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MIGRATION CHRONICLES: REPORTING ON THE PARADOXES OF MIGRANT VISIBILITY

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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 Villoro¹

GIVEN the historical role of the Latin American chronicle as a genre that helps both author and reader to make sense of emerging social realities, it is fitting that the chronicle style has been adopted by contemporary journalists who write about Mexican migration to the United States. In the last three decades, journalists from both sides of the border have increasingly drawn on literary traditions first employed by the *conquistadores* and later used by the American New Journalists of the 1960s and 70s and contemporary Mexican chroniclers of the 70s and 80s,² to interpret the dramatic, tragic and at times shocking realities of the U.S.-Mexico border crossing experience for American 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,³ the publication of book-length migration chronicles increased dramatically since the advent of Operation Gatekeeper and similar border security measures in the early 1990s.⁴ Migration chronicles

¹ “Mexicamérica: La frontera de los ilegales.” n.p.

² See C. Monsiváis (*A ustedes* 76) and J. Villoro (“Mexicamérica” n.p.) for further discussion of the influence of American New Journalism on the contemporary Mexican chronicle.

³ The *Bracero Accord* (1942-64) was created to facilitate the legal recruitment and migration of Mexican labor to the U.S. for seasonal agricultural work.

⁴ Operation Gatekeeper was part of a larger security effort of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (now known as the Bureau of Customs and Immigration Services) that sought stricter enforcement of border crossings

published during the post-Gatekeeper period⁵ provide a narrative footprint that has influenced numerous subsequent migration chroniclers by demonstrating how the literary and creative influences of the chronicle genre can help to bring discursive visibility to the figure of the undocumented migrant.

The contemporary Latin American 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, Rossana Reguillo links the 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 chronicles 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).⁶ The 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 to the U.S. By positioning these men and women at the center of their narratives, migration chronicles give their lives and experiences a place in public record.

at major urban border crossing points. Similar security measures that were begun along the border during this period include “Operation Hold the Line” in the El Paso area and “Operation Safeguard” in the Tucson area. Beginning with the tightening of the Tijuana-San Ysidro, CA border area in 1994, Operation Gatekeeper is commonly associated with a shifting of illegal migrant crossings away from urban centers and into the rural, and arguably more dangerous, mountains east of Tijuana and the deserts west of Nogales, Arizona. Critics argue that, despite the increased dangers of crossing, Operation Gatekeeper did little to dissuade illegal migrant crossings (Ganster and Lorey 186).

⁵ This period is generally defined as 1994-2005. The global recession, which began to show its effects on migration beginning in 2005, appears to have had a dampening affect on migration as more migrants are said to be staying in the U.S. and fewer Mexican residents are choosing to head north (Lacey NYT Online n.p.)

⁶ See also Juan Villoro, who writes that “la crónica mexicana se ha concentrado en llevar al centro a figuras periféricas” (n.p.)

In documenting the experiences of individual migrants, migration chroniclers uphold the chronicle genre's 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 in the U.S.⁷ 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 1994-2005, featured a large increase in the publication of such works. Since 2005, 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.⁸ By interpreting events of historic and social importance through a creative lens, contemporary migration chronicles continue the chronicles genre's tradition of making the individual stories of marginalized persons visible to the reading public.

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 to the U.S. during that 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

⁷ See Herrera-Sobek's *Bracero Experience* (14) for an excellent discussion of these works.

⁸ 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 major newspaper sites such as that of UNAM's *La Jornada*, which maintains a section title "Crónica" under on its 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, CONCULTA, and IME. The literary 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 U.S. and Mexico in 2006 (Unidad de Comunicación Social n.p.)

the border region (Eschbach et al 441-42).⁹ These deaths, and the experiences of migrants who survived arduous crossings inspired by Operation Gatekeeper-style security measures, 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.

In much of the public discourse that surrounds Operation Gatekeeper and similar security measures of the early 1990's, undocumented migrants are constructed as anonymous figures that pose a threat to the security of the U.S. 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). Through the manipulation of media images that portray migrants attempting to cross the border fence in large groups in the dead of night, Andreas argues that political entrepreneurs targeted 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)” (13). Locating the “immigration problem” at the border implies that the fault for this problem lies with undocumented migrants rather than with the employers who hire them or economic processes that encourage them to migrate; furthermore, it confers on undocumented migrants an image of unlawfulness. Matthew 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 “U.S. Southwest border region as an unruly landscape of uncontrolled migration” (190). By portraying the border as a region that must be defended from alien invaders, public discourse of this period casts migration as a collective experience in which individual motivations, experiences, and desires are unrecognizable.

⁹ 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).

This image of the “illegal alien,” in which individual experience is sublimated to a generalized experience that better serves the needs of political discourse, assigns an anonymous quality to the figure of the undocumented migrant. Indeed, anonymity is perhaps the primary paradox of undocumented migrancy on the southern U.S. border. The anonymity that migrants seek and embrace as a necessary element of clandestine entry simultaneously makes them vulnerable to violence, both man-made and natural. Núria Villanova affirms the paradoxical nature of this vulnerability when she writes:

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)

The migrants featured in the chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period exemplify this troublesome relationship with anonymity. Despite the fact that these men and women consciously hope to slip by U.S. security unnoticed and enter the country clandestinely, they continually find themselves vulnerable to the physical and emotional challenges of crossing the border area in an illicit manner.

Anonymity can also be understood as a discursive position that is imposed on the figure of the undocumented migrant by the dominant cultural narratives of globalization. In theorizing globalization, cultural critics such as Néstor García Canclini have noted the reliance that neoliberal narratives place on generalized groupings to play the role of pawns in what Canclini calls the “juego anónimo de fuerzas del mercado” (64). Neoliberal cultural narratives that commodify the undocumented migrant as simple labor power not only strip migrants of their individual characteristics but also, as David Spener notes, denies migrants of their “essential humanity” (18). The anonymous nature of neoliberal cultural narratives is evidenced within the texts of the post-Gatekeeper period through the use of plural subjects, such as “they” or “the migrants,” that blend multiple migrants into a single, generalized group. The experience of individual migrants disappears in these groupings, leaving an image of the undocumented migrant bereft of individual desires and motivations and determined instead by the tragic nature of border crossing during the post-Gatekeeper period.

Through the use of narrative motifs and the construction of plot arcs that highlight individual migrants, the narrativization accomplished in these books 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, and literature, the quest offers a common point of literary reference whose prescribed steps mirror those of a Mexican who leaves home to follow the migrant trail. 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). In these works, the heroism of migrants is proven through their action, specifically in their successful progression through the stages of migration. The emphasis that migration chronicles of this period place on the progression of individual migrants through the various stages of migration places migrants characters on a familiar narrative trajectory in which the journey to the U.S. is interpreted as a conventionalized plot typical of the hero quest.

As a group of texts that consistently explore the individual motivations and experiences behind persons who are often perceived, in the media and other public forms of 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). Three works in particular exemplify how the how chronicles function as a medium for bringing discursive visibility to the stories of individual migrants who participated in group border crossings during the post-Gatekeeper period: *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), utilize a variety of literary techniques that privilege the 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 cultural narratives of globalization. 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 and brings discursive visibility to the stories of this marginalized group.

Heroes and Heroines on the Migrant Trail: *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 mountains of western Mexico. The disparate stories that compose this work are unified through their relation, sometimes social and sometimes geographic, to the Chávez brothers, whose story serves as the narrative axis of the work. As each new story, with its own cast of characters and unique narrative trajectory, piles onto and expands away from the story of the Chávez brothers, the book takes on a web-like structure that reveals the multifaceted nature of contemporary Mexican migration to the U.S. 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*,¹⁰ places it squarely within the chronicle genre and recognizes the fusion of reportage journalism and creative interpretation that defines this book.

The narrative trajectory of *Crossing Over* 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. As the journeys that these individuals take to the U.S. 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. 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 hero quest.

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

¹⁰ Translation by Gabriela Rothschild Plaut. Mexico: Planeta, 2003.

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 in the U.S., but only after walking more than six hours through difficult desert terrain (180-85). 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, never cries (180, 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.

In the web of this narrative, the individual stories of migrants such as Rosa are constantly crossing paths with generalized characterizations of migrants as an anonymous, stereotypical category. As one of the primary sources of narrative tension in the work, the dichotomy between the individual and the anonymous can be observed in the narrator's extensive introductions of the many migrants he meets during his visit to Cherán. In chapters four and five the narrator presents a dizzying cast of migrant characters, each introduced with a detailed physical description and contextualized in relation to the social processes of migration. While these introductions offer, on the one hand, examples of individualized experience, the contextualization simultaneously associates these individuals with larger cultural groupings and stereotypes. This association of individual migrants with the various life-cycle-based motivations typical of culture-of-migration theories transforms individual experiences into conventionalized narrative motifs typical of the migration chronicles of the post-Gatekeeper period. In this way, young men such as Wense, José Izquierdo, and Mario Jiménez (92) come to represent the conventionalized character of the young man who migrates in search of adventure, while Rosa's brothers Fernando and Florentino Chávez (306) represent the young man who migrates to support his young family. Rosa, María, and Yolanda Tapia (134) likewise can be equated with the woman who enjoys greater personal freedoms as a result of migration. Transformed into characters in a crafted narrative, these migrants lose much of their individuality and instead represent stereotypical roles in a generalized cultural narrative.

The use of generalizing vocabulary and plural subjects accomplishes a similar transformation of individual experience into conventionalized narrative motifs. In various places throughout the text, plural groups such as "the migrants" (6) and "the pollos" (27) are transformed into single characters that act as a group. The use of "they" as a single character during the author's retelling of the car accident that killed the Chávez brothers exemplifies this style:

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 Chávez 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.

In *Crossing Over*, the undocumented migrant is interpreted as a problematic figure whose individual experiences are at constant odds with anonymous cultural narratives that portray the “migrant” as a stereotypical discursive figure. 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 anonymous groups that act as one person. This language presents migration as a collective experience and locates the anonymous cultural narratives of globalization directly within the text. The constant interplay of these two images of the undocumented migrant, one individual and the other anonymous, presents a multifaceted view of the undocumented migrant as a figure whose visibility is both desirable and limiting.

An Ironic Visibility: *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 that 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 Edward 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 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.

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,¹¹ in their journey to the U.S. 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 fictionalization that evidences the creative intervention of the author within the text.¹² 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 management of narrative tension through the deliberate placement of short sentences and paragraphs, the 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 plural 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.

For the migrant characters of this book, the crucial struggle of border crossing occurs not at the political line that divides the U.S. from 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

¹¹ 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).

¹² See "Author's Note" (xvi)

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 atrevidos* 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 techniques that increase the dramatic tension as the migrants move closer to death from heat exposure. In the chapter "Killed by the Light," which ends the second section of the book, the narrative 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" (128-29). 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 positions them as heroic characters within the narrative. Migrants such as Hilario¹³ 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,

¹³ The narrator does not give Hilario's last name, introducing him only as "a young man named Hilario" (105).

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 era 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 these men's endurance, the narrator positions the dead migrants 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 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 memorialize each man's death as that of an individual martyred hero.

The individual nature of these characterizations stands in stark contrast to the narrator's portrayal of the Yuma 14 as an anonymous, homogeneous group. As is typical of the post-Gatekeeper migration chronicles discussed here, the narrator uses the technique of blending all the migrants in the group into a single character through the use of the plural pronoun "they." Transforming the group in one character not only allows the narrator to move the action of the story forward more efficiently, but also provides an opportunity for commentary. The narrator emphasizes the heroic determination of these men when he writes that, at the height of their delirium from heat exposure, "They walked. They walked. There was no other story: they walked" (159). Placing these plural descriptions in direct contrast with the individualized characterizations of

undocumented migrants locates the anonymous cultural narratives of globalization directly within the text.

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 is based on their portrayal, in public discourse, as a plural, anonymous 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 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 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 technique of positioning the anonymous cultural narrative of globalization directly within the text serves to highlight, through contrast, the limited, essentializing view of the undocumented migrants portrayed in 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 of the U.S. 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.

Documenting the "Invisible": *Morir en el intento* by Jorge Ramos

MORIR EN EL INTENTO: La peor tragedia de inmigrantes en la historia de Estados Unidos (2005), by Mexican journalist Jorge Ramos (b. 1958), 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 the U.S. Mexico border north toward 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.¹⁴ 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 places it within the chronicle 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.

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 chronicle. 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.

The narrator's introduction of individual migrant characters helps to characterize these men as heroes who are about to encounter a test of emotional and physical strength. The use of

¹⁴ 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 English translation by Kristina Cordero: *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.)

foreshadowing at the conclusion of each migrant's introduction¹⁵ locates each migrant within the narrative trajectory of the quest by placing him at the moment in which he begins the crucial test of his heroism. Per the narrator's description, each of the main characters¹⁶ hesitates before climbing into the trailer. Commenting that the night of May 13 turned out "as superstitious types might have predicted, to be lined with bad luck" (12),¹⁷ the narrator describes Enrique Ortega's hesitation as he boards the trailer by referencing a popular Mexican film about border crossing: "Suddenly, a movie flashed through his head: *El carro de la muerte*, the Death Car. He had seen it when he was 10 years old. It was about a group of undocumented immigrants who got into a water delivery trucks and died. 'I thought back to that movie, and I had a feeling the same thing was going to happen to us,' Enrique said" (12-13). The repeated theme of hesitation in these introductions builds narrative tension, a tension that the narrator further enhances by concluding each introduction with a concise sentence that foreshadows the events to come. Comments such as those that conclude Israel's introduction, in which the narrator observes that "[i]t would be the last trip of their lives" (24), help the reader to anticipate the physical and emotional trials that the men will face during their four hours in the semi-truck trailer and view them as heroes about to embark on a quest.

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, or the space between the political border and the migrant's destination city in the U.S., is defined primarily by the encapsulated space of an unventilated semi-truck trailer that traveled 160 miles from Harlingen, near

¹⁵ The narrator's introduction of these migrants in the second chapter follows a pattern seen in the other chronicles analyzed here. Each migrant is presented in a separate section of and in the following way: After stating where the migrant is from in Mexico, the narrator recognizes his reasons for migrating to the U.S. and mentions any previous experience he has had with migration. The narrator then describes how the migrant crossed the border and came to board the truck trailer in Harlingen, Texas in May of 2003 (9-24).

¹⁶ Israel Rivera Sánchez, Enrique Ortega, Alberto Aranda Amara, and José Reyes Arellano

¹⁷ The English translation includes two errors regarding the date that the migrants boarded the truck trailer. On pages 12 and 23, the date is printed as March, not May, 13th.

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 here, 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.

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 narrator’s use of plural subjects to categorize the multitude of migrants trapped in the trailer is most evident in the first chapter, “When the doors opened.” Here, he utilizes plural pronouns 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)¹⁸

The effect of this language is multifaceted. On the one hand, the plural 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 plurality 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,¹⁹ personal photographs provided by the mother of one of the migrants who died in the trailer, and photos from court records.²⁰ While the series allows the reader to quickly digest the basic themes of this book, much like a feature photo serves to summarize a news article in the media, these images also transmit specific information about the migrants and others involved in this tragedy. In her discussion of photography of 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). 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

¹⁸ This excerpt exemplifies such language, which is evident throughout pages 1-7 of the first chapter and in other sections of the text.

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ 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.

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 death and anonymity 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, four men are shown sitting in a trailer similar to the one in which the tragedy occurred during filming for a documentary by Univision. 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 of these men provide an individualized, personalized, view of the tragedy.

The tension between identity and anonymity that marks this book is quite evident in the last picture of the series, a grainy video still 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).²¹ 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 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, functions to drive the emotional impact of the tragedy home to the reader. 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.

²¹ 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).

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.²² 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 the event, this book demonstrates that the "invisible" undocumented migrant is not nearly as obscure a figure as its stereotype is perceived it to be.

The Consecration of Heroic Sacrifice: Conclusions

THE POST-GATEKEEPER migration chronicles analyzed here demonstrate how contemporary authors from both sides of the border utilize the chronicle genre to redefine the figure of the undocumented Mexican migrant. Interpreting the Mexican migration experience through the creative paradigm of the hero quest, migration chronicles such as *Crossing Over*, *The Devil's Highway*, and *Morir en el intento* elevate their migrant subjects and privilege their individual motivations and accomplishments over those anonymous cultural narratives that represent migration as a collective experience. The use of plural subjects in all of these works locates these cultural narratives directly within the text, recreating in narrative form the tension that exists between

²² 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).

pluralizing discourse and individual stories. These works counter the dehumanizing effect of cultural narratives that effectively relegate undocumented migrants to what Spener terms “the status of a commodified thing —labor power— while denying their essential humanity” (18). Through their creative presentation of the individual migrants involved in tragic border crossing events, these chronicles not only encourage their reader to appreciate the many nuances of undocumented migration, but also 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 437-38). 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 here 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 chronicles defend the basic humanity, and thus grievability, of undocumented migrants in a way that marks them as part of the 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 here 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,²³ 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 chronicle 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 here challenge the paradoxical, and limited, visibility given to the figure of the undocumented migrant in dominant cultural narratives. The figure of the undocumented migrant portrayed in most narratives of globalization relies not just on the pluralization of migrant experience, but also on the negative portrayal of the undocumented migrant as an alien threat. By offering a positive interpretation of the figure of the undocumented migrant, migration chronicles such as those analyzed in this study encourage their reader to question narratives that dehumanize migrants and attempt to erase them from history. 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 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

²³ The photographs in *Crossing Over* are found on the page facing the beginning of each new chapter.

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