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## Walking with the Invisible: The Politics of Border Crossing in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*

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**Abstract:** The article focuses on Luis Alberto Urrea's non-fiction book *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (2004) as a critique of the politics of border crossing and of the mechanisms of state power that shape the contemporary anti-immigration discourse. Drawing on diverse sources, the writer reconstructs the story of twenty-six Mexican men who in May 2001 attempted to cross the U.S.-Mexico border at one of its deadliest stretches—The Devil's Highway. Documenting the story of the “undocumented,” Urrea reveals the forces that render the migrants alienated, racially stigmatized, criminalized, and dehumanized. The writer also points out that the current political debate on illegal immigration essentially pre-empts the need for a discussion that would focus on the human conditions that trigger migration rather than on the illegality of border crossing. Thus, the book reconstructs the tragic incident at the border that not only shows how the story was controlled and narrated by the entities of power but, more importantly, how it was experienced by the walkers.

**Keywords:** U.S.-Mexico border, border crossing, illegal alien, immigration, Luis Alberto Urrea

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One is not born a migrant but becomes one.  
Thomas Nail, “The Migrant Image”

If a Mexican dies trying to cross the deadliest desert in north America, or eighteen Guatemalans vanish, and no one sees them, did they ever really exist in our national conscience?

John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands*

Illegality is not simply a state of being, but rather a matter of social-political construction and struggle.

Josiah Heyman, “‘Illegality’ and the U.S.-Mexico Border: How It is Produced and Resisted”

Without question, the image of the migrant has become a symbol of the humanitarian crisis witnessed over the last years at the U.S.-Mexican border. The situation reflects the current socio-political climate in which American society is becoming drastically polarized over the issues of national identity, culture, and socio-political ideals. While more and more voices demand the problem of migration be tackled with respect for human rights, a wave of anti-immigrant movements, with blatantly nativist agendas, continues to emerge, empowered by the aggressive, anti-immigration rhetoric created by the current U.S. president.

The unprecedented increase in the number of men, women, and children from Central and South America trying to cross the U.S.-Mexican border has been used by Donald Trump to promote (often by aggravating societal fears and anxieties) his xenophobic rhetoric, and to legitimize the idea that in order to be great again, America has to be saved and, therefore, “sealed off” from various forms of danger

and impurity. Many of these dangers are represented by the migrant portrayed as a “pollutant” invading and contaminating the space of the nation state (Cisneros 569). This politically-charged “cleansing” is reminiscent of Mary Douglas’s theory of social ordering of the world based on rejecting any forms of pollution (racial, social, cultural, religious, etc.) created in the process. Dirt, the critic argues, is understood as an undesired, abjected “by-product” that threatens the proper functioning of the system, which relies on clear/clean classifications. To maintain and justify the order, the system must therefore eliminate any elements that do not fit the established norms (36).

Centered on the idea of social cleansing, Trump’s “theater of power” (Truett and Alvarez 31) has led to further militarization of the borderland region and to the strengthening of a narrative about the U.S. as a border nation, “a nation always pushing, always negotiating that spot.... It is a national project” (Malagamba-Ansótegui and Moore 127). The current president’s political agenda can thus be seen as part of the U.S. government’s strategy to naturalize state-imposed control at the national borders. The strategy had its dramatic moment in the 20th century when the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), signed into law in 1986. The IRCA began a series of other actions taken by local authorities to prevent migration in their areas. Three major operations at the border have profoundly impacted the way migration is perceived. Operation Hold the Line was launched in El Paso, Texas in 1993. A year later, two other projects were set up: Operation Gatekeeper in California and Operation Safeguard in Arizona.<sup>1</sup> The enhanced surveillance system provided by these operations was supposed to make the border impermeable and to bring it under control in major strategic urban zones. As many critics have pointed out, concentrating border surveillance in populous urban areas has decreased the number of border crossers there; however, migration in less known and protected areas has skyrocketed, pushing desperate migrants to the perilous regions of the Southwestern desert lands.

Interestingly, as Ila Sheren observes, the names chosen for the operations implied that the United States was constantly being attacked or that it was at war. However, as the critic argues,

[w]hen compared with the individuals undertaking the crossing, these names only underscore the disparity between perception and reality. Much like the naming of the Global War on Terror during the second Bush era, the act of labeling legitimizes the conflict. In both cases, the United States is put on the defensive against nameless or otherwise undefined forces. In the popular imagination, then, the newly fortified border cities become the last bastion of security in an epic siege. (137)

Trying to control the immigration debate, President Trump has on numerous occasions criminalized migrants, portraying them as a monolithic mass of “illegal aliens” responsible for terrorism, violence, contamination, and narcotrafficking, thus posing a serious threat to national security. Supported by the militaristic *modus operandi*, Trump’s scapegoating strategy becomes what critics Sang Hea Kil and Cecilia Menjívar

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the politics of border militarization and its influence on migrants as well as residents of the border see Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the “Illegal Alien” and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Routledge, 2002).

describe as “symbolic racism based on a notion ‘us versus the enemy’ that brutalizes the public as it encourages hostility toward immigrants who cross the southern border” (165). This strategy indicates also the government’s attempt to deny responsibility for the crisis at the border, and to avoid any further discussion that would force the U.S. to address the reasons for the massive migration across the Americas. Kristin E. Heyer notes that by reducing the problems of immigration “to the locus of border crossers alone,” Trump’s administration “eclipses from view transnational actors responsible for economic instability, violent conflict, or labor recruitment, and also eclipses their accountability” (146). The further construction of the border wall has become an erroneously chosen and ill-conceived strategy to address the issues of migration. Much as the U.S. tries to protect itself from the “contaminating element,” a continuous movement in the borderland region challenges the country’s “sealed” and “sanitized” status. The undocumented migrants, constantly re-emerging at the southern border, become the country’s haunting presence,<sup>2</sup> dispelling the illusion that the U.S. can perform a complete physical, historical, and cultural amputation and extricate itself from the obligation to deal with the human crises taking place across the continent.

In the current socio-political climate, Luis Alberto Urrea’s non-fiction book *The Devil’s Highway: A True Story* (2004) becomes a telling critique of the politics of border crossing and of the mechanisms of state power that continue to shape the anti-immigration discourse. Drawing on diverse sources, among them official reports from Border Patrol agencies and consulates, press articles, trial documents, testimonies, interviews, notes on personal journeys, and piles of seemingly tangential material, Urrea reconstructs the story of twenty-six Mexican men (most of them small-plot farmers and coffee growers from rural Veracruz) who in May 2001 attempted to cross the U.S.-Mexican border at one of its deadliest stretches located in the Sonoran Desert—The Devil’s Highway. The harrowing trek began on May 19 and lasted till May 24. Fourteen of the men died on the way of exposure and heat stroke; the remaining twelve were rescued by Border Patrol agents. During the following months, the tragic incident garnered serious media attention and was investigated by various institutions on both sides of the border. In the public coverage the men were given different names, depending on the border station that took part in the rescue mission: “the Yuma 14” or “the Wellton 26.” Dead or alive, the Mexicans became enmeshed in a politically-charged “ping-pong game” played between various institutions involved in the event. Numerous narratives were created in which the walkers were criminals, victims, and national folk heroes, all depending on the intentions of the particular body interested in the incident. The tragic story is aptly commented on by Urrea, who points out ironically: “Nobody wanted them when they were alive, and now look—everybody wants to own them” (*Devil’s Highway* 31).

Yet, no matter the amount of compassion the Wellton 26 received, in the official juridical dispute the survivors were treated as “illegal entrants/aliens” who trespassed the state border and entered foreign land. Reconstructing the ill-fated walk, the rescue action, and the legal procedures following the incident, Urrea offers

2 For a close analysis of the relationship between memory and haunting at the U.S.-Mexico border see Jessica Auchter’s *The Politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

a story that problematizes the issue of border crossing and exposes the political forces involved in the process of controlling and manipulating the issues of migration by the entities of power. Offering multiple perspectives on the incident, the writer reveals the forces that render the migrants alienated, racially stigmatized, criminalized, and dehumanized. Documenting the story of the “undocumented,” Urrea’s account ultimately shows how the current political debate on “illegal immigration” essentially eliminates the human from the center of the discussion. Consequently, a new socio-political figure is created—the “illegal alien.” Seen as a social menace, he/she must be fought against and removed from the space of the protected nation state. As Urrea points out in the book, a debate on “illegal immigration” pre-empts the need for a discussion that would focus on the human conditions that trigger migration rather than on the illegality of border crossing. Framing the debate on immigration as a problem of “illegal crossing” ultimately erases the questions of “why are people coming to the US, often times at great risk? What service do they provide when they are here? Why do they feel it necessary to avoid legal channels? It boils the entire debate down to questions of legality” (Lakoff 6). The book is a detailed reconstruction of the tragic incident at the border that not only shows how the story was controlled and narrated by the entities of power but, more importantly, how it was experienced by the walkers.

The map that precedes the narrated account resembles the official Arizona state map with an enlarged area of detail showing the walkers’ trek, reconstructed during the forensic investigation. The cartographic representation of the story foretells the conflict that is explored by Urrea, namely the clash between how the states and the migrants view the act of border crossing. In his book *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, J.B. Harley argues that rather than mirrors of nature, maps should be seen as rhetorical texts about the social ordering of the world. Thus, as subjective constructions of reality, maps, claims the author, are “never neutral or value-free” (37). On the contrary, they are “a language of power” (79) manifested as “a way of conceiving, articulating, and structuring the human world which is biased towards, promoted by, and exerts influence upon particular sets of social relations” (53). When created and used by a political body, such as a nation state, maps can be seen as “a controlled fiction” used to legitimize power and usurp control over a territory and a people (53). As Harley points out, to fully understand the mechanisms used in the creation of a particular social order, one must, on the one hand, look at what that social order’s maps emphasize, but also pay attention to what they de-emphasize. Interpretation, states Harley, “becomes a search for silences” that may “reveal how the social order creates tensions within its content” (45).

Seen from this perspective, the map included in Urrea’s book demonstrates a clash in power relations characteristic of the U.S.-Mexican border region which, to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s words, turns into “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). The dramatic conflict is represented by two different narratives: the unofficial one, produced by the walkers, and the official one, created and imposed by the U.S. nation state. The language of geopolitical power, represented by the national and state borders, becomes “polluted” by the new element introduced on the map: the footprints of the twenty-six walkers represented by the dotted line marking the trek across the Devil’s Highway. Imagined via a cartographic tool, the

geopolitical order maintained by the U.S. and Mexico is interrupted by the walkers' presence inscribed in the socio-political landscape represented on the map.

The conflict is also implied in the map legend created in the form of 15 points briefly reconstructing the trek. While the U.S.-Mexican border is visible on the map, it is, interestingly, not mentioned in the legend. The information given in point 1 states: "Saturday, May 19, 1:40 p.m. Group entered by vehicle at Quitobaquito" (*Devil's Highway* xix). By focusing on the details of the men's walk in the area of the Devil's Highway, without describing the event as "border crossing," Urrea offers an alternative perspective on the story which shifts the focus from the narrative of "illegal immigration" to the story of the tragic event that forever changed the lives of the twenty-six men and their families.

The subsequent chapters of the book reconstruct the story of the men from the moment they decide to look for better jobs in the U.S., through the story of them being recruited by the border mafia, the ordeal of their trek across the desert, and the investigation, to the aftermath of the event. The narrative opens with a portrayal of their rescue by a Border Patrol agent. Interestingly, it is followed by an elaborate presentation of the rich history of the Sonoran region across which the walkers moved. The desert emerges as a home to the holy spirits still revered by the descendants of the Indigenous and Mexican people who inhabited the region, as well as to the creatures of the folk tales known widely across the borderlands. Called Desolation, it is also a vast graveyard in the form of "a forest of eldritch bones" that holds evidence of the history of pre-colonial life in the region, the arrival of Europeans and subsequent colonization of the continent, the emergence and development of the modern nation states, and the most recent migratory movement across the border (*Devil's Highway* 5). Thus, the desert land, like a palimpsest, becomes an archive, storing material evidence which, when properly deciphered, portrays the land as a rich and "shifting mosaic of human spaces" (Truett 9) characterized by one major feature, that is movement:

Today, the ancient Hohokam have vanished, like the Anasazi, long gone in the north. Their etchings and ruins still dot the ground; unexplained radiating lines lead away from the center like ghost roads in the shape of a great star. Not all of these paths are ancient. Some of the lines have been made by the illegals, cutting across the waste to the far lights of Ajo, or Sells, or the Mohawk rest area on I-8. Others are old beyond dating, and no one knows where they lead. Footprints of long-dead cowboys are still there, wagon ruts and mule scuffs. And beneath these, the prints of the phantom Hohokam themselves. (*Devil's Highway* 4-7)

Presenting movement as a feature inherent to the borderland experience, Urrea implies that migration was natural not only in the pre-contact era but, in fact is an intrinsically human experience. Thus, by merging the story of the Wellton 26 with ancient history and tribal mythology, the writer presents the modern migrants' walk as a continuation of movement that began in the mythic time and place. In so doing, Urrea challenges the Western notions of border politics, and the territorial status quo of the two nation states on both sides of the border. Moreover, describing the history of the region, Urrea points to the fact that with the emergence of nation states, movement across the land became gradually politicized and criminalized:

Immigration, the drive northwards, is a white phenomenon. White Europeans conceived of and launched El Norte mania, just as white Europeans inhabiting the United States today bemoan it. They started to complain after the Civil War. The first illegal immigrants to be hunted down in Desolation by the earliest form of the Border patrol were Chinese. In the 1880s, American railroad barons needed cheap skilled labor to help ‘tame our continent.’ Mexico’s Chinese hordes could be hired for cheap.... Jobs opened, word went out, the illegals came north. Sound familiar? Americans panicked at the ‘yellowing’ of America. A force known as the Mounted Chinese Exclusionary Police took to the dusty wasteland. They chased the ‘coolies’ and deported them. (*Devil’s Highway 8*)

Since the story of the twenty-six walkers is stitched together from different dramatic accounts from the history of the region, in the course of narration the migrants’ experience becomes not only a journey through space, but also through time. The survivors’ coming out of hiding on May 24, 2001 can therefore be seen as their emerging from the dense and dark history of the region, a Desolation they were forced to experience:

Five men stumbled out of the mountain pass so sunstruck they didn’t know their own names, couldn’t remember where they’d come from, had forgotten how long they’d been lost.... They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems. They were beyond rational thought. (*Devil’s Highway 3*)

A physical site where the tragedy takes place, Desolation also becomes a symbol of the multiple borders imposed on the men before, during, and after their walk.<sup>3</sup> Taking the readers back to rural Veracruz, where most of the men came from, Urrea briefly portrays their lives in a region impoverished by the powerful economic changes brought by NAFTA and various U.S. companies such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Pushed to the bottom of the social ladder, the men and their families were rendered socially invisible, vulnerable and thus easy prey to the border mafia who capitalized on poor people desperate to change their lives by luring them with the prospect of a job that would help support their families. Thus, before the men arrived at the U.S.-Mexican border, they had already experienced the social and economic borders that eventually pushed them north, towards their Promised Land. Yet, while the dreams of a better life kept the men walking, the borders of their imagined economic “Canaan” were rigorously protected against the “pilgrims.”

One such protective tactic presented in Urrea’s account is the act of “cutting the drag.” As Ronald Rael explains, the term describes “traditional methods of hunting

3 In her analysis of border crossing, Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui aptly points out that the physical wall is just one of the many borders that the prospective migrant struggles against: “The border starts in the imaginary, in the space of everyday life, in self-representation, in action, and in agency. The border has meanings away from the physical border itself. How can we even conceptualize that border carried along in the head of the migrant. You start saving money for the crossing. You start planning. You start making decisions about your family for the crossing. Everything has to do with the crossing. Crossing the line will mark the event, but the mental spaces created by the future event take place away from the border. The spatial quality of the border has become a powerful place and space it marks an event on both sides of it” (123-124).

by cutting a trail and sweeping back and forth along the expected direction in order to pick up tracks a considerable distance ahead" (46). Used by Border Patrol agents as an enhancement of their surveilling methods, the practice leads to the creation of "manicured landscapes" that, as Rael observes, conceptually resemble "the raked gravel in traditional Zen gardens" (46). Yet, the smoothed patches of land monitored by the Border Patrol play a role unlike that of the pristine and tranquil Zen spaces: "These petrified landscapes remain suspended in time until the next intruder interrupts the serenity of the tabula rasa formed by the grooming, which creates clouds of dust in long rows that mirror the wall from a distance – an ephemeral wall made of particles that disappear back into the landscape" (46-47). The surveilling practice described in the book becomes therefore a symbolic "sealing" of the border so that the unwanted do not intrude on the controlled space. Since the systematic smoothing of the ground erases the migrants' footprints from the controlled zone, cutting the drag becomes a metaphor for the state's intentional combating the migrating "pollutants" and subsequent erasing of their presence from the space of the nation (Cisneros 569).

The mechanisms of erasure and dehumanization of the migrants are also exposed by Urrea in the language created by different parties involved in the story and later disseminated and normalized by the media. In order to recreate the entire incident in as much detail as possible, the writer relied on various sources from across the border.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the book abounds in names used to describe the migrants, such as a "tonk,"<sup>5</sup> "wet/wetback," "taco bender," "walker," "OTM (Other Than Mexican)," "pollo,"<sup>6</sup> "Oaxaca,"<sup>7</sup> "John/Jane Doe,"<sup>8</sup> "illegal alien," "illegal entrant," and "undocumented worker." When used interchangeably in the story, the names reveal how the figure of the migrant as a racially and socially profiled menace is created by the entities of power, leaving the actual people moving across the land with no agency over how they are portrayed and dealt with. The name that stands out from the above mentioned ones, and is indubitably preferred by Urrea, is "walker." Neutral and non-aggressive in its character, it refers only to the aspect of movement. The other terms, on the contrary, stigmatize the migrants as either vulnerable, ignorant, primitive, and exploitable or, when described in legal terminology, connected with crime, intrusive, other-worldly, and thus uncontrollable. As Urrea acutely observes, being regularly called names "other than human," the walkers can be easily turned into an abstract monolithic and dangerous mass deprived of human rights, thus unidentifiable to the public as members of any social group (*Devil's Highway* 39).

When used together in the book, the names given to the walkers reveal yet one more problem explored by Urrea, namely the criminalization of races, and

4 Urrea explains that while working on the book he made sure that the information he revealed would not put the surviving men and their families at risk (*Devil's Highway* xv-xvi).

5 It is a term used among Border Patrol agents that is "based on the stark sound of a flashlight breaking over a human head" (*Devil's Highway* 16).

6 "Pollo" (Spanish slang)—a cooked chicken; a term used to describe a person smuggled across the border by a "pollero"—a mafia guide who becomes a "chicken wrangler" (*Devil's Highway* 60).

7 A name given to the walkers by Mexican mestizos. It comes from the name of the state in Mexico with the largest Indigenous population (*Devil's Highway* 39).

8 A term given to an unidentified migrant who is subject to legal proceedings.

marginalization of their role in the history of the continent and the nation states. As Urrea stresses in his work, the practice becomes more aggressive via the legal language representing the state power. However, explored in the book, the racial othering is not a new phenomenon, but has its roots in the history of both Mexico and the United States:

Some of the Yuma 14/Wellton 26 spoke Spanish as a second language. It surprises people to learn that many of the ‘undocumented entrants’ are indigenous. Think of the border struggle as an extension of the Indian Wars, the cavalry now chasing new Apaches and Comanches. Much of the human hunting that goes on along the border happens on Cocopah, Papago, Pima, Apache, and Yaqui lands. The Arizona Border Patrol, with millions of acres to inspect, has struck up an uncomfortable relationship with the natives in its path. Tohono O’Odham people, for example, regularly submit complaints of harassment by Tucson sector. A truckload of Indians looks like a truckload of Mexicans to the cavalry.... ‘Oaxaca’ is a code-name for Indian, usually Mixtec. The women are often ridiculed as ‘the Marias.’ Some of the Tohono O’Odham call the walkers invading their rez ‘Oaxacas.’ The Yuma 14 are still regularly called the Oaxacas. Indians calling Indians Indians. (*Devil’s Highway* 38-39)<sup>9</sup>

Presenting the Border Patrol surveillance tactics as modern versions of Indian wars, Urrea challenges the “immigration reforms” centered on racial profiling and military practices at the border, and points to a dangerously repetitive violent pattern of dealing with those who are considered a threat to the nation state. Interestingly, drawing on Mark McPhil’s analysis of the rhetoric of racism, critics Kil and Menjívar argue that in the contemporary anti-immigrant discourse, race and war, seen as the “‘natural’ manifestations of human civilization,” are often used to legitimize racial profiling and militarization of the border (169). The powerful combination of war and race rhetoric, the critics claim, appeals “‘1) to the audience’s sense of territoriality, 2) to the audience’s ethnocentricity, 3) which function to enhance the audience’s optimism and 4) which are relevant to war aims’” (McPhil qt. in Kil and Menjívar 169).

Thus, portrayed as “illegal aliens,” the Wellton 26—the fathers, sons, cousins, brothers, husbands, friends—over the course of the story are turned into a social menace and a national threat against which the state must defend itself. Moreover, Urrea shows one more aspect of border politics that the walkers fall victim to: framed as “aliens,” they are not only excluded from the space of the nation which they try to enter but also from the history of the continent. Since in the popular imagination the “alien” is part of outer space, the threat faced by the Mexican migrants, descendants of the Indigenous cultures, is that they are turned into ahistorical figures with no social or political force.<sup>10</sup>

9 Reduced to a “brown skin” type, the walkers’ bodies become sites of racialized borders, making them unrecognizable even in their own country. Thus, when documenting their journey north, Urrea aptly observes: “They were aliens before they ever crossed the line” (*Devil’s Highway* 40).

10 Nail 58. Commenting on the use of the “illegal alien” metaphor in the legal discourse on immigration, Cunningham-Parmeter aptly concludes: “Unreal people live nowhere because they are make-believe. By rejecting the personhood of immigrants, the alien metaphor facilitates this outcome” (1587).



Reporting on the post-rescue part of the event, Urrea points out how the men's stories and lives remained in the hands of the external bodies of power. Since for the survivors the gateway to the Promised Land meant testifying against the border mafia in order to be given immunity, they ultimately became enmeshed in the system that kept them away from their families in Mexico and forced them to remain on the margins of the hosting society. When the bodies of the fourteen victims were returned to Mexico, they became fetishized as the country's "martyred heroes" in a staged ceremony prepared by the local authorities (*Devil's Highway* 198). As Urrea writes, while representatives of the government welcomed "the sons of the state," the traumatized families were kept away from the public eye so that the officially prepared grieving could complete without any inconveniences (*Devil's Highway* 198). Urrea's decision to quote Rita Vargas, the Mexican consul in Calexico who organized the transportation of the bodies to Mexico, is a powerful comment on the entire event: "Later, she calculated that the dead men's flight alone had cost over sixty-eight thousand dollars. 'What if,' she asked, 'somebody had simply invested that amount in their villages to begin with?'" (*Devil's Highway* 199).

Much as the continuous debate on the "immigration problem" reduces the figure of the migrant to a statistic (be it in the Border patrol reports, court cases, mafia business, or media coverage), Urrea's account stands against the humiliation, historical erasure, social expulsion, and dehumanization of the people who risk their lives to cross the border. Providing the reader with as much information about the twenty-six walkers as possible, describing in painful detail the ordeal of the trek each one of the men experienced, including the survivors' testimonies in the narrative, and, most importantly, repeating the name of each one of them while narrating their versions of the event, Urrea gives a human face to a story too often reduced to the narrative of illegal trespassing by anonymous law-breakers.

Therefore, *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* should be seen as a collection of individual stories of the Mexican men whose lifepaths crossed as they all followed "the navigation of the heart" (Malagamba-Ansótegui 126) with the same desire—to ensure a safe and dignified future for themselves and for their loved ones. As the ongoing debate on border crossing continues to brutalize the image of the walkers, Urrea asks in his work to refocus the discussion from the legal to the human aspect:

Perhaps, ultimately, what is so remarkable about the Mexican border is not how many of Them have come across, but how many of Them have not. It is not hard to imagine any one of the Wellton 26 deciding it was time to put a roof on the house, to build a small concrete room for the new baby, to buy furniture for his wife, to feed his family. Their reasons for coming were as simple as that.... We try to put numbers on a story that is, at base, a story of the heart. (215)

The walkers' stumbling out of Desolation on May 24, 2001 was a desperate cry for help that saved their lives and, later, allowed the return of the bodies of their fellow walkers to their families. Yet, described in Urrea's work, it can be seen also as a symbolic cry of the many left in a state of desolation, pushed to the margins of their nations. Tracking the walkers' footsteps and reconstructing their stories, Urrea restores human dignity to the victims and survivors of the horrific trek. But, without a doubt, in its message,

Urrea's book also includes the anonymous Johns and Janes Doe who lost their lives crossing the desert. It also embraces the survivors who remain unrecognized in the society they live in. Ultimately, the book gives voice to people who, when crossing the border, very often choose invisibility to protect themselves and their loved ones. Creating space for their voices to be heard, Urrea leaves the reader with the message that is at the heart of the story he reconstructs: "My life isn't so different from yours. My life is utterly alien compared to yours. You and I have nothing to say to each other. You and I share the same story. I am Other. I am you" (Urrea, *Nobody's Son* 58).

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