the main elements that set contemporary chronicles apart from reportage journalism. Kathy Taylor notes that the use of a first-person narrator is a characteristic that this form has inherited from those texts of the sixteenth century when the conquistadors, seeking to account for their situation and justify their actions, sought to “organize the facts in a coherent and harmonious way, to the point of ‘fictionalizing’

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<sup>15</sup> The term “coyote” is generally used to refer to the guides who assist migrants in navigating clandestine entry to the U.S. from Mexico. David Spener notes that this is the “the colloquial term most widely used by Mexicans to refer to the those who facilitate the clandestine passage of migrants across the border” (14) and he defines a coyote as “a person who surreptitiously guides undocumented migrants across the border into the United States away from the legal ports of entry” (19).

<sup>16</sup> The three migration chronicles analyzed in this chapter are of this type.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel Escobar's *El muro de la vergüenza: crónica de una tragedia en la frontera* (2006) exemplifies this second grouping.

themselves as protagonists of their accounts” (14). The use of a first-person narrator functions to create a dialogue between the chronicler and his reader; rather than speaking from a position of strict objectivity, the chronicler instead weaves his or her “opinions, emotions, criticisms and other personal stances” into the narrative (Eagan 92). This technique results in what Mexican chronicler and cultural scholar Carlos Monsiváis considers to be a more “democratic relation” between the reader and the text (“On the Chronicle” 35). The narrators of migration chronicles have frequently traveled along the migrant trail and visited the places about which they write. They regularly refer to their own experiences with migration and freely share their opinions about the stories and places that they encounter.

A characteristic blending of reportage journalism with literary technique results in the chronicle’s reputation as a hybrid literary form that challenges traditional definitions of nonfiction. Works of this genre typically use literary technique to fictionalize real-life, documentable stories. Chronicles typically privilege selected persons, converting them into protagonists whose story creates a narrative arc that unifies disparate tales into a cohesive account. Other techniques, such as the manipulation of narrative tension and literary devices such as metaphor, irony, juxtaposition, repetition, and humor, allow the chronicle to inform and comment by means of scene rather than summary, to show rather than tell. As Eagan notes, “[r]ather than appeal solely to our intellect, the chronicle also makes a studied effort to engage our senses and, thus, our emotions” (130). Among migration chronicles, there is variation in the extent to which authors employ literary techniques; some admittedly fictionalize parts of their narratives, while others observe a more strictly journalistic perspective. Despite these differences, the use of literary

strategy in all of the works studied here is clearly designed to engage the reader by appealing to his/her senses and sensibilities. Some will be fascinated and others repulsed, yet few will walk away from reading these narratives without having at least formed, or re-examined, an opinion about how the social processes of Mexican migration affect individual migrants.

The contemporary chronicle is often characterized as a literary genre that seeks to bring the stories of marginalized peoples into the mainstream of social discourse. Classifying the genre as one that both analyzes social reality and offers an aesthetic device for self-reflexivity, Rosana Reguillo links chronicle's hybrid form with its function:

But perhaps, more than its confrontation with a linear and domineering discourse, what is really invasive about the chronicle is its employment of other forms of listening. By positioning itself against a vertical discourse, a journalism of "authorized" sources, the chronicle that tells the same events from the perspective of another geography generates the possibility of another reading, and therefore it inaugurates new points of view; new in the sense that certain perspectives have been rendered invisible in the public sphere. (56)

The act of giving discursive visibility to the lives and stories of marginalized people is considered by many to be a central feature of the genre. Monsiváis, for one, affirms this goal when he writes that the chronicle aims to give voice to "los sectores tradicionalmente proscritos y silenciados, las minorías y mayorías de toda índole que no encuentran cabida o representatividad en los medios masivos" (*A ustedes* 76)<sup>18</sup>. The

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<sup>18</sup> See also Juan Villoro, who writes that "la crónica mexicana se ha concentrado en llevar al centro a figuras periféricas" (n. pag.)



migrants whose stories are told in migration chronicles are socially disenfranchised by economic status, language and cultural barriers, and by their legal status as undocumented entrants. By positioning these men and women at the center of their narratives, migration chronicles give the experiences of this marginalized group a place in the public record.

Migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period in particular exemplify how the chronicle's characteristic blending of reportage journalism with literary crafting functions to bring public recognition to migrants who cross clandestinely into the U.S. Chronicles of this period commonly respond to the increased physical and environmental dangers of clandestine entry of the post-Gatekeeper period by placing true stories of migrant death at the center of their narrative axis. The chronicles published in book form during this period demonstrate striking similarities in regard to both form and function; referencing a common set of narrative motifs and literary techniques, these works frequently interpret the border crossing experience using the literary paradigm of the hero quest. The narrativization of real-life experience evident in these works serves to elevate the figure of the undocumented migrant and advocate for the recognition of individual experience.

The notable increase in the publication of migration chronicles following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper reflects a desire, on the part of authors, to document the dramatic nature of Mexican migration during that time period. As the U.S. government fortified security at border areas surrounding major cities, Mexicans fleeing the poverty of *la crisis económica* sought entry via increasingly dangerous methods (Ganster and Lorey 186). While research has shown that Operation Gatekeeper may not

have initially resulted in more migrant deaths, those deaths that did occur were increasingly due to environmental causes and occurred in remote areas of the border region (Eschbach et al. 441-2).<sup>19</sup> These deaths, and the experiences of migrants who survived arduous clandestine border crossings, are the theme of at least six migration chronicles published between 2000 and 2005. Titles such as *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (Rubén Martínez, 2001), *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (John Annerino, 2003), *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004), *Morir en el intento: La peor tragedia de inmigrantes en la historia de los Estados Unidos* (Jorge Ramos, 2005), and *Hard Line: Life and Death on the US-Mexican Border* (Ken Ellingwood, 2005), demonstrate the discursive association between clandestine border crossing and death that emerged in public discourse following the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and similar security measures of the early to mid-90s.

As a group of texts that consistently explore the individual experiences behind persons who are often perceived, in certain modes of media and public discourse, to be stereotypical figures whose roles are defined solely in relation to the neoliberal economy, the migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period respond to Canclini's call for a greater recognition of the individual actors who "hacen, reproducen y padecen la globalización" (64). *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (Rubén Martínez, 2001), *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (Luis Alberto Urrea, 2004), and *Morir en el intento: La peor tragedia de inmigrantes en la historia de los Estados Unidos* (Jorge Ramos, 2005), consistently employ literary techniques that privilege the

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<sup>19</sup> The authors of this article note that previous to the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper, the majority of migrant deaths at the border were caused by vehicular accidents as migrants attempted to cross the interstate that runs parallel to the border in San Ysidro, CA (441).

experiences of individual migrants and challenge the paradoxes of anonymity inherent in the figure of the undocumented migrant of this period. Interpreting these experiences through the literary paradigm of the hero quest, these works build narrative tension by examining the conflict between individual experience and the anonymity imposed by the generalizing public discourse.

In the tradition of the contemporary Latin American chronicle, these works narrativize the real-life experience of undocumented migrants in a way that elevates the experiences of individual migrants. These works ground their dramatic action within the socio-historical context of the post-Gatekeeper period through the repetition of narrative motifs that reference not only the post-Gatekeeper security environment, but also key elements of the Mexican culture of migration. As books that are based on incidents of group border crossing attempts marred by tragedy, the chronicles studied in this chapter must confront the challenge of extracting individual experiences from historical events that involved numerous people. By accounting for the experiences of only few migrants as they move through all the stages of migration, these works are able to give order to a chaotic, multifaceted event. The incorporation of narrative plot arcs privileges the experience of a few individuals over the general experience of the group. The emphasis that this technique places on individual migrants reveals them as the heroes of each story; as these individuals face the trials and challenges of the migrant trail, their ability to survive physical and emotional challenges portrays them in a positive light that seems to contradict their marginalized status as undocumented persons. By placing individual stories in the public eye, these works function as discursive memorials for the many migrants who died as a result of Gatekeeper style security measures.

### ***Crossing Over* by Rubén Martínez**

Although *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001) is ostensibly the story of the Chávez family, whose three brothers died while attempting to clandestinely enter the U.S., in truth the book seeks to present a panoramic view of migration as it relates to the village of Cherán, a traditional sending community in the mountainous western Mexican state of Michoacán. As each new story, with its own cast of characters and unique narrative trajectory, piles onto and expands away from the narrative inspiration of the Chávez brothers' dramatic deaths, the book takes on a web-like structure that reveals the multifaceted nature of contemporary Mexican migration. Woven into this web are clues to author Rubén Martínez's (b. 1962) own history as the child of Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants, a smattering of social science data, and extensive commentary on the part of the author. The title of this work's Spanish translation, *Cruzando la frontera: La crónica implacable de una familia mexicana que emigra a Estados Unidos*,<sup>20</sup> places it squarely within the chronicle genre and recognizes the fusion of reportage journalism and creative interpretation that defines this book.

Born in Los Angeles in 1962 to a Mexican father and Salvadoran mother, Rubén Martínez is known for the production of non-fiction works that provide visibility to marginalized groups. In books such as *The Other Side* (1993), *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001), and *The New Americans* (2004) Martínez utilizes the chronicle style to interpret stories of personal relevance to his life: the borderlands, migration, and the tumultuous social history of El Salvador. Influenced by the pastiche, jump-cut style of works such as Barry Gifford's *Bordertown* (interview with Birnbaum),

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<sup>20</sup> Translation by Gabriela Rothschild Plaut. Mexico: Planeta, 2003.

Martínez's nonfiction work blends various discursive modes in an attempt to present the stories of his subjects in a new light. For critic Salvador Fernández, the fusion of multiple discourses that marks Martínez's work is a political tool that reflects the author's concern with the "representation of marginalized communities that have been displaced, because these communities produce culture and social dissidents who serve as the voices of the underdogs" (145).

*Crossing Over* opens with a detailed description of a car crash that killed eight undocumented migrants, three of them brothers, along a winding road in Temecula, California. After introducing this central organizing principle, the narrative expands to include various migrant families and individuals from the Chávez brothers' hometown of Cherán. The book's trajectory loosely follows the narrator as he travels along the migrant trail, interviewing migrants as they move from Cherán to the U.S. and back again. While the reader is introduced to a large cast of migrant and non-migrant characters whom the narrator meets along the way, individuals from three families in particular are given detailed attention. The stories of the Chávez, Enriquez, and Tapia families, members of whom are interviewed at each stage of their migration experience and with whom the author forms close personal bonds, emerge as narrative plot arcs which give the disparate stories of this work unity and coherence. The detail that is given to the stories of these individual migrants privileges their experience and allows the narrator to examine the personal transformations that can occur as a result of migration.

As the journeys unfold, the reader notices similarities in the path that each migrant character takes from home, to the border, to the U.S. Interpreted through the author's creative lens, these journeys are transformed into conventionalized plot devices

in which migration is understood as both metaphor and movement. Describing the migrant trail as something where the “towns from which migrants hail are joined with the towns of the north to create a city-space of the mind” (139), the narrator imagines migration as both movement from one site to the next and an independent, self-contained space. As individual migrants move along the trail, the narrator examines how each is personally transformed by the experience. The detailed examination of individual experiences at each stage of the trail combines with descriptive language to characterize individual migrants as heroes whose adventures can be understood through the literary paradigm of the quest. This characterization privileges the experiences of individual migrants in a way that counters the anonymity of collective groupings such as those found in media reports. The interplay of these two contrasting images helps to underscore the paradoxical nature of the figure of the undocumented migrant.

The explicit, and extensive, use of descriptive language traditionally associated with the hero quest points to the conscious incorporation of literary technique in this work. Using words such as *adventure*, *myth*, *lore*, *tales*, and *hero* when retelling stories of migrant experiences on the trail, the narrator paints the migrant characters of this work as heroes out to seek adventure on the trail. When the narrator interprets the near-death experience of Wense Cortez, brother-in-law to the Chávez brothers, as an “adventure to add to Cherán’s migrant lore” (148), he affirms his own stylistic manipulations, as none of the characters in the book speak in this way about themselves. The incorporation of imagery and vocabulary related to quest references a common set of cultural and literary associations that help to characterize the migrants of this story as heroic figures who are strong, brave, and honorable.

The portrayal of migrants as heroes is particularly noticeable in the book's presentation of Rosa Chávez, sister to the three deceased migrants. The narrator's retelling of Rosa's migration story emphasizes the difficulty of the crossings and implies heroic valor in the ability to overcome obstacles. After failing to cross three times through the desert and three times through the border wall closer to the city of Nogales, Rosa and her two-year-old daughter Yeni finally succeed in reaching their pickup point on the U.S. side, but only after walking more than six hours through difficult desert terrain (180-5). The narration of their crossing portrays Rosa and Yeni as stoic, brave, and physically strong. Yeni, whom Rosa carries slung in her rebozo the entire time (180), never cries (184). Rosa, despite falling in rocks and sand and tearing her jeans and skin, is able to save Yeni from being hurt, a feat that Martínez describes as miraculous (184). In these passages, the narrator actively positions Rosa in the role of hero: she is characterized as physically strong, emotionally determined, and ultimately victorious in conquering the border.

The heroic characterization of undocumented migrants is also evidenced in the narrator's extensive descriptions of the clothing and accessories that migrant characters wear. While visiting Cherán, the narrator participates in various public events such as the town's *fiesta* and an outdoor concert during which he observes how American clothing and accessories put the migrants' success on visible display and mark them as *nortebños*, migrants who have spent time in the north. These public gatherings, during which the narrator sees returned migrants strutting about with their "their silver buckles gleaming and gold chains glittering" (146), function as public stages on which to display economic success. For the narrator, the urban style adopted by many male migrants while at home

in Cherán serves as a visible symbol of their economic success in the United States.

Wearing baggy pants, gold jewelry, and sports paraphernalia, men such as José Izquierdo stand out against the dusty streets of Cherán:

Depending on whom you talk to, Izquierdo is either a wetback hero or a guy who scares the locals with his cholo style. Izquierdo stands out. Even if he's half a mile down the highway, you notice the long, slicked-back jet-black hair, the mirrored shades, the fat gold crucifix bouncing on his chest, his denim short-sleeved shirt buttoned all the way up, the black baggies and white high-tops. (94)

The narrator links this choice of this style, modeled as it is on a blend of inner-city urban and Chicano fashions, to a conscious decision to dress in a way that connotes success, power, and individuality. Whether or not a migrant actually lived in the city is not important; his or her choice of clothing and accessories “authenticate the tale” of the victorious return from a successful quest (86).

In the spider web of this narrative, the individualized stories of migrants such as Rosa and José are constantly crossing paths with generalized descriptions of migrants that account for little more than the migrant's reasons for leaving home. At certain points in the work, specifically chapters four and five, the narrator's attempts to include a personalized account of all the people he met during his travels turns into a dizzying array of biographical sketches that emerge as superficial and cursory. The focus that these sketches place on motivation link them quite closely to the life-cycle based findings of social science research on the Mexican culture of migration. In these chapters, the reader is introduced in short order to young men such as Wense, José Izquierdo, and Mario Jiménez (92), can be grouped as young men who migrate in search of adventure, while



Rosa's brothers Fernando and Florentino Chávez (306) are all men who migrate to support their families. Rosa, María, and Yolanda Tapia (134) likewise all decided to migrate in order to accompany or join their husbands who were already in the U.S. Here, the individualization of experience is incomplete, occupying a discursive position somewhere between the anonymous discourse of media and political rhetoric and well-developed stories of characters such as Rosa and Wense.

At the other end of the discursive spectrum, collective pronouns such as “the migrants” (6) and “the pollos” (27) replicate the sort of anonymous discourse typical of media reports of the time. This technique is exemplified by the use of “they” to refer to the men who died in the car accident alongside the Chávez brothers:

Increasingly desperate, the migrants pop the camper's rear window open. They throw their small travel bags, their water bottles, and even a tire jack in the direction of the BP vehicle, but these fall harmlessly by the side of the road. They make dramatic hand gestures at the agents, imploring them to give up the pursuit not because they want to avoid another apprehension but because they want their driver to slow down. They are in fear for their lives. (7)

The individual Chávez brothers Benjamín, Jaime, and Salvador are each behind the tinted windows of the camper shell on the back of that 1989 GMC truck, “deep inside the camper, hemmed in by twenty-three other bodies” (6). Yet, at this moment of their death, they lose their individuality and become one with the other migrants around them. A similar generalization is implied through the words of a Border Patrol cop who groups all migrants into a single category when he says “[w]e get a lot of ‘em in through here. Most of ‘em are from Mitch-oh-ah-cahn” (218). Language such as this engages directly with

political and public discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period in which migrants are portrayed as an anonymous other whose individual experience, origin, and motivation are subsumed under generalized categories.

The constant tension that exists between this generalized imagery and the detailed stories of individual migrants reveals one of the central paradoxes of migrant implied in this work. Choosing to cross the border illegally requires a migrant to sacrifice individuality for anonymity; indeed, successful undocumented entry to the U.S. depends largely on a migrant's ability to embrace anonymity in a way that renders him or her invisible to security measures. The narrator's explanation of how he came to investigate the story of the Chávez brothers reveals the irony of the brothers' fame. After successfully crossing the border in order to return to their "usual stint of seasonal work" (7), the Chávez brothers found themselves trapped in the back of a covered pickup truck as their inebriated coyote drove through curvy mountain roads at high speed in an attempt to evade capture by the Border Patrol. The brothers died when the coyote crashed the car into a ravine on the side of the road. The narrator ironically observes that this accident made headlines in the United States for the "enormity of the tragedy (eight people killed, nineteen injured, many critically) and because just a few days earlier another incident involving Mexican migrants had attracted attention" (7).

In this work, the successful migrant hero is able to achieve victory over the border by manipulating this dichotomy in his or her favor. Rosa exemplifies the positive outcomes of anonymity in her many encounters with the Border Patrol. Each time she is apprehended, Rosa gives herself a new name. The author observes, "[t]oday she was María. Later, she'd become Julia, Rita, Iris, and Alejandra. Names she remembered from

magazines: movie stars, rock singers. Names of people she'd fantasized being. Names of people that, in some way, she was becoming" (181). Through her lies, Rosa not only maintains her invisibility, but she engages in a personal transformation that will ultimately result in victory over the crucial conflict of border crossing. Calling this crossing a "a baptism into a new life" (324), the narrator recognizes the important role that personal transformation plays in the successful completion of a quest. For Heller, the hero's personal, inner progress parallels the unity that his quest brings to his community. She writes, "[t]he successful completion of the rite of passage depends on this realization, as well as on the hero's restoration of life to the community from which he is initially divided" (3). Returning to the community after a successful trip to the U.S. provides the migrant heroes of this book the opportunity to put their personal transformation on public display.

While returning home provides an opportunity to show off the material wealth gained while abroad, it does not necessarily offer opportunities for migrant characters to express their individuality. Waiting to board a Mexico-bound plane in Los Angeles around the time of a fiesta, the narrator observes that most everyone "is dressed sharply for the trip home. They want to arrive back in the *pueblo* looking good, to prove they've done well in the States" (140). Wandering the streets during fiesta, the narrator notes how the "well-dressed" *norteños* (161) stand out against the milieu. Yet, in returning for fiesta, migrants characters are portrayed in a collective way that is quite similar to that of their border crossing experience. The group name of "the *norteños*" acknowledges that a transformation has occurred; yet, this transformation relies on a collective, not individual, experience in which "the *norteños*" act as one person:

They are giving thanks for returning home safely. They are giving thanks for finding their families in good health when they arrived. They are praying for a bountiful corn harvest now that the stalks are yellow-dry and withered, waiting only for hands to pick the cobs. They are praying that the next year's journey north will go well, that all the Cheranes will arrive at their destinations. (160)

The discourse of anonymity that marks migrants' entry into, and time spent in, the U.S. also marks their return home. Despite their community's exaltation, the individual accomplishments of undocumented migrant characters are eclipsed by generalizing language that implies collective experience.

In *Crossing Over*, the undocumented migrant is interpreted as a problematic figure whose individual experiences are at constant odds with generalized imagery that portray the "migrant" as a stereotypical discursive figure. By examining how individual migrants interact with each stage of the migrant trail, this book transforms the real-life experiences of these individuals into hero quests. The descriptive language employed in the characterization of these migrants associates them with images of strength and valor, privileging their stories and giving discursive visibility to the personal transformation that can occur through migration. At the same time, however, the book utilizes generalizing language that represents migrants as a single, collective group. The constant interplay of these two images of the undocumented migrant, one individual and the other collective, presents a multifaceted view of this figure in which visibility is both desirable and limiting.

### ***The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea**

In *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2001), Luis Alberto Urrea (b. 1955) reconstructs the tragic border-crossing experience of 26 Mexican migrants and their three coyotes who entered the U.S. through the Sonora-Arizona border area in May of 2001. The resulting rescue operation, which according to the author was the “largest manhunt in Border Patrol history” (Interview with Morris), brought large-scale media attention to the event and caught the attention of Urrea’s publisher, who suggested that the author write a book on the subject (Interview with Jill Owens). The book has garnered much interest and popularity in the United States; featured on multiple bestseller lists and the subject of numerous college/university and city-wide “one-book” reading campaigns, *The Devil's Highway* is currently in production for a cinematographic adaptation. The popularity of this book could be due, in part, to the direct and accessible nature of Urrea’s writing style. Blending first-person testimony with descriptive language and the ironic observations of the narrator, *The Devil's Highway* has made the tragic nature of border crossing during the post-Gatekeeper period visible to a large number of English-speaking readers.

Urrea’s experience growing up in both Tijuana and San Diego influenced his apparent fascination with borders and choice of the borderlands as narrative muse. Born in Tijuana, Mexico to a Mexican father and American mother, Urrea has produced works of long and short fiction, poetry, drama, and he is also an artist/illustrator. He was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, and is a member of the Latino Literature Hall of Fame. Despite claiming to see borders everywhere, Urrea does not describe himself as a border writer. Instead, he imagines himself to be a “bridge builder”

(Interview with Lauro Flores).<sup>21</sup> This attribute is evident in many of Urrea's works of non-fiction, in particular those that focus on life along on the U.S.-Mexico divide: *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (1993), *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996), *Nobody's Son: Notes from an American Life* (2002). The concern that Urrea shows for interpreting the social condition of marginalized persons for a primarily U.S. audience in these works is also an important feature of *The Devil's Highway*.

*The Devil's Highway* follows a relatively chronological progression that reconstructs the path taken by the migrants and guides of the Yuma 14 group, as the migrants of this event came to be called by local officials and the media,<sup>22</sup> in their journey to the U.S. After detailing the background stories of a few of the migrants and their primary guide Jesús in chapters two through five, the narrator places the migrants on the trail, tracing their journey from Veracruz, México to the border town of Sonoita, Sonora. The narrator accounts for each stage of the group's border crossing and their subsequent attempt to reach their pick-up spot on Highway 8 near Ajo, Arizona. Recounting how the guides became increasingly disoriented and led the migrants further into the uninhabited desert of southwestern Arizona, the narrator details with gruesome imagery the death, from dehydration and heat exhaustion, of 14 members of the group. Following the Border Patrol rescue of the 11 surviving migrants and their guide, the narrator examines the aftermath of the tragedy, following the stories of the survivors who

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<sup>21</sup> Urrea also asserts that he is not a border writer in an interview with María Hinajosa on her show *María Hinajosa: One on One* on April 2, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Urrea writes that the various names that this group was given across the Borderlands (Yuma 14, Wellton 14, Tucson 14, Wellton 26) relate to the different sectors of Border Patrol that claimed to have rescued them. "The confusion comes easy. The group entered the United States in Tucson sector, and they were headed for a Tucson pickup spot. They just happened to die in the Yuma section by accident. Walkers are identified by sector, not station, so the Wellton crew was erased from the headlines" (32-3).

stayed in the U.S. as witnesses against José, as well as the stories of the dead as their bodies were returned to Mexico. The chronological progression of this work points to the influence of reportage journalism; nevertheless, the author's incorporation of various literary techniques reflects the creative manipulation typical of post-Gatekeeper migration chronicles.

While the narrator's account of the border crossing experience of the Yuma 14 group is based primarily on testimonies from public record and interviews with both survivors and Border Patrol agents, his interpretation of these events also contains a heavy dose of personal interpretation and narrativization that defines the work as a fictionalized account. In the "Author's Note" which serves as a prologue to the work, Urrea admits freely to his use of literary license, writing that "Certain passages, nevertheless, were subject to educated conjecture...Furthermore, some conversations were implied – they are presented in the text as possibilities based on recollections and inferences from the recorded testimonies" (xvi). The use of literary, and at times poetic, technique throughout the work appeals to the reader's senses and draws him/her into the text. Through the incorporation of language typical of myths and legends, the use of humor and irony, and the manipulation of narrative, Urrea author transforms the real-life story of the Yuma 14 into an intentionally crafted narrative that privileges the stories of individual migrants. The characterization of undocumented migrants as heroic figures in this work contrasts individual experience with the collective nature of the Yuma 14 as a group; through this contrast, the narrator reveals the irony inherent in the public visibility gained by this group following their ordeal.

Using narrative imagery traditionally associated with myth and legend, the narrator portrays the geographical movement of the migrants in the Yuma 14 group as a symbolic passage through the typical stages of undocumented Mexican migration. While not present during the migrants' bus ride north from Veracruz to the border, the narrator speculates that the men saw "many wonders" on their journey, noting that in "some of their ancient beliefs, north was the direction of death...The whole way was a ghost road, haunted by the tattered spirits left on the thirsty ground" (94). The migrants travel through the typical points of reference in a migrant's trip north from the interior of Mexico, specifically the capital and the northern desert, before arriving in the border city of Ciudad Juárez, which the narrator calls "large in Mexican myth, second only to Tijuana in their minds, the wetback's promised land" (96). This portentous arrival, however, proves to be anticlimactic, as the migrants are then directed to change buses and travel to the small Sonoran city of Caborca, just south of the border crossing of Sonoita, and wait in a safe house for further instructions. The narrativization inherent in these descriptions transforms the journey of these individual migrants into a conventionalized plot device; the bus ride to Caborca serves as the preliminary actions of the quest and provides narrative progression that brings the migrants to the border where they will face the crucial conflict of border crossing.

The emphasis that this work places on the border crossing experience reveals the disconnect that exists between the image of the border in dominant discourse and the reality of the border as it is crossed by undocumented migrants in the post-Gatekeeper period. In retracing the steps that the migrants of the Yuma 14 group took during their clandestine entry into the U.S., the narrator is surprised by the relative ease with which



they crossed the political border between the two nations. Arriving at El Papalote, the point where the migrants of the Yuma 14 group are believed to have crossed the border, the narrator observes a tranquil scene. Noting that this popular crossing point is marked by little more than a drooping barbed wire fence, the narrator rejects the image of the border as a war zone, writing instead that “it seems like the myth of the big bad border is just a fairy tale” (57). Using humor to emphasize the lack of security evident along much of the rural Arizona border at this time, the narrator writes that in the nearby area of Tinajas Altas, “there is nothing but a dry creek bed and small sign telling walkers: *Ya’ll better stay out or else we’ll be, like, really really bummed!*” (56). The humor and irony evident in these descriptions implies a sharp distinction between the image of the border as it is portrayed in popular discourse and the reality of the border as it is crossed by undocumented migrants.

For the migrant characters of this book, the crucial struggle of border crossing occurs not at the political line that divides the U.S. and Mexico, but rather during their traversing of the land that separates the border from the highways that lead migrants to their new lives in America. In describing this region, the narrator portrays the region as a place with a rich history of death and suffering. Citing the creation myths of the Tohono O’Odham Indians (6), tales of hauntings by fallen conquistadors (10), and legends of Catholic apparitions (11), the narrator emphasizes the ancient qualities of the area in order to show that migrant death is not a new phenomenon to the region. As the narrator describes the way in which the paths of contemporary migrants cross and blend into those made by native peoples and pioneers (7), he transmits an image of a territory defined by the movement of peoples who have been marginalized by the dominant society. This

image echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's interpretation of a *borderland* as "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary...The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atrevasados* live here...those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of "normal" (3). It is the borderlands, not the border itself, that present the biggest challenge to the Yuma 14 group. This "vague and undetermined" place provides incredible physical and emotional challenges that serve as a narrative backdrop against which the narrator can highlight the heroism of individual migrants.

The author's creative manipulation of this story is particularly evident in the literary techniques used to emphasize the physical challenges faced by the migrants of the Yuma 14 group during their traverse of the borderlands. The narrative employs a variety of strategies that increase the dramatic tension as the migrants move closer to death from heat exposure. For example, the pace of the language in the in the chapter "Killed by the Light," which ends the second section of the book, draws the reader into the story by using the pronoun "you": "Your kidneys, your bladder, your heart. They jam shut. Stop. Your brain sparks. Out. You're gone" (128-9). The short sentences and paragraphs of this section transmit a sense of urgency and give the narrative a poetic quality that takes it far from strict reportage journalism. The dramatic tension created through such descriptions serves to highlight, through contrast, the strength and endurance of those migrants who endured the physical challenges of the southern Arizona desert.

The perseverance and determination of the migrants who survive this challenge underscores their individuality and adds to their heroic characterization. Men such as

Hilario,<sup>23</sup> who is the first to run out of water but “managed to march on, his mysterious strength carrying him through the thirst” (139), and Mario and Isidrio González Manzano, who eat prickly pears to stay alive (171), stand out for their determination and strength. Nahum Landa Ortiz in particular exemplifies the characterization of individual migrants as heroes in this book. Nahum is introduced as a deceptively strong figure, a man whose “quiet voice, with its melodic quickness, its slightly slurred words, and his sometimes evasive gaze, hid the strong man behind the façade” (52). The narrator further observes Nahum to be a natural leader, writing that there was no doubt he would survive, “no matter what happened to them” (52). Thirty hours after crossing the border, when the migrants know they are lost and begin to lose faith in their guide, Nahum finds the strength to continue walking and survives to be found by the border patrol rescuers (145). As one of the author’s primary sources of first-person testimony, Nahum occupies a privileged position within the narrative. His individual story stands out as an example of how the work judges the border crossing experience of the post-Gatekeeper period to be a heroic test of valor for undocumented migrants.

The narrator’s detailed description of the environmental and physical challenges faced by the migrants of the group does not distinguish between survivors and those who died; by emphasizing how much these men were able to endure, the narrator positions even the dead as martyred heroes. The narrator takes great care to record the deaths of the migrants who did not survive the crossing. As the travelers begin to succumb to exposure, the narrator marks each death by noting the GPS coordinates where the body was later found by the Border Patrol rescuers and describing the clothing that the migrant was

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<sup>23</sup> The narrator does not give Hilario’s last name, introducing him only as “a young man named Hilario” (105).

wearing. The death of Reymundo Barreda Maruri Sr. is typical of this technique: “N. 32.23.16/W. 113.19.52. He wore maroon pants and his favorite spur belt buckle. He shoes were gone. Oddly, he only wore one sock. It was black” (175). The repetition of this technique for each of the 14 migrants who died has a ritualistic quality that memorializes these deaths through the creation of discursive grave markers. In his study of narrative tradition, folklorist Orin Klapp’s observation that the “ritual and dramatic significance given to the martyred hero’s death reflects the difficulty that was experienced in killing him and implies a sort of triumph on the part of the dead hero” finds particular resonance in these passages (22-25). These descriptions recognize the incredible endurance that each individual migrant possessed by noting his progression in quantifiable terms of geographic movement, and they memorialize each man’s death as that of an individual martyred hero.

The characterization of undocumented migrants as heroic is but one way in which the narrator of this story privileges individual over collective experience. In addition to developing the stories of particular migrants, such as Nahum, as they move along the trail, the narrator provides numerous biographical sketches that link the motivations of the migrants in the Yuma 14 group to the life-cycle based migration characteristic of the Mexican culture of migration. First appearing in the second chapter, men such as Enrique Lenderos Garcia (52) and Mario Castillo Fern (53) represent young men starting a family, while Raymund Barreda (51) and Reyno Bartolo Hern (53) stand in for older men who are migrating to maintain their family. Later in the work, however, the narrator returns to these men and provides the reader with a deeper understanding of them as individuals. At the height of narrative tension surrounding the migrants’ crossing of the borderlands, the

narrator pauses the action and inserts chapter 11, “Their Names”. This brief chapter expands on the sparse background information provided on the migrants earlier in the work, giving more details on their lives in Mexico and their thoughts about the disaster unfolding before them. The reappearance of these sketches throughout the book encourages the reader to appreciate the individuality of the migrants in the Yuma 14 group and grounds the narrative within the particular socio-historical context of the post-Gatekeeper period.

The individual nature of these characterizations stands in stark contrast to the narrator’s frequent descriptions of the Yuma 14 as a single narrative unit. As is typical of the post-Gatekeeper migration chronicles discussed here, *The Devil’s Highway* utilizes plural pronouns and verb conjugations to refer to the Yuma 14 as a collective group. While this technique helps move the action along more efficiently, it also provides an opportunity for commentary. Writing, for example, how the men continued on through the height of their delirium from heat exhaustion, the narrator declares that “[t]hey walked. They walked. There was no other story: they walked” (159). The repetition of simple phrases emphasizes the collective movement of the group and distills the story into a single action. This over-simplification rejects the individuality for which the narrator advocates in other sections, instead replicating superficial headlines that might appear in any number of media outlets reporting on this story.

In accounting for the public reception given to the Yuma 14 group following the survivors’ rescue by the Border Patrol, the narrator demonstrates how the public visibility gained by these migrants was conditioned on their portrayal as a collective group. While the surviving migrants of the Yuma 14 group stay in the U.S., under the protection of an

immunity agreement, the dead are returned to Mexico under much fanfare. From their impromptu parade to the airport in Tucson, during which there was an “outpouring of public grief that startled everyone” (196), to the “public relations mega-event” that greets them upon landing in Veracruz, the dead migrants are welcomed home as “martyred heroes” (197). Discussing the debate that ensued over the “naming” of the group, the narrator points to the irony of the migrants’ public visibility when he wryly observes that “[n]obody wanted them when they were alive, and now look – everybody wanted to own them” (32). In her work *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asserts that the body is “constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (26). In death, the bodies of the Yuma 14 are effectively converted into what Butler calls sites of publicity (20), public symbols in which their value as an image of economic inequality is greater than their value as individuals.

In contrast, the narrator’s interpretation of the events surrounding the death of these migrants counters the image of the group as a collective, instead privileging the complexity of individual experiences. As the migrants move closer toward death from heat exhaustion, they lose their association with the group and (re)gain their individuality. Describing the deterioration of the migrants’ physical health as they become increasingly lost and disoriented, the narrator compares the group to a “machine breaking down, shaking itself apart” (138), writing that “[t]he group started to break apart as the demons and angels started to sing” (159). The transition from group to individual identity is evident in the imagery used to describe the men’s arrival at an area of the desert in which many were finally overcome by exhaustion:

They made it to some scraggly mesquites. It was a hurricane of sunlight, and like storm victims, the men hugged the hot trucks, clutched the trees to keep out of the killer sun, even tied themselves to the trees. Nahum remembers them going out, one man per tree, the group widening and dispersing as the men sought shade. Each alone, in the awful silence, hanging on with what little strength they had left.

(162)

Shortly after this passage, the narrator begins his solemn task of memorializing the locations where each migrant died. Through this imagery of transition, in death, from group to individual, the narrator offers a form of resolution to the narrative tension of the work. By emphasizing the individuality of all the migrants, dead and living, this chronicle demonstrates that, contrary to the images presented in public discourse, these were individual men, each with their own motivations, experiences, and outcomes, walking through the desert on those fateful days in May.

In his interpretation of the story of the Yuma 14, Luis Alberto Urrea attempts to give his readers a deeper understanding of both the individual stories and the social forces that inform the Mexican migration experience in the post-Gatekeeper period. Interpreting the stories of these undocumented migrants through the literary paradigm of the hero quest, Urrea affirms the value of the individual stories behind the headlines and elevates the figure of the undocumented migrant into a position of valor and strength. The interplay of this imagery with generalized groupings that imply collective experience illuminates, through contrast, the limited, essentialized view of the undocumented migrants portrayed in certain modes of public discourse of this period. For the narrator, the public visibility gained by the dead migrants of the Yuma 14 is the epitome of social

irony, a public celebration of lives lost without any real recognition of the individuals inside the coffins or the social forces that contributed to their demise. Such visibility, in the eyes of the narrator, makes a mockery of the sacrifice made by these martyrs during their clandestine entry. Through *The Devil's Highway*, Urrea thus seeks to give meaningful visibility to the lives of these men, to memorialize their sacrifice and recognize their individual experiences in public discourse.

### ***Morir en el intento* by Jorge Ramos**

Jorge Ramos' *Morir en el intento: La peor tragedia de inmigrantes en la historia de Estados Unidos* (2005), which received a Latino Book Award in 2006,<sup>24</sup> tells the story of a group of migrants who were trapped inside the unventilated trailer of a semi-truck for over 4 hours as they were transported from just north of the U.S.-Mexico border to Houston. Of the 73 migrants who boarded the trailer in Harlingen, Texas on May 14, 2003, 19 died as a result of asphyxiation, dehydration, and heat exposure during the ride.<sup>25</sup> Ramos' investigation of this tragedy follows the stories of a few of the survivors, exploring their decision to migrate from their homes in Mexico, their individual experiences while traveling in the trailer, and their decision to stay in the U.S. as witnesses against the human traffickers who were responsible for their ordeal. The book also investigates the stories of the coyotes, semi-truck driver, and other persons involved in trafficking these undocumented migrants. The combination of first-person testimony, investigative journalism, photojournalism, and personal reflection evident in this work

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<sup>24</sup> Award given by the Latino Literacy Now and Book Expo America.

<sup>25</sup> Ramos notes that there is no official count of how many migrants boarded the truck in Harlingen, and that there may have been more than 73 inside the trailer. (All citations and quotes used here come from the 2005 English translation by Kristina Cordero: *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History*.)



places it within the *crónica* genre. An intentionally crafted narrative, *Morir en el intento* interprets the story of this tragedy in a way that encourages its readers to appreciate the many nuances of personal experience that contributed to this event.

The investigative tone of this work points to author Jorge Ramos' background as a journalist who has worked in both the U.S. and Mexico. Born and raised in Mexico City in 1958, Ramos moved to the U.S. in 1983 as a student. The author has since become a recognized figure in Hispanic media thanks primarily to his work as an anchorman on *Noticiero Univisión*, a position that he has held since 1986. In addition to television journalism, Ramos publishes a weekly newspaper column and is the author of 10 books of non-fiction. Ramos' literary production deals almost exclusively with the topics of migration and Latino culture and is characterized by what Beth Jörgensen calls a "sense of social responsibility that pushes him toward advocacy journalism" (281). In interviews, Ramos has admitted to conscientiously practicing what he calls "journalistic justice". The author justifies this position by stating that, although journalists aim for the objective reporting of events, "we do not act in a vacuum. We have personal opinions whenever we are confronted with a story; we just have to learn to live with that....If I'm writing a column or an essay, and the viewers or the readers know that I'm including my opinion, it's fine as long as they know that it is my opinion" (Interview with Nieblas and Moreno). Ramos' desire to "speak for those who do not have a voice" (Interview with Nieblas and Moreno) is clear in *Morir en el intento*; through both the direct commentary of his narrator and the detailed nature of his investigation, Ramos seeks to make the experiences of the individuals involved in this tragedy part of the public record.

As with the other works studied here, *Morir en el intento* observes a mostly chronological narrative progression that examines the events surrounding the tragedy. After opening with a flash-forward description of the unhitched trailer as a crime scene, the narrator introduces four migrants whose stories he will follow throughout the book: Israel Rivera Sánchez, Enrique Ortega, Alberto Aranda Amara, and José Reyes Arellano. The narrator tracks these four men as they move along the migrant trail, beginning first with their home communities and reasons for migrating, and ending with their role as witnesses in the court case against the human traffickers responsible for their ordeal. The narration of these migrants' stories, composed as it is of both first-person testimony and personal observation, is quite detailed. While their stories are woven in with those of the truck driver, coyotes, and others responsible for trafficking migrants, these four characters stand out as the primary protagonists of this work. These three men's stories act as plot arcs to reach across the work and give it narrative cohesion. As with the prior two works discussed above, the narrator characterizes these men as heroes by highlighting how these individuals overcome the physical and emotional challenges presented to them during their time in the trailer, privileging their individual experiences.

While the narrative of this work maintains a more journalistic tone than *Crossing Over* or *The Devil's Highway*, the use of an active narrator whose commentaries filter real life experience through a creative narrative lens creates a definite viewpoint in the story and defines the work as a *crónica*. In the preface to the book, the author claims that his sole intention is to “tell the story from the point of view of those who actually lived through it. Nothing more. This is their testimony to me. I owe it to the victims and the survivors to keep pure the events of their experience” (xv). The supposed purity of this

testimony is repeatedly complicated, however, by the interjection of the narrator's personal observations and opinions as he draws the reader's attention to the social and economic factors that have influenced this tragedy. The narrator's commentary, which often foreshadows events to come, also influences the management of tension and tempo and impacts the reader's impression of the surviving migrants and other characters. The narrativization evident in these techniques privileges the stories of these survivors and helps to influence the reader's impression of individual migrants as heroic figures.

As in *The Devil's Highway*, the crucial test of migrant heroism in *Morir en el intento* does not occur during the act of crossing the political border. Indeed, the journey across the border itself is portrayed as surprisingly easy for the migrants of this story. The narrator notes that Enrique traveled from Matamoros to Brownsville, Texas "without too much difficulty" (10-11) and that Alberto only took about three hours to cross the Rio Grande and arrive in McAllen, Texas with the help of a coyote (16). Pointing out that "crossing the border itself is in fact the easiest part of the trip", the narrator identifies "a kind of second border within the United States, an area known only to the immigration agents, the undocumented immigrants, and the coyotes that guide them through this terrain" (11-12). For the migrants in *Morir en el intento*, this second border is defined primarily by the encapsulated space of an unventilated semi-truck trailer that traveled 160 miles from Harlingen, near the Mexican border, to Victoria, Texas where the driver pulled over and opened the doors. Although very different than the physical terrain crossed by migrants in the other migration chronicles studied in this chapter, the microcosmic environment of the trailer nevertheless confronts the migrants of this book

with an extreme test of emotional and physical endurance that contributes to their characterization as heroic figures.

In describing the time that the migrants spent trapped in the trailer, the narrator highlights the physical endurance and resourcefulness of the survivors, attributing to them a valor that sets them apart from the other migrants in the group. As the oxygen in the sealed trailer grows thin, the occupants begin to hallucinate. Enrique, for one, envisions a body covered in a sheet and feels himself being “lifted up off the floor” before suddenly returning to his senses. The narrator’s simple, direct, observation that “Enrique hadn’t died. But some of his fellow passengers were indeed perishing from lack of oxygen” (56), places him in contrast with those around him and shows him to be of superior physical strength. The narrator also describes how Enrique’s resourcefulness aids his survival; he and Alberto break the taillights of the trailer so that they can get a small amount of fresh, though exhaust-filled, air into the trailer (48). The men later force their hands through these holes in an attempt to signal other cars (55) and Enrique uses these holes to plead with the truck driver and convince him to open the doors at the end of their ordeal (69). By maintaining his focus on these small portals to the outside world, Enrique is able to save himself, and many other migrants, from impending death.

As seen in other migration chronicles of this period, the contrast between the exceptionality of these four men’s survival and the experience of the group as one marred by tragedy and death is a source of narrative tension in the work. Once again, detailed individual stories are contrasted with plural pronouns that blend migrants into a single narrative unit. In *Morir en el intento*, such blending is evident in the speech of public officials such as the Mexican General Consul of Houston, Eduardo Ibarrola. Stating that

“they were all migrant workers...They were all headed for Houston to earn money. They all wanted to help their families” (102), the Consul’s use of “they” to refer to all the migrants who were trapped in the trailer strips them of their individuality and implies that theirs is a collective experience.

Although the narrator of this book also utilizes plural pronouns to refer to the migrants, he does so in a way that recognizes individual experience amidst group tragedy. The use of collective subjects to categorize the multitude of migrants trapped in the trailer is most evident in the first chapter, “When the doors opened”. Here, such pronouns are used to describe the various states of health in which the occupants of the trailer were found when the driver opened the door:

the dim shadows seemed to suggest piles of sweating flesh and broken wills. Not everyone jumped out of the trailer. Walking like zombies, some people found their way to the door of the trailer and, with difficulty, lowered themselves down the two or three steps that separated them from the ground. The few people who still found themselves with a bit of strength left in them helped the others out of the truck. When the doors were opened, some had regained consciousness, and with painstaking effort dragged themselves toward the doors. Those who remained inside the trailer scarcely moved. Some were still as stone. (2)<sup>26</sup>

The effect of this language is multifaceted. On the one hand, the aggregate nature of these terms impresses on the reader the large number of people who were found in the trailer. Such terms also strip away individual characteristics to create an impression of

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<sup>26</sup> This excerpt exemplifies such language, which is evident throughout pages 1-7 of the first chapter and in other sections of the text.

collectivity and anonymity. However, by applying different terms to the various states of health in which the migrants were found, the narrator avoids completely erasing the possibility of individual experience. Rather than place all the migrants into one, generalized category, this technique allows the narrator to account for a multitude of experiences within a single tragic event, as the living slowly separate themselves from the dead.

This technique of emphasizing anonymity while simultaneously categorizing, and consequently identifying in some way, the victims of this tragedy is also evident in the series of black-and-white photographs which are found in the center of the book. These eight pages include video stills from Univision programming,<sup>27</sup> personal photographs provided by the mother of one of the migrants who died in the trailer, and photos from court records.<sup>28</sup> While the series allows the reader to quickly digest the basic themes of this book, these images also transmit specific information about the migrants and others involved in this tragedy. In her discussion of war photography from the Spanish Civil War, Caroline Brothers observes an illusory quality in the “aura of fortuitous objectivity” that surrounds photography such as that found in *Morir en el intento*. Rather than simply reproduce an unbiased image, photographs are, according to Brothers, deliberate tools of discourse that are “Inflected and adapted to ensure maximum persuasive effect, they speak directly to the cultural concerns of the society at which they are directed, both in the subjects chosen for representation and in the way those subjects are portrayed” (2).

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<sup>27</sup> The video stills credited to Univision include images captured during new reports and during the filming of the documentary “Viaje a la muerte” (Televisión Univisión, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> The images are arranged in a way that mimics the progression of the book itself. Beginning with images of the truck taken just after it was found by the authorities, the series then includes images of the ringleader of the coyote network and truck driver responsible for transporting the migrants. Five pages of this series are dedicated to images of migrants, both survivors and deceased, while the last page contains only a video still of a roadside memorial erected at the site where the trailer pulled over.

The choice and arrangement of images in this series visually characterizes the migrants who were trapped in the trailer in a way that shows a progression from general to specific and encourages the recognition of individual experience within group tragedy.

The progression from general to specific is particularly notable in the contrast between the images found on the first page of the series, which depict the scene where the trailer of was unhitched and left along the side of the road by its driver, and the images of the four survivors who are featured in the narrative of the book. The first page of the series presents two video stills that portray the start of the police investigation. The first of these is a grainy close-up of two inert, male feet peeking out of the back of the trailer. The second shows, from a distance, the opened trailer surrounded by police and other officials. These two images show death, which is represented by the inert feet, and absence, represented by the empty space of the open trailer. While the close-up of the feet humanizes the migrants by indicating to the viewer that individual people were trapped, and died, inside the trailer, the overall effect of these images is to erase individual experience and transmit instead the anonymity inherent in a crime scene.

The anonymity and macabre tone that characterizes these first images contrasts with a series of three images that present the four survivors who are featured in the narrative. In the first two of these images, a still from a *Univision* documentary film about the tragedy, the *four* men are shown sitting in a semi-truck trailer. In the first, the men are shown in profile, their bodies shadowed by the daylight entering through the open trailer doors. In the second, the men are shown in direct light, their facial expressions visible. The individualizing progression of these two photos mimics that of the narrative itself; first the men are shown as separate from the group, but without any

identifying features visible, then they are shown fully as individuals, each with a unique facial expression and point of visual focus. A third image presents just two of the men, Alberto and Enrique, sitting on the grassy hill of a city park as they await the trial of the coyote ringleader Karla Chávez. In this still, the men are smiling and looking off into the open distance of the park while the skyline of Houston rises in the distance behind them. There is an undeniable optimism inherent in this photo, evidenced both in the positive expressions on the men's faces and the openness of the park and backdrop of a typically American city skyline. In contrast to the images at the beginning of the photographic series, the pictures portray the men as individuals.

The last picture of the series reiterates the tension between identity and anonymity found throughout the narrative. This image shows a grainy video still, presumably taken from media reports of the tragedy, of a roadside shrine at the site where the truck had pulled over to the side of the road. This makeshift display of crosses, candles, letters, flowers, and teddy bears fits the description of what Sylvia Grider has termed a *spontaneous shrine*. Defined as “pure expressions of public sentiment”, such displays combine ritual, pilgrimage, performance art, popular culture, and traditional material culture as a means of helping people come to terms with their grief (1).<sup>29</sup> The tension inherent in the term “public sentiment” is clear in this image. On one hand, the image exudes anonymity; the photo is grainy, off center, distant, and seems to be taken from a moving vehicle. The grass overgrowing the shrine makes the objects even harder to identify; the reader has no way of knowing who each memento is for and, in reality, must

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<sup>29</sup> Grider's research of spontaneous shrines focuses primarily on larger shrines such as those that emerged following the death of Princess Diana, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the shootings at Columbine High School. She considers roadside shrines, such as the one featured in *Morir en el intento*, to be spontaneous shrines on a “smaller, more personal level” (1).



rely on the caption to identify many of the objects. At the same time, most readers will be familiar enough with such displays to appreciate the connection with an individual life that each memento at the shrine represents. The inclusion of photos of spontaneous shrines in media reports on public tragedies is common and represents, according to Grider, a conscious choice based on the emotional response that such images engender (1). The placement of this image, on a page by itself and at the end of the series of photographs, emphasizes the emotional impact of the tragedy. This image documents the public reaction to this tragedy from the specific perspective of personal sentiment; it encourages the reader to see beyond the temporality of the shrine itself and to appreciate the individual stories that led to its creation.

The tension that emerges from the presentation of narrative and visual information in this book, in which individual stories are repeatedly privileged against a backdrop of anonymity and group experience, demonstrates the intentional crafting of this book as a discursive tool for bringing public visibility to the plight of undocumented migrants. Ramos admits freely to this intentionality when he writes “if there are no accusations, if there is no sense of urgency, nothing will ever change in that immense cemetery we call the U.S.-Mexican border, a cemetery that is only growing larger with each passing day” (173). The extensive research on which this book is based also speaks to the desire, on the part of the author, to reveal as much detail about this story as possible, to make these migrants’ individual experiences part of the public record. In this way, Ramos is perhaps the most journalistic of the chroniclers featured in this study. For this author, it seems that information equates with visibility; the inclusion of both visual

images and investigative details in this work facilitates the author's goal of memorializing the many personal nuances of the post-Gatekeeper migration experience.

What Ramos' in-depth investigation ironically shows, however, is that much of the information surrounding the stories of the individual migrants involved in this particular story is in reality quite visible. In addition to the literal visibility of the migrants and the media coverage given to the event, both of which are evidenced by the images included in the book, the narrator makes repeated reference to a figurative visibility that should have, in the narrator's opinion, prevented the tragedy in the first place. Emphasizing the irony of the fact that the migrants weren't discovered sooner, the narrator documents multiple instances of the migrants reaching out for help while trapped in the trailer. Stating that at least "two telephone calls might have averted the colossal dimensions of this tragedy" (125), the narrator details two important phone calls to authorities: one made by a migrant using his cell phone inside the trailer and another placed by a man who saw a hand waving out of the back of the truck through the holes that Enrique and Alberto had made (52-55). In both cases, the operators who answered the calls failed to respond in an effective manner.<sup>30</sup> In these examples, the migrants' visibility is only appreciable in hindsight and as a consequence of in-depth investigative journalism. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these details on the reader, guided by the ironic eye of Ramos' narrator, is an appreciation of the accessibility of the story. Both in the literal sense of the extensive media coverage given to the event, and in the depth of information that Ramos is able to uncover about what happened throughout the course of

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<sup>30</sup> The narrator notes that the migrant's call was not routed to a Spanish speaking operator (52) and the other call was "not handled as an emergency" (55).

the event, this book demonstrates that the “invisible” undocumented migrant is not nearly as obscure a figure as its stereotype supposed it to be.

## **Conclusion**

The post-Gatekeeper migration chronicles analyzed in this chapter demonstrate how contemporary authors from both sides of the border utilize the *crónica* genre to explore the figure of the undocumented Mexican migrant. Interpreting the Mexican migration experience through the creative paradigm of the hero quest, chronicles such as *Crossing Over*, *The Devil's Highway*, and *Morir en el intento* privilege the experience of individual migrant protagonists and reject the generalized image of migration as a collective experience. Within these fictionalized narratives, the interplay of individual stories with plural pronouns such as “they” creates a source of dramatic tension. The imagery that emerges from these works is paradoxical, while validating the positive value that anonymity can have in facilitating the clandestine crossing of the Mexico-U.S. border, these works also recognize the dehumanizing effect that anonymity can have on the figure of the undocumented migrant. In their exploration of the individual stories behind tragic, and high-profile, border crossing events of the post-Gatekeeper period, the migration chronicles of Martínez, Urrea, and Ramos serve as memorials to the migrants who died while attempting to enter the U.S.

The recognition of individual migrant experience that is accomplished in these works encourages the reader to appreciate the sacrifices made by all the migrants, living and dead, who participated in the tragic events that are the subject of these works. Of the hundreds of migrant death each year on the U.S.-Mexico border during the post-

Gatekeeper period, most went unreported in the media, and many were never registered with the authorities at all (Eschbach 437-8). By researching, documenting, and commenting on the individual lives behind some of these deaths, the authors of migration chronicles put a human face on these otherwise anonymous deaths. In doing so, they seek to answer the question posed by Judith Butler in her work *Precarious Life*: “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (xv) Migration chronicles such as those analyzed in this chapter address the challenge posed by Butler’s observation that “[s]ome lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xiv-xv). These *crónicas* defend the basic humanity, and thus grievability, of undocumented migrants in a way that marks them as part of the *crónica* tradition of making the stories of marginalized persons more visible in the public sphere.

Both in the creative manipulation of narrative material and the inclusion of visual elements, these works stand as discursive memorials that write the history of these men and women into public history. The works analyzed in this chapter function as memorials on distinct levels. In *The Devil’s Highway*, for instance, the use GPS coordinates in the narrative is supplemented by an annotated map at the beginning of the work; together these elements encourage the reader to associate the narrator’s accounting of migrant death with specific geographic locations. The photojournalism found in *Morir en el intento* accomplishes a similar effect by connecting the narrative of the story with specific locations such as Houston and the roadside memorial that was erected at the site where the trailer was unhitched from the truck. The use of visual elements in *Crossing*

*Over* is much more subtle; while this work does include some photographs,<sup>31</sup> there are no captions that identify the persons in the pictures as those featured in the narrative.

Nevertheless, this work memorializes the lives of the Chávez brothers and other migrants who died along with them through both its narrative description of the accident itself, which traces the path of the car using specific geographic markers such as road names, and in its extensive investigation of the lives and stories behind the headlines of the accident. All three works manipulate the hybrid form of the *crónica* to increase the public's knowledge of the people and places that inform the headlines of migrant tragedy.

As discursive memorials, the migration chronicles analyzed in this chapter challenge the paradoxical, and limited, visibility given to the figure of the undocumented migrant by certain media outlets, political figures, and other modes of popular discourse. In much of these outlets, the figure of the undocumented migrant is subsumed to collective experience, assigned a negative value based on state security measures and cultural bias. By offering a positive interpretation of the figure of the undocumented migrant, migration chronicles such as those analyzed in this chapter encourage their reader to question narratives that dehumanize the figure of the migrant by stripping it of its individuality. The contrast between these two perspectives is evident in Kenneth Foote's discussion of the various ways that society deals with tragedy and violence:

Whereas sanctification leads to the permanent marking of a site and its consecration to a cause, martyr, or hero, effacement demands that all evidence of an event be removed and that consecration never take place. Whereas sanctification is spurred by the wish to remember an event, obliteration stems from a desire to forget. Sanctification leads to veneration of a place, whereas

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<sup>31</sup> The photographs in *Crossing Over* are found on the page facing the beginning of each new chapter.

obliteration leaves only stigma...Rather than be tied to heroes and martyrs, obliterated sites are associated with notorious and disreputable characters – mobsters, assassins, and mass murderers. Instead of illustrating human character at its best, obliterated sites draw attention to the dark side of human nature and its capacity for evil. (25)

The memorialization of migrant experience evident in these works can be understood as the discursive sanctification of the borderlands, a literary marking of the deserts, highways, and other spaces of migration that consecrates the heroic experience of undocumented migrants. Through their thorough examination of the paradoxical nature of migrant visibility, migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period assign an inherently positive cultural value to the figure of the undocumented migrant and encourage their readers to do the same.

### Chapter Three: Literature - Sites of Transformation

*Amigo lector, te invito a que te mueves atento por estos caminos  
donde las imágenes literarias te explicarán mejor que yo lo que deja  
la emigración de nuestras comunidades hacia el país del norte.*

-Herminio Martínez

In the last fifty years, authors from both Mexico and the U.S. have increasingly utilized literary fiction to portray Mexican migration experience as individual, personal, and grounded in the socio-historical milieu. Novels and short stories about Mexican migration occupy a prominent place in the established canon of both Mexican and Chicano literature. The theme has likewise inspired the works of many emerging and regional authors who seek to relate their communities and personal experiences to the larger social process of Mexican migration. Throughout this body of literature, specific periods of historical change, such as the Bracero years<sup>32</sup> or the post-Gatekeeper period, feature prominently. More than any other genre examined in this study, fiction offers its readers an intimate view into the personal experience of migrants in relation to their socio-historical milieu. The works of fiction in this chapter engage with social science research on Mexican cultures of migration by evidencing the influence that community and personal history play on individual migrant motivation. Tracing the impact that migration has on the coming of age process of their undocumented protagonists, these stories interpret the figure of the undocumented migrant as an active agent of change whose experience defines and is defined by the relationship to the home community.

This chapter examines how three works of fiction by Mexican and Chicano authors interpret the literary trope of the coming-of-age story in which undocumented

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<sup>32</sup> As discussed in the introduction to this study, the *Bracero Accord* (1942-1964) was created to facilitate the legal recruitment and migration of Mexican labor to the U.S. for seasonal agricultural work.

migration facilitates personal development and growth. Set in the particular socio-historical context of the post-Gatekeeper period, these stories reiterate the themes, actions, and ideas that social scientists have used to characterize Mexican cultures of migration. As in the chronicles presented in chapter 2, the literature examined here interprets the stages of migration as progressive conflicts of the heroic quest. As protagonists progress through these stages, they encounter tests of survival, both physical and emotional, that challenge their personal resolve. The narrative construction of these stages as sites for personal transformation positions them as heterotopia in which survival is informed by personal history and the individual's relationship to his or her home community. The nuanced way in which these stories overlay the coming-of-age story on the paradigm of the quest informs the characterization of undocumented migrant protagonists as active producers of individual experience and community history.

### **Coming of Age on the Migrant Trail**

Throughout literary canon of Mexican migration, the coming-of-age story, or *Bildungsroman*, has proved a popular narrative trope through which to interpret a migrant's quest for the American Dream. A literary form that traditionally describes "the process of development and education of a single protagonist from childhood through adolescence, leaving him at the threshold of maturity" (Labovitz 3), the *Bildungsroman* accounts for individual development in the context of social interaction and community. The narrative organization of the *Bildungsroman*, which follows the protagonist's progression through a series of personal conflicts, exhibits an affinity for the literary paradigm of the hero quest. Dianne Klein affirms the quest-like nature of this literary



form when he observes that the protagonist of the traditional *Bildungsroman* “comes of age by going through painful rites of passage, by performing heroic feats or passing tests with the help of mentors, by surviving symbolic descents into hell, and finally by reaching a new level of consciousness” (22). Literature about Mexican migration frequently interprets the protagonist’s narrative progression through the stages of migration as a quest of self-discovery. In this literary corpus, migration is interpreted as a coming-of-age process in which individual experience is dependent on both personal history and community influence.

Of the three genres examined in this study, literature is the most prolific, emerging as a popular theme in the works of both Mexican and Chicano authors over the past half-decade. As is the case with the migration chronicles discussed in chapter 2, the publication of novels and short stories about Mexican migration has ebbed and flowed with periods of historic change. The Bracero period, for instance, informed the publication of migration-themed works by well-known Mexican authors such as Agustín Yañez, Carlos Fuentes, and Juan Rulfo.<sup>33</sup> While less studied, the 1959 novel *Pocho*, by Chicano author José Antonio Villareal, was also published during the Bracero period. The story of a young Mexican boy whose family escapes the violence of the Mexican Revolution to become farm laborers in the US, *Pocho* stands as the first of many novels that utilize the coming-of-age story to tell the tale of individual migration to the US. Following the Bracero period, the coming-of-age story gained popularity as a narrative strategy in novels about Mexican migration to the US. Works such as *The Plum Plum*

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<sup>33</sup> Tales of Mexico-U.S. migration appear in Agustín Yañez’s novel *Al filo de agua* (1947), Juan Rulfo’s short story “Paso del Norte” (1953), Carlos Fuentes’ novel *La region más transparente* (1958). While these works evince the themes, actions, and ideas that place them within the context of migration literature, the coming-of-age story is not a dominant trope in their respective narratives.

*Pickers* (Raymundo Barrio, 1971), *Macho!* (Edmundo Villaseñor, 1973), and *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (Miguel Méndez, 1974) utilize the coming-of-age story to tell the story of Chicano migrant workers in the US in the 1970s (Márquez 12-17). In the 1980s, novels targeted at young-adult readers, such as *Trini* (Estela Portillo Trambley, 1986) and *Across the Great River* (Irene B. Hernandez, 1989), reiterate the narrative linking of migration with the process of personal discovery and development.

As with the other narrative genres examined in this study, the publication of fictional works about migration increased dramatically following implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and similar security measures in the early 1990s. Some of the novel published during this period, for example *Lo que estará en mi corazón* (Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, 1994), *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (María Amparo Escandón, 1999), *Caramelo* (Sandra Cisneros, 2002), and *Por el amor al dólar* (Juan M. Servín, 2006) foreground elements of the *Bildungsroman* in their retelling of individual migrant stories but do not emphasize the particular socio-historic context of the post-Gatekeeper period.<sup>34</sup> The three fictional works examined in this chapter, namely *Across a Hundred Mountains* (Reyna Grande, 2006) and short stories such as “Estrellas de arena” (David Manuel Carracedo, 2004) and “Telar de infortunios” (MaLuSiGaVe, 2004)<sup>35</sup> clearly locate their undocumented protagonists’ coming-of-age stories within the context of the post-Gatekeeper period. In these works, the narrative footprint of the coming-of-age story functions to define the migration experience as a quest for personal development. By

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<sup>34</sup> Three other notable works from the post-Gatekeeper period include *Crossing* (Manuel Luis Martínez, 1994), *Lo que estará en mi corazón* (Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, 1994), and *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera* (Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, 2002). These three works blur the line between fiction and chronicle, evidencing elements of each genre while not adhering clearly to one or the other. Of these, only *Lo que estará en mi corazón* utilizes elements of the coming-of-age story.

<sup>35</sup> MaLuGiSaVe is the *nom de plume* of María Lourdes Gil Sanchez de la Vega.

showing that each migrant approaches the process of personal discovery with a unique personal history and set of emotional resources, these works reify the findings of research about Mexican cultures of migration and emphasize the individualized nature of migrant experience.

The three works of literature examined in this chapter are notable for the way in which they link the individual migrant protagonist, and his or her process of self-discovery, to the home community and its culture of migration. For the protagonists of these works, migration serves a rite of passage, a process of self-discovery that is encouraged and sustained through community history and tradition. The stages of migration are transformed into heterotopia, sites that challenge protagonists and inform their personal development. The emphasis that *Across a Hundred Mountains*, “Estrellas de arena”, and “Telar de infortunios” place on the relationship of the individual to his or her community draws on the literary tradition of the Chicano *Bildungsroman*; through extensive characterization and nonlinear narrative strategies, these works interpret migration as a quest of both self-definition and community renewal. In doing so, they provide a detailed and complex characterization of the undocumented migrant as an active agent whose experience both informs and is informed by, the culture of migration from which he or she hails.

The image of migration as a rite of passage offers fiction of the post-Gatekeeper period a way to foreground the personal transformation experienced by migrant protagonists. While the chronicles examined in chapter 2 attempt to account for the experience of a multitude of protagonists, *Across a Hundred Mountains*, “Telar de infortunios”, and “Estrellas de arena” each focus on the story of a single protagonist. The

level of detail afforded through this limitation provides a more nuanced view of migration. Rather than qualify the heroism of migrant protagonists according to the outcomes of their quest, the stories presented in this chapter condition heroism on the way in which individuals maneuver through the heterotopic spaces of migration. In these stories, the migrant quest is a rite of passage whose successful completion is less important than the personal transformations engendered by the process itself. By emphasizing the important role that community plays in these transformations, novels and short stories of this period underscore the cultural nature of Mexican migration in a way that is distinct from that found in chronicles of the same period.

The findings of both social scientists and cultural critics substantiate the idea of migration as a rite of passage for young men and women during this period. In their research on the Mexican Culture of Migration, sociologists William Kandel and Douglas Massey have observed that “young people “expect” to live and work in the U.S. at some point in their lives. Males, especially, come to see migration as a normal part of the life course, representing a marker of the transition to manhood” (981). American journalist Sam Quinones reports on a similar attitude among the men he interviewed in various parts of Mexico when he writes that “[t]eenage boys, above all, ached to leave. They’d heard stories about El Norte all their lives. They weren’t starving. They just sought their own U.S. adventures and their own stories to tell. ‘Para que nadie me cuente’ was how many teenage boys responded when I asked why they wanted to go to the United States” (11). Inspired by factors other than economic need, young migrants such as these often consider undocumented migration to the U.S. to be a journey of self-discovery through which they may prove their worth to the community.

Rather than account for migration in purely economic terms, these works engage with the themes, actions, and ideas identified by social science research on the Mexican culture of migration to present migration as a social process informed by personal and community history. In many of these stories, personal ambition, family reunification, and community expectation play important roles in the individual's decision to leave home. The protagonists of these stories have grown up in communities steeped in the migrant tradition and make decisions informed by the previous experiences of others in their community. In this way, these characters demonstrate the interconnected nature of the Mexican culture of migration as observed by Kandel and Massey, who write "The essence of the culture-of-migration argument is that non-migrants observe migrants to whom they are socially connected and seek to emulate their migratory behavior" (983). Throughout the works presented in this chapter, undocumented migrant protagonists are characterized, in part, by their connection to both family and community. The important role that this relationship plays in the individual coming-of-age process grounds these works in social science research that identifies Mexican migration as a complex and individualized social process.

In these works, the interplay of individual action and community expectation produces a source of narrative tension that is a common feature of the hero quest paradigm. Observing that the quest "affirms the hero's essential individual service to the collective whose salvation rests in his hands," Dana Heller points to the important role that community plays in motivating the hero to leave and in evaluating his or her success upon returning (3). Throughout the works analyzed in this chapter, narrative tension between individual and community serves as a constant reminder to the reader that these

migrants are not isolated and acting alone; rather they are complex individuals connected to a larger cultural process. The narrative interpretation of undocumented migrant protagonists as people who are inseparable from their home community and culture of origin rejects the dehumanizing image of undocumented migrants as simple tropes defined only by their undocumented status or illegal entry to the U.S. Eduardo Barrera notes that the use of such tropes in theoretical discussions has “pushed the image of the migrant to a status of a disincarnate essence, an ambulatory and omnipresent phantom in a heterotopia” (177). The detailed portrayal of individual migration found in these fictions counters this image of anonymous ghosts wandering the desert by grounding their narratives in community and personal history.

The three fictional works presented in this chapter utilize various techniques to highlight the individual, nuanced nature of the migrant experience. In all three, the use of nonlinear narrative strategies, in which both time and point of view are presented as fluid, serves to foreground the inseparability of individual from their community. Likewise, the emphasis that these stories place on the stages of migration positions these stages as heterotopias in which self-discovery is linked to both personal and community history. Both of these strategies are somewhat opposed to the traditional format of the *bildungsroman* which, in its original European incarnation, observes a mostly linear chronology (Eysturoy 136) in which the protagonist leaves his home to “to make his way independently” (Labovitz 4). For Annie Eysturoy, the movement away from linear chronology in Chicana literature signals a desire to express a self who is “rooted in the ethnic experience, who defines herself in relation to family, community and its traditions“(138). A similar trajectory can be observed in post-Gatekeeper fictions about

Mexican migration; in these works, disruptions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* form serve to highlight the interconnected, fluid nature of the migrant experience.

In comparison to the migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period that were explored in chapter 2, the fictional works analyzed in this chapter are less rooted in specific geographic locations. While the *cronistas* of this period go to great lengths to research and specify the exact origins of their migrant protagonists, at times identifying even the street name and house number, the fictional works construct home communities to be a sort of Any Migrant Pueblo, Mexico. The portrayal of locations as the migrant moves from home to the border and on into the U.S. is often similarly vague. Although large cities are often named, the migrant's passage through them is described in very general geographic terms. This lack of specificity, combined with the above-mentioned lack of chronological progression, rejects the image of migration as a linear progression of purely physical movement. In doing so, these stories portray migration in a way that fits Michel Foucault's assertion that "our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22). Through these techniques, the fictional works analyzed in this chapter portray migration as a complex social process in which locations and experiences gain meaning according to their relation to one another and their impact on the overall process of individual and community development.

Throughout the narratives analyzed in this chapter, the sites and stages typical of undocumented migration in the post-Gatekeeper period are positioned as heterotopias in which important personal and community transformations take place. As "counter-sites" where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously

represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24), the trains, buses, brothels, jail cells, Mexican homes, and even the desert consistently prove pivotal in the development of both the migrant protagonist and his or her relationship with the home community. While such sites naturally “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” that is typical of heterotopias (Foucault 26), the issue of accessibility and exclusion is made more acute in these stories by the illicit nature of undocumented migration. Referencing a heterochronic sense of narrative time, the stories analyzed here transform these sites into places in which the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and experiences helps to guide the migrant in his or her personal transformation.

In fictional narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period, the coming-of-age story reveals how the individual development of migrant protagonists is informed by their interaction with the heterotopic spaces of the undocumented migrant experience. In these works, such spaces function as moments of transit that produce, as Homi Bhabha has observed in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994), “complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (2). Bhabha’s assertion that such ‘in-between spaces provide “the terrain for elaboration strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration” reifies the important role that the liminal spaces of migration play in the personal development of migrant protagonists (2). , These stories craft complex characters whose personal development and coming of age is intimately tied to that of their home communities. By fleshing out the stories of their migrant protagonists, the stories analyzed in this chapter position the figure of the undocumented migrant and as an



active agent of individual and communal survival, and privilege the important role that migration plays in the life of persons from communities steeped in the migrant tradition.

### ***Across a Hundred Mountains* by Reyna Grande**

Reyna Grande's debut novel *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) offers an intimate look at the life of Juana Garcia, a young woman from rural Guerrero who leaves home in search of her father, who had left home for the U.S. and was never heard from again. Grande has enjoyed critical and popular acclaim for this, her first, novel. The subject of various "one book" reading campaigns<sup>36</sup>, *Across a Hundred Mountains* was awarded both El Premio Aztlán Literary Award in 2006 and the American Book Award in 2007 (reynagrande.com). A translated edition of *Across a Hundred Mountains* was released in 2007. In contrast to the English-language original, *Através de cien montañas* has not been as widely received by Spanish-speakers.<sup>37</sup> Grande acknowledges the challenges posed by the liminal nature of both her personal history and literary work when she writes "although I write about Mexico, my books aren't available in Mexico. Yet, here, my books aren't considered 'American Literature. So I'm not exactly American either'" (*La Bloga* n.pag.). In *Across a Hundred Mountains*, Grande's popular and accessible writing style helps readers to appreciate how the competing influences of family, community, and personal history inform the migrant coming-of-age process.

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<sup>36</sup>The San Mateo "One Book, One Community" county-wide reading program, of which *Across a Hundred Mountains* was a selection, exemplifies such campaigns: Each year, the OBOC Selection Committee chooses a book written by a major author, usually with local ties, and invites County residents to read this same book at the same time and discuss it through a series of free programs over approximately one month. (Peninsula Library System).

<sup>37</sup>Grande, who translated the novel herself, notes that she has in general "found it difficult to interest Spanish native speakers...perhaps due to their educational background, or the fact that fiction isn't something that is widely read in the Latino community" (E-mail interview).

A first-generation immigrant, Grande was born in México in 1975. The author spent her early years living with her grandparents after her parents migrated in search of work. After coming to the U.S. at the age of nine as an undocumented immigrant, the author eventually obtained a BA in Creative Writing and Film and Video from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University (reynagrande.com). Grande readily acknowledges the influence of her personal life on her writing, noting that in *Across a Hundred Mountains* she was “trying to portray the experiences of a child who gets left behind. Having gone through that experience, it was something that I wanted to share with readers” (E-mail interview). The coming-of-age journey that is the central theme of *Across a Hundred Mountains* reflects Grande’s interest in writing about what she calls “strong female characters” (E-mail interview); in recounting Juana’s quest to resolve the mystery of her father’s disappearance, Grande provides an intimate view of how a young woman’s personal coming-of-age is informed by both her individual migration and the influence of her family and community.

Characterized by the accessible and emotionally driven style of popular fiction, *Across a Hundred Mountains* recounts the difficult life of poverty and violence that led Juana García to leave home at the age of 13. In an opening scene reminiscent of the 1955 Juan Rulfo short story “Es que somos muy pobres”,<sup>38</sup> the novel describes the dramatic death of Juana’s baby sister in a flood and the aftermath of poverty which led her father to leave home in search of work in the U.S. When Juana’s mother is arrested for the attempted murder of a local strongman, the heroine decides to leave home to search for her father. Juana arrives in Tijuana with no money and is soon befriended by Adelina

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<sup>38</sup> From the 1955 short story collection *El llano en llamas*.

Vasquez, a young Californian woman who works as a prostitute in the Tijuana bars. When Adelina is killed by her abusive boyfriend, Juana uses her friend's birth certificate and driver's license to cross into the U.S. and continue the search for her missing father. Assuming Adelina's name and citizenship rights, the heroine completes high school and attends community college in Los Angeles, all while continuing to search for her father. Finally, Juana verifies that her father had died during a border crossing attempt, and she returns home to complete her quest.

Using flashbacks and chapters that alternate their narrative focus between Juana and Juana-as-Adelina, the novel challenges the reader to fill in the missing pieces of a story that does not become clear until the end. The novel maintains a terse style reminiscent of *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea, moving quickly between short chapters that are titled either "Juana" or "Adelina". Descriptive passages by a third-person omniscient narrator intermingle with dialogue to tell the story of these two characters, who are revealed as one and the same toward the end of the novel. The constant narrative shifting between Juana's youth in Mexico and her young adult years in the U.S. as Adelina, while at times disorienting to the reader, creates an impression of fluidity between Juana's two personas. The disruptions of chronological time and narrative perspective found in this text engage the reader in way that encourages critical examination. These techniques also draw the reader's attention to the personal transformations that occur within the liminal spaces of Juana's migration. Grande's creative manipulation of the traditional *Bildungsroman* form reifies the important role that the creation of community plays in Juana's personal development.

The protagonist's evolution from a young, naive, and vulnerable Juana to an older, mature, and independent Adelina occurs through a coming-of-age process that is intimately linked to her quest to migrate in search of her father. Although critic Chinenye Okaparanta concurs that the novel becomes a "quest, in many ways, to bring back the father and husband to home, and to account for his absence in the first place" (4), she also criticizes the work for failing to present Juana as strong, independent female character. Okaparanta postulates that the male character is conspicuous through his absence:

The distinction that begs to be made between Grande's text and those of a majority of Chicana Feminists is that while both are ostensibly woman-centered narratives, Grande inverts this pattern by having her plot revolve, not around her female protagonist, but around the male figure that she is engaged in a search for. Instead of emerging as strong and independent of a male figure, Juana's identity seems so intertwined with her father-quest that she does not stand out in the same vein that earlier female protagonists in the Chicana literary corpus have. (5)

However, while the impetus for Juana's migration is clearly the search for her father, it is the experiences that she encounters along the way that shape her and transform her into a young woman. In this way, it is fair to say that the novel is, in reality, quite centered on the development of Juana's individual identity as a woman, and that the search for her father is instead exemplary of how Juana's personal identity is informed by the relationships she forges in the heterotopic spaces of her quest.

Juana's home community helps her to gain familiarity with the stages of migration common to undocumented migrants in the post-Gatekeeper period. The advice of Don Tomás, a seasoned migrant who is embarking on his fourth trip north when Juana

approaches him, succinctly portrays migration as a progression through a prescribed set of stages: “[f]irst, you catch the train to Cuernavaca and then take the bus to Mexico City... Then you transfer to another bus that will take you all the way to Tijuana. In about two days you’ll get to the border. Then you need to find a coyote, and one way or another he’ll take you to the other side” (113). This progression from home to major Mexican City to border is repeated across genres examined in this study, evidencing the important role that migrant networks play in facilitating undocumented migration. Noting that such networks “put a destination job within easy reach of most community members and make emigration a reliable and secure source of income,” Massey et al. observe the influential role that Don Tomás’ knowledge plays in Juana’s decision to migrate (43).

While such descriptions evidence the culture of migration at work in Juana’s home community, they also generalize the migrant experience in a way that excludes individual experience and variation. When Doña Marina pulls out a map of Mexico and uses her finger to trace the route that Juana should take from her village to the border, she provides Juana with superficial directions based on oral history and lore (141). The “directions” that Don Tomás and Doña Marina give lend a neutral, and utopian, simplicity, to the migrant experience; these characters position cities, buses, and transit points as simple stops along a trail that matter-of-factly ends with entry to the U.S. These are utopian descriptions, through the imagery produced by these characters, migration is a journey through, as “sites with no real place...[that] present society in its perfected form”, ignores individual nuance in favor of idealized generality (Foucault 24). By distilling the stages of migration into superficial points on a map, the imagery produced by Juana’s community emphasizes the destination over the journey itself, eliding the

possibility of danger or failure and ignoring the individual challenges encountered along the way.

In contrast to the cursory descriptions of the stages of migration offered by community members, the narrator's accounting of Juana's experiences along the trail is rich, nuanced, and demonstrative of the personal transformation that occurs as a result of her journey. The narrator lends particular importance to the interactions that Juana has with other characters while traveling on buses and visiting places of exclusion such as jails and brothels. Such sites prove to have a profound effect on the development of Juana's identity and function within the text as heterotopias that stand in direct contrast to the simplistic, generalized stages of migration described by the community. The exclusionary nature of these sites makes them excellent examples of heterotopia; as Juana progresses along her journey, she moves in and out of heterotopic spaces where she comes in contact with new people and experiences that challenge not only her maturity but also her personal resolve to continue on her quest.

Juana's ability to confront and overcome these rites of passage depends, in large part, on the assumption of new identities that allow her to fully function within the heterotopic spaces of her journey. Evocative examples of this occur within the walls of Doña's Lucía's brothel in Tijuana, where Adelina takes Juana after they meet in the Tijuana jail. Despite her hesitation at staying with Adelina, Juana finds a sense of belonging in the brothel as she is taken in and looked after by the women there. Observing Adelina in her work as prostitute and wandering through the city streets alone, Juana gains confidence which allows her to utilize prostitution as a tool through which to continue along in her quest. Through prostitution, Juana is able to meet and talk with

many of the *coyotes* who help migrants cross the border near Tijuana. In this case, her incorporation into the exclusion space of the brothel functions to give Juana access to a group of men who otherwise are closed off and secretive. Assuming the new identity of prostitute not only gives Juana a new-found confidence and maturity that prove transformative in her personal coming of age, but also facilitates her meeting the man who had led her father into the desert, and to learn that her father died while attempting his illicit crossing.

Juana's adoption by the women of the brothel provides her with training, knowledge, and resources to enhance her quest. Specifically, Juana's relationship with Adelina results in a powerful tool, that of Adelina's identity and U.S. citizenship. When the heroine returns to the brothel one night to find that Adelina has been murdered by her violent boyfriend, she swiftly retrieves her friend's birth certificate and memorizes the information it contains. Standing before the mirror, Juana makes a conscious decision to assume a new identity for the purpose of furthering her quest: "'What's your name?' she asked herself in English, knowing that was the first question immigration officials would ask. 'My name's Adelina. Adelina Vasquez'" (223-4). Taking on Adelina's identity as her own allows Juana to easily cross the border and continue on her quest to find her father. This action represents a moment in which Juana's personal transformation is dependent on her connection to the community that she has created within the liminal space of the brothel; as mentor and protector, Adelina empowers Juana to take an active role in her personal transformation and to act in a way that furthers the progression of her quest.

The important role that Adelina plays in helping Juana to confront the challenges posed to her while in Tijuana is echoed throughout the journey by other characters that provide her mentorship and direction. Arriving in Los Angeles in her newly assumed identity as Adelina, Juana is taken under the wing of Don Ernesto, a retired schoolteacher who owns a run-down flophouse where Juana seeks shelter. While Don Ernesto supports Juana in the search for her father, he also encourages her to further her education, an endeavor that ultimately has a profound impact on Juana's personal maturation. Under Don Ernesto's urging, and using Adelina's identity and birth certificate, Juana obtains her high school diploma and goes on to study Social Work at Cal State LA. A constant influence in Juana's life through high school and college, Don Ernesto not only helps Juana gain knowledge and practical skills, but also leaves her a small inheritance upon his death. Thus, again as with Adelina, Juana's ability to connect with others who occupy the heterotopic spaces of migration, and to transform these people into an extended family who form part of her community, is a key element in her ability to move forward in both her quest and coming of age.

The connection between Juana and her community is a narrative thread that runs throughout the novel; the heroine's personal transformation is informed in particular by her relation to other women who are in some way suffering. Juana's migration is directly inspired by a desire to help her mother, an alcoholic with deteriorating mental health, come to terms with her father's disappearance. As she progresses in her quest, Juana repeatedly tries to help other women who are suffering from abuse and misfortune. As a young girl, Juana is unable to save Adelina from her abusive boyfriend. But, after assuming Adelina's identity and becoming a social worker, Juana takes a job at an LA



women's shelter where she is empowered to help women very much like her mother and Adelina. One woman, Diana, in particular acts as a narrative foil to Juana's mother. Finding Diana one evening in an alley way, smelling of urine and alcohol, Juana-as-Adelina helps her up and takes her to the shelter. Using her own personal history and experiences as a way of connecting with Diana, Juana demonstrates the maturity that she has developed as a result of her quest. In this stage of her life, Juana is able to maneuver deftly within the heterotopic spaces of the women's shelter and hospital where she visits Diana; the heroine is able to draw on her many experiences to act as an agent of change in the lives of others.

The maturity, knowledge, and experiences that Juana gains as she progresses along in her quest are questioned and put under scrutiny when the heroine returns home to Mexico. In a narrative twist that reflects the cyclical nature of Mexican migration in the post-Gatekeeper years, Juana's quest does not conclude with verifying the death of her father. Rather, in order to complete her quest cycle, Juana returns to Mexico with her father's ashes and attempts reconcile this knowledge with the expectations of the community she left behind. The return forces Juana to confront that split in her persona that she has been living with for the last decade. Arriving at the site of her girlhood home, the heroine is forced to confront the two sides of her character when Sandra, a childhood acquaintance, calls her by her birth name:

'Are you sorry the shack's gone, Juana?' Sandra asked. Adelina looked at her, surprised to be called by her real name. 'I'm sorry,' Sandra said, 'I should call you Adelina.' 'Adelina died a long time ago. Maybe it's time to let her rest. You should call me Juana. That's who I am...' 'I think you're wrong,' Sandra said. 'You

aren't Juana anymore. You're now a successful woman who has done what needed to be done. You should keep your new name.' (227)

This and other scenes of the concluding chapters portray Juana wavering between her two identities, unable to reach a concrete conclusion on which person she should be now that she is home, and leaving the value of her journey in question for the reader.

In the final chapters of this novel, the constant alternation of narrative perspective between Juana and Juana-as-Adelina synthesizes the paradoxical nature of the heroine's coming of age. While the narrator continues to refer to the heroine as "Adelina", other characters call her "Juana". The heroine attempts to tie up the loose ends of her quest by sharing the story of her father's death with her mother, who has been incarcerated in an asylum for her deteriorating mental health. Unlike her experiences in the heterotopic spaces of the migrant trail, Juana's visit to the asylum fails to prove empowering or to inform her personal growth. Within this space of isolation and social exclusion, the mother's mental state prevents her from recognizing her daughter as the mature and successful "Adelina". Here, Adelina's knowledge and personal growth are challenged; her mother has been surviving on the hopes of her husband's return and the heroine decides, ultimately, not to share the truth that she learned. As the story concludes, the heroine eschews her identity as Juana and leaves home again as Adelina, seeking comfort in the professional and personal community that she has created for herself over the course of her travels.

The detail with which this novel explores Juana's migration emphasizes the important role that the heterotopic spaces of migration play in individual development. By transforming the stages of migration into sites of rich and meaningful experience, this

novel challenges the idea that the buses, cities, brothels, and other sites typical of the migrant trail are empty way-stations along the way to the U.S. Instead, the novel proposes a vision of migration in which the journey is a series of subject-forming moments of transit. While Juana's experience has made her deft at navigating the disorienting and liminal spaces of the migrant trail, it has changed her in such a way that she finds it difficult to return home again. As an outcome of her coming-of-age process, this uncomfortable reality produces a sense of being what Bhabha refers to as "unhomed", of occupying a subject position in which the "borders between home and world become confused and, uncannily, the private and public become part of each other" (13). The accessible and popular appeal of this novel positions it as a work of literature that can project the unhomeliness of the migrant experience to a larger audience, to cast light on the identity-informing transformations that happen as a result of an undocumented person's transit along the migrant trail.

***La vida que él me da: narrativa guanajuatense de migración y violencia***

Among the many stories about Mexican migration published in the post-Gatekeeper period, the 2004 short story anthology *La vida que él me da: narrativa guanajuatense de la migración y la violencia* is notable for the focus that it places on migrant-sending communities. Conceived and edited by Herminio Martínez, a professor at the University of Guanajuato and host of a radio show that highlights local authors and their work, the anthology contains twenty-four stories written by twelve authors from the region. The inspiration for the anthology comes, as the title indicates, from the combined impact of two social processes that have profoundly impacted contemporary life in

Guanajuato: migration and violence. While the authors of the collection address these two themes in different ways, these are unified by a sense of denunciatory criticism. Representing a variety of literary styles, the stories found in *La vida que él me da* offer the reader an intimate look at how social processes become embedded in the cultural fabric of a region. From these short stories emerges a compact view of how individual experience on the migrant trail and community influence join to inform the coming-of-age of migrant protagonists.

Commonly cited as one of the Mexican states with a longstanding tradition of migration, Guanajuato is a fitting location for stories that focus on the home sending communities. Along with Jalisco and Michoacán, Guanajuato is located in the central plateau region of Mexico, from which migrant recruiters first began their search for workers during the railroad boom of the early 1900s (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno n.pag.). Research by migration scholar Lawrence Cardoso has shown that, in the 1900s, about a third of Mexico-U.S. migrants came from these three western states (12). High levels of migration from this region continued throughout the Bracero period<sup>39</sup> and into the the 1990s; today western Mexico is considered by many to be the “historical heartland for migration to the United States” (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno n.pag.). In the forward to *La vida que él me da*, Herminio Martínez affirms the long-standing tradition of migration that characterizes the state of Guanajuato and links it to migrants’ desire to search for opportunities for “una mejor vida” (7). This perspective is echoed by author Edgar Mendez, who describes migration as “una tradición migrante que ha sido heredada de abuelos a nietos” (E-mail interview). These observations point to the

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<sup>39</sup> As discussed in the introduction to this study, the Bracero Accord encompasses the years 1942-1964.

existence of a culture of migration in Guanajuato and position migration as an embedded social process that is both normalized and self-perpetuating.

Throughout the stories of this anthology, migration is constructed as a social process that has impacted the lives of both individuals and their community in a negative way. The prominence of themes such as violence, loss, and isolation challenges the image of migration as a positive experience and exemplifies the profound effects that this endeavor has on both migrants and their home communities. Both Martínez and contributing author Julio Mendez link the dramatic increase in violence that has marked Guanajuato over the last two decades to the region's tradition of migration to the U.S. In the editor's note, Martínez comments on the "problema social que la migración guanajuatense hacia Estados Unidos nos ha dejado...nadie se escapa del destino que la emigración traza sin importar el nivel económico de vida donde se mueven los habitantes de este territorio" (Martínez 7-8). Mendez similarly affirms this link when he writes that "el impacto que tiene la migración en nuestra tierra ha incidido sobre el aumento en la violencia, sobre todo intrafamiliar" (E-mail interview). This linkage between migration and violence permeates the volume, giving the work a fatalistic tone that foregrounds the negative outcomes of migration.

Among the stories of this anthology, two in particular demonstrate the ways in which individual migrant protagonists engage with the culture of migration from which they hail. In "Estrellas de arena" by David Manuel Carracedo and "Telar de infortunios" by MaLuGiSaVe, migration is understood as a rite of passage that is an acceptable, if not expected, part of the coming-of-age process for youth from this region. Other works of the anthology, such as Alejandro Olvera's "Celestina la enmilagrada y los veinticuatro

hijos de sus doce sueños”, Neftalí Báez’ “Los sueños de mama”, and Julio Edgar Méndez’ “El trece negro”, reference migration as a social force at work behind the scenes. Carracedo and MaLuGiSaVe’s stories, on the other hand, feature protagonists whose individual migration experience is encouraged, sustained, and judged by those who stay behind in the home community.

As with Reyna Grande’s *Across a Hundred Mountains*, the coming-of-age stories found in “Estrellas de arena” and “Telar de infortunios” play off of the traditional *Bildungsroman* form by presenting migration as the progression through a series of heterotopic spaces in which personal interactions inform the development of the migrant protagonist. These stories are short in length however’ “Estrellas” barely covers three pages and “Telar” is but five. Given the restrictions of their form, many of the stages that *Across a Hundred Mountains* is able to examine in detail are alluded to briefly in these works. Nevertheless, the short stories examined here feature stylistic techniques similar to Grande’s work; disruption of chronological time and movement between narrative perspectives in these stories functions to emphasize the interconnectedness of the migrant protagonist and his or her own community. Showing that the migrant’s relationship with home informs his or her progression through the heterotopic spaces of migration, these stories interpret migration as a quest for both personal and community development.

At just over three pages, David Manuel Carracedo’s short story “Estrellas de arena” compresses the many emotions of border crossing into a compact literary snapshot. A lifelong resident of Comonfort, Guanajuato who was born in 1966, Carracedo credits the “situación omnipresente” of migration in his region with the

inspiration for his story (e-mail interview).<sup>40</sup> While Carracedo himself has not migrated, he notes that many of his ideas come from stories told to him by other migrants, including his close friends and two brothers. An architect by trade, Carracedo has published various stories and poems in addition to a research-based book about the musical-poetic tradition of Guanajuato. The author claims that “yo no me consideraba (ni por supuesto me considero ahora) escritor”, yet his story belies an affinity for the poetic nature of language through his use of literary imagery and figurative descriptions. The story recounts one night in the journey of undocumented migrants Genaro and Chencho, who find themselves stranded in the Arizona desert after Chencho is injured and unable to continue walking. Relying heavily on Genaro’s interior monologue, the narrative creates a heterochronic sense of time in which the present situation of these two migrants in the desert intermingles freely with their past and imagined futures in their home community to underscore the important role that the community plays in the protagonist’s ability to confront the challenges of his situation.

The short length of “Estrellas de arena” limits its portrayal of the undocumented migrant experience to but one night during the illicit border crossing of its two protagonists. Divided into three paragraphs, the story features two narrative points of view; the first and second paragraphs are narrated through Genaro’s interior monologue while the last features the perspective of an omniscient third person narrator. Genaro opens the story *in medias res* with the declaration “Estoy esperando que se muere el Chencho” (49), an observation that both gives the narrative a static setting and establishes a macabre tone. There is, in truth, little action to the story; during the first two paragraphs, neither of the protagonists move from his location leaning against a rock in

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<sup>40</sup> All quotes and paraphrasing of the author in this paragraph are from an e-mail interview with the author.

what Genaro calls a “mar de arena” somewhere in the Arizona desert near the Mexico-U.S. border (49). In the last paragraph, the men are loaded mutely into a Border Patrol vehicle. The lack of physical movement within the primary narrative setting is balanced, however, by the active flight of Genaro’s interior monologue. Interweaving past, present, and future through the use of verb tenses, Genaro’s interior monologue in the first two paragraphs stretches the story’s narrative universe to include the actions and events of the home community as well.

As the location that inspires these interior musings, the Arizona desert functions, in this story, as a heterotopic space in which Genaro confronts a set of physical and emotional challenges that inform his personal coming-of-age journey. The macabre tone of Genaro’s narration helps to cast the desert as a crisis heterotopia, a site understood by Foucault as privileged, sacred, or forbidden place that is “reserved for individuals who are in, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (24). From the illegal nature of their undocumented crossing, to the extreme physical challenges presented by the location, the space in which Genaro and Chencho find themselves is at once isolated and penetrable, characteristics that Foucault finds common in heterotopias (26).<sup>41</sup> The use of interior monologue allows the reader an intimate view of the thinking and reasoning undertaken by Genaro as he confronts his situation. Limited in scope to one small step in Genaro’s coming-of-age story, “Estrellas de arena” nevertheless replicates *Bildungsroman* form by showing how the heterotopic space of the desert informs Genaros’ ability to survive this challenge and continue on in his quest.

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<sup>41</sup> While not explicitly stated in this story, various details of Genaro’s monologue imply that these men are undocumented migrants who have been abandoned by their coyote during a border crossing attempt.



Genaro's interior monologue in the first paragraph of this story is notable for the way in which it establishes dramatic tension between his community's idealized understanding of migration and the reality of his present condition. The narrator references images similar to those used by author Julio Mendez in describing the culture of migration that inspired his quest.<sup>42</sup> He uses imagery of the heroic migrant return when describing how he convinced Chenchó to join him by "dibujándole en las ilusiones el cuadro de nuestro regreso al rancho trepados en una Van de llantas muy anchas, hacienda un escándalo de música...mientras nos dejábamos mirar con aire indiferente, aire de quien ya conquistó los Estados" (49). This same passage, however, acknowledges the illusory nature of this imagery. Reducing the migrant enterprise to simple, metonymic categories that stand in for the stages of migration typical in the post-Gatekeeper period: "el Norte, el dólar, cruzar la frontera, encontrar trabajo" (49), the narrator affirms the idealized, and even deceptive, nature of the community's understanding of the migrant experience. The juxtaposition of the community's idealized version with the reality of his present situation, accomplished through the fluid interchange of present and past verb tenses,<sup>43</sup> underscores the process of self-discovery and maturation that occurs in the protagonist as a result of his night in the desert.

From this point of discovery, Genaro's monologue transitions, in the second paragraph, into a dream-like, almost hallucinatory state. The repetition of words such as *ilusión* and *sueño* in the first section lead up to an important transitional moment;

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<sup>42</sup> See discussion of Mendez's quote earlier in this section.

<sup>43</sup> In this paragraph, the author expresses the past using the imperfect tense. One of two past tenses available in Spanish, the imperfect is generally reserved for routine or on-going actions that are pertinent to background actions. While grammatically required in the context of this writing, the use of the imperfect also emphasizes the normalized nature of the culture of migration in Genaro's community; here, the imperfect implies that the imagery of migration used by Genaro is common, on-going, and part of the ordinary background of daily life.

concluding his first paragraph with a conscious decision to try to forget that Chencho is dying and to instead, think “inútilmente, que he dejado de sufrir” (50), the narrator switches from concrete thinking rooted in the verifiable present and past into an imagined future in which friends and family react to news of the men’s death. This act of imaging the future can be read as a coping mechanism, a mental exercise that helps Genaro to survive his crisis situation. The change of narrative time, and verbal tense, between the first and second paragraphs produces a heterochronic sense of time in which Genaro connects disparate periods of his life. Despite having not moved from his position leaning against the rock, Genaro exhibits an active engagement with his surroundings. Through the construction of a possible future, the narrator displays a desire to confront and overcome the challenge presented to him. Giving his community an active role in his interior monologue, Genaro affirms the influence that this community has in his ability to confront this challenge.

The future that Genaro imagines concludes his and Chencho’s quest by bringing their journey full circle in a small amount of narrative space. As with the other fictional works examined in this chapter, the return home plays an important role in validating the coming-of-age process of the migrant protagonist. Genaro constructs a future premised on his and Chencho’s death, thus the tone of this section is somber; however, his description of the community members who will watch the men’s coffins return and “lamentará nuestra desgracia, y meneando la cabeza pensará que el destino del bracero se liga necesariamente a estos riesgos, cada vez más ‘gajes del oficio’, cada vez más estadística fría, cada vez más ‘problema político de buena vecindad’” demonstrates his personal connection with the larger, and fatalistic, culture of migration from which he

hails (51). Genero imagines that their return will be notorious and that it might even make front page news headlines. In this vision, he and Chencho return home as martyred heroes, recognized by the community for their heroic valor and sacrifice in the name of migration. By placing himself within the larger tradition of migration, Genaro connects himself with his community in a way that helps to sustain and encourage him. The active creation of an interior, emotional, link with his home community helps him to give value to the suffering and fear he experiences while stranded in the desert.

Despite the limitations of its length and narrative perspective, “Estrellas de arena” transmits the idea that the emotional and physical challenges of illicit border crossing have played a role in the migrant’s personal development. From within the heterotopic space of the desert, Genaro reaches out to his home community and finds strength in the culture of migration found there. True, he recognizes that the community has presented him with an idealized version of the migrant experience that fails to account for the emotional and physical trials of border crossing. Still, when he and Chencho are rescued, in the third paragraph of the story, by the U.S. Border Patrol they make a silent pact to “volver a intentar a llegar al Norte a la primera oportunidad” (52). The men’s commitment to the migrant enterprise supports the idea that migration is an expected rite of passage for men from certain communities, an easy-to-choose blueprint for living that encourages participation in an activity that is potentially dangerous and places the migrant in a marginalized position.

While Carracedo’s story incorporates the community through the interior monologue of its narrator, MaLuGiSaVe’s “Telar de infortunios” interprets the migration experience through the perspective of those who stay behind. Author Maria Lourdes Gil

Sánchez de la Vega (b. 1943), who has published this and other stories under the pseudonym MaLuGiSaVe, found inspiration for her contribution to *La vida que él me da* in the Huasteca, a region of Guanajuato with historically high levels of migration to the U.S. In a phone interview, the author describes her visits to communities in which every able adult seemed to have migrated, leaving behind only the elderly and very young (phone interview). Based on the stories of those whom she met during these visits, “Telar de infortunios” explores the violence and misfortune that is encountered by the women of these communities, both those who migrate and those who stay behind. Told through the bitter monologue of Marieta, a woman whose daughter Esperanza migrated to the U.S. at a young age, this story questions the value of migration and criticizes the negative impact that this social process has on Mexican communities.

As with “Estrellas de arena”, “Telar de infortunios” limits its perspective to that of just two narrators. The story is introduced and concluded by the brief commentary of a third person omniscient narrator who sets the scene for Marieta’s monologue in the home of Doña Chela, located in the town of La Ilusión in the Sierra Gorda of Guanajuato. Describing how Marieta, freshly inebriated from drinking two pitchers of *pulque*, lets loose and allows “la enorme pena que desde hacía meses, muy dentro de ella, cargaba de día y de noche” to escape, the narrator sets a tone of lament and shame that continues throughout the story (115). Peppering her monologue with exclamations of disappointment, sadness, and shame, Marieta leaves the narrator questioning the ultimate worth of the financial success and personal transformation experienced by Esperanza as a result of her migration.

Marieta's monologue, which occupies a single paragraph and extends for four pages, recounts the coming-of-age tale of her third youngest daughter, Esperanza. The mother links Esperanza's decision to migrate to her family's extreme poverty. The middle child of nine with alcoholic parents, Esperanza began cleaning a neighbor's house at the age of 12. At 14 years, she was taken to Mexico City to work for her older sisters, who Marieta blames for filling her mind with the "loco sueño de los inmigrantes" (116). Recounting what Esperanza has told her, Marieta describes how her daughter crossed the border on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday and then proceeded to work up to three jobs in one day, sending home money to build a home for her parents and send her younger siblings to school. After two failed relationships with men who, according to Marieta, only wanted her money, Esperanza shocked her family by declaring herself in love with a Columbian woman and returning home dressed as a man. Mocked by her sisters, Esperanza's personal awakening is rejected by a disbelieving Marieta, who says that a mother "siempre sabe cuando un hijo miente"(119). Despite the economic boon that Esperanza has brought the family, her mother's response expresses an overall disappointment and negativity toward the migrant enterprise.

As with Reyna Grande's work, "Telar de infortunios" demonstrates the destabilizing effect that female migration can have in the home community. In both stories, the heroine undergoes a profound personal transformation as a result of her migration; Juana is empowered through education and professional success, and even Marieta's troubled monologue can't hide the happiness that Esperanza finds in her new transgender role (118). Affirming that gender is a constitutive element of migration, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo observes that the way in which people respond to migration

pressures and opportunities are often determined by “what happens in families and communities, and these are highly gendered spheres...Through the process of migration, women may develop their own social networks that allow them to contest domestic patriarchal authority” (“Feminism” 115). Esperanza’s success challenges not only her family’s sense of tradition, but also the idea that her migration should serve their needs before her own.

By removing the migrant from the act of telling her own story, “Telar de infortunios” draws attention to the role that the community plays in transmitting the culture of migration to future generations. Noting that non-migrants frequently “observe migrants to whom they are socially connected and seek to emulate their migratory behavior”, Kandel and Massey point to the generational transmission of migration in communities such as La Ilusión (983). Bracketing Marieta’s monologue, the narrator’s introduction and conclusion contextualize the story and show how oral history fuels cultures of migration. The narrator not only contextualizes the story by placing it in the heart of migrant Mexico, but also sets a tone of lament and disappointment when she describes Marieta as letting loose the “enorme pena que desde hacía meses, muy dentro de ella, cargaba de día y noche, carcomiéndole el alma, arrastrando su cansancio y desolación por las veredas de la Sierra Gorda de Guanajuato, sufrimiento del que iba dejando pedazos por las empedradas calles de su pueblo: La Ilusión” (115). The linkage between the town of La Ilusión and Marieta’s profound sense of disappointment and marginalization emphasizes that this story reflects the experiences of those who stayed behind, not the migrant herself.

An intimate setting in which Marieta gains the strength to tell her very personal story, the heterotopic space of Doña Chela's house functions as a contact zone in which Esperanza's experience is placed in direct relation to that of her mother. Writing that heterotopia are "*not* romanticized spaces that exist elsewhere on the margins... they are always juxtaposed upon and within the cartographies that are most familiar to us", Debbie Lisle affirms the important role that spaces such as the home of Doña Chela play in mediating the relationship between migrants on the trail and the community at home. Influenced by *pulque* and personal emotion, Marieta's story is a heterochronic retelling in which past and present are juxtaposed according to Marieta's memory and impression of events. Through her monologue, Marieta makes the migrant experience present in the community in a way that acts as counterpoint to Genaro's monologue in "Estrellas de arena". While ostentatiously a story of Esperanza's coming of age, "Telar de infortunios" illuminates the inner conflict that Marieta feels regarding her daughter's migration.

At once lauding her daughter's strength and accomplishments while also questioning the overall value of these successes, the mother's story is fraught with contradiction. Marieta succinctly describes each step of her daughter's migration, echoing the progress through proscribed stages found in other works of the post-Gatekeeper period. The mother frequently characterizes her daughter as a conquering heroine; she marvels at Esperanza's entry in the U.S., and credits her with transforming the family from people who were subject to the elements in "un cuarto de carrozas" into those who now live "como la gente" in a house with furniture and electric appliances (117). Despite this signs of approval, however, Marieta's questions the validity of her daughter's decision to come out as a lesbian and take on a transgender persona. Rather than rejoice

in her daughter's happiness and recognize the coming-of-age process that she has undergone, Esperanza rejects her daughter's lesbianism, calling her a liar and blaming migration for corrupting her child (119). Nothing the hypocrisy of the older sisters, who hurl insults but continue to accept her money, the mother's discomfort speaks to the destabilizing effects that her daughter's migration have had on the family (119).

Using language peppered with exclamations and emotionally distraught vocabulary, Marieta's monologue is a visceral critique of her community's culture of migration. The mother equates the extreme poverty of her daughter's youth with illness. Claiming that she never would have imagined how her poverty "iba a golpear tan fuerte a un hijo mijo", Marieta notes that Esperanza began working at just twelve years of age because she was "desesperada por el padecer el constante dolor de la pobreza" (115-6). In these passages, poverty is portrayed as something that can be physically suffered<sup>44</sup>, that causes physical ailments, and that should be cured. Alluding to the fact that she and her husband are alcoholics, the mother repeatedly blames her older daughters Virginia and Dora for filling Esperanza's head with "el loco sueño de los inmigrantes" and covering her in "el velo de responsabilidad de que si no nos mandaba suficiente dinero, sería la culpable de que Jacinto y yo no nos curáramos" (116)<sup>45</sup>. It is also clear from Marieta's emotional explosion, in which she yells "¡Deber! ¡Deber! ¡Deber! ¡Obligación! ¡Obligación! ¡Obligación! ¡Ganar muchos dólares! ¡Mandar mucho dinero!" (116), that she personally feels a great deal of guilt over the influence that her personal life has played in her daughter's decision to migrate. The passage emphasize the idea that

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<sup>44</sup> Note also the above quote that uses the verb *padecer* to refer to the "pain of poverty".

<sup>45</sup> Marieta alludes to the fact that she and her husband are alcoholics. The implication here is that Esperanza's migration will improve the family's economic standing in such a way as to positively impact her parents' illness.



migration provides an escape from extreme poverty, and show how the influence of family, and their knowledge about migration, encourage Esperanza to leave home.

Relocating narrative perspective to that of the home community, “Telar de infortunios” interprets migration as a social process that profoundly impacts the lives of those who stay behind. In so doing, the work, despite being written by a Mexican author, exemplifies the community-oriented focus of the Chicano *Bildungsroman* and points to the important role that oral history plays in transmitting the culture of migration.

Concluding her monologue with the exclamation “, “¿De qué sirvió que ganara tantos dólares? ¡Mejor quisiera morirme, doña!” (119), Marieta expresses a conclusive disappointment with the migrant enterprise. This point of view transfers to the narrator as she watches the mother leave Doña Chela’s house and stumble home. Noting that she could just see “cómo se envolvía la cabeza con aquel rebozo negro hecho con los hilos rotos de su desgracia” (119), the narrator offers a powerful image. This black rebozo, woven from broken threads that represent the mother’s disgrace, implies the interwoven nature of communities with a tradition of migration. In this story, one mother’s disgrace is integrated into the oral history through which knowledge of, and expectations about, migration are passed. In telling her own story to others in her community, Marieta manipulates the heterotopic space of Doña Chela’s house to transform a story about her daughter’s migration into a powerful criticism against the overall value of the migrant endeavor.

Through their narrative interpretation of the heterotopic spaces of migration, “Estrellas de arena” and “Telar de infortunios” demonstrate the intimate relationship that exists between individual migrants and their home communities. The heterochronic sense

of time found in these two stories emphasizes the interconnectedness of the migrant and their home community and produces an imagery of the culture of migration as a communal experience. As part of the anthology *La vida que él me da*, these stories contribute to the reader's understanding of the Mexican culture of migration as a social force at work behind the scenes, in the lives of those from communities with longstanding traditions of migration. The literal interpretation found in Carracedo and MaLuGiSaVe's stories is complemented, in this anthology, by figurative interpretations such as that of "Los sueños de mamá", by Neftalí Báez, which interprets migration as a journey into the paranormal, of moving into another world in order to escape the poverty and violence of real life (E-mail interview). As a collection, *La vida que él me da* reifies the image of migration as a social process which has a profound effect on both the individual and home community.

## **Conclusion**

The novel and short stories examined in this chapter examine how the coming-of-age process of their migrant protagonists is informed by the heterotopic spaces of undocumented migration in the post-Gatekeeper period. The narrative framework of the coming-of-age story overlaps with that of the heroic quest to emphasize an intimate, and often troubled, relationship between individual migrants and the communities from which they hail. As the protagonists of these works proceed in their quests, they find themselves in contact with illicit and socially marginalized spaces such as brothels, jails, mental hospitals, and the deserts of the borderlands, heterotopias in which alternative social orderings contrast the "taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within

society” (Hetherington 40). These places of exclusion and marginalization, however, emerge as sites in which migrant characters undergo personal transformation, proving heroism through tests of emotional and physical strength. This contradiction is a source of narrative tension in these works; through their interaction with these spaces, characters such as Juana, Genaro, and Esperanza enunciate an individuality of experience that challenges their passive service to the culture of migration of their home community.

Positioning the spaces of undocumented migration as sites of personal transformation and enunciation, these works move these heterotopias into the center of discourse about migration. In doing so, they affirm Lisle’s observation that “otherness and difference are never spatially eradicated – they are always juxtaposed upon and within the cartographies that are most familiar to us” (190) and encourage readers to view the figure of the undocumented migrant not as “disincarnate essence, an ambulatory and omnipresent phantom in a heterotopia” (Barrera 177), but rather as a flesh-and-blood individual whose experience is informed by personal and community history. Defining ‘marginality’ as a concept that “that straddles modernity and postmodernity; it is operative in pluralist utopias and radical heterotopias, following a logic of exclusion in the former and a tactics of singularity in the latter” (214), George Yúdice affirms the productive role of such heterotopias and emphasizes the importance of understanding how such tactics enable their practitioners to “survive and challenge their oppressibility” (217). In the stories analyzed here, the heterotopic spaces of migration function as sites of personal enunciation, locations in time and space where the protagonists actively seek to connect the disparate elements of their lives in a way that informs their own personal and community experience with migration.

Perhaps more than any other genre examined in this study, post-Gatekeeper fiction reifies the interconnectedness of the migrant and his or her community. The focus that these stories place on the coming-of-age of their migrant protagonists produces a sense that both individuals and their communities are transformed by their participation in the social process of migration. Migration provides, in the works examined here, opportunities for the enunciation of experience and history by a group which is relegated, in dominant discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period, to a position of marginality and subordination. In this way, fiction allows for the articulation of social differences from the minority perspective. Homi Bhabha observes that such articulations, while characterized by a “complex, on-going negotiation”, encourage a realignment of the “customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress” (2). The stories of Reyna Grande, David Manuel Carracedo, and MaLuGiSaVe challenge the enunciative boundaries that dominant discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period places on the figure of the undocumented migrant by constructing a literary environment in which those who are most closely involved in undocumented migration can appear to enunciate their own experience with migration.

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## Chapter Four: Film - The Illusion of Success

*What Mendoza calls “authentic” machismo is no such thing. It is simply courage, and it is celebrated in the folksongs of all countries...It is the heroic idea in any time and in any country.*  
—Américo Paredes

As a genre that relies on aural and visual clues to complement and expand upon the story’s narrative, feature-length films are positioned to interpret the undocumented migrant experience in a way that is distinct from that of the other types of creative narrative examined in this study. In the past half century, the theme of migration has proven popular in Mexican and Latino cinema. Many of these films fall into the category of melodrama; through the incorporation of popular music, stereotypical characters, and emotionally driven plots, such films seek to put an entertaining spin on an otherwise grim topic. These same factors also help to enhance a film’s accessibility and popular appeal by offering visual and narrative conventions through which the audience can relate, and perhaps empathize, with the plight of migrant characters. As with other genres of creative narrative, the production of feature-length films about migration increased in the post-Gatekeeper years, resulting in a group of works in which the figure of the undocumented migrant is interpreted in a way that impacts an audience beyond that experience by other, text-based works.

This chapter examines how three feature-length narrative films by Mexican and Chicano directors utilize the imagery and stereotypes associated with the figure of the *macho* to tell the story of undocumented migration in the post-Gatekeeper period. Through the incorporation of popular music and stereotypical images, the films of this period reference themes and cultural associations that not only offer viewers a pathway

into the story, but also link the characterization of migrant, and non-migrant, characters to the cultural figure of the *macho*. Using visual, aural, and narrative clues to contrast migrant and non-migrant male characters, films of this period reveal the illusory nature of hyper-masculine displays of success. Casting migration in a critical and negative light, the feature-length films examined in this chapter assign the figure of the undocumented migrant the role of imperfect hero, one in which individual men embody a fluid masculinity that stands in opposition to the patriarchal power structure of migrant-sending communities.

### **The Migrant as Macho**

The theme of Mexican migration has inspired a substantial number of feature-length narrative films over the course of the last half-century. Starting with the golden age of Mexican cinema,<sup>46</sup> which coincided with the advent of the Bracero era, migration cinema has reflected and sought to interpret the social processes of Mexican migration using techniques that are distinct from those of text-based sources, such as novels, short stories and chronicles. The incorporation of visual and aural expression found in films gives them additional modes through which to influence the viewer's impression of a story. Among feature-length films about Mexican migration produced by Mexican and American filmmakers, melodrama is a popular style. Generally characterized by technical and narrative plot elements that appeal to the emotions of the audience (Dirkis, n.pag.), melodrama commonly incorporates popular images to create a sense of familiarity with

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<sup>46</sup>In the 1930s and 1940s, increased investment in the Mexican film industry by private, government, and foreign sources resulted in the development of well-equipped film production studios which were able to produce high quality films in greater numbers. Films of this time are generally considered to fall into two categories, state-sponsored films with a nationalistic orientation, and commercial films with a Hollywood aesthetic (Hershfield, n.pag.).

the story being told. In Mexican migration cinema, these aspects of melodrama frequently impact the characterization of migrant protagonists; incorporating popular music and imagery, films such as those analyzed in this chapter bring a levity and accessibility to the serious, and emotionally charged, topic of undocumented migration. Throughout the panorama of cinema about Mexican migration, the use of popular music and imagery that references the cultural figure of the *macho* often functions to inform the characterization of migrant protagonists.

The label “melodrama” is frequently interpreted to signal popular, unintellectual film for the masses. Many of the techniques characteristic to this style, such the inclusion of popular music, stereotypical plots with heightened dramatic tension, and character types that are easily recognized by viewers do help to make these films more accessible to a larger cross-section of the population. Such elements represent cinematographic conventions that offer viewers a familiar pathway into the film. By referencing imagery, sounds, and experiences that are recognizable to viewers, these conventions help a film to communicate information quickly and economically (Bordwell and Thompson 53). María Herrera Sobek affirms that the lyrics, rhythms, and tones of music in particular provide an extradiegetic source of narrative information, performing what she calls a “hypertextual function” that aids the plot action to move forward and backwards while simultaneously expanding a particular scene by and “adding to the visual effects and the dramatic import” (“Corrido” 228-9). The hypertextuality of popular elements are one way through which melodramatic film transmits its social commentary and criticism.

Contemporary feature-length films about Mexican migration, and in particular those produced during the post-Gatekeeper period, commonly feature a set of storylines,

characterizations that can be traced to the *comedia ranchera*. With roots in the farcical traditions of the one-act Spanish *sainete* and *zarzuela*, or comedic opera, the *comedia ranchera* found great popularity in Mexico from the 1930s to the 1960s (de la Serna 163, Ragland 102). Drawing on the “stereotyped characteristics of border *corrido* heroes, such as their *macho* tendencies and love of tequila, pistols, and women”, films of this era position their migrant protagonists as popular heroes on a quest for a better life (Ragland 104). Costumed in button-down shirts, cowboy hats, and pressed pants with large belt buckles, the migrant characters in films such as *Pito Pérez se va de bracero* (Alfonso Patiño Gomez, 1947), *Espaldas Mojadas* (Alejandro Galido, 1954), *El rey del tomate* (Miguel Delgado, 1962), and *El bracero del año* (Rafael Baledón, 1964) characterized Mexican migrants as *norteños charros*, or cowboys from northern Mexico. This idealized image, repeated time and again in *comedia rancheras* of the day, emerged as a powerful stereotype that would be carried over into successive generations of films about Mexican migration.

Emphasizing themes of violence and oppression toward Mexican migrants in the U.S., films about Mexican migration from the 1970s and 1980s offer a departure from the comparatively lighthearted nature of the *comedia ranchera*. Films such as the critically acclaimed *¡Alambrista!* (Robert Young, 1977), *La ilegal* (Arturo Ripstein, 1979), and the *Espaldas mojadas* remake *Los mojados* (Roberto Galindo, 1977) in particular emphasize the oppressive conditions encountered by migrants in the U.S. Many of the feature films about migration produced in the 1980s, in particular *El norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983), *Arizona* (Fernando Durán Rojas, 1984), *El carro de la muerte* (Jesús Marín, 1984), *El vagón de la muerte* (Fernando Durán Rojas, 1987), and *Pasaporte a la muerte*



(Ismael Rodríguez Jr, 1988), foreground the dangers of undocumented border crossing (see image 1.4). The 1980s also marks the beginning of *videohome* or *narco-fichera* films, low budget productions which are mass-produced for consumption via home video in both Mexico and the U.S. While often exploitative, violent, and focused on the excesses of migrant and *narco*<sup>47</sup> cultures, these films nevertheless reference the melodramatic style of the *comedia ranchera* through their incorporation of popular music and the stereotyping of Mexican migrants as northern *charros*.

As is the case with other genres of creative narrative about Mexican migration, the number of feature films about Mexican migration produced by Mexican and Chicano filmmakers has increased dramatically since the 1990s. The post-Gatekeeper period in particular marks a point of transition in which established art-film directors first began to incorporate Mexican immigration as a central theme in their narratives (Maciel and García-Acevedo 184). During this period, filmmakers such as María Novaro (*El jardín de eden*, 1994), Gregory Nava (*Mi Familia/My Family*, 1995), María Ripoll (*Tortilla Soup*, 2000), Salvador Aguirre (*De ida y vuelta*, 2000), Sergio Arau (*A Day Without a Mexican*, 2004), and Pedro Véliz (*La tragedia de Macario*, 2005) released films which have since become synonymous with the contemporary canon of migration films. Other notable, though perhaps lesser known, migration films of this period include *Mujeres insumisas* (Alberto Isaac, 1995), *La ciudad/The City* (David Riker, 1998), *The Gatekeeper* (John Carlos Frey, 2004), and *Sueño* (René Chabria, 2005). The 1990s also saw a dramatic increase in the production of *videohome* movies about the theme of migration driven, at least in part, by cheap distribution, through Walmart and Hispanic groceries, to the migrant Mexican population living in the U.S. (Nuestra Gente, n.p.). Despite the

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<sup>47</sup> *Narco* refers to illegal drug traffickers in Mexico, from the Spanish word *narcótico*.

increased presence of the female perspective during this period, films of the post-Gatekeeper period by and large characterize their migrant protagonists through the use of stereotypical, hyper-masculine imagery and popular music.<sup>48</sup>

Of the numerous feature-length films about Mexican migration released during the post-Gatekeeper period, three in particular demonstrate how the incorporation of melodramatic elements informs the characterization of undocumented migrant protagonists. *La tragedia de Macario* (Pedro Véliz, 2005), *De ida y vuelta* (Salvador Aguirre, 2000), and *Cuando llegan los mojados* (Alonso Lara, 2003) all utilize elements of melodramatic film to tell the stories of male undocumented migrants. Each of these films examines the migrant enterprise from the perspective of home, placing their narrative focus on why migrants leave and what happens when they return.<sup>49</sup> They all also incorporate, to one degree or another, music, stereotypical images, and dramatic actions that associate them with the melodramatic form in general and the *comedia ranchera* in particular. The characterization of undocumented migrants in these films occurs through a combination of creative elements. Using music, costuming, and dramatic action to inform their audiences' impression of these protagonists, these films play off of the generic conventions and iconography established by the melodramatic

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<sup>48</sup> In the years following the post-Gatekeeper period, the theme of Mexican migration has continued to provide a source of inspiration for filmmakers of both mainstream, big budget productions and small art-house type films. The films *Babel* (Alejandro González Inarritu, 2006) and *La misma luna* (Patricia Riggen 2007) are well known examples of big-budget Hollywood films that address the theme of undocumented Mexican migration. Art house films that have been lauded at independent film festivals include *Sangre de mi sangre* (Christopher Zalla, 2007), *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008), *El espiral* (Jorge Perez Solano, 2008), *El viaje de Teo* (Walter Doehner, 2008), and *El infierno/El narco* (Luis Estrada, 2011). Using parody, nonlinear storylines, and blending genres, these films expand the story of Mexican migration to include more universal themes of social inequity, institutionalized violence, and transnational economic processes.

<sup>49</sup> The migrant protagonists of *Tragedia de Macario* are leaving home to embark on their migrant journey, those in *Cuando llegan los mojados*, and *De ida y vuelta* have recently returned home after many years of working in the U.S.

*comedia ranchera* to reexamine the image of the undocumented migrant in a contemporary light.

In a nod to the hyper-masculinity of the *comedia ranchera*, feature-length films about migration from the post-Gatekeeper period frequently characterized their migrant protagonists using the rhythms and lyrics of *norteño*, *ranchero* and *corrido* songs,<sup>50</sup> the presence (or absence) of fancy clothing, boots, and trucks, and the way in which these migrants interact with other, non-migrant characters. In many of these films, the characterization of undocumented migrant protagonists, who more often than not are men, occurs through the hyper-textual referencing of stereotypical images traditionally associated with the cultural figure of the *macho*. Interpreting the figure of the undocumented migrant through this lens of masculinity, feature-length films of this period position the figure of the undocumented migrant as a narrative counterbalance to the patriarchal structure of the home sending community.

Many of the melodramatic techniques found in feature-length films of the post-Gatekeeper period can be traced to conventions and iconography established by the *comedia ranchera*. Arguably one of the most popular genres of films produced during the golden age of Mexican cinema, the *comedia ranchera* has been described as a “Mexican version of a cowboy musical that incorporated elements of comedy, tragedy, popular music, and folkloric or nationalistic themes” (Hershfield n.pag.). With their characters invariably costumed as *norteño charros*, simple storylines, and popular regional music playing at all times, *comedias rancheras* appear, in a contemporary light, as lighthearted

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<sup>50</sup> *Norteño* and *ranchero* refer to types of music typical of the northern region of Mexico. Both are influenced by the rhythms and musical style of *mariachi* music. Ranchera music is generally associated with ballads and pastoral country songs (Ragland 102), while *norteño* features a more upbeat rhythm with boastful lyrics.

films overly reliant on stereotypical characterizations and actions. These same stereotypical images, however, have produced a set of generic conventions and iconography that not only define the *comedia ranchera* as an expression of the hegemonic masculinity of post-Revolutionary Mexico, but also place the genre in dialogue with contemporary films about migration.

The repetition of images, concepts, and dramatic actions seen in the *comedia ranchera* and other golden age films about migration offers an example of the nation-building discourse deployed through creative media such as literature and film in the years following the Mexican Revolution. A time in which state sponsorship of films increased dramatically, the golden age of Mexican film in particular is credited with playing an important discursive role in the creation of a national Mexican imaginary that promoted history as a male-centered narrative (Domínguez-Ruvulcaba 77; Gutmann 227-8). The articulation of a “particular self-conscious form of national masculinity and patriarchal ideology” during this time period has led critic Sergio de la Mora to assign the title of *cinemachismo* to films of this period (3). His observation that such films, through their state sponsorship, represent the “institutional deployment of a masculinized *mexicanidad* through the camera lens” points to the role that these films played in helping to legitimize the patriarchal organization of power in post-Revolutionary Mexico (3). Through the creative manipulation of images, sounds, and actions, these films articulate a hegemonic form of masculinity intended to reinforce the nation-building narrative of the time.

In the *comedia ranchera*, recurring images and actions point to a male-centered narrative in which *machismo* is understood as an exaggerated display of masculinity.

Described by Santiago Ramírez as one who has a fondness for “all articles of clothing symbolizing masculinity; the hat (either the fancy sombrero or the wide-brimmed Barsalino), the pistol, the horse or automobile are his pleasure and his pride)” (63),<sup>51</sup> the stereotypical golden age *macho* affects a hyper-masculinity. According de la Mora, the repeated usage of such imagery throughout not only the *comedia ranchera* but other popular movies of the golden age of Mexican cinema established a set of visual clues that equate with the “costume” of the stereotypical Mexican *macho*. The films examined in this chapter reiterate these same images in the visual composition of costuming and details of the *mise en scene*. In these films, all of which locate men at the center of their narrative, the presence, or absence, of fancy cowboy style hats and boots, button-down shirts, and American pick-up trucks serves to qualify the heroism of male characters and transmit narrative information regarding their relationship to one another.

The construction of masculinity in migration films from both the golden age of Mexican film and the post-Gatekeeper period can be understood as the reiterated performance of actions and images that privilege men within the narrative. Following Judith Butler’s assertion that gender is constructed through the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies that Matter* 8), Domínguez Ruvulcaba observes that *comedia ranchera* constructs the figure of the *macho* through a reiteration which is evident “in the quantity of films in which a man is the central figure; his leading role is, in many instances, highly exaggerated... In this construction...men organize their life around their relationship with other men; norms are created to benefit male supremacy” (85). This hyper-masculine imagery is, in truth, found

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<sup>51</sup> Quotes from the Mary Steen translation of Americo Paredes’ article “Estados Unidos, México y el machismo” from the *Journal of Inter-American Studies*

throughout creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period. While women play supporting roles in most of the chronicles and works of fiction studied in preceding chapters, few works have female migrant protagonists. The men of these works are frequently portrayed as *norteños charros*, and the male-centered nature of their relationships is evidenced throughout.

The recycling of what have since come to be recognized as stereotypical images of the *macho* throughout creative works of this period can be understood as a contemporary reiteration of the hyper-masculinity found in films from the golden age of Mexican cinema. Post-Gatekeeper works reiterate this imagery, but they also seek to revise the message that is transmitted by it. As with chronicles and works of fiction, feature-length films of the post-Gatekeeper period utilize dramatic action to characterize migrant protagonists as heroes on a quest. The heroism, or lack thereof, of the men is informed by the way in which they respond to the challenges of migration. Including action, and interaction, in the process of characterization, these works add a layer of complexity to their characters. In contrast to the hyper-masculine imagery of the *comedia ranchera*, the visual construction of masculinity is but one of many elements that contribute to the characterization of migrant men in the films examined here.

In particular, the narrative construction of migrant protagonists as heroes on a quest is informed by these men's actions in regard to other non-migrant characters. These migrant and non-migrant men are frequently placed in dramatic opposition to one another so that individual traits such as humility, honor, and courage, or the lack thereof, become key elements in their characterization. This narrative technique foregrounds the role that actions play in defining male characters as *machos* and produces an image of *machismo*

as a spectrum, a cultural experience with many points of entry and identification. This spectrum accommodates male characters who act in ways that align, on one hand, with a negative, or “false” interpretation of *machismo*, one expressed in “presumptuous boasts, bravado, and double talk” (Mendoza n.pag.) as well as those who act in ways more commonly associated with a positive, or “authentic” view of the *macho*, one in which men “adhere to a code of ethics that stresses humility, honor, respect of oneself and others, and courage” (Mirandé 67). Interpreting *machismo* as an expression of masculinity that is produced through the reiterative performance of not only physical traits but inner actions, the films examined here construct masculinity as more than simple gender display.

As stories about men who are either leaving or have left their home community in order to better their economic circumstances, these films directly reference and engage with social science findings regarding the Mexican culture of migration. The focus that these films place on the economic impetus positions migration as a possible path to social mobility and economic stability and echoes the findings of social scientists such as William Kandel and Douglas Massey (2002, 982).<sup>52</sup> The basic argument of the culture of migration, that people from communities with longstanding traditions of migration see international migration as a acceptable, and even expected, path toward improving one’s economic situation, is clearly foregrounded in each of the films analyzed in this chapter. The idea that migration is a rite of passage for young men such as those featured in these films, however, encompasses a process of idependentization that is often overlooked in literature on the culture of migration. Observing that, for many young men, “a journey

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<sup>52</sup> Conway and Cohen observe a similar effect in the Oaxacan community of Santa Ana. They write that “migration and circulation are common strategies to consider and undertake, centered as they are upon social networks, developed out of kinship ties, and root in traditions of accomplishment and “success” (40).

northward signifies an important patriarchal rite of passage, as it reflects a young man's defiance of his father's authority and a step toward his own independence. These young men are departing not as family emissaries, but as independent seekers”, Hondagneu-Sotelo positions migrant as a challenge to the patriarchal order of the home sending community (*Gendered* 191).

Throughout these films, the narrative comparison of migrant to non-migrant men reveals a social inequality grounded in the structural positions of power that exist in migrant-sending communities. Having bought into the “migrant dream” and its promise of riches, the migrant protagonists of these films represent a hopeful *nouveau riche* whose attempts at social mobility find resistance in the established, patriarchal power structure of the home community. The antagonistic relationship between migrants and other men who, through their inheritance of land or entrepreneurial advantage, represent the patriarchal power structure of the home community drives the narrative of these films. Writing that relations of alliance, dominance and subordination are “constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on”, R.W. Connell affirms the sort of gender politics that are represented by this antagonistic relationship (37). The characterization of male migrant protagonists in these films reflects a complex narrative construction in which the heroic qualities of these men are qualified by their relation to both the stereotypical imagery associated with the cultural figure of the *macho* and the patriarchal power structure of their home community.



### ***De ida y vuelta* by Salvador Aguirre**

An example of the dramatic art-house style of film favored by mainstream Mexican directors in recent decades, *De ida y vuelta* (2000) offers an intricately designed and thoughtful look at the theme of migration. While the film does not exhibit the overtly melodramatic characteristics found in other films of this period, it nevertheless draws on cultural stereotypes and imagery inherited from the *comedia ranchera* and utilizes techniques that amplify the dramatic tension of the narrative. The male characters of this film, both migrant and non, are constructed in such a way that their costuming, material possessions, and actions qualify both their machismo and heroism. In these constructions, the film implies a direct relationship between exaggerated masculinity and the dominant, patriarchal, power structure of the home sending community. The film examines the return of its migrant protagonist from a perspective of futility; despite his best attempts at looking the role of successful migrant, Filiberto is unable to truly overcome the social and economic barriers that inspired him to leave in the first place.

A graduate of the Mexican film school *Centro de Capacitación Cinematográfica*, director Salvador Aguirre (b.1965) has worked extensively within the Mexican film and television industries and has been nominated for three Silver Ariels by the Mexican Academy of Film (Aguirre, *Sincronia*). Having worked with directors such as Alfonso Cuarón, Luis Estrada, Paul Leduc, Ridley Scott, and Carlos Bolado,<sup>53</sup> Aguirre holds a prominent position in the mainstream state-sponsored Mexican cinema industry. The director advocates for the increased distribution of his and other films produced in

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<sup>53</sup> Well known films by these directors include: Alfonso Cuarón (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Y tu mamá también*), Luis Estrada (*El infierno/El narco*), Paul Leduc (*Frida*) and Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner* and *Thelma and Louise*), Carlos Bolados (*Like Water for Chocolate* and *Bajo California. El límite del tiempo*, which won seven Ariels, including best picture, in 1999).

Mexico as well as the levels of funding given to cinematographic production by the government (Aguirre, interview with NOTICINE). His first film, *De ida y vuelta* has garnered the Aguirre recognition from both the Mexican academy and numerous various international film festivals.<sup>54</sup> Despite the universality of themes such as love, ambition, and loyalty, the film has a distinctly regional feel, something which informed the distribution strategy employed in its release. Noting that Mexican films are normally released first in major cities in the central region of the country, the production company of *De ida y vuelta* released the film simultaneously in major, central cities and in the northern parts of the country where it was believed that the context and the theme were “mucho más cercano a personas en el norte que a personas dentro de la misma Ciudad de México” (Golem Productions).

*De ida y vuelta* is the story of undocumented migrant Filiberto, who returns to his home town of Tzurimicuaró in rural Michoacán, Mexico after working in the California asparagus fields for many years. Filiberto arrives to find that his father, the owner of the *hacienda* where he grew up, and his mother, who worked there as a cook, have died. Following the death of their father, Filiberto’s half-brother Heriberto has taken over the ranch and entered into a series of battles with the local indigenous population over the issue of water rights. One of the central protagonists in these battles is Luis, Filiberto’s best friend, who has married and had a child with the migrant protagonist’s former girlfriend Soledad. When Heriberto’s men attack and burn Luis’s home, Filiberto helps his friends to escape and then takes Luis to Mexico City in search of the deed that proves his right to the land, including the embattled water source. In Mexico City, the migrant

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<sup>54</sup> The film was nominated for an Ariel and also won the prestigious Mayahuel for best film at the 2000 Muestra de Cine Guadalajara (Aguirre, *Sincronía*)

protagonist finds work with a mechanic whom he met in the U.S., and becomes increasingly embroiled in corrupt activities. After fighting with Luis and losing his job and his truck, Filiberto returns home and accepts work from Heriberto, who sends him to kill Luis and Soledad. The film concludes with Filiberto killing Luis and then leaving town by hitching a ride on the back of a truck carrying other migrants north.

Filmed on location in the western Mexico state of Michoacán and the capital Mexico City, *De ida y vuelta* is a dramatic interpretation of the social issues affecting the rural poor and indigenous populations of contemporary Mexico. The film's plot involves a complex layering of story-lines which reflect these issues; themes such as the battle for land and water rights, class inequities inherited from a decaying hacienda landownership system, corruption at all levels of civil and government functioning, and the idea that migration acts as an escape valve for the poor and marginalized all feature prominently in this film. This concern with the social and economic problems that affect not only Mexico, but also Latin America in general, is a common theme in Aguirre's work.<sup>55</sup> Noting the role that social inequity plays in the corruption, crime, and violence so common in Mexico, but director notes "En mi país las clases sociales no conviven, sólo coexisten, es por esto que las historias no se tocan. Hay elementos comunes que las unifican y las separan, la corrupción, el futbol y la droga son algunos de ellos" (interview with NOTICINE). In *De ida y vuelta*, Aguirre manipulates cinematographic techniques to amplify the dramatic nature of this underlying set of social conflicts.

The film's dramatic tone is underscored in particular by its *mise en scene* and camera work, which create a visual contrast between the urban and rural experience. Set

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<sup>55</sup> In addition to *De ida y vuelta*, the short film "México ciudad amiga" (1986), the documentary "Las elecciones federales de 1997" (1997), and the forthcoming feature-length *Amor en fin*" all touch on the theme of social and economic inequity (interview with NOTICINE).

primarily in the fields, homes, and streets of a rural Purepecha community in Michoacán, Tzurimicuaró, the film expresses a geographic specificity which roots the action in a rural, indigenous context. This setting is complemented by costuming and scene compositions that portray activities, such as the wake and funeral for Luis's father, typical of the indigenous communities of the region. The isolated and impoverished nature of this region is further implied through the use of yellow-tinted lighting, which gives the scenes shot in Michoacán an arid, softer, over-exposed feel. In contrast, the scenes shot in Mexico City appear as through a bluer light, a technique that creates a crisper, more focused, urban feel. In this light, the costumes and settings of the action which occurs in Mexico City emerge in direct opposition to those in Michoacán; Mexico City is understood as a place of vice and economic largess while Michoacán is understood as a place of tradition and impoverished humility. The contrast between these places, and the essential dichotomy between tradition and progress that they represent, underscores all aspects of the film and adds to its dramatic qualities.

Though the use of music in this film is slight and unassuming, it never the less informs both the dramatic tension and characterization of the main protagonist by adding extradiegetic information to the film. There are only two sources of music included this film: a traditional funeral march played by a Purepecha band and one *norteño* song about migration. The first instance of music encountered in the film is the *norteño* song, which is playing on the radio in Filiberto's truck as he drives home. Heard during a scene in which Filiberto jubilantly drinks a Budweiser while driving a large American pickup truck and wearing a *Lakers* basketball jersey, the music accentuates the viewer's impression of the protagonist as a successful migrant returning home to show off his new

found wealth. The upbeat image created by this scene is, however, immediately interrupted by the slow, deathful march of a Purepecha funeral procession that crosses Filiberto's path as he enters his home town. The cacophonous sound of drums and brass instruments complements the dark funeral dress and *rebozos*<sup>56</sup> of the marchers to directly contrast the previous scene and *norteño* song. The dramatic contrast created by the interplay of these two types of music informs the characterization of Filiberto as someone who is caught at the crossroads of tradition vs. progress.

Intent on showing what he has made of himself in his time away from home, Filiberto affects an image of success that aligns with the stereotypical image of the returned migrant as conquering hero. From his truck, to his clothes, to the television he brings home for his mother, to his usage of English words, Filiberto performs this role by adhering to the exaggerated masculinity associated with the *macho*. The intentionality with which Filiberto crafts his image is seen in his preoccupation with clothing and urban style. As he dresses to go out his first night at home, he dons a pressed white button down and buffs an invisible spot on his truck. Upon arriving in Mexico City, he insists on purchasing new clothes so that he will look like a city dweller and chastises Luis for his rural clothing. The viewer's sense of Filiberto as someone who wants to prove his success is confirmed in his declaration, to Heriberto, that "Yo no fui de wetback para luego seguir igual". Filiberto clearly hopes to project, through his clothing and material possessions, an impression of the victorious conqueror who has returned home a changed man.

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<sup>56</sup> As previously discussed, the *rebozo* is a traditional shawl worn by women from indigenous Mexican communities.

Despite this carefully crafted image of success, various narrative clues reveal Filiberto to be an imposter, someone whose attempts at heroism are undermined by greed and weakness of character. As the movie progresses, these clues slowly erode the hyper-masculine image of success that Filiberto has created. The truck that he parades through Tzurimicuaro, it turns out, is not his own; he was simply driving it back to Mexico for a friend. The clothes that he buys in Mexico City appear clownish and are laughed at by other, urban, characters. Even the protagonist's migration is revealed as ignominious and cowardly; when asked how he crossed the border, Filiberto boasts of paying for the help of *conejos*, men who lure Border Patrol agents in one direction while migrants run in another. In these and other instances, Filiberto emerges as not only un-heroic, but anti-heroic. His self-centeredness functions to make him, as Jean-Charles Seigneuret suggests in his discussion of the anti-hero, a "displaced person and, in relation to society, infrasocial" (60). The first true anti-hero encountered in this study, Filiberto's lack of meaningful relationships and personal integrity position him on the outside of the social fabric of his home community. As with Esperanza in "Telar de infortunios", Filiberto's success is discounted by his community; his success is insufficient to effect any true change in his socio-economic standing at home.

The relationship of Filiberto to other non-migrant male characters both reiterates his position as social outsider and demonstrates the narrative construction of masculinity in this film. The social dichotomy that exists between Luis the indigenous activist and Heriberto the oppressive hacienda owner mirrors their positions at opposite ends of the spectrum of masculinity. Luis, dressed in unassuming khaki jeans, a canvas jacket, and flannel shirt expresses a quiet masculinity and machismo grounded in personal conviction

and integrity. Heriberto, on the other hand, affects an exaggerated masculinity in which his pressed *ranchero* clothing, shining American pickup truck, and armed ranch hands reflect his ruthless self-absorption and false bravado. Filiberto, with his attempts to pass as a successful *nouveau riche* migrant, expresses a masculinity that falls somewhere between these two men. Repeatedly given the option to choose allegiances between each man, Filiberto's machismo is qualified, on one hand, by Luis's integrity and honor and, on the other hand, by Heriberto's unscrupulous villainy. The fluid nature of these allegiances projects an image of masculinity in flux, one in which machismo is not defined by strict lines of positive and negative behaviors.

The protagonist's ultimate choice to work for Heriberto and kill Luis not only reinforces his characterization as a petty, ignominious anti-hero, it also affirms the narrative connection between exaggerated masculinity and the patriarchal power structure. This film uses the visual clues of costuming, *mise en scene*, and material possessions to assign positions of social and economic power to their male characters. Those men, such as Heriberto and his assistants, who are associated with the traditional, hacienda land-owning system of power, perform an exaggerated masculinity through their luxurious clothing, trucks, rifles, and homes. Although these men clearly lack the integrity, loyalty, and conviction that align Luis and other indigenous characters with a positive interpretation of the cultural figure of the *macho*, their social dominance is unquestionable. Filiberto's attempts at passing as a successful *nouveau riche* returned migrant reflect the idea, at the heart of the illusive "migrant dream", that migration provides a possible path to social mobility for those who are otherwise outside of the patriarchal power structure.

While empathic to Filiberto's plight, *De ida y vuelta* nevertheless imparts a negative interpretation of the migrant endeavor. In choosing the side of his half-brother, Filiberto reveals the futility of his personal migrant journey; despite the money, material possessions, and experiences gained, migration does not provide Filiberto with a path to true social mobility. Having killed Luis, Filiberto returns to the hacienda and packs his few belongings into a duffle bag. The film concludes with the protagonist hailing down a truck of migrants who are presumably headed north. As Filiberto jumps on and drives away, the sound of the somber indigenous funeral march returns. The parallelism implied by this music links Filiberto's destitute departure to the hopeful arrival with which he began the film. With this conclusion, the film criticizes the implication that superficial displays of masculinity equate to success, drawing a line of thought between the migrant dream and illusion. In the story of Filiberto, migration is not a guaranteed path to social mobility. Instead, it is a false promise that offers little challenge to the established socio-economic power structure of the home community.

### ***La tragedia de Macario* by Pedro Véliz**

Blending documentary and melodrama, *La tragedia de Macario* portrays the disastrous migration experience of two men from Nuevo Leon, México who die from suffocation in a sealed and abandoned train boxcar. Unsteady images produced by hand-held cameras, simple staging of scenes in locations such as ranches, streets, homes, and cantinas, and natural dialogue between characters combine to give the film a tone of gritty reality. At the same time, the carefully crafted sequencing of scenes, inclusion of musical interludes and hallucinatory scenes in which the Virgin of Guadalupe comes to



life place this work squarely within the bounds of fictional, feature-length film. This blending of techniques creates a melodramatic tone that highlights the tragic nature of undocumented migration during the post-Gatekeeper period. Through characterization and cinematic technique, the film portrays Macario as an honorable, martyred, hero; in doing so, *La tragedia de Macario* positions the figure of the undocumented migrant in dramatic opposition to the to the patriarchal power structure of the home sending community.

Inspired by the true event of migrants who died in the back of a semi-truck trailer in Victoria, TX in May 2003 (O'Connell),<sup>57</sup> *La tragedia de Macario* was the first feature-length film of director Pablo Véliz (b. 1989). Born in Mexico, Véliz moved to San Antonio at the age of 10 (O'Connell) and attended the University of Texas at San Antonio. Although trained as a visual artist, Véliz has directed six feature-length and four short films in addition to various commercials (*Cinematográfica Véliz*). The director was compelled to make the film based on the migration experience of others in his community, asserting that "It's not political, I'm making a human statement" (O'Connell). The film was produced on a budget of approximately \$8000 (IMDb) using actors were themselves undocumented migrants (O'Connell) and was invited to compete in various film festivals, including Sundance, WorldFest, in Houston, Texas, and Guadalupe Film Festival in San Antonio, Texas (IMDb). Thematically, *La tragedia de Macario* fits within a subgenre of migration films that portray migrant deaths in train

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<sup>57</sup> Given the Univision-sourced imaged shown during and following the credits of this film, it appears the real life inspiration for this story is the same as that of Jorge Ramos' chronicle *Morir en el intento*.

boxcars.<sup>58</sup> Véliz's film, however, offers a more refined, art-house style that has facilitated the international distribution of the film.

*La tragedia de Macario* opens with the two main characters, Macario and his friend Felipe, working the land on an arid and dusty farm which text on the screen identifies as the "Rancho de Don Jorge Rodríguez, Sabinas Hgo., Nuevo León, México." As the camera follows the two men home, the viewer learns that they are of meager circumstance and that their work on the *rancho* pays barely enough to provide even the most basic of necessities for their families. Living with his wife Regina in a small home where they sleep on the floor and eat beans and tortillas every night for dinner, Macario laments their poverty and yearns for a better life. When the two friends are fired without notice, they decide to migrate to San Antonio, Texas, where their extended families have promised to help them find work. Macario and Felipe walk and hitch-hike their way to the border, where they connect with a *coyote* who agrees to facilitate their entry into the U.S. After locking the men and seven other migrants inside a train boxcar, the *coyote* is arrested by corrupt federal police and the migrants are left to suffocate in the abandoned boxcar. As their death draws near, the scene cuts between a pregnant Regina at home feverishly praying to the Virgin Mary and an increasingly desperate scene inside the boxcar. At the moment of Macario's melodramatic death, the Virgin Mary appears to comfort him, lamenting his death through a *corrido* that underscores his heroism and validates the positive *machismo* that his life represents.

The film affects a pseudo-documentary style that anchors the story in the realities of Mexican migration in the post-Gatekeeper period. From the opening scene in which

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<sup>58</sup> Films about migrant deaths in boxcars were particularly prominent in the 1980s; three such films include *El carro de la muerte* (Jesús Marín, 1984), *El vagón de la muerte* (Fernando Durán Rojas, 1987), *Pasaporte a la muerte* (Ismael Rodríguez Jr, 1988).

Macario and Felipe are shown working on an arid ranch, a combination of camera technique, realistic settings and costumes, and natural dialogue transmit the authentic and un-staged *mise en scene* characteristic of documentaries.<sup>59</sup> The film's camera work is primarily done through the use of hand-held cameras, whose unsteadied shots create the feeling of spontaneity and unscripted movement. These cameras follows the characters as they go about their daily routines, using the homes, stores, churches, and cantinas of what appears to be a typical small town in Northern Mexico as their setting. While the location shots for *La tragedia de Macario* were actually filmed in Texas (Verdi n. pag.), the combination of setting and costumes used in the film places the action at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a Northern Mexican village typical of those associated with migration during the post-Gatekeeper period. These elements join with the action, marked by its observation of the daily routines undertaken by the poor from such areas, and natural dialogue, which is appropriate to people of the region, to give the film a sense of reliability in its presentation of the story of Macario and Felipe's tragic death.

These realistic techniques are overshadowed, however, by various creative elements that emphasize the narrativization of real-life experience found in this work. The editing of the film belies an intentional ordering of scenes and manipulation of events to produce a specific effect. The use of close-up shots and cross-cutting of scenes, both of which are used extensively with scenes involving Macario and his wife Regina, functions to establish the relationship between these characters and emphasizes the emotional nature of their experience. The frequent use of back-lighting and shallow focus, in which characters in the distance are blurred while insignificant objects up close

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<sup>59</sup> Such is the influence of these documentary techniques that the film that it has been categorized as a "documentary drama" by Teresa Fernández Ulloa (3).

are kept in focus, transmits the sense that characters such as Regina, Macario, and Felipe are marginalized in some way. Finally, the use of slow-motion at key moments, such as when the migrants are walking in a line down the train tracks toward the boxcar, serves to build narrative tension and transmit a sense of impending tragedy. These techniques function together to emphasize the emotional nature of the events surrounding the tragic deaths of Macario, Felipe, and the other migrants in the boxcar.

The addition of a *corrido* to the film's soundtrack presents another level of creative manipulation and helps to define the film as a melodramatic interpretation of lived events. Blending the rhythms of *norteño* music with those of religious hymns, this song is a hybrid interpretation of the *corrido* style. The song is divided into four sections; the first and third sections are sung as a duet between a man and woman who are accompanied by a guitar and accordian, while the second and fourth sections are sung by an apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the style of religious hymns. Despite the varying points of view implied through these divisions, the song is unified in that it progressively tells the story of Macario and Felipe's journey. Both the rhythm and lyrics of this song point to a tone of sadness, lament, and death. Words such as *llorar* and *acabado*, which are repeated in the refrain, complement the virgin's use of *muerte*, *abandonó*, and *no regresó* to emphasize the tragic qualities of the stories. As a constant element in the background of the story, the presence of this *corrido* signals the melodramatic qualities of this film. By adding an extra layer to the dramatic nature of Macario's tragic death, the song amplifies the emotional appeal of the story.

This *corrido* supports the characterization of Macario as a heroic figure by summarizing and adding a narrative level of commentary about his story. Discussing the

use of *corridos* and popular songs within narrative films, María Herrera-Sobek affirms that such elements have a hypertextual function, essentially providing the story line with “additional information, thus expanding the parameters of the scene and the message it is conveying” (“Corrido” 228-9). The stanzas sung by the Virgin of Guadalupe, who appears as Macario prays in a church prior to embarking on his journey and at the moment of his death in the boxcar, respond to Macario’s experience with an air of compassion and admiration. Describing him as a “humilde feliz” who is “[c]ruzando las fronteras de tu vida / Valiente y muy decidido / Buscando una vida digna”, the Virgin elevates Macario and characterizes him as a man of heroic valor. In these important moments, the Virgin’s song complements the visual presentation of Macario; in both scenes the use of soft focus and lighting around the character confer a supernatural quality to the man. Here, the combination of visual and aural clues result in a character that is portrayed as a humble, though honorable, man firm in his religious conviction.

The Virgin’s stanzas also serve to memorialize Macario and ritualize his death in a way that positions him as a martyred hero. The religious connotations associated with the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a cultural figure who holds a prominent place in narratives of the Mexican migration experience, clearly conveys the “ritual and dramatic significance” that folklorist Orin Klapp associates with the martyr (22). In the final scene of the film, the dark lighting and desperate sounds of the boxcar are replaced by a soft, full lighting in which the bodies of the migrants are clearly seen lying inert against each other. In the center of this scene is the Virgin, cradling Macario’s head in her lap as she summarizes his death in song. Singing “Macario ya no regresó / El coyote lo abandonó, Va a llorar después, El aire se acabó / Macario quiso escapar / Pero la puerta

no se dio / Y con todo sus sueños / La muerte se lo llevó”, the Virgin’s song absolves Macario of having any role in his own death, impling instead that he was a victim of circumstances far beyond his control. With this scene, the film memorializes Macario’s death in a way that emphasizes not only his individuality and exceptionality, but places him in direct contrast to those men who were ultimately responsible for his death, namely those who hold positions of power within the class structure of his home community.

The characterization of Macario as an honorable, humble man whose journey signals an heroic attempt to provide for his family is constructed, in part, by the narrative contrast that exists between him and the non-migrant characters of the film. In both physical appearance and action, Macario and the non-migrant characters represent opposite ends of the spectrum of masculinity associated with the cultural figure of the *macho*. Macario is clearly differentiated from the non-migrant characters through the visual clues of costume. Dressed in ragged and un-tucked flannel shirts, worn jeans, and beat up shoes, Macario wears an informal, white cowboy hat and carries a plastic woven *mercado* shopping bag with him everywhere. This image visually contrasts with characters such as the *ranchero* Jorge Rodríguez, the *coyote* Hurtado, the *federales* and their commander, who are uniformly costumed in the style of the Northern Mexico *ranchero*: pressed button-down shirts, crisp jeans, leather jackets, gold jewelry, spotless cowboy hats, and fancy *ranchero* style boots. These costuming choices have the effect of portraying Macario as a humble man whose concerns lie beyond the superficiality of clothing and shoes, while the non-migrant characters appear as braggarts who are interested in showing off their wealth and social position through their material possessions.

These differences are further emphasized by camera techniques that suggest Hurtado as a narrative foil to Macario. In separate scenes, low-angle shots feature close-ups of Macario and Hurtado's shoes stepping onto railroad tracks. The scene showing Macario's shoes occurs early in the film. As he prepares to leave home for his trip north, the camera provides a closeup of his ragged, scuffed, work shoes stepping onto the railroad tracks and following them north. In a parallel scene included toward the end of the film, another close-up focuses on Hurtado's luxurious, sparkling white *ranchero* boots as they step across the tracks of a rail-yard and walks toward the migrants who are waiting to board the train. The parallel nature of these scenes serves to link the two characters in the viewer's mind and establishes a visual contrast between them. In these scenes, the same article of clothing is used to synecdochically represent each man; nevertheless, the obvious contrast between their shoes points to their very different economic positions. Also important in these scenes is the background upon which the men's shoes are placed, namely the railroad tracks themselves. While the movement of Macario along and within the space of the tracks points to his role as hero on a quest, Hurtado's movement across the tracks implies that he is part of one of the challenges that Macario meets along this journey, someone whose presence impedes the hero's progress.

The dichotomous relationship between Hurtado and Macario also exemplifies the way in which action and motivation contrast migrant to non-migrant characters in this film. Portraying Macario's migration as a natural response to his poverty and subordinate status within his community, the film characterizes its protagonist as an honorable *macho*, one who acts in selfless ways that benefit his family and community. Macario's decision to migrate is not one made in haste; only after talking to his wife, Felipe, and

praying to the virgin Guadalupe does he finally decide that the possibility of financial gain outweighs the risks. Hurtado, in contrast, shows little regard for others in his work as *coyote*. When Macario expresses concern about their mode of transportation, Hurtado brushes him off and belittles his fears. In both action and image, Hurtado performs a role of dominance over the migrants. His flashy clothing, truck, and jewelry, which represents the wealth that migrants hope to gain, complements his distance, self-possessed demeanor to forge a dramatic link between his exaggerated masculinity and a position of social dominance. Through both visual and aural clues, the film implies that the *machismo* of Hurtado, based as it is on materialistic bravado, is inferior to that of Macario, who acts as the honorable hero despite his inferior social position and limited resources.

The divergent interpretations of machismo represented by Macario and Hurtado point to their unequal social and economic position within the patriarchal power structure that is implied through the social process of undocumented migration. For migrants such as Macario, economy and class have conspired to make migration the only possible means of improving economic and social status. At the same time, migration provides a source of income for men such as Hurtado who are willing to overlook moral and ethical considerations to make a living from trafficking their countrymen. The visual and dramatic relationship of these two male characters illustrates their uneven access to the social and economic resources made available by migration. Asserting that neoliberalism “degrades the economic and social position of some men, but not all”, Connell observes that entrepreneurial men such as Hurtado are relatively advantaged by the shift of social resources from the state to the market, and by the deregulation of markets” (225). This



advantage, Connell observes, is coded masculine by virtue of being a position that is filled overwhelmingly by men (255). As a narrative foil to Macario, Hurtado embodies a machismo that is more closely aligned to a hegemonic, exaggerated masculinity and the patriarchal power structure. Expressing an understated masculinity defined more by action than by image, the *machismo* embodied by Macario challenges this structure.

The overwhelmingly tragic tone of this film is enhanced through the characterization of Macario as positive interpretation of the cultural figure of the *macho*. Not only does Macario enact the sacrifice for home and family that one expects of a martyred hero, he does so from a position of social and economic subordination. The dramatic conclusion of the film, in which all light within the boxcar has been extinguished and the desperate sounds of the dying migrants are amplified, emphasizes the tragic nature of their death. In contrast to the frenzied sounds of the migrants' death, the appearance of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* in the boxcar is calm and soothing. As she sings softly of Macario's heroism, a warm light radiates from behind her to cast Macario in an aura of benevolent innocence. The film foregrounds the emotional pain and suffering engendered by undocumented migration of the post-Gatekeeper years. Although characterized as a man of great emotional strength, Macario's integrity does little to help him overcome the challenges presented by other, non-migrant, men whose social and economic power is expressed through hyper-masculine displays of dominance. Macario's death reiterates the critical message of *De ida y vuelta*; unable to challenge the hyper-masculinity men such as Hurtado, the protagonist's life represents the illusory, and futile, nature of the migrant dream.

### ***Cuando llegan los mojados* by Alonso Lara**

The story of two young men who return home to party away their earnings after working for five years abroad, *Cuando llegan los mojados* (2003) is a light hearted, low-budget counterpoint to the dramatic art-house style of *La tragedia de Macario* and *De ida y vuelta*. The simple plot, stereotypical characters, on-location shooting, and extensive incorporation of popular *norteño* music give this film a popular appeal. These characteristics, along with the low production value and participation of popular actors and *norteño* music personalities, define this film as an example of the popular Mexican *videohome* style of film making. In *Cuando llegan los mojados*, the themes and stereotypical plot lines for which the *videohome* industry is known are adapted to tell the story of returned migrants in the context of their home community. The simple and direct style of this film also helps to emphasize essentialist stereotypes; performing their machismo through physical appearance, material possessions, and public bravado, the male characters of this film exhibit an exaggerated image of masculinity. Despite its aesthetic shortcomings, this film offers a valuable criticism regarding the role that the image, or illusion, of success plays in the characterization of undocumented migrants as heroic figures returned from a triumphant quest.

With its formulaic plot, low-budget production value, and extensive use of popular music, *Cuando llegan los mojados* exemplifies the popular genre of Mexican cinema known as *videohome*. The *videohome* industry incorporates a vast number of low-budget B-movies that are produced for distribution in both the U.S. and Mexico via the

home video format. Often referred to as *videohome de narco* and *narco ficheras*,<sup>60</sup> these films generally portray Mexican *narco*, or drug cartel, violence, and prostitution, but have also been known to feature stories about migration or the lives of Mexican migrants (Arbelaz 637, Reynoso). The popularity of these films, which Carlos Gutierrez has called “arguably...the most successful segment of the Mexican film industry” in recent years (n.pag.), is reflected in annual video sales worth upwards of 30 million dollars (*Nuestra Gente*). *Videohomes* are often inspired by popular songs and *narcocorridos*, are produced in as little as six days, and are filmed in both the U.S. and Mexico (Reynoso). The ready availability of these films in both Hispanic supermarkets and stores such as Walmart appeals to low-income Spanish speakers on both sides of the border, in particular the low-income undocumented migrant community, for whom movie theatres are both economically prohibitive and places of possible apprehension (*Nuestra Gente*; Gutierrez; Arbelaz 643, Loyola).

Part of a genre that exists on the margins of critical and academic review, there is little published information about the creative producers of *Cuando llegan los mojados*<sup>61</sup>. A quick review of the titles and credits of popular *videohome* films, however, reveals that all have worked extensively within the industry. The International Movie Data Base gives director Alonso O. Lara 19 directing and 26 writing credits. His directing work in the *narco*-themed film “El Muletas al 100” is the topic of various discussion and blog posts (González Ambriz) and he is recognized as a popular screenwriter for the industry (*Nuestra Gente*). The film’s writer Everardo Licea, executive producer Silvia Becerril,

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<sup>60</sup> The term *videohome de narco* appears to be more common among popular sources of commentary on these films (for example new media reports, blog, and discussion forum posts). Critic María Arbeláz, however, use the term *narco fichera* to refer to such films.

<sup>61</sup> After numerous fruitless searches on the general internet and social networking sites, attempts at contacting the producers through the film’s distribution company failed.

and producer Alejandro Chilpa have all worked together on numerous *videohome* films, some of which, such as *Hambre y sed del mojado* (2005), *El rebozo del mojado* (2002), *El agricultor* (2001) have Mexican migration as their theme (www.imdb.com). The most well-known contributor to this film is actor Mario Alamada, who plays the venerable don Jacinto. With 345 35mm film titles and over 1,000 *videohome* appearances (interview with Loyola), Almada is a well-recognized actor who demands up to \$55,000 per project (*Nuestra Gente*).<sup>62</sup> While trivial, these details demonstrate the value of this film as an example of the *videohome* genre and reflect the extent of its popular appeal.

Accompanied by an ever-present soundtrack of *norteño* music, *Cuando llegan los mojados* is the story of two migrants who return home after working as undocumented migrants in the U.S for five years. Following the opening scene, in which the camera pans across the border wall and shows traffic creeping through a busy Tijuana crossing point, the men arrive home with their new American pickup trucks, outfitted in fancy clothes, boots, and gold jewelry. The story focuses on the experience of two of these men, Gonzalo, played by *norteño* singer Jesús Antonio,<sup>63</sup> and Luis, as they readjust to life at home. Torn between spending time with their girlfriends, who hope the men will finally propose to them and settle down, and their desire to party and relax after their years of work in the US, Gonzalo and Luis proceed to spend and bet away all of their earnings through long nights in the cantina and weekends at the local racetrack. After losing all of their money, their trucks, and their girlfriends, Luis and Gonzalo are left with

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<sup>62</sup> In an interview with Bernardo Loyola, Almada describes his fan base as “[m]ostly the working-class people, but very often I run into women from the super-rich neighborhood of Lomas de Chapultepec and they tell me, “Mr. Almada, I watched one of your movies on TV last night. They are great. Please keep making them.” But the main audience is the working class in Mexico, the U.S., and South and Central America.” (n.pag.)

<sup>63</sup> Better known by his stage name *El Lucero de Sinaloa*.

little option but to migrate again. Just as the men are about to leave home, they are offered work by Gonzalo's uncle, the rich *ranchero* don Jacinto. The two men agree to stay, and the film concludes with the promise of marriage between the men and their relieved girlfriends.

Although the cinematic technique of *Cuando llegan los mojados* reflects the quick timeline and low-budget production value characteristic of the *videohome* industry, it also defines it as a melodrama in the tradition of films about Mexican migration. The camera's perspective is limited to a small array of shot-types, the most common of which is the *plan américain*, or American shot, in which multiple characters are shown from the knee or waist up within the same frame. Such shots are punctuated by extreme close-ups, some of which woefully out of focus, in which characters are backlit in a way that makes them look sinister. The occasional use of panning shots functions to establish the location of the film as that of the streets, homes, cantinas and surrounding areas of a typical northern Mexico town.<sup>64</sup> Many of these panning shots are accompanied by a soundtrack of upbeat *norteño* music, allowing the filmmakers to facilitate narrative progression without staging formal scenes. The direct, uncomplicated nature of this camera work emphasizes the physical appearance and actions of the characters, distilling them to the exaggerated imagery that is typical in melodramatic films about Mexican migration.

The ever present soundtrack of popular music helps to define this film as both melodrama and *videohome*. Popular songs are frequently used to over-dub scenes in which Luis and Gonzalo are drinking, attending horse races, and otherwise

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<sup>64</sup> The credits specifically thank the restaurant "Las Arenitas de Tijuana" for its help. This, combined with panning shots of the U.S.-Mexico Border, large white wooden crosses on a stretch of the border fence, and an expansive urban area in the background of some shots, give the impression that the filming location was in or near Tijuana, Mexico.

*parrandeando*, or partying<sup>65</sup> away their earnings. In addition to providing entertainment value that appeals to the film's viewership, the overdubbed scenes allow for the progression of narrative action without expending the production time and effort required of scripted scenes with dialogue. In the tradition of the *comedia ranchera*, this film also features spontaneous concerts performed by *norteco* singer *El Lucero de Sinoloa*, aka Gonzalo, and his band. Whether drunkenly serenading the girlfriends or performing for other men at the local cantina, Gonzalo gives the inebriated swagger and raucous lyrics of *norteco* music a prominent position in the film's narrative. Drawing the viewer's attention to the visual appearance of the characters, the scenes that are accompanied by music emphasize physical attributes such as clothing and material possessions while downplaying the nuances of characterization provided by dialogue. Despite their obvious placement as promotional tie-ins, Gonzalo's spontaneous concerts offer a literal clue to the important role that performativity plays in the characterization of Gonzalo and Luis in this film.

In their physical appearance, material possessions, and economic largess, Gonzalo and Luis very much look the part of successful migrants returned from years of working abroad. The men are consistently dressed in pressed shirts, white cowboy hats, close fitting pants with western belts, and gold jewelry.<sup>66</sup> Their movements reflect a desire to put their new found wealth on display for the community to see and appraise. The public spaces of the town become a sort of stage on which the men perform their role as successful migrants. Upon returning home, for instance, the first thing the men do is to pick up their girlfriends and invite them to ride along as they show off their large

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<sup>65</sup> *Binging, partying to excess.*

<sup>66</sup> The number of costume changes in this film is truly astounding, Gonzalo and Luis seem to have an endless supply of well pressed, *norteco* style clothes and rarely appear in the same shirt twice.

American pickup trucks.<sup>67</sup> A large portion of the film's action occurs in the local cantina, "Las Arenitas de Tijuana", where the men make a show of buying buckets of beer and playing pool with other men, migrant and non-migrant, from the community. The town square and informal horse racing track found on the outskirts of town are other venues where the men perform the role of success returned migration through their physical appearance, material possessions, and economic largess.

The viewer's impression of Luis and Gonzalo as victorious heroes returning from a quest is tempered, however, by their actions and the way in which they relate to other, non-migrant characters in the film. In truth, the men's dramatic actions provide little narrative evidence to support their characterization as honorable, conquering heroes in the traditional sense. Arriving home flush with cash, the men proceed to spend and bet away their earnings, justifying their behavior by saying that they worked hard for five years and now they deserve to party a bit. Rather than pay back the money they were loaned or use their money to marry their girlfriends who have been waiting on them, the men turn themselves into drunken buffoons who are, for all intents and purposes, the laughing stock of the town. Despite their ignoble characterization, the film is sympathetic to Gonzalo and Luis; by placing these two men in a narrative relationship with other male characters, the film constructs an understanding of machismo in which Luis and Gonzalo represent one of the many possible masculinities proposed by the film.

The relationships between the migrant protagonists and two other non-migrant male characters in particular demonstrate the various ways that masculinity is constructed

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<sup>67</sup> Upon seeing the trucks, one girlfriend exclaims "qué bonitas camionetas!" The men invite the women to accompany them while they "pasarlas por todo el pueblo", an entertaining play on the use of the direct object pronoun *la*, which could refer to both the women and the trucks. The impression given, however, is that the men want to show off their trucks, not their girlfriends.

in this film. On one end of the spectrum is Don Braulio, a ranch owner who loaned Gonzalo and Luis money to finance their trip to the US. When Braulio realizes that the two migrants aren't planning to pay him back for the loan, he conspires to bring about their downfall by enticing them into fixed bets and attempting to court Luis' girlfriend. Dressed in all black and sporting a heavy mustache, Braulio is clearly cast as the film's villain. He is boastful, vindictive, and uses his money and influence for his own personal gain. On the other end of the spectrum is Gonzalo's Uncle Don Jacinto, played by venerable *videohome* actor Mario Almada. Like Braulio, Jacinto wears the typical dress of the wealthy northern ranchera and owns a large ranch. Yet, unlike Braulio, Jacinto exudes a quiet, prideful, demeanor and uses his money and influence to help others. Offering the boys work so that they may stay at home and marry their girlfriends, Jacinto exudes a positive, "authentic", machismo which directly counters that of Braulio.

The narrative positioning of Gonzalo and Luis in relation to these two men reveals a criticism about the social power structure at work in migrant-sending communities. In both cases, the non-migrant male characters serve to reinforce the power structure of the home community and undermine the idea that migration might provide a path to social mobility. In this film, the success found through migration is interpreted as fleeting. The cycle of debt-wealth-excess-debt primarily benefits other male, non-migrant characters who stand to make money from the migrants. The cantina owner recognizes this cycle when he comments that "Nomás, que llegan gastando mucho dinero. Y luego andan pidiendo prestado." The film is critical of those who stand to make money off of the migrants; Braulio, for example, finishes the film arrested and on his way to jail for attempted murder. Still, the overall message of the film is that migration itself did little to



help Gonzalo and Luis. Gonzalo and Luis are “saved” in the end by Don Jacinto’s financial sponsorship, not by anything they themselves have done.

While the film is sympathetic to Gonzalo and Luis, it also questions the value of the time, money, and effort that they spent in going to the US. The disconnect between the image of success that the men outwardly display and the tenuous nature of their new found wealth, which dissipates in a surprisingly short amount of time, is a clear source of narrative tension in the film. The critical eye that the community casts towards Gonzalo and Luis as they parade their new found wealth underscores this skeptical view of the migrant endeavor. Closing the film with the statement, “mientras tengamos trabajo aquí en México, jamás se nos vamos de mojados”, Luis solidifies the film’s message that the blame for Luis and Gonzalo’s failure lies with a social and economic power structure in which young men are forced to migrate to find work. With this conclusion, the exaggerated masculinity to which these young men aspired is revealed as a false promise. As with the two previous films examined in this chapter, Lara’s work argues that the success implied through exaggerated displays of masculinity is illusory and that migration is, in truth, a rather ineffective means of social mobility for young men in rural Mexican communities.

## **Conclusion**

The three films examined in this chapter manipulate the cinematographic techniques of melodrama to critically interpret the migrant enterprise from a perspective of negativity and failure. Referencing iconography and generic conventions established by the *comedia ranchera* places the male characters of these films in dialogue with

cultural stereotypes and associations attached to the figure of the *macho*. These films construct *machismo* as a gender performance qualified by both physical appearance and action; their migrant protagonists represent points along a spectrum of masculinity in which social position and economic dominance inform the structural relationships between men. Alternately portraying the migrant as martyred hero, buffoon, and anti-hero, *La tragedia de Macario*, *Cuando llegan los mojados*, and *De ida y vuelta* interpret the figure of the undocumented migrant as an imperfect hero, one whose personal failures are qualified by a narrative comparison to other male, non-migrant, characters. The comparison, through both visual representation and interpersonal action, of migrant and non-migrant characters in this film reveals them to be critical of the illusion of success implied through material displays of exaggerated masculinity.

The migrant characters of these films are unable to achieve true success as defined by economic independence and sustainable social mobility. Macario's death is the most literal example of this, yet in both *De ida y vuelta* and *Cuando llegan los mojados*, the success engendered by migration is shown to be fleeting and ineffectual. A notable difference from other genres examined in this study, the image of the migrant as conquering hero is absent from these films. Filiberto is ridiculed as anti-hero, Macario is martyred for his honorable intentions, and Luis and Gonzalo are mocked as buffoons. In all cases, the actions of these men are insufficient to upend the social and economic dominance of non-migrant men in their home community. While many of the chronicles and works of literature leave open the possibility for a positive interpretation of migration, the films of Aguirre, Véliz, and Lara unequivocally condemn the migrant endeavor as a futile search for social mobility.

Despite rejecting an image of the migrant as conquering hero, these films nevertheless portray their migrant protagonists in a sympathetic light. The melodramatic techniques utilized in these films serve not only to enhance each work's emotional appeal, but also help to ground the narratives in a setting and social reality to which many viewers might relate. In particular, the authentic locations, popular music, and simple storylines found in these works offer pathways that are recognizable to both migrant and non-migrant viewers. These pathways encourage viewers to empathize with the migrant protagonists by creating a sense of pathos, an emotional connection through which the audience might identify with a protagonist. Calling pathos a "queer ghoulish emotion", critic Northrop Frye affirms how this technique implies a hero who is "isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy" (38). The migrants in these films are clearly isolated from the dominant socio and economic power structure represented by the exaggerated masculinity of men such as Heriberto, Hurtado, and Don Braulio. In comparison to these men, the migrants of these films embody the "the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong" the Frye identifies as an important component of pathos (39). These films appeal the universality of social and economic marginalization to create empathy for the plight of their characters.

While the humanizing effects of melodrama may not condemn the migrant characters themselves for their failures, it does not act similarly in regard to migration. The image of migration as false promise that emerges from these films implies that a true path for social mobility necessitates a challenge to the patriarchal socio-economic power structure of the communities from which migrants hail. This argument brings forth an

element little discussed in research on Mexican cultures of migration, namely the role that local economic and social structures play in encouraging and sustaining migratory behavior across generations. Clearly, such literature acknowledges that economic need influences migrant decision-making. These films, however, demonstrate that migration can in fact act reinforce and strengthen the hegemonic masculinity of sending communities. Hurtado, the *federales*, and Don Braulio all make money off of the migrant endeavor, without ever leaving home; from these characters emerges an image of the culture of migration as a social force that influences, and is influenced by, relations beyond those of just the migrant and their family. The contrast of migrant to non-migrant characters in these films is thus informed by more than superficial imagery of boots, belt-buckles, and hats. Rather, it is best understood as an attempt to reveal the stark contrast in social position and resources engendered through the cultural cycle of migration in Mexico.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

The post-Gatekeeper period has provided a substantial body of creative narratives through which chroniclers, authors, and filmmakers attempt to interpret and respond to the dramatic imagery and events of this time. The creative works included in this study offer valuable insight into an historical period in which economic processes collided, often dramatically, with state security and human lives. As stories, these works tell a tale of travel, heroic quests in which migration is transformed into a search for personal and community renewal. These stories are grounded in a context that is familiar; by virtue of media coverage and political rhetoric, most readers and viewers of these works will have some level of preconception about the social process of migration. These stories, however, offer a view of migration that stands in stark contrast to that found in popular media reports and political and economic discourse about migration. Privileging undocumented protagonists within their narrative, these works elevate this often marginalized figure to a position of active agency that reflects the productive role that individuals play in the creation and perpetuation of cultures of migration.

Recognizing the quest as an organizing principal of the dramatic action in these works places them in dialogue with a narrative paradigm not generally associated with the figure of the undocumented migrant. The paradigm of the quest brings with it a number of cultural associations, but it also represents a literary mode that equates to western, European models of discourse. The utilization of such of a mode in these works aligns them with Mary Louise Pratt's definition of autoethnographic texts. Writing that autoethnography is one medium through which "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms", Pratt affirms

that the utilization of dominant literary modes, such as the quest form, exemplifies the “appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” characteristic of autoethnographic texts (9). By utilizing the narrative trope of the quest to tell individual stories of undocumented migration, these works seek to engage with, and challenge, dominant political and economic narratives that portray migrants as a collective group whose movement is linked to macro-economic imbalance.

The ability to define creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period as autoethnographic texts depends on privileging *how* they were crafted over *who* crafted them. The authors and filmmakers whose works are considered in this study enjoy a level of economic prosperity beyond that found in the majority of undocumented Mexican migrants of the post-Gatekeeper period.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, these works exhibit the heterogeneity that Pratt observes to be an important characteristic of autoethnographic texts through their bilingualism and bicultural reception. Pratt writes that the idioms appropriated in autoethnographic texts are those of “travel and exploration writing, merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with the indigenous modes. Often...they are bilingual and dialogic” (9). Throughout these stories, creative choices regarding language inform the tone, perspective, and message of the work. These choices include not just the language used, but also manipulations of perspective, chronology, narrative imagery, and paragraphing. Such techniques underscore the process of individualization characteristic of creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period.

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<sup>68</sup> In particular, Jorge Ramos, Luis Alberto Urrea, Reyna Grande, and Salvador Aguirre have achieved notable success and public notoriety. A quick internet search on any of these producers will attest to their popular reception and success as each is associated with numerous news reports, recorded interviews, public appearances, and active participation in social media.

The bilingualism of these works can be seen in their manipulation of language through code-switching and narrative perspective. While each story is written in either English or Spanish as dominant language, code-switching through the inclusion of words or phrases in the other language is common. Urrea, Martínez, and Grande write primarily in English, but pepper their narratives with words and phrases in Spanish. The protagonist of *De ida y vuelta* utilizes certain English words in an effort to show his familiarity with American culture. Similar linguistic manipulation can be seen in choices regarding narrative perspective. MaLuGiSaVe and Carracedo, for example, utilize long interior monologues that allow a single paragraph, and the first-person perspective of the narrator, to monopolize their stories. Music adds a source of extradiegetic that complements the dialogue of films, while figurative language adds an additional level of information to the narration of certain characters in textual works such as those of Urrea and Carracedo. The creative manipulation of language in these works generally functions to disrupt the narration in some way, shifting narrative perspective to that of the migrant or creating dramatic tension that contrasts individual migrant experience with the generalizing imagery found in dominant forms of discourse of the period.

These works also exhibit heterogeneity in their reception among the reading and movie-going public. Pratt describes how the reception of such texts, “usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker’s own social group”, are bound to be received differently by each (9). The reception of these works by the general public is discussed throughout this study. The works of Ramos, Grande, Martínez, and Urrea have received popular acclaim, primarily in the U.S.; all have been extensively used by reading groups and community literacy campaigns where they are not only read,

but discussed and debated publicly. Films by Véliz and Aguirre have been lauded at independent film festivals in both the U.S. and Mexico. While the reception of these works by mainstream media and cultural outlets is easier to identify, this study has also documented, through published interviews and personal emails, the extent to which these works have been received by individuals who themselves have had the experience of migrating. The heterogeneity of these works' reception demonstrates the level to which they are integrated into general public discourse about the theme of migration. In telling the story of migration from the perspective of the migrant, creative narratives such as those explored here offer an alternative mythology of the figure of the undocumented migrant.

The image of migration as heroic quest exemplifies the way in which creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period appropriate the idioms of dominant, Western culture to tell the story of marginalized persons. As has been shown throughout this study, such works recur to a common vocabulary of themes, ideas, and actions which reference social science research on Mexican cultures of migration in order to characterize their migrant protagonists as heroes and heroines on a quest. The image of the quest elevates these characters to a position of exceptionality by associating them with an archetypal form with which the majority of readers and viewers will have a pre-existing association. Defining archetypes as "associative clusters" that are composed of "specific learned associations which are communicable because a large number of people in a given culture happen to be familiar with them" (102), literary critic Northrop Frye illuminates the implications of heroic characterization. To the vast majority of readers and viewers, the archetype of the hero connotes universal symbols of food and drink, the quest for



personal and community improvement, and the battle of light and dark. Associating the figure of the undocumented migrant with these symbols transmits a universality of experience that demystifies this figure and challenges its characterization, in certain modes of media and public discourse of the period, as an anonymous and generalized other.

Envisioned as heroes, the undocumented migrant protagonists of these stories are placed on a trajectory that encompasses not only their journey to the U.S., but also their past and present relationship with the home community. As is the case with archetypal tales of heroic quest, the works examined in this study assign an important role to the home community. The return home not only gives the hero the opportunity to prove his success, it also demonstrates, as Dana Heller affirms, an “essential individual service to the collective whose salvation rests in his hands” (3). The creative narratives examined in this study handle the theme of the hero’s return in a variety of ways. In migration chronicles, the successful return of individual migrants is contrasted paradoxically with the tragic death of those who perish in the act of border crossing. Literature relies on the perspective of the home community to qualify the success of the migrant protagonist’s efforts. In feature-length films, the superficial appearance of material success underscores the subordinate position that migrants occupy in relation to the patriarchal power structure of the home community. In all cases, the return home is an important stage of the migrant’s journey, one that foregrounds the role that the community plays in inspiring, sustaining, and judging the value of individual migrant experience.

Privileging the role of the home community reifies the generational and cyclical nature of transnational movement in Mexican communities with longstanding traditions

of migration. Throughout these stories, migration is an accepted and expected part of the life course, an endeavor that is imbedded in community culture and oral history. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo affirms that migratory tradition is both encouraged and sustained through “vibrant transnational social networks and by the glories of return migrants, popular folklore [that] defines a journey northward as a rite of passage” (*Gendered* 191). Heller finds a similar cycle of influence in the narrative paradigm of the hero quest, in which the “the continuation of the life cycle demands that heroes win their laurels only to be displaced by new heroes, perhaps their own sons” (3). Stories of migration in the post-Gatekeeper period replicate this cycle, showing how individual migrant actions are both inspired by and influential to the culture of migration found in his or her local community. Assigning the figure of the undocumented migrant an active role in the production of local cultures of migration, these works interpret migration as a social process driven by community history and experience.

The creative narratives examined in this study interpret migration as a progression through stages; the motivation to leave home, the physical and emotional tests of crossing the border, and the return home emerge time through these stories. In this narrative construction, individual migrant experience informs, and is informed by, the sites through which each man and women passes. Describing how translocal relations are “constituted within historically and geographically specific points of origin and migration established by transmigrants”, Michael P. Smith and Luis Guarnizo point to the triadic connections that exist between migrants, the localities through which they migrate, and their locality of origin (13). In these stories, migration is interpreted as a transnational practice in which individual experience is embodied, as Smith and Guarnizo indicate, in “specific

social relations established by specific people, situated in unequivocal localities, at historically determined times” (11). The paradigm of the hero quest unites the disparate locations of individual migrant experience; much like the idea of a culture of migration, the quest gives meaning and purpose to the movement of individual protagonists as they travel along the migrant trail.

The migrant trail is a problematic, if omnipresent, image that emerges from creative narratives of post-Gatekeeper period. Taken literally, a trail is understood as an established path through specific geographic terrain; it is bounded by the limits of its extension, limits which constrain and dictate the movement of those who traverse it. The term “migrant trail”, however, is generally used as a euphemism for the typical progression that migrants follow from home in Mexico, to border, to the U.S., and home again. In reality, the journey that migrants take in attempting clandestine border crossing has an infinite number of variations. And, as is shown in the creative works examined in this study, such journeys are often anything but direct. At first glance, the image of the migrant trail emerges as totalizing, an over simplification of the multitude of paths followed by individual people. Implying a path that necessarily passes through a political border, a literal interpretation of the migrant trail exudes a sense of boundedness and surrounds migrants with what David Spener calls a “virtual border and the stigma of illegality (17).<sup>69</sup> Conceived in this way, the image of the migrant trail reifies the generalizing language characteristic of neoliberal discourse by offering a succinct way to metaphorize the flow of migrant labor.

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<sup>69</sup> Spener’s observation of a virtual border that surrounds migrants as an extension of their “illegal status” is informed by his reading of de Genova’s 2002 article “Migrant “Illegality” and Deportability in Everyday Life” in which he describes a “social space of illegality” (247).

The complex and nuanced interpretations of migrant experience found in creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period, however, challenge this totalizing image of the migrant trail. The narrative overlay of the hero quest onto the image of the migrant reveals how the path taken by each migrant impacts not just the individual, but his or her home community as well. Regardless of geographic location, the migrant protagonists of these works are linked to the culture of migration from which they hail, affirming Martínez's definition of the migrant trail as a "city-scape of the mind" in which "towns from which migrants hail are joined with the towns of the north" (139). In these stories, the migrant trail is a metaphor for the trans-local relations that define cultures of migration. As a functional practice, the culture of migration offers a strategy through which communities, as Smith and Gaurnizo observe, "actively pursue transnational migration to create and reproduce another kind of transnational social space, the "trans-locality" to sustain material and cultural resources in the face of the neo-liberal storm" (7). Through the metaphor of the migrant trail, the creative narratives examined in this study represent Mexican cultures of migration as transnational social spaces, contact zones in which individuals and their communities are interconnected in a way that spans geographic distance.

Bhabha's work in *The Location of Culture*, frequently quoted in this study, helps to illuminate how creative works of the post-Gatekeeper period position cultures of migration as sites in which both migrants and their home communities play an active role in the production of local and individual history, experience, and identity. For Bhabha, understanding culture as an enunciatory site opens up possibilities for "other 'times' of cultural meaning (retroactive, prefigurative) and other narrative spaces (fantasmic,

metaphorical)” (255). Bhabha asserts that articulations of cultural difference, such as those found in the creative narratives examined here, provide a process through which “objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience” (255). While the creative works examined here rarely give individual migrants the opportunity to give a direct and unmediated account, they do utilize a variety of narrative techniques that encourage the audience to appreciate the individual value of individual experience. By engaging with themes, ideas, and actions that link them to social science research on Mexican cultures of migration, these works also underscore, in a critical and retroactive way, how cultures of migration produce, and are produced by, individual experiences of migration.

This image of the Mexican culture of migration as a social space in which migrants play a productive role is evidenced, in creative narrative of the period, through the portrayal of undocumented migration as a normative strategy employed by migrants and their communities. For the protagonists of these stories, the choice to migrate, as Kandel and Massey have indicated, is part of the “calculus” of young persons from these communities, a strategy employed to improve their chances of social mobility and success (982). Defining migration as a functional strategy recognizes the culture of migration as a distinct social space, one that assumes what Michel de Certeau the ability to be “circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it” (*practice* xix). Conceptualized as such, the culture of migration emerges from these stories as a social space that is distinct from represented in right-leaning media, political, and economic discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period. Instead, migration offers what Spener calls a “social space of

mutualism” that is “impervious to ‘surveillance from above’” (22). Within this social space, the migrant protagonists of these stories play an active role in both producing and sustaining the culture of migration from which they hail.

If migration itself can be understood as a strategy, then the individual actions undertaken by migrant protagonists in these works should be read as tactics, every day practices through which individual accomplish, as de Certeau describes, a degree of “independence with respect to circumstances” (*practice* xix). The choice to leave home, the journey to the border, the attempts at crossing the border are all actions that, in the context of undocumented migration of the post-Gatekeeper period and the Mexican culture of migration, are proscribed and accessible, familiar to a new migrant by virtue of his or her community’s culture of migration. In the narrative universe of these stories, the actions that help protagonists progress through the stages of migration are interpreted as daily practices, “ways of operating”, that, while common to the experience of many, are accomplished in a unique way by each individual. Throughout these stories, protagonists approach the challenges of migration in ways that are unique to their experience, their individual maneuvers defining not only their experience, but also their independent agency.

The detailed accounts of clandestine border crossing found in these works most clearly exemplify the way the individual actions of migrant protagonists can be understood as tactics. In these scenes, migrant protagonists are repeatedly described as using clever tricks and maneuvers to evade apprehension and enter the U.S. without proper documentation. The hiring of *coyotes* and other helpers, the use of fake names and identities, and the decision to serve as witnesses in legal proceedings against human

traffickers are all examples of ways that the migrant protagonists of these works game the system and express a sense of independent agency. The characterization of these protagonists as heroes frequently depends on these very tricks. For instance, in *Crossing Over*, Rosa Chávez uses tools and tricks that are unique to her situation to succeed in crossing the border clandestinely. From wrapping her child on her back in order to evade Border Patrol officers in the desert, to changing her name each time she is apprehended, Rosa's heroism, and success in conquering the conflict of border crossing, is conditioned on her ability to function independently within the circumstances of her experience as an undocumented migrant from a community steeped in the migrant tradition.

The independent agency of these protagonists further underscores the active role that they play in the production and replication of the culture of migration from which they hail. The tall-tales told by Rosa's husband Wense, the *pulque*-fueled lament of Marietta in "Telar de infortunios", and the boastful bravado of Luis and Gonzalo in *Cuando llegan los mojados* are but a few of the many examples where the previous experience of migrants contributes to oral history and the home community's knowledge about the migration. Characters such as Genaro in "Estrellas de arena", who admit freely that their choice to migrate was conditioned on their observation of other migrants, affirm the self-perpetuating nature of the Mexican culture of migration observed by Kandel and Massey when they write "the essence of the culture-of-migration argument is that non-migrants observe migrants to whom they are socially connected and seek to emulate their migratory behavior" (983). In creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period, undocumented migrant protagonists are given an active role in shaping not only their own migration experience, but the culture of migration from which they hail.

In these examples, oral history and community influence stand in as metaphors for the myriad of networks that serve to stimulate and perpetuate migration. The migrant protagonists of these works are not acting in isolation, rather they are engaging with established cultural, social, and economic networks that connect the translocalities of the migrant trail. The individualized nature of their experiences, however, concurs with Michael Samers' assertion that transnational linkages such as those embodied in the metaphor of the trail are often cut across by "differences in age, generation, religion, class position, and other axes of differentiation" (96). In creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period, these axes of differentiation inform both the way in which individual characters are shaped by the culture of migration in their home community, as well as how the home community is in turn shaped by the experience of individual migrants.

The positive interpretation of migrant individuality and agency implied by these narratives is problematized, however, by the overwhelming sense of futility and disappointment that marks the tone of these works. Time and again, the ultimate value of migration is questioned by the dramatic outcomes of these narratives. The positive ways in which individual lives are changed through migration are relative to the sacrifices that were made along the way. Marietta's lament, Macario's dramatic death, the countless lives lost in the chronicles of Urrea and Ramos, Filiberto's decision to migrate again, and Juana's unresolved attempts at closure are all examples that underscore the critical tone of disapproval that emerges from these works. The overwhelming negativity found in these works is clearly an outcome of the socio-historic period in which these works are set; a time of dramatic and deadly border crossings, extreme poverty, and political and social disenfranchisement for many Mexicans, the years following the implementation of



Operation Gatekeeper and other similar security measures represent a macabre period in the history of Mexican migration. Against this background, the exceptionality of individual migrant protagonists is relative, and even small successes emerge as futile and inconsequential in comparison to the larger social process of migration in that period.

Despite the extensive work that these narratives put into defining the independent agency of their migrant protagonists, these works nevertheless exude a fatalistic tone. As a normative cultural strategy, the culture of migration fuels, and is fueled by, a cycle that encourages migrants to undertake dangerous and life threatening behavior. In these narratives, migration is conceived as a unavoidable eventuality, an event that is determined, at least in part, by cultural factors that are outside individual control. While the migrant protagonists of these works are frequently given the power to influence *how* their migration experience occurs, rarely do they have a choice in whether or not to actually migrate. The emphasis that these works place on the inevitability and inescapability of migratory behavior underscores their critical tone; in evidencing the power that the Mexican culture of migration holds in the lives of their protagonists, these works implicate this cultural process in the physical, emotional, and cultural violence exerted on the figure of the undocumented migrant by the security policies and discursive marginalization of the post-Gatekeeper period.

The violence that is exerted on this figure can be linked to the troubled and paradoxical relationship that undocumented migrants maintain with anonymity. As discussed in the introduction to this study, Nuria Villanova's observation that anonymity is at once a "companion of freedom and emancipation" and an "ally of exclusion and this violence" (22) affirms the idea that while migrants may have power in determining

aspects of their own experience, their participation in migration as a social process subjects them to certain types of violence that are conditioned on their unlawful status. This violence can take many forms. The most obvious is the physical violence engendered by state-policies that encourage migrants to make clandestine entries to the U.S through remote and dangerous terrain and subject migrants to abuse by the *coyotes* and human traffickers who facilitate these crossings. This violence can also take a less literal form, namely that of public, political, and economic discursive modes that collectivize experience and portray the figure of the undocumented migrant as a threat to the security of the U.S. Such expression effectively strips this figure of its humanity and imposes what Spener identifies as a “radical ‘othering’ and stigmatization that constitutes a form of *cultural violence*” (18).<sup>70</sup> As a group of texts that engage with this troublesome anonymity, the creative narratives examined in this study draw attention to the complicit role that the Mexican culture of migration plays in subjecting migrants to these forms of physical, emotional, and cultural violence.

In exploring the individual stories and experiences that make up the social process of Mexican migration, creative narratives of the post-Gatekeeper period evidence and reveal the nuanced, paradoxical, and complicated factors that contribute to the publicly conceived image of the figure of the undocumented migrant. Though fictionalized and mediated, these works nevertheless contribute to the public record and historiography of the time. Observing that history gives a privileged position to “whatever goes badly...because of an urgent need to mend these holes immediately with the thread of a language that makes sense,” de Certeau affirms that informational discourse furnishes a “common referent to all those who are otherwise separated. In the name of the “real,”

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<sup>70</sup> Emphasis by the author.

they institute a symbol-creating language that generates belief in the process of communication and in what is communicated, thereby forming the tangled web of “our” history” (*Heterologies* 205-6). Through their bias, distancing, and creative mediation, these stories add another layer to the discourse of the post-Gatekeeper period, offering new modes of public seeing and hearing that challenge and expand upon the image of the undocumented migrant that has been constructed by dominant and scholarly discourse of the period by bringing the figure of the undocumented migrant into the realm of creative representation.

The post-Gatekeeper period signals a shift in perspective of cultural and historical thought, a time in which the stories of individual migrants began to play a larger role in public discourse about the figure of the undocumented migrant. The many ways in which creative discourse has sought to individualize the stories of migration lends exceptionality to this social process, making it public in way that gives value to the lives lost as a result of state security practices and economic trends. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler asserts that some lives “are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xiv-xv). The creative narratives examined in this study interpret the figure of the undocumented migrant as one that is defined by individual experience, community tradition, and relation to the socio-historic milieu. In these narrative constructions, the undocumented migrant is a grievable character, a “socially constituted body” whose loss and vulnerability extend from his or her inextricable ties to others (*Precarious Life* 20). In assigning grievability to this figure, these stories advocate

for the many men, woman, and children whose circumstances dictate that they leave home as migrants, underscoring their humanity in a way that challenges the social, cultural, and discursive violence to which they are regularly subjected.

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